



Pacific Passion
STORMCHILD

Vivian Arend

Sandhamn Publishing

These elements have no desire to be tamed...

Pacific Passion, Book 1

As the new traveling doctor for the Pacific Inside Passage settlements, Matthew Jentry balances dual roles for his water-shifter people—caring for their health as a human-trained physician, and for their spiritual needs as a shaman.

Distractions of the female kind are not on his agenda, but his magical bloodline makes him a target for every marriage-minded woman within range. There's something about the mysterious Laurin Marshall, though, that he finds far too enticing. It's just as well that it's time for him to move on.

Laurin thought she had perfected her guise as a mild-mannered teacher, but the sexual fireworks she and Matt touch off are threatening to blow her cover out of the water. Luckily it's time for her to catch the boat to her next assignment.

When she discovers she'll be sailing with Matt, she realizes there's only one thing more dangerous than their unforgettable one-night stand—being trapped with him on a boat that gives “riding out the storm” a whole new meaning...

Warning: Contains strong sexual currents and powerful waves of desire that break down inhibitions. Recommended only for those able to navigate through extremely steamy situations, on land and at sea.

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Stormchild

Vivian Arend

Dedication

To my dad, who took me out in my first sailboat years ago on the IJsselmeer in Holland. You started me thinking life is an adventure to be experienced fully.

And to my hubby who takes me out in kayaks, canoes, rowboats and other watercraft to prove many times over that the adventure is never done.

Chapter One

His lack of arousal would have been embarrassing if it wasn't so damn amusing.

The gold-tinged light of sunset cast shadowy fingers over the half-naked bodies dancing around the fire pit. Hips twisted and torsos shimmied. Reflected firelight flickered off warm skin and firm muscles and something ached deep in his soul. Matthew Jentry reclined on one elbow in the sand and accepted the honor of his people's traditional tribal farewell.

Two weeks at this settlement had provided plenty of opportunities to witness the innate sensuality of the People of the Sea. His first concern had been medical checkups for a tribe who lived far from the easy access to care in Vancouver or Victoria.

The matriarch had other goals.

He spotted her across the fire ring, staring with a hint of amusement in her smile. As another of the lithe young women danced nearer, leaning to display her ample assets to their best advantage, Matthew laughed inside.

Yes, he knew it was traditional for travelers to share pleasure with the locals. He knew it was considered an honor to provide such a service, especially to one like himself who was both a magical and modern healer.

But he wanted more. No matter how tempting the offers before him, he had started this position the way he meant to continue. Alone. Until he found the one to complement him and make his true mission a reality, he had no intention of hopping into bed with anyone. After a dry spell of six months, his urge for sex still lay dormant.

The dance concluded and he applauded along with the elders around him, accepting pats on the back from the men as they shuffled off to enjoy the barbeque pit and containers of sweet cider cooling in buckets by the surf. Mama Tanis cornered him before he vanished to safety with the old men.

For a large woman she moved with amazing speed.

"You enjoyed the dance?" She stared at him, eyes filled with wisdom. She was old—far older than the medical records in the town office showed.

"I did. Thank you for honoring me before I head to the next village. I cherish the time I have had with you." He bowed low in respect.

She shook a finger in his face. “You say that, but I think you’re following your own way, not Mama T’s. Why do I see you with the old men who have no juice left in their veins? I can entertain them with stories. You should be on the beach with the young people, living and laughing and loving.”

“Mama T—”

“Oh no, you avoided all our entertainments the whole time you stayed with us. You worked from sunrise to dark, and even now when you’re leaving, you think of ways to avoid play.”

He lifted a brow. “Perhaps I am too old and juiceless myself to want to inflict my company on the young people.”

The woman shook with her laughter. “Too juiceless? The only thing you are guilty of is being too cautious, my friend. I will stop taunting you. This night is for you, enjoy it as you wish.” She leaned forward and her dark eyes bore into him. “But I will tell you this. Sometimes what you seek is closer than you imagine, and found only when you stop looking.”

A shiver raced over his skin as she spoke. A prophecy? An omen? There was no way of knowing. The People of the Sea were rich in power in many ways. He bowed again, grasping her hand and kissing her knuckles. His actions drew a chuckle from her lips.

“You’re a bad boy to tease Mama T.”

He winked at her, and she shook her head and smiled.

Matt stepped back, ready to rejoin the men, when it hit him. *Oh hell, he’d forgotten.* “I need to apologize. You asked me to examine one of your people. She never showed up for her appointment. I tried to make another slot available but was told she had gone on a camping trip. The high school students went on a field trip to do biology research, or something. I’ll have to see her next time I visit.”

The matriarch folded her lips together into a firm line. “I should have known. She insists there is no issue, that she doesn’t need a shaman’s help.” She sighed. “As you said, it will have to wait. I’m going to give her a piece of my mind when I see her. I told her myself I wanted her to keep the appointment.”

Matthew stopped in amazement. “I’ve rarely heard of any troubles with youths challenging the hierarchies of our people. How could she ignore a direct command from you? What’s the problem that she’d flout her matriarch to avoid seeing me?”

Mama Tanis planted her fists on her wide hips. “The girl can’t shift. We know she’s got shifter blood, but we’ve never seen her make the change.”

He wandered down the beach, Mama T’s gaze burning his back. A chuckle escaped him again. The world of academia he’d exchanged for the world of the mystic created a study in contrasts. Conflicting as it seemed at times, both were full of truths. Germs and viruses caused disease, but so did evil spirits and curses. His challenge as shaman was to bring the two worlds into harmony, no matter how strange the blend appeared.

The light faded from the sky, twilight's streaks coloring the horizon over the ocean. Matt paced carefully, his bare feet comfortable against the still-warm sands. The puzzle presented by the matriarch tugged at his mind again like an undercurrent dragging him out of his path. A shifter who couldn't shift—for the People of the Sea it would be like never learning to walk. Until they were as at home in the water as on land, a person would never truly fit in.

On impulse, he angled farther down the beach toward where the young people gathered around a large bonfire. Perhaps he'd be able to spot the girl amongst her friends, get a feel for her trouble without frightening her. Although he couldn't imagine why she was scared to see the shaman. The strains of guitar music rose on the air and ahead he spotted couples cuddled together around the heat of the blaze.

His gaze caught on a smaller circle farther inland, a group of laughing mothers watching protectively from their beach chairs a few metres away. The children played an intricate game involving switching positions and hiding a shiny shell of abalone. A woman knelt in their midst, her head thrown back in laughter, straight blonde hair tousled around her shoulders.

His body tightened. There was something more provocative in her uninhibited moment of delight than in all the sensual beauty he'd seen during the earlier dance. He watched with a growing ache in his groin as she joined a child in the outer circle and the game carried on around them.

Dark eyes, light skin. She must be a visitor to the people. He'd never seen a fair-haired shifter among the orca clans, and Mama T would have told him about such an anomaly. The woman hadn't been one of the many of the settlement on whom he'd done a routine physical exam during the past two weeks. He rejoiced he'd avoided having to give her an examination when the mere sight of her heated his blood and drove his desire insanely high.

He had to meet her.

Another burst of giggles rose from the children as he changed directions to enter the circle. Childish voices cried out in greeting. No matter where he went, it was the little ones who made his heart sing the loudest, and he longed for the day he would have his own. He would sire them and raise them *and* they would remain a family. He swore this would happen, no matter what traditions were held amongst the shamans.

He exchanged hugs, accepted kisses and waved a greeting to the mothers who watched cautiously. A few blushed, but most looked pleased to have their offspring gain his attention. Then he slowly turned his focus to her. Savoring the moment, prolonging the time until their eyes met.

Midnight-filled orbs stared back, the curve of her cheek creamy white in contrast with her dark lashes. Her full lips drew him, the bottom one glistening where she'd licked it seconds earlier. He dropped his gaze slowly down her torso, not even trying to hide how attractive he found her curves and modest shift.

"You gonna play?" Small hands pulled him to the sand ahead of his response. He sank into position gratefully.

A mischievous smile tugged at the corner of the woman's mouth as she looked him over. "You know how to play the game?"

He knelt upright in the middle of the circle and nodded. Surprise flashed in her eyes before he covered his face with his hands and the chanting began. Around him, small bodies moved and singsong voices echoed with the tune of a thousand years of tradition. When they stopped, another of the contrasts between the People of the Sea and the children of the human world grew apparent.

Utter silence surrounded him.

He removed his hands and let his eyes adjust to the dim light offered by the distant fire. All the childish voices were still, hands quiet, faces blank. Matt observed carefully before moving toward one of the pairs of children. They stared back with soft smiles, and he grinned. He traced their arms with a light tickling motion. They never moved.

A giggle broke free behind him and he spun. The culprit calmed her expression seconds too late and Matt crawled across the sand on his hands and knees, growling like a ferocious beast. The others laughed as he focused his attention on the noisemaker and her partner.

Oh sweet Lord, his mysterious woman sat behind the child.

He froze for a moment until her flashing eyes taunted him. Brushing the little girl's arms gave far too little opportunity to brace himself for the next step. The blonde sat motionless, moonlight turning her hair into a glowing beacon. He took his time, running his palms along her silky flesh instead of using his fingertips like he had on the children. The caress of skin on skin made his mouth go dry and his body harden further with desire.

It was a child's game and he was getting turned on. There was no mercy in the world.

The child in her lap shifted and knocked against his arm. His fingers grazed the side of the woman's breast and she sucked in a gasp of air. He wanted to ignore the fact her nipple hardened instantly, but his gaze had locked on her torso like on a target.

Where the hell had she been for the past two weeks? Because all his righteous plans about remaining celibate were floating out on the evening tide. If there was any justice, any magic in the world, they were meant to be together. Even if it was just for one night.

Chapter Two

Laurin cursed her libido for exposing her need so clearly to the visitor. She didn't do casual. She didn't. She might want to scratch her itch, but certainly not with someone she'd never met before.

And maybe if she recited that lie often enough she'd come to believe it. There was nothing casual about what she wanted from the dark stranger kneeling close by. Only the children of the settlement surrounding them stopped her from pressing him back to the sand and crawling on top to ride him into oblivion.

When he pulled the hidden shell from under her partner's arm, squeals of delight rose around them. The little girl crawled forward, pausing to drop a kiss on the man's cheek before taking her place in the center of the circle. Voices rose for a moment and Laurin was caught between horror and fascination as she realized he had to take his place in the pairs.

With her.

She ignored the fact her pussy grew instantly wet and instead inched forward to make room. He settled intimately behind her, his thighs surrounding and caging her. One arm tucked under her ribcage as he leaned her torso back and her breath caught in her throat.

Firm muscles were everywhere. In his arms, his thighs, his body. The simple fact their bodies touched made a shiver trace up her spine and goose bumps rise on her skin.

He laughed softly. "Cold?" The whisper tickled her ear, as he brushed his lips against the lobe. A hint of moisture adhered as he licked and a brief shudder shook her from head to toe. "I can warm you up. If you're interested..."

