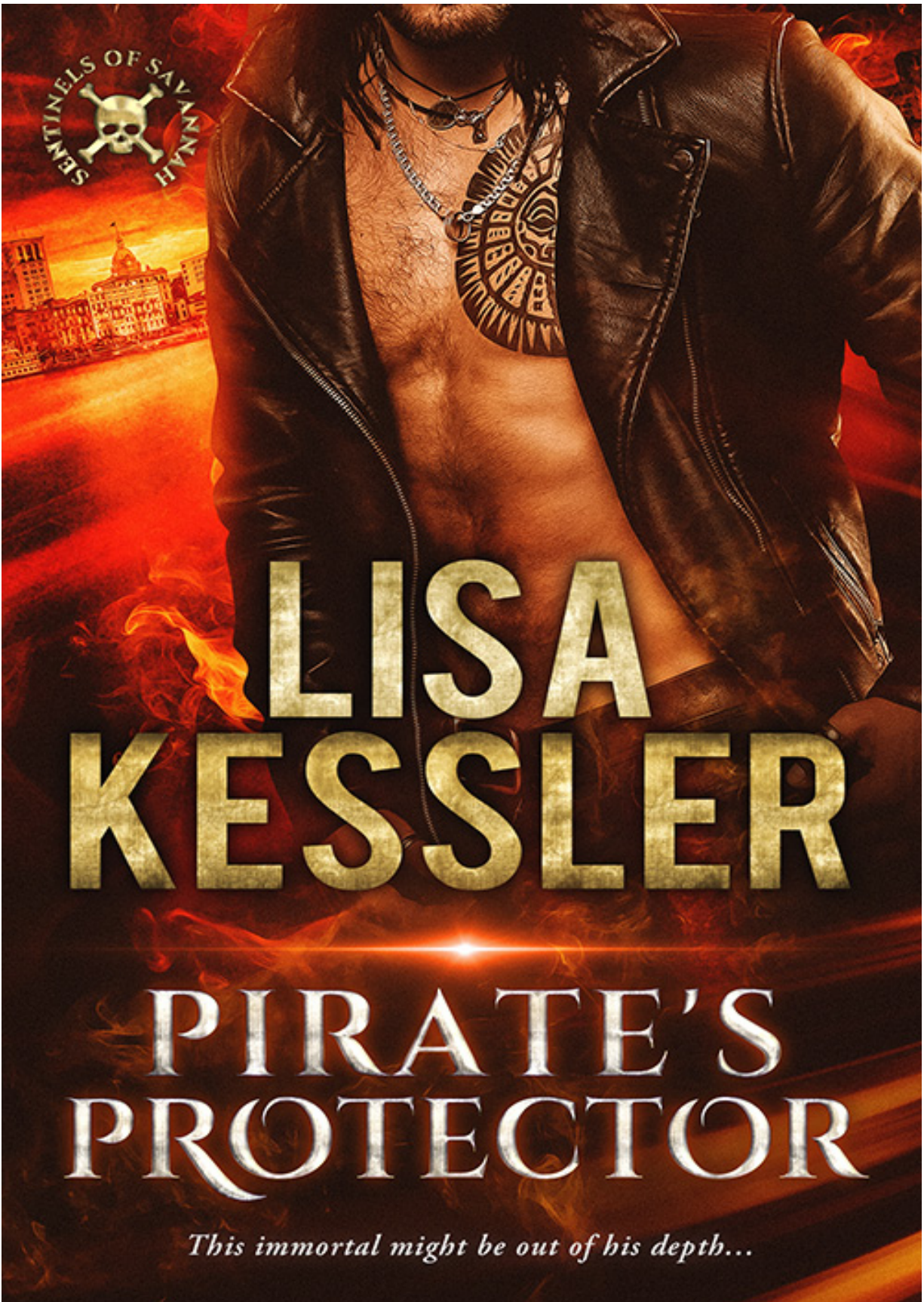




LISA KESSLER

PIRATE'S PROTECTOR

This immortal might be out of his depth...



PIRATE'S PROTECTOR



**LISA
KESSLER**

Table of Contents

[Content Warning](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Discover more romance from Entangled...](#)

[Highland Justice](#)

[Hunter's Hope](#)

[Night's Bliss](#)

[Nightshade's Bite](#)

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Entangled Publishing
644 Shrewsbury Commons Ave
STE 181
Shrewsbury, PA 17361
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Amara is an imprint of Entangled Publishing.

Edited by Jen Bouvier
Cover design by Miguel Parisi
Cover photography by Just dance, Marc Roura, and ESB Professional/Shutterstock

ISBN 978-1-64937-358-8

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition June 2022

AMARA
an imprint of Entangled Publishing, LLC

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This one is for my editor, Jen, lover of mermaids and polisher of words!
I have enjoyed working on this immortal pirate crew with you. Thanks for
all your input and encouragement along the way.

Chapter One

Duke Proctor propped his boot up on the post of the pier and rested his forearms on his knee as he looked out over the Savannah River.

Wisps of fog billowed up from the water like ghosts rising from the depths, returning to the haunted city. Spooky to some, but he'd lived here since the 1700s, and he found it comforting to imagine that people he'd lost might not be as far away as some thought.

In order to keep his immortality hidden, he had to reinvent himself every thirty or so years. When the mortals around him started to notice that time didn't seem to be taking a toll on him, he'd fake his own death and return as a distant relative to collect his uncle's estate. Over the years, he'd been a history professor, a pro fisherman, and even opened his own watersports store.

In this lifetime, he'd opted to freelance instead of tying himself to a job with set hours. He didn't need the money anyway. His size, standing at just over six foot three inches, and muscular build made freelancing as security a logical choice. He'd been helping Greyson, one of his immortal crewmates, with his security company, and now that Greyson had accepted a position working with Aura in the Department 13 field office, Duke had bought out Greyson's interest in the personal security business. It usually meant late hours, but he enjoyed the work.

He'd just finished a job providing security for a concert. His ears were still ringing while he soaked up the solitude. The full moon sparkled on the water.

Three a.m. was the magical hour when he could pretend cell phones and social media didn't exist, and he could imagine over two hundred years hadn't slipped through his fingers.

Usually, the passage of time didn't bother him. History was his passion,

but sometimes... Sometimes he wondered why life had unfolded the way it did.

He shoved the memories back, refusing to allow them to encroach on this peace.

There was a splash in the distance.

Could've been a gator or a turtle, maybe even a giant catfish jumping. He didn't mind sharing space with them. They hardly ever spilled their beer on him or flashed their tits hoping to get backstage.

Tonight's concert had been challenging. His personal security company had been hired by Justin Blake's promoter for his first performance at the new District Live concert venue, right near the river. Duke's staff had been professional, but it had proven tough to manage the rowdy crowd.

After the show, the push to get backstage to the performer had been massive and his crew had been stretched thin. They'd held the line, but barely. He needed to hire a few more people, but the more the business grew, the more his interest in it waned.

It might be time for a big change. Too early to fake his death and reestablish himself, but he could sell this business and start over again. Next lifetime, maybe he'd go back to teaching history at the university.

A cold gun barrel kissed the back of his neck next to his ponytail and a woman's hushed voice said, "Don't move."

He didn't flinch or even lower his boot from the post. He'd been shot before. Many times. It fucking hurt, so he hoped whoever was holding the gun didn't fire. But even if she did, unless she separated his head from his shoulders, he'd heal.

"Do I know you, lass?" He mentally ran through his short list of exes. Pointing a gun at him didn't seem likely for any of them.

"You have something that doesn't belong to you."

He smirked, staring up at the moon. He'd been a pirate for over two hundred years. He owned plenty of things that didn't belong to him. "Could you be a little more specific?"

"Do you *want* me to shoot you?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "I hate being shot."

She made a noise, but it didn't sound like a laugh. "Then give me the comb."

What the hell was she talking about? "I use a brush, myself."

She landed a solid punch to his kidney that had him seeing stars. "Stop

fucking around and tell me where you put the comb.”

The sucker punch lit the short fuse on his temper. He slid his boot off the post and turned around, and she countered by pointing the barrel down and pulling the trigger. His foot exploded with agony.

She’d shot him.

He grabbed the lapels of her coat and jerked her in close to his face. “What the fuck is your problem?”

She was a curvy blond with eyes as blue as the sea and full lips that he might have wanted to kiss if she hadn’t just put a bullet into his foot. She narrowed her eyes and pressed the gun barrel to his abdomen.

His abs clenched as if they could stop a bullet. He was pretty proud of them, but even after all of his workouts, they were no match for a Glock.

Her jaw tightened as she spoke through clenched teeth. “My *problem* is you and your friends took a comb, and I’m here to retrieve it.”

She must mean his crew. They’d plundered the Holy Grail together in 1795 and after a sip, they’d all been immortal ever since. How did she know about the *Sea Dog* crew?

He shoved her backward and knelt to inspect his boot. His foot was already healed inside.

He couldn’t say the same for his favorite Wolverine steel-toe work boots. He just got them broke in too.

“Damn it.” He looked up at her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do.” She kept her gun aimed at him. “The Atlantean had no right to give you that comb.”

Now that rang a bell. “The mermaid comb?”

She nodded, eyeing his foot. “I need it back.”

He rose to his full height. She was tall for a woman, maybe five-foot ten, but he stood six-foot three in bare feet. “Are you saying you’re a mermaid?”

She looked at his foot again. “Why don’t you bleed?”

He crossed his arms. “I feel like we’re having two different conversations. Maybe we should start over with fewer guns. I’m Duke Proctor.”

She jammed her gun back into her shoulder holster and withdrew a dagger with an inlaid handle. It had the same kind of multi-color abalone shell finish as the comb. She gripped the hilt in a tight fist. “Annika Mare.”

He raised a brow, studying her face a little closer. “‘From the sea’ in Latin. Nice touch.”

She tossed her head, sending her long blond hair down her back. “I don’t have time for...this...whatever this is.”

He opened his hands and held them out. “I’m unarmed, and I don’t have your comb.”

“Fuck.” She slid her dagger back into the sheath hanging from her belt and stared out at the water. “That comb was never meant to be touched by human hands.”

His friend, and the navigator of the *Sea Dog*, Caleb, had recently found Atlantis, and returned a key that allowed the legendary city to vanish from view once again. He’d saved Savannah from a massive tidal wave, and the Atlanteans had rewarded him with a strange crescent shaped comb.

Supposedly, it belonged to a mermaid, but Caleb had turned it over to Agent Bale and Department 13. The top-secret branch of the U.S. government specialized in studying and storing paranormal relics to keep them out of human hands.

Even if Annika really was a mermaid, she wouldn’t be able to break into Department 13. They found you, not the other way around.

“You still haven’t told me if you’re a mermaid. Though...” He looked down at her feet. “You don’t seem to have a tail.”

She rolled her eyes. “Merfolk can walk on land. The transformation comes when we get back into the water.”

He blinked, digesting the reality that he’d been shot by a mermaid tonight. A familiar buzz of curiosity blossomed through him, along with a slew of questions this warrior woman would probably never answer.

Unless he could get her to stick around. “I can probably help you get it back.”

Suddenly, he had her full attention. She crossed her arms and looked up at him. “What are your terms?”

She was all business. And so much more beautiful than Marina, the wooden mermaid figurehead on the front of their Spanish Galleon, the *Sea Dog*.

He cracked his knuckles and met her eyes. “We work together, and you’ll answer all my questions about the merfolk.”

A crease formed between her eyebrows. “It’s my understanding that pirates deal in gold and precious stones.”

“I have all the gold and jewels I need. Give me knowledge, and I’ll give you my temporary oath of allegiance until your comb is returned.” He held out his hand, shocked by the realization that he was offering a partnership to a mermaid.

A mermaid who’d just shot him.

The universe was a fucking hilarious place.

...

She studied his hand before finally grasping it tightly. “I will answer your questions until our work is finished.”

Annika released him and took a step back. She rarely touched humans. They didn’t repulse her, but she’d made mistakes with them in the past. Her chest tightened before she could push the memories away.

It had been her idea to visit Earth three-thousand years ago. She’d come through the portal from her home on the planet Neptune with her sisters Atargatis and Yemaya. The first humans they’d encountered were navigating boats across the oceans. Her sister Atargatis fell in love with one.

Annika cut off the memory, unwilling to relive the disaster. They hadn’t known humans couldn’t breathe beneath the surface.

She looked up at Duke, studying her new partner for this mission. He was tall by human standards, with broad shoulders and a slender waist. His long curly hair was pulled back in a ponytail and his goatee was short and well-kept. He wore black pants with many utility pockets and a black short-sleeved shirt with a collar. His arms were chiseled, stretching the fabric around his chest and biceps.

Attractive...for a human.

“Where do we find the comb?”

He arched a brow. “You don’t waste time.”

“Because it is running out.” She sucked in a slow breath. The saltwater river lured her closer. She ached to dive in, to swim, to free herself of the confining clothes humans insisted on wearing.

But a mermaid’s comb was an extension of her being. With it, she could communicate with the merfolk and locate the portals to go home. The combs also regulated their changes. If their comb was broken or damaged, they would lose the ability to use legs on land. And if it were destroyed, mermaids could fade from existence.

She would cease to exist.

In the wrong hands, a mermaid could be compelled to commit atrocities, if that's what it took to be made whole with her comb again. Annika shuddered at the thought and forced her gaze from the saltwater.

Duke pointed at a large ship further down the dock. "We can talk in private on the *Sea Dog*. Come on."

She followed him down a pier to a large Spanish Galleon.

This was the ship that had taken her comb. She'd swam after it for miles, all the way back to Savannah, but after the humans departed, she searched every inch of the boat. Her comb was gone.

It had been safe for over a thousand years. Why would the Atlanteans give it away now?

And why give it to these human sailors?

Duke crossed the gangplank and onto the main deck. He led her into a large room with kitchen appliances on one side and two long tables and benches on the other.

He turned on the lights and straddled the center of one of the benches as she sat on the end. Her breath caught in her throat. He was even more attractive in the light. He had brown skin and dark brown eyes that sparkled as he rested his forearms on the table. "We gave the mermaid's comb to Department 13 for safekeeping. Agent Bale will be able to tell us where it is. I can contact him in the morning."

Her brow furrowed. "I've never heard of Department 13."

"They're a top-secret branch of the American government. They specialize in locking up dangerous paranormal relics to keep people safe." He drummed his fingers on the table. "If this comb is so important, why did the Atlanteans have it in the first place?"

"We need some boundaries on the questions."

"That wasn't in our pact." His dark brown eyes shone in the moonlight coming through the porthole, and his sly grin tempted her to smile.

She never smiled.

"Fine." She rolled her eyes. "Because I was cocky, and I didn't think I'd need it."

He sobered. "It's *your* comb."

She nodded slowly and got up, unable to sit still. "It was reckless to leave it with the Atlanteans, but at the time, I didn't have any other options."

"What does that mean?" Duke asked.

His line of questioning was bringing back memories she would rather leave buried. “My sister and I were fighting. I was afraid if she found my comb, she would send me back home. The Atlanteans knew how important it was to keep it hidden. I didn’t imagine the city would ever sink.”

That wasn’t the entire painful story, but thankfully it seemed to satisfy the pirate for now.

He stood and stepped into her path. “Maybe it’s safer with Agent Bale. They’ll keep it locked in a vault. No one will use it.”

She shook her head and moved around him, walking out onto the main deck. “You don’t understand.”

He turned around, his gaze following her around the deck. “Then enlighten me. I get paid to protect people, not to read their minds.”

She crossed her arms and shot him a glare. “They have already tried to use it.”

“What?” His brow furrowed. “How do you know?”

How could she explain the connection to her comb to a human? She stared at the ship. “You said you protect people for money. Is that what you do on this vessel?”

“I guess you could say that.” He looked up at the sails. “I’m the right hand of the captain.” He met her eyes. “I was brought on board to protect him, but over the years my loyalty grew. I would give my life for any member of this crew now. They’re my family.”

Family. She blinked, her gaze locked on his. “My comb is like my family when I’m out of the water. I hear it sing in my dreams, and it’s calling me right now. Something is wrong.”

He came closer. “What happens if someone uses it?”

“Most will ask for wishes to be granted, but my magic is limited here. The real danger is...” She lifted her chin, refusing to let fear be her master. “In the wrong hands, that comb could force me to open the undersea portals to lead them back home.”

“Force you?”

She pressed her lips together and started to nod. “The desire to possess our comb is instinctive. Even if I knew the request would lead to ruin, I’m not sure I could resist.”

He shook his head. “I’ll find Agent Bale in the morning. We’ll get your comb back, okay?”

She wished she could bottle his confidence, but earlier today, she’d been

swallowed by the foreboding darkness.

Something or someone wanted passage through the portals.

Someone evil.

Chapter Two

Agent David Bale entered the nondescript brick building that housed Department 13, making a beeline for his office. Agent Aura Henderson had woken him before the sunrise this morning with some information he couldn't afford to wait to investigate.

His top-secret division had a leak, and he intended to plug it.

Aura was now heading up the new Department 13 field office in Brunswick, Georgia. It was a quiet suburb of Savannah and a thousand miles away from the main office in D.C. She was the best candidate to look for a suspect, because no one from Department 13 could be looking over her shoulder.

Recently, David had discovered a demon had managed to infiltrate their ranks long enough to steal a mythical sword from the high-security relics vault, and then this past month, David had crossed paths with Sampson Bane, a shady character who somehow knew David's full name and exactly who he worked for and what he did.

There was absolutely no digital footprint for the department—his shamanic computer programmer swept for that weekly. Someone must've leaked the information, and David was determined to find out who.

They depended on secrecy. If Americans ever discovered Department 13 existed and that they housed mystical relics capable of bringing on Armageddon underneath Washington, D.C., the safety of the human race could be at stake.

He turned on his computer, then entered his password and thumbprint to access the employee database. Aura mentioned she'd scanned some of the more senior employees and noticed some irregularities with termination and hire dates.

The work was tedious, but he jotted down names that had hire dates

without retirement listed. Most of them were probably clerical errors or had fallen through the cracks when the department had finally moved from leatherbound ledgers to computer databases.

But even so, he was going to check every name.

He'd worked for Department 13 since 1963 and was promoted to director in 1970 when the previous director had retired suddenly. The special blend of healing herbs doused in water from the Fountain of Youth, and oil derived from the Balm of Gilead, was passed from director to director, enabling the leadership of Department 13 to continue indefinitely as long as they used the unique formulation. So, there should be retirement dates for all of these employees.

Unlike the department leadership, they weren't immortal.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been scanning the names when a knock interrupted him.

He looked up to find Kingsley Pratt leaning against the door. He was in his sixties, but his constant intake of alcohol sucked the color from his cheeks and reddened his eyes and nose. He'd lived hard.

But he was the best at what he did.

"Hey, King."

He eyed the notes on David's desk before lifting his gaze. "Seems that you've been here since last night."

"I got in really early." David didn't always see eye to eye with his sarcastic British programmer, but he trusted him. "Come in and close the door."

Keeping his voice down, David brought Kingsley up to speed on the search for the leak in their department. He handed him the list. "Do you recognize any of these names?"

Kingsley pressed his lips together, humming "God Save the Queen" under his breath. He placed the list back on David's desk. "I only recognize two names." He cleared his throat, his accent crisp. "May I make a suggestion?"

"Sure." David leaned back in his leather executive chair.

"I would cross-reference the divisions as well. It would be easier to hide a mole as far from the director as possible." Kingsley tugged at his chin. "Look for employees who are rarely required to report to you directly, or to staff meetings in general. They would be free to wander the halls with minimal chance of being exposed."

“That’s a good point.” The thought of going back through two hundred years of employment records again almost made David cringe, but King was right. “Well, damn. I guess I better go back through them.”

King stood and held out his hand. “I can whip up a search protocol that will power through that list faster than you can. I’ll have it back to you in a couple of hours.”

David raised a brow. “Some of these aren’t in the database, they’re scanned pages from the 1800s employment files. You can’t just import them into a spreadsheet.”

King took the employment records and peered at David over the rim of his glasses. “This is the magic I believe I’m being compensated for.”

David chuckled and rocked back in his chair again. “All right. Thanks, King.”

There was one name that kept bothering him.

Holli Porter, from the vault data collection department.

Her dates appeared to be a data entry mistake. The records showed she’d been hired October 13, 1987, but she appeared to be in her thirties. It had to be a typographical error. Maybe that was her birthday, not her hire date.

Although she didn’t have any physical contact with the relics, she collected all the facts, then added the attributes and abilities to the database. She coded the item numbers with the item maps for the vault, and until the sword had gone missing, he’d never had any real reason to interact with her.

That was about to change.

Chapter Three

Duke stepped out of the shower, still tired, but awake enough. Some days, he longed for his previous life as a history professor. They had better work hours than private security. He got dressed and grabbed his cell phone. A text from Annika flashed on the screen.

Meet me at Williams Southern Kitchen at 10 a.m. I need to talk to Agent Bale right away.

So, he hadn't dreamed her last night.

He looked over at his favorite pair of boots. The bullet hole confirmed as much. *Shit.*

Funny that she'd picked Williams Southern Kitchen. His mate, Caleb, the *Sea Dog's* navigator, had just gotten engaged to the Williams's daughter, Diana. Duke was happy for him, but it was a little bittersweet. Caleb still hadn't taken another drink from the Holy Grail since the Atlanteans had claimed his immortality in a trade for saving Diana's life.

And Duke had the sneaking suspicion he wasn't going to. Caleb hadn't said it out loud yet, but if he married Diana, Duke couldn't see Caleb being willing to outlive her. Unless she was drinking too, Caleb wasn't going to choose immortality again. He'd grow old with Diana.

Duke didn't blame his friend. That was part of why he hadn't been eager to go searching for love like his crewmates. He didn't have anything against love, but he didn't have the stomach to watch someone he cared for die.

Best to stick to no-strings sex and leave it at that.

Scrolling through his contacts, he called Captain Flynn. He'd have Agent Bale's number. Ian Flynn wasn't the real captain of the *Sea Dog* anymore, but he'd kept the title.

Flynn was the one who'd recruited Duke to join the crew, and Duke was one of the few people on the planet who could talk sense to the man. Flynn

had an iron will and a questionable moral compass, but Duke knew something no one else did.

He knew where Flynn had buried his treasure.

And Flynn would do anything to keep it hidden.

“Duke?” Flynn sounded tired when he answered. “What’s going on?”

“I need Agent Bale’s phone number.”

He paused. “Why?”

If Duke told the captain about the mermaid, he wouldn’t be able to resist trying to leverage her for some personal gain. “Doesn’t matter, but I need to talk to him.”

Another pause. “What’s going on, Duke? Does this involve the crew?”

Duke rolled his eyes, his frustration causing his nautical accent to bleed into his voice. “I’m not going to answer yer questions, mate. Ye want off this phone, give me the damned number.”

Flynn finally capitulated, told Duke the number, and ended the call.

Step one was complete. He put Agent Bale’s number into his phone, pressed the call button, and waited.

“This is Agent Bale.” His voice was all business.

Duke didn’t bother covering his accent, in fact, it might help if Agent Bale recognized him. “Hey, mate, it’s Duke from the *Sea Dog* crew.”

“Duke?”

He could almost see Agent Bale running down the crew list to find his name.

“Flynn’s first mate.” Duke stared out his bedroom window. “I’m calling about the mermaid comb.”

“What about it?”

Here was the tricky part. He didn’t want to expose Annika, but he wasn’t sure how else to get the comb back. “I need to pick it up from you.”

“That’s not possible. It’s being catalogued for the vault.” His tone deepened. “If you’re looking to order a mermaid to do your bidding, you’re going to have to find some other way.”

Duke frowned. “I don’t want anything from a mermaid.”

“Then why do you need the comb?”

Duke sighed. There was no way to get the comb without acknowledging who was looking for it, but he could still keep her identity out of it. “The owner is looking for it.”

“You met the...” His words faded and doors opened and closed on the

other end of the line before he continued. "Explain to me what's going on here."

"She attacked me last night while she was searching for the comb. Apparently it's in the wrong hands..." He thought about the portals she'd talked about, hidden at the bottom of the ocean. In the light of day, it sounded even more outlandish than it had the night before. "Look, it doesn't belong to you. You've got no right to lock it up. I can give it back to her."

"I'll need to meet her before I turn it over."

Duke looked over at his boots with the new bullet hole. "I'll see if she'll agree to your terms."

"Good. Call me back." And Bale was gone.

Duke cursed under his breath. Why had he agreed to get involved in this mess? Maybe he already knew why. He'd spent lifetimes fighting to protect others. It had been his calling since he'd been a boy defending his younger siblings. Then he'd defended his captain, the crew, and now, he protected strangers for money.

But Annika wasn't part of his crew or his family, and he'd offered his allegiance for knowledge instead of cash. He looked at his boot again.

It had been the desperation in her eyes.

There was a stark pain and loneliness there that he'd seen in his own reflection recently. Two years ago, the effects of the Holy Grail had started to wear off and the crew hadn't been healing as quickly. For a brief time, death had been back on the table. After they'd recovered the Grail, he'd taken another drink without any hesitation.

Immortality had been his reality for so long, he couldn't fathom facing growing old and fading from this world.

But Colton, their quartermaster, had refused another drink. He'd fallen in love and wanted a family with Skye. Then Drake, their carpenter, had traded his immortality for a magic root to save the woman he loved. And now, his best friend on the crew, Caleb, had bartered his immortality to the Atlanteans and was considering not taking another drink.

There were going to be painful deaths, irreplaceable losses in his future, and it had him questioning his choice to drink again. Too late now.

When Annika had shown up and needed his help, the chance to have a real purpose, even for a short time, had been too exciting to pass up. She did shoot him, but he was determined to see this through anyway.

He put on a pair of cargo shorts and a black tank top. Since his boots

were out of commission, he put on tennis shoes. His long hair was still wet from the shower, but he brushed it back and pulled it into a knot at the back of his head to contain the curls.

When he arrived at Williams Southern Kitchen, Annika was already seated at a table in the back corner.

Her long blond hair was up in a ponytail, exposing the line of her slender neck. He wet his lips and approached her, making a mental note to mingle with some women soon.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been in a night club or a bar. Ever since his crew had started accepting work from Agent Bale and Department 13, he'd been sailing more. Juggling that with taking over the security company from Greyson hadn't left much time for anything else. He hadn't made the conscious decision not to date, but when Annika's blue eyes locked on his, parts of his body were very alert and reminding him it had been a couple of years since he'd had a woman in his arms.

He took the chair across from her and smiled. "Morning, lass."

She took a sip of her ice water. "Did you contact Agent Bale?"

Apparently, she wasn't a morning person. And last night she'd shot him, so she didn't seem to warm up much in the evenings either. "I did. He wants to meet you to be sure the comb is yours."

She rolled her eyes, shaking her head. "I suppose he'll try to dip me in the water and take some photos for his records."

He shrugged. "He didn't mention a dunking tank, but I could ask."

The corners of her lips trembled like she might've been just on the edge of a smile, but that was as far as it got. "We need to arrange the meeting as soon as possible."

"When are you available? Do you work?"

She shook her head. "My only job is recovering lost mermaid combs and defending those who find themselves trapped on land."

Duke could relate to the calling to protect others, but he still wondered how she made money to survive on land. Before he could ask, the server came by.

They ordered their food, and she lowered her voice. "Explain how you didn't limp after I shot your foot last night. You barely bled. What are you?"

"I'm a pirate." He winked. Her annoyed glare only encouraged him. He'd make her smile eventually. She had no idea she'd met one of the most

stubborn pirates on the seven seas. "I'm also immortal."

She blinked and took another swallow of her water. "But you're... human?"

"Yeah." He leaned in closer. "We plundered the Holy Grail. One sip from the Lord's cup and I heal pretty quickly from any wound. I also don't age."

Her gaze wandered over him as the server approached with a tray of food. "I've got a Southern Breakfast platter?"

Duke raised his finger. "That'd be me."

She placed an oversized plate in front of him filled with scrambled eggs, bacon, country ham, and grits, and then a small plate of biscuits and gravy. She picked up the other plate. "And you must be the gooey cinnamon roll." She handed Annika her plate and smiled. "Let me know if you need anything else."

Once she was gone, Annika took a bite of her breakfast and moaned.

His body reacted like she'd just slid her hand up his thigh to stroke him. *Fuck*. He shifted in his chair. "Explain how a mermaid owns a car and a cell phone?"

"It's a rental." She smirked. It wasn't a smile, but he was getting closer. "I've amassed plenty of human money. Mermaids are also immortal."

He raised a brow. "So, if I shot you in the foot, would you bleed?" She flinched and her breath caught. He frowned, shaking his head. "That wasn't a threat. I was kidding."

"No. It's not that." She lifted her gaze from her plate to his face. "I heal when I'm in the sea."

He wasn't sure why there was so much trepidation in her eyes. He lowered his voice. "Is that why you're in Savannah? So you're close to the salt water?"

She broke eye contact, poking at the cinnamon roll with her fork. "I can't risk getting into the open water while humans have my comb."

His brows pinched together as he dropped his voice to a whisper. "Have you been out of the water since we got back from Atlantis?" He thought back. "It's been a month."

She nodded and took another drink from her glass. "I've never been on land for this long without a swim to rejuvenate."

"Maybe I could go in the river with you." A voice whispered through his head that this wasn't his problem, but he couldn't help himself. "If you get a dazed obey-your-comb look, I'll drag you back out."

She shook her head with a soft laugh that was anything but happy. "It doesn't work like that." She took another bite, and when she lifted her head again, all traces of emotion were gone. "The sooner I meet your Agent Bale, the sooner I can put this nightmare behind me."

"He's in Washington, D.C., but maybe we can meet him tomorrow morning." He took out his phone and sent Bale a text.

Can you be on the deck of the Sea Dog tomorrow at 10 a.m.? You bring the comb and I'll bring Annika.

They finished their food and he tried a few more times, unsuccessfully, to get her to smile. He paid the bill and held the door open for her as they left the restaurant. "I don't have to work until tonight. What's on your agenda today?"

She rubbed the back of her neck. "Something that doesn't require walking."

He raised a brow. "I thought I was the one who got shot in the foot."

She *almost* smiled. "I apologize for shooting you. I'm getting desperate to find my comb. I never imagined it would take me this long. For other merfolk, I've been able to recover combs within a couple of days."

"It's Agent Bale's job to stop paranormal relics from slipping through his fingers. He's not eager to give this one up, either."

A crease formed on her forehead. "Does he want me to grant him wishes?"

"I think he's more worried about someone else asking for wishes." He looked over at her as they walked toward her car. Her gait was slow and intentional, as if she had a pebble in her shoe. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She looked up at him and nodded. "I will be."

He scanned the shady square. "You could come to my place. I don't have to work until tonight, and I have a nice television set."

She shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

He wished he could figure her out. Maybe he'd meet someone after the concert tonight. Getting laid might help him interact better with this mermaid, since she obviously wasn't interested in him. "Then I guess I'll see you on the *Sea Dog* tomorrow morning. You know where it's docked?"

"Yes. Thanks, Duke." She popped the locks on the car and looked back at him. "I really do appreciate your help."

But not his company. He shouldn't care.

He shouldn't be getting involved at all. She pulled out onto the street, her

face tight, and he swore he saw a tear. Something was going on with her, but how could he help someone who had such a deep line in the sand?

It didn't matter. Tomorrow they'd have the comb and he'd never see her again.

He shouldn't care about that either.

Chapter Four

Agent Bale sat behind his desk and rubbed his forehead. They hadn't even finished documenting the mermaid comb properties yet, and already he needed to return it.

But it wasn't his to keep. It was probably better to give it back anyway.

