

Chapter 1 - - Shots in the Fog

There are three great mysteries in the world. The first is the mystery of God's love for man. The second is the mystery that comes out of the depths of the ocean. And the third is the mystery of love between a man and a woman. These three mysteries all came together, one Sunday, in the little coastal town of Brookings, Oregon.

Now, George Carol was a fisherman by trade. His father ran a charter fishing boat, the Gold Digger. And like all the charter boats, times were lean. Fisheries had been closed down. Fishing trawlers sat idle in their slips, many had for sale signs. Their owners and crew were on land working somewhere, struggling to make the boat payments so that, someday, when the fish came back, they could once again return to the sea. George Carol was angry. He was angry at the Federal government for shutting down the salmon season. He was angry at the farmers for taking all the water out of the rivers the salmon needed. And he was angry at the seals for taking the salmon that he and the others were denied. And when George got

angry, he drank. And when he drank, he got angrier. On this particular Sunday, George decided to even up the score. So he got his dory, and his buddy Ronny Hayworth, and they headed out to sea with a rifle and a box of cartridges tucked under a blanket in the bottom of the boat, next to a bottle of Jim Beam.

Tom Olson was in church that Sunday morning, trying to concentrate on the sermon. But his mind wandered. His boat was ready to sail, but he had a lot of things still to do.

He struggled to listen to Pastor Art.

“Focus, focus on the sermon,” he told himself. “What did he say? Something about the ‘depth of God’s love, passes all understanding?’ The depth of God’s love?”

His brain quickly took a left turn.

“Depth, I wonder how deep Sam set his crab pots this time. I’ve got to pull them in this afternoon. Oh! Forget the crab pots. Focus on the Word!”

His eyes scanned the pages before him. Where was the Art reading from? It’s not in Ephesians. What book had he switched to? Tom looked up and casually glanced at the Bible of the attractive young woman sitting next to him.

Leah Crenshaw discreetly held up her Bible so he could see, her index finger tapping softly by the verse her father was quoting. She smiled as he murmured “Thanks”. Tom was considered, by many to be her boy friend and her mother hoped for a marriage soon. But Leah knew better. Tom’s heart was in his boat, and in sailing around the world. She took a fleeting look at him. She wasn’t sure if she could sail around the world in a sailboat, alone with Tom. But then, he’d never asked her.

A young woman made her way down the beach to the tide pools carved out of the ancient basalt that formed the base of the cliff. She located a large rock she had been scouting for days. It was close to the water and close to the cliff. The gap between them provided a certain amount of privacy. There was only one easy way in during low tide, across the smooth black rocky shore, otherwise you had to scramble up and over the back of the formidable boulder. Sand had washed up and formed a soft smooth base revealing the footprints of whoever came into this little sanctuary. Today it showed the webbed paw prints of a sea otter. The young woman looked around to make sure she wasn't followed, then, ducked into her private little cove.

She pulled her back pack off and stuffed it high in a cleft of the rock above the waterline to keep it dry. She emptied her pockets, one by one placing the contents in the zippered pouches on the pack. She wedged a stick into the sandstone cliff and hung her jacket on it. One last quick look around showed she was definitely alone. No one walked along the beach, and the cool foggy air kept people off their expensive view decks that lined the bluff above. She pulled off her sweatshirt and shrugged off her pants. She scooped these up and hung them on the stick. In her haste she didn't notice the small brown leather pouch drop from her jacket. Dressed now in a light blue bikini, she cautiously slipped out of her hide away into the large tide pool that led to the ocean. The cool salty air gave way to cold ocean water. She waded through the wave cut opening of the shore and into the calm ocean. She took a breath and slid beneath the water into the kelp bed below.

It was foggy just off shore. George and Ronny were having trouble locating their prey. It didn't help that their internal fogginess was increasing as the contents of the whiskey

bottle decreased. There was a lot of cursing drifting through the fog that morning but no one was out to hear it.

Tom loaded his gear into the small launch Sam always used to tend his crab pots. He waved at Murray, the local repair man that Sam always used. Murray could fix just about any radio, but he was as slow and methodical as a sea slug.

“Murray! Is Sam’s radio ready yet,” Tom asked, but he already new the answer.

“Pretty soon”, Murray answered, as always.

Today, being Sunday, Sam had elected to stay home with his wife, Paddy, who was worrying about the land crabs again. Tom shook his head as the engine cranked, coughed then started. “Land crabs. Lord, please don’t let them fumigate the house again” he prayed. The small rusty launch chugged out of the harbor, down a short hundred yard stretch of water, and out into the ocean. Eons ago, the Chetco River sliced a deep cut through the coast range to the Pacific Ocean. Its estuary is short so the fathers of Brookings created a safe harbor with jetties along the south shore. The river empties straight into the Pacific with jetties on the north and south sides to protect the channel. No wind meant a calm sea but it also meant fog. The chill in the air invigorated Tom, lifting him out of the pastoral tranquility that church always left him in. He loved the smell of the ocean, especially when it mixed with the smell of cooking from Hanks Harborside Restaurant. He enjoyed the way the smells faded as he motored down the channel and out into the open water, and he enjoyed it even more as it acted like a homing beacon to his nose. The foghorn on the south jetty poured out its plaintive cry every 30 seconds. Tirelessly it announced to all ships at sea, that here was

life and safe harbor, on the other side of the fog. Tom motored out about a half mile to give all the hidden rocks plenty of clearance and headed north past Chetco Point towards Macklyn Cove.

George and Ronnie finally found a target. A male seal was swimming around the kelp beds off Macklynn Cove. Ronnie slowed the tired old Evinrude until the dory crawled through the water, then he eased it into idle. The boat slid forward on momentum, only the rhythmic chug of the engine broke the silence. The seal, normally a cautious creature, would swim away when man approached, but this one was distracted by something in the water. George tried to steady himself as he stood in the dory. He raised the rifle to his eye and tried to get a fix on the enemy before him. The boat was almost on top of the seal when he fired three quick shots. The Seal, too late, rolled over and dove beneath the kelp.

“Got him”, George whispered triumphantly!

“Did you get him?” Ronny’s voice trembled, afraid that some one on shore would hear.

George roared in a hoarse whisper “Of course I got him. Stupid animal sat there on the surface until I was point blank, right on top of him. Hell, even you could have shot it.”

Ronnie pleaded, “Then let’s get out of here.” Courage for Ronnie came from others.

George shook his head, “No, wait. I want to see if the carcass floats back up.” George leaned over the edge of the boat, peering into the dark waters.

“It’s dead, it won’t float. Dead seals don’t float!” Ronny said, agitated by the sudden need to hide. “They don’t float, they just roll along the bottom until they wash up on shore,

and people find them...and...and they find a bullet hole in the body and the police and the Feds start asking questions. So please, let's get out of here!"

George ignored Ronny's bleating. He stared intently into the hole in the water where the seal and disappeared. "Too bad", he thought, "too bad I can't tell anyone, that I bagged a big one". Then he saw something moving up slowly through the kelp. He could make out something...it was the seal! Coming straight up at him! George stood up a little too quickly. The boat started rocking back and forth, nearly throwing him over the side.

He bellowed at Ronny "Hold still! He's coming back up!"

George struggled to steady himself. The rifle buried deep in his shoulder, he peered down the gun sight waiting for his shot. Ronny shifted to get a better view, sending George reeling again.

"Clumsy oaf", George cursed. "Hold still or I'll shoot you and have you stuffed 'n mounted in my house where this seal should be!"

George brought the rifle back up to his eye and froze. For where the seal had been, was the face of a woman, her hair tangled thick with kelp, her eyes were blazing green and below her, George saw the silver green of her tail. Holding the dead seal in one arm, she lunged for the side of the boat.

"How dare you!" she wailed, her eyes exploding with anger, "How dare you shoot my people!"

That was all Ronny could take. Screaming in terror, he grabbed the outboard, throwing it into gear, and cranked the throttle wide open just as George fired. The woman dove deep into the water as the out of control boat roared off into the fog.

Tom heard the first three rifle cracks through the thick fog. Three gun shots was a distress signal. He instinctively reached for the missing radio. "Hang it, Murray." Tom hadn't brought his cell phone, and even if he did, he had no clue where he was. A piece of him wanted to rush in to render assistance, but with the fog and the rocks, it was wiser to go slow. He checked the compass and got a bearing on where he thought the shots came from. Then he heard some loud voices in the distance, but they were too muffled and confused by the fog. Then he heard a fourth gunshot and the sound of screaming mixed with a boat engine speeding away. Worried now, he slowed even further and called out.

"Ahoy there! Ahoy!"

He cut his engine and drifted silently through the fog shrouded waters. He could hear the surf lapping on the shore and the waves washing over the rocks. He thought he should be close to the kelp beds off Macklynn Cove, but the fog confused everything. "Ahoy!" he cried out again. "Anybody out there?"

A weak cry replied two points off his starboard.

"Help him."

It was a woman's voice!

"Help him, please."

Her cry reached deep into Tom's heart.

"He's hurt."

The fog lifted just enough for Tom to spot a woman in the water, struggling to hold something up in the cold ocean. He started his engine and maneuvered into the kelp bed next to the woman. She was holding a wounded seal. So that was what the shooting was all about,

“Poachers,” he muttered. Tom dropped his anchor off the bow and killed his engine. Then he reached down and took hold of the seal under its front flippers. The seal was covered with blood. It was heavy, but he managed to pull it up into the boat as the woman pushed from below. He laid it gently on the deck. Its brown eyes were lifeless. Blood from a single gun shot wound in the back trickled down forming a pool beneath it.

Tom turned his attention to the woman.

She said, “Is he okay?”

Tom shook his head.

“I’m sorry.”

Her eyes which had blazed green with hatred and anger just moments before, dulled to a gray green as sadness over took her. She was exhausted now. The blood of the seal swirled in the water around her, mixing with the kelp.

“Let me give you a hand.”

