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The Mermaid Seduction

Aurora Rose Lynn

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ISBN: 1-894942-55-8
Cover art and design by Martine Jardin

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Published by eXtasy Books, a division of Zumaya
Publications, 2003

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www.zumayapublications.com
www.Extasybooks.com

The Mermaid Seduction

By

Aurora Rose Lynn

Dedication

*To Michael, my husband, for his love and
encouragement*

Chapter One

New England Coast, 1872

The old man is crazy.”
Joshua Harding examined his best friend’s face. Why was he teasing him without mercy? “He’s dying,” he said flatly.

Caleb Sewell didn’t flinch from his gaze. “Face it, Josh. It’s not like he was your best buddy or anything.”

“That’s a harsh thing to say about an old man.”

Caleb shrugged. “He left the lighthouse only to tell you nutty stories about the ocean and its resident monsters. Stories you weren’t interested in hearing.”

That wasn’t wholly true. When Josh had been a child, he had enjoyed seeing the old man trudging up the brick path to the front of the house. Even before he set foot on the stoop, he was throwing back his head, laughing then telling a funny one-liner about the sea. “I couldn’t have been more than five when he first starting telling them. He’d sit by the hearth, rocking back and forth in the old chair, with Katie on his lap hanging onto his every word.” Those had been

the days. His grandfather could weave a tale out of nothing, telling stories of monsters larger than any seafaring vessel known to man, of creatures with long tentacles that liked to wrap them around the lighthouse, and of merpeople who inhabited the ocean in certain places.

"Yeah, every kooky word. No one believes in sea monsters. And you shouldn't neither, at your age."

At thirty, Josh wasn't a kid anymore, but he knew of many along the coast who believed in sea monsters of one kind or another. Much of that was his grandfather's legacy to the small fishing community he occasionally came home to — when another member of the community would volunteer to keep the kerosene lamps in the lighthouse burning.

"I didn't know him that well."

"Yeah, he was always standing guard in that lighthouse. Day after day, year after year. He wouldn't even leave that place to see his grandchildren so he could get to know them. I won't be like that. If I get married, I'm going to get to know my kids. By the way, how's your sister doing at school?"

"She's going to make a fine teacher," Josh supplied.

"You know, your grandfather had plenty of time to make up wild stories. I really liked the one where the creature with long tentacles wrapped them around the lighthouse and scared him half to death."

"But there was always a fiery spirit in his eyes, as if he could see things land-dwellers couldn't," Josh said, defending his grandfather but not understanding why. The community had always thought that all

those lonely years in the lighthouse had made his grandfather crazy.

"Just a lonely old man, my friend," Caleb said, pounding a meaty palm on his shoulder. "Just be thankful your mother didn't listen to his tales, and she paid for that fine education of yours."

"I do have her to thank for that."

"Didn't your mother and your granddad always fight when he took a vacation from his keeper's duties?"

"Always. She wanted to raise me so I could work with my brain, not my hands. Grandfather had other ideas. He said the lighthouse had been in the family for generations, and with her being a female, the link had been broken. He wanted me to carry on the keeper duties, and keep the lighthouse his ancestors had built in the family." His sophisticated mother despised living in the country near the ocean. The few times Josh's grandfather had come to visit, she had made a point of telling him he was a shame to the name Harding. The old man had simply smoked his pipe, and after a short time, resumed telling his stories of the sea.

Caleb shrugged again. The action appeared incongruous on a big man like he was, towering over Josh's five foot eleven. He gave a low-pitched whistle. "Look who's coming. Miss Coulter."

Josh turned on heel. "Alexandria," he said softly. He enjoyed looking at her strong, yet gentle lips; the fine column of her neck, and imagining being able to see her naked breasts.

"Uh-oh. You've got that smitten look in your eyes

again.”

“A man can’t help but look forward to his wedding day,” Josh said carefully. Alexandria was still out of earshot, but he didn’t want to take the chance she would hear his comments. She had the prettiest pixie face a man could imagine, as well as a body that could very likely ignite a man’s cock if he so desired, although he hadn’t seen her naked.

“Yeah, then you can rightfully take her to bed and make love to her as long as you want.”

Josh sighed. If only he could see what her ankles looked like under that voluminous skirt she always wore. Or if he could steal a kiss, when her chaperone, who even now walked behind her by a few paces, wasn’t observing them with her hawk-like eyes. Her primly set-together lips didn’t bode well neither for a man who desperately wanted one kiss.

Like a properly brought-up lady, Alexandria stopped a few feet away. She had a melancholy look and her sloping shoulders sagged a little. “I wish you wouldn’t go, Josh. Your grandfather isn’t well.”

Caleb snorted. “She’s trying to tell you the old man isn’t right in the head. But then he never has been, has he?”

Shocked, Alexandria blushed and stared at him. “How can you say that about a man on his deathbed?”

Again the careless shrug. “He’s just a crazy old coot telling stupid sea stories. The world won’t miss him.”

“Well, maybe he is—”

Josh cut her off. “I don’t want either of you talking

about him like that. He's just different in a way you won't ever understand."

Alexandria and Caleb exchanged knowing glances.

"He's been alone a long time. That's a lighthouse keeper's job to insure the ships and sailors are safe from the hazardous shores. But you wouldn't understand about those kinds of things, would you?"

Alexandria turned lovely, appalled blue eyes on him. "So you think you're better than us?"

Caleb rested a hand on her forearm. "He doesn't think any such thing. He thinks he's better than us because his family has kept a lighthouse on some lonely old rock for years."

With a stern scowl, her chaperone moved forward, forcing him to release Alexandria's arm.

Having had enough, Josh walked away, up the hill to where his mother's square two-story house rested among stately weeping willows. He hadn't intended to but now he wanted to prove to his wife-to-be and his friend that being a lighthouse keeper didn't make a man crazy. His grandfather enjoyed telling tall tales, but that didn't make him any crazier than a writer or a newspaper reporter searching for a good story angle. Josh would be back within a month, his duty to his grandfather would be over and his sanity would be intact. And he'd make sure he wouldn't tell tall tales to all who would listen.

Chapter Two

The waves below crashed against the rocks, skirting the hundred-and-fifty-year-old lighthouse with its heavy swirling black stripes on a white background. Foam-capped breakers raced forwards and backwards into the ocean as darkness broke with the faint trace of dawn edging over the eastern horizon. Like a lover caressing his woman's thigh, Josh thought forlornly. The night had ended uneventfully, both for him and for the ships that traveled New England's coast. It was strange how he didn't feel the loneliness in the dead of night when the only company he had was the crashing waves and the light wheel that sat in its ceiling cradle. Far away against the distant horizon there appeared a clipper, but with the light of day, the captain could see for himself the dangerous shoals over which the lighthouse stood guard.

Josh gazed out over the sapphire blue of the ocean, the clipper's masts startling white against a cloudless azure sky. Ocean and water met for as far as the eye could see. He opened the door to the small promenade that circled the lighthouse tower and

stepped out, braving the cold. It was only mid-September, but the weather had turned frigid. The wind tore through his short hair with icy fingers, and he huddled in the warmth of his jacket.

He placed his hands on the rails and soaked in the smell of salt water, watching the gulls circle in the sky. How could his grandfather have stood the loneliness inherent in such a barren landscape for most of his life? The sounds were different here than they were in the city among milling people. There were no train whistles as the long iron and steel monsters inched by at night. No people gathering together to gossip. No people hurrying from one place to another on important errands. No clip-clop of the horses' feet as they pulled carriages with finely dressed ladies. At the edge of the ocean, nothing of any interest ever happened.

And Alexandria was in the city. Could she make love with passionate abandon? He hoped so, because he planned to have sex with her every day for the rest of his life, or until he got so old his dick wouldn't get up.

He blew out a huffed breath, his mind wandering back to some of the tales his grandfather had told. Those stories were appropriately told to five year olds who were easily impressed with adventure and the unknown. Adults didn't believe in hulking monsters of the sea, or in merpeople who were half fish and half human. Those stories didn't sit well in the real world.

The sun began to poke over the edge of a distant mountain. He should never have agreed to his

grandfather's request, even though the old man was dying. If Josh wasn't careful, by the end of the month, he would be as wacko as his grandfather, telling tales to amuse himself because of the loneliness within him and surrounding him. The clipper was a small dot on the horizon, where the ocean met the sky.

Josh sank further into his jacket against the bitterly cold wind. He couldn't wait to get back to his life, to Alexandria and his promising future as a physician. Yet there was another long twenty-eight days to go. He had thought to bring a few books, and even a chessboard, but no matter how he searched for them, he couldn't find them. The keeper's quarters weren't all that large, perhaps ten feet by twelve, accommodations enough for a single man. It was as if they had been thrown into the ocean by an invisible giant hand. Most things that were lost under the tumultuous waves remained lost forever. The ocean kept its secrets.

He drummed his fingers on the railing. It was too cold to stand out here doing nothing. How had his grandfather stood the solitary life, day in and day out?

