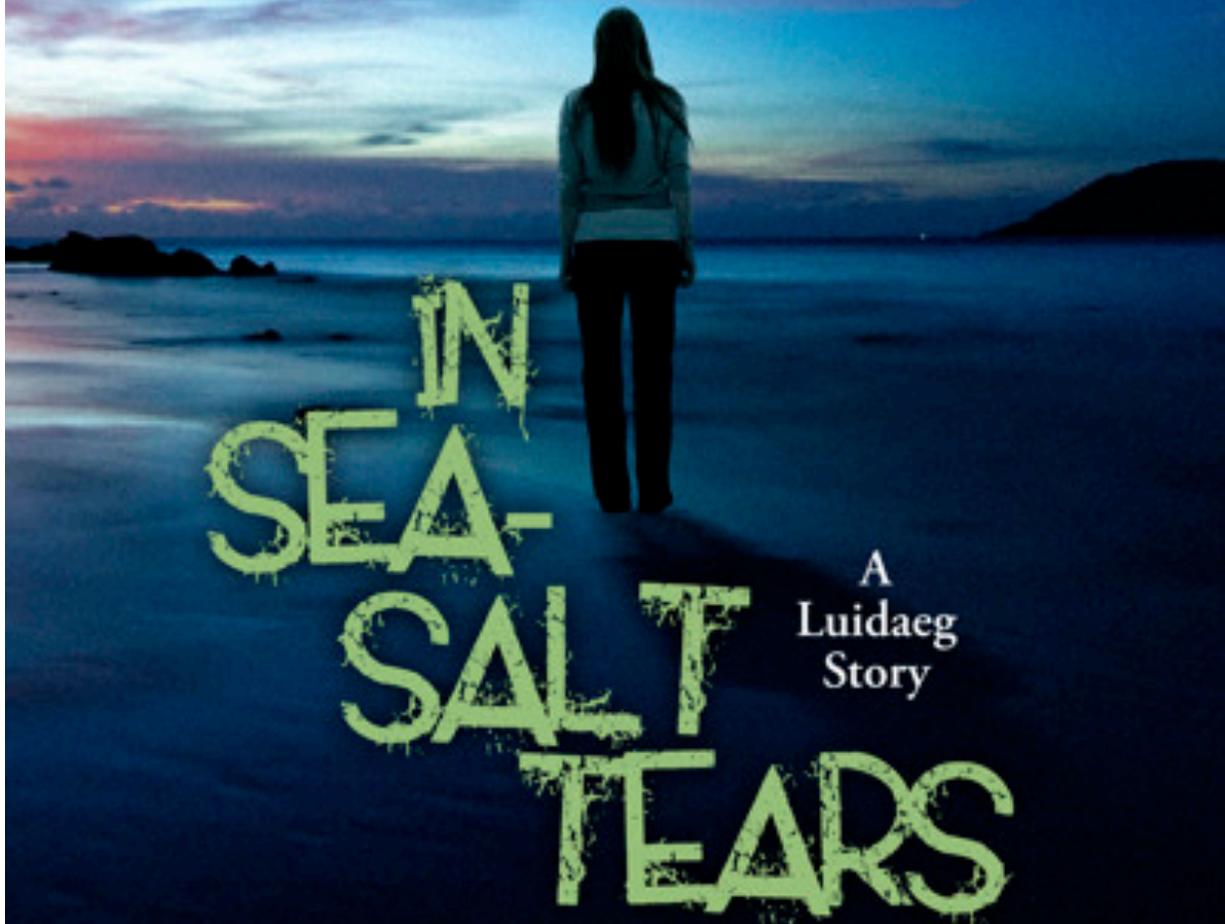


New York Times bestselling author

SEANAN MCGUIRE



IN
SEA-
SALT
TEARS

A
Luidaeg
Story

O'SHEA

In Sea-Salt Tears

by

Seanán McGuire

Wound it with sighing, girl, kill it with groans;

Or get some little knife between thy teeth,

And just against thy heart make thou a hole;

That all the tears that thy poor eyes let fall

May run into that sink, and soaking in

Drown the lamenting fool in sea-salt tears.

—William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*

These are the things every Selkie-child knows; these are the things we're taught long before we learn whether or not we'll ever be chosen to receive a skin, before we know whether our aching need for the tides will ever be answered.

We know that, while we may love the ocean, the ocean doesn't love us. The ocean is incapable of loving us, no matter how sweetly she loves the Merrow and the Cetacea and the Roane.

We know that we, among all the fae, are temporary and hence flawed, although no one tells us why, no one breathes a whisper of it—not until the day they draw us aside and offer us our own cold version of the Changeling's Choice that is offered to the half-breed children of the so-called purebloods.

We know that we must never, *never*, upon pain of misery beyond measure, trust the sea-witch, or take her bargains, or risk her anger. These are the things every Selkie-child knows.

But they never tell us that the sea-witch can be kind, when she wants to. They never tell us that she cries at night like a lost child, or that the ocean loves her, or that she's lonely, or that she's alone.

They never tell us not to love her.

Maybe no one's ever needed that lesson before; maybe it's one of those things that we're supposed to just *know*, somehow etched all the way down to our bones. Maybe there was never a chance that it would happen, not since time began, not since the first tide rolled out. Maybe it was never meant to be a Selkie's downfall.

But it was mine.

May Oberon forgive me, but I'm not sorry. Because that downfall was mine...and so was she. My pretty Annie. The only woman I could ever love, or ever wanted to. I miss her every day, and the worst of it? The worst of it is that she never existed. My pretty Annie never existed at all.



Half Moon Bay, California. The summer of 1972.

We gathered on the beach in our traditional circle around the bonfire, each of us clutching an offering we'd pilfered from our parents' kitchens. Mathias had beer. Mathias always had beer—his parents were Canadian, and they'd been letting him drink since he was fourteen, the lucky stiff. Tempe had a whole tray of Aunt Margaret's sea salt chocolate chip cookies. Colin had the weed. I had three packs of hot dogs and a bundle of sticks for us to roast them on. Just an ordinary Friday night in Half Moon Bay... except there was no Daisy. There was a hole in our circle where Daisy should have been, and where she was never going to be again.

