

A person is silhouetted against a sunset over the ocean. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright reflection on the water. The sky is a mix of blue and yellow. The person is standing on a beach, looking out at the sea. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

# *Ocean Tied*

*Kara Costegan*

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karacostegan@gmail.com

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## OCEAN TIED

By

Kara Costegan

As he rounded the last curve, Ciaran caught his breath at the sight before him. The Atlantic Ocean, a clear view to the horizon. Waves crashed against the rocky cliff below the road, throwing spray that glistened in the pale winter sunlight that barely filtered through grey clouds.

It was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen. No wonder Rilla had moved here. She'd always loved the ocean, and from the pictures she'd sent him, her house overlooked this view.

He drove another few hundred yards before he spotted the tiny sign identifying Rilla's lane. If she hadn't given him detailed directions, he would have driven right past. He made the turn. The road was barely wide enough for his truck.

Rilla's tiny slate-blue cottage sat at the end of the lane. The one-story structure was dwarfed by larger houses beside and across from it, but it looked as if it belonged there, while the taller buildings seemed out of place. Ciaran saw no driveway, so he stopped in front of the cottage, hoping he wouldn't block anyone's way.

As he slid out of the truck, the pale yellow front door of the cottage swung open. Rilla stood in the doorway, her long blonde hair loose nearly to her waist, wearing a simple blue T-shirt and denim shorts. In person, she was even more beautiful than the pictures she'd sent.

Ciaran caught his breath, and his heart skipped a beat. He couldn't stop staring. With Rilla to look at for the next several days, he might not even notice the ocean.

She gave him a tentative smile. "Hi."

"Hi." He leaned into the truck to grab his suitcase from the passenger seat, then turned to face her again. "This is a nice place."

"It's home." Her face reddened a bit. "I can't believe you're here. You drove all this way just to see me."

"I haven't seen you since middle school. It's way past time." Ciaran closed the truck door and slowly walked to her. Something gave him the sense that if he moved too fast in any way, it would scare her off. He didn't want to scare her. In middle school, he'd loved her as much as a thirteen-year-old could.

Seeing her now, after nearly a year of talking online, he loved her even more. His friends had called him crazy for driving eight hundred miles to see a childhood friend, but now that he was here, he knew he'd done the right thing. He needed to be with Rilla.

He took a breath. His mind was already jumping too far ahead of the situation. He'd just arrived. He didn't know whether they would be able to tolerate each other for even a few hours, let alone the five days he planned to stay.

Rilla tilted her head, and the watery sunlight glinted off her hair. "Is something wrong?"

"No." Ciaran smiled and closed the small distance between them. "Just giving us both time to adjust, I guess. It's been too long."

"Yes." She gave him a mischievous grin. "So how about you put down that suitcase and show me how glad you are to see me."

Ciaran set the suitcase on the ground and pulled Rilla into his arms. Her lithe body fit perfectly in his embrace. Her hair smelled like the sea. He breathed in the scent and didn't want to let her go.

After too short a time, she pulled away from him. "It's so amazing to see you. I never thought you would actually make this trip."

"I told you I would." He picked up his bag again. "You should have remembered I never break my word."

"You never did before." She stepped back. "Come in, please. It's too cold to stay out here."

*And yet you're wearing a T-shirt and shorts.* He shivered. He'd had his truck heater on full blast, and the warmth of that and of seeing Rilla again had blocked the cold. But now that she'd mentioned the temperature, the chill wind off the water cut through his jacket and jeans.

He went inside, and Rilla closed the door. A woodstove in one corner put out nearly as much heat as Ciaran's truck heater. No wonder Rilla was dressed in such light clothing.

He removed his jacket, and she took it from him and draped it over another jacket on the back of a wooden chair. "Sorry. I don't really have anywhere to hang things. It's a pretty small place."

"It's nice," he said. "It suits you."

Her face colored again. "Thanks." She hesitated. "Wow. This feels way more awkward than I thought it would. All those conversations online, but now that you're here, I don't know what to say to you."

