

# By the Salt, Salt Sea



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"Sometimes, in the evening, I sit outside, singing to myself as I wait for them to return, father and son, from the sea they love so much. If I feel lonely, all I need to do is reach for them, finding the quiet warmth within myself and sending it spinning from me, reaching out to the shore and beyond. Soon, I will taste the salt spray and feel the ageless rhythm of the waves, and together we three will celebrate and sing the songs of the ocean."

Somewhere between the outskirts of the city and the turn-off to the town of Presteign, there was an invisible boundary, and time itself was left behind, along with tourists seeking more modern seashore attractions. As though the driver was afraid that staying any longer would trap him in the Twilight Zone, the bus stopped for only a few minutes at the general store. Shari grabbed her suitcase and barely had time to turn toward the store entrance before the bus was on its way again, giving her no chance to change her mind. She needed to find a cheap room, because she had already used too much money for bus tickets and the occasional drab city motel room, but still a place that would serve as a temporary refuge. She hoped that Charles wouldn't even think to search for her in this small, out-of-the-way community; he usually ignored such places, believing them obsolete and facing extinction. Shari looked around, took a deep breath to give herself some confidence, and made her way into the store.

There was an elderly couple sitting next to the counter, playing chess. They both looked up as Shari approached, and looked closely at this new arrival, as small-town folks do when strangers come their way. Still feeling a little self-conscious, Shari found her free hand around her neck, habitually trying to hide any marks around her throat. Little did she know that the haunted fearfulness in her eyes spoke louder and was far more noticeable, than what was left of the old bruises. The old man sniffed a little, coughed, and exchanged glances with his companion. He stood up, giving

Shari a friendly smile. "Anything I can do for you, Miss?" he asked, his voice tinged with a soft burr.

"Well, I was wondering if you could direct me to a motel."

He chuckled. "Only motel's a dive out on the highway, no place for a young lady alone. Most people who live here prefer tourists who pass through, shop a bit and move on. We all like it quiet."

"Oh, that's just what I need!" Shari blurted the words out before she could stop herself; she blushed and said, "I mean I was looking for a quiet place to stay for awhile. Is there anywhere I could just find a room? Uh... I don't have a lot of money, though. I need some kind of a job, too. I'd be willing to take anything, cleaning, waiting tables, cashiering, whatever. I don't suppose you need someone here?" Only weeks earlier, she would never have dared to ask strangers for this kind of help, but strangers were all she ever saw now, and, surprisingly, she found some small courage in this relative anonymity.

The man sniffed again, and looked at a woman, who was probably his wife; they shared the kind of silent communication seen only between long-joined couples. "You might have more luck in the city," the woman said finally, speaking slowly and bringing her voice up at the end of the phrase, making it more like a question. "They have shelters and such there, and job centers."

Shari shook her head. "I'm just not comfortable in the city. All those people, the shelters are so crowded and everything is so expensive. I was really hoping... I don't have much money." Her voice trailed off; she had prepared a speech, all

about her husband's unexpected death, her struggles to pay his many outstanding debts and get away from his hostile family, but somehow the lies got jumbled up in her mind and she couldn't get them out. Lord, why was she telling her secrets to these people? "Please, can you help me?"

The woman looked down at the chessboard, then over at her companion again, raising her eyebrows a little. He grinned slightly, and nodded twice. Finally, she looked back at Shari, obviously having reached some decision. "In that case, child, I think it's the lighthouse for you."

"What do you mean?" The strange comment startled Shari, and her familiar panic, a constant companion throughout the years of her marriage, threatened to surface again.

"She means Mr. Maclachlan's place, Miss," the old man said. "I can take you there now, if you'd like. He's a writer, Mr. Maclachlan is, and he's bought the old lighthouse. The tower's old and needs work, but the keeper's house is still in good shape. I'm Gil," he added, "and this is my wife, Bess. This is our store."

"I'm Shari," she said, putting her suitcase on the floor beside her, "Shari Logan." She had decided to use the name of her last foster family, before she turned eighteen and the child welfare system wrote her off, because it was unlikely that Charles would expect her to use that name. He'd never even met the Logans, and she'd never had much reason to talk about them.

"Mr. Maclachlan might seem a bit strange at first." Bess said. "He's English, you see. But he's a good man, and the cottage is nice and quiet. He told us last week he's looking for



someone to help him keep house and handle his mail, but most of his savings went to buy the place, so all he can offer is room and board and some small wage."

"He keeps to himself," Gil added, "Spends a lot of time trying to fix up the tower, or just relaxing down on the rocks. He's real fond of the sea. He lives alone except for his dog, but you don't have to worry about how he'll treat you. He's a kind one."

"No one bothers him here, and that's how he likes it." Bess chimed back in. "You should try him at the cottage first, if he doesn't answer the door, you could just wait a bit. The weather's nice today, not much chance of a storm."

Shari's fearful indecision started whispering warnings in her head, but she had gotten a lot of practice ignoring that voice in the last few weeks, and she smiled at her new acquaintances. "It sounds like a possibility," she said, "Yes, thank you; I'd like to go there. If nothing else, I've always liked seeing lighthouses."

It wasn't a long drive down to the shore. In her head, Shari tried to estimate how long a walk it would be, and guessed maybe half an hour at a steady pace. It was a small peninsula just past the edge of town, isolated enough to be quiet and yet close enough to feel safe. The sight of the quiet light tower further out toward the water, struck a chord in Shari's soul that she had never heard before, and it felt good. "Oh please, Lord," she whispered to herself, praying that this lovely place could be her sanctuary, at least for a little while.

Gil carried her suitcase up to the door of the cottage, and knocked. When there was no answer, he shrugged and

apologized. "We should have tried calling him first, I guess. Don't know why I didn't think of that. He should be back soon enough, I would guess, but if you'd rather not wait, I can take you back." He scratched his forehead, a concerned expression on his face. "Lady living not far from the store has a couple rooms she lets out from time to time. Might be, I can talk her into giving you a room there for the night, and then try here again tomorrow?"

"I think I'll wait," Shari said, hope making her momentarily brave. "If I have to, I can hike back. It's so nice out here, and it'll be light for a while yet. Thank you so much for your help."

"Our pleasure, Miss. You be careful, now, and tell Mr. Maclachlan my Bess will take it real hard if he doesn't at least try to help you out." The old man grinned and gave her a conspiratorial wink.

Feeling almost relaxed, Shari grinned back at him. As he drove away, she picked up her suitcase and walked around the house. There was another small porch at the back, facing the ocean, somewhat at an angle to the light tower that was a short distance from the house. This was the first lighthouse she'd seen where the tower and the keeper's quarters weren't connected, but she'd read about several that were separate, and it was interesting to actually witness one. She took a deep breath, welcoming the ocean breeze into her body, and sat down on the porch steps to wait. The warning voice in her brain was asking if she knew what she was doing, shouldn't she have gone back with Gil and taken a room with his neighbor. No wait... more people would see her then and possibly remember her if someone started asking questions.

She firmly silenced the voice, sick of worrying and watched the sea gulls circling just past the light tower. There had to be an updraft there, and the birds were enjoying it, extending their wings and balancing on the air for as long as possible before flying around in a wide circle to return to the same spot and hover again. Down the shore, she could see what appeared to be some kind of spaniel patrolling the rocks like a sentinel. Much further off in the distance, there were waves breaking against the rocks, sounding almost like music. Her heart jumped in an unexpected reaction to the rough beauty of the peninsula, and also the familiar fear of rejection.

As the gulls flew further out and the music faded, the spaniel was joined by a young man who walked up from the shore. As he got closer, Shari could see that he was not much older than she was, probably in his early thirties, dark and slender, with eyes deep enough to drown in, gray-green like the sea itself, only a shade darker. As afraid of men as she had become, Shari saw in him a beauty she had thought reserved for the wild things she loved in nature, or perhaps the occasional actor. Her heart began beating even faster, and a sudden heat rose inside her. His eyes were incredible; he wasn't tall, but there was strength and agility in his graceful carriage, and he was truly handsome.

The dog came up to her, sniffed her fingers and then licked her hand. Without thinking, she scratched his ears. The man smiled at that, and Shari thought her knees were going to melt. With a silent prayer in her heart, she stammered out a short explanation about needing a job and asking the people at the general store.

"Yes, I asked Bess and Gil to be on the watch for someone," he said, with a truly beautiful accent. "I could use a little help here. I'm afraid the room is somewhat small, but it does have a nice view, and a private bath. All you'd have to do is keep the place tidy, help in the kitchen, run a few errands in town, and maybe sort through the mail a bit. There's a machine for the telephone, so you won't have to handle any of that. Don't worry about Aneurin here, either. He's a well-mannered dog, most of the time. There are a few cats wandering about, I caught them and had them fixed, and I leave food out for them, but they're all the company I get, as a rule." He extended his hand. "I'm Gareth Maclachlan."

Shari took his hand, which was warm and strong, with the kind of long fingers one associated with artists or musicians. She had a quick recollection of someone saying that most musicians he knew had hands like truck drivers. "Shari Logan. Ah, Aneurin is a Clumber spaniel, isn't he? I like to watch the dog shows on TV." Her new employer smiled again, nodding to indicate that she was right about the dog's breed. He picked up her suitcase, and led her into the house, the dog following politely behind them.

Her room was small but very comfortable. The furnishings had obviously been chosen to make the most of the available floor space and yet fulfill the needs of its resident, whether male or female. One wall was nearly taken up by built-in drawers and a closet. There was a double bed with a pedestal stand to serve as a bedside table, a small writing desk with a mirror so it could double as a vanity, an old rocking chair, and a beautiful cushioned window seat that called to Shari the

instant she saw it. The attached bath was small, with only a shower instead of a tub, but it included a mirrored medicine cabinet and two small storage units, and it was private, with a door that locked from the inside. She had very few belongings to put away, but even so, the room felt like home by the time she was finished.

They had a simple supper, accompanied by some personal conversation that Shari found awkward, because her contributions were only partially true. Once again, the dialogue she had rehearsed on the bus proved inadequate, and she found herself improvising.