He reached over to pull her up, but she backed away.

“No, that’s okay. My things are on the shore. I’ll just swim back and get them.”

“Are you sure?”

She paused for a moment, as if hearing something in the water around her. A lone gull started crying out, and a seal shot between her legs.

“On second thought,” she said, “maybe I’d better come aboard.”

Tom reached down again, his hand clasp firmly around her arm. She winced and cried out in pain.

“Are you hurt?”

“Never mind the pain, just help me up, quickly” she said through clenched teeth.

Tom took both arms and pulled her up straight from the water and set her down carefully on the gunwale. She was covered in seal blood. Her long brown hair, matted and tangled with kelp, almost covered her breasts. And except for her bikini bottom she wore nothing. The small blue cloth that made up her only apparel hardly covered the elaborate silver and green fish scale tattoo that covered her waist and thighs to just below her buttocks. She looked up at Tom and their eyes locked for just a moment. Tom gasped.

“Do you have a bucket?” She said to the dumbfounded young man in front of her.

“A bucket?”

“Yeah, so I can rinse off. There’s a shark out there and I don’t want to smell like a bleeding seal, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh sure, sorry,”

Tom snapped in action. From beneath a bench he pulled out the cleaning bucket which had a rope attached to the handle. He dropped it over the port side and filled it with clean ocean water. Just as he pulled it out, he saw a large shark, slide under the boat. Tom handed the bucket to his guest. She turned her back to Tom, and slowly emptied the bucket over her head, washing away the blood. She rubbed herself down as if she had done this before. She did this twice more. The bloodied seawater pooled around the dead seal in the bottom of the boat.

Tom rummaged thru Sam’s sea locker and pulled out an old blanket. He turned and saw fresh blood trickling down her left arm.

“You’re hurt.” He said as he wrapped the blanket around her shoulders.

Staring at her arm, as if for the first time, she realized she was bleeding.

“So I am. That miserable drunken fool.”

Tom grabbed the first aid kit and was digging around trying to sort out the bandages. It didn't offer a great selection. Choosing some bandages and gauze, he sat her down next to the seal and kneeling, he tended her arm. She watched him carefully clean away the wound with an alcohol pad and inspect it. She sniffed his hair as he worked. It was an intoxicating mix of salt, sweat and fish. It was an honest smell, that of a hard working man, not filled with mousse, and fancy shampoos like some of the men she knew.

“It doesn't look too bad.” He said, “But I can stop the bleeding, you should see a doctor.” He gently placed the pads over the hole and began wrapping it with gauze. His touch was firm and gentle, showing experience.

“What's your name?”

“Tom. Tom Olsen. And you?”

“Selkie”.

“Selkie...what”?

She smiled a wistful smile.

“Just Selkie,” she said.

The name sounded so right to him. “Hello Selkie.”

“His name,” she said sadly, indicating the seal, “his name was Gwynwald.”

Tears, saltier than any ocean water filled her grey green eyes.

Tom finished her bandage. It quickly started to soak through. With no time to waste, he started the engine, pulled in his anchor and steered due west to clear the fog. Once out of

the fogbank he sped up and changed course to line up with the channel markers. The return trip was in silence broken only by Selkie softly crying. She sat slowly stroking Gwynwald's lifeless body. As they approached the harbor, Tom broke the silence with three sharp blasts on his air horn, followed by another three. Martin, the harbor master and Murray's older brother, rushed out of his office. Tom waved at him and had him call 911.

The next few hours were chaotic. The sirens filled the harbor as the police and paramedics arrived, followed by a large crowd from the restaurant, other sailors, fisherman and tourists. Selkie, still wrapped in the blanket, was examined by the paramedics. They were taken aback when they saw her tattoo. One of them made a comment about treating a Mermaid and that started the crowd going.

Tom pointed at her arm and said, "Guys, she's bleeding."

This snapped them back to reality and they strapped Selkie to a gurney and rushed her up the ramp to the awaiting ambulance. She balked at going until Tom assured her he would follow. Tired, cold and weak from blood loss, she gave in. Tom explained first to the police then to state game warden, and to the coast guard, what had happened. Then he asked to be taken to the hospital to join Selkie.

At the emergency room, Tom found Jack Harding. Jack was a police officer and attended Tom's church.

"Jack, I am so glad you're here," he said.

"No problem. Say, did you bring the Mermaid in? Can you give me any information about her? She said her name was Selty?"

"Selkie", Tom corrected. "Sell-key with a "K" not a "T"."

“Do you know how to spell that?”

“No.”

“Is that her last name or first?”

“Jack, I don't know. I just pulled her out of the water out by Macklynn Cove. I haven't had time for formal introductions.” Tom took a deep breath and sighed. “Do you know how she's doing?”

“Doc said she would be fine. She lost a little blood from the wound, and that, coupled with shock and exposure, knocked her for a loop.”

A nurse came out of the ER with some charts.

Jack said, “Hey, Carla, can we see her yet?”

“Who, the mermaid? Sure, Jack. Hang on just a minute more. We're cleaning her up. Does she have any clothes?”

“I don't know. What do mermaids wear these days?”

Jack laughed but Carla ignored his attempt at humor.

“Don't worry, I asked Sarah to bring some down.”

“Good, 'cuz she sure can't go around the way she is.” Carla ducked her head through a door way, spoke to somebody on the other side and beckoned Tom and Jack to follow her in.

Through the partially opened privacy curtain, Tom could see Selkie lying on the bed, her eyes closed. She was dressed in a hospital gown with a blanket across her legs. The left arm was in a sling. The nurses and orderlies were cleaning away the bloody rags and surgical

equipment. Two of them looked over at Tom, one whispered to the other, and giggling, they moved away.

Tom and Jack stood at the foot of her bed. Doctor Jo, the attending physician, a young female resident, came over with her clipboard.

“So, Jack, is this our mermaid’s boyfriend?” she teased.

“No, I am not her boyfriend.” Tom snipped back. “I just rescued her.”

“Well, she’s been asking for you.”

Jo and Tom had known each other for years, since she started her residency at Brookings General Hospital.

“That makes you responsible for her. So, mister hero, who is going to pay her hospital bill?”

Jo slapped the clipboard into Tom’s chest.

“Not me.” Tom said as he handed the clip board back.

“Say, Jo.” Jack said, “Did you learn anything about her? Like her full name, her age, where she got that tattoo? Is that for real?”

Jo shrugged, “Name – Selkie; age- old enough to know better, probably early twenties, the tattoo? She swore me to secrecy. Doctor-patient privilege. But it is real, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You’re a married man. And speaking of Sarah, where is she? I thought she was coming down to help.”

“Relax, she’ll be here.” Jack said, “And it was just police business. We have to check out all manners of clues in our search for the truth.”

“So why not ask me?” asked a voice from behind the curtain.

Tom pulled the curtain back and smiled.

“Hi.” he said.

She smiled back at him and something stirred inside him. Her green eyes had more of a spark in them. Her thick curly brown hair spread across the pillow like a fan and down across her shoulders. Her lips were pink and healthy, her cheeks flushed with color. She was beautiful.

“You know,” she said, “it’s not polite to talk about someone in the third person when they’re lying next to you”

“Sorry” Tom said. He stood for a moment lost in her gaze.

Jack cleared his throat.

Tom made the introductions, “Selkie, this is Jack Harding. As you can see he’s a police officer, but don’t hold that against him. He’s a good friend of mine.”

“Actually, I prefer being called a ‘Cop’. It makes me feel more rugged.” Jack said.

“Well, rugged or not, any friend of Tom is a friend of mine.” Selkie offered her right hand.

Jack took it and smiled back at her. His train of thought derailed, he stood there for what seemed like an hour, but was only a moment of awkward silence.

“Officer Jack,” she said to break the spell, “Did you want to know how my name was spelled, or did you want to know about this?” She slid the hospital gown up her thigh to reveal just a glimpse of the tattoo.

Jack Blushed.

“Uh, let’s start with your name.”

“S-e-l-k-i-e.”

“Is that your first or last name?”

“It’s my name. First, last and always.” She answered.

“Do you have any ID?”

“Why, yes, officer, I do. However, as you can see I don’t have any on me at the moment. Except for this”, Selkie held up her hospital bracelet. “And surprise! It says, Selkie.”

Jack was actually beginning to enjoy the banter.

“Okay, we’ll move on.” Jack turned professional. “Could you tell me what you were doing out there topless, swimming in the kelp beds off Macklynn cove?”

“Well, I didn’t start out topless.” She replied, “I have to blame Gwynwald for that.”

“Who’s this Gwynwald?”

“He was her seal, the one who was killed.” Tom said.

“He wasn’t my seal, or anybody’s seal”, she said. “Gwynwald was my name for him. He was one of the elder seals of the area. I’m not sure of his age, he never told me. Age doesn’t mean much to a seal. But you don’t care about that.”

Selkie went on to describe her time in the water. She guessed that she had been swimming with Gwynwald for about thirty minutes when he swung behind her and bit through her bikini strap. She lost it in the kelp and was trying to find it when she heard the gunshots. She recounted how she watched in horror as the lifeless seal rolled over and slid down towards her, a cloud of blood pouring out of his back. She caught him and swam upwards, hoping to save him. Through the water she could see the image of a man standing

in the boat with something in his hands. He could hear muted voices through the water as he yelled at his companion. Then as she broke through the surface, she screamed at him and made a grab for the boat. "That's when the gun went off. The boat roared away,"

Jack took it all down in his notebook.

"Do you think he was aiming at you?"

"No." she said after a moment, "No, he was too drunk. I think I scared the hell out him and the gun went off. He probably thought I was another seal."

"How do you know he was drunk?"

"I could smell it. As bad as he smelled, he must have been drinking for a while."

"Can you describe him?"

Selkie gave a general description of white, unshaven, dirty and drunk for both men.

"Now do you think you could identify the man who shot you?"

Selkie's eyes turned a cold green. "I could if I saw him again; him and his buddy."