He got up and headed for the elevator. He rode it down to the vault level, wishing it moved faster. The doors finally opened and he hustled toward the preservation room, but when he turned the corner, Holli Porter almost crashed into him. Her long, dark brown hair was up in a bun on top of her head and her arms were full of binders that were now all over the floor.

"I'm so sorry, sir!" She pushed her glasses up her nose and quickly knelt down to start picking them up.

"My fault." He bent down to help her collect them, casually scanning the labels on the front covers. "Atargatis." He handed them back to her, arching his brow. "Why are you pulling the files on the first mermaid?"

She stood up with all the folders. "Just being thorough, sir. I know you don't visit often, but the vault data collection department works really hard to find every possible connection with new additions to be sure we make the right placement in the vault. Imagine if we stored Pandora's Box near the clay vessel entrapping Apep, the Egyptian god of chaos." She shuddered. "I'm just pulling all the files we have on mermaids to look for mentions of combs and their properties."

That seemed logical. "Do you think the comb could belong to Atargatis?"

"No," she rushed to say, and then shook her head. "Well. I don't think so."

"Good to know." He cleared his throat. "The comb is actually why I came down here. Is it still being processed?"

"Yes." She turned around and pointed down the hall behind her. "It's in

the preservation department being prepared for storage.”

“Thanks, Holli.” David moved around her and started for the preservation room. When he glanced back, she was already gone.

By the time he reached the preservation room, the door was closed. He knocked, just in case it wasn’t safe to open it, but no one answered. Grasping the handle, he twisted. It wasn’t locked.

He opened the door and frowned. It was dark in the windowless room. He checked the time on his phone. It was ten thirty in the morning. At least one staff member should’ve been there by now.

Adrenaline laced his bloodstream as he turned on the lights.

Nothing.

He drew his weapon and made his way past the file cabinets and worktables piled with boxes. Different relics were in various states of processing across a large worktable.

The lost cipher of Dr. John Dee, that could translate the Enochian language of the angels, was locked in a bulletproof acrylic box with an item number engraved in the corner. The relic could allow humanity to unlock the end of the world, thus earning it a spot in the apocalyptic section of the vault. A knotted mahogany wand with an ID tag hanging from one end sat on the other table.

When he finally reached the employee locker room, he found a man, unconscious, lying face down on the floor. He rushed over, checking for a pulse. *Steady and even*. He rolled him over and his eyes widened.

“Hector? What are you doing down here?”

Hector Garcia was one of David’s field agents. Why was he on one of the sublevel floors?

Hector groaned, wincing as his eyes fluttered open. “Agent Bale?”

David helped Agent Garcia to his feet, ready to support him if he lost his balance. “What happened?”

“I can’t remember, exactly.” Hector rubbed the back of his head. “I came down here to give Athena’s Amulet of Wisdom to Ben, so it could be returned to the vault, but Agent Kinney wasn’t down here, so I...” He looked around and frowned. “It’s gone.”

Damn it. The amulet wasn’t dangerous, but it was priceless and irreplaceable. Agent Ben Kinney was the lead for the preservation department, and although David rarely interacted with the sublevel departments, he’d never had any complaints about Ben. He was reliable and

dedicated to the department.

Could he be the leak David was searching for?

“Do you remember who attacked you?” David asked.

Garcia shook his head. “Sorry. They hit me from behind. It seemed like a taser or something. I seized up and then everything went black.”

David gripped his shoulder. “Just to be on the safe side, go up and see Petra in the occult division. Ask her to check you for any hexes or spells.” He paused and studied Garcia for a moment. “Do you need help getting up there?”

“I don’t think so.” Hector took a couple of tentative steps and shook his head slowly. “I think I’m fine.”

“Good.” David nodded. “I’ll be up to check on you in the infirmary soon.”

“Yes, sir.” Hector walked out and David scanned the room, taking a closer look at everything.

When he reached the end of the second worktable, he found a new, seamless acrylic cube.

According to the sticker next to it, the container was filled with salt water gathered from the Atlantic Ocean to preserve the mermaid’s comb. David stared into the container, his pulse thumping loudly in his ears.

The water-filled cube was empty.

He quickly searched the area.

Nothing.

Shit.

He’d agreed to meet the mermaid in Savannah tomorrow morning. He needed that damn comb. He’d been hunting for a leak, but now it seemed he also had a thief on his hands.

The problems inside Department 13 were bigger than he’d realized.

He smashed the elevator button, then took out his cell phone and scrolled to Brenda Quinn’s number. She’d been his personal assistant for the past ten years. He trusted her implicitly. He pressed her name and waited.

She answered as he stepped into the elevator. “David? Are you okay? I heard about Hector.”

Brenda wasn’t a field agent, and she also was the only person in the building who called him by his first name. He watched the floors light up above the door, willing the elevator to move faster. “I need you to activate Black Box protocol. Now.”

“How long do you want the lockdown enforced?”

Until he found that damned comb. “Until five o’clock.”

“Will do.” She ended the call and the elevator doors opened.

The lockdown alarm was already blaring through the halls, the overhead lights flashing in time with each screech. Brenda was efficient.

David strode down the hall to Kingsley’s office and went inside.

King clenched his jaw, lifting his red-rimmed eyes. “I cannot work in these conditions.”

“I’m afraid it’s a necessity at the moment.”

His programmer cursed under his breath, shaking his head. “I can’t hear myself think.”

“Then I hope your employment roster list is ready for me? The sooner I find my leak, the sooner it’ll be quiet in here again.”

“By all means, go find your leak.” He handed a printout to David.

“Thanks, Kingsley.” He skimmed the names as he headed for his office to grab a few talismans. Judging by what had happened to Agent Garcia, the leak might also be utilizing some of the relics that hadn’t yet been stored in the vault.

He’d focus on the vault level employees first. Hopefully, by five o’clock he’d have both the mermaid comb and the leak.

Chapter Five

Until Annika had her comb again, it was too dangerous to risk a swim. Whoever had it could swipe the prongs through the water and the call would be hypnotic. Impossible to refuse.

But not returning to the water was already taking its toll. It had been a month since her last swim in the open water.

This wasn't her first time on land. Thousands of Earth years ago, it had been her idea to explore Earth, and that decision had led her to take it upon herself to retrieve missing combs for other mermaids around the globe. It was her fault they were here.

In the early 1900s, she'd sold her jeweled necklaces and invested the money in human treasures like real estate and gold bars. She'd hired trusted human assistants who could wire her money anywhere, learned to shoot guns, fight in hand-to-hand combat, and never looked back.

She'd become the warrior her people needed in this world of mankind.

But weeks had passed and still no comb. It was out of desperation that she'd approached Duke. Shooting him had probably been irrational, but she was running out of time and patience.

Climbing the flight of stairs up to her tiny granny flat apartment was agony.

How much longer could she go on like this? It didn't matter. Soon she would have her comb.

Annika spent the rest of the day nursing her feet and wishing she could stop thinking about the immortal pirate. Why did he have to wear that damned tank top to breakfast? Had he not noticed what his chiseled arms did to every woman in the restaurant? His intricate tattoos along his biceps and shoulders were works of art that she'd caught herself wanting to trace with her fingertips.

And why did he have to be so kind to her?

Her attraction to him was an annoyance, nothing more.

She was dying. This was no time to get attached to a human. Even if she recovered her mermaid comb, there was no future for a land dweller with an aquatic being. Surely, he could see this too.

But he'd invited her to his place anyway. For a moment, she had wanted to say yes, but this strange attraction would be over soon enough. Once she had her comb back, she could swim to the depths of the ocean and heal. She never had to see him again.

That thought didn't lift her spirits.

She sat on her loveseat and groaned as she pulled off her shoes. Tears filled her eyes. Red, angry blisters covered her feet. She took a few slow breaths, getting a handle on the pain. Once the tears were at bay, she reached for the diaper cream she kept on the table and slathered it on her sore toes, spreading it all over her feet.

It dulled the ache, but the wounds wouldn't heal. Only saltwater from the ocean could do that.

When the pain was finally bearable, she hobbled into the bathroom and filled the tub. This was the only water that would be safe. Her comb couldn't command her from here.

But it wouldn't sustain her or heal her.

She stepped into the bathtub and slid under the water. Her legs pressed together and her feet fanned out until she had one fin. She lifted it from the water and a single tear escaped the corner of her eye. Her beautiful fin was covered in holes and tears, thin and flimsy, and her scales were no longer a lush, shiny green with their peacock-blue tint. They were pale silver.

The color of a dead fish in a human grocery store.

If she didn't get back in the ocean soon, she'd be just as dead. Her immortality depended on a saltwater habitat, like her home on Neptune. She'd pondered scooping a bucket of water from the river to bathe in, but it was too risky. One drop of water and she'd have a tail instead of legs.

Closing her eyes, she sank beneath the surface and dozed.

In her dreams, she swam free in the ocean, racing the dolphins and playing games with the whale calves. Her tail was healed, the pain a distant memory, and she never wanted to wake up. As she swam beneath the surface, a simple melody resonated from the depths, calling to her, tempting her.

She woke with a start, splashing water onto the floor.

Someone was summoning her. The melancholy song of her comb.

She was far enough from the Savannah River to resist the pull, but it left her mentally exhausted. She lifted herself from the tub and sat on the edge, allowing her fin to settle on the floor. It split into two, revealing her wounded feet and a new blister on her ankle.

The damage was getting worse.

Once she had her comb, she could dive back into the Savannah River and swim for days. But she needed to find it before it was too late.

She walked into the tiny bedroom, proud of herself for not hobbling, and pulled on her *The Little Mermaid* pajama pants, a purple tank top, and her fluffy slippers.

Her stomach rumbled, reminding her about the leftovers she'd brought back from the restaurant. She opened the fridge, took out the fried chicken strips, and sat in front of the television set. She found a documentary about an octopus and settled in. Seeing the coral reefs and sea creatures was therapeutic while she was missing the ocean.

After a couple of hours, she checked her phone and found a text from Duke.

I think I already know the answer, but I'm working security at the Tyler Blake concert tonight. I have an extra ticket if you want to come. Let me know.

She looked down at her blistered feet and sighed. Just the thought of standing all night made her wince. But if she brushed him off again, how many more chances would he give her? She shouldn't want any.

But she did.

I can't. Sorry. See you tomorrow on the boat.

A few minutes passed. He didn't answer. Of course, he didn't. She'd given him no reason to.

But then another text popped up.

According to our agreement, my involvement is based on learning information about mermaids that you agreed to supply. So, how about after the concert I bring over a couple of beers and a pizza to your place?

He was tenacious. Maybe if she soaked in the tub again, she could rejuvenate a little more. And she did promise him answers in trade for his help contacting Agent Bale about her comb.

She texted him her address and then sent one more.

Pineapple and Canadian bacon on the pizza please.

A moment later, one more message came through.

An insult to pizzas everywhere!

She laughed before she could rein it in. The sound echoed through her empty studio and through her cavernous chest, where her heart used to be. She sobered and sent back one more.

No pineapple, no deal.

She stood, wincing at the pain in her feet. Her phone buzzed again.

Are all merfolk as shrewd as you?

A smile crept up on her as her fingers tapped the screen. The curve to her lips was as foreign as the flirtations she was fumbling through.

No. Just me.

She waited for a reply and realized that for the last few minutes, she'd forgotten about the pain radiating up from her feet.

His response surprised her. *Can't wait to see you.*

She stared at her screen and set her phone on the counter. What was happening here?

Nothing. He was assisting her in retrieving her comb. She hadn't expected to enjoy his company, but nothing had changed. Once she had the comb, she'd dive into the depths, regenerate, stash the comb, and continue her work for other merfolk.

Simple.

But she had to admit, she was looking forward to seeing him again too. *Foolish.*

He made her laugh and smile. She couldn't remember the last time that had happened. It almost frightened her. She didn't deserve any happiness.

She deserved the pain of dying a slow death.

Sighing, she shuffled to the bathroom and sat on the toilet lid. Bracing herself, she slid her feet out of the slippers and rubbed ointment on the rash and blisters. She'd tried all sorts of human medicinal creams and salves. Nothing healed the sloughing skin and blisters. This wasn't a human malady. Her flesh was deteriorating, stripping her of her immortality slowly, day by day.

After the sores on her feet, and the new ones on her ankles, were dressed in the cream, she went to the mirror and took out the rubber band tying her hair back.

Her long blond locks fell down her back and over her shoulders in a heap.

She missed the way it floated around her head in her world, weightless, with a life of its own. The gravity of living on land pulled at her. Her breasts were heavy, leading her to buy a bra from the city.

She took off her shirt and the bra followed. In the reflection, she cupped her breasts, lifting them the way the ocean used to. Even her blue eyes were duller. They used to practically glow in the sea, but here...the daylight and technology attacked them daily.

But Duke had found her attractive. She'd seen him adjust himself in his shorts. It made her curious. She'd tangled tails with male merfolk in the sea many times, but she'd never experienced sex on land, with legs. Would it be as good?

She would never know. Tomorrow, she would take her comb and leave this place.

But she had tonight.

She looked down at the mess of her feet and sighed. Duke hadn't seen her damaged feet. Perhaps sex could be managed with socks and shoes on. She stared at the bathtub, the temptation of soaking under the water calling to her. It didn't matter that she'd already soaked. The water reminded her of home. Even if it couldn't heal her, it would relax her.

On the land, there was another way to relax, or at least that's what the movies and books would have her believe. She wandered into the bedroom and pulled off her pajama pants. She didn't wear underwear. She didn't see the point of them. The weight of her breasts needed a bra, but the juncture of her new legs didn't need multiple layers of covering.

She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes, exploring her body with her hand. Everything below her navel was new territory. When her fingertips explored the soft mound between her legs, she parted them wider, giving her hand better access. Her exploration sent tingles and awareness through her body, stoking a smoldering heat low in her belly.

In her mind, it was no longer her own fingers sliding through her folds. It was Duke's.

His body weighed hers down as he kissed her lips and dipped his rough fingers into her opening. Her breath caught as her back arched. He dragged his lips down the center of her chest, sucking at one nipple and then the other, sending bolts of pleasure to her core.

Her fingers moved up and she discovered a very sensitive nub. Her lips parted as she gasped, rubbing it and tapping it, gauging the pleasure as the

desire swelled like high tide.

This was good.

And she wanted more.

Her imagination conjured Duke's dark brown eyes staring into hers with a yearning that set her on fire from the inside out. She rubbed her core faster as she feverishly bucked her hips into her hand. Suddenly, there was a release that seized every muscle in her body.

Gulping for air, she stared up at the ceiling. As the aftershocks slowed, she relaxed and closed her eyes as her lips curved into a blissful smile.

Maybe life on land wasn't *all* bad.

...

"Oh my God, look, Jamie! It's Aquaman!"

Duke clenched his jaw as the inebriated women slithered through the exiting crowd like trout swimming upstream to spawn. Earlier today, he'd thought he might entertain a willing woman after the concert, but as the day wore on, he realized he wasn't looking forward to getting laid as much as he was to bringing pizzas over to Annika's place.

The two women bumped into him as one fumbled for her cell phone. "Can we get a picture with you?"

He raised a brow. "I'm the head of security, not Aquaman."

"But you *look* like him," the one with the phone replied as she held it up.

He bent his knees and smiled for her photo. He'd been around for lifetimes before Jason Momoa had come into the world, but in the past ten years, he'd been singled out and mistaken for the actor at almost every concert he attended.

The women turned around. Their pupils were dilated and their breath reeked of beer. The one with the camera wet her lips, staring up at him.

"What time do you get off?"

The other one bumped her friend with her hip. "You just want to get him off."

"You could help me." They both looked up at him, laughing with hunger in their eyes.

Duke chuckled, shocked at his lack of interest. Earlier today, Annika had moaned over her cinnamon roll, and he'd been instantly hard enough to need an adjustment in his shorts, but these two beautiful women were throwing themselves at him, potentially offering a ménage à trois, and...

nothing.

“Sorry ladies, I have a date with a pizza.”

The redhead rolled her eyes. “You can have pizza anytime. *I’m* a once in a lifetime offer.”

Her friend slid her arm around her waist. “And I’m dessert.”

Duke shook his head. “Not interested.” He gestured to the exit. “Be careful on the way out.”

One of them cursed under her breath as they walked away. His disinterest in the women puzzled him. That pair was his usual type. No chance of a relationship, just a good time for a night. They were pretty and willing and...all he could think about was the mermaid who wanted fruit on her pizza.

After the last of his team clocked out, Duke checked in with the band’s manager and finally headed for his truck. He should’ve warned Annika he’d be late. The show had finished relatively early, at ten o’clock, but it was eleven thirty now, and by the time he had pizzas, it would be midnight.

He sent Annika a text on his way to his security van.

Just finished up. Still want pizza?

Domino’s was open until midnight, so he called and ordered the pizzas. If she was already sleeping, he’d just put hers in his fridge. He could bring her cold pizza in the morning.

Before Agent Bale delivered her comb and she disappeared back into the ocean. Duke probably wouldn’t ever see her again.

His phone buzzed with a text.

Starving.

He chuckled and sent back, *Be there in a half hour.*

On the way to pick up the pizzas, he made a mental list of questions he wanted to ask. If he only had tonight, he had to make it count. It also meant if he was going to coax a smile out of that mermaid warrior, he was running out of time.

Greedily, he ached hear her laugh, too. Not a sarcastic chuckle, but real, full-bodied laughter. Although, part of him wondered if he could handle the beauty of a joyful Annika. She was leaving. Soon. He shoved the thought away. All that mattered was the present. Tonight.

First, he wanted to ask her about how she got here. She’d mentioned the undersea portals. Did she come from another planet? And while he’d been pursuing his doctorate in history, he’d studied Sumerian myths, and the

story of the mermaid who seduced a prince. Was any of it true? And what about the temples and followers of Atargatis? She was the first mermaid mentioned in writing. Did Annika know her?

He should be making a list.

When he pulled into Domino's and picked up his order, the pizzas were hot, and the scent reminded him he was hungry—well, more like famished.

If he wasn't taking a pizza over to his new mermaid partner, he'd already be eating a piece on the drive home. He followed the navigation from his phone and ended up in front of a quirky metaphysical shop called the Mystical Mermaid. Lights were on in the loft above the store.

That must be her apartment.

He carried the pizzas up and knocked on the door. Annika opened it, wearing a purple tank top and *The Little Mermaid* pajama pants with purple fluffy slippers. Her hair was down, and she was a fucking vision.

"Nice pants."

She peeked down and back to his face. Still no smile, but there was a playful spark in her blue eyes. "I couldn't resist." She looked at the pizza boxes in his hands. "Are you going to come inside?"

He grinned as he stepped into her place. "Yes." He looked back at her and headed toward the kitchenette. "I forgot to get plates, so we might need to eat it right out of the box like barbarians, unless you've got some."

She walked past him and bent down to the cupboard below the sink, giving him a prime view of her ass. Blood shot to his groin, forcing him to make an adjustment. So, his junk was still functional, it just seemed to prefer this mermaid, who would be leaving tomorrow.

At least his heart wasn't involved. His dick would recover and find new favorites. His heart was choosier. He'd walked this earth for almost two hundred fifty years now, and he'd managed to keep from getting attached to anyone. His only love was for the *Sea Dog* and her crew. Until recently, loving his fellow crewmates hadn't involved any risk. They were immortal. He'd never have to watch them age and die.

But that was all changing.

Annika was immortal...

She handed him a plate, interrupting his thoughts. "I think I have some napkins too."

She walked past him to another cupboard and the lavender scent of her hair enticed him.

He opened the pizza boxes and took a piece of the meat lover's, putting it on his plate. "Are you going to miss pizza when you're back in the water?"

"Not for long." She gave him a napkin, then grabbed a slice of her fruity abomination. "I'll be back. It probably won't be Savannah though." She took a bite and groaned with delight. "I've been to so many cities."

"Any favorites?" He took another bite, trying not to notice how delicious her lips looked when they were slick with pizza grease.

As if she could hear his thoughts, she dabbed her napkin on her mouth. "San Diego and Honolulu are nice. Malibu, Myrtle Beach, Manhattan, and Cape Cod."

"All beach towns." He finished his piece and reached for another one.

She shrugged. "Most mermaid affairs happen near the water."

"That makes sense, I guess." He glanced at her fridge. "I didn't grab any drinks. Do you have anything handy?"

"I think so." She opened the fridge and took out a bottle of milk. He blinked. He'd never had milk with pizza before, but before he could say anything, she handed him a glass. "This might be your last chance to ask about mermaids."

She bent over to put the bottle of milk away, and he took a long sip, hoping the cold liquid would cool the fire she stoked in him. "Yeah, I had a million questions on the way over here, but now...I just want to know about you."

"About me?" She arched a brow as she approached the table. "Like what?"

"Like, how did you climb out of the water a month ago and rent this place and get a car? You said you own real estate, but you couldn't have come out of the ocean with a cell phone and ATM card."

Her lips quivered. Close, but no smile. "I have a human assistant who arranges everything for me. I saved her daughter from drowning fifteen years ago, so she knows what I am."

He leaned his hip against the counter, studying her while he polished off his next pizza slice. "The legends warn us to be wary of mermaids because they'll drown sailors, but you're out there rescuing humans."

She swallowed her pizza and set the plate on the counter. There were shadows in her eyes as she walked past him to the small loveseat. "We didn't know humans couldn't breathe underwater like we can. Most of the drownings were accidental."

He followed her over and sat beside her. The loveseat forced him to be close to her. He didn't mind, of course, but it made it hard to concentrate when her thigh brushed against his.

"I didn't mean to upset you."

She shook her head and looked over at him. "You didn't. Talking about the past is sometimes...painful."

This wasn't getting him any closer to a smile. She pulled her legs up underneath her and one slipper fell off onto the floor. He bent to pick it up and caught a quick glimpse of her wounded foot. He handed it to her. "What happened to your foot?"

She shrugged. "I've been on land too long. It'll be fine."

"May I? Foot rubs are my specialty."

"No, thanks." She popped the slipper back on, but Duke didn't miss the tiny wince. This was why she was walking so slowly.

He lifted his gaze and noticed a tattoo of an old skeleton key dangling from a wire on her bicep. "Nice ink."

"I got it decades ago." She touched the key. "It's supposed to be the key to my heart." She looked at him from under her lashes. "The joke is, I don't have one."

He chuckled. "You talk tough, but you've been protecting your kind for centuries. I'd say you've got more heart than most."

She broke eye contact with a shrug. "It's nothing compared to all of yours."

He grinned. "You were checking out my arms earlier today?"

She pressed her lips together with an arched brow. "Please. I'm pretty sure you wore that tank top so every woman would check them out."

He chuckled. "Maybe just for a mermaid."

She studied him, narrowing her eyes slightly. "I thought you were only interested in the history of merfolk."

"You thought wrong." He took another bite of pizza, eyeing her. Usually, his easy charm had women smiling and at ease with him in spite of his towering size, but nothing seemed to crack through her emotional walls. He reached for his glass of milk. "I've been protecting everyone on my crew for centuries and I'm already tired, so I'm very curious how you keep up the fight after a thousand years."

Her eyes shone in the light. "Guilt, mostly." She brushed her hair back over her shoulder. "It was my idea to come and explore Earth. My people

built the interstellar portals and traveled into your oceans.”

“Interstellar?” He arched a brow. “As in other planets?”

“Yes.” She went on before he could pepper her with more questions about alien races. “I was too eager, and didn’t consider the ramifications. Once the portals were open, other beings also came through, and some of their intentions weren’t as harmless as ours.”

“Wow.” His mind was spinning with the new information. “What kind of beings?”

She shrugged. “The Atlanteans, the Arcturians, and then a few random trespassers from other galaxies came through to hunt humans for sport. That’s when we started guarding the portals.”

“Caleb, our navigator, met one of the Atlanteans. She was the one who gave him your comb.” Duke grasped the back of his neck, wishing he had written out all his questions. He lifted his gaze to her face. “All the stories and legends say Atargatis was the first mermaid.”

“I’m impressed you know my sister’s name.” She pulled her hair in front of her shoulder.

“Your...” He blinked. “Holy shit.” He chuckled, shaking his head. “Atargatis is your sister?”

“Yes.” She nodded, her lips hinting at a smile. “She was the first to make contact with humans and be written about, but we came to this planet together.”

Hearing her share her story made it easy to believe she trusted him, and to forget they had made a deal. That she was obligated to answer his questions. He pushed the thought away and tried to keep her talking. “Is she still here?”

She shook her head, breaking eye contact. “Not anymore. She went back to Neptune through the portal.”

Duke blinked. “I’m no man of science like my mate, Caleb, but...I thought Neptune is made of gasses, not water.”

She met his eyes. “What do you think your water is made of? Hydrogen and oxygen, it’s simply in a liquid state. Our bodies adapt quickly to every gas permutation.”

He wished Caleb were here to ask follow-up questions. Studying her for a moment, Duke’s tone softened. “Why didn’t you go with her?”

She shrugged, lifting her chin a notch. “I’m banished. I have no home.”

She grabbed her plate and stood to get more pizza, careful and slow.

Duke took in her every movement. She was proud and strong, but she wore it like a suit of armor. It made him wish she would let him in. He sighed. "I would have gotten another piece for you."

"I'm perfectly capable." She looked down at his foot. "You're already healed?"

He nodded. "I was fine before we left the dock last night." He set his plate down. "You might need a doctor."

She winced with each step as she came back to the loveseat. "Nothing will heal it except the sea, and I can't return without my comb. We already discussed this." She sat down and the hem of her pajama pants rose to expose angry welts and blisters on her ankle. "Let's talk about something else."

"Couldn't we just dip your feet into the water? I could carry you to the dock."

She set her plate on the table and put her hands in her lap, and he could almost feel the temperature change in the room. She hadn't meant for him to see her struggles.

And that made him ache to help her.

Her fingers balled into tight fists. "This was a mistake. You should go."

"Are you always such an island?"

She tilted her head slightly. "Excuse me?"

"You don't have to do everything yourself, like you're stranded on a deserted island. I can carry you, and we'll have you healed in a few minutes." He frowned, wondering why she didn't seem eager. "Does it take longer? You made it sound instant."

She pulled her hair back from her forehead. "I already explained. I can't risk being in the water. If someone swipes my comb in the tide, I'll be compelled to do whatever they ask."

"If I'm holding you while you put your feet into the river, then you're not going anywhere." He squeezed her leg just above her knee sending an unintended ripple of desire through him. "I'd never let you go."

Chapter Six

Annika stared at the pirate beside her. Could he be serious? More importantly, could it work?

There were other logistics to consider. As soon as her feet were wet, they would transform into her tail and her legs would fuse together. She'd be totally dependent on this man she barely knew.

She didn't depend on anyone but herself. "It's tempting, but I don't think it's a good idea."

Duke shook his head. "You can hardly walk." He pointed to the sores on her ankle. "Are you allergic to being on land?"

"No." She sighed and slid her foot free from the slipper, exposing her sloughing skin. "I'm dying, slowly, a little each day." She lifted her eyes to his face. "I can be on land for short periods of time. But I haven't been back in the sea since you docked with my comb."

"You've been a landlubber for a month?" Concern lined his eyes. "Let me take you to the water."

"Tomorrow I'll have my comb. I can make it until then."

He tipped his head toward the kitchen. "You could barely walk across the room for a piece of pizza. How are you going to get on board the *Sea Dog*?"

She wasn't sure. The only certainty was that she wasn't going to be helpless in the presence of a human. "I'll figure it out."

He cursed under his breath and stood up, heading into the kitchenette. His size made her loft seem much smaller. He closed the pizza boxes and peered over at her. "What if you bring your gun?"

"What?"

He came back toward her. A curl of his long hair had come loose from his ponytail and hung down the center of his forehead, tempting her to touch it. "If I do anything you don't approve of, you can shoot me. You've already

done it once. It won't kill me, but it'll keep me in line because it does hurt like hell."

She stared at him, unable to bite back the smile that curved her lips. "Are you serious?"

He grinned and sat down beside her again. "We should go now. It's late enough that River Street should be deserted."

"Okay." She waited for him to move, but he didn't. He just looked at her, his gaze wandering over her face. She sobered. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He shook his head like he was shaking off a trance. "I've been waiting to see you smile, but I wasn't prepared for the way it makes your eyes sparkle. You're beautiful."

Heat crept up her neck. Merfolk came in all sizes and colorings, and they were all attractive by human standards, but something about hearing him call her beautiful made her heart flutter. *Strange.*

She broke eye contact, turning to look into her bedroom. "My gun is on the nightstand."

He chuckled. "You're really going to bring it along?"

She looked at him again. "Just because you tell me you think I'm pretty doesn't mean I can trust you. Besides, you might need it to stop me if someone uses the comb."

His eyebrows shot up. "I'm not going to shoot you."

"Unless I try to swim away."

He went into the bedroom, calling out, "You could only swim away if I let go, and I already told you that's not happening."

His words warmed her all over. He came back out and helped her slide her arms through her shoulder holster. He started to scoop her up, but she pushed him back.

"Wait." She looked down at Ariel smiling up at her from her pants. They'd be ruined by her tail. "I should change clothes first."

She turned and sighed. Her bedroom seemed far away on her sore feet.

As if he could read her mind, Duke bent down and scooped her up into his arms like she weighed nothing. He walked into her bedroom and looked around. "Closet or dresser?"

"Closet, please."

He took her to the closet and very carefully lowered her feet to the ground. She peeled off her pants and reached into the closet for a black peasant skirt. As she stepped into it and pulled it up, she found Duke with

his back to her.

She frowned. "Is everything okay?"

"Aye. Just trying to give you some privacy." He peeked back at her. "Wasn't expecting you to get half naked. I just figured we weren't close enough friends for that yet."

"Sorry. I forget about human modesty when it comes to their bodies." She looked up into his eyes. "I think I'm ready now."

He didn't hesitate, just lifted her up again and headed for the door.

By the time they got to the dock on River Street, all the bars and businesses were dark. Duke was right. Their timing was good. He came around to the passenger side and picked her up.

She tried not to nuzzle into his chest. Tried. She didn't succeed.

He carried her past the *Sea Dog*, and farther down the street, until he found a place to set her down next to the water. He sat behind her, straddling his legs so she was between them, then he wrapped his arms around her waist.

She held her feet out straight, hovering above the river. The scent of the salt water had her heart racing and if she'd been alone, there was a chance she might have giggled with anticipation.

His chest was warm on her back, reminding her she was far from alone.

His deep voice rumbled against her ear. "What are ye waiting for, lass?"

"I need to be certain you won't let go."

He shook his head, tightening his hold around her. "I've got you."

"I'll be very strong if the comb is in the water. I'll fight you to break free. You might have to shoot me."

"The comb is locked in a vault. It's not in the water, and I'm not going to shoot you." His breath teased the bare skin on her shoulder.

She turned her head to find herself nose to nose with the handsome pirate. The moonlight highlighted the angles of his face. His lips parted as his gaze locked on hers.

"Thank you," she whispered as she brushed her lips to his.

She dipped her feet into the cool water and moaned as the pain in her lower extremities washed away. He deepened the kiss, tilting his head as his tongue slid into her mouth, twining slowly with hers. Her tail churned in the water, the ache fading away as she reached a hand up, tangling her fingers in the back of his hair.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she tasted his lips over and over.

Until a whisper hissed in the back of her mind. *Come to me.*

Her entire body stiffened and her teeth elongated. Her comb.

She jerked away from him, flailing her body as she pushed against him, struggling to break free. "Let me go!"

Her tail splashed in the water and they both fell into the river. But his hold on her didn't loosen. The call became more insistent, making her head throb and her limbs ache to swim.

But Duke didn't let go.