"My husband, well, we split a few months ago. We were married for eight years and the end was ... difficult. I'd really rather not talk about it, if you don't mind. I just needed to get away from there, and Presteign is about as far away as I could get. I'm tired of cities anyway." This brief statement was all she could manage about her situation, and much to her relief, Gareth didn't press for more.

His life sounded so nice that Shari was doubly grateful when he didn't press for more information about hers. "I was born in Cornwall, but we moved around a lot, Cornwall, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and Skye. It was just my parents and me; they didn't have any other kids. I know Mum would have loved more, but both she and Dad were very good at accepting whatever God gave them. Dad was a nature photographer, that's why we moved around a lot, but he preferred the seacoast. That's how I fell in love with the ocean. When I first thought of moving across the Atlantic, this was exactly the kind of place I was dreaming of, and I could

scarcely believe it when I found the lighthouse and learned it was for sale. As for Mum, well, she's a scholar, an expert on King Arthur. She named me after one of the knights. She settled in Cornwall after Dad died."

His father had died in a tragic accident while protesting the slaughter of baby seals. Even now, years after, his voice broke with grief as he spoke of it.

He took a little time after the meal to show her around the cottage. Like her room, the rest of the small house was furnished simply and comfortably, making good use of all the available space. Besides the kitchen-dining room, there was a small laundry room with a half bath. Gareth's master suite was a bedroom and tiny sitting room with its own door to the home's full bathroom. Another bedroom served as his office with a smaller spare room that was his library, with books shelved from floor to ceiling. There was a nice-sized living room with one end of it also housed full bookcases. Shari could hardly believe all the books! She somehow found the courage to ask if he would mind her exploring his collection.

"Of course not! You can read whatever you like. Books are supposed to be read, after all. I'm a writer, adventure mostly. Without readers, I'd be out of work."

He finished by telling her that he'd start showing her what work he wanted her to do in the morning, and that he wanted to get some of his own work done before bedtime. He closed himself into his office, and Shari retreated to her room, curling up on the window seat and staring off toward the ocean. From her window, she could see the battered old tower that had once housed a great light to guide ships past

hidden rocks to safe harbors, and further up the coast, the tall metal structure that housed the new automatic light that had taken its place. Somehow, against all odds, she had apparently found a safe harbor of her own, for at least a few weeks and possibly a little longer; she knew she wouldn't be able to stay forever, but at least she could relax for now.

Finally, she curled up in bed, and just before falling asleep, found herself thinking about her employer. She thought everything about him was attractive: his soft voice, the beautiful Celtic shape of his face, his lean athletic body, even the fact that his height was much better matched to her own; everything entranced her. Thinking about him caused the heat in her body to rise, enough to set off alarms in her psyche. 'This is dangerous, back away, run, run ...' but for once, she was able to quell the panicky thoughts. The last thing on her mind before falling asleep was a pair of eyes that were the color of the ocean, but just a shade darker.

Shari woke the next morning to the beeping of her little travel alarm, pleasantly surprised to realize that she had slept straight through without any nightmares. She took a quick shower and stood before the mirror brushing her short dark blonde hair, mentally reviewing her small wardrobe. As soon as she had a little more money, she would have to buy some new clothes, but for now, what she had would have to do. She decided on a dark blue polo top to go with her only skirt, a knee-length black A-line. She considered using more makeup than usual, now that she wasn't facing another day on the bus, but chose instead to use some simple eyeliner to

accent her light blue eyes, a pale lipstick, and a little foundation to cover the freckles Charles hated.

She emerged from her bedroom as Gareth came in the back door with Aneurin, who had obviously just enjoyed a morning run. Her new employer was dressed much as he had been when she first met him: a dark turtleneck jersey and cords. "Good morning, Mr. Maclachlan," she said with a smile.

He smiled back. "Please, let's go with first names. With just the two of us, it seems a bit silly to be formal. Do you mind if I call you Shari?"

"Not at all. What can I make you for breakfast?"

"Why don't we make it together this morning, so you can get familiar with where everything is?"

The morning continued in this comfortable, casual way. Gareth showed her around with more detail, explaining what her duties would be, standard housekeeping just as she had expected, and some cooking, although he made it clear that they would share that responsibility. She would have evenings, Wednesday afternoons, and weekends free, and would receive her wages every Friday. The only thing she found at all frightening was providing the information Gareth needed to give to his accountant, but she didn't know what else to do. "I haven't had the chance to change all of my records yet, so some are still in my married name," she told him. This was the first time she'd used the fake social security number she'd found online, sitting in a cyber-cafe, checking out obscure websites set up for women on the run, trying to save themselves or their children from domestic horrors of all kinds. She'd thought of finding one of the shelters set up for



that purpose, but Charles would know to check those places, so she'd felt a trifle safer doing things on her own.

She settled into her new routine quickly. Because Gareth was habitually neat, did not entertain, and the house was small, her housekeeping chores were quite reasonable. He spent most of his daytime hours working at his computer, or occasionally doing restoration work in the tower. Aneurin, named after one of the very first Welsh poets, spent a lot of his time with his master, but as he became more familiar with Shari, sometimes he would follow her around the house as she worked.

Regardless of the weather, late every afternoon, master and dog went down to the ocean, walking along the rocky seacoast. Gareth was insistent on being alone for these walks, with Aneurin to watch over him and only himself to talk to; he wouldn't even take his cell phone. The only explanation he gave was that this was his way of restoring his creative energy, and she felt it wasn't her place to question it.

Shari welcomed this quiet life. There was just enough work to keep her busy throughout the day, and in her free time, she was learning things she had once hoped to learn from Charles, with his exclusive private school background. Gareth loved music, and he was more than willing to discuss it with her while they ate, or even to spend the evening sitting on the porch. They talked about how Rachmaninoff had toured for years as a concert pianist, unable to compose after leaving his beloved Russian homeland, until a Swiss hypnotist cured him. There was also a collection of Celtic music

recordings, and Shari could tell by the music in Gareth's voice when he talked about it that this was his personal favorite.

It didn't take much encouragement for Shari to plunge into the book collection, either. She was able to read to her heart's content, without worrying about being disciplined for wasting her time when she should have been getting the house ready for guests. Gareth talked about literature with her and obviously loved it as much as she did. There were times when his voice alone made her tingle all over, and occasionally, while he was out walking, she would indulge in daydreams, wondering how it would feel if he touched her, danced with her, kissed her.

At first, she missed watching television. Charles had refused to waste money on books, believing that they would soon be dinosaurs in a new technological age, and Shari had not been allowed to go anywhere alone, so she had rarely gone to the library. Catching certain TV programs, especially about nature or animals, had been the only escape she had. Even while on the run, she had tried to catch her shows in bus depots and motels. However, in the lighthouse it did not take long for her to learn that books and her imagination could provide just as much satisfaction as television had.

In her free time, she often walked up to the village. There were a few interesting little specialty shops catering to the occasional tourist passing through on the way to the more welcoming, trendy places further up the coast. There was a little public library that shared a building with the town hall, the volunteer fire department, and the small police department. Although at first, people would study her closely

when they first saw her, still, no one asked any hard questions she wouldn't have been able to answer openly, and she felt like the community for the most part, accepted her. She supplemented her scanty wardrobe with t-shirts, casual slacks, simple blouses, and a few calf-length skirts that she thought complemented her long legs better than the shorter lengths.

At least once a week, after a library visit, Shari would stop at the general store to talk to Gil and Bess. She felt safe enough to confide a few details about her life before marrying Charles, and the old couple shook their heads in dismay hearing about the foster care system. Once, Bess gave her a thick, hand-knitted sweater, so she could discard her well-worn light jacket, and the unexpected gift brought tears. "I'm sorry, really, I'm not upset or anything. It's just, I've never ... hardly ever had anyone just give me something like this, for no reason. It's so sweet. Are you sure I can't pay you for it?"

"Oh, child, that's the beauty of gifts! I'm not selling you the sweater. I want to give it to you. That color is just perfect for you, I knew the moment I saw it. Use your money on something else."

A swimsuit would have been nice, Shari thought. She had never tried swimming in the ocean before, but it was already early September, and the water, according to Gil, might be too cold for swimming if she wasn't used to it. It would probably be best to wait until summer, despite the singing she heard nearly every afternoon, calling her toward the sea until Aneurin's inevitable barking woke her from the trance.

It was after looking at swimsuits that Shari realized she had already been here more than the few weeks she had originally anticipated, and was fully planning on staying even longer. Gareth MacIachlan and his cottage, the friendly village, Gil and Bess, and even the watchful spaniel, had wrapped her in a blanket of peace, pushing the fear of pursuit back into a dark corner of her mind. She felt protected in this community, and she really didn't want to go back to the tense life of running from place to place, always on the edge of terror.

That night, she had her first nightmare since coming to the lighthouse. While she was actively on the run, the bad dreams had been frequent, but they'd stopped once she began working for Gareth. Now, the worst one of all disturbed her sleep.

She curled up against the wall of the restroom in the bus station, hiding, almost afraid to breathe. Charles pushed his way in, forcing her to leave with him, past strangers who either ignored her or shook their heads in disgust. Her husband dragged her back to his house and beat her up again, spewing criticism and disgust, taunting her madly while his mother looked on. Finally, he chained her in the basement like an errant dog.

"I'm only trying to save you from yourself, Shari. You obviously never learned how to be a proper wife. Look at everything I've given you! This house, clothes, quality friends, a decent, civilized lifestyle—do you think you could ever be able to get any of that for yourself?

"You need to learn self-discipline, you stupid bitch! What I'm teaching you about life, about society, about culture, that's worth what little sacrifice I ask of you.

"You should be proud of being my wife, you filthy whore, PROUD! Instead you keep trying to leave, to find someone else to spread your legs for! All I ask is for you to love me, and to follow my lead. Is that really so terrible?"

