

A muscular man with a beard, wearing a black leather motorcycle jacket that is unzipped, revealing his chest and abdominal muscles. He is holding the lapels of the jacket with both hands. He is wearing a silver chain necklace. The background is a fiery, orange and yellow scene with a cityscape visible in the distance.

LISA KESSLER

THE CAPTAIN'S CURSE

"Sexy, spicy, and so much fun!" —*NYT* bestselling author Alyssa Day

A muscular man in a black leather motorcycle jacket is the central figure. He is holding the handlebars of a motorcycle. The background is a dramatic, fiery scene with a cityscape at night. The overall color palette is dominated by oranges, yellows, and blacks.

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THE
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LISA
KESSLER

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*This one is for my Dad.
You were the miracle of the year.
I'm so glad you're still making music.
I love you.*

Chapter One

Ian Flynn narrowed his eyes as he searched the horizon for his ship and crew.

Nothing made him feel less like a pirate captain than discovering they had set sail without even inviting him. It happened more now than he cared to examine.

Since most of them had fallen in love and expanded the crew to include their women, he'd never felt more like an outsider.

Life would be much simpler if he could walk away. He had plenty of money, and his business was in Atlanta, far from the blue Atlantic Ocean. But his damned heart wouldn't allow it. He was a pirate. The sea called to his soul. He could no sooner turn his back on his crew and sailing than he could stop breathing. He'd die for any of them.

If death were still an option.

The reaper had been taken off the table for him and his crew the second they'd taken a drink from the Holy Grail over two hundred years ago. The *Sea Dog* crew was still walking this Earth because of Flynn's decision to attack the Spanish ship carrying the Grail.

Every choice he made affected all of them, and he didn't take that responsibility lightly. He wouldn't walk out on them, even if that was what they wanted.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He turned from the water and took it out. Agent Bale's name flashed on the screen. He pressed ignore.

He was in no mood to hear the director of Department 13 tell him, yet again, that they hadn't found Captain Rutger Morgan or Sampson Bane or whatever the fuck he was calling himself these days. The top secret division of the government prided itself on protecting Americans from paranormal threats, but lately their deadly relics had been vanishing from their vault.

Flynn and his crew had pocketed plenty of gold from Agent Bale by retrieving the missing artifacts, but cleaning up Department 13's messes wasn't going to benefit him right now.

Not while the vengeful ex-captain of his ship was plotting his next move. The longer he managed to remain hidden, the chances rose that Flynn would find himself in a trap, and this was a game he was *not* going to lose.

The phone rang again. Flynn clenched his jaw and pressed accept this time. "Tell me you've located Rutger Morgan."

"Not yet. I've got an agent working on it, but I've got bigger problems at the moment."

Flynn rolled his eyes and waited for Agent Bale to continue.

"Since we discovered my former data entry employee, Holli Porter, was smuggling paranormal relics from Department 13's vault, we've been running an in-depth inventory. I've got agents out on recovery missions to get back what she sold all over the world, but there's one artifact in particular that worries me."

Flynn arched a brow. "And this concerns me because...?"

"I'm getting to that." Agent Bale huffed.

"If you'd opened with it, I might be paying more attention to this conversation."

Bale cursed under his breath. "We could get this deal hammered out faster if you stopped being an insufferable asshole, just for a minute."

Flynn smirked as the sun descended behind River Street. "If there is an offer of payment for my crew, then I'm listening."

He caught himself hoping Bale would fight back. He needed to blow off some steam. He didn't want to admit the crew sailing without him mattered. Clearly, he was lying to himself.

"There would definitely be a monetary reward for your crew." He paused. "The Spear of Destiny is missing from the vault. Holli swapped it with a forgery. There's a good chance your previous captain has it now. There's no trace of it on the dark web. It hasn't been listed or purchased that we can find, so they must've kept it."

A chill slithered up Flynn's back. "The lance that killed the son of God was in your vault?"

Of course it wouldn't be for sale. Morgan wouldn't part with such a powerful weapon.

According to the legends, the Spear that pierced the side of Jesus Christ

could kill anyone with a single stab, even an immortal.

“Yes. The church lost track of it in 600AD, and there are at least four replicas spread across Europe, but this was the original.”

“How can you be certain you didn’t have a forgery?” Flynn’s brows pinched with concern.

If Bale really did lose the Spear of Destiny...then Flynn’s entire crew was in danger. And so was Lily. Her beautiful face filled his head before he could push the memory away. She had stolen his heart, but after he discovered Morgan was still alive two months ago, Flynn had ended their relationship. He knew better than to fall for a mortal, but he’d broken almost all his rules when it came to her. Foolish.

Now every day that Morgan walked free was another day he could track Lily down. Morgan would hurt her because she was mortal. He could kill her, and that would be a wound Flynn couldn’t heal. He’d already arranged for Duke to have one of his personal security men tail her, just to be safe, but the Spear added a whole new dangerous layer to the situation.

“It was the real deal,” Bale replied quietly. “I can’t divulge the details, but it killed an immortal being after it was taken from the vault.”

“Fuck.” Flynn grunted. “You’re telling me you don’t know where Rutger Morgan is hiding, and he most likely has the Spear of Destiny at his side?”

“Yes. We need to recover it and lock it up. If he sells it and it ends up in the wrong hands, it becomes an unstoppable weapon.”

Flynn looked down at his shined Louboutin loafers, shaking his head. “And what happens to Morgan once we deliver this relic? Will we use it on him?”

Flynn and his crew had been skirting the law on behalf of Bale’s top secret government department for the past three years, helping them retrieve dangerous metaphysical artifacts for the United States. The partnership had enabled the immortal crew to relive their piracy days, but this job could end all of that.

For that kind of risk, Flynn needed more than money. He needed blood. Morgan’s.

A door closed on the other end of the line and Bale lowered his voice. “Even though Morgan probably isn’t a legal American citizen, he’s still protected under our laws. I can’t sanction an execution.”

“You also can’t put him in jail for a life sentence when we both know he’ll never age or die.” Flynn started walking up the cobblestoned street

toward Bay Street. “He carries a god-killer weapon in his hand. If I tell you he *fell* on it, then that’s what happened.”

Bale didn’t have to like it, but Flynn would protect his crew...and Lily.

“I’m going to pretend I never heard that.” Bale cleared his throat. “I’m emailing you the file on the relic and the contract for the reconnaissance assignment with the standard confidentiality agreement.”

“I’ll let you know after the crew votes. Hell of a way to start the new year,” Flynn grumbled.

He ended the call and shook his head. This shit was draining the immortal life from his veins. He couldn’t just stand around the dock waiting for the crew. Maybe he could find an office supply store nearby to print out the documents Bale was sending over while he waited for the crew to dock.

Anything to stop watching for the *Sea Dog*’s sails to appear on the horizon.

He crossed Bay Street, heading for One-Eyed Bob’s restaurant. He’d left his car parked in Bob’s lot. Their pirate cook had opened Bob’s Seafood nearly a century ago, and it was now an institution and part of Savannah’s rich history as the oldest city in Georgia. Although Flynn’s business was based in Atlanta now, this city was a touchstone for him. The heart of Savannah remained unchanged just like he did. She even managed to survive the bloody Civil War when the Union troops marched in.

When he reached Bob’s place, the old salt was carrying a bag of trash out to the dumpster. Although he was immortal, he’d sipped from the cup when he was in his sixties. He looked up as Flynn approached. In this lifetime, Bob was sporting a glass eye, although on the ship he used his eye patch. “Hey, Captain. What are you doing in Savannah?”

“I could ask you the same. I thought you’d be sailing on the *Sea Dog* with the rest of the crew.” Flynn couldn’t quite hide the bitterness in his voice.

Bob grinned. “I wouldn’t miss cooking my lucky New Year’s Day dinner plates.”

He’d forgotten Bob’s tradition. Not that Flynn had ever participated.

Flynn clenched his teeth. He’d made a bargain with the crew in 1795, after the sinking of their original *Sea Dog* ship, that he would stay away from this city.

For the most part he had.

He’d built his commercial real estate empire in Atlanta, but when his hotel deal in Savannah had crumbled due to a single property owner’s

holdout, he'd been forced to visit more often in order to sell off the other properties he'd acquired.

Although he'd never admit it out loud, since the crew had started stealing relics for Department 13, he'd caught himself hoping he might restore his relationship with them. In the past that idea had seemed insurmountable, but each time they set sail on another adventure, the men accepted his presence, and at times, even his leadership.

He shouldn't give a shit what they thought, but immortality had taught him that love, and his pirate crew, were the only things that never died. Eternity was fucking lonely when the world changed, yet he remained the same.

"I'm negotiating another sale of one of the properties around the Magnolia Mystic shop. Trying to recoup some of my losses." He scanned the parking lot, avoiding eye contact. Skye's refusal of his generous offer for her property had been unexpected and, without her lot, his resort project had fallen through. He rarely lost a deal. It still stung.

Bob lifted the lid to the dumpster and tossed the bag inside. He turned to Flynn with a wide grin. "I had an interesting customer at my annual New Year's Day feast yesterday."

Flynn couldn't be less interested, but he nodded as he took his car key fob out of his pocket.

Bob rambled on. "She was a pretty thing with long black hair and dark brown eyes that could see into a man's soul. Turns out she knew you."

Flynn frowned, not wanting to make the connection.

Bob made it for him. "Her name was Lily Bouchard."

Flynn's heart dropped. This couldn't be true. She should be in Atlanta, hundreds of miles away from Rutger Morgan. Fuck. His gaze snapped to Bob's face. "Why was she in Savannah?"

"I'm not sure. It sounded like she was trying to get over a broken heart." He adjusted his eye patch and narrowed his other eye. "Seems *someone* walked out of her life without so much as a goodbye."

Gods, hurting Lily had never been Flynn's plan. That's why he'd left abruptly two months ago. If he'd looked into her eyes or heard her voice, he never would have been strong enough to walk away.

But since the day Morgan had captured Flynn and tortured him, there was no hiding from the reality that Morgan wouldn't hesitate to kill Lily just to hurt Flynn.

The only way Flynn could protect her was to vanish from her life and never look back.

That wasn't completely true.

He'd actually planned to find a way to kill Morgan, and then explain the situation to Lily and hope she would forgive him someday.

At the time, he hadn't realized Morgan would be so difficult to find. As the weeks passed, his plans to reunite with Lily faded, and doubt crept in.

She was probably better off without him. She deserved so much more than the love of an immortal pirate captain.

"Fuck." He scanned the area like she might appear at any moment. "She can't stay in Savannah. It's too dangerous."

Morgan couldn't kill Flynn, but killing Lily would ruin him.

"You know her?" Bob sobered, straightening up. "Wait. You think Morgan is in Savannah too?"

"Yes." Flynn had always depended on his intuition. It was like a hidden sixth sense, giving him a knack for spotting synchronicities and opportunities. His gift made him a good pirate captain, and right now, it was telling him they were being watched. Morgan was just waiting for the right moment to strike. "I'll explain everything when the crew docks the *Sea Dog* tonight." He focused on Bob again. "Did Lily tell you where she was staying?"

Bob pulled at his chin. "She didn't tell me, but I did see her phone when she ordered the Lyft to pick her up. She was going back to the Pirate's Moon Bed and Breakfast."

He knew that place. He could be there in ten minutes. Being a cold-hearted son of a bitch was usually simple, but he dreaded turning it on Lily. He'd do whatever it took to get her out of the city.

Flynn popped the lock on his black Infiniti Q60. "Thank you, Bob. I'll text Colton and let him know to keep the crew on board. Meet me on the deck of the *Sea Dog* at nine o'clock tonight."

"Aye, Captain."

Even after centuries had passed, it still felt fucking amazing to be called captain. He got behind the wheel and drove across the historic district to Reynold's Square. Every street was lined in massive live oak trees with Spanish moss dripping from the limbs. It was like the city embraced you at every turn. The beauty was never lost on him.

He would've loved to share it with her. His heart stuttered. Damn it. He

clenched his jaw, struggling to keep his cool indifference in place like a suit of armor. He shouldn't be risking this, but he had to try.

Could he walk away from her a second time?

He would have to. He had to get her away from Savannah, even if that meant making her hate him more than she probably already did.

At least she'd still be alive.

His shoulders tensed. He excelled at being an arrogant asshole, but not with her. Lily had awakened a part of him he'd never realized existed. She made him laugh, and sometimes even at himself. It was equally thrilling and terrifying at once.

And it was over.

His duty was to keep her alive, and to do that, he needed her to stay away from Savannah and far away from him. He sucked in a deep breath and crossed the street to the Pirate's Moon Bed and Breakfast, ignoring the way his heart pounded with anticipation.

...

Lily Bouchard sat alone in the courtyard of the Pirate's Moon Bed and Breakfast nursing a Sprite and praying for the Advil to kick in. The weathered red brick courtyard was covered in moss and ivy. The fountain bubbled in the corner with a cherub perpetually pouring water from a basket. The sound was probably soothing on a normal day. Today it was much too loud.

Those sparkling Mai Tais from Bob's Seafood last night had packed a punch, and she'd been struggling with the world's worst hangover all day.

Way to kick off the new year, Lil. She rubbed her temples. Oof. The sun was fading from the sky, maybe then she could stop squinting. She'd come to Savannah for a much-needed change of scenery to kick off the New Year.

After Ian Flynn, Atlanta's most eligible bachelor, ghosted her and shattered her heart, she'd been picking up the pieces.

Plus, she had a book deadline and she was hoping being in a place that didn't have memories hidden around every corner would poke her lazy muse.

A shadow fell across her and she twisted around, looking up. Her heart stuttered with disbelief. Was she hallucinating now? "Ian?"

He looked like he just stepped out of *GQ* magazine in his perfectly

tailored suit. His fiery red hair was slicked back into a small man bun that he managed to make look hot, like a warrior from some historical movie. Meanwhile, she'd been lucky to wash her face and get her hair brushed up into a ponytail.

What was he doing here? She'd fantasized for weeks about crossing paths with him again, but in her fantasies, she'd been dressed in her sassy black miniskirt and the tight red sweater she knew he couldn't resist.

In her head, she would tell him she'd hardly noticed he was gone and let him know she had burned his favorite shirt he'd left hanging in her closet, instead of wrapping herself in it just to breathe in his scent.

Right now, her hungover brain was too foggy to come up with anything snappy. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm negotiating some property sales." His gaze wandered over her as he frowned. "Are you...sick?"

Okay, his condescending attitude was thinning the mental fog. She smirked. "I'm not your concern anymore."

He stroked his well-groomed copper goatee. His gold pinky ring flashed in the fading light. It was the only part of his outfit that never changed. The large ruby-eyed serpent ring seemed in contrast to his all-business persona. He'd always reminded her of a Viking trying to blend into the world of business. There was a wildness under all his manicuring. It was as if his finely tailored suits and designer shoes were just a disguise.

Or she had romanticized him from the moment she'd met him. She couldn't say for sure. She'd been a writer her entire life. Empathy and tragic backstories were her catnip, and Ian Flynn was a complicated man with layers that drew her in like a moth to a flame.

She never stood a chance.

And now she could add the mystery of his sudden disappearance from her life.

"Are you selling this bed and breakfast too?"

"No." He cleared his throat and lifted his chin. "I was passing by and noticed your car. It's urgent that you get out of Savannah. Now."

How could he be so nonchalant, as if he hadn't tossed her aside like garbage? Did he notice her car and think she might be happy to see him again? Arrogant jerk. If he thought she was going to do anything he said, he was dead wrong. In fact, maybe she'd extend her stay.

"Ah. I see." She rolled her eyes. "You noticed my *car*, but not my

voicemail messages or emails?” She shook her head. “Screw you, Ian. You ghosted me. You don’t get to waltz back in here and tell me what to do.”

“There are...dangers...in Savannah.” He scanned the empty courtyard. “You’re safer in Atlanta.”

She stood up, too fast. *Oh shit.* Her knees wobbled as she reached out to steady herself. She blinked and rubbed her forehead. His arm was around her waist, steadying her before she could tell him not to, and it felt so damned good. Too good. She rested her head on his chest, trying to catch her breath, but his scent filled her lungs, bringing back memories of the night he’d taught her to waltz, and their first kiss. She closed her eyes.

No. Forgiveness wasn’t happening. Self-preservation took over.

“Don’t touch me.” She pushed him back a step, hating that she missed being in his arms. “If you didn’t come here to apologize or explain your sudden disappearance, you can get the hell out.”

There was a flash of regret in his eyes, but it was gone so fast, she convinced herself she’d imagined it. Maybe she wished she’d seen it.

He straightened his suit and a muscle in his cheek jumped. His blue eyes were like ice as his gaze bored into her. “Hate me, Lil. I deserve that. But don’t put your life in danger. Get out of Savannah.”

Her brow furrowed as frustration burned through the mental fog. “What are you talking about?”

He shook his head. “I can’t tell you that, but the sooner you get to Atlanta, the better.” His tongue brushed his lower lip like he wanted to say more, but he clammed up again. “I should go.”

She stared at him. Hating the way her chest tightened. They used to be on the same team, but ordering her around and expecting her to obey him without so much as a simple explanation made it plain that whatever love and trust she’d thought had been between them once was long, long gone now.

And if he thought she was going to do anything he wanted, he was going to be sorely disappointed.

“That’s it? Seriously?” Sarcastic laughter escaped her throat. “You are a piece of work, Ian. I can’t believe I ever fell for you.”

He looked back over his shoulder. “I wish things could be different.”

And like the enigma he was, Ian Flynn walked out of her life again.

Lily sank into the wrought iron chair again and reached for the bottle of Sprite. Her hands trembled and her chest threatened to hiccup with a sob as

her heart ached.

Apparently, she hadn't gotten him out of her system like she'd thought.

But between his cryptic warning and the brief feel of his strong arm around her waist, unwanted memories of being naked in those arms crept in. The way he used to look at her, like she was his most prized treasure, stabbed at her wounded heart.

She took a swallow of the bubbly drink and vacillated between wanting to defy him by moving to Savannah permanently and getting as far away from him as possible.

She could write from anywhere. She never had to see his face ever again.

But that flash of regret in his eyes tormented her.

Maybe she'd been projecting. She'd wanted him to be sorry for breaking things off with her. Ugh. Enough thinking. She could live lifetimes inside her head and never make a single real decision if she wasn't careful.

This time she stood up slower and avoided the woozy feeling in her head. For now, she needed food and some sleep. She'd reconsider her options in the morning.

As she walked past the sitting room, the front door opened, and a big man filled the doorway. He had a head full of dark brown, almost black hair tied back in a ponytail, a closely trimmed beard, and shockingly bright eyes. They were almost violet.

A beautiful woman with long, wavy brown hair was on his arm. A big ring sparkled on her finger, competing with the smaller diamonds shining on the tennis bracelet around her slender wrist. When Lily lifted her gaze, the woman smiled at her.

Lily quickly broke eye contact. She hadn't meant to stare.

They were probably honeymooners. *Love.*

Her stomach roiled. She might gag.

But her brain was already concocting the couple's honeymoon trip. Was she an heiress? He brought her to Savannah, and then she'd have a tragic accident while they were parasailing, and he would inherit everything. The story practically wrote itself.

Lily stepped into her room and locked the door, praying the happy couple were too exhausted from travel for a night of sex. These old walls of the bed and breakfast probably wouldn't be able to contain the sound of their lovemaking.

And now she was suddenly remembering that last night with Ian in her

bed.

He'd held her, kissing her temple, as they'd basked in the afterglow. He'd wanted to tell her something important, but an emergency phone call had sent him yanking on his clothes and racing to his car.

She never saw or heard from him again until tonight.

Please, brain, shut up.

She went into the bathroom and took her hair down, staring at herself in the mirror. Her eyeliner was smeared, her complexion bordered on yellowish-green, and her eyes were bloodshot.

"Eat your heart out, Ian Flynn. Look what you lost out on," she mumbled as she washed her face.

Heavy footsteps came down the hallway. Oh great, the big guy and his new bride were staying on her side of the inn.

Of course they were.

She brushed her teeth and stripped off her clothes.

Tomorrow she'd shower and decide her next move. For now, she didn't want to think about Ian Flynn, or happy couples, or danger. She turned out the light and slid under the covers with a sigh.

Her new year was off to a sucky start.

Chapter Two

Flynn caught the monkey's fist knot and tied the *Sea Dog's* line to the iron cleat on the dock, eager for any activity that might distract him from the hurt in Lily's eyes an hour ago. He straightened and looked up at the crew in the riggings tying up the sails. He was usually at the helm of the ship barking orders, but they hadn't invited him on this trip. Not that he cared. Much.

He'd had business to conduct anyway. Documents needed to be signed and escrows opened for the buildings beside and behind Skye's psychic shop. He didn't have time to sail off into the horizon right now.

Sometimes he didn't recognize himself. Yes, he'd been accused of being a pirate of real estate for his sometimes-questionable negotiation tactics and handshake deals, but from his point of view, this was still a very tame life for a pirate captain. He lived by his Google calendar now. No more flashy quill-tipped pens and inkwells to sign agreements anymore.

Hell, nowadays most of the documents were signed on a tablet with computer-generated signatures.

He crossed the gangway and onto the deck of the *Sea Dog*. His Louboutin shoes clicked against the wood like one of the landlubbers who often came through the ship on the weekends for historical tours.

When had he become so domesticated?

Since he'd settled his life so far from the ocean in Atlanta. The ocean's salty scent was the air a buccaneer breathed. Was he still a pirate when he existed inside a climate-controlled high-rise with no waves in sight?

"Captain Flynn? What are you doing in Savannah?" Colton, their quartermaster, had built this replica of their original ship. He was the tallest member of the *Sea Dog* crew, with broad shoulders that he kept proudly rolled back. He never apologized for his height. His light brown hair was

always clipped short and the tattoo of a compass pointing true north still covered his forearm. It fit him. Colton's integrity had never wavered in the lifetimes Flynn had known him. He was the true captain of this vessel.

Flynn was well aware he was captain in name only these days. "I had business in Savannah, and I got a call from Agent Bale. He has another contract for the crew if we vote to accept it."

Colton raised a brow. "You don't seem eager to take it."

"Not exactly." Flynn scanned the deck for his first mate. "Where's Duke?"

"He's at the stern with his mermaid."

Annika. She'd stolen Duke's heart, and the others seemed to like her, but she hadn't shown any interest in joining the crew like the other women did.

Over the past three years, Flynn had performed weddings for his crewmates on the deck of the *Sea Dog*, and seeing them fall in love had been...surprising. Not that he was jealous. He'd secretly married mortal women twice since the crew had taken that first swallow from the Holy Grail. It meant outliving his wives, and then his children. The pain of loss had been as real as the love.

It was the trust that he envied.

Seeing his crewmates confess the truth of their immortality and allow their partners to know them fully, that was something he'd never even contemplated before. It wasn't that he hadn't loved the women. His affection had been real.

But no one, not his wives, nor the family lines he'd sired, knew his secret.

The decision to lie to them had been based on pride. He could see that now. It had been his decree that none of them should ever tell anyone about the Grail or their immortality. At the time, he'd believed it was the only way to protect them. If too many people knew immortality was achievable, there would be duels and battles to possess the cup. His crew would never have peace or rest.

And in spite of the grief, he never broke the oath of secrecy he'd forced his crew to take.

The day he'd discovered Colton had told his then girlfriend, Skye, about the crew's immortality, he'd been livid. But as he witnessed them together, he'd come to realize that by trusting her with the truth, Colton had deepened their union.

Their solid partnership was unbreakable. Skye became a member of the

crew, and Flynn had grown to trust her loyalty too. She'd never betray their secret.

Why had it never occurred to him that weaving love and trust together would make a stronger lifeline in a world that continued to evolve around them?

That's where his pride came in. It had been his decision that telling anyone about the Grail would be too dangerous. For him to break that rule would prove that his judgment had been wrong.

He clenched his jaw. As a pirate captain, indecision could quickly become a death sentence not just for him, but his entire crew. Unthinkable.

So he didn't think about it. He loved, he lied, and he mourned.

He'd never had a true partnership like the ones on board this ship, but it wasn't for a lack of want. He had planned on sharing his secret with Lily. Until he discovered Captain Morgan still walked this Earth. Fuck. He hurried his stride to the stern as if he could outrun the memories.

Duke, the first mate, was stripping off a wetsuit. He flipped his long, wet brown hair out of his face and smiled. "Captain? What are you doing here?"

Flynn crossed his arms. "I thought you had assigned a security guard to protect Lily until we could locate Morgan."

He nodded. "I did."

Flynn's brows pinched together. "He's doing a piss-poor job of it. She's here in Savannah. Why did I hear it from Bob instead of your man?" Duke draped the wetsuit over the railing and Flynn frowned. "Were you diving?"

"Aye." Duke's grin widened as he looked over at Annika. "Show him what we found."

Annika had long blond hair and eyes as blue as the Atlantic. And outside of the water, this mermaid had legs. Flynn still hadn't seen her with a tail. She opened a drawstring bag and reached inside. When she pulled her hand back, Flynn's heart stuttered.

His spyglass. He'd purchased it with the gold from his first plunder as the captain of the *Sea Dog*. It had been at his side until the night they'd lost the ship during the storm. He never thought he'd see it again.

He took it from her, half expecting it to vanish as if he were dreaming. The weight felt good in his hand, solid.

He looked over at Duke. "Where did you get this?"

"From the *Sea Dog*." Duke looked over at his mermaid. "Annika knew where the shipwreck was. This was our second dive to the wreckage. When

I found your spyglass, I thought you'd want it back."

Flynn's chest tightened painfully. He rubbed his sternum as he frowned. "You've seen the ship?"

"Aye. She's still a beauty. In more pieces now, but the Maritime Museum is working on a grant for a recovery expedition to bring her back up from the depths."

Flynn blinked. This news should've made him happy, but he couldn't shake the guilt. If the *Sea Dog* was brought back into the light, it would also bring back memories of that fateful night.

Duke's smile faded. "I thought you'd be excited."

"I...I am." Flynn nodded. He looked up from the spyglass in his hand. "Thank you for finding this and giving it back to me." Flynn tapped the spyglass against his leg as he had lifetimes ago. Funny how some things never changed. It was comforting in a way. "You never told me why your security detail didn't warn you that Lily was in Savannah. He's still tailing her, right?"

"I'll call him to verify his position." Duke pulled on his shirt. "My phone's in the cabin. I'll meet you on the bow."

"Thanks, Duke." Flynn nodded to the mermaid and walked over to the railing, not quite ready to join the rest of the crew.

He hadn't seen any sign of Duke's man near Lily when he'd walked into the courtyard of the bed and breakfast. Dread welled in his stomach as he stared down into the dark water of the Savannah River, unable to keep his mind from replaying the moment he'd seen her again tonight.

Lily.

Even in her sweatpants and T-shirt, locking eyes with her had wrung him out and cracked the walls he struggled to keep around his heart.

She wielded a power over him that he still didn't fully understand.

From the day she'd come into his life to interview him for a freelance article, he'd been taken with her. She was intelligent and beautiful, but it was her headstrong attitude that had caught him off guard. He was accustomed to being obeyed as captain of a ship and CEO of his corporation.

Lily wasn't big on following orders, which would usually annoy him, but she had a way of seeing the world that intrigued him.

As he got to know her better, he realized that her tough exterior was as much a mask as his own cold CEO persona. He'd never met anyone like

her. Lily forged her own path, writing thrillers and pitching freelance articles to newspapers and magazines when royalties were running low.

Her mind was always working, weaving stories, and breathing life into every second of time. She challenged him with a bullheadedness he found both infuriating and intoxicating at the same time. He caught himself aching to see her smile and hear her sparkling laughter.

And gradually he started to let down his guard, preparing to trust her with the truth, to make her his partner in this world instead of just placing her on a pedestal.

But the night he'd bolstered his courage to tell her everything, Duke had called with the news that the man they'd been chasing for Agent Bale on the search for another missing artifact was actually their ex-captain.

Flynn had led the mutiny against Rutger Morgan to take over the *Sea Dog* nearly two hundred fifty years ago. They'd left Morgan on a deserted island to die thirsty and alone.

Apparently, fate had another plan. He didn't die a slow painful death, the bastard discovered the Fountain of Youth. Now, Morgan was just as immortal as Flynn.

Once he'd found out, Flynn knew he had to leave Lily behind. Any hope of a partnership was gone. Morgan couldn't kill Flynn and Flynn couldn't eliminate him, either. They were both immortal.

Lily was not.

And once Morgan discovered Flynn cared for a mortal, the bastard would kill her instead. Probably painfully and slowly like he'd executed Flynn's brother.

Hopefully she'd heed his warning and go back to Atlanta.

He lifted the spyglass and telescoped it to its full length, pointing it in the direction of River Street to see if the lenses were still intact. He peered through the lens and scanned the area. There was some water in the base of the glass, but otherwise the magnification was still clear.

He lowered it slowly and compressed it again before he slipped it into his pocket.

Duke had already been to the wreckage twice.

And no one had mentioned it.

Flynn swallowed the bitterness in his throat. His commitment to his crew had never waned, but it wasn't a two-way street. Usually, he had no trouble ignoring it, but moments like this, when he realized he was excluded...hurt.

He stuffed the pain down deep and lifted his chin as he strode toward the deck. Pirate captains lived and died by their swagger.

And Flynn had no intention of dying. Ever.

Once he had the entire crew's attention, he shared his conversation with Agent Bale and the charge to recover the Spear of Destiny. When he finished, Colton crossed his arms, his expression stern and unmoving.

His frustration was plain when his nautical accent bled through. "Yer tellin' us Rutger Morgan has the Spear that killed the son of God?"

Flynn clenched his jaw. "Aye."

"Fuck." Colton shook his head. "If he had the Spear of Destiny, why didn't he use it on you?"

A cold chill rippled down Flynn's back. Why didn't he? "Maybe he didn't want me dead. He probably enjoyed torturing me." His torture almost took Flynn's eye. "This weapon could kill any of us."

He scanned the crew.

Colton hadn't taken another drink from the Grail after its effects had expired a couple of years ago, Drake had traded his immortality to a water Loa, and Caleb had given his to the Atlanteans to keep his love from drowning.

But Flynn supposed the Spear leveled the playing field for the rest of the crew. They were all vulnerable now. With the tip of that Spear, any of them could be killed.

Flynn shook his head. "Bale told me they had proof it killed an immortal. It's deadly." He paced the deck, thinking aloud. "We need to take a vote. Are we willing to accept this mission from Department 13? Ayes?"

All hands popped up except for two.

Skye and Heather, Colton's and Drake's wives.

Skye's violet eyes met his. Her raven hair was up in a bun as she crossed her arms. Heather stood beside her in a hooded cloak, keeping her expression in the shadows, but her light blue eyes pierced the darkness as she stared at him.

Flynn cleared his throat. "Nays?"

Both women answered. "Nay."

Flynn arched his brow at them. "Yer outvoted."

Skye moved to Flynn's side, facing the crew. "This isn't our problem. Agent Bale lost this Spear. He can find it." She pointed toward the captain's quarters as she stared at Colton. "We have a child sleeping in that cabin

who needs his father. This isn't a game. You saw what Captain Morgan did to Flynn." She looked at the rest of the crew. "Please reconsider this."

Flynn clenched his jaw as his eyes flicked from Skye to the crew. "Morgan took me because I was alone. We're ready for him now. We might as well get paid for ending the threat."

Skye spun to face him. "And how exactly do you plan on ending him? He's just as immortal as you are."

"We use the Spear before we return it to Agent Bale." It seemed simple enough.

Skye frowned and crossed her arms. "Did Agent Bale tell you Morgan has it? Do we know that for a fact?"

"It was smuggled from the vault by the mermaid's sister, his girlfriend." Flynn looked over at Duke and Annika. "I think it's logical to assume she gave it to Morgan. According to Bale there's no proof they ever sold it."

Duke came forward to stand at Flynn's side as he had for centuries. His first mate always had his back. Duke placed a heavy hand on his shoulder. "We all want to stop Morgan, but..."

Flynn couldn't fucking believe his loyal first mate was stabbing him in the back. He narrowed his eyes as he looked over at him. "But?"

Duke shrugged. "I think Skye's right. We've got a new generation of this crew to think about now. We don't need the money anyway."

Flynn frowned, his brow furrowing as he stepped away and spat, "Do ye hear yerself?"

He shook his head, sucking in a breath and burying his piratical accent. He didn't usually lose control, but his recent brush with his ex-captain had unearthed trauma he'd thought he'd put behind him. Nightmares of his brother's cries haunted him again, and he ached to silence them.

And he believed Morgan's death would close that door forever.

Colton came forward to his wife's side. "You're right. I should be thinking of Ace, not revenge."

Flynn shook his head. "Has the *Sea Dog* crew lost its heart? Are we to tuck our tails and endure that man's torture?" He'd thought their earlier sail without him had stung, but this betrayal pierced far deeper, into the dark crevasses of his heart that had never truly healed. "He killed my brother and almost killed our boatswain." He looked over at John Smyth, but his expression was unreadable. Underneath John's business casual attire and the gold hoop earring, his back still bore the scars of the lashes from

Morgan's whip. The beating had cut his flesh, exposing the bone beneath. Flynn frowned. "The vote stands."

Colton shook his head. "Sorry, Captain. I'm a nay. I stand with my wife."

Flynn's hands trembled as, one by one, the men crossed to stand with Colton. This was the mutiny he'd always feared. He almost wished they had weapons. Then he could fight. Making eye contact with each man he would have laid down his life to protect and seeing them refuse his order cut deeper than any blade. He sucked air through his teeth and shook his head. "Fine. I don't need you anyway."

Duke shook his head. "If he has that Spear, he can end you, Captain."

Flynn smirked and patted his shoulder. "Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing, mate."

He crossed the gangway without looking back.

Chapter Three

Recovering the artifacts that Holli Porter had smuggled out of the vault for Sampson Bane to sell had been challenging. David ended up prioritizing the list by threat level to the American public.

He stared down at the warm bronze helmet imbued with a dragon's strength. According to Norse mythology, the Helm of Awe gave its wearer the strength of a thousand men. If it fell into the wrong hands, the consequences would be dire.

At least his agents had recovered it. Finding all the lost relics was a big task on a good day, but Department 13 was currently fighting fires on all fronts. Agent David Bale locked the lead-lined case and handed it to one of his agents. "Take this directly to Brenda to be prepped for the vault."

"Yes sir."

He walked away, and David took out his phone, pressing Kingsley's name.

His shamanic computer programmer answered on the first ring. "Kingsley Pratt at your service." His crisp English accent was clipped. Hurried.

David rubbed his forehead. "We recovered the Helm of Awe."

"Well done." A keyboard clacked in the background. "I'll mark it off the list."

David braced himself and asked the question, even though he wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer. "Any word yet from our mole in the CIA?"

"I'm monitoring his movements in the building, but other than that, no definitive information either way."

David closed his eyes, rubbing his forehead. "Keep me posted."

"Will do, sir."

David ended the call and put his phone in his pocket.

Recently he'd discovered the CIA had planted an agent within Department 13. They'd captured him, but not before he'd emailed photos and intel to the CIA director.

King had developed a malware virus with an extra kick of magic to destroy any files related to Department 13, and David had been cautiously optimistic that they'd dodged the bullet.

Secrecy was the chief tenet for his department because of the sensitive, powerful nature of the relics vault.

As long as the world believed these mythical artifacts and weapons were nothing more than legends, he could warehouse them and keep the danger out of circulation.

If the CIA or the Department of Defense discovered Department 13 existed, the temptation to use the relics in the vault would lead to dark consequences. The safety of the world would be compromised.

But two weeks ago, David had received an encrypted email from the director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Although all her digital evidence was gone, and the spy she'd sent to infiltrate David's ranks now had no memory of ever being inside the walls of Department 13, she still had firsthand knowledge of the intel, and she wanted a meeting.

Today was the day.

He left Department 13 and drove twelve blocks to the Central Intelligence Agency. Once he found parking, he headed for the blocky white main building. Although it housed America's best intelligence officers, it had been designed in the 1950's to resemble more of a college-campus-like atmosphere. Today it even boasted a Starbucks where the baristas weren't allowed to ask for any names.

A man with an earpiece met him at the door. "Hello. Can I help you?"

David nodded, scanning the cavernous lobby. "I have an appointment with the director."

He raised a brow. "And you are?"

"Special Agent David Bale." He flashed his badge and quickly put it back into his pocket.

"Right this way."

He followed the CIA agent, crossing over the large emblem on the marble floor to another desk where he rang someone else to announce David's presence for a meeting.

The cavernous hallway boasted darker gray columns, adding to the sparse, cold décor.

When he finally got past the gatekeepers, he reached for the door with a plaque that read ANNE MCCREARY, DIRECTOR, CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY.

She was probably in her fifties with a short bob of gray hair. Her navy blue linen suit was neatly pressed, and she gave off the air of confidence he would expect in the head of America's spy network.

She was already on her feet when he opened the door. She gestured to a leather chair facing her desk. "Agent Bale. Please have a seat."

He sat down and waited for her to follow suit.

Director McCreary took her seat behind her walnut desk and folded her hands. "I appreciate you coming in to meet with me. As I understand it, you're running an entire department on federal funds, but very few seem to know you exist."

"That would be true." He crossed his legs. "And I need to keep it that way."

She shook her head slowly. "You're asking me to look in the other direction while you run an entire division of the government without any oversight."

"Our secrecy is one of our most important tenets." This would have been the perfect opportunity to use the moth man dust to make her forget. Sadly during the inventory of the relics vault, they'd found the container emptied. He cleared his throat. "If Americans discovered what we were protecting them from, there would be mass panic."

"I'd like to be the judge of that."

He arched a brow. "You don't have the authority or the clearance."

She laced her fingers in front of her, staring him down. "Do you really want me talking up your department with the president, because that could be arranged. I'm sure he'd be eager to grant whatever clearance is necessary so that I can give him a full report."

David's gut twisted. She was probably bluffing, but what if she wasn't? "Probably" wasn't good enough.

And then an interesting idea sparked. If the director of the CIA came to Department 13, they could perform the retirement protocols on her like they had with her spy. She'd never remember walking into his building.

Was he seriously considering wiping part of her memories? This was the leader of the Central Intelligence Agency. What other choice did he have?

He uncrossed his legs, placing both feet on the floor. "If I allow you inside, you won't be able to carry any tech to record anything."

A thin smile curved her lips. "That's fair."

He was 99.9 percent sure she'd bring one anyway, but he had to try to control this invasion of his top secret department. "And you'll come alone."

She tilted her head slightly. "I'll have my driver, but they can wait outside in the car."

He stood up and reached across her desk, offering his hand.

She took it in a firm handshake.

He released her and forced a tight smile. "When were you thinking of visiting?"

"How about tomorrow? I'll have my assistant clear my schedule."

He blinked. Could he gather all the supplies necessary for the occult division to perform the retirement protocols in time? He didn't know, but the sooner he could get the CIA off his back the better. "Tomorrow's fine."

"You'll email me the address?"

"Yes." He nodded even though he was not about to send her the address to Department 13. He'd send her an address to rendezvous and then blindfold her and drive around Washington DC for a few miles before circling back.

She stood behind her desk as he went to the door.

"Agent Bale?"

He stopped and turned back. "Yes?"

"We're on the same team. We both want what's best for America."

"I know." He left her office and went straight to his car.

The CIA was spying for America's interests, but Department 13 was protecting the country from paranormal threats, which meant protecting the country from itself.

There were weapons in the relics vault that could end life as they knew it. It was too dangerous for even the president to know about.

He got in his car and started the engine. He was already exhausted, and his day was just beginning.

Chapter Four

Lily stepped out of the shower and dried off. She was supposed to check out today and go home to Atlanta, but after Ian's surprise visit last night, she was tempted to extend her stay with the bed and breakfast just to spite him.

After she got dressed, she grabbed her phone off the counter and noticed a missed call from her agent. Guilt sank its claws into her. Her deadline was creeping up and the book still wasn't finished. Her agent had stuck her neck out for Lily to grab a stand-alone thriller spot with her publisher, giving her a much-needed break from her FBI profiler series.

She looked at her abandoned laptop on the table in the other room. At least it was open. She had *intended* to write on this trip.

Maybe she still could.

She packed up her suitcase and closed her laptop. Once she checked out, she could put everything in her car and drive over to Forsyth Park. People watching usually inspired her. She could bang out a couple thousand words and then drive back to Atlanta with a clear conscience.

What she should've done was ask for a deadline extension. But that would have been admitting that her life was unraveling. Since Ian had broken her heart, she'd been spinning her wheels.

Before she met him, she had this five-year plan all mapped out for herself. She was finally going to travel and see the world. When she was a little girl, her mother used to tell her stories about their distant ancestor, Admiral Nicolas Baudin, who'd spent his life exploring the world and navigating to multiple continents.

Her mother promised they would see the world together someday, but a freak aneurysm stole her before Lily turned eight years old. She'd promised herself that before she turned thirty-five, she was going to travel and see all the places her mother never got to.

Then Ian Flynn strode into her life with breathtaking swagger, and had her believing they'd see the world together. Why?

That was the part she couldn't figure out. What was the purpose of making her promises he'd obviously never intended to keep?

She fixed her hair, added a little makeup, and packed her bags before heading to the main living area for the continental breakfast. The walls were covered in pictures of pirates, ships, and old black-and-white photos of Savannah. Five small round tables filled the room, with white tablecloths and red roses in slender bud vases in the centers.

The new couple had a table in the back corner, and there was another newcomer she didn't recognize perusing the buffet line. He was tall, wearing jeans and a windbreaker over a T-shirt.

Beth, the owner of the historic bed and breakfast, came out with a tray full of blueberry muffins. She had her gray hair up in a bun and wore an apron with a dusting of flour across the front. After she set the food on the long table against the wall, she smiled at Lily. "How was your stay?"

"Good." She nodded. "Just what I needed." Lily picked up a plate while she scanned the fruit platter.

"Did you get much writing done?"

Lily blinked. She'd forgotten she'd told Beth she was a writer. "A little." She shrugged. "Not as much as I'd like, but more words than I had, so..."

"Are you writing about Savannah?" The man in the corner asked. His voice commanded attention, filling the room, but he wasn't yelling.

"No. I...just wanted a fresh start to the new year." She put a few slices of pineapple and a bunch of grapes on her plate, then took one of the still warm blueberry muffins. She started for the empty table near the window.

"We have an empty chair." The big man pointed to the chair across the table. "Please. Join us."

"Oh..." She shook her head. "I don't want to intrude."

She also didn't want to be a third wheel.

"You're not. I'm intrigued."

Lily forced a polite smile and took the chair. She enjoyed people *watching*. Participating wasn't in her top ten favorite things to do.

He smiled at the woman beside him, and Lily studied the way she looked at him. The power dynamic was skewed from what she'd expected. The man was physically much larger than his partner, but she didn't seem the least bit intimidated. In fact, her body language hinted at wanting to get him

away from here.

Lily couldn't blame her. If they really were on their honeymoon, the heiress wouldn't like her new groom inviting other women to their table.

He focused on Lily again. "What kind of books do you write?"

"Thrillers mostly. Sometimes I freelance articles too." She picked up her fork and poked at the pineapple on her plate. "So, what is it you do for a living?"

His grin was wide, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I'm an...importer. I bring in rare antiquities from around the world for my clients."

Lily wanted to kick herself for not making an excuse to leave, but hearing about interesting jobs always pulled her in. Her curiosity was more voracious than her appetite for food. "What's the strangest thing you've ever sold?"

The woman answered before he could. "A mermaid comb." Her voice was husky and oozed sex appeal. She didn't have an accent, so if she was an heiress, she wasn't European royalty or anything. Maybe she was a Rockefeller, American royalty. Her writer brain was already spinning a new backstory as the woman's words sank in.

Lily frowned. "Did you say mermaid? Like, a comb with a mermaid on it?"

The man lifted the woman's hand to his lips, kissing it as he chuckled. "I was going to say the key to Atlantis."

Lily frowned, her brows pinching together. "No seriously, have you ever sold something strange? Like a really rare antique?"

He sobered and faced her again, no trace of his smile. "Oh, I'm not joking."

Lily wasn't sure what to say. She should've gotten up and left instead of peppering them with more questions. Instead, she took a bite of a mini blueberry muffin to keep from asking him anything else.

His girlfriend bumped him with her shoulder. "Stop playing with her." She looked at Lily and offered her hand. "I'm Holli Porter."

Lily swallowed and took her hand. "Lily Bouchard. It's...nice to meet you."

Holli released her and glanced at her date. "And this is Sampson."

His name sounded more like royalty than hers.

Maybe she'd gotten it all wrong last night. Sampson was the one with money who would die in a boating accident in Savannah. Holli didn't look

like a killer, but that would be what made her so deadly. No one would expect it. Maybe this wasn't her first dead husband.

Lily bit on her lower lip, forcing herself to cease building their backstory. These were real people who were telling her they'd sold mermaid combs and the key to Atlantis.

Savannah was a strange place.

"Nice to meet you, Sampson." Eager to shift the focus, Lily asked, "What brings you two to Savannah?"

They shared a silent look before he answered. "I'm looking for an old friend."

That seemed like a job for sleuthing on Facebook, not road-tripping to Savannah. "Do you live around here?"

He shook his head. "I've got a few residences around the country, but I call Charleston home for now."

Why would someone drive two hours from Charleston to look for a friend? Savannah wasn't a small town. But he also seemed to believe in mermaids and Atlantis. None of this was making sense. She pushed her chair back from the table. "I've got to finish checking out. It was nice meeting you both."

"Likewise." Sampson tipped his head with a barely there smile and a spark in his eyes that sent a chill all the way down to her toes. That was a silent "Until we meet again" look, but she had no intention of ever seeing them again.

She was probably overreacting and reading into this whole situation too much. It was a job hazard as a writer. She filled her head with true crime documentaries and research on everything from stalkers to untraceable poisons. Of course she second-guessed every person she met.

And she was writing about a stalker now. They were probably just eccentric. She turned to leave the room. Unease had her heart racing. Her imagination had a habit of running away with her, and it made it tough to distinguish between imagined threats and intuitive warnings.

The other man in the corner was getting up with his plate and nodded as she walked back to her room. She'd forgotten he was there.

What would have happened if she'd been alone with that couple? She didn't want to think about it. The weight of their eyes on her back was almost palpable. The sooner she got out of here the better.