"Damn it!" His voice sounded distant, although he was right in front of her. "Fight it, Annika!"

She sank her teeth into his shoulder, blood filling her mouth.

"Fuck!" he shouted.

And suddenly, she was airborne. She hit the dock and coughed, her newly-healed tail vanishing as she rolled over onto her belly.

The spell was broken. She was free of her comb's compulsion.

Duke planted his hands on the side of the dock and pushed himself up, out of the river. He rushed over and knelt beside her. "Are you hurt?"

"No." She wiggled her toes. No pain. She sat up, staring at the blood soaking through his shirt. Shame swelled inside her. "I bit you."

He chuffed. "Just a scratch." He pulled out the neck of his shirt to expose the wound. "It's almost healed already, see?" He looked back at the river. "But apparently that comb isn't locked up like I was led to believe."

She shivered, shaking her head. "I can't risk touching the water again."

He inspected her feet. His touch was gentle and caring, yet a few minutes ago, he'd hurled her out of the ocean at least five feet.

"You're all healed for now."

But the truth sat right in front of them, whether he wanted to see it or not. She stood and looked up at the moon. "If I don't find it soon, I'll fade away."

"You're immortal."

She met his eyes. "I am when I'm in the water. Mermaids weren't meant to live on land."

He took her hand in his. "Then we'd better find it. We'll start with Agent Bale in the morning."

"Do you think he's still coming?"

"I'd bet money on it. Me and my crew find things for him. If someone's stolen the comb, we're the ones he'll hire to steal it back."

He didn't release her hand as they walked down the dock, and she didn't pull away. The simple comfort eased her anxiety.

When they got to the pavement, he bent down and picked her up. "Lots of broken glass around here. Wouldn't want to cut those gorgeous new feet."

She spread her toes and a soft giggle escaped her lips.

His jaw dropped, a sexy sparkle in his eyes. "Holy shit, the mermaid laughed."

She swatted his chest. "Only because I'm on the edge of madness with worry about my comb and who might command me to open the undersea portals."

"Bullshit." He arched a brow. "I think you enjoy having toes to waggle in the wind."

What was it about this man? She'd just experienced a harrowing near disaster, and he'd suffered a mermaid bite, and somehow, he made her laugh and smile.

She didn't deserve happiness and she didn't have time for merriment. She sobered as he carried her to the van. When he opened the door and put her inside, she reached for the seat belt.

He caught her hand and waited for her to meet his eyes. "I don't know what's happening in your head right now, but I want you to know, I don't regret that kiss." He slammed the door without another word.

She bit her lower lip to hold back a guilty smile.

She didn't regret it either.

Chapter Seven

David barely noticed the blaring alarm anymore.

He had narrowed his list down to three people who worked on the vault level of the building. He'd start with Holli. Since she was half of the vault data collection department, she'd need to gather information and document as many details as they could find about the relic before it was boxed up and logged into the vault.

But that also meant she was well aware of what the comb could do and the power it could wield.

He found her sitting at her desk in her small, windowless office. She looked up and plucked a foam earplug from her ear. "Agent Bale. What are you doing down here...again?"

"Since I bumped into you earlier today, Agent Garcia was attacked in the preservation area, and the mermaid comb is missing." He studied her reaction to this information, but judging by the way her eyes widened behind her glasses and how she shot out of her chair, she was either a great actress, or she didn't know about the missing comb.

"What happened to Ben and Eric?"

That was a good question. Ben Kinney was the lead in the preservation department, but Eric Gross was on David's list too. Eric was an engineer, and specialized in designing appropriate containers for each relic.

David crossed his arms. "I didn't see them."

She shook her head. "I hope they're all right."

David sat down in the folding chair in front of her desk. "Did you see anything odd today?"

"No." She stared at her open binders and slowly lifted her head. "Just running into you earlier." She hesitated and added, "I heard you were the one who found Agent Garcia in the preservation department? Isn't he a field

agent?”

“Yeah.” News traveled fast through Department 13. “He said he was attacked from behind, maybe with a taser.” He leaned forward in his chair. “Do you have one?”

“No.” She flinched, her lips parting slightly. “Are you...accusing me?”

“No. Just trying to rule you out.” He stood. “If you think of anything else, please let me know.” He stopped at the door and turned back. “What year did you join Department 13?”

She answered without the slightest hesitation. “2007. Why?”

“I was going through some employment records and it seems like there might be a few clerical errors. I’ll let you know if I have any more questions.”

He walked out without the answers he was hoping for.

She’d confirmed his hunch that her start date with Department 13 couldn’t have been back in 1987, but something else bothered him.

She’d asked about Ben.

Maybe he was being paranoid. Ben did work on her floor. She probably interacted with him at least in passing on the way to the elevator or in the halls.

But he hadn’t mentioned Ben was missing. David opened his file and scanned his notes about the lead engineer in the preservation department.

Ben was the only person who had worked down here longer than Holli, making him the only one who could potentially verify her start date. He’d worked in the preservation department for over thirty years now.

He sucked in a slow, deep breath. There was no way Holli was old enough to have worked for the department since 1987. It had to be a data entry error. Someone had entered her birthday into the hire date. That had to be it.

Five years ago, he wouldn’t even be considering this. But in the past few years, he’d discovered a demon had infiltrated their ranks, and now they had an information leak and a missing relic.

He stepped into the elevator and headed for the infirmary. He needed to find Ben Kinney, and Agent Garcia may have been the last person to see him.

His phone buzzed with a text from his assistant Brenda.

Do you want me to reschedule your meeting with Duke Proctor in Savannah?

Damn it. He checked the time. It was almost two o'clock in the morning. His meeting was at ten a.m. If he took the private jet, he could be there in ninety minutes. If he didn't recover the comb inside the building, he might need the *Sea Dog* crew to help him find it anyway.

He sent her a reply.

No. I'm going to need the private jet to take off by 8 a.m. Thanks.

He stepped off the elevator into the infirmary. Agent Garcia was sitting on the gurney, chatting with one of the department's healers. His coloring was already better. He sobered as David approached.

David nodded to the healer and she gave them some privacy. "How are you feeling?"

"Embarrassed, I guess." Hector rubbed his forehead. "Physically, I'm fine, sir."

"Good. I have a couple more questions about what happened in the preservation room today. Did you see Ben or Eric when you got down there?"

"No." He shook his head. "Neither of them were in the preservation room, but they both knew I was coming down."

David frowned. "Did you notice anyone or anything out of place?"

"No. I'm sorry." Garcia cleared his throat and added, "When I got down there, I called for Ben and Eric, and then the next thing I knew someone zapped me from behind." He sighed, reaching up to rub his opposite shoulder. "Do you think it was Eric or Ben who tased me?"

"I don't know. They're still missing."

David clenched his jaw, disgusted with himself all over again. His entire team was in danger because his security had been laxer than he'd realized. David squeezed Garcia's shoulder. "Thanks for the information. I'm glad you're all right."

He walked away with a sinking feeling. Where was Ben? Could he or Eric have taken the comb and set up Agent Garcia to take the fall?

One problem at a time. If the comb was still in the building, he needed to find it.

He left Agent Garcia and got back into the elevator. This time, he exited on the 13th floor, home of the occult division. He knocked on the open door to Petra's office.

Her head shot up from the tarot spread on her desk. Her auburn hair was pulled up into a ponytail. She adjusted her red-rimmed glasses. "Agent

Bale. Please tell me we can go home. I'm dozing off on my cards."

"Soon." He came into her office and closed the door behind him. "I'm wondering if you could cast a locator spell for a mermaid comb within the building. It's missing from the preservation room, but I need to know if it's still inside our walls someplace."

Her eyes widened. "We have a thief?"

"Maybe." He gestured up to the blaring alarms. "The sooner I have the comb, the sooner we can all go home."

"Give me just a second to set up." She cleared off her cards and unfolded a worn, beaded tapestry and chose a jade pendulum from her rack. "I can call on Archangel Chamuel to show me if the relic is still within these walls. A locator spell takes time, and it won't work if the comb is already outside."

"Thanks, Petra." David waited while she closed her eyes. When she opened them again, her gaze was distant, worlds away from this office. She raised her hand above the tapestry. The pendulum dangled and gradually started to spin in a large circle.

Her voice was soft, like a guided meditation. "Chamuel, are you willing to work with me to find the mermaid's comb?"

The pointed stone at the end of the beaded chain stopped spinning and swung toward the "yes" on the tapestry.

"Thank you," she responded. The pendulum spun in a circle again. "Is the comb still within the walls of this building?"

The pendulum circled long enough that David was beginning to doubt this was going to work, but finally the swing changed and pointed to "no".

Petra opened her eyes. "Sorry."

"Damn it. How is that possible?" He raked his hair back and went to the door. "Thanks for trying."

Shit. He pressed Brenda's name on his phone as he headed back to the elevator.

"Agent Bale? Did you find it?"

"No. It appears it's already out of the building. Wait a half hour and then you can cancel the Black Box Protocol."

"Yes, sir."

He took the elevator down to his floor and went to his office, mentally berating himself with every step. His mentor's warning from decades ago filled his head with fresh vigor.

You don't delegate enough, Bale. A director needs to be in the building managing staff, not running around the country cleaning up messes.

But David had dismissed the advice. He'd always been hands-on, putting himself on the front lines, rather than risking other team members.

And now it was biting him in the ass. *Shit.*

He grabbed a handful of GPS trackers and went down to the underground parking garage.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Agent Garcia or Holli Porter, or any of his team, but there was a thief within their ranks, and he needed to find them.

Fast.

Chapter Eight

Duke brought Annika up the stairs to her loft. No sense injuring her healed feet. Not when she couldn't go back in the water again.

He'd seen plenty of things in the past two hundred years, but since they'd started pirating for Department 13, he'd also faced demons, witches, werewolves, a cursed sword, Pandora's box, and even a woman who'd made a deal with Davy Jones.

But tonight, he'd kissed a mermaid.

He was still trying to wrap his head around it. When they were back in her loft, she hiked her skirt up, inspecting her feet. His attention was on her shapely legs. Less than an hour ago, she'd had a massive, strong tail with teal blue scales that reflected the moonlight. She'd been gorgeous in both forms.

She went into the kitchen, picked up the meat lover's pizza box, and handed it back to him. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow on the boat."

He took the box, unsure of why he felt disappointed. He hadn't expected her to ask him to spend the night.

But, to be fair, he hadn't expected to kiss her either.

If Agent Bale really didn't have her comb, she wouldn't be swimming away forever in the morning. He'd have more time to get to know her, to catch more of her smiles and hear her laughter.

There was a something about her, a sadness buried deep inside that drew him in. He wanted to help her. Maybe it had just been too long since he'd been with someone, but he'd had the opportunity earlier tonight and felt no interest.

How could drunk groupies compete with a warrior mermaid?

They couldn't.

He took the box. "I'm going to see this through. I'll help you find it."

She nodded and came closer. "Thank you, Duke. For everything."

He couldn't read her expression, so he turned to go. At the door, he stopped and looked at her over his shoulder. "You've got a great tail too."

She rewarded him with another laugh, then she rolled her eyes. "See you tomorrow."

He grinned all the way back to the van.

...

Duke woke up in his empty bed with a raging erection. He'd been dreaming of Annika, but in the fantasy, she hadn't handed him his pizza and sent him home.

In the dream, he'd spent all night exploring every inch of her beautiful body.

Reality was much less amazing.

He got in the shower and masturbated while the illusion was still fresh in his mind. Once he relieved the pressure, he could finally think straight. He had to be alert and ready if things went south. Agent Bale, or someone working for him, was trying to use Annika's comb to control her.

He didn't know if Agent Bale was aware of the underwater portals or what they could do, and he didn't know if Annika would be willing to tell him about them. Either way, they needed to find that comb.

There was a darker side to finding it that he didn't want to acknowledge.

The sooner they found her comb, the sooner Annika would leave him.

He'd only known her for a couple days and they hadn't even shared a bed yet. But he couldn't ignore the sadness in her eyes and her rare, hard-won smiles that tied him in knots inside.

Probably his "savior complex" at work again, but fuck, he'd tried therapy twice in his long life and no one had managed to erase his curse. Something about protecting others lifted some of the guilt he still carried for not being able to save his younger siblings as a boy, plus it gave him a purpose in this everchanging world. A reason for him to still be walking inside of it.

He pulled on a pair of jeans and reached for a T-shirt, but hesitated. Instead, he grabbed a blue tank top. She'd mentioned his arms before, and he was shameless enough to take every advantage to keep her here with him.

He brushed his wet hair back into a low ponytail and headed out.

When he parked on River Street, her Sentra was already there. He walked

over to her car. She got out as he approached and stood up without flinching. Last night had clearly helped.

She looked over at the ship. "I guess we should get on board?"

He caught her hand and she didn't jerk it free. He hadn't meant to touch her. The impulse had been instinctive. They crossed the gangplank to the *Sea Dog* in silence. When they stepped onto the top deck, he squeezed her hand. "What's wrong?"

She glanced his way. "What's *not* wrong would be a faster answer. My comb is missing. Someone tried to use it last night, and since I splashed in the water, I can't think of anything else. Being this close to it isn't helping."

"Like an addiction?"

She shrugged. "Like I'm famished, but the only food I crave is the one I can't have."

"We're going to get it back." He kept his eye on the black, unmarked sedan parking on the edge of the river.

Agent Bale got out and buttoned his sportscoat. The director of Department 13 was about the same height as Duke, but leaner, with short, dusty blond hair and crystal blue eyes. As he approached, Duke suddenly wished he'd called Flynn too. The captain was an arrogant asshole, but he was also a shrewd negotiator, and he never missed an opportunity to push Agent Bale for more than his initial offer.

But something made him hold off on the call. Maybe deep down, he just wasn't ready to share Annika with the rest of the crew. Not yet.

Agent Bale crossed the gangplank and scanned the empty deck before meeting Duke's eyes. "Where is everyone?"

"It's just me and Annika." Duke gestured to her. "This is Annika."

Bale shook her hand and straightened up. "I have some bad news."

"You don't have my comb." She narrowed her eyes. "Someone does. They tried to command me last night."

Agent Bale rubbed his forehead. "I'm working on it, but the comb was somehow smuggled out of our building before it made it into the vault."

Although Duke and Annika had figured as much from the experience the night before, hearing Agent Bale admit it so openly, as if it was no big deal, ignited Duke's temper into an inferno. "Somehow? Sounds like ye have a fucking wolf in yer henhouse, Bale. We gave it to ye because ye claimed it would be protected." He wanted to hit something, but the *Sea Dog* didn't deserve his rage. He balled his hands into fists at his sides. "This is fucked

up, mate.”

Bale nodded. “I’m pissed too. We screwed this up and I’m already working to recover it, we just need a little more time.”

Agent Bale hadn’t seen Annika’s feet and legs last night, the pain lining her face. Duke shook his head. “That’s not good enough. She’s a damned mermaid. She can’t stay on land waiting for ye to find her comb.”

Annika touched Duke’s arm and met his eyes, silencing him with just a look. Then she focused on Agent Bale. “My pirate is upset because last night someone tried to use it.”

Duke liked hearing her refer to him as hers, even if she didn’t mean it the way he wished she did. He wasn’t her lover or her boyfriend, just a partner in this quest for her comb. It stole some of the sting out of his rage.

Bale stared out at the horizon. “This is all on me. I’m the director. I should’ve been questioning our staff ever since we discovered a demon smuggled the Tyrfing sword out of the vault. Damn it.”

Annika squeezed Duke’s arm and cleared her throat. “This isn’t the first time I’ve hunted a lost comb. It’s just the first time it’s been mine. I believed it was safely hidden with the Atlanteans, so I bear some of the blame too. I need to know everything you’ve discovered so far.”

Duke marveled at her apparent calm. She’d uttered the words last night that she was dying, an immortal being. She couldn’t rejuvenate herself without the ocean. What if they couldn’t find it soon enough? Would she die rather than be bound to her comb?

Agent Bale distracted him from his dark thoughts as he told them about his short list of suspects. Bale opened an app on his phone that displayed three trackers. He clicked the first one.

“I have one engineer unaccounted for. His car is still in the parking structure.” He clicked the second tracker. “This one is on my field agent’s car.” Then he pressed the last tracker. “And this one is...” His voice trailed off. “On the move.”

Duke watched the dot moving down Interstate 95. It was already out of Washington, D.C., driving through Virginia. He looked at Bale. “They’re almost to North Carolina.”

Bale shook his head. “That’s the tracker on Holli Porter’s car. She works in the vault data collection department.” He frowned. “She doesn’t handle the relics. Her job is to research them and then document everything.”

Duke looked at Annika and back to Bale. “Why was she on your list?”

“Her hire date in our system couldn’t be correct, but the one employee who can verify her actual start date is the one who is missing.”

Annika watched the moving dot. “Are you sure she’s human?”

“Yes. She passes through our bio scans every time she enters the building.”

Duke crossed his arms. “So did the demon that grabbed the Tyrfin sword while you were doing an inventory of the vault.”

“He possessed a human body.” David paused. “It doesn’t make sense for a demon to choose a data processor that doesn’t have access to the vault.”

Annika tapped her fingernail on his screen. “She must be the most likely suspect. She’s the only one running.” She lifted her eyes. “Mermaids and sirens have the same biological makeup as humans.”

“Sirens?” Duke frowned. “I thought that was just another name for a mermaid.”

Annika shook her head. “They have legs, not tails, and they’re from Earth. Fae blood powers their magic.”

Duke rubbed a hand down his face again, wishing he had something to write down the questions brewing in his head. Every answer from her seemed to spark ten more questions.

Agent Bale beat him to it. “You think Holli is a...mermaid?”

“No.” Annika looked at Duke for a second and back to Agent Bale. “I’m telling you there are other beings besides humans that can survive in your atmosphere. They visit this planet and walk among you.”

Bale sighed, his gaze shifting to the horizon. “I’m assuming you’re talking about the portals.”

She raised a brow. “So, you’re aware of them.”

“Aware they exist? Yes.” He looked at Annika. “Knowledgeable about the mechanics? Not really. My department focuses on paranormal relics, psychics, and magic, but our sister branch is Department 51. They handle... extraterrestrial affairs.” He paused. “I could loop the director in.”

“No.” Annika shook her head. “The last thing we need is human bureaucracy. I simply need to retrieve the comb. It won’t be safe for me to return to the water until we do.”

Duke took out his phone. “Can you give me the tracking app? We can go intercept her.”

“Sorry.” David slipped his phone into his pocket. “I’m not going to assume a loyal agent of Department 13 is guilty. I’ll track her and question

her.”

Duke frowned. “Are we just supposed to wait?”

“No.” David looked at them both. “I was actually hoping you could set sail. If Holli does turn out to be the one with the comb, she knows every aspect of how it works. She’s been researching all our files about mermaids. If she comes for Annika, she could knock her into the water, or abduct her and then drop her into the ocean. The best way to keep Annika safe is to keep her where Holli, or whoever has stolen the comb, could never find her.”

That made sense, but he still didn’t like it.

“I’ll talk to the crew.” Duke rolled his shoulders as the tension knotted in his muscles. “You’ll keep us informed on the comb’s status?”

“Yes.” David turned to leave. When he crossed over to the dock, he turned back. “Be sure your crew understands how important it is to keep Annika out of the water.”

“I will.” Annika waited for Agent Bale to leave the boat before she looked up at Duke. “Being this close to the ocean and unable to get into the water is torture. I’m not sailing out into the Atlantic.”

Duke took his phone back out. “I need to talk to Captain Flynn.”

“He’s your leader?”

“He used to be.” He met her eyes as he put his phone to his ear. “Now he’s more of a pain in the ass, but if there’s a gray area, he can find it. I think we need someone with a broken moral compass and a knack for finding loopholes.”

Flynn answered on the first ring. “Duke. What’s happened?”

Although Flynn pissed off most of the crew simply by existing, Duke knew him better than anyone. Under all the bravado and arrogance was a rare loyalty Duke had never known before. Flynn might complain and demand a deal in return for his help with something, but Duke knew his secrets.

First off, Flynn would always fight for his crew, even if he never saw a single piece of gold he’d been promised. And second, Flynn had a hidden cache buried in the sand on the banks of the Savannah River. Duke didn’t know what was in it, but he did know where it was buried. More importantly, the captain was aware Duke knew.

Duke put his phone on speaker and stared at Annika as he spoke. “I have a situation and I need your help.”

“I’ve got a full schedule right now.” Flynn paused. “What’s in it for me?”

Duke rolled his eyes. “I’m standing on the deck of the *Sea Dog* with a mermaid beside me.”

Flynn chuckled. “I’m not sure why you’re playing these games, but I sadly don’t have the time...”

“It’s not a fucking game.” Duke growled. “That comb we gave to Agent Bale is hers and now it’s gone missing.”

“What reward is Agent Bale offering us to find it for him?”

Damn it. Duke had been so focused on saving Annika, he hadn’t even asked Bale for compensation. But he couldn’t blurt out to the captain that he was having some confusing feelings for this mermaid when he hadn’t even said anything to her yet. They’d kissed, but that was hardly a declaration of lifelong partnership.

He wasn’t even sure that was what he wanted yet, but he definitely wanted to explore the option.

“Bale is wrapped up with trying to plug leaks in Department 13.” Duke looked out over the water. “We didn’t agree to anything.”

“Fuck, really?” Flynn hissed. “You didn’t commit the crew, did you?”

“No. Just myself, but I could use your help.” He turned back toward Annika. “Bale is following a woman named Holli Porter. I think we need to find her first.”

“I have a business lunch on Tybee Island. Meet me at the lighthouse at three.” A car door slammed. “Bring your mermaid.”

“See you then.”

Duke ended the call and looked over at Annika. “He can be a dick, but if anyone can find a way to steal that comb back, it’s Flynn.” He stuffed his phone into his pocket. “We have a few hours to kill. What do you like to do while you’re on land?”

She worried her lower lip, making him ache to see her smile. “I don’t know. Usually, I’m pretty focused on recovering combs and then I go back into the ocean. I’ve never just...killed time.”

He wanted to take her all over the city, to discover what she enjoyed most, but they didn’t have that kind of time. Then the fountain at Forsyth Park popped into his head. He took her hand and grinned. “Let’s get away from the saltwater. Come on.”

She didn’t seem eager or smile, but she did lace her fingers with his, making him yearn to kiss her again.

But this wasn't a date.

If Annika stayed with him, she'd die.

That thought brought him right back down to reality. Now, he just needed to stay there.

Chapter Nine

David took the turns on the narrow two-lane highway fast enough to make the tires squeal as he headed north to intercept his data processor. When the road straightened out, he checked the app again.

Holli's tracker had finally stopped in Charleston, South Carolina. It could be a pit stop on her way to...where? Was she going to Savannah? Why? She couldn't know that's where the mermaid was hiding.

By the time he found her car, it was parked on a residential street just outside the historical district of Charleston. He got out of his car and opened the trunk. While he pretended to rearrange his storage space, he was scanning the windows and driveways for any onlookers.

When he was convinced he was alone, he chanted the incantation for a blur spell. It would slow time for everyone else and give him the chance to peer into the windows of the houses near Holli's car without being seen. As long as he didn't touch anything solid, he'd basically be invisible.

The first house was empty. The second one had a living room full of toddlers. Maybe a home day care? The third one made his jaw go slack.

The curtains were closed on the big picture window, but there was a smaller side window without the blinds lowered. And there was Holli, sitting at a dining room table with a big burly man he'd last seen in Savannah.

A bearded man with violet eyes.

Sampson Bane.

Holy shit. How had this guy infiltrated David's employees at Department 13? Or had it been the other way around? Sampson had known David's name and where he worked. Holli must've been the leak.

That didn't make her the thief.

How had they even met?

He had plenty of questions, but he didn't want to ask them in front of Sampson. He'd have to lay low and catch Holli alone.

David went back to his car and called Brenda at Department 13.

"Hello, sir."

"Any word on finding Ben Kinney or Eric Gross?"

She hesitated. "Yes, but it's not good news."

Damn it. "Okay."

"Ben's dead. They were doing a sweep of the preservation department and found his body in one of the employee lockers."

David raked his hair back from his forehead. He'd gone from having an informational leak inside of Department 13, to a thief, and now to a murderer. This was fucking unacceptable. He should step down.

The thought hit him like a lightning bolt. He shivered inside of his car. He didn't have a life outside of the department. It wouldn't matter. When someone retired from Department 13, their memories of their employment were wiped out by the dark magic division. It was too risky otherwise.

The idea of not remembering his work terrified him. It would be like his identity ceased to exist.

But what was happening within Department 13 was unacceptable. He'd been too cocky. He should've delegated more so that he could've stayed at his desk, managing their personnel. He'd put too much trust in his team. These mistakes were his fault. He should've been monitoring the department more closely.

Brenda broke the silence. "He had a bite mark. Someone tore his throat out...with their teeth."

"Another damned demon? Shit. Did you lock down the vault?"

"Yes." She paused and added, "The occult team is testing samples from Ben's bite to see if we can trace what type of...entity we're looking for."

He took a deep breath. One problem at a time. He stared at the house, Sampson's house. "I think Holli is the leak that told Sampson Bane about me and Department 13. She left D.C. and came straight to Charleston. They're together right now."

"In Charleston?" she asked. "I thought he was hassling the *Sea Dog* crew in Savannah."

"He was." David paused, narrowing his eyes as Holli stepped out of the house. "Do me a favor and have Kingsley pull up the list of properties he found for Rutger Morgan." He gave her the address and sighed. "I'm sorry

about Ben. We'll honor his service when I get back."

"I'll let everyone know. And I'll send the property list over as soon as I have it."

"Thanks, Brenda." David checked the app with the trackers again and frowned. "Have you found Eric yet?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Keep looking. His car is still in the underground parking garage. He must be in the building someplace." David paused. "Be careful, though. He could be the killer."

"Wouldn't he have fled as soon as the building opened?"

"Maybe. Just be careful. I'll be back as soon as I can."

As he took the phone from his ear, Brenda replied, "This isn't your fault." He ended the call.

He didn't deserve understanding. He needed to get results.

Under his watch, or lack of watching, he now had a thief, a murderer, and a missing artifact under Department 13's roof. Funny, a week ago, he'd thought he was a fairly capable director. Not the best in the history of the department, but adequate.

Today...not so much.

He clenched his jaw, biting back his frustration, and looked up just as Holli went to her car. David waited, willing her to get in and start the engine.

Instead, she went to the back and opened the trunk. That blocked her from view of the window. This was his chance.

He slipped out of his car and whispered the blur spell incantation again, then jogged across the street. Once he was hidden by the open trunk, he grabbed her arm and pulled it behind her back.

He covered her mouth with his other hand and whispered against her ear, "I think we need to talk, Holli." She looked back at him with wide eyes. "No screaming. I'd hate to have to shoot your boyfriend."

She nodded slowly and he moved his hand from her mouth. Her voice wobbled. "What are you doing here? Am I under arrest?"

"No." He shook his head. "I need to know how much you've told Sampson about Department 13."

She wet her lips. "Nothing really. He knows I work in data collections, and I research paranormal objects before they get stored in the vault."

"I don't know how long you've known this guy, but he's involved in

black market artifacts. He could be using you for information.”

Her eyes flicked to the house and back to David. “It’s not like that with Sampson. He cares about me.”

“I think you’re giving him too much credit.” David released her arm. “How did you meet him?”

She rubbed her arm where he’d been gripping it. “We’ve been together for years. Long before I started working for Department 13.”

So, he probably wasn’t just using her for access to the vault. “What have you told him about your job?”

“He knows I work for the government and that it’s top secret.” She maintained eye contact, no rapid blinking or long pauses. But she was still hiding something.

He kept his gaze on her face. “Ben Kinney has been found dead.”

Her eyes widened, her jaw slack. “H-how?”

He hadn’t planned on telling her about Ben, but he wanted to see her reaction, just in case she was more than just an informational leak. Holli didn’t appear to be a creature capable of biting out a man’s throat, but David couldn’t afford to make any more bad assumptions.

“I’m not sure yet,” David lied. He’d already told her more than he should have. “Department 13 depends on our top-secret clearance and, as of now, yours has been pulled.”

Her brows pinched together. “What are you saying?”

“You’re fired.” He walked back to his car.

As he drove away, David opened the tracker app on his phone. Something she’d said still bothered him. She had asked if she was under arrest.

Sharing top-secret information with her boyfriend could get her fired, not arrested.

Unless she’d stolen something.

He put his phone on speaker and called Brenda again.

She answered on the first ring. “Did you find Holli?”

“Yeah. The tracker is still on her car.” He checked his rearview mirror. “We need to watch her. I think she might have that comb and since she’s friends with Sampson Bane, it’s safe to say he could be trying to sell it on the dark web already.” David shook his head, gripping the wheel tighter. “Ask Kingsley to scan the dark web for any listings of the mermaid comb.”

“Will do, David.”

“Thanks, Brenda. Keep me updated.”

They still needed to recover the mermaid's comb, but it was becoming a secondary task. One of his agents was dead and a preservation tech was missing. He needed to get back to D.C.

David and his team needed to find the killer and shore up their defenses. Maybe he could get the *Sea Dog* crew to hunt for the comb.

Chapter Ten

Duke took Annika to Forsyth Park. She'd heard of it before, but she'd never been there.

Swaths of Spanish moss drooped from the limbs of the massive oak trees that lined the paved path leading to the center of the park. It seemed as if they were living inside a watercolor painting.

Although she'd been on this planet longer than Duke, he'd kept Savannah as his home for centuries. She'd never had a home base on land. She'd visited many seaside cities over the years, but walking in a park was...new.

Kids rolled by on skateboards and an elderly couple held hands on a bench in the shade.

Duke glanced her way. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "This is different from what I expected."

"What were you expecting?"

She shrugged. "I guess I didn't expect it to be so beautiful."

"You haven't even seen the fountain yet."

She grabbed his hand, holding it tight to be sure she had his attention. "I want to see it, but I can't get close enough to get wet. One drop of water and..."

"The world will know mermaids are real?"

"Exactly." She shuddered at the thought. "I'd be imprisoned in some kind of human aquarium like the fish and sharks."

He laced his fingers with hers and they started walking again. "All it takes is a drop of water?"

She nodded. "That's why I only stay in places with a tub. I can step into a shower and then I lose my legs to get out."

His brows pinched together. "Can you drink water?"

"No." She shook her head slowly. "We can have soda or juice though. It's

pure water that changes us back into our true form.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m not well-versed in astronomy and space, but as far as we’ve been able to determine, Neptune is too cold for oceans. Is there any land there?”

“No land.” In her long existence, she’d never discussed any of these things with a human before. It was...enjoyable. “But there are oceans underneath the ice. When we designed the portals for interstellar travel and set them to reach the depths of Earth’s seas, we’d never imagined the idea of land or legs.”

“What made you and your sister decide to visit Earth?”

Thinking of her older sister made her chest hurt. “My father was the leader of our reef and he pushed my sister and me to follow his example. I’m not sure either of us were ready, but we tried.”

“She didn’t want to come to Earth?”

She shrugged. “She and I were opposites. Atargatis was more studious and inventive, while I was the one who yearned to explore and try new things. We clashed at times.” She paused and met his eyes. “I was the one who decided we should explore Earth.” She pressed her lips together. “My father was intrigued with finding out if we could form colonies throughout the universe, so he pressured my sister and the others to come with me on the expedition. I think my sister felt like he’d be disappointed in her if she didn’t go.”

Annika swallowed the lump in her throat. She’d never told anyone about this. Ever. “Our father died while we were here. She never forgave me.”

He frowned. “I thought you were immortal?”

She nodded. “I am. Once we reach adulthood, we stop aging and we heal from injuries, like you, but there are limits.”