Twice, she had this dream, woke for an instant, and then fell back into slumber. The third time, however, she didn't stir, and the nightmare continued. Now, older memories blended with the new. As her husband's diatribes grew in volume and vile language, Shari's mother sat in a corner, crying and drinking. Her father stood on the stairs, ignoring everything, reading a newspaper, and then he turned around and left, making it clear he would never return, after which her mother started moaning about how having a worthless daughter had cost her everything. Neither of them did anything to help her.

Then Aunt Frances entered the dreamworld, walking up to her and lecturing in her sweet, condescending tones about how Charles was such a fine husband, with his education and breeding, and his money; Shari should just give him what he needed and be happy about it, and they'd all be better off. Didn't she realize Charles had paid off the family bills? Finally, Shari wrenched herself awake. She sat up, sobbing into the sleeves of the long, soft flannel nightgown from the general store, feeling very alone.

But she wasn't alone, not anymore. The door to her room was ever so slightly warped by the sea air, and didn't always

latch firmly. As Shari cried, Aneurin pushed the door open and came over to the bed, whining quietly at her distress. He rose up with his forepaws on the bed, trying to reach her hands with his tongue. Shari scratched behind the dog's ears, forcing back her tears to sooth the spaniel.

Gareth appeared in the doorway. "I'm going to have to fix this, or he's going to try sleeping with you," he remarked. As Aneurin lay down on the rug, Gareth asked very gently if Shari needed anything.

Trying to brush everything off, barely realizing what she was doing, she said, half-joking, "A good divorce lawyer, who works for next to nothing and won't let Charles know where I am."

"Charles. The man you're running from," Gareth said. "It wasn't hard to figure out," he added. "Bess said once it was the only thing that made sense."

Shari nodded, her heart pounding from fear. Would he reject her now, knowing that she'd stopped honoring her husband's wishes, knowing that she was a runaway?

"Gil's cousin in the city is a retired civil judge. I'm pretty sure he's still a member of the bar. He might be able to help you. I'll go with you tomorrow, and take you to see him."

"No!" Shari looked at him in horror. "No, don't make me go! It's too soon! Elena said to wait at least 6 months. I can't let him find me. Please, I can't!"

Gareth sat down on the edge of the bed, wrapping her in his arms and letting her cry against his shoulder. "Shhh, it's okay, we can talk about it later. I won't force you to go." He was rocking her like she was a child afraid of the dark, and

Shari leaned into him. Gradually, she could feel the tension loosen its grip, and her tears began to dry. Gareth brushed her hair back, and his touch left a warm tingle. It all felt so good, a natural continuation of their comfortable evenings together. He smiled at her, let his lips touch her forehead, and she was no longer a child but a grown woman in the arms of a man she found very, very attractive. She needed this so much! Her lips met his, and heat spread rapidly throughout her body. She could tell that a similar heat was building up in him, as his arms tightened about her. Even better than in her fantasies, the kiss deepened, their mouths opened and their tongues sought each other's touch.

At last the kiss ended, and his embrace loosened, just a little. Their eyes met hers both afraid and eager, and his inquiring. Both expressions spoke of their physical desperation. "Shari?" he whispered.

Could this be? Did he really want her, desire her? "Please!" she said urgently. They stood up, only briefly, helping each other remove unwanted nightclothes, and then they were back on the bed and in each other's arms.

Shari didn't know exactly how she should respond. Charles had been her first—and only—lover; this felt so different from what she had endured under his demands. Now, though, there was a strong need inside her that pushed the anxiety aside, and she let her body's long-suppressed instincts direct her actions. It was all so incredibly beautiful, his gentle strong active hands tracing magic across her skin, followed shortly by his tongue. She opened her legs to his body's urgent commands, and then he tasted her. Her hands found their

own magic path, first across his back and into his thick black hair, and then, as he moved forward again, her hands went around his waist and his lower back, trying to pull him even closer to her.

His mouth and fingers found her breasts, the nipples threatening to burst out of the skin even as his teeth nibbled ever so gently, teasing her. Shari's head first bent backwards, and then she leaned forward instead, burying her face in his hair. There was a sweet surprising smell of ocean breeze, a blanket of saltwater sweeping over them but feeling more like a sanctuary than something threatening to take away her ability to breathe. His skin, when she found herself licking his shoulder, tasted of salt as well, and for some reason, Shari started to laugh, a sound of freedom and joy. Her legs opened even wider, and then her feet tried to come together again, pressing her legs around his body as he entered her.

"Yes! Right now," she moaned, and then her mouth found his. His rhythm intensified, deepened, and they were completely together, breathing and moving and feeling as one being, in a way Shari had never experienced. Even their final cries were joined, a mutual sound like the wonderful, mysterious music she heard from the ocean, every afternoon while he was taking his walk.

He withdrew from her slowly, carefully, and then they both fell back to the bed, on their sides, facing each other. His fingers traced her features, while hers caressed the hair on his chest, as their breathing gradually returned to normal. There were a few tears on Shari's face, and he wiped them clear with his hand. "Did I hurt you?"



She shook her head. "Was it ... was I?"

"You are beautiful!" Suddenly, there was a disturbance on the bed, and they realized that Aneurin had jumped up. He sniffed at them both, and then, as Gareth was about to order him off, he left of his own accord. They both laughed.

"I wonder who he thought needed protection," Gareth said.

"Not a difficult question," Shari said, with a trace of bitterness and resignation.

"Hush, enough about that for tonight, you're safe here now, let's just get some sleep and we'll talk about it more in the morning."

Shari opened her mouth as though to argue, but his lips met hers instead, and the kiss effectively ended the debate before it began. She sank back against him, feeling the safety of his embrace even as he scrambled a bit to pull the covers over them. They both settled down to sleep, free of nightmares.

In the morning, it was Aneurin who woke them up, crying a bit as he licked Gareth's face. "He needs to go out," he mumbled as he sat up, swinging his legs over the side and reaching down for his robe. "Sorry, but I have to take care of him."

Shari lay curled up in bed for a few minutes, listening to Gareth let the dog out. Then she sat up herself, and was pulling her robe around her shoulders as he came back into the room. He sat down, putting his arm around her. "Well, I guess we're awake. Why don't I make breakfast? You can take a shower and join me."

She nodded, closing her eyes as he left again, taking a deep breath and trying to organize her thoughts. It had been a beautiful experience, and she couldn't really regret it, but what was going to happen now? Was this just a fluke, a moment of pity turned to lust? What did he expect of her now, what would he want? How was she supposed to act?

Moving very slowly, she went into the bathroom and took her shower. The feel of water against her body restored some of her equilibrium, when she emerged into the bedroom; she was able to respond easily to Gareth calling her for breakfast. Asking him to wait just a minute, she quickly pulled on some clothes, raked a comb through her damp hair, and walked into the kitchen.

Gareth was also dressed, although his wet hair hadn't been combed and he needed to shave. He put her plate down, and sat across from her with his own omelet. For a few minutes, they both ate hungrily, without words, but then Shari couldn't delay it any more.

"Gareth, I'm sorry I didn't tell you about, well, that I'm still married," she started. "I needed to wait a while, just to be safe."

"He's that dangerous?" Gareth spoke softly and calmly.

"This is so hard. I... well, I really loved him once. I didn't know. I thought what he did meant he loved me. No one ever cared about what I did before I met him. Dad was always so cold, and finally he just left altogether. Mama dived headfirst into a bottle, and never came out again. I was bounced between foster homes and my Aunt Frances for years. I thought when Charles always wanted to know where I was or

what I was doing, it just meant he was interested. I even thought having him choose all my clothes was really sweet. Then, after a while, it just got so stifling, and when I wanted to do things on my own, make my own choices, he got really angry and was mean." Shari had to stop, feeling a tight pain in her chest. What if Gareth couldn't understand? What if he blamed her for everything, thought she should just go on doing as Charles demanded, as Aunt Frances had, the one time Shari asked her for help. Charles paid for everything; didn't that give him the right to set a few rules?

"That's okay, Shari. Breathe deeply, and take your time. Did you ever try to tell the police?"

"Twice, but the first time, well, he really seemed sorry, like he didn't realize he'd actually hurt me and he kept swearing that now he knew, he'd never do it again. I made up some story to explain why I called, that I'd just panicked and Charles didn't really do anything. The next time, I ended up in the emergency room and the doctor there called the police, but my mother-in-law, she told everybody I had problems and would hurt myself to get attention. I was so afraid they'd believe her, since I'd lied before! I slipped out of the hospital and tried to get to a women's shelter, but Charles found me and forced me to go home with him. He said if I didn't cooperate with him, he'd have his doctor swear I was crazy and I would be committed. That was the doctor who told me sex was supposed to hurt, and maybe I should just try some antidepressants; I figured he'd go along with anything Charles asked him to do."

Shari closed her eyes and took some more deep breaths. The story was almost finished, and Gareth wasn't angry. Maybe he wouldn't blame her! "Then Elena, my mother-in-law, I always thought she was as bad as he was, she gave me money to get away. She told me to give her half a year, and she would persuade him to divorce me. She wanted grandchildren, you see, and I never even had a false alarm. She wanted to be rid of me, I guess. She said I should just get a travel-pass for the bus, the kind where you don't have to give a specific destination, so I could just keep going. And, here I am. I swear, I'm not making this up, I'm not crazy or anything ..."

"I know that, Shari, I believe you. I guess I understand why you'd want to keep hidden, but really, I think you need to do something more." Gareth spoke very carefully. "Why don't we at least talk to Gil's cousin? He might know more than we do, and he'd be bound by attorney-client privilege."

Shari was reluctant, but he was very persuasive. His kind concern gave her enough courage to make the trip into the city to meet Gil's cousin, Colin, that afternoon. Soon, she was discussing filing divorce papers. "It will be complicated, to avoid having to face him in court," the old man explained sternly. "But then, you're not asking for alimony, you didn't take anything of value with you when you left, there are no children, there aren't even any pets involved. So, I think it can be done. You may perhaps have to face him once, when the final documents are signed, but since we'll know in advance, we can have some guards present, and his own attorneys will most likely advise him to stand back at that

time." For now, he said, they would work through a larger legal firm, to protect her even more, and they would move very, very slowly.