A speck of movement, something that glimmered in the sunshine and in the cold water, caught his eye. He shielded his eyes with an outstretched hand and looked hard. Could it be a swimmer? But that far out, and in this cold? A man would die of hypothermia in only a few minutes. Maybe the clipper had lost a passenger. Travelers could be so careless at times. Careless enough to lean too far over a railing and suddenly lose their balance. Should he go to

investigate? He'd have to get his horse in the nearby village, then persuade a fisherman who hadn't gone out in this sun-kissed weather, to take him out. Perhaps his grandfather had clout in the village and he could use some of that. Hell, why didn't he just go home? Saddle the old mare and just go back to the city where an educated man such as he belonged?

Indecisively he watched a little longer. It was so easy to do nothing. And perhaps the object that had glistened in the sunshine wasn't anything more than flotsam.

Below the lighthouse, the waves slammed into the monstrous rock face, pounding and battering the sheer rocks. For an instant, he thought he saw, approaching the rocks, a path made of cobbled stone. He blinked and it was gone. Keeping his eyes focused, he stared at the spot, but it was now covered with torturous breakers. He shook his head at his gullibility. What would make him think there was a path into the ocean leading from a rock face that couldn't be scaled? He looked out towards the horizon. There was nothing but water as far as he could see.

He turned back into the lighthouse and firmly closed the door behind him. Hell, but he was lonely. He shivered even though it was almost like a toasty day in here compared to what was out there.

A sound of stomping feet alarmed him in the silence broken only by the ocean's pounding. He opened the door to the staircase, a never-ending set of moss-covered stairs that tuckered out the most athletic of men. The sound of stomping continued,

coming closer and closer.

"Who's there?" he called out, repressing the urge to say a short prayer as protection against a ghost or some supernatural creature lurking in the old lighthouse. How would he defend himself if something came up those stairs?

His heart kept time with the insistent stamping. He scanned the room quickly for a weapon. There was nothing but a piece of deadwood. How had it gotten here? Keeping one eye on the door, and another on the mysterious deadwood, he examined the gnarled and waterlogged piece of wood. He hadn't carried it up here. He would have known if he had. Despite himself, he shivered.

The stomping up the steps stopped.

"Anyone there?" he called tentatively, amazed at his telltale signs of fear. His heart raced and his palms were damp with sweat. Had his grandfather's tales affected him after all? He remembered the tale of the tentacled monster throwing its huge spine-ridden arms around the lighthouse in a tight bear hug to drag the tall tower into the ocean.

At least the pounding had stopped. He relaxed the tense muscles in the back of his neck. He was submitting to the old fears and an overactive imagination the same way he had when he was a child. He'd awakened from nightmares filled with monsters of all shapes and sizes. Then his mother soundly berated her father for telling frightening tales. He heaved a sigh of relief. He'd imagined the thumping sounds, and there was nothing more to them. He berated himself for being afraid in the

daylight.

He opened the door onto the staircase and looked out, but saw nothing in the near darkness. Somehow, even though he knew he was alone, he felt eyes boring into his back. A shiver tingled up and down his spine, a bodily warning bell. Slowly, he turned his head to look over his shoulder. He gasped and his mouth fell wide open. It just wasn't possible. He shrank back against the wall, unable to believe what his eyes witnessed. Daring himself, he scanned the area behind him. His pulse skittered.

A sensuous siren-like voice said, "Hey there, big boy."

"Easy does it. You're just imagining this. You need to get some sleep," he whispered, staring at his bed, where a woman in naked glory reclined against the pillows. Her hair was made of the finest spun gold, her blushing cheeks curved to a dimple near each corner of her mouth, and her breasts lay heavy and full with the dusky-rose areoles as tight as tiny buttons. Her ankles and her feet were all that remained covered by a thick gray blanket.

"I *am* real, big boy," she said. Sea-green eyes rimmed with long honey-gold eyelashes observed him, and her mouth moued into the naughtiest pout he had ever laid eyes on.

His cock stirred. There was something about her; some mysterious but sultry quality that tempted him like honey lured a buzzing bee. To his consternation, his cock swelled against the fabric of his pants. He remembered the tale his grandfather had told him about both humans and sea creatures that invaded

lighthouses to capture the keepers, to prevent them from protecting the ships and their sailors from certain death against perilous, rocky shores.

Josh turned and faced her. "I want you to get dressed, and then get out of here as fast as you dare," he snarled, hardly believing he was talking to empty air. After two days of being alone in the lighthouse and he was already losing his mind.

She batted her eyelashes. "I don't have any clothes." How could her pout turn him on so badly?

What an audacious thing to say! "You have no clothes? Then throw that blanket over your shame and get out."

"I don't want to."

"I don't care what you want. I order you to cover yourself and get out." He was used to giving orders, but not to naked women.

"I don't take orders from you," she said, boldly examining him.

Despite himself, he wanted to lick her, starting along her high cheekbones, down the column of her neck and the beating pulse at her throat, and down those lusciously full breasts. His cock stiffened, straining against the material. He had no doubt now that she was a temptress, that she meant to entice him away from his keeper's duties with her brazen nakedness.

Casting off his momentary lethargy, he rushed towards her and pulled the blanket up her shapely dancer's legs, past her mound, up her tiny waist and up past her breasts. "You do now." He stepped away.

The pout kicked up a level, from merely sinful to

decadent.

"Come and play with me, big boy," she murmured, brushing away the blanket. Oh Lord, but his eyes were intoxicated with the sight.

"Go away! You're not real!" he bellowed, frantically trying to wave away her image.

"Do you really think that will work?" She smiled, flaunting her dimples. Her moist lips drove him wild, made his nerve endings wish they were dancing along her bare ivory-blushed skin. How long had it been since he had made love to a woman? Probably too long, if he was going to the trouble of imagining one with such mesmerizing beauty.

"You humans aren't very sexual, are you?" She stroked a once-again-bare thigh.

"I don't discuss sex with women I don't know," he flashed back. Hell, he never talked sex with anyone but Caleb.

She angled her head up and slowly looked him up and down. Her compelling eyes stopped at his cock. "But you do want to know me, don't you?"

The only word he could think of for this woman was seductive. She had all the right moves—and then some. Tossing the blanket away from her, but still covering her ankles, she edged her legs apart.

"Don't do that!" Josh backed away towards the door, but that gave him an even better, and unwanted view of her exposed pussy lips and her clit. "Ladies don't do that kind of thing."

"Who said I was a lady? And what kind of thing?" she asked, her eyes twinkling.

Chapter Three

For the first time ever, he found his tongue tied, and the words he wanted were lost in the maze of his mind. It wasn't as if he wasn't familiar with the female anatomy, but this woman gave new meaning to 'in-your-face pussy'. He couldn't help himself, and stared at the jewel between her legs. Oh, hell. He licked his suddenly dry lips.

"So, big boy. Do you like what you see?"

Did his throat have a rock stuck in it or was it his imagination? He managed to croak, "Cover yourself. Immediately."

"That didn't work last time. Why would it this time?" Her laughter tinkled like tiny harmonious bells. Her shoulders shook, and so did her mound. "I've never let any man give me orders. I won't start with you."

"Breathe," he whispered, hoping the vision of seductive loveliness would fade away. He was just tired— but how could a single night without sleep wreak such havoc with his imagination?

"Why don't you come breathe on me?" She fanned her hand over her forested mound with one hand and

with the other, she pinched and extended a nipple, teasing and pulling.

His eyes lingered on the drop of cream moistening her clit. Hell, but he was in a bad way. No sleep for a couple of nights, no woman in a few months, and now he was as horny as a rutting bull.

"Why don't you come and taste me?" She stopped playing with her nipple and slipped a finger into her mouth to close her lips around it. Then she reached the moist fingertip to her clit, where she picked up a dab of her honeyed cream. Once again, she lifted her finger to her rosy lips and licked the cream off as if it was a delicate, expensive gourmet candy.

"I can't do that," he found himself saying, although he desperately wanted to. He wanted to kneel down and suckle her clit, and thrust his tongue deep into her sheath to taste and devour her musky essence. That would be only the beginning of his feast.

"Why fight it, big boy? It's free. You humans always think there's a catch to anything that's willingly offered."

To his utter astonishment, she cupped her breasts and lifted them up and squeezed them together. She jiggled the soft, plump flesh up and down. The nipples were distended nubs of dusky-rose flesh. "Come and play," she murmured, her eyes becoming heavy-lidded.

When had a man ever been able to resist such outright temptation? How could he avoid gaping into those sexy green eyes, which were inexplicably turning gold? Now what was he supposed to do? If he had any sense, he would run down the lighthouse

stairs as fast as he could, hurl himself on his old mare and ride away from the lighthouse as quickly as he could. How could he pull himself away from such an inexplicable lure?

"Who are you?" he asked. It dawned on him that she was possibly as real as he was.

"Merleau," she replied, her eyes traveling up and down his body again. "Merleau means 'gift from the sea.'"

"As in a fish?"

Her laugh tinkled around him as pleasantly as shades of a pastel rainbow. "No. As in what the sea gives to humans. If they will it."