He tightened his hold on her hand. “We can’t regenerate. If our heads are separated from our bodies, we can’t come back from that.”

“Our makeup is similar. A lack of a head or too long outside of saline water.” Annika nodded. She stared down at her hands. “We didn’t consider that the passage of time would be different on other planets. We got word from a wounded warrior who came through the portal that war had come to our reef and our father perished in the battle.”

“I’m sorry.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “It was a long time ago.”

“That’s why she went home?”

“Yes. She returned to Neptune to help with our brother’s coronation.” Annika kept her attention focused forward. It was easier to control her emotions that way. After all this time, she hadn’t realized the wounds were still so close to the surface. “I wasn’t invited, and I haven’t seen my sister since.” Eager to change the subject, she squeezed his hand. “What about you? Any siblings?”

“I did once, lifetimes ago.”

She studied him for a moment. All of her family were born immortal. She’d forgotten Duke and the crew had stumbled into their immortality. Had he not been able to share it with his family? She shook her head slowly. “I don’t understand.”

“I was born on a small island they call Samoa now.” He glanced her way. “A French explorer named Louis Antoine de Bougainville arrived on our shores. He and his crew spoke a strange language and wore clothing I’d never seen before. I was supposed to be looking after my younger brother and sister that day, but I was a curious little boy.” He chuffed and shook his head. “When they fell asleep, I crept out and ran to the beach. The foreign ship was anchored very close to the shore. I just wanted to see what it was like.” He stared into the distance. “I didn’t realize they were weighing anchor when I crawled on board.” His gaze locked on her face. “I couldn’t find any ships heading to Samoa, and I never saw my family again.”

She looked into his eyes and for the first time, felt a connection with someone, an understanding. “I know that feeling.”

He nodded. “I got lucky because eventually I ran into Flynn. He convinced me to join the *Sea Dog* crew. I found a new family.”

Did she even remember what it felt like to be loved, to know someone supported you no matter what?

They turned a corner and a huge fountain came into view. The sunshine formed a kaleidoscope of colors in the spray from the cascading water, and she froze. “It’s beautiful.”

“I was here the day it was finished almost two hundred years ago.”

She studied his profile as he watched the water. His long hair was pulled up into a messy bun and his goatee shadowed his strong chin.

A smile tugged at her lips as she pointed at the fountain. “The first time I saw a rainbow, I wept at the beauty. It coaxed me in for a closer view. I swam onto a beach and that was when we discovered the oxygen in the atmosphere would transform our tails into legs while we were on land.”

“Would you like a better view of the fountain?” he asked. “I promise to keep you out of the water.”

She slid her hand into his. “I’d like that.”

They made their way through the park and sat on a bench with a clear view of the fountain. Duke drew her in close for a selfie on his phone, teasing her until she rolled her eyes and grinned. The sound of children laughing and music from a party over on the grass, cast a spell over her. She looked down at their joined hands and caught herself wishing for things she could never have.

She lifted her gaze. “If you love history, why do you own a security company?”

He chuckled. “I guess you’ve never had to fake your own death and come back as a distant relative so you can start over again.”

“No.” She looked over at him. “I never stay anywhere long enough for anyone to notice I’m not aging.”

“Every twenty-five or thirty years, I have an accident and come back as my own cousin or a nephew. New job, new identity.” He shook his head. “I used to think it was fun, like a clean slate. Lately, it’s more of a hassle. With everyone having smart phones and social media, it gets tougher to pull it off.”

His phone dinged in his pocket. He took it out and frowned. “Hate to cut our visit short, but Flynn is already on his way over to the lighthouse.”

She expected to be more eager to meet Captain Flynn, but there was a shadow lingering in the back of her mind. If Flynn helped them find her comb, there would be no reason to stay in Savannah.

There would be no more walks with Duke, no more kisses, and suddenly, for the first time in her long life...she wished she was human.

...

When Duke parked his van in the bumpy, uneven parking area outside of the Tybee Lighthouse, Ian Flynn was already out front, eyeing the shoreline through the telescope the Historical Society had placed for the tourists.

Puffs of fine white powder erupted from each step Duke took across the worn, tabby concrete of the lot as he went around to open the passenger door. The mix of oyster shells, sand, and water was common along the coastline, but it degraded quickly in the wet weather.

Flynn noticed them and met them halfway. He narrowed his eyes, looking

Annika over, and Duke was struck by the sting of defensiveness that shot through him. He'd wanted to keep her to himself.

"You must be the mermaid." Flynn offered his hand.

Annika glanced at Duke before shaking it. "And you must be the previous captain of the *Sea Dog*."

Duke laughed, quickly coughing to try to cover it.

Flynn released her hand, glaring at Duke. "I thought you needed my help finding her comb."

Duke did his best to wipe the smile from his face as he nodded. "Agent Bale would like our assistance in recovering it, but I don't think he realizes how urgent the situation is."

Captain Flynn's hair shone in the sunlight like a newly-minted copper penny. His goatee was pristine as usual, and his custom blue-grey suit brought out the blue of his eyes. Duke knew him well enough to know this was one of his power suits and wondered who he might have been meeting on Tybee Island.

Flynn pulled at the knot in his tie to loosen it. He popped the top button open and focused on Annika again. "Are the legends true? Whoever has your comb can control you?"

"Only if I'm in the ocean."

His eyes flicked over to Duke. "Simple, she stays out of the sea until we find it."

Duke raised his eyebrows. "It's far from simple."

Annika pulled her braid around her shoulder. "Every day that I'm out of the ocean weakens me. Eventually, I'll die."

Flynn looked at Duke. "What price has she offered us to find it?"

"Price?" Duke shook his head. "Caleb brought the comb up from the bottom of the ocean. Now we need to return it to her. She's not going to pay us for stealing from her."

"The Atlanteans gave Caleb the comb as a gift." Flynn tugged at his chin. "As I see it, the comb belongs to us now."

"Fuck you, Flynn. I'll find it without you." Duke took her hand and turned to go.

"Wait," Flynn said.

Duke looked back as the captain's gaze wandered down to their joined hands and back to Duke's face. Flynn's expression lost some of the edge. "Don't get mixed up in this, mate. The merfolk aren't our concern."

“I’m not like you.” Duke squared his shoulders. “I can’t look away when someone needs help.”

“Would she do the same for you?” Flynn raised a brow. “Mermaids can be fickle things.”

Annika released Duke’s hand and walked up to Captain Flynn, poking her finger in his chest. “How would you know, you arrogant bastard? Have you met a mermaid before?”

A muscle jumped in his cheek. “My loyalty is to my crew, not to a beautiful siren in need of a favor.”

She shook her head. “I’m not a siren, and whether you choose to believe it or not, I tried to keep Duke out of this. But if you’re not going to help us, then stay the hell out of our way.”

Duke almost smiled, impressed with her low tolerance for the captain’s shit.

“Fine. But only because my first mate seems to care about you.” Flynn brushed non-existent dust off his coat sleeves as he looked over at Duke. “Did Agent Bale give you any leads?”

Duke came closer. “He has a GPS tracker on the car of one of his employees, Holli Porter. Annika thinks she’s our best suspect.”

“Good.” Flynn took out his cell phone. “I have a private investigator on retainer. Let me make a call. We’ll find her. He might even be able to hack into the GPS tracker.”

“Thanks, Flynn.”

“Give me a few minutes.” He looked at Annika and back to Duke. “Take her up in the lighthouse. It’ll keep her away from the water.”

Duke took her hand. “It’s an incredible view from up top.”

“Let’s go.” She almost smiled and his heart pounded in answer. He’d seen a trace of pity in the captain’s eyes before, and Flynn was right. This might hurt when she retrieved her comb and left Duke behind, but every smile made him hunger for another. He was going to enjoy every second as long as Annika was here.

He could deal with heartache later.

After making their donation to the Historical Society, he led her to the circular staircase that lined the inside walls of the round tower. He looked up, forgetting how tall it looked from this vantage point. He turned to Annika. “You’re not scared of heights, are you?”

“Not that I know of.” The corners of her mouth twitched, but she didn’t

smile. "Are you?"

"Nah, I climb the ratlines on the main mast of the *Sea Dog* all the time." He took her hand and started climbing.

Each landing of the stairs had a long, slender window to peer out at the surroundings and gauge how high they were. By the third window, they were both slowing a little. He looked over at her, shaking his head. "Keegan, our ship's pilot, was chased up these stairs by a group of blood-thirsty zealots a couple years ago. When he told me the story, I didn't remember it was so many stairs."

"Humans have adrenaline. It makes you stronger and faster when you need it most." She was trying to hide it, but she sounded a little winded as they continued the climb.

"Merfolk don't have adrenaline?"

"Our genetic makeup is similar to that of a human, but we don't have hormones like adrenaline. Besides, we've got the strength to overpower most humans without the added power boost."

He chewed on that during the next flight of stairs and at the landing caught her hand, doing his best to hide the fact that he was also catching his breath. "If you don't have hormones, do you...are you attracted...to others?"

She smiled and he was grateful to be on a landing and not on the winding staircase, or he might have fallen at the sight of it. "When we kissed, I was definitely attracted to you."

"But you still put the pizza box in my hand and sent me home."

Her chuckle bounced off the walls and echoed through the cavernous lighthouse tower. "I didn't want you to see my feet."

He shot her a crooked smile. "So, no hormones, but plenty of vanity."

"Rude!" Her jaw dropped as she elbowed him with a spark in her eyes that he hadn't noticed before. Joy. He wanted to bottle it so he could remember it after she was gone. Her smile softened. "But true." She shook her head. "Thanks for helping me heal my feet last night. I'm sorry I bit you."

"I'm a fast healer." He winked and took her hand. "And I'm glad I wasn't the only one who wanted more than a kiss."

"I've never had more with a human. Yet." She wet her lips and all the blood rushed out of his brain. "Ready for the last two flights?"

Climbing stairs with an erection was not his idea of a great time, but he

adjusted himself and followed her, watching her ass the entire way up. At the top of the stairs was a padlock on a gate, keeping tourists away from the spinning light.

“I guess this is it.” He looked out of the opening in the block tower with her at his side as they stared out at the Atlantic coast. The sea breeze kissed their cheeks and whistled past his ears.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

He nodded. “Aye.” He released her hand and slid his arm around her waist, bringing her in a little closer.

She put her arm around him too, and his lips curved into a bittersweet smile as he caught himself wishing she could stay.

Chapter Eleven

David spent the rest of the drive back up to D.C. on the speaker phone, first with Brenda, then with Kingsley. Brenda was keeping him updated on the sweep of the preservation department, and King was watching Holli Porter's car.

When he was an hour out of D.C. he called King again. "Has Holli gone anywhere?"

"Not that I can see, sir. She either found the GPS tracker and removed it, or she's decided to stay with Sampson for the night."

"You scrubbed her keycard and passwords?"

"Yes." He dropped his voice to a whisper, but his English accent still managed to come through. "We went through her workstation, and it appears she was altering some of the reference materials about the mermaid comb."

David frowned, merging into the roundabout. "What do you mean changing it?"

"It looks like she was trying to remove the pages that explained a mermaid's compulsion to grant wishes in order to reclaim her comb."

He stopped at a red light and rubbed a hand down his face. "I met a mermaid today who informed me that mermaids and sirens have the same genetic makeup as humans. She also alluded to the fact that other beings do too. We need a new security system to clear employees. The bioscan isn't specific enough."

"I'll add it to my ever-growing list, sir."

"Let me know if Holli's car starts to move again." He ended the call and pressed Brenda's name.

She answered before the second ring came through. "I don't have anything new to report yet."

“I’m almost there. In the meantime, be on the lookout for any signs that Holli is...not human.”

Her breath caught. “You think we have another demon?”

“Not a demon, but...maybe something else. She was our information leak and we know she’s been spending time with Sampson Bane. He sells artifacts on the dark web. We have to be sure that comb doesn’t show up in a dark web auction.”

“You think Holli’s our thief now, too?”

“I’m not sure, but until we know for certain, I’m not taking any chances.”

He ended the call and took the next two roundabouts so fast his tires squealed. After he finally pulled into the underground parking garage, he jogged to the elevator. His next conversation would be with Agent Garcia. On the way up, he mentally sorted through his assumptions and the unknowns to gather his questions.

The doors opened on the infirmary level. He strode down the hall until he found his agent. “Agent Garcia. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine, sir.” His color was back and other than the ice pack on the back of his head, no one would have ever guessed he’d been knocked unconscious.

“Are you feeling up to answering a couple more questions?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Did you see the comb when you got down there? Was it in the saltwater container?”

Garcia thought about it for a second and gradually frowned. “No. The box was empty, just water.”

So, it had been stolen before Agent Garcia got downstairs, and Ben had probably already been dead before Garcia even got off the elevator. Which again had him wondering where Eric and Holli had been while Ben had been attacked. Could Eric’s body be stashed somewhere down there too?

Hector lowered the ice pack. “Have you found Ben and Eric yet?”

“Eric is still missing.” David pressed his lips together for a second. “And Ben is dead.”

Garcia’s eyes widened. “Damn.” He shook his head. “Do we know how it happened?”

David nodded. “We discovered his body jammed in a locker with...a bite.”

A crease formed in Agent Garcia’s brow. “Like a vampire?”

“Not exactly.” David shook his head slowly. “There weren’t any puncture holes. Whatever killed him tore out his throat with its teeth.”

“Shit.” Garcia pushed himself up higher on the bed. “And it was inside our building? How is that possible?”

“I’m still trying to figure that part out. One last thing. Did you see Holli Porter while you were in the preservation room?”

“Yeah.” He rubbed his chin and then nodded. “When the elevator doors opened, she almost bumped into me. She was in a big hurry and apologized as she went back to her workstation.”

Just like when David had gone down there last night during the lockdown. “How well do you know Holli?”

“Just from the department’s Christmas party and the annual picnic.” He shrugged. “She seemed very bookish and eager to research new items. Perfect for her department.” He paused. “Is she a suspect?”

David didn’t think Agent Garcia was really involved in any of this, but in light of all the mistakes they’d discovered this week, he wasn’t sure he could trust his gut anymore.

“Everyone’s a suspect right now, until I get some solid leads. Let me know if you remember anything else.” David walked straight back to the elevator and started to press the button when a white-haired man in a lab coat got in with him.

His face was lined, not with crow’s feet from smiles, but deep frown lines on his forehead and around his mouth.

His badge read, “Milton Donegan, Master Healer.” David would have to look him up later.

David waited for him to push a button, but the older man didn’t move. David reached for the panel of buttons. “Going down?”

“Eventually.” Milton Drake’s voice was more of a dry, raspy hack. “I came in here to tell you about Holli.” He pressed the button to close the elevator doors but didn’t push a floor.

“You knew her?”

He shook his head. “Not really. She came into the infirmary once, shortly after I started working here.”

“Wait.” David furrowed his brow. “So, you met her when you started? That was before 2007.”

“Yes.”

David’s heart sank.

“It was 1997.” Milton added, “She hasn’t aged a day in over twenty-five years.”

Shit. Holli wasn’t human.

“That would’ve been nice to know...years ago.” David ground his teeth.

Milton seemed unruffled as he shrugged. “You haven’t aged either. I figured she must be on the same regimen as you.”

David lowered his voice even though they were alone in the elevator. “Are we bound by HIPAA? Can you tell me why she came to see you?”

He grinned, exposing straight coffee-stained teeth. “I’m not exactly part of the medical board.” He let out a thready laugh, sobering when David didn’t join in. “She came in with welts all over her feet. I tried some healing spells and herbal rubs, but nothing worked. Eventually, she could barely walk. I don’t know how she finally healed them.”

David was already mentally poring through all of his knowledge on demons and other immortal supernatural beings. Incurable welts on feet and legs didn’t ring any bells. “Thanks, Milton. I really appreciate the information.”

Milton hit the open button and stepped out of the elevator. As the doors were closing, he turned to David. “I tried holy water on her wounds too. Whatever she is, she’s not demonic.”

“Thanks again.” The doors closed and David’s mind raced as the numbers flashed. Not a demon and not human...*wait*. He took out his phone and pressed Duke’s number.

He needed to talk to the mermaid.

Chapter Twelve

When they came out from the lighthouse, Duke's phone rang.

Annika moved to his other side, allowing the next group of tourists to pass by. Duke plugged one ear, frowning as he listened.

"Aye. She's right here." He handed her his cell. "It's Agent Bale."

Annika took the phone, concern pinching her brows together. "He wants to talk to me?" Duke nodded as she put the phone to her ear. "Yes?"

Agent Bale's voice was calm and controlled. "I've been searching for your comb and trying to figure out which of my employees inside of Department 13 might have taken it. I've narrowed my list to a couple of options, but I need to talk to you about one of them."

"How will talking help?" Annika's pulse thrummed, eager to hunt them down and take back what was hers. "Have you captured them for questioning?"

"No." His chair squeaked in the background. "It's not that simple."

She rolled her eyes. "It should be."

Agent Bale ignored her remark. "You mentioned before that merfolk would be able to pass our bioscans. You said there are other beings that have the same biological makeup as humans..."

"Many. Sirens, selkies, aughisky, and some of the fae. Why do you ask?"

"Because I just discovered one of my employees is immortal."

"And you think I might know what type of being they are without even seeing them? Sorry to inform you, mermaids aren't that magical." Annika didn't bother hiding the sarcasm in her tone while she focused on Duke. He'd walked over to Captain Flynn a few feet away. She couldn't hear their conversation, but Duke's brow was furrowed and a vein pulsed on the side of his neck. "Do you have any more information other than your employee's immortality?"

“She goes by the name Holli Porter, and other than the fact that she started with the department in 1987 and hasn’t aged a day since, I don’t have a lot to go on. She’s apparently close with a black-market relics dealer, Sampson Bane. Right now, they’re in Charleston, South Carolina.”

“Why are you telling me all this instead of arresting her?”

He sighed. “Because she still has rights. I can’t break the law just because I *think* she already has. I have no proof she took the comb. I called you because I need to know what she is so I can find a way to stop her.” He paused. “Maybe you could surveil her and let me know if you can identify what kind of creature I’m after. For now, it doesn’t look like they’ve sold the comb. At least, not yet. I’ve got agents searching her apartment here in D.C., and I’ve got a tracker on her car. Once you tell us what we’re dealing with, I can research and plot out a way to catch her and return your comb.”

Annika wasn’t going to wait for Agent Bale to stop anyone. She could retrieve her comb and deal with the thieves herself. She didn’t need an agency from the government to do that. But he lived by human laws, so she didn’t share her plan. “Text over the address and I’ll go check it out.”

“Thank you.” Agent Bale added, “Don’t engage unless it’s necessary. I already have one dead agent. They won’t hesitate to kill for this comb.”

Annika frowned. “How were they killed?”

“We’re still analyzing the wound, but it appears something tore out his windpipe with their teeth.”

Annika’s heart skipped. Mermaids had teeth sharp enough to rip through the leathery skin of a shark; a human neck would be a simple kill.

But it didn’t make sense. No mermaid would be trying to sell another mermaid’s comb. They understood the power and connection between the comb and its owner.

So, what could have done it? A demon, banshee, or maybe some kind of animal shifter?

“We’ll find her and call you once I know what we’re dealing with.” She ended the call and walked over to Duke and the captain. She handed Duke his phone. “Agent Bale is sending us an address to follow up on one of his leads.” She looked between the two men. “What did I miss?”

Duke sighed and met her eyes. “Flynn was just telling me we shouldn’t go after anyone until Agent Bale agrees to terms of payment for the crew.”

Her gaze snapped to the captain. “It’s because of your crew that my comb is missing in the first place.”

He stroked his goatee as he shook his head. "Technically, I believe the Atlantean is to blame for offering it up as a trinket, but either way, we turned it over in good faith that the item would be safe in Agent Bale's relic vault." He dropped his hand to his side. "He lost it, and a band of pirates isn't going to find it for him without a cut of the profits."

Before she could tell him to shove it up his ass, Duke took her hand. "Come on. We don't need the crew's help with this."

They started to go back to the car, when Flynn muttered something. She and Duke turned around and Flynn came toward them. "You're missing the point. We both know you're helping this beautiful mermaid retrieve her comb, that's perfectly clear, but Agent Bale doesn't. Why not demand payment for a service? You two can chase down the address, while I negotiate a price on your behalf."

"What are you up to, Flynn?" Duke frowned. "Does he have something you want? You've got plenty of money. Everyone on the crew does."

"Are you sure about that?" Flynn narrowed his eyes, but Duke stood his ground.

They didn't have time for this. She squeezed Duke's hand, breaking the spell he seemed to be under. He locked eyes with her for a second and then focused on the captain again. "Fine. Do whatever you think is best, but we're not waiting for some negotiation."

The corner of Flynn's mouth twitched. "Safe travels, Duke."

Annika waited until they were back inside Duke's van before she asked, "What was all that back there?"

"I'm not sure, but I don't have time to pick at it right now." He pulled out of the parking lot and watched the side mirror as they drove away from the lighthouse, leaving Flynn in the dust. "Something's not right."

She rested her head on the seat. "Thank you for helping me."

"Partners, remember?" He glanced her way. "It'll take us a couple hours to get to Charleston. We can grab some food on the way."

"Sounds good." She stared out the window at the saltwater river as they crossed over a bridge. The water called to her, making her ache to dive in.

She tried to focus on Agent Bale's question about immortals that could pass for humans and then added the layer about teeth capable of tearing out a human throat.

Vampires were considered to be fictional by the world, but she'd met a few blood drinkers in the Yucatan. They didn't call themselves vampires

and weren't like Dracula from fiction. They were called Night Walkers, inhumanly strong, and definitely had the capability to tear out a throat with their teeth.

But they also slept during the daylight hours, so working for the government seemed unlikely. Maybe a banshee, but they were drawn to death, not bureaucracy. She couldn't imagine a banshee as a government employee. A siren would have the same difficulties as a mermaid with living on land long-term, but it wasn't unheard of. Unlike mermaids, who remained immortal as long as they could swim in the saltwater of an ocean, sirens maintained their ageless forms by drinking in the life force of mortals, so technically, they could have a life on land.

Could Agent Bale's employee have been a victim of a starving siren?

They were about to find out.

"You're pretty quiet over there. Do you need me to make a stop?"

She looked over at Duke. "I'm just trying to figure out what type of creature might have my comb."

"Whoever it is, they must know what it can do...or make you do."

Shit. She hadn't even factored that in. Mermaid combs weren't big in human folklore. Merfolk weren't from Earth. That would probably wipe a demon off her list too. They weren't from this physical plane, but they were still part of this planet. She'd be surprised if they knew about a mermaid's comb.

"I think whoever took the comb must be someone who either came through the undersea portals or is familiar with merfolk."

He started to nod. "Okay, so that would be...?"

"Sirens and kelpies would know about our combs, or alien beings from other planets, like the Arcturians and Atlanteans."

Duke arched a brow, casting a quick glance in her direction before focusing on the road again. "You left out merfolk."

She shrugged. "I doubt it would be one of us. What would be the point in a mermaid taking another's comb? They have the same abilities that I do, why command me through my comb?"

"Maybe they didn't take it to control you. Maybe they took it for some other reason. Is your comb special in some way? Better than theirs, maybe?"

She hadn't thought of that either. Duke was a helpful partner.

The details of her comb were hazy. She hadn't laid eyes on it in centuries,

since she had given it to the Atlanteans to bury with their city. She'd wanted it to be safe from humans and as they started dragging nets through the oceans it was getting harder to find places humans couldn't find. She didn't have a home on this planet or handy pockets like the humans, so it had seemed like a good idea at the time. It had worked for over a thousand years.

But now it could be anywhere.

She shrugged. "I don't remember it being any more special than anyone else's. They're made of abalone shell, crafted by our mothers after our birth."

"Do you have any enemies who might take it just to punish you?"

"Not on Earth." She stared out the window. With any luck, she'd have her comb soon. Then she could...swim away. She looked over at Duke and her heart stuttered when the sting of regret crashed over her like a tidal wave.

She wanted to recover her comb, but she wasn't ready to escape to the depths of the ocean...not yet.

...

Duke drove the rest of the way to Charleston in silence.

Until they found Bale's wayward employee, he didn't know what to expect. All he could be certain of was that he was in a no-win situation with this woman. The sooner he helped her retrieve her comb, the sooner she'd be gone.

Last night's kiss still haunted him. He'd given and received countless kisses during the centuries he'd been on Earth. Some hello kisses, many goodbye ones, and everything from hot and urgent to slow and savoring, but none of them had ever been as real as the one with Annika.

Until her comb had started calling her and she'd bitten him, the kiss had been passionate and hungry...and risky. Not because she was a mermaid, but because she was immortal, just like him.

Every minute he spent with Annika made him ache for more. This was new.

And yet, here he was, driving her to Charleston to hunt for her comb so she could swim away and leave him. He wanted to shake himself. This was going to hurt, and the wound wouldn't be something the Holy Grail could heal.

He glanced at her in the passenger seat and wished he could read her

mind. Suddenly, her eyes met his. “What’s wrong?”

Everything. Nothing.

He shook his head with a smirk. “Fuck if I know.”

His tough mermaid laughed. He reminded himself she wasn’t “his”, but he still wanted to hear more of her laughter. She sobered a little and nodded. “I can relate to that.”

He grinned, forcing himself to watch the highway instead of the mermaid beside him. “I like to hear you laughing.”

“I wasn’t sure I remembered how until I met you.”

Her admission made his pulse race. “We make a good team.”

She raised a brow. “One on land and one in the sea doesn’t make teamwork very easy.”

He shrugged. “Sometimes good things don’t come easy.”

But she was right. They lived in different worlds.

He didn’t want to think about it, recommitting himself to living in the present moment. He could worry about the future when it knocked on his door.

She pointed at a sign overhead. “Charleston. We’re almost there.”

Duke checked his phone. “About twenty more miles.” He looked over at her. “If you didn’t have to live in the ocean, would I stand a chance at sweeping you off your feet?”

She grinned. “You already did that last night.”

“I’m talking figuratively, not literally.” This conversation was perilous, but he was curious. “You didn’t answer the question.”

“True.” She studied him, and he started to think she wasn’t going to respond, but finally she stared out the front windshield with measured, thoughtful words. “I’ve never daydreamed about a life on land before.” She turned his way again. “If I didn’t have to live in the water...I’d like to spend more time with you.” She shook her head. “But it’s impossible.”

“Not really.” He switched lanes on the highway. “We held hands at the fountain in Forsyth Park today and hiked to the top of the Tybee Lighthouse.”

“And last night I could barely stand until you helped me get into the Savannah River.” She straightened in her seat. “Fantasizing about some pretend future isn’t going to help me find my comb.”

He refused to let her barb get under his skin. If he had any sense when it came to the mermaid, he would recognize her point and back the fuck off

this perilous connection with her.

But he was also stubborn and tenacious to a fault. He adjusted his grip on the steering wheel. "Might help the time pass faster though."

She arched a brow as she looked over at him again. "By making us wish for something we can never have?"

"Who says we can't have it?" He looked over at her. "We've both got an eternity ahead of us, love. Surely we can carve out a little of it for fantasizing." The corner of his mouth quirked up. "I'll start... How about after we find this Holli person, you let me buy you dinner?"

She didn't smile, but she finally shrugged. "I do like to eat."

"Do you dance?"

"No." She pressed her lips together for a second before she added, "But I have always wanted to learn."

"I'm no expert, but I can lead."

She turned to look at him. "Are you asking me to dance?"

"Aye." He nodded with a chuckle. "I think I am."

"Then I accept."

He signaled for the exit. "Let's find your comb."

The sooner they found it, the sooner he'd have her in his arms.

He followed the driving directions from Google and finally parked on a side street.

Agent Bale had given them the address, but not what kind of car his employee drove. Duke started to send Bale a text when Annika gasped.

Her cheeks paled as she slid lower in the seat. "It can't be."

"Can't be what?" He scanned the street. A woman with long brown hair was walking to the car parked in her driveway. Other than that, nothing moved. He glanced at Annika. "Do you know her?"

Her eyes met his. "That's my sister."

"What?" His gaze snapped back to the car reversing out of the driveway three houses down. He didn't get a close look at her, but as she drove away, her dark brown hair blew out the open car window. "I thought she went back to Neptune."

"She did." Annika peeked out the passenger window. "She swore she'd never come back."

Duke turned on the engine and followed her car. "The address checks out. She must be going by Holli Porter right now."

"It can't be her." Annika straightened, shaking her head. "We're far away."

She probably just looks like my sister.”

Duke shrugged. “We’ll tail her and see what we can find out.”

But he had a sinking feeling in his gut. If this really was her sister, then she’d known exactly what she was doing when waving Annika’s comb through the water last night.

Although they hadn’t parted on good terms, she was still Annika’s sister.

What if he ended up having to hurt Holli in order to protect Annika? Would she forgive him? Plus, if merfolk were just as immortal as he and his crew, how could he stop her?

Protecting Annika was going to be harder than he’d anticipated.

Chapter Thirteen

Annika wanted to believe the woman in the car ahead of them was just a thief—a mundane human government employee with nefarious intentions.

She hadn't seen Atargatis since they'd learned of their father's death almost a thousand Earth years ago, but she'd recognize her sister's proud frame anywhere.

Her dark walnut-brown hair was still long, with shiny waves down her back, and her profile was unmistakable. Annika took her looks from their mother, but her sister bore the king's long, slender nose and square jaw.

The only trait that they shared was their ocean blue eyes.

If Annika was right, and the woman who just parked in front of a grocery store was actually her sister, living among humans and masquerading as Holli Porter, employee of Department 13, that would mean that she had Annika's comb.

Impossible. Atargatis had been angry with Annika, but even so, she wouldn't use her comb against her. Would she? Maybe she was trying to punish her.

Or she could've been using it to find Annika.

She looked over at Duke. "Agent Bale told us they were searching for posts on the dark web about anyone trying to sell the comb, right? They hadn't found any yet."

He parked and turned off the engine. "That's how I understood it."

She grabbed his hand, ignoring the zing of awareness at the contact. "Maybe my sister stole the comb to find me. Last night, she might've put it in the water to call me, to return it to me."

That wouldn't explain why her sister had been working at Department 13 since 1987, but she wanted to believe Atargatis missed her as much as she'd missed her sister. Maybe they could reconcile.

The pang of hope in her long-cold heart frightened her.

Duke squeezed her hand. "I was doing some reading up on your sister. I'm not sure where the truth ends and the myth begins. According to the records I found, she has healing abilities in water and can help women conceive children. Is there anything else I should know?"

Annika started to shake her head and stopped herself. They'd agreed to be partners, but it was second nature not to trust anyone other than herself.

She lifted her gaze to his face. "She can also manipulate water. Her hydrokinesis is powerful. If you're anywhere near water, you're in danger with her."

In the distance, her sister entered through a pair of tall glass doors on the side of the building.

Annika got out of the van and walked toward the huge shopping mall with Duke at her side. "When we first came through the portal, we didn't realize humanity didn't share our gifts. My sister ended up being worshipped as a goddess. Humans built temples and golden idols in her honor. Once we realized what was happening, we were more careful to keep our true nature hidden from human eyes."

"Do you have any special gifts I should know about?" Duke looked at her as they crossed onto the sidewalk, heading for the doors.

The impulse to lie swelled, but she forced it back. Duke had carried her to the water to heal her feet and had kept her from succumbing to her comb's call, in spite of her biting him. The least she could give him in return was honesty.

"We all have different abilities that emerge as we mature. When I sing, my voice entrances humans and bends them to my will." She broke eye contact, choosing to focus on the door ahead so she wouldn't have to witness any fear in his eyes. "I can also communicate telepathically with sea animals."