The first step, Colin said, was to hire a detective and find out what Charles was doing. "We can try to put together some evidence of cruelty, enough to threaten him with abuse charges if he causes any trouble. Your home state has mandatory jail time for spousal abuse convictions, and if his lawyers are worth anything at all, any serious mention of charges supported by real evidence should be enough to guarantee cooperation."

Torn between the need to be free of the man she had once loved to the point of worship, and the fear of retaliation from the monster that man had turned out to be, Shari still hesitated. Gareth chided her in his quietest, most earnest voice. "If you don't put all of that behind you once and for all, it will haunt you for the rest of your life. You can't hide forever. Finish it now, Shari. It's time to taste some real freedom. You've been stuck behind his prison walls long enough."

It was almost dark when Shari and Gareth got home from the city. After all the disturbing memories she'd been describing, for most of the ride home, Shari had sat in the car half-dreaming of a quiet evening in Gareth's arms, only to hear him excuse himself as soon as they walked through the cottage. "I'm going out for my walk."

"Now? It's late and I was hoping ... aren't you hungry?"

"I just need to clear my head. I'll be an hour or so. Why don't you fix yourself supper, and I'll just have something light when I get back."

With that, he was gone, and the dog with him. She was alone again. Shari sat at the table frozen with disappointment, and then the tears started. He'd just been feeling sorry for her; he'd didn't really care for her that way, and he wasn't attracted to her. He was only playing with her. After the beauty of their night together, this rejection was more painful than any other.

The minutes crept by, and her tears finally stopped. Shari pulled off her sweater and walked wearily into her room. Not even bothering to turn on any lights, she curled up in the window seat, fighting the impulse to retreat to the self-protective numbness she'd used as a shield from Charles' emotional and psychological torment. What should she do now? Should she stay here anyway, now that she had a lawyer and had made some real moves toward starting over, or should she run again, since Charles could soon find out where she was and what she was doing? She had some money now, and there were other towns along the coast... but most of them were tourist-oriented communities and the tourist season was pretty much over. Cities were so expensive and she was tired of cold, crowded, sad shelters. She only had her high school diploma, and few real job qualifications. She'd dropped out of college after one year to get married. She had no training, no experience, and no references. She was just plain useless without a husband.

Very briefly, she considered whether Gareth was seeing another woman during those daily walks, but discarded the thought easily. It was only likely if he was seeing a mermaid; no one lived down on that beach. So, he just enjoyed his walks more than being with her. Charles was right after all. No other man could want her. She was too tall, too flat, and too stupid.

Wrapped up in depression, she didn't hear Gareth return. Suddenly, Aneurin was there, shoving his nose into her hands, whining. Gareth came in slowly, placing his hands lightly on her shoulders. "Did you find something to eat?"

"I wasn't hungry after all," she replied, her voice tired and resigned.

He moved one hand to her chin and turned her face toward him. "Shari, I'm sorry, but you know I always need my walk. Look, obviously Charles hasn't found you yet, and it's too soon for him to have heard from the solicitors. We have time to arrange some kind of security for the house."

"It's not that. I just thought ... last night was special and I really thought ..." she choked, expecting him to start laughing. She should have fixed some food to have ready for him, she should have ...

He pulled her up and folded his arms around her, letting her forehead rest against his chest. He gently rubbed her back and shoulders, and finally she began to relax again, putting her own arms around his waist.

He kissed her hair and began murmuring one of his Celtic songs. She had no idea what the words really meant, but the

tone was clear, and some of the pain in her breast slipped away. She lifted her face to meet his in a long, tender kiss.

Finally, Gareth pulled away, kissing her once more, quickly, on the forehead. "Now, why don't we get something to eat?"

They settled for fruit salad and scones, a very strange evening meal, but after the heaviness of the day, a light meal seemed right. While they ate, Gareth talked about some of his projects. "The staircase in the tower is actually in pretty good condition, considering the age of the building, and the outer wall is stable. I'm just working on redoing the inner walls right now. Soon, I'll have to take you up to the lens chamber itself, the view is spectacular."

"I'd like that," she replied softly. "I've never gotten to see the view from inside a lighthouse; I've just looked at the buildings from the outside."

"Well, now that I've sent in the completed manuscript of this book, I'll have a little more free time, until the editor lets me know what he thinks and I have to do the final rewrites. Of course, I'm still working on translating my great grandmother's journals. Did I tell you about her? Journals were very popular in her day, and hers are quite lovely, but she wrote them in Gaelic. I've been working on the translations for a long time now."

Later, when they settled in the living room, he began to read some of the passages he'd already translated from the journals. It sounded something like poetry to Shari; in fact, some of the phrases were so strange, it almost had to be poetry.



"Sometimes, in the evening, I sit outside, singing to myself as I wait for them to return, father and son, from the sea they love so much. If I feel lonely, all I need to do is reach for them, finding the quiet warmth within myself and sending it spinning from me, flying out to the shore and beyond. Soon, I will taste the salt spray and feel the ageless rhythm of the waves, and together we will celebrate and sing the songs of the ocean."

"That was beautiful," Shari said sleepily. "Can we go to bed now?"

He laughed. "Yes, I suppose it is getting late, isn't it?" He picked her up and carried her into her room. She was too sleepy to protest, although she marveled at the ease of his movement. He sat her down on the edge of her bed and started taking her clothes off. She reached out to unbutton his shirt, and soon they were climbing into bed together. All he did, though, was pull her to his side and hold her. "We both need to sleep, luv," he whispered. Shari felt a flicker of disappointment, but even as her hand was moving across his chest, that flicker died. She felt warm, comfortable, and safe, after a day filled with painful recollections, and it was so reassuring to simply feel his chest rise and fall with each breath. Sleep soon buried disappointment.

In the days ahead, their relationship continued to deepen, even as there was a slow steady progress in the business of legally freeing her from Charles. It took only a few days for Colin's detective to file a preliminary report, and the lawyer immediately faxed it to them. The report showed that her husband's attempts to find his missing wife had been sporadic

and apparently ineffective. He was more occupied at present fighting serious economic problems both at work and at home.

Even better, for their purposes, the detective had gotten some documentation of abuse, in the reports from the emergency room doctor and statements from other hospital employees. There was one strongly-worded statement from one of the ER nurses, an older woman who had seen far too many cases of domestic abuse, and saw more of the truth behind what Charles and Elena had sworn. She also made it clear that she would be willing to testify to that in court. So, the divorce papers were filed.

Shari left all the technical business in Colin's hands, starting to trust him just as she was learning to trust Gareth, and to believe that he really was as different from her husband as he seemed. Still, every time there was a new legal problem to discuss or more paperwork to handle, the nightmares would come back, and she couldn't stop them. Supposedly, even Charles' lawyers didn't know precisely where she was, but there were channels of communication open to him now, and he used them, having the lawyer's forward letters to her.

At first, the letters were sentimental. "Do you remember going to the ballet? I introduced you to The Nutcracker and Swan Lake, and you would lean forward in your seat, and your face would shine so much I almost cried to watch it. I had tickets to Cinderella last month, but I just couldn't face going alone, so I threw them away." And that night, in her dreams it was the King of the Rats, staring at her with

Charles' eyes, which dragged her from the bus station. And as Elena watched her son beat Shari yet again, she wore the Black Swan's costume and smiled sweetly at them both.

Gradually, the sentiments faded, replaced by hurt feelings. "I tried to make it all up to you. I know I get angry sometimes, but you hurt me so much. I just want you to love me back, that's all." And the Charles in her dreams was crying all the while he assaulted her, raped her, and handcuffed her to the basement wall.

Finally, the last letters were simply angry. In them, Charles kept swearing that he really loved her and wanted her back, and he swore that divorce wouldn't end anything, that she was his and always would be a part of his life. She was a fool if she thought she could get away with humiliating him like that. Didn't she realize that no one else would ever want her? "Without me helping you, you'll dress like some back alley whore! You don't know anything about the world; you're stupid and uneducated and wear makeup like a common streetwalker. That's probably what you'll end up doing, too, and don't think I'm going to give you any kind of settlement to keep you off the streets either, you greedy little witch. Except for your \$50 customers, you'll be completely alone!"

Still, Shari insisted on reading the letters, feeling it was better to know than to imagine. So, the nightmares continued, but the impact grew less, because she wasn't alone. She got used to the feel of Gareth's arms around her, soothing the nightmares away, and to the sound of his voice, as strong as it was gentle, swearing to keep her from harm. Soon, much sooner than she had ever believed it would

happen, she was no longer sleeping in her little room, but was sharing Gareth's four-poster. The heat of his body and the security of his arms around her combined to ward off the bad dreams, and his breathing reassured her when she woke during the night.

As inexorable as time always is, fall gave way to winter, and the sea air grew colder. Shari's solitary walks to town decreased, but Gareth reacquainted her with the skills of driving and she was welcome to use his car. There were also visits to Colin's office in the city to discuss legal developments, and on these excursions, all three of them would eat out. Sometimes, Gareth would take Shari shopping while the attorneys worked, although he always insisted that they leave the city in time to be home before it was completely dark. As pleasurable as these trips were, Shari was always relieved when they got back home, and not only would she be alone with her lover and the faithful spaniel, they could turn on the newly installed security system and lock the rest of the world out of their lives.

Despite the harsher weather, Gareth continued his daily hikes down to the shore, even if he did have to adjust the time to fit around Colin's schedule. His only concession to the weather conditions was to wear a heavier coat. As the days grew shorter, he returned to the cottage closer to, and then after, nightfall. By this time, Shari was well used to his habits, and tried very hard not to let it bother her. Once or twice, she asked if she could go with him, only to be told again that this was his "quiet time" and he needed to be alone. It was the

only thing he ever really denied her, but despite everything, she still worried.