"So you are merely a figment of my imagination," he confirmed to his utterly confused mind.

She shook her head as if taking pity on him. "Gifts from the sea are given only to a very few chosen. There is much to be learned from the sea, but humans do not acknowledge that." She shifted slightly and pinched her left budded nipple with a dainty forefinger and index finger, tugging on it until it extended at least an inch from the pale ivory globe.

"This is some kind of trap, isn't it?" Once again his grandfather's tale of the sea creatures playing mayhem with the keepers of the lighthouse came to his weary mind. With a finality he didn't feel, he said, "I won't have any part of this."

Merleau shrugged. "What if I don't give you any choice?"

He turned on his heel and threw the door to the staircase open. He almost stepped out before he cried out in shock. He reeled dizzily back, grabbing the

doorframe with white-knuckled fingers. The steps that had been there minutes earlier were simply not there. Incredulously, he looked down into a vast abyss of spiraling stone and dark emptiness lit only by a few tiny windows. Unreasoning fear made his heart rate accelerate. Hell, if he had stepped out without looking, he would have fallen to certain death. The stairs were the only means of exit from the lighthouse.

Suspiciously, he looked back at the woman. "Is this how you inhibit my freedom of choice?"

She held her hand at chest level and examined a fingernail with great interest. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Anger took deadly hold of him. He rushed at her, intending to wring her neck before he remembered he was a gentleman, that he would never intentionally harm a lady—no matter how the urge consumed him at the moment. "Put the stairs back, lady, or else I'll throw you out that window." It was only meant as a threat, but his anger so overwhelmed him, he had no doubt he would dangle her outside the window by one ankle until she gave him what he wanted.

Her eyes, reflective pools of green sparsely dotted with gold, gazed into his. "You have no intention of throwing me out the window. You want to experiment with me." She ended by flashing him a seductive smile.

"Put the stairs back." Comprehension sank in. He was arguing with a naked woman who was a figment of his imagination, and there were no stairs leading from the keeper's quarters to solid earth below.

Maybe he was losing his faculties but in a far shorter time than his grandfather. Should he take the risk that this wasn't imaginary and step out onto the first stair and test it for a solidness that didn't appear to be there? Irresolutely, he worried his lower lip.

"I'm really losing it," he muttered, glancing nervously around the quarters. The dead wood still rested against one wall. Did it have any significance? He had no idea but decided to test if the stairs were invisible in his particular frame of mind. He stepped toward to the door.

The whole room began to shimmer, weaving in and out of solid reality into a dreamlike haziness. His hands became clammy. Merleau disappeared behind a bank of impenetrable gray fog. He was the only one in the solitary room, then in the solitary world, and then in the dark uniformity of the universe. Stars twinkled in and out of existence. A keening wind shrieked, racing through his hair and whipping at his clothes.

Every sound increased in intensity, from the breakers thrusting against the rocks to the loud creaking of the wood of the lighthouse to a female singing in a high but melodious voice. His vision sharpened. He could see right through the walls of the lighthouse and across the sky and into the ocean. When he tried to grip the wall, his fingers crept onto empty air. He screamed in pure terror, his voice echoed in his head competing with the roar of the waves.

Abruptly silence fell, punctuated only by his ragged gasps for air. At first he saw nothing. Panic

rippled through his nerves. A slight creaking and groaning should have warned him that more was to come. Horrifyingly, the lighthouse began to move, not sideways as if the waves had ensnared it but imploding in and down on itself. Gargantuan sucking and slurping sounds overwhelmed him. The ocean moved closer and closer as the lighthouse plummeted into its depth. He screamed in abject terror. The lighthouse had stood for so many centuries, but now it slid into the ocean.

Josh was helpless to do anything but scream and send a silent prayer that he would live through the experience. The sounds multiplied. Shrieks of metal breaking and crumpling over and over. Crackling fire roaring through every nook and cranny. Never having felt so helpless before, he curled into a fetal position, covered his head with his hands and sobbed.

Chapter Four

As had occurred once before, an excruciating silence fell. Dared he look out from his position that was both safe and cowardly? His ears rang painfully with the absolute quiet.

Tentatively, in case the lighthouse began moving or the world erupted into shrieking horror, he uncovered his head and unclamped his cramped fingers from his ears. He took a deep breath, finding it incredulous that he hadn't died in whatever catastrophe had occurred. Then he lifted his head, daring to look around him.

He froze at the breathtaking paradise surrounding him. A seahorse danced by riding an invisible wave. Emerald green limbs of small trees swayed back and forth. Tall flourishing ferns stood at a greater height than he had seen any coniferous tree. Small brightly colored fish in close formation swam by. A dazzling coral reef rocked to and fro with the water's motion. He huddled on fine grainy sand reminiscent of that on the beaches. An ivory shell caught his attention and momentarily forgetting the horror he had been through, he picked it up with delicate fingers, fearing

he would crush the fine shell. As his grandfather had taught him to, he held the piece of shell to his ear and listened intently.

His body stiffened in astonishment. He didn't hear the ocean in the shell. Instead, a pleasant and melodious voice greeted him.

My friend, you are here as the guest of the Cerkanians, peaceful and pleasure-loving people. We have no quarrel with any human. We have brought you here at the request of—here Josh couldn't make out the word— and as such we will show you every pleasure we believe you are capable of bearing. There is much here and your lifetime can be spent learning about us. Welcome to Cerkania. May the Sea Lords be with you and keep you in safety.

Baffled, he drew the shell from his ear. What was this 'Cerkania'? And what sea lord could keep him safe? Most of all, who or what was it that had requested his presence here in this strange place that he found astonishingly comfortable and pleasing to the eye? Would this voice speak to him again? He raised the shell to his ear but heard nothing. Was he losing his mind?

"You have arrived," a sensuous and familiar voice said from behind him.

It was that woman again! He leaped to his feet. Merleau paddled long elegant fins where her feet should have been.

"What do you want?" he managed with a raw voice. Fascinated and repulsed, he scrutinized her. Her breasts were bare and gloriously full, her nipples hard and her mound rich with honey-gold hair. She looked prettier now than in the lighthouse.

She pouted and batted her eyelashes. The dimples showed on her cheeks. "I asked that you be brought here so that you might enjoy yourself, free from the restraints your humanity puts on you."

He gaped. "You did this?"

"I did not. The Sea Lords rule here and all that are in the oceans."

"Sea Lords?" he asked, his eyebrows furrowing.

"They're your equivalent, I believe, of your God."

"Does he know I'm here?"

"Your God?" she asked, crinkles forming at the corners of her eyes.

Josh nodded.

"No, I don't believe so. Only the Sea Lords would know for sure." With effortless movements, she paddled with fins that glittered with the myriad colors of the rainbow.

"Are you a mermaid?" he asked skeptically. He should never have listened to his grandfather's tales. He was probably at home dreaming this nonsense.

She laughed in that melodious way she had, the kind that sent shivers of delight up and down his spine. "Humans call me a mermaid. I can change at will from the human female form to a fish any time I care to." She batted her eyelashes over her sea-green eyes.

He had never heard of such a thing. A mermaid was a mermaid and people were people. So much like pouring kerosene on an already burning fire, his cock began to respond to the unmistakable lure of her mermaid's body. He had always preached that color didn't make a difference, and with Merleau he could

overlook the fact that she had those small fins where her feet should have been.

She floated closer, her sparkling fins shimmering in the sunlight.

He backed away, unwilling to touch her until he knew his feelings better.

"Why are you so afraid of me?"

"I'm not afraid of anything," he countered, still backing away.

"But your own feelings."

He shook his head in denial.

Gracefully, she swam up to him and ran an elegant finger down his cheek, across and under his chin. "If you're not afraid, then prove it. Make love to me. Acknowledge your own ability to seek pleasure without guilt."

Several times he gulped. "I'm not a coward, and I won't let you pressure me." Alexandria, the most attractive woman he had ever met, came to mind but no matter how he tried, he couldn't visualize her. He did remember how prim and proper she was and wondered if she would lift her skirts up so he could gawk at her ankles. Probably not.

Merleau kissed him on the tip of his nose, drawing him back into the present. Would Alexandria ever know or even care that a mermaid had seduced him? Or, more honestly, that he had succumbed to the temptation a mermaid offered?

"Are you going to kiss me?" Merleau asked petulantly, holding her face inches from his.

"Maybe," he admitted, wanting to ask her some questions. She may not have been real in the

lighthouse, but here she could be nothing else but that. "Precisely where are we?"

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her breasts against him. If she didn't stop soon, he'd end up not being able to think at all. "I already told you. We're in the kingdom of Cerkania."

As if his nerves weren't coiled enough, she reached between their chests, made sure he was observing her, and stroked her nipple daintily, extending it into a tiny blossom.

"Don't do that!" he snapped. She was doing everything to overpower his reasoning capabilities and urge him to bury his stiffened rod in her pussy.

"You're not being a whole lot of fun," she said innocently.

So she wanted some fun, did she? What if she played by his rules, instead of the other way around? Would it still be fun for her? In a terse, authoritative voice, he commanded, "Play with yourself."