The fear didn't have to make sense. That was where most people who fell

victim to a bad situation went wrong. They downplayed their fight-or-flight instincts. She trusted her intuition, and right now it was screaming to get the hell away from those two.

And that was exactly what she was planning to do.

• • •

Flynn finished his coffee and set the mug down as his cell phone rang. Duke's name lit up the screen. He was tempted to ignore it. Last night his first mate had sided against him.

But Duke was the last real "friend" he had left.

His finger hovered over the screen, but he finally accepted the call and put the phone to his ear. "Hello."

"Are ye still going to chase that Spear for Agent Bale?"

Flynn stared out the window of his condo overlooking the Savannah River. He lived in Atlanta, but he kept this small flat in Savannah so he'd have a place to stay when they set sail before the sunrise.

"Aye. I haven't spoken to Agent Bale yet, but I will."

Duke sighed. "We're going to help you."

Flynn took the phone from his ear, staring at it for a moment as his brow arched. Had the crew had a change of heart? "We?"

"Annika and I. The rest of the crew still thinks this is too risky."

Flynn pressed his lips together. Of course. He should be grateful that Duke still had some loyalty to his captain, but all he could think about was how much riskier it would be for his crew to allow Rutger Morgan to live. They should be facing this threat together. "What's changed your mind?"

"Annika wants to be sure her sister is unharmed."

The mermaid's sister was going by the name Holli Porter now, and until recently, had worked for Department 13. Agent Bale discovered she'd been smuggling dangerous paranormal artifacts from his relics vault and with the help of Rutger Morgan, they'd been selling them.

"Good." He nodded slowly. "She can keep her sister out of my way while I send Morgan to hell, where he belongs."

Mermaids were powerful immortal beings, and if Holli chose to protect Morgan, killing him was going to be nearly impossible for Flynn alone. Having Annika to keep her out of the fight would level the battlefield, and with Duke at his side, he could finally finish Morgan for good.

Duke ignored his comment. “Annika is looking for her sister’s mermaid comb. She’s convinced he’s controlling her with it.”

“I’ll let you know when Agent Bale gives us a location to find him.”

Duke paused, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “We don’t need Bale for that.”

Flynn’s blood went cold. “Have you seen Morgan?”

“Not firsthand, but I think my man who is tailing Lily did. The description matched Morgan and Annika’s sister. They were together.”

“Here in Savannah?” Flynn closed his eyes, rubbing his forehead, wishing he could wake up from this nightmare. If Duke’s man spotted them while he was following Lily, that meant Morgan had been close to her, too. Hunting her. Fuck. This couldn’t be happening.

“Aye.”

Flynn’s eyes popped open. “Where were they?”

“The Pirate’s Moon Bed and Breakfast.”

Where he’d seen Lily last night. His heart sank. Was he too late? He forced the question from his lips. “Is Lily safe?”

“For now. He just checked in to let me know he was in Forsyth Park.”

At least it was a very public place. It would be difficult for Morgan to grab her there. “I’m on my way.”

“She’s safe.” Duke’s calm voice wasn’t helping Flynn’s anxiety level. “My man is sticking close. You’re just going to scare her.”

He’d told her to get out of Savannah last night but apparently hadn’t scared her enough to actually leave. *Fuck*. “Your guy doesn’t understand Morgan like I do.”

He ended the call. It was a waste of Duke’s breath at this point to try to convince him to stay away. There wasn’t a chance in hell of that happening. Morgan had been at her bed and breakfast. That wasn’t a coincidence.

It was a hunt.

And he wasn’t about to let Lily end up in Morgan’s trap. Even if that meant giving up his chance to use the Spear to kill Morgan.

On the way to Forsyth Park, he called Agent Bale. He answered on the first ring.

“This is Agent Bale.”

“I’ll take your offer to bring back the Spear of Destiny.” He got behind the wheel of his Infiniti and started the engine. His mind spun almost as fast as the tires. He needed to get the Spear, and he wouldn’t have his entire

crew backing him up this time. Agent Bale wanted that relic enough to get his ass and his agents to Savannah to retrieve it.

He'd rather have his crew, but he'd take whatever help he could get. Losing Lily wasn't an option.

"Great. I'll get the crew the list of the deeds registered to Rutger Morgan. That should give you a starting point to find him and the Spear."

"I've already found him. He's here in Savannah with your mermaid thief." Flynn punched the accelerator, flying through a yellow traffic light.

"Holli Porter is still with him?"

"Appears they've reunited. Yes." He slalomed through the street traffic, hurrying toward Forsyth Park.

"Shit." Bale grunted. "I need to handle a few things here in DC, but I'll catch a charter jet to Savannah tonight."

He ground his teeth. That wasn't good enough. He was on his own. "Tonight may be too late. I'll keep you informed." Flynn ended the call and gripped the wheel in both hands.

If anything happened to Lily... He couldn't think about it.

Chapter Five

Lily found a shaded picnic bench and opened her laptop.

The famous fountain shot water toward the sky, and the sound eased some of her frazzled nerves. Even though she wrote thrillers, escaping into a fictional world that she controlled was a comfort. She skimmed the last few pages, rereading to ground herself in the story again.

A young couple passed by on roller skates, holding hands, and a sad smile curved her lips. Seeing Ian last night still had her in a funk. She'd been right on the edge of getting over him, so of course he had to come smashing into her consciousness like the Kool-Aid man. Damn him.

She sighed and finished reading the page. Just above her screen, kids laughed, chasing one another around the fountain. She started to pull her gaze back to her work when a tall, slender man caught her eye.

He was the same guy sitting in the corner at the bed and breakfast this morning. She was sure of it. She narrowed her eyes, wishing she'd paid more attention to his clothing so she could confirm her suspicions. He leaned against a tree with his arms crossed, casually watching the fountain.

When he turned her way and discovered her looking at him, he quickly broke eye contact. Why was he spying on her?

She closed her laptop and slipped it into her computer bag. Hoisting it onto her shoulder, she walked toward him. He didn't look her way again.

When she got to him, she put her hand on her hip, sizing him up. "Are you following me?"

He flinched like he'd just noticed her for the first time. "Oh. Hi. Small world, I guess."

"I know you were watching me a minute ago." She shook her head. "What's going on here?"

He started to open his mouth when another familiar face caught her eye.

The sun reflected on his red hair, making it glow as he strode down the cement path between the oak trees draped with moss. He looked like a man on a mission, his jaw tight as he moved with determined strides.

What was Ian doing here?

She looked over at the other man again. “Did Ian Flynn hire you to make sure I left town?”

“No, I work for Greyson Security.” He dropped his hands to his sides. “Look, I was assigned to tail you and be sure you’re safe, that’s all.”

“Unbelievable.” Lily hissed out a breath. “You don’t think someone should have mentioned I had a bodyguard following me?”

“That’s something you’d have to bring up to the owner. My instructions were not to make contact with you unless absolutely necessary.”

She opened her mouth, but a very familiar voice called her name.

And her traitorous heart fluttered. Thankfully her brain had no trouble remembering this was the same man who had vanished from her life without so much as a goodbye. And then he’d resurfaced just long enough to tell her to get the hell out of Savannah.

He didn’t miss her. Maybe he missed trying to order her around.

She shored up her emotional defenses and turned around to face Ian. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“Good. I didn’t come here to talk.” He took her hand and started walking away.

The instant electrical charge shooting up her arm must’ve shorted out her brain. She actually walked a couple of steps before she noticed what was happening.

Yanking her hand free of his, she narrowed her eyes. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Lily, please.” He turned her way. “We can fight about this later.”

“First off, there is no ‘we.’ You made that perfectly clear by ghosting me without ever looking back.”

It felt good to unload all the pain she’d been bottling up for months.

She pressed her lips together, wishing he didn’t look so damned hungry for her. If it were real, he wouldn’t have been able to walk away the way he did. He would’ve reached out to her.

She was seeing what she wanted to see. She set her jaw. “Did you hire this guy to follow me?”

Ian eyed the man from the security company and focused on her again.

“Not directly.”

She arched a brow. “Indirectly?”

“When I found out you were in Savannah, I did reach out to a friend who owns a personal security firm.” His gaze swept over the park and then he met her eyes like she should be thanking him.

She shook her head. “You are a piece of work. Why are you even pretending you care what happens to me?”

A muscle jumped in his cheek. “No one is pretending, least of all me.”

Her jaw went slack as she struggled for a snappy comeback, but she couldn’t find anything. He walked out of her life like she never mattered. No calls, no emails, nothing. He obviously didn’t care about her. But here he was, warning her to leave town again and hiring security for her. “You’re not making any sense.”

He offered his hand. “If you come with me right now, you have my word I will answer your questions.” He scanned the crowd gathered around the massive fountain. “We’re too exposed here.”

“Exposed?” She looked around, unsure what she was even looking for. “This isn’t a war zone, it’s Savannah.”

“Yes, but as I warned you before, it’s not safe for you here.”

The dread from her earlier encounter with Sampson and Holli came flooding back. Something was...off. Or did she just want to spend more time with Ian? She sighed and took his hand. “Fine, but I’m holding you to your word. I want answers.”

“I would expect no less.” He nodded to the security guy as they passed by and hurried to his car.

She got inside and barely managed to stifle a moan. His scent filled the interior. He always smelled so damned good anyway, like spice and leather, maybe a touch of rum. It wasn’t an expensive cologne, it was just...Ian. She never should have agreed to this. She was supposed to be getting over him. But the promise of answers was too tempting for her to resist. She made herself an empty promise to leave as soon as he told her everything.

She could do this.

He got behind the wheel and drove through the lot. She looked over at him, studying his profile. He had a strong, square jaw with a straight nose and proud chin covered by his well-manicured facial hair.

She forced herself to face forward. “Where are we going?”

“I own a condominium in Savannah. We’ll be safe there.”

They were going to be alone for the first time since he'd walked out on her.

She pulled her computer bag up from the floor and clutched it on her lap. Anything to keep something between them. "I'm not forgiving you."

He smirked. "I'm not bringing you to my condo to beg for forgiveness."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not having sex with you either."

A muscle tensed in his cheek. "I'm not trying to seduce you."

Even though she'd told him she wasn't interested, his words still stung.

Nothing made sense right now. She'd said she wouldn't sleep with him. He was just confirming *her* boundaries.

But a petty part of herself hoped he still wanted her so she could reject him. She wanted him to understand how badly it sucked to love someone and have them turn their back on you.

His attention was focused on the rearview mirror so intently she caught herself watching the side mirror. "Who do you think is after me?"

The question should have made her laugh. She was a midlist author. No trust fund, no rap sheet, no enemies that she knew of... She looked over at Ian. He had money and secrets.

He probably had enemies, too. What if this was real?

"A man who goes by the name of Sampson."

Her back stiffened. That wasn't a common name. Her mouth went dry and the familiar tingle of anxiety prickled through her hands. "I met someone named Sampson at the bed and breakfast today. He and his girlfriend Holli checked in last night."

He tightened his grip on the wheel without looking her way. "I was trying to keep you out of all this."

"All of what?"

Ian pressed a button on the visor and a gate opened to an underground parking garage. He drove inside and watched it close behind them before driving forward and parking in a numbered space.

He turned off the engine and looked at her. "Staying away from you has been one of the hardest things I've ever done."

She'd written this scene in her head a million times since the night he left, but here it was and...she didn't trust him. He just wanted her to do what he said, to be compliant.

Screw that.

"No." She broke eye contact and grabbed the door handle. "I don't want

an apology. I just want to understand why you did it. There won't be a second chance with me. We're through."

He nodded, but there was a heaviness in his gaze. "I wasn't asking for another chance, Lil. I don't deserve it anyway. I was just being honest."

Just hearing him call her Lil again had butterflies fluttering in her belly. "That's not going to save me from whatever you seem to think is coming for me."

He pressed his lips together and nodded. "I need a drink. Come on, let's get inside."

Going up to his place was setting off warning bells in her head, but he'd given her his word that he would answer all her questions, and her curiosity outweighed her caution by a longshot.

But she wasn't sure her body was on the same team. Every time he said her name, her blood heated. This was going to be tricky. She followed him to the elevator and stepped in, leaning on the railing as far from him as she could get while he punched the button for the top floor.

The elevator lurched into action, leaving her staring at the real estate mogul and reminding herself over and over again that any man who could walk out on her so easily didn't deserve any of her energy.

But being this close to him wore down her resolve and brought back unwanted memories of happier times. Times when his arms held her tight, and he flashed a rare secret smile meant only for her.

"When we get upstairs, I need you to..." He paused, the corner of his mouth curving just slightly. "I can't recall what you called it when you were writing your books and you wanted readers to believe something could really happen."

Okay, when he brought up her writing like he had actually paid attention and respected her work, it made it harder to remember she hated him. "Suspending their disbelief?"

"Yes." He nodded and the elevator stopped right on cue. The doors rolled open. "I'm going to need you to suspend your disbelief until I tell you everything."

Now she was intrigued, and a little scared. Maybe this Sampson guy really was after her. "Are you a spy or something?"

"Something." There was a sparkle in his blue eyes as he held the elevator doors for her.

She walked out and into a hallway with a door on either side.

Ian opened the one facing the river. "After you."

She passed by, proud of herself for resisting the urge to touch him. Her jaw dropped as she took in the space. The far wall consisted of seamless picture windows and an unobstructed view of River Street and the Savannah River below.

"Wow." She crossed the wood planked floor to the windows, admiring the way the late afternoon sun sparkled on the water.

"Can I get you a drink?"

She looked over her shoulder to find Ian opening a liquor cabinet. He took out two glasses and opened a small freezer. He dropped two ice cubes in each glass and reached for a bottle of spiced rum.

Lily chuckled. "Rum is still your drink of choice."

"Always." He filled his glass and lifted his eyes. "Can I pour you some? It might help with what I'm about to tell you."

What kind of secret was he harboring? Maybe this was all a ruse to get her alone. He knew a good mystery was the best way to capture her. She should go. But she didn't. "Sure. Thanks."

He opened the fridge again and took out a small bottle of Dr. Pepper. Her eyes widened and laughter bubbled from her lips. "You remembered."

He twisted the lid, letting it hiss before removing it completely. "I'm not sure why I kept them, but I had a few left from...before."

Before he walked out on her. She glanced at the water again. "I thought you said it was an abomination to have Dr. Pepper and rum mixed together."

Behind her, he poured and then carried the drink to her. "Oh it is, but... I'll overlook it for you."

She took the glass and followed him to the black leather sofa. She took a seat on one end, relieved when he took the other. "So why do you think Sampson is after me?"

He took another swallow of his drink and met her eyes. "I need to start further back than that."

"Further back?" She wasn't sure she understood. "Is he someone you knew before we met?"

"Lifetimes before I met you." He nodded slowly.

She tipped her head, convinced she misunderstood. "Lifetimes?"

"Aye." He knocked back the rest of his rum and set the glass on the crystal coffee table. "This story starts in 1780."

Chapter Six

Her forehead creased as she frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Flynn’s pulse raced. He was finally going to be honest with someone about his true identity, his real life, his actual age...but she didn’t look like she was going to believe him. It wasn’t like he could produce photos and birth certificates. He didn’t have absolute proof.

He cleared his throat. “I realize what I’m about to share might seem unbelievable at first, but I need you to suspend your disbelief.”

She placed her glass on the table. “I think if I’m going to do that, you can’t just drop me back in time two hundred and fifty years. I feel like I woke up in a vampire novel or something.” She blinked. “You’re not a vampire, right? You walked to meet me at Forsyth Park in broad daylight.”

He chuckled. “I’m not a vampire.”

“Good.” She nodded and tucked her hair behind her ear like she did before when she used to tell him about a new plot twist she’d discovered while writing.

Every second he spent with her more memories returned to him. How had he stayed away from her for so long? Being near her awakened a lost melody in his soul.

She studied him for a moment. “So, let’s start with the guy at my bed and breakfast this morning. How do you know him and why would he want to hurt me?”

Lying would be simple. She might even accept it and stay safe. Untruths were easy, but trust was another matter, and trust was the only path to a second chance with her. One he didn’t deserve and shouldn’t dare to wish for.

But his fate was sealed. “Sampson’s real name is Rutger Morgan, and he’s coming for you because he knows I care about you.”

“That’s news to me.” Her eyebrows popped up. “I haven’t seen you in months. Why would he think that?”

“Because I was a sentimental fool.” He got up and crossed to the window, unable to bear to look at her and admit to such a monumental tactical error. He sighed and forced the words out. “I didn’t want to leave you the way I did, but I didn’t see another way to keep you out of this feud. But...I missed you...” He glanced over his shoulder and back out at the river below. “I had Annabelle at the office print out a photo of you from my phone so I could keep it in my wallet.” Admitting it aloud made him feel even more foolish and...vulnerable.

Uncomfortable to say the least.

He cleared his throat and spit the rest out quickly. “Morgan ambushed me a few weeks ago, and while he beat me, he took my wallet. When I found it, your photo was gone. He took it, so I knew he was looking for you.”

“This sounds like something from a mobster movie.” She stared at him like he was a stranger. “I thought your business was aboveboard.”

“As in...legal?” He nodded, focusing on the water below. “It is.”

“Then why would anyone be physically beating you?”

He returned to the sofa and sat down beside her, his heart pounding in his ears. “Because in 1780 I led a mutiny and took his ship. I left him marooned on an island, without a weapon, to die a long painful death.”

He could practically see her disbelief come roaring back in. Gradually she shook her head. “This isn’t funny, Ian. Why are you doing this?”

The pain in her eyes ate at him. Was this how it went with the rest of his crew? It hadn’t occurred to him that their women might not have believed them. How could he prove any of his story to her? Suddenly he was second-guessing his decision to tell her at all.

Usually, his self-confidence was a certainty he could depend on, regardless of the storm brewing around him. But right now, the only thing he was sure of was that if she ran out of this building, she could be running right into the arms of Captain Rutger Morgan.

His pulse raced as he took her hand. “I know this sounds impossible, but I’m trying to be honest with you, Lil.” His mouth went dry, but he forced the words out. “I was born in Ireland in 1755. In 1795, after I became a pirate captain, we plundered the Holy Grail. I haven’t aged since I took a sip from that cup.”

It was out.

His biggest secret was laid bare. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, but he felt lighter. Like he wasn't alone anymore.

One person really knew him.

He studied her face as she worried her lower lip. If only he could read her mind. Was she about to bolt? Would she laugh at him? He wished she'd say something. Waiting for her to speak was agony.

She finally stood, her hand sliding free of his. "You know, I thought you were a callous asshole when you vanished from my life without a word, but I never thought you were cruel."

He rose to his feet, his brows pinching together in confusion. "I don't understand."

"You're making fun of me." Tears shone in her eyes, but she blinked them back before they could spill over. "This is more than suspending my disbelief. You want to sell me some piratical fantasy, and you actually expected me to swallow that? You really think I'm that gullible?"

Seeing the pain on her face physically hurt him. He'd envisioned her potential reactions to this news hundreds of times, but he'd never imagined this. He'd been trying to tell her the truth, not make her cry.

"Not at all." He reached up to clasp the back of his neck, struggling for a way to make her understand. "This is why I never told you. I was afraid you wouldn't believe me."

"No." She shook her head. "You were just afraid. Period. You didn't trust me, and now you're telling me impossible stories for reasons I can't begin to fathom." She started for the door. "I need to get out of here."

His pulse raced at the thought of her leaving. Did she think she'd walk back to Forsyth Park to her car? She'd be cannon fodder for his enemy. He caught her wrist. "Morgan is still out there."

She rolled her eyes. "Captain Morgan?" Her gaze moved to his liquor cabinet. "Just like the rum you love to drink. Seriously Ian, if you were going to try to feed me a fictional story, at least use a better name generator."

He ground his teeth. This was a disaster, and he didn't see a way to navigate his way out. "What if I could prove to you that it's all true?"

"And how are you going to do that, have me step into your time machine to see your ship?"

He sighed. "I don't have a time machine." He paused, trying to think of something that might be proof of his story. He didn't have old photos of

himself, but he could call Bob and have him bring the Lord's cup over. "What if I showed you the Grail?"

She slid her hand free of his. "How would I know if it's real?"

Unless she drank from it, there would be no way he could prove its authenticity. Damn it. How else could he prove he was telling the truth?

Then he had an idea.

"Wait." He went into the kitchen and returned with a knife from the butcher block.

Her eyes widened. "Oh shit. Did your cheese just slip off the cracker? What are you doing?"

He shook his head. "Just watch." He slid the blade across his hand, wincing at the pain as it cut through his skin and ligaments. Blood dripped onto the polished hardwood floor at his feet.

"Damn it, Ian!" Lily raced past him and came back with a towel.

He offered his newly healed hand. She stared at the small red line of healing flesh. "How is that possible?" She looked down at the crimson puddle and back up to his eyes. "What the hell is going on here?"

"I drank from the Lord's cup, Lily. I'm immortal." He held his breath. Would she believe him now? Was this bloody display too much? She didn't run screaming as he opened and closed his hand until the wound had closed completely. He went on, "I don't age, heal almost instantly, and unless my head is separated from my shoulders, I can't be killed."

Although the Spear of Destiny changed all that. If the legends were correct, one scratch could kill even an immortal. But he kept that to himself. He'd told her enough for now.

The color drained from her face. "I need to sit down."

He'd been living with this secret for over two hundred and fifty years. It was his reality. It hadn't occurred to him how it might affect her. He wished he could figure out what to say or do to fix this. Now she was caught in a fight between warring captains. She deserved so much better.

He busied himself, cleaning up the mess as she went to the couch. He dropped the knife in the sink and went back into the living room. Lily looked pale, her gaze distant. He sat beside her, struggling to come up with a plan to keep her out of all this. If anything happened to her, the blame would rest solidly on his shoulders.

He sighed. "Do you believe me now?"

She met his eyes, studying his face like she was seeing him for the first

time. He couldn't tell if she believed him. Was she afraid of him now? His pulse thundered through his veins while the seconds slowly ticked by.

"Was this what you were trying to tell me the night you vanished?" she asked.

He nodded slowly as warmth spread through his chest. She knew his secret. Now she would understand why he'd kept his distance. "I've never told anyone the truth, but I wanted to tell you. I wanted you to know all of it."

"And instead, you left without a word." She crossed her arms around herself.

He frowned. "I already explained this." This was the moment he thought she would forgive him. He loved her enough to share the truth, but the truth could put her in harm's way. Didn't she see that? "I was protecting you."

"From the truth?"

"No, from Morgan." He smoothed the hair on his chin, scrambling to find his footing. She obviously didn't understand what Captain Morgan was capable of. "I think I have to go back to 1780 for you to understand."

"That's a lot of backstory to infodump on me." She rubbed her temples. "You didn't walk out on me in 1780."

"No, but the night I left we discovered the man who killed my brother and wants revenge against me is still alive." He paused, waiting for her eyes to meet his. He needed her to appreciate how dangerous Morgan was, but how could she? "I'm immortal, Lily. You're not. I couldn't risk him finding you. I had to leave."

She studied him for a moment. "Nothing's changed. I'm still mortal and he's still out there. In fact, I had breakfast with him this morning."

Why was she making this so difficult? "You're not safe until I kill Morgan."

She blinked and took another step backward toward the door. "You're tossing out the idea that you're going to murder someone like it happens every day."

"Not *every* day." He pulled his hair back from his forehead, fighting to keep his frustration from spilling out. Why couldn't she understand? "Morgan isn't from today's time. He's a killer. He won't hesitate to cut your throat if he gets the chance."

"Seems like he had the chance this morning and I'm still standing."

"Enough." He hadn't meant to raise his voice. "Stop fighting me on this."

He sighed. “He didn’t touch you because there were witnesses.”

She lifted her chin in defiance. “If he’s such a bloodthirsty pirate, why would he care if someone saw him killing me?”

“Damn it.” He cursed under his breath. There wasn’t time for arguing. He wasn’t used to getting pushback like this. “Why are you being so obstinate?”

She raised a brow. “Why are you being shortsighted?”

He crossed his arms. “I’m trying to protect you from an immortal pirate.”

She nodded slowly. “The big question is which one? Morgan or yourself? Seems to me Morgan never mentioned killing anyone over breakfast. I can’t say the same about you, Ian.”

How could she compare him to his murderous ex-captain? Did she think so little of him? He’d already lost the respect of his crew but losing hers cut even deeper. Covering his emotional wounds, he lashed out. “I think I know that bastard better than you do. If he gets the chance, he won’t hesitate to hurt you.”

Her lips parted and he braced himself for her next attack. It didn’t come. She shook her head and picked up her computer bag. “I might not be immortal, but I’ve been a writer long enough to know that characters, like people, evolve. If you and your previous captain have really been alive for more than two hundred years, I would hope you’ve grown from who you were. Maybe you’re still seeing him through your 1780s lens.”

She put the strap on her shoulder and went to the door. He suddenly realized she was leaving. Worry snuffed out the sparks of his anger. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means killing someone sounds like a 1780s solution.” She opened the door and looked back over her shoulder. “The Ian Flynn I fell for was crafty. He made fearless business deals most people would never risk. He didn’t need to kill anyone.” Her gaze slid up his body to his eyes. “If you find *that* guy, give me a call.”

She closed the door, and he fought the urge to chase after her. It would only piss her off further. He sent a text to Duke to have his security man keep shadowing her. It was still daylight. As long as she stayed in public spaces, Morgan wouldn’t risk attacking her.

He needed to think. Nothing had gone the way he’d anticipated. He swiped his glass off the table and poured another rum. The alcohol did little to cool his temper. She actually compared him to Morgan. Un-fucking-

believable.

He knocked back another shot of rum. Flynn had saved his entire crew from that coldhearted bastard. The only thing Morgan understood was violence.

But he'd obviously had the chance to grab Lily earlier today, and he hadn't. That went against everything Flynn knew of Rutger Morgan.

He set the empty glass back on the table and went to the window.

Lily appeared on the street below. She got into a car with a pink light on the dashboard without ever looking up at his window. The slender security guy got into his car and pulled away from the curb, following them.

Then it hit him. It wasn't the shock of being compared to Morgan that triggered his frustration. It was the realization that she really didn't love him anymore. There would be no reunion. He'd tried to remind himself there wouldn't be a second chance with her. She'd been very plain about that, but it wasn't until now that he realized how badly he'd wanted it. He'd been foolish to think she'd love him again once she knew the truth, but apparently his heart had still clung to hope.

He didn't deserve her anyway.

That didn't make him care about her any less. He still needed to keep her safe. From the moment he caught her in his arms at the bed and breakfast, the truth had been inescapable. He'd never stopped loving her. Holding her was a balm to his battered soul. The thought of a world without Lily in it was insufferable. If Morgan laid a hand on her, he would *wish* he could die. Flynn took a deep breath. Lily had compared him to Morgan, but there was a big difference. Morgan depended on his might. Flynn used his mind. He just needed to think.

Lily's life depended on it.

He went down the hall to his office and grabbed a dry-erase pen from his desk.

He stood in front of his whiteboard wall and allowed the words to pour out. He always thought of the technique as free thinking, but he'd learned from Diana, one of the psychic women who had recently joined the *Sea Dog* crew, that it was commonly referred to as automatic writing.

When the words started flowing, they usually came out in Old Irish. They called it Gaelic now.

When his pen slowed, he stepped back, studying his words. He tugged at his chin and circled a few phrases.

Súil le haghaidh súl, eye for an eye.

He skimmed further. Mentions of family, his brother, and the word mutiny were all repeated, but as the writings went on, the words “eyes” and “family” kept reappearing.

A few weeks ago, when Morgan had captured him and delivered a torturous beating, it had brought back the pain and trauma of losing his brother, Pryce, all over again.

Nightmares began reaching further back, to Ian’s father. Killian Flynn had nearly killed Ian the night he’d stepped between his parents to stop his drunken father from hitting and kicking his mother.

That was the night his father had thrown him out.

He’d believed all that trauma was behind him, lifetimes ago. Maybe it never really went away. After all, his father’s abuse had made him into the man who’d become a pirate captain and even beat the reaper himself.

He supposed he never would have lived through centuries to meet Lily without all that...what would she call it? Backstory.

His eyes flicked to the whiteboard again.

Family.

He took his phone out of his pocket and scrolled through his photos until he found the picture Colton had sent the night his son, Ace, was born. He enlarged the photo, taking a closer look at the baby and his mother.

At their unique violet eyes.

Just like Morgan’s. That’s why she had looked so familiar the first time he’d stepped into her psychic shop.

He stared at the words repeated over and over on the whiteboard. Family.

Birth control hadn’t been as reliable in the 1800s and he’d fathered children a few times during his long life on this Earth, but he’d quickly learned the acute pain of losing them to death’s embrace was a wound he couldn’t heal. For a few generations, he’d watched them from a distance, sending unexpected windfalls of money when they needed it. He’d occasionally swooped in as a long-lost uncle, but eventually even that brief contact was too difficult. It was easier to navigate the sea of eternity without tangling his lines with mortals.

He hadn’t fathered a child in over a hundred years now.

But what if Morgan had? He set his pen aside and crossed his arms.

Skye, Colton’s wife, had mentioned she’d never met her father. There was a good chance Morgan might not even realize he had a daughter.

He ran a hand down his face, trying to clear his head. Could this be real?
If so...

It could be Flynn's leverage.

But it would work only if Morgan was capable of loving a family.

Had he evolved?

The beating he'd given Flynn said no, but...could he have been triggered
when he found out Flynn and the crew were immortal, too?

It was a big gamble.

His lips curved at the corners. But what was life without some risk?

Chapter Seven

Lily drove all the way to her place in Atlanta without a single bathroom stop.

The drive was a blur of replaying her bizarre conversation with Ian. It would be so much easier to write it all off as some kind of eccentric fiction if she hadn't witnessed his hand healing in front of her eyes.

That cut had been deep. She couldn't come up with a logical answer to explain the way it healed in less than five minutes. Did that mean the Holy Grail was real? And if she believed he really did take a drink from the Grail, was she willing to take it a step further and believe that Ian had been a pirate captain in the 1700s?

Then there was the matter-of-fact way he'd mentioned killing a man.

She felt off-balance, as if the Earth had tilted on its axis and she couldn't regain her equilibrium. This was the man she'd fallen in love with once. She had thought she was going to grow old with him.

And now she realized she'd never known him at all. Not really. She'd fallen in love with Ian the businessman.

The man openly discussing executing someone was all Captain Flynn. This was the pirate he'd been two hundred years ago.

Maybe he still was.

She checked her phone and sighed. He'd already left her a voicemail and sent a text, asking to speak with her, but what could she say? She still couldn't wrap her head around the idea of Ian being some kind of immortal pirate.

But his hand did heal in less than five minutes.

She blew out a frustrated breath and opened her laptop.

First, she Googled pirate captains from the 1700s, but there was no mention of Ian Flynn. Maybe he'd changed his name? She doubted that. On

his business card it listed him as Ian Flynn, V. She'd asked him about it once and he told her it was a family name. He was the firstborn son, so he was Ian, the fifth.

It was all bullshit. His father's name probably wasn't even Ian. He'd been lying to her since the day they met.

Then she tried Rutger Morgan and a doctoral thesis came up about pirate trade routes through Savannah. He was mentioned as the captain of a ship called the *Jeweled Serpent*. There was a mutiny, and the captain was never seen again.

She reread the information. This was real. The guy she met at the bed and breakfast was a pirate captain. She rubbed her forehead as a stress headache loomed. She'd watched Ian's hand heal right before her eyes, but seeing a historical document verifying everything in writing that he'd told her gave his impossible story even more proof. He was telling her the truth.

Lily skimmed the paper further. The historian listed a new ship, the *Sea Dog*, that docked shortly after the mutiny. Rumors around the port swirled that it was the *Jeweled Serpent*.

Lily scrolled back to the beginning to find the author, Charlotte Sinclair. She quickly typed the name into Google and the Savannah Maritime Museum came up. Dr. Charlotte Sinclair was listed as the curator of the pirate exhibit. Lily found a link to her email and fired off an introduction and a request for a meeting. She claimed it was for book research. That usually opened doors for her. She had to try.

If the historian responded, was she really going to make the three-hour drive back to Savannah? She shouldn't. Ian had given her his story, and she should keep moving forward. Someday she could laugh about it and tell stories at conventions about how she once dated a pirate.

She got up and went to the window. The security guy was sitting in his car across the street. If he was going to keep following her around, she wanted to at least know his name.

She grabbed her jacket and jogged over to his car. The wind gusted, and the cold bite in the air stung her cheeks. She tapped on the window.

He rolled it down, raising a brow. "I'm not trespassing." He had a doughnut bag on the passenger seat, surprising her a little. He looked very fit in his black turtleneck. She loved dichotomies in people that she could weave into future characters.

She pulled her coat tighter around herself. "I didn't catch your name

earlier...”

“Paul.” He had hazel eyes and a sheepish smile. “I’m just doing my job.”

“I know. I’m Lily, by the way, but you probably already know that.” She offered her hand, and he took it in a firm grip.

He nodded and released her. “Good to meet you.”

She looked up and down her street. “Any danger lurking in the shadows?”

“Not yet.” He looked at her. “Want to give me your number and I’ll let you know if that changes?”

“Sounds like a plan.” She entered her number into his cell. “I hate to admit it, but I do feel a little more secure with a cop outside.”

“I’m not a cop, but I can hold my own.”

A gust of cold January wind sent a chill down her spine. “You must be freezing your ass off out here.”

He shrugged with a chuckle. “All part of the job.”

“I don’t envy you.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “I better get inside. Thanks, Paul.”

When she got back to her laptop, she opened her Word doc and started typing. This book had a stalker and a restraining order, but she feverishly added in a private security bodyguard. Her heroine wasn’t keen on the idea, but neither was Lily, so they were even. The added conflict had the words pouring onto the screen. This was when she loved her job most, when it felt like the story was downloading from the universe directly to her fingers.

Writing was her escape, and hopefully she could lose herself in the pages and pretend her ex wasn’t really an immortal pirate.

After an hour, she stretched, grabbed her phone, and headed into the kitchen for a snack. She should probably go to bed, but she hated to walk away when the words were flowing.

An email notification popped up on her phone. She picked it up and smiled. Apparently, Dr. Charlotte Sinclair was a night owl, too.

Hi Lily,

Thanks for reaching out. I have pretty extensive records on the Sea Dog and the sinking in 1795. Maybe we can meet at the Maritime Museum tomorrow afternoon? I have time at two o’clock.

Let me know if that works for you.

Tomorrow? In Savannah? Lily groaned. She just got back to Atlanta, and Ian was probably still in Savannah; what if she ran into him? Her mouse

hovered over the reply button, but she didn't click it. She should just ask her some questions through email.

But the historian had actual records. More proof of Ian's story. How could she pass that up?

She sighed. She'd kick herself forever for missing an opportunity like that. She was going back to Savannah tomorrow. She sent a quick reply before she could second-guess herself.

What was she doing? This wasn't for book research, this was...taking her down a path that might prove Ian was telling her the truth about everything.

She shouldn't care. They were finished.

How could she ever trust him again after he'd thrown her away like a meaningless piece of garbage? Even if he'd thought he was protecting her, he'd cut her out. That wasn't a partnership.

He wasn't *her* captain.

She took a sip of her water and closed her eyes. She could try to rationalize all of this, but the way her body responded to his touch hadn't changed. And even though he'd infuriated her, no man had ever intrigued her more.

Her phone chimed. She picked it up and frowned. A text from Paul, her new personal security guard, flashed on her screen.

Someone's casing your house. The same car has come by three times. You should get a hotel room, just in case.

Shit. Was it Morgan? Would he have followed her all the way back to Atlanta? Ian's warnings about his violent ex-captain came flooding back into her head until her hands trembled with adrenaline.

She sucked in a deep breath, trying to think positively as she hustled into the living room and closed her laptop, stuffing it into her bag. Hotel rooms were great places to write. No distractions. This could be a good thing. Besides, Paul was just being cautious. There was no way to know if someone was really casing her house. She hooked her laptop bag over her shoulder and grabbed her still-packed suitcase. The clothes inside were dirty, but she could wash them later.

She double-checked that the front door was locked and then went to the door leading to the garage. As soon as she stepped through, someone grabbed her from behind, covering her mouth.

A woman whispered against her ear, "We need to talk."

• • •

Flynn kept the engine running while he waited for Agent Bale at the airport, eager for whatever assistance he could get from Department 13 to help him stop Morgan. It was the only way to guarantee Lily's safety.

The radio was on, but the music was just to fill the silence. He couldn't stop obsessing over the possible connection between Skye and Rutger Morgan. If he was right, then Morgan not only had a daughter on the *Sea Dog* crew, but a grandson too.

Would that matter to the cruel bastard?

He ran his finger under the eye that Morgan had stabbed. The memory of the pain had his adrenaline pumping. He sucked in a slow breath, burying the anxiety as deep as he could. Ever since he'd told Lily the truth, he felt like the anchor line of his life was being pulled in two directions.

One was dragging him back to the past, to kill or be killed, and the other was Lily's influence tugging him into the future, where it might be possible for him and his nemesis to find redemption in this new world.

His solution seemed the simplest.

Killing Morgan would guarantee the safety of Lily and his crew. But to kill an immortal, he needed the Spear of Destiny, and if Morgan had the weapon, he could use it on Flynn.

He sighed, clenching his jaw. His self-confidence was usually his greatest asset, but Lily had him rethinking everything.

Which was part of what drew him to her in the first place. She had a way of seeing the world that thrilled him like a new wind filling the sails after a day lost in the doldrums. And no one had ever challenged him the way she did.

Even if he solved the problem with Morgan, it wouldn't bring Lily back to him. He'd sent her a text and left a voicemail, but so far, she still hadn't responded. He also called Duke's man to verify he was watching over her.

For now, she was safe, and really that was all that mattered.

Travelers trickled out from the baggage claim, but Flynn didn't recognize any of them. Finally, a tall man with light brown hair and a black suit approached the car. About damned time. Bale had a leather attaché case over his shoulder, and probably had a couple of weapons hidden under his jacket. Flynn popped the locks on the car and waited for him to get in.

Agent Bale opened the door, bringing a gust of cold wind inside with

him. “Thanks for picking me up.” He pulled the seat belt across his chest. “Want to tell me why the whole crew won’t be working with you on this mission?”

Flynn checked his mirror and merged into traffic. “Because they’re all in love. They have a reason to live, and they’re not ready to risk losing that to the Spear of Destiny. Duke and Annika are willing only because she wants to protect her sister.”

Bale nodded slowly, staring straight ahead. “I guess that’s understandable.” He looked over at Flynn. “Why are you so eager to take the risk?”

“Vengeance.” Flynn glanced at him, arching his brow. “Plus, I won’t have to split the payment.”

Both of those things were true, but neither were his real reason.

Lily’s smile filled his head. And suddenly he realized he was willing to die for her. He’d loved other women before, but this was...new.

Bale checked the side mirror. “Any idea where Morgan and Holli Porter might be?”

“The last sighting of them together was at the Pirate’s Moon Bed and Breakfast.” He tightened his hold on the steering wheel. “I had my assistant book a room for you there.”

“Good. I already reached out to Agent Henderson and Greyson. They’re searching through the vault inventory lists for any potential defenses against the Spear of Destiny. Maybe there’s an impenetrable shield or something we can use for protection until we recover the relic.”

Greyson Till, the *Sea Dog*’s master gunner, had fallen in love with one of Agent Bale’s team, and now Aura Henderson was a member of the *Sea Dog* crew as well as a field agent for Department 13. They made a formidable team.

And if they could find something to help him defend himself from the Spear, he was going to try it.

Being willing to die was far from being eager. He had no intention of leaving this Earth anytime soon if it could be avoided.

Silence settled between them for a few blocks. Finally, Flynn looked over at his passenger. “If we capture Morgan and Holli Porter, what do you plan to do with them?”

“We’re working on a holding cell inside the vault for Morgan, and we’ll turn Holli over to Department 52. They’ll deport her back to Neptune and

hopefully come up with something for the portal in the ocean to keep her from coming back. Why?"

"Because with the Spear I could end Morgan, and banishing Holli from our planet will be a problem. She's Annika's sister." Flynn readjusted his grip on the wheel.

Annika was Duke's love, and Holli Porter was really Atargatis, the first mermaid to make contact with humans. Annika would not be happy with her older sister being unable to return to Earth, which meant Duke would be unhappy, too.

It wasn't Flynn's problem, not directly anyway, but Duke was on his very short list of friends. He couldn't allow this to happen. An idea began to take shape.

"What if she agreed to comply with your demands?" He glanced over at Bale. "She could redeem herself."

He shook his head. "Or she could infiltrate Department 13 again and steal more dangerous artifacts from the vault." A muscle jumped in his cheek. "It's too risky."

Everything they were planning was.

Flynn exited the freeway and headed for the Historic District of Savannah. The fog was rolling in off the river, giving the yellow streetlamps a halo. "I think this has gotten personal for you."

"Oh please." Bale shook his head. "You're a damned pirate. You'd kill her if she'd smuggled your treasure."

"Impossible." Flynn smirked. "She's immortal."

"Exactly my point." Bale checked the side mirror. "The only way to be sure we keep the relics in the vault is to get that mermaid back to her home planet."

"You don't even know if it's possible to close the ocean portals to her. You'll end up having a very angry mermaid gunning for you." Flynn drove into the parking lot of the bed and breakfast and looked over at Agent Bale. "What if she helps me recover the Spear?"

"She claims to be in love with Morgan." Bale opened the door and turned Flynn's way. "How are you going to pull that off?"

Flynn raised a brow. "By making her a deal, of course."

Bale chuckled as he got out of the car. "If you make that happen, we can *discuss* it."

"I'll hold you to that." He wasn't sure how just yet, but he'd find the

leverage.

Bale smirked. “Fair enough.” He got out and reached for his leather bag. “I’ll call you if I run into them here.”

Flynn had already scouted out the Pirate Moon Bed and Breakfast after Lily went back to Atlanta. There was no sign of his ex-captain and the mermaid. It made Flynn nervous, but he’d checked with Duke’s man twice and he’d assured him she was safe.

“We’ll talk soon.” Flynn waited for him to slam the door and then drove away.

He needed to think.

Chapter Eight

Lily turned around to find the woman from the bed and breakfast. Her eyes widened. “Holli?” *Oh-shit-oh-shit-oh-shit*. She wished she had telepathy so she could tell Paul what was going on. Instead, she blurted out, “What are you doing here?”

Lily’s heart raced as she searched the shadows for any sign of Morgan. She wrote about kidnappings all the time. She should be better at figuring a way out of this, but she could barely think through the panic and adrenaline.

“We don’t have a lot of time.” Holli pointed to the car. “Let’s get out of here.”

Lily jerked free of her grasp, or maybe Holli let her go. She stumbled back a step, her hands trembling. She didn’t see a weapon, but that didn’t mean Holli was unarmed. “You broke into my house. Why would I go anywhere with you?”

Holli’s dark eyes sparkled even in the dim light of the garage. “Because I’m your best chance at staying alive. You’re the queen in a chess match between two men who aren’t thinking straight right now.”

Ian’s warning about his ex-captain came back with a vengeance. This could be a trap. Lily tightened her grip on her suitcase. “How do I know you’re not delivering me to your boyfriend?”

“If I were here to hurt you, you’d already be unconscious in the trunk.” She paused as Lily digested her words. They weren’t comforting, but they did ring true. If Holli were just going to kill her, there’d be no point in trying to talk things out. Holli started again. “He thinks I’m at our storage unit retrieving a weapon, not with Flynn’s girlfriend.” She looked at the car and back to Lily. “Sampson knows where you live. It won’t be long until he comes for you.”

“I’m not Ian’s girlfriend,” Lily replied as his impassioned plea to stay

with him flashed through her head. Morgan wanted to kill *her* because he couldn't kill Ian. Every second the truth of Ian's story became harder to deny. Her voice shook as she forced the words out. "We broke up."

Holli's lips curved. "Flynn has been scrambling to protect you ever since he realized Rutger Morgan was still alive. It doesn't matter how you feel about Flynn, his actions betray how he feels about *you*. That makes you a target."

Lily clenched her jaw, steeling her will. She could be walking right into Morgan's hands, or this could be a chance to save herself. These were the kinds of choices she'd force her characters into. Facing them in real life wasn't nearly as thrilling.

Holli went to the passenger side of Lily's car. "Come on. We've got a lot to talk about."

"Why can't we talk here?"

"Because when I don't come back with the weapon, Sampson will know something is wrong and he'll come for you." She paused, her tone softening. "You're my only chance to save him. If he goes down this path, he's either going to be dead or locked up for eternity."

That was something Lily could understand. "Fine, but I have a stun gun and I know how to use it."

Holli chuckled. "Does it work on mermaids?"

She got into the car before Lily could respond. Lily popped the trunk and put her suitcase inside, then opened her laptop bag and took out her small taser. Why would Holli bring mermaids into all this? Maybe it was just a weird attempt at a joke.

Anxiety bubbled in her stomach as she slammed the trunk closed. She could run right now. Holli was in the car. Lily would have a head start. She could get to Paul and...

She looked at Holli through the back window. If she'd wanted to hurt Lily, she would have. And if she really did have an idea that might help her get Ian to give up his vendetta to kill Sampson, then...Lily had to try. She got into the driver's side. She opened the garage door and fired up the engine. "You should get down, so the security guy doesn't see you."

Holli eyed her for a second before she bent over, hiding herself from the windows.

Lily backed out and waved at Paul as she drove away. Was he going to stay behind and watch the house or follow her?

Like so many other parts of her life at the moment, she had no clue. She wasn't even sure she wanted him to follow her. Would Ian see her meeting with Holli as a betrayal? Probably. It would be better if there weren't any witnesses.

She hoped she wouldn't come to regret this decision.

Holli sat up once they got to a light. "Take a left here."

"Where are we going?" Lily adjusted her grip on the wheel.

"I have a room at the Holiday Inn."

Lily looked over at her passenger. "I know where it is. Why don't you tell me why you're here?"

Holli chuckled. "You're braver than I thought you'd be."

Lily shrugged as she made another turn. "You don't know anything about me."

"I think I know a little. I've read all your books."

Lily blinked and looked over at her passenger. "You knew who I was this morning at breakfast?"