Jack snapped his notebook shut.

"What I don't understand, is how you could be swimming out there in the cold Pacific, without a wet suit. No one can do that."

"She can if she really is a mermaid," said a voice from behind him.

Enter Sarah, Jacks' wife; devoted mother, staunch environmental advocate; a force to be reckoned with.

"That's what you are, aren't you?" It wasn't really a question. When Sarah stepped in she spoke as if her questions were facts. It was a trick she learned in the conservation battles

of the 1980s and 90s. "I mean, the word is out all over town, that Tom, our Tom, caught himself a real mermaid." Sarah leaned over and gave Tom a sisterly kiss on the cheek.

"How you doing, Tom?" Without waiting for a reply she forged ahead. "And you must be the mermaid."

Sarah took Selkie's hand and shook it.

"Call me Selkie. 'The Mermaid' sounds so cold and impersonal."

Sarah laughed. "Ha! Get used to it, kid. Everywhere you go in Brookings, they'll be saying, 'There goes the Mermaid.'" Sarah turned and gave Jack a peck on the lips. "Hi dear, have you caught the man who shot this poor girl and killed an innocent seal yet?"

Jack dropped into his best Jack Web imitation.

"No Ma'am. We're still gathering the facts. But don't worry. We'll get the slime ball. And speaking of slime balls, where are the kids?"

"Sam Feeney's out by the car watching them." She answered while digging through a large grocery bag of clothes. She emptied the bag unto Selkie's bed. "I sure hope we have something here that will fit you. Jack didn't give me your size. He just said, 'remember how you looked when we met, that's about her size'. He calls himself a detective."

"I do not! I'm a cop. A plain and simple officer of the law. A Serve and protect kind of guy. The city can't afford to pay me a detective wages," he explained, "so I don't detect nothing."

Sarah chased Tom and Jack to the other side of the curtain.

"You two go play cops out there while I help Selkie get dressed."

Sarah swung the curtain close. She turned to Selkie with a grin. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "So, what do you think?"

Puzzled Selkie said, "Of what?"

"Of Tom of course." Sarah began holding the clothes up to Selkie. "You know, he's the most eligible bachelor in Brookings. Many a young lady has cast her hooks for him, but he's avoided them all."

Bemused, Selkie replied, "You're too young to be his mother, so you must be his older sister."

"Coming on a little strong, aren't I? Sorry, it's just I haven't seen him look at any woman the way he was looking at you."

Selkie lay back on the bed and sighed.

"You know, some times it's a curse to be a mermaid. Men just throw themselves at you, and it's so hard to choose these days."

Sarah laughed, "Well if that lovable husband of mine starts falling for you, watch out. Well, this isn't much, but it will keep you decent." She said as she held out the ensemble of sweat pants and top." Looking at you, I know I don't have a bra that would fit you, and my "undies" would fall off those slim hips of yours."

Sarah helped Selkie get dressed. Her wounded arm was stiff and uncooperative, but they managed to get a baggy sweater on without too much discomfort.

"I don't know how to thank you.

Sarah gave Selkie a hug. "Thank me later. Now let's get you out of here."

They found Tom, Jack and Doctor Jo, in a deep discussion by the door.

“Now I'll need to do a follow up with you this week. Make an appointment at the front desk.” the young doctor said.

“How much do I owe you?” Selkie asked.

“Do you have insurance?”

“Uh, no. But I do have money. It's in my back pack with my ID. I can pay you tomorrow after I get my things.”

“You can take that up with the front desk. In the meantime, where are you going to stay?” Jo asked.

Selkie shrugged, “I was going to sleep on the beach. I normally do. I like being near the water.”

“She can stay on my boat,” Tom offered. “It's warm and dry, and there's plenty of room in the fo'c'sle so you won't have to worry about banging your arm. And it's as close to the water as you can get and stay dry.”

“What about you?” Jo asked.

“I room with Sam and Paddy Feeney.” He replied looking hopefully at Selkie. “She can have the boat to herself.”

The doctor thought it over, “Sounds good. Best way to keep the wound clean. What do you think, Selkie?”

Selkie looked at the people around her. She normally would prefer to be alone, she felt safer that way. But it wouldn't hurt to sleep in a bed. She agreed.

“As long as I'm not putting you out.”

“Not a chance.” Tom said.

“Let’s get you checked out.” Sarah said. “Then I’ll drive you two to the marina.”

Minutes later they were outside heading for the car. The night air was chilly. And offshore flow had chased the fog away and the sky was filled with stars.

Sam Feeney was standing by an old Volvo with two children sticking out the back window, hanging on every word the old Irish fisherman said. He was describing the mermaids he had seen on a trip to the South Seas when he was a lad, comparing them to the mermaids that plied the waters around his native Ireland.

As the adults approached little Toni, age 5, pointed a finger at Selkie and cried out, “Look it’s the mermaid.”

Sam turned around and stared in awe at the beautiful young woman standing before him.

Tom did the introductions.

“Sam Feeney, this is Selkie. Selkie, Sam Feeney.”

“Glad to meet you, Selkie...” Sam started to offer his hand, and then froze. “Did you say, Selkie?”

Selkie recognized his accent and gave him a firm knowing nod. “That’s right”, she said, taking the half offered hand. “And judging by your accent, I’d say you’re from Donegal.”

“Yes, yes indeed.” Sam looked her sharp in those green eyes that were now filled with the mischief the Irish had always associated with the wee people and fin folk of the outer islands. He smiled. “Oh lass, where’s you’re skin?”

“Safe,” she replied with a nod.

Sarah hustled Tom and Selkie into the car. Selkie road up front with Sarah, Tom squeezed in with the car seats in the back. Jack had to go back to the station to write up his report.

“Selkie,” he said, “I’ll go down to Macklynn Cove and check on your things. If the tide’s not in, I drop it by the boat tomorrow.”

“Oh it’s too late for that.” Sam said knowingly, “Its high tide now and sure Macklynn’s Cove will be awash. Next low tide is in the morning, about eleven, I think.”

Selkie thanked him and said, “Sam’s right. I stuck my things well above the tide level, so we can get it in the morning.”

Jack was okay with that. He didn’t relish going down a steep path to the beach at night.

Sam cleared his throat, “Err, uh Tom,” he started. “Did you happen to pull in any of my crab pots before you caught this fine young lady?”

Before Tom could answer Selkie answered,

“Oh, were those your crab pots by the kelp beds? They were empty. You really should have put some bait in them to attract the crabs.”

“Funny, I thought I did.” Sam said. Then he slapped his forehead. “Oh, and speaking of crabs. Paddy fumigated the house again. Now I know we promised to seal your room but she did it while I was out. You know how she gets.”

Before Tom could respond, Sarah started the engine and drove off.

“Mommy, Sam was telling us about mermaids.” Toni announced.

JJ, who was eight added, "Yeah. He said he's seen them in the South Seas and around Ireland." He looked at Selkie, "Where do you come from?"

"My people come from the Orkney Islands, way up past Scotland." Selkie replied.

"Sam's a darling man, but he'll talk until the end of time, filling the kids with stories and such nonsense."

Selkie came to his defense.

"Oh, Sam's a good Irishman. For him talking is just an extension of breathing."

Tom, his body, contorted around Toni's car seat, sat quietly, hoping it would be a short trip to the dock, so the circulation would return have a chance to return to his arms and legs. And now he had another worry. Where to sleep?

At the marina, Sarah dropped them off then turned the car around before Tom had a chance to ask about sleeping on their couch. With no other choice, he led Selkie down to his boat.

Tom helped her up into the cockpit, and then he went below and turned on the lights. Selkie came slowly down the companionway backwards, holding tightly to the handrail with her one good hand. Tom guided her down with his hand on the small of her back. Once on the deck, she turned around and was pleasantly surprised. The interior was a warm mixture of Mahogany and teak. The fo'c'sle was actually a large V shaped berth that took up much of the bow. To get into the birth one climbed through an oval shaped opening in the forward bulkhead. There were privacy curtains on the inside. The wood work had been lovingly restored to a bright shine, highlighting the matching wood grain. The coved ceiling was

tongue and groove strips of cedar painted white to brighten up the quarters. Brass lamps and accents shined from many hours of polishing.

Tom gave her the “five second tour”, explaining how to operate the head. Selkie was fading fast. She declined dinner and suggested that sleep would be best.

“That’s fine.” Tom said. “Uh, look, I hadn’t counted on Paddy fumigating the house again. If its okay with you, I’ll sleep here” he pointed to the quarter berth which was across the cabin from the fo’c’sle.

Selkie winked at him and slyly said, “It’s your boat. I trust you but can you trust a mermaid in the fo’c’sle.”

He smiled back and said, “Well, I do have to watch out for my reputation.”

“That’s right” she said through a yawn, “You’re Brookings’ most eligible bachelor.”

With a little effort she got under the covers. A little more wriggling freed her of the sweatpants which she tossed on the floor.

Tom tried not to watch, he checked on her progress out the corner of his eye while busying himself with clearing all the flotsam off the quarter berth. He was uncomfortable with the situation, but felt he could handle it. He turned and threw a switch to turn on the water heater, which ran on shore power. Then with one final glance he turned off the lights. In the cover of darkness he pulled his pants off and slipped into the sleeping bag the lived on the quarter berth.

He lay there staring out the porthole above him at the mast of the boat next to his.

“Lord,” he prayed silently, “I hope I’m doing the right thing here. I’m in uncharted waters, and I need your guidance.”

He heard the rustle of the blankets as Selkie moved. In a moment he heard the pad of bare feet coming his way. She stood beside him for a moment, then, she leaned down and gave him a long kiss on his forehead. Her hair hung down across his face. He inhaled, deeply savoring her smell. She smelled like no other woman he had ever met. She was what they meant when writers wrote of an intoxicating woman. He had an urge to grab her and hold her and, yes, make love to her, right there, right now.