He had only known her a matter of an hour, yet he felt this inexplicable bond between them, as if they had known each other far longer. He knew that he would have given in to her in the lighthouse if he had been given a few more minutes. His body yearned for hers.

"I didn't hear you," she replied coyly. She stopped toying with her nipple, and pressed herself flatter against him, melding bare thigh to clothed muscled thigh, and soft breast to broad chest. He tried to step back, but she trapped his ankles with her fins in a relentless hold.

"I want you to lie down, spread your legs apart

and play with your clit," he said smoothly, knowing she had heard him the first time. The sight would turn him on like no other had before.

She felt too good against him, smelling of aroused musky female and a fragrance of salt water and roses and lavender and jasmine. It didn't help that her face with its pale flushed ivory skin was next to his, her lips slightly puckered. How he wanted to kiss her! But he didn't dare.

A little voice in his mind urged him to thrust his tongue into her mouth, to explore what a mermaid tasted like. The rational part of him told him he was a fool, that there were no such beings, that he must have smoked enough opium to create the most fantastic of hallucinations.

Merleau spoke very softly, bringing him from his thoughts. "Why don't you prove you can be a real man?"

A rough primeval instinct made him lash out with his forearm and capture her head against his arm, where her hair flowed in wavy tendrils. In the heat of the moment and spurred on by the challenge, he crushed his lips against hers. His tongue demanded entry into her mouth, against the pearls of her teeth, against the warm wetness of her tongue.

His baser instincts gentled at the meeting of tender flesh under his and at the reciprocated plundering. This felt too good but it wasn't right. He groaned, trying to pull himself free. A man and a mermaid had nothing in common. Almost as soon as he attempted to dislodge himself, she fastened her arms around his neck, her sweet mouth demanding and entangled

with his. All reason dropped away. Lust took over. He threaded his fingers through her long hair. Some of the strands strayed up and over with the water's lapping motion.

Reluctantly, he pulled his lips away from hers. The perfume of her arousal swirled around them. His eyes gazed into hers and he saw something he hadn't seen before. Her love for him shone in those glittering sea green eyes. He sighed and looked down at her magnificent breasts.

"What was that for?" she asked, looking down his chest and peeling his heavy jacket over his shoulders to hang on his arms.

"I was thinking you're not real."

One corner of her mouth rose up in a half smile. "You keep on saying this isn't real, yet what will it take for you to believe that this—", she threw her arm out in an expansive gesture, "—is real? That I'm real?"

He grunted. Why be preoccupied with what was and wasn't a hallucination? Why not enjoy it? He yearned for her silky touch against the bareness of his skin. "You have a way about you," he murmured, burying his face in her scented hair.

Releasing her hair, he allowed his hands to gently roam down her bare back, along the knots of her shoulders, against her butter-soft skin and the hard ridges of her spine. He explored the beginning of the cleft of the twin cheeks of her ass. Her ass rounded against his hands, small and tight. For a fleeting moment, he envisioned his hard cock inside. He immediately admonished himself. Women weren't to

be used that way. His breath stuck in his throat. Would Alexandria allow him to plunge his cock into the tight ring of her ass? Somehow he didn't think so. With the mermaid, he thought he could do anything lewd, just as some men did to women in a brothel. His roughened hands against Merleau's silky skin made him rethink that conclusion. Whatever this time was, he determined to enjoy it without self-recriminations. And when he got back to New England and Alexandria, she would never know he had made passionate love to a mermaid. Hell, she would never believe him even if she did find out.

Merleau wrapped and unwrapped her fins around his ankles as if she was nervous. She shouldn't be, since she had initiated their lovemaking.

"Do you express your feelings with your fins?" he asked.

"Sometimes," she whispered against his ear. Her tongue laved the oval of the crest of his ear, creating a cold wisp of air across the skin before she heated it with her light panting breaths.

His hands wandered up over her back, feeling the skin goosebump against his touch. "Do you like this?"

Her breasts heaved and fell against the thickness of his shirt. "Oh, yes." She watched his face from under half-lowered eyes.

He bent his head and took her nipple into his mouth, tasting and teasing. Her nipple tasted of honey and almonds. But he wanted more than the tiny nub. And urgently. What in the hell was happening to him? How could he want this woman who looked like a mermaid with every part of his

body? His fingers trembled as he grasped strands of her hair, rolled them into tight spirals and rubbed them against the satin skin of her back. She shivered. He swelled with manly pride at the fact that she wanted him.

Words became unnecessary as he allowed her to unfasten the buttons of his shirt. Each movement was deliciously deliberate and maddeningly slow. Unable to grit his teeth in frustration and need any longer, he yanked his coat from his arms and ripped the shirt from his back.

Merleau pulled her arms from his neck and stood back, watching with appreciative eyes. The longing evident in her stance fueled him to jerk his pants off. As he slid his fingers into the waistband of his underwear, she pressed her dainty hands onto his wrists and stilled them. "Let me do it," she whispered.

He watched her as she weaved her fins back and forth and with excruciating slow movements, pulled the underwear down over his muscled hips and thighs. His bulging cock sprang free of its imprisonment. Pre-come glistened on the tip of his glans. Merleau curled her small hand under the ring of his cock and pumped the shaft. Pleasure rippled through him.

No longer willing to wait, he closed the distance between them and lowered her to the sandy ground.

"A big man like you dares to take a small mermaid like me?" she asked playfully.

He spread her legs apart. "Isn't that what you want?"

"You're a rogue!" she teased, opening her thighs wider.

He dipped his finger in her sheath and moaned at how wet and needy she was. Gently, she raked her fingernails down his naked back.

How could he control himself with such pleasure an eminent thrust away? "What do you see in me?" he murmured more to himself than to her. Concentrating on the burning in his cock, he plunged into her sheath, going as far as her body allowed. He felt her tense underneath him, opening up to capture him better and matched his thrusts with her own. He experienced the bond of being one with a lovely foreign being from the ocean and strained his neck muscles as he arched his neck to stare sightlessly above him. His body began to go rigid, and then he felt the simultaneous torture and pleasure of release. She shuddered and as he blinked his sweat-drenched eyelashes open, he saw her striking face contort erotically as her body wrenched in one spasm after another.

He collapsed on his elbows placed on either side of her body. Their breaths came in rapid gasps. The urgency to make love, he realized, hadn't dissipated. Instead it had intensified, leaving him in its mind-numbing grasp. He wanted still more of the mermaid named Merleau.

Chapter Five

Merleau watched as his face darkened and his neck muscles became rigid with the intensity of his effort. He curved his neck and she thought he would scream out her name. But he didn't.

After he had taken her yet again in passionate frenzy, he had fallen asleep, exhausted by the exertion. She gave a heavy sigh as she carefully pushed out from under his body so as not to awaken him, resting his head on her breast and gently stroking his forehead.

She watched his eyelids flutter with some movement in a dream. Watched his cheeks become less flushed. His breathing evened out. His cock wandered up and down, flaccid one moment, stiff the next. He smelled of heated sex and sandalwood. Her nipples pebbled at the thought of making love to him again.

From the moment she had cast her eyes on his tall, rugged frame, she knew she wanted him. An insatiable drive to know him intimately forced her to swim to the lighthouse, taking the chance he would see her glittering fins. Once she had thought he had

sighted her, but she ducked back in the water quickly. Cerkanian mermaids had always been known for their strong sexual needs. She would never be able to get enough of him.

How long would she be able to keep him here? She picked up the shell he had discarded on seeing her, encircled it with her palm and placed the ivory to her ear. The melodious strains of the sea creatures around her were amplified within. The dolphins whistled to each other, the squid shoveled in the sand searching for food, and far distant one seashell spoke to another. The coral reef hugging the shore almost half a world away, whispered to the sea waves.

A heavy sigh drifted all around her. She prayed the Sea Lords would not find out she had impersonated one of them. It would mean certain banishment from Cerkania. Was a human male worth that risk?

Obviously she had been mad enough to think so, if she had brought Josh here against the strict orders of the Sea Lords. And neither did it bode well that she had been the Neckarian Sea Lord's mistress some years ago. The Sea Lords were very protective of what they claimed as theirs and she had the reputation of being the loveliest mermaid in and out of Cerkania. But the kingdom was gigantic compared to the puny landmass that rode upon it. When she had disappeared, she had made certain to travel as far as she could to the farthest reaches, safe from Neckarian's reach. The Sea Lords weren't as all-powerful as they made themselves out to be.

A harsh low voice interrupted her questioning. "Is he everything you dreamed of?"

Merleau looked up into Anen's eyes, as black as midnight darkness. She wanted to ask how the shapeshifting business was going, but knew she'd receive a snide reply. The old woman could shift from a mermaid to an old woman to a Mintares monster in a heartbeat or less.

"Is he?" the erstwhile mermaid prompted. Her thin lips pressed together.

"Yes." Merleau lowered her eyes, wondering what the old Mintares monster was up to.

"Do the Sea Lords know you brought him here?"

