

# Heart of the Sea

by Christine Warren

- an exclusive short story -

St. Martin's Press

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"Heart of the Sea"

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St. Martin's Paperbacks are published by St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Jenny Ferguson staggered across the floor of her cozy cottage with the grace and speed of a drunk on the tail end of a week-long bender. As she reached the door, she glanced to the right and caught a glimpse of herself in the oval mirror mounted against the wall and decided she looked like that drunk, too.

Her always unruly red hair looked as if it had been recently trimmed with the aid of a lawn mower, and drying sweat had glued random strands to her skin with all the artistic sensibilities of a deranged Rhesus monkey. Wincing, she consoled herself with the knowledge that her first order of business for this morning would be a very long shower. Right after she sucked in the world's most enormous lungful of clean, fresh Scottish air.

Wrenching open the cottage door, Jenny suited actions to words and felt an almost orgasmic shiver course through her. Goddess, but nothing on earth had ever felt or smelled or tasted so good. Not in her entire life. After all the past hours spent locked inside, immersed in incense and candlelight, the touch of salt-tinted air on her skin felt better than a lover's caress.

Well, almost. After all, she did have a fairly amazing lover. One who in three short days would finally become her husband.

Jenny felt a foolish smile stretch across her face and opened her normally bright green—but momentarily quite bloodshot—eyes and soaked in the glory of the bright morning sunshine. Not even the crisp bite of the October air could dim her mood. Her activities of the night before might have sapped her strength, but they had also left her an extremely satisfied woman.

What a glorious day to be alive, and a witch, and in love.

“Jenny, lass,” a deep, masculine voice called out behind her. “Did you happen to notice where I left my shirt last night? I found my trousers under the settee in the parlor. And one of my socks. But the rest eludes me, and I confess to feeling a slight chill this morning.”

She didn’t even bother to glance back. The front garden and rich landscape beyond held her too captivated. Or maybe it was love that managed that particular feat. “Check behind the armchair, Paddy,” she answered over her shoulder. “You always did have a sorry aim.”

A good-natured grumble was her only answer, and her smile curved into a grin. She hadn’t quite heard his answer, but she didn’t need to. After knowing each other for so many years, she could guess well enough how it had been phrased.

Jenny had met the two most important men of her life the day before her eighth birthday, when she and her parents had relocated from the bustle of Inverness to the small western highland coastal town of Rontraigh. One had been the son of the village tavern-keeper, her best friend, and her first lover. The other had been the scion of an ancient and powerful local family, her closest confidant, and her one true love. Soon he would be her life’s mate and her little world would be complete.

Anticipation sang through her veins. She could hardly wait for Saturday.

A gust of wind sent a dry leaf skittering across the slates of the front path and reminded Jenny that she was standing barefoot and mostly undressed on her stoop during the first of the year’s serious cold snaps. If she wanted to make it to her wedding day with a nose that didn’t drip, she should get back inside before she caught cold.

Laughing at her own idiocy, she took a step back and had the door halfway shut when another gust of wind caught the weight of it and pushed it back open, leaving Jenny face to face with the last man she’d expected to see this morning.

Her fiancé. Richard Maccus.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Richard!” Jenny cried, feeling her heart stutter and then leap forward like a horse from a racing gate. “I thought you’d still be in Edinburgh. You said you’d not return before Friday.”

Richard’s mink-dark eyes fixed on her, taking in her disheveled appearance and the rumpled oversized t-shirt that was all she wore. Dark brows arched high above sharply angled features.

“Aye, that’s what I expected,” he drawled in the deep, slightly burred voice that had always made her feel at once protected and threatened. “Business took less time than I anticipated.”

Jenny nodded dumbly. She had counted on his being out of town for another two days. It was why she’d arranged for last night to happen. She could have chanced it with him still at home, but it had seemed so much safer to take advantage of his absence. Even a witch with her talents had a hard time pulling the wool over the eyes of a selkie.

“I-I guess so.” Her voiced sounded weak in her own ears. The lady only knew how it sounded to Richard.

He hooked his thumbs in the front pockets of his faded denim jeans, and Jenny could see his broad swimmer’s shoulders flexing beneath his heavy Arran sweater. “I thought you’d be pleased to have me back in time to help with the wedding fuss.”

She was. She would have been. Except for one small detail.

Jenny saw Richard’s eyes shift from her to the shadowed doorway behind her and watched as they went from the warm color of sealskin to the frozen hue of tundra soil.

“Patrick.”