Colin looked gloomily out at the water, the firelight flickering in his eyes and making them seem even bluer than they normally were. They were human eyes. All of us had human eyes, and now Daisy didn't. She'd traded her human eyes for a silver seal's skin and the freedom of the open sea. I missed her. I hated her. I was terrified of what they'd done to her, and wanted to know why I wasn't good enough for them to do it to me.

“Do you think she misses us?” asked Colin.

I was trying to come up with a diplomatic response when Tempe snorted and threw a piece of driftwood at him. It bounced harmlessly off his shoulder. “She’s a *Selkie* now, you idiot. Not just kin. She’s not thinking about us. She’s never going to think about us again. Not unless we get skins of our own, and that’s not going to happen unless...you know.”

We knew. We all knew. Selkie skins are limited, and passed down only when someone dies, or decides they’re ready to. Daisy’s skin had belonged to her great-grandmother, Adrianna. After three hundred years, she’d finally decided that it was time for her to go. She’d given her skin to her favorite granddaughter, leaving three more crying in the corners, and she’d moved inland to die. Michigan or Montana or one of those other states that starts with “M” and doesn’t have a coastline. Former Selkies almost never stay within sight of the sea. The ones that do always wind up drowning when the need to go back to the sea gets to be too much for them.

“Let’s not fight tonight, okay?” I opened the first pack of hot dogs and poked a stick into one of them before holding it out over the fire. “Daisy got what we all want. We should be happy for her.”

“I’m happy for her,” said Colin, without conviction.

Tempe was the one who surprised me, though. “Who says we all want it?” she asked, in a small voice. We all turned to blink at her. She shrugged. “I just...why does that have to be what we all want? Why can’t we just be happy being who we are, and stop wishing for something that we might never have? It seems like a good way to waste your life. You could spend the whole thing on wanting, and wind up having nothing.”

“That’s...whoa,” said Mathias. “You really feel that way?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.” Tempe shrugged, her shoulders rising and falling like a bird’s wings. “I guess I just feel like there should be more for us than wanting. Like maybe there might be somewhere else that we could be.”

None of us knew what to say to that. I passed the hot dogs silently around the circle. We each took one, holding it out over the flames, lost in our own thoughts. I didn’t know what the boys were thinking, but I was aghast. How could Tempe even *say* such a thing? The sea was everything. The sea was what we were born for. How could she want to be anywhere else but here?

Our hot dogs were almost ready, and Colin was rolling fat marijuana cigarettes with practiced fingers, when Tempe sat up straighter and frowned across the fire. “Hey,” she said. “Who’s that?”

“Where?” I turned to follow her gaze, unrealistic hope springing in my breast. Maybe it was Daisy. Maybe she wasn’t going to abandon her old friends after all; maybe she was coming back to tell us all what it was like, and to convince Tempe that this was where she belonged—

But no. The woman trudging her way through the dunes wasn’t Daisy. She wasn’t anyone I’d ever seen before. I would have remembered. She was older than we were, but not by very much, with fat brown braids hanging over her shoulders and skin that was freckled enough to show how much time she spent in the sun. She was barefoot, wearing bellbottom jeans and a green peasant blouse embroidered with flowing kelp. A six-pack hung from one hand.

“Hey,” she said, once she was close enough. “Hope I’m not crashing. Your folks said you might be cool with some company out here.”

I squinted at her through the firelight. I knew the others would be doing the same. There was a faint glitter in the air around her, the indication of an illusion. "The party's back at the house," I said, a little rudely. All the Selkies would be taking to the sea soon, to celebrate Daisy's admission to their ranks. The kids would cluster on the back porch, watching them swim away. That was all well and good for children, but once you were old enough to be hurt by being left behind...that was when you took to the dunes, like my friends and I had done. We didn't need any Selkies reminding us of what we didn't have yet, and might never get for ourselves. That was a reminder that would be waiting for us when we got home, whether we wanted it or not.

"I know," said the stranger. The fingers of her free hand moved in a quick, complex tattoo, and the glitter around her vanished, revealing...essentially the same figure. Her ears were very slightly pointed, and her eyes were driftglass green, irises just a little too big to be human. "I'm not invited to their reindeer games."

"What are you?" asked Mathias bluntly. Tempe hissed for him to be quiet. He ignored her.

The stranger smiled. It was a sad, somehow, like a part of it was missing. "A cousin," she said. "I don't have a skin. They said I should come out here."

I frowned. "Your eyes are green," I said. "Roane?"

She nodded.

"Dude, sucks to be you," said Mathias, with honest sympathy. Roane are shapeshifters, not skin-shifters like Selkies. A Roane changeling who didn't inherit the ability to transform would never be able to learn how, no matter how well they served their family.

"Frequently," she agreed. "I'm Annie."

The rest of us introduced ourselves before scooting over to make room for her. She passed around fresh beers, and Colin passed around the joints, and for a few hours, we let ourselves forget how we weren't included in what was happening in the waters just offshore.

Somehow, Annie wound up sitting next to me. I took the joint she offered my way, and asked, "Why're you here, anyway?"

"I was invited," she said. "What's your name?"

"Elizabeth. You can call me Liz. All my friends do."

"It's nice to meet you, Liz." Her smile wasn't sad that time, although it still felt like there was something missing. "Was she one of your friends?"

She didn't say Daisy's name, but she didn't need to. To the skinless, the newly-skinned might as well have been dead. It would be years before Daisy finished learning everything she needed to know and remembered that we existed. We'd be grown up and maybe even gone by then. "She was, yeah."

"But she was older than you are."

"Not by much. Daisy's twenty-five, I'm sixteen. That's like, no difference at all."

Now she looked amused. "No difference at all," she agreed.

I fed another log to the fire, and asked, "Do you ever hate them?" I didn't have to explain who "them"

was: anyone who would be here, on the dunes, would understand. Tempe nodded. So did Colin. Mathias just looked toward the water, and didn't say anything at all.