The game in front of them had resumed. Laurin was grateful for a moment's distraction. *Oh damn, oh damn, oh damn.* She had to decide, and now. Did she want to go off with this stranger, as delectable as he seemed? Tomorrow morning she headed to the next of her one-month teaching assignments in another settlement. He was obviously an orca shifter returning from the outside world.

She'd never taken advantage of the sexual favors offered by the People. After spending the past two years traveling from settlement to settlement along the Pacific Inside Passage, all the tribes knew she taught the children to the best of her abilities and otherwise stayed strictly alone. Even the oversexed otter folk hadn't managed to convince her to play around, although they had come the closest to tempting her.

Until now.

The firm clasp of his arm warned her a split second before he moved closer. Oh God, his erection pressed into the seam of her butt, heat scorching through the material of his jeans and the thin cotton of her dress. He adjusted his arm slightly until her breasts rested on his forearm, his hand clasping the side of her torso. Then he moved his thumb in a gentle stroke and she moaned with need.

“My name is Matt.”

The butterfly softness of his words caressed her ear. She wiggled and an involuntary squeak escaped her. Childish laughter drew her attention back to the game as the seeker approached to discover the hidden shell. They didn’t have it, but there was no way Laurin wanted anyone to know what else had risen between them. She forced a small smile as the little girl made a quick search. Matt squeezed them together, his cock a firebrand against her. Somehow he twisted his hand under her arm to allow his fingers to slip into her tank-top sleeve. Skin touched skin. She held her breath as images filled her mind of the other places she wanted skin on skin. With him.

And that was her answer, wasn’t it?

Perhaps it was for the best. With her leaving in the morning there would be little time for personal discovery. They could enjoy what looked to be a spectacular physical attraction without having to deal with future questions about where she came from and who she really was.

Sex. Plain and simple. She could do that. Right?

He stroked again with his thumb and her pussy creamed involuntarily. Plain and simple? She doubted it. Hotter than Hades? Oh yeah.

The game ended abruptly as the mothers clapped their hands, cajoling their young ones to head for home. The group rose to their feet, children milling about bestowing goodnight hugs before joining the exodus. Stars filled the sky overhead, the ocean waves carrying a lullaby across the settlement. Laurin nodded back at the polite bows directed her way. She knew the families appreciated her ability to cover everything from ABCs to trigonometry. The People of the Sea lived an isolated lifestyle, but their children still learned of the outside world. The orca clan was one of the larger settlements, only four hours from Vancouver Island by powerboat. They had a large enough population she might even be able to convince the department of education a full-time teacher would be a worthwhile investment.

A smooth caress on her arm reminded her that this time when the children left, she wasn’t alone.

“You’re not shivering anymore.” He hesitated, and she hurried to reassure him. Now she’d decided, there was no way she’d miss this opportunity.

She turned to face him, staring into surprisingly blue eyes. With his dark skin and hair, she’d expected the predominately dark shades common among the orca people. Fascination filled his expression as he gazed at her lips. Instinctively she licked them, and he groaned, wrapping his arms around her. As she settled into his embrace, something softened in her core and desire flooded her body.

“Heat me up,” she whispered, raising her hands to cup his face. A soft kiss. Another. She planted delicate caresses on his lips until he snatched her closer and assumed control. He consumed her. Feasted on her. He slid his mouth down to suckle on the pulse point throbbing at the juncture of her neck and shoulder. Cupping her ass in his hands, he dragged her hard against his body. Her mound connected with his erection and he lifted her, rubbing them together. Her last lucid thought was they still stood on the beach, in plain view of the whole clan.

He growled deep in his throat and swung her up, marching into the shadows as he continued to offer his lips in worship. She closed her eyes and blindly accepted wherever he took her. Blindly accepted the wonders of what his mouth did to her. It went beyond kisses. A world of desire passed between them and the only connection point was their lips.

He ducked low, and she opened her eyes to find they were in a wall tent. As he lowered her to the mattress she glanced around. There were few personal possessions in the square dwelling. A simple trunk stood in the corner next to an empty desk. She lived in a similar space, and all her belongings were already packed in preparation for the morning.

Preparation. *Shit.*

“Do you have a condom?” She pressed on his chest to separate them, even as her fingers curled involuntarily to clasp the soft cotton of his shirt.

An inexplicable expression floated across Matt’s face before he hurried away to swing open his trunk and rummage in its depths. She sat up to watch him. It was reassuring he didn’t haul protection out of his back pocket like he hoped this would happen. A twinge of doubt at her actions hit, but before she could act, he turned in triumph. Their eyes met, and she was lost.

She had to have him.

Matt flicked on the small lantern beside the desk, and a dim glow filled the tent. A hazy, smoky light that turned his dusky skin even darker as he approached to kneel before her. He stared into her eyes for the longest time. The brilliant blue of his irises burned into her like an x-ray and she felt exposed. Every desire—and right now she had a lot of them—laid bare for him to examine. She had to drop her gaze.

Instead she watched from under heavily lidded lashes as he unbuttoned his shirt. Muscles carved from obsidian graced his torso, and she reached without thinking to stroke the ridges of his abdomen. Hmm, soft skin, rock-solid base. She slid forward on the mattress to press both palms against the heat radiating from him.

“What’s your name, my ray of moonshine?” His voice teased all the dark parts in her soul with needs she’d never dreamed she had. She swallowed hard as he shrugged his shirt off and reached to unbutton her dress.

“Laurin.”

His gaze remained locked on her body as the edges of her cotton shift separated. The cool breeze of the ocean snuck in the tent flaps to brush her skin.

“A beautiful name.” He stroked his knuckles along the edge of her bra and her nipples tightened to the point of pain. “Laurin, I thank you for the gift of sharing pleasure with me tonight.”

The air rippled around them and she held her breath. Something magical had begun, and she was powerless to stop it. Perhaps this was what always happened during a sexual encounter with the People of the Sea. She wouldn’t know.

Matt leaned toward her and she met him halfway. Their lips connected as his hand slipped forward to cup her bra-clad breast. His flavor, smoky sweet, tickled her taste buds as she accepted his seeking tongue. Nips and licks, and open-mouthed kisses followed, while his thumb traced wicked circles around her nipple. She wanted to stay like this forever, the tender touch of his firm mouth against hers. He snuck his other hand around her neck to direct the angle of her mouth. Laurin groaned, wanting him closer. Wanting to be consumed by his taste, consumed by his heat. He stroked his tongue along her teeth and over the roof of her mouth and she answered by sucking lightly.

When he left her lips and moved to her lace-covered breast with his mouth, a soft sigh escaped her. She arched under him, inching closer until her thighs bumped his hips. Her heated core nestled against his abdomen and the gentle abrasion set her clit throbbing.

The world slowed to nothing but her sense of touch. An aching heat shot to her womb from where he suckled at her breast, melting fingers of pleasure spreading leisurely. He moved his hand to her thigh, smoothing the inside of her leg until he cupped her core.

“Oh damn, you’re wet.” His fingers stroked over her panties. A firm controlled touch that teased and enticed. She opened her legs farther and moaned in protest when he pulled away. Wordlessly he stripped off her dress, removed her panties and bra and arranged her on the mattress to his liking. He undressed quickly, then stood over her. The admiration on his face was echoed in the admiration shown by his body, his cock jutting from his groin. A whimper escaped as she fought the urge to taste the pearly bead clinging to the rigid tip.

“Please...” She stared at him, unable to complete her statement of need. She grew feverish waiting for him to stop looking and start touching.

The pale glow of her beauty wrapped around his heart as much as around his body. As Matt gazed at Laurin, laid out like some kind of exotic feast on his bed, he wondered when he had lost control of the situation.

The magic filling the room was more powerful than he’d ever experienced. Sexual pleasure was a strong catalyst for shaman skills, but of this intensity? The unreasonable concentration of passion he felt scared him. Made him hesitate and wonder if it was safe to continue. He sat beside her with care and laid

his hand on her chest, his fingers splaying out as he opened himself to his mystic side. It wasn't an invasive search, only a surface questioning of her innate skills.

Nothing.

Nothing came to him except the overwhelming desire to drive into her body and never leave. Laurin moaned, a small noise deep in her throat, and he lost all interest in solving the mystery of why the room blazed with energy. He'd formally accepted her offered gift, now was time to enjoy each other. They could seek answers later.

He covered her with his naked body. He sucked in a quick breath at the rightness of the sensation, heat to heat, hard to soft. Lip to lip as he took her mouth again. Honeysuckle sweet, submissive under him, Laurin lifted her hands to stroke his back with a whisper-light touch. Her legs fell open to allow him to nestle closer. His erection wept where it rested against her belly, and involuntarily he rocked his hips, shifting them lower. The motion dragged his shaft through her soft curls and moisture from her pussy coated his cock.

He kissed his way down her body, worshipping her breasts, nuzzling the underside of the sweet curves until she squirmed. A trail of kisses descended farther, stopping only to lap at her bellybutton. She gave a soft giggle when he dipped his tongue into the indent, and he leaned up on one elbow to smile at her.

"I love the sound of your laugh."

Her dark eyes twinkled at him. "I love what you're doing to me."

"Hmm." He kissed her belly, his gaze locked on hers. "Any requests?"

She stared back wide-eyed. "Don't stop," she whispered.

The fragrance rising from between her legs tormented him and he could wait no longer. "Your command is my wish, my lady."

He glanced at the pale curls covering her mound, moisture clinging to them. He drew in a deep breath to fill his head and his lungs with her scent before dropping his mouth to kiss her intimately.

Had he imagined she tasted of honeysuckle? No, far sweeter. Her flavor burst forth like an exquisite wine and he savored each sip. Parting her curls with his fingers to expose pale pink folds, he traced delicate circles with his tongue. Laurin quivered beneath his mouth, her nether lips flowering open as he laved again and again, lapping the cream leaving her body. The moisture, that even now, prepared her body for their joining.

The erect tip of her clitoris peeked out from its protective hood and he drew it into his mouth and suckled gently. She cried out, then relaxed under him, tangling her fingers in his hair. He hummed against her core, slipping a finger into her depths to test her readiness. A wave of lust raced over him as her passage squeezed so tightly he had to concentrate on not coming right then and there like an inexperienced youth.

"Oh damn, Laurin. Just...damn."

She raised her hips, demanding his attention and he gave it, whole-heartedly. A second finger joined the first and he stroked the front of her sheath with a curling touch. He licked and sucked in turns until her body responded like a wave breaking on the shore, exploding against the rocks and flaring up into the cool night air. Laurin arched hard, her head thrashing from side to side, small moans of delight escaping her lips.

He continued to touch and caress, softer now, more and more gently until the aftershocks faded away. When their gazes met she had tears in her eyes and something inside his heart twisted. Matt rose and kissed her, their bodies tangling together as she twined her fingers in his hair and held their mouths together. He rolled them over, loving the sensation of her weight resting on top of him. Then he clasped her hips, squeezing her muscular butt cheeks. The heavy weight of his erection rested between her open legs. When she slid up slightly to kiss her way along his temple, the hot wet tip of his cock pressed against her slick opening.