She now needed more than her housekeeping duties and the visits to town to occupy her mind. She started working her way through his music collection, sometimes pulling down one of the musical reference texts to look for specific information about composers or styles of composition. She also took up drawing. At first, she hid it from Gareth, afraid that he would laugh at her artistic ambitions, but he soon found out, and instead bought her books on the techniques of drawing, so she could study and improve.

One day, when Gareth and Aneurin got back from their walk, he found Shari absorbed in a pencil portrait of the spaniel. Gareth gestured to the dog to remain at his side, and they both stood quietly, watching her, without her knowing they had come in. She would pick up a photograph and study it, gnawing on one corner of her lower lip, and then the photo would be put aside, and she'd draw in a few more details. Finally, after several minutes, she put down the pencil and stretched. Aneurin apparently decided this meant he didn't need to be still any more, and he padded over to Shari's side, nuzzling her hand.

"That is really, really good, Shari," Gareth said. He walked up behind her, picking up the photo and comparing it to the drawing. It was obvious that she was using her memory as well as the picture, since the portrait was not an exact duplication. "You really need to pursue this. You know, I've heard that the community college offers some pretty good

classes in art. Once a few more legal things are settled, we should get you enrolled there."

Shari almost gasped. "You wouldn't mind? I mean, I'd be gone more, and seeing other people ..."

Gareth grinned. "I'd be proud." He knelt beside her, taking her hand and looking up at her. "You have a real talent, and I want you to fulfill yourself."

She smiled tentatively at him, and tears formed in her eyes. He stood up, pulling her to him, and she leaned against his chest, feeling his warm support and accepting it, swearing to herself that she could—and would—prove herself worthy of it.

"I think I love you, Shari," Gareth said softly, and some of her tears began to fall. His hold tightened, still gentle but even more secure.

"I think I love you, too," she whispered.

"Stay with me. After the divorce, too. I want you with me forever as my wife."

Shari could scarcely breathe, and in the sudden quiet, she was amazed that the pounding of her heartbeat wasn't making the artwork on the walls shake. "Time," she gasped. "I'll need some time, after ... after it's all over. I can't think about it now."

"I can wait. I won't even mention this again until afterward, but I'm not going to forget either." He squeezed her for a second, and then released her, picking up her drawing again. "This really is very, very good."

That night, for the first time, Shari had dreams that weren't nightmares, dreams of the seashore, and watching

the sun come up over the ocean, drawing with it a blanket of brilliant color.

Gareth had an extensive collection of books about Celtic folklore and history. Shari found herself very attracted to them, first because of the exquisite knot work that illuminated many of the bindings, and then because the stories themselves were so interesting. Soon, her drawings included interpretations of those stories; she was pulling things out of her imagination, and sketching them began to feel as natural as drawing something sitting directly in front of her eyes.

She found that music not only made the time slip past more smoothly, it also helped her relax. After exhausting Gareth's classical collection, she began listening closely to Celtic music, both instrumental and vocal, even though she could not always understand the lyrics. When it was just the dialect, and sometimes even when the lyrics were in the original Welsh or Gaelic languages, she learned to look in "The Popular English and Scottish Ballads". Gareth owned a complete set of Child's classic reference work, and she would dive happily into the descriptions of a song's history and development, along with the translations of the lyrics.

It was one gray afternoon in November, when Shari first listened to a recording of "The Great Selkie of Sule Skerry". The sadness of the ballad touched her deeply, even though this recording did not use the final verses. Not until she pulled down the appropriate volume of the Child texts and read avidly through the explanation of the song, did she realize that the woman in the ballad committed suicide. She bore a

child for a father who was "a man upon the land" and "a Selkie in the sea", who would pay her a purse of gold for his child. Then, her husband, "a right fine gunner", killed both father and child, and the woman threw herself into the sea. The story vibrated deep into Shari's soul, almost as deep as her love for Gareth. Searching through other texts, she read everything she could about Selkies, strange beings who could appear as normal human folk on land but who would pull on a sealskin and change into a seal, swimming away to their great underwater kingdom, Sule Skerry, but she could never find enough information to satisfy her strong curiosity.

Part of her realized that she was not supposed to sympathize with the Selkies, frequently portrayed in the songs and stories as villains, but she couldn't help herself. For so many years, she had dreamed of being able to just go away to some beautiful world where people like Charles and his mother, or like her own cold, uncaring father, did not exist. It took little imagination to make Sule Skerry into that world. She kept on researching, going to the small public library, searching through their limited collection for more references to Selkies and extracting a promise from the librarian to request more books from other libraries. She had long discussions with Mrs. Sanworth about mythical creatures, mostly shapeshifters, but also elves and wizards, winged horses and the one and only Phoenix, but Selkies remained her favorite.

Finally, she asked Gareth if he knew of any other sources of information, and was disappointed by his reluctance to discuss what he called a "depressing and morbid" topic.



"There are so many other stories, other creatures. You know, there are even some legends about our lighthouse. The story goes that one of the first keepers got so lonely his first winter here; he got desperate for a wife. Back then, the town of Presteign didn't exist, and the closest settlement was where the city is now. Anyway, he wrote lots of letters and arranged a marriage. What he didn't know is that the woman wasn't really given much of a choice in the matter. Her father and stepmother were desperate to get rid of her, because, like her real mother, she was a Siren, like in mythology. Anyway, it turned out for the best, because she could use her abilities to lure stranded shipwreck survivors down the coast to the lighthouse, and safety. I would imagine Mrs. Sanworth has some books about that legend, being that it's local history. Have you asked her about local folktales?"

"We've discussed it a little," Shari admitted. "But I keep thinking of the Great Selkie, like in the song. I want ..."

"Oh, but stories with local ties can be really fun. I know, how about a Pooka? Just last year, some tourist stopped on the shore just to take some pictures, and she saw a horse galloping down the beach. She swore she'd seen a woman first, and the woman turned into a horse and ran away, and she babbled about Pookas, like the rabbit in Harvey. Chief Corrigan had to take her over to the Cameron place and show her their horses to persuade her she'd just seen a horse that got spooked by something and ran off without her rider. Pookas can at least be a little fun to read about, not always so sad."

"I don't know. There's just something about Selkies that makes me want to know more about them. The whole idea just fascinates me." Shari persisted, knowing by now that Gareth would not respond with anger or violence, and at last he gave in.

As it turned out, he knew some really old stories; ones that rarely saw print and were told only in tiny villages in the remotest corners of Scotland and the northern isles, legends that went back as far as the Biblical flood.

"When God sent the flood, Lucifer and the other angels who had followed him to rule over the humans were able to escape, but they had to leave behind their half-human children. Some of these poor souls had tried desperately to turn aside from their ungodly heritage and to live according to Yahweh's laws, and when they prayed to Him to spare their lives, He was merciful to them. Some say they hid themselves in the deepest caves of distant mountains, where they remained, separate from humans, becoming the elves, dwarves or other Faery Folk of legend. However, some were simply changed into a form that could survive the floodwaters, becoming seals, seeking refuge when necessary on small barren rocks that were high enough to rise above the water, and afterward, this rocky land became the kingdom known as Sule Skerry." With his accent, the story almost sounded like a song.

The Selkies were given a choice. They could retain the seal form, but would have only the lifespan of animals, without an immortal soul, or they could resume human form as long as they returned to the sea regularly. In this way they retained

their souls, and lived as long as normal humans. However, Selkies could only have offspring with human mates, and these was the source of the better known legends of evil Selkies, males who would force, trick, or seduce human women into mating with them, only to steal the babies, using magic sealskins to change the children into Selkies.

As Gareth continued the tale, there was sadness in his eyes and he was not looking directly at her. "There are kinder stories," he finished, "where Selkies and humans form permanent unions, even marry and have that marriage sanctified in the eyes of the Lord. These stories are known only to a very few, because they could not survive the age of witch-hunting, when Selkies were declared the spawn of Satan. If a story told of a good Selkie, it was denounced as heresy. Still, there are some remote fishing villages where the verbal tradition survives, and that's how I heard these legends."

He stopped abruptly, and then repeated his earlier statement that he found it all very depressing, certainly not good material for a late evening conversation. Shari could sense that no amount of begging on her part would get him to say any more on the subject, and she decided not to try. Besides, it was time for his daily walk. Within minutes, he was out the door, with the ever-faithful spaniel at his side.

Still, throughout that night, she felt strangely unsettled, as though she had heard something she was not meant to hear. There had been a tense undercurrent in the story, or perhaps it was only the sadness in Gareth's voice, or that distant look in his eyes, but whatever the case, the subject obviously

made him uncomfortable. He loved the sea so much—never once had she known him to direct his daily walk in any other direction—and yet, despite his clear interest in myth and legend, he obviously did not like to talk about this one sea-based story. Why was he so ... uncomfortable, talking about that subject?

Her sleep was again uneasy, filled with strange dreams in which a male figure looking very much like Gareth approached a crying woman and took a baby from her arms. She woke feeling sick, and even though she knew the dreams were absurd, the product of an over-active imagination, she decided never to ask her lover any further questions about Selkies.

The sick feeling, though, refused to go away for very long, and often, her nausea coincided with music she alone seemed to hear, the sea songs carried over the waves by the wind, however distant and faint the sound was. The approach of Thanksgiving also made Shari consider how long she had been living in Presteign. This led to other considerations about dates, and she realized that there might be an explanation for these recurrent bouts of nausea, one that had nothing to do with the ocean's music.

How could she have so badly lost track of time? Of course, there had been other serious concerns that took a lot of attention, but to have missed at least two, maybe even three, months without even thinking about it? Birth control was something Charles had refused to discuss, as his family vehemently opposed contraception. In fact, one of the reasons he had grown more antagonistic and violent was

Shari's failure to conceive. Gareth, however, always used protection. Since she had been so unfamiliar with condoms, they sometimes turned the matter into a kind of game, with her being the one to pull the rubber over his cock while using every possible part of her body to maintain his excitement in the process.

