

LOVE

LOTTERY

**Aurora
Rose Lynn**

**Book 2
in the Neptune
series**



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Chapter One

Iridescent seahorses glided by effortlessly in the turquoise blue ocean of the underwater kingdom of Cerkania. Tiny, the playful dolphin, attempted to upset Merleau, the seductive queen of mermaids, bumping into her from the side and bowling her over. Laughing, she turned around, hugged him and slapped a wet kiss on his blunt nose. Antenor watched the proceedings and wished he could return to his work. Wretchedly unhappy, he drew away from the edges of the small crowd cheering Merleau on.

“Why aren’t you joining in the fun?” Rian taunted, raising a thick golden-brown eyebrow.

“What do you care?” Antenor retorted sharply, suddenly desperate to get away from the gathering onlookers. He had few friends here. He knew that. Why had he thought he could come and at least share a laugh with one of the mermaids? The idea had been utter foolishness. He didn’t belong here.

“Now what makes you think I don’t care?” the other merman asked, assuming a mock fatherly tone. He was the archetype of the merman females chased after and feted on this special day. Antenor didn’t

have the bodybuilder physique his tormentor had. Normally, he wasn't bothered by that fact. Today, he felt left out and lonelier than usual. He shrugged, trying to make the gesture as careless as possible to throw Rian off.

Nude, the other merman puffed out his lightly furred chest and flexed his muscled biceps. "Everyone should have fun on Heart to Heart Day."

"That's your privilege," he said, keeping his voice low.

"Does that sound like a jibe?"

"You know very well I didn't intend it that way."

"So the little man can't have a bit of fun?"

Antenor gave him an ugly frown, not wanting to pick a fight but feeling he wouldn't have much choice if the other merman persisted in ridiculing him.

"Ah, look at that," Rian continued maliciously. "He's getting all wound up."

"I've got work to do," Antenor replied, repressing a shudder. He hated being waylaid by Rian who thought he knew what was best for everyone—as long as the knowledge served his own interests first.

Rian's arm snaked out and seized Antenor's forearm before he could march away. "Your jewelry business can wait. Look at all the mermaids who are looking your way with that hungry, sexual look. Why don't you come with me and we'll fix ourselves up with one or two?"

Antenor couldn't stomach the thought of sharing something so personal as sex with someone as reprehensible as Rian. "I told you. I've got work to do."

"Come off it, Anty. Loosen up a bit. There's always tomorrow for polishing those worthless stones of yours and stringing them together. Heck, you could give one of your charms to a lucky lady here and they'd be head over heels in love with you. Look at the pretty one with the luscious big breasts. Wouldn't you love to get under her fins?"

Antenor examined the mermaid. Her black hair flowed gently back and forth. She had outrageously large breasts and her hips were well-rounded. He wanted a mermaid, a companion who would be more than a one night stand. With his family name, he wasn't likely to ever get someone like that. His father had left an appalling legacy when he had been executed by the Cerkanian Lords ten years ago.

"So you don't want a little fun? That's a real shame."

"Why don't you go have some fun rather than taking what you think is fun out on me?" Antenor said, raising his voice.

Rian feigned an innocent expression. "Are you telling me that I'm trying to sport with you?"

A young mermaid swam by with a platter made of seashells. "Would you two bucks enjoy a fruit punch?" She winked invitingly at Antenor and gave him a wide, even-toothed smile as if attempting to lure him to her bed.

"No. Thanks." Antenor picked Rian's finger from his arm and swam away, feeling angry and unwanted although everyone, without exception, appeared to be in a party spirit. He wanted to get back to work, to forget the joy other mermen his age were

experiencing with the fair sex. Love wasn't meant for him, through no fault of his own. The goddess Netunia knew that.

"Uncle?"

Antenor stopped and weaved back and forth in the water in one place. "What's up, Denny?" brightening at the sight of the boy who had adopted him as his family. The boy wasn't more than five Cerkanian years old, but he had a maturity that was rare for his age. He was so much like his grandfather it brought tears to Antenor's eyes.

"Why does Cerkania celebrate Heart to Heart day?" The boy had a perpetual impish expression although he seldom played a practical joke. He was a scholar in the making.

Antenor canted his head to one side and watched a seahorse drift idly by, its translucent skin a hue of mingling rainbow colors. "I don't recall being told," he admitted. But he could make up a spontaneous story to appease the boy's hunger for knowledge.

"I thought you knew everything," Denny persisted, tossing a lock of coral-colored hair over his head and out of the way.

Antenor chuckled. The children brought out the best in him. Denny was a seeker, forever asking about things he didn't understand. "I never said that." He ruffled the boy's silky hair. "Are you having fun?"

"The girls are teasing me." He pouted.

"Why in the ocean would they do such a thing?"

"Because they're girls!" Denny said with a charming grimace.

"Why didn't I think of that? That gives them the

right to do all kinds of things, doesn't it?" he teased.

"No, it doesn't. Not because they're girls! Bleck!"

Antenor heartily agreed with the boy but he wouldn't say so out loud. He had learned the hard way that what he said to Denny came back to bite him in the fins in the form of his mother, Aleutia. She had a burr up her spine about being born a female—a fact of life she couldn't change. "I'm sure they'll learn as they get older not to tease you."

"You mean I have to wait that long?" the boy asked, making a face and sticking his tongue out. "But Pader said then I'll want to kiss the girls."

Antenor patted him on the head. Pader, Denny's older brother, had a way of telling the brutal truth that didn't jibe with his mother's sense of good taste and what should be said in the hearing of an innocent boy. "I'm sure the time will go by faster than you can imagine."

"But am I going to want to kiss girls when I get older? Bleck!"

Antenor shrugged. "Only if you want to but that won't be for a while yet."

"I want to be grown up like you."

The boy flew into his arms, nearly upsetting the fine balance Antenor anchored himself with. He didn't feel quite so alone when he was with Denny.

In the heat of the moment, the tall, athletic merman lifted the boy up in the water and twirled him around and around until they were both dizzy. He collapsed in the sand and Denny landed on top of him, squeezing the air from his lungs. "That's not that far away," Antenor heaved.

The boy's eyes circled in their sockets. "Who needs girls?"

"You're right. Who needs 'em?" Antenor mimicked, starting to swim off. He wanted to finish the lovely pearl necklace Josh, the third lord of Cerkania, had commissioned for Merleau, his wife.

"No. Wait, uncle! You didn't tell me about what Heart to Heart Day means," Denny shouted, swimming rapidly in front of Antenor to cut off his means of retreat.

"Well, let me see," Antenor said, positioning himself in the warm sand. He would have to finish the necklace after he satisfied the boy's inquisitiveness. "Once upon a time," he said, employing his deep storytelling voice.

"Is this story for girls?" Denny asked, perking to full attention. "I thought we agreed we don't like girls."

"This story is a special one. It's just for you." Antenor nodded sagely.

"Oh cool! Are you making it up?"

"Now why would I do a thing like that? Some stories are meant to be told only once and only to special people. Are you listening, or do I have to go back to work?"

"I'll listen, Antenor. I promise." The boy plunked himself in the sand and covered his fins with the fine grains.

"Good." Once again in his storytelling voice, Antenor began, "Once upon a time, the first merman in Cerkania found he was quite lonely. There was nothing but seahorses, and oysters, and starfish to

talk to." He noticed that the dolphin had left Merleau to her own devices and was listening intently as if he understood. "And dolphins too," Antenor added, to be on the safe side. Tiny usually played gently, but there were times when he made his displeasure known by being a menacing monster, albeit still good-humored. Antenor couldn't say for certain, but he thought Tiny smiled a dolphin smile.

Denny's eyes had become as large as starfish.

"His name was Hexter, and what he enjoyed more than anything else, was company. But seahorses and oysters, and starfish, and dolphins, of course, can only provide so much company. He got very lonely and decided to take a trip to the Upper Lands."

"No one can go there, though," Denny interrupted. "Merman can't swim on land."

"Normally, they can't, but sometimes the Lords of Cerkania give permission for a merman or a mermaid to transform into a human."

"What's a human?"

"They're the people who inhabit the Upper Lands. They don't have fins like we do and many of them can't swim."

"They can't swim? Why not? It's as natural as breathing."

"You have to understand that humans are principally land dwellers. They don't know the fine art of swimming but have to be taught at a very early age."

"Is that why Captain Black made the humans walk the long plank?"

"Well now, Denny, that's another story altogether,

but you have the right idea. Captain Black was a mad octopus who hated the idea that humans traversed the oceans in their small wooden ships so he thought to get rid of as many as possible."

"Oooh," the boy intoned. "You're in trouble." Denny wagged an index finger at his uncle.

"Why? What did I do now?"

"Mummy said you shouldn't use the word 'hate'."

Antenor decided the better part of valor was not to give in to a five-year-old boy who treated his mother like some sort of goddess. "Are you going to keep interrupting? If you are, I won't be able to finish my story before nightfall."

"But that's what Mummy said. I can't use words like hate, and swear words like —"

"That's enough!" Antenor roared. "I'm not allowed to use swear words either. So now can I continue?"

The boy shifted in the sand. Tears welled up in his eyes.

Antenor knew the tears were part of a child's ploy to win sympathy. "Come here," he said gently.

The boy climbed into his lap, the wetness in his dark brown eyes immediately part of history. "Is Captain Black still out on the oceans snagging humans?"

"Some say he is, but no one knows for sure. Anyhoo, Hexter, you know the —"

"The lonely first man of Cerkania," the boy shouted lightheartedly.

Antenor hugged him, loving his baby softness and how the boy had wrapped his arms around his neck. The boy obviously wanted to participate. "That's

right. He was so lonely he had to leave our beautiful kingdom and find a companion."

"A girl! Bleck!"

"Not just any girl. She was the goddess of all things beautiful, and all that live in the ocean. So when Hexter returned to Cerkania with her, he immediately declared there would be a Heart to Heart Day, a day to share goodwill to landlubbers—"

"You can't say that word, either!" Denny shouted, clamping his palms over his little ears.

Antenor pried his hands away and said, "That's actually what Captain Black would say. I meant to say land dwellers."

The boy nodded. "That's good. 'Cause I don't think Mummy would like you saying that word either."

Antenor worried his lower lip. "So Hexter declared that each Cerkanian year, there would be a day set aside to make peace with the land dwellers and also to make 1—," he thought better of using the expression 'make love' to a kid, and finished with, "make love cards and such."

Tiny nudged him from behind. Antenor glanced over his shoulder and found a whole host of Cerkanians observing him. Merleau winked, her face alight with enthusiasm.

Denny raised his head and peered over Antenor's shoulders too. "Um, Antenor, but do you think they haven't heard this story before?"

Josh eased along, his regal bearing every inch that of a Lord of Cerkania although he had been Upper Land born. "Son, don't worry about whether we've heard this version before. Antenor is very deft at

making things up."

"It's because he's got a good 'magination," Denny replied.

"That's part of it, Josh replied. "I have to interrupt, though. We came to tell Antenor that we drew a name out of the conch shell."

"Is that merman going to win a trip for two to the Upper Land?" Denny asked, bouncing up and down in Antenor's lap.

"It's a trip for one, actually. Can you guess who the lucky guy is?" Josh asked.

Denny shook his head. "No, I can't."

Antenor had a sinking feeling that he knew whose name had been drawn from the conch shell. Of all the names that could have been chosen, why did his have to come up first? He groaned before thunderous realization struck him. "I didn't put my name in the conch shell."

Rian stepped forward and smiled mischievously. "You didn't. But I did."

"Then my name should be disqualified," Antenor said, desperately trying to think of a way out of this mess.

Rian sidled up to him and whispered hoarsely, "Here's your chance to get out for good. Why not take it and vamoose?"

Antenor wanted to punch him in the nose but restrained himself. One day, Rian would get back the bad attitude he dished out.

Josh and Merleau smiled encouragingly. "It doesn't matter how your name got in the shell. The important thing is that your name was chosen. You should feel

privileged," Merleau said, her voice swirling like tinkling bells around him.

"He has to finish a present for you," Denny cut in. "That's why he can't go."

"That was supposed to be a secret, Denny," Antenor muttered hoarsely.

"Oops," the boy cried out, clamping a hand over his mouth.

"I assure you, I didn't hear a thing. Not a thing," Merleau said, all graciousness.

Antenor suddenly found himself wishing for a beautiful and elegant lady like Josh's wife. He doubted the Upper Land sported any woman quite as vivacious as she was. He gave Rian another ugly frown. One day, the bully would grow up. And one day, Antenor wholeheartedly hoped he would belong some place where he felt warm and loved and content.

* * *

"Why are you looking so glum?" Josh seemed to tower over everything in Antenor's cramped living area. The bedroom, bathroom and kitchen were each miniature to what most Cerkianians had. He didn't mind. He had enough space to create the jewelry he loved to make.

Antenor spared Josh a brief glance, although he felt as he was being spun around and merman-handled every which way the tailor could think of. "Can't you pick another name from the shell? The necklace you ordered for Merleau won't be ready in time for your

wedding anniversary if I'm sent off on some fool mission."

Josh didn't blink at his brutal honesty.

The tailor, a short-haired young merman apprentice whose mouth was filled with tiny silver pins, motioned for Antenor to turn ninety degrees. Antenor complied much like an automaton.

Antenor failed to understand Josh's look of utter belief until he grasped the fact that Josh had come from the Upper Lands and might be sensitive about disparaging comments that were made. "I apologize. I didn't mean it to sound as if I'm ungrateful but I—"

"Nonsense," Josh said, sweeping a broad hand through the beard he had acquired in the last two hundred years. From all accounts Antenor had heard, he looked as young as the day his wife Merleau had seduced him in a lighthouse and transported him to Cerkania. "It's quite an honor for a merman your age to transport to the Upper Lands." He sighed a wistful breath. "Sometimes I wish I could return, but the Upper Land is a much different place now than when I left. Besides, I would miss Merleau to no end."

"I know you would," Antenor said softly. Everyone knew the relationship between the older man and Merleau was a true love story. Everyone in Cerkania wanted a love just like that. But few found it. Antenor didn't for a second believe that he himself would find true love, but then he hardly believed in the concept. Disconsolately, his mother had watched as his father was executed. She had died within six months of a broken heart. Love was a notion made for tragedian plays, not for Cerkanians.

Rian entered the small fitting area as the tailor asked Antenor to circle again. A young mermaid with long blonde hair and tail fins that glittered a silvery gold, swam along beside him, holding onto his crooked elbow.

"What's up, Anty?" he asked, as mean-spirited as usual. From one instance to the next, Antenor couldn't anticipate what he would do.

Josh replied. "Antenor is rethinking his lucky fortune." Lowering his voice, he said to Antenor, "I've directed you be dropped off in a small town, similar to the one I grew up in. The humans are generally friendlier in those places, so you won't have too many problems acclimatizing to their customs and making friends."

Antenor thought better than to say he wasn't cut out to be an adventurer like Josh and Merleau. He liked his home despite his loneliness and didn't want to venture far away. But this time, he didn't have much of a choice. Tradition was tradition and Cerkadians placed a high value on them, regardless how meaningless they were. "What will happen to my fins?" he asked. Humans, he had been given to understand, didn't have any because they didn't spend much time in the water. Antenor couldn't comprehend that. Water was the source of life. Everything, no matter how small or large, grew from within the ocean. The very first amoeba had thrived and burgeoned into millions and humans had assuredly originated from the sea.

"I have pressing tasks demanding my attention," Josh said. "I must be on my way."

Antenor found himself appreciating the older man's taking time to encourage him on his voyage to the Upper Land. Neither of the other two Cerkanian leaders would have stooped to speaking to an underling. But Josh was different. He was more attuned to the kingdom and its multitude of inhabitants in a way that made Cerkanians look to him for guidance and leadership.

Antenor bowed his head in acknowledgment. "But what will happen to my fins?" he asked.

"I have a magick spell I'll use to make them disappear before you leave," Josh said.

"Won't that be an experience?" Rian gloated. "A merman without his tail fins?" The pretty mermaid tugged gently on his arm, discouraging him from making another petty comment.

"It's the truth," Rian finished. "A merman is nothing without his fins."

"Enough," Josh said in a freezing tone. "Merpeople are only one species on earth and I suggest you respect each of the other species."

Rian shrugged. "You're not part of the merpeople. Just because you married Merleau, that doesn't make you a merman."

Antenor gaped at Rian's rudeness. Josh was much respected and well loved by the people, regardless whether they were merpeople or not. "You're being intolerant and rude," he said with disdain.

"My work is still calling to me," Josh said in a level tone. To Rian, he said, "I'll caution you to be civil. It doesn't matter one way or another who is who in the kingdom. Everyone should be equally respected." He

left, his head held high.

"You're beginning to look like a fat penguin," Rian joked, not missing a beat.

"Beware, or your head won't remain on your shoulders long," Antenor growled.

"Like your father's?"

"Keep him out of this," Antenor snarled. "You have the gall to speak about a man you never knew." A man he only knew by reputation, and a bad one at that.

Rian grinned. The unpleasant sight made Antenor sick to his stomach. "Now, now. You know that's not true. Josh doesn't get mad like the other Cerkanian lords. He doesn't have as much power, I guess."

"I wouldn't say that," the tailor murmured.

"Who asked you?" Rian snapped.

"No one but you would do well to stay clear of him. What he lacks in magical powers he makes up for in with the love of his people. You shouldn't forget that."

"That's true, Rian. He's a man to watch. You don't want to make him angry," Antenor added.

Rian ignored him as if he hadn't spoken. "I brought Eva so she could give you a little comfort before you leave."

The tailor made a choking sound. A few pins slid out of his mouth and onto the hard-packed sand floor.

Antenor felt sorry for the fellow. "You know darn well I don't go in for that kinky stuff."