"Yeah." He looked around the room, which served as both living room and kitchen from what he could see. It was tidy and decorated with shells, pictures of fish, and other ocean-related items.

Exactly what he would have expected of Rilla. During the two years he'd known her in school, he'd never seen her far from the shore in their hometown. Their school grounds had ended at the waterfront, and some days, she'd disappeared from class and been found

at the edge of the grounds.

She'd gotten into a lot of trouble for leaving the building. So much that her mother had finally removed her from school entirely, claiming she intended to homeschool Rilla. Ciaran hadn't seen Rilla again after that, not even around town.

"I don't know what to say." Rilla gave a nervous chuckle. "And I already said that. This is silly. You can bring your bag into the bedroom. Over here."

She motioned toward a door to their right, and Ciaran followed her into a small room barely large enough for a full-sized bed and a bureau. The bed was against the wall, which would be complicated if they shared it.

He yanked his thoughts back from that direction. They'd flirted during their online conversations, and some of the flirting had gotten pretty explicit. But that didn't mean they were going to have sex now that he was here.

Rilla sat on the edge of the bed and looked up at him. Her eyes gleamed in the faint light from the narrow window in the wall. "Come here."

*Or maybe we are going to have sex.* The desire he'd tried to ignore reached full force, and his cock hardened. She was beautiful. More beautiful than she'd appeared online.

And he did want her. This was the first time they'd seen each other face to face in fifteen years, but he wanted her.

He sat beside her.

She rested her hand tentatively on his thigh, and he put his hand over it. Slowly, she leaned toward him.

He closed the distance and pressed his lips against hers. Heat rose through him. He needed her touch. Anywhere and everywhere on his bare skin. On his cock. He needed her.

With one hand, she cupped the back of his head, holding him in the kiss though he didn't need the encouragement. He touched his tongue to her lips and she opened her mouth.

Tightening his arms around her, Ciaran deepened the kiss, and Rilla made a soft sound against his lips. She moved her hand up his thigh. He held his breath, waiting to see how far she would go and praying she would touch him where he so desperately needed her to.

Instead she broke the kiss and stood abruptly. Ciaran blinked, startled, and tried to find the words to ask what he'd done wrong. Before he managed to form the question, Rilla stripped off her clothes and stood in front of him, pale skin almost glowing. She caught her lower lip between her teeth and looked at him.

"You're beautiful." Ciaran's voice croaked. He cleared his throat but decided not to speak again.

“Thank you.” Rilla smiled. “And you?”

Ciaran stood and removed his clothes, which he let fall to the floor. For half a second he hesitated. He’d driven four hundred miles that day, from the hotel in upstate New York where he’d spent the night. He smelled. He should shower.

Then Rilla stepped back into his arms, and nothing else mattered. If she wasn’t bothered, he had no reason to be. He only needed her.

She kissed him again. He moved his hands over her silken skin, savoring the sensation. The only thought in his mind, repeating over and over, was that she was beautiful.

His skin ached, and as if Rilla realized it she slid her hands slowly over his back and sides and down his torso. Heat and hunger raged through him, and he broke the kiss to beg for more.

He didn’t need to speak. The moment their mouths were separated, Rilla dropped to her knees and took Ciaran’s cock between her palms. She looked up at him, eyebrows raised, and he nodded. After all the times he’d fantasized about seeing her again, he could barely believe this was happening.

When she touched her tongue to the head of his cock, Ciaran was lost. He closed his eyes and simply let the sensations and pleasure race through him as Rilla licked and sucked him, bringing him to the boiling point in merely seconds. With one hand, she played with his shaft and balls, and every touch was like a spark.

He came so suddenly he didn’t have time to warn her. He bucked and cried her name, and she made a pleased sound and swallowed.

His legs shook from the intensity and he stumbled back against the bed. Rilla let go of him and laughed. “I was that good? I haven’t had much practice.”

“I don’t think you need much.” He dropped onto the bed and exaggerated his breathing, which made her laugh harder. “Whew. I owe you as soon as I can breathe again.”