Was it possible that she had conceived during those last terrible days with Charles? No, she distinctly remembered the discomfort of cramps while she was still riding the bus for hours every day, after leaving him. If she was indeed pregnant, Gareth had to be the father.

Then she remembered the very first time they had shared their bodies, over two months ago now. There had been that nightmare, the first one she'd had here in Gareth's cottage, and she had clung to him like a desperate shipwreck victim holding tight to the spar that kept her head above water, before passion swept them both away. It was the only time she could remember when Gareth hadn't taken precautions. It was hard to believe that, after years of failure, one time could be enough, but there was no other explanation. She fought panic as she wondered how he would react. He rarely said anything about children, whether he liked them or wanted a family of his own. She decided she needed to confirm or deny her suspicions before she said anything to him, rather than threaten her new life needlessly.

Thanksgiving Day was unusually warm and sunny, and shortly before noon, they had a pleasant walk into town to share a fine traditional holiday dinner with Bess and Gil. Afterward, they all worked together to clean everything up,

and then while the men played chess, Shari and Bess had a quiet conversation. Bess was the closest adult friend Shari had ever had, and she had to talk to someone about her dilemma.

"I wasn't too worried, because I didn't conceive in all those years of marriage, but now... I don't know what else to think."

Bess sighed deeply, then smiled and said she would make an appointment for Shari to see her own doctor for tests. "I know they have these new home pregnancy tests, but I don't really trust them. Better to have the doctor handle it."

Shari cast a look across the room, to where the men sat hunched over their game, and then, very quietly, she brought up Gareth's insistence on his private daily walks down the beach. "I mean, he's so determined about it, every single day, regardless of the weather, and if I even mention the possibility of me going along, he almost has a fit." Trying to make it sound almost like a joke, she mentioned how she had gotten interested in Selkies, and wouldn't it be strange if that was why Gareth always went alone, with only the dog to guard the beach until he came back. "That would be typical for me, I finally find someone I think I can truly love, and he's really a seal!"

Apparently, she hadn't succeeded in making it a joke. Bess took a deep breath, and wrapped her arms around Shari. "Oh, Child, such worries you have! Please remember, there will always be people who are, well... just different. Not monsters or freaks, not better or worse than everyone else, just different. What is important, what you need to always hold

close, is what a person is in his heart. Gareth has a good heart, much like my old Gil; neither of them would ever willingly hurt another person. Consider carefully now, can you really see that beautiful man seducing a woman so he could steal her baby? Of course not. Otherwise, if he does things a little differently, if he's not an ordinary everyday man, if he has few private needs, just accept them as part of what he is. My Gil needs his private time too, but I wouldn't trade him for the world."

Shari nodded, and smiled at her friend. She wasn't sure Bess really understood her fears; it still sounded stupid to her too, but the older woman's words were mildly reassuring.

As it was getting dark earlier every day, Gil gave them a ride home. Shortly after they got there, Gareth took Aneurin and departed for his daily excursion. Shari sat down in the living room, picking up one of her interlibrary loan books, a text that had actually come directly from the British Library, but as she began to read, the phone rang.

It was Colin. "I have some news," he said. "Charles has been behaving more and more erratically, even arguing in public with his mother, and then yesterday, he was arrested for embezzlement. I don't have a lot of details as yet, but I wanted you to know. I'll call as soon as I know more."

In shock, Shari hung up the phone. She should have been relieved that Charles was in jail, but instead, she felt a strange foreboding. She reached once again for her book, but then the familiar nausea started. Folding her head toward her legs and trying to control the queasiness with deep breathing, she began to hear that strange distant music, eerie and

indescribable. Suddenly, she felt so terribly sick, she ran for the bathroom. Even as she bent over, retching miserably, she could have sworn she heard Gareth cry out her name; the waves sounded as though they were breaking right outside the window instead of some distance down the beach, and for one brief moment, she swore she could taste sea water. She also felt as though her lover was right there, touching her, caressing her.

As she walked shakily out of the bathroom, Gareth burst into the house, calling for her. "I felt something," he said, as he wrapped an arm around her and helped her to the sofa. "Somehow, I knew something was wrong. Are you all right? Do you want me to call for help?"

"No, no, I'll be fine. It was just ..." What could she say? She couldn't tell him her suspicions, not yet. "I got some news from Colin, and I guess it upset me and I just felt really sick." She told him about Charles' arrest, and he held her even closer.

"It could help us, you know," he said. "Maybe he'll have to give up contesting the divorce. At least now, he has something else to be angry about."

Gareth insisted on her going to bed early, promising to join her as soon as he took care of some email correspondence with his mother in Cardiff. Shari curled up under the covers, her thoughts torn and wild as the sea during a tempest. How had he known she was sick? Had she actually heard him call her name? And what about feeling his touch, his warm fingers on her arm, as though he'd been right beside her?



Every bad thought she had ever had about his solitary hikes washed over her, even her crazy dreams where Gareth took a baby from its mother like the Great Selkie of Sule Skerry. She was afraid that if she spoke to Gareth now, she would blurt out her questions, her worries, so when he finally joined her in bed, she pretended to be asleep. This was something she had practiced often with Charles. It had been easy with her husband, because he didn't really care about her that much, but she had to struggle not to respond to Gareth's quiet hand brushing her hair back and his warm lips touching her forehead. It would have been so easy to curl up in his arms and let passion wash her fears away, but she felt a deep need to keep her head clear, to think about these fears instead of just dismissing them again.

Somehow, even as part of her recognized the thorough craziness of it, the thought that kept surfacing, over and over, was that he was, impossibly, a Selkie. There was his reluctance to discuss the subject, and the intensity of his words and his emotions when he finally did tell her of the Bible-oriented legends. Maybe he hadn't just heard those stories in tiny, isolated fishing villages.

He'd lived all of his life near the ocean. Maybe his father's preference for photographing the seacoast was actually a similar need to go to the ocean every day. And the elder Maclachlan had died trying to protect baby seals!

Gareth's hair always smelled of a sea breeze, and every time Shari kissed him, or tasted his skin, she tasted salt, however faintly. Perhaps it hadn't just been sweat, as she had occasionally thought. She'd also tasted salt water that

evening, in the bathroom. And every time they made love, she could hear the sound of the waves, just as she had while she was sick.

There was also that mysterious, beautiful music she heard, both in the throes of passion and every time he was taking his seashore walk. In some of the books she'd been reading, the Selkies loved music, and made their own out on the ocean.

She recalled the entry from his great-grandmother's journal. The woman had waited for her husband and her son to "return from the sea they love so much." More than just daily walks to the shore, perhaps?

All night, these thoughts churned through her mind, even as she tried to relax and sleep, spooned against her lover, his arm draped casually across her shoulder, the sound of his breathing keeping her awake instead of reassuring her. By morning, she had reached only one conclusion: she had to find out, one way or another, even before a doctor confirmed something else she already knew in her heart was true—that she carried this man's child.

Right after breakfast, Gareth had to leave for a few hours, to visit with his accountant. He asked Shari if she wanted to go along, perhaps to be dropped off at the library or the general store, but she simply told him she preferred to get some housework done.

As soon as he left, Shari went into his office, searching through the documents and papers on his desk, snooping like she had never done before. She found his translations of the journal entries, and began looking for the part he'd read to

her. When she found it, she sat in his comfortable desk chair, and began to read. She didn't have to go very far to find a passage that, despite the beauty of the words, chilled her heart. "Through our passion, through this child that our love has created, we are connected, and that connection is never lessened by distance, or by the differences between us," she read. "For we are very different, and there is a part of his life, their lives, that I cannot physically share, yet even as I sit here, alone, separated from them by ocean and physical form, we are joined. I feel what they are feeling, the water around me as they swim so joyfully. This is the power of our Love."

Shari could read no further. She sat at Gareth's desk, looking out at the rocks that marked the sea coast, and cried, the salt of her tears tasting so different from the sea salt she could taste in her lover's kisses. Finally, she took several deep breaths, wiped off her face, and carefully replaced the pages on his desk where she had found them.

It wasn't like she could just ask him if he was a Selkie. If he wasn't, if there was some other explanation for everything, he would think she was truly insane. If he was, he would probably deny it anyway, and afterward, she might be in danger, although somewhere in her heart, she knew that he would never intentionally hurt her. That part of Bess's advice she could accept fully and without question. For one thing, obviously neither his father nor his grandfather had stolen their children and abandoned the mother; no, there had been real family connections.

There was only one solution. Somehow, she would have to watch him, to see him sweep the sealskin around himself and change form before leaping into the water. That was the only way she would know. Until she found a way to do that, she had to keep him from knowing that she even suspected.

She went to work, diligently cleaning one room of the cottage after another. By the time Gareth got back from town, she was done with his bedroom and the bathroom, and was working on the kitchen. She paused for lunch, during which she made simple conversation about small things, like the weather, of course, and the weekly grocery order. After lunch, she finished cleaning the kitchen and moved on to the living room, when Gareth laughingly told her that since she'd done two days' worth of work already that morning, she should rest for the afternoon. A quick thought sprinted through her mind. "Would you mind if I visited the tower? The weather's so nice; I really think the view will be perfect."

He'd taken her to the tower once before, shortly after the first time he'd discussed the subject with her, so she was familiar with the layout, and knew that the staircase would hold her weight without any problems. "Of course. You don't need my permission, you know. Just watch out for the tools and everything else lying around."

He went into the office to handle some correspondence pertaining to the foreign language sales of his last two novels, and Shari strolled over to the tower. She climbed up to the lens chamber and went out on the keeper's walk. The view was indeed beautiful, but she was more interested in just how far she could see down the coastline. She could just make out

his oft-described cove, and hoped that the visibility would stay clear, so she could see it later that day as well, when he and Aneurin went out for their walk.

She sat on the walkway for a while, breathing deeply and trying to clear her head of all thought, just taking in the fresh air and sunshine, relaxing. She even dozed off for a while, and when she woke and went back to the house, she felt relaxed enough that she didn't need to resume working at the hectic pace of that morning just to keep from worrying, or blurting out words she knew she'd regret. Instead, she picked up her book again, and began reading, able to concentrate well enough that she found herself grabbing her writing pad to jot down some more notes.