He arched a brow. "I thought singing was for sirens."

"We both do." She swallowed a lump in her throat. "They sing to draw in humans and feed. My voice is to command. Human life force isn't part of our diet."

She expected more questions or maybe an uncomfortable joke, but Duke just grabbed the ornate handle on the door and pulled the oversized glass door open as if it weighed nothing.

"Are you afraid of me now?" she asked as she passed by him.

“No.” He took her hand in his as they went further into the shopping mall. “In the past year, a demon nearly destroyed the *Sea Dog* with a legendary sword, we had a run-in with Pandora’s Box, and a few weeks ago, Caleb walked on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean and met an Atlantean.” He shrugged, looking over at her with a crooked smile that made her heart flutter. “It would take more than a few otherworldly powers to scare me off.”

She squeezed his hand. “Maybe I should be afraid of you.”

“Aye.” He chuckled. “It does sound like I have a string of bad luck.”

And his luck hadn’t changed. She’d shot him the first time they met.

His voice interrupted her thoughts. “Are you planning on confronting your sister here? Bale asked us to determine what kind of supernatural she was. I’m not sure what you’re hoping to accomplish with this.”

She hadn’t really thought it through. The idea that she might be able to talk to her sister again was intoxicating, but Duke was right. This might not be the right place—in front of so many humans. “I just want my comb back.”

“Do you think she brought it with her to the mall?”

“No.” Annika shook her head, narrowing her eyes to search for her sister. “Probably not. But... What if we lose her?”

He lifted his phone. “Tracker on her car, remember?”

He was right. Her sister walked out of the store and Annika cut a path through the shoppers. She couldn’t help it. She hadn’t seen Atargatis in over a thousand years. One more day would be too many.

Her sister’s eyes widened as they approached. Annika’s mouth went dry. “Atargatis. What are you doing here? I thought...”

Her sister held up her hand. “I’m Holli in the human world.”

“I’m not human.” Annika crossed her arms.

Her sister didn’t respond. Her eyes flicked to Duke and her gaze slid up his body so slowly, Annika had to fight the urge to step in front of him and claim him as her own.

“And who is this?” Her sister’s voice oozed with sensuality.

Duke offered his hand. “I’m Duke Proctor.”

Atargatis shook his hand with a hungry sparkle in her eyes. “Nice to meet you, Duke.” She glanced at Annika and back to Duke. “How do you know Annika?”

Without any hesitation, he slid his arm around Annika’s waist. “I’m her

boyfriend.”

Annika blinked. He was hardly a boy, and they weren’t involved together in the way his familiar touch suggested. Not that she wasn’t attracted to him. She was. Simply having his arm around her waist made it difficult to think straight.

Her sister wet her lips and shook her head. “I wasn’t aware my sister was dating humans.” Her eyes focused on Annika’s face and her tone was ice-cold. “She knows better. Or she used to.”

“And what about you...Holli?” The name seemed hollow on Annika’s tongue. “Why didn’t you tell me you were back on Earth?”

“Because I still have nothing to say to you.” Her words stung like venom.

Annika lifted her chin a notch, welcoming the edge to her voice. “Then let’s keep this short. Give me my comb.”

Her sister’s brows shot up. “Have you lost it?”

Annika stepped forward, enjoying the way Atargatis shrunk back. “Cut the crap. I know you have it.”

The mock surprise melted away from her sister’s face. “I *don’t* have it.”

Annika grabbed her sister’s wrist in a tight grip. “Where is it?”

“It’s with mine.”

“Your comb is missing too?” Annika’s eyes widened as she released her. “I don’t understand.”

Her sister looked at Duke. “Does he know...”

Annika nodded. “Duke has been helping me recover the comb. And he’s not my boyfriend. We...have an arrangement.”

“Is that what it is?” Atargatis tipped her head toward Duke.

Annika looked over her shoulder to see Duke walking away. She called him, but he didn’t slow, or even look back. *Shit*. She turned to her sister again. “Someone used my comb last night. Was it you?”

There was real shock in her eyes for a second, and then it was gone. “No. My...partner has the comb. I didn’t realize he would try to use it.”

“Your partner?” Annika’s eyebrows pinched. “What’s going on? How long have you been back?”

She shook her head slowly. “I can’t do this now. He’ll know something is wrong.” She took out her phone. “Give me your number and I’ll text you.”

“Who will know?”

“We don’t have time for this.” She rolled her eyes. “Your number.”

Annika gave her the number and looked back in the direction Duke had

gone. "I'll go." She faced her sister again. "But I'm coming for that comb."

Atargatis tipped her head slightly, studying Annika before slowly replying, "This is bigger than you know. Be careful, sister."

Annika nodded, unsure what to say. She turned and started after Duke.

Her mind kept tumbling her sister's warning over and over. She'd been clear that her anger hadn't cooled in the centuries they'd been apart, but she'd called Annika sister by the end. What did it all mean?

She stepped out the glass doors and found Duke leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his broad chest. His brown skin was bathed in the warm glow of the late afternoon sun, and when he turned to meet her eyes, there was an unfamiliar pang of warmth in her heart.

He straightened up. "Since you blew our cover, I thought you'd get more information if I wasn't around."

"I didn't know we had a cover to blow." That was almost true. He'd said he was her boyfriend without realizing being in a relationship with a human had been the first cut in her connection with her sister. Rather than dredge up painful memories, she plowed forward. "She doesn't have my comb. She said her partner had it and warned me to be careful."

Duke rolled his shoulders back. "I should probably call Agent Bale and warn him that his employee is a mermaid anyway."

Annika lifted her gaze to his face. "I'm not sure we can do that yet. I..." She shook her head. "I can't figure out why my sister would return to Earth, and then to hear she's been working for the government for decades...none of it makes sense. Agent Bale said she's been working with a relics dealer named Sampson Bane. We need to find him."

...

Duke took out his phone. "Bale might already know." But Annika didn't look convinced.

He wanted to help her, but it seemed like he didn't have the whole picture yet.

Not discussing a cover story on their way to Charleston was a rookie mistake. He'd blurted out that he was Annika's boyfriend to explain his presence, but when Annika had been so quick to tell her sister it wasn't true, he recognized he must've unknowingly touched on a nerve or crossed a line. It had been easier to give them some privacy rather than keep trying to come up with an excuse for his presence, so he'd waited outside.

That was almost all true. There was also a small part of himself hiding in the shadows that he wasn't ready to examine yet. Instead, he'd gone outside to lick the wounds to his ego.

This mermaid ran hot and cold in a way that had him aching for more, then a few minutes later wishing he could walk away and break the spell. Until today, he hadn't faced much rejection in his long life. No wonder the legends of mermaids luring sailors to their doom had multiplied. When she looked at him and smiled, it left him defenseless. He'd follow her anywhere.

She snapped through his mental gymnastics. "Let's go back to the address Agent Bale gave us. My sister seemed surprised someone had used my comb last night, and she was in a hurry. Something about how he'd know something was wrong."

Duke frowned. "You said your sister can move water, right? Plus, she's immortal and stronger than humans. Why would she be afraid of this guy?"

"If he has her comb, he could be using it as leverage with her to say and do whatever he tells her to."

He walked beside her back to the van, running through their options in his mind. "You still don't want Agent Bale involved?"

"Not yet. My sister is his prime suspect, but until I know why she's been working for him and who her partner is, I don't want to put her in more danger than she already is."

He popped the locks on the van and looked over at her. "She didn't seem happy to see you. Why are you trying to protect her?"

"Because earlier, as I was leaving, she told me to be careful." Annika met his gaze. "There was fear in her eyes."

Duke whistled. "Damn. What would scare an immortal mermaid?"

"That's exactly what I want to know."

When they got back to the address from Agent Bale, Duke drove slowly past the house, but he didn't see anyone there. Annika's sister's car wasn't in the driveway yet either.

He parked farther down the block and turned off the engine. From here, he could see the house in the side mirror of the van. "Looks like we beat Holli back."

She nodded. "I should've asked her why she was at the mall. Maybe she had to pick something up. It could've given us a clue into what they're planning with my comb."

“Or she was just grabbing a sandwich.” He met her eyes. “We’re going to get it back.”

A few minutes later, Annika’s sister drove into the driveway. The front door of the house opened, and a ghost stepped out of the house to greet her.

Duke rubbed his eyes, his fingertips tingling. He narrowed his eyes at the mirror, unable to believe what he was seeing as he whispered under his breath, “No fucking way. It can’t be...”

Annika leaned closer to him. “What’s wrong?”

Rutger Morgan. He should’ve been dust on that island they’d left him on over two hundred years ago.

But he could swear this was the same man.

“I think I know your sister’s partner.” He reached into the console and took out a pair of micro-binoculars. The second he adjusted the focus, the man with Holli looked up. His violet eyes scanned the area before he turned and followed Annika’s sister back into the house.

Duke lowered the binoculars and looked over at Annika. He still couldn’t believe it. “I don’t know how, but...” He struggled to gather his thoughts. “When I joined Flynn on the *Sea Dog* crew, they’d just taken control of the *Sea Dog* from a ruthless captain who had beat some of the crew nearly to death. I helped Flynn deposit their ex-captain on a deserted island centuries ago but...” He looked at the house again. “That’s him. I’d bet my life on it.”

“Did he drink from the Holy Grail too?” Annika asked.

“None of us had at that point. We hadn’t plundered the Spanish ship with the Grail yet.” He turned, meeting her eyes. “This can’t be possible, but he had these dark, violet-tinted eyes. That’s got to be him.” He stowed the binoculars back in the console and started the engine. “I have to tell Flynn about this.”

Annika caught his hand before he could pull away from the curb. “Wait. What about my sister?”

“She’s immortal, right?”

“As long as she can get back into the ocean.” She tightened her grip on his hand. “She said my comb was with hers.” She pointed at the house. “That man is controlling her.”

Duke sighed. “It could be a trap. If that’s really Captain Morgan in there, then he’s immortal too. Plus, if I walk through that door, he’ll know the *Sea Dog* crew is still alive. He’ll come for revenge. We need backup.”

She released his hand. “My sister told me this is bigger than we realized,

and I should be careful.”

“So, let’s go get the backup we need.”

She stared at the house and gradually started to nod. “Okay.”

Duke took out his cell phone as he drove away. He pulled up Flynn’s number, pressed call, and set it to speaker.

Flynn answered after the first ring. “I was just about to call you. Did you recover the comb?”

“Not yet, but...”

Flynn interrupted. “Department 13 is scrambling. I just accepted a lucrative contract from Agent Bale to assist in capturing a thief from within his walls and recover the mermaid’s comb.”

Annika’s sister.

Annika looked at Duke and his knuckles went white on the steering wheel as he tightened his grip and faced forward again.

Flynn went on. “Did you find the comb yet?”

“No. But I know who has it.”

“Bale’s employee?” Flynn asked.

“She was there too, but there’s someone else behind all this.” Duke almost said their previous captain’s name out loud, but stopped himself. Flynn still carried some trauma over what Morgan had done to his brother, what he’d been forced to witness. It seemed wrong to tell Flynn over the phone that his worst nightmare was not only still alive, but likely immortal. “I’ll explain everything when we get back to Savannah.”

“Where are you?” Flynn asked.

“We’re leaving Charleston now.”

Flynn’s tone was all business. “I’ll gather the crew and meet you at the *Sea Dog*.”

“Thanks.” Duke ended the call and looked over at Annika for a second. “We beat Rutger Morgan before, and we’ll do it again. You’ll have your comb.”

“What about my sister? It sounds like Agent Bale is offering your crew a bounty for bringing her back.”

“She stole from Department 13.”

She chuffed. “Coming from a pirate.”

He arched a brow. “I thought she left you behind. You don’t owe her anything.”

“Maybe not, but I don’t think she’s here by choice.”

His brows pinched together as he peered over at her. “How do you figure that?”

“I don’t know anything for sure, but she said her comb was with mine. Your previous captain has them both. He could be controlling her with it.”

Duke rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, pondering her words. “She must’ve given it to him.”

“No mermaid would willingly give her comb to a human.” Annika looked up at the roof of the van. “Before we discovered our father had died, my sister and I decided it would be safest to keep our combs hidden from humanity. I hid mine in Atlantis, and my sister stashed hers in the pond of the Fountain of Youth.”

“It’s real?” He shook his head. “Explorers have searched and mapped every part of this earth looking for it.”

“It was on a small deserted...”

“Island,” he finished. “Fuck.” He banged his hand on the steering wheel. “You’re saying we left Captain Morgan on the one uncharted island where the Fountain of Youth has been hidden for eons?”

“I don’t know. But drinking from it would’ve given him immortality, but not a way to escape the island.”

Duke groaned. “He must’ve built a raft or something. He couldn’t starve or dehydrate.”

“He wouldn’t have known that.”

Holy shit, she was right. How many years passed on that island before Captain Morgan had realized he wasn’t aging? Then it hit him. “The comb.”

Annika nodded. “He probably didn’t realize what he had with the comb either, but maybe he took it into the sea one day.”

“That would be enough to bring your sister back to Earth?”

Annika met his eyes. “Definitely.”

“How is that possible?” Duke struggled to make the pieces fit in his mind. “Caleb said the Atlanteans told him that the merfolk guard the portals. Are they always open? How would she have come back without anyone knowing?”

Annika looked out the front windshield. “The portals are connected to all the planets of this galaxy. Because the merfolk developed the interstellar pathways, we do guard them from being destroyed, but we don’t have a sentry stationed there like a doorman at one of your human hotels. Atargatis could have come through the portal from Neptune and vanished into Earth’s

oceans in search of her comb without anyone ever seeing her.”

“Fuck.” Duke focused on the road and gave the van more gas. If that vengeful asshole ever found out the *Sea Dog* crew was still alive, he’d be coming for them.

Chapter Fourteen

Annika stepped out of the van and stretched as she eyed the ship. The sound of the water lapping at the hull seemed to be amplified, calling her. She ground her teeth and forced herself to focus as Duke came around to her side of the vehicle.

He took her hand. The touch connected her to the moment, easing the pull to dive into the river. He kept his voice down as he stared into her eyes. “Before you meet the crew, I want to be sure I understand what you want from this. Flynn likes to think the crew will follow his orders without question, but as a crew, we vote on every issue. I’ll champion your cause, but I have to know where you stand.”

That was such a human turn of phrase, where you stand, as if life could be as simple as a line in the sand and stepping onto one side or the other. In her experience, life was more like the tide, rising and falling, pushing through the path of least resistance, wearing down the sharp edges of rocks and smoothing over the angles.

She lifted her chin. “I want to recover my comb, and then we protect my sister until we know exactly how she ended up with your ex-captain for a partner and working for Agent Bale.”

Duke’s rough thumb caressed her knuckles in a slow, distracting circle. “Flynn will ask what’s in it for the crew not to turn her over to Department 13 and collect the bounty.”

A flush of anger shot through her veins. “Because you’ll only get my cooperation if you abide by my terms. They’re going to need my help to stop your ex-captain and my sister. I’m your only hope of collecting any money.”

He squeezed her hand with a soft chuckle. “Ye don’t need to convince me, love. I’m on yer side.”

Her jaw softened. "Sorry. I'm not used to...having a partner."

"Apologies aren't necessary, but I will be holding ye to that promise of a dance later tonight."

He bobbed his eyebrows and her lips curved into a smile. How he'd managed to coax it out of her was a mystery. Maybe he had a little magic of his own. "I'd like that."

He brought her hand up and brushed a kiss on the back of it. "Then let's get this meeting over with."

She followed him down River Street to the gangplank leading to the deck of the *Sea Dog*.

It had looked much bigger the last time she'd been on board. Now it was filled with new faces. Duke led her over to a couple standing near the opposite railing.

The man was at least six inches shorter than Duke, with dark brown hair and bright blue eyes. He was holding hands with a woman with long braids, wearing jeans and a purple top.

Duke gestured to the man first. "This is Caleb. He's our navigator and resident scientist."

He offered his hand. "You must be Annika."

She nodded. "I am. It's good to meet you. Duke talks about you all the time."

Duke chuckled. "All good stuff, mate."

Caleb looked at the woman at his side. "And this is my love and better half, Diana."

There was an undeniable spark in Diana's eyes, a knowing Annika had come to recognize as a human with an old soul.

Annika shook her hand. "It's good to meet you."

Diana released her and kept her voice low. "It's nice to see Duke so happy." Diana's smile widened as another couple approached. The man wore jeans and a thermal shirt that stuck to his torso like a second skin, and his eyes were lined underneath. Diana looked at Annika again. "And this is our resident rock star, Keegan. He's the lead singer of the Scallywags."

He arched a brow, clearly expecting some kind of recognition from Annika. She glanced over at Duke and back to Keegan. "You're in a band?"

Duke laughed, shaking his head. "They're a local group, not something you'd hear on the radio." He smiled. "Maybe you'll play something for us later, mate?"

Keegan didn't seem bothered by her slip. He turned to the raven-haired woman beside him. "This is my beautiful Dr. Charlotte Sinclair."

Charlotte pushed her red-rimmed glasses up to the bridge of her nose and offered her hand. "It's a pleasure meeting you. I couldn't remember anyone's names on this ship for a few weeks. It's pretty overwhelming at first."

Annika appreciated her kind words, knowing she'd never be able to hold all the names in her head. One by one, Duke introduced her to everyone, and she tried not to notice the way their eyes all dropped to her feet, making it clear Captain Flynn must've told them she was a mermaid.

She and Duke stood at Flynn's side while the captain laid out the agreement with Agent Bale. Her stomach twisted, hearing her sister tossed around like a treasure to plunder instead of a living, breathing, feeling person.

As if he could sense her growing dread, Duke interrupted the captain and addressed the crew. "I know Agent Bale wants us to deliver the thief to him right away, but before we vote, there's more I need to tell you about this situation." When everyone turned their attention to Duke, he finally spoke again. "We followed Annika's sister today and her partner is someone most of us know...Rutger Morgan."

Rumbles broke out across the deck instantly, but none bigger than Captain Flynn's. "Im-fucking-possible," he growled, shoving Duke's shoulder. "He's dust."

While the crew were wide-eyed with surprise, there was real fear glinting in Flynn's blue eyes. Annika could almost smell it wafting off the captain's broad shoulders.

Had he known already? Maybe he'd just suspected.

Duke shook his head. "It was him, right down to the violet eyes."

Colton stepped forward. He was easy for Annika to remember because he was the tallest crew member, and he and his wife, Skye, were the only ones on this ship with a baby.

Skye had long, auburn hair tied back in a ponytail and a small blanket over her shoulder as she bounced the little one in her arms. The baby boy looked like he was only a few months old, but he'd smiled at Annika, sending a wave of regret through her before she could shore up her defenses. As a girl, she'd always dreamed of being a mother, but coming to Earth had changed all that.

“How is this possible?” Colton asked. “We left him on a deserted island over two centuries ago.”

Duke met Annika’s eyes and she stepped up beside him. “My sister told me he has her comb too. She hid it eons ago in the bottom of the waters of the Fountain of Youth.”

“Wait. Are you saying...” A slender man with distinguished features and a well-tailored suit came toward her, his words dying on his lips.

She struggled to remember his name and couldn’t come up with it.

He was the investor for the crew. The boatswain, Duke had called him. He had a single gold hoop earring and anguish in his dark brown eyes. “Yer saying we stranded that sadistic bastard on the same island where the Fountain of Youth was hidden? Rutger Morgan is immortal?”

Annika pressed her lips together and started to nod. “It appears so.” She scanned the rest of the crew. “And if he has my sister’s comb, then he can control her too. We can’t just hand her over to Agent Bale. Not until we understand the situation.”

Duke’s big hand brushed the small of her back, offering his silent support as he spoke to the others. “For now, we have surprise on our side. He probably thinks we’re long dead.”

Flynn crossed his arms and a muscle in his cheek tensed as he shook his head. “I wouldn’t count on that.”

...

“What?” Duke stared at the captain. “How could you have kept that from us?”

Flynn met his eyes. “I’ve been trying to confirm my suspicions for a few months. No sense in worrying everyone if it was just paranoia toying with me after all these years.”

Duke clenched his jaw, fighting to keep from picking the captain up and tossing him overboard. “We’re all at risk if he knows we’re still alive. You remember his last words as we left him behind?”

How could any of the crew forget?

Captain Morgan had sworn that he would hunt them through this life and the next, until they begged him to kill them. It might’ve seemed like a rage-induced empty threat, but Captain Morgan had taken it to another level by ripping the rings from his ears, leaving blood trickling down his neck. He’d wiped his hands in it and spread the crimson all over his face as he spat the

words.

They'd all felt the weight of his curse.

But as the years had passed, they'd assumed he was long dead.

Flynn faced the crew again. "After Keegan and Dr. Sinclair killed most of the Serpent Society, I started receiving some threatening letters at my office in Atlanta."

"Serpent Society?" Annika asked.

Duke stared at the captain for a moment before answering. "They were religious fanatics trying to buy their way back to the Garden of Eden." He focused on the captain again, narrowing his eyes. "I thought the letters stopped."

Flynn had hired Duke to try to track the letters back to the sender, but he'd come up empty. None of the postmarks on the envelopes matched. Every letter had come from a different city and state. They'd finally written them off as threats from angry competitors.

"They did." Flynn looked at him. "Then the emails and the website hacks began. I've spent a fortune on website security for Flynn Enterprises over the past two years." He turned to the rest of the crew. "Recently, I procured a map from Department 13. I had planned on proposing we sail to the coordinates to see if the Fountain of Youth actually exists, and if it might be on the same island where we left Captain Morgan, but apparently that won't be necessary."

"If Duke's seen him, I say we go pay him a visit." John, the boatswain, cracked his knuckles with a dark gleam in his eyes.

Duke hadn't been part of the crew while Morgan had been the captain, but he'd heard the stories. John Smyth had almost died after the final flogging he'd received from Captain Morgan. That beating had been the catalyst for the mutiny. Flynn had been the quartermaster under Morgan, and with the help of Colton, Keegan, Drake, and Caleb, he had convinced the rest of Morgan's crew to join in the fight to free themselves from his tyrannical leadership.

"Not so simple." Duke shook his head, his gaze on John's face. "He's as immortal as we are."

Annika backed him up. "He's also got a powerful mermaid under his control. It's a fight you can't win."

A muscle jumped in John's cheek as his attention shifted to Annika. "We can't stand around and wait for him to hunt us."

His girlfriend, Harmony, had her long, black hair tied back in a ponytail, and her dark brown eyes scanned the group as she stepped up beside John and took his hand. “There are other ways to get him. Now that we know he exists, I can start tracking him online. He’s not the only one who can hack websites, and I’d bet everything I have that I’m twice the hacker he is. We’ll hit him where it hurts.”

Duke held his breath, watching John. Usually, Harmony was the risk-taker of the couple and John was the anchor keeping them from treacherous waters, but right now, she was his lifeline. And if anyone could hobble Rutger Morgan digitally, it was Harmony. She worked with John at Privateer Investments by day, but she used to have a side hustle that included computer hacking for a now-defunct dark web group, the Digi Robbins. Her skills had even evaded Department 13.

“Fine.” John nodded, grumbling. “You’re right.” He met her eyes and shook his head. “It won’t be nearly as satisfying as runnin’ him through with my cutlass.”

Duke let out a relieved breath as Annika nudged him, drawing his attention. “My comb...”

“Right.” He faced the crew and raised his voice. “If we can steal the mermaid combs, Morgan will lose his edge. *Then* we can overpower him.”

John frowned. “If he’s immortal, what’s the point in attacking him? We all bleed, but we heal. Sounds like a waste of energy.”

Duke dropped his hands to his sides and laced his fingers with Annika’s. “I say we make him wish he could die.” All eyes turned his way. “We put him on another island with no phone and no mermaid comb. He can spend eternity trapped there.”

“I can get behind that plan,” John said.

“We have to think this through.” Colton, the tallest member of the crew and the owner of the replica of the *Sea Dog*, looked over at Duke. “A few of us aren’t as immortal as we used to be. Drake, Caleb, and I aren’t protected by the Grail anymore. Morgan probably assumes we’re immortal since we’re still alive, but if he found out we can be killed...”

Shit. Duke clenched his jaw. Colton was right. “We’ll make sure he doesn’t find out.”

Flynn gripped Duke’s shoulder. “One problem at a time. Let’s get the mermaid combs, then we can decide our next step.” Flynn looked past him, to Annika. “First, we need to understand everything we can about the

treasure we're after."

Annika looked up at Duke and he wished he could read her mind. They needed the crew's help, but she'd have to trust them first.

"Seems like a good time for a snack." The semi-circle of the crew parted and One-Eyed Bob came through with a platter piled high with seafood.

Their elderly cook had his weathered, leather eyepatch on tonight and his tufts of white hair were slicked back onto his head. He flashed his perfect white veneers as he grinned at Annika. "I heard we had a mermaid on board, so I whipped up a seafood platter of raw oysters, baked clams, steamed crab legs and lobster tails..." He tipped his head toward the right side of the tray. "And my famous hushpuppies on the side."

Annika's smile made Duke's knees wobble as she picked up a crab leg. "Thank you."

"I wasn't sure what yer favorite foods were, but I hope ye enjoy it." Bob plucked a cracker from his apron and held it out to her.

Annika popped the crab leg in her mouth and bit right through the shell. She glanced at the wide eyes and shook her head. "All the fiber and calcium is in the shell. We could never figure out why humans throw it away."

Bob laughed and looked over his shoulder. "Eli? Where's the table, lad?"

Eli, their youngest crewmember, was far from a lad. He'd been barely eighteen when they'd drunk from the Grail, so although he'd lived over two hundred years now, he still appeared to be a gangly teenager.

He also struggled with immortality the most. He often wandered off for years at a time, sometimes working as a roadie for a rock band, and others just traveling the world. He drove fast cars, took too many risks, and seemed to have a death wish that could never be fulfilled.

Duke had been surprised when Eli had taken another drink from the cup two years ago. He'd recently returned from another road trip, but Duke hadn't heard any details yet.

Eli unfolded the card table and Bob placed the tray in the middle. "We all think better on a full stomach."

Annika finished the crab leg and took one of the oysters on a half shell. She nudged Duke with her elbow. "These are good luck when you swallow them together."

He grinned and picked up an oyster. "I've heard they boost libido, but not luck."

Her eyes sparkled as she clicked her shell against his. "I guess it depends

on your definition of getting lucky.” His gaze locked on hers and they knocked back their oysters at the same time. She smiled and licked her lips. “Delicious.”

Oh, he could imagine. He wanted to taste every inch of her.

“Now that we’re no longer famished, what can you tell us about the mermaid combs?” Flynn shattered the mood with a glimmer in his eyes that spoke volumes. He knew he was fucking interrupting and he didn’t give a shit.

Annika cleared her throat. “You saw what they look like, but it’s what you can’t see that makes them powerful. We have a visceral connection to our comb when we’re in the water. The compulsion to possess it overrides us.”

Flynn’s eyebrow rose. “You don’t feel it when you’re on land?”

“We miss it, but the compulsion is gone.”

“Then how would Morgan be controlling your sister?” Flynn asked.

Annika looked down at her feet and back up. “Because we can’t stay on land for very long. Our bodies start to decay.” She lifted her head. “She has to return to the water to heal, and anytime she’s in the water and the comb is too, she’ll do anything he asks.” Her voice softened. “I will too.”

Flynn’s cold blue eyes flicked over to Duke. “We have to lock her up until we recover the comb.”

“No,” Duke said as Annika tensed beside him. “We need to find the damned comb before she needs to get in the water again.” Duke looked at Caleb and Diana. “We were the ones who turned her comb over to Agent Bale. We owe it to her to return it.”

Flynn countered, “We don’t owe the mermaid anything. We didn’t steal that comb, she lost it. This is our chance to stop Morgan and make some money from Department 13.”

“By turning in my sister?” Annika growled and drew her gun.

Duke’s eyebrows shot up as the tension escalated faster than an incoming storm.

Flynn shook his head with a snort. “Shooting me will only piss me off, mermaid.”

“My name is Annika.” She pulled back the slide on her Glock and put him in her sights again. “Putting a bullet in you might not kill you, but it might make me feel better.”

Duke put his hand on her shoulder. “We’ve all wanted to shoot Flynn at

one time or another, but it's a waste of a bullet." He turned to the crew. "Let's vote. We retrieve the combs and wait on the bounty from Agent Bale until we understand the full picture."

Flynn raised his voice, "Or we find the combs and return Agent Bale's wayward employee and collect our payment."

Duke held up his hand. "For my proposal?"

Every crewmember shouted, "Aye."

Flynn narrowed his eyes. "When did this crew get so fucking soft?"

He left the deck and crossed the gangplank while the rest of the crew crowded around Duke and Annika to make plans. Duke watched Flynn disappear into the darkness.

This was the first time Duke had ever openly challenged the captain. He'd been in the right, but there was still a needle of guilt stabbing into his heart. Flynn had saved his life and given him immortality.

He'd make it up to him. But first, he needed to find Annika's comb.

Chapter Fifteen

David stared at his cell phone, willing it to ring. Why hadn't they called from Charleston yet? He pressed Duke's name on his phone, but it went directly to voicemail. Again. *Damn it.*

Maybe they couldn't identify what kind of being Holli Porter might be. Or maybe they hadn't even laid eyes on her yet.

He turned his attention to the next problem on his list.

Eric Gross was still missing. Agent Garcia said Eric was the one who'd called him down to the preservation room, which could mean that Eric was either in on the theft with Holli and he'd killed Agent Ben Kinney, or he could be dead too, and they just hadn't discovered his body yet.

Either scenario made the acid in David's stomach bubble. Not that long ago, Department 13 had been one of the only places on Earth that felt safe and protected to him. Now, he was second-guessing every shadow.

His phone buzzed, but it wasn't Duke's name on the screen.

He frowned and accepted the call. "Kingsley? Did you find anything?"

"Yes. Meet me in the vault."

"The vault?" David rubbed his forehead. "What's going on?"

King's voice oozed with sarcasm as he said, "If it was safe for me to answer that question, I wouldn't be standing inside the vault. Sir."

David cursed under his breath. "Fine. Be right there."

He ended the call and headed for the elevator.

When he stepped off on the vault level, the scent of industrial cleaners hit him like a wall, reminding him of Agent Kinney's bloody body in the locker. He caught a glimpse of the clean-up crew as he passed by preservations and continued down the hall to the keypad.

Only five people in the department knew the codes to access the vault, making it the most secure place in the entire building to talk openly.

David pressed his thumb to the keypad which brought up the screen to enter his security code. A computerized voice spoke as the locks turned. "Welcome, Director."

He stepped inside to find Kingsley and Brenda from his team, as well as Petra from the Occult Division, and a face he rarely came in contact with, Leon Williams.

Leon was a tall Black man with short, white hair and slender bifocals that lingered near the end of his nose. His dark brown eyes pinned David in place as he smiled. "Long time no see, Director."

The librarian was one of the few people who had worked inside Department 13 longer than David. While he appeared to be in his sixties, he was well over two hundred years old. He'd been brought into Department 13 at its inception, before the vault had even been built. Leon had volunteered during the American Revolution and General Washington had recognized his aptitude for record keeping and tapped him to keep secret journals of metaphysical resources. Leon coded all the language, so if the journals ever fell into the wrong hands, no one would understand what they referred to.

David wasn't sure which item had granted Leon immortality, but the man had seen everything when it came to Department 13, and David couldn't help but feel ashamed of what Leon must be seeing when he looked at him right now. David didn't notice any judgment in his eyes, but maybe there should've been.

"Good to see you, Leon." He looked at Kingsley. "Why are we meeting inside the vault?"

"Because this is the only place I could be certain we are not being surveilled."