She released her kiss. She looked him in the eye, her lips hovering above his.

“I just wanted to thank you.”

And then she straightened up and padded softly back to bed.

Tom was in turmoil. He stared out the porthole, replaying what just happened. As tired as he was, it would be many hours before he slept.

Chapter 2 - - Macklynn Cove

A high pressure cell pushed up from the central valley of California into Southern Oregon while hundreds of miles off the coast, where only whales and weathermen would notice, while a weak low pressure system hung around with nothing better to do. The California High, as the Weather Bureau called it, warmed up the air over Medford and Grants Pass. It created an east wind that flowed over the Siskiyou, across coast range and down to the Pacific. The off shore flow brought warm temperatures and clear skies as it blew away the fog that had shrouded Brookings for days. To the townsfolk, this meant that tourists would be coming.

Tom woke as the sun rose up over the mountains and found the porthole by his berth. He rolled over and looked about the cabin. Everything seemed okay, nothing looked out of place, and except for the pile of women's clothing by the V berth he had nicknamed the "Fo'c'sle". True, it wasn't literally a "fo'c'sle" as in the days of the great sailing ships, but it was forward of the mast, and fo'c'sle sounded better, more romantic than "V Berth".

He stared at the dark brown hair that cascaded over the pillow. He remembered the smell of it from the night before. He closed his eyes and prayed silently.

“Lord, be with her. Bring healing to her, and help us find her things, Lord. Keep them safe ‘til we get there.” He paused, not sure what to say next. “Lord, I’m confused. I’ve only just met her and I know nothing about her, but I am so attracted to her. Father, if this is not your will, then remove her from me and let me get back to work on my voyage.” He paused again. He didn’t know how to ask God what he really wanted, and he hoped that God wouldn’t make him ask it, so he chickened out. “And Lord, please keep me from temptation. Don’t let me do anything stupid, Lord. Amen.”

Tom got up and quietly dressed. He rolled up the sleeping bag and tucked it back away in the foot of the quarter berth. He glanced up at the mast through the transom. The wind gauge had swung around to the west. “A good day for sailing”, he thought. He turned and looked at the sleeping stranger who had entered his life. “God she is beautiful.” He went up the steps and removed the washboards that closed the companionway. Out in the clean fresh air he stretched, then closed the hatch and rolled down the canvas cloth over the opening. He found a dry spot in the cockpit where the sun had dried out the dew and sat down to enjoy the view, and to think.

Below, Selkie stirred, as she heard footsteps above her. She opened her eyes slowly, adjusting to the light coming from above. She couldn’t remember where she was until she moved her left arm. A sudden stab of pain brought the memories flooding back. She lay on her back, rubbing her arm, taking in her surroundings. The walls and ceiling of above her were ornately carved with sea creatures, birds and palm trees. There was a definite South

Seas theme going on here. In the center of the ceiling above the bed was a single block of wood, mahogany, she guessed, that was not carved or finished in any way. It was a bit out of place amongst all the artfully carved surroundings. But there was a definite carved frame surrounding it.

She carefully rolled over and saw that Tom was gone. She heard his footsteps above her as he moved about the deck. She pulled a pillow from the side and buried her head in it and took a deep breath. His smell was on the pillow. She smelled the blankets and sheet, his smell was there too. His smell was good. It struck her odd that she would think this. Why was she sniffing around like a dog? He was a man, men smell. She had been with enough men in her life to know they each had a different smell. But why, for the first time did she think that this man, this stranger, who had rescued her, who had shown her kindness, who had shown remorse over the death of Gwynwald, why did he smell "Good"? There had been others who had smelled good, some smelled bad. Henri' came to mind. Too much garlic, but a passionate lover. But Tom smelled different. He smelled..."Good."

With the sun flowing through the transom, the cabin came alive. Selkie crawled out of her berth and began to explore. She heard Tom walking around topside, so she felt free to snoop. She had learned that a man's house always revealed the truth of the man. Henri' was French Canadian, an artist in his field, a good lover, as far as sex went, but was too self possessed to make a life long partner. His apartment in Venice Beach, California was a wreck. He never cleaned up more than what was required of him. How long did their relationship last? Three months? She thought it may have been six. They met in February, but he was already moving on to the blond body builder by the end of April, so the last three

months didn't count. Still, he did leave her with something that no one could take away. She hadn't really been with anyone for any length of time since.

To judge Tom by his boat, she found a neat and orderly man, who was kind to strangers. She chuckled, "Probably picks up stray cats and dogs." There were two doors, both were hand carved. The door leading to the head had two ornately carved panels. The top panel showed a sail boat in full sail, flying with the wind and a dolphin riding the bow wave. The bottom panel showed a fisherman pulling in his loaded nets with seagulls circling overhead. The door to the wet locker also had two panels. The top showed a snarling tiger with its tail coiled ready to strike in a grove of palm trees. Its lower panel showed a seal on a rock overlooking the ocean, with clouds floating free overhead.

Overhead were handholds that ran the length of the salon. Each hand hold was knurled providing not only a solid grip, but matched the carved woodwork trim around the boat. The dark mahogany looked ages old, but the transom opened the interior to sunlight, which highlighted the grain in the wood. The ceiling was curved, tongue and groove white strips of wood between the dark mahogany stringers that supported the deck above. Oval Brass portholes let a sweet breeze through now, but could be dogged down and sealed against the worst of weather. A propane heater on the starboard side stood opposite the head. It vented out the top. The galley was on the portside of the companionway. The gimbaleed stove looked used, but well maintained. Just forward of the galley also on the portside, was a small berth accessible through an oval opening. The quarter berth was on the starboard side of the companionway, and just in front of it was the navigator station with maps and charts stowed neatly above it in tubes that hung from the ceiling. Ahead of that was the dinette.

She turned back to the head, opened the door, hoping to remember the instructions Tom gave her the night before, she was relieved to see the instructions were on a plaque attached to the wall. There was a shower stall as well. It was small, but serviceable.

“First things first.” she said to herself.

Tom was inspecting the rigging. It was new, and had worked well off shore. Would it hold in the blue water? Only time would tell. He heard a door squeak beneath him. He was over the hatch above the head. Embarrassed, he softly he snuck back to the cockpit. A few minutes later Selkie pushed the companionway cloth aside, and winced in the bright sunlight.

“Good Morning. How’s the patient?” he asked cheerfully.

Selkie put her right hand up to shade her eyes.

“Blinded,” She grimaced. “What’s a girl got to do to get a shower around here?”

Tom laughed. “If you’ll clear the way, I’ll get you set up.”

Still over whelmed by the brightness, Selkie grumbled something about the advantage of fog, and carefully backed down the steps. Inside Tom showed her how to work the hand held shower. Then he took a plastic bread bag and some adhesive tape from the first aid kit and with a pair of scissors created a water barrier to protect the bandages on her arm.

“Now, do you need anything else?”

“Breakfast.” she replied, “Mermaids have to eat, you know.”

“Okay,” he said, “Breakfast after shower. Now, how about clothes?”

“If you’ve got any women’s lingerie around here, I take a size seven panties and, a 36B bra.”

Tom blushed. She enjoyed it.

“Sorry, I can't help you out there.”

“Some eligible bachelor and sailor you are. A bed like that” she pointed to the V berth, “and you haven't any souvenirs?”

Tom was really flustered now. He tried to stammer out a retort, but she stopped him.

“You are as red as a beet...I like that.”

She ducked into the head and latched the door. She knew she didn't need to, he would never barge in. She was more concerned that the door might accidentally open while she showered and cause him further embarrassment.

Tom gathered his composure. What was it about her that did this to him? Sarah had often teased him about his love life, or the lack thereof, but a few words from Selkie and he was a basket case.

“Uh, Selkie, “he spluttered, “I, uh do have some clothes...they're mine...you know, T-shirts, socks and stuff that I keep on the boat...just in case. They're in a drawer just below your berth. Help yourself. I'll be topside.”

With that he beat a hasty retreat.

Selkie chuckled at his innocence. The soap slipped off its holder, and she spun around too fast catch it and slammed her left arm into a hand hold in the shower. The pain shot through her, taking her breath away. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“Ooh.” She clenched her teeth and grabbed the handhold with her one good hand and held tight. She shook her head to clear it.

“Fool! Serves you right! Anytime you meet some one nice, you drive them away.”

She scolded herself for the rest of her shower.

Selkie half heartedly wrapped the towel around her shoulders and stepped from the head into the salon. She turned to the drawer and dug out a pair of socks, a printed T-shirt from Seattle, which proclaimed, "Please forgive me, I've done something Nautical", "That might work." She thought. "Man size, extra large, yeah, that'll work". She found some bandanas and with a flourish of knots she created a halter top. "Okay, now, what else is there in the magic drawer?" She found at the bottom a pair of blue boxer shorts. "So he's a boxer man, hmmm. Well, beggars can't be choosy." She gathered up her pile and assembled herself. The image in the full length mirror didn't look too awful, so with the addition of the sling for her arm, she felt she was ready to face the world. All she needed was a comb or a brush. She thought of Tom's close cropped hair and gave up. The world would just have to accept the long tangled mop of wet hair until she got her things back. The thought of having her possessions made her happy.

This time, when she opened the companion way cloth, she was ready for the sunshine. Tom was on the dock talking to some guy who was apparently handing him a radio. Tom took the radio and stepped down into the boat he had driven when they met. She caught his eye, and he waved.

"Be with you in a moment, I just need to install this in Sam's boat."

True to his words, he quickly mounted the radio, connected some wires and made a test call and returned to the boat. Standing on the dock, he helped her down. In his strong arms she seemed as light as a feather.

"Ready for breakfast?" he asked.

"Can we get it on the way to pickup my stuff?"

Tom took her by her right arm and started up the gangway to the parking lot. "Sure. Do Mermaids like fast food?"

"Light on the grease heavy on the fast."

"Hmmm," he shook his head, "I don't know. That could be a challenge." He thought for a minute, "Do you like pastries, you know like croissants, muffins, stuff like that?"