Annie sighed. "Every day," she said. "Every day and every night of my life."

Eventually, the beer and pot went to my head, and I snuggled down into the sand, watching the fire through half-closed lids. When even that became too much trouble, I let my eyes drift closed, and fell asleep to the distant sound of the sea.

When I woke up, Colin was putting out the last of the flames, Mathias was packing up our garbage, Tempe was snoring gently into the morning air, and Annie was gone. It would be two years before I saw her again.



Half Moon Bay, California. The fall of 1974.

Colin put his arm clumsily around my shoulders as we watched Tempe's father leading her away from us, down to the beach. Her mother would be waiting with a rowboat, one too small and too delicate-looking to seem safe on the water, and together, the three of them would row out to one of the forbidden spots along the shore, where Tempe would be draped in her very own sealskin for the first time. I was so jealous I felt like I might die. Only Colin's arm was keeping me from dropping to my knees and keening out my grief. Why her? Why her and not me? Tempe and I were cousins. If Aunt Margaret was going to pass her skin, why would she choose the girl who never wanted it instead of the girl who felt like she was going to die without it?

I was barely eighteen years old, and as I watched my cousin dwindle into the distance, I felt like my life was over.

"I'm sorry," said Colin. They were empty words, and we both knew it. There was no good reason for Tempe to be chosen over me. I was as smart as she was, I did as well in my studies and worked as hard for the family. The only difference was that I had never threatened to leave. Shouldn't that have made them choose me over her? Didn't loyalty matter?

"I just don't understand," I said, my voice thick with unshed tears. I didn't resist as he tightened his arm around me and led me back toward the house.

Bonfires were already springing up on the dunes as groups of our younger cousins clustered together in their own private pain. I wanted to join them—sweet Oberon, I wanted to be away from this house, where everything smelled like the sea, no matter how much we scrubbed—but I couldn't go. Someone had to stay and keep an eye on the children. The older cousins would relieve us around midnight, and then I could run. Until then, this was where I had to be.

It wasn't a surprise, but it was almost a relief when we opened the kitchen door and found a dark-haired woman sitting at the kitchen table, head bowed over a cup of tea. I stopped in the doorway, and Colin stopped with me, his arm still tight around my shoulders.

"Annie?"

She looked up. It was the first time I'd seen her in proper light, rather than the forgiving flicker of a beach bonfire. Her skin was freckled, and the ghosts of old acne scars dusted her cheekbones, giving her a speckled complexion, variegated as sand. Her driftglass eyes were older than they should have been. That must have been her fae blood making itself known. True fae can age so slowly they seem to be standing still, and sometimes, that goes for their changelings as well. Annie's blood could keep her alive for centuries, and deny her the sea for that entire time.

The ache in my heart changed then, just a little. I would have other chances, other offered skins. She would have nothing but this: empty kitchens and watching cousins walk into the waves when she had to stay on the shore.

"Hello, Liz," she said. Her eyes flicked to the side, and she nodded before she added, "Colin."

"Where've you been?" he asked, gruffly. I shot him a startled look. He ignored me. "It's been two years. You didn't say goodbye."

"Around." She shrugged. "I don't really fit in so well with the rest of the family, so I don't stay anywhere for very long. My ride was leaving. I had to go. I'm sorry if I upset you. I didn't mean to."

"Yeah, well." Colin frowned, keeping his arm around my shoulders. It seemed suddenly like he was smothering me, but I couldn't figure out how to step away without insulting him. It was clear that he saw Annie as a threat. I just didn't know *why*. "I'm not the one you should be apologizing to."

"I know." Annie looked at me and smiled. It was an earnest, hopeful expression, and she blossomed around it, seeming suddenly beautiful. "Liz, I'm sorry. I had to leave in a hurry, and I should have woken you. Forgive me?"

"Sure. You must be starving." That smile explained everything. My cheeks reddened as I ducked away from Colin's arm, heading for the refrigerator. "Can I make you a sandwich, or heat up some of the cottage pie? The big party's tomorrow, so pickings are slim..."

"Anything would be wonderful." Annie raised her teacup, eyes going from me to Colin and back again. "Where's your other friend, Mathias?"

"He moved up the coast to be with his parents," said Colin. He still didn't sound like he was happy she was here. "One of his brothers died, so his chances of getting skinned at home went up. Down here, he was just another cousin."

To my surprise, Annie grimaced. "Why do we call it that, do you think? Getting skinned. It makes it sound like someone's out there hunting Selkies."

"I don't know," said Colin. "Why don't you ask at the next place you go to stay?"

"Colin!" I didn't realize I was going to snap until I had already done it. He turned to blink at me, eyes wide and wounded. I shook my head. "Be nice. Just...please, for me. Be nice tonight."

"Fine," he huffed. "I'm going to go check on the kids."

"You do that," I said.

He looked at me for a moment more, like he was waiting for me to say something. I didn't have anything to say, and finally, he turned and stomped out of the kitchen, slamming the door behind himself. I sighed.

“Annie, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she said, and took another sip of her tea. “I’m not part of the game.”

Now it was my turn to frown. “What do you mean?”

“I mean look at me.” She waved a hand, indicating herself, the distinctly non-Selkie color of her eyes and the too-mortal lines of her face. “I’m not a candidate for a skin. Anyone who looks at me can see that I’ll never be a Selkie. I don’t have the right qualifications for the job. Sometimes, that makes people who are waiting a little...I don’t know, uncomfortable. Like I’m just here to watch them suffer. He’s not the only person who’s reacted to me like I’ve come to steal all his toys and make him miserable forever.”

“Well, that’s not a very nice thing for them to think. Whatever Colin may say, I wasn’t upset when you left. I understood.” I pulled the cottage pie out of the fridge. “Although I guess I should ask...*why* are you here?”

“Tradition. I can’t attend every skin-passing ceremony, but I attend most of them, at least here on the West Coast. I have for a long time.”