Rian shrugged. "You've always been such a stick in the mud." He whispered something into the mermaid's ear. She blinked, gave Antenor a coy

glance and smiled at him.

"I know what you're up to, Rian," Antenor said, once again turning. The suit, a muted navy blue that suited his tanned skin, made him feel as if his movements, no matter how basic, were restricted. He was used to being naked, his only adornment his glittering emerald green fins. What other adornment did a merman need?

"Yeah? What would I be up to?" the other merman asked. His eyes had become hard reflections.

"You're trying to make me angry so I won't enjoy my trip to the Upper Lands. It won't work."

"Maybe not but that doesn't alter the fact that you look like a penguin. What kind of human would fall in love with you?"

"I'm not going there to fall in love."

"That's what everyone says. Every time a merman is chosen for the Heart to Heart celebrations, he had every intention of falling in love, that love will strike him in the heart and gut."

"Why don't you take my ticket?"

"Why would I want to do that? I've got Eva here. She's all I need to make me happy and fulfill my needs. Since you don't want her," Rian said slyly.

"She's not a puppet to pull on a string."

Rian gave a smile that made Antenor shudder.

"You're all done," the tailor said from around the pins. "Here. Let me help you out." Very carefully, Antenor eased out of the jacket. Even so, a few pins scratched the skin along his shoulders blades. He hissed in a breath at the sharp pain.

The tailor got up from his knees and staggered

back a step into Antenor. Rian fondled Eva's breast and his lips were pressed against hers. "Excuse me." The tailor flung the jacket's material over his arm and rushed from the room, leaving Antenor staring at the couple.

"Can you two go over to one of your homes and get on with the hot stuff?" Antenor asked, hating to interrupt but not finding any alternative.

"Your house is as good as any," Rian muttered, now stroking Eva's breast with his tongue.

Antenor stomped off into his bedroom, thinking how insane Rian was acting.

Once in his bedroom, Antenor made a point of slamming the door shut with a heavy thud. Even so, he could hear Eva's eager, whispered encouragement as to where she wanted Rian's mouth. The walls of the small house were far too thin to block out the female moans and the male groans.

Pulling out a drawer in the chest near the bed, he slipped the necklace of precious gems out. He hoped Merleau would enjoy the pearls and diamonds and the hammered gold. Some pearls had yet to be polished to a higher sheen and Antenor hadn't yet finished the gold clasp.

However, it was impossible to work on Merleau's necklace. Instead, he found himself straining his ears for each sound of tortured pleasure. And his shaft bloomed to life, tormenting him into thinking that he would do best to do one of two things. Either leave the house entirely or join Eva and Rian. His bones refused to move, so he did the next best thing.

He grasped his cock in his right hand and started

pumping, picturing a sexy mermaid. She had covered herself up in a flimsy material that did little to cover her delightfully full breasts. He imagined the nameless woman stripping out of the gauzy material and kneeling in front of him, her eyes, gems of lapis lazuli, gazing into his. When she lowered her head, she took his straining cock between her silky, sugared lips, sucking on the honeyed glans. He bucked his hips and as he clenched his hand around his shaft, he dreamed of fixing his intent gaze on the mermaid, her head bent. Her mouth felt like fire along his stiffened length. That's when his self control ebbed away and he pumped harder. He held his breath and strained for release which came all too fast. He exploded in a rush of feeling and semen. His warm come spurted over his taut stomach and over his retracting balls. He rode the high, bit into his lower lip before he cried out. There was no name to call out. His mermaid remained nameless.

He slid his back against the cold chair back and tried to still his rushed breathing and his pounding heart. He felt content with the world, at peace with being alone. True love wasn't meant for him but for others. He had to remember that as he grew older and as he traveled in the world of the humans.

Chapter Two

The lunch hour crowd at the *Fortunes by Wanda* restaurant had dwindled to a few old-timers sipping their coffees in an effort to delay having to go home. Outside the large windows, the gray sky threatened a snowstorm.

"I'm taking a load off my feet," Kira Piros called out to Big Sam, the head, and only chef, at the late fifties style restaurant. He waved her off with a huge grin. She grabbed a Coke from the refrigerator case and popped the tab, toeing a portion of the black and white tiled floor with a white nursing shoe. "It's depressing without a little sunshine to warm a heart," she said offhandedly.

"Naw."

"The man never stops smiling no matter how bad his day is," Kira grumbled good-naturedly, moving onto her office. "It must have something to do with the fact that he isn't ruled by female hormones." She reached her office, collapsed in a wobbly chair behind a small writing desk littered with unpaid bills, menus and order requisitions. She yawned. The day was proving to be one of those long ones where the minutes dragged by as if they would never end.

She noticed how the waitress uniform she wore, a soft pink confection covered with a form-fitting, mini white apron, rode high up her thigh. "What a waste," she murmured. "Not much in the line of men here in a place aptly named Paradise."

She drank from the can, nudged an electricity bill aside and raised a Valentine cookie to her lips. It smelled of sugar and rum extract. 'Be My Valentine' glared back at her in happy dark rose letters. "Yeah, yeah, right." She bit into the cookie with a vengeance. A few more days to Valentine's. She was twenty-eight and without a prospect in sight.

"Hey, anybody home? Is the fortune teller in?" her sister, Lizabeth asked, sweeping aside the curtain of multi-colored beads and popping in. Her two-piece wool suit was cherry red, as were her high heels. The suit hugged her ultra thin curves. She never did anything understated. When she walked by on the street, everyone knew it. But that wasn't difficult to do in a town of sixteen hundred and thirty-two residents, adding a few dogs and cats into the mix.

"Not today. Fortune telling is on its way out, if you want to know." Sometimes, after the breakfast crowd departed but before the lunch crowd arrived, Kira told the older residents their fortunes.

"Don't be so down. Look at Sam out there. He's always in a good mood. Hell, his wife just left him."

"He didn't like his wife," Kira reminded her.

"Oh. Well, never mind about that," Bet said imperiously.

That was Bet right down to the bone. She never admitted she was wrong about anything. "Are you on

the way home?"

"It's cold today. Did you notice?" Elizabeth asked, surreptitiously eyeing Kira's thigh.

"I take it that you want to borrow my car to go home. Where's your Porsche?"

"You know how it is. The mechanic I took it to has to send it to Barstow for replacement parts." Bet seemed to go on the defensive. "And it's just my luck he doesn't have a replacement car."

Porsches were hard to come by in Paradise. If Kira remembered right, Bet had the only one. "Are you going to be able to make the transition to a less, um, muscled car?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

Kira held back a sigh. "Just don't forget to pick me up."

"Of course I won't! What do you take me for?"

"A sister with a challenged memory. You've only forgotten the last four times." Kira's thoughts returned to her fortune-telling. "I wonder why I can't tell my own fortune, grab myself a hunk."

"I can explain that. The first time—" Bet replied, ignoring her sister's last statement.

"I know! I know! You don't need to remind me. You had a hot date."

"It led to marriage, didn't it?" Elizabeth asked smugly.

"Sometimes I wish I could divorce you," Kira muttered.

"You can divorce your friends, but you can't divorce your family."

Kira sighed inwardly. Her younger sister would

never learn. "You can *choose* your friends."

"Oh. Well. I got it mostly right. Did you tell anyone's fortune today?"

"Everyone in Paradise knows pretty much what their future is. Grow up in a small town, get married in a small town, drop dead in a small town."

"I sense negative vibes coming from you," Lizabeth fanned the air towards Kira.

"Nothing of the sort. My feet are killing me in these new shoes. Pat at the shoe store said they're supposed to be comfortable." Kira found herself envying her sister for her ability to wear four-inch high heels. Kira preferred barefoot and naked but in the small town of Paradise, there was no way to go naked and not be found out. Dave Hoffsmeyer always closed his blinds when he vacuumed in the buff, but most everyone knew he did his housekeeping without a stitch of clothing. It was impossible to keep a secret in Paradise for long.

"Soak them in some Epsom salts. They'll be okay in no time. Did you have any strangers come in and ask to have their fortunes told?"

Strangers, any kind, were news in Paradise and always welcome. "Why the twenty questions?"

"It's not twenty, unless I ask the same one twenty times."

"Mrs. Ferenc came by." Kira set the Valentine cookie back on the plate, even though it sported front teeth marks. She toed her left shoe off. "I'm going to have to find another line of work. A more meaningful occupation."

Lizabeth gave her a deadpan stare. "Everyone is on

the search for more 'meaningful'."

"I mean as in making hundreds of thousands of dollars each month."

"You're teasing me, right?"

"Honest, how many times can I tell Mrs. Ferenc's fortune while old man Caruthers bellows for yet another cup of coffee?"

"You own the restaurant. You must make a small mint each month. What's your problem?" Elizabeth asked, taking a dainty white handkerchief from her purse. She dusted off a rickety folding chair before she sat down cautiously and rather primly.

"I don't make anywhere near a 'small mint' each month."

"Mrs. Ferenc pays you to tell her fortune, doesn't she?"

As if the two dollars each week or so would help Kira's financial situation any. "Sure she does, but how many times a week does she want to hear the same fortune? And then she gives pointed advice about how not to have sex."

"At sixty? What does she know about sex?"

"Look at Mom. She's been widowed for twenty years and now she's in the market again." Kira pushed the plate of cookies towards Elizabeth. "Want some?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I have to watch my figure. And I don't care for cookies that already have bite marks on them."

"Just pretend it's Halloween and a ghostie took a bite. And what do you mean that mom is in the market?" Kira smoothed the pantyhose along her

thigh.

"She's looking. For a man. You know. For some nookie."

"Me too. But I'm not having any success at the moment."

"Is Mrs. Ferenc out looking?"

"I wouldn't think so. She's been married four times. She divorced her first husband because he couldn't get it up, the second because he wouldn't leave her alone, the third because he was playing nookie with a younger chickie from next door, and the last, I guess his heart gave out. So no nookie for her."

"Or for him either," Bet said in an expressionless tone. She liked being called a household sanitation engineer, but didn't think of herself as a housewife.

"No kidding. And now that Mom's out looking, gosh, what's the world coming to? All anyone seems to want is nookie."

Lizabeth fiddled with the straps of her shiny black purse. "No, sis, it's not what everyone wants. It's what *you* want. You're projecting your feelings onto everyone else."

"Are you using that psychological mumbo-jumbo on me again?"

"That's how it is. When we want something, it seems like everyone and his brother wants it, too."

"Harumph," Kira managed. Maybe Bet had a point. "Is that like the time before you married Terrance and you wanted to get pregnant and you saw that everyone but you was pregnant?"

"Something like that. It didn't help that half my

grad class got married the same year. Everyone was sprouting babies. Anyway, let's not talk about me but about you. You got to get out more, sis. Got to go out and party party. You know what I mean?"

"That hasn't worked so far," Kira said a little petulantly, pulling her checkbook closer. She had bills and taxes to pay, a situation that was becoming more and more dire as Bet kept talking. If Kira couldn't have her dream man, what was the point of getting married? "I've been to every bar within a hundred mile radius and every picnic and barn raiser for the last three years, and nothing. Not even a nibble." And the bars were nothing to brag about either, with all the swirling smoke and the macho guys pawing her whenever they got the idea they were in love with her. That was until the beer wore off. Then they couldn't stand the sight of her.

"Are you thinking about your fantasy lover again?"

"Nope." Kira wasn't about to admit she was dreaming about a tall, athletic man with perfect pecs and flawlessly formed thighs, a man with hungry green eyes flecked with gold and one who had hair the color of varnished oak. She wouldn't settle for less.

"Are you sure? You have that dreamy sexpot look on your face again."

"Where else would I have it?" Kira got to her feet, unable to concentrate on the paperwork. She might as well help Sam and get some extra cleaning in. "I've got to get back to the restaurant."

"Why? Don't you own the place? You're allowed to

take some time off."

If I don't keep the restaurant going—"

"Don't worry so much, sis. The old guys like Caruthers will make sure the coffee pot is on."

"That doesn't keep a restaurant going."

"For the love of Pete. We're only talking about a few minutes. Not years and years."

"Did you say mom was making cabbage rolls for dinner?" Kira said, trying to change the subject.

"I said nothing of the sort. Don't you get enough to eat here?"

Kira's eyebrows notched up. "Do you mind explaining that?"

"Well, doesn't Big Sam feed you?"

"Only when I beg," Kira murmured. A blush heated her cheeks. She wasn't exactly thin, not like Elizabeth. She liked to call herself generously proportioned although she thought her breasts were a little too big. As were her hips. She blew out a breath. There wasn't much she could do about what the Big Guy Upstairs had given her. "So why did you drop in?" So unexpectedly.

"There's a new guy in town. I thought you might want to know about him."

"What would I like to know?"

"His eye color, whether he's tall, dark and handsome. What he does for a living. Whether he'll marry you. Stuff like that."

"And you're suddenly an expert on this guy?" She would never think of marrying a man she hadn't spent at least eight months getting to know. Sixteen months would be better.

"I wanted to give you a little push in his direction. Wouldn't hurt any."

"I don't need any more men in my life."

"Like you have a whole lot." Lizabeth snorted.

"I know you mean well, but can you lay off for a few minutes?"

Lizabeth looked taken aback. "I was only trying to help. He is handsome. Don't you have a crystal ball or something?"

"It's not doing me any good." The same one she used for her customers. Kira sighed. The thing didn't seem to predict the future at all.

"It's helping Mrs. Ferenc. She's tied up, you know."

"How do you know?"

"She's trying to get into Mr. Caruthers' pants. He just might make husband number five."

Kira shrugged. "All the more power to her."

"She seems to have a better attitude towards men than you do."

"You wouldn't be too hot on any dates if you had heard what I had when I was walking down the aisle."

"You never did say why you suddenly decided you didn't want to marry Ben. And you were dressed in your wedding gown, only a few feet from him at the altar."

"I overheard a whispered conversation. Two women were talking in the seats next to the aisle. One said that she was still in love with Ben and that he didn't mind sharing himself."

"You're kidding," Lizabeth said, clearly shocked.

"That wasn't all. The other woman said he liked fooling around and could easily do that since I was so 'simple'."

"Well now. I can't imagine that."

"I felt as if I was in some sort of conspiracy with these women talking about him like that. And to imagine I thought I loved him."

"Why didn't you confront him at the altar?"

"And make a spectacle of myself in front of my family and friends? It's not like Paradise will forget any time soon." The town's residents still hadn't stopped shaking their heads in astonishment. Days before the wedding, Mrs. Ferenc had predicted that it was only a matter of time before a bride left her man standing at the altar by his lonesome. It was just bound to happen.

"That was all of six months ago. It's time to get on with your life. Who knows, but with the new guy, you can make a fresh start."

Kira didn't care how many new guys came into town. She had made a mistake with Ben. No—she tried to soothe her hurt feelings—he had made a mistake. He had missed out on a good marriage with a faithful wife who wanted nookie here and there without sharing her husband with other women. "Okay. What gives?"

"Nothing."

"Just because you had one bad experience doesn't mean you'll have another."

"That's what I said about Tommy in the eighth grade. Since then I can't say how many bad experiences I've had. The last one being Ben. So you'll

excuse me if I'm not 'looking' right now." How Kira would have loved to murder Ben as he stood dressed in a black tuxedo in front of the altar laden with fragrant pink roses and baby's breath. But Paradise didn't condone murder, and she didn't have much heart to spend her life in a jail cell smaller than a cooking pot.

"You're a sourpuss." Elizabeth picked a piece of imaginary lint from her jacket. Her nails were painted the same cherry red as her suit. She was obviously a woman who kept herself all together. Of course, she had a rich husband and that allowed her to spend time on herself. The kind of time Kira didn't have. Kira made herself a silent bet that her hair was pronging out of her ponytail right about now and that she had a thread-thin run angling its way down the back of her pantyhose. Elizabeth never had a hair out of place, and never wore snagged nylons.

"I am not!"

"Are too!"

"Am not!"

"Ladies," Big Sam interrupted. "I can hear the two of you bickering in the restaurant."

His grin would have melted cheese, Kira thought, cringing. Elizabeth and she hadn't gotten along together when they were kids—not for more than two minutes—what made her think they would get along as adults?

Elizabeth patted her hair into place, although no strands stood awry. "Mom is making cabbage rolls. On Sunday," she said more quietly.

"You said that already."

"I did not."

"Did too."

"Now ladies, if you need a referee, I'm happy to oblige," Big Sam said, folding his arms across his bulky chest.

"We don't need one, Sam. Don't you have customers to attend to?" Elizabeth asked, looking over her shoulder and scrutinizing him.

"That's no way to talk to the sheriff," Kira said outraged.

"Naw," Sam replied, blowing a big bubble with the perpetual gum he chewed on.

"Who hired him anyway?" Elizabeth leaned forward.

"I did."

Big Sam inclined his head and wiped the bubble gum from the tip of his nose. "Yep. She's got good taste in men."

"She does?" Elizabeth asked, ogling him.

"In sheriffs, too," Big Sam went on.

"Both of you. Stop it," Kira intervened. Most everyone in Paradise had more than one job since the population was so small. Mr. Dryder was not only the proprietor of the Dryder Dry Goods Store, but also the mayor of Paradise. "You," she said, pointing a menacing finger at Sam. "Get back to work. Please."

"Slave drivers," he muttered but walked out obediently, his hips swaying.

Elizabeth gave an elegant shrug. "You better be careful. He might arrest you one day if he finds you're being mouthy."

"He keeps his gun at home. No need to worry on

that count."

"Have you made out with him yet? Maybe in one of the booths?"

"I what?" Kira couldn't believe her ears. Since when had her sister become so obsessed with sex?

"In the booth? You know? You're both naked, or close to that state."

Kira found herself blushing. She had never made out with Big Sam. He was single now, and apparently liked that non-matrimonial state after his disastrous marriage to Lulu, the barmaid, who happened to like dancing topless on the bar at all hours of the day and night.