They both froze.

The dire urge to thrust confused the hell out of him. He was the one who didn't want to leave children behind like a trail of foam in his wake. He was the one who should be getting out of this position and sheathing up. It made no sense, but he was powerless to move. Frozen in place as he used every bit of his power to remain still and not bury himself to the hilt.

Laurin was the one who swore and slid to safety. She sat on his abdomen, the pulsing heat of her core smearing a line of moisture on his skin.

"Condom. Oh God, please, I don't want to stop, but you've got to—"

"I've got it." He spun her again, dropping her flat on the mattress, taking her mouth in a tender caress that grew harder and more needy by the second. He squeezed her breasts together and lapped from side to side, nipping at the now bright red tips until she dragged his head away. He rose over her and for one awful, dreadful, marvelous moment he was once again lined up bareback with her welcoming passage. Their eyes met and he swore.

"Damn it, I want you so badly. Like this, skin touching skin." He rocked his hips and his cock nestled a little deeper. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth together. Oh fuck, he needed to stop but the thought was killing him. Why was everything in him crying for them to come together unhindered by anything unnatural?

"Please not without... I can't, I just can't." Again Laurin was the one who found the strength to stop them. She wiggled from under him, whimpering piteously. His magic flashed—even as she left him he sensed she wept for his touch without the barrier. She wanted him as much as he wanted her.

No—needed. This went beyond want. This was off the scale of desire and pleasure. Somehow joining with her had become as necessary as breathing and having the sun rise in the morning. Dazed, mind clouded, the rustle of foil broke through his distorted hearing. He managed to mindlessly open the package but his very soul protested his attempts to put on the condom. Laurin moved to help, and the touch of her

hands on his aching cock was like the first flush of dawn's light after a stormy winter night. Every cell in his body yearned for her and as soon as she rolled the latex over his erection he clasped her back into his embrace.

They scrambled together, half-sitting, half-lying and then in one frantic motion they joined. She sank onto him with a soul-emptying keen of delight. It tightened his groin and sharpened his senses to everything they shared. Her breasts rocked against his chest, her turgid nipples scratching his sensitive skin. Her soft belly rubbed his abdomen and she wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging to him. She pumped hard onto his shaft, driving it deeper into her welcoming warmth. He kissed her frantically, attempting to silently apologize for his lack of control even as he took back the lead, grasping her hips to lift and lower her again and again. The sweet cream between them eased his way through her tight clasp. Tongues tangled and thrust together in imitation of their hips.

Suddenly there was nothing but impending fireworks and lightning strikes breaking across their bodies. He brought her down hard one last time, flexing his hips to drive them as close together as possible as the first pulses of her orgasm fluttered around him. His mind emptied with his seed, the sensation of being in her arms and in her body so good and so right, words failed him.

Breathlessly he waited until the tremors racking them both faded to something on the lower end of the Richter scale. He dropped a kiss on her shoulder, the heat of her skin welding its way through him like a branding iron.

By the time he could move again, they both shivered in the cool night air. He pulled back the sheets and lowered her tenderly to the mattress surface. Laurin's eyes remained shut, a dusting of tears painting her lashes. He kissed them away before leaving her briefly to deal with the condom.

Then he returned and wrapped himself like a blanket around her, physically unable to let the sensation of her skin touching his stop even a moment before the dawn broke.

Chapter Three

It was somehow distasteful and very trite. Yet when she woke before Matt, her first thought was to find a way to sneak out of his grasp and get to the harbor as quickly and quietly as possible.

Still, she stared at his face for a full minute, memorizing the lines, the firm bone structure. Whatever else had happened last night, she didn't regret her actions. Or at least she wouldn't if she made it out of his tent without disturbing him. She didn't need any early-morning complications. Rolling cautiously, Laurin slipped from under his muscular arm and slid off the bed. Her dress lay across the back of the chair, and she inched it over her head in an instant.

Then she was out the tent flap, returning to her own place, hoping to avoid any of the early-rising locals on their way fishing. She didn't need a lengthy tête-à-tête with anyone about why she still wore last night's clothing.

The crisp morning breeze filled her nostrils like a refreshing spring rain. It was always difficult to say goodbye to a community, but heading to a new settlement excited her as well. Laurin ducked into her own tent to change into travel gear and grab her day bag. Someone had already picked up her main suitcase and she quickly prepared for the coming trip. She wondered briefly who Mama T had conned into giving her a ride to her next teaching assignment. Most of the time she ended up on slow-moving barges or supply vessels. Occasionally a speedboat, but that convenience was far more rare. All she knew was that by nine a.m. she had to get to the harbor.

She spent her spare time on a rocky outcrop overlooking the settlement, staring at the ocean and wondering why the taste of Matt lingered in her mouth. Last night had amazed her, overwhelmed her.

Scared her to death.

She'd been so close to making love unprotected. That wasn't her way. Something about the combination of her and Matt made her lose control—the passion in the room had been off the charts. She wished she could crawl back into his arms and ask for another round. The magic they'd shared had been unlike any previous sexual experience.

She laughed at herself. Two years of hiding from her heritage, and she'd been close to throwing it all away on a whim. Part of the reason she'd left the mountains and come to the ocean was to escape from her supposed destiny. The People of the Air were good people. She just didn't want to end up the partner of anyone who thought they met all the requirements of some ancient mystical prophecy. She wasn't ready to settle down and she'd left before anyone forced her to make a dire mistake.

Still, she missed shifting. The need to remain hidden had required staying in human form. It had been far too long since she'd soared through the air and she missed riding the currents and gliding above the clouds. Above her head the sky grew brighter, tinged with a harsh red. A storm gathered strength in the distance. She smelt it on the air, the electrical charge sharp in her nostrils. Her journey from this settlement would be less than idyllic. The wind shifted, now blowing out toward the sea, and she rose. Time for daydreaming was over. Whoever she was hitching a ride with would have to hurry to stay ahead of the weather.

The well-worn boards of the dock bounced underfoot as she strode to the waiting boats. She watched one of the village men load her trunk onto a yacht, and Laurin breathed a sigh of relief she wouldn't be trapped on the boat anchored at the end of the harbor, a scrap barge, going at a snail's pace through the Inside Passage.

Laurin whistled as she caught a closer look at the nearer ship. Her lines were clean and trim, sparkling in the sunshine reflecting off the water. She was a beautiful craft—single mast, rigged to allow an experienced sailor to handle her solo with ease. Laurin bet an inboard engine would be tucked beneath for those days the ocean turned to a sheet of glass or for a day like today when getting ahead of the wind meant safety. With delight, she spotted a kayak carrier jutting off the back, her own well-loved cedar strip already strapped in place beside a gorgeous Kevlar single seater, the brilliant red of its sides glowing like the sun.

Nice. *Very* nice.

The boat drew her like a magnet, and in a moment she was by the vessel's side, stroking a hand along the gunwale, squatting to see the name painted across the prow.

Stormchild.

She crawled aboard, completely mesmerized by the craft. Two comfortable seats in the open stern would allow passengers to face the water. She pressed her nose to the window of the covered pilothouse to peer at the helm. Exquisite woodwork filled the space, the cherry red tones bringing warmth and beauty to every detail.

"Ahem." Mama Tanis stood on the dock with her heavy fists planted on her hips. Laurin straightened with embarrassment. Invading another person's boat, no matter how attractive, was uncommonly rude.

"I'm sorry, I—"

"I see you've discovered the ride I arranged."

Laurin let her delight shine through. "Oh Mama T, I love you."

Hearty rolls of laughter sprang from the matriarch's throat, and Laurin joined in, suddenly feeling wonderfully alive. The wind whipped her hair across her eyes and she pulled it back, tucking it up with an elastic from her pocket.

The matriarch stared for a moment. She nodded as if in approval. "You're ready early."

Laurin hopped the gunwales and returned to the travel bag she'd dropped on the platform and bowed carefully. "There's no use in waiting. Tide turns in thirty minutes. If I'm here we can leave as soon as the owners are ready." Mama Tanis raised a brow, as if waiting. Laurin shrugged uncertainly. "Is something wrong?"

"I fail to understand how a bright young woman like you can be so bullheaded and lacking in common sense."

Laurin frowned. She glanced around in confusion. "What have I done?"

"Such a complete lack of curiosity. You haven't even asked who the pilot is for your vessel."

The traveling bag slung over her shoulder, Laurin stepped aside to let the man who had brought her case on board pass her. He nodded politely then hurried up the dock and out of the gathering wind. "I'm pleased with whatever arrangements you've made for me."

Mama Tanis chuckled loudly. "Really? You seemed to have had troubles with other earlier arrangements I made for you."

The appointment. Damn, she'd hoped to get away before Mama T discovered she'd ditched the checkup. "I'm fine. I appreciate your concern, but I'm fine."

They stared at each other. The other-worldliness of the people rolled out from the matriarch and Laurin stiffened her spine. She would not succumb to the mystical—accept it, yes, but never did she consent to let the animal nature rule her human side. She didn't want anyone to know her powers. She hesitantly braced a wall between them, not allowing the orca clan leader to read any sign of her talents.

"You resist? How can you...?" Mama's voice was a whisper, shock lacing her words.

Laurin thought quickly. "I'm just a visitor. Your authority can't force me like it would a local under your protection." She dipped her head respectfully, cursing she'd had to show a hint of her own abilities.

Soft chuckles broke from the older woman. "So hesitant to share. I will say again, sometimes what you need is much closer than you think."

A deep rich laugh rang out that Laurin's body instantly recognized. She scanned the dock frantically, trying to see where the hell he was when a shiver teased her spine.

His voice boomed directly behind her. "Mama T, are you still taunting me? What I need is not cryptic words, but my passenger."

Laurin turned in time to see Matt pop out from the wheelhouse, his bright blue eyes flashing his surprise as they raked her from head to toe.

*

The close quarters of the boat grew even closer after three hours, and Laurin felt the tension like a gathering storm. They spoke little, both distracted with their own thoughts. The graceful vessel moved slowly through a dangerous section of shoals and sandbars. Matt concentrated diligently at the helm as he

studied the radar scanner and the map spread beside him. The waves had grown in height as time passed, the sky slate grey and heavy with the coming moisture. Whitecaps peaked higher and higher to splash over the boat's sides, soaking the deck.

Laurin paced to the door and splayed her fingers against the glass. The cold moisture condensed on the pane did nothing to ease the heat rising in her body. Something inside her longed to break free and soar into the wild wind. She wanted to challenge with wing and claw to reach the calm above the storm. The urge to shift grew increasingly frantic and it took everything in her to fight it down. Shifting wasn't possible right now. She had to resist.

She turned from studying the darkening sky to stare instead at Matt's profile. He was every bit as gorgeous now in the day as last night. Oh God, last night. Her skin tightened, her breasts ached. The wheelhouse was too small to contain the two of them *and* her memories of them tangled intimately together.