“You don’t owe me anything.” She sat beside him and leaned back on her arms. “I, um, was that okay?”

“Anything you and I do together is going to be okay.” He lay back and pulled her to him. Lying across the bed, their legs dangled, but he didn’t care. “Why wouldn’t it be okay?”

“You just got here and I pretty much jumped you.” She snuggled against him. “I’ve been thinking about this since I found out for sure you’d be visiting me. All the things I want with you. And it seemed like one way to get over the how do I talk to him thing.”

“I think it worked wonders for that.” Her small breasts with their hard nipples were too tantalizing. Ciaran ran his hand to the side of one, and Rilla turned slightly, giving him better access.

Ciaran took that as encouragement, and he ran a light touch over her breasts and

nearly-flat abdomen. Rilla let out a low moan and squirmed, and Ciaran found his hand moving toward the junction of her legs as though it had a mind of its own.

Not that he objected. Nor did Rilla.

He hesitated with his hand cupping her pussy and looked into her wide green-blue eyes. She simply smiled, and he needed no further answer.

She was wet, and when he brushed her swollen clit with a finger, she cried out. Still marveling that this was even reality, Ciaran stroked her clit with a finger until she writhed and bucked against his hand. She moaned his name, and that brought his own hunger roaring back.

He wanted to taste her, but more, he needed to be inside her. He owed her as he'd said, but he had days to pay her back. He needed her. He couldn't wait any longer.

She made no protest as he rolled onto her and thrust into her.

*Shit! Condom!*

The voice of reason in his mind barely cut through the haze of pleasure at having his cock surrounded by Rilla's tight warmth. She moved with him, matching his pace and urging him faster, and their moans grew louder.

It was too much. Despite having already come once, Ciaran wouldn't last long. He wanted to stay inside Rilla forever, and at the same time he needed release.

She cried his name, and her pussy contracted around his shaft. That was more than he could stand. As she bucked beneath him, he spasmed and came hard, nearly losing all consciousness of anything besides the skin against his.

The euphoria faded slowly, and through it all, he and Rilla held onto each other as if letting go would be the end of everything.

After long moments, Rilla's breathing caught, and Ciaran eased out of her and moved to her side. "Sorry. I got lost."

Rilla laughed. "I know what you mean. Wow. I didn't dream it would be like that."

"Like we belong together." He blurted the words before his brain completely registered them.

"Yes," she said softly. "Like that."

He held out his arms, and she curled against him with her head on his chest. Her hair tickled his skin, but he loved it. He had his Rilla. Even if he didn't yet have the right to call her his.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"For what?" She kissed his chest. "I'm not."

"We didn't use a condom. I should have... I have some."

She laughed again. Ciaran was beginning to fall in love with just that sound. "It's okay. I know one time is all it takes, but I don't think I'll get pregnant, and I don't have any other reasons to need protection. Do you?"

"No. Regular testing." He felt even more awkward discussing this than he had when he'd arrived and they hadn't been able to think of anything to say, but it was important.

"So let's not worry about it. We just got carried away, and I'm okay with that." She lay her head on his chest again. "I'm glad you're here."

"So am I."

He might have dozed. He wasn't entirely sure, but the light outside faded, and that told him time had passed without his noticing. He kissed the top of Rilla's head, and she looked up at him and smiled. "Are you hungry? I've had a stew in the slow cooker all day."

"Sounds good." He wanted to take her out to dinner. Somewhere special, as she deserved. She shouldn't have to cook for him. But at the same time, he didn't want to leave her cozy home, and he didn't want to share her with anyone else.

In middle school, he'd loved her even though he hadn't entirely understood what that meant. Over their year of chatting online, he'd fallen for her again.

Now, after only a couple of hours in her presence, he didn't want to go anywhere else. He loved her. And he could only hope she would feel the same.

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When Rilla had first learned Ciaran planned to visit her, she had tried to talk him out of it. In junior high, he'd been the boy she hadn't wanted to be away from, even as the ocean had drawn her outside over and over. She'd wished he would go with her.