"My apologies. You wouldn't know what nookie is like if it hit you in the head, would you?"

"Stop being catty, Bet. It doesn't look good on you."

Her sister harrumphed and tucked her camisole neatly under the bodice of her jacket. "When mom's cabbage rolls don't make your mouth water, then there's something up. What gives?"

Grateful for the change of subject, Kira confessed, "It's more like something down, Bet. I'm getting old. I don't have any prospects, not even on the horizon."

"Is that what your crystal ball says?"

"Fortune telling isn't for real. Everyone knows that." That was her secondary job in Paradise. Kira owned a family style restaurant and also told fortunes on the side. Her other job was quite in keeping with her Hungarian blood. At least her mother and Mrs. Ferenc liked to think so. Mrs. Ferenc liked to throw in that Kira must have some Gypsy blood too—she was

really super at telling fortunes.

Bet shrugged carelessly.

"I don't need a crystal ball to recognize a gut feeling. I'm going to spend the rest of my life without nookie, or at best looking forward to meaningless one night stands."

"Don't despair. Someone will come along. You just wait and see."

Kira shrugged listlessly. No one stuck around long in small towns like Paradise. The few jobs that were available were already taken. When tourists visited in the summer, they usually came to stay for short periods of time on the way from one point to another. So there wouldn't be much in the line of new men angling into town. If a new man arrived, Janelle, her old high school adversary, was sure to play her coquettish games with him. Men always fell for women like blonde-haired Janelle.

"Marriage will happen for you, just like it did for me," Elizabeth said reassuringly.

After Janelle was good and married. And that was after Kira got so old, she needed a walker to be able to get around. "Probably not until I'm too old to enjoy a little nookie. I'm going to find myself a real job. Like nursing. Maybe."

"That means four more years in school and we all know how much you hate books. And that also means finishing high school. Which means another two years before you go into nursing school. Besides, just because you're the oldest in the family and unmarried doesn't mean it should be a sign of shame. And what would you do with the restaurant?"

Kira flashed her a mock angry glance. "Sam would do a pretty good job running it."

"What happens if he has to run off and catch a bad guy?"

"I'm sure we could work things out. But right now, I don't have the money for school. And one more thing. Not everyone is lucky enough to marry a wealthy man like Terrance and I'm not ashamed to be a spinster."

"A spinster without nookie," Bet chimed in. "And I take exception to that."

It was Kira's turn to shrug.

"Besides, I didn't marry Terry for his money. He's terrific in bed. He's a dream come true for a hot-blooded gal like me."

That didn't surprise Kira. Her family had a reputation for being hot-blooded, both when it came to being bad-tempered and in bed. Except for her, that was. She had a reputation for walking down the aisle and ditching her husband-to-be.

"It's a sign of things to come," her sister said with self-assurance oozing from her pores. "Are you feeling a bit better now?"

After two near arguments and the threat of Big Sam intervening as a referee, Kira didn't think so. "No. I'm not. This is a small town, with a population of sixteen hundred and thirty-two people. Valentine's Day is coming up. That means while everyone has someone, I'll have no one."

"You're not the old maid in Paradise, sis. Janelle has that honor. She's a few weeks older than you."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Janelle

was the same age as Kira but pretty and blonde, of course, while she was a brunette. Men always went for the blondes rather than brunettes, especially if they weren't Hungarian and had their moms make cabbage rolls every Sunday to 'fatten' their daughters up a bit.

"It should. It means you're not alone in spinsterdom."

"Knowing my luck, this guy will get interested in me and then she'll grab him right from under my nose."

"Not if you punch her lights out."

Kira examined her sister's grinning face. "I love you, Bet, but sometimes you're a bit too violent for my taste." *And snobby*, she added silently.

"You gotta stand up for yourself, Kira. A woman can't let men walk all over her."

"There are no men in Paradise, let alone men walking on me," Kira muttered.

"You can't let women like Janelle walk all over you neither."

"I've grown up some since the fourth grade when she used to bully me, you know," Kira replied defiantly, swinging her ponytail over her shoulder. Although the fourth grade didn't seem all that far away when thinking about the pain that bully had inflicted, yanking on her ponytail in art class when their hands had been smeared in lacquer paints and stomping on her instep during gym class.

"You just keep that in mind when she comes looking to take your man."

"But I don't have a man. So she can have this

nonexistent man all she wants."

"You will. Honestly, it's only a matter of time. What man could resist a fortune teller for a wife?"

"I know of a couple. There's Ben Withersman, and Ron Misterly, and —"

"Okay, so I missed one or two."

"I guess I'm burned out, and suddenly Big Sam is not looking so bad after all." He was a bit tall at six and a half feet, and chunky, but he was goodhearted and always helped when she needed him.

"You could share him. That's fun. Sometimes."

"Sharing isn't my style."

"That's good. You remember that when Janelle comes knocking on your door."

"What's with this Janelle stuff?"

"Like I said, I saw the most delicious guy walking down the street today. You should grab him before Janelle does."

"If she hasn't already."

"She hasn't."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Easy. I asked." Bet primped her hair and looked too smug.

"You mean you walked up to him and said, 'Hey, new guy in town. Are you single? Has Janelle set her teeth in you yet?'"

"Something like that." Bet didn't look the least bit mortified.

"You've got some nerve!"

"Someone has to take care of your best interests."

So you just walked up to him? And he's a stranger?"

"Of course. I asked him if he had met Janelle Osterman yet. He looked genuinely puzzled which made me conclude that he's never heard of her before."

Kira shot to her feet. "You mean to say you didn't drag him in here?"

"I tried. But he said he was preoccupied."

"I can't believe you would do such a thing. You're making this all up, aren't you?"

"No. He'd be perfect for you. Tall. Very handsome. Very tanned. Everything you would want in a man."

Kira exploded. "When are you going to stop trying to decide what kind of man is best for me?"

"When you've got one," her sister replied haughtily.

"Didn't the idea ever enter your head that being married is about more than good looks?"

"Possibly."

"Finding the right man isn't that easy. I have certain attributes I look for before I accept a marriage proposal."

"Like you've accepted a slew of them."

Kira clenched her fists at her sides. "You're being catty again. When the perfect man comes along, he won't only look like a Greek god with an excellent physique, but he must also have other qualities."

"Just can't imagine what they would be," Elizabeth muttered.

"He'll have to be gentle, and kind, and funny, and not involved in conspiracies of any sort. He'll only love me and no one else. He'll have more to share with me than living in a small town can offer."

"That's the clincher, right? This guy has to be your ticket to get away from Paradise."

"Yes. And no. I mean, he'll have to like it here since everyone knows everyone else."

"What if he wants to move to the big city? You've never lived in one before. How would you manage?"

"I've been to Los Angeles. It wasn't that bad."

"Is that why you called Mom every day and told her how much you detested the place because it was so overcrowded and the traffic was congested at all hours of the day and night? How you couldn't wait to get home?"

"Okay. So I did that. Once."

"You're a small town girl, Kira. There isn't much that's going to change that."

Kira stomped out of her little office. The space had suddenly become a little more closed in than she liked.

Chapter Three

Antenor paused at the restaurant oddly named *Fortunes by Wanda*. The gray sky loomed over his head and threatened to dislodge more snow. He had picked his way around mud puddles and wet snow on the sidewalk. Occasionally in Cerkania, the calm was shattered with a tumultuous storm which made everyone burrow into the sand seeking safety. Cerkania was always bright and filled with life but in this town, he hadn't met anyone on the street although the stores on either side of the boulevard were lit to dispel the heavy gloom. The day couldn't get any worse, could it?

A woman who looked like murder on too-bright red high heels approached him. Keeping in mind what Josh had said about people in small towns being friendlier than in the large metropolises, Antenor waited for her to walk up and greet him. At least, that's what he thought the procedure should be. She glowered when she stepped into a puddle and splashed muddy water on the back of her legs.

She halted in front of him, gaudily dazzling his eyes with the harsh red she wore. Antenor preferred

the muted blues, light greens and pastel yellows he had grown up with. The color the woman wore wasn't part of the color wheel in Cerkania. The color grated on his nerves.

"Have you met Janelle Osterman yet?" she asked from behind lips painted the same flashy color as her outfit.

Antenor backed away. "I haven't actually met anyone here."

"Well now. You won't want to meet her. She's got a venereal disease, so you won't want to have sex with her unless you want to get the disease yourself."

Perplexed by the woman's words, he asked, "Why would I want to have sex with her?"

"Because everyone wants to," the woman snapped.

Janelle sure had to be special in order for everyone to want sex with her. He couldn't think of anyone with a reputation like that in Cerkania. "Do people in small towns always have sex with Janelle?" Maybe he was misunderstanding what a Janelle was. Janelle could be a toy, as so often was utilized during lovemaking where he came from.

"Well, in this small town they do. So you're well advised to keep away from her. She's up to no good."

More puzzled than before, he watched her walk away. Her hips seemed to jar from side to side rather than flow like the fluid movements of a swimming mermaid. It would take time to get used to the ways of humans. They appeared to be heavy limbed, as if the air provided an encumbrance to easy mobility.

That was the strangest conversation he had ever had. Why would he want to have sex with this Janelle

and why had Josh told him that small towns were friendlier than large ones? He certainly hadn't seen anything friendly about this woman in red.

His stomach gurgled, reminding him he had been too nervous to eat before he left Cerkania. Now was a good time to fortify himself—before the woman in red returned and gave him more advice he hadn't asked for.

He strode along the front of the restaurant, skirting huge puddles of wet snow mixed with mud and opened the glass door. A blast of warm air hit him, reminding him of the temperate temperatures of Cerkania. The Upper Land wasn't near as pretty or inviting as the kingdom of Cerkania was.

He seated himself midway between the back of the restaurant and the door and observed a big land dweller flipping some kind of pancake high into the air and whistling a tune Antenor didn't recognize.

A woman with hair colored like fine rum bustled out of a doorway located to one side of the kitchen, slipped a notepad into the pocket of her light pink uniform and headed towards him. Antenor sighed and rubbed his thumb along the silky material of his trousers. The soft color of the woman's very short uniform reminded him of the seashells he enjoyed. The woman was all long, silky thigh—which didn't help his testy frame of mind. He made the analogy that the woman was much like an attractive seashell, yearning to become a prize in a fine piece of jewelry. Did she wear such an indecently short dress to turn a man on? Why else would she wear it? He wanted to yank the material lower, to cover her beckoning

thighs.

"Good afternoon, sir," she said, reaching his table and sliding to a halt. A laminated menu appeared magically in front of him. She appeared to be breathless, as if she had been in a terrible hurry to get somewhere. She slipped the notepad from her pocket, and poised a short pencil, ready to write. "What can I get you today?" Her smile was soft and enticing and innocent. Soothing to his frayed nerves. Her eyes were the color of airbrushed chestnuts. She had high cheekbones and a perky nose.

"You wouldn't want to have sex with me, would you?"

The woman's mouth dropped open and her cheeks bloomed with rose blotches. "I beg your pardon?" Her voice was barely above a choked whisper.

He shifted slightly in his seat, uncomfortable with her strained expression. Perhaps she hadn't heard him the first time. "You wouldn't want to have sex with me, would you?" he repeated.

The man in the kitchen had stopped whistling and flipping pancakes. He leaned his burly elbows on the counter dividing the kitchen from the restaurant. A single, white plastic rose loomed from a glass container on the counter. The man's deep scowl told Antenor that something was wrong.

"When I asked what I can get for you," the waitress said in a huffy tone, "it wasn't an open invitation for anything under the sun. I confine my statement to what's on the menu. You know? The food we serve? If you have something else in mind, like sex, then you'll need to travel to Barstow down the road where

they have a house for men like you."

"For men like me? What do you mean?" All he wanted was food to fill his empty stomach. Hadn't the woman he had encountered on the street said everyone wanted to have sex with Janelle? The man behind the counter relaxed his bulky shoulders but continued to glare at Antenor.

"Do I have to spell it out for you?" the waitress asked, leaning one hand on her hip.

"Are you Janelle?" he ventured to ask, unsure of whether he was making progress with her. He didn't seem to be.

The woman heaved a deep sigh. "Why is it that every guy who comes in here asks for Janelle?" Her voice rose an octave. She shoved her notepad back into her pocket and slipped the pencil behind her ear.

"I was told to watch out for Janelle," he said meekly, realizing the woman was gravely irritated. And it was his fault.

"Now look here, whoever you are. You get your ass back out on the sidewalk and don't bother coming in here if all you can think about is sex. Got that?"

The man in the kitchen disappeared from sight but reappeared and ambled through a swinging door. "What's going on here?" he growled. One strap of his cook's apron was held to the broad apron itself with a safety pin. Under the apron, Antenor saw black sweat pants and a pair of scuffed black and white running shoes.

"Who might you be?" Antenor asked, looking the man full in the face. Really, all he wanted was to get something to eat. He couldn't fathom why Josh had

told him that people were friendly in small towns. They seemed to be hostile, without exception, from the woman who was blushing prettily and scowling to the beefy man who had folded his arms across his chest and whose face threatened black murder. His nose canted to one side suggesting he had had an encounter with someone's fist at one time and had ended up on the losing side.

"I'm the sheriff here in Paradise. You'd better get your mind out of the gutter or I'll haul you off to jail."

Antenor couldn't understand what he had said to make the man angry. If the woman on the street had warned him against having sex with Janelle, wasn't the prudent course of action to find out who she was? And what did this mean to get his mind out of the gutter? For oyster's sake, he was only watching out for himself!

Kira observed the stranger from under lowered lashes. His question had certainly been odd. If he was so desperate for nookie, then why hadn't he gone to Barstow where the local mayor and his council overlooked Fiona Hackwill's propensity to act as a lady of pleasure? When Mayor Dryder had called the Barstow mayor on the carpet about allowing a house of prostitution within Barstow's city limits, the mayor had replied, "I wouldn't call it a house of prostitution. And what gives you the right to determine what kind of business I allow in my town?"

One of the Barstow councilors tittered and Kira had plainly heard him say, "He's just not willing to admit that he utilizes Fiona's gracious services when his wife is looking the other way."

Kira shook herself free of the memory and pulled herself away from the leading males conflict between Paradise and Barstow and gazed at her customer. Her heart danced in her throat. He was so much like the man in her dreams, the man she would barter with the devil for. Good-looking men, however, never stepped out of dream fantasies and into real life. That happened only in the movies.

"I don't want to mess with the law," he said to Sam. "All I want is some food."

Sam shrugged. "Your gold is as good as the next man's. Just make sure not to hassle the lady here or else I'll make sure you spend a night or two in jail, courtesy of Paradise."

Kira read the apprehension in the man's green eyes, filled with tumultuous sparkles of raw gold. "Don't tell me you don't have any money?" she asked gently.

"I don't have any gold as the gentleman says," the man replied. "I won't be able to pay you for my dinner."

He was obviously from somewhere else. "I'll accept traveler's checks."

"I don't have any of those either." He shook his head from side to side, obviously confused. Or pretending to be.

Kira had the distinct feeling that he didn't know what a traveler's check was. "How are you paying for the goods and services you receive then? You have to have some method of payment, maybe even plastic."

"No. No plastic." More confusion registered in his eyes.

He looked so vulnerable and yet he appeared as masculine as the man in her dreams was. But he was real. What would his hard-muscled chest feel like under her questing fingertips?

He shifted in his seat and tugged on his tie with long, slim fingers. "I don't know how to pay for my meal."

"He's some kind of bum," Big Sam leaned forward and whispered in her ear. "Send him packing."

"But bums don't dress in the kind of tailored suit he's wearing," she whispered back, feeling utterly rude.

"I'm definitely not a bum," the man muttered, his eyes sparking with anger. "I'm simply unfamiliar with your customs. I don't think that's a crime." He glared at Sam and got to his feet, unfolding every inch of his lithe six feet. "Just because someone isn't like you, doesn't mean you have to label him a bum. Maybe try a bit of tolerance."

Big Sam's mouth gaped open in astonishment. He unfolded his arms and stood battle ready.

Uh-oh. War between the two men was imminent, Kira predicted. "You could always wash dishes to earn your meal," she blurted. The man had impeccable manners and a strength about him that was unusual in the men she knew. Ben couldn't compare with him at all.

"Dishes?" the stranger asked.

"Yup. It's either that or the jail cell," Big Sam said in his sheriff to prisoner voice.

"This guy," the customer asked Kira, turning his eyes on her, "he's not well versed in dealing with

prejudice, is he?"

"Oh, sometimes he enjoys playing the bad dude sheriff," she responded, looking at the sheriff. "Like in the westerns."

The man shook his head from side to side, as if he was trying to comprehend what she had said.

"I am not familiar with westerns."

"Don't worry. He's not carrying his gun," Kira said. "You can opt to wash dishes if you don't have money to pay for your meal."

"You're the boss," Sam rumbled with ill grace.

"Before this gets out of fin, do you serve seaweed soup with fresh oyster crackers?"

Kira blinked several times but Sam spoke before she could get over her astonishment. "We're fresh out since last night." He wiggled his eyebrows and all but circled his index finger around his ear to indicate that the stranger was quite possibly mental institution material. The customer observed him distastefully.

"Where exactly did you come from?" Kira asked, hoping to deflect the man's budding animosity. After all, tolerance went only so far.

"The kingdom of Cerkania." The man tugged on his conservative blue tie spotted with small red seahorses. A very unusual tie, Kira noticed.

"I've never heard of the place," Sam replied, shoving a hand in his pants pocket.

Kira couldn't understand why he was being so antagonistic towards someone he had just met. He wasn't acting like his normal, gentle self. The customer's picture wasn't hanging in Sam's office on a wanted poster, was it? "Me either," she said,

discovering that her curiosity had been piqued by her customer. "Could you tell us where it is? You must have come a very long distance."