Gareth came out to the living room, seeming very pleased. "How would you feel about having a guest here for Christmas?" he asked. "I just got an email from Mum and she says she'd like to meet you, and see what I've done with this place. She hasn't been here since I first moved in last year."

"That's great!" Shari said, faking more enthusiasm than she could make herself feel. 'His Mother' meant Elena as far as her nervous system was concerned, and as a result, meeting Mrs. Maclachlan was a scary thought. Yes, Elena was the one who provided her with money and its corresponding ability to get away, but up until that point, her mother-in-law had been persistently hostile, cold, and unforgiving, and her stated reason for helping Shari had been very self-serving. Still, maybe Gareth remained close to his mother for better reasons, and her wish to come for the holidays and meet Shari could be a good omen, not a threat.

He hugged her briefly, and for a moment, all she could feel was desire, a stronger than ever wish that he would pull her down to the living room floor and make love to her tirelessly for the rest of the day, but before she could fully register that thought, he was bouncing back toward his office. "You'll like her, Shari, I promise you that. And I'm sure she'll love you. How could she not?"

Shari set her book down and rubbed her forehead. She had to succeed that afternoon, had to learn once and for all if Gareth was just a wonderful, beautiful, kind man with one eccentric habit, or a creature of legend. She placed her hand on her stomach. What if he only wanted her child? So many of the legends concentrated on that theme, but again, obviously he had lived with both of his parents, and his mother was very much a part of his life. His father hadn't taken him away. And he had spoken, with sincerity and intensity, about 'stories' of Selkies who consecrated their love for their human mates with church weddings.

Soon enough, Gareth pulled on a jacket and headed out the door with his canine companion. Shari watched him go for only a few seconds before reaching for her own winter jacket, the outside temperature finally having gotten too cold for just the sweater Bess had given her, and slipped outside herself, making once again for the light tower. Just as she went out the door, the house telephone rang, but she couldn't take the time to answer it, didn't want to take the cell phone with her, and so left the machine to pick up the call.

It was getting darker, of course, and she found it difficult to see details along the coast. Still, she kept her eyes on the

two figures moving along the rocks. She wasn't sure what she was praying for, beyond just knowing, one way or the other. She stood at the metal barricade, and kept watching Gareth and Aneurin as they proceeded toward the little cove.

They walked around a rock formation, and suddenly, she couldn't see either of them anymore. Her heart almost stopped—to fail at this point would be a nightmare. She didn't know if her sanity could survive another 24 hours with these questions pressing on her soul. Then, she kneeled at the barricade, almost like taking communion. She settled back on her heels, closed her eyes, and tried to clear her head of everything but the smell of the ocean breeze and the sound of the breaking waves. She had heard him last night; he had known something was wrong. The connection his great-grandmother had written of was all she had left, if she was to get an answer to her questions.

The seagulls were calling, and a growing wind whistled around the tower. Gradually, starting in the distance and moving closer, the music of the ocean swept over the rocks toward her. Although Shari's eyes were tightly closed, she could see those rocks, and then the loyal dog sitting alone, waiting for his master to return. The melody surrounded her, and when it moved back out to sea, she was riding with it.

Shari gasped. The water was so cold, and yet so ... safe! She felt it all around her, felt a moment's panic as she went under the waves, but her nostrils closed quite naturally, and then opened again as her head rose above the water. There was a kind of quiet collision, and she knew that Gareth felt her presence.

Much to her surprise, she felt ... joy! He wasn't disappointed, or angry, he was happy, and she could sense that he had been hoping for this to happen. He continued his merry journey through the waves, and the music grew louder. "I knew it!" she heard him think. "I told Mum that we were joined, but you didn't know it yet."

"You knew I'd figured it out?" Shari found herself talking to him as though he were physically beside her.

"Last night, I thought you might have. I couldn't say anything. If I was wrong, you'd think I'd gone bonkers or something." He was laughing, and at first, Shari laughed with him, but his next words sent a kitten walking up her spine. "It's a girl, you know. The baby you carry, I can already tell it's a girl."

"This is what you wanted, isn't it?" She couldn't help herself, she had to ask. "You wanted me pregnant, like in the song. You're going to take the baby!"

"No, I swear! It was an accident; that first time, I wasn't thinking. You know I've been careful ever since." His thoughts felt sad, as though he was disappointed that she would believe him to be so cruel. "I love you, Shari! I want to marry you, and I don't intend to ever leave you. But the baby is a fact, she's real, and I can't help but be happy."

Somehow, suddenly, Shari knew that he couldn't lie to her when they were communicating like this, and much of her fear drifted away. The water swept around her, and it no longer felt cold. In fact, it felt like ... his fingers, dancing along her bare skin as they lay together. His lips touched hers, and she tasted the salt. Her breasts rose, swelling in



almost painful ecstasy. She threw back her head and pulled him to her chest, her fingers drowning in his thick hair. She felt a different wetness, and his fingers were probing her there, too, and she opened in full expectation of receiving him. She reached down and felt the fullness of his erection, singing of his need for her. There was so much joy in being able to excite him in this way, and in realizing that his own pleasure was multiplied by knowing that she shared it. Then they were joined, despite their physical separation, rolling in the wildness of the ocean waves, and the water sang to them, sang of their love to the whole world.

The waves broke against the rocks, over and over, and she felt each one, thrusting into her until the last crash against the outer wall of the lighthouse, and there the water left her behind. Gareth had come ashore, and Shari gasped at the strange sensations under her skin, feeling his muscles moving in ways she had never dreamed possible, bones shifting and stretching, as he regained his human form, and she opened her eyes in wonder at this incredible phenomenon.

She was still in the light tower, kneeling at the metal barricade, her heart pounding as her lungs struggled to return to their usual rhythm. Although the physical sensation of being with Gareth was gone, they were still connected, and she knew when his transformation was complete. She stayed where she was, closing her eyes again so she could watch with her mind, seeing him as he took his clothing from a water-proof box anchored in a cleft of rock, watched over by the faithful Aneurin. He dressed rapidly, and she could tell

that now he was feeling the colder temperatures, as she was again herself.

Man and dog walked up the shore, and Shari kept her position on the tower, enjoying the sound of Gareth's breathing, the feel of his hands as he thrust them into his pockets to keep warm. Somehow, she knew that as soon as she opened her eyes, the visual link would be gone.

He had reached the house, and she knew he was looking up at the tower, searching for her. Aneurin started barking; a frantic sound, and then, she heard a voice, a horribly familiar voice.

"Excuse me. I'm looking for someone and I think you can help me." A tall figure moved away from the side of the house, just as Shari opened her eyes, sending a frantic thought to her lover.

"Charles! It's Charles!"

She stared desperately down at the house, which now seemed so far away from the tower. In the growing darkness, illuminated only by the single light on the porch, she watched as Charles moved toward Gareth. Aneurin growled and leaped forward; there was a dreadful exploding sound, followed by the dog's painful cries as it fell back to the ground. Charles pointed his gun at Gareth, and gestured toward the house.

Shari turned and ran into the lens chamber. She started down the winding stairs, almost stumbling in her rush, and then she could hear Gareth's voice in her head. "Get help, Shari. Don't come alone."

"There's no time!" she thought back, frantically. "It's me he wants ..."

"Then he could just kill both of us. Get help."

Shari closed her eyes, hoping to see through his again, to know what was happening. She caught a brief glimpse of Charles, gesturing madly with the gun, saying something about how ultimately, everyone betrayed everyone else, and just as he had been betrayed, Gareth could count on Shari turning on him. Then, it was like a door closed in her face as Gareth thrust her out, once again telling her to get help.

Shari's legs weakened, and she almost sat down on the stairs, but before the tears could begin and her old fears about Charles overwhelmed her again, a tide of strength swept over her instead. She wasn't that person anymore, she had found what love truly was, and she was carrying a baby who would need both of her parents if she were to have a better life than Shari had known as a child.

Moving as rapidly as she could, Shari made her way to the ground level. Peering desperately through the dim light around her, she searched through Gareth's tools until she found a hammer. She hefted it, making sure that it wasn't too heavy for her to swing easily, and then she slipped out of the tower, moving quietly toward the house.

There was a whimper as she passed Aneurin lying on the ground, and she had to suppress the urge to comfort the injured dog beyond one quick hand placed gently on his head, for barely one second. As she got closer to the porch, she could hear Charles yelling angrily about how women simply couldn't be trusted, ever, and couldn't Gareth see that he was being used? Not knowing if she could get the thought past the

mental door that Gareth had slammed shut, she still had to try. "Keep his attention. I'm coming."

As she quietly opened the door, she heard Gareth shouting back at her husband. "You deserve everything the courts can hit you with, you vicious bastard! You're a bloody mean one, you are, and a coward to boot! You think women are property, slaves to do whatever you order! How many times did you beat her up, and still expect her to love you?"

"You really think she's going to stay with you when she learns what I know? I watched you yesterday through my binoculars, you filthy saltwater freak! I wanted to have a quiet look at the lighthouse, and the motel owner let me use his boat to get to that little island, just down the coast. Of course, he didn't know I used it, but what the hell? No harm done to it or him. Ah, but now, when I tell Shari what I saw, she'll beg me to take her back! I only wish I'd had a camera with me—National Enquirer would pay a fortune for you!"

Somehow, Shari knew that Gareth had heard her message, and took strength from knowing that they were facing this together. The fact that Charles knew Gareth's secret only made it more essential that they stop him. Afterward, they'd just have to tell everybody the man was crazy, which wasn't really much of a stretch.

She snuck through the kitchen, and looked carefully around the doorway into the living room. Gareth was at the far end, standing erect with his hands set angrily on his hips. Charles was a few feet ahead of her, facing Gareth. "And you think I'm a coward, do you? If I were such a chicken, I'd have run away last night when I watched you shrivel up into,

whatever it was you became. Instead, I'm the one standing here in your fucking stupid lighthouse, and your pathetic excuse for a watchdog is dead outside."