Matt cleared his throat. "This is going to sound strange, but could you please stop? I can't concentrate with you..." He jerked the wheel to the side and the scrape of sand rubbing along their starboard side sounded briefly. The ship rocked between the unbalancing waves and their narrow escape of the shoal.

Rubbing. She wanted to rub on him. This time, with no time limits about when they needed to stop. No fears of being discovered. Just time to explore his body, admire the firm muscles and let him—

The motor cut off, breaking her reverie. Suddenly he clasped her arms and spoke directly in her face. "Laurin! Enough. Please. Go below into the main saloon, or the galley, and let me navigate through this mess before we get in real trouble. The storm will peak soon and I need to find a safe harbor."

She fled like a startled bird.

When he was out of sight, her overwhelming sense of urgency weakened. The need to touch him remained, but at least once again her mind was her own. The motor restarted, the familiar hum calming her. She put on a kettle of water for coffee, latching it safely in place against the rocking motion of the ship. Doing something normal in the midst of the chaos was what she needed. Laurin drew a long, slow breath.

What the hell was happening? Ever since she'd spotted him on the boat, the feverish desire to roll herself all over him had grown to epic proportions.

Back on the dock she hadn't said a word of protest. Hadn't let even a blush indicate she'd already known who he was when Mama T introduced them. A wry smile hit her lips as she dug through the cupboards of the galley to find the supplies she needed. The rich scent of coffee beans hit her nose and eased her soul a little. She *hadn't* known who he was, and that was the point. In some ways it was comical her one-night stand happened with the only man in the settlement who wasn't staying.

A shaman. She had to pick a damn shaman for her first sexual encounter with the People of the Sea. She snorted in derision. If you had to screw up, screw up big. He was the most likely candidate to be able to

unravel her secrets. Although letting him discover all the things she hid potentially meant a lot of fun. They'd need at least a few more rounds in bed, and possibly even...

She jerked herself upright. *What the hell was up with her hormones?*

Laurin enjoyed sex. Not in the "need it, gotta have it" daily kinda way like her caffeine or dark chocolate. But ever since she'd laid eyes on Matthew Jentry, she'd been like a homing pigeon trying to come back to roost. She imagined his capable hands on the wheel, guiding them through the dangerous passage. Better yet to imagine his hands on her body, smoothing up her torso to cup her breasts, his dark skin contrasting with her fairness. He'd roll his thumbs over her nipples while supporting the aching globes in his palms.

Laurin leaned back on the short countertop and closed her eyes. God, she could almost feel it, the tingling sensation from her tight nubs trailing through her body to fire her core. She rubbed her breasts in an attempt to stop the throbbing. The sensation felt so wonderful she trailed a hand down her belly, slipping under the elastic waistband of her shorts to press on her aching clit. Desire wrapped around her like a cloud on the mountaintop and she was powerless to stop it.

Curses sounded from the deck above her and she startled, suddenly realizing she was fondling herself where Matt could walk in at any time. Heat flushed her face and she hurried to deal with the now-singing kettle. Her heart thumped in her throat and her hands shook as she poured the water into the French press she'd found. Then she leaned her forehead on the cool glass of the small round window in the saloon, trying to calm her soul. By the time the coffee was ready she was back to being agitated instead of direly horny. She stirred an extra spoonful of sugar into her travel mug in the hopes the calories would help her deal with the stress.

She stared at the second cup in frustration. She didn't know how he liked his coffee and she was scared to death to go up the four steps to the wheelhouse and ask him. That would require actually looking at his face. Speaking to him.

Oh hell, she was screwed big-time.

The engine sound faded and she turned in a panic to face the door, her hands clutching her cup protectively in front of her like a shield. Solid footsteps paced away for a minute, a loud splash sounded, and then the steps returned. The door opened smoothly and his sandaled feet appeared as he took the stairs toward her two at a time. He stopped at the base, his chest heaving. His nostrils flared as he glared at her with his cobalt eyes.

He slowed his approach. One step. Two. The third put him toe to toe with her and she shrank back against the counter. He loosened her death grip on the cup, reaching past her to place it somewhere behind her. Their torsos touched and scalding heat flashed. Laurin realized she held her breath and she released it slowly, a puff at a time. He shifted and his firm chest brushed her already erect nipples. He caged her, one

arm on either side of her body before deliberately pressing his hips into her. Oh hell, his erection felt huge against her belly. Moisture flooded her passage and she whimpered.

Matt leaned into her harder, every inch of their bodies in contact. He tilted his head and approached her mouth. She was sure he must hear the roaring beat of her heart. He touched their lips together, his eyelashes brushing hers like a butterfly's kiss and she exhaled with a little moan.

She was on fire. This wasn't what she'd expected.

Matt spoke against her lips, his voice shaking. Every word punctuated with a soft kiss. "You're...driving...me...insane."

Then the storm broke between them and his gentleness vanished. She flung her arms around him and pulled his lips to hers. Lightning flared between their souls, the frenzy of her needs whipping like the whitecaps outside on the ocean. He thrust his tongue into her mouth and she accepted it, sucking it in uneven pulses. Their hips ground together and she wrapped a leg around his hip, opening her body in an attempt to line up her clit with the tempting rock of his erection. He thrust into her, lifting her hips slightly to help and then it was there. Just what she needed—the angle, the pressure. She groaned into his mouth and he swallowed the sound. The air around them heated, rippling with magic as he lifted her to the surface of the counter. Behind her the coffee mug tipped, rolling harmlessly into the sink with a clatter. His hands were busy, unsnapping her shorts, tugging at her T-shirt.

"I need to touch you. I need to see you." He growled and stepped back, shaking his head like a wild beast. The lightning came from his eyes and she stared in fascination as he leaned on the wall across from her. They were all of three feet apart and it seemed like a mile. "I don't understand this. I will stop if you ask me to, but God I hope you feel like I do. I have to have you again."

Panic hit. Then delight. Fear followed rapidly by desire. His need poured over her, echoed by her own arousal. *Now? Here?* "The storm..."

"The ship is anchored in a bay. We're as safe as we're going to get." His hands clenched into fists, his entire body rigid. A wave of magic floated past her again, overwhelming her senses. She reached deep to try to counter it. It had been so long since she'd used that part of her nature her skin burned. The answering flash of passion that exploded from within was not what she expected. Instead of cooling her ardor for the shaman watching her with lust in his eyes, her fascination grew.

He was willing to stop? Oh God, if he stopped she would die.

Chapter Four

He waited impatiently, uneven breaths racking his body. Her eyes were huge—giant pools of midnight to step into and drown in delightful passions. He didn't understand the attraction between them, but it was innately right. At the very least, there was nothing wrong with them both enjoying another round of exceptional sex.

She nibbled on her lower lip for a moment. His heart skipped a beat as she answered him wordlessly. With a sultry smile, she shimmied her T-shirt over her head, reaching behind her to slip the clasp on her bra. She tossed the items in his direction, but his arms were too heavy to react fast enough. Laurin laughed as her clothing hit his abdomen and fell in a heap at his feet. He stared unblinking at her, his vision suddenly too full. Long slim legs, tapered waist. Her breasts were full and firm, red areolas crowning the gentle curves.

"You are so beautiful." He swallowed hard, unable to tear his gaze away.

"Your turn. I want to see your body as well." She slid off the counter and reached for him. He held out a hand to stop her. Any contact right now and he'd be embarrassed before they even started. He removed his shirt and she whistled approval, a sweet smile teasing the corner of her mouth. He longed to kiss the spot and inched closer. They met in the center of the small space, the heat of their skin touching before the actual moment of physical contact came.

Slow needy kisses followed, their mouths and hands and torsos meeting. There was no turning back, no stopping where this would ultimately take them. Matt thrilled at the taste of her, the sensation of her hands as she stroked his ribs. Her caress stayed firm and controlled, a fingertip flicking his nipple, trailing through the dusting of hair on his abdomen. He lifted his hands to cup her breasts and her sigh of satisfaction made his toes curl.

They stood for a long time, touching, caressing. Wrapping around each other, their bodies and souls melting together. Slowly it became too much to wait, his need making him hot and hard and aching.

When she dropped to her knees before him he swore the walls vibrated with the pulse of adrenaline that drove through him. The light kisses she planted on his belly taunted him, his cock tightening impossibly against the khaki fabric of his shorts. She slipped his button free and maneuvered open the zipper, his cock so sensitized she could have been brushing his skin. When she took his erection into her hand, he thought he'd die with the pleasure of it. The confident way she stroked him made a streak of jealousy rise at anyone else she'd ever touched.

“I want to taste you.” The way her big eyes shone as she stared at him made his knees weak. She lapped the sensitive slit, cleaning off the bead of precome that pearled there, and he trembled.

“Yes. Oh God, yes. No wait...we need to talk.” The boat rocked from side to side in the rising ocean, and this wasn’t the time or place. Whatever magic drove them—the timing couldn’t have been worse.

She kept eye contact as she licked a circle around the crown of his cock. “Talk later.” Then she wet her lips and sucked him in. The moist cavern of her mouth enfolded him, enticed him. He slid his fingers into her hair, the soft texture rubbing his palms like a fountain of silk. She rocked slowly, and each brush of her lips, each stroke of her tongue drove his need higher until he had nothing left but arousal and fire. Still she moved over him, sucking with dark pressure on each withdrawal. When she lifted a hand to fondle his balls, he held on to his control with a fine thread.

“I’m close. If you don’t want me coming in your mouth, you’ve got to stop.”

She wiggled below him, winking one eye before swallowing his cock to the back of her throat. It was the most glorious sight, her mouth spread wide around him, lips glistening with saliva and the tracings of his seed. She tilted her head slightly, adjusting her angle and his shaft slipped in a little deeper. Then she swallowed and a buzzing started in his ears. A low, persistent pressure that built to volcanic levels. And when she clasped his hand and locked his fingers in her hair, motioning for him to take control back, he lost it.

He cradled her head gently, but firmly, rocking his hips with increasing speed as she groaned and adjusted her body. She cupped her breasts, pinching her nipples tight before reaching up to roll his sac in her fingers. She hummed, and his release detonated. He held her still, his groin pressed tight to her lips as she swallowed and moaned, suckling his cock as his seed shot down her accepting throat.

His vision blurred, his heart raced. He’d never come so hard or long before in his life. She nuzzled her nose into the tender crease between his thigh and groin, then planted a final kiss on his abdomen. Matt stepped out of his shorts and scooped her into his arms. They stood there, wrapped together, breaths mingling. She buried her face in the hollow of his neck and purred with delight. There was barely enough room to move in the tiny galley as he rotated and opened the small door to the sleeping berth with his hip.

“Your turn, Moonshine.”

His large bed was tucked tight under the foredeck, the mattress filling the awkward vee-shaped berth to its best advantage. He lowered her tenderly, brushing a strand of her hair back from her forehead. His skin tingled where they touched, and he reached out with his shaman magic, trying to come up with an explanation for the emotion and passion that drove him. Drove them both. She caught his hand in hers and brought it to her mouth, kissing and nibbling on his knuckles. Her pink tongue teased him, slipping between each digit in turn. The contrast between the teasing touch and the desire it stimulated shocked him.