"You haven't heard of Cerkania?"

Kira shook her head. Sam did nothing but stare, and she got the impression the big man was getting ready to call for the guys who carried the white straitjackets.

"It's under your ocean."

"There's nothing that lives there except a few nasty tempered octopuses, or are they called octopi? Never mind." Sam slapped Kira on the shoulder. "When he decides what kind of real food he wants, let me know. If he gives you any trouble, just yell Sheriff, and I'll come running."

She could handle this on her own. If Sam hadn't hauled her customer off to the pokey already, then he was most likely as safe as strangers came. Realizing she was lonely, Kira decided to have a little chat with the handsome man and angled herself into the seat opposite his. She rested her hands on the table and toyed with her fingers. "I'm having a really strange day," she began, her voice barely reaching the man. "I'm wondering if you can help me out."

"I'll try." Again the man jerked on his tie and finally, giving a sigh of frustration, he loosened the fabric. Pure bliss etched his features as if he was relieved to be free of the cloth noose. The action freed the column of his throat, showing off corded muscle. Kira found she couldn't swallow and wished desperately for a glass of water. The man was devastatingly attractive and she was already

beginning to respond to his charms.

"Are you all right?" he asked solicitously, placing his large hands on the table. Only a few inches separated them.

Why had she sat down with him? She could no longer remember exactly what the reason was and said, "I'm Kira Piros. My last name is Hungarian and means red. I don't have anything to do with Janelle except that I went to school with her. Seems like years and years ago," she said, shaking her head, trying to free herself of the memories suddenly flooding through her. "What's your name?"

"Antenor," the man replied, gazing into her eyes.

Heat coiled up into the pit of her stomach and down into her pussy. Whoa there! That hadn't happened in a long time, even prior to the traitorous Ben. "Just Antenor?" she asked, her voice squeaking in a way it hadn't before.

"Yes. That's my name."

"It's nothing like Hans Christian Andersen," she babbled, slapping herself mentally. How inane that sounded.

"That name would be far too long for Cerkonians to remember."

"So, where exactly is Cerkonia under the ocean?"

"It's a secret I'm bound on pain of death not to reveal."

"Why's that?"

"Cerkonians are a rather insular people. They don't care to have their kingdom overrun by land dwellers."

"Land dwellers?"

"Yes. Cerkonians call people like yourself land dwellers."

"I can appreciate that," Kira said, moving her hands closer to Antenor's. The discussion was fascinating and his imaginary world was clearly well developed. He was a struggling writer. That's why he was broke. "Do you have nicknames in Cerkonia?"

He nodded. His eyes sparkled with passion, whether for her or for his kingdom, she couldn't tell. She felt odd speaking to a stranger about what was most likely a fantasyland that only existed in his fertile imagination. He had to be a writer, so immersed in his world that he didn't know anything but to role play. "Is it all right if I call you Tony?"

"Sure." He laced his fingers together, tanned and strong. Each one of his unconscious actions was turning her on, making her feel helpless against his gravitational pull.

"I'm getting really turned on," she admitted, surprised and shocked at her body's reaction to this splendid man.

"What does this 'turned on' mean?" Antenor asked. Kira was an unusual and lovely name. And why hadn't Josh told him that he would need money? Or were the folded green papers in his wallet the Upper Land's currency? He didn't want to feel stupid in asking about this money thing. In Cerkonia, everyone bartered for what they needed for every day survival.

"You really do come from another country, don't you?"

"Your land, customs," especially the part about

Janelle enjoying sex, "and your speech are foreign." One thing that hadn't changed was how females displayed an interest in a male. This time, with Kira's lush, pouting lips smiling, he didn't mind. Her heavy-lidded chocolate eyes gazed into his. He saw the bridge between their worlds dissolve. He was a lusty male and she was a desirable female.

"Is your custom here to handfast before the, er, sexual act?" he asked. The Upper Land and Cerkania were two very different worlds. Females in the kingdom were not constrained from indulging in sexual pleasures but here that could be a different matter.

"Handfasting? That sounds old-fashioned, but I don't know what that means."

He took a deep breath. "I find you incomparable, so unlike the mermaids in Cerkania. I wish to bond with you but not if your custom demands that I pair with you to create a household."

Her smile was like dazzling sunshine peeking out from among chalk gray clouds on a rainy day. "Are you comparing me to a mermaid? That is so flattering." Her fingers inched closer to his.

"Yes. I'm comparing you to a mermaid. You are beautiful and kindhearted," he replied, wondering at the magnetic pull he felt to this land dweller.

"So this handfasting, if I understand you right, is much like marriage here."

He blinked, clearly puzzled.

"Marriage is a ceremony where a man and a woman decide they want to live together for the rest of their lives. I don't know what's the point. More

than half the marriages end in divorce after seven years."

"Divorce?" Tony's eyes took on a look of deep hurt and sadness. "Is that when they speak to one of the Lords and the handfasting is dissolved?"

"Yes, I think so." She was astounded by his knowledge of the Cerkanians. "Are you a writer, by any chance?"

"I'm a jewelry designer." He wondered if he should reach into his pocket and retrieve a singing seashell for her. Would she appreciate the gesture? Deciding she would enjoy the seashell, he fished in his hip pocket. His fingers closed around the ridged edges of the shell. "This is from Cerkania."

He placed it in his palm and waited for her to lift it to her ear.

"It's exquisite," she exclaimed, picking the multi-colored shell up daintily. She turned it one way and then another, examining the pale brown surface laced with speckles of gold and fine grains of peridot.

Gut feeling told him she might not know what special kind of seashell she held. "If you hold it up to your ear, it will sing for you."

Glancing at his face, she lifted the seashell to her ear and listened. "It's awesome. It sounds like harps and flutes mingling together with the ocean waves crashing."

Antenor had specially made the shell to sound as if the heavenly chorus was playing within. He had even found a means to cause it to vibrate lightly.

Kira laughed with delight. "It's beautiful! It's like listening to the angels singing."

His mouth fell open. How had she known what he had intended the shell to sound like? Cerkanians were of the belief that land dwellers couldn't hear the strains of ocean music, or that they were tone deaf to the mind-boggling beauty of the ocean and all that dwelled in its rich vastness. Kira heard the music, something he felt many others couldn't hear. His stomach rumbled with hunger.

Kira set the seashell on the middle of the table as if she had been burned. How could she forget that Tony had come into her restaurant to get a bite to eat? Instead, she was thinking of rolling in the hay with him. She was a businesswoman for heaven's sake, not a prostitute in Barstow.

She jumped to her feet, scraping her hip against the table but she repressed a shout of agonized pain. "What would you like to eat?" Flipping the menu open, she pointed at some words in the upper left hand corner. "Sam makes a pretty mean roast beef au jus sandwich. If you don't care for that," her finger slid down the page, "you might want a BLT." She felt self-conscious and clumsy.

He raised his eyes and seemed to analyze her face. "You're beautiful. I do hope you will choose to bond with me."

Kira blushed. "I don't know. What would you like Sam to get you?"

She desperately wanted to bond with him as well and his desire for a one night stand was evident. Berating herself, she wondered where her determination to avoid one night stands had gone. Hadn't she told Bet earlier that a man had to have

certain qualities, like a sense of humor and kindness, before she would consider him for marriage? Perhaps this once, she could put aside her quest for the perfect man and simply have some fun, have a little nookie on the side. There didn't have to be a sense of seriousness in any of what she did with Tony. Obviously, he was playing a role in one of his dramas. Why couldn't she play a role of her own with no strings attached?

He rose gracefully to his feet. Standing a head taller than she, he gazed into her eyes. "I want to eat you more than anything else."

She giggled. No man had ever spoken to her like that before since eating wasn't usually associated with sex. Was it?

She observed him from under hooded eyes. "You mean that? You're not just playing a game with me?"

He lifted his hand and tantalizingly stroked the slender column of her throat. "I don't know what this role playing is, but no, I'm not playing a game with you. I've never been so serious in my life."

Kira sighed inwardly. He looked so much like her dream man, from the tanned skin to the mahogany hair and his strong, lithe body. She wanted to melt into his arms and play the wanton but she knew Sam was watching her every movement and taking it upon himself to protect her. Although she didn't need protection. She could fend for herself.

She brushed her fingers against his rugged jaw sporting five o'clock shadow. "I want you, too," she whispered, reaching up on tiptoes to kiss his lips. He tasted of anise and cotton candy mixed together. His

lips opened in invitation. She plunged her tongue in his mouth, ravaging and plundering, tasting his sweetness. His arms wound around her waist and he pressed his body into hers, fitting hard planes against soft curves. She couldn't help herself, found her fingers raking through the fine hairs on the back of his neck. Her pussy was wet with yearning for his bulging shaft pressing against her stomach.

"What's going on here?" Sam bellowed a hair's breadth away.

Kira jumped and whirled around to face him, feeling inexplicably naughty. "What?" she flashed back at him.

"Do you two know each other?" the large man asked.

"Yes."

"No," Tony responded.

Sam crossed his arms over his chest and scowled. "So which is it?" he asked, glancing from one to other.

Tony pressed her upper arm lightly as if to say he would reply. "We know each other, but it's none of your business."

"Is that right?"

She had to deflect the threatening war again. "What Tony means to say, is that we know each other from high school. We were sweet on each other back then."

"Uh-huh," Sam said, his face becoming thunderous. "Why don't I believe that?"

"What?" Kira asked innocently. She rarely lied but this time the circumstances warranted it. Her pussy was in dire need of being satisfied. "You think I'm

going to make out with every Tom, Dick, Joe and Harry when they come in?"

"That did cross my mind. So what's his real name?"

"I already told you," Tony cut in. "Did you want to come outside and make a man of yourself?"

"I really think we ought to go home," Kira intervened.

"What's your mother going to think of a fruitcake like him?"

That posed a troubling question. Her mother wouldn't have any reason to recognize Tony since she had never met him before. What if Sam called her while she and Tony were on the way to her house? Sam would set the police on her for sure, thinking she had been blackmailed or kidnapped. She decided to risk the possibility that he might phone her mom. "Mom was hoping I'd marry him, actually. But things didn't turn out that way."

Behind her, Tony gave a strangled sound.

"So now the engagement's back on?" Sam queried.

"Your attitude is getting somewhat cumbersome, Sam," Kira said. Turning to Tony, she said, "Let me get my coat and purse and I'll be right back." To Sam, she said, "You behave yourself. You're acting meaner than a junkyard dog when there's no need to. If I get back, and one of Tony's hairs is out of place, I'll send you packing."

She stalked out but not before she saw Sam's murderous expression. "I'm warning you," she threw over her shoulder. "Not one hair out of place."

Grabbing her burgundy jacket and her tiny black

purse, she caught sight of the paperwork on her desk and sighed. Tomorrow she would have to buckle down and get it done. Today, she was going to allow herself a little fun. After all, it was close to Valentine's Day, and she didn't know when would be her next chance to date, or bond, with a handsome fellow who had walked into Paradise. No one ever came to the small town without a reason. Perhaps Tony was testing out his ready-made world of Cerkania and getting ready to put a book or two on the market. Heck, there might be no better way to get the marketing done but than to surprise unsuspecting people.

She rushed out into the restaurant and sighed with relief. Mr. Caruthers, a withered old man in his eighties, was talking to Tony as if he had known him all his life. Sam was back in the kitchen, banging pots and pans together and making quite a din. She rapped on the dividing counter loudly to get his attention and gave him her junkyard dog look.

"I can't help it," he said, strolling over and leaning close to her. "I worry about you. I don't think you know him from Adam, yet you're going out with him. He could be a murderer, or some kind of nut."

"That's only the sheriff in you talking," she said as soothingly as possible. "Sometimes a woman has an itch she's got to take care of. There's nothing wrong with that."

"As long as you call me every other hour. I think that will satisfy me."

Kira laughed. "You're beginning to talk like my papa."

"God rest his soul, but someone has to take care of you. Since I'm the sheriff in Paradise, it's my right to do so."

"What gives you that idea? I can take care of myself. You know that."

"Yeah, just like that night just before Christmas when you were out in the parking lot and some guy tried to nab your purse. Good thing, I was lurking in the shadows. Otherwise, he might have taken you too."

Kira squinted. "Why were you lurking in the shadows? I thought you had gone home already."

"I hadn't. I wanted to make sure you were all right once you locked up the restaurant."

"Are you lonely since your divorce from Lulu, Sam? Is this what all this is about?"

"Don't no old guy get some brew around here no more?" Mr. Caruthers called out in a thin, scratchy voice.

"I wish he'd learn to get it himself," Sam said in what were uncharitable words for him. "He practically lives here."

"Lonely?" Kira prompted, drumming her fingers impatiently on the counter. Was Sam trying to avoid her question?

"There's nothing to talk about, love," he replied. "Lulu wasn't the right woman for me. I knew that early on."

Kira felt instantly sorry for him. "Looks like you're in need of a Valentine miracle too." She turned to watch Tony who had his broad back to her. Her pussy was sure doing a number as she imagined his strong

fingers, currently resting alongside his muscular thigh, stroking her wet clit. She moaned.

"Are you hurting?" Sam asked, reaching out to touch her upper arm.

"No," she said out loud, but she was hurting. Hurting for Tony's touch and for his body next to hers.

Chapter Four

Kira pulled the car she had borrowed from Sam into the driveway of the old Colonial style house she shared with her mother, one sister, two brothers and various uncles and aunts, and cut the engine. Tony sat next to her, staring straight ahead.

"Are we there yet?" he asked.

"Yup. Listen, you don't like traveling in cars, do you?"

"I didn't think it showed that much," he admitted.

"No, not really, except for every time we reached an intersection and you yelled there was a car coming from the left and we were going to crash." His shouting wouldn't have been all that bad if he had done it only the once. But he had hollered in each of the five intersections they had traveled through.

"I couldn't help it," he said, facing her, appearing a little pale.

"It's probably a good thing you didn't eat at the restaurant."

"Why's that?" he asked, his skin a strange green color.

"Oh, because you'd have lost it, I think."

"Hmm," he said, fumbling to find the locking mechanism to get out of this contraption. Kira leaned over and across him, and pulled the door handle open. Every line in his magnificent body relaxed as he set his feet on the ground and lifted himself from the car. It would be a while before anyone could persuade him to get back inside.

The house was two stories tall and had more windows than he could shake an octopus at. Here and there, a light burned in one of the windows, making him feel strangely welcome. A bizarre looking person stood on the lawn with a carrot for a nose and what looked like two black candies for eyes. A red and green scarf had been wound around its neck.

"What's that?" he asked, hoping it didn't move. He didn't have a stingray to attack it with if it did. Even a piranha didn't look as scary as this thing did.

Kira gave him a searching look. "Aren't you taking this role playing thing a bit far?" She rounded the front of the faded blue car and stood beside him.

"I'm not sure what this role playing is. Will it bite if I try to get by him?"

She punched his upper arm lightly. "He, as you call him, isn't real. He's three balls of snow stacked on top of each other to form a snow man." She felt silly explaining what a snowman was. Every child knew what one was from a very early age.

"Oh," was all he could say. He pulled himself to his full height.

Maybe Sam was right, Kira thought. Tony could be mentally unstable, but how could that be possible? He

had a look of complete innocence and he examined everything with wonder.

The front door opened and Kira's mother strode out onto the steps. "Welcome," she said, in a thick Hungarian accent. "You must be Kira's new boyfriend."

Kira and Tony walked up the eight steps, bordered with cement blocks that in the summertime were filled with pansies, a flower Kira's mother adored.

He towered over the five foot two lady but bent and kissed her cheek. "I've heard a lot about you from your daughter, Mrs. Piros," he said, his voice pleasantly genuine.

Kira relaxed a fraction of an inch. So Sam had called but her mother hadn't taken that amiss. Her mother rarely thought bad about anyone. Sam could easily take lessons from her. "It is not every day my daughter come home with nice man, so you are welcome here."

Her mother was a terrific hostess. No one could refuse when she offered a second helping of her terrifically delicious food or a bedroom for the night 'because it was a long way home' even though the guest lived in the next block.

Tony grinned. "I always wished I had a mother like you. You're awesome."

Kira came to the conclusion that he was a lady charmer. She wasn't at all displeased by that. She was delighted that Tony and her mom had taken to each other without the usual abrasive, covert assessments parents gave their children's new partners.

"Please. You must come out of the cold. You are

not wearing much," her mother said to Tony.

Kira would have liked to see him wearing much less than his suit, but she was certain that would come later.

"There is dinner in the oven," Mrs. Piros said once they reached the toasty warm kitchen. "I am sure Kira will make nice hostess for you."

"Where are you headed?" Kira asked, pausing at the dining table which seated six.

"Mrs. Waloski's boy took ill, so I made him some herbal tea. It is time for flu, you know."

"I will come with you," Tony said, turning to the gray-haired lady. He felt at one with her—perhaps because she spoke with an accent and showed such hospitality towards him.

"No. There is no need," Mrs. Piros said, already trudging down the hallway and throwing a bright orange scarf around her neck.

Kira grabbed his arm, glad for the unintended respite her mother was giving them. "I know where Mrs. Waloski lives. We can go there later if you want to."

"At least let me give your mother this," Tony said, angling his hand into his pocket. He dug in his pocket and fished out the seashell. "Could you give this to the boy to listen to?" he asked, his voice gentle concern.

Mrs. Piros gave him a searching look before she took the shell and dropped it in the pocket of her navy blue jacket. "I will do that." She turned to Kira and gave a blatant wink. "Do not let this man go. This one has heart of gold." She adjusted Tony's lapel,

patted the material once and let herself out.

"She likes you," Kira said, holding onto his arm and leading him down the hallway and back into the kitchen. "I think she made chicken paprika. My favorite."