Tradition has power in Faerie, and no matter how human Annie looked, she wasn’t. The Roane have been rare verging on extinct since there have been Selkies in the sea. She might have been fulfilling some old role as observer that the rest of us didn’t know about, and she looked so *sad*. She looked lost, almost, like she had no real idea of where she was going to go from here.

So I smiled, and didn’t push her any further. Instead, I picked up a spatula, and said, “Let’s get you fed.”

Two hours later, Annie and I were still sitting at that table, drinking tea and laughing at her seemingly endless supply of embarrassing stories about the Selkies of Northern California. She’d met everyone, or she knew someone who knew someone who’d met them, and every time I thought I was too tired to laugh any more, she’d start another story. It was amazing. It was...perfect, and my belief in that perfection only grew when I looked at the clock and realized that it was almost midnight.

“My shift is almost over,” I said. Thanks to Colin, who was still sulking somewhere in the house, the younger cousins hadn’t bothered me at all.

Annie smiled. “So what’s next for you?”

Originally, “what’s next” had been a bed, and Colin, and trying to forget about Tempe joining the other Selkies in the sea. I met Annie’s eyes, bit my lip, and said, as boldly as I dared, “Want to take a walk with me?”

Her smile grew. “I’d love to.”



We walked along the beach, listening to the waves as they crashed themselves senseless against the sand. We’d been holding hands for the last half-mile or so. I wasn’t sure who’d reached for whom first,

and I didn't care. Her fingers were warm. There were no webs between them. She didn't judge me because of what I did or didn't have. She never would.

"I have to leave in the morning," she said.

"I sort of figured you would." I sighed. "I don't suppose you want to tell me where you live? Maybe I can come visit."

"Not just yet," she said. "Maybe next time I see you."

"Ah-ha!" I dropped her hand, skipping ahead a few steps so that I could turn and walk backward, facing her. "So you admit that there's going to be a next time. You want to see me again."

"I didn't say that," said Annie, but she was laughing, and the wind was blowing her hair around her face, and she was beautiful. I didn't realize until that moment just how beautiful she was.

"You'll miss me," I challenged.

Annie smirked. "Is that so?"

"Yes. That's so. You'll think about me every night. 'What's Liz doing?' And then you'll wonder if I miss you."

"And will you?" she asked. "Miss me?"

"Yeah," I said. I stopped walking. The water rushed in to cover my feet, pooling around my ankles and tugging, ever so faintly, as it ran back out to sea. "I will. I don't know you too well yet, Annie. But I want to. I really, really want to."

She stopped in turn, so close that I could reach out and touch her, if I wanted to. "What if I said that it was dangerous to know me?"

"I'd say that I didn't care." I tilted my chin up, challenging her. "Come on. What do you have to lose?"

This time, her smile was tinged with the sadness I'd seen in the kitchen. "Here and now, in this sea, on this sand? Nothing."

When our lips met, it tasted like the brine blowing off the water, and like tears, salty and sweet and impossible. I stepped closer, and she put her arms around me, and we stood there for what felt like forever, two girls tangled in the web of one another's embrace, kissing by the sea.

I kissed her like she was my Annabel Lee, and in some ways, in some places in my heart, I think that I'm kissing her still.

In the morning she was gone, of course. But I'd known that would happen all along.



Half Moon Bay, California. The spring of 1980.

Annie blew through my life three more times in the years between 1974 and 1980. Each time, we had just long enough for a few kisses in the surf and a few whispers that didn't quite amount to promises, although they came closer with every repetition. Each time, I let her leave without a word of protest. What good would it have done? She had tradition to uphold, passed from house to house like a spindrift secret that no one really remembered the reasons for, and I...

I had windows to wait beside, and waves to watch. It's an odd thing, being Selkie-kin and not yet having a skin to call your own. Every day was a tug-of-war between dreaming of my own future and realizing the horror of what would have to happen for that future to be mine. A relative could choose to pass his or her skin, becoming mortal and dying in the human way, but that's not the usual way for Selkies to be made. If it were, there wouldn't be so many of us. We die younger and more often than almost any other race in Faerie.

It was 1980 when I was reminded of that fact in the coldest way of all. A fishing boat struck Tempe—foolish, timid Tempe, who should have gone to the desert after all—while she was swimming back to the beach. Judging by the wounds in her neck when she washed up on the shore, she was killed instantly. Judging by the look on her face, that didn't make it any better.

Colin and I were called before our parents that night. Our mothers sat; our fathers stood behind them. We stood apart, our hands clasped in front of us, our eyes fixed on the room's back wall. Whatever they decided, one of us would not be going to the sea.

My mother cleared her throat. "Elizabeth," she said, slowly. "You have been a diligent daughter. You have served this family in all ways. You have never shirked from duty."

My heart sank. That wasn't a speech that screamed "so we're giving you a skin." I didn't say anything. I just kept watching the wall.

Now Colin's mother spoke. "Colin," she said. "You have been a diligent and headstrong son. You've charted your own way through these waters, and I haven't always agreed with your choices, but I've understood them."

Colin didn't acknowledge her.

My father met my gaze. Any hope I had of a happy ending died when I saw his face. I closed my eyes, and listened as my mother—my *mother*, who was supposed to choose *me* over anyone else in this world—said, "Colin, Tempe was your friend, and she died of too much caution. Her skin is passed to you, if you would claim it."

And he said, "I would," and my heart broke into a thousand pieces, and I thought that it would never be whole again.

There were other words after that. I stayed where I was, keeping my chin high, until they'd all been said. I didn't hear a single one of them, and when the last ones had been spoken, I turned and left the room. I walked down the hall. I walked down the stairs. I walked out the front door, and I kept on walking. The driveway turned into the road beneath my feet, strange alchemy of grief, and I kept on walking. The road twisted and bent, heading away from our house, heading into town, and I kept on walking. I couldn't think of what else to do.

I must have gone two miles or more when someone fell into step beside me. I kept walking, and so did my unknown companion. Several minutes slipped by, and finally, Annie, said, "Do you want to talk about it?"