He laughed and stole his hand back to remove her shorts, the pale yellow shimmer of her silky panties evoking an instant reaction. In spite of just having come, his cock filled again as he stroked a finger down the center of the damp fabric.

She shivered.

He smiled and repeated the caress, sliding under the edge of her panties and pulling them from her body. He was going to enjoy this as much as she would.

"I need to touch you, Laurin. I need to taste you." The boat rocked violently and she pulled him to the relative stability of the mattress.

He licked his way down her body, kissing her ribs, planting butterfly kisses on her soft belly. Every taste, every touch built his anticipation until with a sigh he settled between her thighs. He couldn't wait to take her over the edge again. Without warning, without build-up, he lowered his mouth to cover her moist core. Laurin arched into his touch as he buried his tongue in her body.

The storm faded from his hearing as he feasted on her, the sounds of delight from her mouth rising above the cry of the wind around the mast and, the slap of the water into the windows. The roar of fire through his veins was all he felt, the pounding of his blood in his ears all he heard. And her. Throaty moans, sharp gasps, delicate pants—all pushing him to make her pleasure peak cataclysmic. And when she called his name, her fingers laced through his hair, hips raised to him, his satisfaction matched hers.

The dire need to be all she wanted swelled in his mind. He pulled away to see her melted into the mattress, boneless and relaxed. The smile on her face as she reached for him seared his soul.

How was it possible that in less than a day's time his heart ached at the thought of leaving her? Was it possible the magic even now filling the small stateroom was the result of something deeper than their attraction? He ran a hand up her torso until he cupped her face. She turned and planted a kiss on his palm.

"Are you ready for more?" she whispered. The taunting touch of her hands on his back made him shiver. When she grabbed his ass cheeks and squeezed, his cock jerked in reaction. Her aggressive, take-charge approach made him grin, the sensation of her wiggling under him sublime. She lined them up intimately and tugged on his hips to pull them together.

Oh crap. "Wait. Condom."

Her eyes widened and she swore softly. He chuckled as he splayed across her, heated skin to heated skin, and reached with one hand to dig in the small cupboard beside the bed. This time she had forgotten. It was good to know he made her lose control as well...

A cracking noise followed by a resounding twang rang out, loud even through the storm, and the boat shifted violently, tumbling them both across the mattress.

Fuck. What now? "Stay here. I'll check it out. No use us both getting soaked." He dropped a kiss on her cheek and crawled off the bed to make his way to the deck.

The darkness of the sky obscured his vision, the rain and the wind competing in turns as they struck the sides of the boat. The edge of one of the sails had become untied and flapped like a rabid ghost intent on mischief.

Over in the corner he saw the splintered remains of a tie-down. The anchor rope had torn clean away, and *Stormchild* now moved under the propulsion of the waves and wind. Even as he rushed to the helm to manhandle the boat, an exposed sandbar rapidly approached. They'd be stuck until the storm passed and the tide turned. Who knew at what angle the boat would end up before the night was over.

They had to get away before it grew too dangerous with the rapidly changing depth of the bay beneath them. Leaving the steering to the sea's whim, he grasped the walls of the saloon for support as he made his way back to the berth. Chilled water droplets clung to his bare skin and he shook his hair out of his eyes. It was a pity they would have to leave the ship, but with a little luck they'd be able to return in the morning and continue their journey.

Laurin stood at the door, her hands shaking on his skin when he drew their bodies together. "Are we safe?"

The tremble in her voice made him pause, and he stroked her cheek in reassurance. Passion flared between them again in spite of the situation, and he smiled at the ridiculous timing. "The ship should be fine, but right now we have to shift. We'll wait out the storm in the water. Or we can swim to land and take cover there. When I found this bay I noticed there's a couple of small cabins marked on the map."

As he spoke she stiffened in his embrace.

He smoothed back the strands of hair that fell across her cheek. "It's okay. I can help you." If they'd had more time he'd have taken this step slower, but the storm forced his hand. A faint scratching sound dragged along the hull as the underside of the ship touched sand.

She shook her head and pulled away. Losing the touch of her against his skin physically hurt. "Laurin, what's wrong?"

The rocking grew worse and she muffled a shriek. As she stared at him, her pupils were small dark pinpricks of fear. "I can't shift. I need to... I need..." Panic rolled off her and he stepped closer, attempting to reassure her. The craft jolted and they both fell to the mattress. Laurin clawed at the sheets, her breaths coming so rapidly he feared she was having a panic attack.

He pressed her to the mattress, trapping her body with his own. They both panted, him from attempting to slow the unreasonable need surging through him to take her again. He forced his libido down, cursing whatever strange affliction affected his mind and body.

This wasn't the time.

"I can help you. I'm a shaman. I can shift into any of the People of the Sea. No matter what form you are, I can guide you. Even if you've never done a shift." The trembling in her body slowed. He stroked a hand over her ribs, sending calming thoughts, reassuring. He had to make her understand his powers were

enough to break through whatever trouble she'd experienced in the past. He opened his shaman talent and poured it into her, sharing his desire to help her while he searched for her animal spirit.

"No!"

A blast of magic exploded between them, flinging him to the floor. Somehow she'd thrown him off and now scrambled away, out the door and through the galley onto the storm-lashed deck.

"Laurin!" He chased after her, both of them naked, both instantly soaking wet, between the pounding rain and the whitecaps breaking around them. Standing in the open doorway, he peered through the plummeting torrent. Ribbons of water descended around them in a curtain. "Tell me what's wrong," he shouted. "I can help you."

She clung to the railing. Her body jerked, tossed by the wind and violent tilts of the vessel between the rockers of the largest waves. Resignation passed over her face as she looked into the sky, water streaming off her. "Damn it, I really don't want to shift and I can't swim."

"What? Of course you can. I'll help you and we can swim together." He reached for her, scrambling along the slick decking. The ship creaked on the sandbar, lurching to the side as the waves smashed the craft. He stumbled and barely caught the railing beside her in time. "We have to leave now. Please, Laurin, jump with me. I promise I won't leave you."

She threw back her head and, to his surprise, laughed. Sheer and utter delight broke from her lips. The burst of joyful sound cut through the violence of the storm and made his heart ache with concern. Had fear pushed her over the edge?

She shook her head, her eyes bright as she gave him a wry smile. "You won't leave me? Oh, Matt. Since it seems I have no choice in the matter... I might not be able to swim. But I *can* fly."

She threw herself over the railing and he scrambled to catch her, his fingers slipping off as she shimmered. A heartbeat later an osprey circled back toward the ship before gliding upward, away to safety above the storm.

Chapter Five

Laurin skimmed the water's surface where she'd last seen the dolphin rise. She headed for the nearby shore, back-winging inches above the sand before resuming her human form. The wind lessened here in the lee of the hillside, but the night air and the rain chilled her naked skin. She wrapped her arms around her torso to fight the cold.

Staring over the ocean, she wondered how Matt would respond to her being an air shifter. The sound of his cry as she'd leapt into the air reverberated in her head—he hadn't wanted her to go. The temptation to stay wrapped in his arms puzzled her, almost as much as the need she felt to physically join with him.

She'd never needed someone this desperately before in her life. Her whole body itched to have him back. She wanted to hear his gentle laugh, and to feel again the way he stroked his knuckles over her skin. Oh damn, what was the matter with her? Less than twenty-four hours had passed and she ached to be in his presence.

Her rain-soaked hair hung in tangled ropes over her face, water pouring in rivulets down her back. A deep sense of peace warmed her heart as his head broke the surface of the water.

Long firm strides brought him quickly to her side. His naked skin glowed in the pale moonlight that snuck through a short break in the clouds. Around them the storm raged in gusts, whipping her hair around her head. She lifted her hands to clutch it back and he took advantage of the moment to step closer, pressing their bodies together.

"Air shifter."

She smiled into his twinkling eyes. "Shaman."

A shiver traced her skin. He wrapped himself around her, their lips meeting, tongues tangling. Heat built between them, driving the night away. Their skin, slick with the rain and the ocean's salt water, slid together easily as he lifted her into his embrace. She wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms over his shoulders, mouths never separating.

Need swept through her, her breasts tingling where they pressed tightly against his firm chest. She linked her fingers into his hair and tugged until he released her lips. They both sucked in air.

"Damn it, I am so paddling your ass for not telling me sooner," he growled.

Laurin's heart skipped a beat at the erotic pictures that flashed through her mind. A tingling sensation settled heavily between her legs and she ground her crotch on his rock-hard abdomen. Matt groaned and dropped his head on her shoulder for a second. He took a deep breath then spoke, barely audible above the

crash of the waves on the shore. “You’ve got to stop. I don’t know how or why, but for the last five hours I’ve fucking seen everything you imagine doing sexually with me.”

The heat pulsing in her veins egged her on. “I’d think you’d love it.”

He broke into a laugh and cradled her against his body. Quick steps carried them toward the tree line. “Hell yeah, but it’s making this whole situation even harder to figure out. Come on. Let’s find shelter.”

He cracked open the lid on another plastic storage bin. “Jackpot. Dry off and I’ll get the fire going.” A clean blanket settled around her shoulders, soft and warm, his hands massaging her gently for a moment before he winked and turned away.

The tidy little cabin had been unlocked when they found it. A small wood-burning stove nestled in one corner, a table with one chair next to it. The single bedframe was attached to the wall, its mattress rolled and standing upright in the corner to protect it from mice. Laurin scrubbed at her skin vigorously, trying to rid herself of the lingering chill. After toweling off her hair, she wrapped the grey blanket around her like a sarong and joined Matt where he squatted by the open stove.

“Here, I’ll take over. You need to dry off as well.” They brushed shoulders as they switched positions. Laurin resisted the urge to lean into him, the heat of his body drawing her like a magnet.

“Coffee?”

Even the sound of the word made her mouth water. “Oh Lord, yes. Are you sure it’s okay to use these supplies?”

Matt nodded. “You know the rules. We’ll leave the cabin in as good a shape as we found it, and I’ll restock whatever we consume as soon as possible. I’m sure we’re not the first unexpected visitors here. The fishermen understand.”

That was true. She’d had to shelter in a small trapper’s cabin in the mountains before and never felt guilty. The kindling crackled before her and she fed a few more pieces of wood to the flames. Building heat reflected back at her and she sighed with relief.

She glanced at Matt. He’d dried off and found a pair of shorts in one of the totes. He grinned when he saw her watching him and held out a pile of fabric. “I don’t mind what you’re wearing now, but you might want a little more warmth.”

They worked around each other in a companionable silence. Laurin pulled on the oversized shirt, its tails hanging low enough to touch her knees. Slowly the room warmed. The rain continued to beat on the roof, but now it sounded pleasurable, a part of the rhythm of the place. Rich coffee scents floated enticingly on the air, and she turned from where she’d been making the bed.