Jenny felt a hand on her shoulder attempting to ease her out of the way, but she planted her feet and refused to budge. She didn’t need her old friend

and former lover to defend her from her fiancé, for the Lady's sake.

Patrick MacLennan slung his shirt over one bare shoulder and gave Richard a cool nod accompanied by a smile with an unhelpfully taunting edge. "Maccus. Fancy seeing you here."

Jenny rolled her eyes. Richard and Patrick were both locals and had known each other their entire lives. Once upon a time, the two men had been the best of friends. Half of their childhoods had been spent running together along the cliffs and tiny hidden beach on Richard's family estate. The camaraderie of childhood, however, had died a quick death when Jenny had turned eighteen and she and Patrick had become lovers.

But for pity's sake, it had been more than seven years since any romantic or physical relationship had existed between her and Patrick. You'd think Richard would have gotten over it by now.

"Do you mind telling me what you're doing standing half-naked in my woman's doorway less than half an hour after dawn, MacLennan?"

Jenny sighed. Apparently he hadn't.

"Richard, we—"

Patrick held up a hand to cut her off. "You and Jenny might be engaged," he said, his voice carrying a distinct edge, "but that doesn't make her your possession. If she wants you to know her personal business, I'm certain she'll tell you of it. Until then, it's not my place to carry tales."

A flash of rage lit Richard's dark eyes, and Jenny stifled a groan. She hated the rift that had appeared in the two men's relationship. They had been so close, once upon a time, and she couldn't understand why neither of them seemed willing to heal the breach. Her affair with Patrick had ended ages ago, and she and Richard had forged the sort of bond that even eternity would never erode. Jenny knew that in her heart, just as she knew that any romantic attachment Patrick had once felt for her had long ago evolved into a much more brotherly sort of affection.

So why in the name of all the gods did the two of them keep scraping at

each other around her, as if they were a couple of mongrel dogs and she an abandoned soup bone?

“I want you to stay away from her,” Richard snarled, a predatory sound Jenny had never heard from him before. The power of a selkie came from magic, after all, not from the sort of brute power of other shapeshifters. “This is your final warning. If I catch you putting one hand on her ever again, I will rip it off and use it to dig your grave at the bottom of the sea. Do I make myself clear?”

“As *uisge beatha*.”

It took all of Jenny’s willpower not to roll her eyes at her fiancé’s masculine posturing and her friend’s equally testosterone-influenced taunting tone of voice. As far as she was concerned, they were both acting like idiots.

“Richard, listen,” she began, but she got no further. At least, not that he could hear.

With a last fuming glance in Patrick’s direction, Richard spun on his heel and strode away down the garden path with his hands clenched into fists and his back straighter than a ruler’s edge.

Jenny sighed. All at once, the reality of every hour of sleep she had missed last night seemed to weigh on her like Atlas’ globe. She lifted a hand to her face and rubbed her eyes wearily.

“Dinnae fash yourself over him,” Patrick said, patting her shoulder and probably trying not to sound like a self-satisfied sod. He was failing miserably. “He’ll cool down soon enough. And it will do him good in the meantime to learn not to take you for granted.”

He dropped his hand and busied himself shrugging into his pale blue shirt and applying himself to the buttons. “Now what do you fancy for breakfast? I’m in mind of a fry-up myself, I think.”

She turned on him and glared. “If you think I’m wasting good sausages on you, Patrick Michael MacLennan, you are in for a rare and rude awakening.”

Patrick blinked at her, his hands frozen on his shirt front, his eyes

genuinely puzzled. "What?"

"After what you just pulled?" Jenny snorted. "You're lucky I don't take you over to Mr. Wallace's farm to feed you. To his pigs!"

"Jenny, lass—"

"Don't you 'Jenny, lass' me, you great bampot! D'you think I'm some sort of idiot that I cannot tell when you're being deliberately provoking?"

He frowned. "Don't be blaming me for his sins, lass. The mon should know you well enough to know you'd never cheat on the one you're promised to. He's the one who insulted your honor, not me."

"You're an arse."

"Me? Don't you mean your precious Richard?"

"I mean both of you." Jenny shoved her way past Patrick and marched through the cottage toward her bedroom at the rear of the small house. "I *mean* the entire male sex. You're all clunch-headed fools. Every single one."

She cut off Patrick's reply by the simple method of slamming her bedroom door in his face and flipping the lock more as a gesture of her irritation than anything else. If he'd wanted the door open, one quick spell or one swift kick would have accomplished the deed. Instead, she heard some muttered curses, followed by the sharp thump of feet being stamped into a large pair of shoes. A moment later, her front door slammed shut and angry footsteps crunched through the leaves on the path across the field toward the village.