Holli nodded. "Yes, but I couldn't let Sampson know that. He has your picture from Flynn's wallet. He knows only that hurting you will hurt Flynn."

Lily drove into the Holiday Inn parking lot and found a place right under a light. Holli hadn't tried to hurt her, but she wanted to be in a well-lit area just in case. She put the car in park and left the engine running, then looked at Holli.

"Ian says his real name is Rutger Morgan."

A soft wistful smile curved on Holli's lips that made her suddenly seem so much older and wiser. "When I found him on that island two hundred years ago, bitter and angry, *that* was Rutger Morgan. I was Atargatis back then."

Lily recognized that name. She'd written a book a few years back featuring a linguist who translated Sumerian cuneiform. She'd researched Sumerian folklore. "The mermaid from the Sumerian legends?"

"Yes. That was lifetimes ago." She shook her head. "We carved out a new life together. We made new identities. It felt like a fresh start."

Holli was a... She couldn't finish the thought. Her gaze wandered to her passenger's legs. She had to be lying, but why make up something so outlandish? Lily wished she had her people-watching notepad. True or not, she didn't want to forget a word of this conversation. "Have you been with

him since...the 1700s?"

"He'd been drinking from the Fountain of Youth for twenty years without realizing the magic of the water. My mermaid comb had been hidden inside. He found it one day and that called me to him. I think it was at the beginning of the year 1800 here on Earth."

Lily blinked. The Holy Grail, the Fountain of Youth, and mermaids were all...real? It couldn't be, but the way Holli talked about it without any hesitation made it seem like a casual truth. Somehow it was easier to believe all this when it came from a woman she didn't know than it had from Ian. She'd thought she knew him, and maybe that impression of him made his fantastical secrets seem even more impossible.

Holli sighed. "Rutger Morgan had a reputation for cruelty and violence. He grew into a better man and changed his name to Sampson Bane."

"According to Ian, Morgan nearly beat him to death recently. Sounds to me like he's still pretty cruel and violent."

Holli nodded and rubbed her forehead. "Since he discovered Flynn is still alive, he's been...regressing. I'm not a therapist, but it's like seeing Flynn again flipped some switch inside of him. He's obsessed with revenge for something that happened lifetimes ago. He can't seem to let it go."

"I don't know how I can help with that." Lily shook her head.

"That's not what I'm asking." She waited for Lily to meet her eyes. "I just need time. I'll keep working on my pirate captain. I need you to help me with yours."

Lily chuffed. "Ian's not my captain. I thought he was a commercial real estate broker."

"So remind him of that." Holli pointed at the glowing Holiday Inn sign. "The world has moved on. These two men aren't pirates anymore, and revenge is wasted energy. Vengeance isn't going to change the past, and it won't prove anything in the future. If you can get Flynn to accept this, there might be hope to save Sampson, too."

Holli spoke like immortality was a given, just as Ian had. This wasn't fiction, but somehow, she couldn't fully wrap her brain around it. If she did, she'd have to also believe that Holli was a mermaid.

Lily studied the woman in the passenger seat. Holli looked human. No sign of a tail or gills or anything to hint that she was...something else. "Were you serious earlier...about being a mermaid?"

"Yes." She nodded slowly. "And Sampson..." She swallowed, her tone

softening. "I feel like I'm losing him."

Lily understood that feeling, and in spite of the woman beside her claiming to be some kind of mermaid, in that moment, Lily could relate to her. "Ian ghosted me the second he got word that Sampson was still alive. He says he was protecting me." She shook her head. "But he seems stuck on the idea that no one will be safe unless Morgan is dead."

"The minds of men." Holli rolled her eyes. "I was born immortal. We learn quickly that a never-ending existence depends on cycles and evolutions. But these captains were mortal men. Being mortal teaches you that each day is precious because death could come at any moment. As soon as Sampson realized Flynn was still alive, his old vices returned. Vengeance accomplishes nothing."

Lily agreed, but that didn't change the reality around them. "Even if I wanted to get involved, I don't see how I could help you with any of this."

"Persuade Flynn to walk away from this conflict. I'll do the same with Sampson."

Lily let out a humorless chuckle. "You give me way too much credit. I don't have that kind of power over him."

She patted Lily's knee. "You may not think so, but if anyone is going to be able to get through his thick skull, it will be you." She straightened. "Are you willing to try?"

The rational part of her brain was screaming to run away from this mess, but her heart was calling the shots, and right now, it whispered that maybe she could save Ian. This might be the only way.

Gradually, Lily started to nod. "I have an appointment in Savannah tomorrow anyway. I'll try to talk to him, but no promises. I already told him I didn't think trying to kill an immortal was the right move."

Holli's lips curved into a bright smile. "Good. I'll give you my cell phone number so you can reach out when you have news."

Lily entered Holli's number while her mind wrestled with all the new information, not only that immortality might be possible but the fact that mermaids could be real, too. It was like the world had just burst through the boundaries of what she'd always considered to be reality. The expansion was sudden and difficult to accept, but she couldn't just stick her head in the sand and pretend nothing had changed.

She looked over at Holli. "So you're really an immortal mermaid?"

Holli nodded.

Lily's gaze slipped to Holli's feet. She couldn't help it. "But you have legs."

"All it would take is a drop of water and my tail would be all folded up on your floor mat." She opened the door. "But we don't have time to talk about mermaid physiology right now. Until we get the captains thinking straight, you should stay away from your house. Sampson knows where you live."

She was right, but right now, other than Ian, Holli was the only immortal Lily knew, and she had a million questions. Lily tilted her head slightly. "Have you been with him all this time?"

Holli met her eyes. "We separated a few times over the past two centuries. The last time was about thirty years ago when I first started working for Department 13, but we always seem to find our way back to each other."

Lily had no idea what Department 13 was, but before she could ask, Holli got out of the car. She leaned down and said, "I can't promise Sampson won't come for you. He's drowning in a desire for vengeance right now. You'd be safer with Flynn and his crew."

She slammed the door, leaving Lily gripping her steering wheel.

She couldn't go home if Sampson knew where she lived, and she didn't have much of a safety net to rely on. Her parents were gone, no siblings, and her writer friends didn't live in the state.

The time on her cell phone taunted her. It was after ten o'clock at night. Even if she decided to go back to Ian's condo in Savannah, she wouldn't arrive until after one in the morning. Maybe she could get a hotel?

As if he could hear her thoughts, another text from Ian buzzed on her phone. She clicked on it and sighed.

Where are you?

She scanned the parking lot and noticed Paul's car in the next row over. Guess that answered her question about whether he'd follow her or not. She sent Ian a quick reply.

Could ask you the same thing.

A few seconds passed.

I just want to know you're safe.

Her eyes suddenly welled with tears. Maybe it was finally sinking in that

someone out there wanted to hurt her.

She wrote about killers stalking the heroes in her books all the time, but imagining it and living it were two completely different things.

This was...scary. She didn't want to be alone in a strange hotel wondering if someone was going to break into her room.

She sucked up her pride and typed out her reply.

I was thinking about driving back to Savannah tonight.

Instead of a text, her phone rang. Ian's name lit up her screen. She took a breath and accepted the call.

"Hi."

"Hello." His deep voice soothed her frayed nerves. "I'll text you the address for my condo and the gate code for the garage. Please come. Stay with me."

She closed her eyes. "Are you sure? This isn't...I'm not interested in..." She sighed. "We're not getting back together. Ever."

The wind whistled into his phone. Was he outside? "I just want to keep you safe."

She held her breath. Was she really going to sleep under the same roof as Ian Flynn again? The man oozed sex appeal. He'd also broken her heart.

But she had to talk to him anyway. If she wanted to get off Morgan's radar, she needed Ian to give up this vendetta against his former captain.

She opened her eyes, staring out the windshield into the parking lot. "All right. I'm on my way."

"I'll see you soon."

She ended the call and got back on the road.

...

Flynn slid his cell back into his pocket and rested his hands on the railing of his balcony overlooking River Street. Fog had rolled in off the water, causing a muted halo of light around each of the yellow gas lamps lining the edge of the water.

He sucked in a slow, deep breath, hoping the cold night air might snuff out the fire in his chest. When he'd gotten the call from Paul that a car had been casing Lil's place, Flynn had wanted to throttle someone.

The tidal wave of relief that washed over him when he got her text had made him weak for a moment. She was safe, and she was on her way to

him.

But this wasn't a reunion that would end with her naked in his arms. She'd been clear about that. Now he couldn't get the memories out of his head. Damn it.

He went inside and locked the sliding glass door behind him. She would be walking through his door in about three hours. Until then, he had business to attend to.

He swiped the remote from the table and clicked the button to lower the motorized window blinds, then went into the kitchen.

Maybe he'd start with a drink, or twelve.

He took out his phone and pressed Duke's name. His first mate answered on the second ring. "Captain? Is everything all right?"

"Is Annika with you?" He rarely called her by her name, but right now he needed the mermaid, so he would do his best to be civil. It wasn't that she had wronged him, but the day she'd left Duke and returned to her home planet Neptune after a fight, she'd crossed a red line in Flynn's book. He'd never seen his first mate so broken.

Forgiveness wasn't one of his strengths.

"Aye." Duke paused. "Why?"

"Can you bring her over to my place? I need to talk to her about her sister."

Duke sighed. "She doesn't know where Atargatis is."

"I know. I still have to talk to her."

A woman's voice came on the line. "What do you need?"

"I'd rather discuss it in person."

"I'm not coming over to your place to be attacked because my sister might know where to find the Spear of Destiny."

"Good." He swirled his rum around his glass. "That's not what's going to happen. How soon can you be here?"

Duke came back on the phone. "We'll be there in twenty minutes." He lowered his voice to a snarl. "Don't be an arse to her."

"I'll be a gentleman, mate." He ended the call and smirked as he pocketed his phone.

Duke knew damned well he was no gentleman.

While he waited for them to arrive, he went into his office and fired up his computer. He opened the flash drive from Agent Bale, skimming all the information about the Spear of Destiny. The tip was engraved in Hebrew.

During his lifetimes in this world, he'd learned many languages. He was fluent in Gaelic, English, Spanish, French, Russian, Chinese, Arabic, and Hebrew. He'd been pondering studying Portuguese next, but he hadn't made the time yet.

He scrawled a quick translation. It appeared to be more of a labeling that this was the tip that pierced the side of Jesus Christ instead of instructions for using the blade. Pity.

He flipped through more notes about where it had been discovered before being locked into Department 13's vault.

Did it ever really make it inside? He doubted it. A powerful relic like that would've been too tempting for Atargatis, or Holli, as she called herself today.

The doorbell chimed and he got up to let Duke and his mermaid in. His first mate towered over Annika. Duke wore a loose-fitting coat, no doubt hiding the holster around his shoulder, and Annika had her long blond hair in a high ponytail.

Her ocean blue eyes narrowed as Flynn's gaze met hers. "What's happened?"

"Thank you for coming." Flynn walked them into the living room, ignoring her question for the moment. She might not bother with human pleasantries, but he'd promised Duke he would be a gentleman. They sat on the leather couch, and Flynn took the chair. "Agent Bale is in Savannah and he gave me the file on the Spear of Destiny." He paused, his gaze locked on Annika. "He also wants to arrest your sister, but I might have an alternative ending for her."

"Why are you telling me?" Annika crossed her ankles, leaning against Duke. "I don't work for my sister."

"I simply need to get a message to her." Flynn rested back in his chair. "If she helps me recover the Spear of Destiny, I can convince Agent Bale to give up his quest to see her banished back to Neptune for stealing from the relics vault."

"Banished?" She straightened, a crease forming between her brows. "Even if I tried to persuade her to help you find it, she's been adamant about protecting Morgan. I can't imagine she'll give you the Spear. Especially if you're planning to kill Morgan with it."

"I wasn't going to lead with that." He tugged at his chin. "I made a deal with Agent Bale that if I can get her to cooperate and help me locate the

Spear, he won't pursue punishment against her."

The mermaid rolled her eyes. "If he thinks he can keep her off this planet, he's wrong."

"He seems to think Department 51 has the tech for that." Flynn studied the pained look on Annika's face. This was going to work. He just needed to bait the hook. "Helping me would mean she could stay here with you."

She looked at Duke for a moment before meeting Flynn's eyes again. "I can try to contact her, but if she's forced to choose between me and Morgan, I'm pretty sure we all know she won't be choosing me."

Flynn nodded. "But it should give her something to think about. She wouldn't have to hide or look over her shoulder and she could pass through the undersea portals any time she pleased."

Duke cleared his throat. "And giving you the Spear would mean you could end Morgan and win back your lady."

Flynn's gaze cut to his first mate. "Our entire crew will be safer if he's gone. Keeping Lily safe is a side bonus."

Annika stood up. "Tell me one thing. Why are you even offering her a deal? Agent Bale has amazing paranormal tech at his disposal. It's only a matter of time before he locates the Spear."

"Fair question. When I signed the contract for this mission, Agent Bale asked me to alert him if I locate your sister in the process of finding the Spear. When I asked what he had in mind, he mentioned the interstellar deportation." He shrugged his shoulders and focused on Duke, uncomfortable with the uncharacteristic compassion of his decision. "I imagined if she was trapped on Neptune, it might lure you to visit her, and the last time you left Duke behind...it was painful." He cleared his throat. "So, I made Bale a counteroffer. If we can secure her help, she won't be bothered by Department 13 again."

Duke got up and slid his arm around Annika's waist as he met Flynn's eyes. "Thanks for thinking of Annika through the haze of vengeance, Captain."

"She's not crew, but you are. Crew always comes first." And he meant that. Every word. They might think he was a narcissistic arse, but they didn't know all the sacrifices he'd made for his crew over the centuries.

And he planned to keep it that way.

He walked them to the door. "Thank you for passing along my offer."

Annika nodded. "I'll let you know if she responds."

They closed the door, and he went back to his office.

The first step of his plan was complete. With any luck, Rutger Morgan would be having dinner with the devil himself soon.

His gaze lifted to the whiteboard, and he clenched his jaw. The word “family” was circled over and over, picking at his resolve. What if Lily was right and Morgan wasn’t the same man he’d been when they’d left him on that island? The recent beating said otherwise.

Killing him would solve everything.

Wouldn’t it?

He raked both hands back through his hair. Indecision led to the death of pirate captains.

Fuck.

Chapter Nine

Lily entered the code into the keypad and drove into the underground garage of Ian's building. Her shoulders were tight, and her hands ached from keeping a death grip on the steering wheel.

But she was finally here.

She parked in a guest spot and sent a text to Ian.

Made it.

She stuffed her phone in her pocket and got out. She went to the trunk and put her laptop bag over her sore shoulder, then bent to get her suitcase. Behind her, the elevator doors opened.

"Can I help?"

Why did his voice still turn her legs to Jell-O?

She steeled her expression and glanced over her shoulder. He looked as sexy as he sounded in his heather gray Henley with the sleeves pushed up his forearms. She kept her voice cool and detached. "That'd be great. Thanks."

Ian swooped in to lift her suitcase out of the trunk, his biceps giving her a show she didn't want, but she also couldn't look away. He reached for the strap on her laptop bag. "Can I carry this too?"

"Sure, but if you drop it, I might have to toss you off your balcony." She allowed him to slide the strap from her shoulder, the brief caress of his fingers making her hyperaware of his touch. Her body was having a tough time remembering that he hurt her and she would never trust him with her heart again.

He chuckled. "I'll be careful with it."

She walked ahead of him to the elevator, pressing the lock on her key fob as she went. Inside, she tried to stay as far from him as she could get, but it wasn't a huge elevator, and with her bags, it was tight. He pressed the

button for the top floor and straightened.

“I’m relieved you’re safe. When Paul called, I...wasn’t happy.”

She resisted looking at him. “I’m fine.”

The doors opened and they stepped out.

She followed him into his condo and collapsed on his sofa. The bottle of rum was already on the counter with an empty glass beside it. It was considerably less full than last night when he told her about the Grail. At least she wasn’t the only one upset by all of this.

Resting her head back, she stared at the ceiling, trying to organize her thoughts.

She’d practiced a speech during the entire drive about how he wasn’t a pirate captain anymore and how forgiveness was tougher than revenge, but exhaustion had set in, and it all seemed jumbled now. She’d talk to him about it in the morning.

The couch moved as Ian sat beside her. “I have the bed made in the guest room, but if you’re too tired to get to it, I could bring blankets out to you here.”

She rolled her head to the side so she could see him. His blue eyes were hypnotic, drawing her in, and his lips were framed by his perfectly groomed goatee. She used to love the way it brushed her skin as he pressed slow languid kisses down her body.

Stop it.

She forced her gaze back up to his eyes and found a sparkle in them as if he knew exactly what she’d been fantasizing about. “Blankets out here would be great. And my suitcase is full of dirty clothes, so I hope you have a washing machine.”

“I do. I’ll be right back.” He turned around and went down the hall.

His ass was still perfect, too. She stared at the ceiling again, struggling to remind herself he was the same guy who’d walked out of her bedroom and never spoken to her again. His exit had been effortless then and it would be again.

Do not give him another chance, Lily.

He came around the back of the sofa and set the folded blankets beside her, then his big hands were on her shoulders. Before she could swat them away, he squeezed and she almost moaned. Her eyes drifted closed as he worked the tension out of her body.

“You...don’t have to...do...that.” Her voice sounded breathier than she

intended, but she couldn't help it.

"I know." He continued massaging her shoulders and when her head tipped forward, he soothed the muscles on the back of her neck.

Just feeling his fingers on the sensitive skin of her throat brought back memories of the way he'd touched her when they kissed, rough and tender all at once. Heat pooled low in her belly and parts of her body were suddenly wide awake.

"I didn't want to leave you, Lil. I didn't know what else to do."

"I can't do this." She was too tired to debate with him. She scooted forward, freeing herself from the heaven of his hands, and turned around to look at him. "I'm never going to trust you with my heart again. It has nothing to do with you being some kind of immortal pirate captain and everything to do with you never seeing me as your partner. At the first sign of a problem, you were gone. No note, no call, no closure." She shook her head, drinking in the pain her words were dredging up. "You knew *all* my secrets, and I knew *none* of yours."

Regret shone in his eyes as he cupped her cheek. She should've slapped his hand away, but she couldn't move. Couldn't reject the comfort he offered.

He bent down, so they were eye to eye, and whispered, "I'm sorry. I hate that I hurt you."

He brushed a kiss to her forehead and stood up. There was tension in his jaw and hunger in his eyes. She recognized that look. All it would take was a word, and he would scoop her into his arms and carry her to his bedroom.

But she stayed silent.

"We'll talk in the morning," he whispered.

She managed to nod.

"Night, Lil."

She waited until he disappeared into his room before collapsing onto the blankets and groaning into them. Then she made the mistake of inhaling.

They smelled so good, like rum and leather, like Ian.

She was doomed. If she let him suck her in again, she deserved the devastation when he walked out on her.

In an effort to distract herself, she unfolded the blankets and found one of Ian's shirts folded up underneath. She held it up and her breath caught. It was a sweatshirt she'd bought him when she'd dragged him to an Ed Sheeran concert in Atlanta.

He'd kept it.

She peered down the hallway, but it was empty. She quickly undressed and pulled the oversized sweatshirt over her head. It fell to her mid-thigh and wrapped her in a soft warm embrace. She slid into the blankets and tried to get settled, but all she could think about was Ian, naked, right down the hall.

Her hand wandered down her belly and under the hem of the sweatshirt. She parted her folds, dipping her fingers inside her wet entrance. Closing her eyes, she imagined Ian looking up at her from between her legs before pressing his tongue deep inside her. He'd whisper filthy things against her skin until she practically came the second he touched her clit.

She parted her lips, struggling to stay quiet as she moved her fingers faster. Her hips writhed, aching for release. In her head, he was kissing his way up her body. With her other hand she pinched her nipples through the fabric, arching her back as her muscles tensed. She could almost feel the heat of his breath against her ear demanding she fuck him harder, telling her to come, and growling about how tight she was around him.

Suddenly her inner muscles clenched, and her breath caught. She bit her lower lip to keep from crying out as her toes curled and her thighs pressed together. A shaky sigh escaped her lips as she drifted off to sleep. Maybe he'd visit her in her dreams.

• • •

Flynn came out to start the coffee maker and found Lily sleeping in his sweatshirt. One leg dangled down from the couch, free of the blanket. She had one arm up above her head and the other hung out over the table. He'd forgotten how she slept all sprawled out across his king-sized bed. She used to steal the covers and leave him, the captain, curled up on the edge.

His heart twisted. He'd missed her.

And late last night, he'd heard her muffled moans and caught himself hoping she was fantasizing about him. Just thinking about her coming had him adjusting himself in his pajama pants.

He went to the cupboard and took out two mugs, wishing things could be different. He'd meant what he'd said last night. He hated himself for the hurt that had shone in her eyes. The betrayal.

His fault. He sighed and filled the pot. As he poured it into the machine,

Lily's sleepy voice warmed him all over. "Five more minutes."

He chuckled. "Not for me."

She sat up, pulling the blanket over to cover her legs. Her black hair fell just past her shoulders and her dark brown eyes were bright in spite of her rubbing them.

Seeing his sweatshirt on her brought out a possessive spark in his soul. He'd tucked it in with the blankets after she mentioned needing to wash her clothes, but he wasn't sure she'd wear it. She had bent over backward to make it clear that she wasn't here to reconcile their relationship.

He didn't deserve her.

But he liked knowing part of him was touching her.

"Are you on a deadline?" he asked as he took two mugs from the cupboard.

"Always." She slid her fingers through her hair. "This one is a standalone, without my FBI agent lead, so I'm having a hard time finding the voice of this new heroine. She's a journalist, which I can sort of relate to from my freelance jobs, but she's been poking around a story about the CEO of a pharmaceutical company with shady dealings with the FDA. Not my usual storyline."

He poured the coffee, enjoying her musing about the fictional world she was creating. The way her mind worked fascinated him. "If there's no FBI agent, there must not be a serial killer."

"Sadly, no." She chuckled. "If only I had a killer. This book revolves around a stalker, and he's been leaving her bloody gifts. Mostly animals. It's kind of twisted, even for me. I can't decide if he's trying to scare her off the story, or if there's another connection that even I don't know about yet."

"I hope the words come faster." He tipped his head toward the hallway. "Feel free to use my office to work. I have some...business to attend to anyway."

"Is this about real estate or is it about pirates?" Her brow popped up. "The secret is already out. You don't have to lie to me anymore."

His pulse thrummed at the idea of never having to lie to her again. "Does that mean you believe me?"

She smirked. "Well, I do have a two o'clock appointment with a historian at the Maritime Museum to find out more about a mutiny on a ship called the *Jeweled Serpent*."

His stomach twisted hearing her say the name of Morgan's ship. Foul

memories whispered through his mind. “Is that so?”

“Don’t act surprised.” She chuckled. “You know my Google powers are expert level. You must’ve expected I’d be searching out every mention of Captain Rutger Morgan and Ian Flynn.”

He ground his teeth, his emotions jumbled at the thought of her discovering who he had once been. He wasn’t ashamed, far from it. But it had been a different time back then. Would she understand his choices?

“Are you meeting with Dr. Sinclair?”

She nodded slowly. “How did you know that?”

He chuckled and lifted his gaze. “She’s a member of the *Sea Dog* crew. She’s engaged to our pilot, Keegan.”

He brought over the mugs of coffee and handed her one.

She took it, wrapping her hands around the warm cup. “Wow. Small world.” Her eyes met his. “How many immortal pirates are hiding out in Savannah?”

“Too many.” He took a swallow of the coffee, savoring the burn in his gut.

She set the mug on the coffee table. “You’re still planning to kill the other immortal pirate captain?”

He bristled at the judgment in her tone. “You don’t know this man like I do.”

“And how well do you really know him? He’s been living over two hundred years now. You honestly think he hasn’t changed at all? Haven’t you evolved since the day you took over his ship?”

“I have changed.” He nodded, struggling to keep his voice level. “But recently Morgan ambushed me, bound me to a chair so I couldn’t defend myself, and then beat the living shit out of me. When he realized killing me wasn’t an option, he plunged a dagger in my eye just to torture me. So, I think I do fucking know him, better than most, and he’s still the same man I remember.”

She looked down at her hands. “And you’re going to sink to his level and try to kill him somehow?”

He pressed the button on the remote to raise the shades and went to the window, fighting to control his temper. “I’m not sinking to anyone’s level. I’m protecting you and my crew. The world will be better without him in it.”

Behind him, the couch squeaked as she got up. She stopped beside him,

the blanket wrapped around her like a regal cape. “He’s probably saying the same thing about you.”

He stared down at the river. “Maybe he’s right.”

She slipped her hand into his, surprising him. “I don’t think so.”

He looked over at her, his pulse skipping as his fingers laced with hers as if they’d never been separated. Her kindness tore at the emotional armor he’d worn for centuries. The cold indifference of a pirate captain was tough to maintain when she offered him comfort.

“I’ve been struggling, since the rest of the crew have found love.” The honesty of his words surprised him. He hadn’t admitted them even to himself, but here he was confiding them to Lily. Unable to make eye contact, he focused his gaze down the river to the main mast of the *Sea Dog*. “I’m not sure what my purpose is in this world anymore. It used to be to protect the crew and keep them together, but now...”

He cut himself off, shocked by the revelation. As the captain, he kept insecurities and fears close to the vest. Any sign of weakness was an opportunity for someone to usurp his position.

But somewhere down deep in the shadows of his tarnished soul, he trusted Lily. He always had.

She squeezed his hand and slid hers free. “I better get my laundry going and get ready for my meeting with Dr. Sinclair.”

Flynn smiled, shaking his head. “You’re standing next to the captain himself. What can she tell you that I can’t?”

Her eyes sparkled with determination that warmed him all over. Damn, he’d missed her. “She won’t be trying to get me into bed.”

He cocked a brow. “You made yourself very clear last night. I’ve been a gentleman.”

Her laughter intoxicated him. “But we both know you’re a pirate.”

Damn straight he was. Fuck being a gentleman. He bent down and had her over his shoulder so fast, her laughing became a squeal.

She swatted his ass. “Put me down right now.”

He carried her back to the couch and laid her down. She was so damned beautiful. And now she knew everything...and she was still here with him. A lump formed in his throat as he reached out to caress her cheek. “You do make me wish I could be a better man.”

The corner of her mouth quirked up. “I never asked you to change.”

Her acceptance unlocked emotions he didn’t fully understand. She knew

him in a way no one else on Earth ever had. To his crew, he'd always been the leader, but with Lily, he'd been simply a man, powerful yes, but still just a man. They'd danced and laughed and loved. Gods, did he love this woman. And now she knew about the side he had never shared with another mortal. She knew he was a pirate captain.

And she wasn't asking him to change.

Without thinking, he slid his fingers around the back of her neck and lifted her to him, claiming her lips. His tongue plundered the heat of her mouth, and a growl escaped him as her fingers tangled in the back of his hair.

This was *his* Lily. She made him feel more alive than the Holy Grail ever had.

He tilted his head, deepening the kiss, and his other hand caressed her thigh. He'd forgotten how soft her skin was and the way her body writhed, hungry for his touch. When his fingertips reached the juncture of her thighs, she grabbed his wrist, breaking the kiss.

"Wait." She shook her head. Her voice was breathless. "I can't do this." She wriggled out from under him. "I'm sorry. I...got caught up."

He raked his fingers back through his hair. "Aye. Me too."

She pressed her lips together, her cheeks still flushed with color. "I've never heard your...pirate voice."

Laughter bubbled from his throat as he shook his head. "I pride myself on being a businessman. Piracy is frowned on in the boardroom."

She shrugged and got up. "It's kind of...hot."

The hem of the sweatshirt teased him, riding higher up her thighs with each stride as she rushed to the bathroom. He wet his lips and chuckled.

She was a treasure. His treasure. He just needed to convince her of that.

Chapter Ten

“Agent Bale.” David squinted as he answered his cell phone. He checked the time. Damn it, he’d overslept.

“Hi. It’s Holli.”

His rogue ex-employee’s voice had him wide awake. Why would she be calling him? Maybe she’d had a falling out with Morgan or she was tired of being on the run. He could hope. He sat up in the bed, rubbing his forehead. “Where are you?”

She tsked. “I’m not calling to turn myself in.”

He should’ve known. It would’ve been too good to be true anyway.

Holli Porter had worked for his department for over thirty years, quietly smuggling some of the most powerful and dangerous relics out of Department 13. Working in the sublevels of the building in data collection, she’d flown under the radar. Her smuggling of dangerous artifacts exposed flaws in Department 13’s bioscan systems. Their technology was supposed to be able to detect non-human beings, but this breach made it clear the tech needed more work. It also highlighted the need for a new manager of human resources to track employees and new hires.

He stared up at the ceiling. “Then why are we talking?”

The click of her shoes came through the phone. Wherever she was, she was walking fast. “Because my sister contacted me this morning with an offer from Captain Flynn. He claims if I help him locate the Spear of Destiny, you’ll stop hunting for me and won’t turn me over to Department 51.”

He nodded, looking over at his laptop. “That’s the deal on the table, but you’d have to deliver.”

“I have a counterproposal.”

David rolled his eyes, grateful she couldn’t see his expression. “I think

the original offer is more than fair.”

“My counter is this.” She paused. “I’ll give the Spear back to *you*. Not Flynn. And then you also stop searching for Sampson Bane.”

David stood up. “His name is Rutger Morgan. He profited off selling top secret government equipment. He doesn’t get to walk free for that.”

“You and I both know the government doesn’t own those relics, either. You didn’t come by them any more legally than we did.”

“But we also don’t sell them off to the highest bidder.” He went to the window of his hotel room and opened the blackout drapes, squinting into the morning sun. “We lock them up to keep Americans safe.”

“There’s no deal unless you drop your charges against Sampson too.”

He didn’t even ponder her proposition. Calling him by a new name didn’t change the fact that Morgan was a violent immortal who stole from the government and couldn’t be trusted to wander free in America.

David shook his head. “I don’t understand why you insist on the charade. You know who he is.”

“Who he *was*. Just like I was Atargatis. We’ve evolved. I’m Holli and he’s Sampson now. Believe it or not, someday you might want to be more than Agent David Bale of Department 13.”

“Changing someone’s name doesn’t make them a new person.” David smoothed his hair back from his forehead.

“Maybe not, but time does.” She clucked her tongue. “I’m not handing over a weapon to Flynn that could end us both, and I can promise you that you’re not going to get it from Sampson without my help.”

She was overconfident. Yes, she knew about the weapons and relics they had in the vault, but he also had agents who could wield magic that would be tough, even for an immortal mermaid, to defend herself against.

But it would be so much easier for everyone if she would just return the Spear. Holli had been there the day an immortal agent impaled himself on the Spear. The vampire had worked as an informant for centuries before becoming a special agent, but even with new purpose, eternity had been too much.

Holli was well aware of the Spear’s potential capability. How could she trust that pirate captain to wield it? “If you two have changed so much, how do you explain torturing Captain Flynn?”

She sighed. “The night Sampson saw the footage that leaked from the Tybee lighthouse, he caught sight of Keegan on television. He knew then

that the *Sea Dog* crew was still alive too. It triggered something in him. He's not violent...not anymore."

He'd struggled to cover up the supernatural battle at the Tybee lighthouse. A cult of religious fanatics had trapped Keegan and Char inside the lighthouse, forcing them to smash out the light at the top, and triggered the coast guard and the news media.

"I'll reserve judgment on that." He crossed back to his laptop on the table. "And I'll consider your offer."

"I need an answer by tonight." She paused. "Meet me at ten o'clock in Reynolds Square in front of the Olde Pink House."

The call ended, and David set his phone beside the computer. "Damn it."

He stared at the ceiling like an answer would magically appear.

Flynn wouldn't approve of this deal, but maybe he wouldn't have to know about it until it was done. David could lock the Spear in the vault, pay Flynn's fee, and leave it at that. Mission accomplished.

He might've been able to live with that if he hadn't seen Flynn's injuries after the beating Sampson had dished out. When he'd realized he couldn't kill Flynn, he'd moved on to torture. David couldn't allow a violent immortal like that to wander the world freely. Whatever Holli believed, Sampson *was* dangerous. His actions had proved as much.

His phone rang again. Kingsley's name filled the screen.

He accepted the call and put it to his ear. "Hey King."

"Are you seriously considering hosting the head of the CIA here inside our walls?"

David clenched his jaw before he said something unprofessional. Kingsley must've gotten the memo about the preparations for the tour. "Did you call me to second-guess my orders?"

"I called to find out who you are and what you've done with Agent Bale."

David chuckled in spite of himself. "She won't take no for an answer, but I've got it handled. Petra, the head of the occult division, is going to perform the retirement protocols. Director Anne McCreary will go back to the CIA with no memory of her tour of Department 13."

Petra had proven herself in the past. David trusted her skills implicitly. And he'd like to think it had nothing to do with the dimple in her cheek when she smiled at him. He shoved the thought away. He didn't have time for distractions; besides, the protocols prohibited dating within the department for good reason.

“That’s a big risk,” King replied. “She has the best spy equipment. She could be wearing a camera and recording her visit remotely.”

David sat down in front of his laptop. “You’ve been fine-tuning the new bioscan systems already. Just add another layer to identify magnetic fields.”

Kingsley was quiet for a few seconds, and when he spoke again, he sounded distracted, his keyboard clicking in the background. “I’ll see what I can do... No promises.”

“Thanks, King. I’ll let you know once I have the Spear in hand.”

“Good luck, sir.” King ended the call, leaving David to continue pondering Holli’s offer.

As much as he needed to recover the Spear of Destiny, he couldn’t look the other way and allow Sampson to evade any consequences after selling relics from the vault and the beating he’d given Flynn.

But the *Sea Dog* crew had killed on his behalf. Was it really that different?

Maybe he could make the agreement with Holli and then let the *Sea Dog* crew handle Sampson. Either way, he had to talk to Flynn.

He pressed the captain’s name on his screen.

“Agent Bale?” Flynn said. “I wasn’t expecting to hear from you so soon.”

David put the phone on speaker and set it next to his laptop while he opened his email. “There’s another wrinkle in the plan. Holli just called me.”

A door closed on Flynn’s end of the line. “Did she misunderstand my offer? She was supposed to give me the location of the Spear in trade for her freedom from Department 13.”

“Apparently, she’s not keen on handing it to you. She thinks you’ll use it to kill her boyfriend.” He waited for Flynn to respond, but he didn’t say a word. David shook his head. “My only mission is to acquire the Spear and lock it in the vault. Once I have it, what you do with Sampson is your business.”

“Don’t let her convince you he’s changed.” Flynn cursed under his breath. “Trust me, he’s still Captain Rutger Morgan.”

“Call him whatever you want. It doesn’t change that my only mission is to procure the Spear of Destiny and lock it away in the relics vault. I don’t care how you handle the rest of the situation.”

“Fuck,” Flynn hissed. “What you’re really saying is I won’t have the one tool that can end an immortal.”

David frowned and looked over at his phone. He needed Flynn to accept this. If the pirate captain tried to take the Spear before David had it locked up, this could get very messy. “We signed a contract. You’ll still be paid either way. That’s the best I can offer.”

The line went dead.

“Damn it.” David put his phone back in his pocket. Between the CIA poking around Department 13, the missing Spear of Destiny, and the two warring immortal pirate captains, he was rapidly running out of bandwidth.

Chapter Eleven

Ian insisted on driving her to the museum. She didn't fight him very hard. That kiss had her off-balance. Her brain was insistently reminding her that she couldn't trust him. He could walk out on her again at any time.

But her damned heart was singing a different tune and whispering things about second chances.

She pushed the thoughts away and jogged up the stairs to the front door.

She'd pretend this was for book research, not to dig into Ian's past. Who knew, maybe she really would get a new idea out of it. Stranger things had happened.

She opened the door and stepped inside.

The Ships of the Sea Maritime Museum was nothing like Lily expected. It wrapped her in its spell as soon as the door closed behind her.

Unlike the sleek modern museums back in Atlanta, this one was inside a historic home. The William Scarbrough House and Gardens radiated old-world elegance and nautical flavor. The walls were covered in paintings and photos of sea vessels through the centuries, and each room featured models of historic ships built to scale and protected inside glass cases.

She'd never given sailing ships much thought before. She'd grown up in Atlanta, far from the Atlantic Ocean and stories of pirates. Here in Savannah, the legends lived and breathed.

Walking around the replica of the steamship *Savannah*, Lily imagined what it must have been like for the explorers of the day. The ship, financed by the man who'd once owned this house, became the first steamship to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

According to the plaque, the *Savannah* had visited Liverpool, Stockholm, St. Petersburg, Copenhagen, and Arendal in Norway.

Her mother would have loved this place. All her life, her mom used to

daydream about all the adventures they'd go on someday. Mom's bucket list had included the pyramids in Egypt, the Colosseum in Rome, and the Acropolis in Greece.

Lily pressed her lips together, struggling to navigate the wave of grief. The farthest her mom ever got was Charleston, South Carolina.

Lily shoved the dark thoughts back as an elderly docent approached her. The woman wore a Maritime Museum polo and a nametag that read LOUISE.

"Excuse me." She peered at Lily over the top of her bifocals. "Did you have a ticket to see the exhibits?"

"Oh." Lily shook her head. "I actually have an appointment with Dr. Sinclair."

The docent smiled. "I'll let her know you're here."

Lily wandered back into the gift shop and poked around. She picked up a book on shipwrecks on the Atlantic coast and skimmed the table of contents. Her finger stopped sliding down the page when she found the *Sea Dog*. She flipped to the page and stared at the drawing of a Spanish galleon with a pirate flag at the top of the main mast.

This was Ian's ship.

Looking at it in a history book and knowing the man she used to sleep with had been onboard was beyond surreal.

"Lily?"

She almost dropped the book as she turned around.

A woman with long black hair, dark brown eyes, and red-rimmed glasses smiled and offered her hand. "I'm Dr. Sinclair."

Lily had met with and interviewed experts before, but her books were all thrillers set in the contemporary time period. Dr. Charlotte Sinclair was her first historian. She'd expected someone more...bookish? Dr. Sinclair was dressed in a well-fitting pantsuit with fancy red pumps that matched the frames of her glasses. She could've been working for Vogue instead of a maritime museum.

"Nice to meet you." Lily shook her hand and put the book back on the shelf.

The historian turned to Louise standing behind the cash register. "I'm taking Lily down to my office. If anyone calls, can you take a message?"

Louise nodded. "Sure thing."

Lily followed Dr. Sinclair to the lower level. The basement had been converted into offices at one end, and hands-on exhibits at the other. Dr.

Sinclair's office was tight, and in lieu of windows she had large prints of River Street and the Fountain from Forsyth Park hanging on the walls.

Lily sat in one of the chairs in front of the desk and Dr. Sinclair took her seat in the leather executive chair on the other side.

"So what kind of book are you writing?"

Lily blinked. She'd forgotten about her excuse for this meeting. "I write thrillers."

Dr. Sinclair tilted her head slightly. "The *Sea Dog* is an interesting setting."

"Actually..." Lily took out her notepad and pen. "This was for more of a personal project."

"Oh-kay..." She pushed some printouts across her desk and a couple of drawings of old sailing ships, clearing a space in the center. She rested her forearms on the edge. "Do you have a connection to the ship?"

Since Ian said he knew her, Lily didn't hesitate to name drop. "Ian Flynn."

"Wow." Dr. Sinclair took off her glasses, her eyebrows pinching together. "How do you know Flynn?"

He'd told Lily that Dr. Sinclair was a member of the *Sea Dog* crew, so she had to know they were immortal. Didn't she?

Lily cleared her throat. "We used to date."

"Flynn?" Her lips started to curve into a smile. "I'm sorry. I'm just... surprised."

"He recently told me some...things that were"—words were Lily's business, but at the moment, she couldn't find any of the right ones—"well...unbelievable...so I...I don't know. I thought if I could get... confirmation? When I found your articles online, I thought you might be able to clarify some of it for me." Lily tapped her pen against her pad of paper. "Can you help me, Dr. Sinclair?"

She chuckled, shaking her head. "You can call me Char." She laid her glasses on the desk and shook her head, studying Lily. "He told you, didn't he? Captain Flynn told you everything about the *Sea Dog*."

"I think so." Lily nodded slowly. "When I mentioned I was meeting with you, he said you're part of the crew now, too."

Char sat back in her chair. "I am." She sobered and lowered her voice. "Did he tell you how...this is possible?"

Lily checked over her shoulder and leaned in closer. "The Holy Grail."

“Daaamn.” Char breathed out as she reached for her glasses again. “Sorry, I’m usually more articulate, but he’s always been so committed to keeping it a secret. I…” Her jaw dropped slightly. “He’s in love with you.”

“What?” Lily frowned. “No. He actually ghosted me a few months ago. He claims it was to protect me, but… If you love someone, you don’t walk out on them. I thought he was dead until he showed up on television during a ribbon-cutting ceremony.”

Char rubbed the base of her chin. “You also don’t confess your deepest secret to a woman you don’t trust or expect to spend more time with.”

Lily sighed, wishing her heart hadn’t fluttered at the thought. Would she never learn? If there was anything her single mom had drilled into her it was that a man who walks out on you once will do it again. She had to keep thinking with her head. She looked down at the papers. “So what can you tell me about the *Sea Dog* that might…help this all make sense?”

Char looked like she was going to ask her something, but once her gaze dropped to the historical papers, she was laser focused. “The *Sea Dog* sank at the mouth of the Savannah River in 1795.” She plucked out a pen and ink drawing from her stacks of papers. It looked similar to the one in the book upstairs. “This was the ship in 1793.”

Lily jotted some notes on her legal pad and then stared at the picture. “This is Flynn’s ship?”

Char nodded. “He was the captain then, yes.” She paused. “Has he told you anything about the crew?”

“Just that you’re on it and you’re in love with the ship’s pilot. Keegan was his name, I think.”

Char picked up a five by seven frame from her desk and turned it around to show her a photo of a man on a small stage wearing black jeans with black T-shirt and a microphone. He stared into the camera with a sexy smolder and guyliner that reminded her of the pirate on *Once Upon A Time*.

“This is Keegan.” Char smiled. “He’s the lead singer for the Scallywags here in Savannah. Have you ever seen them in concert?”

“No.” Lily shook her head. “I’m from Atlanta. New Year’s was my first visit to Savannah.”

Char pressed her lips together and finally grinned. “He and the Scallywags are playing the Wormhole again tonight. It’s a club here in town. You should come. Bring Flynn.”

Lily laughed before she could stop herself as the memories of Ian at the

Ed Sheeran concert filled her head. The way he'd glared at the drunk concertgoers who spilled their beer, and the times he kept checking his watch when he thought she wasn't looking. "He's not really a live concert guy."

Char arched a brow. "All the more reason to drag him along, right?"

Lily smiled. She liked Char. She was nothing like what Lily pictured a historian would be. Instead of awkward and hiding from the bustling tech world, Char was dating a rock star and going clubbing.

"I'll ask him." Lily sobered. "He's really worked up about this guy, Rutger Morgan."

Char nodded and quickly sorted through the papers again. She fished one out and pushed it toward Lily. "This is all the documentation I could find regarding the mutiny. Flynn led it and left Morgan on a deserted island to die." She paused, lifting her eyes from the page to Lily's face. "There's so much Flynn never talks about, but Keegan told me Morgan was cruel. He flogged John, the boatswain, so brutally that he nearly died. He's still got the scars. And Flynn's younger brother was keelhauled."

Ian had a brother? Lily swallowed a lump in her throat, realizing that in all their time together, he'd never mentioned his family, parents or siblings. Nothing. How had that escaped her before? And then the last part sank in. "What's keelhauled mean?"

Char sighed as she met Lily's eyes. "It was a cruel, torturous punishment. They basically tied someone's wrists together, hooked the binding to a line that looped under the ship. They'd throw him overboard and then pull the line from the other end of the ship, dragging him across all the barnacles on the bottom of the hull. They'd either drown or suffer lacerations that would bring on infections. It was basically a death sentence."

Lily cringed. She wrote visceral death scenes in her books, but imagining this level of torture and knowing Ian had witnessed it made it personal.

Char went on. "Recently Morgan ambushed Flynn and tried to kill him. I can see why Flynn is so sensitive about him. He's dangerous."

Lily stared at the ship, trying to envision the big dark-haired man she'd met at the bed and breakfast as the captain of a pirate ship. As a writer, she often tried to see the world like a game board: it looked different depending on which side you sat.

She looked up at Char. "Do you think Morgan is afraid Flynn will kill him for real this time?"

Char shrugged. “I don’t know, but they’re both immortal, so they’re going to waste a lot of energy trying.”

“But there’s a Spear, right?” Lily studied the picture. “Ian said if he can find it, the Spear will change everything.”

Char raised her eyebrows. “The crew voted not to go after the Spear, but Flynn might be planning to hunt it down on his own.”

“They voted?” Lily frowned. “Isn’t he the captain?”

Char let out a sarcastic laugh. “He still has the title, but he’s the reason the *Sea Dog* sank in 1795. The new replica of the ship belongs to Colton. He was the quartermaster on the original vessel, but he captains this one.” The corner of her mouth quirked up. “Flynn left that part out, I take it.”

“How did Ian sink the ship?”

“I’m still not sure of all the details.” Char shrugged. “There was a storm and Caleb, the navigator, warned Flynn that it was too risky to try to get to Savannah. Caleb fought to keep the ship out in the open ocean, but Flynn insisted they sail to the port. The hull smashed into rocks near the mouth of the river and the ship sank.” She shook her head slowly. “He’s never told any of them what was so important to risk the ship, but they lost faith in his leadership that night. Now he’s more of a thorn in their side.”

Hearing her talk about Ian like that rubbed Lily the wrong way, even though it shouldn’t. She knew Ian’s secret only because Morgan was after her. It wasn’t because he wanted her to know everything. She didn’t need to defend him.

But still.

She cleared her throat. “Ian talks about the crew like his only family. Maybe he’s a *thorn* because he cares.”

Char sat back in her chair again. “He’s got a funny way of showing it. He voted not to allow me to be part of the crew. And he was pissed when he found out Keegan told me about the Grail. That’s why I was so surprised that he said anything about it to you.”

Lily scooted forward. “Pirates had to be tough, right? Maybe he’s not sure how else to communicate.”