“When did you get here?” I asked. The question I didn’t ask was shorter: *Do you know?* Was Annie already aware that I’d been passed up again, and that I was the last of the little bonfire circle she had stumbled into eight years ago? Did she know?

“My ride dropped me off just as you were coming down the front steps. I thought you were coming to greet me, but you didn’t stop when I waved. You didn’t even seem to see me. You just kept going.”

I glanced to the side. “News travels fast.”

“Yeah, it does.” Annie shrugged. She was wearing a sundress, dark blue with white trim, like the ocean, and she had a seashell barrette in her hair. “As for when I got *here*, on this stretch of middle-of-nowhere...I followed you. You seemed pretty upset, and I didn’t want you getting hurt out here on your own.”

The words burst from my lips before I had consciously decided to utter them: “They passed me over again, Annie. It was me or Colin, and they passed me over *again*. When is it going to be my turn? When am I going to have something go right for *me*? When?”

Annie didn’t say anything for so long that I started to feel like I had broken an unspoken rule between us by reminding her that I could even be considered. It was petty, it was stupid, and it wasn’t fair. She would never be a Selkie, no matter how much she might want to be. She would never—

She took my arm. “Let’s go have dinner,” she said. “I’m sure there’s someplace nice around here.”

“Okay,” I said, and sniffled, and let her take the lead.



We wound up in a little Italian bistro near the Mill Rose Inn. I had walked past the place a hundred times, but I’d never gone inside. It was too close to the tourist traps that kept trying to take over, and there was nothing they could offer me that I couldn’t get better, and cheaper, at home. Besides, it was a nice place. I didn’t own anything nice enough to wear inside. I started tugging on Annie’s arm as soon as I saw where she was taking me.

“They’re not going to want me in there dressed like this,” I said, indicating my cut-off shorts and flip-flops.

Annie smiled. “Trust me,” she said, and pulled me inside.

The maître d’ looked up when the door opened. His eyes found me first, and for a second, he did exactly what I’d feared: his nose wrinkled, and his shoulders tensed as he prepared to suggest that I take my business elsewhere. Then he spotted Annie, and his posture transformed. Arms spread wide, he stepped forward.

“Annie-my-love!” he cried. “You haven’t forsaken us after all, huh? Thank God, I was starting to fear for my heart.”

“I haven’t, and I’m so sorry, Lenny. I’ve been busy.” She smiled winningly. “I’m also sorry to burst in here without a reservation, but my friend has had a hard night. Can you find a place to seat us where

my dress won't drag down the ambiance?"

The maître d'—Lenny—looked at her dress, and then at me. His smile didn't flicker. "For my friends, on a hard night? The kitchen table is yours. Only dress code in the kitchen is 'don't be on fire while you're eating,' and you should both manage that just fine. If you'll follow me?"

Annie laughed, keeping hold of my arm, and pulled me in her wake like a buoy as she trailed Lenny into the kitchen, where a small table was set into a cozy nook out of the way of all the hustle and bustle. It wasn't dark, or intimate, or private...and somehow, as we settled on the antique wooden chairs and Lenny lit the candles, that just made it more romantic. I didn't come from a dark or private place. I came from a Selkie house on the sea, and Annie knew that. She was bringing me home by taking me away from home.

In a matter of minutes, we were comfortably ensconced with a bottle of the house red, a loaf of steaming sourdough bread, and a pair of menus. Annie didn't even glance at hers. She just smiled at me, watching across the table.

"Feel any better?" she asked.

I reached for the wine. "I will."

The food was amazing. After trying—and failing—to puzzle through the menu on my own, with its long lists of ingredients and complicated preparations, I just let Annie order for both of us. Our menus disappeared, replaced by caprese salad, and hot fried calamari twists, and more wine. The main entrée was a mixed seafood linguine with a spicy red sauce that came in a single large bowl, allowing us to serve ourselves. Annie piled both our plates with pasta while I filled our glasses. The second bottle was almost empty. Neither of us really seemed to mind.

Everything was delicious. Especially the wine, and the tiramisu that followed the meal. By the time the check arrived—and promptly vanished, accompanied by a pile of bills that Annie had produced from her pocket without really looking—I felt like I was going to explode.

"You're going to have to roll me home," I informed her.

Annie smiled a little, almost shyly. "Who said anything about going home?" she asked.

I blinked, my cheeks flaring red for a moment before I ventured, "Tradition?"

"I'm not needed until tomorrow night. I came early. I wanted to see you."

There was a choice there, blurred by sweet red wine and sea-salt tears. Annie didn't reach for my hands. She was leaving me the room to make that choice on my own, and I appreciated that, because I knew, just looking at her, that she was offering me something more than sex. Sex was easy; sex was fun and cathartic and nothing even remotely like a commitment. But Annie...

Annie had been hurt before. I knew it every time I looked at her.

And I was not going to be the one to hurt her again.

"Promise to come back when it's not just about tradition?" I asked.

Annie smiled.



She had a room at the Mill Rose Inn, on the second floor, where you could see the ocean from her window. The curtains were open when we hit the door, her shoving it open with her shoulders, because her mouth was too busy with mine for her to turn and see what she was doing. I helped as best I could, even though my hands were more interested in mapping the curves of her waist, her breasts, all of the places I'd never had the luxury of mapping during our stolen moments on the beach. She still tasted like brine, even under the red wine and the tiramisu, my Annabel Lee, and in that moment, I forgot that I'd been passed up for the skin.

No: I didn't forget. I didn't *care*. Because this was here, and now, and Annie was pulling away from me, her absence like a knife in my side, but only long enough to pull her sundress off over her head, and oh, Oberon, she was beautiful. The freckles on her face continued down the slopes of her breasts and the side of her arms; she wasn't wearing a bra. I could have counted every single one. Her panties were strangely old-fashioned, white cotton and cut like my grandmother's idea of lingerie. That didn't matter.

What mattered was that she was reaching for me, and somehow, my shorts were on the floor with her dress, and then my tank top and bra joined them, and we fell into the bed in our underpants, once more tangled like fish in the nets of one another's arms.