"As long as their edible, I don't care."

"I know a place where they'll melt in your mouth. Do you like coffee or tea?"

"Either." She replied.

"Good, they have both."

They reached his truck and climbed in. The engine sputtered, coughed and slowly ground to life.

"Does anything you own not cough and sputter?" she asked.

"Yes, my boat." He said pointing to his sailboat. "Trucks and cars and Sam's boat, I'll someday leave it all behind. Nothing else matters but the "AKIUKIU".

"Excuse me?" she said.

Tom pointed at the stern of the boat. There in a flowing script was the name *AKIUKIU*.

"What does AKIUKIU mean?"

"It's Hawaiian. It means 'a penetrating and searching wind.'"

With that he jammed the truck into gear and took off across the bumpy parking lot to the road. They sped up the road to Highway 101, which cut through town. They went north across the bridge over the Chetco River into town. Tom turned into a small shopping center

that had seen better days. The shops were small. A gift shop with kites and whirligigs hanging off the front, another shop sold used books. Yet another sold locally produced hand crafted jewelry. Tom parked at the far end in front of a bakery called "The Bread of Life."

"You'll enjoy this." He said as the truck came to a rest. "It's run by some friends of mine. Art's the pastor of our church. In fact, we're so small we meet here on Sundays."

Selkie grew uncomfortable. She had run into religious people before. It was a bad experience and she never felt comfortable around them after that. Still, if they were anything like Tom, they couldn't be too bad.

A bell tinkled cheerfully as they opened the door. She didn't know about the people, but the smells inside were most decidedly heavenly. It was a real working bakery with bags of bread stacked high on the counter top. The display was filled with pastries, small cakes, muffins of all flavors and sizes. Fresh hot coffee was brewing adding to the joyful aroma.

"Good morning, Leah." He said.

"Hi Tom," replied the young blond working the coffee machine.

"Where's your Mom?"

Leah capped the coffee dispenser and nodded to the back. "She's pulling some bread out of the oven. Dad's back there too."

Mary walked up with a basket full of loaves of crusty French bread. She wore a flour dusted apron. It was like a scene out of a movie.

"Good morning, Tom." She leaned over the counter and gave him a hug. She looked at Selkie, "Is this her?" Mary could be a little direct. "Is this our little mermaid?"

Selkie tried not to bridle at being called “our little mermaid.” She felt as if she were meeting Tom’s parents for the first time.

“Mary, Leah, this is Selkie.”

Leah leaned over the counter, her smile was friendly, but Selkie had the feeling that she was sizing up the competition. Mary came around the counter. She swung her apron around to her back and gave Selkie a big hug.

“Welcome, child. And God bless you!” she whispered in her ear.

Selkie suppressed an urge to run. She smiled and replied, “Uh, Thank you.”

“Hey, we came for breakfast.” Tom interjected, “We need to get to Macklynn’s Cove. Selkie, pick out anything you want.”

“What are you having?” she asked

“Do you like eggs? I can make a tolerable scrambled egg and croissant sandwich and as you can see, it hasn't killed Tom.” Mary said. “Do you drink coffee?”

“Sounds good,” Selkie replied.

Tom said, “Leah knows how I like mine. Listen, I want to talk with Art, and I’ll be back in a minute. Just have a seat. Mary and Leah will take care of you.”

Selkie thought, “That’s what I’m afraid of.” as Tom disappeared into the back.

Leah brought a cup of coffee and sat down across from Selkie. There was a moment of awkward silence as Selkie sipped from the cup. “It’s very good. Thank you.”

Leah smiled and leaned forward, “You know,” she said in a hushed tone, “The story is all over town already, about how Tom rescued you from the jaws of death while you held onto a dead seal.” She paused for a moment then added, “Some folks were saying you must

have been crazy and were trying to commit suicide, or that you were thrown into the ocean by drug dealers after a drug bust went bad and that's why you were shot."

Selkie stopped in mid swallow and stared at Leah.

"Uh, no, the first story is accurate."

"That's what I told them." Leah said relieved. "Tom's a really nice guy, isn't he?"

"Here it comes," Selkie thought. She heard this conversation before.

Cautiously Selkie said "Yes he is."

"He's well respected in our church, and in the community. And I wouldn't want anyone going around spreading rumors about him, or you for that matter."

Selkie took another sip of coffee before formulating her reply.

"Thank you. I appreciate that. Uh, what kind of rumors?"

Leah leaned forward and whispered,

"Look I know this isn't true, and I don't go around spreading rumors about anyone, but I wanted you to know that a couple of fishermen, I won't mention their names, said they heard you and Tom going at it last night on his boat, and that the boat was rocking like it was caught in a storm."

Leah paused for a response.

"Look, Leah. Nothing happened. I was shot in the arm by a drunken poacher. Tom gave me a place to stay, and he wouldn't have slept there except that his landlord had fumigated the house."

"That would be Sam Feeney."

“Right, I sort of met him last night as we left the hospital. I mean look at me. I have a bullet hole in my arm, which is in a sling. NOTHING happened!” She took a gulp of coffee this time. “And I promise nothing will happen.”

Leah blushed.

“I am so sorry.” She felt her face with her hands. “Oh, my goodness, I am so embarrassed.”

Selkie watched the progression of the redness across Leah's face with amusement.

“You know,” she said softly, “He blushes too.”

Leah sat up right.

“Really? I've never seen him blush. How do you know?”

Selkie smiled, “Something silly I said this morning. He turned as red as you are right now.”

Leah relaxed; her face went back to normal.

“So he is normal, isn't he?”

Selkie got the picture now.

“So are you two like seeing each other?”

“Well, we're friends.” Leah said wistfully. “We've kind of grown up together. Mom and Dad opened the bakery to support their ministry, and we started having church here because we couldn't afford any place else. Folks in our church don't have a lot of money. Hard working, decent, but usually broke. Tom came in one Sunday, about five or six years ago. He was a hungry down and out teenage run away from a bad family situation. Mom and Dad took him in. He got saved a few months later. And he became a sort of big brother to me

at first, I was about fourteen, he was almost seventeen. Dad got him a job with Sam Feeney. A year later he bought the sailboat. You should have seen it. It was a wreck. The best thing about it was the door to the head. It is so beautiful.”

“I know.” Selkie agreed.

“Yeah, I guess you would. Any how, he told me he was going to make the rest of the boat look just as good. And he did.”

Tom found Art in the back reading a Bible covered in a coat of fine flour dust.

“Art, you got a minute?” he asked.

“Sure, I’m just letting my buns rise.” With that he slowly stood up. “Okay, they’re up.” It was an old joke he had been repeating for years. “What’s up? Wait, let me guess, this has something to do with the Mermaid?”

Tom nodded, “Her name is Selkie.”

“Jack Harding called me last night and filled me in.”

“So you know we spent the night together on my boat?” Tom asked.

Art stopped and looked carefully at Tom. “That, depends on how you mean, together. Doesn’t it?”

Tom looked puzzled, so Art continued.

“Did you sleep in the same bed?”

Tom shook his head.

“Did you have Sex?”

Tom answered with an emphatic, “No!”

“Then, you didn’t “spend the night together” on your boat.” Art pointed out the difference to Tom. “In today’s language, if you say you spent the night together some where, anywhere, people will automatically assume you had sex. So, if anyone asks, you let her stay on the boat because...”

Tom finished the sentence, “She was shot in the arm and didn’t have any place else to stay.”

Art nodded, “Excellent. You see, this avoids the suspicion of scandal, and it tells the truth. God always honors the truth.”

Tom could see the point. It took one load off his mind. But now, he had to confront the other issue.

“Art, I...I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing here.”

Art raised an eye brow; this meant you had his full attention.

“I know this sound really crazy, but she’s the one.” Tom began pacing. This told Art how serious this was; serious and difficult for Tom.

Tom poured out his emotions about the rescue, in watching her taken away to the hospital, and how he felt when he saw her there. He told Art about the kiss on the forehead, and every thing. How she flustered him that morning. Art was the closest thing to a father for Tom. He had raised three children, all girls. Leah was the last. Now, the young man he had come to think of as a son was talking to him about love. Art had always, secretly hoped that Tom and Leah would get together and Tom would give up on sailing around the world. Mary was much more open about it. Still, Tom was determined, to sail at the end of summer after

the charter fishing season had ended. Now, he was in turmoil over what must be his first love, and it wasn't Leah.

"So, what do I do?" Tom said.

"You said you asked God to remove her from your life if it wasn't his will, right?"

Tom hung his head down and nodded.

"Okay then. Just because she didn't magically disappear over night, doesn't mean that she won't leave later on. But, since God has brought her into your life, you will just have to deal with it as best you can. He won't put you in a place where He can't help you. Besides, it seems she can't leave without her belongings, and she was shot, after all, so she will need time to heal. God has appointed you as a care giver, so go take care of her, and see where it leads."

Tom found Leah and Selkie laughing hysterically.

"Oh," Leah exclaimed between breaths. "That explains everything."

Selkie looked up at Tom, her face was red and her eyes watered from laughing, "Oh, there you are. Where were you?"

"I was back with Art, Leah's dad." His puzzled face made Leah and Selkie start laughing again. "Did I miss something? What's so funny?"

"Nothing" they chorused.

"Where are the sandwiches?" he asked.

"Right here," Mary handed them to Tom. "You got money?"

"Uh, I'm a little short. Sam still owes me."

“Okay, I’ll add it to your tab.” She said. “A woman could go broke around here.”

Tom looked warily at the two women at the table. “Is this about me?”

“He’s quick. Sorry,” Leah announced, “Girl talk! Privileged information! Need to know basis only.”

“I need to know.” Tom said.

“Maybe,” Leah smirked, “but you don’t want to know.”

Selkie and Leah bid their goodbyes. Once strangers, they had quickly become friends.

As Tom held the truck door open for Selkie, he asked, “What was that all about?”