After her mother had pulled her out of school, Rilla hadn't expected to see Ciaran or any of her other classmates again. Her mother had been too afraid people would realize something was different about Rilla. She'd isolated them in this cottage, only going to stores for brief trips. No one had socialized with them.

Her mother had passed away four years earlier. Since then, Rilla had been alone, obeying her mother's orders. *Don't get too close. They might learn your secrets.* Her mother had been a perfectly normal human being.

Unlike Rilla.

Rilla hadn't been able to keep herself entirely away from people. She grew lonely and made trips into the nearby city so she could be around others. She bought a computer and joined online communities, where there was far less chance anyone would find anything unusual about her.

And then Ciaran had found her. She'd known the first day they'd chatted that she wouldn't be able to hold him at arms' length the way she had everyone else. When he'd asked to visit her, she'd eventually given in.



With him in front of her, Rilla's fear and the years of warnings from her mother had almost overwhelmed her. Taking him to bed was the only way to shut up the concerns, and she hadn't been at all reluctant to do so. Sex was the way she'd learned to interact with others, because it was the least dangerous connection.

The morning after Ciaran arrived, Rilla woke to find him snoring softly beside her. She'd rejected his offer to sleep on the loveseat in the other room. For the first time, she had someone she wanted near her, and even though her bed was barely large enough for both of them, she'd insisted he sleep with her.

She was between him and the wall, and she didn't want to leave the bed. She would wake him. He'd come a long way to see her, and she wanted to let him rest. They hadn't slept much the night before.

He murmured something and turned onto his side. He blinked a few times, and Rilla looked into his brown eyes. The expression there was something unfamiliar and wonderful, and she was certain it was mirrored in her own eyes.

"Good morning," he said softly.

"Good morning." She smiled. "Shower? The water will be hot, I promise."

"Yeah." He pulled her into his arms and kissed her forehead. "Want to go with me?"

"No, thanks." She chuckled softly, but her chest tightened. As much as she already loved having Ciaran with her, she didn't want to be joined to him quite so much. She needed some space. Some privacy.

She needed time with the sea, and Ciaran couldn't find out. If this visit turned into something more, she would eventually have to tell him the truth about herself, but it was far too soon. And she was far too afraid of his reaction.

"Are you sure?" He ran his hand over her bare breasts, and she shivered. "I've heard playing in the shower can be a good start to the day."

"In my shower, one of us would run into the wall," she replied, thankful that it was true. She had only a tiny shower stall. "I'll clean up after you're finished. Take your time. I had the water heater redone a few years ago, so it's pretty difficult to run out of hot water."

"Okay."

He kissed her with heat and need, and Rilla had to force herself away. It would be so easy to spend the day in bed with him, but she had to go out. The ocean was calling, and she couldn't ignore it much longer. Waiting until he was in the shower would be torture enough.

"I'll try to have breakfast ready when you're finished," she said with a smile. "Everything you need is in there. Towel, soap, all of it. Enjoy."

"Thanks." He looked at her uncertainly.

She left the room before he could speak again and hurried to the stove to pretend she was cooking breakfast. She felt his gaze on her as he went from bedroom to bathroom, but she didn't turn around.

As soon as she heard water running in the bathroom, she ran outside. Still nude. Her neighbors wouldn't notice; they hadn't yet.

She leapt from the cliff. Behind her, Ciaran screamed her name.

Rilla had no time to react. As she fell, her body shifted. She hit the ocean's surface as vaguely human-shaped liquid and fell through the water. Going home. This was where she belonged. Where she had always belonged.

For that moment, nothing mattered but rejoining the sea.

After time Rilla couldn't measure, she emerged and allowed her bones and skin to reform. When she looked up toward her cottage, her heart stopped. Ciaran stood at the top of the cliff, white-faced and blue-lipped. He wore only jeans and a thin flannel shirt despite the winter air.

He had seen everything. She couldn't hide.

She took a long breath. She didn't want to hide. Of all the people she'd ever known, Ciaran was one she wanted to trust with her secret.