Tony observed her bend over and show off a very nicely rounded ass. He swallowed hard, suddenly finding it very warm. Once again, he tugged on his tie, trying to let off a bit of steam. He was hungry, but he also wanted this woman and now the war between his stomach and his cock was in full force. The thrumming in his veins won out. Food could wait till later.

He waited until she lifted a temptingly browned chicken in a rich creamy sauce from the oven and set the baking dish on the counter. Her hands were enveloped in large checkered oven mitts as he honed in on her. She smelled like a vanilla cookie, luring him to what would be certain and all-consuming pleasure. He prided himself on being always in control but this was different. Kira gazed at him with dark brown bedroom eyes. He made the mistake of roving down her body. Her nipples were taut, ripe buds against the clinging material of her uniform. His cock strained against the unfamiliar cloth of his pants.

"I really want to bond with you," he said simply.

"You mean you want to see me naked with my legs spread apart?" she murmured, smiling impishly.

"That, too." His mouth was so dry, he could hardly swallow. Was it going to be different making love to her than it was making love to a mermaid? She didn't appear to be self-conscious but reveled in her body.

Or had she been teasing him?

He closed the distance between them and felt her soft breath, a slight puff of heated air, on his throat. Her cheek was as silky as he had imagined it would be. He let his fingers trace her cheekbone and linger against the corner of her mouth. She curled her hand around his finger and slid it into her mouth and sucked intently on the tip, sending a thrill of excitement down his spine.

"You taste like the ocean," she said in an awed tone.

He chuckled. "And how exactly does the ocean taste?"

"A bit salty, and I can smell you. Your cologne smells like the ocean, briny, distinctive and haunting."

He nodded, slipping his hand down to her nylon-clad thigh closer to her pussy, to her feminine heat.

"I never quite thought of it before but the ocean is so huge." She imagined the snow-capped waves rolling back and forth and pounding insistently on the sandy shore in a never-ending and primeval rhythm.

"I didn't think land dwellers had an appreciation for it," he murmured against her ear. He stroked the crown of her ear with a hot tongue as he slid his hand under the hem of her uniform and to the vee between her legs.

"I've been to the ocean. Once. I stood on the shore and looked far out onto the horizon and couldn't imagine being all alone somewhere in the middle."

"You wouldn't have been alone," he whispered.

Kira remembered his tendency toward role playing

with his kingdom of Cerkania. A stranger man she had never met, she thought, even as his fingers burned through the thin cotton of her panties and along the rise of her mound. What impossible fantasies she was having. She sighed as she cradled Tony's face in her hands and lifted her yearning lips to his.

His mouth tasted salty and sweet and his masculine power overwhelmed her femininity. She had never made love in the kitchen before. Would Tony lift her up on the counter and slip off her panties to get to her throbbing pussy? His kiss was tender yet intense as their tongues met in the melody of passion. His hand fit perfectly against the crevice between her legs. He made the blood in her veins sing. All her thoughts retreated into a hazy background, lost in the adamant demands her body pleaded for.

His tongue felt like the finest velvet in her mouth and against her teeth. He pressed the full length of his body against hers, hard muscle to soft, yielding curves.

"You feel as if you were made for me," he murmured.

"I want more of you," she responded. Her nipples were tight beads and her pussy seeped cream.

A door slammed somewhere deep within the cavernous house. Heavy footsteps trudged down the hallway. "Hey Ma! What's for dinner?" Kira's younger brother, Johnny, called out in a much less accented voice than his mother's.

Tony immediately pulled away from her and leaped behind her, trying to cover the evidence of his

erection.

"Oh," Johnny said, coming to a sharp halt. "I didn't know we had company. When did you get home?" He was taller than his sister and had the same high cheekbones and dark hair. His expression was of mild curiosity and his eyes lingered on Tony's face.

"I got home early," Kira replied. Quickly she made an excuse, although every inch of her skin hummed from Tony's touch. What made Johnny's presence worse was that she could feel Tony's hard shaft at the back of her butt. "We were just getting dinner. Are you going to join us?"

"I've got a hot date tonight, but I'll take a beer instead."

Tony was surprised that Johnny didn't help himself to the beer. Kira straightened her shoulders and smoothed her skirt over her hips before she ambled to the almond-colored fridge and retrieved the beer. She twisted the cap off the bottle and handed it to Johnny. "There ya go. Anything else?"

Tony watched her brother's eyebrows notch up a fraction of an inch. "My, aren't you in a good mood today. Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

Kira hadn't forgotten about Tony and she supposed she was being rude in not wanting to share Tony right now but she relented. "Johnny, this is Antenor. He's new here."

"I'll say," Johnny replied. "What brings you to Paradise?"

"I'm just passing through," Tony replied in a shaky voice.

"On business?" Johnny asked, ever the curious brother.

"Johnny! You ask too many questions," Kira cut in. "Maybe Tony isn't up to answering them."

She heard a small titter from behind her. Johnny didn't seem to notice. "Well, I guess. How long are you staying in town?" he asked, directing his attention fully to Tony's face.

"I'm not sure," Tony replied evenly to Kira's relief.

Johnny tipped the bottle to his mouth and took a long drink. He licked his lips, apparently observing Tony with a calculating interest. "If you hurt my sister, I'll tar and feather you before I drag you through the middle of town, buck naked. Got that?"

"Johnny!" Kira cried out, outraged. "How can you talk to Tony like that? Mom never taught you that."

"I gotta take care of my sis," he said blandly, pivoting on heel and walking out with long strides.

"Hmm. I wonder what that was about," Kira muttered to herself.

"In Cerkania, we have a day called Heart to Heart where two people get together and make love. Do you have a day like that here?"

Kira decided to ignore Johnny's vigilant remark as she suspected Tony had done and bustled about getting a small meal prepared. "I think you mean Valentine's day. That's in a couple of days." She cut the chicken's wings and drumsticks off before she sliced the breast thinly the way she liked them.

"That smells good," Tony said, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist.

"Just be careful where you put your hands. I've got

a sharp knife," she teased.

"I'm sure you know how to handle it. Can I help?"

"You can sit yourself at the table," she said, pointing the butcher knife in the dining table's direction, "and get ready to eat."

He lifted the plate filled with chicken pieces and ambled to the table, but didn't seat himself. Kira looked good enough to eat and the memory of her pussy against his roaming hand made him rock hard again. He sighed. If they kept getting frustrated in their attempts to make love, this would be a long night indeed. He decided to concentrate on the meal, instead of Kira's breasts bobbing against her uniform, as if teasing him, and the long legs stemming from under her skirt. She kept her face as expressionless as possible as she took cooked noodles from the oven and set the bowls in the center of the table.

"I told you to sit," she admonished him.

Once he saw her haughty look, he obeyed and seated himself on the wooden chair.

"What would you like to drink? I've got beer, milk, or water. Oh, and some juice for the kids, but that stuff has more sugar in it than sugar itself."

"Water is good," Tony answered.

He examined her as she ran water from the tap into two tall glasses. His fingers itched to get under the pink uniform, to reach into her panties and travel over the tight curls of her mound and down below, between her labia. He ran his tongue over his lips. His erection was once more in evidence. The woman was going to make him insane with lust.

She placed a drumstick on his plate, heaped wide

noodles and the reddish sauce on the plate and set the dish in front of him. "Eat," she urged.

"What is this red sauce?" he asked, unused to eating Upper Land foods and hesitating to try.

"It's a sauce made from roux with paprika, or as the English people call it, red pepper." As she spoke, she served herself, sat and began eating. "I'm famished," she said with a full mouth.

What would it hurt to try the food? Cautiously, Tony lifted noodles covered in sauce to his mouth and tasted. His mouth exploded with flavor and heat. He hefted the glass of water and drank most of the liquid. "Wow!" was all he could say.

"Good, huh? My mom makes the best food. I wish I could cook as good."

"Yeah," he said, his mouth pleasantly on fire. Cerkianians normally didn't serve spicy food, but he found he enjoyed the sensation, along with the cooling water down his throat.

Another door opened and closed somewhere down the hallway. "Is anyone home?" Kira's mother called out.

Several voices responded with several variations of 'I'm home'.

"I didn't realize there were other people in the house," Tony said, his eyes widening to almost plate size.

Kira sighed and lifted a fork filled with chicken to her mouth. "I can't think of a time when I'm actually alone."

So there went his game plan of bonding with this tantalizing woman. He had heard at least three

different voices.

Kira's mother bustled in, heaving her jacket from her shoulders. Tiny crystal snowflakes melted against the dark blue fabric. "It is snowing again," she said. "You would think that there was enough snow this year."

"After Valentine's day, it shouldn't snow too much more. It will be spring before you know it," Kira suggested. She yearned to see green grass, tulips and daffodils pop up in profusion from the earth.

Mrs. Piros nodded and seated herself. "You forgot the green beans," she said, lifting herself up and heading towards the stove.

"It's no wonder I forgot," Kira murmured to Tony's delight. He was certain she had been referring to their tryst. The one that wasn't going to happen any time soon. Watching Kira drove him mad with desire. Watching her eat was so erotic, he couldn't feel but turned on and his cock had become rigid again. What would Kira's mother think if she knew what his thoughts were? If she were anything like the mothers in Cerkania, she would boot him out and give strict instructions never to come back.

"Are you enjoying your meal?" Mrs. Piros asked, rounding the table to Tony's side and heaping long green beans swimming in butter on his plate. "You must have more! You are too skinny!" Without asking him if he wanted more food, she served him another piece of chicken and more of the noodles covered in the zesty sauce.

"Don't worry," Kira said around a mouthful of noodles. "Mom says that about everyone."

"In my country," Tony said reflectively, "it is considered extremely rude when you visit not to eat everything that is placed on your plate."

"Oh! Just my kind of boy!" Mrs. Piros exclaimed, thumping his shoulder. "What country you come from?"

"Cerkania," Tony said, swallowing.

"It's somewhere in Russia," Kira added, winking.

"Oh? I never heard of place but that do not mean it is not existed."

Kira laughed. "Most people haven't. It's not exactly —"

Tony knew what she was going to say before she said so and cut her off. "Most people haven't been there because it's so hard to reach."

"That is terrible shame. Is it difficult for you to get out? Sometimes is the military that make it hard for good people to come and go." Her face had a wistful look.

"You miss being in your homeland?" Tony asked.

Once again he surprised Kira with his sensitivity to the nuances of what people said.

"Yes, even though all my family is here now. I miss mountains and Lake Balaton. It is where I grew up."

"I'm sorry. Perhaps you can visit someday?" Tony felt as if he was going to bust. The food had been spectacularly delicious.

"I have no reason to go home now. No family. What I have is only in memory," Mrs. Piros said, tapping her forehead. "I would go home and I would realize that everything is changed from when I was little girl. Only memories there now. Not the real

thing.”

Tony nodded understandingly. One day, when he was old, he would probably think the same way. Memories were often poignant and there was no way to return to the events that had created the memory.

“I forget!” Mrs. Piros slapped her forehead with the heel of her palm. “I mean to say that Mrs. Waloski’s boy is much better. I gave him seashell and you should see his face! It was as if he saw an angel from heaven. He did not even drink herbal tea I made for him but he is better right away! What did you put in seashell?”

Kira spluttered and almost spewed the water she had been drinking across the table. “I want to know, too,” she choked out.

“You no look good. Maybe you get bug that bit the Waloski boy, too. That not good.”

Long ago, Kira had given up trying to correct her mother’s broken English but for some reason, she couldn’t resist saying, “It is not a bug that bit Charlie. He’s got a bug.”

Tony smothered a smile with a cough.

“I do not see difference. Pardon me for speaking.” Grinning mischievously, Mrs. Piros pushed away from the table and got to her feet. “I cannot please everyone. I am old lady now and that is how I talk.”

“You’re doing just fine,” Tony intervened, reaching out to pat her arm. “You are much like my own mother was.”

“Was?” Kira and her mother said at the same time.

“Yes. My mother died when I was young. I almost don’t remember her.”

Kira felt instantly sorry for him. She had never known anything but a happy family life. Sometimes the house got a bit crowded but all in all, she enjoyed her family and their antics. She would much rather feel she was being hemmed in than be alone.

"That remind me. Do you stay in hotel?" Mrs. Piros' eyes fell on Tony. Kira got the impression that she already thought of him as a son. That wasn't a good idea. She only wanted a little nookie and she would move on in life. Valentine's Day made her think like that, but last year she had had Ben to play nookie with. This year, until Tony had come along, there was no one in Paradise she would have wanted to spend a night with.

"I don't even know what a hotel is," Tony replied, raking his fingers through his short hair as if something was troubling him.

Mrs. Piros burst out laughing. "You have excellent sense of humor. I like you."

Amused, Kira laughed along. Would Tony never give up his role playing? Wasn't he taking this a bit too seriously? It was only a novel after all, wasn't it?

"If you don't have a hotel lined up, I would really love if you stay with us."

Right up his ocean trench, Tony thought, a little piqued by Kira's amusement at his unfamiliarity with Upper Land words. From the context in which her mother had used the word, he gleaned that 'hotel' meant a place to stay while traveling. Perhaps, he and Kira could finally make love, uninterrupted by members of her family.

"You can have the spare room but I tell you that

Maritza she have her puzzle on floor and like to work on it. I will tell her not to disturb you though."

There went that idea. "I would like that. Thank you." Tony had hoped that a moment alone with Kira wouldn't be so hard to manage but it was turning out to be impossible. His cock hardened as he considered Kira naked, waiting for him to pleasure her silken body.

Mrs. Piros brimmed with delight. She tapped her daughter on the shoulder. "You are planning to hold onto him? If not, you need to rethink. He has wonderful manners. So perfect."

"But you only just met me, Mrs. Piros," Tony protested, although he felt he was wasting his time.

"You never mind," the old lady said. "You are miracle for Kira and for little Waloski boy. Now please to excuse me. I go read to Maritza before she get divorce from her grandmamma."

"Your mother reads?" Tony asked in a hushed and surprised tone. He couldn't fathom a lady speaking with such a heavy accent, yet being able to read.

"Maritza, she loves being read to, but mom reads to her in Hungarian, not English. Maritza feels more at home in that language."

"Can I ask a stupid question?"

Kira nodded as she ate the last bite of chicken from her plate.

"Who is Maritza?"

Kira set her fork down and wiped her mouth with a paper napkin that had little hearts swirled about on its surface. "Maritza is the neighbor's daughter. Ever since her parents took off for a vacation and never

returned, Mom has been taking care of her. She's only five."

Tony's heart thudded loudly in his chest. "You mean her parents abandoned her?" Anger flared to life.

"Yes. Mom found her one day close to Christmas last year. She was alone and crying."

"Your mom has a heart of gold. Is Maritza well now?"

"Mom is seeking to adopt her. We have lots to offer her. A stable family life, and lots of love. And she loves Mom to pieces."

"You're a lot like your mom. You take care of the people in your life."

Kira's cheeks splotted with pink. "You don't know me well," she protested.

He reached across the table and grasped her fingers in one big hand. "When I walked into your restaurant, I asked you if you wanted to have sex with me. You gave me the sting. Most Upper Landers don't have that kind of backbone."

"There you go living out your fantasy again," she murmured disapprovingly. "That's getting old. Can't you be yourself? Why do you have to hide behind make believe?"

"I'm not hiding behind anything," he stated simply, appealing to her with pleading eyes.

She shrugged. "If you say so." But she didn't believe him. Not for a moment. The man quite likely had an identity problem. He was a writer garnering more information for his fantasy kingdom of Cerkania and had trouble coping with the real world.

His hand felt firm and strong against her small fingers and once again, heat built up to fever pitch in her sheath. She swore she felt a trickle of cream edge out from between her legs.

"I'll show you to your room. That is, unless you've decided not to accept my mother's hospitality."

He rose with her. "I wouldn't hurt your mother's feelings for the ocean," he said.

Kira knew he meant it. There weren't that many people who could resist her mother's old world charms. With her fingers interlaced with his, Kira strolled down the hallway with him, past tall lush green ferns and a spotlessly clean living room with a few toys sprinkled on the beige carpet. The banister leading upstairs was quaint and richly carved. Their steps fell softly on the geometric carpet as they wound their way to a wide hallway flanked on either side with doors.

"You mean your family lives in each of these rooms?" he asked.

"There's a suite of rooms, actually, for each family member. For Johnny, for Maritza when she gets older, for Lizabeth, for Eric, mom, and me. Don't people in your Cerkania live in big households?" She ambled down the hallway past countless doors.

"Cerkonians don't normally live in large households. Quite possibly because most of them are so long lived that after a certain age, they simply prefer to live alone."

"Why that preference?" Kira asked, throwing open a paneled wood door.

He ogled the room with its plush velvet draperies,

a single bed, a comfortable wing-backed chair and a round end table. "I'm not sure. Cerkanians prefer their own company."

"Don't you guys party or anything?"

"Of course we do. I do not know how to say that we enjoy each other's company but not for long, especially if they're not of the opposite sex."

"Speaking of the opposite sex," Kira said, relieved they were finally alone, "I think we were starting something before Peter interrupted us."

He groaned as she partially closed the door and pressed her body against his. Her curves fit against his body, exactly as if she had been made for him. "Kiss me," she said, tilting her chin and gazing into his eyes. "Kiss me the way you did in the kitchen."

He couldn't control himself. Found his arms winding around her trim waist. One hand trailed down to the top of her ass and the other squeezed her against him.

"I'll kiss you if you do me a favor."

She blinked, momentarily taken aback. "Yes? Is it kinky?"

He shook his head at the word 'kinky'. He wasn't sure what it meant and didn't really want to find out. "Will you take your clothes off for me while I watch?"

Kira thrilled at the suggestion. She knew she blushed. What was the harm in stripping for him? After all, this was nothing more than a one-night stand, despite what her mother thought. She certainly wasn't going to marry a man who couldn't let down his hair even for one night.