David's eyebrows shot up. "What are you talking about?"

King's bloodshot eyes narrowed. "While I was checking the employee list, I noticed an anomaly when I reached the file for Eric Gross."

Oh shit. David braced himself. This couldn't be good. "Is he our killer?"

"I can't tell you that for certain, but I doubt it." Kingsley scanned their small circle. "When I hacked into the confidential personnel background files on Eric Gross, I saw his initial background check was completed by the CIA."

"That can't be right." David frowned. "Eric came to us from the Army Corps of Engineers."

“It would appear that was a lie, sir.” Kingsley cleared his throat. “If the CIA has infiltrated Department 13...”

“Damn it.” David raked his hand through his hair. “No one is supposed to know we exist. That’s the only way we can keep the items in the vault safe from being used as weapons.”

Leon rested a heavy hand on David’s shoulder. “When Truman first formed the CIA, they were sniffing around our door, claiming we were a rogue agency with too little oversight.”

Leon’s words didn’t solve anything, but they did give David a boost of reassurance. If Department 13 had butted heads with the CIA before and survived, they would be able to shield themselves again.

David turned to the librarian. “How did we get them to back off?”

“In those days, Director Harrison was in charge. He gave the order to use the dust from the moth man’s wings on the director of the CIA.” He dropped his hand and shrugged. “Back then, we didn’t have to worry about computer backups or cell phone video footage. The dust allowed us to plant the false memory that Department 13 didn’t exist.”

David had worked under Harrison when he’d first joined the department in 1963, so the CIA incident had been before his time.

Kingsley added, “I still have a digital back door into the CIA database. I can search for any videos or backup records that involve us. Something must’ve tipped them off to us.” King looked at David. “But we need to find Eric and his cell phone in order to plug the leak permanently.”

Brenda looked over at the endless aisles of crates. “I’ll see if I can find any remaining moth man dust, since it saved us once before. I’ll check the inventory lists.”

“Good.” David glanced between them. “Thank you both and keep me posted.”

Brenda nodded. “Will do.”

She and Kingsley left the vault, leaving David alone with Leon.

David sighed. “I never planned to go down in history as the most incompetent leader of Department 13.”

Leon chuckled. “Is that what you think you are?” He shook his head. “You better start trying harder. Every director here has dangled over the precipice of discovery at least once during their tenure.”

David let out a humorless chuckle. “You’re telling me past directors were infiltrated by spies and had agents killed inside the building?”

“The demon that stole the Tyrfin sword wasn’t our first.” He gave David a pat on the back as he headed for the door. “Come up to the library sometime. How can you know where you’re going if you don’t know where you’ve been?”

The vault door opened and closed, leaving David behind in the tomb-like silence.

He walked over to one of the rows of metal shelving and rested his forearms on the shelf. Sucking in a deep breath, he put his forehead down on his arms and sighed.

Half of him wanted to interview every member of the team, searching for the killer and Eric Gross, while the other half pondered Leon’s advice.

What if the answer really was hidden in the past?

He flinched when his phone buzzed. He took it out and answered, “Agent Bale.”

“It’s Duke.”

David straightened up. “Did you find Holli?”

“Yeah. Her real name is Atargatis.”

That name rang a bell. David frowned. “The first mermaid?”

“Aye. She’s also Annika’s sister. And apparently the guy she’s with has her comb too. That’s why she took Annika’s.”

David ran a hand down his face. “Sampson Bane is controlling her.”

“Looks that way, but we can’t be sure yet.” He paused. “Whatever you agreed to pay Captain Flynn for bringing the comb back, I also need your assurance you won’t go after Holli. Mermaids need to be in the water. Jail would be a death sentence for her.”

“I’ll have to get back to you on that.” Until he had a team down here to run another emergency inventory of the vault to see if she’d taken anything else, he couldn’t promise anything.

“That’s not good enough.”

David rolled his eyes. “Back the fuck off.” His words echoed off the walls of the massive vault. He took a deep breath and lowered his voice. “Either fulfill the bargain we have with Flynn or don’t. But this is too important for me to promise immunity to anyone.”

Heavy footsteps came through the phone and Duke growled into the phone. “Look, this is more complicated than you think. The guy you call Sampson Bane...is really Rutger Morgan. He was the captain of the *Sea Dog* before Flynn. He’s dangerous.”

This day just kept getting more screwed up by the second. David clenched his jaw. “Rutger Morgan owns a bunch of properties in cities that were all pirate ports. I’ll send over the list. If you lose him in Charleston, that’ll give you places to look. We didn’t realize it was the same person. So, he’s...”

“Immortal. And probably the luckiest bastard on the planet. Looks like we marooned him on the one deserted island that also hid the Fountain of Youth.”

“It still exists?” David frowned. Flynn had bartered for the map to the Fountain of Youth recently. David had given him a copy in trade for his efforts during the hunt for the Tyrfin sword. While Department 13 had precious vials of the water in the vault, they had sponsored two expeditions over the years in search of the mythical spring, and even with the map, they’d never found it again. He figured it had either dried up or the location was lost to time.

“Aye.” Duke sighed. “We’ll be in touch.”

He ended the call and David put his phone back into his pocket.

Two questions pinged inside his head.

If Atargatis, the mermaid, and Rutger Morgan, the pirate, were partners, which one of them had known about Department 13 first? And how did they find out?

He sent Brenda a text to schedule an emergency inventory check on the vault. If a pirate had had an in with his department for the past forty years, it was possible other items had been pilfered that they weren’t even aware of yet.

The thought made him ill.

He left the vault and went to the elevator. Inside, he pressed the button for the thirteenth floor, the top floor of their building. Something Leon mentioned had sparked an idea.

He’d always put off visiting the archives of Department 13. He’d joined after the death of his father at the hands of the Serpent Society, and after his training, he’d risen up through the ranks and never looked back. The past was full of ghosts and pain. The future was all that mattered.

But maybe the answers he needed for the future survival of Department 13 were buried in the past.

Chapter Sixteen

Annika stood right beside Duke as if she were part of the crew, but she couldn't shake the feeling of being an outsider.

Maybe that was just her comfort zone. She usually hunted for lost mermaid combs on her own. Not relying on anyone else meant she was never disappointed.

Witnessing an entire pirate crew devise a plan to steal her comb from Rutger Morgan made her feel weak and inadequate, instead of grateful. These people didn't know her, but they were willing to help, possibly passing up a chance at monetary gain by not turning her sister over to Agent Bale.

She quickly reminded herself they were doing this for Duke, not her.

He looked over at her and the warmth in his eyes weakened her knees. Unlike his crew, he'd agreed to help her in trade for information about the merfolk. He'd already gotten everything he'd asked for, and yet he was still here, helping her.

While he focused on his crewmates again, she was left to wonder why. Yes, the kiss between them had been hot, but surely he could see they had no future together?

The older man with the eye patch stopped beside her. "Everything all right, lass?"

Annika looked over at him and forced a half smile. "Yes." She paused and shook her head slowly. "I guess I can't understand why your crew is willing to help me. It makes me...nervous."

"It's simple." The cook grinned and gave her a wink. "We're family." His gaze shifted to Duke. "And we've never seen Duke openly defy Captain Flynn before." He turned her way again. "Speaks volumes about how he must feel about you."

He walked away and disappeared into the galley before she could ask anything more.

Duke interrupted her train of thought by taking her hand and pulling her tighter into the circle. "Do you think your sister will welcome our interference with Morgan, or will she defend him?"

"I'm not sure." She thought about her sister's warning that he would know something's wrong. "I think she's a prisoner of her comb, but if she's been working with him for forty years, they might have a bond of some kind." She scanned the circle. "She was surprised to hear he'd used my comb, for whatever that's worth."

Duke looked over at Colton. "Seems like you, John, Drake, and Caleb should stay in Savannah to be sure he doesn't circle back to the *Sea Dog*. Keegan, Greyson, and I will go to Charleston and stake out Morgan's house. As soon as he leaves, we go in and take the combs."

John straightened and lifted his chin. "I'm going with you."

"Not a good idea, mate." Duke shook his head. "Yer heart's too wrapped up in this one. Ye want a fight that I'd rather avoid for now."

"Are we still pirates?" A muscle jumped in John's cheek. "Since when do we avoid fights?"

Duke rose to his full height and rolled his shoulders back. "Just until we get the combs. Then yer free to go to Charleston and brawl with Morgan."

The sea breeze teased her nostrils with the scent of saltwater, but she couldn't take her eyes off Duke and John. Electricity sizzled between them in silent opposition, but finally John nodded slowly.

"Fine." John looked at the others. "Where do we think Flynn falls in all this?"

Duke crossed his arms. "Sounds like the captain's been keeping secrets, but he never took any action. My money is on him staying in Atlanta."

Colton chuffed. "Now that he knows Morgan's alive and immortal like us, we may never see Flynn again. He's got to be on the top of Morgan's revenge list."

The others chimed in, but Annika barely noticed. The young pirate, a slender man with intense, emerald-green eyes, stood beside Greyson, staring at her. She couldn't remember his name. His brown hair was cut short and his distressed jeans and black T-shirt made him look more like an angry teenager than an immortal pirate. He couldn't have been much older than a teen when he'd drunk from the grail.

His eyes narrowed slightly before he focused on Duke. "I can find someone to cover me as a roadie for the next leg of the tour. I'll stay in Savannah with John to keep watch over the *Sea Dog*."

He looked at Annika again, making her curious about his intentions. She was sure they'd never met before. But he watched her like they had history.

Duke didn't seem to notice his crewmate's interest. "Good. I'd feel better if there were two immortals here to watch the ship anyway. Thanks, Eli."

Eli. Annika filed his name away and looked around the circle. "Thank you all for your help."

Colton's wife, Skye, smiled as she cradled her sleeping baby. "Compared to some of our recent jobs for Agent Bale, this seems pretty straightforward."

Colton slid his arm around her waist and shook his head. "The jury's still out on whether Rutger Morgan is a demon. That would actually explain a lot."

Most of the crew laughed.

Except Eli.

Annika was half tempted to sing and coax his secrets out into the open, but there were too many people around. Besides, she had bigger things to worry about, and once she had her comb, she could leave Savannah behind anyway.

Duke smiled at her and her chest tightened.

Leaving Savannah was going to be tougher than she wanted to admit.

Once the travel plans were set, One-Eyed Bob invited everyone into the galley for more food and the rum started flowing.

Annika enjoyed the warmth smoldering in her belly and spreading out to her limbs. Her worries about her sister and the dread over her missing comb lightened a little. Keegan took out his guitar and after tuning it, he began to sing. She didn't recognize the nautical song, but the words held all the hope of returning to a loved one's arms. She swayed along with the melody while she sat beside Duke.

He smiled and leaned in close, his lips brushing her ear. "I'll claim that dance now."

She pulled back, meeting his eyes with a raised brow. "We're still on the ship."

"Aye." He got up and offered his hand. "Dance with me."

She hadn't expected to have an audience for her first dance lesson. Heat

crept up her neck and into her cheeks as she stared at his hand. “We should wait. I’ve had too much alcohol.”

He bent down so she couldn’t escape his gaze. “Dance with me.”

Desire simmered in his eyes and the heat that had gathered in her cheeks moved down to coil low in her belly. She didn’t know how to dance, but she’d seen humans do it for a millennium. It meant she’d be close to him, and right now there was nowhere else she’d rather be.

“Fine.” She rolled her eyes and took his hand. “Just one.”

He chuckled and walked with her to the open space near the door. “You might like it.”

She highly doubted that she’d enjoy humiliating herself in front of his entire crew, but she stood anyway, facing him while he slid his arm around her waist. Then he took her other hand in his. She looked up at him and waved her free hand. “Where do I put this one?”

“My shoulder.”

She did as he instructed and the heat from his skin practically burned her hand right through the thin fabric of his shirt. His muscles tensed and she ached to run her hands all over him, to explore every chiseled inch of his body.

He tightened his hold on her, pulling her close until she was pressed against him. His beard teased her cheek as he whispered, “Just follow my lead.”

His leg stepped forward and hers moved back. It was halting and unsure at first, but gradually, she sank into him, trusting him to take her where they needed to be, to guide her across the floor. Keegan sang, and Duke hummed along to “Let It Be.” She closed her eyes, begging herself to memorize every moment.

Why couldn’t it be that simple?

But the only answer would be her swimming away when this was over.

And while her body was eager to surrender to the feelings he kindled inside her, her heart whispered dire warnings. *This partnership would be painfully short.*

Duke’s lips teased her ear. “You’re a natural, love.”

Love. That was a word she hadn’t heard uttered toward her since her father had kissed her goodbye before she swam through the portal to explore Earth.

Suddenly, her vision wavered. Her eyes burned as she blinked rapidly,

willing the tears to back off. What was happening to her?

"I'm sorry." She stepped back, pulling free from Duke's arms. "I need some air."

She walked out of the galley before he could say anything.

Standing at the railing, she sucked in a long deep breath of salty air and stared at the moonlight sparkling on the Savannah River. The shimmer on the surface tempted her to dive in, but until she found her comb, it was too dangerous. She struggled to stay focused on the task at hand.

Duke came up and stopped beside her. "Something wrong?"

She nodded without looking over at him. "I'm only here to find my comb."

He caught her chin, turning her to look at him. "And we're going to get it. Tomorrow, we'll drive back to Charleston and I'll put it in your hands. You have my word."

She pulled free from his touch, already mourning the loss. When had her body become so traitorous? "And once I find it, I'll be able to return to the sea. Where I belong."

"Aye." He put his big hands on the railing, gripping it tight. "I haven't forgotten."

"Then what was that in there?" She pointed toward the galley.

He looked toward the galley and then to her again with a raised brow and a hint of a roguish crooked smile. "It was a dance."

She shook her head slowly. "It was a seduction."

He wet his lips, his grin broadening. "I probably should've warned you I'm *almost* as good at dancing as I am at fucking."

Her thighs pressed tight together as she imagined his hands exploring her body. "If you had warned me, I would've suggested dancing at my place instead of on a ship full of people."

"Is that why you came out here?" He brought a hand up to trace her jaw. "We could leave."

She wanted to drag him away and lose herself in him, to pretend that would be enough. She lifted her gaze to meet his. "You make me want things I can't have."

He tipped his head slightly. "I was hoping you wanted me. And you can definitely have me, Annika."

Hearing her name on his lips made her skin flush with heat. "I do want you, but it won't change that I'll be returning to the sea."

He closed the distance between them and kissed her so slowly that she ached. He whispered, "We're together now. And right now is all that matters. I don't let the future poison the present. Will you?"

His words were the escape she'd been searching for. And she did want him. More than she'd ever desired anyone.

She fused her lips to his and he wrapped his arms around her, pressing her body tight against his. Her fingers tangled in the back of his hair as she pulled him closer, her tongue exploring his mouth.

His chest rumbled with a hungry groan as he lifted her. She wound her legs around his waist and he started walking. She didn't care where he was going as long as it got her closer to him.

His footsteps were slow and measured, heavy. *Stairs?* She didn't open her eyes, trusting him not to drop her. The way she was clinging to him, he could probably let go of her and she wouldn't fall.

But she never wanted him to let go.

A door opened and closed, and he pressed her back against the wall. The coolness of the wood sent a chill through her as he broke the kiss.

"My cabin." He was breathless, his eyes hungry with desire. "Can't drive a car like this."

"I need you." She ran her hands over his chest as she lowered her feet to the floor.

He took a step back and pulled his shirt off. Moonlight filtered through the porthole behind him, casting him in a dreamy silver shadow, accentuating the chiseled muscles of his shoulders and chest.

She lifted her shirt over her head without hesitation and tossed it aside, then unfastened her bra and dropped it to the floor. The way his gaze explored her body added to the inferno of yearning inside her. She slid her hands down her body and unbuttoned her jeans. She pushed them over her hips slowly, her eyes never leaving his as she stepped out of them and kicked them away. Her hand traveled lower, to the juncture of her thighs.

His lips parted, his chest heaving as she traced her fingers down her body and dipped them inside her core. "I'm...wet," she whispered, unsure if she was telling him, or herself.

This was all so intoxicatingly new. Having legs and this new erogenous zone between them suddenly made her feel like a virgin again. Since she'd never had sex in this form, or with a human before, she supposed maybe she was. Atargatis had told her stories, but after her sister had accidentally

drowned her human lover, merfolk had been banned from mingling with humanity. What was the point? It was too risky.

And yet her sister had broken her own rule for the past forty years by working with Department 13 and forming some kind of partnership with Rutger Morgan.

The thoughts instantly evaporated from her mind the moment Duke unbuttoned and unzipped his pants. He bent down to kick off his shoes and step out of his jeans.

When he straightened again, his erection throbbed, drawing her attention. Her pulse quickened as he came back toward her. He cupped her cheek in his large, rough hand, his chest almost brushing the tips of her hardened nipples, making her ache for him to be even closer.

His eyes searched hers. "You still want this?"

She nodded, sliding her tongue along the seam of her lips. "I'm not sure how to...satisfy you."

There was that roguish smile that left her knees wobbly. He took her hand, bringing it down to his thick shaft. He closed her fingers around it and guided her hand along his length.

"That's good," he whispered against her mouth.

He released her hand and skimmed his fingertips along her hip, to the juncture of her thighs, sliding them through her folds until he found the sensitive spot that made her gasp. He froze for a moment and stared into her eyes. "Is that it?" He tentatively stroked her again and her jaw dropped.

"Yes." She'd never heard her voice so breathless before, so needy.

His hips rocked into her grasp in a slow rhythm, taking her fingers from the base of his shaft all the way back up to the tip as he plundered her mouth.

His other hand cupped her breast, pinching her nipple until she writhed against the wall. In her mermaid form, it was her nipples that brought her to orgasm. Was it the same for humans?

He dipped his fingers into her and suddenly growled into the kiss. "Shit."

She opened her eyes, frowning. "What's wrong?"

"Condom. Fuck. I don't know if I have any here." He crushed his mouth to hers, his teeth grazing her lower lip as he pulled back. "Don't move."

He walked away, leaving her leaning against the wall, breathless.

His ass was a work of art. Every inch of him was strong and hard. He came back from the tiny bathroom with a grin that spoke volumes. He tore

open the foil packet and removed a flat piece of rubber. Questions must have been written on her face because his eyes sparkled as he put the round piece on the tip of his erection and slowly rolled it down his length.

“It keeps us from makin’ a babe.”

Birth control. She’d heard humans throw the words around before, but she’d never given it much thought, since she had never planned on interacting with humans in that way. He covered her body as she leaned against the wall, his chest caressing her sensitive breasts. The fire he’d stoked a few minutes ago was already an inferno again.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” He nuzzled her lips and she breathed in his whispers.

He brought her leg up to his hip, opening her to him. Would this hurt? Did she care? She was so hungry for him, aching to be filled.

“You’re human. You can’t hurt me.” She gripped his ass, pulling him closer. “I need you.”

He pressed his hips forward, his shaft stretching her until she gasped. He stopped for a moment, but she caught his lower lip in her teeth. “Don’t stop.”

He thrust into her completely, filling and stretching her. She moaned as he kissed her again. She’d mated with merfolk before, but the clasping didn’t involve the delicious thrusting Duke was doing. Each time he slid in and out of her, the pleasure swelled.

She tangled her fingers in his hair as he kissed his way down her neck, dragging his hot mouth down her chest to lick her sensitive nipple as his hand wandered lower. His fingers deftly navigated her core and found that magic spot again, rubbing her in time with his thrusts.

Her hips ground into him, instinctively searching for more and less all at once. She wanted the peak, but she also didn’t want the pleasure to end. This was a delicious torture, and the sight of his lips and tongue and teeth at her nipple, hungry for her, had her chest heaving.

She couldn’t catch her breath. He straightened, claiming her lips as he thrust up into her so hard, her other foot came off the ground. “Let go, love. Come with me.”

For a moment she almost asked where, but every muscle in her body suddenly contracted as her orgasm consumed her completely. Duke’s hips slammed into her a few more times, and finally, he growled her name and froze too.

She closed her eyes and drank in the stillness of the moment. His lips brushed her shoulder, his breath warm on her skin. Her only sexual experiences had been with merfolk, and because they were in the water, they never ended with this pause, as if time itself had frozen. Their tails were always in motion, and when they were sated, they swam away.

This closeness, feeling his skin on hers, his body still joined with hers, was completely new and...beautiful. He lifted his head, staring down at her with wonder in his eyes, as if she were his most precious treasure.

He kissed her slowly, soft and lingering. Finally, he rested his forehead on hers. "Better than dancing?"

A breathless laugh escaped her well-kissed lips. "Much better."

He grinned and slid free from her body before scooping her up into his arms. He carried her to the bed and lay down with her.

"Next time, I'll try to take it slower." He shook his head. "I usually have more control. Not with you."

She caressed his cheek and whispered, "Good."

He arched a brow. "You don't even know what I could have done with my tongue..."

Now she was imagining it. She traced his lower lip with her index finger. "I like knowing you can't control your hunger for me."

"Do you now?" He sucked her fingertip into his mouth, his tongue circling it.

She watched his lips as his hand wandered lower. Already, her body was warming again, eager to drown in the pleasure he stoked within her. He explored her folds until he circled the sensitive nub again. Her lips parted and he drew his mouth back from her finger with a wicked smile.

"I'm not finished with you yet..."

His lips trailed down her chest and her heart raced as she surrendered to the pleasure he offered.

Chapter Seventeen

Duke dragged his mouth along her soft skin, from her navel all the way down.

Other than the long hair on her head and her thick lashes and arched eyebrows, she didn't have any body hair. Maybe mermaids didn't grow any. As he turned himself on the bed and settled between her legs, he parted her swollen lips, sliding his finger slowly over her core until she shuddered.

Watching her face, he lowered his head and ran his tongue along her opening. Her back arched, her breasts jutting up toward the ceiling and although he'd just come a few minutes ago, his body was already eager for more.

He groaned into her as he closed his eyes and lost himself in her taste, salty and sweet.

Addictive. He pushed the thought from his head. Living in the present was his strong suit. He wasn't about to let the future intrude on this ecstasy.

Right *now*, she was his, so right *now* was all that mattered.

He teased her clit with his tongue relentlessly, losing count of how many times her muscles clenched as another orgasm shot through her. He dipped two fingers into the heat of her sex, aching to drive himself back inside of her.

Her moans were like music and he couldn't get enough. He gripped her ass with his other hand, lifting her hips as he buried his face in her. She trembled as she clutched the bedding, writhing against his mouth. He was ravenous for her, hungry for her to surrender. Again.

When her fingers tugged at his hair, he lifted his head. Her cheeks were flushed with color and her forehead shone with perspiration. An exhausted smile curved her lips. "I can't take any more."

He grinned, pressing a kiss to the soft skin of her inner thigh. "But I

thought you were an all-powerful mermaid?”

“Not all-powerful...” Her breathy, spent laughter made his long-dormant heart flip. “Just stronger than you.”

He pressed slow, lingering kisses up her body as he lay beside her. “I’d be willing to kill for another condom right now.”

Her fingers explored his chest as her gaze wandered down to his raging erection. “Is there a way I can...help without a condom?”

He’d never bothered keeping count of his lovers as the centuries passed by, but he was certain he’d never met a woman who embodied such a unique blend of virginal, yet, not. She wasn’t reaching to cover up with a sheet or fumbling around trying to be sure she was in the right lighting.

She wasn’t inexperienced in sexuality, just...not with a man.

He reached over to cup her cheek in his hand. “We’ve already had sex like humans. Why don’t you show me how mermaids get it done?”

She bit into her bottom lip but the sparkle in her eyes made it plain she wanted to smile. “You don’t have any claspers.”

He raised a brow. “Like a shark?”

He was no expert, but he knew claspers on male sharks delivered the sperm, but they also held the females in place.

She shrugged, kissing her way across his collarbone. “Similar. When we mate, the male clasper locks us together.” She looked at him from underneath her lashes as she flicked the tip of his nipple with her tongue. “We don’t thrust like you do.”

He stared at her lips as she sucked him into her mouth and his erection pulsed, aching for her attention. “How do merfolk come?”

Her brow arched as she lifted her head. “Come?”

“Have an orgasm,” he clarified as his fingertips traced an infinity sign on the back of her shoulder.

“Oh.” She pinched his taut nipple and grinned. “A couple more sucks and pinches and you’d be over the edge.”

Her other hand wandered down his body, exploring it until she wrapped her fingers around his shaft, stroking him slowly. He had to struggle to form words as his hips rocked up into her hand. “Your nipples get you off... instead of...your clit.”

She kissed her way over to his other nipple. “I don’t have any of those lower parts when I’m in the ocean. This is all...new for me.” She looked down at her hand and back up to his face. “I could use my mouth, like you

did.”

“Aye.” He groaned through clenched teeth. “What yer doin’ now feels... amazing.”

“I’m a mermaid.” A playful, almost devious sparkle flashed in her eyes. “I can do better than amazing.”

He started to laugh, but it mutated into a growl as she moved down and took him into the warmth of her mouth. Her tongue circled the tip and then she took him all the way in. He buried his hands in her hair, encouraging her as he pumped his hips.

Her fingertips stroked his balls and his entire body trembled. He tightened his fists in her hair. “I’m close.”

She slid him free and whispered, “Yes, very close to me.”

He opened his mouth to explain about a human man’s orgasm, but she sucked at him, and he had to fight to keep from exploding. *Aw fuck.* He couldn’t hold on much longer. He gently pulled her back. “My orgasm is messy, love.”

She raised a brow. “Messy?”

“I’ll show you.” He reached for her hand and placed it around his pulsing shaft. The tip was dark and bulging. He’d be lucky if he lasted two more strokes. He guided her hand and stopped fighting the pleasure. His balls clenched and he erupted all over his stomach. She continued stroking him, all her attention on the explosion of come dripping down his side.

He took her hand away from him. “This is what I was trying to warn you about.”

“That would’ve been surprising in my mouth. That’s what went into the condom before.” Her eyes met his. No embarrassment or shock, more like wonder shone in her gaze. “What do human women do with it?”

“Depends.” He grabbed a handful of the blanket and wiped off his abs before it started to cool. He also made a mental note to take the blanket home from the ship to get washed. “Some climb on before the explosion, some spit it out, some swallow, and some just do what we just did.”

She arched a brow as she released him, studying her sticky hand. “Just how many mates have you had?”

“I don’t keep count.” He shook his head. “Enough, I suppose.” He glanced toward the bathroom. “I have a shower in there.”

Her eyes snapped to his face. “No. I won’t be able to stand once the water hits me.”

He bent his arm, contracting his bicep as he waggled his eyebrows. "I can hold you up."

"What if someone comes in?"

"They won't." He paused and added, "Besides, they know you're a mermaid already."

She thought about that for a moment and met his eyes. "Other than my assistant, I've never shared my true nature with any human before."

Again, his heart thumped. She trusted him. He stood up and went to the tiny dresser against the wall. He pulled on a pair of boxers and turned around with a smile. "Don't move. I'll be right back."

She nodded and he slipped out of the room, jogging up the stairs to the top deck.

It was quieter now. Most of the crew had gone home, but dishes were still clanking in the galley. Duke headed into the kitchen and One-Eyed Bob gave him a once over, shaking his head. "You *do* fancy that mermaid."

Duke smirked. "If you're about to lecture me that she lives in the water and I live on land, save yer breath, old man. I'm livin' in the moment."

"No advice about mermaids from me." Bob chuckled. "If yer lookin' for more hushpuppies, Greyson and Colton took the rest home with them."

"No. I need a big bucket. Maybe a shrimp boil pot?"

Bob dried his hands and went over to pull open the walk-in cooler. "I had an empty bucket from the peanut oil around here. I don't think I threw it away."

He came back out with a five-gallon plastic bucket and handed it to Duke with a smile. "Don't tell me what this is for. I don't want to know."

"Probably for the best." Duke chuckled and shook his head. "Thanks, mate."

Duke hustled back out onto the deck and went to the railing. He grabbed one of the lines and tied a quick bucket hitch knot around the handle before lowering it down into the river to fill it with saltwater. Hauling it back up was a chore, but once he had the full bucket of saltwater, he grinned.

She might not be able to go back in the ocean right now, but he could bring it to her.

By the time he got down the stairs and back to his cabin, sweat rolled down his forehead. She looked up as he entered, and the sight of her naked on his bed made him grin. Bob's words echoed through his head.

Oh, he definitely fancied this mermaid.

Grinning, he carried the bucket to the tiny bathroom. Annika came up behind him, peering into the bucket. "What is..." Her words faded away as she looked up at him. "Is that..."

"Saltwater from the Savannah River." He looked down at the bucket, suddenly second-guessing his great idea. "You said the tap water doesn't heal you, so I thought..."

She caught his face in her hands and pulled him down to her, kissing him over and over. When she drew back, her eyes shone, sparkling with tears. "You didn't have to do this. My feet don't even have sores yet."

"But it will still feel good and keep you healthy, right?" He searched her face. "I never want to see you suffer again." The stark truth of his words hit him in the chest like an unexpected beam of a sail slamming into him while tacking the ship. He swallowed the unwelcome emotions and scooped her up into his arms. "I thought we could shower and then I can set you down and pour the salt water over you. Will that work?"

"Are you sure?" She arched a brow. "I'll have my tail again."

"Nothing I haven't seen before." But the truth was, it had been dark the night he'd held her in the river, and the pull of the comb had hit her so quickly he'd struggled to hold her back and then get her out of the water.

He'd never gotten a really good look at her true form.

"Okay." She wrapped her arms around his neck and the hint of a smile on her well-kissed lips warmed him all over.

He carried her into the bathroom and set her down on the counter of the sink. After he turned on the shower, he went back to retrieve the bucket of water. He placed it by the toilet and reached in to test the temperature.

"I think it's warm enough." He walked over to his beautiful, naked mermaid and kissed her, growling as her fingers slid into the back of his hair. He scooped her into his arms without breaking the kiss and brought her into the shower.

Her breath caught as she broke the kiss. He opened his eyes, surprised to find her legs were already replaced with a tail.

Scales started just below her navel and ended with a wide fin that draped all the way to the floor of the shower stall. Her mermaid tail was shockingly blue, like a peacock, with the scales getting gradually darker as they moved up closer to her skin. When he lifted his gaze to her face, there was uncertainty in her eyes.

He arched a brow. "Just between you and me, love... I think you might

be a mermaid.”

Her musical laughter echoed off the tiled walls. His new favorite song was Annika’s laugh. He struggled to rein in this unfamiliar romantic streak. What the hell was happening to him?

He released one hand to reach for the shampoo. “If you can hold on to my neck, I can wash your hair for you.”

“Strong mermaid here, remember?” She laced her fingers together behind his head.

He chuckled and tapped her ass, or where it used to be anyway. “As if I could forget.”

He massaged the shampoo into a lather, and her laughter became appreciative moans. Her breasts rubbed against his chest, and he wished like hell that he’d stashed more condoms on this damned ship. He lost himself in her eyes as he rinsed the shampoo from her hair.

This was more intimate than he’d ever been with anyone, but as strange as it was that her fin covered most of the floor of the shower stall, nothing had ever felt so right.

He hadn’t realized part of himself hadn’t been whole.

Until he’d found himself completed.

By a mermaid who was going to leave him tomorrow when she had her comb.

He clenched his jaw and turned them both around so he could wet his own hair. It also gave him a chance to close his eyes and get a fucking grip on himself. He was not about to allow the future to encroach on this amazing present moment. Tomorrow could go fuck itself.

The present was all that mattered.

When they were both clean, he carefully lowered Annika to the floor of the shower stall.

She sat up with her back against the tile and her tail curled beside her. She was a vision.