“Maybe.” Char didn’t look convinced. “But Flynn wasn’t a scorched-earth pirate. Keegan told me they had a code. Flynn insisted none of his crew attack women or children, and the only stealing they did was from ships, never from families on the shore.”

Lily pondered that information for a moment before asking, “Why? That

sounds...odd for pirates, doesn't it?"

"It was, but Flynn enforced the code. Anyone who broke it was tossed overboard." Char collected the stack of pictures and handed them to her. "I wish I knew why, but apparently only Flynn knows, and he's not one to share with the rest of us. These copies are for you. You can take them with you if you'd like."

Lily put the stack on top of her legal pad and smiled. "Thanks so much for your time."

Char stood. "It's really great to meet you. Call me anytime if you have more questions."

"I will. Thanks." Lily hiked the stairs, her mind puzzling over all the new information Char had given her.

She sent Ian a text and wandered through the exhibits until he let her know he was waiting outside. With Sampson Bane out there looking for her, it was too risky to walk back to Ian's place, and now that he and Holli knew where she lived in Atlanta, she couldn't go back there either.

She tucked the papers under her arm and stepped out into the cold wind.

Ian's car was warm, but his expression was not.

She frowned as she buckled her seat belt. "Is everything okay?"

He glanced over at her. "Morgan is still somewhere in Savannah looking for you, so...no. Things are not okay."

There was nothing she could do about that, but maybe she could change the subject. She laid the papers in her lap and rested her hands on top of them. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything." He made a left out of the lot instead of a right. Where was he taking her?

"When I told you about my mom dying when I was ten, why didn't you ever mention your family?"

He shook his head as he stopped at the light. "Less is more when you're trying to omit rather than outright lie. If I had told you my mother was a washerwoman and my father was a drunk bastard who spent all her wages, it would have been difficult to have you believe I was born in the 1970s or 80s. That's when the untruths would begin. If I don't volunteer information, I don't have to lie." He looked over at her. "What did Dr. Sinclair tell you?"

Lily looked down at the documents in her lap. "She told me about Morgan killing your brother and you leading a mutiny and taking over the ship." She lifted her gaze, watching his profile as he drove. "A week ago, I

thought I knew everything about you. Now...I'm not sure I ever really knew you."

He took one hand off the wheel and placed it over hers, sending an electrical charge up her arm. "If Morgan hadn't surfaced when he did, I would have told you everything. I wanted to."

"But instead of treating me like a partner in all this, you ran." She slid her hand out from under his and looked out the passenger window. "You wouldn't have ever made contact with me again if I hadn't been in Savannah for the New Year's weekend."

"You're wrong. I had every intention of finding you again once I'd dealt with Morgan." His voice softened. "I didn't expect you would forgive me, but the hope I might earn it someday kept me going."

She ignored his admission and the way her heart softened. Self-preservation had to be her top priority. Forgiving him would open her up to being hurt again. She looked over at him. "How did you find me anyway? It couldn't have been my car."

He almost smiled. "One-Eyed Bob. Biggest gossiping buccaneer on the seven seas."

"Bob from Bob's Seafood? He's immortal too?"

"Aye." He made another turn and slowed as the tires rolled onto the uneven cobblestones of River Street. "He was our cook on the *Sea Dog*. Now he fancies himself some kind of meddling piratical matchmaker."

Lily laughed before she could stop herself. "All those pictures on his founder's wall... They're all him."

"They are." Ian nodded. "He told me about a beautiful woman who spent New Year's Day drinking at his restaurant. When he said your name, I made him tell me where you were staying." Ian found a parking spot on River Street and turned off the car. His intense blue eyes locked on hers. "I thought if I pissed you off enough, you'd go back to Atlanta." A sad smile curved his lips. "I'm stubborn, but I don't think I have the strength to walk away again."

She reached up to caress his cheek before she could stop herself as she searched for words. "We can't fix what's broken here."

His gaze locked on her as he whispered, "Maybe we can start over?"

Her heart raced, battling her head for control. Was starting over even an option? She swallowed the lump in her throat. "I don't think so. If I can't be a full partner, then this is never going to be a relationship."

His jaw tightened. "I've never had a partner."

"So you're overdue." She arched a brow, her heart hoping he'd meet her halfway and her head screaming he wasn't capable of that.

"I could try." He ran his finger along her jawline, his touch short-circuiting her brain for a moment.

"That might not be enough," she managed to whisper.

"But it could be." His mouth curved slightly at the corners. "I can work with that."

A grin crept up on her. "Have you always been this cocky?"

"Definitely." He closed the distance between them, but he didn't touch her. Her lips parted as she struggled to keep from kissing him. What was she doing? His voice was husky, and the warmth of his breath caressed her. "This is your chance to get out of the car."

Her heart galloped, but she didn't move. This was a dangerous game with her heart hanging in the balance. "What if I stay?"

The corners of his mouth curved into a sexy wicked smile. "I'm losing my grip on what's left of my self-control."

Knowing he wanted her as badly as she wanted him made her want to surrender. Risk be damned. No. She should go.

But before she could reach for the door handle, his lips brushed hers, slow, like he was savoring her mouth. Heat flushed her skin. The protective walls she'd built around her heart were battered every time he touched her. But he'd said he'd try to be partners.

He'd said he loved her before and then walked out on her.

As if he could sense her trepidation, he broke the kiss and took her hand, squeezing it. "Come on. I want you to meet my crew."

Chapter Twelve

Flynn went to the passenger side and took Lily's hand.

Every touch of her soft skin left him aching for more. It was more than just a physical connection; it was the emotional one that continued to surprise him. Electrified him.

The only way he had mustered the strength to leave her a few months ago was knowing his presence would put her in danger.

She was a bright light in his world, and he would sacrifice everything, even his own happiness, in order to keep her safe.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

He pointed to the replica of the *Spanish Galleon* tied to the dock. Colton had worked for the better part of a year with Drake, their ship's carpenter, to recreate the *Sea Dog* down to every gunport opening in the sides of the hull. The main mast rose one hundred twenty feet above the main deck with six sails covering roughly eleven thousand square feet. She was a beauty this world no longer produced. "This is the *Sea Dog*. Colton, our quartermaster, built it with Drake, our ship's carpenter."

The eagerness in his chest was new. He'd never shared any of this with anyone who wasn't crew, and the fact that it was Lily made it even more thrilling.

"What's a quartermaster?" She looked up at the top of the main mast, shielding her eyes from the sun.

"He was the second in command if something happened to me."

She seemed puzzled as she turned toward him. "I thought that's the first mate."

"Pirate ships are..." He cleared his throat, correcting himself. "They *were* democratic. The crew voted for the captain and the quartermaster, but the captain was allowed to choose his first mate." He paused and shook his

head. “Think of it as the quartermaster was the crew’s second in command, and the first mate was my choice for second in command.”

“I see.” She took a couple of steps and then squeezed his hand. “He was your muscle in case of another mutiny.”

He smirked, allowing his true accent to bleed into his words. “Ye would’ve made a fine pirate, love.”

She rewarded him with her laughter as they walked together down the dock. When they reached the gangway, Lily hesitated. “Are you sure they’re going to be okay with this? Do they even know about me?”

He arched a brow. “You’ve already met Bob. Do you really think he hasn’t told them?”

She grinned and rolled her eyes. “I didn’t realize pirates gossiped.”

Flynn chuckled. “We didn’t have television or internet videos for entertainment.”

He helped her onto the deck and turned around as Colton came over from tying the lines for the sails down around the iron cleats. Colton was one of the tallest members of the crew. No one would ever guess he’d been a formidable pirate if they saw him today. He was dressed in jeans, a black T-shirt, and one of the *Sea Dog* pirate baseball caps they sold to the tourists.

Colton tipped his head to Flynn, then turned to the woman at his side. “You must be Lily. I’m Colton.” He looked back over his shoulder and called, “Where is my beautiful wife?”

A woman with auburn hair came up the stairs from the lower deck with a pudgy baby on her hip. “She was changing a less than beautiful diaper.”

She stopped beside Colton and smiled at Lily. “I’m Skye. It’s nice to meet you.” She looked over at Flynn with a knowing smile. “You’ve been full of secrets, Captain.”

Flynn slid his arm around Lily’s waist, grateful she didn’t push him away. “I wasn’t ready to share her with anyone.”

Lily bumped him with her hip. “That’s not how I remember it.” She offered her hand to Skye. “I’m Lily. It’s nice to meet you.”

Flynn stared at Skye and her young son. They both had violet eyes. He flashed back to his whiteboard. He’d known only one other person in all his lifetimes who had the same unique color.

Rutger Morgan.

They had to be kin, but he wasn’t sure what to do with that information yet. Colton had told him that Skye never knew the identity of her father, and

her mother crossed over before Colton met her.

Could Morgan have strayed from his mermaid lover? If it was just one night in passing, he might not have even known the woman carried his child. And if he didn't know he had family, that might be leverage Flynn could use.

The baby flirted with Lily, offering her a toothless grin and giggle. Skye bounced him on her hip, laughing softly. "This is Ace." She looked over at Flynn. "You better look out, Captain. He's cuter than you."

Flynn ignored her teasing and squeezed Lily's hand. "Would you like a tour?"

"Sure."

He looked over at Colton. "Can you reach out to Aura and Greyson and tell them to meet me on deck?"

Since Annika's sister had apparently made a deal for the Spear directly with Agent Bale, he was hoping Aura and Greyson might have another supernatural weapon locked up in the field office that he might be able to use to stop Morgan. He had to try.

"Aye." Colton frowned. "Have you found the Spear?"

"Not yet." He guided Lily down the port side of the ship to the stern. He leaned forward, resting his arms on the railing as he scanned the horizon.

She stopped beside him, bumping him with her shoulder. "Don't you owe me a tour?"

"It was more of a scheme to get you alone." He met her eyes. "I don't know how I can protect you without that Spear." He hated admitting his own indecision out loud. Indecision led to mutiny. But it did feel good to have someone he could confide in.

She squeezed his hand. "Can I ask you something?"

He nodded. "Sure."

"Why are you so sure you need that Spear? It's not the 1700s anymore and you're not a pirate. You're a real estate mogul now."

He stared out at the water again. "He won't stop coming for me, Lily. I can't be certain you or my crew will be safe until he's gone." He sighed and glanced at her again. "You saw that babe in his mother's arms. He's innocent and mortal. I need to ensure their safety."

"Char told me you had an unusual code for pirate ships of the time. Any man who killed or robbed an innocent was tossed overboard?" The wind pulled at her hair as she threw his past decisions in his face.

“Dr. Sinclair overstepped her bounds.” His pulse pounded in his ears, and emotions he’d bottled up centuries ago churned, kicking up dust he didn’t want to acknowledge.

“Come on, Ian.” Lily searched his eyes. “Killing him can’t be the only answer here. There must be another way.”

She was the only person in the world who called him by his first name, but from the moment she’d showed up in his office for an interview, he could never bring himself to correct her. He liked that she saw him as a man. Not a captain, not a CEO, just as Ian. But he realized now, it also gave her the power to crack through his defenses.

He sighed and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “There is... something. But I don’t carry much faith it would succeed.”

She arched a brow. “Have you talked to your crew about it?”

“No.” He shook his head and watched the sunlight sparkle on the surface of the water.

“Maybe you could try it out on me?”

He rolled his shoulders back, digesting her offer.

Telling her about his suspicion that Skye could be Morgan’s daughter would only give her hope that this situation might end without bloodshed. If he believed it had any chance of working, he’d share it with her without a second thought, but the only way to end this danger was to end Morgan. He was sure of it.

He ground his teeth and shut her out. “It’s best left unsaid. It wouldn’t sway Morgan anyway.”

She straightened up from the railing. “So us being partners was all bullshit?”

He looked over his shoulder at her, and for a moment, he almost told her, but he was still the captain of this crew. Duty came first. Lily didn’t understand the kill-or-be-killed world of a pirate. “It’s pointless. It wouldn’t work anyway.”

“Wow.” She let out a humorless chuckle. “You almost had me sucked in to believing we could start at the beginning again, but this is never going to work.”

“Why not?” His heart sank as he turned to face her. He was losing her. He could see it in her eyes. It wasn’t fucking fair. He was trying to keep her alive. Why couldn’t she accept that? “I don’t know what you want from me.”

“Honesty.” She threw out the word like a gauntlet. “I don’t want to be compartmentalized into a certain section of your life. I’m either all in or I’m out.”

He rubbed his forehead as a headache throbbed. She didn’t understand. He’d always been the leader, the captain. He knew nothing of partnerships. How could he make her see that? “There are things I can’t share with another person.”

“No. You *won’t*. Big difference.” She broke eye contact. “I don’t want to have to learn about you from letters and documents at the Maritime Museum. If you *really* want a future, then we have to be equals.” Her gaze flicked to his face. “You’re not my captain, Ian.”

But being a captain wasn’t a job. It was his identity. Couldn’t she see that? Bitterness bubbled in his gut. This pain was his own fault. He never should have entertained a chance to have a union like the rest of his crew enjoyed. They were used to depending on one another. All he had left was his title.

He was the fucking captain of the *Sea Dog*.

“Then what am I?” He didn’t mean to shout, but the words poured from the dark place deep in his soul where he kept his loneliness chained. When she didn’t answer, he asked again. “What am I, Lily? What purpose do I serve? The world around me changes every day.” He pointed to his chest. “I do not.”

Lily didn’t retreat. She kept pushing, matching his intensity. “Is that how you see it? Because *I* see a man who has the chance to reinvent himself over and over again if he chooses. But instead of growing, you’re trying to cling to a world that doesn’t exist anymore.”

He grabbed her shoulders, pulling her closer. “But Morgan *does* exist. And he’s coming for you. Do you understand how much that fucking terrifies me? I’ve sailed this ship through hurricane winds, faced off with demons and cursed swords—nothing scares me anymore, except the thought of a world without you in it.”

She looked at him and he braced himself for her response. Her eyes wandered over his face, and her tone softened. “Can’t you see? I don’t want anything to happen to you either. I’m on your side, Ian. Always. If you have a plan, I want to help you put it into action. You don’t have to carry all this alone.” She ran her hands up his chest and grabbed his shirt, pulling him down close to her. Her voice cracked. “You could die.” She searched his

eyes. “And I will never forgive myself if I don’t do everything I can to keep that from happening.”

Had anyone ever cared if he lived or died? He fused his lips to hers, his body responding where words had failed him. He wrapped her in his arms, enjoying the way she clung to him.

She was his world. No treasure was as precious as this woman.

Her tongue tangled hungrily with his as he held her tighter. Her body fit his perfectly. She slid her hands up around his neck and pulled the tie free from his hair. His heart pounded as the wind blew it across their faces.

She always loved when he’d let his hair down with her.

Her teeth scraped his bottom lip and he growled as his erection pulsed between them. She stoked fires inside him, infernos of passion he’d never experienced until he had this woman in his arms.

She broke the kiss, cupping his face in her hands. “Promise me something, not as the pirate captain or as the CEO, but just as Ian Flynn.”

He wasn’t sure who Ian Flynn was without the captain or the tycoon, but she made him want to find out. He lost himself in her eyes as he nodded. “Anything.”

“Whatever is coming from Rutger Morgan, we’ll face it together. Don’t shut me out.”

His pulse pounded in his ears. In his long existence, he’d always been the leader. He didn’t know how to be a partner.

But for Lily, he would try.

He nodded slowly. “Partners.”

She arched a brow. “No loopholes?”

The corners of his mouth quirked up. “You drive a hard bargain.”

Her eyes sparkled as her full lips curved into a sexy smile. “I learned from a pirate captain.”

He fucking loved this woman.

And he prayed that wouldn’t cost her life.

He wet his lips. “Partners in everything.”

She pulled him down for a tender, slow kiss and whispered, “I like the sound of that.”

• • •

She slid her arms around the back of his neck as he plundered her mouth

again. Heat coiled low in her belly, making her ache to feel him inside her.

Until someone coughed.

She took a step back and found a man, not quite as tall as Ian, with long braided brown hair and a woman beside him with straight shoulder-length black hair.

The man grinned at Ian. “Sorry, Captain, but *you* were the one who called *me*.”

“Aye.” He reached up to try to tame his copper hair and keep it out of his face. Lily handed him the rubber band she had slid free earlier, and he quickly tied it back again as he introduced her. “Greyson, this is Lily.” He reached for her hand, bringing her in a little closer to him. “This is Greyson, our master gunner, and his partner, Agent Aura Henderson.”

Aura offered her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Lily shook her hand.

Aura’s attention was focused on Ian, her posture stiff. “What was so important we needed to come right away?”

Ian crossed his arms over his chest. “It seems Annika’s sister has made her own deal with Agent Bale behind my back. He’ll be regaining custody of the Spear of Destiny, and we’ll be left defending ourselves from Morgan on our own. I know you and Greyson have some paranormal weapons at your field office here in Savannah. Is there anything we can use to stop an immortal?”

Lily tried to keep up. She hadn’t met Annika, but Holli had the Spear so...Annika must’ve been a mermaid, too. Her world was rapidly becoming stranger than fiction.

Greyson and Aura shared a long look before she turned to Ian again. “We could slow him down or blur his memory, but we don’t keep anything that can kill an immortal. Weapons like that are too dangerous.”

Lily’s heart sank. Ian was still fixated on killing Morgan.

With both men being immortals, they could attack each other for centuries, leaving pain and destruction in their wake without solving anything. Couldn’t he see that? The world was so much more complicated than kill or be killed. He’d mentioned another idea, but he still hadn’t shared it.

Ian shook his head. “That’s not good enough.”

Greyson bristled, his shoulders tensing. “Your command doesn’t change reality, mate.”

Aura added, "I'll let you know if I can procure any weapons that might help."

"Thank you." Ian nodded, slowly. He started to turn toward the water and stopped. "We could set sail. Morgan doesn't have a ship. We could stay at sea until you find something that will work."

"No." Lily took his hand, her fingers threading with his. "We'll figure this out. Besides, if he's been selling all these priceless relics, he could've bought a yacht."

Greyson arched a brow. "Listen to her, Captain."

Aura kept her attention on Ian. "I'm not sure we'll be able to find what you're looking for anyway. Potentially you'd be out on the open sea for a long time."

"Best start searching then. Keep me informed," Ian commanded.

Greyson and Aura walked away. Ian released Lily's hand and returned to the railing.

Lily sighed. He was obviously frustrated, and instead of confiding in her, he was over there bottling everything up. She called over to him. "You could finish giving me a tour of the ship."

"We have bigger issues to face."

She walked to his side and stared at his profile, trying to figure out how she could reach him. He'd agreed to being full partners, but he didn't seem to understand that meant confiding in each other. She wanted to help him, but he had to let her in first. "When I write myself into a corner, the best way to figure out how to fix it is to do something else. Let your subconscious work on the problem for a while."

He looked over at her, the frustration plain on his face. "This is life and death, Lily."

She caressed his cheek. "You know what makes life worth living?"

He lifted a questioning brow, but he didn't answer.

"Love. You love this ship." She dropped her hand to her side. "I want to know you, and a big part of you is the *Sea Dog*."

He shook his head, breaking eye contact. "My ship is at the bottom of the Atlantic. This is Colton's *Sea Dog*."

"How long did you captain it?" She followed his gaze out to the horizon.

"Not long enough."

She pressed her lips together. Apparently, he was going to make her drag the details out. Fine. "How many ships did you plunder?"

He chuffed. “We probably robbed fifty ships or more.”

She wasn’t sure what she expected, but it wasn’t fifty. They were a busy crew. “What made you attack the ship with the Grail?”

He shrugged his shoulder without meeting her eyes. “A feeling.”

His answer surprised her. She expected a successful businessman like Ian Flynn to depend on data and hard numbers to make big leadership decisions.

“What kind of feeling?” she asked.

He looked at her, lowering his voice. “When the crew weighed anchor in Nassau, we heard stories about the *Santa Maria*. It was a large Spanish ship but, according to my sources, the ship’s manifest listed corn, rice, and grain.”

“So you didn’t believe it.”

He shook his head. “No. I think it was the name that gave it away. The *Santa Maria* was named after the blessed Virgin Mary. My gut was telling me this ship carried treasures for the church, not harvested grains.”

“How did you get the crew to agree to go after it? They all had a vote, right?”

He nodded slowly and leaned in close to her ear. “I lied.”

Lily laughed and bumped him with her shoulder. “What did you tell them?”

“I went back ashore to scout around to some of the prostitutes who might have garnered some secrets from any of the crew about the *Santa Maria*. Behind one of the taverns, I found Bob being beaten.”

She liked Bob, and the thought of people being cruel to him didn’t sit well with her. “Why would anyone hurt Bob?”

Ian’s gaze went distant. “He’d been gambling at the dice table and drinking, which led to him running his mouth about a chest we’d stolen recently full of religious relics. Apparently, he’d been using his stories as credit. When the debt came due and he didn’t produce any gold trinkets, they threw him out.” He paused, focusing on her again. “Outside, he was attacked by monks in black cloaks wearing gold rings in the shape of a serpent. They tried to blind him for daring to look upon the Lord’s treasures. I killed them before they could take his other eye. That was my first encounter with the Serpent Society.”

“That’s horrible.” Lily cringed, thankful she wasn’t born back then. Then something made her look at Ian’s hand. At the gold ring on his pinky finger.

He'd worn it as long as she'd known him. It was gold and fashioned in the shape of a snake with two small rubies for eyes. "Is that where you got your ring?"

"Aye. Bloodthirsty zealots believed they could buy their way back into the Garden of Eden if they collected enough of the Lord's treasures." He opened and closed his hand, brandishing the pinky ring. "They couldn't take their jewelry where I sent them." He shook his head. "I brought Bob back to the *Sea Dog* and relayed that one of the ladies from the brothel told me the Spanish ship had the world's greatest treasure on board."

"But you never really got to talk to any of the women, right?"

"True. But those monks were looking for something. My gut said it had to be valuable." He lifted his gaze from the water to her face. "We killed the Spanish guards and tossed the priests overboard with empty water barrels to float on until another ship came along. But the treasure was a wooden cup. Each of the crew took a sip, but the cup never emptied of water. We noticed our wounds healed instantly, but we still didn't fully realize what the cup had done until we lost the *Sea Dog* a few weeks later in a storm and none of us drowned. We were...immortal."

Her imagination was replaying the scene until she ached to write it down. Historical fiction wasn't in her wheelhouse, but this story made her want to change all that.

Ian sighed, resting his forearms on the railing. "Stories circulated about the ghost ship *Santa Maria* running aground near Jamestown in Virginia, but no one seemed to know the true cargo had been the Lord's cup. We've protected it ever since."

Char had mentioned that Ian never told the crew why he tried to sail into Savannah in spite of the storm that night, but Lily didn't ask. He'd already shared more than she expected. It actually gave her hope. Maybe they could be partners after all.

She took his hand. "If you hadn't found the Grail, we never would have met."

He brought her hand to his lips, brushing a kiss to her knuckles. "You might have been better off if I hadn't."

"Oh please." She rolled her eyes. "I know you better than that. You're not that humble."

He chuckled, lowering their joined hands. "You probably wouldn't have an immortal pirate captain stalking you if we never met."

“I have no regrets.” She raised her finger. “Wait. I do regret that I didn’t notice you never mentioned your family or...really anything about your past. Maybe then I wouldn’t have been so shocked when you vanished.”

“I never wanted to hurt you, Lily.” He drew her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. “I won’t walk away again.”

His words were everything she had ached to hear, but could she trust him? She pulled back and stared into his eyes. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

He pressed his lips to hers, and all her doubts were submerged under a tidal wave of desire.

Chapter Thirteen

David waited on a bench in a shadowed corner of Reynolds Square.

The Olde Pink House was closed now. Most of the ghost tours had already passed through, and still no sign of the woman who used to work for him. He checked his phone again. Holli was ten minutes late for their meeting. The statue of John Wesley towered over him. The founder of Methodism had visited Savannah in 1735, opening the first Sunday school in the New World.

Now Wesley looked down on David with cold, unfeeling eyes.

He rocked forward, scooting to the edge of the bench, as he peered around the empty square. Maybe Morgan had realized Holli was planning to return the Spear of Destiny. Holli was a powerful mermaid, but that Spear could end her.

Would Morgan hurt her? It was definitely a possibility. But it was more likely she'd had a change of heart about returning the relic. Damn it.

He stood up and scanned the shadows one last time. The rhythmic click of heels on the pavement echoed off the alleyway leading into Reynolds Square. He turned toward the sound just as Holli stepped into view. She checked the quiet street before crossing over to the square.

She was dressed in a black pencil skirt and black tank top that sparkled in the flicker of the streetlights. Her long brown hair was in a thick braid draped over her shoulder.

When she stopped in front of him, she smiled. The same expression he'd seen on her face countless times during meetings at Department 13. "Sorry I'm late."

David raised his brows as a gust of chilly January wind bit at his cheeks. He started to remove his coat. "Are you cold?"

She tipped her head back, her laughter echoing through the empty square.

When she met his gaze again, her eyes sparkled with an inhuman glow. “I’m not human, remember?”

He did, but it was difficult to reconcile the woman he’d worked with for decades with the reality that her true identity was Atargatis, the first mermaid on Earth. Shaking his head, he dropped his hands to his sides. “I didn’t realize mermaids don’t get cold.”

She sobered. “We do, but a winter on Neptune is colder than anything you have on this planet.” She searched his eyes. “Have you considered my offer?”

“I have.” He clenched his jaw, checking the shadows again. He couldn’t shake the feeling they were being watched. Nothing moved. “I can’t agree to allowing Rutger Morgan to walk free. He’s too dangerous.”

She shook her head, narrowing her eyes. “Rutger Morgan is long dead. Sampson Bane just wants to spend eternity traveling the world. He’s not a threat.”

David chuffed, rolling his eyes. “He stabbed a man in the eyeball recently. That’s hardly an immortal riding into the sunset.”

“Flynn would have done the same thing if he’d gotten the chance, and you’d not only look the other way, you’d *pay* him.”

“You’re wrong.” David crossed his arms. “Flynn has no record of torture. The code he enforced on the *Sea Dog* forbade the killing of innocents. It was rare for the time period.”

She rolled her eyes. “I won’t bring you the Spear of Destiny if you’re going to turn around and use it on Sampson.”

David reached into the inner pocket of his jacket. He withdrew a folded sheet of paper and offered it to Holli. “It’s a notarized affidavit that once I take possession of the Spear, it will be stored in Department 13’s vault for permanent storage. It won’t be used against anyone.”

She dropped it on the ground without opening it. “Stop wasting my time. Your promises mean nothing if you intend to lock him up.”

“Maybe he shouldn’t have been stealing from Department 13.”

“Technically, that was me.” She smirked. “He found the buyers.”

He clenched his jaw. This was getting him nowhere. He straightened his coat. “Then I guess we’re through here.”

She sighed. “There must be a compromise.”

“As long as you’re set on protecting Sampson, I don’t think there is.”

She placed her hand on her hip. “What if we agree that I’ll return the

Spear, and then you'll give us a week before you send agents out looking for him? You'll still get to hunt your wanted man, and I'll have time to persuade him to leave this country. Everyone wins."

Not quite, but Sampson wouldn't be his problem anymore. He studied her for a moment. She didn't show any outward signs of deception, but she'd been smuggling artifacts from the relics vault right under his nose for years so... He sighed. "If I agree to your terms, there's nothing stopping the *Sea Dog* crew from chasing after him."

"They already voted not to help Flynn find the Spear. My guess is they won't come after us either." Her hand dropped to her side. "This will work. Everyone will have what they want."

She made it sound like this would be a smooth transaction, but his gut was telling him it would be anything but.

He looked up at the statue of Wesley and shook his head. "Get me the Spear and I'll give you a week."

She reached out and squeezed his arm. "I'll text you once I have it in my hands."

He nodded. "I need to wrap this up fast before Flynn catches wind of the agreement."

"Okay. Meet me back in this square in forty-eight hours. Same time."

He had a sinking feeling about this, but he was running out of options, and still had to navigate bringing the director of the CIA into the walls of Department 13. The clock was ticking. "Done."

"Good. Forty-eight hours." She hurried off in the direction she'd come from, leaving him behind.

He watched her go, but something moved in his peripheral vision.

He spun around, searching the shadows. Nothing. The hair on the back of his neck rose. His other instincts were warning him not to trust his eyes.

He took out his cell phone and fired off a text to Kingsley back at Department 13.

Someone else is here in Savannah. See if any of our informants have heard anything.

He put his cell back in his pocket and headed for his car. He scanned the square one last time. Could the CIA be tailing him?

It was possible. But this felt...ominous. He got into the car and started the engine. Savannah was one of the most haunted cities in the country. Maybe

the dead were watching him.

He caught himself hoping it was just a ghost.

Chapter Fourteen

Flynn parked his car in the underground parking garage of his building and looked over at Lily. He'd fallen in love with her before she knew the truth about him. But his cards were all on the table now. And it felt nothing like he'd envisioned it would.

Trusting her with his secrets left him feeling vulnerable and uncomfortable. He'd spent lifetimes hiding under the armor of his well-crafted lies. She'd imagined a life with Ian Flynn, the CEO of Flynn Enterprises, but now he'd allowed her to see behind the curtain, into a part of himself he'd never shared with...anyone.

He stood before her not as a CEO or even a pirate captain; he was just a man.

Could that possibly be enough for her?

Walking away from her had been difficult. It hurt him. He'd missed her. But he'd believed the distance would keep her safe. Now that all the lies between them had been removed, what if she didn't like what she saw? He wasn't sure he could bear her rejection. He could see now that he'd romanticized honesty. Seeing it play out through the rest of his crew led them to new partnerships and happy endings.

None of them had ever mentioned the vulnerability that came along with that trust.

He'd exposed his true identity, and without his armor in place, she could drive a dagger right through his heart.

He hadn't realized he still had one.

Lily raised a brow. "What's wrong?"

He shoved the fear aside, removing the keys from the ignition. "Nothing. Just undressing you with my eyes."

"Bullshit. I know when you're seducing me." Her smile faded as she

searched his eyes. "I can't do this if you shut me out."

But at least then she'd be leaving him because he was an arrogant ass. He could live with that. If she left because she couldn't love the real man underneath all the masks, he didn't think he'd ever recover from that.

"We should get upstairs." He checked the rearview mirror. "It's too exposed down here."

She looked out the windows. "You think Morgan is hiding in your gated parking structure?"

"I would if I were planning to ambush him." He risked eye contact with her. "Humor me."

"Fine." She shook her head and got out of the car, taking her bag of papers and books from Dr. Sinclair with her.

He locked the car as he followed her to the elevator.

Inside, she stood opposite him. Her demanding stare made it clear she wanted him to speak first, but all he could think about was how beautiful she looked when she called him on his shit. The way she crossed her arms and her hip jutted to the side spoke louder than any words. Somehow she knew he was a mess inside. And she didn't look happy that he was trying to push his unwanted feelings aside.

The doors opened to his penthouse, and he gestured for her to step out. She ignored his suggestion and came toward him. Searching his eyes, she reached up to caress his cheek. Her touch had him at her mercy.

"I don't understand what's changed since we kissed on the *Sea Dog*." She dropped her hand. "But you're making me nervous."

She turned to leave the elevator. He caught her arm, bringing her back to him. "You should be nervous, Lil. I brought you into this world and it's not fictional, it's deadly."

She jerked free of his grasp. "Stop it." She backed through the doors, pointing at him. "You don't get to keep blaming everything on some captain you had a fight with almost two hundred and fifty years ago."

He followed her as the doors rolled closed behind him. "What are you saying?"

She set her bag on the table and her gaze locked on his. "I'm asking you to stop lying to me, Ian. Damn you, I'm sick of it."

Confusion tugged at his brows as he shook his head. He wasn't lying. He was trying to be honest about the threat...and trying like hell to avoid discussing the unfamiliar emotions that seemed to be surfacing. "You know

he's after you. He talked to you at the bed and breakfast."

She crossed her arms. "And we haven't seen him since. You've been silent from the moment we stepped off the boat."

His mouth went dry. His heart ached to pour out his insecurities, but his head wouldn't allow it. How could he bare that kind of weakness? He couldn't.

He went to her and ran the back of his hand up her arm. If he couldn't speak the words, maybe he could *show* her the depth of his feelings. He kneaded her shoulder, and her breathing deepened, her voice taking on a breathy tone that already had his blood pumping to his groin.

"You're not playing fair."

He arched a brow as his other hand caressed her hip, moving up to her waist and drawing her closer to him. "I'm a pirate, Lily."

She sighed, freeing her hands to wander up his chest, setting him on fire for more. She lifted her eyes, peering up at him from under her long lashes. "I've missed you."

His heart thundered as he closed the distance between them. "No more."

He claimed her lips, his tongue wrestling urgently with hers, and he pulled her into his arms. She freed his hair from the tie at the back of his neck and tangled her fingers, pulling him even closer. This was what he craved. No more insecurity and fear. He surrendered to flames of hunger and desire.

His hands moved up underneath her shirt. Her skin was warm and soft under his rough fingers. He needed her naked, pressed against him. Losing himself in her was the only escape from the emotions he didn't want to face.

He growled into her mouth. "Tell me what you want while I have a shred of control left."

Her teeth caught his lower lip as her hand wandered down his body to grip his erection through his pants. "My self-control is long gone."

He smiled as he plundered her sweet lips again. His hand gripped her ass, pressing her tight against him. He ached to be inside her. Gasping for air, he dragged his lips down her neck, whispering against her skin. "Please tell me you're still on the pill."

Her fingers tightened around his shaft, stroking him through his pants. "I am."

He sucked at the base of her shoulder and growled. "Good." He pressed

hot kisses up her neck and finally met her eyes. “Now take off your jeans. I need you naked.”

• • •

Her breath caught at the raw passion in his eyes.

How many times had she thought of him whispering that command while she pleased herself? More than she wanted to admit, but hearing it from his lips had her thighs pressing together as heat coiled low in her belly.

Ian had always been dominant in the bedroom, but not in a whips-and-leather kind of way. Now that she knew his secret, she realized this was the commander in him. He took what he wanted.

And she was the treasure. He’d always made her feel that way.

She slid her jeans and underwear down her legs, slowly, enjoying the feel of his heated stare. When she stepped out of them, he pointed to the back of the couch. “Stand there.”

She walked over to the couch and turned to face him.

His gaze wandered up her legs as he unbuttoned his pants. When he met her eyes, his voice was tight. “Now take off your top.”

With anyone else, she would have fidgeted, maybe even surrendered to a fit of awkward giggles, but not with Ian. With him she felt safe, beautiful, and so sexy. It gave her the freedom to shed any self-consciousness about her body that spent way too many hours sitting in a chair at a keyboard.

She lifted her T-shirt over her head and dropped it at her feet. His nostrils flared as he sucked in a breath. She ran her hands up her body slowly, taking her time before unclasping the front clip on her bra. He quickly unbuttoned his shirt, the flash of his chiseled abs making her pulse jump.

“Lose the bra,” he growled.

She freed her breasts from the cups and allowed the straps to fall from her shoulders. The fire in his gaze had her aching to feel his hands on her skin.

He wet his lips. “Turn around.”

She did, holding her breath. If he didn’t touch her soon, she was going to scream.

The heat coming off his body when he came up behind her had her biting her lower lip. His hands gripped the outside of her thighs, his fingers wide and possessive. He moved them up slowly, like he was worshipping every inch of her bare skin.

His arms came around her, his chest pressing tight on her back as his lips brushed her ear. She looked down, watching his tanned hands and muscled forearms on her body. One hand wandered down while the other rose to knead her breast.

His voice was raspy against her ear. "Spread your legs."

She did, and he cupped her sex, drawing a deep moan from her lips as she tipped her head back against his chest. He parted her folds and slid a finger into her, making her entire body tremble. He withdrew it and ran it up the center of her body and into his mouth.

"I've dreamed of your taste," he growled. "I heard you on this couch last night. Was it me you pictured while you came?"

She'd had a few lovers before Ian, but none of them ever talked during sex. It was always a rush to get off. But Ian dragged out the pleasure. He'd ruined her for other men.

"Always you," she admitted.

He brought his hand back down to the juncture of her thighs, his finger deftly finding her clit as if he'd memorized every inch of her body. "Good." He rubbed her faster. "You were trying to be quiet last night..."

"I"—she gasped for air as pleasure swamped her—"didn't want you to... know."

His teeth scraped her earlobe. "To know what, Lily?"

Her voice caught. "That...I still...wanted you."

He kissed the tender skin below her ear. "Look down. Watch me make you come."

The muscles in his forearm contracted as his fingers teased her clit. She ground her hips into his hand, aching for release. She ran her nails down his arm. "Don't stop."

"That's it," he growled. "Give me what I want, Lily."

Her entire body trembled as her orgasm slammed into her. Her inner muscles clenched, and her nails dug into his skin. He cupped her core through all her aftershocks. Her inner thighs were wet with her desire as she struggled to catch her breath.

"We're not through yet." His voice was raw as his hands moved up to her waist. "Lean over." He guided her forward until her chest was resting on the back of the sofa. "Spread your legs wider." He gripped her hips. "Arch your back."

She did, imagining he could see every bit of her now, but instead of any

shred of modesty, her pulse raced, her body eager for his attention. He kneaded her ass, spreading her even wider.

“I’m so hungry for you.” Suddenly his mouth was devouring her sex, his tongue feeding on her sensitive clit while his fingers slid inside, filling her.

She moaned his name as she rocked her hips back. He withdrew his fingers, his tongue taking their place, as he fed on her desire. His thumb found her sweet spot, rubbing faster. She closed her eyes, her chest heaving as he brought her close to another orgasm.

He growled into her. “So fucking delicious.”

That sent her over the edge. She practically screamed into the void as her orgasm swamped her until her legs went weak and she gripped the sofa to keep from sinking to the ground.

His tongue slid slowly over her sex, making her shiver before he pressed wet kisses to each inner thigh. He dragged his hand up her back and lifted her shoulders. “Turn around.”

She did, and he fused his lips to hers as he scooped her up. She vaguely recognized he was walking, but it couldn’t distract her from his greedy kisses. His mouth tasted like her, awakening a primal possessiveness. He was hers.

He lowered her onto his bed. She lay back, her legs dangling over the edge while she basked in the afterglow. He seemed to admire his work while he took off his pants.

His erection was thick, pulsing, making her ache for him to fill her. He gripped the shaft as he came closer. “Touch yourself. I want to see what I missed last night.”

This was new. She’d never masturbated in front of anyone before. She wasn’t sure if she could get there with someone watching, but seeing him stroke himself with passion burning in his eyes made her eager to try.

Her hand glided down her abdomen and her fingers dipped inside her core. She was drenched in desire. She slid them out and circled her swollen clit.

He wet his lips. “That’s it. Open your legs. Show me.”

She bent her knees, putting her heels on the edge of the bed, opening herself completely to him as she worked her fingers faster. Her chest heaved with shallow breaths as her gaze locked on his. She willed him to come closer, and as if he could hear her thoughts, he crossed to her.

He took her ankles, bringing her legs up onto his shoulders, and he

entered her slowly, every inch filling her. He was made for her. Hers. And that empty ache that had been her companion since he walked out of her life faded. They were one.

She slowed her fingers, but he caught her wrist. "Make yourself come."

She was so close already. Her fingers picked up their rhythm and her inner muscles clamped around him. He moved her hand away, keeping his thrusts slow as he closed his eyes. "You feel so fucking amazing."

She peered down as his shaft glided in and out of her body, and just like that, she was on fire again. He'd always made her feel safe and sexy. She'd missed him more than she ever allowed herself to admit, and she was still insatiable when it came to this man.

His blue eyes met hers as his lips curved into a sexy smile that was for her alone. "My turn."

He slid his fingers between their bodies and worked her clit, slow and gentle at first, warming her up, but as his thrusts became more frenzied, so did his hand. It was like they'd never been apart. He remembered exactly what she liked, and it felt so damned good. She rocked her hips into him, aching for release.

His gaze never strayed from hers. "Give it to me, Lily. Come for me."

She shuddered as her body obeyed his command. Even her toes curled as the world folded in on itself. Her orgasm hit her like a tidal wave. Ian followed her over the edge, exploding deep inside her.

For a blissful moment, time stood still. The world shrank until they were the only ones in it.

Ian bent down and lifted her to his chest without freeing himself from her body.

She clung to him, wrapping her legs around his waist as she breathed him into her lungs. Closing her eyes, she imagined this could be her life, her future. Lost in Ian's arms with no secrets separating them anymore.

She wasn't sure how long they stood like that, clinging to each other, but eventually he turned around and sat on the edge of the bed. She raised her head from his chest and met his gaze.

A crease formed between Ian's brows. "What's wrong? Did I hurt you?"

She frowned and brushed a hand to her face, surprised to find tears there. "No. I..." She struggled to voice the emotions churning inside her. "I guess it's just...been a while. Big release, you know?"

He nodded slowly, but she didn't think either of them really bought her

excuse.

Deep down, in the shadowy places that writers loved to dig into for characters on the page, she'd realized something tonight. Ian was more than the immortal pirate captain of the *Sea Dog*.

He was the captain of her heart.

And right now, if he got his hands on that Spear, he was on a path to destruction.

She wasn't ready to go down with the ship...but she wasn't sure she could abandon it, either.

Chapter Fifteen

Flynn woke up early, but he didn't get out of bed. Lily was still sleeping, curled against his side. He wanted to memorize every angle and curve of her face. Last night he'd lost himself in her, and he'd thought reminding her how much pleasure he could offer would relieve some of the insecurity gnawing at his bones.

Judging by the knots in his stomach, his plan had not only failed, it only reminded him how much she intoxicated him. How much *he* needed *her* in his life. Fuck.

She could awaken and leave him. Worse, she could stay, and Morgan could take her from him forever.

Love was a fucking curse.

How could he have forgotten that one simple rule? This world had carved it into his soul the day he lost his brother, and then again the night he lost his ship...and...

No. He sat up, dropped his legs over the edge of the bed, and pinched the bridge of his nose, forcing the memories of her freckled cheeks and bright smile back into the shadows. His tiny angel.

He ground his teeth. This was no time to open old wounds.

Over his shoulder, Lily didn't move. He sighed and reached for his cell phone, aching for a distraction. He unplugged it from the charger and scrolled through the notifications. No missed calls, and no texts. He clicked on his email and frowned.

He had a new message from Agent Bale. The head of Department 13 usually texted him. He hadn't even realized Bale had his personal email address. He pressed the message and straightened up as he scanned the screen.

This message will be erased on this end once I hit send. I'm a friend of

Agent Bale, and his subordinate in the department.

I'm reaching out to request your help because I'm well aware that Agent Bale will not. He's fighting on multiple fronts right now.

He has invited the head of the Central Intelligence Agency to tour Department 13 with the intention of performing our retirement protocols on her at the end of her visit. What he doesn't realize is that the same person who tipped them off about the department also provided her with proof of falsified birth records and social security numbers for a crew of thieves on the department's payroll.

If we're exposed, you and your crew will be as well.

It's in your best interest to assist me in rectifying this issue.

My daughter knows how to contact me.

The email was signed "A Friend and Father."

Dr. Sinclair's father was some kind of magical computer programmer for Department 13. Flynn didn't understand how it worked, but somehow, he wove magic into his coding, supercharging search engines and God knew what else to help Department 13 in their mission to protect Americans from paranormal threats.

He lifted his gaze to the window, pondering his next move.

This break in the chain of command at Department 13 worried him almost as much as the realization that after almost two hundred and fifty years, his crew might be exposed. How would the government handle the knowledge that immortality was achievable? And how far would all the religions of the world go to claim the Holy Grail for themselves?

The Serpent Society flashed through his head. Keegan and Char had killed many of them in the battle at the Tybee lighthouse, but their leader had escaped. Flynn had no idea if they still existed, but he'd rather not find out.

It had to be Morgan. Who else knew they were immortal?

He flinched in surprise as Lily ran her hand up his back.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"What's right would be a shorter list," he grumbled as he opened his contacts to find Char's cell phone number.

She sat up behind him and slid her arms around his waist. Her breasts caressed his back, making it nearly impossible to concentrate. He peered

back at her. “It appears Captain Morgan has been busy.”

She pressed a kiss to his back between his shoulder blades. “What happened?”

“I was just alerted that the head of the CIA has proof of the crew’s falsified birth records and social security numbers.”

She moved to sit beside him on the edge of the bed. “How do you know Morgan did it?”

“No one else knows we’re immortal. The last thing Agent Bale and Department 13 want is for the CIA to discover the Holy Grail is real. They wouldn’t have exposed our secret.”

“Slow down.” She rested her hand on his thigh. “What’s Department 13?”

He covered her hand with his. “It’s a top-secret division of the government. They have a subterranean vault in DC where they store paranormal relics. They protect the country from paranormal threats.”

She arched a brow. “How did you get tangled up with them?”

He twisted the serpent ring on his pinky. “A couple of years ago, the Holy Grail was taken from us. Agent Bale found a listing on the dark web and came to Savannah. That’s where our partnership began. We’ve also stolen Pandora’s Box and the cursed Tyrfining sword for them. They discovered that Holli had been smuggling powerful relics out of the vault and giving them to Morgan to sell on the dark web.”

She met his eyes. “He must’ve leaked information to get Department 13 off his back and then shared the fake documents to...what? Does he think they’ll arrest you for making false birth records and social security numbers?”

He hadn’t considered that angle. Glancing over at her, he shrugged his shoulder. “I’m not sure. I think he wants to keep us distracted. If Agent Bale is too busy protecting Department 13, and the crew is forced into hiding, it would be easier for him to walk away with the Spear of Destiny.”

“Or use it against *you*.” She brushed her lips to his biceps. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m sending a text to Char to get her father’s phone number. He works for Department 13, and I think the email I just received is from him. Since he reached out to me, he might have a plan in mind.” Her silence surprised him. He looked up from his phone to her face. He recognized the set of her jaw and the angle of her brow. “You don’t agree?”

She shrugged. “It’s not like you to look to someone else for a plan.”

“I already have a fucking *plan*.” He narrowed his eyes. “Steal the Spear of Destiny and bury it in Morgan’s chest, but you’re not much of a fan of that idea.” He stood up, shaking his head as the frustration twisted in his gut. “I don’t know what you want from me. I feel like I’m five steps behind him, and your life is hanging in the balance.”