She made her way up the rocks with an ease born of years of practice. As she reached Ciaran, he held out a blanket. Uncertainly, she stepped forward, and he wrapped her in the warmth of fabric and his arms.

"You scared the fuck out of me," he said.

"You were supposed to be in the shower." She touched his lips with a finger. "Come inside and warm up."

"Will you tell me what the hell just happened?"

"I'll do my best." Her chest tightened, and she wanted to run. His words were harsh, but his tone and expression gave away nothing. She feared his anger, but more, she feared he would walk away from her once he knew the truth.

They went into the cottage, and Rilla pulled the wooden chair close to the woodstove. "Sit down."

"You should be colder than I am." Ciaran obeyed her order. "What the hell, Rilla?"

"Are you angry?" She felt foolish asking, but she had no other way to know.

"I don't know." He shivered. "You jumped off a frigging cliff. I'm freaked out. I don't know about angry."

Rilla draped the blanket over him. "Let me get dressed and get you something warm to drink."

“You aren’t supposed to be taking care of me.” He pulled the blanket around himself. “Shit. Rilla—”

“I’ll be right back.”

She hurried into the bedroom and closed the door before he could say anything more. *How can I explain?* She wasn’t cold because temperature didn’t affect her. Especially when she changed form. The cold ocean water would kill a human, but she wasn’t entirely human.

She pulled on sweatpants and a T-shirt. Nothing she could say to Ciaran would make sense. She barely understood it herself. Her mother had told her the connection to the ocean, the shifting, the insusceptibility to cold or heat were legacies from Rilla’s father, but she hadn’t been able to tell Rilla anything more about the man. And Rilla had never met him. She doubted he even knew he’d fathered a child.

Rilla didn’t know what she was. She knew only that she was part of the sea, and that if she was away from the water for long, she weakened. That was why she’d constantly run out of school to stand near the shore. She didn’t know what would happen if she was away too long. She didn’t want to find out.

She returned to the main room and set a pot of water on the stove to heat so she could make coffee or hot cocoa for Ciaran. He shouldn’t have gone outside in so little clothing.

“Talk to me,” Ciaran said. “I’m not angry, Rilla, but I want to understand. Please.”

Rilla leaned against the counter and took a deep breath. “I don’t know how well I can explain. Whatever I say, just let me say it, okay? I’ll try to answer your questions. I just don’t know if I can.”

“I’ll listen.” He held out his hand. “All this time we’ve been talking, I feel like I know you better than most of my friends and family. I want to know anything you’ll tell me.”

Hesitantly, Rilla took his hand, and the touch calmed her immediately. *We belong together.* She’d felt it the night before, a connection to Ciaran nearly as strong as the one she had to the sea, but she’d rejected it. It was too soon.

It was too right.

“I don’t know everything,” she said slowly. “My father... my mother barely knew him. A one-night stand mistake sort of deal. She never saw him again after that night. By the time she realized she was pregnant, she could barely remember his name.”

“That must have been hard for you.” Ciaran clapped his free hand over his mouth. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Rilla gave him a faint smile. “It wasn’t easy, but Mom did her best. She realized early that if I was away from the water, I got sick. And then one day when I was a few months old, she took me into the ocean and I—I changed. She said she dropped me

because I wasn't solid anymore. Still shaped like a baby, but as if I were made of water. It scared the shit out of her."

She paused. Ciaran merely nodded.

"It sounds ridiculous," Rilla said. "I mean, I wouldn't believe it myself if I didn't live it. But I can't be away from the ocean. I start feeling weak and anxious if I'm away from it for more than an hour or so. That's why my mother bought this cottage. That's why I always walked out of school. And sometimes I need to be *in* the water. I'm part of it. It's home."

She stopped again and squeezed Ciaran's hand, hoping he would take that as a sign she needed him to speak.

"So this morning, you were sort of getting your fix," he said. He quirked his mouth. "That doesn't sound right, but you know what I mean. You needed to be in the water."