I kissed her like I was drowning. She kissed me back like she was giving me permission. Then her mouth found its way between my legs, and ah, I didn't care what happened next. The tide was coming in, and I was coming with it.



Half Moon Bay, California. The summer of 1987.

“What?”

Annie leaned on the porch rail, eyes still fixed on the horizon line. The sun was slipping slowly down behind the waves, painting the water orange and red. “It's a pretty simple question. Will you move in with me?”

I blinked. I didn't know what to say.

Annie and I had been seeing each other more and more often as the years passed. True to her word, she came to visit even when it wasn't about tradition and there were no skins to be passed. On those occasions, she drove herself, and sometimes, we drove away together. We hiked in Muir Woods. We went to Disneyland, where she kissed me on the Haunted Mansion ride and we had our pictures taken with Cinderella's Fairy Godmother. We curled up together in her room at the Mill Rose Inn—she always got the same one—and she kissed the back of my neck, and told me about her life in San Francisco, where Selkies were rare, and changelings were almost common.

The sun dipped lower, and I thought about what she'd asked me. She wanted me to leave my home, leave my family, and what? Go with her to live outside fae society, in a place where we'd have to make our own rules? I wasn't sure that I could bear it.

I looked at her. I opened my mouth. And I said the only thing that I could say:

"I would love to."



My mother sighed. My father cried. I loaded my things into the back of Annie's car, and together we drove to San Francisco, where her apartment was waiting for us. It was surprisingly spacious, taking up most of the ground floor of an old brick building near the wharf. The neighborhood was run down and dangerous looking, but that didn't bother Annie. She laughed as she led me to her door—to *our* door—and into the bright, clean hallway on the other side.

"This is our room," she said, and pulled me in a small room with a brass four-poster bed set squarely in the middle. I put my suitcase down, looking around. My gaze skipped from the dressers to the wardrobe to Annie, standing with her hands folded behind her back and a hopeful expression on her face, waiting to hear what I thought.

"It's wonderful," I said.

It only took us an hour to get me unpacked, and then there was fried chicken from a little restaurant down the block, one where they all knew Annie's name, and smiled at the sight of her. It tasted like hot grease and freedom, like charting my own course from here. We walked hand-in-hand through the city until it was almost dawn, and then we ran back to the apartment, and fell into bed, and held each other through the sunrise.

When I went to sleep, it was with a profound sense that finally, *finally*, I was where I wanted to be. It had only taken fifteen years. Not too bad for a Selkie girl without a skin.



My years with Annie were like pearls: each of them was different, beautiful, and flawed in a way that made it all the more special to me. To the both of us. Perfection is boring, that's what Annie used to tell me; perfection is the refuge of small minds, simple stories, and people who don't have anything more interesting to strive for. She was temperamental sometimes, her moods blowing in and out like storms. I was restless, moving from job to job until I found a position as a night clerk at a store that sold skin magazines and dirty movies. She said I didn't have to work, but I wanted to. I wanted to show that I was contributing, not just living off her savings.

And always there was tradition, like a shadow over what might have been a perfect life. I would wake up in the afternoon and she would be gone, leaving a note on the refrigerator. "Half Moon Bay, back

tomorrow,” it would say, or “Monterey,” or even “Puget Sound.” She was never gone more than two days. She never took me with her.

We’d been living together for almost a year before I asked about her family. She was at the sink, washing the dishes; I was sitting at the kitchen table, finishing a crossword. The silence was comfortable, but something made me want to break it. That little imperfection, trying to get out again.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

The words fell into the silence like glasses breaking, toppled off a server’s tray by a careless hand. Annie stopped moving. Several seconds passed, and finally she said, “Away. I’m from very far away. I really don’t want to...very far away.”

“Is your family still very far away? What about your parents?”

“My parents.” Annie laughed. There was a bitter edge to it that I didn’t like. She pulled her hands out of the dishwater, wiping them dry on a towel, before walking over to sit across from me at the table. “Okay. This was going to happen eventually, but that doesn’t mean I’m very comfortable talking about them. So please, can we not talk about this again after tonight?”

“Sure, sweetie,” I said. I reached for her hand. She didn’t give it to me.

That worried me more than anything else, until she sighed and looked down, saying, “My father loved my mother very much. That’s what she said every time he left us, and I believed her, because that’s the one gift a little girl has to give to her mother. Belief. I believed that he loved us, and I believe it still, because I...I remember him. I remember him loving me. He was gone so much of the time, but when he was home, when he was with us, he loved me. He loved all of us.”

I didn’t say anything. Speech felt dangerous, like it could end her story unfinished.

“He used to call me his little princess of the sea.” A small smile graced her lips, visible in the way her eyes creased, in the slight changes of her posture. “He’d put me on his shoulders and he’d walk down to the water, and he’d say, ‘All this is for you, Annie. All this is for you, because I love you, and because you will do right by it. Always remember that. Doing right matters more than doing what you want.’ And then he’d throw me up into the air, and I’d laugh, and everything would be *perfect*. Sometimes my mother would come to watch us by the water, and she’d be laughing too, and that was even more perfect than perfect. That was...it was holy. Do you understand what I mean? The three of us there, like that, by the sea, we were *holy*.”

“I think I do understand,” I whispered. She was describing the way I felt when she held my hand and danced with me in Golden Gate Park, one two three and turn, and there was nothing but her, and me, and the good green world around us.

“Anyway.” Annie shook her head fiercely, not looking up. “My mother...went away. And my father couldn’t stand to be around me after that. He left me by the sea. Said ‘It’s in your hands now, Annie,’ and walked away. I haven’t seen him since.” Her breath hitched, and I realized with a start that she was crying. “I miss them so much.”

“Oh, Annie, Annie, I’m sorry, baby, I didn’t mean to...I’m sorry.” I got out of my chair and went around the table to close my arms around her, holding her as tightly as I could. “I won’t leave you. I promise, Annie. I won’t ever, ever leave you.”