All the paintings and sculptures didn’t do mermaids justice. Not only was she beautiful, but there was also a fierceness in her eyes, a warrior’s spirit shining from their depths.

He picked up the bucket and raised a brow. “Ready?”

She stretched out her tail. Seeing it move made him ache to see her in the water, in her element, gliding through the tide. She smiled up at him as she unfurled her wide fin. “Yes.”

He tipped the bucket gently, wanting to make the saltwater last as long as possible. As it splashed on the base of her tail, she hummed, sending a ripple of pleasure through him as if he'd stepped into a warm bath. He continued to pour all the way up her tail and then back down again, until the bucket was empty.

"Thank you." She looked up at him, studying him for a moment. "After I have my comb...would you..."

He waited. Was she...nervous?

She shook her head. "Never mind. It's a bad idea."

"You should let me be the judge of that." He reached for a towel to dry off and handed one to her.

"I was thinking maybe we could...swim together." She started drying off. "But it's too dangerous."

He jerked the towel free from drying his hair and frowned. "Dangerous?" He chuffed. "I'm the best swimmer on this entire crew."

"You can't breathe underwater. Humans drown."

"Only if I can't get any air. It wouldn't kill me anyway." He helped her out of the shower and her tail split, her scales fading, leaving smooth skin in their place. "Damn." He blinked. "Your legs."

She chuckled. "The first time I ever stepped out of the water here on earth, I screamed. I thought I'd contracted whatever humans had that gave them legs."

Duke wrapped the towel around his waist. "You never had legs before?"

"No." She hung her towel up and walked past him into the bedroom. "Maybe I would have, but we didn't have any land on Neptune." She picked up her bra and started putting it on. "I've never told anyone about that before."

He tried not to focus on that admission, but knowing she'd given him another piece of herself that she'd never shared with anyone else did make him happier than it should.

He put on a new pair of underwear and then grabbed his jeans off the floor. "Will you stay with me tonight? We could sleep here, since we're meeting the others here in the morning anyway."

She pulled her wet hair in front of her shoulder. "I don't have any clean clothes here."

He hadn't thought about that. Maybe the blood still hadn't returned to his head yet. Before he could respond, she said, "But you could stay at my

place.”

“I don’t have any clean clothes here either...” A grin tugged at his lips. “But I’d like that.”

Her gaze locked on his. “Me too.” Her smile faltered and she broke eye contact. “There’s still no future for us though. We both know that, right?”

He crossed to her and lifted her chin until she looked him in the eyes. “The future will be here soon enough. Don’t let it pollute the time we have right now.”

A wistful smile warmed her features as she placed her hand on the center of his chest. “How did you get so wise?”

“It doesn’t show, but I’ve been around the sun a few times.” He winked and soaked up the beauty of her laugh.

The truth was, it was getting harder and harder to keep back the shadows of a future without Annika in it, but he was already too addicted to her smiles to step back.

He understood Icarus much better with every passing minute that he spent with her.

Chapter Eighteen

Annika woke with a start.

The sky was just beginning to lighten outside her bedroom window and the queen-size bed was much cozier with her hulking pirate snoozing beside her. His hair was shorter than hers, but it still hung past his shoulders, and right now it surrounded him like a halo.

She studied his features, trying to memorize every tiny mark. There was a small scar at his jawline and a dark freckle just above one eyebrow. She ran her hand up his soft, brown skin, smiling as he hummed in his sleep. His arms and shoulders were covered in intricate patterns of black ink, but there was one on his neck, right below his ear, that didn't resemble the tribal markings.

She leaned in for a closer look, her lips parting as the form took shape.

Duke had a mermaid tattoo.

His eyes blinked open. "Everything all right?"

She pointed at the side of his neck, trying to keep her expression neutral. "Should I be jealous?"

"This?" He reached up, sliding his fingers over the drawing of the blue-eyed topless mermaid. Shaking his head, he chuckled. "That's Marina. She's our figurehead on the *Sea Dog*. After the ship sank, I wanted something to remember her by."

"She looks familiar." Annika studied the mermaid with long, black hair, and gradually a smile spread across her lips. "I think I've seen her before, on the bottom of the ocean just outside the mouth of the Savannah River."

"Wait." His eyes widened as he sat up. The sheet pooled on his lap and she struggled to focus on his face instead of the thin trail of black hair leading below his navel. "You've seen the wreck of the original *Sea Dog* ship?"

“I didn’t know it was your ship, but yes.” She lifted her gaze to meet his eyes. “I could take you down to see it.” As soon as the words had left her mouth, dread swelled inside her. She shook her head. “On second thought, that’s probably a horrible idea.”

“No.” He took both her hands in his. “Please. I’d love to see her again.”

“It’s too risky for a human.” Images of her sister’s human lover’s lifeless eyes filled her head. “You’ll drown.”

“I have my scuba certification.” He tightened his grip until she met his eyes. “Plus, I’m immortal, remember? No drowning for this pirate. Not anymore.”

Was he right? “How would you breathe?”

“Oxygen tank, but even without it, I wouldn’t die.” He released her hand and cupped her cheek. “I’ve never taken a swim with a mermaid before.”

Her heart raced in answer, eager to share her world with him. What was happening to her? Her head nodded of its own volition. “After we find my comb, I’ll take you to your ship.”

He leaned in, brushed his lips to hers, and whispered, “Thank you.”

She rolled her eyes as she broke the kiss. “Don’t thank me yet. If we don’t find that comb, I can’t get back in the water.”

His grin made her pulse race. “Ye have a band of pirates at yer service, love. You’ll have yer comb.”

She got out of the warm bed and went to the closet to get dressed. “The sooner we have it, the sooner I can swim.”

He followed her lead and stood up. He collected his clothes, dressing as he spoke. “If we hurry, I can stop at my place and change clothes before we meet the others at the *Sea Dog*.”

She shouldn’t be curious about seeing where Duke lived. It was none of her business and it didn’t matter, but that didn’t dampen her eagerness to see where he slept. She brushed her hair out and quickly wove it into a French braid.

When she was ready, she turned around and Duke shook his head. “Yer too beautiful to be seen with a band of pirates.”

She crossed to the door, swatting his ass as she passed by. “You obviously haven’t looked in a mirror lately.”

He drove her to a house just outside of the historic district, within a block of the Savannah River. The two-story custom brick home wasn’t a pretentious mansion, but it was still big. It didn’t appear to be one of the

historic homes in Savannah, but it also didn't look new.

Until she got inside.

He clicked a keypad on the interior wall next to the door and a loud beep echoed through the empty rooms. The lights gradually brightened on some kind of invisible dimmer switch, and music she vaguely recognized from the car radio filled the space.

"Wow." She peered around the living room.

Duke followed her inside. "This is nothing. You should see John's house on Chippewa Square, where Forrest Gump was filmed." He stopped beside her. "I bought this place so I could make changes without upsetting the historical society. I'm more excited about the electronic technology of this world than some of my crewmates."

"I can see that." She scanned the spacious living room.

There was a massive flat-screen mounted on the adjacent wall, with some lit-up shelving on either side. Unlike the tech, his furniture choices seemed more antique. There was a claw-footed bench along the wall of the entryway, and in the center of the living area he had two Chesterfield couches instead of a more modern, sectional sofa.

She'd never owned any of the human furniture pieces, but she secretly coveted them whenever she was on land. Her loft had come furnished and she wouldn't be here long enough to buy anything of her own. She'd made do, watching the trends come and go and evolve as the centuries passed by.

He walked her over to the far side of the room and gestured to an oversized, ornate wooden hook hanging on the wall. Lines and geometric symbols that matched the tattoos on his arms and chest were etched and burned into the wood.

"This is my matau. I carved it myself after I washed up on the shore of the Savannah River in 1795."

"After your ship sank?" She took a closer look. Fishhooks usually put a bad taste in her mouth, but this was different, artistic.

Since they'd arrived on Earth, merfolk had been scarred by mankind's stray hooks and harpoons. Although humans lived on land, they terrorized and hunted every part of this planet. Some of the merfolk had sought revenge, luring sailors into the water and drowning them, but it hadn't stopped the hunting. Nothing did.

"Aye." Duke took her hand. "They're a symbol of knowledge and understanding. I worked on it while I was coming to terms with the reality

that I had eternity ahead of me. It was tough to wrap my head around it at first. This kept my hands busy.”

“It’s beautiful.” She pulled her eyes from the art and smiled up at him. “I didn’t realize you were an artist too.”

His eyes had a playful spark. “I left out that it took me almost a century to finish it. Not sure that makes me much of an artist.”

He gave her a quick tour of the rest of the house and then changed into clean clothes. While he brushed his teeth, she wandered into the kitchen. There was a window above the sink that opened into the manicured backyard. He had a pond.

She checked over her shoulder and then went to the sliding glass door. Quietly, she slipped out, wandering toward the water. The pond was larger than she realized. As she got closer, she guessed it must be about twenty feet across.

Hungry koi fish swarmed the edge, poking their gaping mouths out of the water. She chuckled and peeked around for food.

There was a storage shed next to the fence. She walked over to find it unlocked. She rolled one of sliding doors back and stepped into the musty shadows. Yard tools hung from the walls, and on the opposite side of the shed she noticed a bucket labeled “Koi Fish Food”.

She started to reach for it when Duke called her name. She grabbed the handle of the bucket and carried it out. “I’m back here.”

Duke joined her at the edge of the pond. “I thought you had second thoughts and left.”

She opened the lid on the bucket. “I saw the water and...”

His hand slid up her back. “You miss swimming.”

“I do.” She tossed a handful of tiny pellets out over the water, laughing as the fish devoured them. Their whispers filled her head, all talking over each other but saying the same thing. She glanced at Duke. “They said you forgot to feed them yesterday.”

“They lie.” Duke chuckled, but his smile faded quickly. “Were you joking or did you...”

“Understand them?” She tossed out another handful of fish food. “Yes. I can speak to sea creatures. Koi have a similar dialect to parrotfish.” She looked up at him. “You devoted a lot of your yard to the water.”

“Aye.” He nodded slowly. “It took me a while to decide what I wanted. I could’ve gone back to Samoa, but I didn’t want to leave the crew behind, so

eventually I settled into this life, knowing it would never end.” His lips curved into a crooked smile. “Flynn would never admit it, but he didn’t want me to go.” He focused on the water. “The pond was his idea. He knows how much the water means to me.”

“Most humans have swimming pools.”

He shrugged. “Fish and turtles hate chlorine though.”

She laughed and nudged him. “You have a beautiful home.”

His gaze locked onto hers and time seemed to slow. Her heart pounded, yearning for... She wasn’t sure what. But being here, in his space, made it harder to face what was coming after she had her comb.

He leaned in, his breath warm on her mouth as he whispered, “It’s never been as stunning as the moment I found you standing on the water’s edge.”

His lips caressed hers as he wrapped her in his arms. She ran her hands up his chest, her tongue twining with his as heat flooded her veins. He was becoming an addiction. She broke the kiss, struggling to catch her breath.

“We should go find my comb.”

He wiped his chin and nodded, but the hunger in his eyes tied her in knots. “You’ll still take me to see the *Sea Dog* shipwreck afterward, right?”

“Yes,” she agreed, knowing she shouldn’t be spending more time with him. She was a mermaid. He should be with a human who could live in this house and feed the fish with him.

She used to pity humans for being trapped on land and unable to live in the weightless paradise of the oceans, but Duke had shown her so much magic while on land, she kept forgetting she couldn’t live here.

Not long-term anyway.

He caught her hand. “I can almost see the future glimmering in yer eyes again. Stay in the now with me.”

She nodded, tentatively at first, but gradually her conviction grew. Why not enjoy the present with him? It would leave her with memories to cherish while she defended the merfolk.

Or at least that was the lie she would tell herself.

She squeezed his hand. “Let’s find the comb and then we’ll explore your shipwreck.”

“Aye, aye, captain.” He winked at her and her knees wobbled.

Somehow, Duke made even mundane moments...fun. His smiles were like sunlight dancing on the sea. How could she go back to her solitary existence?

She was going to find out...sooner than she wanted to admit.

...

Duke gripped Annika's waist and brought her down from the gangplank and onto the top deck of the *Sea Dog*.

He couldn't help but notice the twinge of pain on her face when her feet met the hard wood of the deck. Could the blisters be returning again already? It had only been a few days since he'd dipped her legs into the saltwater river. And he'd poured a bucket of saltwater on her a couple days ago. She'd told him she could be on land for a few weeks.

Maybe she hadn't been in the water long enough to heal completely.

"Duke. I need a moment." The captain's voice surprised him as he turned to find Flynn in black jeans and a black button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He wasn't sure if Flynn owned a T-shirt.

"Captain... I didn't expect to see you here." In fact, Duke thought weeks or months might pass by before he'd speak with the captain again after Duke had sided with Annika instead of Flynn in the vote.

"Can we talk?" Flynn's eyes narrowed. "Alone."

Duke glanced over at Annika. "I'll be right back."

He followed Flynn to the stern of the ship. They stopped in front of the captain's quarters, but on this replica of the *Sea Dog*, that cabin belonged to Colton, not Flynn.

Flynn leaned on the railing. "You're obviously fond of this mermaid, but I need your vow that my business will remain private when it comes to her."

Duke shook his head. "I don't owe you anything. How could you keep it a secret from us that Rutger Morgan was still alive?"

The words came out with a bite Duke hadn't expected.

"Would you have believed me?" Flynn cursed under his breath and looked up into the clouds. "I thought my mind was playing tricks on me. I didn't want to believe the bastard had enough luck on his side that we marooned him on an island with the Fountain of Youth." He looked over at Duke. "You know better than most that I will always protect my crew, and that's why I need to be certain I can count on you to keep my secret."

His treasure. Had to be. Duke leaned forward, resting his forearms on the railing as he stared at the river below. "Annika isn't interested in anything from you. Once she has her comb, she'll be out in the ocean, miles from here."

It was on the tip of Duke's tongue to mention she was going to take him down to the shipwreck of the *Sea Dog*, but he didn't. Maybe he just didn't want to share what little time they had left together with anyone else.

Flynn straightened and took a step back from the water. "We can't kill Morgan, but there are a few on our crew that he could take from us now. We have to convince the others to take another drink from the grail. It's the only way to protect them."

Duke shook his head. "It's not so simple. When Diana made the root magic that turned Drake mortal, she said if he ever sipped from the grail again it would kill him."

Diana Williams was a member of their crew now and had recently become Caleb's betrothed. While they'd explored Atlantis and saved Savannah from a tidal wave, he'd traded his immortality to the Atlanteans in order to keep Diana from drowning. So, Caleb was at risk now too.

Flynn raked his hand through his fiery copper hair. "I gave my word the day I took control of the *Sea Dog* that Rutger Morgan would never harm another member of my crew, and I intend to keep that promise." His gaze locked on Duke's. "For Pryce."

Duke's gut twisted. He'd joined the *Sea Dog* after the mutiny, while Pryce Flynn still breathed. Within days, he succumbed to the most horrific injuries Duke had ever seen. Pryce was Ian Flynn's younger brother.

Captain Morgan had accused Pryce of stealing more than his share of food and water. Because Morgan had already beaten John Smyth, their boatswain, for hiding missing supplies from the books, he'd been too exhausted to lift the whip again for Pryce. One hundred lashes from the whip should have killed John too, but he had been too fixated on vengeance to surrender to the peace of death.

Instead, Captain Morgan had sentenced Pryce to be keelhauled. According to Colton, Flynn's brother had been dragged underneath the ship from bow to stern. The barnacles had ripped at his flesh, as the lines had pulled him underwater for the length of the boat, only to drop him back into the salty sea and drag him back up to the bow again.

When Duke had joined the crew and come on board, Pryce was barely clinging to life, with dislocated shoulders and deep lacerations all over his body, some all the way to the bone. Chunks of his hair and scalp were missing, leaving bloody, infected wounds on his head. Pryce couldn't feed himself or even hold a cup to his lips for a drink. Duke imagined death had

been a merciful escape when it had finally come.

And he thought the punishment had been exacted centuries ago when they'd sailed away. They'd sentenced Rutger Morgan to starve to death and die alone, trapped on a small island in the middle of uncharted waters.

Duke frowned. "If Morgan knows we're still alive, he must realize we're immortal too." Duke reached up and rubbed the back of his neck. "We need to be sure he doesn't discover death is back on the table for Colton, Drake, and Caleb."

A muscle clenched in Flynn's cheek. "And if he discovers my treasure..." He didn't finish the sentence. "If I can't kill him, then I need a way to control him."

"Taking away the mermaid combs will eliminate Annika and her sister's magic in his arsenal."

Flynn's chest expanded as he sucked in a deep breath. "It's a start." He looked at Duke, but there was an absence of his usual conceit and confidence. There was concern and worry, maybe even a dash of fear, lining Flynn's blue eyes. "No one can find out about..."

"I know. We'll keep them safe."

Flynn's most priceless treasure was a living legacy. His progeny still walked the streets in Savannah and Atlanta. A family that broke his heart over and over with the passage of time as he lost them to death again and again. His family line was a secret he ever-guarded from his crew.

Duke didn't think Annika would ever betray them to Morgan, but the uncertainty in the captain's eyes unsettled him.

In over two hundred years, Duke had never told a soul, not even the crew. He put his hand on Flynn's shoulder with a firm grip. "I'm yer First Mate. Yer secrets are safe with me. They won't slip from my lips. Not to anyone."

Flynn nodded. "Let's go to Charleston."

Chapter Nineteen

David scanned the leatherbound journals filled with faded brownish-black ink.

These books were pieces of American history most people would never read. The detailed ledgers were written by Peter Franklin, brother of Ben Franklin. He'd been tapped by General Washington to gather magical relics that could help the colonies, should the rumbles of rebellion against England ever come to fruition.

His notes had become the first inventory for Department 13.

Leon came back with two more books. These were newer tomes with small, black print and twice as many pages. Leon pulled out a chair beside David and rapped his fingers against the tabletop. "I could be of more help if I knew what you were looking for."

"I'd tell you if I knew for sure." David lifted his gaze off the books and looked at Department 13's librarian. "I need to know how the directors kept us hidden from the CIA beyond the moth man dust, and I guess I want to find out what other creatures besides a demon and a mermaid managed to skirt our security protocols and work inside these walls. How did I miss them?"

Leon reached for one of the newer books. The leather binding was faded, but the yellowed pages had typeset printed words instead of handwritten notes scrawled inside. He skimmed the text and pushed it in front of David. "This is Director Harrison's account of the ordeal."

Director Paul Harrison had been recognized as the 4th Director of Department 13. He'd taken over in 1900. It had been under his leadership that Department 13 had constructed the underground levels of the building, including the vault. Paul had been David's director when he'd joined the department in 1963, but that was long after the CIA had come calling, in

1947.

According to Harrison's account, Truman had founded the CIA in answer to the growing cold war, but it had quickly evolved into an organization of spies and covert operations, including the one that had sought to infiltrate Department 13 and drag the mystical and metaphysical secrets into the bright spotlight of mundane America. Two of Harrison's agents had turned out to be CIA operatives.

David clenched his jaw. *Two?* What if Eric Gross wasn't the only one moonlighting for the CIA?

He needed to focus. Once the spies had been exposed, Harrison had determined that their communications hadn't yet reached Truman, but the director of the CIA would have to be handled. After discussion amongst his team, they had decided to use the moth man dust to wipe the memories of the CIA agents and the director.

David's current situation was slightly more complicated.

"I don't think moth man dust is going to be able to save our asses this time." He looked over at Leon, shaking his head. "Eric Gross has probably already submitted video and photographs. We're lucky the feds haven't already busted down our doors." He raked his hand through his short hair. "We're fucked."

Leon chuckled, but there was no fear in his eyes. "You forget you've got resources no one else on Earth has. The Hourglass of Kronos is locked in the vault. You could use it to turn back time and never hire Eric. Or there's Mnemosyne's lamp of memory, to wipe the memories of the director and anyone else who might've seen Eric's footage. It's a little trickier, since you'd have to get each person to stand in the light, but we could figure out a way."

"If he's already uploaded the video and photos, it's only a matter of time before someone stumbles onto them and comes knocking at our door again." David shook his head. "I'm not sure we can contain this."

Leon arched a brow and laid another book in front of David. "I know you haven't been here as long as I have, but surely you've heard of the...Spear of Triam? The tip of Zeus's spear is pure energy. The magnetic field around it will corrupt any hard drive and disrupt any nearby electrical fields."

He was right. David started to nod. Could it work? It was worth a shot. David jotted down a couple of notes. "Thanks, Leon."

"You're welcome to visit the library anytime, director."

David went to the door. “Maybe after the *Sea Dog* crew recovers the mermaid comb and we’ve got Holli in custody, I can put together a team to visit the CIA with the tip of the Spear of Triam.”

“Speaking of the *Sea Dog* crew...” Leon stacked the books, walking them back over to the shelf. He carefully slid each one into place as he spoke. “Diana Williams might be able to help. Her magic is strong. She could make a root to collect or distort any digital records, and Heather Storrey could reach across the veil to Agent...” He paused and plucked one of the books from the shelf again. Flipping pages, he poked his finger to the page and smiled over at David. “Agent Knox. He passed away twenty years ago, but he was the one who discovered the CIA operatives back in 1947. He might have the insights to help us with this breach.”

David turned back, all his attention on the librarian. “How do you know about Diana Williams?”

Leon’s dark brown eyes sparkled. “You’re not the only one in this building who can’t help but keep track of the descendants of your family line. I don’t intrude, but...I watch over them.”

Watching over his own descendants had gotten David into trouble, when Christopher Bale, his brother Paul’s great-grandson, had been mesmerized and nearly opened Pandora’s Box, spilling pure evil into the world a couple years ago. Christopher had died during the struggle to reclaim the sentient mythological box. The guilt and grief had worn David down until he nearly gave up his career with the department.

He’d made a pact to no longer allow himself to seek out distant descendants. So far, he’d only broken it twice.

David shook his head as he focused on his loafers. “I’ve been running this department all wrong.” He lifted his gaze. “I’m sorry it took me fifty years to get up here to the library.”

Leon shrugged. “You’re the fifth director I’ve worked with and I can tell you, every director has a reckoning eventually. For some of them, it pushed them to retire, and for others, it molded them into stronger leaders. Which will it be for you?”

David’s earlier thought that he might be training his colleague Aura to take over flashed through his head, but he shoved it away as he crossed his arms. “While I don’t want to go down in history as the director that failed the department, I’m going to see this through. It’s my mess to clean up.”

Leon cleared his throat behind him. “Can I offer you a word of advice?”

He stopped and turned back. "Sure."

"Stuff your pride down deep. Lean on your team and that pirate crew. You're not in this alone."

"Thanks." David walked out to the elevator and a smile crept up on him. Leon was right. He didn't have to do this alone.

Chapter Twenty

Duke kept his gaze on the driveway where he'd spotted Captain Morgan two days ago while he waited for Keegan to answer his call. He'd been here for two hours and nothing had moved.

There was a car was parked out front, but no one had come in or out.

Annika looked over at the house. "You think we've lost them?"

"Maybe." He shook his head. "Greyson told me Department 13 ran a list of all the properties Morgan owns. His partner Aura has it, and we can visit every single one if that's what it takes. We'll find your comb." He left out that every residence was in a different state. They could be chasing him for a while.

"Hey, mate," Greyson said as he came up behind their car. Their master gunner wore black from head to toe, and his long braids were pulled back into a ponytail.

Duke spun around, reaching for his gun. Habit. He relaxed and tipped his head toward the driveway. "Any movement around the back of the house?"

"Not that I could see." Greyson pointed at the white van parked on the next block. "Aura's back on the computer with Kingsley, the shamanic programmer from Department 13. They're running Morgan's credit cards to see if he's on the move." Greyson scanned the street and frowned. "I thought Flynn was going to help us with this one."

"Me too, but I haven't seen him since we met at the *Sea Dog* this morning."

Annika pointed to the driveway. "They couldn't have gone far. My sister's car is still parked."

"Unless they took Morgan's wheels." Duke sighed, knowing she wasn't going to like what he was about to say, but that didn't make it any less true. "Your sister could have warned him about us after we left her at the mall. If

they got out of Charleston right away, they could be anywhere by now.”

“No.” Annika shook her head. “I don’t believe it. Why would she warn me to be careful, that this was bigger than I knew?”

Duke took her hand. “It could’ve been a lie to get you to leave Charleston.”

“No.” She narrowed her eyes. “My sister and I don’t lie.”

Duke’s brows shot up. “She’s been lying to Agent Bale for decades while she deposited paychecks from Department 13.”

“More like she omitted important information.” The intensity of Annika’s gaze bore into him. “If Atargatis left with him, it’s because he compelled her with her comb.”

He didn’t press the issue with Annika. It wouldn’t change the fact that they were too late to catch Morgan. A text came through from Keegan, interrupting his thoughts.

The house is empty, even the closets. They’re gone.

“Fuck.” Duke stuffed his phone back into his pocket. “They’ve moved on.” He looked at Greyson. “Maybe Aura has a lead on where they’re spending money, so we can track them?”

Duke’s phone chimed with a sound he didn’t recognize. He pulled it out again and his brow creased. “Video call from Flynn? The captain has never FaceTimed with me before…”

He pressed accept and the screen came to life. Flynn was bleeding from his nose, right eye, and mouth.

Duke frowned. “Captain? Did you get in a car accident?”

“No.” Flynn narrowed his swollen eyes. “Don’t bargain—”

The image shook and Morgan’s face filled the screen. He had a cut on his forehead too, so Flynn must’ve gotten in a couple of blows before he’d been overpowered. Seeing Morgan’s face again brought back nightmares Duke had buried lifetimes ago.

He wished this was a dream.

Morgan didn’t mince words. “Bring me the mermaid and I’ll return your captain.”

Duke’s chest clenched. He wanted to help his captain, but he wasn’t going to hand over Annika. Besides, Flynn didn’t want him to make a bargain anyway. It wasn’t like Morgan could kill him.

“Where are you?” Duke asked.

Morgan smirked. “Not until we have an agreement.”

Duke fought to keep his expression neutral, to bury his emotions deep. “And I’m not going to agree to anything until you answer my question.”

Morgan stepped out of the frame and Flynn shrieked in the background. It was a pained scream Duke had never heard before, and he’d known Ian Flynn for over two hundred and fifty years.

The camera moved and Flynn’s face filled the screen again. The handle of a small dagger protruded from Flynn’s right eye. His face was covered in blood as he struggled against his bonds.

Morgan turned the camera back on himself. “He might heal, but I’m betting he won’t be able to grow a new eye if I pluck it out, am I right?” A crooked smile twisted Morgan’s mouth. “If I can’t kill this treasonous bastard, I bet I’ll enjoy sending him back to you in pieces.”

Fuck. Duke was going to reach through the phone and throttle him, but before he could respond, Annika snatched the phone out of his hand and looked at the screen. “Tell me where to meet you.”

“There you are.” Morgan wet his lips. “Another pretty mermaid. Come back to Savannah. Text me when you arrive and I’ll send you the rendezvous spot.”

The screen went dark and she handed his cell back.

“What the fuck was that?” Duke sputtered. Between his shock at seeing Flynn being tortured and his anger at Annika for offering herself up to Morgan, there was no hope for controlling his emotions at this point.

“I need my comb.” Her gaze fell to his phone. “You saw what he’s capable of.” She lifted her head. “He could force me to commit atrocities like what you just witnessed. I won’t let that happen.”

Duke shoved the cell into his pocket and took her hand. “This is pointless. He’s not going to return your comb. He’s had your sister’s for... who knows how long. If she couldn’t get hers back, I’m not sure how you think you’re going to see a different outcome.”

“My sister was the eldest, raised to be the princess. *I’m* the warrior.” She shook her head. “He’s not the first cruel human I’ve encountered.” She turned to Greyson. “Can you and Aura give me a GPS tracker like the one on my sister’s car?”

Greyson nodded. “Aura has plenty of tech at the field office back in Brunswick. We could stop there first.”

“All right.” Annika said. “Thank you.”

Greyson locked eyes with Duke for a moment before jogging back

toward the van.

The silent message was clear. *We need to save our captain.*

Yes, most of the crew had issues with Ian Flynn, but they weren't going to leave him behind to be tortured.

Annika sighed. "This is the only way to bring Flynn back in one piece and you know it."

Duke couldn't wipe the image of Flynn's bloodied face from his mind. He clenched his teeth. There was no way he was going to stand aside and allow Annika to take the captain's place. "I'm coming with you."

A crease formed between her brows. "He'll cut you up just like your captain."

"I know Rutger Morgan better than you do. Power is what fuels him. He'll hurt you just to prove he can." Duke wanted to scream, but frustration was getting nowhere with her. He'd have to try another tactic. "I can grab your sister while you find your comb."

That got her attention. She raised a brow. "I thought you're not sure if she's working with him willingly or not. What if she did tell him we were in Charleston?"

"I'm not sure of anything, except that no one deserves to be under Rutger Morgan's thumb." He took her hand. "You stay focused on recovering the combs and I'll worry about getting Flynn and your sister out."

She pondered the offer and gradually began to nod. "All right." Her posture softened like the tension had suddenly left her shoulders. "I've never had a partner before."

"I've been Flynn's muscle for centuries." He memorized her face and added, "I'd be honored to stand at your side."

They buckled their seat belts and Duke pulled out on the street, but as he made his way out of the residential area, a black sedan followed in the rearview mirror.

Chapter Twenty-One

Annika studied the metal building on the edge of the saltwater river.

Aura and Greyson's white van was already parked next to the back door when Duke pulled into the gravel lot of the field office for Department 13.

She unfastened her seatbelt, but Duke caught her hand. "Wait. We have company."

"Company?" She scanned the area. "I don't—"

"They just drove around the corner."

She checked the mirrors. "Who?"

Duke met her eyes. "A black car's been tailing us all the way from Charleston."

She looked up and down the sleepy street, but it was empty. "Are you sure it was the same car?"

"Aye." Duke got out and went toward the trunk.

She followed him to the back of the car as he took out a shoulder holster.

He slipped his arms through without taking his eyes off the street. "I've got an extra Ruger pistol in the utility box."

She opened the slender black container and took the compact handgun out. After checking to be sure there wasn't a round in the chamber, she tucked it into the back waistband of her pants. As humanity progressed, they constantly came up with new ways to kill each other. In the beginning, she'd struggled to keep up with all their weaponry and relied on her merfolk strength, but once she'd learned to handle a gun, she'd taken to target shooting with ease.

Beside her, Duke searched the street again. Nothing moved. He took her hand and her fingers twined with his, like they were one being.

Duke squeezed her hand. "Let's see what they've got for us."

They walked out of the late afternoon sun and into the shadows cast by

the building. Duke knocked and Aura ushered them inside. Aura was a couple inches taller than Annika, with shoulder-length black hair. She had a gun holstered at her hip and waited for them to enter while she scanned the parking lot behind them.

Annika blinked as her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting. One wall was made up of computer screens. Some showed live security footage from every side of the building and others... She couldn't be certain of what she was seeing, maybe a feed from someplace else? It definitely wasn't Savannah. The buildings were taller and the street was packed with traffic.

Aura walked to the back wall, entering a big area surrounded by a tall chain-link fence, like a cage. She grabbed an iPad and plucked a small, white headphone from her ear. "I think I have a couple things that might help."

Annika crossed the cavernous warehouse with Duke close behind. Her stomach bubbled with an unfamiliar dread. She didn't usually experience any physical responses to altercations with humans. No adrenaline or fear. She couldn't be killed, so there was no instinct to run.