Jenny sighed and let her irritation at Patrick drain away. She knew he hadn't really meant any harm. Taunting Richard had become a sort of reflex action for him. Every time the two men crossed paths, it was veiled insults at twenty paces. Frankly, she was sick of it.

Sinking onto the edge of her neatly made bed, Jenny felt her exhaustion creep back through the veil of anger and disappointment. She had expected better of her fiancé. Patrick had been right—Richard should have trusted her. She was head-over-heels in love with him, and he knew it, so he ought to have



realized that there would be a logical explanation for the scene he had stumbled on this morning. She shouldn't have to explain herself to a jealous idiot, but it looked like that was exactly what she would have to do.

Later.

First, though, she desperately needed some sleep.

Levering her feet up onto the mattress, Jenny settled back against her pillows and let her body relax into the soft down quilt beneath her. She hadn't slept in almost thirty-three hours and for almost five of those hours, she had been casting one of the most challenging spells she had ever attempted. Even with Patrick's help, she had worried they might not pull it off, and he was the most talented magic worker she knew. Now, her body craved sleep like an addict craved her fix. Her eyes drifted shut and almost immediately, she felt herself begin to drift.

In the end, all of her effort had been worth it, she mused sleepily. Even with that ridiculous encounter with Richard added into the equation, she still believed she had made the right choice.

Lifting a hand, Jenny patted the pocket of her baggy t-shirt and felt the reassuring shape of the item inside. It had absolutely been worth it. And after she had made Richard apologize for his actions of bended knee, she felt certain he would feel exactly the same.

From her hiding place among the rocks at the base of the cliff that edged the tiny private beach, Jenny watched her fiancé emerge from the surf and make his way awkwardly a few feet up the sand. He looked sleek and healthy and not at all affected by the icy cold of the North Atlantic waters. In the moonlight, his wet hide glinted silver, and tiny droplets of water clung to the tips of his whiskers, sparkling like jewels. Even in seal form, Richard managed to look regal and powerful. It may have been his most powerful magic, but Jenny refused to let it sway her from her purpose.

Silently, she watched as he stretched, his body arching backward until the skin at the top of his skull seemed to split. From beneath the sleek, wet hide, a human head emerged, dark hair slicked back with icy water, skin pale and gleaming in the glow of the waxing moon. He shrugged, and his shoulders slid free. In a few mystical seconds, the entire sealskin slid away and Richard stood on two human feet, his other self laying like a bundle of wet rags on the sand. It was the moment Jenny had been waiting for.

She stepped forward in a rush, one hand outstretched, an ancient chant on her lips. She felt the rush of magic flow through her and in an instant, her lover's skin had flown to her hand. She held the dripping weight of it and stared at him across the darkness.

"You're not getting it back until you listen to me," she informed him, pitching her voice to carry over the low music of the waves.

"And why should I do that?" Richard asked, in a voice much calmer than Jenny had expected.

"Because as long as I have your skin, you can't return to your seal form. You're the selkie here, Richard. You're supposed to know this sort of thing."

"Ah, yes. I do vaguely recall something about that. Perhaps I was told as a child? Or maybe it can be called a sort of species memory."

Jenny shrugged, perplexed by his calm. Stealing a selkie's skin was the worst crime a human could commit against one. It trapped him on land when the sea would always be calling him home. If she hadn't been so determined to force him to listen to her explain about last night, she never would have done such a thing. But desperate times and all that.

"I mean it, Richard. I'm keeping the skin until we've talked this through."

He prowled toward her, seeming oblivious to his nudity. Somehow that nudity seemed a lot more intimidating than it had while he'd been a seal.

Jenny backed up a step. "You stalked off this morning without giving me a chance to explain what Patrick was doing at my cottage."

"Mm, I did, didn't I?"

The space between them appeared to be shrinking at a rate that made Jenny uncomfortable. She glanced uneasily around and noticed that she had very little room to maneuver before she hit the cliff wall. She had better talk fast.

"I know neither of us was what you would call completely dressed," she continued, stepping swiftly to the side, her eyes fixed on Richard's relentless approach, "but it was completely innocent. It's just that the cottage heats so quickly when the candles are lit."

"I've noticed." Dark eyes fixed on her face, their expression surprisingly predatory. Disturbingly predatory. "There has been a time or two when we've had to stop at what I would call an...inconvenient moment to open a window. You remember."

"I do. But that isn't the point."

"Mm."