"They know." She knew her cheeks tinged pink with the lie.

"You couldn't lie if your mermaid skin depended upon it. You know what will happen if they find out your deception, don't you?"

Merleau knew but she had to take the chance they wouldn't find out.

"You're not going to tell them? No? I guess it wouldn't be your usual way of doing things." Directing a nod in Josh's direction, she said, "They might exterminate his puny life."

Merleau thought how his neck muscles had corded as his climax rushed upon him. She knew she wouldn't be able to bear it if something happened to him because of her selfishness.

"This human has you wrapped around his cock, doesn't he?"

Her lower lip bled as Merleau bit back a sharp retort. Had Anen ever known what it was like to be in love, and to discard reason in her attempt to get the man she wanted? "He doesn't have me wrapped

around any part of him." She shifted one leg to make it more comfortable under Josh's weight.

Anen huffed a breath. "Tell me something I don't know. You've cast a concealing spell on him," she said in awe.

Merleau didn't want to know how Anen had come to that conclusion. She wanted the Mintares to disappear back into the shadows in which she had shrouded herself. To her shocked amazement, the old Mintares reached out and touched Josh's flaccid rod and rubbed the mushroom-tipped cap. "He's got a mighty fine one. Do you think he'll come for me like he did for you?"

The hairs on the back of Merleau's nape bristled. "Get away from him, Anen."

The shapeshifter laughed. "Once I was just like you. Beautiful, eager to please a man. But it went all wrong." Her eyes looked far off into some distance Merleau could never gauge. Absentmindedly, she continued to stroke Josh's cock with gnarled fingers with the tiniest spine-backed ridges embedded in them.

For a reason Merleau couldn't fathom, the old mermaid began to transform herself. It was frightening watching an old hag become spider-web thin before she seemed to explode into a mass of black spines radiating from every inch of her body. Before her eyes she became one of the most hideous creatures she had ever seen. A sea monster with spines as long as she was tall. The spines radiated from her back in eight long arcs and two were suspended from her gills.

Merleau cast a sleeping spell over Josh, so he wouldn't awaken and witness the horrors the sea creatures could make of themselves, especially Anen. The mermaid had seen the change once before. The first time it had so unsettled her, she had hidden under a gigantic clamshell for several hours. This time she had Josh to think about. When Anen was angry enough to become a Mintares, it didn't take much for her to injure anyone.

"We have to have some way to protect ourselves," Anen cackled. "When the Sea Lords are slow to respond to a request for protection, it never hurts to have additional protection." Her voice grated along Merleau's nerves. "Aren't you going to run and hide, little one?"

Merleau hugged Josh close to her, shielding his head from the Mintares, although that was probably the last thing she needed to cover. His rod was as stiff with longing just as if he had been awake and gazing at her with ardent desire. What kind of conversation could she engage Anen in that wouldn't prod her to harm him?

The Mintares guffawed. "I can reach out and touch him now. But I would leave a mark he would never forget me by."

"Who taught you to shapeshift?" Her movements calculated and slow, Merleau slid out from Josh's deadweight, shielding him even so as best she could.

"Ah! Who taught me? There are shifters everywhere, my little one, but you do not have the eyes to see them with."

Merleau now lay next to Josh but between him and

Anen should she decide to attack. "What kind of eyes do I need?" Weren't her eyes sharp enough?

"The eyes of the Old Ones," Anen said mysteriously.

"They are so old the sea hardly recognizes them."

"That's exactly my point. The Old Ones did not make themselves more adaptable so we did."

Fear prickled at Merleau's spine. "Who is 'we'?"

Anen laughed, raising the hair on Merleau's nape again. "Why should I tell you my secrets?"

"No particular reason. I just thought you wanted to talk." She had heard tales of obscenities that lived under the ocean's depths, that if the ocean creatures and humans knew about, wouldn't think twice about obliterating them.

Anen stretched to her full height of seven feet, including the spines on her back. "I'll tell you what. If you share him with me in my mermaid form, I won't have to press the life from your mindless skull."

"Don't threaten me!"

"What if I were to turn myself into a charming earth woman? Would your lover leave you then for another?" the old mermaid asked with a malicious twist to her ugly lips.

"You can't do that."

Josh stirred, angling his head into a more comfortable position along the ridge of her spine. He slept on, breathing lightly in and out. When Merleau's eyes met Anen's, she saw undisguised jealousy.

"I can." Unbelievably, she did a little jig. "I can, but I've thought of something better. I'll go directly to the Sea Lords. They'll know what to do with him."

Merleau gasped. "What do I do to stop you?"

Anen laughed. "Kill yourself, girl. Get your shabby excuse of a life over with."

She would never consider such a thing. Life was too precious and short.

"Perhaps all I have to do is shift into my younger self. With a little eyeliner and lip rouge, I'd look younger than you. Any of the Sea Lords would welcome me as their mistress, just like they did you. All I'd have to do is whisper a thing or two in a willing ear."

Merleau looked away from the woman. She had never practiced politics with Neckarian, although she understood Cerkanian politics as well as any head of government did. An idea impressed itself upon her. Could it be possible?

"I set you to thinking. That's good. I hope you're thinking how to save him before I eat him up. Literally."

Merleau squirmed under her gaze. There was hope against Anen, but she had to act quickly, and she would have to do something she had vowed never to do. In coming to Cerkania, she had found solace as a mermaid. In finding Cerkania and its sea creatures, she had thought she had found peace and safety but that was far from the truth.

"You think too much for a brazen mermaid," Anen croaked and emitted an ear-piercing laugh. "So stupid to think so much." With that, she spun herself into a scary-looking ball and floated away.

Merleau choked back the sobbing that threatened to overwhelm her. She watched Josh sleep peacefully,

and shifted him to allow his head to loll against the softness of her naked breast. Would she be able to spirit him home in the same way she had spirited him here for her own selfish means? She planted a whisper-soft kiss on his forehead. His body tensed and then his eyelashes fluttered, dark silk threads against bronze skin. In his sleep he murmured, "Have to get back," so low she had to strain her ears to hear. She stroked his forehead tenderly.

If Anen went to the Sea Lords, her life in Cerkania was finished. If Anen hurt Josh, her life would become as meaningless as an empty pit again. She also knew that if Neckarian found out she had double-crossed him, her moments as a living mermaid would be short indeed.

Chapter Six

Josh absorbed the feminine sexuality of his seductive mermaid. The tip of her nipple rested an inch below eye level. The pounding in his groin began again. "Why is it that you are so attractive, even though you're stark naked?" he asked, his voice sleepy but alert.

She laughed, showing even white teeth. "Isn't that when a woman is at her most attractive?"

"You mean mermaid," he corrected hoarsely. What had made him sleep like the near dead? He never did so, not even when he was exhausted.

"Let me get you a drink," she said, abruptly lifting his head from her breast and swimming a few feet of distance. As if by magic, a earth-colored conch shell appeared close to his hand. "Talk about service," he mumbled.

"The sea creatures do their very best to provide for a visitor's stay."

He lifted the conch shell to his lips and sipped at the greenish-brown liquid. Despite its horrible appearance, it tasted sweet and tangy. He gulped it down greedily and watched Merleau's oval face. Her eyes were downcast, and she didn't seem to have

quite the same good spirits she had after they had made love. She had a wariness about her that hadn't been there earlier.

His thirst satisfied, he wanted to love her again before he returned home. He had no idea what time it was, but it must be getting close to dusk, time to ensure all the lights had kerosene.

He got to his feet and walked towards his seductive mermaid. She was a very rare and special woman to be able to lure him with her enticingly erotic behavior. "Play with your pussy again."

"Why?" Her eyebrows inched up. Whereas she would have smiled before, she merely contemplated him.

"Because I want you to." Heedless of his nudity and his shaft stiffening, he continued to move forward, hoping to grab her playfully.

She shrugged. "That's not reason enough."

"Then what's reason enough?" he asked, puzzled by her sudden reticence.

"I need to hear a magic word."

He frowned. Did she think he was going to tell her that he loved her? How had she come up with such a ridiculous notion? Or were those the words she wanted to hear? He pushed up against her. It wasn't that he hadn't his share of fair women, but none had ever stirred him up to such a zealous pitch where he could think of nothing but embedding his stiff cock in her pussy and satisfying this insatiable urge. "You brought me here to play. Now I want to play. On my terms. Play with your pussy."

Her lips curved in a tiny smile but her eyes, her

most spectacular feature outside of her luscious, gorgeous breasts, gazed back at him with an innocence he found hard to accept. For no reason he could fathom, she giggled. "Is that how you pleasure yourself? By looking?" she asked, thrusting her breasts into his face.

He felt his eyes bulge outward and he swore he smelled almonds covered in honey. "Yes. So how about it?"

"Do you want me to lie down?"

Momentarily he puzzled over that, before he remembered she was part fish. He figured he liked lovemaking in a more traditional sense and would find it disconcerting to make love to a floating woman. He pushed her on her back, rounding one ankle around hers. They both fell to the ground. "Lying down," he grunted.