She sighed, and turned, and let herself sink into my arms while she cried over a grief so vast I could

barely scratch the surface. My poor Annie. My beautiful Annabel Lee.

Did she know, even then, that I was lying to her? Did *I* know? I like to think not. I was a child, and she was a child, in our private kingdom by the sea. I never meant to go.



San Francisco, California. The winter of 1993.

Annie was out at the farmer's market when the phone rang. I had stayed home, pleading migraine, but in reality, I didn't want to deal with some of the sellers, who had been looking at us more and more strangely over the last few years. It was funny, in a horrible sort of a way. When we met, I was sixteen, and the fact that she looked nineteen was inconsequential. Now, I looked every one of my thirty-seven years, and she still looked like she was fresh out of high school. We had become a May-December romance in the eyes of the mortal world, and all because I'd had the audacity to let myself get old.

The sound of the phone snapped me out of my angry contemplation of the bathroom mirror, and I walked to the kitchen, lifting the receiver from its cradle. "Hello?"

"Hello, Lizzy," said my mother.

I didn't need to say anything after that. All I had to do was listen. And, when my mother asked me the question I'd been waiting for all my life...

...all I had to do was agree.

I was sitting at the kitchen table when Annie came home an hour later, her arms laden with winter fruits, root vegetables, and fresh jam from the stall we both liked so much. Her cheeks were red with the cold, and she was laughing to herself, apparently caught in the echo of some private joke. "Hi, honey," she said, dumping her spoils on the counter. "How's your head?"

"Annie, I need you to sit down," I said.

She blinked, the color draining from her cheeks. "Are you okay? Do I need to call for a healer?"

A little stab of jealousy went through me, like a fishhook in my heart. The fact that Annie had ties to the local fae community, however loose, and I didn't...it was hard. Oh, they were nice enough, when our paths crossed, but I was a Selkie without a skin. I was beneath even a merlin in the order of things. No one knew how to deal with me, and so they didn't, when they didn't have to.

"No," I said, pushing the jealousy away. "Please, can you sit down?"

Looking concerned, she moved to take the chair across from me. "Honey, you're scaring me."

"Annie, my mother called a little while ago. She's decided to pass her skin."

Silence.

"She's decided to pass it to me."

More silence.

“I’m two years from the cut-off, Annie; if I wait much longer, I’ll lose my chance. I’ll never be able to go to the sea.”

She still didn’t say anything.

“Annie, please. Talk to me. Say something. Say *anything*.”

She tilted her head up slightly, looking at me. For a moment, the reflection from the kitchen window made her eyes look strange, too green, too deep, too *old*. And then she spoke, and I forgot about her eyes:

“If you go,” she said, “don’t bother coming back. I won’t be here.”

“Annie!”

“I mean it, Elizabeth. If you leave me to claim a skin, if you *take* a Selkie skin, don’t come back to me. We’re finished, you and I.”

“Damn it, Annie! That’s not fair! Have you looked in a mirror lately? I’m getting old! I’m going to keep getting old, and then I’m going to die, and I’m going to leave you alone again! I’m doing this for *you*!”

Annie laughed, a sound as bitter and lost as the bellow of a foghorn. “No, Liz. Don’t even try that on for size. You’re doing this for you. Because you want it. Because you feel like you were cheated somehow. Well, you weren’t cheated, Liz. I gave you everything I had it in my power to give. You weren’t cheated. I was not a second place ribbon.” She stood, and walked to the counter, where she began dumping her purchases out of their bags.

The kitchen felt suddenly too small, like it might crush us both if we took a wrong step. I stood, reaching for her. “Annie...”

“Go think for a little bit, Liz. Decide what you want. As long as you don’t go to the water, I’ll be here.”

I lowered my hand. I looked at her. And then I turned and walked away.

The Greyhound for Half Moon Bay left at eight-thirty. I was the first person onboard.



My mother—who was somehow younger than me now, sweet Oberon, how was that possible? How was that *fair*?—came to meet the bus at the station. She didn’t seem surprised to see me empty-handed, or without Annie. She just folded me into her arms and ushered me into the car. We drove back to the house, which was exactly the same and entirely different: new kids, new cousins, new teenagers building bonfires on the dunes, new wallpaper in the front hall. But the music and the smell of baking biscuits and the rushing sound of the sea were all the same. I was home.

At midnight, she and my father led me down the beach to the rowboat that had been chosen for me. I

wore white, like a bride on her wedding day. I looked ahead, so that I wouldn't have to see the jealous eyes of the cousins standing on the high dunes. Then we climbed into the boat, my mother, my father, and me, and we rowed away, moving along the shore until we reached a sheltered cove.

We rowed inside. My father anchored the boat. My mother helped me step out into the water—it was cold around my ankles, so cold—and we walked past the tideline, where she sat, and pulled me down beside her.

I glanced back to where my father stood, just out of earshot, and frowned. “Isn't he...?”

“I've lived to pass my skin to the heir of my choosing, Elizabeth. I must tell you what I am asking of you myself.” My mother's mouth twisted. “Oh, sweetheart, I'm sorry. I tried to be strong, for your sake; I tried to let you go. But I couldn't. I couldn't sit by and watch you leave us. I'm so sorry. I was weak.”

I blinked at her, uncomprehending. “Mom?”

She took a deep breath. “Elizabeth Ryan, you are here to make your choice. Will you join the Selkies in the sea, or will you live human for the length and breadth of your days, however long or short those days may be?”

“I already told you—”

She continued like she hadn't heard me. “Before you choose, you must understand where we come from; why our skins are limited in number, why there are no other races like us in Faerie. To become a link in the chain which binds us, you must first be forged. Do you understand?”

“No,” I said, honestly.

“Neither did I,” she said. “Elizabeth, haven't you ever wondered what happened to the Roane?”

And then she told me.

I stared at her throughout her explanation, too shocked to speak. We wore the skins of dead Roane in order to use their magic? How could that be true? How could Faerie allow anything so horrible to go on? But ah, Faerie hadn't done it: the sea-witch had, when she saw her children slaughtered. The Roane had been born of her bloodline, and in her fury and her grief, she cursed the descendants of those who killed them. She created the Selkies, not as a gift, but as a punishment.