"Yes." Relieved, Rilla sagged against him. "The pull just becomes too much, and I have to go. I waited until I thought you were in the shower so you wouldn't see. I'm sorry you were scared."

"I'm sorry you didn't think you could tell me about this." Ciaran pushed the blanket to the floor and pulled Rilla onto his lap. "I know we've only been talking online, but I'd hoped you would trust me enough to open up to me about yourself, especially once I got here."

"No one knows." Her eyes watered, and she took a ragged breath. She wasn't sure whether she was on the verge of tears because of his acceptance or because of fear. "My mother was the only one who knew. She kept me away from everyone. She was afraid someone would study me or hurt me if they found out. I haven't been a hundred percent alone, but I've never gotten close enough to anyone to tell them about myself."

"You were afraid." He held her more tightly. "I wish you hadn't been afraid to tell me. I'm glad you have now." He hesitated then chuckled softly. "So I guess this means you wouldn't be able to visit me."

Rilla shook her head. "I wouldn't be able to handle the drive, let alone spending time so far inland."

He stroked her hair. "Then I'll have to spend more time here. If you'll have me."

"You aren't running away." She smiled. "That's a good sign."

"I'm in love with you." His eyes widened and he pressed his lips together.

Rilla's chest tightened, and for a moment she had no words. She pulled back and stared at him, shock mingling with warmth and an expansion in her heart. Happiness. Something she'd experienced only as her true self until now.

But Ciaran couldn't mean what he'd said. Rilla couldn't believe it. "You've only been here a night."

“We’ve been talking a year.” He shrugged, looking confused. “I’ve known for months. I loved you years ago. That hasn’t changed. Maybe it should have, but I feel the same about you as I did in junior high. I came out here to see how we’d be together, in person, and to talk to you about having a life together.”

“This is...” Her tears began to fall, and she made no effort to stop them. She couldn’t hide her smile, either, as her heart soared. He wanted her. Even with what he’d learned that morning. She’d dreamed of hearing him say it, but she hadn’t believed it could happen.

She hadn’t believed he would accept her secret.

“No pressure.” Ciaran put his finger over Rilla’s lips. “Don’t decide anything now. I think my mind was made up when I decided to visit you, but my heart didn’t know until now. You’re trusting me with something you’ve never told anyone else. And waking up beside you this morning...”

“It’s where we belong,” Rilla said softly.

“Yes.”

Rilla rested her head against Ciaran’s shoulder and sobbed softly. She’d had years of being alone. Of being afraid. Even when she and Ciaran had found each other online, she’d been certain she wouldn’t be able to let him get close. Even remembering how good he’d been to her in junior high.

She wouldn’t be alone anymore. Even though Ciaran had been with her only a night, she knew. Asking him to leave his life wouldn’t be fair, but it was what she wanted. And he had said he was in love with her.

She hadn’t replied to that. “I love you,” she said.

“I’m glad.”

He tightened his arms around her, and a sense of such strong warmth and safety surrounded her that for a moment, she could only cry harder.

“You told me once, months ago, that the ocean keeps you company,” Ciaran said.

“I did?” Rilla didn’t remember saying it.

“You did, and I thought then that you shouldn’t be so alone.” He kissed her forehead. “Is there room in your life for the ocean and me?”

She didn’t even have to think about it. “Of course. But you have your job. Friends, family, a life.”

“A life I want you in,” he said gently. “And if having you means leaving all of that to be here, I’m willing to at least consider it. As you said, we belong here. Not you alone anymore. Us. I knew it the moment I saw you, and after last night...” He chuckled. “I have no doubt.”

“It was good.” She smiled.

The water bubbled in the pot, and she got up to turn off the burner. Ciaran followed and put his arms around her from behind. "We don't have to decide it all now."

"I know." She turned in his arms and kissed his lips. "But I think we already have. I love you. Stay with me. I promise even when I leave, I'll always come back."

"I love you too."

He touched his mouth to hers, and outside the sound of the waves against the rocks grew louder for a moment then quieted again, as if the sea had given its approval.