"Why not try something new? Isn't variety the zing of existence?" She leaned back on one elbow and held herself up.

Variety the zing of existence? What was she talking about? "Oh! You mean variety is the spice of life."

"So you do have a land-dweller expression that's much the same."

Hastily, he changed the subject back to making love in unconventional ways. "Is it that much different for mermaids than ordinary women?"

Shifting subjects with him, she looked away from his face at something in the distance. "I don't know what you mean by 'ordinary women'. I've never been one." Her voice lacked inflection.

He pushed her legs apart and sat cross-legged

between them, keeping his eyes on her face. Her lips trembled.

“Lie completely on your back. Don’t hold yourself up on your elbow.”

She leaned back all the way on the sand, her hair waving all around her. She was a gorgeous creature, with large dusky-rose areoles and faint pink-lustered skin. Beads of water trickled between her breasts, glistening a trailing path down to the dip in her navel. He took his finger and traced the path, smearing the drops in its wake. Her skin felt as soft and resilient as rubbing a rose petal between his forefinger and thumb.

“You feel so perfect,” he whispered, trailing the tip of his finger down the flatness of her stomach and to the place where her thighs met her legs. He meshed his splayed hand into the strands of her pubic hair, amazed at how thick and golden-colored they were.

He groaned, a sound rumbling from deep within his chest. Why did she make such an impression on him? Why did he linger here when he knew the lighthouse needed tending? The lighthouse!

He jumped to his feet. “How do I get back?” He had to get his mind out of his cock and back in his head and think about the sailors’ safety.

She got to her knees and tipped her head to look up at him. “They are safe without your presence.”

He hauled her to her feet and pressed his face close to hers. “You don’t understand. I promised Grandfather I would care for the lights. Humans aren’t such competent swimmers as mermaids,” he ground out. “Now how do I get back? Or is there no

way home?" Had he died without knowing it and gone to the sea version of heaven? Or was this hell where a fish-woman kept him from his duties. He had heard stories of men being lured to their deaths by both humans and sea creature alike.

A school of delicate yellow goldfish swam by.

He shook her shoulders. "Tell me!"

"I can't take you back," she said barely above a whisper. Her face had suddenly gone ashen gray.

Unreasoning anger rushed over him. "You mean you could get me here, but now you can't get me back?"

She drew away. "I can't go to the Sea Lords now, as I had earlier to bring you here."

"You bring me here for your pleasure, and yet you have no way to get me back? Is that what you're telling me?"

She swallowed hard and nodded, but her eyes no longer would meet his.

He lifted his hand and tipped her chin up with an index finger. "I'm not amused by your antics, seductive mermaid. I need to go home, and I need to do it right about now."

"I can't do that."

Something in her expression and the repetitive blinking told him she was lying. "Where are these Sea Lords that I can go to and ask them to send me home?" he demanded.

Her pert tongue darted out to moisten her lower lip. He tried to look away, but couldn't. How could she captivate him like this? Why couldn't he concentrate on getting home? That one simple action

drove him wild. Unable to help himself, he bent his head and brought his lips within an inch of hers. The smell of roses and jasmine mingled with seawater overpowered him. His limbs went weak as his lips demanded hers, kissing with fierce and passionate abandon. His mind yelled at his lack of self-control, but his cock insisted that it be satisfied.

Her breath, tasting much like a sweet pineapple, mingled with his and their tongues dueled and darted in the age-old mating dance. He wanted her to open her legs wide again for him so he could see her wet clit, so he could finger that hardened spot and toy with her until she cried out in climax.

Carefully, he drove her to her knees and down on her back, where he once again sat cross-legged between her spread legs. He didn't need much foreplay. "I want you to touch your clit and bring yourself to climax."

She turned her head away as he looked down at her pussy. Hell, but she was wet. Her fingers lay unmoving in the sand at her sides. Leaning forward, he grasped both her hands and laid her fingers next to her pussy lips, opening her wide to expose her hard weeping clit. His rod stiffened at the sight. Her thighs were soft blushing ivory columns no longer veiling her most intimate treasure, a delicate pearl that throbbed with need, just as his erection did.

He bent over her and tongued her nipple. Merleau shuddered and cried out, riding a surging tide of culmination. Her breasts heaved up and down with her heated breaths. Her skin was hot to his touch. Intuitively he knew she wanted him again as much as

he desired her.

"Why don't you come for me again?" he asked, placing his fingers between her head and the sand, urging her to look at him.

Pensive sea green eyes met his. "I want you," she said in a hushed and awed voice.

"Enough to bring me here," he muttered.

"Yes."

"Show me how you want me."

"Haven't I done that already?" Hadn't she brought him to Cerkania to mingle with the sea creatures, to pleasure himself?

He lifted his shoulders carelessly in a small sign of indifference. "If you want my body so much, then why don't you do what a mermaid is supposed to do?"

She smiled a little. "And what would that be?" No other human, save one, had been to Cerkania. How long would it take Anen to persuade Neckarian to banish her from the kingdom for as long as she lived? Perhaps days, but more likely hours.

"Make love to the human male you've trapped in your cunning web," he said, his voice icy.

Knowing she was denying the truth, she shook her head from side to side. "I've done nothing like that."

The skin of his face became drawn and sallow as the color leeches out. His eyes, the deepest shade of marine blue she had ever seen, narrowed. "Despite your beauty, you lie worse than any drunken sailor I've met."

His angry look made her feel exposed and vulnerable. She tried to slip her right leg around him

to edge her legs together to cover her pussy.

"I'm not going to let you go anywhere. You owe me an explanation and a way to get home." He clamped down on her kneecaps, much like an octopus did when squeezing the life from its helpless victim. She should never have flaunted her power, knowing the Sea Lords could easily banish her. Not only was his life in danger, but hers as well. All for a momentary gratification.

"You yearned for someone different," she said simply.

He pressed his lips together in a pencil-thin line and forced a breath. "How would you know that?"

"I knew the moment I first saw you." From the moment two nights ago when the powerful kerosene lights illuminated him from her vantage point far out in sea. He had been nothing more than a shadow but his male scent had aroused her. That and his yearning for companionship, that longing for something more than an isolated lighthouse and the crashing waves around it offered.

"And when was that?" Thoughtful blue eyes bored into hers.

"At the lighthouse," she replied.

Was someone watching her? She shivered, even though the water was balmy. She glanced over her shoulder, but saw nothing except for the usual fish swimming playfully nearby. Yet the sensation of being watched stayed with her.

"When you tempted me?"

"Is that how you perceive my actions?"

"How would you have me look at what you did?"

A horrendous thought struck her. Would Anen be able to read his mind? She searched her memory for what she knew about the Mintares, but couldn't remember if they were noted for their mind reading. Fear gripped her. If Anen could read Josh's mind, then not only was he in danger, but so was the lighthouse. If she sought an audience with one of the Sea Lords in her young mermaid persona, she could easily sway him to believe her devious thinking.

Or would she use her old Mintares persona and convince the Sea Lords with her seeming kindness and her old age, principles that had ruled the oceans for as long as the earth had existed? Age counted more than any other attribute with the Sea Lords and other sea creatures.

"Answer me," he ordered.

Merleau didn't know how to respond. Should she tell him the truth? Then wouldn't she find herself in a salty brine! She'd be caught between his resentment and Anen's scheming. "I—"

"If you were in my position, how would you view what you did to me?"

She examined his dark hair, angry bronzed face and the corded muscles in his neck resting on broad shoulders. "I don't know," she managed.

"You don't know."

"Make love to me," she whispered, gathering the slim threads of her courage. She gazed boldly into his eyes. "Forget what brought you here or why."

He glared at her and stumbled to his feet. She realized that not only was Anen unpredictable, but Josh might very well be too.

Chapter Seven

Josh knew he couldn't erase wanting to know why he had been brought to Cerkania. He'd heard too many of his grandfather's stories relating the sea creatures' treachery. He had never dreamed that a mermaid, a fantasy creature only found in children's storybooks, could possibly be so twisted as to imprison a human simply to have sex with him. He would have believed it of the mythical Sirens who sang their lovely songs in those same children's storybooks, but not of a mermaid. A mermaid was without guile, incapable of scheming.

It was time for him to learn more about her, to learn what made her mind work in such a cunning manner. When he returned to the lighthouse, he would have a story to tell his grandchildren when they got old enough to hear his sea tales. Distracted, he found his lips widening in a grimace. When had he started thinking about grandchildren, and telling them tall tales?

He leaned down and tenderly helped Merleau to her fins. She floated before him. As considerately as possible, he asked, "Where do mermaids come from?"

She blinked. An aura of sadness touched her face.

"Where do humans come from?"

Why couldn't he get anywhere with her? "I asked first," he teased, giving her what he hoped was a lighthearted smile.

She burst out laughing, becoming carefree in a bare second. "Tell me anyway."

"Some say humans were created by God, and others believe we are descended from monkeys."

"A mon-key?" Her brows arched together in a puzzled frown.