Jenny swallowed hard and nearly tripped when her heel hit a large boulder. "The point is that you jumped to conclusions this morning. You saw Patrick and I together first thing in the morning in what looked like a compromising position and just assumed that something sexual had happened between us—"

"No, I didn't."

"—but you should know that I would never—"

Jenny stopped, blinked, frowned. And had to crane her neck to meet her fiancé's gaze as he finally halted with less than a hand's-breadth separating them. "You didn't?"

"Of course not."

"But you growled at Patrick. You threatened him!"

Richard sighed, lifting a hand to brush a lock of hair away from her cheek. "Jenny, my love, you were standing in front of another man wearing less than a suit of armor or a full Muslim burkah. Of course I growled. I'm a man, and—apparently—a jealous git. I want to be the only man who gets to

see you half naked. But I never believed you and Patrick had slept together. I know you'd never betray me like that."

Jenny felt like a balloon that had been left too long at the party—sadly deflated. "Oh. So I stole your skin for no reason."

He smiled and wrapped a strong arm around her, pulling her body flush up against his. She could feel the chill of his skin and the heat of his erection seeping through her clothes.

"I wouldn't fash yourself over it, love," he murmured, leaning down to press his mouth to hers. "You can keep it. I plan to spend the rest of my life with you, and I've no desire to ever escape."

Relief and love and passion and humor welled inside her, bringing a smile to Jenny's lips. She rubbed it against his, then nipped gently with her teeth. The sealskin slipped from her hands as she closed her arms around him and ran her palms appreciatively over his smooth human form.

Richard retaliated with a kiss that stole her breath and curled her toes. Or maybe he just kissed her like that because he wanted it. Either way, Jenny had no plans to object.

"Well, if that's the case, then I guess you don't need the present Patrick helped me make for you."

He pulled back and raised an eyebrow. "Present?"

She chuckled and rubbed up against him "What else did you think Patrick and I were doing in my cottage last night?"

The barrier of her clothes suddenly seemed like a personal affront and Jenny willed them away with a surge of magic. Her skin pressed to his and she shivered, not in cold but in delight.

"I didn't think," he murmured, dipping his head to nibble at the curve of her shoulder, then soothing the small sting with the warm stroke of his tongue.

"Well, we were making your wedding present."

She gripped his shoulders and boosted herself until she could wrap her legs around his hips. His hands immediately went to her bottom, cupping and

supporting her weight.

“Where is it, then?”

“Right here.”

Locking her ankles together behind his back, Jenny reached up and removed a chain from around her neck. A small disk dangled from the sturdy links, looking almost like a saint’s medal with a raised center in the shape of a heart. The piece of jewelry was masculine without being heavy and looked like something that could be worn beneath clothes without drawing attention to itself.

“What’s this?” he asked as Jenny fastened the gift around his own neck.

“My gift to you,” she whispered. Her eyes smiled into his as she cupped his face in her hands and kissed him, a kiss full of passion and tenderness. “It’s a piece of my heart. I wanted you to be able to carry it with you always, even when you go to the sea without me. This way we’ll never really be apart and you’ll always know that my heart belongs to you.” Placing a piece of yourself into an object was hard and deeply intimate, but Richard was worth it.

“*Gràidheag*,” he murmured. His eyes seemed to melt into hers as he leaned closer until their foreheads touched and their breath mingled between them. “I cannae give you a piece of my own heart, for you’ve owned the whole of it since the first time I laid eyes on you.”

She gave a watery laugh and blinked back tears of love and joy. “I was a grubby eight year old with carrotty braids and skinned knees.”

“You were a witch who bespelled my heart even then.”

Jenny stroked her hand over his face and grinned. Her heart felt so full it threatened to burst. If love was this overwhelming now, what would it feel like in two more days, when they finally took their vows together.

“Oh, I’m a very wicked witch, my love,” she said, and kissed him again, “for I intend to never give it back.”

Available July 2009

# Huntress

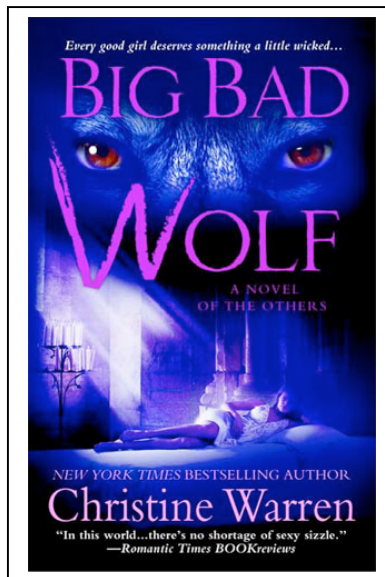
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