Matt gestured to the cup resting nearby. “I added extra sugar. Thought you might need it.”

She wrinkled her nose and nodded slowly. “I guess I owe you an explanation.”

He handed her the cup, then sat on the bed and carefully pulled her onto his lap. “Drink first. If you haven’t shifted in a long time you need the calories.”

Which warmed her more—the smooth liquid heat sliding down her throat? The heat passing from his body to hers where they touched? The caring tone in his husky voice? He ran a hand down her back, stroking and rubbing gently. She wanted to purr and nestle closer.

The emotions this man produced in her were incredible. Passion and lust and sweet longing for home, all wrapped together in a vibrating burst of life. Too much and not nearly enough.

She looked up at him. “Why do I feel like...”

“...you want to crawl into my skin? Spend the entire night wrapped together?” He brushed her chin with his knuckles. Stroked her jawline with his thumb. “I feel it too. An air shifter. I never dreamed of this happening.” Their gazes meshed. The knowledge he saw her every desire made heat rise to her cheeks.

“Never dreamed of what happening? Getting trapped by the storm? I hope your boat is all right.”

He shook his head. “*Stormchild* will be fine. We probably could have stayed onboard, only we’d have been sleeping on our heads with the tilt she’ll hit before the tide turns. That’s not what I meant. I can’t believe I didn’t realize you were from the air clans.”

Laurin snuggled tighter into his body. It felt too right to fight anymore. “I didn’t want anyone to know.”

“Why keep it a mystery? Shifters get along, most of the time. No matter what species.”

Laurin debated how much she needed to tell him. Her one-night stand had turned into something bigger. If she was honest, Matt attracted her immensely, but not only by the physical pull between them. The caring way he had behaved opened her tightly locked secrets. She wiggled off his lap to face him more easily.

“I left the mountains two years ago. There were too many power-hungry shifters trying to woo me to their side and frankly I got sick of the whole thing. Teaching is what I’ve longed to do, but they wouldn’t let me alone. I applied for the traveling position, and I’ve been with the People of the Sea ever since. My family knows how to find me, but as long as I didn’t shift the others were unable to track me down.” She sighed and finished her coffee before placing the cup back on the table. “Now I’m going to have to figure out how to chase them off again. I bet by the time the storm clears we’ll have a dozen of the more astute of the eagle and hawk clans winging their way here looking for a fight.” Matthew’s shocked expression made her laugh. “What?”

“Why would you have men from more than one clan type chasing you? You shifted into an osprey...”

Damn. “Well, about that. I’m kinda—”

“Holy shit, you’re a shaman too.” The light in his gaze burned too hot for her to maintain eye contact.

“No, hang on a second. I’m not what you are. In fact, I’m the exact opposite—I have no magical abilities on my own. Yeah, I can shift into any of the air clans. But that’s the point. Since I can shift into

anything, all the second sons and third cousins who hope to break into the upper hierarchies want me as a mate. I'll boost their powers."

Matthew's smile burst like a sunrise on a clear summer morning. "I think we're meant to be together."

"Oh God, not you too." The words escaped before she could seal her lips.

Confusion raced over his face. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Look, just because I...we..." She stood, disappointment washing over her. She'd thought he would be different. She didn't want someone taking advantage of her innate skills, wanting her only for what she could bring to them. Before she could take a step he caged her, dragged her closer in one bold motion to rest on his chest as he lay back on the bed. Rolling quickly he pinned her beneath him. "Let me go," she demanded.

A raise of his brow answered. "You're being unreasonable. I want to talk and if this is the only way to get your attention—"

"The last time you tried to get my attention by flattening me you ended up on your ass." How dare he control her this way? She tried to ignore the small part inside reveling in the command he took over her. Mentally chastised herself for even thinking about enjoying his bossy behavior.

"Hmm, you really do like the idea of me paddling your ass, don't you? Laurin, listen. I'm not trying to take over your life. I'm offering you a solution to your problems, and mine." He nuzzled her neck and she shivered.

"Stop."

Matt chuckled. "Why?"

"I can't think when you do that."

"You're not supposed to be able to think when I do this." He laid a line of kisses along her collarbone, unbuttoning her shirt and exposing her torso to his gaze. "Fuck, woman, you make me lose all control." He pulled away and sat up, stroking her arm gently. "I need you, Laurin, but not to take over your life. I want you as well, and I think between the two of us we have the beginnings of a beautiful relationship. If you want to listen to my proposal."

Chapter Six

He nearly swallowed his tongue at his poor choice of words. The expression on her face returned to almost as panicked as she'd been back aboard the *Stormchild* before they'd abandoned ship. Shit, his brain had tangled in knots. He was never this stupid, never so undisciplined.

She was a bloody air shifter. Never in a million years would he have guessed she was from the mountains and not the sea. He felt so comfortable with her. So...right. *As if they belonged together.* He shook his head slightly and tried to clear the cobwebs from his brain.

"Relax, Moonshine, I'm not suggesting you and I get hitched. If what you say is true, there could be a mess of jerks looking for you on the morning wind. I'm a very convenient solution."

Laurin sat up on the bed and he worked diligently to ignore the fact her shirt gaped open, her sweet breasts peeking out from behind the fabric.

"What are you talking about?"

He shrugged, then let a ripple of his power fill the room. Her eyes widened for a moment and then she smiled back at him, mischief written on her face. "Oh hell, that would freak them out. You're like the big bad boogey-man compared to that lot." He wiggled his brows at her and she laughed. The sound died in midair. "Wait. What do you get out of the deal? Other than the fun of making a bunch of chicken hearts lose some feathers as they flap for the hills, scared to death?"

I get to take care of you. He wouldn't voice the thought. Not yet. But perhaps a little of the emotion driving through his veins, just a little, ran through hers. For now, he shared a part of his troubles.

"You know what kind of a family life shamans usually have?"

"Shamans don't have families. They..." Her face paled and she opened and closed her mouth a few times. "Oh my God, that's why you were surprised when I told you I wanted to use a condom that first time. Most women want to have sex with you so they..." She swore softly, shaking her head in sympathy.

He nodded. "They want to get pregnant and potentially have a powerful offspring. It's not an easy thing, to get pregnant with a shaman, but it happens. And, speaking personally? It's a fucking miserable way to grow up, with no father but some mystical presence who visits once in a blue moon. I have no issue with single moms, but the ones who deliberately set out to gain status through having a kid—their idea sucks. I'm not having it, Laurin. I want a real family some day. In the meantime, I've spent the past six months fighting off the women who simply want me to be a sperm donor. If I had you by my side, my problem would be solved."

Laurin nodded slowly, considering his words. She wrinkled her nose for a second. “I’m scheduled to teach at Bella Coola for a month. How long are you supposed to stay?”

“Two weeks. I could arrange to do short-term visits to some of the closer settlements on weekends when you’re free to accompany me.”

“I might be able to rearrange my schedule a bit. It could work.” Her dark eyes looked him over carefully. “What if while we’re in this arrangement, you find someone you want to get to know better? I mean, you might miss out on the love of your life while we’re pulling this charade.”

I think I’ve already found her. Oh fuck. His gut twisted. *Think fast, Matt, she’s not ready to hear that.* He forced himself to stay calm and relaxed. “I won’t cheat on you if that’s what you’re asking. For now, I simply want a chance to relax and do my damn job. Let’s give it a shot, and see what happens.”

Laurin paused for a moment before she stuck out her hand and they shook, businesslike. Impersonal. A moment’s guilt assaulted him along with the trickle of sexual electricity snapping between them. This arrangement would stand for now, but he had no intention of letting her go. At least this way he’d have the time to be able to convince her they belonged together.

The deliberate fluttering of her eyelids did strange things to his heart. Another erotic image flashed from her mind to his, and he clamped down on the groan of desire wanting to escape. She’d envisioned them naked and entwined, the pale light of sunset on their skin as they made love on the deck of *Stormchild*.

His heart beat faster as she slipped the oversized shirt off her shoulders. It pooled around her hips and he swallowed hard. His cock filled like a sail in a stiff breeze. “Laurin?”

“I figured if we’re going to be a couple, we’d better practice. We need to be convincing for the boys when they arrive tomorrow. Don’t you think?”

Oh God, she was going to kill him. Could a man die from his dick exploding? “Moonshine, I love the way your mind works, but I left my wallet on the ship. No protection. The cabin owners were prepared, but obviously not expecting mermaids to come waltzing in the door.”

She crawled toward him, a sultry expression on her face. Passion in her eyes, her breasts swayed slightly as she approached and his breath caught in his throat. “You need to think this through logically. We don’t need a condom. Air shifter, plus water shaman? Remember your science, medicine man.”

His erection stood straighter and saluted with a hallelujah. “Shit, you’re right.” She couldn’t get pregnant, not without some serious mumbo-jumbo first. Which he’d be very willing to go through once he’d convinced her this was more than a relationship of convenience.

Her fingers fumbled with the fastenings on his shorts as he tried to kiss her senseless. They rolled together on the tiny bed, the crackle of the fire meshing with the pounding of the rain. A symphony of nature providing a background to their lovemaking.

Their naked skin brushed as they exchanged wet kisses. Matthew took his time and explored every inch of her body again in the dim light of the cabin. Her gasping breaths as he nipped and suckled at the rosy peaks of her nipples made his body ache. Made his heart sing.

He stroked her gently, circling the rigid nub at the apex of her mound with his thumb, sliding his fingers into her wet passage. They kissed long and thoroughly. Tongues and teeth, heat and hearts. When she gasped out with her release, he captured the sound in his mouth, continuing to draw her over the edge until her whole body shook in reaction. Then he settled between her open thighs and nestled their bodies together.

Sweet heat, warm and enveloping, welcomed him in. He pressed smoothly until he was buried hilt deep. It was everything he'd ever wanted and still not enough. The urgent need for her—he'd thought it would diminish now they were connected intimately, skin to skin. Something was still missing. His soul ached.

He pulled back to stare into her eyes. "Laurin." His raging blood didn't cause the pulse within his body to beat out of rhythm. Something deeper, more elemental and wild was happening.

She cupped his cheek in a hand and narrowed her gaze, a frown creasing her forehead. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "Nothing's wrong, but I have to tell you...I have to show you." Unable to contain his power anymore, he let go of his restraint.

Bells rang in the small room, a deep tolling sound originating from his magic. Magic that tangled their limbs, stroked their minds. Laurin clutched his back, her legs wrapped around his hips. "Oh my God, what are you doing?" A shimmer, like the light of a million fireflies, lit even the farthest corners of the room. A breeze formed out of nowhere and brushed their naked skin.

"I can't stop." He thrust in again, slow and smooth, dragging his abdomen over her clit and tilting his hips to hit the exact angle he sensed she needed. Laurin sang out in delight and scratched his shoulders.

"I don't want...you to stop...oh mercy...yes."

Another thrust. Another. Laurin bit her lip and lifted into his motion. The magic in the room spiked and she swore.

And lost control of her own tightly reined power.