She came up beside him and took his hand. “That might be the first honest thing you’ve said to me since we got back from the *Sea Dog*.”

He smirked. “What the hell are you talking about?”

She started for the bathroom. “I’m saying from the moment you told me who you really were, you’ve shut me out.”

“You were naked in my arms all night.” He followed her. “How is that shutting you out?”

She looked back at him. “We’ve never had a problem being naked, but trusting me with the truth is another story.” She went into the bathroom and started to close the door. “Send your text. I need to shower.”

The latch engaged behind her.

He spun around, raking his hands back through his hair. The attacks were coming from all sides, and he had no counter. If he could think straight, he might be able to find his angle, but Lily had his emotions clouding his better judgment.

He wouldn’t lose another person he loved.

Love. How many times would the flame burn him before he learned to fucking stay away? Damn it.

He sent a text to Char and then looked up Duke’s number and pressed call. He glared at the bathroom door, waiting for his first mate to answer.

“Captain?”

“The CIA knows about the crew’s forged birth records and social security documents.”

“Oh shit,” Duke replied. “How?”

“Morgan.” His name tasted foul on Flynn’s lips. “It had to be him. No one else knows except Department 13, and they need us, so it wouldn’t make sense for them to leak the information.” Flynn paced the length of his bedroom. “Char’s father sent me an email to warn me.”

Confusion was plain in Duke’s voice. “Wait. Agent Bale didn’t tell you?”

“No. That’s what worries me. If there’s a mutiny at Department 13, we could all be exposed. I’m not sure how the government would react to finding out immortality is possible, but it’s probably safe to assume we’d be

taken into custody.” He stared at the bathroom door. “I want to keep Lily out of this.”

Duke sighed. “How does she feel about that?”

“It doesn’t matter. Keeping her safe from Morgan and having a plan to get her back to Atlanta if the authorities come looking for us is what matters.” Flynn grabbed a pair of boxers and pulled them on. Duke chuckled in his ear as Flynn straightened. “What the fuck is so funny?”

“Do you think you’re going to be able to order her around without any complaint?” Duke paused. “She’s not a member of your crew.”

Flynn clenched his jaw. “What are you suggesting?”

Duke lowered his voice. “Maybe try telling her you’re worried about her and see if she’s got some suggestions.”

Flynn walked out of the bedroom toward his office. “She’s not a warrior like your mermaid. She writes thrillers.”

“So maybe she can write us out of this mess.”

Flynn rolled his eyes. “This isn’t fiction, Duke. Just have your security detail stay close and if I give the signal, they should be ready to take her back to Atlanta.”

He sighed, but he stopped fighting. “Aye, Captain.”

“Thanks, Duke. Warn the others to be wary of the authorities. I’ll let you know once I’ve talked to Char’s father.”

He ended the call and there was a tap on the door behind him. He turned to find Lily, wrapped in his white bathrobe. She wasn’t smiling.

“If you’re planning on having someone drag me back to Atlanta against my will, I can save you some time and I’ll just go on my own right now.”

She didn’t seem angry, not outwardly anyway. He shrugged. “You would be safer.”

“Maybe so.” She crossed her arms. “But if I go, that’s it for us. I don’t want to see you again.”

He should agree. She’d be better off without him, and love brought nothing but pain. No one knew that more than him, but the thought of never seeing her again...his chest tightened. He was weak when it came to Lily.

But what if his weakness led to her death? He’d have to live with it for eternity.

“You should go,” he whispered, dropping his gaze to the floor. “But it’s the last thing I want. I’m trying to keep you safe.”

She came to his side, staring out the window. “You can’t agree we’re

partners, and then make plans behind my back to drag me away. We're either in this together, or we're not."

"We already talked about this. He wants to kill you in order to hurt me."

Her gaze met his. "Try for a second to put yourself in my shoes, okay? From where I'm standing, Morgan has a weapon that could end you, whether you drank from the Holy Grail or not. You're just as mortal as me right now, and I don't want anything to happen to you, either."

He digested her words. He hadn't thought about it from her perspective. Knowing she cared about his safety warmed his cold heart. "My crew will protect me."

"Your *crew* voted not to help you find this Spear." She put a hand on her hip. "Forgive me for not trusting them with your life."

He stared at her, struggling for words. Her loyalty to him caused a physical ache to crack open in his heart like a long-forgotten treasure chest. He didn't know what to say.

Drawing her into his arms, he pressed a kiss to her head. "I don't deserve you, Lil."

She laughed as she slid her arms around his waist. "There you go sucking all the wind out of my rage."

He smiled, shaking his head. "Those are sails I'll try not to fill again."

She peered up at him with a smile that threatened to make his immortal sea legs wobble. "So, we're in this together? No dragging me off when the waves get rough? "

He chuckled at her nautical metaphor and nodded. "Aye. Partners."

She rose on her toes and kissed him. He savored her soft lips and sent up a silent prayer that whatever happened, Lily would be safe.

He could dream.

Chapter Sixteen

Lily scanned her notes from the Maritime Museum again.

Ian was busy on the phone in his office. Even though a rival immortal captain was hunting them, he was still making real estate deals. His assistant, Annabelle, made sure Flynn Enterprises kept generating listings, but Ian was the closer. Right now, he probably just needed something he could control.

Who was she to judge?

She was sitting at his dining room table researching, and it wasn't even about the captain who was searching for her. Nope. She was scouring documents that might give her some insight into the captain who was stealing her heart, piece by piece. Again.

She rolled her eyes. This was all probably a huge mistake. She never should have slept with him. Now she wanted more.

Instead of shoring up her emotional walls, she flipped another page on her notepad, rereading her notes about the *Santa Maria* again. Ian had mentioned his intuition telling him that boat had precious cargo onboard, but she kept thinking there must've been more to it. She was missing something.

Her eyes narrowed as she reached the bottom of the page.

The body count on the ship included Spanish guards who probably doubled as crew, and a single monk. By the time the ghost ship ran aground, the bodies had been mostly picked clean by winged scavengers. The locals identified them by their clothing and the ship's log. The inspector made a notation that the monk still wore a gold ring in the shape of a serpent with ruby eyes.

She blinked. Like Ian's ring.

She tipped her chair back, peering down the hall toward Ian's office.

There was no sign of him yet. Her pen flew across the paper while the thoughts were fresh.

Ian had told her he claimed his serpent ring from one of the robed monks after they took Bob's eye. That was *before* they found the Holy Grail. If the monk on the ship with the Grail was one of those...what did he call them? Serpent Society? Then it was either a really gigantic coincidence, or Ian wasn't telling her the whole story.

He'd said the monks were collecting relics hoping to earn their way back into the Garden of Eden. Wouldn't the Holy Grail be the master key for something like that? The Lord's Cup that granted immortality to those who drank from the living water must've been one of the most precious religious artifacts.

What if Ian had managed to make one of the monks talk and discovered what the cargo really was on that ship? Even if he had, why would he have wanted it? He said it was made of wood, not gold. He could have tried to sell it, but he never did.

And the night the *Sea Dog* sank, he'd insisted they get back to Savannah instead of riding it out at sea.

Ian came down the hall. "Sorry for the phone calls, but they couldn't wait."

She quickly flipped the pages down on her notepad and looked up at him. "Flynn Enterprises won't run itself."

He smirked, his gaze flicking to her notebook. "Since we're partners in this endeavor, I should probably mention that I also made contact with Kingsley Pratt at Department 13." He sat down beside her at the table. "He's Dr. Sinclair's father and uses magic in his computer coding. Apparently, he's produced a malware virus to target any data mentioning Department 13 that deletes files about the department on their servers, but the information about us and our forged documents appears to be saved on the CIA director's private device, not on the main server."

She arched a brow. "What does this have to do with you?"

"He asked me to come to the department and steal her cell phone."

Lily's eyes widened. "She'll recognize you."

"I'll use a false name."

She shook her head. "She's going to recognize your face. There's no way the head of the CIA hasn't looked up you and the rest of your crew on the internet."

A muscle jumped in his cheek. "You have a better idea?"

She doodled in the margin of her legal pad. She thought better with a pen in her hand. This was just a plot hurdle. There was always a way around, she just had to look at it from a different angle.

That was it. She was the angle!

"I'll do it. It should be me."

He didn't laugh, but he also looked far from convinced her idea could work. "Have you ever stolen anything in your life?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to pickpocket her. Tell your inside man that I'll need a badge or whatever they use there so I look like an employee. In the interest of secrecy, they can collect her cell phone. I'll take it and get it to the guy to erase whatever he needs to, and he can give it back at the end of her tour."

He shook his head. "If taking the cell phone of the director of the CIA was so simple, they wouldn't be asking for my help."

True. She studied his face. "What happens if she recognizes you?"

He was quiet for a minute and gradually a smile spread over his lips. "Then Agent Bale skips the rest of the tour and takes her directly to the memory treatment." He put his hand over hers. "I'll be fine. You have my word." He searched her eyes. "No one has ever considered my safety like you do. I'm lucky to have you for a partner."

She stared at their hands as the memory of her late-night meeting with the enemy crept back into her head.

Her agreement with Holli had been to protect Ian. But that was the same lie he'd been telling himself about plotting to have her extracted from Savannah and dumped back in Atlanta when Ian needed her most. She had to tell him.

Lifting her gaze, she sighed. "You might not think that after I tell you about my meeting with Holli Porter."

His grip on her hand tightened as a crease formed between his eyebrows. "What meeting?"

"It wasn't like I set a secret meeting." She sighed and shook her head. "She was hiding in my car, and she wanted only to talk."

He removed his hand from hers. "She could have killed you."

"She wants this feud between you and Morgan to end as much as I do. Killing me wouldn't help that effort." She set her pen down. "She asked me to persuade you to give up this obsession with revenge against Morgan, and

she was going to deliver the Spear to Agent Bale to keep you both safe.”

He didn't respond and time seemed to slow. Would he shut her out again? She held her breath, hoping he would understand.

Finally, he looked over at her. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“I don't know.” That much was true. “I think I was waiting until we knew Agent Bale had the Spear in the vault. Once death was off the table, I was going to tell you everything.”

“Unbelievable.” He got up, pacing the room. “When I got the email this morning from Char's father, I worried that there was mutiny within Agent Bale's department. I failed to realize it was also happening to me.”

Was he seriously accusing her of plotting against him? She shot out of her chair, defiant. “I am *not* part of your crew, and I was not betraying you. I was protecting you.”

A cold laugh escaped his lips as he turned to face her. “Funny, that line between protection and betrayal is very thin. Deathly so. I watched Morgan torture my younger brother until he died a slow painful death, because I believed I was protecting people.”

That's why his hatred of Morgan seemed so personal. No wonder he was still carrying around this thirst for vengeance. “I'm sorry, Ian.” The words came out softer than she intended. “I just don't want you to lose yourself in this obsession with Morgan. I thought taking the Spear out of the equation would keep you safe. That's all it was. I don't want anything to happen to you.”

She had a million questions about his brother and what happened on Morgan's ship, but they evaporated when he looked at her. The raw pain and loneliness in his eyes stabbed her heart.

“There was a time when my crew defended me because I was their captain, but I don't know that anyone has ever worried for my safety before.”

She went to him, unable to stop herself, and wrapped her arms around his waist. He didn't move to embrace her. She pressed a kiss to his chest and looked up at him. “I'm on your side, but you have to let me in.”

He brought his hand up and cupped her cheek. “I've misjudged everything.”

She arched a brow, unsure what he meant. “About?”

“A relationship.” He stepped back out of her arms, putting some distance between them. “I watched the rest of my crew fall in love, and it looked

easy. They seem happier, and the women are nothing like the ladies of my time. They fight right beside them, and most have joined the crew. So, the night you came to my office in Atlanta to interview me, my guard had been down. I allowed myself to imagine a relationship like they had.”

Okay, this was starting to hurt now. She pulled the robe tighter around her. “Are you saying you regret our relationship? You don’t think I’m strong enough to join your crew?”

He shook his head, tugging at his chin. “No. I’m saying there is this…” His hand opened and closed in front of his chiseled abdomen. “This uneasiness inside me. This…vulnerability.” He spat the word out like it tasted sour on his tongue. “Every time you push, and I reveal secrets I’ve kept locked up for centuries, my stomach bubbles with acid. None of my crew ever mentioned this when they found their women.” He went to the window, turning his back to her. “The tyrant who killed my brother is walking the streets of Savannah again. I can’t afford to show any weakness.”

She stared at his back, her writer brain struggling to see the world through his eyes while her heart was cracking under the weight of his admission.

She made him weak?

It would’ve been romantic if he was attempting to sweep her off her feet, but if anything …he was trying to push her away. “Why are you feeling vulnerable? Do you think any secrets you reveal could change how I feel?”

He glanced over his shoulder at her. “You’ve had one foot out the door since I found you at the bed and breakfast.”

His words were like a splash of cold water, but he wasn’t wrong.

Still, she couldn’t help defending herself. “Forgive me for being cautious. How would you feel if I had walked out on *you* that night? If I just stopped returning calls and emails like I dropped off the face of the Earth?”

“It would’ve made me determined.” He faced the window again. “I would’ve gone to Rozina’s coffee shop every day until I caught you there, hovered over your laptop. You couldn’t stay away from there for long.”

She blinked. He was right. She had no doubt he was tenacious enough to do just that.

The question was, why hadn’t she fought as hard for him?

She rested back into the couch. He’d taken her to the Sky Lounge at the top of the historic Glenn Hotel many times. It was his favorite happy hour

spot after work. If she'd kept visiting, she would've run into him eventually.

But when he stopped taking her calls, old wounds had opened. Her father had walked out on her, too. She'd waited for weeks, spending every night watching the door for him to walk in and swing her up in the air the way he used to. But he never showed up. She promised that little girl that she'd never wait by the door for another man to come back.

It was easier to be pissed at Ian than take the risk to fight for him.

The realization smacked into her like a bus, but before she could say anything, he took out his phone, a crease forming on his brow.

"Annabelle? What's going on?"

Lily had met Ian's broker assistant a few times at the firm. She was an older Black woman with plenty of family roots in Atlanta. Her knowledge of every suburb around the city and the nearby counties was impressive. Ian had told her many times that he couldn't run Flynn Enterprises without her.

Now that Lily knew his secret, she wondered how he would keep his immortality from the office. If he faked his death, how would he be able to swoop in and work there again without everyone recognizing him?

"Shit," Ian spat. "Okay, put him through." His blue eyes went cold as he looked over at Lily. The irate voice shouting through the phone made it impossible not to eavesdrop.

"Where is the Spear, you fucking arse?"

"Morgan." A muscle clenched in Ian's cheek, but his voice remained calm and controlled. "I wasn't aware you were interested in a commercial property."

"Don't play games with me, Flynn. Where is it?"

Ian arched a brow. "How would I know?"

His smug responses seemed to light a fuse in the already unhinged captain on the other end of the line. "Ye haven't changed, ye arrogant bastard. I'm coming for ye. Nowhere will be safe."

"Not if I find you first." Ian's voice was tight and menacing.

"So ye do have it."

Ian chuffed. "If I did, it would already be buried in your chest."

Lily straightened on the couch. Holli must've taken the Spear of Destiny to Agent Bale. If she and Holli could convince these immortal men not to waste eternity trying to kill each other, Holli's plan might actually work. They could coexist.

And then what?

Morgan's menacing voice cut through her thoughts. "Ye should've ended me when ye had the chance," Morgan snarled. "Leaving me on that island, thinking ye were better than me..." He chuffed. "Yer woman's not taken a sip of that damned cup. I'll kill her slowly." He paused, maybe waiting for Ian to take the bait. But he didn't. Morgan chuckled. "I'll keep ye in chains so ye can watch her beg for her life."

"Fuck you." A vein pulsed in Ian's neck as color crept up his face. "Your mermaid almost had me believing you changed in over two hundred and fifty years, but you're the same heartless bastard you've always been."

And just like that the last ounce of hope in her heart faded away. Damn it. They were both impossible.

"Ye bring out the best in me, ye traitorous fuck. I'll be seeing ye soon. Watch yer back."

The call ended and Ian shook his head as he met her gaze. "There's not going to be any peace. If you know where the Spear of Destiny is hidden, now is the time to tell me. Without it, we'll never be free."

Lily sighed, glad she couldn't answer his question. "I don't know where it is." That was the truth. "But I hope Holli got it back to Agent Bale."

He went to the window, resting his forearm on the frame over his head as he peered at the street below. "He wasn't bluffing, Lily. He's coming for you."

His words were like the spark on a fuse ready to detonate a bomb of anxiety she might never be able to escape. Instead of allowing her brain to imagine all the ways Sampson might torture her, she tried to stay focused on keeping Ian safe. He was worried about her enough for both of them.

"And how would having the Spear change that? It wouldn't. It would just mean he could kill you with it." She got to her feet and went to stand beside him, replaying the conversation with Sampson in her head, dissecting it. "He was full of swagger, but why?"

Ian glanced over at her. "Because it's who he is."

"Maybe?" She shrugged. "But if he wanted to torture and kill me, why didn't he grab me at the bed and breakfast?" Her writer brain started churning, digging deeper into his motivation like he was a book character instead of an immortal pirate who wanted to kill her.

She met Ian's eyes. "I've written plenty of serial killers and they usually aren't capable of falling in love with anyone, let alone maintaining a relationship for over a century."

He rolled his eyes. “His feelings for that mermaid haven’t redeemed him.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” How could she explain it to a non-writer? She crossed her arms. “You’ve read my books, right? Remember Garrett from *Time to Kill*?”

He pulled at his chin. “He was violent, but he wasn’t the killer.”

“He was a bully.” She nodded. “And deep down, they’re afraid. They figure if they lash out first, no one will challenge them.” She dropped her hands to her sides. “I’m not defending all the horrible things Morgan has done, but he had the chance to abduct me and do all the things he just threatened, and he didn’t.” She lifted her gaze to lock on his. “He’s an asshole, I’ll give you that, but I don’t think he’s a lost cause.”

Ian straightened, raking his hand back through his hair. “I don’t think you’re right, but there is something that I might be able to leverage with him.”

Lily tilted her head slightly. “Besides me?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You’re off the table.” He took her hand, sending a tingle of warmth up her arm. “Do you remember meeting Skye from my crew?”

“The one with the baby, right?”

He nodded. “The first time I met her, I was trying to buy her shop. It sits on valuable property in the historic district here.”

A smile pulled the corners of her lips. “Let me guess. She told you to stuff your offer?”

His brow arched as a crooked smug grin made her heart flutter. “When did you become a psychic?”

Lily chuckled. “Just a writer.”

His thumb stroked her knuckles. “She did refuse my offer, but her eyes haunted me for days.”

“They’re pretty. Almost...violet. Her baby has her eyes, too.”

He pulled at his chin. “She never met her father and, according to Colton, her mother had an unexplained hatred for pirates.”

Lily’s jaw went slack for a moment. “Do you think Morgan could have ___”

“I do,” he finished for her. “I also think he has no idea he fathered a child.”

Her head was spinning. She should be writing this down. “He has a

grandson.”

“Potentially, if my theory is correct.” He walked her to the couch and pulled her to sit beside him. “Lifetimes ago, when we sailed the open ocean for weeks at a time, the crew shared stories. Colton talked about a fortune-teller who had given him a warning about a woman with violet eyes who would signal the beginning and the ending of his life.” He let out a dry chuckle. “Gibberish at the time.” He lifted his gaze to meet hers. “But when he met Skye, the effects of the Grail were fading. We all took another swallow from the cup, but Colton refused. He wanted a family with Skye, and he didn’t want to outlive all of them.”

She blinked. “She gave him a new life, and now he’s aging.”

Ian nodded. “And the only other person I’ve ever met with violet eyes is Captain Rutger Morgan.”

“Holy shit.” Lily breathed, shaking her head as she struggled to absorb all of it. “We have to tell him.”

“And betray my crew?” Ian cursed under his breath. “I won’t.”

“But if you’re right, then Morgan has family. He’ll want to protect them.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Or he’ll use them to get to us. He knows I’d die for my crew. I can’t say he ever would have sacrificed as much for his own. Why would family he’s never met be any different?”

She rested her hand on his leg. “Because they’re his legacy.”

“Or his bargaining chip.”

He could be right. A plan started to form as she opened her mouth. “You’re right. It could go either way. But we have to try.”

He covered her hand with his. “Why are you so eager to save this man you don’t even know?”

“I’m not.” She studied his eyes. “You’re the one I’m fighting for.”

“I don’t need your protection.” A sad smile curved on his lips. “I’ve killed more people than I can remember. He’d just be one more.”

She shook her head slowly. “That was Captain Flynn in the 1700s. It’s Ian Flynn, Atlanta’s most eligible bachelor, who I’m worried about.”

He leaned in to brush his lips to hers as he whispered, “I haven’t been a bachelor since the day we met.”

Chapter Seventeen

David punched the plunger on his ballpoint pen over and over. The rhythmic clicking gave him something else to focus on other than the damning report from one of their informants in Savannah. The Serpent Society had regrouped, and they were in Savannah. Which had to mean they knew the Spear of Destiny was also there. He couldn't let them get their hands on such a powerful weapon. They'd almost killed him once. This time he'd be ready.

Tomorrow night he was supposed to meet Holli Porter in the square to take possession of the relic, and the Serpent Society would be drawn to the religious artifact like moths to a flame. With any luck, he could finally rid the world of their dangerous doomsday cult.

He dropped the folder back onto his desk.

Kingsley cleared his throat from the other chair. "I understand it's not what you wanted to hear, but Aura and Greyson are already searching Savannah. If our informant is correct, we'll have confirmation soon."

"If the Serpent Society is hiding in the shadows again, I should be the one hunting them. If anything happens to Agent Henderson because I was busy sitting behind a desk placating the director of the CIA..." He didn't finish the thought. He picked up the transcription of the call from their informant one more time. "I should've assigned an agent to watch the Brotherhood Apartments to be sure the monks didn't come back."

"There can't be many of them left after the...altercation at the Tybee lighthouse."

Calling it an altercation was an understatement.

King's daughter, Dr. Charlotte Sinclair, had unleashed a bloodbath that night. Her astral projection had saved her life and Keegan's, but she'd also slaughtered upward of fifty of the Serpent Society's members without ever

lifting a finger. Her psychic gift was more powerful than he wanted to admit. If he gave it too much thought, the urge to keep her in a secure facility grew.

But there had been no sign of the Serpent Society's leader that night at the Tybee lighthouse, and they had no idea if he had any other supplicants with him. It had been another miscalculation to think they'd finished the threat. He should've been more thorough.

"If the monks were otherworldly beings, I could take one of our talismans to sense them, but they're mortals. Humans. I don't have a spell or a relic that would recognize them and alert me if they're nearby."

Kingsley nodded with a sigh. "It's too bad the Department of Defense keeps such a tight lid on their werewolf service members. They could probably sniff them out."

David blinked and dropped his pen on the table. "That's not a bad idea."

His shamanic computer programmer tipped his head. "Have you got a connection inside the DoD?"

"No. But I met two shifters at the Maritime Museum a couple years ago." He picked up his cell phone. This could work. Hope was a welcome burst of energy. "I think they were there to talk to the crew. I'll check with Flynn and see if any of them know how to get in contact."

King cleared his throat. "I suppose that could work."

David recognized that tone and narrowed his eyes. "What aren't you telling me?"

"It's nothing, sir." He shook his head. "It's already being handled."

Dread slid down David's spine as his brows pinched together. "What's being handled?"

King shifted in his chair. "I discovered that although we successfully used the retirement protocols on the CIA mole, and my malware took care of the files he sent about the department, something else was sent to the Director of the CIA directly. That's how Department 13 ended up on her radar again."

Acid bubbled in David's gut. "Why am I only hearing about this now?"

"You were preoccupied with the Spear of Destiny and the director's visit. I took it upon myself to clean up this incident."

He clenched his fists to keep from shaking King. Since when did he do anything without being asked? David dragged a hand down his face. "What the hell happened?"

Kingsley wiped his hands on his pants. “It appears someone directed her to false birth certificates and social security documents for the *Sea Dog* crew and alerted her to our payments to them.”

“And you didn’t think you should tell me about this?” He shot out of his chair, pacing the office. He couldn’t afford for this meeting with the director of the CIA to go south. Shit. “You’re telling me the head of the CIA, who should be here for a tour any minute, knows about the *Sea Dog* crew and that our agency has been paying them with government funds? ”

“Yes, but it’s being handled.” King had the good sense to back up toward the door. “You need to stay focused on the meeting today.”

David frowned. “Since when are *you* the director?”

He wiped his forehead. “I was supporting you.”

“No.” David tugged on his black sportscoat. “You were hiding shit from me.”

The intercom on his desk buzzed and his assistant Brenda’s voice came through the speaker. “Director McCreary is here to see you.”

David went to his desk, but his gaze never left King’s bloodshot eyes. “I expect a full written report on my desk by the end of the day.”

“Of course.” King hurried to the door. “Let me know if you need help with the director’s visit.”

“I think you’ve *helped* enough.” He waited for King to disappear around the corner before pressing the button on his desk phone. “I’ll be right there.”

He straightened his tie and took a deep cleansing breath. He needed to keep his head in the game. He would give her a full tour of the facility and finish in the occult division where Petra was waiting to perform the retirement protocols that would wipe only the memories of the department from the director’s mind.

If everything went according to plan, his brush with the CIA should be over in a few hours. Then he’d call a meeting to remind his team about chain of command and protocols.

Chapter Eighteen

Flynn waited in the underground parking lot of Department 13.

The code Char's father had sent got him through the security gate, but the elevator had no buttons, and he didn't have a key card to swipe. He dusted his black slacks again and tugged at the cuffs of his white dress shirt.

This wasn't his usual power suit. Char's father had instructed him to wear their standard dark pants, white button-down shirt, with a black tie and black loafers.

He rolled his head, easing some of the tension. At least he'd gotten Lily out of Savannah.

She insisted on coming with him to Washington DC for this short mission. Right now, she was in their hotel suite working feverishly at her laptop.

Hopefully he'd be back within an hour. Taking the cell phone should be easy enough. He'd leave it with Char's father and be back in time to take Lily to lunch.

The elevator doors finally rolled open and a slender elderly man waved him over. His English accent echoed through the structure as he scanned the parking level with puffy red eyes. "I'm Kingsley Pratt."

"Captain Flynn." He stepped into the elevator. This man, who reeked of alcohol and breath mints, was Char's father. He didn't notice much resemblance to the crew's historian.

Kingsley looked him over and finally met his eyes. "With any luck the CIA Director won't recognize you, but Agent Bale will, so you'll have to be stealthy."

Char's father's breath was tinged with the sweet smell of rum.

Flynn cocked a brow. "You never told Agent Bale I was coming?"

He swiped his keycard over the sensor and the door rolled closed. "I told

you in my initial email that Agent Bale wouldn't ask for your help. I thought that made it clear he has not signed off on this operation."

Flynn shook his head. "I didn't agree to a mutiny."

"This is far from a mutiny. Call it...liability protection. Agent Bale has plausible deniability should this operation blow up in our faces." The doors opened to a quiet hallway that could have been any professional office building. "Even if Agent Bale's plan goes well today, it won't erase the documents on the director's phone. Once you get it to me, I can remedy that problem and then slip it back to her after the evidence of the crew's documents have been purged. No one is the wiser and Department 13 is still a secret just the way Agent Bale intends it to be."

Flynn had a bad feeling about this, but the information would expose his crew, too. He had to protect them.

They stepped out of the elevator, and he followed Char's father to his office. It was dimly lit, his desk shielded by four computer screens. He sat down and motioned Flynn to his side.

He pulled up security camera footage, flipping through the different cameras until they found Agent Bale walking down a hallway with a woman in a steel gray pant suit and silver hair styled into a tidy pageboy cut just above her shoulders.

"That's your target." He pointed to the woman on the screen. "Just get her cell phone and bring it to me. I'll clear the files and return it. I can tell her it was found on the ground by an agent."

Flynn studied her movements on the screen. She carried a clipboard in one hand and a large bag over her shoulder. No firearm that he could see.

He looked over at the computer programmer. "Can you ping her phone? I need to know where she keeps it."

He clicked his mouse, opening and closing files faster than Flynn could track. Finally, he stopped. "Here it is." He checked the screen. "I'll call her from a cloaked number. Ready?"

Flynn nodded, keeping his attention on the security camera footage. On the monitor, the CIA director stopped and withdrew a planner from her bag. The cell phone was clipped to the cover.

"Got it," Flynn said.

Kingsley ended the call. "They're on sublevel five." He handed Flynn his keycard for the elevator. "Be careful. I'll be waiting for you here."

"See you soon." Flynn took the keycard and grabbed a black baseball cap

from a hook by the door. "I'll return this with the phone."

The hat had a white shield insignia, but there was no reference to any law enforcement department. Typical of all the Department 13 secrecy. It didn't matter. He hoped it would help him hide his face, in case the CIA Director had Googled him like Lily suggested.

He went to the elevator without rushing. When you behaved as if you were the captain of the ship, others tended to treat you that way. As far as he knew, none of these people would recognize him anyway.

Agent Bale would be a different story. Since he didn't know about Flynn's visit, he'd probably be pissed, but he couldn't say anything with his guest present. Flynn didn't really give a damn either way. He was here for his crew. The sooner he delivered that phone to Char's father, the sooner he could get back to Lily.

He swiped the keycard over the pad next to the elevator doors and they parted, exposing an older man in a white lab coat. Flynn held the man's gaze until he stepped aside.

As the doors rolled closed, Flynn realized he didn't know how to tell the elevator which floor he needed. *Shit*. He should've asked.

The man in the lab coat had disheveled white hair. He smiled, exposing coffee-stained teeth. "You must be new to the department." He chuckled, shaking his head. "Or maybe you've just never been injured and sent up to my floor, so we've never met." He offered his hand. "I'm Milton Donegan."

"Brian Volk," Ian replied without hesitation as he shook the man's hand. He often used the alias when he was evading the press. He forced what he hoped was a self-deprecating smile. "I didn't realize we had a healer. I'm kind of new around here." He released his hand. "I hope this elevator is going down to sublevel five."

Milton let out a rough, scratchy laugh like he'd been a heavy smoker all his life. "I've been here over forty years and I'm still no expert on these fancy elevators." He looked at the card in Flynn's hand. "You have clearance for sublevel five?"

"Yes. I'm replacing Holli Porter."

It was risky to throw out her name. For all he knew, Agent Bale had already replaced her. But if this man had really worked for Department 13 for thirty years, he probably knew about Holli's betrayal of the department or at least had heard the rumors about her.

Milton's bushy eyebrows popped up. "Agent Bale must've put you

through the wringer on your background check.”

He nodded. “I wish he’d been so thorough about operating the elevator.”

Milton let out another dry laugh. “Let me try.” He held his hand out for the card.

Flynn handed it over. “Thanks for your help.”

“I haven’t gotten you there yet.” The elevator stopped and the doors rolled open. “This is my stop.” He waved the keycard over the pad and a few different red numbers lit up. A crease formed between his brows. “Wow. You must have really high clearance. I can’t get access to half of these floors.” He pressed the S5 button and handed the card back to Flynn. “Welcome to Department 13.”

Flynn waited for Milton to step out and the doors to close before releasing his breath and allowing the new guy grin to fade from his lips.

What the fuck had he gotten himself into? No doubt Milton was going to run his mouth about a new guy named Brian with access to secured floors. He needed to get that phone and get the hell out of this place.

• • •

Lily’s fingers flew over the keyboard.

Times like this, when the words flowed as if she’d been downloading the story from the ether instead of actually writing it, were her favorite.

She’d learned over the years that every book was different. Some came easily and some were like opening a vein and bleeding on the page to get words out.

This book had been leaning more toward the bloody side. She wasn’t sure why. It could have been the heartbreak over Ian ghosting her, or the subject matter. She didn’t usually write books with stalkers. Serial killers were more in her lane.

Apparently, now that she was really being stalked, she had more primal emotions to dig up and throw on the page. Who knew? But the words were flowing, and she was grateful. It made it easier to ignore the voice deep in the shadows that kept whispering about what happened next in her actual life.

She took a sip of her tea and slid the scrunchie out of her hair.

The time displayed on her cell phone tormented her. Ian had to be inside Department 13 now. She wished she knew what was happening. Stealing

something from the head of the CIA seemed risky, even for a pirate who'd been plundering treasure for over two hundred years. She picked up her phone to text him and wandered over to the window for a little sunshine.

Their hotel was in Alexandria, Virginia, just a few minutes outside of the bustling District of Columbia. The third story window of their room looked out on the parking lot.

A tall, slender man leaned against a silver sedan. Paul was apparently still watching over her. It had to be costing Ian a fortune to have this bodyguard following her around, but she had to admit, it did make her feel more secure.

She started her text message to Ian, and then stopped. What if she distracted him?

If he got caught because of her, she'd never forgive herself. She needed to wait. With a sigh she put her phone next to the laptop and sat down again, rereading her last two paragraphs.

Just as the words started flowing again, her phone vibrated. She grabbed it, checking the screen, and frowned.

It was from Holli.

Call me.

Lily worried her lower lip. If she was going to make contact with Holli again, now, while Ian was out, was probably best. She pressed Holli's name and waited for her to answer.

"Lily?" Holli whispered.

She strained to hear her. "It's me. What's going on?"

"I have the Spear, but...there's someone following me. I can't seem to shake them."

"Where are you?" Lily reached for her notepad and pen.

"At our storage unit in Charleston."

"Why are you calling me?"

She cursed under her breath. Was she running? Finally, she whispered, "Because I can't call Sampson or he'll know I took the Spear, and Agent Bale isn't answering his phone."

"He's giving the director of the CIA a tour right now." She tapped her pen on the paper. "What can I do?"

"I'm supposed to bring the Spear to Agent Bale at Reynolds Square tomorrow night. You need to be sure he knows what happened if I don't show."

She was on the move again. Suddenly her phone crackled like she dropped it. There was a skirmish. Holli gasped.

And everything went silent.

“Holli?” Lily held her breath. “Are you okay?”

“She’s still alive,” an out-of-breath man said. “For now. But that could change.” His tone was deep, but between his southern accent and the cadence, he reminded her of a fire-and-brimstone preacher. “We’ll trade her life for the Grail. Bring it to the meeting tomorrow night or her blood will consecrate the Spear of Destiny.”

Lily struggled to keep her imagination from allowing his words to conjure a gory picture in her head. “What meeting?”

“Don’t play with me. I heard her talking to you. Bring the Grail to Reynolds Square or she dies.”

Lily swallowed the lump in her throat. She’d written enough abduction books to know that the odds weren’t in Holli’s favor even if they followed his demands. “I need proof she’s still okay or I’m not doing anything for you.”

“You’re in no position to make demands.”

She jotted some notes while she tried to keep him on the phone. South Carolina. Storage unit. “Since you’re counting on me to do the legwork with Captain Flynn and Agent Bale, I’d say you need me.”

Long pause. For a second she worried he’d ended the call. Finally, he responded. “Fine.” He murmured something in the background, and she quickly added, “He’s not working alone” to her list.

Holli’s voice came on the line. “Lily?”

“Are you all right?”

She grunted and growled. “They’ve tied me up with something enchanted. I can’t snap it.”

Lily wrote another note. Magical rope?

“I’ll let Agent Bale know. We’ll get you back.”

“Don’t give them the...” She was gone and the man’s voice was back. “Bring the Grail or she dies.”

The line went dead.

Lily paced the room.

She couldn’t get in touch with Ian or Agent Bale at the moment, but part of her already knew that didn’t matter. Both men had seemed less than happy to be working with Holli anyway.

The only one who might give up anything to save her was Morgan.
And Lily didn't know how to contact him.

She picked up her notepad, looking over the list. They must have tailed Holli to the storage unit in South Carolina. They must've known she was planning to return the Spear to Agent Bale. Why else would they be trying to grab the Grail too?

Sitting at her laptop again, she saved her work in progress and opened her browser.

When Ian had told her about the day he'd saved Bob from the religious fanatics, they'd been trying to find religious relics. The Spear that pierced the side of Jesus would be irresistible to someone hoping to buy their way back into Eden.

Ian seemed to think Char had wiped them out, but what if she hadn't?

Lily came up empty at all the usual spots like Google and Wikipedia, so she went to some of her alternate sources with her digital library card. The *History of Secret Societies* was no help, but an old volume of Templar Knight history mentioned a group of monks who called themselves the Serpent Society. It listed another reference text in the footnotes, leading her to the *History of Religious Fringe Societies*.

She borrowed the digital version and flipped to the first mention of the Serpent Society. She skimmed a few paragraphs devoted to the men with golden serpents on their fingers and frowned.

Bob wasn't the only person they'd maimed. Apparently, the Serpent Society had continued through the centuries. One monk had been arrested in the 1970s after carving an *S* into the chests of all his victims.

He was the only one ever caught, but bodies with the signature *S* had been discovered across America since the 1800s. Lily sighed. It was easy to believe serial killers were a new breed, but reading this made it clear that without a twenty-four hour news cycle and the internet, killers could move from city to city without anyone connecting the dots.

Except this went on for centuries. Unless the murderer had taken a drink of the Grail, too, no way the same guy had killed all these people. None of the victims seemed to be connected, but she wondered if she could find the old newspapers, would she discover all the victims possessed rare Christian antiques?

She shook her head and stood.

None of that was going to help Holli, and there was a good chance when

she told Ian about this, he wouldn't care, either. He didn't have any loyalty to the woman who loved the man he hated. Deep down, she didn't either, but Holli had wanted the two captains to evolve and coexist, and Lily could relate to that.

Surely someone else must care about her. Duke's girlfriend, Annika, was her sister. Maybe she could find her. If Morgan really loved her, he'd fight to save her, wouldn't he?

But he'd never work with Agent Bale or Flynn. They'd kill one another.

She went back to her list on the computer. There had been another person there. What if there were more Serpent Society members than anyone realized? And if they had a Spear that could kill an immortal, Ian's entire crew could be in danger.

That was something Ian would get behind. He'd protect his crew. And maybe saving Holli would make Morgan drop his revenge fantasy with Ian. They'd be even.

It could work.

Or it could blow up in her face.

But she had to try. If Ian and Rutger Morgan could find a way to coexist... Then what? Did she think she could go back to being Ian's girlfriend?

He was immortal. She'd get old and die.

She'd streamed the old *Highlander* TV seasons recently, and the memories of watching people mistake the love of the hero's life for his mother stung. She couldn't wither away and leave Ian to mourn her forever, could she? What kind of life would they really have?

Her phone buzzed, rescuing her from the relentless inner questions.

She picked it up and gasped at the gory photo, dropping her cell as if it burned her. She ran to the window.

Paul, the bodyguard, was on the ground, motionless next to his car with a bloody S carved into his chest.

She bit her hand to keep from screaming, then scrambled back to her phone and dialed 911.

Chapter Nineteen

David stopped in front of the security pad next to the lead door of the massive underground warehouse and turned to his guest. “Welcome to the relics vault, Director McCreary.”

She almost smiled. “I’m eager to see the assets you’ve been hiding.”

“Storing.” David ground his teeth. This was exactly why his department was supposed to remain secret from the CIA and other branches of the government. The artifacts they kept in this lead-lined vault were too dangerous to be used. They weren’t assets or weapons to be wielded.

But the sooner he showed her, the sooner he could take her up to meet the occult division and Petra could perform the retirement protocols. The plan was running smoothly so far.

He pressed his palm to the pad next to the door. “We have the highest security implemented here to keep the relics vault protected from theft, weather, even earthquakes.”

Behind him, Director McCreary gasped, and a familiar voice filled the hallway. “Forgive me, I didn’t mean to crash into you. It’s usually empty on this level. I shouldn’t have been reading these inventory sheets.”

David looked over at Captain Flynn, not quite believing his eyes. He wanted to ask him what the fuck he was doing inside Department 13, but he’d just finished expounding on their high security measures. Instead, he narrowed his eyes, his voice tight.

“What are you doing down here?”

Flynn tucked a clipboard under his arm. “You must not have heard my clearances came through. I’m catching up on the data entry for the vault now.” He glanced over at the CIA director. “I’m Brian Volk.”

Brian? Flynn was a ballsy pirate, he’d give him that. David cleared his throat. “This is Director McCreary from the CIA.”

Flynn raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. "I'm sorry for interrupting."

"I'm fine." Director McCreary shook her head. "It's nice to meet you."

Flynn locked his gaze on David's, but whatever he was trying to communicate wasn't coming through. He slipped his hand into his pocket before removing the clipboard from under his arm. "I better get to work."

David waited until he turned the corner to face the director again. "I'm sorry about that. Are you all right?"

She finally cracked a smile. "It takes more than a bump from a distracted employee to shake me."

"Good to know." He placed his hand on the touchpad and the screen came to life, prompting him for a numerical password. "I guess we better get on with our tour."

His earlier conversation with Kingsley ran through his head as the door rolled open.

He'd said he had a problem handled. It had to be him who allowed Flynn into the building. Not many of the staff at Department 13 knew about the immortal pirate crew in Savannah.

He stepped into the vault with Director McCreary at his side. "Excuse me, I just need a second."

She scanned the aisles of crates on fourteen-foot-high racks as she nodded. "Take your time."

He pulled out his phone and sent a text to King.

What the hell is Flynn doing here?

A few seconds later a reply popped up.

Stealing Director McCreary's cell phone.

Oh fuck. David didn't have time to dig into the problem, but it explained why Flynn had been on Sublevel Five and his theatrics with that clipboard. He'd been hiding the phone he must've snatched from her bag during the bump.

David ran a hand down his face and slid his cell back into his pocket. He needed to keep her busy before she noticed her phone was missing. He could deal with King later.

"As you can see, our storage facility is expansive." He walked her toward the oldest side of the vault. "Some of the artifacts on this side were collected during the Revolutionary War."

She looked over at him and for the first time, she seemed impressed. "If

this department was founded before the Revolutionary War, who funded it?”

“At first, the vault was hidden by George Washington.” He led her over to a faded crate in the corner. “This item has been in the vault since the beginning.”

She studied the serial number on the side. “What’s inside?”

“According to Washington’s notes, it’s the Staff of Merlin.”

She blinked, shaking her head. “It’s real?”

“Yes.” He nodded slowly. “Washington realized it was too powerful to be out in the world, so he logged it into a ledger and placed it in an underground storeroom in his barn. After he was installed as president, he obtained the funding for this building. He lumped our budget under a vague title, and we’ve worked in the shadows ever since.”

She finally focused on David again. “From the modest staffing I’ve seen so far, how is it possible to have collected so many items? You must have a large reconnaissance team out in the field.”

David crossed his arms, surprised by her line of questioning. “We do have a network of informants who help us locate artifacts.”

“Then you deploy agents from DC?”

His gut was pinging that he was being cornered, even though he wasn’t quite sure how just yet. “Our methods aren’t why you’re here today.”

“Aren’t they?” She adjusted the bag on her shoulder. “I have my own informants, and I’ve heard you’re using government funds to pay for labor under the table, possibly to illegal immigrants. My source sent me proof of a few in Savannah, Georgia.”

This had to be the issue King had raised. David didn’t know how she could have gotten intel about the *Sea Dog* crew, but that must be why Flynn was walking the halls of Department 13. Damn it.

“My department would never make any payments without legal proof of citizenship or a work visa, but I’ll audit our books immediately to be certain nothing slipped through our oversight.”

She studied him as if she’d already snared him in her web. “Actually, I’d like to have one of my agents perform a forensic audit, since you were named as the person who approved and delivered the payments. Conflict of interest, you understand.”

Shit. How could she know any of this? He kept his emotions buried deep, forcing his expression to remain neutral. “I have nothing to hide, but I’ll

need to see that they have the highest clearance levels before they're allowed to enter this building."

"Of course." She turned to the crates again. "This is very impressive. The Department of Defense must have an inventory list of this vault inside the Pentagon as well, correct?"

"No." His tenuous grip on the bitter panic coursing through his veins was beginning to slip. "Absolutely not. They're the last people who need an inventory of this storage facility."

Her eyebrows rose as her gaze snapped back to his face. "You can't keep weapons secret from the DoD."

"That's literally my job, Director McCreary."

"By whose authority?" She tugged on her bag again. There had to be a wire in there someplace. But they scanned her before she came inside. Other than her cell phone...

She didn't know it was gone.

David cleared his throat. "I should take you up to the library. You can read the charge from President Washington for yourself."

"I'd like that."

He took out his phone as they exited the vault. On the way to the elevator, he sent a text to Kingsley.

She was recording all of this on her phone.

His response came in seconds.

I've scrambled the file and erased the photos of all the records for the Sea Dog crew.

Tough to stay angry at him when he was busy saving David's ass.

Thanks.

"Is something wrong?" Director McCreary asked as they stepped into the elevator.

"Yes." He nodded, pressing the button for the top floor. "But it's being rectified."

Chapter Twenty

Inside the elevator, Flynn's phone vibrated. He took it out of his pocket and almost smiled when he saw Lily's name.

He accepted the call. "I'm still at Department 13, Lil."

"I know." Her voice was strident with panic. "But he's dead. I called 911. He's not moving. There's so much blood. I know he's dead."

"Who?" Adrenaline shot through his bloodstream as he frowned. "What happened?"

"Paul. I saw him earlier in the parking lot watching the hotel." She was talking so fast, it was difficult to understand her. "When I checked outside a few minutes ago, he was on the ground in a pool of blood."

Flynn's pulse skyrocketed. Morgan. It had to be. "Stay inside. Don't open the door for anyone."

"You're the one I'm worried about."

"Me?" His brows pinched together. "Why?"

"Because they called me."

They? He shook his head. "Who called you?"

"The Serpent Society, or someone in their group."

"No." The elevator doors parted and he stepped out, lowering his voice. "That's impossible. They're dead. And even if they weren't, how would they get your number?"

"They didn't." Her voice hitched as she sucked in a breath. "Holli called me. She had the Spear to give to Agent Bale tomorrow night, but someone was after her. They caught her and took the phone. He told me to tell you to bring the Holy Grail to the meeting or they'd use the Spear on Holli."

"They have the Spear?" He hadn't meant to raise his voice, but the shock was impossible to rein in. "Was Holli in DC?"

"No. She said she was at a storage unit in Charleston."