He couldn't resist. He imitated a monkey, scampering from foot to foot and curling his hands under his arms to simulate the beast's long arms. "Ooooh, ooooh," he shrieked.

Merleau watched him with a great deal of fascinated astonishment. "That's a mon-key and you say you're descended from it?"

All of a sudden, Josh found himself laughing and feeling more carefree than he ever had. He pecked her on the cheek. "That's what some claim."

"Your God must be strange indeed if he allows mon-keys. There are some sea dwellers that have been here since time began. They are very old and don't have much to say to younger folk."

"Would they talk to a human? We can be very persuasive, you know."

A pained expression crossed her aquiline features. "I don't believe they would. They fear for their ancient home, for the ocean. Most likely, they would kill you."

The lightheartedness rapidly vanished. "How do they know what's happening?"

"I'm not sure how the Old Ones come upon what they know. Reputedly they hear vibrations." In a low voice, she said, "I've never heard of human beings being able to communicate with them."

"Why is that?"

"There has never been one in Cerkania before."

Her statement shocked him. "There's never been a human here before?" he repeated.

She didn't meet his eyes. "No."

He shifted from one foot to the other. Maybe the Old Ones ate humans. This world was certainly different enough than New England.

A hundred feet away, a silver-gray dolphin honed in low on something in the sand. Josh squinted, hoping to see what the dolphin pursued. A gigantic black turtle with vivid orange markings lumbered along. The turtle would easily have made a good-sized chair. To his amazement, the dolphin edged his nose to the turtle's underbelly, and flipped him over. The turtle made a huge ball of sand and water as it landed on its back. It struggled for several moments, angling its pudgy legs back and forth before it laboriously righted itself.

As soon as the turtle was on its feet, his head still tucked safely in its shell, the dolphin flipped him over again. The silver-gray mammal shrieked.

"He's going to harm that turtle! What does he think he's doing?" Josh shouted.

Merleau placed a calming hand on his forearm. "Dolphins play like that."

"But he's hurting the turtle," he protested.

"The dolphin's hurting Chester? No. He's got a

thick enough shell to prevent injury. He's safe there."

He shrugged off her small hand. "We'll see in a minute." He marched forward. He was going to show the dolphin what fun really meant. The dolphin couldn't bully the turtle simply because he moved faster and because it couldn't defend itself.

Behind him, Merleau whistled and made some odd clicking sounds. Gracefully the dolphin turned from Chester and pointed his nose in Josh's direction.

He heard the mermaid chuckle. "Now you're in trouble."

As the dolphin swam determinedly towards him, he saw Chester poke its head out from its bright shell.

The dolphin slammed into his chest with a big whoof! One moment Josh was on his feet, the next he was lying in the sand. Amazingly enough, as the dolphin's body pounded into his, it hadn't hurt. But his landing in the sand had. Josh repressed a groan.

Merleau laughed. "You better apologize to Tiny. He won't leave you alone unless you do."

Indignantly, he picked himself up and straightened to his full five feet eleven. He easily weighed half what the dolphin did, but that didn't deter him from his mission. He refused to be bested by a dolphin that played games with a helpless turtle. And of all the names to call a mammal that was definitely not small in size.

From the corner of his eye, he caught the mermaid bent over double, holding both her hands to her stomach. "You should see yourself," she managed from between gales of laughter.

He gained his bearings, ignoring the raucous

laughter. Purposely the dolphin aimed its snout at him and slammed into his solar plexus. Josh found himself lying in the sand again.

"You dirty lowdown—" Seething with anger, he got to his feet.

"Just apologize," Merleau instructed in between fits of hysterical laughing.

He would do no such thing. Dolphins weren't intelligent creatures. Besides which, the dolphin was making him look like a clown dunce in front of Merleau. He wasn't going to tolerate any of that nonsense.

"After all," she continued, "you're the one who went after him."

"You beast," he muttered, shakily attempting to climb to his feet. The dolphin nudged him with its nose and kept him down. Chester had stopped and was now eyeing them with beady black eyes.

"He'll keep at it until you say you're sorry."

"I'm not going to tell it any such thing." The dolphin wouldn't understand his words anyway.

The mermaid still held her sides in a big belly laugh.

The dolphin made little chirping sounds.

"He says he'll get his buddies to terrorize you if you don't tell him you're sorry on the double. He's a lot smarter than you give him credit for." Tears of laughter ran down her cheeks.

It was at that moment he realized he had fallen in love with this seductive mermaid. She had qualities he had never seen in a woman before—even if she was half fish and half human. He'd never met anyone

quite so determined to have her way, and she also had a sense of fun that he had never known another woman to have. Maybe he could excuse her for spiriting him here.

He also realized his error in thinking Tiny had wanted to hurt the huge sea turtle. Maybe it was time to come out and play. And he wanted to hear Merleau laugh some more. The sound filled him with happiness. He grabbed hold of the dolphin's snout and tugged. The dolphin shrieked and made small whirring sounds.

To his consternation, Josh found himself on his back again but with a difference. The dolphin playfully weighed him down, continuing to make small whistling and chirping sounds.

Merleau continued to laugh. "Just tell him you're sorry, or they'll be oceanic hell to pay."

"I'm going to tame you one day," he boasted fearlessly, meeting the great beast's eyes. He saw a warmth there he hadn't expected to see. "Okay, you big fish. I didn't mean to make fun of the way you play."

The dolphin chirped some more.

"He says that's not good enough."

"Well, what does he want? A playmate for the rest of his life?"

"To hear the word 'sorry'. He really is smarter than you think."

"Oh, hell. I don't think you're so damned smart."

More whistling and whirring from the dolphin.

"He says I should hear you say that too. It will make more of a man out of you." She dissolved into

gales of laughter and fell to her knees.

"More of a man, eh? Since when are you a critic?"

The dolphin whistled. Merleau was too busy holding her sides and chortling to translate what he'd said.

"Everybody's a critic. Okay. I give up. *I'm sorry.*"

The dolphin gave him one last gleaming look of pity and swam away. A moment later, Tiny was back to flipping Chester over and over. Josh hadn't made any difference to the turtle's way of life, and the dolphin continued his playful ways.

"If only you could see the expression on your face." Merleau walked up to him and wrapped her arms around his neck, brushing her breasts against his naked chest.

"I've seen the dolphins from the lighthouse, but I never thought they would be able to talk. And play." He smiled and patted a tear from her cheek.

"You forgot the part about their being very smart."

"That too." He lowered his head and kissed her salty lips before he drew away to gaze into her glossy eyes. "I thought you'd hurt yourself if you laughed any harder."

"I haven't laughed like that since, I can't even remember." She chuckled.

"You know where humans think they come from. Where do mermaids come from?"

She shifted slightly in his arms as if the question had made her uncomfortable. "They come from the sea."

"I already know that. Don't you have legends telling where you came from?"

She shook her head. "I come from everywhere, and nowhere."

He sensed her hesitancy and her sadness again. "Where do *you* really come from?"

"If you really want to know, ask me," a harsh voice intruded.

Merleau glanced over her shoulder and gasped. Her face drained of its rosy hue.

Chapter Eight

Josh found himself face to face with a lovely mermaid and a burly man who appeared to be at least six times her twenty earth years.

"So you've done what you threatened to do," the old man said, his voice as deep as a foghorn's wail.

Merleau pushed away from Josh jerkily. He wanted to hold and protect her, but this was her world, not his, and even though he took the old man's voice as threatening, she might not perceive it that way. He decided to wait and see which way events would turn.

"Lord Neckarian," she said respectfully. Every line in the seductive mermaid's body was rigid.

So the old man was someone in authority, Josh mused.

"Do you admit to the charges being rendered against you?" the lord asked.

"Is he one of your Sea Lords?" Josh asked quietly. If he was better informed about who everyone was, then he wouldn't feel so out of place and he would be better able to decide what aid Merleau needed.

In response to Josh, she whispered, "Yes." To Neckarian, her voice was as soft as a light breeze

murmuring among the leaves of a weeping willow. "I do not."

She had to own up to her mistake. That was, if the Mintares hadn't already clued Neckarian in. Fear clawed at her. Anen's expression was too smug as she held her hands around the Sea Lord's upper arm.

"Who might he be?" the Sea Lord asked.

Helpless to stop him, she watched as Josh stepped forward and said, "I'm a human from a place called New England. I watch over a lighthouse on the coast as my grandfather did."

"Never heard of this place."

Anen reached up on tiptoe and whispered in his ear.

The Sea Lord's eyes, a soft powder blue, glittered like hard jewels. He patted Anen's wrist. "If you think so, my dear."

What lies was the Mintares telling him? Merleau had been his unwilling mistress for ten years before he had banished her. Her heart ached to tell the Sea Lord the truth about who she was.

"I offer you my hospitality should you ever decide to visit," Josh said, not put off by the old man's hostility.

Merleau admired him even more for his gallantry.

The Sea Lord's unwavering gaze flickered before he concentrated his attention on her again.

"I've been told by an indisputable source that you've brought this human into Cerkania against our will. This appears to be the case. You will both be punished."