The supernatural essence of their souls—of air and water—met as they made love. The small cabin attempted to contain the elements within a twelve-by-twelve-square-foot space. There was hard aching physical need, the stroke of his cock deep into her body. The pull of her hands to bring their mouths together. Her addictive taste, the meld of their now-sweating bodies and salty skin. All of it, oh so right and necessary.

And on yet another level they touched. Her thoughts brushed his mind, revealing the level of her excitement, as well as the longing for him in her body. In her life. He sensed everything—desires and needs—and he hungered to provide for her.

Her body tightened, the first pulses of her climax clutching him. He held on for another three strokes, trying to prolong her pleasure, before it grew too much to bear. Burying himself in her warmth, he let loose and emptied himself. His body joined with hers as close as possible.

Their minds and souls linked.

Images, emotions. Knowledge of her hidden hopes and fears rolled through him and he knew her intimately, inside and out. Her eyes widened and she cupped his face tenderly as his own history wrote itself into her memory.

Matt wasn't sure how long they remained, postcoital, still joined. He became aware he lay on his side, staring into her face. A single tear leaked from the corner of her eye and he kissed it away.

"What happened?" Laurin whispered, running her fingers through his hair again and again. "Did we do something wrong?"

He brushed his thumb over her trembling lower lip. "Something very right."

"We're...this isn't just a casual relationship, is it? We're something more."

He nodded, unable to stop kissing her. "You still have time. I won't push you for more than the commitment we made to help each other. But we complement each other. Not only in bed, but in our skills and personalities."

"The magic. I've never lost control like that before." She rolled on top of him, pressing up to straddle his waist. Her hair hung like a curtain over her shoulder and he reached to brush it back from her breast. The need to touch her undiminished.

"I don't think you lost control of it. You would have shifted."

She nodded slowly. Matt held his breath, waiting for her response. He knew what he'd experienced.

His world had changed.

Whatever happened from here on in, he needed her to be with him. But if it took more time for her to accept their joining, he had the patience. The People of the Sea were old in tradition. Calm and deep, able to wait until the time was right. He sat up and folded her in his arms. "I'm going to love getting to know you better. You still willing to take me on? Magical destinies and all?"

The wind rushed in where angels fear to tread. Laurin's voice was soft, but clear as she spoke. "You think I can ignore what just happened? I wasn't planning on making up wedding invitations, but that was a little more than sex we just shared."

She nuzzled against his throat and the knot in his belly loosened. The tension of the past months eased away. When she giggled, he pulled her back to stare into her dark eyes. "What?"

“You know how weird it is to look at you and know what you like to eat for breakfast? That you drive too fast and you secretly love to read—”

Matt laughed out loud as he pressed a hand over her lips. “That’s cheating.”

She kissed his fingers, the light shining in her eyes beautiful to see. “Not my fault.”

He held her gently, his heart overflowing. “You don’t know everything, you know. We still have some secrets.”

Laurin grinned at him. “Are you still planning on kicking the boys’ butts when they arrive in the morning?”

He had to concentrate to answer her with the thrill racing through his body. “Oh hell, yeah. They even breathe at you funny and we’ll have a new feather duvet for our bed on the *Stormchild*.”

The sound of her laughter intoxicated him and he reached for another shot of pure sweet Moonshine.

The rest? They’d figure out the details as they went along.

About the Author

Vivian Arend has hiked, biked, skied and paddled her way around most of North America and parts of Europe. Throughout all the wandering in the wilderness, stories have been planted and they are bursting out in vivid colour. Paranormal, twisted fairytales, red-hot contemporaries—the genres are all over.

Between times of living with no running water, she home schools her teenaged children and tries to keep up with her husband—the instigator of most of the wilderness adventures.

She loves to hear from readers: vivarend@gmail.com. You can also drop by www.vivianarend.com for more information on what is coming next.

Look for these titles by Vivian Arend

Now Available:

Granite Lake Wolves

Wolf Signs

Wolf Flight

Wolf Games

Tidal Wave

Turn It On

True love's path never did run smooth.

Wolf Games

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Granite Lake Wolves, Book 3

After seven years of total denial, Maggie Raynor's body—and her inner wolf—are in full revolt. Weak and shaky, she literally falls into the very large and capable arms of the Granite Lake Beta, Erik Costanov. The last thing she wants is a mate, particularly when just looking at another wolf scares her to death. And one as big and sexy as Erik? Really bad idea, no matter what her libido says.

Erik expected to meet Maggie in Whitehorse to escort her to the home of her sister, his pack's Omega. Sheer chance puts him in the right place at the right time to catch her, but the realization that hits him with the force of a full body shot is no accident. She's his mate. An even bigger shock? She wants no part of him—not until she resolves her issues.

She'll have to work fast, because they're both selected to represent the pack during the premier sporting event for wolves in the north. Not only will she have to work as a team with Erik, she'll have to face down her fear of wolves. Let the Games begin.

Warning: Contains uber-sexy werewolves of Russian descent, reluctant mates and exotic travels through the Yukon wilderness. Includes sarcasm and hot nookie under the Midnight Sun.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Wolf Games:

Her bright eyes examined his face closely, as if she was trying to see if this was some kind of trick to impress her. "You're a very complicated man, Erik Costanov."

He shook his head. "I'm as simple as they come. I believe in the golden rule, and I try to live by it."

She knocked him off balance by crawling across his legs and straddling him, her butt resting on his thighs. He lay very still, afraid to scare her, but savouring the sensation of her weight on top of him.

"What are you doing?" There, that managed to come out sounding reasonably intelligible. Damn, he spoke seven languages and right now English didn't seem to be one of them. His tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth.

She wiggled a little closer and he bit back a groan. Her hot core now rested against his groin and his cock rose like new bread in an oven. "I want to kiss you."

Hallelujahs rang in his brain. Holy freaking exclamations of jubilation, rejoicing and unending glee broke out in a full chorus. But when he spoke, he delivered a measured, "Okay."

She leaned forward and brushed her lips over his, and the electric sensation he'd felt before when they kissed buzzed through his torso and up his spine to his brain. Before he knew it, he'd buried the fingers of one hand in her hair, moving her the way he wanted her, while the other wrapped around her body to pull

their torsos together. Her sweetness filled his senses, tantalizing his taste buds with the desire for more. Eager noises rose from her as their tongues brushed.

The night remained warm, and they both wore only shorts and T-shirts. Having a barrier between them was torture. He broke off their kiss, sat with her still straddling him, and whipped off his shirt. Her eyes bulged for a second before she reached down to caress his abdomen, the fleeting strokes tormenting him even as he savoured his mate finally, finally touching his skin again.

“Please take off your shirt.” His voice cracked, he needed this so much. He closed his eyes against the disappointment of her saying no, then the rustle of fabric hit his ears. When he looked again, she still wore her bra, but the creamy smoothness of the rest of her skin more than made up for that small disappointment. He touched her reverently, stroking from her hips up the gentle indent of her waist until he covered the swells of her lace-covered breasts. She sucked in a gasp as he rubbed his thumbs in small circles over her nipples, the tips beading to tight points that stabbed his flesh through the fabric. “You’re beautiful.”

He ignored the driving urge to roll her over and take her, and instead slipped his hands back around her torso so their lips met again.

They kissed leisurely, exploring each other’s mouths and necks, tongues stroking, teeth nibbling. Erik wasn’t sure how long they sat there and frankly, he didn’t give a damn. He’d waited his whole life for her, and they were finally doing what his wolf had been howling at him to do for days. Although the beast was going to be sorely disappointed when they didn’t go all the way.

Maggie’s breathing grew more rapid and she squirmed against him, her mound rubbing his groin like a firebrand. When he finally couldn’t take it anymore, he grabbed her by the ass and adjusted her until he was happy. He ground them together again and again, and she moaned in his ear. Damn, he was going to come right like this if he didn’t watch it.

So he lifted her and undid her belt.

She slapped at his hands. “What are you doing?”

“Take off your pants.”

“Erik, we can’t—”

He was on fire with a desperate need. “We’re not having sex but I need to touch you. Take them off, now.” She hesitated for just a second, then unzipped and dropped both her panties and her shorts, stepping out of the legs where they bunched around her ankles. She stood there, bare-naked except for her bra, with her pussy right in front of him and he had no power to resist.

He clutched her ass and buried his face between her legs. She cried out softly but he was too busy to warn her to stay quiet. Her sweet scent drew him, and he separated the curls covering her with his tongue and licked the length of her slit. Oh Lord, she tasted good. Her flavour raced through him and drugged his senses. He pressed his tongue into her pussy as far as it would go, lapping at the cream coating her passage.

She rocked against his mouth, opening her legs wider, her fingers clutching his head. The arm he’d

wrapped around her ensured she stayed right where he could reach and delve into her body. She made the most delicious noises, and he stopped to take a deep breath and enjoy the sensation of holding her intimately.

“More,” she demanded.

“Yes.” He slipped a finger into her depths and suckled her clit with his mouth.

“Yessss...” Her hiss of agreement trailed off into the contented rumble of a wolf being petted and he smiled.

When the past bites, bite back.

Blood and Destiny

© 2010 Kaye Chambers

Ladies of St. George, Book 1

For Destiny St. George, shapeshifting lioness and private investigator, her best friend's looming wedding is little more than a reminder of her failed relationship with vampire king Marcus Smythe. Tired of being only one of many mistresses—and dinner entrees—she's stayed away from the vampire scene altogether. Until a missing-person case forces her to seek his help.

Knowing that pressing Destiny is not the way to convince her to give their relationship another try, Marcus has been waiting her out—and his patience is rewarded when she steps into his nightclub. Now is his chance to lure her back into his arms. This time, he plans to keep her there.

Destiny's not sure which is worse: working with Marcus, or trying to remember all the reasons she called it off with him. And when it becomes clear the case is an elaborate trap to avenge a millennia-old grudge, she finds herself caught between love and instinct—while the clock ticks down on an innocent victim's life...

Warning: Vampires determined to take more than a bite out of the heroine. A lioness sure that she's going to have the last word.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Blood and Destiny:

"Maybe you should go."

His hands froze over the wine bottle. Without turning, he resumed twisting the corkscrew into the wine cork.

"No car," he reminded me.

Oh, right. He had sent the driver to find out news of the new vampire in town. Criminy. I latched on to the next solution.

"When did you tell Peter to bring my car home?"

"He'll bring it after work tonight."

Which meant not until the wee hours of the morning at best. I watched Marcus pour the rich red wine into the glasses.

"Cab?" I suggested out of desperation.

The look he gave me as he turned to me with the glasses in hand was all the answer I needed. The idea of Marcus in a cab was a little bit ridiculous.

"I'll grant that it may have been overly optimistic of me to assume I would be invited to stay the night. Nonetheless, you're stuck with me for the moment. Come, have a glass of wine. Let's not let my ego

ruin this reunion. We can talk a bit and if you're still anxious for me to leave, I'll call the driver back."

Why did the man have to be so reasonable? Simple. Time was on his side and he knew it. I would have loved to say his confidence was misplaced, but we both knew how much I wanted what he was offering. The question was if my strength of will was stronger than my desire?