Then how did they get to DC to kill Paul? The dominoes were falling, but he couldn't track them yet. "I'm coming. Stay there."

"Ian, you need to be careful. There was an S carved into Paul's chest. I could see it from up here. It was a message. They're watching us."

So there must be enough of them to have a team in Charleston and one tracking him and Lily in DC.

The Serpent Society. He'd allowed himself to believe they'd been wiped out at Tybee Island. Fuck. "I'll be there in a few minutes. Wait in the room."

"Watch your back."

He nodded. "I will."

Flynn clenched his jaw and ended the call as he hurried his long strides to Kingsley's office. He put the phone on the center of his desk. "Erase it. I need to get back to the hotel."

Char's father frowned. "Has something happened?"

"The Serpent Society aren't as dead as I believed."

He tensed. "Where are they?"

Since the fanatics nearly killed his daughter, Flynn figured the news might upset him.

"I was going to ask you that same question. Apparently, they murdered the bodyguard I left at the hotel, and they've captured Holli Porter too. Inform Bale. They're demanding I bring the Grail to the meeting tomorrow night."

Kingsley raked a shaky hand through his unruly hair. "Bloody hell."

Flynn nodded. "I'm going back to Savannah, and I'm not giving them the Grail."

He stormed out, his pulse thundering in his ears. The serpents had messed with the wrong pirate. He'd bested them before, and he would again.

But this time, his enemies were flanking him from both sides, and they both knew he had a weak spot. A beautiful, intelligent, sexy weak spot that he would die a hundred times over for.

Love was a fucking curse.

He peeled out of the parking garage, slaloming through busy DC traffic toward the hotel without checking his rearview mirror. If a police officer was back there, they'd have to chase him back to the fucking hotel. He had to get to Lily. He raced through two yellow lights just as they flicked to red, ignoring the blaring horns.

When he got back to the hotel, he rushed to the elevator. The numbers

crept up so slowly he fought to keep from poking the button over and over. As the doors rolled open, he hustled out and ran to their room.

She threw her arms around him the second he opened the door. He held her tight, kissing her hair and praising whatever gods might be listening for her safety. He'd never been so damned scared.

Peering up at him, she sniffled. "I was worried about you."

He smirked as he smoothed her hair back from her forehead. "I'm the immortal one here, remember?"

"Not if they have the Spear of Destiny."

The realization settled on his shoulders like a sack of gunpowder. "It's been a long time since death has been in play for me."

"Not just you." She searched his eyes. "Your whole crew. No one is safe."

His gut twisted. She was right. "We need to get back to Savannah."

Lily pointed to their packed bags on the bed. "I thought that might be the plan."

She was a captain in her own right, the way she anticipated his movements. He went to grab the bags.

"Did you get the phone?"

He'd already forgotten his brief mission inside Department 13. He glanced back at her with a crooked smile. "I'm Captain Ian Flynn, love."

She chuckled, the sound lifting his spirits. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Aye. The crew should be safe from the government discovering our secret." He sobered as he pulled the bags to the door. "But I hadn't counted on the serpents crawling out of the shadows. I need to get the crew together. They might not have been eager to deal with Morgan, but if the Serpent Society has the Spear of Destiny, they won't stop coming for us until they have the Grail, too."

"Maybe Char can handle them again?"

"Perhaps." But as they walked into the parking lot, he realized it was unlikely that Char would be able to reenact the fight at the lighthouse.

She'd had all the fanatics in one place that night. They were inside a small building with no escape, dressed in robes, so it was simple to recognize them. This time, they were so far in the shadows, he hadn't even known they were rebuilding.

They knew about Char's ability now. They wouldn't trap themselves again.

And this time they had a weapon that could kill her and the rest of the

immortal pirate crew. Fuck.

When they were inside the car, Lily looked his way. “I had another idea, but you’re not going to like it.”

He turned her way and arched his brow. “This is not how you sell a business deal, Lil.”

“I know, but I think it could work.”

He started the engine and looked over at her again. “We have a long drive, and I’m your captive audience.”

“I was counting on that.” She smiled.

She was too damned clever. He was merging onto the interstate before she laid it out. “We should get word to Morgan that they have Holli. He can be the one to worry about freeing her so that you and the crew can stay focused on the serpent guys. Maybe Agent Bale has a handy gadget to see them in the dark or something.”

He gripped the steering wheel tighter. “Morgan’s mermaid is none of my concern.”

“She might be to Duke and Annika.”

He narrowed his eyes, stealing a glance her way. She knew his soft spot for his first mate, so pulling him and his woman into this conversation was a calculated step. He could admire her effort, but he didn’t have to like it. “It’s good that you waited to tell me this until we were in the car because I would have left the table by now.”

“I know this is personal for you.” She sighed. “But if you could find a way to see this through his eyes, maybe it would make more sense.”

He let out a cold, cynical laugh. “He tortured my brother for stealing food for the crew. Men were dying and Morgan didn’t give a shit.”

She nodded slowly. “Your brother sounds like he was a noble man.”

He shook his head, keeping his eyes glued to the road as he struggled to keep his voice, even as a bitter secret escaped his lips. “*I stole the food.*”

Saying the words aloud brought the pain roaring back like it had happened yesterday instead of more than two centuries ago.

She placed her hand on his leg and the wave of emotions threatened to drown him. He couldn’t handle her tenderness right now. He checked the mirrors, moving into the fast lane. “Pryce confessed before I could. He’d been trying to unite the crew to mutiny against Morgan, but I refused to join. I…” He cleared his throat. “I thought I was being loyal.” He pinched his nose and pressed the accelerator even harder. “I was an idiot. I won’t be

one again.”

She rubbed his leg, her voice soft and filled with more kindness and understanding than he ever deserved. “Your brother forced your hand.”

He sniffed, checking his mirrors again. He’d never considered that. “He was braver and bolder than me.”

She squeezed his thigh. “Or he saw that you were the leader. You just needed a push.”

He frowned, digesting her point of view. Pryce had always been hotheaded and more eager to fight than to strategize. “He didn’t expect to be keelhauled for taking the blame for feeding the crew.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Morgan is a bully. It probably scared him that someone was bold enough to disobey his orders and give the crew food. He overcompensated, hoping it would scare everyone else.”

Was she right? He swallowed the memories, struggling to clear his head. “Instead, it made me determined to unite the men against him.”

“Why was he starving his own crew?”

Flynn sighed. “We’d lost the wind. The ship sat in the doldrums for ten days. The food supply was running low, but the way I saw it, if we lost the crew while we waited for the winds to fill the sails, we’d be dead either way.”

He was relieved when there were no follow-up questions. Those were dark memories he’d rather leave in the past. Seeing Morgan again had brought it all into the present.

A half hour slipped by in silence before he finally muttered, “I’ve blamed myself for my brother’s torture for lifetimes. It should have been me, Lil.”

She leaned over and kissed his cheek before resting her head on his shoulder. “He made that choice, not you. He probably knew he couldn’t lead the men against Morgan. But they would follow you.”

“They did.” He adjusted his hand on the wheel and brought his other arm around her shoulders. “And I thought I had avenged my brother the day we left Morgan on that island.”

“You did. He didn’t hurt any more men on the crew.”

“But he’s still breathing.”

She patted his leg. “He was probably miserable on that island before he realized he was drinking from the Fountain of Youth. Fire ants biting him, sunburn, chafing, starving...”

A smile begrudgingly crept up on him. “Stop trying to make me feel

better.”

She squeezed his leg again. “And I bet he really hated that you were a better captain than he’d ever been.”

“My crew wouldn’t agree.” He sobered, shaking his head. “The *Sea Dog* sank because of me.”

Chapter Twenty-One

After sharing the brittle yellowed parchment of the original charge for Department 13, written in Washington's hand, David guided Director McCreary back to the elevator.

"This has been enlightening." She switched her bag over to the other shoulder. "I'm still going to need to share this information with the Pentagon. We can keep it at the highest clearance levels, but we can't have federal dollars being spent without any oversight."

He arched a brow. "We're not finished yet. Our last stop is the Occult Division." The doors opened right on cue. "Our department keeps a database of every psychic and intuitive in the country. We document their abilities as well as rank the strength of their gifts. If our country ever needs added supernatural talents to meet a threat, we know where to find them."

He walked her down the hallway, past a few cubicles, toward a door at the end.

She searched the area, probably taking mental notes of everything. "Do you have any psychics on your team here?"

"Yes. Some of the strongest magic comes out of our Occult Division. They can manifest protective wards over buildings and cast binding spells that hold a suspect better than cuffs." He opened the heavy door at the end. "Come inside, I'd love for you to meet Petra. She's the head of this division."

Before he could get the door closed, Kingsley rushed down the hallway. "Excuse me, sir. I have something for the Director."

She turned around and Kingsley presented her with a cell phone. "This was turned in, and I believe it belongs to you."

Her jaw dropped as she took possession of her cell phone. "How..." She looked at King. "Who found this?"

“I’m not sure. It was left on my desk. I’m afraid I had stepped away.”

She stuffed it into her bag, glaring at David as if he had pilfered it himself. “I’ll need all your security camera footage for your building.”

David crossed his arms. “I’m sorry, but you don’t have the clearance for that.”

Her eyes widened. “I’ll get a subpoena. There are classified files on my device. I need to know who had contact with this phone.”

David allowed a smile to curve his mouth. He had her now. “Last time I checked, it’s a crime to have classified documents on a private server, right? I’d hate to have this get out to the press.”

She pressed her lips together and shook her head. “Never mind. Let’s finish up here.”

He looked at Kingsley. “Thank you.”

And he meant it. He hadn’t appreciated not knowing that Captain Flynn was going to be inside the building, but King had made the right call. His plan had worked.

Kingsley straightened with a barely perceptible nod. “You’re welcome, sir.”

He walked away and David took their guest deeper into the occult division, back to the retirement room.

Petra met them at the door. Her auburn hair was up in a messy bun with a tendril that trailed down her neck, tempting him. Her eyes shone behind her red glasses. The corners of the frames had ruby stones that caught the dim light of the room. She offered her hand. “You must be Director McCreary. I’m Petra. Welcome to the Occult Division.”

“Pleased to meet you.” The director released her hand. “Agent Bale tells me you use magic. I’d love to see a demonstration.”

“I was afraid you’d never ask.” Petra smiled at David, and his jaded heart kicked up a notch. He’d never crossed any professional boundaries with Petra, but he’d imagined it more and more lately.

He stepped out of the room as Petra settled the director of the CIA in a chair and began the ritual. The tendril of smoke from the incense snaked up the wall in the corner as Petra instructed Director McCreary to close her eyes. She placed clear crystal quartz disks over each eye and whispered her incantation.

David stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him so he wouldn’t inadvertently get caught up in the spell. The director of the CIA

would have no memory of this place. This was going to work.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He took it out and frowned at the gory picture on the screen. A man on the pavement of a parking lot with an *S* carved in his chest. His fingers instinctively traced the similarly shaped scar on his own abdomen.

The mark of the Serpent Society.

Shit.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lily waited for Ian to speak again, but he'd gone silent, and the stress of the day had left her exhausted. By the time she blinked her eyes open, they were just passing into the Savannah city limits.

"I'm sorry." She straightened up with a yawn. "I didn't mean to fall asleep."

Ian glanced over at her. "One of us should be able to rest."

She checked her phone. It was eight thirty. She'd slept for almost six hours. "I wasn't very good company."

"I had plenty to think about."

That was probably true. She settled back in her own seat. "Do you have a plan?"

"I already sent a text to Colton for the crew to meet us on the deck of the *Sea Dog* at nine o'clock. I'll tell them about the Serpent Society and my intention to keep the Holy Grail as far from them as possible."

She looked over at his profile. His features were chiseled, hardened by tough decisions that still took a toll on him. "And what about Holli?"

"She's not our concern." A muscle flinched in his cheek. "The crew is all that matters."

"They're in danger as long as the monks have the Spear."

He nodded. "That's why I'm going to take it from them."

Her body tensed. "Excuse me?"

He finally looked at her. "I stole the CIA Director's cell phone from her bag today without her ever knowing. I can take on some fanatics trying to get back into Eden."

Her heart pounded as she shook her head. "This isn't a game. They'll kill you."

He released the wheel with one hand and held the other one in front of

her. The streetlights sparkled in the ruby eyes of the serpent ring. “They didn’t defeat me when I was mortal, and they won’t beat me now.”

“How can you be so sure? They have the Spear of Destiny.”

He rested his hand on her thigh, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Because I have no intention of dying.”

“You’re stubborn, I’ll give you that, but you can’t just will yourself to live.”

“Watch me.”

She rolled her eyes, knowing full well that determination was part of what attracted her to him in the first place. “Dying will piss me off.”

“Then I’d better continue to live.”

She turned his hand over and laced her fingers with his as he exited the interstate and headed for River Street. “When this is over, what happens next?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, are we still...dating?” Is that what they were doing? She didn’t know anymore.

“I left you in Atlanta only to keep you safe.” His thumb caressed the back of her hand. “Once Morgan and the Serpents are no longer a threat, there’s no reason for us to be apart.”

“We’re just going to ignore the fact that you’re going to stay handsome and strong forever, and I’m going to end up looking like your grandmother?” She sighed and looked out the window. “I don’t see how this can work.”

He stopped at a light and reached over to catch her chin. “I was hoping you might take a drink from the cup when this is all over.”

She blinked. Sip from the Holy Grail? It hadn’t even crossed her mind, and now that he’d said the words out loud, her blood pressure shot up at the thought of eternity. “I...I don’t know.” He searched her eyes until she pointed at the light. “It’s green.”

He faced forward and drove, sliding his hand free from hers to grip the wheel. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I thought you would be...eager.”

Was she? Her emotions were too jumbled to identify. Instead, she blurted, “What if things don’t work out? Then I’d be facing forever alone...”

He looked over at her. “You know I love you, Lily. That has never changed.”

“Really?” For some reason the way he said it pissed her off. Like his

feelings were a given. Her heart begged to differ. “You have a funny way of showing it.”

“How many times do I have to tell you, I broke things off to protect you?”

“It’s not that.” She shook her head. “I get it.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

He turned onto the cobblestones of River Street, and her voice vibrated with the bumps. “I think we need to be committed before I make a decision to take a drink from that cup. I have to trust that you’re not going to disappear again, and...I don’t think I’m there yet.”

He didn’t reply.

He parked the car and got out. He came around to her side, opened the door, and squatted so they were eye level. “You frustrate me and challenge me and make me think. I’ve never met anyone like you before, Lily Bouchard, and I will do whatever it takes to gain your trust and win your heart.” Before she could respond, he leaned in to kiss her. Her blood heated as his hand caressed her cheek. He drew back, his gaze locked on hers. “And just to settle that beautiful writer brain, this isn’t because you’re a treasure for me to possess.” He searched her eyes. “You make me better, Lil. And I do love you.” He straightened to his full height and looked over at the ship. “We need to get up on deck.”

She got out of the car and swiped a stray tear from her cheek. No one had ever said anything as sweet as this pirate just did. Her heart might never recover, but her head hadn’t caught up. The pain of him walking out on her was still too fresh. She sniffed and pulled herself together. If he discovered how quickly he tied her in knots, he’d be even more dangerous than he already was.

He offered his hand, and she took it without hesitation. He hadn’t waited for her to say the words. She’d told him she loved him before, but she hadn’t known his secret back then. Now that she did, it didn’t change how she felt about him.

She did love him. But saying it out loud didn’t feel...natural yet.

She needed to heal that little girl inside her who was expecting him to leave her again just like her father did.

One problem at a time.

First, they had to survive.

When they walked across the gangway and onto the deck, the rest of the

crew was already on board.

She recognized Char from the Maritime Museum, who introduced her fiancé, Keegan. He was in jeans and a black T-shirt with a touch of guyliner under his eyes. He flashed a dazzling smile as he shook her hand. “I have a concert later tonight. You should come.”

“He’s the lead singer for the Scallywags.” Char grinned up at him before looking at Lily again. “They’re playing at the District Live. It’s only a couple blocks from here. Most of the crew is going. We could drop you back at Flynn’s place afterward, if that’s where you’re staying.”

Something about the way Char’s eyes flicked to Ian and back to Lily made her bristle. Was Ian not invited? He probably didn’t care. She knew he wasn’t a big live-music guy. But he’d just driven eight hours to get back down here to warn his crew about a threat after putting himself in harm’s way to keep their existence a secret from the feds.

And they couldn’t even invite him to a concert?

She pulled Ian in closer and forced a smile. “We’d love to go.” She looked up at Ian. “We could use a little fun after today, right?”

He looked confused for a moment before nodding. “If you’d like to.”

She grinned at Char and Keegan. “I guess we’ll see you there.”

Keegan raised a brow. “Maybe I’ll sing Flynn’s favorite chantey for the encore.”

Ian chuffed. “I don’t have a favorite.”

“Bullshit.” Keegan’s eyes sparkled in the yellow light of the gas lamps but he didn’t say anything more.

Ian released her hand and strode into the center of his crew. He wasn’t the tallest man on his crew, but the way he carried himself made it seem like he was. His shoulders rolled back, chin lifted high, and his eyes narrowed, daring anyone to ignore him. He was every bit the pirate captain. “The Serpent Society has apparently been recruiting and growing their numbers. They’ve taken the Spear of Destiny and want me to turn over the Grail.”

Annika, the mermaid with legs, stepped forward. Lily wished she could force herself to stop staring like a tail might appear at any moment, but to be fair, she hadn’t known any mermaids until this week.

“My sister had the Spear.” Annika had her long blond hair in a ponytail. Her hulking pirate, Duke, was close behind her. Her brow furrowed as she looked up at Ian. “She sent me a text that she was returning it to Agent Bale tomorrow night.”

Lily bit her lower lip, willing Ian to do the right thing and tell them about what happened to Holli. As if he could feel her stare, he glanced back at her before facing Annika again. “The Serpents have your sister. They want to trade her for the Grail.”

He’d told her the truth.

Lily knew Ian well enough to know it didn’t make sense to him to share that information, not when he wanted to stay focused on retrieving the Spear and protecting his crew. He’d done it because it was the right thing to do. Annika had a right to know.

Now she hoped he would take it a step further and offer her idea to let Morgan rescue Holli while the crew took care of the Serpent Society. She was well aware it was a long shot, but she couldn’t help herself.

The mermaid’s eyes widened as she grabbed Duke’s arm. She narrowed her eyes at Ian. “We have to save her.”

“She isn’t crew,” Ian replied. “But her capture might lure Morgan to the meeting. If I can find the Spear and take it, we could end Morgan once and for all.”

Damn it. Lily couldn’t remain silent any longer. “Or we could help Morgan save Holli and make him an ally instead of an enemy.”

All eyes landed on her. While she was fearless on the page, standing here in real life with a bunch of pirates staring at her left her unsure what to do with her hands.

To her surprise, Ian swooped in on her behalf. “Lily has been in contact with Annika’s sister, who assured her Morgan has evolved. She says ‘Sampson Bane’ isn’t a violent man anymore.”

Duke shook his head. “The beating he gave you a few weeks ago makes that tough to believe.”

Lily shook her head. “The same could be said for Ian. I’ve known him for almost two years and never heard him talk about killing a man until he saw Morgan again.” She paused, but no one refuted her. “You probably used to kill and steal much more in the 1700s than you do today, right? You’re different people now.” She shrugged. “I’m not a psychologist, but I’ve written enough characters to see when someone is triggered. Couldn’t Morgan have been when he realized all the men who outsmarted and overpowered him years ago were still alive?”

Her gaze flicked over to Ian, but his expression was unreadable.

Duke rested a hand on Annika’s shoulder. “Even if all that is true, we

can't just have a beer and tell him we're all different. We can't change the past."

Lily glanced over at Skye holding her son on her hip. Their violet eyes were so similar to Morgan's. Ian's hunch had to be right. "But maybe you could change the future."

Annika tipped her head. "How will that save my sister?"

Ian blew out a frustrated breath as he turned to Colton and Skye. "There is a card on the table that I have yet to play."

Lily's pulse surged. Was Ian going to tell them his hunch about the connection between Skye and Captain Morgan? She wished she could send him a telepathic word of encouragement, but all she could do was wait to see if he chose to lay his cards on the table.

Colton frowned. "What card?"

Ian focused on Skye. "The first time I met you, you seemed familiar, but I couldn't place it at the time. Since Morgan has returned to Savannah, it seems clear to me that you have his eyes. That's why I thought I'd seen you before. I had believed he was long dead, but now it seems possible that maybe he visited Savannah in the past without any of us realizing it."

Lily's gaze flicked to Skye. She seemed stunned for a moment. Lily couldn't blame her. Suddenly finding out your absent father could be an immortal pirate seemed...farfetched, even for a fiction writer.

But life was becoming stranger than fiction a lot lately.

Skye held her son a little tighter. "Are you saying, you think he could be...no." She shook her head. "My mother hated pirates. She wouldn't even let me pretend to be one when I was little."

Ian arched a brow. "Maybe she had a good reason for that."

The picture was getting clearer as the silence stretched out.

"It's impossible. He's been with Annika's sister." Skye tried to deny it, but the color had drained from her cheeks as the realization sank in. Ian's theory could be correct.

"He's a moody bastard." Ian shrugged. "They may have broken up. He met a beautiful woman in a bar and had a few nights of pleasure."

Skye looked at her son and shook her head. "No." She kissed her son's forehead and looked at Ian. "We're not going to be cards for you to play. I'm not getting involved in your vendetta with that man."

Lily could understand her hesitation, but she was missing what this revelation could mean for everyone she cared about. Lily sighed. "This isn't

a poker game. This is about blood and family.” She gestured to the other pirates. “Do you know how precious that is to a bunch of men who have outlived every person they ever knew? If you’re Morgan’s family, that could protect this entire crew.”

“Only if he gives a shit,” Ian grumbled.

But Lily didn’t back down. She’d come too far. “We don’t have to mention Skye. We already know he cares for Annika’s sister. What could it hurt to get a message to him that the Serpent Society has her? He’d be another immortal to help get rid of the monks who have a weapon that could kill all of you.”

Colton wrapped a protective arm around Skye, his attention on Ian. “She’s right.” He focused on his wife. “We won’t tell him about you or Ace.”

Ian clenched his jaw. “And what if we tell him and he somehow gets control of that Spear again during the fight?”

Lily took Ian’s hand. “As far as we know, he’s had it all this time and hasn’t used it against any of you.”

He froze and gradually looked down into her eyes. The rest of the crew faded as she stared at his face. He studied her for a moment. “You’re right.”

His words hung in the air before he turned to address his crew. “He could have killed me as soon as he realized I was still alive. Any one of us could have been a target, but he left the Spear of Destiny in a storage unit.” He looked at Annika. “Do you have a way to contact him?”

“I think he called me once. His number is probably in my phone.”

“You should call him. He’ll think it’s a trap if I tell him.” Ian looked at the crew again. “Be alert. The serpents could be anywhere. I’ll reach out to Agent Bale and let him know I’ll be covering the square tomorrow night. If they have the Spear of Destiny, death is back on the table, so I don’t expect anyone else to take this stand. I won’t ask it of you.”

Lily stepped beside him, sliding her hand into his as she scanned the circle. Surely they weren’t going to let Ian face this mess alone. “I’m coming with you.”

Duke tipped his head toward Ian. “Won’t be facing the serpents without yer first mate, Captain.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

One by one, his crew pledged to support him.

He kept his expression neutral, unable to allow his feelings to show outwardly for fear his emotions might bring him to his knees. To have the crew ready to fight at his side again seemed like a fool's dream.

Yet here they were, willing to risk their lives.

He cleared his throat with a nod. "It's decided then. Annika will alert Morgan about the threat to Holli from the Serpent Society, and I'll talk to Agent Bale." He checked the time on his phone, grateful to break eye contact with the crew before anyone noticed the emotion welling in his eyes. He pinched his nose, forcing the feelings back. Taking a breath, he looked over at Keegan. "Don't you have a concert?"

Keegan grinned. "Damned straight."

Conversation swelled as the rest of the crew made their way over to River Street and, instead of stepping away and distancing himself from his crew, he made plans to see them at the venue.

He waited until the last couple exited the ship before he turned to Lily. "Thank you."

"For what?"

How could he put into words what had just happened? Not only had the crew backed him and his plan, but they included him in the concert. He almost felt...like the captain again. She'd pushed him to share information with them. Without her, he never would have bothered.

He bent to kiss her and whispered, "For making me a better man."

She smiled, bringing her hand up to cup his cheek. "Thank you for being brave enough to let me in."

He claimed her lips. She opened her mouth, welcoming his exploration. His fingers slid into her hair as his other hand moved down her back,

pressing her body tight against his.

“Captain?”

He lightened the kiss, his teeth grazing her lower lip as he grumbled. “Not now, Bob.”

“Afraid it can’t wait.”

He sighed and turned to face his one-eyed cook. “What is it?”

Bob grinned at Lily with a wink before focusing on Flynn again. “I know yer intentions to keep the Grail from the Serpents, but with the Spear in play, I wondered if I should have the cup on hand in case they use the Spear on anyone.”

He narrowed his eyes. “We can’t risk it. If they found it, we’d never see the cup again.”

Bob shrugged. “All the crew who wanted a drink has had one, but if they hit any of the crew with the tip of that Spear, we might need it to stop the bleeding afterward.”

Flynn clenched his jaw, pondering Bob’s logic. Finally, he shook his head. “No. We have crew that might someday rethink their choice and want another drink. Besides, we don’t even know if it would counteract the effects of the Spear, and if the fanatics got their hands on it”—he leveled his gaze at the cook—“The last thing we need is to face an immortal Serpent Society.”

“Aye, Captain.” He tipped his head. “I’ll keep it hidden then.” He smiled at Lily. “Good to see you again, lass.”

He left the ship and Lily squeezed his hand. “Want to go to the concert?”

That was a loaded question. “They don’t want me there.”

“Really?” She arched a brow. “I thought they seemed shocked that you might go.”

“They invited you, love.”

She ran her hand up his chest, the touch sending fire through his veins. “Come with me. I’m planning on having rum. I might need you to carry me back to the car.”

He chuckled. “Fine.”

He could deny this woman nothing.

They held hands and made their way onto River Street, following the thump of the bass echoing over the water.

He wasn’t much of a storyteller, but something about the magic of the darkened street made the words slip out. “I never wanted to be the captain. I

liked being a part of something. I was happiest when the crew elected me quartermaster under Morgan. When he started mistreating them, I fought back because they were my family.”

“So why did you become the captain?”

“Anger? To spite Morgan? I’m not sure. I wanted to avenge my brother, and the crew already looked to me to lead them as the quartermaster. I guess it made sense at the time, and once I was in that position, there was no going back.” As they neared the venue, the flashes of colored lights inside reflected off the water. “I accepted my rank as captain, and then...I sank the ship.”

She squeezed his hand. “You didn’t cut a hole and let the water in. There was a storm, right?”

He nodded, regret welling in his gut. “A storm we should have waited out at sea. Caleb, our navigator, fought my orders, but I ignored his good sense. I needed to get to Savannah. There wasn’t time to spend another day at sea.”

The door to the District Live opened, drowning them in loud music and the cheers from the crowd. He led Lily inside, grateful for the distraction from the end of the tale.

The *Sea Dog* wasn’t all he’d lost that night.

• • •

Keegan was electrifying on the stage, and he fired the crowd up to a fever pitch that would make Mick Jagger envious.

As she dragged Ian deeper into the concert hall, she spotted Char and the others on the right side of the stage. Ian’s earlier confession on the way over made her even more determined to spend time with the crew.

Ian hadn’t spoken the words aloud, but it was clear his position as captain had isolated him from the only family he had left in this world.

He seemed to forget that he didn’t have to be that person anymore. And maybe hanging out and having a little fun would lift his spirits before the danger coming tomorrow.

She ordered a drink, and Char pulled her over to dance with a group of women from the crew. Char leaned in close and pointed to a short woman with brown skin and a shoulder length bob of straight black hair as she shouted over the music. “This is Harmony.”

A pale woman with a thick braid of white hair resting in front of her shoulder danced next to Harmony. She waved and called out, "I'm Heather."

"Great to meet you!" Lily yelled over the cheering.

Up on the stage, Keegan finished a cover of "Free Bird," and the crowd went wild. He scanned the crowd, his eyes locking with Char's as he lifted the mic again. "This one's for my lady down front."

The band started their version of "So Into You," and after serenading Char with the first few lines, Keegan went back to working the crowd.

Lily bumped Char's shoulder. "I think he likes you."

Char laughed, tipping her head back. "He just wants to get laid when we get home."

Now Lily was laughing too.

Char sobered and tilted her head toward the east wall near the bar. "I can't believe you got Flynn to come."

"He didn't think you really wanted him here."

Char shrugged. "This was the first time we invited him."

Lily made eye contact with Ian and waved. He lifted his glass and stayed right where he was. She faced the stage again. "Thanks for including him. I think it means more than he'll ever allow you to know."

"He's usually an asshole, but seeing him with you... I don't know, he seems different." Char pulled her gaze from the stage to Lily's face. "You might be rubbing off on him. Changing him."

"I don't know about that." She scanned the bar, but Ian was gone. She looked at Char again. "I get that he can be abrasive and cocky at times, but he does love this crew."

A wistful smile curved Char's mouth. "Maybe someday he'll trust them with the truth."

Before she could ask what that meant, someone grabbed her hips from behind. "Wanna dance?"

She spun around to find a drunk man in skinny jeans and wide-open blue shirt that could've used a few more buttons.

"Not really." She jerked free of his unwanted physical contact.

His eyebrows pinched together like a sad puppy who just got scolded for peeing in the house. "Just one?"

She opened her mouth to respond, but a familiar deep voice did it for her. "Fuck off, asshole." Ian slid his arm around her waist and gave her a

possessive squeeze. “She’s too good for you.”

The guy lunged for Ian, but he stepped both of them to the right, avoiding any contact. The man fell face first on the floor and didn’t move.

“Is he...unconscious?” Lily asked.

Harmony squatted down, pressing two fingers to the side of his neck. She straightened up. “He’ll be fine. His pulse is strong.”

Lily looked up at Ian. “I had it handled.”

“I know.” He almost smiled and the spark in his blue eyes sent heat pooling low in her belly. “But seeing someone else touch you couldn’t go unanswered.” He leaned, his lips brushing her ear. “Dance with me.”

It was phrased as a command, not a question, but she nodded anyway.

He took her hand and held her close with his other arm. The next thing she knew they were spinning in a waltz that seemed more at home in a royal ballroom than a concert venue in Savannah, but his presence had people clearing a space for them. She kept her eyes on his, trusting him to lead.

Her heart pounded. Could he feel it? He was in his element, exuding confidence. Okay, he was cocky as hell, and...she secretly loved the way the crowd parted for them.

As the song came to an end, Keegan took a bow, and she and Ian joined the crowd in applauding as the band came to the edge of the stage for a group bow.

Keegan lifted the mic to his lips. “Thanks for being here tonight!”

The crowd roared as they jogged off. Gradually the chants coalesced into one voice calling out “Chan-tey! Chan-tey!” over and over until Keegan walked out to center stage with an acoustic guitar.

He stopped in front of the mic. “Tonight’s encore is dedicated to my friend Flynn.”

She smiled up at Ian, but his attention was on Keegan. She followed his gaze to the stage.

Keegan strummed a chord. “This one’s called ‘The Golden Vanity.’”

He sat on a stool, playing the song about a faithful crewmate who sank a Spanish warship in trade for the captain’s daughter’s hand in marriage. “This is your favorite?”

“It used to be.” He brought her hand up to his lips to press a kiss to the back of her knuckles.

Keegan sustained the final chord as the crowd cheered. Ian applauded with her, then caught her hand and walked her back to the others. Char was

up by the stage getting a kiss from Keegan, and Harmony and Heather were now joined by their pirates, John and Drake. Drake was a ringer for Thor, and John was the only member of the crew who still wore a gold hoop earring. Those little details made it easier for her to keep the crew straight in her head.

Ian looked at John. "We'll see you tomorrow. If you can think of a way to find the Serpents before they find us, I'd like to hear it."

John glanced at Drake and back to Ian. "Actually, before the show we were talking to Keegan about that. Char's dad called from Department 13. He was looking for a phone number to reach the shifters who visited the Maritime Museum a couple years ago. Apparently, they don't have a gadget locked in that vault to sense and find humans, but werewolves could sniff them out. Keegan reached out to them to see if they might be willing to back us up."

Lily blinked. She must've misheard. Did he say...werewolves?

Ian didn't seem fazed. "I'll pay all their expenses."

"I don't know what Keegan offered, but they're flying in tomorrow afternoon." John took Harmony's hand. "We'll stop them, Captain."

Ian nodded. "Can you tell the crew to meet on the *Sea Dog* at seven o'clock?"

"Aye." He looked at Lily. "Pleasure meeting you."

Part of her was certain she must've misheard. She waited for the others to leave before looking up at Ian. "Was he serious? Werewolves are flying into Savannah tomorrow?"

He locked eyes with her as his lips curved slightly. "You've already met two mermaids. Shifters aren't that much of a stretch, are they?"

Laughter bubbled from her throat as she shook her head. "If I ever tried to put this into a book, my editor would tell me it was too unbelievable."

He arched a brow. "She's obviously never been to Savannah."

Lily followed him out to the car, keeping her voice hushed. "Werewolves walking right past TSA."

He grinned. "They look just like you and me until the full moon."

Her head was swimming with probing questions. How could he be so calm and casual about people who actually became animals? But instead of peppering him with questions he probably wouldn't know the answers to anyway, she said, "I can't wait to meet them."

He drove them back to his place and parked in the underground garage.

When they got out, a big man stood in the shadows next to the elevator. Ian tensed. "Wait here."

She bumped him as she dipped her hand into her purse, clutching her small canister of pepper spray. "Partners, remember?"

He cursed under his breath, but he didn't try to get her to hide again. As they got closer, she recognized his bearded face from the bed and breakfast. Sampson Bane. Adrenaline prickled up her arms and she tightened her hold on the pepper spray in her pocket. It wouldn't stop him, but it could slow him down enough for them to make it back to the car.

"Morgan." A muscle jumped in his cheek. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to lay out my terms."

"Excuse me?" Ian blurted. "For what?"

His gaze wandered over her. "Holli is fond of you." He sobered as he focused on Ian again. "If I'm going to the meeting tomorrow night, I want to clarify my target will be Holli. Once I have her, I'm leaving. No one will follow us."

Ian crossed his arms. "And you'll never return to Savannah."

He shook his head. "Ye don't get to dictate my comings and goings, Flynn."

"What assurances do I have that you won't take the Spear and use it on me?"

Morgan smirked. "I could ask you the same."

Lily looked between them. "What if you both forgot about the past and looked ahead to the future instead?"

Morgan's violet eyes snapped to her face. His upper lip pulled back into a menacing snarl. "Easy for a mortal woman to say. You haven't been alive long enough to know how deep an old scar can root into yer soul."

Ian took her hand. "Lily is not a target. Not now, not ever."

Morgan narrowed his eyes. "And what will I receive in trade?"

Lily was starting to doubt her earlier conviction that this man had changed over the past two centuries. Maybe Ian had been right about him all along.

A muscle jumped in Ian's cheek, but his voice was cool and calm. "My assurance that I won't end your miserable existence."

Morgan pondered that for a moment and crossed his arms. "And yer friend from Department 13 will stop hunting us."

"I can't speak for them." Ian maintained direct eye contact, daring him to

look away. “But I can tell you that Agent Bale’s only target for tomorrow night is that Spear. You can take Holli and go.”

Lily held her breath, willing the other man to accept the deal.

“Where does this leave us?” Morgan asked.

Ian glanced at Lily and back to the man who’d tortured his brother lifetimes ago. “I haven’t forgiven you.”

“Likewise.” The other pirate nodded. “But I’m not the same man I was.”

Ian let out a sarcastic chuckle. “Me neither.”

They weren’t going to be best friends, but they were agreeing not to kill each other. Baby steps.

“So, we have a bargain.” Morgan put out his hand.

Ian stared at his outstretched hand. Lily nudged him.

Finally, Ian clasped it tightly. “A bargain.”

Morgan released him. “Until tomorrow night.”

“Fair winds and black sails.”

Morgan chuckled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “I’m glad someone remembers.”

“Aye.”

Lily’s heart clenched watching these two ageless men exchange pleasantries that had vanished into obscurity centuries ago. The loneliness was almost palpable.

Morgan turned to go and looked back. “Thank ye for telling me about Holli.” He pressed his lips together and added, “I owe you.” He paused. “I may have tipped off the government that ye and yer crew have been paid on fake social security numbers. Watch yer back.”

“I knew that must’ve been you,” Ian replied.

“I’m still a salty bastard.”

“I’ve already handled it.” Flynn rolled his shoulders. “I protect my crew.”

Morgan nodded slowly. “Ye always did.” He walked away without another word.

Lily stared at his back as the tension drained from her muscles. They weren’t going to kill each other. She and Ian were still alive. Now they just needed to survive the night.

Ian took Lily’s hand and went to the elevator. He didn’t say anything, but neither did she. What could she say? Seeing the two men together had bent the illusion of linear time. They met as if two hundred and fifty years had never happened and they were two warring captains, and left as tenuous

allies with a common goal. The passage of time was evident, weighing on their shoulders. She wasn't sure words could adequately describe the moment.

When they were inside the elevator with the doors closed, Ian spun toward her, pinning her against the side as he fused his lips to hers. She moaned into his mouth as her hands ran up his chest. She wasn't sure what brought on the kiss, but his hunger for her drowned out all rational thought until all that existed was them.

Maybe that was his plan all along.

When the doors rolled open, he scooped her up into his arms and carried her into his condo.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Flynn brought Lily into his bedroom and lowered her to the floor.

She looked up at him. “Do you want to talk about what just happened?”

His lips trembled as he fought back a smile. He took her hand and brought it down to place it over his raging erection. “No.”

Her grin made his heart race as he plundered her mouth again, his tongue possessively wrestling with hers.

After the meeting with Morgan, his emotions were jumbled. His enemy, the man he swore he’d never forgive, had thanked him.

He couldn’t rationalize what was happening inside him. It didn’t make sense.

He suddenly lost his sea legs, and the tempestuous tide had him off-balance. His fight with Morgan had been so long ago—lifetimes. Flynn wasn’t the same man anymore, and it was probably shortsighted to think Morgan would be. Flynn was another captain with no ship and no crew trying to navigate a turbulent eternity.

Until he found Lily.

She’d become his anchor mooring him to this present moment. His partner.

He undressed her quickly, needing to lose himself in the softness of her skin and the curves of her body. His previous relationships hadn’t resembled anything like what he had with Lily. None of them had ever known his secret, and he’d never considered any of them his equal. He’d written it off as being the norms of the time periods, but tonight, with her on the ship helping him navigate his crew, he understood the difference.

Lily pushed him to see the world from other perspectives, instead of just his own. She made him a better captain and a better man.

She started to unbutton his shirt, but he caught her wrists, moving her

hands away.

“You’re overdressed.” Her voice was breathy and winded already. He fucking loved knowing he made her breathless.

And now he wanted to make her scream.

“You’re all that matters.” He knelt at her feet, running his hands up her legs. His gaze wandered over her body, to the juncture of her thighs, then to her abdomen, and finally to her breasts. The tips of her nipples were already taut and ready for his affection, but he needed to pace himself.

He yearned for her to trust him with more than her body. He desired her heart and soul because he knew now that he couldn’t face another day without her in his life, let alone face eternity, and he didn’t want that to change after the threat to her safety was behind them.

“Sit on the bed,” he whispered.

She did, and her knees were together. He shook his head with a teasing smile and allowed his true accent to escape his lips. “How can I plunder ye like that?” He moved in front of her. “Show me, Lily.”

She put her hands behind her, leaning back just slightly before opening her thighs. He wet his lips as his gaze wandered along the juncture of her thighs.

“So beautiful,” he mused as he dropped to his knees between her legs. He parted her lips, and the sight of her swollen clit had him pulsing, yearning to bury himself inside her. Not yet.

He leaned in, dragging his tongue through her folds, circling her sweet spot until she groaned. “You can do better than that, Lil.”

He dipped his finger into her opening, and then another. Her breath caught, and her hips rocked into his hand. “That’s it,” he growled as he buried his face in her core.

She cried out his name as he teased her with his tongue, and he ached for more, to hear her scream his name, to need him, to want him...to be his.

He drew back, his teeth grazing her inner thigh. “You know what I want. Don’t hold back, Lil. All of it. Yer mine.”

His tongue devoured her until her muscles clenched around his fingers as her orgasm washed over her. Between her breathless screams and the sight of her hands fisted in his comforter, he nearly came with her. He slowed the strokes of his tongue, pressing lingering kisses to her tender flesh before standing.

He removed his clothes without ever taking his eyes off her. Her cheeks

were flushed, her breasts full, her chest still heaving, and her long hair draped around her like she was a sea nymph in a weightless world. Sweat glistened on her forehead, but the fire in her eyes, the yearning, consumed him.

He was hers too.

Standing naked before her, he lifted her chin, losing himself in her gaze. He whispered the words before he realized he was going to speak. "I would do anything for you."

She wet her lips. "Make love to me."

He lowered himself over her and slid his arm around her waist, bringing her farther onto the bed with him before he settled over her. Pressing his hips forward, he entered her completely, growling into the kiss. Her body was heaven. Made for him.

She wrapped her legs around his waist as he kissed his way down her neck. He lifted his head, resting his forehead on hers. There was so much he wanted to say, but words escaped him. As pleasure swamped him, he slid a hand between them, searching her folds until he found her clitoris, rubbing it in time with his thrusts.

Her hips bucked underneath him, grinding into him. He wanted this to last forever and at the same time, he ached to pound into her until his orgasm slammed him to oblivion. A delicious torture.

As her fingernails dug into his back and her inner muscles clenched, he surrendered, erupting deep inside her as she orgasmed around him.

Time stood still. He fought to catch his breath, tasting her lips over and over.

Finally, he rested his head on her chest, her racing heartbeat like a melody in his ear. She stroked her fingers through his hair. "I tried so hard to hate you."

He closed his eyes. "No one would blame you."

She kissed the top of his head. "They don't see you the way I do."

He lifted his head, surprised to find his vision blurring as he stared down at her beautiful face. The feelings she stirred in him were unfamiliar, and he struggled for words. "You make me feel...like I don't have to be the captain. I'm enough." He stole one more kiss and whispered against her lips, "I love you, Lily."

She caressed his cheek. "I love you too." She searched his eyes. "And you are enough."

After all the mistakes he had made...she loved him again. Fuck, he'd never deserve her, but he'd cherish her for all time. Her words were a balm to his battered soul.

"Will you drink from the Grail?"

Her lips curved slightly. "I'm still thinking about it."

"All right." He could almost hear the seconds ticking by inside his head. "Then you should stay here tomorrow night."

She traced his lower lip with her finger. "They have a Spear that can kill an immortal, remember? It wouldn't matter if I took a sip from the Grail right now. There's still a chance that things won't go the way we want."

"Please, Lil." His voice hitched and he swallowed the lump in his throat. "I can't lose you."

She shook her head. "And I can't lose you again either, so I guess we'll have to watch each other's backs."

"This isn't something you can write your way out of. This is real."

She lifted her head and brushed a kiss to his lips. "And there's nothing you can say to make me stay here."

He hummed into her mouth as he kissed her again. "Stubborn woman."

"Bossy captain."

He smiled as he fused his lips to hers.

Maybe tomorrow would never come.

...

Lily woke up as the light filtered through the blinds. She was sore in all the right places. She'd missed that while Ian was gone. He made her feel alive and treasured. And that was before she'd discovered he was a pirate.

She reached for her phone and flipped through her email. A breaking news headline caught her eye. She clicked on the email and frowned.

CIA DIRECTOR ANNE MCCREARY NOT EXPECTED TO LIVE AFTER A RUPTURED BRAIN ANEURISM.

Something must've gone wrong at Department 13. It had to be an accident. If they had planned to kill the director, why bother to give her a tour first?

Ian stirred beside her and pressed a kiss to her shoulder. "Have you been awake long?"

"No." She showed him her phone. "The CIA director is in the hospital."

He took her cell, quickly reading the article. “Shit.”

“Do you think Agent Bale did this?”

“No.” He shook his head, handing the phone back to her. “He was very confident in some protocol that would make her forget anything having to do with Department 13.”

“Could that have caused this?”

“I don’t know, but we need him *here* tonight, not cleaning up messes in Washington, DC.” He got up and went into his walk-in closet, giving her a nice view of his ass.

She stretched, pulling up the comforter. “He’s supposed to be meeting Holli to grab the Spear tonight, but the monks have her and the Spear. Why would they bother showing up to the meeting?”

He came back out of the closet in boxer briefs and a dark blue Henley that made his eyes even more stunning. “Because they want us to give them the Grail in trade for the mermaid.”

She studied the scene beginning to meld together in her mind. “So why wait until tonight? They could have made the trade with you last night. It doesn’t make sense.”

He took a pair of khakis out of his dresser and turned to face her again. “You’re right.”

In her head, she was already rewriting the scene from the monks’ point of view. “Just brainstorming out loud here, but what if Agent Bale is really their target? Does he have a history with them?”

“I think so, but I’ve never had a conversation about it.”

She nodded slowly. “So it’s possible they could be trying to take out Department 13.”

He stepped into his pants. “Department 13 has religious relics from around the world locked up in that vault.”

It was starting to come together. “And if they could get the department exposed, the government might put the relics in a museum or something.”

“Where they could take them.” He zipped his pants. “And they might have some artifact that could have caused the aneurism with a look.”

Lily blinked. “Such a thing exists?”

He shrugged. “The cult of Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses, were said to have worshipped her as the Lamp of Memory. It’s not hard to imagine they could have fashioned some kind of idols and imbued them with power. There’s also the water of Lethe that could make someone

forget.” He met her eyes. “If we’re hypothesizing that the serpents are trying to expose Department 13 by attacking the Director of the CIA, there are many ways they could accomplish it.”

“If the CIA traces her steps, it could lead them right to Department 13...”

Ian finished her thought. “Agent Bale and his entire organization could be shut down.”

“Exactly.” She sat up. “This is their final play. They’d have everything they need to get back to Eden.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“We’re fucked.” David rubbed his forehead as he addressed his inner circle at Department 13.