Selkie chuckled and said, “If you’re a good boy, I’ll tell you someday.”

By the time they had arrived at Macklynn cove Selkie had eaten both sandwiches and drank Tom’s coffee as well. Just as the truck engine sputtered one last time, Sarah pulled up in her car.

“There you two are. I’ve been looking all over for you. Where have you been?”

Tom pointed at Selkie and said, “Feeding her, and getting insulted for it.”

“We weren’t insulting you. Leah and I were talking,” she turned to Sarah for support.

“You know. ‘Girl talk’. Sarah, would you explain to him that guys aren’t allowed to hear girl talk.”

Sarah shrugged, “Sorry Tom. Rules are rules. However, the rules also state quite clearly that you have to share anything you and Leah discussed with me.”

Selkie winked, “Fine. Only big ears here can’t be around.”

“Big ears?” he was outraged. “‘Blabber mouth’ said I had big ears?”

The argument continued as they walked down the path to the beach. The tide was out and the rock sat high and dry.

“Hey look, it's Sam out in his launch.” Tom pointed to the grey boat out on the water. Sam could be seen pulling an empty trap in.

Selkie said, “I told him he needed to bait the traps.”

“Too bad,” Sarah said, “Sam really needed the money. If he doesn't get some decent fishing this week, he'll go bust. He might even lose the boat.”

“Is it that bad?” Tom asked in shock.

“Yeah, and with Paddy getting worse... Well, it's in God's hands. And He's never let them down yet.”

“I hope not,” Tom thought. “He owes me a lot of money.”

“You and everyone else.”

Selkie led the way to the space between the rock and the cliff.

“There's my stuff!” she squealed with delight. “She pulled down the back pack and started pulling out her clothes. “I want to change.”

“Now?” asked Tom.

“Yes, now. So you go stand guard on the other side.”

“Okay, okay.”

He retreated to the other side of the rock. Leaning up against it he looked out at Sam and wondered what was going to happen to both of them.

Sarah helped Selkie struggle out of her borrowed clothes. The left arm ached, but Selkie was determined to wear her own clothes again.

“No offense, but I don't feel myself if I wear some one else's clothes.”

“I quite agree...What are those?” Sarah gasped pointing at Selkie.

“They're Tom's blue boxers.” Selkie replied as if it was the most common thing in the world for a woman to wear a man's boxer shorts. “They're the only thing he had. I had to pin them to keep them from falling down.” She did a quick turn around to model her make shift lingerie.

“I can understand why you don't feel yourself.”

“Actually, they fairly comfortable, and it is a stylish blue. I think they go quite well with the bandana halter top, don't you.”

“Hmm, goes well with your tattoo. In fact it covers most of it. You're not changing out of them?”

“The truth is I really need to get to a Laundromat. Why not wear these until I have clean things to wear?”

Sarah balanced Selkie as she pulled her pants on with one arm.

A few minutes later and Selkie had struggled into her jacket. She started going through the pockets pulling out a small wad of cash, some pieces of paper, but she couldn't find the leather pouch.

“I can't find it.” She exclaimed. “I know I put it in my pocket. I always do.”

“Find what?”

Selkie was starting to panic.

Seized with terror, Selkie rummaged through her back pack, finally dumping all the contents on the ground.

"It's not here! It's not here!" she screamed.

This brought Tom back around the rock.

"What's not here? What's missing?"

"I don't know." Sarah said with a bewildered look.

"My skin, it's gone!" Selkie shrieked at her perplexed friends.

Selkie collapsed in tears on the sand. Her deep sobs tore at Tom's heart.

"I'll check around out here." Tom said, "What did it look like?"

Choking back the tears, she said, "It was a brown leather pouch with a leather strap so I could wear it around my neck when I traveled." She sobbed, "It was given to me by my grand mother. It belonged to her mother before her. She made it out of a seal skin from the Orkney Islands." She grabbed Tom's arm. "Oh Tom, you have to find it." She begged. "I can't leave without it."

"Okay, Selkie, we'll find it."

"Promise me," she cried.

Tom looked at Sarah for support. But she was in shock. She couldn't believe how such a strong confidant young woman could collapse into the quivering person before her. Not knowing what to do she shook her head back at him.

"I promise I will look for it, Selkie. Beyond that...it's in God's hands."

He pulled himself free and ran to the back side of the rock. Nothing! No fresh footprints, no sign of climbing the rock, nothing.

He came back around.

“Nothing back there.” He began looking for clues. “It couldn’t have washed away in the tide. The tide line stops on that side of the rock. See along the beach, the high tide leaves a ring of debris. Without a storm or high winds, the water never reaches into the cleft in the rock.”

“Maybe some child found it.” Sarah offered. “I’m going to call Jack and see if anyone’s turned it in.” She checked her cell phone. “Drat, no service down here. I’ll go up to the cars; I know I have service there.” She turned and marched across the sand.

While they were talking Selkie silently rose up and walked out into the surf until she stood knee deep in the water. She stood there, her chest heaving in great sobs, tears pouring down her face. She let loose a mournful wail that washed across the water towards Sam. It was so distressing that Tom and Sarah were dumbstruck in wonderment.

Then they saw it. First one head, then another, until a dozen or more seals appeared, their heads above the water, all stood facing Selkie.

In his boat, Sam was seized by the cry as it came across the water. He looked up and saw the woman standing knee deep in the waves. “Ah, lass.” He said quietly, “So, it is your skin, you’ve lost. How sad. What are you to do?” He crossed himself, “Father and saints preserve us. Deliver your poor child from her misery, Lord.”

A large seal rose out of the water next to Sam’s boat. Sam spoke to it in a rusty Gaelic that he had seldom used, save for Saint Patrick’s Day. “Go. Go to your mistress, my friend, and comfort her. I’ll do what I can, but you and yours will need to help as well.”

The soft brown eyes blinked at him, as if the seal understood, and slipped beneath the water. It reappeared directly in front of Selkie. Rising up it nuzzled her hand. She looked down at the gentle creature and rubbed its head. She looked deep into its eyes and nodded.

“Thank you, my old friend.” Calm came over her, “I’d almost forgotten.”

The seals submerged as one, and were gone. She turned around and came out of the water.

Tom his voice a whisper said, “My God, Selkie, what was that?”

“It was a reminder.”

Selkie returned to her back pack and began gathering the scattered clothes and personal items, and stuffing them inside. Tom knelt down beside her to help. Once everything was picked up, he helped her stand and they moved silently across the beach. Sarah met them at the truck. She wore a worried expression. She watched Selkie’s demeanor closely. Something was wrong, really wrong here. She decided that it was time for Jack to get involved.

In the truck, Selkie sighed and looked at Tom. She laid her head on his shoulder, and said. “Sorry. I really freaked out, back there.”

“No problem.” He said as he started the old pickup. “I know what it’s like to lose everything that’s near and dear to you.”

“Yeah, Leah told me a little about you.”

“More girl talk?”

“No, more like sister talk.” She said, “Where to now? The funny farm?”

“Close, we’ll go to the Feeney’s house.”

“Why there?”

Tom shrugged, “Oh, I don't know. Sam and Paddy have always been a good refuge. Besides, Mary always told me that, if you get really stressed, do something simple and ordinary. Like laundry. All my clothes are there, and they probably smell like bug bomb. Your cloths are now covered in sand, and I can't think of anything better to do.” He smiled, “And besides, I'd like to get my boxers back.”

“Ooh, you were listening!” she slugged him in the arm.

“Hey, why do think Leah called me ‘Big Ears’?”

Chapter 3 - - Bargains made, Deals struck

Mrs. Patricia (Paddy) Dorothy Margaret Feeney was a boisterous woman. When Tom and Selkie arrived she was carrying an arm load of empty cans of bug bomb out to the trash.

“How often does she do this?” Selkie asked.

“At least once a month”, Tom explained. “Every dark of the moon she convinces herself that land crabs are sneaking up the beach to attack the house. We’ve tried everything to explain to her that there are no land crabs, but she won’t hear of it.” He paused then he added. “She’s a little more than eccentric, but not quite nuts.”

“Great combination” Selkie said. “And it happens every month?”

“No. Only when things get tight and she starts to stress out. If business pickups or something happens to preoccupy her, she’s fine. But when the money runs out, or the fish don’t bite...”

“I get the picture.”

“Tom? Why there you are!” Mrs. Feeney cried out. “I heard you were rescuing some fair damsel in distress. Is this her?” Mrs. Feeney gave Selkie the once over. “Oh, Tom, she’s lovely. Are you married dear?”

“Uh, no, Mrs. Feeney”, Selkie stammered.

“Did you hear that, Tom? She’s available. And she’s so pretty. She’s definitely a keeper. And don’t you call me Mrs. Feeney. Any friend of Tom is a friend of mine, especially, if she’s a girl, such as yourself. Call me Paddy.”

Tom was embarrassed, but Selkie enjoyed it.

She said, “Well, Paddy, Tom was telling me about the trouble you’re having with land crabs.”

Tom tried to change the subject, but Selkie kicked his shin to silence him.

“I see you’re using the bug bomb, so the incense didn’t work for you?” As she spoke she let a soft Scottish brogue she had picked up from her mother slip into her voice.

“Incense. Incense?” Paddy shook her head. “Now, I never heard of using incense to stave off those awful creatures.”

“My maternal grandmother told me that when she was a wee girl, her mother used incense to keep the land crabs at bay.”

“And where was your grandmother from?”

“My people come from the Orkneys. Have you ever been there? No? Well,” Selkie took a deep breath then she took Paddy’s arm and walked towards the house. “My grandmother said that when she was a child the land crabs on the Orkney Islands were particularly bold. They’d sneak into a cottage and steal the food right off your plate at supper time. Then an

angel revealed to her mother, my great-grandmother that incense, like that used in the church to sanctify the place would keep the demon crabs away.”

Paddy was spellbound. “Really?”