"Will you?" he prompted.

"Yes but I want you to sit on the bed while I get out of my clothes." She felt almost like one of the Barstow women but then why not? Why not throw all inhibitions aside for the night? It would be her Valentine's day gift to herself.

He moved back and sat on the flowered comforter. "Okay. I'm ready," he said.

She noted his ear to ear grin and smiled, beginning to enjoy herself. She could be a little promiscuous tonight for this man who lived so much in his writer's world of Cerkania, which he claimed was under the ocean.

"Do you want me to start from the top or the bottom?"

"The top," he said, swallowing hard.

So he was looking forward to her strip tease. She chuckled and looked him in the eye. "Are you a breast or a pussy man?"

"All of the above."

He slid to his knees beside the bed. "Let me worship you."

Kira had never before felt so feminine, so powerful in a strictly female sense. She reached up under her uniform.

"No! From the top," he said, his voice tortured and low.

"I was getting there but these pantyhose are darn uncomfortable."

His mouth watered as she continued to reach up under the scanty pink uniform. He got a peek at the darkness of her pussy before she seized the top of the nylons and rolled them down her thighs to reveal

satiny skin. The nylons continued their path downwards, past her knees, her calves and down her ankles.

"Would you like to do anything to my toes?" she asked.

His mouth hung open, much like that of a pubescent teenager. "You've got legs," he muttered, wiping the back of his hand across his forehead.

"Most women do," she said, bantering.

"Mermaids have fins," he stated without inflection. "You don't. There's quite a bit of difference."

"You're role-playing again. Can't you stop even for a few minutes?" The pantyhose puddled to the floor in a small light coffee-colored heap.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered. "Like a pearl of the highest quality nestled on its iridescent background. Priceless. A captivating treasure."

Kira allowed her irritation to drain away. All she wanted was a bit of nookie to relieve her itch. After tomorrow, Tony would probably move on and forget all about her. At the moment, she was determined to enjoy herself. But his flattery made her feel as if she could fly.

A door opened and closed down the hallway. She held her breath. Would one of her family walk in inadvertently? It had been sheer foolishness to leave the door open the way she had but she wasn't going to interrupt the laid back mood that had enveloped her. Sex was like chocolate—one couldn't take a single bite but had to have more.

"Will your family walk in here?" Tony asked, seeming to read her thoughts.

"I don't think so. They have no reason to." Her eyes flicked to the partly open door and back to Tony before she remembered the puzzle.

"That's good." He slipped his arms out of the silk-lined jacket and allowed the material to fall behind him in a rich pile of darkest cobalt.

Kira raised her left foot and rubbed the back of her right ankle suggestively. A pack of cigarettes lay on the Persian rug next to a half finished puzzle of an eighteenth-century woman dressed in a stunning dark green velvet gown. The cigarettes meant that Johnny had probably been helping Maritza to put the pieces together. Knowing him, he was most likely to arrive and put the pieces together a few at a time as a form of relaxation and for something to do. Wasn't he supposed to be out with a hot date tonight? Kira fervently hoped so. She wouldn't want him witnessing her bare ass.

She watched as Tony's tongue darted out and licked his upper lip dry of the small beads of moisture. The man was a sexpot, regardless of whether he was a role-player in one of his novels. His short hair was mussed a bit from running her hands through its length. Her nipples perked to stiff attention, thrusting against the thin fabric of her uniform. The crotch of her white cotton panties were damp. She wanted this man; wanted every part of him.

Slowly, she reached behind her and began pulling down the zipper. The sound, a light rasping, was only interrupted by Tony's heavy labored breathing. His amber eyes flashed with appreciation. "More, more,"

he said, clapping his hand together with delight.

As the zipper traveled downwards, the bodice curled open around her shoulders. The zipper glided to a stop below her waist. The simple act had left her panting with sizzling desire. Tony angled forward on his knees, halting at her feet as if he honestly intended to worship her. "You are the queen of all women," he murmured, tilting his chin to gaze at her face.

Her lips parted. She felt decadently wanton as she sank to her knees facing him. His eyes adored her, tracing an indolent path from her face, down her exposed throat and to the place where her uniform peeled away from her shoulders.

As if she was a fragile goddess, he lifted his hands to her shoulders and stroked her shoulder blade with a lazy thumb, the movement intensely erotic and pleasing. His lips had opened and his breath was hot against her molten skin. Her aureoles pressed so tightly against her bra she felt they would poke a hole through the thin lace.

When he angled his arms around his back, trapping her body close to his, she leaned into him and nuzzled her lips against his cheek.

"Hmm," he whispered hoarsely.

Her tongue wandered further along his cheek and towards his moist lips. She nibbled on his lower lip before she pried his mouth open and teased her feverish tongue against his. Fire met burning need as his hands tingled along her spine in a downward journey, stopping at the base of her spine where he fanned his fingers across the span of the curve of her ass. He felt so right there but she wanted more of him,

and closer, their bodies matched in the dance of mating.

She pulled the material from her breasts and allowed it to pool around her midriff. Tony's light sigh reverberated around them. Kira placed her hand against his bulging shaft, wondering at the blatant hardness beneath her palm. Unbuckling his belt, she unfastened the button of his trousers at his waist and watched as the rosy tip of his cock burst past the elastic of his white briefs in a show of perfect glory. She smelled his essence and a pearlized drop of pre-come glistened on the tip of his glans.

With the pad of her thumb, she rubbed his juices around the mushroom cap. She swore her nipples were about to explode. Very slowly, she stripped the straps of her bra from her shoulders and down her arms. The elastic whispered down her hot flesh. She saw Tony swallow hard and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"You know you're making me harder, don't you?" he asked with an impish grin.

She nodded.

"And that whatever happens from here on in, that I can't stop it?"

"Why's that?" she asked with a wicked glint in her eyes.

"It's the way things are with mermen."

Kira chose to ignore his statement. No one believed in merpeople, which were only the stuff of legends. Her body didn't care if he was an ogre from a wicked wizard's castle. She wanted him with every fiber of her being. "I can't stop myself either. Reputedly,

Hungarians are hot-blooded and I'm one hundred percent the real thing."

She expected him to laugh at her little joke, but he didn't. His brows knit together, but she got no more of a reaction.

He bent lower over her chest and using his teeth, he drew the lace cup down over her right nipple, which sprang free, obviously with a life of its own. His tongue burned pleasurably against the tight bead as he suckled.

A sigh of pure enjoyment washed over her but caught in her throat as Tony spread his fingers wide on her belly and slipped his fingers past the slinky elastic waistband of her panties. He swept his hand through her damp curls and between her weeping folds.

A moan escaped her parched lips. She elongated her throat, permitting him to shadow kisses down the length of her throat and back down to her left nipple. Her breasts were naked and demanding his attention. Cupping her hands under his arms against the fine silk of his white shirt, she urged him up and bent to slip the black loafers from his feet. The black socks followed. As the thick cotton rolled off his toes, she reared back, gasping in shock.

"Your feet have webs between them," she managed with a croak.

"Yes. One of the lords of Cerkania magically removed my fins but he said that if he completely eliminated what makes me a merman, he wouldn't be able to undo his changing spell."

Astonishment made her heart pound. There had to

be a rational explanation for the small webs between his feet, which glistened in the rapidly waning late afternoon light. Not that there had been much in the first place, she thought absurdly. Darkness would fall quickly now.

"I know," she said, delighted she could think cogently even though his fingers pressed lightly against her ass cheeks. "You've painted them on to make them look real."

He shook his head from side to side. "I wish you would believe me. I'm not a writer, I'm not an actor and I really do come from the kingdom of Cerkania, which is under your ocean."

"Where? Exactly?" she asked, suddenly feeling as dry as a desert.

"I told you I can't tell you."

Kira's inner turmoil boiled to the surface. She wanted nookie. She believed acting wasn't too much of a problem for a writer but here was physical evidence that Tony might actually be what he claimed to be. A merman. "I don't believe this," she said out loud. "You're not real."

He sighed. "If I'm not real, then how can you feel my pole in your hand?" As he spoke, he grasped her hand and circled her palm against his hard shaft.

"I don't know," she breathed. Had her desire for nookie made her blind to the man she wanted to sleep with? She could have hit herself. Tony appeared to be so much like the man she had dreamed about for so many years, that she had thrown caution away. His cock felt hard enough in her hand. And real enough.

"I'm as real as you are."

"Then you're not joking about being from this place you call Cerkania?"

He shook his head from side to side.

"You really are a merman?"

He nodded, his eyes begging for understanding. He clasped her hands in his. "It doesn't make any difference, though. We're male and female and that's all that really counts."

She pursed her lips, unable to give credence to his words.

Antenor observed Kira's saddened expression and felt his heart go limp. He didn't know how or why but he had fallen head over fins over this woman. He had never met anyone quite like her. Feisty, intelligent, caring and so artlessly sensual.

She drew back, pulling the bodice of her uniform over her naked breasts. The desire for sexual fulfillment had vanished as completely as if it hadn't existed. "I have to think about this. You're welcome to stay the night, but I really do need to think." She got to her feet and strode out into the hallway.

Chapter Five

As Kira turned away, Tony didn't hesitate to notice the tears glistening in the depths of her eyes. Passionately, he wished he could return to Cerkania but until his thirty days—Cerkanian time—was up, he would not be able to transform back into a merman and resume his life in the ocean.

He clenched his fists into tight balls and swore an oath. He would stay the night as a guest, but in the morning he would be on his way out of Paradise.

He chuckled mirthlessly. Paradise wasn't quite living up to its name.

* * *

Kira marched to her room, threw open the door and made sure she slammed it shut once she was inside. How could she be so gullible and idiotic? Tony was most certainly a writer living out his fantasy of being a merman, although that didn't account for the webs between his toes. Had they been real? What baloney was he spewing about being a merman? He believed it, though. That's what bothered her the most.

She sighed. Standing at the window and looking down on the street usually helped soothe her raw nerves. Tonight, she found no peace.

A light snow had begun to fall. The streetlight gave everything under it a yellow sheen. In the house across the street, only one bluish light, probably that of a TV, burned in a lower room next to the street.

She had the uncomfortable feeling she had met her dream man, but not quite in the form she had expected. Could he truly be a merman from the kingdom of Cerkania, as he repeatedly claimed? Be careful what you wish for, she reminded herself, clutching the uniform against her breasts. If only wishes could come true. Were Tony and her dream man one and the same? She doubted it. This man had a multiple personality problem. Who would he pretend to be tomorrow?

The tears that had threatened to spill welled over, bathing her cheeks. She had hardly known Tony for more than a few hours but had she fallen in love with him? Why? She remembered the seashell and Mrs. Waloski's son listening, and being instantly cured of his cold. Was that coincidence? And look at how her mother reacted to him. As if he was the only man in the world who was just right for Kira. Her mother's approval wasn't that easy to receive. She had censured Ben ever before he proposed to Kira.

"There is just something about him that I cannot put my finger on," Mrs. Piros had stated flatly as she rolled out dough to make sugar cookies.

Kira resisted. "What makes you say that? What about saying something specific?"

"I cannot," the old lady said, waving the rolling pin around like a pointing device. "It is a feeling. Nothing more."

Kira sighed. "The one man I want to marry and you're vetoing him."

"You make me sound like I am President."

Kira grinned. "Of course you are, Mom. Right here in the Piros household."

"That is good enough for me," her mother said, returning to her task.

Kira pinched off a bit of the creamy-colored dough. Her mother playfully slapped her hand. "You wait until it is cooked." Her eyes sparkled.

"See? Your cookies are so good, I can't wait for you to bake them."

"I remember when you were little. I used to make chocolate cake and you cried until I set the bowl down in front of you after I poured the batter into the cake pan. You used to take the wooden spoon to scoop out every last bit. When you were finished with that, then you licked the spoon dry. I did not have to wash dishes after."

Kira laughed with delight. "Really? I did that? But you did wash the dishes afterwards, didn't you?"

"Of course, *lanyom*. When was the last time you saw me put dirty dishes back into the cupboard?" Mrs. Piros had taken shaped cookie cutters and was diligently setting them to the dough.

"You haven't called me 'my girl' in a long time. Are you being a little melancholy today?"

"I miss your papa. Some days are worse than others. Today is very bad."

Kira knew how much her mother and father had been in love. She missed her father, too.

"He worked hard to support his growing family after we got married," Mrs. Piros continued, battling away a threatening tear. "Often, he have two jobs and do not come home until late at night. He eat and go to sleep and next morning, come four o'clock, he was back at work. He was good man."

Kira remembered how often, her father would come late at night in to her bedroom and give her a soft goodnight kiss on her cheek. Even after two years, the family missed him sorely.

"That is what I wish for you. That you marry good man. Not all men equal. Some are so-so, some are okay, some are great and some melt your aprons off. So, you ask, and I tell you, but Ben is only so-so. You do not want to marry him."

Kira drew away from the memories and the window. But here was her mother greatly pleased with Tony even though she had met him for the first time this afternoon. In the simple act of allowing Tony to kiss her cheek in greeting, she had accepted him without interrogating him as she usually did with Kira's other boyfriends. Ben had been a mistake. Her mother had told her right from the start. Now she had given her seal of approval to Tony, but what if she knew what kind of person he was? That he was a writer with an all too vivid imagination and that he had even created webs between his toes to simulate a merman? What would her mother think of him then? Something was wrong somewhere but Kira couldn't put her finger on what it was.

Maybe a good night's sleep would vanquish the seething doubts. Perhaps she wouldn't be so exhausted as she was now. Maybe the morning light would demonstrate to her that her fears about Tony were unwarranted. After all, writers were permitted to research and play the roles of their characters in their books.

As she fell asleep, she heard Maritza run down the hallway, shrieking with laughter. Kira envisioned the little girl with her long hair tied up in two pigtails with long bright ribbons and Mrs. Piros flying after her. As Kira's eyes closed, she fell into a hazy slumber and dreamed of her man with the green eyes filled with amber.

Chapter Six

The next morning, Kira awoke to the chirping of chickadees who had found a place to call home outside her window in the pine tree beginning its climb towards the sky. Sunlight filtered through the lace curtains, drenching the carpet at the foot of her bed. Her uniform had wrapped around her waist. She shucked it off and onto the floor. As soon as she stuck her hand out from under the quilted comforter, she shivered from cold.

“Brrr,” she managed from between chattering teeth. She had forgotten to raise the electric heater last night when she had rushed into the room. The thermostat seemed so very far away. She could make a dash for it, turn the knob up and dash back to bed until the room warmed up. She envied the chickadees the ability to keep warm in the glittering cold.

Kira opted to hurry and flip the thermostat on. As she rushed back to bed and covered herself, a light knock echoed on her door. “Enter the cold, if you dare,” she called out.

Maritza entered, hugging her doll against her chest. “The big man from your restaurant called. He

asked if you were dead," she said, her dark eyes going wide.

Kira patted the bed beside her. "Here. Climb in with me until we get warm." She helped the little girl into the large bed and made sure she was completely covered. Maritza seemed to get lost under all the blankets and the hefty comforter.

"What did that man mean?"

Shrugging, Kira replied, "He just wanted to make sure I got to work on time."

"Why?"

"So I could get to work."

"Why?"

Kira smiled indulgently. Apparently Maritza was going through the asking 'why' stage of her life, as every child did. "If I don't get to work, I won't make any money to keep the restaurant open. If I don't keep the restaurant open, then Sam will lose his job."

"Why?"

"Honey, I wish I knew all the answers to your questions, but I don't." Fondly, she patted the questioning girl's arm.

"How come Mrs. Piyos knows everything?"

Kira repressed a smile by pretending to yawn. The child couldn't get any cuter, pronouncing the last name not with an 'r' but with a 'y'. "I'm not sure she knows everything."

"She told me this morning she does."

"I can't imagine why." Although Kira had a good idea. It was Mrs. Piros' way of getting Maritza to stop asking 'why'. *Wise tactic*, she thought with a touch of humor.

"Uncle Tony made coffee for me, too."

That got Kira's undivided attention. "He did what?"

"Mrs. Piyos says you've got the hots for him," the child carried on.

Kira sighed. "I don't think Mom should be telling you that."

"Why? Is it a secret?"

"Not in this instance," Kira said softly. "Where is Mrs. Piyos now?" The room had warmed up enough to get in the shower and find a clean uniform.

"She's talking to the merman."

Once again the child received Kira's consideration. "A merman?" she asked incredulously.

"Oh yes. He's the real thing. I saw."

Tony's role-playing for his novel was getting out of hand but this time with a child who would get hurt once he finished his game. "And he made you coffee?" she asked in disbelief.

"He never made it before. I helped him 'cause Mrs. Piyos was still sleeping."

"She was, huh?" Kira smelled a setup. Her mother was always up with the dawn. She was a great believer in the proverbial early bird caught the worm.

"I think we're going to have a talk with your merman."

"You will?" Maritza asked, her face flushing with excitement.

"Yes." Kira jumped out of bed. She pulled on her velour bathrobe and marched into the hallway. Her feet were bare, but she was too angry to care.

"Is there going to be war?" Maritza asked, running

along behind her.

"You bet."

"Why?"

"Because I think it's a good idea."

"Is Mrs. Piyos in trouble too?"

Kira hurtled down the steps, taking them two at a time. "No, she's not."

She found her target in the kitchen, sitting at the table with a newspaper spread out in front of him. He wore one of Johnny's flannel pajamas. Had he charmed her pig-headed brother like he had her mother?

"Would you like a cup of coffee, too?" he asked, taking in her disheveled appearance. Her bathrobe, a soft pink which complemented the brown of her eyes, was precariously held together by the slimmest of knots and teetered off her shoulders. The long tresses of her hair were mussed and her eyes were dreamy with sleep.

