



BY

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SEA

*A tale of Liamec*

J. STEVEN LAMPERTI

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ISBN-13: 978-1-7345974-2-4

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Lamprey Publishing  
LampreyPublishing@gmail.com

Cover design by: OliviaProDesign

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For Horst and Doris,  
the best in-laws  
anyone could wish for

## 45 Prologue

**A**nnabelle swung the tiller to starboard as she brought the vinscif about in the wind. She kept her head down as the boom whipped across the deck. She resisted the urge to call out “hard to lee,” as there was no one but her on her small sailing boat.

50 The wind filled the sail, and the boat heeled until the blue-gray seawater lapped at the gunwale. The sail ruffed a little, and Annabelle tightened the main sheet to make up the slack.

Annabelle felt the joy of sailing fill her. There was nothing she liked better than feeling the sea breeze in her hair and smelling the salt spray as it splashed over her clothes.

The storm winds that filled the sky and Annabelle’s sail had kept some boats from the fishing fleet docked today. Annabelle had the bay to herself until the rest of the fleet returned from the deeper waters out in the open ocean.

The bay was the heart of her little town. The rough rock cliffs that lined both sides of the outlet to the ocean were the same gray stone that hung over the simple houses her fellow townsfolk all occupied.

60 The sky was gray, just a little less blue than the water, but the two almost matched, making the horizon sometimes hard to see. The wind whipped through the opening from the harbor out to the open ocean.

The vinscif were the small sailing boats that the people of her town had been sailing since before time began. The larger fishing ships were usually crewed by two or three men. When you traveled alone or rode the winds for pleasure, you would take a small, light vinscif.

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Annabelle laughed as her boat took up speed. A distant flash of lightning brightened the dark gray clouds, and the reflected light lit up her blue-green eyes for a moment.

She turned to look at the harbor entrance and saw one of the boats from the fishing fleet tacking past the gray cliffs. It was early, but probably the storm had caused someone to call it a  
70 day.

She looked again and recognized the boat. It was her father's. She was surprised to find him being the one to head home early.

She brought her vinscif about and sailed in toward the dock. She would have to give her father grief for this. She had tried to get him to take her instead of Corentin. Her brother didn't  
75 like stormy weather, and she would have been glad to take his place.

As Annabelle jumped off the vinscif, the dock line in hand, she looked over at where her father was tying up the larger fishing vessel. It could be operated by two men, though most of the fishermen in town crewed boats of that size with three.

She felt a flash of panic. Why was her father tying up the boat himself? Usually, he'd stay  
80 at the tiller while his crew mate jumped onto the dock with the painter.

She cleated the line and ran across the boards.

"Where's Corentin?"

Her father turned to her, and she could see the streaks across his face where the sea spray had mixed with tears.

## 1

**T**here was a little town called Chelle by the Sea. Chelle by the Sea was by the sea, for the sea, of the sea, and with the sea. It was practically in the sea, though it wasn't, not really. The town was, of course, a fishing town. There were people in town who did other things. Some of them, surprisingly enough, even did things that didn't have much to do with the sea. There was a cobbler; there was a schoolteacher; there was a farrier. The town didn't have a mayor, as the duke, who ruled this province in the land of Liamec, lived in his castle on a hill not very far away from town. Most of the other towns and villages in this province had a local government—all, of course, beholden to the duke. But Chelle by the Sea, due to its proximity to the ducal castle, appealed to the duke himself, or his representatives, to solve local problems.

The duke's castle was built on the hill at the top of the cliffs between Chelle and the land. The little town and its harbor were protected, sheltered, and kept apart from the mainland by rising cliffs and highlands. The primary way to Chelle, the Duke's Way, was a winding track that led from the town, up the cliffs to the lands around the duke's castle.

Around the hill that was crowned by the duke's castle was nestled the town of Ardstead. Ardstead was known, the kingdom over, for the quality of its fish exports and the exotic seafood dishes and delicacies you could get there. What wasn't as widely known was that the fish and other sea creatures that made up these recipes and exports came up the Duke's Way each morning from Chelle below.