Merleau watched as Josh's mouth fell open. "It was

against my will I came," he replied, wrapping his arm around Merleau's waist. "And I believe against Merleau's as well."

Anen gave a small smile before she coughed and hastily covered her lips.

"No one can come into my kingdom, whether willing or not. All who come here come by invitation only. Thus, you will be put to death so none of the New England humans will know of our kingdom."

Josh stepped closer, but Merleau blocked him. She had to tell the truth, but for his sake. For her it was too late. "Lord Neckarian, I will willingly serve as your mistress for the remainder of my life if you will release him. He had no part in this." Her voice faltered.

The Sea Lord and Anen stayed quiet, waiting.

"I am not who I appear to be," Merleau continued softly. "I was secretly brought here by my mother for safekeeping when the war between the Land-dwellers and the Atlanteans broke out. My mother promised she would take me home when the war was over, but the sea took back what is rightfully its own."

"But that was thousands of years ago," Josh spluttered.

"Yes, many, many years ago. When it did, I was stranded here in Cerkania, half-human, half mermaid. My mother had taught me certain spells to conceal myself and to allow me to visit the Land-dwellers when the need arose."

"But casting spells is forbidden for anyone but the Sea Lords." Anen smirked.

Lord Neckarian waved a hand for her to go on.

"My mother taught me the penalty for the misuse of casting spells in Cerkania. She said humans tolerated the casting of spells even less than the Sea Lords. She taught me to be circumspect in using those spells." Merleau sighed.

"I was lonely, Lord Neckarian. I wanted human companionship. When I saw Joshua Harding on the deck of the lighthouse, I wanted him more than I can express. It's difficult being alone for so many years with no one to care for me and love me for who I am."

Anen snickered. Quickly she slapped a hand over her mouth.

"Go on," the Sea Lord urged.

"I've ever cast but two spells in Cerkania. One was to bring Josh here and the other was a sleeping spell to protect him from her." She nodded in Anen's direction.

Josh's eyes bulged. "You did bring me here! I knew it! But how dare you cast a spell on me?"

Tears trailed down Merleau's cheeks. "Forgive me, but I wanted you to enjoy what I could give you, what Cerkania can give you. And then when I cast the sleeping spell, it was to protect you from her sly ways." She indicated Anen with a small wave.

Anen leaped at her, her claws reaching for Merleau's throat. "You will not sully my reputation, you little slut."

Josh hurled himself between them. No matter how angry he was that Merleau had cast a spell on him without his knowledge, he wasn't willing to stand by and see her hurt by a malevolent being.

Merleau screamed, stepping back and almost out

of Anen's reach. A long claw caught her along the inside slope of her breast. Josh seized Anen's arm just as she began her transformation into a repulsive fiend. He clamped his hands around her wrists and used all his considerable strength to keep the horrible spined creature from shearing his beloved mermaid in two. She lost all semblance to a mermaid and finished the transformation, a repulsive demon. He no longer understood the epithets she hurled at Merleau.

He heard Merleau shout at Lord Neckarian, "Aren't you going to help him?" but he didn't hear the response. That lack meant the Sea Lord probably didn't intend to help him. For a fleeting moment he wondered why the mermaid didn't try to cast a spell, but his mind was occupied with survival. He was nude, and this monster, whatever it was, was armed with dangerous spine-like protrusions.

Suddenly it stopped, holding him in a fierce stranglehold. "Did your grandfather ever tell you the tale of the tentacled monster who wrapped its arms around the lighthouse and took it away?"

Josh held the monster in check. "That was only a tale grandfather told. No truth to it."

Malicious laughter burst out all around him. "You would like to believe that was the truth, but it's not. For centuries, I have made certain you puny humans would lose your lives to the sea and its creatures. Then, this little slut has the audacity to bring one of you here. Mark my words, but it will never happen again. Your kind is not welcome here and never will be. Now you will find out my true strength. You will

die. Your kin will not know what happened to you or your precious lighthouse."

He didn't know what overcame him. The lighthouse had never been what he would have called 'precious', but now it was of paramount importance to save it and the countless seaman who traveled the nearby waters. "Your killing days are numbered," he said from between gritted teeth. He raised his knee and slammed it into the soft spot of the fiend's stomach.

He heard Merleau whispering behind him. The Sea Lord had disappeared, quite possibly viewing them from a spot of safety.

"Step away from her, Josh," Merleau cried out frantically. "Step away!"

Josh paid her no heed. He couldn't allow an abomination to both the sea and humans to go unchallenged or to walk away. He fought desperately with the monster, slowly retreating as it pushed forward, swiping its spines at him. It seemed that lifting his knee into her stomach hadn't slowed her down, but had infuriated her further.

His actions speeded up. He felt as if every movement was made with lightning speed, but the fiend kept at him.

Merleau hurled her arm around his waist and tugged at him. "Get away from her, Josh. Let her be but quickly."

"I can't—"

Screams rent the air as the monster dropped to its knees.

Merleau dragged him away as he watched

perplexed. "I cast a spell," she said quietly from behind him. "Something I promised I would never do to harm another being. You do not want to be near her now."

The fiend thrashed about wildly, using its spines to claw at the sand and digging deep holes, holes larger than three graves stacked one on top of the other.

Its efforts slowly weakened, before it lay silent.

"Is it dead?" he asked, moving forward.

"No! You mustn't go near!" Merleau pulled him back and he suddenly found himself lying on the sand with her on top of him. An explosion of black matter ripped through the air, shattering the oppressive silence. One more explosion, and then there was blissful silence.

"Merleau?" he asked tentatively. She didn't move. His breath caught in his throat.

As gently as he could, he pulled out from under her and examined her. Her face was as pale as the moon behind a thick mist, and streaks of blood marred her cheeks, her breasts and her back. She lay so still.

He placed a fingertip to her wrist and checked for a pulse. The slight beat was barely there. He had to get her to a doctor, but even if he could get her to the lighthouse, it was at least an hour to the nearest village, and then perhaps another hour to the nearest physician.

"Merleau, can you hear me?" Unheeded tears ran down his cheeks.

A tender touch on his shoulder made him look up startled. The Sea Lord watched him with pitying eyes.

"She is healing herself. It might take time, human named Josh. The Mintares left poison in her bloodstream." He indicated the deep cut on the mermaid's breast.

"Help her! Don't let her die!"

"I cannot help her. Only you can," the Sea Lord said, his voice filled with regret.

"I have no medicine to help her with!" Josh cried out, his thoughts whirling. He knew nothing about Mintares poison or what the sea creatures used for medicine.

"Her will is weakening. You must go back to where the land-dwellers live. You must renounce your life there and return here and tell Merleau you love her. Nothing less will strengthen her will. Thus she will be healed and become whole again."

He stared at her closed eyes, those eyes that could be so seductive and so filled with mirth and playfulness. But how could he renounce all that was familiar to him? What would his future under the sea hold? What would his life on the New England coast be like without Merleau if he couldn't forsake his former life?

Josh had no idea how long he had been in Cerkania but he knew he had fallen in love with the beautiful mermaid who had shown him a new world.

"Go, my son," Lord Neckarian urged. "There isn't much time left."

The old man's use of the word 'son' startled him. "What do you mean by calling me your son?"

"Even the Old Ones must die," he said in a level voice. "I am near death and must find one who has

the courage, nobility of mind and unselfishness to continue the legacy I have created. Without renouncing your world, you will always be split in two, as Merleau was, and will not be able to live in good conscience in either world."

Tiny, the dolphin, weaved and chattered softly, nudging Josh with the tip of its nose.

"What will happen to Merleau if I forsake my world?"

Lord Neckarian chuckled. "She will be content. Why? Because you are at her side, loving her. That's all she's ever wanted. Not even I could give her that, although I tried."

So the old man had a heart after all. "How do I get back to my world?"

"This one time, if you will it, it shall occur. But only this once. Think carefully, my son, before you choose."

There was no choice for Josh. He had fallen in love with the seductive mermaid.

Epilogue

One stormy night in the year 1872, New Englanders claim, a monster of epic proportions rose from the tumultuous ocean, wrapped its arms around the lighthouse and heaved it in a fit of anger into the sea.

Others claimed the lighthouse had never been there to begin with and that tales of the sea and its monsters were intended to frighten bad children into behaving themselves.

As for Joshua Harding, he lives in Cerkania with his mermaid wife. He rules wisely with the other two Sea Lords, and with Merleau's help, occasionally appears to the land-dwellers to help them understand the ocean and the sea creatures. The seductive mermaid asks him every day if he regrets the choice he made. Every day, he tells her he loves her before he takes her in his arms and makes love to her.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aurora Rose Lynn lives in southern California with her husband and talking conure Star. She has written many short stories that have seen print in fantasy, science fiction, horror and mystery. Her mystery novel featuring private eye Cory Purchase received an Honorable Mention in the 1998 National Writer's Novel Writing Contest. Her first novel, *LITTLE NOTHINGS*, a contemporary romance, was published in April 2003. She is currently at work on a paranormal romance and a humorous fantasy.