“So, each month, when the moon was dark, great grandmother took sticks of incense and stuck them into bits of driftwood. She set two on one end of the cottage, and two on the other, and just to be sure, she put two on the kitchen table.”

“Did it work?” Paddy asked.

“Grandmother told me that it worked so well, that all the women folk on the islands followed her example, and from that day forward, no one on the islands has ever been bothered by land crabs.”

Selkie waited to see what effect the story had on Paddy. Paddy thought long about it.

“What kind of incense did she use?”

“Well” Selkie continued after some deliberation, “I recall grandmother said they used Sandal Wood, they tried Musk, but that got the men all excited.” She winked at Tom. “If it’s really bad, Frankincense was especially effective. The important thing was the incense represented the holiness of God, and the crabs dared not enter.”

That made sense to Paddy.

“Of course, and all these bug bombs are man made, so they might not cross them while they’re fresh, but that’s why they keep coming back.” Paddy made her decision. “As soon as Sam returns, I’ll send him out for some incense.”

Selkie whispered to Tom, “Follow my lead.”

“Actually Paddy, Tom could go and get some incense right now. Couldn’t you Tom?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, sure why not. And while I’m out I can get some gas for the truck,” his voice dropped to a whisper as he leaned into her ear, “with the money I don’t have.”

“Would you do that, Tom?” Paddy clasped her hands together, “Oh saints be praised. It would be such a relief to this poor old heart. Come in darling and I’ll put the kettle on.”

Tom was getting upset. “Selkie, can we talk.”

Selkie turned to Mrs. Feeney, “I’ll be there in a minute. I just want to make sure that Tom gets the right kind. You know how these men are.”

Paddy went into the house lamenting over all the times that Sam had bought the wrong thing.

Tom waited for the door to close then he turned on Selkie.

“What are you doing?” he demanded. “What’s all this crap about incense and land crabs in the Orkney Islands and your grand mother and your great grand mother? Is any of that true?”

Selkie was not one to back down.

“Yes. My great grandmother did live in on Orkney Island, and so did my grandmother and I’ll have you know my mother emigrated from there to the United States and settled in East Prairie Iowa.” She softened her tone, “As for the land crabs, well Mrs. Feeney believes it, and when there are no land crabs in her house tonight, that poor woman will finally have some rest, and so will Sam. And so will you.” She stopped and looked up into his eyes. “I know it may not be the right thing to do, but, to offer somebody some hope is often the more important thing to do. Telling her she was wrong wouldn’t work, so I told her what she needed to hear.”

Tom looked down into the deep green eyes staring up at him. "Okay, I can see that. But, I still don't have enough money to buy gas, let alone incense."

Selkie dug into her back pack and pulled out a wad of bills wrapped with a rubber band.

"What's this?" he asked incredulously.

"It's all I have." She said, as she put it in his hand. "Go and get the gas and the incense. Then pickup three pieces of driftwood, drill some holes in them so they'll each hold two sticks of incense. And make sure they won't tip over in a breeze."

Tom unrolled the wad of cash. He quietly counted it. "There must be almost five hundred dollars here."

"Maybe, I don't count it that often." She smiled. "And while you're at it, pay for anything else that you need to, starting with breakfast."

"I don't know about this."

He started to refuse, but Selkie put her hand up to his face and with two fingers, she gently silenced him.

"Hush," she whispered as if he were a baby. Gently rubbing his cheek with her hand she felt the rough stubble of his beard. "It's okay." She said, "I trust you."

Tom looked into her eyes. She did trust him. He reached out and ran his fingers through her unruly hair then he cupped her chin in his hand, and looked at her for the longest time. How could he resist?

Finally he said, "Okay. Just be here when I get back."

Selkie, in voice as soft as a cloud, replied, "I'll be here."

Tom climbed into the truck and as he drove away she added tearfully, "Without my skin I can't leave."

She wiped the tears from her eyes and turned her thoughts back to Mrs. Feeney.

"All right now, if I can't leave, I'd better make some changes around here." She picked up the back pack and started into the house. She asked, "Paddy, may I use your washing machine?" as the door closed behind her.

Two hours later, the clothes lines outside of the Feeneys' were flapping with clothes and sheets. The windows of the house were all open to air out in preparation for the incense Tom was bringing. Selkie had washed all of her clothes and hung them up on the center lines and had placed the sheets around them on the outside, at Mrs. Feeney's insistence.

"If at all possible, I believe a woman's fineries should always dry on the clothes line on a bright sunny day like today. However, you should place them in the middle of the line and surround them with sheets and pillowcases to keep them a secret between you and your husband."

Tom arrived, a short time later with the incense, the driftwood and Sam in tow.

Selkie was in the center of the clouds of white sheets and pillowcases billowing in the breeze. She was maneuvering a pair of heavy pants up onto a line with her right arm, launching it like a shot put of heavy wet denim up and over the clothes line. Sam waved to her and went in to see his Paddy.

"I found Sam down on my boat. He thought we might be there. I told Sam about the incense." Tom said as he maneuvered through the sheets. "He seems to think it could conceivably work."

“Well,” she grunted as she threw another pair of pants over the line, “that’s a vote of confidence.”

“How many pairs of jeans do you have?” he asked.

“I have two pairs.” She said as she straightened the pants out to dry. “These are yours.”

“Mine? Why are you washing my clothes? I never asked you to.”

“No, you didn’t.” she answered as she clipped clothes pins into place.

“You’re not doing this to pay me back for saving your life are you.”

Selkie stopped and glared at him for a moment, “No. I am doing this because if I am going to stay, and have to hang around you, I’d rather you didn’t smell like bug bomb.”

Selkie pushed her way through the sheets with a laundry basket tucked under her good arm. It was then that Tom realized that she was wearing only a camisole and his blue boxer shorts.

“When do I get my boxers back,” he teased.

Selkie dropped the basket and faced him. “You can have them any time.” With that she hooked a thumb into the waistband and began shoving them down.

Tom turned bright red and spun around. “You don’t have to take them off right now.” He exclaimed.

Selkie laid the boxers on his shoulder and carrying the basket on her head she walked past him exaggerating the swaying of her hips. Tom hesitantly watched her go by. She had been wearing her bikini bottom under the boxers.

She turned with a sly “Gotcha” smile, and laughed. “You are so easy.”

Tom wadded up the shorts and tossed them to her. "Here," he said. "They look better on you anyway."

Sam came out onto the porch with a proclamation from the lady of the manor.

"Herself wants to know, if the two of you, will be staying for supper?"

Selkie turned to Tom. "Is it safe?"

Tom Nodded. "Oh yeah, she's a good cook."

"All right, then." Selkie turned to Sam and replied in a very formal manner, "Please extend our thanks to the lady of the manor and tell her that we will be staying for dinner."

"I thought you would," he grunted, then he continued by adding, "She also wants to know if you will be dressing for dinner, or should we all strip down to our skivvies to make the mermaid feel more at home?"

Selkie broke out laughing.

"You may tell the lady, that yes, I will get dressed to honor her some what provincial tastes and that I in no way would put her through such anxieties."

"Oh thank God for that." He said as he started fiddling with his pipe. "I for one don't mind seeing you in your skivvies. Makes me feel younger. Still, it's not for me to say, but stripping down to *my* skivvies would ruin any dinner."

Selkie skipped up the steps to Sam and gave him a hug and peck on the cheek. "Sam, you are a dear. Tell Paddy I'll get decent and be right in to help."

Selkie turned back to face Tom. Her eyes were alive and sparkling. She walked down the steps with a swagger.

"That went rather well."

Tom shrugged.

“What?”

“Nothing” he said, shrugging again.

Selkie refused to rise to the bait. “Okay.” She picked up the empty laundry basket and made her way through the fluttering sheets to her clothes in the middle. Tom followed. She checked her clothes and began pulling the dry items off the line and dropping them in the basket.

“Would you excuse me for a moment, I want to get dressed.”

She directed him to the other side of a large sheet. He obliged and standing there, Tom struggled with the many questions he wanted to ask.

“Selkie,” he started, “about this morning, at the beach.”

She knew what was coming. “Yes?”

“What happened? I mean what really happened down there? What’s with all the seals? Did you call them?”

Selkie knew they had reached a turning point. She couldn’t hide from Tom the truth, and for the first time in her life, she didn’t want to. She been so careful with all the other men she had known. She hadn’t fallen for anyone since high school, so that didn’t count. This time, she found some one who was so very different that she couldn’t risk hurting him.

“Tom, I trust you.” She said quietly as she dressed. “And because I trust you, I feel I owe you the truth.” Selkie pulled the rest of her clothes off the line and dropped them in the basket. “Do you trust me?”

Tom weighed his answer. “I suppose so.”

“Good. I appreciate that.” She pushed the sheet aside with the basket. “To understand me, you need to know who I am. And if after you know, you want to walk away, I’ll understand that.”

Tom was beginning to wonder what dark secret he was about to discover.

“You need to ask Sam.”

“Sam? What’s he got to do with this?”

“Tom, you need to ask Sam, because he knows who I am, what I am, and he can explain it better than I can.” Selkie was getting edgy so much relied on this. “Sam can explain it. I’d just mess it all up.” With that she ran into the house.

A moment later, Sam came out smoking his pipe. He looked at Tom with a quizzical look.

“Selkie wanted me to talk to you. I’d be guessing that you want to know about her. Am I right?”

Tom nodded. “You saw her this morning at the beach. Do you know what’s going on?”

Sam sat down on the porch and motioned Tom to join him. He pulled on his pipe for a moment before he began.

“In Ireland, Scotland and Wales, there are legends about a race called ‘Finfolk’. These were creatures that lived in the sea, but came up onto dry land like normal men and women.”

“Like mermaids?” Tom asked.