There were small ways into town from both the east and west that wound precariously below the crags. Every few years a storm would blow in from the sea to the north, and damage one of these ways enough to make them impassible. It would take months, sometimes longer,  
110 before the trails would be repaired.

So, Chelle by the Sea was screened from the mainland by the duke and his castle. Whether it was protected, sheltered, barred, or isolated from the land depended on who you asked.

There were people in Chelle who did things other than fish, but the kings of Chelle were  
115 the fishermen. They were the kings, the princes, the earls, and even Chelle by the Sea's jesters. They ruled the town, under the auspices of the duke. There was a town council, the closest thing Chelle had to a government, composed of the most respected fishermen in town.

Now, you may ask, where were the fisherwomen? Where were the women of Chelle  
120 while the men were out fishing? Where were the daughters, mothers, and wives of these fish-gut-covered princes of the sea?

There had been, and would be, fisherwomen in Chelle. Every so often, a woman would be born, the sea in her eyes, who couldn't be dissuaded from the sea. Occasionally, one of these women would break her way through the barriers and make it into the fisherfolk's ranks. Still,  
125 most of the time, the sons would be taken out on the fishing boats, and the daughters would stay home with their mothers.

Some women fought their way out of these confines. Sometimes by finding someone to mentor them within the ranks of the fishermen of the town, and sometimes just by leaving. The pirate "Bloody Peg," who sailed the warm waters of the seas south and west of Liamec, was



130 rumored to have been born Margaret Atwater in the little town of Chelle by the Sea.

Now, as to men or boys who might have been born without the sea in their blood, as to youths who might have enjoyed traveling by land to far-off countries, exploring, or just living in the town without venturing out on a boat each day, there actually weren't any of those ... if you

135 asked the men on the town council.

## 2

140 **T**here was a young woman who lived in Chelle by the Sea. Her name was Annabelle.  
Annabelle was neither from the sea, with the sea, nor for the sea; though of  
necessity, she was by the sea. She rejected the idea that she might be of the sea,  
though you might have thought otherwise if you gazed into her stormy blue-green eyes. The  
fisherfolk of Chelle were known for those eyes.

Annabelle was a little taller than most of the other young women in Chelle. She was also  
145 a little more athletic. When she was younger, she spent countless hours climbing the crags that  
bordered the town and swimming and splashing in the sea below those crags with her brother.  
Those days on the rough beaches and rocky slopes were her childhood.

She had grown, though she didn't know it, into a beauty. The swimming and climbing  
had wrestled strength into her young body. Her hair was the midnight black of the sea-urchins  
150 that covered the rocks of the beaches below the crags at low tide. And her eyes. Those blue-green  
eyes. Anyone looking into them would have been hard-pressed not to find them of the sea and  
would have been further hard-pressed not to drown in them.

Annabelle and her sister Bellarose lived with their parents in a little house near Chelle's  
western side. House is rather a generous word. The term cottage might be more applicable. As  
155 with most dwelling places in Chelle, their home was built of, and practically part of, the stone  
from the crags that separated and protected Chelle.

The cottage almost seemed formed from the rocks that came down from above. It was

just on the seaward side of the Way that led from Chelle to the west. One reached the cottage by walking down a steep stone path to a small courtyard. Annabelle's family home was the only dwelling off this small courtyard. Above their home was the Way. Below was a steep rocky staircase that led to a small harbor. Theirs was the last home on the west side of town. Beyond the steps leading to their cottage, the narrow path wound up into the crags and finally through them to leave the sea.

Annabelle's family were the Fishers. In Chelle by the Sea, the name Fisher meant a great deal. There had been a man named Fisher on the council for at least two hundred years.

Annabelle's father was fond of saying Fisher men were always fishermen, and would always be fishermen, though there were rumors he had a cousin somewhere landward who was a carpenter.