"No, I don't want a cup of coffee," Kira said, her voice thin with ill-concealed anger. "What do you think you're doing?"

He affected the most innocent look he could manage—which wasn't that difficult, since he didn't have a clue what she was talking about. "What was I doing?" he asked politely. He wanted to kiss this attractive woman senseless, not spar words with her.

Maritza climbed into his lap and seated herself facing him. "Can you tell more merman stories, please?"

Kira circled the table and reached out for the little girl who drew back. "I want to hear more stories,"

Maritza insisted with a little pout.

"I'll tell you what. Why don't you run and see what Mrs. Piros is doing and see if she needs any help?"

Maritza shook her head. "I don't want to."

"Remember our little secret?" he continued. The child was a delight, inquisitive and sensitive. Since dawn, he had told her about his home and the kingdom of Cerkania. Fascinated, she had listened, occasionally asking questions that made him homesick. He had opted to stay at the Piros home until after breakfast, after which he would leave the place that had felt more home to him than his own had.

"You promise?" the child asked.

"I promise," he replied with a hasty wink. He wanted to give Kira a chance to explode in private without the little girl present for whatever misdemeanor he had supposedly committed.

Maritza climbed off his lap, started to run out but turned back to Kira and halted. "He's awesome, Auntie Kira. He's for real, too!" Then she was gone in a flurry of bubbling excitement.

A tense silence fell in the room. A clock on the wall nearest the table, ticked away, heralding doomsday.

"How can you tell Maritza stories that simply aren't true? You're not a merman any more than I'm a mermaid."

Tony shrugged nonchalantly, which seemed to make her angrier. "I'm only telling the truth."

"Look," she said, placing tightly clenched fists on her hips in what she hoped was a menacing stance.

"Your little joke wore thin. If you're having an identity crisis, that's not my or my family's problem. Why can't you admit you're a writer and get on with life? Why do you have to think that everyone else wants to play your little role playing game along with you?"

"Are you finished?" he asked, getting to his feet.

"Oh, goodness," she muttered. The last thing she needed was to realize how scrumptious he looked with the upper buttons of his pajamas unfastened to reveal an enticingly hairy chest. A chest that women wouldn't be able to stop running their fingers through.

"What's wrong? Are you ill?" he asked solicitously.

Her cheeks grew fevered. She wanted him so badly. Every pore in her body demanded his caress. Why on earth had she rushed down the stairs? She fought to remember. Oh yes. She wanted to kill him.

"Did you borrow those?" she asked, pointing at the pajamas. Unfortunately, the direction was a bit lower than she had intended. Her gaze followed her finger. "Oh, goodness," she murmured again.

"Are you sure you're not ill?"

"No." The man's cock was engorged and straining at the pajama's fabric. His cock pulsed madly. "Why don't you just stop it?" she cried out, deliriously desiring him. He went beyond outrageously sexy.

"Can't you forget about whatever's eating you and make love to me?" he begged.

Her eyes lingered on his face, on the strong lines of his jaw and the beard growth ridged along its curved length. A trickle of cream edged down along the

inside of her thighs. Why did she care if he spewed silly stories of nonexistent mermen to Maritza? Children loved to listen to tall tales—the taller the better. “I can’t,” she whispered. That was her mind speaking rationally but her body didn’t want rational. Her body wanted hot and frenzied and passionate lovemaking.

He stood an arm’s length away. Her eyes flicked down to his throbbing cock. “Why are you doing this to me?” The words were a shuddering groan. She felt as if she was under his mesmerizing spell and she had no willpower to step away from its influence.

He closed the distance between them and pressed his body to hers. “Is this what you’re resisting?”

His cock pounded against her thighs. Her nipples had become tiny diamond points and her vagina throbbed delicately in expectation.

He slipped the robe off her shoulders. She found no strength of will to stop the velour from dripping down her arms and onto the floor where the material pooled around her bare feet. And she stood helplessly as he peeled her bra away, exposing her aching, full breasts.

“The moment I laid eyes on you, I wanted you,” he said softly. “There’s something about you I find irresistible.”

His words rasped against her ear as he trailed a languid tongue down her cheek and to her lips, where he pried the smooth flesh apart. Kira finally reacted and opened her mouth to welcome his silky tongue into its other home. He kneaded her breasts and rolled the cinnamon aureoles. She groaned in ecstasy.

His touch was lovingly tender but fire sparked along her heated skin.

He shimmied her panties off, circled his hands around her waist and lifted her onto the table. The edge of the newspaper he had been reading crinkled against the pliant skin of her ass. Her arms wound around his neck, in a tenacious hold. Her thighs fell apart of their own volition.

He dropped his pajama bottoms and his cock stood straight at military attention, wavering towards her pussy. She felt the pad of his thumb against her weeping clit, rubbing and maddeningly arousing her beyond fever pitch.

"Make love to me," she whispered, hanging onto him.

He chuckled softly. "My land pearl," he murmured, lifting his finger to his mouth and sucking tantalizingly on her juices. Her eyes had gone heavy lidded and her lashes feathered her cheeks.

"Don't torture me anymore," she beseeched. "Fuck me."

Again he laughed but the sound was harsher now, as if he too, could no longer wait. He spread her lips apart and placed the tip of his pulsing cock at her entrance. Slowly, he drove himself into her tight sheath, groaning, softly muttering unintelligible words. Her nails bit into his upper back but he didn't care. He had only one purpose now and that was to see her climax.

A door closed somewhere in the house. Kira gasped. Of all the places to give rein to their lust, why did it have to be the kitchen table in an extremely

public area of the house? But she was beyond caring, with Tony's shaft lodged in her sheath. She held her breath, waiting for him to move. His pulse pounded relentlessly against the walls of her vagina. She raked his nails down his back along his knobby spine and that was all the catalyst he seemed to need.

Her blood heated in her veins as he slid in and out, slowly at first, then faster. She rocked her hips in time with his thrusting. Excruciating pressure mounted in her pussy.

Footsteps echoed on the carpet, halted and continued on. She drew a sigh of momentary relief but her mind no longer cared who saw her. She was at one with Tony. And that was all she wanted.

Her orgasm hit hard and swift. She buried her head against the soft place between his shoulder and neck and cried out. As soon as her spasm began, he too went over the edge. The tendons in his neck became rigid, corded muscles and he thrust one last time so hard, she thought she would break. Her climax built again so quickly, her pussy clenched about him just as he came in an explosion of heated sigh and merged bodies.

She rocked with him as their hearts beat frantically in unison and their breaths came in short, ragged gasps.

"I love you," he whispered against her ear. "You're all I could ever want."

Kira heard Maritza laugh somewhere. It could have been in the living room or Mrs. Piros' room on the second floor above the kitchen, but she couldn't tell for certain.

Wobbling a little, Tony retrieved her robe from the floor and helped Kira into it. He handed her the discarded panties and bra with an impish smile. "I've never done it before on a table."

She kissed his cheek. "Necessity is the mother of invention, but don't you think you should pull up your pants before someone sees your gun?"

He gave her a guileless look. "My gun? I'm not carrying a weapon."

She nodded at his near flaccid cock. "That's your gun. And a mighty fine weapon it is, too."

He looked down at his nakedness. "Sorry. I forgot. Cerkanians don't normally wear anything in the line of clothes."

"Well? Are you going to pull your pants up or do you want my mother to walk in and see us in this compromising situation?"

He made a small sound of irritation but pulled up the pajama bottoms. Just in time. Mrs. Piros strolled in. She normally didn't make any noise but today she was humming a cheerful tune and gave the pair a huge smile...almost as if she knew what they had been up to.

Chapter Seven

Kira took a long hot shower and wondered at herself. She had never made out in a public place before. Instead of turning her off, the thought excited her. She wished Tony had been under the hot spray of water with her. His long fingers would have been put to good use on her clit.

Reluctantly, she turned the shower off and rubbed herself dry. Her skin turned pink. She remembered Tony's pulsing cock inside her sheath before she considered how he had told her that Cerkanians didn't wear clothes. She shrugged.

In the last few hours, her thinking had turned to having children, getting hitched and settling down with Tony.

She berated herself. What foolishness had gotten into her? Yesterday, she had sworn she had wanted only a one-night stand. Today she wanted to get married. She shook her head in amazement. Tony was getting under her skin, the same way he had gotten under her mother's skin.

After her shower, she hurried down the stairs to grab a quick bite for breakfast. A quick glance at her

black leather wristwatch showed she was already late getting to the restaurant. She called Sam to let him know she would be a few minutes later than she normally was.

"Don't worry," he said. "I have everything on the griddle under control and the only customer who's come in before I officially opened for the day, was Mr. Caruthers."

"I hope someone nice comes along for him," Kira said, fervently hoping a special woman would come into the old man's life.

"Your mother was here too earlier. She made a batch of blueberry pancakes for Mr. Caruthers. They're shaped like hearts. Do you know what's up with that?"

Kira toyed with the telephone cord. "I have no idea."

"So how did last night's date work out?"

"Like it's any of your business."

"Your mother said you're hot for each other."

Kira groaned. The woman was turning into a gossip.

"She also said she's never quite met a man like Tony. What's up with that?"

She shrugged although she knew Sam couldn't see the movement.

"I'll expect you in soon then. Just don't forget it's Valentine's Day."

"It is?" she asked, her voice hazy.

"I'll make sure Tony takes care of you," Sam muttered before he said, "Mermen think they know everything but he doesn't have a clue about a lot of

things." He hung up, leaving dead silence on the line.

What had he meant by that, she wondered hurrying towards the kitchen. She felt herself blush as she entered the place of former, uncontrolled lust.

Bacon sizzled in a frying pan. "That smells good," she told her mother.

"I don't think you ate much last night." Mrs. Piros wiped a strand of hair from her forehead with the back of the hand that held a fork.

Kira pecked her mom on the cheek. "You're fantabulous. Do you know that?"

"When you say that, I know something is up. What are you getting yourself into?" her mother joked.

Kira opened the fridge, took out a carton of milk and poured herself a glass. The smooth liquid soothed her nerves simply pouring it. She left the empty carton on the spotlessly clean counter. "You're doing a terrific job with Maritza."

"I hear a 'but' in there somewhere."

Kira heaved a sigh. "But is it wise to allow her to listen to Tony's stories?"

"I don't see anything wrong with it."

"Mother!" Kira cried out in exasperation. "He's not a merman! I don't think he has the faintest idea of what one is. He's a writer with an identity problem. You can't let him keep telling Maritza those stories."

"Kira. I am ashamed of you. Tony is best thing you've had going for you in a long time. How can you talk about him like that?"

"He's not a merman and why hasn't anyone ever heard of this kingdom of Cerkania?"

"How can you be so sure he is not who he claims to

be?" Mrs. Piros frowned.

"Aren't you going to burn the bacon?"

"I am two and a half times older than you, my child. When was the last time I burned anything?"

"I can't remember."

"I think you are trying to change subject. Why you do not believe Tony might be a merman?"

"Mother, how long have you lived in the United States?"

"Since I left Hungary in 1956. That is almost fifty years now."

"During your travels, when was the last time you met a mermaid or a merman?"

Mrs. Piros lifted the bacon, dripping with fat, onto a plate covered with a paper towel. "I will tell you a story. Sit down."

"But I'm late for work."

"Never mind. This is more important." Mrs. Piros pointed the fork at an empty chair.

Kira vacillated. She was already late, so what difference would another five minutes make? Her mother's rare scowl encouraged her to behave herself. She sat.

"Before my parents and I left Hungary, we had much terror in our hearts. We barely had any food. I remember how my mother used to pretend she was full and give me the last of whatever food she had managed to dig up. That was one of the problems. The soldiers were everywhere. They killed aimlessly, whoever came in their way. Old men, young children, pregnant women. We feared for our lives.

But one day, miracle happened. One of the bad

men had a gun and was pointing it at me. My mother held me, but I cried and cried. Even back then I know death is long term, and you not come back. My mother stood silent but I feel her shaking against me. The bad man was about to shoot. My mother and I both know this. At last moment, when he was almost ready to fire, I see something shiny behind him. A woman dressed in pale blue with a halo of pure gold around her head caught my eye. She smiled so gently, it was almost like being brushed by a feather. She floated up behind the man, and then, before he could fire, he clutched at his chest. His eyes rolled up into his head and he fell to the ground. He was dead."

"Okay. I give up. What does your story have to do with Tony or with mermen?"

"Wait. I am not finished yet," Mrs. Piros said, lifting her hand for silence. "I ask my mother if she see angel, but she said no. All she saw was the man fall over, but she tell me afterwards, that room smelled of lovely flower garden before he died, probably from heart attack. She did not see angel, but she witnessed her presence."

Her mother seemed to have stopped talking. "What does this have to do with mermen?"

"I learn when I was very little, that what most people believe to be impossible, is possible, if we only believe."

Kira circled her finger around the rim of her glass. "So what you're trying to tell me is that you believe Tony? That his story about being a merman isn't all that farfetched?"

Mrs. Piros nodded, slipping a couple of pieces of

bacon and a fried egg on the plate next to Kira's milk glass. "Egen. Yes. Tony is a merman. Look at how he brings so much delight to Maritza's face. Look at how Mrs. Waloski's boy was healed after he listened to the seashell Tony gave me to give to him." Mrs. Piros paused dramatically. "And look at how you love him."

"Mother!" Kira protested. "That's not true!"

"I see the way he looks at you with great affection and concern. I see how you look back at him. You are meant for each other."

"But that doesn't have to make him a merman," Kira said, cutting into her fried egg with a vengeance.

"He is a merman. He is different. You give him chance and he will come through for you, as you young people say."

"I've got to get to work." Kira pushed back her chair and leaped to her feet. She hadn't finished her breakfast but she no longer had an appetite.

"You remember, *lanyom*, that you cannot run away from love. Once it find you, you have no option but to give in."

Kira was halfway out the door before she felt her mother's restraining touch on her arm. "I make these for you."

Kira glanced from her mother to what she held outstretched in her hand. A Valentine's cookie decorated with two hearts. Kira grabbed it and ran.

Chapter Eight

Kira jumped into her car and energetically pumped the gas pedal several times before she turned the ignition. The car cranked to life. Her breath misted in the cold air. Sunshine glinted off the passenger sideview mirror. Why did her mother think she could convince her that fantasy creatures existed? Angels did not exist in the same dimension as mermen did.

The engine hadn't fully warmed up yet, but Kira risked backing out of the driveway. The snowbanks were piled high on either side, blocking her view of oncoming traffic down the narrow, two lane residential street. He had been content enough to continue telling stories of Cerkania to Maritza, who had listened in wide-eyed fascination.

As Kira turned the wheel, the car slid to the right on the ice. Quickly, she decided to steer into the skid. She hated driving in winter conditions and would have preferred driving in the rain on a cold summer's night.

She slowed at the stop sign at the corner, thankful Tony wasn't with her. He would have been shouting

that a car was headed in their direction on the other side. He really was terrified in a car, as if he had never traveled in one before. She smiled at the memory, recalling how he had raked his eyes over her as he had yesterday. Sexual sparks had flown in every direction on the way home. Today, the car felt empty, like a tin can.

Somehow she managed to get to work on the ice-slicked roads and pulled into the parking space marked 'Management' at the back of the restaurant. Who would come to have their fortune told today, she mused. She wondered if Tony would follow her later, after Maritza got bored with his Cerkanian tall tales.

Getting out of the car, she shivered against the horrid cold. The temperature was easily twenty degrees cooler than it had been yesterday and the stiff wind cut through her normally warm burgundy jacket. She grabbed her purse from the front seat, feeling icy tentacles reach around her. It was as if she had stepped into a zone marked extreme and bitter cold. She turned to hurry through the back door but halted in her tracks when she saw what loomed ahead.

Her breath caught in her throat. The hairs on the back of her neck stood straight up in terror. The cold seemed to penetrate further through her coat. Her teeth chattered.

The restaurant wasn't where it should have been. Instead, a huge wall of frozen water towered over her, like a tremendous wave on the ocean, threatening to crash around her and bury her at any moment.

"Are you surprised?" a hoarse, rasping voice

asked.

Kira would have spun around but the voice seemed to come from every direction at once. "Who are you?" she called out. The wind picked up speed and riffled through her hair.

"I am from the kingdom of Cerkania. The only reason I tell you this is that you will not live long enough to tell any other Land Dweller."

Speechless, she examined the creature who suddenly appeared before her. He was part man, part fish with scales an elegant emerald green. His hair was golden brown and a forelock hung over eyes as dark as mud. He was taller than Tony, but not as well developed in the chest. His cock, nestled in a patch of curly gold brown hair, was clearly visible from where she stood.

She made a small choking sound as uneasiness tracked along the length of her spine.

"What?" the alien mocked. "You're not going to put up a fight before I annihilate you?"

"You're not real," she managed with a furred tongue. Her limbs felt inordinately heavy and her fingers pinched with cold as she held onto her purse. This was, perhaps, the strangest robbery attempt anyone had ever experienced.

Kira sighed. "If you want the money, just take it," she said, shoving her purse towards him. The bitter cold ate through her jacket

"Money? Ah, the currency you Land Dwellers use." The fish-man snickered. "I am not holding you up. I want to kill you. For the sheer pleasure of doing so."

His words made no sense. Why kill for the joy of killing? Flabbergasted, she stared at him, willing him to disappear so she could get to work in her normal world.

"Ah, the barracuda got your tongue. Poor girl," he ridiculed her.

"You've got the expression wrong. It's the cat's got your tongue," she shot back, hating the look of scorn he gave her. Her breath misted in front of her face. Was it possible that this man was role playing because Tony had asked him to for her benefit? Then he couldn't possibly be real. "Okay. The game's up. I know you're playing some kind of game with Tony and his Cerkania. Don't either of you get it? That all that is make-believe?"