Brenda, his secretary and right-hand, looked up from her tablet. Her short brown hair was tousled, a testament to her frustration. Her brown eyes met his. “I’ve finished going over the notes from the retirement protocols and the security video. The CIA Director walked out of the building in good health without even a headache. Maybe it was an existing condition?”

Kingsley sat across the table, with Agent Aura Henderson from their field office in Savannah on a screen beside him. King slid his hands off the keyboard of his laptop. “It’s possible something happened after she left. I’m sure she had plenty of enemies in her line of work as the face of America’s largest spy organization.”

Aura piped in, “I’m getting a call from Captain Flynn, can I patch him in?”

“Why not?” David dropped his hand from his forehead. “Maybe the Serpent Society has another mess for us to clean up.”

Aura’s screen split and Captain Flynn filled the other square. “Agent Bale, I think we have a problem.”

David shook his head with a humorless laugh. “What’s one more at this point?”

Flynn didn’t crack a smile. This was going to be good. The red-haired pirate tugged at his chin and stared directly into the camera. “It appears to us that the Serpents are targeting Department 13 and you in particular.”

David raised his eyebrows at the unexpected theory. “What makes you say that?”

“Lily discovered it. They captured your employee, Holli Porter, then contacted us to offer a trade, her life for the Holy Grail. They suggested we

bring it to the meeting at Reynolds Square tonight. If the Grail was their ultimate goal, why wait until you were supposed to meet her to retrieve the Spear of Destiny? They want you there.”

“Interesting.” David sat back in his chair. “I’m sure you saw the headline today about the director you bumped into yesterday.”

“I did. I assumed your protocols must have failed.”

“No.” David shook his head. “They were actually textbook, and she was fine when she left our building.”

Aura cleared her throat. “Excuse me, sir, but did we ever discover what caused her to plant Eric Gross into Department 13 in the first place?”

Eric Gross had infiltrated Department 13 as a tech for the restoration department on sublevel five. He’d been transmitting intel and photos to Director McCreary until David discovered his true identity. His retirement protocols had worked, and King had sent a shamanic malware program through the CIA’s firewall to destroy the evidence.

David hadn’t thought about what might have made her aware of them enough to place a mole in his department. “Are you thinking the Serpent Society tipped them off?”

Flynn chimed in. “If they could get your department shut down, and the vault opened, it would make it much easier for them to steal the relics.”

David glanced at Brenda and Kingsley. “Do either of you know of anything the monks could have in their possession that could have injured Director McCreary?”

Aura replied, “We’ve been hearing whispers of a witch concocting a deadly elixir that can raise your blood pressure enough to cause the vessels to rupture.”

“It would mimic an aneurysm.” David sat back in his chair and ran a hand down his face. “Damn it. If the monks have been building their numbers...” He shook his head. “I didn’t keep my eye on the ball after Dr. Sinclair wiped them out at the Tybee lighthouse.”

“They might not be rebuilding. They could have called in different factions from around the globe.” Petra sat across from him. She had her hair up in a ponytail and her red-rimmed glasses on today. He shouldn’t be wasting time noticing small details like that, but he couldn’t seem to help it when it came to her.

“Keegan contacted the Sloans.” Flynn looked at someone out of the frame and then back to the camera. “The shifter couple agreed to fly to

Savannah. They arrive later this afternoon. They might be able to catch the scents of the monks. We can be sure they don't escape this time."

There was a chance the monks might outnumber them, but he kept that to himself. "Good." David took his pen from his pocket, popping the plunger. "How did you get them to agree?"

"Apparently the Department of Defense nearly declassified their research on werewolves recently." Flynn arched a brow. "If the government exposes Department 13 to the world, it might shine a light back on the super soldier experiments the DoD performed on shifters. It benefits everyone if Americans keep believing the supernatural is make-believe."

Aura spoke from the square next to Flynn on the screen. "With their heightened sense of smell, we're hopeful they can help us locate the serpents before they try to use the Spear."

David focused on Kingsley again. "You've got the jet ready for me to go to Savannah?"

King nodded as he clicked a few things on his tablet. "You should arrive at eight o'clock tonight."

"And the meeting is at ten." He scanned the rest of the team at the table and Flynn and Aura on the tablet screen. "I'll need to come to the square alone, or they'll know something is up. For this to work, they have to believe I'm still waiting to meet Holli to take possession of the Spear."

Flynn brought someone else onto the camera with him. She was at least six inches shorter than him with long black hair and dark brown eyes. "This is Lily Bouchard. The Serpents spoke to her on the phone after they abducted Holli."

Lily added, "They said Ian needs to bring the Grail or they'll use the Spear on the mermaid."

David straightened in his chair, his pulse kicking up a few notches. Why was Flynn adding more people to this mess? "And how are you connected to any of this?"

Flynn narrowed his eyes. "Lily is with me."

David's eyebrows shot up before he could stop himself. Captain Ian Flynn had fallen in...love? Apparently there really was someone for everyone. His gaze wandered across the table to Petra. He broke eye contact, cursing his lack of focus.

Maybe not quite everyone.

"Keep that cup as far from this meeting as possible." David focused on

Flynn. “The last thing we need is for the Serpent Society members to become immortal.”

“Aye.” Flynn nodded. “I’ve already spoken to Bob. He’ll keep it far from the square tonight. Most of the crew will be in the shadows as backup. We’ll get the Spear back.”

Lily cleared her throat. “We told Morgan they have Holli. When he sees an opening, he’ll free her and get her out of there.”

David dropped his pen on the table, his eyes narrowing. “You did what?” He shook his head. “Why would you...damn it! He’s a loose cannon.” He looked at Flynn. “You’d be dead now from his beating if you hadn’t had a drink from the Grail. What were you thinking?”

Flynn tipped his head to the side, cracking his neck. “Things have gotten complicated, but now he owes me. Having him in my debt will keep him from turning on us.”

Acid bubbled in David’s gut. “We’ve got a lot riding on this to risk everything trying to save someone who stole relics from the vault that put all of us in danger.”

“Holli is Annika’s sister,” Flynn countered.

David replied without hesitation, “Last I checked, she’s not crew.”

“But Duke is, and he loves her.” Flynn’s response surprised David.

“Since when does that matter to you?”

The captain glanced at Lily and back to the camera. “We’re wasting precious time. I’ll be in the square tonight without the Grail. Once you have the Spear of Destiny, I expect you to honor your bargain with me. If I don’t survive, the gold payment will be made to my crew and my share will be given to Lily.”

In the years he’d worked with Flynn, they’d never had to endure discussion about death. David’s pouch of herbs mixed with water from the Fountain of Youth healed any injuries he sustained, and kept him from aging, and Flynn was immortal after his drink from the Holy Grail, but the Spear of Destiny could kill an immortal.

None of them were safe this time.

David looked at King. “Can you write up the captain’s wishes? And if I don’t make it back, Brenda has the protocols for my replacement.”

They all had the good sense not to ask who that might be. It was just as well. The person he’d been grooming to take his place wasn’t sitting at this table anyway.

Kingsley typed while David stared at Flynn. “It’s done. I’ll see you in Savannah tonight. Good luck.”

Flynn almost smiled. “Fair winds and black sails.”

His screen went blank. Aura signed off and David focused on his team. “I don’t like that Morgan will be there. Search the vault database for something that might entrap someone. Just in case I need to hold anyone at the scene. I can’t maintain a binding spell and fight at the same time. My magic skills have limits.”

“I could go with you, sir.” Everyone turned to look at Petra. She pushed her glasses up. “Why not? I’m the best magic worker at the table.”

“It’s too risky.” David shook his head. “I’d be distracted if I had to protect you too.”

She smirked, crossing her arms. “I passed all the weapons and defense modules to be an agent. I can fight just as hard as anyone else at this table, and my magic skills would be an asset.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. She was right. But he didn’t want anything to happen to her. He couldn’t push back too hard on this without exposing his unprofessional feelings for the head of the occult division.

He started to nod. “Fine. You’re right. But I want you to stay posted at the edge of the square and, if there’s a physical altercation, use your magic.”

“Understood, sir.”

He nodded, completely convinced this was all a huge mistake. But if he died tonight, at least he got to spend some of his last night with her.

He got up from the table. “We’d better get to the airstrip.”

In a few hours, one way or another, this would all be over.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ian walked through the historic district of Savannah, drinking in the city as if it were his last time seeing it.

He hadn't pondered death in so long. The sadness and regret surprised him.

Even after almost two hundred fifty years, there was still so much more he wanted to do.

Now that Lily knew his secret, he wanted to show her this haunted city through the eyes of a pirate. Then he could take her to the holiday galas he used to dread. Having her with him changed everything. Maybe they could catch another one of Keegan's Scallywags shows.

Lily squeezed his hand. "If you leave me alone with my thoughts for much longer, I'm going to worry myself into an early grave."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "I keep thinking how much I'll miss this city. Have you noticed the way it glows at night? Like all the spirits here still linger."

"It's beautiful. I can see why your crew stayed." She looked over at him. "Why did you move to Atlanta?"

He shrugged, facing forward. "The crew couldn't kill me after we lost the *Sea Dog*, so they banished me instead." He started to walk and stopped, glancing over at her. "Actually it was more of a 'get the fuck out of Savannah and we'll try to forget you sank our ship.'"

"That's horrible."

He squeezed her hand and led her farther down the street. "There were too many ghosts for me anyway. I needed a fresh start. Atlanta offered me that, but...it never really felt like home."

"Why did you force the crew to sail into the storm that night?" she asked.

He sighed, preparing to change the subject, but walking past the

headstones in the Colonial Park Cemetery, he realized if he didn't tell someone, Ellie would be lost to time. Truly dead. Forgotten. His cold heart twisted.

"My little girl had tuberculosis. From her mother's letters, the doctors had tried every treatment, but she continued to weaken." He swallowed the lump in his throat, stunned at the acute pain in his chest, as if whatever healing more time might have offered had been ripped away to reveal a wound that never healed.

"Did the crew know?"

"No." He clenched his jaw to keep his voice steady. "They didn't even know I had a daughter."

As they reached the corner of the cemetery, Lily stopped and turned to face him. "That's why you plundered the Grail."

He blinked, unable to bury the shock. "What?"

"I couldn't figure out the why before, but now it all makes sense." She searched his eyes. "I was researching that ship, the *Santa Maria*, and when it washed ashore, the monk was still wearing a serpent ring. They described it as having ruby eyes. You said your intuition told you that ship wasn't carrying wheat and rice, but it was one of those monks, wasn't it? They spilled what was really on board, and you wanted it to save your daughter."

She'd torn away his final mask, leaving him emotionally bare. He broke eye contact. He'd never be able to get the words out if he looked at her. "Remember that story in the Bible about the man who left his home to find Jesus and asked him to heal his daughter? I'd already bought her the best treatments, and none of them worked, so when I found the monks attacking Bob, I left one breathing. When he blubbered about the relics opening the gates to Eden, he mentioned they already had the Lord's Cup, and I realized maybe God would spare my little girl." His voice broke as he risked a glance in her direction. "Obviously a crew of pirates weren't going to vote to attack a ship that didn't carry gold."

"You concocted the story about the world's greatest treasure." She whispered his darkest secret, but she didn't look disgusted.

He nodded slowly. "Once we had the cup, I had to see if it was real. We each took a drink. Our wounds healed instantly. I didn't realize it made us immortal until the ship sank." He ran his hand down his face. "I insisted we sail into that storm because I didn't know if Ellie was alive or dead, but I was holding a cure in my hand." Saying her name broke the dam around his

emotions. His vision blurred as her face filled his memory, her bright red pigtails bouncing as she ran to his arms on the dock. “I thought we could heal any injuries we sustained, and I could save my little girl, so I ignored the better judgment of my navigator and my pilot. My bloated ego blinded me to the idea that the storm might drive our ship onto the rocks.”

A scalding tear escaped the corner of his eye as she ran her hand up his back slowly. “I hate to break it to you, but you’re human. You were trying to save your daughter.” Silence dragged out before she finally asked the question he dreaded most. “Did she make it?”

“No.” His voice cracked. He cleared his throat as he shook his head. “She had passed away the week before. It was all for nothing.”

Lily wrapped her arms around him, and gradually he accepted her comfort, burying his face in her hair. Another tear rolled down his cheek as his dear little Ellie came back to haunt him.

He straightened up, swiping his hand across his cheek. “She had curly red hair and a few freckles across her nose. She thought her papa was a fisherman.”

“I’m so sorry, Ian.”

He ground his teeth. “I should be ready to leave this cruel world, but then fate sends me a beautiful, intelligent woman who isn’t afraid to go toe-to-toe with me. So of course, now destiny decides to cut my time short.” He let out a cynical laugh. “What a fucking world this is.”

Lily bumped him with her shoulder. “We’re partners, remember? I say we make a no-dying policy. We’re not saying goodbye anytime soon.”

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Let’s never say goodbye.”

She tilted her head. “Are you asking me to...marry you?”

“Not yet. I don’t have a ring worthy of your finger.” He pulled her in close and stared down into her eyes. “I’m asking you if you’re ready to take a drink from the Grail.” He kissed her before she could protest and whispered, “You told me you wanted to travel to see all the places your mother never got to visit. We could do all that and more.”

He held his breath as she gazed up into his eyes. “Ask me again tonight, after Agent Bale has the Spear and we’re both still alive.”

His heart sank, but he forced his lips to curve into a slight smile. “You drive a hard bargain.”

“Would you want me any other way?”

He stole one more kiss. “Only if I could have you naked.”

She grinned. “Best we live through the night then.”

His phone vibrated in his pocket, snapping him back to reality. He took it out and accepted the call. “Keegan? You have the Sloans?”

“They’re here. I’m heading for Johnson Square. Meet us there in twenty minutes.”

Flynn nodded. “See you there.” He ended the call and focused on Lily again as he walked her toward Congress Street. Johnson Square was a block from Reynolds. “Are you ready to meet a werewolf?”

She shrugged with a twinkle in her eyes. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

He chuckled. “I can see that writer curiosity burning in your eyes.”

Her jaw dropped slightly as she teased. “You might know me too well.”

• • •

Lily knew she should be more concerned about the potential conflict coming later tonight, but at the moment, she was too excited about meeting a real werewolf.

It would be tough to keep a lid on all the questions that were already percolating in her brain. She decided to be grateful for the distraction. Usually, fight scenes were something she wrote about in books. This was the first time she’d be a part of one.

Although her only responsibility was to watch Ian’s back. She promised to keep her phone and pepper spray in hand and otherwise stay out of the action.

When they rounded the corner, she saw Keegan and Char with another couple standing in the center of the tree-lined square under a gas lamp.

Keegan looked small next to the other man. He was tall with broad shoulders and, although the yellow of the street lamps washed the color out of the scene, his light eyes still bored into her. The woman beside him was a couple of inches taller than Char, with short black hair. She was dressed in all black clothes and reminded Lily of someone in a spy movie.

As they approached, Ian held out his hand to the man. “Good to see you again, Aren.” He turned to Lily. “I sold Aren and Sasha an investment property just outside of Savannah.” He focused on the couple again. “This is my...partner, Lily Bouchard. Lily, this is Aren and Sasha Sloan.”

Hearing Ian introduce her as his partner made her heart jump. She’d been in his life before, and he’d introduced her at many functions as his friend,

his date, and even his girlfriend, but never as his equal. She wanted to kiss him, but she reined it in.

Sasha's eyes widened slightly as she shook Lily's hand. "As in Lily Bouchard, the author?"

"Yes." Lily nodded as she released her hand. "I write thrillers."

Sasha's grin brightened. "You're one of my favorite authors." She nudged her husband. "This is the author of the book I was reading on the plane."

Lily grinned. A werewolf was reading one of her books. She'd better not be dreaming. "Which one are you reading?"

"Thirteen Lost." Sasha shook her head. "I wish I'd brought it with me. You could've signed it."

"No spoilers, but the ending of that one scared me." That book had featured her creepiest serial killer yet. She'd pitched this stalker book to take a break from the killers, but this book had taken a dark turn, too. "I had to watch cartoons before I could fall asleep."

Sasha's smile widened. "I'm a police detective. It takes a lot to scare me."

A werewolf police detective. Lily's brain was already writing the book.

Aren offered his hand. "Nice to meet you, Lily."

"Good to meet you too."

Sasha met her eyes. "After we finish this tonight, will you sign my book?"

"Of course." Lily tried to keep her cool, but meeting a fan was always exciting, and here was this well-armed female police detective who was also secretly a shifter, and she was reading Lily's book on the airplane.

"Thank you both for coming." Ian brought her back to the moment.

Aren nodded. "Shifters came pretty close to being public knowledge recently. If the world finds out the government has been hiding magical artifacts, we might come under the microscope again, too." He glanced at Sasha and back to Ian. "It's in all our best interests that we wipe out this threat. If we can help, we're going to."

Sasha looked over at Lily with a hint of a smile. "And maybe afterward we can get a coffee and sign a book."

Heat crept up Lily's neck as she nodded. "I'd love that. But there's a good chance I'll wear you out peppering you with questions about being a werewolf."

Sasha chuckled. "And I'll blow your mind because I'm a jaguar shifter. Aren's the werewolf."

Lily's eyes widened as she edited the mental book to include a jaguar shifter. "I didn't know there were other animals."

Aren slid his arm around Sasha's waist. "Hopefully we can get that Spear to your agent without a big scene, and we'll grab a drink." He sobered as he looked at Ian again. "There are still a lot of people milling around. Unless you have something that belongs to these monks, we're going to have a tough time sorting them out of the crowd."

Ian checked the time on his phone. "The ghost tours should be wrapping up now and the restaurants are closed, so the squares will be emptying out." He held out his hand with the serpent ring. "Their members wear a ring like this one. And usually they're in black robes, but they may be trying to blend in tonight. We're not sure of the Serpent Society's numbers, so we might be outnumbered tonight."

Sasha narrowed her eyes as she peered into the shadows. "I'll take the north side of Reynold's Square." She looked over at Aren. "You've got the south side?"

He nodded and brushed a kiss to her temple. "Sounds good."

She smiled. "Be careful, wolf."

"Always." He chuckled, and they jogged in opposite directions.

Ian looked at Keegan. "How will they communicate with us if they locate any Serpents?"

"They both have my cell number, and on the way over, I told them about the danger, so if they have to fight, we're not taking any prisoners." Keegan glanced at Lily, but she already understood his cryptic answer. They were fighting to the death tonight. Keegan's gaze flicked back to Ian. "Bale has a cleanup team nearby for after?"

"Aye." Ian turned to Char. "Will we have your gift at the ready?"

She nodded. "Keegan and I are going to pick a bench in this square. He'll watch over my body while I astral project to Reynolds Square."

"Good."

Seeing Ian in his captain's role showed another side to him. He was a nonsense leader, but instead of sending foot soldiers into battle, he was walking into the heart of it.

As they walked away, Lily looked at Ian. "What gift?"

"Char is a strong psychic, and her spirit can astral travel." Before she could ask what that meant, Ian said, "She can kill a man with her spirit, while her body lies miles away."

Lily blinked. The historian was a psychic. Okay. She'd already met two mermaids. This wasn't that much further out of the boundaries of this new world she found herself in. There wasn't time to doubt or question right now. Her palms were slick with nervous sweat. She slid her free hand into her pocket for the hundredth time to grasp her pepper spray.

With werewolf and jaguar shifters, immortal pirates, and a psychic who could kill from a distance, her pepper spray seemed comically pointless, but it was all she had. Even if Ian handed her a gun, in a fight she'd probably be more likely to shoot herself or one of the crew. Her only experience with a gun was a Glock at the gun range with an off-duty police detective during a book research outing.

Shit. This was all really happening. What was she doing here?

She looked over at Ian, deep in discussions with Keegan and Char, and then she remembered. While he was full of concern for protecting his crew, who was protecting him?

Keegan and Char finished plotting with Ian and came over to her. Keegan cracked a cocky smile. "Keep an eye on the captain for us. He's the only one we've got."

Char rolled her eyes. "Ignore him." She sobered as she searched Lily's eyes. "Are you sure you're okay? No one will think twice if you want to wait in the pub until this is over. It's not your fight."

Lily looked at Ian standing alone, staring into the night, and her heart ached. She shook her head as she met Char's eyes again. "I love him. That makes it my fight."

Char raised a brow. "In that case...fight like a pirate captain's woman."

An unexpected smile tugged at Lily's mouth. "That sounds pretty badass."

"You must be, because you've obviously stolen Captain Flynn's heart." Char pulled her into a tight hug. "Be careful."

"I will." Lily stepped back and went to Ian's side. "I'm ready."

He took her hand and they walked toward Reynolds Square. "You better be." His tone was deep and rough, and much too sexy for the situation they were walking into. "Because when we finish this, you're mine."

She squeezed his hand. "I already am."

The bravado dropped from his voice as they stepped into the shadows. "Stay behind me and be safe."

That was totally her plan.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Flynn's entire body was tight, adrenaline coursing through his veins as they entered Reynold's Square. He hadn't brought the Grail, but he did wear his long trench coat to give the impression he could be hiding it inside.

Most of his crew members were hidden in the shadows at the four corners of the massive square. Skye and Heather were far from the action, watching over little Ace, but Char was in the next square, or at least her body was. Her spirit could be anywhere. Greyson and Aura were hidden in the alleyway behind Agent Bale, ready to recover the Spear in his absence if the monks somehow got to him.

They were as ready as they were going to be. He looked over his shoulder at Lily, wishing for the millionth time that she had stayed with Heather and Skye. But she refused. She wanted to be there for him.

There were very few people who had ever stood for him so steadfastly.

He would fight with his last breath to protect her through this night.

To his right, Agent Bale stood alone under a yellow gas lamp in front of the statue of John Wesley. There was no sign of Holli or the serpents as he scanned the square. He didn't see the Sloans either, which was probably for the best. If he couldn't see them, neither could the monks.

The square was quiet; one person walked a dog on the east side, but otherwise nothing moved. He held his breath waiting for the fuse to light.

This tension brought back memories of their battles at sea, waiting for the wind to bring the ship within the cannons' range. The moments that could strangle you with their silence.

And then Lily screamed.

Flynn spun around to find a monk wiping his eyes. Fuck! Flynn put himself between Lily and the man in the black hooded robe as he drew his gun. "Show me yer hands."

“Give him the Grail or she dies!” Another man shouted.

Flynn swiveled his head without taking the gun off the pepper-sprayed monk. A robed man dragged a woman with long hair into the square. Her wrists were bound, and he had the point of the Spear underneath her chin.

“Don’t do it!” Holli shouted as she threw her head back into the monk’s nose.

He shoved her to the ground, pointing the Spear at her chest. The wooden shaft was bowed with age, and the bronze tip glowed in the yellow light. “Captain Flynn, I won’t ask again. Bring me the Grail or she’s dead.”

Was Morgan hidden in the shadows somewhere? He must be. But if he were going to reach Holli in time, he’d need a distraction.

Flynn snapped his head to the pepper sprayed monk and pulled the trigger, sending a bullet into his chest. He crumpled onto the grass as Flynn turned to Lily.

Her face was pale, her eyes wide. She’d written about countless murders, but he figured this was her first time seeing one. He didn’t have time to comfort her.

“Stay here.”

She nodded. He turned and walked into the splash of yellow lights in the center of the square toward the monk with the Spear. “If you want the Grail, you’ll have to pry it from my cold dead hands.”

“That can be arranged.” He shouted something in Latin, and at least twenty robed men infiltrated the square like rats escaping the bilge of a sinking ship.

Flynn aimed his pistol, killing three that neared him. The gunfire would attract the police, but the monks wouldn’t want to be arrested any more than he and his crew, so the sooner the authorities arrived, the sooner they would scatter.

Across the square, the Sloans were outnumbered by four robed monks. Before Flynn could shout for his crew to back them up, Aren Sloan picked up a monk by the neck and threw him into a brick wall as if he weighed nothing.

The monk didn’t move.

His wife spun, dropping the other three with her pistol. No human could move that quickly. Ian flicked his eyes to the center of the square where the monk lifted the Spear above Holli’s chest, but he didn’t bring it down.

Suddenly, a man bolted into the square from the alley, knocking the monk

to the ground. Morgan. He was dressed in black, but his beard and the gold rings on his fingers gave him away. He scooped Holli into his arms and boosted her over his shoulder. Without any hesitation, he carried her back down the alley he came from and away from the melee in the square.

The man holding the Spear didn't move. He was frozen on the ground in the same position, still gripping the Spear, ready to strike. A woman stood at Bale's side now with her hands outstretched. She must've cast a powerful binding spell.

Agent Bale raced toward the frozen man and wrenched the weapon from the monk's hand.

It was done. Flynn stepped closer as Bale inspected the ancient Spear.

"Ian!" Lily yelled. "Look out!"

He spun around as a monk rammed into him like a truck. Flynn fired his pistol again as they both fell to the ground. Hot blood soaked through his shirt and his chest constricted painfully. Every breath was agony as he shoved the dead man off him and scoured the chaos for Lily.

"Shit!" Bale shouted. He looked over at Flynn. "This is a fake. This isn't the Spear of Destiny."

Flynn started to get to his feet, but fell back to his knees, all the strength leaving his body. What the hell was wrong with him? He looked down to find his side covered in blood. The monk's blood. He pressed on it and winced. He was wounded. Why wasn't he healing? His vision clouded. No.

He blinked, clenching his jaw, fighting to remain conscious as he looked over at the dead monk. The robed man was still clutching a battered spear in his hand.

Fuck. The Spear of Destiny.

"It's here." He grunted. "The Spear. It's..."

He lay on the ground, unable to hold his head up.

And then his angel was there. Lily.

She put his head in her lap. He shivered as the night air sank all the way into his bones. Her tears dropped on his face like hot rain.

"Don't you dare die, Ian." She searched the area. "He's injured! He needs help!"

The battle continued around them, but Flynn could barely keep his eyes open. Robed bodies fell while fighting an invisible attacker.

Char. His crew would win this fight.

Flynn's lips curved as he gazed up at Lily's beautiful face. "You'll be

safe,” he managed to whisper.

She met his eyes again, so fierce. “I don’t want to be safe.” She caressed his cheek. “We have places to go, remember? I still haven’t seen Stonehenge or the Eiffel Tower or the pyramid at Chichén Itzá. Please, Ian. You have to hang on. I love you.”

He brought a blood-covered hand up to cover hers. “I love...you...Lil.” Suddenly keeping his eyes open was too much effort. Her sobs tore at him. He wanted to comfort her, to tell her there wasn’t any pain, as the Spear drained away his immortality.

But his breathing was too shallow to form words.

Then another voice joined hers. He tried to focus, but he was slipping away. Oblivion beckoned, and he was too weak to tell it to fuck off.

...

“Cover the wound!”

Lily looked up to see One-Eyed Bob dodging the falling monks as he raced toward her. She pressed her fingers over the hole in Ian’s side. His body jolted a little. At least he was still alive, even if he wasn’t quite conscious. She wasn’t sure how the pirate cook was going to save Ian from a Spear that could kill an immortal, but she was willing to try anything.

He knelt beside her and pulled a bundle of kitchen towels out of the big pocket of his apron. “Stay alive, Captain, so you can chew me out for disobeying your order.” He pulled the towels off one by one and grasped the neck of a wooden chalice. She blinked. The Holy Grail. He pressed it to Ian’s mouth. “Drink up, ye bastard.”

Lily held her breath, but Ian didn’t move.

Bob put the cup to his pale lips again. “Drink. Let me finally repay the life debt I owe ye.” He gave Ian’s cheek a hard pat. “Swallow it, ye bastard!”

Time seemed to slow as Lily’s heart tore in two. They were too late. She was losing him. Her chest constricted. She closed her eyes, praying this was all a bad dream.

Suddenly Ian coughed, then swallowed.

Lily sobbed as she looked down to find her fingers pressed on his healed side. “It’s working.”

More tears lined her cheeks. Relief. Massive amounts of relief.

Agent Bale picked up the Spear from the dead monk and knelt on the other side of Bob. “Did you get here in time?”

“His wound stopped bleeding.” Lily sniffled, her hands trembling, and she stroked Ian’s hair back from his forehead. “That’s a good sign, right?”

Bob nodded. “I would think so.”

Agent Bale looked behind him at the woman who had been at his side through the fight. “Petra, maybe you can help.”

She jogged over. “I think all the Serpent Society has been accounted for.”

“I’ll call for the cleanup team.” Agent Bale scanned the square. “We need to get the *Sea Dog* crew out of here before the police show up. I can cover from there.”

Petra knelt near Ian’s feet and held her open hands over him, whispering some words in Latin. Lily assumed it was a healing spell of some kind.

The Sloans approached, keeping their voices low. “Emergency sirens in the distance, and there are some curious humans coming over here.” Aren looked down at Flynn. “Is he going to be okay?”

Ian chose that moment to open his eyes, but his gaze was locked on Lily’s. “Yes.”

She’d never been so happy to hear his voice. “You’re all right?”

He answered her by pulling her close and kissing her. She laughed and cried as her lips brushed his over and over. He was alive. Immortal. They could be together. They could love and laugh and see the world.

And she swore she’d never take time for granted again. It was far too precious.

Agent Bale cleared his throat. “We’ve got to move this reunion out of the square. Sorry.”

Lily straightened and wiped her nose as she smiled down at Ian. “Can you stand?”

“I think so.” He groaned as she helped him to his feet. He turned to One-Eyed Bob. “I told you to keep the Grail as far from the monks as possible.”

“Aye. But I thought you’d kick my arse if something happened to Lily and we couldn’t help her. Didn’t expect I’d be using it on you, Captain.” His eye shined as he grinned. “Took me centuries, but I finally repaid my debt to you. A life for a life.”

Ian’s mouth curved into a crooked smile. “For once I’m glad ye couldn’t follow a simple order.”

The sirens were getting closer as she and Bob helped Ian out of Reynold’s

Square.

Lily was covered in his blood and maybe some of the monk's too, but she didn't give a shit. All that mattered was that Ian was alive.

Keegan and Char met them at the mouth of the alley leading to Johnson Square. They'd been in the neighboring square where Keegan watched over Char's unconscious body while her spirit fought with the crew. Keegan frowned. "What happened?"

Ian chuckled and winced. "I found the real Spear of Destiny."

"With his side," Lily finished.

Char's eyes widened. "Are you dying?"

"No." Bob patted the pocket of his apron. "I disobeyed a direct order and brought the cup along with me tonight."

Keegan shook his head with a laugh. "We have psychics and shifters and an immortal pirate crew, but it's the salty old cook who saved the day." He gave Bob's shoulder a playful punch. "Didn't take ye for a hero, old man."

Bob flashed a bright smile. "Don't tell me you're surprised. I'm a hero every time I make my fresh hushpuppies."

Keegan's brows shot up. "That's true."

Ian lifted his head. He still looked pale, but at least the bleeding had stopped. "Are the Serpents all dead?"

Char nodded slowly. "I think so." She looked at Keegan. "The Sloans took out a few runners, but I was able to handle the rest in the square."

Handle was a clinical way to put it. As they left Lily had seen the bodies that littered the ground. Most had their necks snapped. She tried to push the carnage from her mind. Those monks had every intention of killing Ian and the rest of his crew to get to the Grail. Everyone had done what they needed to in order to get the Spear of Destiny back to Agent Bale.

But she'd never seen so much death firsthand.

A shiver racked her body, and Ian wrapped his arm around her waist. "Let's go home."

They were saying their goodbyes when the Sloans approached. Aren had a cut on his forehead, blood at the corner of his mouth, and his eye was swollen. Sasha still looked deadly, not a single hair out of place. She obviously took the danger out with her guns and not her fists.

"Is everyone okay?" Aren asked.

Keegan gestured to Ian. "Nearly lost our captain, but he's still standing."

Ian offered his hand to Aren. "Thank you for helping us make sure none

of the serpents escaped. We would've lost them without your help. The *Sea Dog* crew is in your debt."

"Good." Sasha took her husband's hand. "Because if we ever need backup, we're going to call in the favor."

Ian chuckled. "If ye need a band of pirates, we'll be there." The rare moments when his nautical accent slipped into his voice, Lily's knees still went a little rubbery. As if he could read her mind, he caught her eye and winked before looking up at the others again. "Keegan, can you tell the crew to meet us at Williams Southern Kitchen for breakfast? Ask Diana if her parents will save the back room for us."

"Aye, Captain."

He looked at the Sloans. "You're welcome to join us."

Sasha smiled. "Thanks for the invite." She looked at her husband. "I'm game, are you?"

Aren nodded. "Sounds great to me."

She turned to Ian. "We're in."

"We'll see you then." Then Ian looked at Lily. "Let's go home."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

David helped Petra remove one of the monk's robes and wrapped the Spear of Destiny inside. She took it back to the car, while he went to intercept the local police. Three cruisers and an undercover sedan so far. Damn it. He sighed.

This wasn't his favorite part of his job.

Multiple guns were pointed at him as he stepped into the bright spotlights of the four cars. "Hands where we can see them!"

He put them up over his head. "I apologize for the noise. There was no live ammunition." Where the hell was the cleanup team? He bought more time. "Can I show you my badge? I'm with the ATF."

There was some muffled discussion, then one of them shouted, "Take it out slowly."

He did. While being shot wouldn't kill him, it hurt enough that sometimes he wished he could die. He opened the leather folder and held it up in the lights. He wasn't ATF, but his Department 13 badge was usually enough for local law enforcement.

He just needed to stall them until the cleanup team showed up.

One officer stepped in front of the wall of light, approaching him without lowering his firearm. He snatched the badge out of David's hand, and suddenly everything stopped.

Silence descended as David turned around, shaking his head. "It's about damned time."

Agent Garcia jogged up in his standard-issue black suit. His black hair was slicked back from his forehead. Two of the occult team were busy casting binding spells and wards to glamour the area, hiding the bodies from prying eyes. "Sorry, sir. We were slowed by law enforcement on the other side of the square."

Department 13's cleanup crew consisted of two magic workers from the Occult Division, plus four stagers who cleaned up and set the scene to match the story given to the authorities, and two of David's undercover agents, one to head up the mission and one to evaluate the final product.

While the magic workers held the officers in a binding spell, the rest of the team would remove bodies and any evidence, and stage the area to reflect the description they gave the police.

David tucked his badge back into his coat pocket. "I told them I was ATF, and we were running an operation without live ammunition."

Agent Garcia nodded and spoke into his coms. "Check for bullet casings. No live ammunitions can be left behind on this block."

David scanned the crew as they loaded bodies onto a cart. "I'm taking the Spear to the field office in Brunswick for safekeeping. We'll take it back to the vault tomorrow. Have you got this scene contained?"

"Yes sir."

David nodded. "Thanks, Hector."

He walked back toward his car, scanning the alley in the direction Morgan had taken Holli. He hadn't told his team about the deal he'd made with her. If they saw her, they'd take her into custody and bring her back to the DC office.

But she was probably long gone by now. Hopefully she'd stay that way.

As the shadows swallowed him in the alleyway, something caught his eye. He narrowed his eyes and clenched his jaw. He was too well trained to ask if someone was there.

Normally he'd pull his gun from the holster, but his hands were gripping the Spear of Destiny. There wasn't a deadlier weapon.

The familiar sound of the slide being pulled back on a Glock came from his left. "Give me the Spear and I'll let you walk out of this alley unharmed."

"Come and get it," David growled.

If he dared to follow through on his threat, Petra would hear the gunshot, and she knew how to use his healing herbs. Hell, she mixed them. He tightened his hold on the Spear.

Finally, a robed man came forward with his gun raised. His hood was off, but even in the dim yellow light, David recognized him. This was the head monk who had been at the Brotherhood Apartments and recruited Dr. Sinclair's boss into their fanatical fold.

Wisps of hair were brushed across his bald head, and a deep crease formed a crevasse between his bushy eyebrows. “Set the Spear down and back up.”

The old man didn’t come any closer. Unless David threw the Spear, he wouldn’t be able to reach him, and there was no way he was going to risk missing his opportunity to kill the leader of the order. Maybe they’d splinter and fade into oblivion.

That was worth the pain of a bullet.

But damn it, he hated getting shot.

He tried one more time. “I’m not putting it down. If you want it, come and get it.”

“I’m too old for these games.” He pulled the trigger.

David fell backward onto the pavement. All the air whooshed from his lungs, but he forced the stars at the edge of his vision back. He had to stay conscious. No way Petra missed the sound of that shot.

The old man holstered his gun and walked over. When he bent to take the Spear, David switched his hold on the shaft and jammed the tip deep into the serpent leader’s abdomen. His mouth opened in a silent scream and he sank to the ground.

David rested his head back just as Petra came around the corner. She dropped to her knees beside him. “Shit. You’re shot.”

He nodded, wincing as he opened his eyes again. “Jacket pocket...my pouch.”

He didn’t need to say any more. She found the herbs and opened his shirt, sprinkling them over the open wound. Hopefully the bullet had gone straight through. Removing the shrapnel later was as bad as getting shot all over again.

As if she could read his mind, she rolled him onto his side. “Good news. There’s an exit wound.”

She pushed his jacket up and untucked his shirt to get to the hole in his back. Once the herbs started to do their work, he met her eyes. “Thank you.”

Her gaze flicked to his abdomen, probably just checking the healing progress on his wound, but she almost smiled when she met his eyes again. “My pleasure, sir.”

Was she flirting with him? No. He was probably a little delirious from blood loss. She helped him to his feet and he picked up the Spear. “I’ll let

Hector know there's another body down here."

Petra hooked his arm around her shoulder, supporting him as they headed for the car. "So the cleanup team arrived?"

"Yeah, they're taking it from here so we can secure the Spear at the field office in Brunswick."

She arched a brow. "We?" She glanced at his chest and back to his eyes. "You're almost healed. Don't you want me to stay and help the cleaners?"

Yes, her magic skills would be an asset on a scene this large, but...the team could handle it. "No. Until we're sure the Serpent Society is eradicated, it's too risky to have anyone alone with the Spear. Even me."

All of that was true, but he hoped she wouldn't suspect the other reason he wasn't ready to examine. Something about her company soothed him.

She tipped her head. "I guess that makes sense."

They got into the car, and he kept questioning his own motives as he drove through the quiet streets of Savannah.

Finally, Petra broke through his mental deposition. "I know the Serpents want to get back into Eden." She shook her head as she stared into the darkness. "But even if they had gotten their hands on the Holy Grail and the Spear of Destiny, who were they planning to give them to? It's not like there's a repository to drop them off in exchange for keys to the garden."

David chuckled as he merged onto the freeway. "I think it's more metaphorical. Kingsley has crawled through the dark web to see if he could find any trace of the Serpent Society selling any relics or antiquities and there aren't any. My gut says they must have a ritual they believe will transform this world back into Eden, but it's just a guess. I don't have any facts to back it up."

"Sounds logical to me." She looked over at him. "Do you think we got them all tonight?"

"I hope so." He shrugged. "I'm not sure anymore. I thought they were done after the fight at the Tybee lighthouse. I guess I'm hesitant to let my guard down again."

"That's why you're the director." A few miles passed before she broke the silence again. "If you're not allowed to answer this, just ignore me. But why did you take this job? I've taught you most of the spells in your arsenal, so you didn't take it because you're a magic worker."

He exited the freeway and stopped at the traffic signal, glancing over at her. "My dad worked for the department before me. I didn't know that until

I joined after the assassination of JFK.”

She met his eyes with a crooked smile. “Wow. You look amazing for your age.”

This was exactly why he shouldn’t get involved with anyone in the department. It was too easy to inadvertently overshare. “You should probably forget that last part.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” She chuckled. “Did your dad get you an interview?”

“No.” He drove through the empty streets of Brunswick, sharing parts of himself he’d never shared with anyone. “The Serpent Society killed him in 1933. I was just a kid. They attacked me in 1964 and I still have the S-shaped scar to remember them by. That’s when I discovered they were the ones who murdered my father. He had the same wound in his chest when we found him in the backyard.”

“We?”

He nodded. “My older brother Paul.” He cleared his throat as long-dead memories flooded him. Luckily the warehouse building was coming up on the right. He parked and changed the subject. “You have a sister, right?”

“Yeah.” She got out of the car. “Hailey. We haven’t talked in almost ten years. She doesn’t even know I started working for the government.” Petra crossed her arms as he popped the trunk. “Our family isn’t very close.”

“If you work for the department long enough, it becomes your family.” He picked up the bundle of black fabric hiding the Spear and closed the trunk. “Thanks for all your help tonight. We probably wouldn’t have recovered this one without you.”

She blew on her fingernails and buffed them on her shirt. “I try.”

He chuckled as he entered the code into the security pad. A second thumb sensor pad slid out. He pressed his thumb on it and the door rolled open.

Petra followed him inside. “Wow. They’ve got nice tech here.” She looked over at him. “One of the pirates works here, right?”

He went to the safe in the corner and entered his code. “Greyson and Agent Henderson both work here.”

“Do the shifters work for us too?”

He almost dropped the Spear. He slid it onto a shelf and turned around. “Shifters?”

He knew what the Sloans were, but Petra didn’t have the clearance. They didn’t fall under Department 13’s jurisdiction anyway.

“Please.” She lifted a brow. “No human could move as fast as that woman did, and her husband was as strong as five men. He threw one of the monks at least twenty feet into a brick wall. Unless they were some kind of cyborgs, they had to be shifters.”

He reset the code on the safe and then met her eyes again. “Shifters are the Department of Defense’s responsibility.”

“Why were they helping us tonight?”

He sighed. “They were doing a favor for the *Sea Dog* crew. If the CIA exposed Department 13 to the world, it wouldn’t be long until everyone discovered immortal pirates still walked the streets of Savannah, and once that was accepted as a reality, shifters would probably be next.”

“So, they came to help us keep secrets.”

He nodded slowly. “That sums it up.” He paused and asked, “You don’t seem...surprised.”

Her eyes sparkled as her lips curved into a smile. “I grew up in Salem.”

He couldn’t figure out what that had to do with shifters. “There are covens there...”

“I was in one of them.” She arched a brow. “There’s also a wolf pack.”

He chuckled. Unbelievable. “So, you’ve known about shifters this whole time?”

“But until tonight, I didn’t realize the department knew about them.”

He looked at the ground with a chuff. “After working for Department 13 for so long, I’m rarely surprised.” He lifted his gaze to her face. “But you surprise me.”

Her smile softened for a moment, or maybe he imagined it, seeing what he wanted to see. “I hope that’s a good thing.”

“I think it is...” His phone vibrated and he took it out, scanning the text from Agent Garcia. “The team is finished.” He lifted his head. “Tomorrow we’ll come back for the Spear and head to DC.”

“Okay.” She started to yawn and quickly popped her hand to cover her mouth. “Sorry. I could use a good night of sleep.”

“Me too.” He walked her out and set the security system and the magical wards around the building. “Let’s get out of here.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

By the time Flynn parked in the underground garage of his building, the Grail had worked its magic. He was healed, but his gut was still roiling. It had nothing to do with the stab wound. He looked over at Lily and his heart lurched. She was so damned beautiful, and he could've lost her tonight.

Instead, she nearly lost him.

She met his eyes. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "I need a shower, but otherwise I'm fine." He reached over to caress her cheek. "You look...pale."

A sad smile curved her lips. "This is going to surprise you, but I usually write deadly consequences. I've never seen them with my own eyes." She pulled away from his touch. "I know they would have killed all of us to get the Grail, but..." She shrugged, staring out the front window.

He slid his hand along the steering wheel. "Remember the code Char told you that I demanded of my crew?"

"Yes." She paused. "Why?"

He glanced over to find her looking at him. Holding her gaze, he whispered, "We stole from only those who could afford the loss, we killed only to keep from being killed, and we never attacked anyone who couldn't defend themselves. Any crew member caught breaking that code was thrown overboard."

"Those seem like odd rules for pirates. Why?" She studied his face, and his pulse raced as he struggled to find the words he'd never spoken aloud, not to his first mate, not to another soul.

"Because I knew what it was like to be...brutalized." He broke eye contact, staring straight ahead. "My father was an alcoholic and a gambler. He often used me and my brother to pay off gambling debts. While I was used as a servant and beaten by strangers, I swore an oath that I would

never become my father. My brother thought joining Captain Morgan's crew would be an escape for us, and it was, at first. Until Morgan started seeing me as a threat."

He risked a glance at her, relieved to not see pity shining in her eyes.

She took his hand in hers. "I'll kick his ass next time I see him."

He brought her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to the back. "I never asked to be a pirate captain. But the day he nearly flogged the boatswain to death and keelhauled my brother, my fate was sealed. I fought and killed every man who was loyal to him, and I set the code for my crew. We weren't angels, but we also weren't preying on anyone who couldn't protect themselves. In the end, the code brought me the most unlikely pirates, like Greyson, who wanted to be a knight, and Drake, who had never sailed. It granted me the undying loyalty of John Smyth and Keegan, too."

She shook her head. "But when you needed them to help you get the Spear, they voted against you. Do they still blame you for sinking the ship?" She paused, her tone softening. "Why haven't you ever told them about your little girl?"

His chest tightened as he looked down at their joined hands. "Because I'm too fucking proud to be a hypocrite."

"A hypocrite?" She squeezed his hand, and he lifted his head. Her gaze reached right into his soul. "How does loving your child make you a hypocrite?"

"Because I was the captain. My *crew* should've come first. I demanded their loyalty, and then I put my family's welfare above the crew's. I lied to them to get the Grail, and then I forced them to sail through a storm for my own benefit." Saying the words out loud grated on him, stirring up the self-loathing he usually buried under the weight of a massive ego. "I don't deserve to be their leader. Colton is a much better captain than I ever was."

She arched a brow. "You'd rather have them think you're an asshole than have them know you were human?" She chuckled, shaking her head. "I haven't known any of them as long as you have, but I bet if you had told them the truth, they would have taken the Grail and sailed toward that port for you."

He pulled his hair back from his forehead. "It's too late for that."

"Is it?" She searched his eyes. "Ian, this crew is your family. It's like you're the only one who doesn't know that."

"No." His brow furrowed. "The second we left Morgan on that island, the

crew voted for me to be their captain. From that moment, I was no longer part of the crew. I led them.”

She sighed. “You saved them, but then you lost your way.” She caressed his cheek. “You bought into Morgan’s brand of leadership.”