The reason for the fame of the Fisher name in Chelle wasn't just their continuing presence in town and on the town council. There were many famous men in the Fisher line. (And perhaps some women. Bloody Peg's mother's maiden name was Fisher.)

Caspian Fisher, Annabelle's great grandfather, was the source of many of the stories parents told their children on cold, windy nights in Chelle. One story was how he had rescued some fellow fishermen during what was still known as "The Great Storm." The storm had swept in so suddenly that it had caught many of the town fishers by surprise. Caspian had skillfully sailed his little vinscif around the nearby waters, warning and helping the rest of the fishing fleet make it back to safe harbor.

There was a barnacle-covered piece of dried wood hanging over the mantelpiece of their cozy little stone home. It was supposedly a piece of Caspian's vinscif. Annabelle sometimes thought it was just a shriveled-up piece of old wood that didn't look any different from the driftwood she occasionally picked up on the beach. It was one of Annabelle and Bellarose's

father's chief sources of pride.

One of the many stories told about Caspian was that he had once caught a magical fish that could talk. It offered him a wish if he threw it back into the water. Caspian threw the fish back and wished that, with his next cast, he would catch two fish. This story was told by the  
185 fishermen of Chelle as an example of how pure a fisherman Caspian was. Annabelle often hoped this one wasn't true, as she didn't want to be related to anyone so stupid.

### 3

190 **B**ellarose and Annabelle were hanging wash on the clothesline that stretched across  
the stone courtyard in front of their house. Each end of the line was clipped onto an  
old iron hook embedded in the stone. Annabelle sometimes thought about how  
long those hooks had been there, about how many generations of women named Fisher had  
clipped lines onto those same hooks. The salt air from the sea had corroded the iron, but it had  
195 been thick initially. Those hooks would be there and still be able to support a clothesline a  
hundred years from now.

The wind from off the sea was bright and lively today. The clothes would dry quickly,  
though they never seemed to dry completely. A slight trace of dampness and a smell lingering in  
the cloth always left a little vestige of the sea in them. Some days there was more sea smell to the  
200 dried clothes, some days less.

“Gunnora Poole says Danu has a torch for Delmar,” said Bellarose. She turned her bright  
blue eyes to Annabelle to see if she was listening. Sometimes Bellarose thought Annabelle didn’t  
really understand how important some things were. Bellarose clipped a pin onto a pair of her  
father’s undergarments. Then she attached another. The wind from off the sea was unpredictable.

205 Annabelle wasn’t paying attention. She was holding one of her mother’s smocks loosely  
in one hand and gazing out to sea. Sometimes she felt as if the sea was watching her. This was  
one of those times.

Bellarose stamped her foot. She was half a head shorter than Annabelle, but Annabelle

was reluctant to cross her when she got angry. In fact, so was everyone who knew her.

210 “Annabelle Agatha Fisher!” she said. “You listen to me when I’m talking to you.”

“Is there something out there, Bella?” said Annabelle. She gestured out to the open waters and the gray skies to the north as she spoke.

“There’s nothing out there that isn’t always out there,” said Bellarose. She snorted. Sometimes she felt as if *she* were the older sister.

215 Annabelle slowly took the smock in her hand and clipped it to the line.

“The second pin, Annabelle,” said Bellarose, with a bit of annoyance. Bits of Bellarose’s bright golden hair, which weren’t bound in the long braid that ran down her back, tossed in the wind.

Bellarose’s blond hair and blue eyes didn’t just make her stand out from her sister. They 220 made her stand out in the entire town. She had always gotten a lot of attention for her looks. When she was younger, she was teased for them. The other kids had called her things like straw head and lemon top. Now that she was older, she was getting different kinds of attention from the boys.

Annabelle’s eyes turned back out to sea.

225 Bellarose was getting increasingly annoyed. “Annabelle,” she said, “let’s just finish hanging the laundry and go inside.”