I needed action. Walking past him, taking a glass from his hand as I went, I flipped on the outside light and kept moving to the living room. The apartment wasn't very big, but it boasted a small dining room, a living room, a bedroom and a centrally located bath. Considering I spent most of my time downstairs, it was all I needed.

He followed like a shadow, not needing any more light than I did to travel the familiar path across the worn carpet. I skirted the doorway to the bedroom, grateful that I had closed it before heading out earlier, and led him to the couch and love seat. Pointedly not looking at the oil painting centered above the couch that Marcus had given me for my birthday last year, I leaned over to flip the lamp on low before settling into the corner next to it with my feet curled under me. It was a very catlike pose, but it was too late to change as Marcus settled close to me.

If he felt awkward, it didn't show. He sat with a casual grace and surveyed the room with an imperial air. Considering nothing had changed since the last time he visited, the rush of anxiety I felt was totally absurd. Of course, my jumble of emotions may have been the kiss and the remaining hum of unfulfilled desire. My libido hadn't quite realized I was going to be frustrated by morning and responded to the promise of his presence.

Hell, whom was I kidding? I was already frustrated and the solution was close enough to touch. I couldn't have been more miserable if I were staring at a display of chocolate-covered strawberries behind the glass of a closed shop. Since breaking the glass wasn't an option, I had to tough it out with the reminder that I had gone to him, after all.

I drank from the glass but couldn't appreciate the rich taste of the wine. The quality of it indicated Marcus had my number on more than one level. The silence stretched from awkward into downright rude. When he finally spoke, I jumped, sloshing wine across my hand and onto my slacks. Even as his gaze dropped to the red staining the tan fabric and heated with all sorts of lascivious promises, his words registered.

"You've stayed away a long time, Destiny. I've missed you. My heart has been lonely."

The tension shifted back to the sexual undertones and I had to beat back my libido. Grabbing on to the only lifeline I could find, I tried to pick a fight.

"I noticed you said your heart was lonely and not your bed."

Months ago, it would have had the desired effect. Either Marcus had gotten wise to me or he had mellowed. Vampires as old as he was didn't change readily, so I was betting on the former. Instead of rising to the bait, he met my challenging look with a contemplative gaze.

“Why is my lifestyle so repugnant when yours wouldn’t be very different if you followed your instincts?”

Our time apart had made him smarter too. I was screwed and not in a good way. I sensed retreat might be in order, but argued anyway. “For starters, female lions are very selective in their breeding habits and don’t have a different male every night of the week.”

“So your objection isn’t to the other women, just the variety?”

On one hand, my ego was stroked that he’d wasted so much time thinking about why I’d left him. On the other, it meant I was going to have to be totally honest with both of us. Since moral outrage hadn’t worked, maybe honesty would.

“I don’t know, Marcus. I wasn’t raised among lions, so my moral code doesn’t exactly jive with my genetic programming. Lionesses in the wild will commit to a male coalition if they’re strong enough to keep the pride safe and they’ll share those males among them. Do shapeshifting lions abide by that same code? You tell me since you’ve known more of them than I have.”

It came out with a wealth of bitter undertones. I cringed, but held my ground. I thought I had come to terms with the fact my mother had left me on the doorstep of St. George’s Children’s Home as a newborn, but apparently my abandonment issues were creeping up to haunt me at the most inopportune time. It also gave away more than I wanted Marcus to know. Intuitive as always, he picked up on the hidden clue.

“So if it’s not the sharing that offends you, what is it, dear Destiny?”

I took the opportunity to look at him, really look at him. The first moment I’d laid eyes on him, his presence had hit me like a blow to my middle. He still had the ability to do that to me. Now it was tempered by familiarity and genuine affection for the man underneath which made it so much more dangerous. With that in mind, I strove for gentle honesty for both our sakes.

“It’s the being left behind, Marcus. You make time for me on my allotted days and then you disappear until my turn on the rotation rolls ’round again. What bothers me is I’m a type of casual fling for you. It’s not enough for me. Not when you’re more than that for me.”

His temper prickled along my senses, but he quickly bottled it. Without meaning to, I’d offended him.

“I gave you more time than any of my other women. Even you can’t feed me more than twice a week without harm.”

“And did you think that you don’t have to use me as dinner to be with me? How about having your dinner then meeting me for a movie or for a quiet night in? That never occurred to you, did it?”

His head snapped back as if I’d struck him and I knew I was right on the mark. With a deep breath, I set my wineglass on the side table and turned to face him by shifting my back to the arm of the couch.

“Destiny,” he began. I watched him decide on the words to use. Apparently, he was being as careful as I was. “You’re right. It never occurred to me to consider spending time together unencumbered by need.”

I was expecting more outrage and a true argument so his capitulation gave my mounting frustration no outlet. His gaze lingered on mine and he nodded as if making a decision of his own that I wasn't privy to. He rose with all the grace of his station and held out his hand to me.

"When was the last time you truly rested?" he asked. "When have you truly felt safe in the world enough to sleep?"

So he was going to use his knowledge of my secrets against me.

"The absolute last place I want to be right now is in bed with you."

Liar, liar, pants on fire. I ignored my subconscious taunting.

The most damaged heart can fly with the right pair of wings.

Everlong

© 2010 Hailey Edwards

Madelyn's life is far from fairytale perfect. She is second in line for the throne of a corrupt, brutal monarchy. Or at least she was until her dark guardian sacrificed his life to hide her safely in a realm of infinite possibilities.

For years she's lived among a colony of escaped slaves as her guardian's widow. Even in this simple life, though, nothing is as it seems. Her hero kept a secret—a younger brother named Clayton Delaney. Warrior, winged demon...and the man who now wants to lay claim to her heart.

No longer cast in his brother's shadow, Clayton meets all obstacles head on, including one named Maddie. His infatuation with her reaches the breaking point when she undergoes a royal rite of passage, going into heat and pushing them both over the edge.

Just as Maddie learns that some risks are worth taking, she discovers that her guardian may be alive. And she's forced to make a choice between the man she'd thought she loved, and the demon willing to lend her his wings.

Warning: This book contains virginal angst, a hero who's too nice for his own good, wings, claws, and convenient use of glamour. It contains heartbreaking loss, conversation with a woodland creature, and sweet, sweet demon loving.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Everlong:

Pushing up the trail harder than I should have, I almost missed the turn guiding me up the final incline to where the landscape dropped away before me. Trees and rocks jutted up off to my left and right, but ahead lay nothing. My legs ached from the effort of climbing to Emasen's cliff edge, but the view made the burn worthwhile.

Exhausted, I shrugged out of my backpack, letting it slide down my arms to land with a soft thud on the compacted earth. Sweat stung my eyes. Perspiration beaded on my skin, struggling to squeeze through the coating of waterproof sunscreen Emma had made me apply before allowing me to leave the house.

I walked to the edge of the precipice and stood with the toes of my sneakers hanging over the sheer rock face of the cliff. My shoulders tensed, air whooshed into my lungs as I rolled to the balls of my feet, preparing for the impossibility of flight.

"Step back from the ledge," Clayton's soft voice coaxed from behind me.

"Clayton," I groaned. "I wasn't really going to jump." I pointed towards my back. "No wings, remember?" As if either of us could forget.

I twisted abruptly, discounting the lingering tenderness in my knee, and lost my footing. Arms flailing, I tried to regain my balance and failed, toppling backwards from the ledge.

“Clayton!” I shouted his name as my body whistled through the air, plummeting towards the earth. Frantic heartbeats thundered in my ears, drowning out the sound of my screams.

As I fell, my earliest memories flickered through my mind. I pushed aside the barrage of images and settled on my favorite. That of a black-skinned boy with glittering onyx eyes. And wings. Tiny, ruby-red wings that had fluttered with his excitement and made my child’s heart long for the half of my heritage I lacked.

“Madelyn!” Clayton bellowed, leaping from the edge and following me into the sky.

I had only a fraction of a second to wonder if he would make it before his strong arms plucked me from my downward spiral.

His enormous scarlet wings opened wide, stretching out so far in either direction I couldn’t see the blackened tips and tiny, hook-like hands that topped them.

Clayton’s blunt chin dug into the top of my head. The muscular arms holding me close tightened until my breath wheezed from my lungs.

“Were you trying to get yourself killed?” he snapped. “What if I hadn’t been there? What if you’d been alone?” His skin trembled beneath my fingers.

“It was an accident.” I struggled in his hold, trying to free my arms from where he pinned them to my sides. “If you hadn’t startled me, I wouldn’t have fallen in the first place.”

“You can’t be so careless.” He held me dangling in the air before him, shaking me senseless, before tucking me back against his chest. His voice cracked. “What would I have done without you?” His thumb worked across a bony protrusion behind my shoulder blade, marking my absence of wings.

“It’s okay, really.” I rested my cheek against his chest since my hands weren’t free. “A fall from that height would have hurt.” I carefully avoided making a comment on my personal experiences. “But I would have healed eventually.”

“I don’t want to hear this.” His head tossed from side to side. “I don’t want to know how you know that.”

If I’d thought he couldn’t hold me tighter, I’d been wrong. I would wear bruises for a while, but for now, I allowed him to have what he needed, letting him squeeze until joints popped and pain blossomed. It was such a small hurt when compared to the anguish carried in his voice.

Using my chin to part the fabric of his shirt, I rested my face flush against his skin. His body shuddered beneath my cheek. His desperate groan filled my ear with his heated breath as he glided the last few feet and touched down.

Still gripping my upper arms, Clayton lowered me to the ground, sliding me down his body so slowly time felt suspended. With earth beneath my feet, I leaned into him, trying to calm his ragged nerves.

Something hard pressed against my stomach, making me shift to get comfortable and him growl low in his throat. Oh. *Oh*.

“Madelyn...” His voice grew husky.

I pulled back, meeting his gaze. “You really are worked up over this.” I twisted in a circle before him. “I’m fine. See?”

“Madelyn...”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it.” I touched his arm, the muscle beneath my hand pulled taut as a bowstring.

“Run,” he grated out over his lips.

I spun around, searching for another demon or a wild animal, unable to imagine anything Clayton couldn’t protect me against. We were alone in the ravine. No one or thing had followed us here. “Why? What’s wrong?”

Our eyes locked. I gasped and backed away slowly. Clayton’s pupils flashed silver, huge, luminous and spellbinding. His wings twitched with his effort to still them, but vibrant reds saturated his skin as his arousal heightened and called forth my body’s own response.

“Go.” He clutched his head, breaths ragged. “Run!”

I turned, but from the corner of my eye I saw him fall to the ground. Instead of leaving, I took a half step forward.

“Get away from me!” He slashed the air inches from my face with razor-tipped claws. “I can’t control myself. It’s too much. Your scent...” His wings stretched and then cloaked his body as he hid himself from me. “Find Figment, she knows the way.”

This time he didn’t have to ask twice. I spun on my heel and ran.



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