He jerked back. “I did no such fucking thing. I never flogged a crew member, and I’d lay down my life to save any one of them.”

“That’s not what I mean.” She shook her head. “You’ve made yourself into this untouchable ‘captain’ who doesn’t confide in his crew, he orders them. I’m saying when the crew voted you captain, there’s no reason you had to interact with them any differently than when you were quartermaster. Look at Colton. You said he’s a better captain than you were, but he still claims to be the quartermaster who captains the new *Sea Dog*.”

Her words sank into him like water seeping through the bilge of the ship during a storm. “I...the only captain I ever served under was Morgan.”

“And you were a million times better than him, but you didn’t have to alienate yourself from your friends.”

He thought back to the concert the other night. His crew had invited Lily and had been surprised when he’d accompanied her. Was she right? He rubbed his forehead and met her eyes. “How did you get so wise?”

She smiled, shaking her head. “I don’t know about wise, but if you ever gave your crew the chance to know you like I do, you wouldn’t have to hide from them in Atlanta, burying yourself under your work.”

“It’s too late for that.”

She leaned in and kissed his cheek. “A week ago, I thought it was too late for us, but here I am about to take you upstairs and have my way with you in the shower.”

And just like that, she distracted him completely from his self-loathing. He turned his head and tasted her lips, sliding his fingers through her hair. She moaned into his mouth as their tongues tangled slowly. He couldn’t get enough of her.

And he couldn’t ever lose her. Not again.

He broke the kiss and whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She opened her eyes. “Let’s get upstairs.”

He reached for the door handle. “There’s one more thing.”

She looked over at him. “What’s that?”

“Bob gave me the Grail. If you’re still willing to take a drink.”

• • •

Lily's breath caught and her heart raced. The Holy Grail was here in this car. Was she really going to take a sip? She should be excited. She'd never have to worry about the cancer that took her mother, and she'd never get old.

But all she felt was trepidation. She stared into his eyes. "I need...to think."

It was impossible to miss the flash of disappointment in his eyes. "I understand."

She shook her head. "I don't know if you do. I'm not saying no, I just need a few minutes." She peeked around the car. "Where is it?"

"The trunk."

"Can you bring it upstairs?"

He nodded. "Aye."

She got out of the car on rubbery legs. She wasn't sure if it was the aftereffects of all the adrenaline, or kissing him, or the thought that tonight could be her last as a mortal. Was she seriously considering this?

Ian came to her side with a canvas-wrapped bundle under his arm. That cup had saved him a couple of hours ago, and now he was offering her a taste. Why was she hesitating? Memories of her mother filtered through her head. Her mom's list of sights she wanted to see before cancer stole those dreams from her.

Lily could see them all.

But something was holding her back.

Eternity was a long time to be alone.

They rode the elevator up to his penthouse in silence. Ian kept his attention glued to the red numbers above the doors. He didn't look nervous exactly, but this wasn't the high-stakes negotiator or pirate captain that he showed to the rest of the world.

When they stepped off the elevator, he placed the cup on the counter, and someone cleared their throat. Ian had her behind him so fast, she almost gasped.

"What the fuck are you doing here? How did...you don't have a fob for the elevator."

Lily peered around him to find Morgan and Holli seated at Ian's large glass dining room table. Morgan's brow furrowed, but Holli interjected,

“We came to say thank you. I didn’t want to risk running into Agent Bale, in case he considers our agreement null and void, since I didn’t technically give him the Spear.”

“You thought breaking into my home would be a safer option?” The threat of violence colored each word.

Lily moved up beside Ian and focused all her attention on Holli. “Are you okay?”

She nodded and placed her hand over Morgan’s balled fist on the table. “Thankfully, someone told Sampson where to find me.”

Her use of Captain Morgan’s alias seemed to soothe the smoldering aggression in the room. It was a subtle reminder that the man who risked his immortality to save the woman he loved was no longer the same Rutger Morgan who tortured and killed Ian’s brother.

Lily looked at Ian. “I know we weren’t expecting company, but maybe we should toast to ending the Serpent Society?”

Ian shot her a questioning look and she shrugged. A muscle jumped in his cheek, but he turned to the uninvited guests and cleared his throat. “How did you get up here?”

Morgan tossed a plastic card on the table. “I’ve learned a lot about computers and key cards in my...business.” He tapped his finger on the card. “It’s my only copy. I’ll leave it here.”

Ian shrugged. “I’ll have security reprogram the elevator.”

He smirked. “You always were the smart one.”

Were they talking like human beings? Lily blinked.

Ian didn’t crack a smile, but he did go into the kitchen and take down four glasses from the leaded glass cabinets. He opened the liquor cabinet below and glanced over at the table. “I’m sharing my rum with you only because Lily is convinced that we’re not the same men we once were.”

“I’ve been Sampson Bane much longer than I was ever Captain Rutger Morgan.” He narrowed his eyes slightly. “Yet yer still Captain Flynn. Why?”

Ian put an ice cube in each glass. “I haven’t been a captain since 1795. I’m Ian Flynn the fifth these days.” He poured rum into the glasses and looked up. “I never did anything I was ashamed of, so why change my name?”

“Fuck you, Flynn.” Morgan opened his hands, staring at the scars crisscrossing his palms from the ropes, blades, and anchors centuries ago. “I

made mistakes. Plenty of them. Is that what you want to hear?” He lifted his gaze. “I grew up in the queen’s Navy where beatings and torture kept order. It kept crews alive.”

Ian arched a brow. “It doesn’t feed them.” He swiped two glasses off the counter and put one down in front of Morgan before sitting across from him. “*I* was the one who stole the food for the crew.”

Morgan’s brows pinched together. “You let your brother suffer for your crime?”

“Not exactly.” Ian rubbed a hand down his face. “He forced my hand. Whispers of mutiny had been growing, and my brother and others wanted me to lead it.” His gaze locked on Morgan. “But I was too loyal to our captain to agree.”

Silence blanketed the room, and Lily held her breath.

Suddenly, Morgan laughed.

She’d already written three different ways to end this scene in her head, but someone bursting into laughter hadn’t even been on her radar.

“Bloody hell.” He shook his head. “Fate is a fucking bitch.” He sobered. “If I hadn’t punished yer brother...”

“I wouldn’t have agreed to lead the mutiny.”

They stared at each other, and finally Morgan lifted his glass. “Yer a better man than I’ll ever be, Flynn.”

Ian raised a brow and tapped his glass to Morgan’s. “Here’s to being better men.”

As he took a swallow, his gaze locked on Lily and her heart fluttered. He wasn’t making that promise to Morgan.

It was for her.

Holli knocked back her glass and stood up, drawing Lily’s attention. She almost smiled. “We’re heading back to Charleston, but if you need us, Lily has my number.”

Lily got up with Ian and went with him to the door to see them out. Morgan offered his hand.

Ian didn’t take it right away, but as Morgan started to retract it, Ian caught him in a tight handshake. “Good to meet you, Sampson Bane.”

“Aye.” Something sparked in Sampson’s eyes. “And I still owe ye.”

“I won’t forget. I may call in that token someday.” Ian released him and nodded to Holli. “I’d advise you to stay away from DC. Department 13 was on the verge of being exposed by the CIA, and Agent Bale seems punchy.

He's trying to tie up loose ends."

"We're finished stealing relics." She shrugged. "I'm ready for a vacation anyway."

Lily slid her hand up Ian's back, needing to touch him. The electricity of the tension in the room was getting to her. She forced a smile. "Good luck, you two."

Holli met her eyes and slipped her other hand into her pocket. "I almost forgot. I brought you something." She held up a smooth round stone that seemed to glow from within. "This is for you. Thanks for helping me get these two to see past revenge."

Lily took the stone and an electrical current zipped up her arm. Her fingers closed around it, and she gasped.

"Sorry." Holli frowned. "I forgot it carries a charge."

Lily opened her hand, studying the stone a little closer. The pulsing blue glow was otherworldly. She narrowed her eyes and noticed rings around the blue center.

She looked at Holli. "It looks like a tiny...planet."

Holli smiled. "It's a rock from Neptune's core. I brought it with me when I came back to Earth."

Lily's eyes widened. "I can't take this."

She closed Lily's fingers around the crystal. "Yes, you can. I want you to have it."

Lily shook her head. "I don't understand."

"You helped me save something irreplaceable." Her eyes sparkled. "And this is my gift in return."

Lily studied the planet within the stone. "It's beautiful."

"It's also the gateway to dreams. A...muse of sorts." She grinned. "Happy writing."

They stepped into the elevator and once the doors closed, Lily turned and set the stone on the counter next to the Holy Grail. She couldn't take her eyes off the items most of the world would call fiction and tried to embrace them as reality.

Ian stopped beside her and slid his arm around her waist. "You've been much too quiet."

She laughed and shook her head. "I think I'm still in shock from earlier, then you add that the Holy Grail and a rock from Neptune are sitting on your counter, and we're supposed to have breakfast with a couple who

shifts into animals and...it's safe to say I'm having a tough time wrapping my brain around all of this."

He reached for the rum. "Another glass?"

"That might help."

He brought over their glasses and poured another shot into each. "For centuries I thought Morgan was long dead, and when I realized he wasn't, all I wanted was revenge."

"Are you ever going to tell him he has a daughter and a grandson?"

He swirled the rum in his glass. "Skye asked me not to, but you know how to contact them if she's ever ready."

"Maybe, in time, everyone can get to know Sampson Bane instead."

"Maybe." He knocked back his drink and his blue eyes locked on her face. "Never dreamed he'd end up owing me a favor."

"He's a different guy now." She took a sip of the drink, savoring the warmth spreading through her belly.

He chuffed and set his glass down. "I suppose I am too."

She finished her drink and placed her glass next to his. "How so?"

He shrugged, staring at their empty glasses. "The man I thought I was would be plying you with alcohol until I convinced you to drink from the Grail, because that's what I want. But here I am, standing next to this cup and hoping you'll *choose* it."

She brought her hand to rest on his. "Maybe I will. It's a big decision."

"Why? It should be simple." He turned to face her. "We'd have eternity to travel and see all the places you have on that list in your computer. What's holding you back?"

He was right. But what fell from her lips was, "We?"

"I just thought..." He frowned as slid his hand free of hers.

Without a word, he walked around the island and put the glasses in the sink, or maybe he was just putting some distance between them. She studied the cup again. Why not take a drink? She was afraid and she wasn't sure why.

When he looked at her again, his jaw was tight. "Why are we so good together naked, and then we talk ourselves in circles? Why is love so fucking complicated?" Pain lined his eyes. "I love you, Lily. I never want to lose you. If you drink from that cup, no one will ever be able to separate us."

Her eyes welled with unexpected tears. She hated that this was hurting

him, but just thinking about putting that cup to her lips had her hands trembling. “If I could figure out why I’m not gulping down immortality, I would tell you, but I don’t know. Right now, all I’m feeling is scared, and that tells me I shouldn’t make a hasty choice.”

Chapter Thirty

Flynn studied Lily's face. Her cheeks were wet with tears he didn't understand.

What was he missing? She said she loved him, and he definitely loved her. She didn't have a family to outlive.

So why would eternity frighten her? It made no sense.

Did it matter? If she never chose to drink from that cup, would it make him love her any less? No. Would it hurt when time stole her from him? More than he could imagine.

But he would face that pain without hesitation just to spend one lifetime with her.

He came around the island and took both of her hands in his. "Fuck the cup. Drink from it or don't." He kissed each hand. "I love you, Lily, and I will for all time. That Grail won't change it." Meeting her eyes, he whispered, "Marry me."

She sniffled. "What?"

"Be my wife." Yes. It felt right on his lips. She was his partner. The only one he'd ever had in his long life. "My business can run without me. We'll travel the world. You can write your books and we'll stop everything to watch the sunset on each continent."

But she didn't fall into his arms and say yes. She searched his eyes and whispered, "What about your crew? The women I've met are fighters and psychics, they add value to the crew. I...write."

He shook his head. "You've done something none of them ever could."

She rolled her eyes as she wiped her nose. "What's that?"

"You offer me counsel and hold me accountable."

"How does that help your crew?"

He cleared his throat. "I called them together tomorrow morning so that I

can tell them what I should have centuries ago.” A humorless chuckle escaped him. “Then they can formally sever our relationship and I’ll be free to see the world with you.”

The thought of being shunned by men he would have gladly died for hurt more than he cared to admit, but he wouldn’t blame them for their actions. They deserved a better captain than he would ever be.

Lily shook her head slowly as she reached up to cup his cheek. “That crew is your family. They might be upset, but at least they’ll understand why it happened. They’re not going to send you away.”

“None of that changes how I feel about you.” He turned to press a kiss to her palm before meeting her eyes again. “So I’ll ask again.” He slowly lowered himself onto one knee and took her hand in his. “Lily Bouchard, will you be my wife?”

His ancient heart galloped in his chest as she wiped the tears from her face with her free hand. “I...” She glanced at the Grail and back to his face. “What if I never take a drink? I’ll get old.”

“And I’ll remind you every day that I love you, even if I have to find your hearing aids first.” He squeezed her hand. “I’ll carry you to your keyboard.”

She laughed or sobbed, he couldn’t be sure which, possibly both, but it wasn’t helping his racing heartbeat. He’d tried to live without her once. He wasn’t going to give her up without a fight.

“You’re serious?” She searched his eyes. “You’d still want to marry me even though I’d die someday?”

He swallowed the lump in his throat at the thought of a world without Lily in it. “Yes. Please, Lily. Don’t curse me to face another day without you in it.”

She choked on a sob and took a step away, grabbing the chalice in both hands. Her gaze locked on his and she took a drink.

He shot to his feet, unsure what had just happened, although he’d witnessed it with his own eyes. She put the cup back on the countertop and looked at her hands, turning them over as her bumps and scratches from the earlier fight healed.

He stood, his brow furrowed. “I don’t understand.”

Her gaze lifted to his face. “Eternity didn’t scare me anymore.”

He frowned. “What changed?”

“I guess forever seemed daunting when I thought I might have to face it alone.” She took his hand. “But if you’d be with me even when you knew it

would hurt you in the end, I'd rather just stay with you." She squeezed his hand. "Ask me again."

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Stay right here."

He went to his bedroom, shocked at how much lighter he felt without her mortality hanging over him. His lungs seemed to expand further. Inside his walk-in closet, he spun the lock on his wall safe and opened the door.

A red velvet box sat in the corner.

He'd bought the ring a year ago, back when he thought he'd reveal the secret of his immortality to her and ask her to be his bride.

He'd never imagined he'd share *every* secret with her, and that she'd not only accept him and his past mistakes, but she'd change his world so completely. Revenge didn't have its teeth in him anymore, and there was a chance he might have a real relationship with his crew as he'd had before the mutiny elevated him to captain.

She made Ian Flynn enough.

He grabbed the box and returned to Lily. He dropped to one knee again, peering up at her as he opened the box to reveal a simple brushed titanium band with a trio of diamonds, a karat in the middle with a smaller stone on either side.

"This ring is my promise to love you in the past, the present, and the future." He bit back the wave of emotion swelling his throat and managed to whisper, "Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she answered without hesitation as she knelt before him, kissing him as he pulled the ring from the box.

He drew back and slid the ring onto her finger.

"It's beautiful." The light danced in the stones as she held her hand up.

"It pales when compared to the woman wearing it."

Her grin widened as she met his eyes. "You're just trying to get in my pants."

His mouth curved into a crooked smile. "I *am* a pirate, love."

"Happy to be plundered." She wrapped her arms around his neck.

He laughed as he scooped her into his arms and carried her to his bedroom.

He settled her ass on the vanity in the master bathroom, tasting her lips as he ran his hands up her thighs. He forced himself back and turned on the water in the shower. When he turned around, she already had her top off. He followed suit and quickly unbuttoned his shirt.

He dropped it next to her shirt as his fingers hooked under the front clasp on her bra. “You are my greatest treasure.”

She caught his hand, meeting his eyes. “I’m trusting a pirate with my heart.”

He unfastened her bra and slid it down her arms. “I’m trusting a novelist to write us a happy ending.”

She raised her brows with a sexy smile. “Oh, I think it’s going to be very happy.”

“Is that so?” He opened her jeans.

She did the same for him, freeing his erection from his pants. He wanted to bury himself inside her, but they needed to wash the blood and dirt off their bodies first.

He lifted her from the sink, and they finished undressing. After adjusting the water temperature, he took her hand to help her into the shower and caught sight of the ring on her finger. His cold heart melted. She’d said yes.

He’d gotten so damned lucky. He didn’t deserve her, but he’d spend the rest of eternity trying to change that.

Starting with telling his crew the truth about that night in 1795.

Lily moaned as the warm water cascaded through her long hair. With her back arched and her head back in the stream of water from the shower, her breasts jutted toward him, and he was helpless to resist. He bent to take one wet nipple in his mouth, enjoying the way her breath caught as he circled the hard tip with his tongue. He kneaded them and pushed them together so he could lick one nipple and then the other as the water sprayed them both.

She leaned back, bracing her hands on the tile behind her as he dragged his lips lower. He closed his fingers around her ankle and placed her foot up on the shower bench, opening her to him. He peered up, drinking in the desire in her eyes as he bent to taste her.

Water pelted his back, and her moans echoed off the walls. Seeing the ring sparkle on her finger as she pressed her hands against the tile had his heart racing. He wanted to pleasure her, to love her, and to show her what he couldn’t seem to put into words.

Knowing she loved him, all of him, that acceptance was something he’d never known. Ever.

“Don’t stop,” she gasped.

He slid two wet fingers into her as his tongue circled her swollen clit. When her inner muscles clenched, he plunged his tongue inside of her,

eager to taste her pleasure.

Her legs wobbled, and he hooked his arms under her thighs, lifting her as he stood and buried himself inside her. Her body was hot and tight around him. She tangled her fingers in the back of his wet hair, and he quickly lost track of where he ended and she began.

She rested her forehead on his. "I love you."

"Forever," he whispered. "My heart and soul are yours, Lily."

She sealed his pledge with a kiss.

Chapter Thirty-One

David sat on the plane, trying not to notice Petra was dozing against his shoulder.

They'd taken off just before sunrise, but he was too wired to sleep. Why did she have to smell so good? He studied the angles of her face, aching to caress her skin.

Enough.

He turned to look out the window. There were more important issues to worry about. They'd evaded the CIA for now, but the death of the director worried him. Petra had assured him the retirement protocols that wiped her memory of Department 13 couldn't have caused the aneurism, and Kingsley was certain that after he deleted the files from her phone, there weren't any more traces of Department 13 or the immortal pirate crew inside the CIA.

But his gut was still tight with concern.

It could be a huge coincidence that the director had had an aneurysm, but in his experience, there was usually a cause and effect.

He pulled in a deep breath.

For now, the mission was complete. The department's anonymity was intact, and the Spear of Destiny was wrapped up underneath his seat on the private jet.

Hopefully the Serpent Society was no longer a threat, and when he scanned the local news before they left Savannah, the story seemed to be that there was a communication error between the ATF and local authorities involving an exercise in Reynolds Square.

Holli and Rutger Morgan were also out of his hair for now. Hopefully forever.

"You're so tense. You make a sucky pillow." Petra straightened, and suddenly seemed to remember who she was with. "Sir. Sorry."

“You can call me David,” he blurted without thinking, blurring important lines.

She responded by holding out her hand. “I’m Petra.”

He took it in a firm handshake, but his lips curved. “Good to finally meet you.”

Her eyes sparkled behind her red-rimmed glasses. “Likewise.”

For the rest of the flight, they talked about anything but the department, and for the first time in years, Agent David Bale, Director of Department 13, was simply David.

When the plane landed, his responsibilities would settle solidly back onto his shoulders, but for this moment, thirty thousand feet above the Earth, he was just a guy and she was a girl.

And it was magic.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Lily woke up to find Ian staring at her. Her lips curved slightly. “Have you been awake long?”

He ran his fingers up her arm and along her neck, already heating her blood. “Most of the night.”

She arched a brow. “I thought you’d be exhausted.”

They’d made love three times. She was still achy in all the right places.

He rolled onto his back. “I can’t stop running scenarios with the crew in my head.”

“Anything I can help with?” She rested her head on his chest. His steady heartbeat warmed her almost as much as his big hand sliding up her bare back.

“I don’t think so.” He shook his head. “I’ve spent over two hundred years convincing myself I didn’t care what the crew thought of me. It’s been surprising to realize that...it might not have to be that way.”

She sent up a silent prayer that the meeting with the crew today would go well. She lifted her head and smiled. He was so damned handsome. Rugged and just the right amount of dangerous. “No matter what happens today, you’ll still be *my* captain.”

A crooked smile curved his lips as he arched a brow. “I seem to recall you telling me you weren’t part of my crew.”

She slid her leg between his, marveling at the way his erection already pulsed against her. “I don’t know how to sail.”

He gripped her waist and shifted her over him. “I could teach you.”

She tilted her hips until he brushed her entrance. “I’m a quick learner.”

His grip on her waist tightened as he thrust his hips up into her. “Maybe we’ll just stay in bed today.”

She grinned as she guided his hands to her breasts. “I’m pretty sure

they'd miss you." As if someone heard her, his cell phone buzzed, and she chuckled. "You better answer that."

He shook his head. "I'm busy."

She bent down and brushed her lips to his. "Take the call."

He arched a brow as he reached for the phone and she sat back up, staring down at him while he accepted the call.

"Hello?"

She smiled at him as she ground her hips, taking him deeper inside her. He clenched his jaw, but the fire in his eyes only encouraged her. She slid one hand between them to stroke herself while she pinched her nipple.

"Aye." His voice was husky, his gaze intense as he looked up at her. He cleared his throat. "Fine. I don't give a shit."

She rocked her hips faster as her blood heated. His tight jaw told her his control was stretched to the breaking point, and she didn't feel even a little guilty. In fact, she'd never felt so confident and sexy.

"Goodbye, Bob." He ended the call and flipped her over so fast, she squeaked. His hips pounded into her as he fused his lips to hers. His other hand gripped her ass as she rubbed herself faster.

Her orgasm slammed into her so hard, she almost bit his lip. He followed her over the edge, erupting deep inside her. He lifted his head, staring down at her. His chest heaved as his lips gradually began to curve. "I should spank you for that."

She shivered at the thought and tried not to smile. "Too bad we have to leave."

He kissed her long and slow, growling into her mouth, "This isn't finished."

Now there was something to distract her all day.

They'd cleaned up quickly and made it to the Williams Southern Kitchen right on time. Apparently, Bob's call had been to let Ian know that the Sloans were going to join them at the restaurant in an hour, and he wanted to know if that was enough time, but Ian was...eager to end the call.

If he was going to come clean with his crew, he had to do it right away.

He'd been quiet on the drive over, and now that they were in the light of day, she could see the puffiness around his eyes. It made her heart hurt to see her cocky captain so worried. If his crew were assholes to him, she might start a fight.

The last thing he needed was for her to get involved, but she felt like she

was the only one in his corner.

When they came into the back room, the rest of the crew was already there.

Her gaze moved around the table, trying to pull up names. Duke and Annika were seated right next to Ian, and Keegan and Char were on the other side of Lily, with One-Eyed Bob sitting right across the table from her.

He smiled and gave her a wink. “Good to see you.”

The way he’d said it made it seem like he knew something the others didn’t.

She glanced at Ian and realized Bob must’ve also asked him if she took a drink from the Grail. Bob had brought it to the Square the night before, so he had to know Ian took it home with him. When Ian answered the phone, she couldn’t hear the other side of the conversation, but he had answered something in the affirmative.

She forced a smile and nodded. “Thanks. Good to be here.”

Next to Bob were three more couples. Lily didn’t know all of them, but she’d met Diana at the Scallywags concert. She was wearing a bright violet halter dress with Caleb beside her in his khakis and black polo shirt. This was her family’s restaurant. And two chairs were empty.

“Where’re Greyson and Aura?” Ian asked, pointing to the empty chairs.

Bob answered, “They’re coming. They had to go to Brunswick to secure the wards after Agent Bale took the Spear this morning.” He paused as he started to smile. “We can fill them in on your news when they get here.”

“What news?” a deep voice asked from the door.

Lily turned as Ian stood to greet the man. He was about Ian’s height, with long brown hair in braids that were tied back into a single ponytail at the nape of his neck. He looked more piratical than the rest of the crew even though he was wearing jeans and a T-shirt instead of a frock coat and boots.

Ian turned toward Lily. “This is Greyson, our master gunner, and his partner, Aura Henderson.”

Lily shook their hands. “You work with Agent Bale?”

They nodded and Aura said, “I head up the field office in Savannah for the Department and Greyson is my...”

“Pirate,” he finished with a grin.

“I was going to say partner.” Aura rolled her eyes, obviously trying not to crack a smile.

Greyson hooked his arm around her waist. "S'pose I'm that too."

They took the two chairs next to Colton and Skye while she bounced little Ace on her lap. Greyson looked at the final two chairs and back up to Ian. "You expecting guests, Captain?"

Lily took her seat again, but Ian remained standing behind his.

"I am." Ian leaned forward and took a swallow from his water glass before addressing his crew again. "After this meeting, ye may all want to never see me again. So first, I want to admit that sailing with this crew has been the highest honor of my long life."

Bob was beaming across the table. Clearly, he had no idea what Ian was about to announce, but Lily just smiled and looked up at the dashing captain.

His copper hair was slicked back into a tie at the base of his head, his goatee was manicured to perfection, and his ice blue eyes were on full display as he surveyed his crew.

"I think you've all met Lily." His gaze locked on hers for an intense moment, as if he were gathering her strength to add to his own. Then he scanned the crew. "She's an author and, with Char's help, she dug up a few things I thought were long buried."

"Yer heart?" Duke chuckled.

Ian tipped his head to his first mate. "That too." He sobered. "Seeing Morgan again brought back some of my past decisions and I think..." He hesitated and Lily sent him silent support. He cleared his throat and faced them again. "It's time to let the past go so we can sail into the future."

Lily surveyed the crew's expressions. Most looked confused and a couple seemed wary, but Ian went on.

"When we weighed anchor in Savannah on the original *Sea Dog*, I was leaving behind a very sick little girl. My sweet Ellie had consumption, and while I promised all of you that we would set sail for treasure, I was searching for something to save my daughter and I couldn't do it without your help." He sighed, gripping the back of the chair tightly. "The day I caught the monks beating Bob behind the brothel in the Bahamas, I captured one and...he told me about the *Santa Maria*."

Duke frowned. "You knew about the Grail? You let us drink from that cup without telling us what it was?"

"And without it ye'd all be dust now," Ian snapped.

Lily reached over to cover his hand with hers. If he got defensive and lost

his temper, this was going to be a powder keg.

His eyes flicked to her face. He seemed to catch her drift and nodded. He lifted his head again. "I should have been honest with all of you. I see that now." He shook his head. "I didn't want to lose her, and no amount of gold had helped those doctors find a cure. If the cup was real, I wanted to put it to her lips."

Caleb drummed his fingers on the table and lifted his gaze. "That's why you insisted we sail into that storm instead of waiting it out on open water."

Ian nodded. "I never should have risked all of you and our ship. I failed as your captain, and ever since..." He stared down at his hands. "I've been trying to bury that failure."

He raised his head, his attention moving around the table. When no one spoke, Lily's heart sank.

Finally little Ace broke the tense silence with a giggle and clapped his pudgy hands. Colton looked from his son's face to Ian. "I would have sailed into that storm to save yer daughter."

...

Flynn frowned. Was he serious? As he looked around the table his crew began to nod. His shoulders fell. "I couldn't ask for yer help." His true nautical accent bled into his voice. "I was yer captain."

Duke raised a brow. "But ye could have been our friend."

His first mate's words hit his chest as soundly as a fist. Flynn shook his head slowly. "She was already gone by the time I got to shore." He ran a hand down his face. "It was all for nothing. I failed you."

"Failed us?" Greyson pointed to his chest. "No. But ye did royally fuck up, Captain. Yer not perfect. Welcome to the human race, ye pompous arse. Only took ye a couple of centuries to get here." He looked at Lily. "Yer a miracle worker to bring him down off that pedestal."

Lily chuckled, color flushing her cheeks. "I can't take all the credit. I think having the past literally walk back into his life had something to do with it."

Flynn nodded slowly, girding himself for the next step of this meeting. "There's one more thing we need to discuss." He looked at Skye and Colton. "Morgan owes me a favor. He won't be a threat to the *Sea Dog* crew anymore."

Skye narrowed her eyes. "You didn't tell him your theory..."

"No." Ian shook his head slowly. "I honored your wishes, but...I did ask him to join us this morning to prove his willingness to honor his word."

Sampson stepped through the door and stood beside him. He wore black jeans and a navy blue T-shirt tight around his broad chest. Most people would guess this burly man with a full black beard and gold rings on his fingers was in a biker gang, not a former captain of a pirate ship.

Duke was on his feet with a gun drawn. "Get the fuck out of here."

Ian glared at his first mate. "Put the gun away. He's our guest."

Colton clenched his jaw. "He nearly killed you."

"And if I had had the chance, I wanted to do the same to him."

Holli came up beside Morgan, her attention focused on her sister at the other end of the table.

John growled through gritted teeth. "This is the fucker who killed yer brother and nearly beat me to death."

Flynn nodded. "True, and we may never be friends, but I've come to realize that time does change us, and this is Sampson Bane. Rutger Morgan is dead."

Skye stared at the bearded man, clutching Ace a little tighter.

Flynn stayed silent, waiting to see if she would say anything. He wasn't going to force anything, but if Bane had a blood connection to their crew, it could be another level of assurance that he would be loyal to his word.

She handed her baby to Colton and stood, coming around the table. "I've never met you before."

Sampson frowned, shaking his head slowly as he studied her face. "I don't think so."

She glanced at Flynn and cleared her throat. "Our captain noticed we had similar eyes. He thought we could be related, but I told him it was impossible."

Morgan blinked and looked at Flynn. The shock was plain on his face as he focused on Skye again. "Maybe not."

Skye crossed her arms. "How is that possible? Were you in Savannah thirty years ago?"

Color drained from Morgan's face. "I did visit Savannah." He swallowed. "Holli and I took separate paths for a lifetime. I met a woman while I was here." He tugged at his beard. "She wanted more commitment, but I couldn't tell her I was immortal."

Skye cocked a brow. "So you ran?"

"I moved on." He shook his head. "She never told me she was pregnant."

Ian studied Skye for a moment and added, "That's probably why yer mother was so against pirates, lass."

She stared at the man with her violet eyes. "I..." She looked over at Colton. "That prophecy about meeting a woman with violet eyes."

Colton nodded. "Told to me over two hundred years before ye were born."

"This was all...destined. All of it." Her attention flicked to Sampson again. She swallowed. "I don't know what you expect from me."

"Nothing, lass." His gaze wandered from her over to her son and back again. "But ye have my word that yer family line will have my protection until the end of time."

Flynn held his breath. This was the best outcome he could hope for, but only if Skye accepted it.

She looked over at Colton and then back to Morgan. "You swear you're not a threat to any member of this crew anymore?"

"Aye." He finally took in the rest of the crew. "Ye all have my bond. Yer my family."

All around the table Flynn's crew began to relax.

No. Not his crew. Not anymore.

Flynn gave a stern nod. "Now that this is settled, and the crew will be safe, I'll go. I'm sorry for my failures."

Lily rose from her chair to stand beside him. His heart hurt at the thought of leaving, but he'd done all he could.

Bob pushed back from the table. "Where do ye think yer going, Captain?"

Ian's brows pinched in confusion. "I'm not fit to be called that anymore."

"Bullshit." Colton looked at the rest of the crew. "I didn't hear anyone take a vote to replace the captain. Does any member of this crew vote to send Flynn packing? Yeas?"

The silence made Flynn's ancient heart pound. He thought he had made peace with losing his position and his crew, but seeing none of them vote to remove him had his gut in knots.

"Nays?"

The room roared with the no votes. And two weeks ago, his chest would have puffed up with pride, but now...it felt...empty.

Lily grinned beside him and he smiled in return, unsure why this moment wasn't filling him with purpose.

Colton smirked, crossing his arms. "It's decided. Yer still our captain."

He looked at the rest of the room, from one face to the next, and it dawned on him that the people seated around this table were more than his crew. They were his family. And they didn't need a captain. Gradually he shook his head. "I think I have to decline."

All the cheers quieted, and Colton frowned. "Why?"

"Because I'd rather call you friends."

Bob laughed and came over to pat his shoulder. "I'm too old to start calling you somethin' else. You can be the captain and my friend."

Raucous laughter and conversation filled the room. And for the first time since he led that mutiny over two hundred years ago, Flynn was a part of it. His heart overflowed with gratitude, and none of this would have come to pass if his favorite author hadn't come back into his life.

He turned to Lily and pulled her in to his chest as he bent to kiss her soft lips. Her lips parted and he explored the warmth of her mouth.

"Get a room!" Duke teased.

Flynn broke the kiss and shot a glare at his first mate. No. His friend. "Fuck off, Duke."

Bob took the opportunity to bump him with his elbow. "Don't you have another bit of news for the crew?"

"I don't know how much more we can take." Skye chuckled.

Flynn took Lily's hand, lacing his fingers with hers. "Lily has agreed to be my bride."

The shock on Bob's face made Flynn laugh. "Did you really think you knew all the secrets, old man?" He faced the crew and spilled the one secret Bob did know about. "And she took a drink from the cup last night."

The crew were on their feet hugging Lily and making introductions while the rest were congratulating him, but all his attention remained on Lily.

Today would never have been possible without her. She'd shown him unconditional love.

And through the revelations, his crew was made whole.

It would take time for Morgan to prove that Sampson Bane was a better man, but the door had been opened and the blood connection would ensure the alliance.

Diana's folks came in with trays of food and he took his seat with Lily

beside him.

He leaned over and whispered, “I love you.”

She smiled and ran her hand up his thigh. “I love you too.”

And that was enough.

• • •

Lily finished her biscuits and gravy and took out her people-watching notepad and pen from her purse. Holli and Sampson—she was trying to leave Rutger Morgan in the past where he belonged—had excused themselves to head up to Charleston, but it was good to see Colton and Skye swapping contact information with Sampson. That had been more than Ian had expected. Introducing them had been the extent of Ian’s commitment. The rest was up to them.

Lily hoped Sampson would continue his commitment to protect them and maybe someday they’d even have a bigger family.

The Sloans had arrived a few minutes later, after all the drama had passed, and the crew made room for them to sit beside her.

Right now, the shifters had all her attention. “So how did you two meet Ian?”

Aren chuckled. “My company specializes in investments and when we wanted to find some properties on the east coast, Ian Flynn was highly recommended as the man to see.”

Ian patted her thigh. “I didn’t know then that my new buyers were shifters.”

Sasha laughed and rolled her eyes. “Never dreamed our broker was an immortal pirate either.”

Lily smiled and set her fork down. “A week ago, I thought all this paranormal stuff was only in books.”

“A week?” Sasha shook her head. “You seem like you’ve adapted pretty fast. Some of the pack members weren’t so lucky with their mates.”

“Mates?” Lily glanced at the crew and back to Sasha. “They told their friends?”

“Not like mates on a crew.” Aren looked over at her. “Werewolves have one mate for life. When he touches her skin to skin, the wolf recognizes her and that’s it.” His eyes sparkled when he looked at Sasha. “I found mine while we were trying to kill each other.”

Lily's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"It's a long story." Sasha elbowed her husband and glanced over at Lily. "Luckily I didn't kill him."

Lily swapped her fork for a pen. "I'm a big fan of long stories if you're willing to share."

Sasha reached down into her bag and pulled out a paperback copy of Lily's most recent release. "Only if you're willing to sign my book first."

"Deal." Lily grinned and signed the book. As she handed it back, she noticed Ian smiling in her peripheral vision. She looked at him, keeping her voice hushed. "What? Do I have something on my face?"

"No." He shook his head, and the pride in his eyes did something to her heart. "I just like seeing you in your element, talking books."

She did love this man. She kissed his cheek and whispered, "I hope you always feel that way."

"I have no doubts." He chuckled. "Interview your shifters."

And that's exactly what she did.

Chapter Thirty-Three

EPILOGUE

TWO MONTHS LATER

Lily leaned her forearms against the bow of the *Sea Dog*, staring out at the colorful horizon as they sailed into the sunrise. Ian stopped beside her, sliding his arm around her waist. “It never gets old.”

Same went for his touch, but she kept that to herself as she looked over at him. “Don’t you need to be captaining the ship and shouting orders?”

He smiled. “Colton is leading the crew today, since I’m getting married.”

“Hey...” She grinned. “I’m getting married today too!”

“He’s a lucky bastard.” He kissed her long and slow.

She hummed as she broke the kiss. “You’re not going to miss being Atlanta’s Most Eligible Bachelor?”

“No.” He shook his head slowly. “But it did bring you into my office.”

Her freelance project had been a favor to a friend. No one would ever believe it had led to love and immortality.

They held hands as the sun lifted above the horizon. She peeked over at him. “So, we’re really going to do this?”

“Aye.” He nodded. “I brought my frock coat and boots as requested.”

Her grin widened. “I’m looking forward to seeing you in your full pirate captain regalia.”

He arched a brow. “Almost as much as I’m looking forward to seeing you in a corset.”

They’d agreed to get married on the *Sea Dog*, and although Ian had been leaning toward a more formal affair, she’d convinced him that if they were getting married on a pirate ship, they should go full pirate.

The truth was, she couldn’t wait to see him completely in his element.

He must’ve sensed her eagerness because he insisted that they change on

the ship closer to the ceremony. Right now, he was dressed in jeans and a pinstriped button-down shirt with the cuffs rolled up. Those chiseled forearms right out there to tempt her.

Behind them, Colton shouted, “Wind’s in our favor! Drop the mainsail!”

Above them Greyson and Drake sat at the top of the mast, freeing the sails from their bindings. They finally dropped with a snap and filled with wind.

The massive wooden ship groaned as she picked up speed, taking them farther into the Atlantic until the land faded from the horizon. The sea air pulled at her hair, and she struggled to tuck it behind her ear.

“I didn’t think about the wind and my hair situation.”

Ian chuckled, shaking his head. “You’re beautiful, Lily.” He took her hand. “Come on, I’ll give you a tour.”

They walked toward the helm where Keegan gripped the big wooden wheel. The rock star grinned. “Perfect day for a wedding.”

Ian smiled and clapped his shoulder as they passed. “Thanks for sailing us out.” He led her down the stairs to the lower deck. “This will be your dressing room.”

He opened the door to a room with a large table. She looked up at him. “Map room?”

“You learn quickly.” He pointed to the captain’s chair, covered in garment bags. “Your dress is there.”

They walked farther down the hallway past many cabin doors until they reached the final one. He opened it and stepped inside. It wasn’t as large as the map room, but there was a full-sized bed, a tiny bathroom, and a small window. In the corner was a small desk.

He walked over and pulled open the slender center drawer. When he came back to her side, he handed her a stack of postcards.

“What’s this?”

He shrugged. “Call it a wish list.”

She thumbed through all the beautiful pictures, from the colorful buildings poking out of the ice on Greenland, to the white beaches of Hawaii, to the Parthenon, and the pyramids at Giza. She looked up at him. “I don’t understand.”

“I took a sabbatical at Flynn Enterprises. I thought we could mark off some of those places on your mother’s travel list.”

Her heart melted as she fanned out the cards again. “You’re serious?”

He nodded. "Fair winds and black sails."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. He scooped her up, but before they could make it to the bed, there was a knock on the door. They both turned to find Char in the doorway.

"Sorry to interrupt. Keegan wanted me to tell you we're at Caleb's coordinates, so he's going to drop anchor, and Bob has the food ready."

Ian set her down with a crooked smile. "We'd better get changed." He looked over at Char. "You're going to help Lily?"

They shared a knowing glance as she nodded. "Yes. I brought a bustle dress, too."

He pressed a kiss to Lily's forehead. "I'll see you soon."

She left with Char and headed for the map room. "Thanks for helping me with the dress. I can barely figure out how to tighten someone else's corset, let alone my own."

Char chuckled. "No worries. I enjoy playing dress-up sometimes." Char let her pass into the map room before closing the door behind them. She handed Lily her garment bag and then unzipped the other one. "Never in a million years did I think I'd be attending Flynn's wedding."

Lily smiled as she removed all the dress pieces. "I'll admit I used to fantasize about us getting married, but I had no idea he was a pirate back then, so this pirate wedding wouldn't have even been in the realm of possibility."

"I've never seen him happy before." Cher met her eyes. "It's...been really nice."

Lily smiled. "I appreciate everyone being so friendly even though I don't know anything about sailing or have a psychic power or anything useful."

"You can learn to sail, and you have words, Lily. It's probably the most powerful gift you could bring to the table. Your words immortalize people."

She'd never thought about it like that before. "Thanks, Char." She looked at all the dress pieces she just laid out on the table and sighed. "I'm not sure what to put on first."

"Lots of layers. We're going to make Flynn work to get to you later."

Lily laughed.

Char grinned and held up a gauzy slip dress. "Chemise is first."

And layer by layer, it was like she stepped back in time, back to Flynn's time, and...it felt right.

• • •

Flynn examined his reflection in the mirror.

His tall black boots were polished, his steel gray breeches were fitted, his canvas doublet and linen shirt were pressed. His leather frock coat bore many battle scars, but it was as regal as it was going to get. He reached for his baldric belt and lifted it over his one shoulder, so it crossed diagonally over his chest. He slid his cutlass through the sheath and studied the pirate captain looking back at him.

He smirked. This was the pirate she requested, but he wasn't simply putting on a costume to stand at the altar. He'd arranged with Char to keep Lily occupied until Keegan gave her the signal. He exited his cabin and strode down the hall to jog up the stairs.

One-Eyed Bob gave him a wolf whistle as he stepped onto the main deck. "Did we just time travel back to 1795?"

Flynn rolled his eyes. "I smell much better than I did back then." He walked over to the ratlines and looked up the main mast.

Greyson grinned. "Yer really going up in the lines? You think that's a good idea?"

Flynn smirked and cracked his knuckles. "Please. I was a quartermaster before I was ever a captain. I lived in the lines."

Colton arched a brow. "But the swing you've got planned is a higher level of difficulty."

Flynn shot him a look. "Appreciate yer concern, but I can't die, so..."

His pride could be injured, but it was worth the risk. He wanted this to be special for Lily, like a scene from a book. He took two running steps and leaped for the ratlines.

He caught the rough line and pulled himself up. Once his boots were hooked in the rungs, he looked down at his crew with a grin. "I've still got it."

He looked up the mast, ignoring their laughter below. The sea air blew across his skin as he climbed higher and reached for one of the free-hanging lines that had been tying up the sails. He gave it a firm tug. It seemed solid. He wrapped it around his forearm and gripped it tight.

His pulse raced and he sucked in a deep breath. He had forgotten how much he enjoyed the view from up in the lines.

Keegan shouted to him. "Ready for yer bride?"

“Aye!” Flynn looked at the canopy set up on the upper deck. He’d practiced the swing a couple of times during the past week, but the canopy hadn’t been up. Pirate movies made the rope swings famous, but the truth was, if they were fighting, they were rarely up in the rigging, so swinging wasn’t something Flynn had done very often.

Keegan jogged back up the stairs. “She’s on her way.”

He grabbed his guitar and put the strap over his shoulder. He’d made his own arrangement of a song Lily had chosen by someone named Ruelle.

When he got to, “I get to love you” Lily came up the stairs. Flynn gave the rope one more tug as she looked around the deck for him. Char helped her to the canopy on the upper deck and she finally turned around and saw him on the ratlines. The wind chose to gust, blowing his coat back. This was it. He kicked his boot free of the rigging and jumped.

The wind whistled in his ears as he flew past the rest of the crew, toward his future with the love of his immortal life.

Her eyes widened as he got closer. He soared past her, waiting for the rope to start its journey back, then he let go and dropped onto the deck. He stumbled, nearly landing on his arse, but he saved his pride and managed to stay on his feet.

The look on her face was worth every effort he’d taken. She covered her mouth, her eyes still wide. “Holy shit. You’re a pirate.”

He chuckled and took her hand, bringing it to his lips. “I’m *your* pirate.”

“I like that sound of that.”

Colton cleared his throat. “Ready to make some promises?”

“Aye.” Flynn took her hands, and they faced each other.

Colton called out, “Our couple has written their own vows, so I’ll just be tellin’ them to kiss.”

The crew cheered and Lily smiled up at him. “From the moment we met, I knew there was more to you than you allowed the world to see. And the day you shared your secrets with me, you changed my life forever.” Her eyes brimmed with tears. “You’re the captain of my heart, and I get to love you. I get to see the world with you. And no matter what the future holds, we’ll face it together. Partners. Always.”

He lost himself in her beautiful eyes. “You stole my heart with one look. And you challenged me to be more than I ever dreamed I could be. You are my true north, and the wind in my sails. I will cherish you forever, Lil.”

He didn’t wait for Colton’s instructions. He cupped her cheek, stepping in

to kiss her. The crew cheered, but he hardly noticed as her hands slid up his chest and around his neck.

He rested his forehead on hers and whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Lily smiled up at him and whispered, “What is it you say? Fair winds and black sails?”

“Aye.”

She caressed his cheek as her lips brushed his. “Look out world... Here we come.”

The rest of the crew moved in to congratulate them and Bob fed them until Flynn thought he’d never eat again. His heart was full, too, and yet, as Lily laughed with the other women on the crew, he’d never been so eager for an adventure.

He was ready for a new chapter, and with Lily at his side, they could write a million happy endings.

This was just the beginning of forever.

And it felt fucking amazing.



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Acknowledgments

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About the Author

[Lisa Kessler](#) is an Amazon Best Selling and award winning author of dark paranormal fiction. Her debut novel, *Night Walker*, won a San Diego Book Award for Best Published Fantasy-Sci-fi-Horror as well as the Romance Through the Ages Award for Best Paranormal and Best First Book. Her short stories have been published in print anthologies and magazines, and her vampire story, *Immortal Beloved*, was a finalist for a Bram Stoker award. When she's not writing, Lisa is a professional vocalist, performing with the San Diego Opera as well as other musical theater companies in San Diego. You can learn more at <http://Lisa-Kessler.com> She loves hearing from readers — LdyDisney@aol.com

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