Shari took two steps into the room, raising the hammer. "Aneurin's not dead, you miserable pig!" she shouted. As he turned toward her, startled, she swung the tool at his shoulder, knocking him off balance. Gareth moved across the room faster than she would have thought possible, and engaged his taller enemy in a frantic struggle, trying to get the gun out of his hand. Shari circled around them, still holding the hammer. Dimly, her mind registered distant sirens, but she stayed focused desperately on the two men in front of her.

She hit Charles again, in the side, and he stumbled, but recovered much faster than she expected, and threw her against the wall. She was stunned for a moment, and dropped the hammer. Gareth was distracted enough that he lost his grip on his opponent's gun hand, and dropped to one knee. They were back to a stand off, with Charles holding a gun pointed at Shari, making it obvious that if Gareth moved, she would be shot.

Then there was an unexpected sound, a fierce, angry, threatening growl, much deeper than anything Aneurin would have been capable of even if he wasn't lying outside the house, bleeding. They all looked at the doorway, to see an incredibly tall, long-legged canine shape crouching there, its lips drawn back so all its teeth were on clear display.

The new arrival continued growling, its eyes intent on Charles. Shari had time enough to think, no, it's not Aneurin,

he's not that big. And then, as Gareth moved into position between her and the other man, the strange dog leaped at Charles, who screamed and fell to the floor, dropping his weapon. Both men reached for the gun at the same time, Charles with one hand while with the other arm, he was still trying to fend off his canine attacker. Gareth grabbed the pistol, and Charles desperately stretched to reach the hammer where it lay almost at Shari's feet.

Charles swung the hammer toward the dog, causing the animal to lose his hold on the man's arm. With a mad, wordless scream, Charles rose just high enough to tackle Gareth at his waist, and the men started wrestling, each man determined to gain control of the gun. There was another explosion of blinding sound, and Charles doubled over, and fell almost in slow motion. Gareth reached for Shari's hand, dropping the pistol.

Shari and Gareth stared down at her husband where he lay, not breathing, blood spreading out beneath his body. In shock, they watched the dog that had given them their chance sniff at the enemy on the floor, and then slip away as fast as it had come in. They just barely registered some new dog sounds from outside, whimpers and a worried whine. Shari took Gareth's hand, and then they both jumped, as lights poured through the windows, accompanied by the sound of sirens. A uniformed figure burst through the kitchen, in the classic pose that Shari remembered from watching countless police shows on TV.

The policeman moved carefully into the living room, and bent down over the crumpled figure, keeping his own gun out

and ready until he was able to touch Charles' neck with his free hand. He relaxed a bit, and looked up as Gareth reached Shari's side and wrapped her in his arms. "It's okay, folks, he's gone."

Shari started to cry, shaking as the reality of the last few minutes began to sink in. Had she really attacked Charles? Was he really dead?

"How did you know to come?" Gareth asked, breathing hard.

"Your lawyer called Gil, said he hadn't been able to get hold of you, but that this guy knew where you were, and he wanted you to know. Bess called us." The cop put his gun away, pulled out a handkerchief and reached for the other gun. What seemed like a lifetime earlier, Shari remembered the phone ringing as she left the house, it must have been Colin. So close ...

"What about the...strange dog... it was here just before you came in... where did it come from?" Shari gasped, trying desperately to stop crying.

"Where did it go?" Gareth asked.

"Oh, that was just Gil. He told Bess he had to come right away, because he was really scared for you both. Colin wasn't sure there was any real danger, he figured this jerk might just be running for his own life, but Gil, he saw somebody watching your place yesterday, didn't think much of it then, but later he figured he should have warned you, so he headed straight over."

The cop stood up, and caught the confused expressions on their faces. "Yes, I mean Gil," he repeated, with a quiet smile.

"The old guy's a shifter. They're not really like the movies, you know. We got a few of them around these parts, one of the reasons everybody likes to keep things private. Anyway, he was worried we wouldn't get here in time. Only reason he slipped out of here so fast is he's gotta put clothes back on. Most of the time he's harmless—to his friends that is. Nothing to worry about."

Shari's tears froze, and she stared blankly at the policeman. Gil? A shapeshifter? Is that what Bess had really been talking about? Gareth looked down at the floor, shook his head a few times, and sighed. "He tried to tell me, I think, but I just kind of laughed it off and he gave up. I never sensed anything different about him," he whispered. "All this time ..."

The cop turned away, as someone else called from outside, saying something about the fallen dog. Concern for another friend abruptly took over their thoughts. "Aneurin!" Gareth cried out. "He got shot!"

"Calm down, Gil and Kathy there will get him to the vet. He was trying to get up when we got here, so we can hope he'll be okay." The policeman stepped around them, walked through the kitchen, and could be heard talking quietly to his companion. Shari had a very brief memory of meeting a policewoman one day as she left the library, and somehow being able to visualize a face made her relax a little about leaving the poor dog in a stranger's care. Of course, Gil wasn't a stranger either ... was he?

A few minutes later, Gareth and Shari were sitting in the kitchen, listening as the policeman, Chief Corrigan, told them



more about the phone calls that had brought him to the lighthouse.

"His mother bailed Charles out, and then, when they got home, apparently he beat her up, took some guns from the house, and left. It took a while for the woman to get help, and by the time someone was looking for Charlie here, he'd already chartered a plane. So much for his bail. Anyway, eventually his mother's lawyer figured things out, called your lawyers there, who called Colin Simpson. When Colin didn't get any answer here, he called Gil, and Bess called us. Lawyers! He should have called us first, but like I said, he wasn't sure there was any immediate danger. Warning took way too long to get to me, though you three handled things okay."

"Was Elena hurt very badly?" Shari asked, trying to see the woman as a fellow victim, rather than another abuser.

"She's going to be in the hospital for a bit, but she'll live. Report is she's got a gentleman friend to take care of her. That's part of what set her son off, I understand. She told him about her friend, he figured she was betraying his father or something. Course, it didn't help that she wouldn't empty her bank account for him either."

"His father's been dead for over ten years," Shari said. Somehow, it fit that Charles would expect a widow to stay faithful to her dead spouse.

"Well, if there's any justice, his old man's giving him a whipping right about now," Corrigan said, and then there was a knock at the door. The county coroner had arrived. "I don't think either of you will be in any trouble over this, it's obvious

it was self-defense, so we'll get things taken care of just as quick as we can. Ah, it would be best if you don't mention Gil. A lot of us know about him, but it isn't anything we talk about in the open, if you get my meaning."

"Oh, we definitely understand," Gareth said. "I intend to thank him, of course, but I can handle that very quietly."

"Paw to fin? Sounds good." The chief stood up, and almost laughed at how far their jaws had dropped. "What? You think I didn't know? Man, I'm the law around here. People expect me to know stuff—and usually I do. You've been here long enough, after all. Oh, don't worry yourselves; it isn't like you're breaking the law by swimming in the ocean.

Everybody's entitled to their privacy, after all. Just be cautious, okay? Lord, I nearly had a nervous breakdown last year when that tourist photographer saw Abby Cameron trotting down the beach. You must have heard about that. I thought we'd have the tabloids here for certain." He went out to meet the coroner.

"Gil turns into a dog?" Gareth whispered. "He turns into a dog!" Given his own abilities, he had to accept the existence of other shapeshifters, but the friendly old storekeeper? The guy he played chess with at least once a week?

"And Corrigan knows about you." Shari gasped. "He knows about both of you! He hasn't locked either of you up! And what he said about Abby Cameron ... do you really think she's a Pooka?"

"Or something like," Gareth took her hand. "I'm not sure I believe it, but ... oh, that doesn't matter right now. Darling, it's over! We're all safe." His lips brushed her forehead.

"Thank you, Shari. You risked your life coming in here like that, when you could have gotten away."

She looked at him in weary surprise. "You're the life-saver here, and not just because of tonight." She picked up his hand, laid it against her face, and closed her eyes.

The nightmares of the past were over. Now there were just dreams of a surprising future.

\* \* \* \*

The invisible boundary around the town of Presteign still exists, serving as a kind of protection for the peaceful community. Tourists still stop to visit the small shops along Main Street, make some small purchases, and then continue on in their quest for more exciting attractions. The old motel on the highway remains open, attracting mostly overnight visitors with few choices, delayed by weather or car trouble; providing just enough business for the motel to stay open, but certainly not enough to inspire expansion or competition. The bus still stops for a few minutes at the general store, although it usually just drops off packages, not passengers. Gil and Bess have retired, turning the store over to Gil's nephew, whose own son, just past his thirteenth birthday, enjoys patrolling the aisles, occasionally stumbling over the huge paws the young Scottish Deerhound has yet to grow into.

Over the years, though, there have been a lot of changes in the lighthouse. Gareth now has his office and library in the tower, along with Shari's studio, and the old office is his mother's room. Anne Maclachlan retired, and moved in with

By the Salt, Salt Sea  
*by R. L. Stuemke*

her son and his wife shortly before their daughter, Rohannah was born. Rohannah, now nine, has Shari's old room, and the old spare room is the private property of her brother, Gaheris, age seven.

Late every afternoon, both children accompany their father out to the coast, guarded by a healthy young Clumber spaniel named Taliesin, after another of the old Welsh poets. Aneurin, although he gets around quite well on three legs, is old, and he stays on the porch with Shari and her mother-in-law. Shari either plays guitar or draws, working on some of the art she sells through a city gallery, while the older woman reads, and occasionally Gil and Bess join them. Without the responsibility of running the store, the elderly pair travel a bit more than they used to, but Presteign is still their home, where their secrets are safe.

On those days when their friends aren't with them, if Shari and Anne start to feel lonely waiting for the rest of their family, they take each other's hands and close their eyes. Together, they reach out together for the shore and beyond. Soon, they can taste the salt spray and feel the ageless rhythm of the waves, and along with Gareth and the children, they celebrate and sing the songs of the ocean.

THE END