The fish-man's thick brows notched up. "Is that what you think? This is all make-believe?" He burst out laughing with a sound that sent chills down Kira's none too warm spine. So there was another lunatic who professed to believe in this Cerkania. Both Tony and this nutcase were certifiably crazy.

He stepped closer and the chill around her became more pronounced. Where was Sam? Why didn't he come outside and arrest this psycho? Kira opened her mouth and screamed. The shrill sound ought to bring the sheriff of Paradise running.

But it didn't. Instead, frigid water crashed over her, smothering the breath from her lungs. The liquid filled her mouth and rushed up her nose. If this was make believe, then she had become an unwilling participant. For some reason she didn't comprehend, she was going to die as a dam of water unleashed its

fury on a cold winter's day.

Chapter Nine

Maritza sat on Tony's lap, intently paying attention to his tales of Cerkania. Earlier, he had dressed in his trousers and shirt, but left off the tie and jacket to give a more relaxed appearance. He had related the Heart to Heart festivity as he had told Denny, what seemed like years ago, although not more than three days had elapsed since Tony had left the kingdom.

Mrs. Piros stood next to the counter, brewing a cup of espresso, the 'perfect cure for such a cold day', she had said.

"Can you tell some more stories, Uncle?" Maritza asked, reaching up to hug him around the neck.

Tony found he loved the child, for the way she made him feel as if he was made of gold and could tell a story any master storyteller would be proud of.

"Now, Maritza," Mrs. Piros chided. "Don't you think Tony has other things to do than tell you more stories?"

"He told me he doesn't have to go anywhere. He's going to wait until Kira gets back."

"That's Aunt Kira to you, young lady," the old

lady admonished her fondly.

The doorbell rang, startling Tony from his chair.

"My, you're jumpy today," Mrs. Piros said, placing a calming hand on his shoulder.

He reseated himself, piqued with the edginess that had seized him once Kira had left for work. Tony couldn't explain the feeling.

Mrs. Piros had gone off to answer the door. Voices, both female, trailed down the hallway.

Mrs. Piros beamed. "Looks like Paradise is growing by one more," she said, waving her arm at the cloaked and hooded stranger next to her.

Tony took a closer look at the young woman under the bulky hood and cloak. Startled by the woman's eyes, he jumped to his feet and set Maritza on the dining table.

"What are you doing here, Eva?" he asked, astonishment making his voice gruff.

"Is she from Cerkania?" Maritza queried, turning to look at the lady.

"Tony," the mermaid said without the normal pleasantries. "Rian's come. He swore he would harm Kira. Can you stop him?"

Mrs. Piros stared at the woman. "What do you mean this person is going to harm my Kira?"

Tony only stopped long enough to say, "Please. Lock the doors when you leave. Don't let anyone in. No one at all. Do you understand?"

"Is Kira hurt?" Mrs. Piros reached under her sleeve, tugged a tissue out and wiped her nose.

Tony scrutinized Eva's face for confirmation. The mermaid gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"Not yet, but I must leave in a hurry. Make certain you lock the door after I leave."

"Can I come, too?" Maritza asked, jumping up and down. "I want to be in danger, too."

Tony patted the top of her head and bent down to her level. "Maritza honey, will you take care of Mrs. Piros for me?"

"Can I tell her our little secret?" She bounced on her feet.

"If I don't return, then you can. But until then, it's our secret. Okay?"

The child nodded solemnly but her lips drooped sullenly.

Tony didn't feel the cold as he hurtled down the street in his thin shirt. He didn't feel the deadly chill in the air as he ran through the icy intersections on shoes that hadn't been intended for ice and snow. Several times he slipped and almost fell before he caught himself.

How could Rian get to the Upper Land without permission? How had Eva? She raced along beside him, puffing for breath. "It's easier to swim," she said, gasping for air.

"How did you know about Kira?" Tony asked, placing his hand under her elbow to steady her although if he slipped, they would probably both take a tumble into the snow.

"Rian followed you without your knowledge. He got jealous, as he tends to do."

"But why hurt Kira? What has she done to him?"

"She hasn't done anything. The ticket that you won? He actually won the Heart to Heart lottery. He

was disqualified because he had entered more than once."

"How did the Lords know that?"

"The Lords know everything. Besides, Josh saw him put his name in the shell more than once."

"And now he's going to hurt Kira?"

"No. He's not going to hurt her. He's going to kill her."

Tears froze solid on Tony's cheeks as he continued to run. He prayed to the Lords that he would get to Kira before Rian harmed her. Tony knew he couldn't live without her, without the oneness they had experienced. His breath caught in his throat as he swallowed a sob. After only a few hours, and she had won his heart in a way no mermaid possibly could. He strained forward, hoping against hope, trying to keep Eva and himself upright on the slippery ice. Tony vowed that if Rian harmed one hair on Kira's head, he would make sure Rian suffered in a way he never had. He might get his revenge but his life would be empty without Kira's love, even if she didn't believe he was from Cerkania.

"Oh, oh, there she is," Eva said on a gasp.

Tony sensed she sank to her knees, unable to go any further. He leaped forward, terrified at the horrifying sight that met his eyes. Most of the city block near the restaurant seemed to be under a streaming torrent of muddy water. It was as if the ocean had inundated the small town of Paradise. Logically, that was impossible, he reasoned. Paradise lay inland, hundreds of miles from the ocean.

The cold air made him cough. Where was he going

to find Kira? Oddly enough, there were no observers from the town. His heart sank. The current moved quickly with a vortex like movement, swirling dizzily around and around and sucking everything into its unrelenting grasp. For a brief second, Tony thought he saw dark hair weaving madly in the water. He peered hard at the spot where he had thought he had seen Kira but saw nothing further. He had no option but to jump in.

"Don't," Eva said, clutching onto his forearm. "You'll get sucked in, and there is no way out."

"I have no choice," he muttered. A warning peeled in his mind. "How do you know that?" he asked too sharply. He should have been thankful that Eva had traveled out of her way to warn him about Kira. She hadn't been obliged to do so. Instead, hostility boiled up from within him. She was, after all, Rian's mermaid.

"I don't for sure," she said, her pupils wide. "There is the legend of the vortex that if one falls in, he will continue moving towards eternity but never reach that point."

"Where did you hear that?" Tony asked, trying to keep the raggedness from his voice.

"I heard it as a little girl. Didn't you hear that story?"

Tony shook his head. Cerkania was a kingdom rich with traditions and legends. The tale of the vortex had apparently escaped him. "I'm not asking you to jump in but if something happens to me, that I don't return, go back and tell Mrs. Piros that she has a heart of gold and that I love her and Maritza dearly."

Eva nodded. Tears glimmered in her eyes. She threw her hood back, uncovering reddish brown curls. She rose on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. "May the Lords go with you."

Tony patted her shoulder before he looked into the water's depth. He saw nothing but the churning, muddied waters. "Kira, sweetheart, I come for you," he whispered before he stretched out his arms and jumped in.

Magickally, as if he had summoned them, his legs developed into fins once again. He found he could breathe under the driving waves although he couldn't propel himself in quite the direction he yearned to go. Which way had Kira gone? Was she still alive? His heart hammered in his chest and his breathing quickened. He smelled nothing here except for overpowering murkiness.

Tony swam forward, hindered by the water's power. Several times, the vortex sucked him into its depths. Exerting every inch of strength he possessed, he barely managed to free himself. Within the vortex, the horrendous sounds of screaming reached his ears. He couldn't tell if the screams were male or female. The noise ripped his soul apart.

He didn't know how much soul-searching time went by. Perhaps only a few seconds or many eons, he couldn't tell. He could only hope that he would reach Kira before she died. She was a Land Dweller and her lack of belief in Cerkania would hinder her being able to overcome the tremendous supremacy of the ocean water which might have boiled up from under the earth.

All of a sudden, he saw her. She floated lifelessly in the water, her normally alive eyes wide and lifeless. Her long hair had unsheathed itself from its fabric constraints and weaved back and forth with the wave she had become trapped in.

Tony swam towards her, fearing the worst. She lay on her back, her heavy jacket having borne her down to her death. Tears blurred the shape of her lovely face. He touched her. Her skin was already cold and clammy.

"No," he murmured. "Don't die, Kira. Don't die. I promised your mother no harm would come to you. Don't die." He saw Mrs. Piros in his mind's eye when he told her the tragic news that her daughter had died in an ocean accident. The ocean would earn the Upper Land Dwellers' animosity once again. He had heard the stories of the land dwellers who had set out on their rickety wooden ships, braving the ocean's ferocious and precocious moods. The ocean was a like a child, knowing it had great power and determined to use its strength to the utmost to throw the land dwellers' lives into panicked confusion.

He drew Kira's lifeless body into his arms and held her head against his chest. He had never done so before but he knew he battled a power greater than his would ever be. Tony bowed to the greatness of the ocean and knelt down to pray. Hopefully, the goddess Netunia would hear his plea and spare Kira's life—if it wasn't too late.

"Great goddess," Tony began. "I have honored you all the short years of my life. Never have I brought dishonor on you and have taught even the Land

Dwellers of your greatness. I pray you will hear my supplication, that you give Kira life for I know she too, will honor you for your power. Please, goddess, give me back my Kira."

He held his breath.

Nothing happened.

Had his prayer been a waste of effort on Kira's behalf? He clenched his fists. What more could he do? As his lips kissed her forehead, he thought he discerned a warmth to her skin, a warmth that had not been there earlier.

"Kira?" he whispered. "Can you hear me?"

A rich voice filled with the music of the ocean replied. "You must take her back to her kind. I give you her life for what you say is true. You have always honored me. If she acknowledges my power, then she may return. Love in peace."

Astonished, Tony gazed into the face of a woman who he would have described as beautiful and fearsome at the same time. Her face was as oval as a clamshell and her skin alabaster fine. Her hair was made of fiery starfish and she wore a weaving octopus around her wrist. She wore nothing else. A school of small fish swam around her head, as if they were part of a crown invisible to his eyes. Before he could see more of her, she vanished, merging with the ocean's waves.

"Thank you," he whispered gratefully.

He didn't doubt that once he got Kira back to the Upper Land, she would once again be his.

Chapter Ten

“So what happened next?” little Maritza asked excitedly, tugging on Tony’s shirt sleeve.

“Why don’t you let Kira tell you?”

“Aunt Kira,” Mrs. Piros reprimanded gently.

“Some things never change,” Tony said softly, beaming at her as he held Kira’s hand. Maritza bounced at the side of Kira’s bed.

Kira watched them both, her eyes brimming with tears. “Tony is the master storyteller. I’ll give him the honor of finishing our story.”

Tony squeezed her fingers gently and nodded. “I held Kira in my arms and was about to leave when Rian returned.”

“Did the pretty mermaid come back with him? Can I be a mermaid when I grow up?” Maritza asked eagerly.

Mrs. Piros lifted the girl into her arms, pulled up a rocking chair and sat down. “Why don’t we listen to the rest of Uncle Tony’s story? When he is finished, then we can ask questions. Okay?”

Maritza inclined her head but not before she let the imp show through.

"You are much like Denny, who adopted me as his big brother," Tony said. "Are you comfortable?" He turned to Kira, who had closed her eyes for a moment. "I thought you were going to ask if I believe in merpeople now," she teased.

"You have a little brother?" Maritza cried out.

"Have you been in the cookie jar again?" Mrs. Piros questioned her.

"We've been together since Kira got out of the hospital." Tony pulled the comforter closer around Kira's shoulders. "If she had any cookies, they must have been invisible."

"I believe invisible happens, but I didn't have any cookies, Mrs. Piyos," Maritza claimed, winking at Tony.

"Okay," Mrs. Piros said, hugging the girl against her chest. "I believe you. What happened when Rian showed up?"

Tony sighed. This was the part he didn't understand. How could Rian and Eva come to earth when Josh had created a magickal spell to give him the appearance of not having fins? "Rian got really nasty. He said if the vortex hadn't finished Kira off, then he would with his bare hands." He shook his head with great sadness. "Of course, I wouldn't let any such thing happen. Not after I promised Mrs. Piros to keep Kira safe."

"I would say not!" Mrs. Piros exclaimed, before she drew back and made a shushing motion with her finger over her lips. Maritza giggled.

"You see, Rian's father had been part of the rebellion in which my own father was killed for being

an insurgent."

"What's that?" Maritza cut in, braving Mrs. Piros' frown. "I have to know."

"At least she's not asking, why, why, why," Kira said softly, her head nestled in the plumped pillows.

"An insurgent is someone who thinks they can make their homeland a better place to live but they do it by violent means," Tony responded. "My father was delivering a message one night when the Cerkanian lookout caught up with him and arrested him. They didn't give him a fair trial to see if he was truly guilty or not and the Cerkanian government killed him."

"Bad, bad." Maritza rapped her fingers on the arms of the rocking chair.

"Yes, it was. But what no one knew was that Rian and his father were heavily involved in the uprising. They were part of what they called the resistance, so very few Cerkanians knew who they were."

Mrs. Piros clasped Maritza's hands in her own to quiet the continual smacking sound.

"Rian's father thought my father had said something to me before he was executed, something that might incriminate them."

"Why would he be concerned after such a long time?"

"A hundred years isn't that long a time in Cerkanian terms," Tony went on. "Rian's father was fearful he would be discovered and put to death like my father was, even though my father was put to death without just cause."

"Rian and his father had received some measure of

support from one of the lower Cerkanian lords who uses magick. This lord created a passageway from Cerkania to earth so Rian could find me and finish me off."

"But why did he want to hurt Auntie Kira?" Maritza asked. Her brows creased in a puzzled frown.

"He was concerned when he saw that we loved each other. Lovers tell each other secrets of all kinds."

"Not that I heard your secrets," Kira murmured.

"You never asked me!" Tony cried out in mock anger. "Besides, what can a merman tell an earth woman if she doesn't believe he's from under the ocean?"

"You've got a point there."

"You told me a secret," Maritza called out with a great deal of excitement.

"Yes, I did," Tony replied. "What was it?"

"That I wasn't supposed to tell Mrs. Piyos unless something happened to you."

"So do you want to tell us your secret?" the old lady asked, cradling her forehead in her cupped hand.

"Are you sick like Kira, Mrs. Piyos?"

"No. But I must say we have today quite the Valentine's Day."

"Or Heart to Heart day, as we call it in Cerkania."

"Tony told me that he's a real, honest to goodness merman and that he might take me to Cerkania to visit."

Mrs. Piros grimaced. "I wonder how I would explain that to the judge? The little girl I was planning to adopt, she's been kidnapped by a merman."

"Shsh! It's our secret!" Maritza cried out. "You can't tell no one."

"Not even the judge?" Kira asked amused, propping herself higher on the pillows.

The phone rang down the hallway. "Come with me," Mrs. Piros said to the girl as she got up, spilling her from her lap. "Let us go see who is calling."

"You mean give those two lovebirds some quiet time?" Maritza asked, glancing over her shoulder and winking at Kira.

The two walked out into the hallway where Mrs. Piros closed the door firmly behind her.

"She's a smart girl." Tony leaned forward and kissed Kira's lips.

"I wonder how she knew we wanted to be alone?"

"Children are very perceptive. Do you want to have sex with me?" Tony gazed into her dark brown eyes, hoping she would say yes. He knew she hadn't fully recovered from her chilly ordeal but he was willing to wait.

"No," she said flatly.

"You don't? I thought you —"

"I do love you, but I want to bond with you, not have sex."

"Are you laughing at me?" he asked, remembering how two short days ago he had first met her and asked if she wanted to have sex with him.

"I'm laughing with you." Kira sobered. "I was so terrified when I saw that wall of water where the restaurant should have been. How did Rian create that illusion?"

"It wasn't an illusion. It was the real thing."

"Why didn't anyone else in Paradise see it then?"

"I think that the Piros family has been chosen by the higher ups for grand things."

"Like love?" Kira persisted, rubbing her hand against his wrist.

"Like love," Tony replied. "Now do you believe in merpeople and the kingdom of Cerkania?"

Kira laughed. "I do. For a while there, I thought you were a starving artist, that you were desperate to create your kingdom of Cerkania for any reader who came along."

"Is that right?" he teased.

"Then I thought you had an identity problem."

Tony chuckled. "I've never had one of those. I'm Cerkanian through and through despite what the lords did to my family. I can't change who I am."

Someone started hammering on the door. "Can I interrupt?" Maritza asked, her voice muffled.

"For a minute," Kira called back.

The girl opened the door a few inches and stuck her head around the wood. "Mrs. Piyos talked to the judge. She said I am a Piros now. Does that mean I'm part of the family?"

"You bet," Tony said, smiling warmly. He felt the same way—as if the Piros family had taken him into their hearts.

"Oh, goodie!" True to her word, Maritza shut the door and ran down the corridor laughing at the top of her lungs.

"Now where were we before we were interrupted by the little munchkin?" Kira asked, knowing perfectly well where Tony had left off.

"Something about a merman falling in love with a landlubber."

"I take offense at your calling me a landlubber," she said, feigning annoyance.

"Denny's mom doesn't like the word either but you'll have plenty of time to meet her."

"Do you expect me to change?"

"Only if you want to. Can I tell you a secret?" Tony asked, stringing her along.

"It's the right day for secrets."

"I'm madly in love with you. Will you be my Heart to Heart mermaid?"

"If you'll be my Valentine," Kira murmured happily.

"Yes, I will."

She threw her arms around his neck and held him tight. This would always be a Valentine's day to remember.

About the Author

Aurora Rose Lynn lives in Washington State 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 novels from eXtasy include: LITTLE NOTHINGs, EXTASY NUGGETS ONE and TWO, THE MERMAID SEDUCTION, LADY GODIVA AND BEYOND RECOGNITION. Aurora Rose loves to hear from her readers who can email her at: auroraroselynn@earthlink.net