When my mother finished, everything felt strange, like the world had been broken and put back together badly. I bit at my lip, and finally said, “The humans have a concept in their church. They call it the mark of Cain, the first murderer. They say anyone who bears the mark is damned.”

“Our mark is a blessing as well as a curse, but they aren't wrong,” said my mother. She unwound the sealskin belt from around her waist, offering it to me. “Will you swim the deep waters? Will you be a sister to your people, and keep them ever in your heart?”

I thought of Annie, pretty Annie, with her green Roane eyes. The skin seemed suddenly repulsive to me. “If I say no?” I asked.

“Then you make me bury my daughter,” she said. “Please don't make me.”

The threat was implicit in her words. One way or another, my mortal life ended tonight. My only choice was whether I wrapped myself in a dead Roane's skin, or whether my mother would be forced by tradition—I was learning to hate that word—to murder me.

With shaking hands, I reached out and took the skin.



As we rowed back to the shore, I thought I saw a figure standing on the rocks too far out for any human. They were forbidden to the cousins and to all the Selkies of the clan: this was my choosing night, and the waters were mine alone. But still, for a moment, I thought I saw her, a slim human woman in a long white dress, with her face turned toward the boat.

Then the waves leapt, and when they came down again, she was gone.



The party lasted all the night and well into the next day. Every time I tried to plead exhaustion and slip away, hands pulled me back in, rejoicing, clutching, begging me to delight in my new life. I did my best to smile, despite the growing dread in my stomach, and danced the hours into dust. It was past noon when I begged the keys to one of the family's loaner cars and drove back to San Francisco as fast as the old beater allowed.

The streets were familiar. I knew where I was going. And when I reached our apartment, it was gone.

Not Annie; not our things. The entire apartment building. An old gas station was in its place, decrepit and long-since closed. I circled it three times, praying I was somehow turned around, but all the addresses matched my expectations...except for that one.

She had told me not to come back. She meant it.

In a way, I think I knew then. But the knowledge was too much on top of everything else, and so I drove back to Half Moon Bay in silence, shattered and mourning for my love, for my life, and for my Annabel Lee.

It would be nine years before I saw her again.



Half Moon Bay, California. The summer of 2002.

My father's funeral was held with all pomp and ceremony. He was laid to rest in the waves, his wicker coffin towed far out to sea by the strongest of the Selkie males. Let the humans and their burial laws rot.

He was my father. He would not be buried away from the sea.

The mourners were a constant tide, terrifying my daughter—sweet Diva, only seven years old, with her father’s huge green eyes and my tendency toward stillness—and forcing me to answer questions I wasn’t yet prepared for. Yes, I had all the financial information for the family accounts in the mortal world; yes, I had all the details of the various debts and boons we had incurred with the local Undersea. Yes, I understood what my new role as head of the family would entail. Yes, I was up to the challenge. Yes, I had just lost my father, and I was tired, but I would recover quickly. Yes, yes, yes.

By the end of the second night, I was so tired of saying “yes” that I retreated to my father’s study, hiding in the one place where I could be wrapped in memories of him without also being wrapped in the arms of unwanted sympathy.

I was contemplating the liquor cabinet when someone knocked on the door. Inwardly, I groaned. “Come in,” I called.

The door swung open, revealing the heads of the three nearest Selkie clans: the Chase, O’Connell, and Anthony families. They stepped into the room, leaving the door open behind them.

“There are things you must know,” said Isla Chase. “I’m sorry we can’t give you more time to grieve. But this, too, is part of the compact.”

I stiffened. “There’s more?”

“Just one piece,” said Claude Anthony. He looked over his shoulder, and a fourth person stepped into the room.

“Hello, Elizabeth,” said Annie.

I stood before I could think better of it, almost stumbling as I raced around the desk. “Annie! Annie, I missed you so much, I—”

She raised a hand, silencing me. “I told you not to go,” she said, looking me squarely in the eye. And then, without looking away, she...changed. The color bled from her eyes, leaving them dark as deep water. Her skin paled and roughened at the same time, taking on a faint suggestion of scales. Somehow, her hair unbraided itself, falling loose and heavy down her back. I remembered winding my fingers through that hair while she cried out, muffling her voice against my skin.

I looked at that hair now and knew without touching it that it would slice my fingers, that every strand would be razor-edged and deadly.

“The sea-witch comes for the passing of each skin,” said Joan O’Connell. “She watches us, to be sure the compact is kept. She is the last secret you must keep. To all others, she is simply a cousin like any other.”

Annie—the sea-witch—smiled. It did not reach her sea-dark eyes. “Tradition,” she said.

I forced myself not to look away from her. “I missed you,” I said.

“I buried you,” she replied. And then she turned and walked away from me, her hair reshaping itself into braids as she moved, her posture changing slightly, until it was Annie, my Annie, leaving for forever. My Annie, who was the sea-witch all along, and who was somehow able to see past what the Selkies did to her children for long enough to love me.

The three clan leaders followed her, with sympathetic glances back at me. And when the last of them was gone, I sat down on the floor, put my hands over my face, and wept.



These are the things every Selkie-child knows: that the sea does not love us, that we are finite and flawed, and that we must never, never trust the sea-witch. I know all these things to be true. Because I made the greatest mistake of all, a mistake that may well be unique in all our world: I loved her, and she loved me. I broke her heart. I proved that we are still no better than we were. Even after all these generations, we are still betraying her.

Now the moon never beams without bringing me dreams of my beautiful Annabel Lee...and I suppose, in its way, that's no more than I deserve.

I may never forgive my mother for offering me her skin; I may never forgive myself for my weakness. These are the things I had to live with every day. At least my daughter will be spared the choice. Her father was Roane: she will never wear a Selkie's skin.

May Oberon forgive me for all that I've done, but Annie, my darling Annie...I am still not sorry.