“Yes, except mermaids and mermen could breathe underwater. The Finfolk were mammals. They had to breathe the air. Like whales and dolphins...and seals.” He paused for another pull on his pipe. “The legends say that certain seals would shed their skin and for a

fortnight walk amongst humans as a man or a woman. They often had affairs with humans before returning to the sea. The males would seduce a woman; the females would fall in love with men. But they couldn't return to the sea without their skin. These magical seals were called Selkie." He let the name lay out before Tom.

To Tom this was a fairy tale. It had no foundation in the twenty first century, and no justification in the Bible.

"Are you telling me, that Selkie is one of these creatures?"

"Ordinarily, I'd say no. But, if you look at the facts, they do point towards a conclusion."

Tom grew argumentative, "Facts? What facts?"

Sam counted them off on his fingers.

"One, you pull her half naked out of the water with a dead seal. Two, she can swim in icy cold water, when anyone else would turn blue and die of hypothermia. Three, she was frantic over her 'skin'. Four, well we both experienced four this morning. And five, I spoke to a seal in Gaelic to go to her and comfort her, and he DID!"

"Six," Tom continued, "she said her mother emigrated from the Orkney Islands."

Sam took a long draw on his pipe and blew a long blue cloud of smoke.

"Well, that tears it, then. The Orkneys are at the center of the legends. And you say she told you this?"

"Aye, she did." Tom dropped his head in his hands. "What else do the legends say?"

Sam scratched his head. "Well, the female Selkie usually falls in love with a man, who is a Christian. They're happy for a while. Some times they have children. But she always

returns to the sea, unless the man has hidden her skin, then she can't. As I recall, the stories say that while they're together, the Selkie turns into a docile, loving wife. But the sea is always beckoning."

Tom had a revelation. "But you can't hear the sea in Iowa."

"What's that?" Sam asked.

"Selkie's mother immigrated to the US and settled in Iowa."

Sam chewed the tip of his pipe and pondered this. "Iowa's a long way from the sea, no matter which way you go. It would be a good refuge." He drew hard and the tobacco embers in the bowl glowed a deep fiery orange.

"So, do any of these legends have a happy ending?" Tom asked sullenly.

"Not usually. Either she dies or she leaves. And if a Selkie leaves it cannot return for seven years. Once in a great while, she stays with her man" Sam scratched his head, "It must be the dourness brought on by living with the North Sea that makes these tales so melancholy."

"Yeah, must be." Tom agreed.

"Are you in love with her then?" the old Irishman asked with a smile.

Before he thought about it, Tom replied. "I think I am."

"Well good for you. And here Paddy and I were worried you'd sail off alone. Believe me, lad, you could do worse. If you have her skin, you have her."

"But I don't have her skin. I just have her under *my* skin"

Sam rose with a grunt, tapped his pipe against the porch step and headed for his workshop. "Believe me lad, after thirty years of marriage, it all feels the same. I guess we'd better make those incense holders."

Dinner was served on the good china, handed down for generations before Paddy inherited them from her aunt. Selkie tried to remain calm but couldn't help but stop by the door to listen for any reaction. She half expected Tom to storm in and tell her where to get off and then leave. But he didn't. She hoped for him to come in, sweep her off her feet and carry her to his bed room, where their passions would intertwine and explode in lovemaking. But he didn't. Instead Tom came in bearing two smoking sticks of sandal wood incense mounted in a piece of driftwood for the table, just as she described. When he spoke to her it was in even tones that revealed as much about his emotions, as a flounder caught in a mud bank.

Dinner was a delight, though Tom worried about the cost of all the food. Paddy insisted that she would be sending leftovers home with him. Paddy asked Tom to give thanks. He called on God to watch over them all, and to provide for their needs, and to bless both the food and the hands that prepared it.

After dinner, as Selkie helped Paddy clear the table, the phone rang.

"Hello Ed Hope, how are you?" cried Paddy as she answered the phone. It was her way of alerting Sam so he could sneak out if necessary. "What, Sam? Why yes he is here. You'll be wanting to speak with him - a business deal- Okay, I'll fetch him."

She turned over the phone to Sam and went back to the dishes. She found Selkie scraping the plates into the garbage. "Oh no child," Paddy took the plates. "Now you and

Tom run along while I tidy up here.” Paddy would brook no excuse as she chased her guests outside.

The cooling evening air outside was spiced with the fragrance of sandalwood. They sat down on the porch watching the waves roll up the shore in front of them. The silence was stronger than the sandalwood.

When she couldn't stand the suspense anymore, Selkie asked “Well, Tom?”

“Sam asked if I love you.” He said evenly.

She dreaded the answer, which ever way it went.

“And I told him that...I think I do.” He turned to face her. “All things considered that's pretty crazy, right?”

“Yeah it is.” She smiled, “But it's a nice kind of crazy.”

They leaned in for a kiss, when the door burst open nearly hitting them and smashing into the wall. Sam came out and did a jig on the porch accompanying himself with a “Dee diddly-dee, the sailor's life for me.”

“Sam, what happened?” Tom asked.

“Oh, my buckaroo, we have a job tomorrow. Yes we do!”

“What kind of job?” Tom asked.

“A charter job!” seems a big important company booked Ed Hope's boat and Ed had already booked his boat out to another bunch of fishermen. So he's giving us the charter so he can have the big company group.”

“That's wonderful!” Selkie exclaimed.

"Sam," Tom being ever practical asked, "do you have enough fuel and supplies for a group of...?"

"Eight or Ten. Minimum of eight."

"Okay, do you have the fuel?"

Sam's jig stopped in mid step. His face grew ashen as he realized the problem.

"Oh dear oh dear." His hopes dashed he said sadly. "I guess I'll have to call him back."

"Sam, wait a minute." Selkie's eyes had turned bright green again. "Tom, how much money is left over?"

"Over four hundred and fifty dollars," He gave the roll of bills to Selkie who passed them on to Sam.

"How bout it Sam? Four hundred and fifty dollars. Will that do?"

Sam looked at the money. "Where did you get it?"

"It's mine," Selkie explained, "I earn it here and there, and never spend much. Is it enough?"

"Well Aye, it is enough. But it's your money, Selkie. I can't take it."

"Think of it as a loan." She said.

"I don't take credit from anyone." He countered.

"Okay, think of it as I'm buying a share in the venture."

Wary of getting trouble for a partner he asked, "How big a share?"

"As big as four hundred and fifty dollars will buy me."

Sam thought a long while, before he said. "Done!"

He spat in his hand and offered it to Selkie. She spat in her good hand and took his.

“Done and Done.” She laughed.

“I’m still the captain, right?”

“Aye, aye, Captain Feeney.” She shouted, “And Tom’s your first mate.”

“And what does that make you?” Sam asked?

Selkie grinned, “Me, I’m the mermaid.”

They planned the trip into the evening. Sam and Tom would manage the boat, while Selkie would work the fishermen. As Tom and Sam talked about where the fish be could be found, Selkie yawned and said, “Leave that to me. I’ll find them.”

“Do you know where the fish will be?” Sam asked curiously.

“I can’t tell you where they *will* be, I can only tell you where they are at when we get there. I’m a mermaid, not a psychic.” She yawned again. “Tom, I’m loosing it. Can we go home?”

“Home?” he asked.

“You know the boat.”

“Sure, we can go.”

With plans laid out, they bid Sam and Paddy good night. The trip to the harbor was quiet as Selkie slipped off to sleep, her head leaning against Tom’s shoulder. It was a sensation that Tom knew he could get used to.

Back in the boat, Selkie stepped into the head to change while Tom quickly prepared for bed. He climbed into the quarter berth and waited.

“Selkie,” he asked, “Why did your mother leave Scotland and come to America?”

From behind the door, she replied, "Mother always said that my father was killed in a fishing accident when the boat he was working on sank in a storm. She was pregnant with me, but they weren't married. So to avoid controversy, she emigrated. She said she looked for a place in the middle of a continent, as far away from the closest sea or ocean, as she could get." Selkie came out in an over sized tie dyed T shirt and climbed into her bed. "I think she was afraid that I would jump in and swim away, like in all the stories."

"Are all the women in your family like you?"

"Yes, they are, except me."

This puzzled Tom. He rolled over on his stomach and asked, "I thought you were a Selkie?"

"I am...and more." She steeled herself; better tell the whole truth now. "My grand mother came to visit us when I was about fourteen. She told me all sorts of tales about the islands. How hard and cold it could be in the winter, and how incredibly beautiful the short spring and summers were. And every tale led back to the sea. Well this made mother nervous, but she figured we were safe, that I was safe, living so far from the ocean. Then the day before she left, my grandmother took me aside and we had a long private talk. She told me about being Selkie, how my name and my identity were one and the same. And I believed her. I was captain of the swim team, I could have gone to the Olympics, but I was pulled a different route. The day before she left, she gave me my skin. It had belonged to my great grandmother. Grandmother explained that because times had changed, life was very hard for the Selkie. So my great grandmother had put away her skin, and stayed human. She married and Granny came along, and she eventually married. But great grandma kept the skin and the

memories alive. They talked to the seals and swam with them, but always in private so no one would suspect." Selkie went silent for the longest time. "Then grandmother told me that my father hadn't drowned in a boat accident, like my mother had told me and everyone else. He was a Selkie. He had gone back to the sea when he found out that my mother was part Selkie. I guess he thought she would follow him. But she couldn't because she decided to stay human. I never did learn why."

"And you believe this?"

"Hey," she said, "Look at this morning. It's not the first time it's happened."

"So you ran away from your mother?"

"Yes. After I graduated I ran away to Venice beach California where at the age of seventeen I met a French Canadian named Henri'. He was a tattoo artist, who was more in love with his art and himself, than he was with me. Still, I did get something special out of our tumultuous six months together, don't you think?" Don't quit now, she thought. "I've been with a number of men, Tom. I won't deny it. I didn't go looking for them, but I never refused them either. I wouldn't blame you if you booted me out tonight after hearing this. But, I sure hope you don't."

Tom said simply, "You're safe here."

That ended the conversation that night. Their thoughts and dreams were hidden in the darkness.