But hearing Captain Flynn's scream and seeing the knife protruding from his head had her all twisted up inside. What if Morgan hurt Duke? She'd be fighting on two fronts. She needed to reclaim her comb and also be sure Morgan didn't capture Duke.

And what about her sister?

Until a couple of hours ago, she'd been certain Atargatis wasn't working with Rutger Morgan by choice. He had her comb. But what if her sister had been a willing participant? Could she have stood by and allowed that violence to happen? How much control did Morgan wield over the oldest mermaid on this planet?

Aura gave Annika a tiny metal button. "Here's a little bug for your ear. We'll be able to hear everything around you, and it's got a GPS tracker too, so we can find you if things go south."

Annika held up the small device, turning it over in the light. It looked like a smooth piece of sea glass. "This goes inside my ear?"

"Yes. I have one for Duke, too." Aura handed an identical bug to Duke and he slid it into his ear without hesitation.

"What about a magical weapon or talisman, or something to give us an edge?" he asked.

"Greyson and I were just discussing that." Aura went to a locker in the

corner and pressed her palm against a backlit pad. “The really amazing stuff is locked in the vault back in D.C., but we have a few things here that might help.”

The lock disengaged and Aura opened a thick door. She started sorting through the contents as she spoke. “I knew your sister as Holli in vault data collection. We were best friends, but...” She looked over her shoulder. “I thought I knew her.” She shook her head and went back to sifting through the weapons inventory. “I never would have guessed she was a mermaid.”

“You couldn’t have known.” Annika could see a few weapons, but these weren’t guns. One looked like a battle axe she hadn’t seen since the Middle Ages, and swords and daggers hung from the other wall, but Aura didn’t hand her a fierce weapon. “We can blend in with humans. Our biological makeup is very similar.”

Aura held two stones in her hands. She handed one to Annika. The smooth limestone bore a natural hole through the top like a pendant.

Annika studied it before looking at Aura again. “What is this?”

“It’s an Adder Stone. It gathers magic inside the hole, so if your sister or Morgan try to use your comb or some other spell on you, this should collect it, so you won’t be affected.”

Annika closed her fingers around it. She couldn’t imagine this small stone could dampen the compulsion from her own comb, but it was better than nothing. “Thank you.”

Aura turned to Duke and handed him the other stone. It was black obsidian with a cross carved into it. The symbol had four equal arms, each with a cup at the end with two lines on them, like an ancient rune of some sort. “This is a protection cross rune. As long as it’s touching your skin, you’ll be protected from any physical harm.”

“I already took a sip from the Grail.” He narrowed his eyes as he stared at the smooth stone.

“The Grail grants you healing and keeps you from aging. Think of this as invisible armor. You won’t need to heal because you can’t be injured.” She put up a finger before Duke could say anything and added, “It’s really important that Morgan doesn’t see you have it. If he figures out what it is and takes it from you, he’ll be unstoppable.”

Duke clenched his teeth, nodding. “I’ll keep it hidden.”

Annika carefully deposited the tiny bug in her ear and waited for something to happen. “How do we know if this is working?”

"I hear yer voice loud and clear." Greyson gave a thumbs up from a computer on the other side of the room.

She locked eyes with Duke.

His usual easy smile was nowhere to be seen. "Ready?"

"I think so." Annika tucked the Adder Stone into her pocket. "I guess we should call him and get the rendezvous point."

Duke looked over at Greyson. "Can you warn the others to be scarce until we resolve this issue with Morgan? I don't want him to find out some of our crewmates are mortal again."

"Aye." Greyson picked up his cell phone. "I'm on it."

Duke took Annika's hand, and her fingers laced with his, binding them together and reconfirming her commitment to get him out of this situation unharmed.

Aura grabbed a set of keys on her way out of the cage. "Greyson and I will be close by, in the van. If things go south, we'll have your back."

"Thanks," Duke replied, tightening his hold on her hand. "But I think we'll be fine."

"I'm sure you will, but either way..." Aura glanced at Greyson and back to Duke. Her lips curved with the hint of a smile. "We never miss a chance to kick some ass."

Duke chuckled. "I'll text you the rendezvous point."

Once they were back at the car, Duke lifted his pant leg and slid the protective stone into the top of his sock. When he met her eyes again, he flashed a quick grin that stilled some of the trepidation brewing inside her.

"Let's get this over with." He found Morgan's number on his phone and pressed the speaker button. Annika held her breath.

"Duke." Morgan's deep voice filled the interior of the car. "I was beginning to wonder if I was going to be sending Flynn back to you in pieces."

Duke ignored his barb. "We're in Savannah. Where do you want to meet?"

Annika's phone buzzed. She pulled it from her pocket and found a text from her sister.

I'll get your comb. Stay out of this. There's more at stake than you realize.

Duke was writing something down as she sent a text back.

Why should I believe you? You helped him steal it from Department 13.

She hit send. The truth of her words pummeled her chest. She didn't want

it to be real, but according to Agent Bale, Atargatis had taken the comb before it could be locked in the vault, and their GPS had tracked her car going directly to Rutger Morgan's house.

Her sister had betrayed her.

"Annika?" Duke rubbed her thigh. "What's wrong?"

"I'm fine." She looked up from her phone, aching to change the subject. "Where are we meeting them?"

He studied her for a moment. "You don't have to lie to me."

She sighed, shaking her head. "It's nothing you don't already know."

"Then I'm not sure why you'd lie about it."

"I'm not lying about anything. I just don't want to talk about it." She broke eye contact. "I need to find my comb. Nothing else matters."

He set his pen aside and handed her the address scrawled on the back of a postcard. "We're meeting him here. I assume it's his Savannah house."

She put it into her phone, and the Google lady was the only one who spoke for a few miles. Outside her window, the moss-covered oaks passed by in a blur.

No doubt she and Duke were walking right into a trap, but there wasn't another option if they wanted to recover Duke's captain in one piece.

If she were working alone, it would've been much simpler. She could've made a grab for her missing property and gotten back out. Now, Duke and his crew were all in danger because of her.

And then there was her sister. She still didn't know which side Atargatis was actually fighting for.

But Duke's loyalty to her still seemed steadfast, even after seeing his captain being tortured. This was all so new—uncharted waters for her. Did she really trust a human? And if she trusted him, why not lay all her cards on the table?

Annika looked over at him, her decision made. No more secrets. "My sister sent me a text before. That's why I wanted to change the subject."

Duke kept his eyes on the road. "Did she ask you not to tell me?"

"No." Annika sighed, studying her hands in her lap. "She warned me to stay out of this and offered to return my comb."

He adjusted his hands on the wheel. "So, I was wrong about her then."

She finally looked over at him. "I don't think so. I sent a text back saying I knew she was the one who stole it from Department 13, and she hasn't replied since. I think you might be right about her. I didn't want to see the

truth.”

He reached over and rested a heavy hand on her thigh. “I’m sorry, love. No joy in being right about this.”

She looked out the passenger window. “How could she choose a human over her own sister?”

“I think maybe the question yer really chewing on is what will happen if you’re forced to do the same.”

“No. This isn’t the same.” She shook her head. “I’m taking my comb back. I’ll only fight to defend myself.”

He squeezed her leg. “That’s not what I meant, love. Once we have the captain, I’m not going to let Morgan take you in trade. If your sister is loyal to Morgan and tries to stop me, you’ll be put in the same position. You either defend her or me, but ye won’t be able to do *both*.”

She blinked as his words sank in. Was that what had her heart tied in knots? Maybe not. Not quite, anyway.

It was the realization that she already knew she’d choose Duke. If she did find her comb, it would be because of Duke and his crew. Without their help, she never would have found it. In spite of her attacking him the night they had met, Duke’s steadfast support of her had never wavered.

A new, very foreign warmth swelled, melting her heart.

They would meet this day together. *Partners*.

The future would reveal itself soon enough. She covered his hand with hers. “Atargatis told me again that there’s more going on than I realize. Could we be missing something?”

“We’ll know in another mile.”

She blew out a pent-up breath and rubbed her forehead with her other hand. A red welt on the inside of her wrist caught her eye. *Shit*. Why was her body breaking down already? Duke had helped her into the Savannah River a few days ago. She should have at least two weeks before the rotting or whatever this was started. Maybe she hadn’t been in the water long enough?

It didn’t matter. She’d have her comb back before sunset, and tonight, she could swim in the ocean again.

She just needed to push through this meeting.

Duke parked the car and stared at the small, unassuming house. “I guess this is it.” He looked over at her. “Are you ready?”

For the first time in her long existence, she wasn’t sure she was, but she

nodded and got out of the car.
She needed that comb.

Chapter Twenty-Two

David's cell phone rang, snapping him out of his obsession with the call logs strewn across his desk. He still couldn't pinpoint Eric's contact within the CIA. "Agent Bale."

"It's Aura, sir."

Had the pirate crew recovered the comb already? He tried to tamp down his hopes. "Do you have news on the mermaid comb?"

"Not definitively. Duke and Annika are on their way to meet with Morgan in Savannah."

He frowned. "I thought Holli was staying with Sampson Bane?"

She cleared her throat. "After Duke saw him, he identified him as Rutger Morgan. He was apparently the captain that the crew mutinied against."

"So, Sampson Bane is an alias." He fished through the handwritten notepads on his desk and jotted the note. "Wait. That means..."

"He's immortal, sir."

"Of course he is... Shit." The sarcasm oozed from his voice, but he couldn't rein it in. "It also means he has access to properties in a few states."

"Right." She paused. "And there's...an added complication."

"Seriously?" He bit back a curse. "What happened?"

"Morgan has Captain Flynn, sir. He's holding him to trade for the mermaid."

David cursed under his breath as he stood, unable to sit down while this tornado of shit blew through his office. "Damn it. You can't let them make that exchange. He has their mermaid combs. He'll have two immortal beings under his command."

"Duke is going in with her. I gave him the protective cross rune and Annika has one of our Adder Stones to try to dull the comb's power over

her. They both have bugs in their ears and I'm monitoring them. Greyson and I will go in if they need back-up."

David raked his hand back through his hair. Aura was good. Maybe someday she'd be the first woman to become director of Department 13. "Keep me informed."

"I will, sir."

Before she could end the call, David added, "Wait. Did you ever meet Eric Gross while you were here in the D.C. office?"

"No...I don't think so."

He went back over the papers on his desk. "Kingsley found a trail that leads back to the CIA."

"Oh shit."

"Exactly." He pushed the plunger on his ballpoint pen over and over. "Our exposure risk is high at the moment. I'm going to text you Eric's employee photo. We haven't been able to locate him since the mermaid comb vanished. Stay alert. He could be tracking our missing employee too."

"You think he's after Holli Porter? Why?"

"Call it a hunch, but he might've witnessed Agent Rhodes's murder. He might know Holli is...not human." He scanned the documents strewn across his desk and sighed. "We need to stop him before he can prove it and report back to the CIA. We don't want them sniffing around. The last thing we need is for politicians to be taking tours of the vault and trying to use things they don't understand as weapons."

"Armageddon."

"Exactly." David nodded. "Let's try to avoid that."

"I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks. Be careful down there. I'll send the photo in a minute."

He ended the call and then texted over Eric Gross's picture from his employee file. He turned around and flinched, surprised to see Kingsley in the doorway. "Hey, King. What's up?"

"Didn't mean to startle you." He cleared his throat and lifted a tablet. "I stumbled onto something I thought I should discuss with you in person."

David came over so he could see the screen. "What is it?"

"I think I found the instigating event that brought our department to the attention of the CIA." He tapped his finger on the screen and pulled up an encrypted memo. He clicked a few more keys and the pixels cleared to reveal an email to Eric Gross.

While investigating the deaths at the Tybee Lighthouse involving the cult members, there were multiple mentions of a “Department 13” as a branch of the U.S. government, but there are no documents to substantiate it. If this department exists and had anything to do with the unexplained deaths, we need to identify them and investigate their involvement.

David looked at Kingsley. “I thought our cleanup team took care of the scene at Tybee that night.”

“We all did, but when Keegan smashed the lights at the top of the lighthouse, it alerted the military. We had very limited time to secure everything. That’s why most of the bodies were still there on-site.”

Kingsley’s daughter, Dr. Charlotte Sinclair, had annihilated the Serpent Society members while astral projecting outside of her body. Even if the cleanup team had tried to share the truth when emergency personnel arrived on the scene, no one would have believed it. Instead, Department 13 had tried to get in front of the story with a mass suicide theory.

But, apparently, the CIA hadn’t bought it.

“What was Eric Gross’s hire date?”

Kingsley swiped to the next screen, obviously anticipating David’s question by having Eric’s personnel file open.

“Shit.” David grunted.

They’d hired the CIA operative ten days after the date on the encrypted email.

“I need the Hourglass of Kronos from the vault. I can go back to this date and choose not to hire Eric Gross.” David handed the tablet back to Kingsley.

His shamanic programmer raised his eyebrows as he shook his head. “They’ll just send someone else. The CIA is tenacious, sir. It won’t stop with Eric.” He tucked the tablet under his arm. “You’d have to go further back, to the night at the lighthouse. Time travel is dodgy at best. The butterfly effect could end up making radical changes to our present with a change like that.”

He was probably right. David rubbed his forehead. “Do you have a better idea?”

“I’m not certain it’s better, but it could be less risky.”

David shrugged. “I’m listening.”

“I can program a virus that will search for files that contain Department 13 within the CIA’s network and delete them. Meanwhile, you can find Eric

Gross and bring him back here. We could wipe his memory.”

King’s plan could work. “You’re certain you can infiltrate the CIA’s firewalls and security?”

“Please.” Kingsley rolled his eyes. “I’ve already breached them both. Installing the virus is just another step.”

“Let’s do it. I’ll keep searching for Eric.”

King left and David went around his desk to grab his phone. He clicked the tracking app and searched for the GPS tracker he’d installed on Eric’s car. Suddenly, his screen came to life with a call from Brenda.

“Hey, Brenda.”

“David, I’m glad I caught you.”

“Is everything all right?” He settled into his chair behind the desk and picked up his pen again.

“You need to come down to the vault.”

Damn it. “Is something wrong with the inventory?”

She lowered her voice. “It appears that the mermaid comb isn’t the first thing Holli might have smuggled out of the building.”

He smacked his pen back down on the desk and stood. “How is this possible? We inventory every quarter.”

“I think I can show you that when you get down here.”

He ended the call and headed for the elevator. When the time flashed on his phone, he blinked. With all the fires he’d been putting out, he’d lost track of...a day. He needed to get some sleep, but that seemed like a luxury he couldn’t afford right now.

When the doors opened, the lower level was gravely silent, reminding him of the staffing issue he’d have to tackle once they’d put a lid on this crisis. He hurried to the vault and punched in his code, then pressed his palm to the security pad for the vault.

Brenda looked up as he walked through the door. She was maybe five foot four on a tall day, but her all-business demeanor made her stature seem much larger. She kept her red hair cut short and her intense brown eyes demanded his full attention. Her expression softened as he got closer. “When was the last time you slept?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure.” He looked at four crates on the table. “Are they empty?”

She shook her head. “No, but these aren’t the relics they’re supposed to be.” She handed him her tablet. “I think that’s how Holli was able to keep

this smuggling plot under the radar. These are the first discrepancies I've found, but I would recommend we go through every item that we received since Holli came to work for the department."

He checked the number on the first crate and matched it with the inventory list. This crate should've held the Aegis of Athena, but the photo on the file showed a shield with a Greek trim around the edges.

David frowned, looking over at Brenda. "This isn't right. Athena's Aegis was enchanted goat-skin armor with the Gorgon's face on the chest piece." He peered into the crate, at the bronze shield. "This is...not the Aegis."

"Exactly." Brenda nodded. "But to any team performing the inventory..."

"It would match the photo and the item number." He lifted his gaze. "She was changing the descriptions when she did the data entry for new items that she thought she and Morgan could smuggle out of the building."

"That would be my guess, sir." Brenda looked down the rows of shelves full of crates. "She didn't have vault access, so she'd have to make the swaps before the item was locked up, maybe while the preservation department was preparing the container for the vault."

Now that he knew Holli was actually Atargatis from mermaid legends, he'd have to see if they had any records of what her supernatural gifts might be. If she could mesmerize or hypnotize humans somehow, then Agent Rhodes in preservations wouldn't have realized she'd swapped items.

Brenda looked over at him. "I can keep double-checking the crates, but I'm not sure I'd recognize all of the fakes. I happened to know what these items looked like when we recovered them, before they went to the vault, but Holli worked here longer than me, so some of these were before my time."

"I'll have to do it, but I can't worry about this mess until I find Eric Gross. Once he's contained and dealt with, I'll work on the vault inaccuracies." And depending on which items were missing, he'd have to send agents out to retrieve them.

Brenda took the tablet from him. "How can I help?"

His mind was racing. Lack of sleep wouldn't kill him as long as he had the pouch of healing herbs in his pocket, but it was definitely starting to impact his decision-making skills. "Let's lock down the vault. I need to get upstairs and find out if we've got any leads on Eric's whereabouts yet."

"I can lock up down here." Brenda put the lid back on the crate. "I'll meet you upstairs."

“Good work on this.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He returned her tablet and headed back to the elevator. His phone buzzed with a text from King.

I found footage of Eric Gross leaving the building. He got into a black sedan in the parking garage ten hours ago.

David got in the elevator and smashed the ground level button. Ten hours was an eternity. Eric could be anywhere by now.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Duke checked over his shoulder as they walked toward the house to rendezvous with Morgan and Annika's sister.

The black car he'd been watching in the rearview mirror during the drive was gone. Right now, they had bigger problems than worrying about being tailed anyway.

Duke looked over at Annika, marveling at her cool demeanor.

This wasn't her first fight.

She met his eyes and gave him a slight nod. They were as ready as they were ever going to be. He knocked on the door and held his breath.

It opened a crack and Annika's sister frowned at them. "I told you to stay out of this."

Atargatis had the same blue eyes as Annika, but otherwise he would never have guessed they were sisters. They were both beautiful, but Atargatis had long, dark brown hair and her jaw was more square, her nose more slender.

Annika shook her head at her sister. "Not until I have my comb."

"I'll return it to you. Go."

"Why?" Duke crossed his arms. "You're the one who took it."

"I had to." She narrowed her eyes. "If you come inside, he'll kill you and my sister will be his new weapon. Is that what you want?"

She didn't know Duke was immortal. He filed the information away while behind her, Flynn groaned. Duke pushed forward, struggling to see beyond her into the house. "I'm not leaving without Flynn."

Annika caught his arm. "Wait." She focused on her sister. "Why are you doing this? Are you under his control? You said he has your comb..."

"It's complicated." She checked over her shoulder, and Duke saw his chance.

He kicked the bottom of the door, popping it free of her grip, and moved past her with Annika following him. Atargatis cursed behind them, but Duke didn't slow his pace. Flynn's moans grew in volume as he tracked the sound to a kitchen at the back of the house.

Rutger Morgan was just as tall as Duke and built like a linebacker. His thick, wavy brown hair hung past his shoulders and his beard brushed against his chest. He'd already been a prisoner when Duke joined the crew. He'd seemed like a caged animal then, a few pounds lighter and his energy sapped.

Right now, he paced the kitchen like a predator, much bigger than Duke remembered.

Flynn sat in the middle of the linoleum floor, bound to a chair, the dagger still buried in his eye socket. *Fuck*. Duke's gut twisted as his gaze wandered lower.

Flynn's boots were off and his feet were black and burned. If it weren't for the magic of the Grail, Flynn would be dead. No one could have survived this much torture.

Duke drew his gun and stepped into the light. "Get the fuck away from him."

Morgan spun around, his violet eyes pinning Duke under the weight of his stare. "'Bout time ye got here." Morgan sneered.

"We held up our end of the bargain. We're here." Duke kept Morgan in the sights of his gun. A bullet might not kill him, but it would hurt and slow him down long enough to grab Flynn and get the hell away from this horror show. "Let him go."

Morgan wet his lips and came toward Annika. "There's my beauty. Come to me." He reached for her, but Annika jumped back, shaking her head.

"I'm not going anywhere with you..." Annika put her finger up. "Not until Duke and his captain are free from this house."

"Fair enough." He narrowed his eyes at Duke. "Take the trash out with you." He caught a fistful of Annika's hair and jerked her to his side.

Her gasp had Duke lifting his gun again. "Let her go."

The corner of his mouth lifted into a crooked smirk, his eyes narrowing as he snatched another dagger off the kitchen counter. He pressed the blade to her throat. "Has she told you, merfolk are only immortal if they're in the ocean?" He shook his head slowly. "Would be a pity to watch her bleed out on the floor?"

Duke pointed his gun to the ceiling, shaking his head. "Don't hurt her."

"Captain." His voice was deep and gruff. "Call me by my proper title."

Duke had never wanted to kill a man as much as he did right now. But as a trickle of blood slipped down her neck, he forced the words out. "Don't hurt her, *captain*."

"Better." He slid the point of the blade down her chest, stopping just over her heart. "Now, get that sack of shit out of my house."

Duke stared at Annika for a moment. There was no fear in her eyes. If anything, she looked even angrier than she had the night they met. If she got the chance to shoot Morgan, it wouldn't be in his foot. He sucked in a breath. One problem at a time.

Annika could fight. Flynn could not.

Duke stuffed his gun back into the holster at the small of his back and pulled a pocketknife from his jeans. Quickly, he cut the electrical tape binding the captain's legs to the chair. Some of it was still stuck to his ankles, but they could worry about that later. While he started working on the tape on his wrists, Atargatis entered the kitchen, her hips swaying with each stride as she approached Morgan.

"I hope all this revenge porn you played out in here was worth it."

Morgan stopped threading his fingers through the back of Annika's hair and turned toward her sister. "Are ye jealous, love? I told ye, she's no replacement for you."

"Taking her comb blew my cover at Department 13 and our entire underground operation. This stunt is going to have that crew of immortal pirates chasing after us for eternity." She glanced over at Annika and back to Morgan. "My sister isn't worth all that trouble, trust me."

"Fuck you!" Annika yelled as she slammed a solid elbow into Morgan's abdomen. She caught his wrist, but his grip on the knife remained tight in spite of the surprise.

In one swift move, Morgan bent his knees and the hand that had been in the back of her hair slid around her waist. He straightened, lifting her feet off the ground with one arm and moved the point of the dagger up under her chin. "You're a fighter. I like that." His tone dropped to a cold snarl. "One more stunt like that and I'll drop you. Gravity will take this blade up into your brain. There's a chance you'd live, and you'd be a docile thing, doing whatever I say without a complaint."

Duke's hands trembled with rage, his heart pounding in his ears. He

wanted to attack Morgan, but one wrong move and he could drop Annika right onto his knife.

Morgan stared at Annika, gauging her reaction before his eyes moved to her sister. “We don’t need Department 13 anymore. We have another mermaid to help us with our next hustle.”

Duke clenched his jaw to keep from saying something that might send Morgan into a rage. If he ever tried to torture Annika like he had Flynn, Duke would spend the rest of eternity making him pay.

After he freed the final bond on Flynn’s wrist and stood, Aura whispered in his ear through the earpiece, “Shit. Someone’s coming in hot. Watch your back. We’re on our way.”

Before he could register her meaning, a man in jeans and a black polo shirt rushed into the kitchen, gun raised. “Freeze, motherfucker.”

Duke didn’t hesitate. He dove for Annika, knocking her free of Morgan’s grasp. He covered her body with his as they fell to the ground. Three gunshots rang in his ears, gunpowder stinging his nose. He jerked his head back, checking to see if she was shot. Annika wiped some blood from her chin and his heart sank.

She shook her head and whispered, “Just a cut.”

Morgan laughed behind them, the sound bouncing off the walls. “Is that all you’ve got?”

Duke looked back at the shooter as the man unloaded the rest of his clip into Morgan’s chest.

Blood covered Morgan’s shirt and spilled onto the floor, but he remained standing. He tipped his chin down, inspecting his shirt. When he lifted his head, he smiled, exposing blood-covered teeth. “Out of bullets?”

The shooter’s eyes widened. “What in the hell?”

He dropped the gun and drew another, clunkier version from his belt. Duke recognized it as a taser, but Morgan apparently didn’t. As Morgan reached for the shooter, the prongs hit him in the abdomen and he timbered to the floor like a massive tree, quivering as his muscles spasmed.

Duke seized the moment and scrambled to his feet. Time to get the fuck out of this house of horror. He helped Annika up and then bent over to lift the captain out of the chair and onto his shoulder. Flynn’s burned feet were already beginning to heal, but they were still too blistered to hold his weight.

The shooter stared at Annika’s sister. “What the hell are you people?”

Before Atargatis could respond, Aura rushed through the door dressed from head to toe in black with her feet hip distance apart and the gun barrel pointed right at the shooter. Greyson was right beside her. His weapon pointed down slightly, covering Morgan on the floor.

Aura's command echoed through the house. "Drop your weapons."

The shooter showed her his hands without holstering the taser. "Aura? It's good to see you. Did Bale send you?"

"You can drop the act, Eric. We know you're a mole from the CIA." She tipped the barrel of her gun to the side. "Hands on the wall."

The CIA? Duke frowned. Department 13 was supposed to be top-secret. Agent Bale claimed that even a few presidents weren't completely aware of their existence. If the CIA knew...

Morgan grunted on the floor, moving his fingers. *Shit*. It was time to go.

Duke adjusted his grip on the captain's legs over his shoulder and caught Annika's hand. "Let's get Captain Flynn and your sister out of here."

Atargatis shook her head. "I'm not going anywhere." She looked to the other side of the room, where Aura handcuffed the CIA operative. "Eric saw me argue with Ben at Department 13. He knows too much."

"Argue?" Eric twisted around, his voice shrill. "That was no argument. You *killed* a man with your *teeth*. Your inhuman shark teeth." His gaze fell to the floor where Morgan groaned. "And how can this guy still be breathing after I emptied a clip into his chest? What the fuck is happening here?"

Aura ignored his question and grabbed his bicep, tugging him to her side. She looked over at Atargatis. "I'm taking him back to Department 13. We have ways to be sure he doesn't remember you."

"I can assure you there isn't any more moth man dust in the vault. We took that years ago." Atargatis knelt beside Morgan. "You should let us handle this. The CIA can't know mermaids exist."

"And they won't." Aura gripped the man's arm and passed him off to Greyson.

Greyson hesitated, locking eyes with Duke. He gave his crewmate an almost imperceptible nod. Duke would take care of Captain Flynn.

After Greyson left with the CIA operative, Duke looked at Annika's sister. "Where are the combs?"

Atargatis let out a sarcastic chuckle. "If I knew that, would I still be here?"

"I don't know." Duke arched a brow. "You tell me. According to your sister, the comb only controls you when you're in the water, so is that what's keeping you here now?"

Flynn groaned against his back. He needed to get him out of this house, but he also didn't trust Atargatis enough to leave Annika alone with her.

Behind them, Aura bent down to cuff Morgan. Duke glanced at Atargatis. She didn't make any move to stop Aura. Maybe she wasn't as fond of Morgan as Duke thought.

"Take Flynn back home." Aura bent down to pull Morgan to his feet. "We'll get Morgan to tell us where the combs are hidden."

"Like hell you will." Morgan growled as he smashed his head backward, connecting with Aura's nose.

She fell to the ground. Morgan scrambled to his feet and sprinted for the door, fast for such a big man. Duke started to follow, but with Flynn over his shoulder, he couldn't move fast enough.

Annika shouted, "Don't worry. We'll find him."

Duke looked back. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because we have his mermaid." Annika gripped her sister's arm, her shirt stained with blood from the cut on her chin. She looked every bit the warrior. "He's nothing in this world without her."

Duke wasn't nearly as comforted by that as Annika seemed to be. Morgan had been a monster from sea stories, a caged lion they'd left on a deserted island, but now he was all too real. And he would be back.

His gut twisted at the thought.

Cursing under his breath, Duke shook his head. "I need to get the captain back and warn the crew to watch for Morgan." His gaze locked on hers. "I'll be back to help you find that comb."

She nodded, but there was a hesitation there that had him on edge. An unspoken apology.

An unfamiliar swell of insecurity swamped him, growing stronger with every step closer to the door. He couldn't shake the feeling he might never see her again.

He stopped and turned around. "If your comb turns up before I get back...you promised me a swim, remember?"

A smile curved her lips, but it didn't dim the regret in her deep blue eyes. "I remember."

His chest tightened. He wanted to run back and demand her word that she

would still be here when he got back, but Flynn moaned, reminding him of the danger lurking for the entire crew as long as Morgan was in Savannah. His loyalties were being stretched too thin.

He nodded to Annika. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

He walked out into the darkness, praying that wasn't the last time he'd ever see her.

...

Annika watched him go, and then focused her attention on Aura.

She had regained consciousness and sat up, tipping her head all the way back, trying to staunch the blood coming from her nose.

Atargatis went to the sink and wet a washcloth, then went to the freezer and filled a bag with ice. She brought them to Aura. "This should help."

Aura wiped at her nose with the towel and then placed the ice over it.

Greyson's voice came through the bug in Annika's ear. "Can you let Aura know the CIA lubber is chained to the seat in the van? Is she bringing Morgan out?"

Annika had forgotten the tiny earpiece was connected to the van outside. She looked at Aura as she replied, "Morgan got away." To Aura, she said, "Greyson has the other man contained."

Aura removed the ice from her face and tentatively touched her nose. "The Holy Grail works fast. I...I think it's better."

Atargatis raised a brow. "That's how Flynn and his crew are still alive. All of you drank from the Holy Grail."

Aura nodded, but her gaze locked on Annika for a moment before focusing on her sister again. "Holli, with Morgan on the run, I better take you back to Department 13. It'll keep you safe and Agent Bale has more questions for you too."

Wait. Annika's pulse raced. This wasn't the deal. She was supposed to get to make the decision whether her sister would be turned over as a thief or not.

Annika reached up, plucked the bug from her ear, and crushed it between her fingers as she opened her mouth and sang a soft rendition of "Yellow Submarine". It was the first melody that had come to mind.

Aura's expression went blank. Hypnotized.

Annika took her arm and walked her toward the door. "You caught the CIA spy, but Morgan and Holli escaped."

Aura holstered her gun. She shook her head. "I can't believe we lost them."

"At least you got the spy." Annika looked back at her sister and then to the street. "Maybe Duke will find Morgan and Holli."

"I hope so." Aura rubbed the back of her neck, frowning. "I guess I'd better get Eric Gross back for questioning."

Annika waited for Aura to get into the van before she turned around to face her sister.

Atargatis stared at her like she didn't recognize her anymore. "Why did you do that?"

It had been a split-second decision, but the answer fell from Annika's lips like it had been a given all along. "Because you're my sister." She added quickly, "But I reserve the right to turn you over to Department 13 later."

Would using her hypnotic voice come back later to bite her in the ass? Probably, but she hadn't seen another option. Aura would've hauled her sister back to Department 13 for...punishment? Would they lock her up in the vault Annika kept hearing about?

Maybe Aura and the rest of the *Sea Dog* crew would never find out she'd been manipulated. Too late to change it now. Annika would deal with that later.

Her sister rested her hand on her hip. "Isn't your new boyfriend going to have a problem with you using your merfolk powers against his crewmates?"

Would he? Maybe. Wait. Was he her...boyfriend? They hadn't made any formal commitments. Just the promise to take him down to the *Sea Dog* wreckage.

Annika struggled to focus. "This has nothing to do with Duke. Were you working with Morgan by choice or because he had your comb?"

She smirked. "Is this world so simple for you, sister? Right and wrong still have a straight line between them?" Atargatis pulled out a chair and sat at the dining room table. "I guess the answer is a little of both?"

Annika frowned, shaking her head. "You saw what he did to Ian Flynn. He's reckless and cruel, and you helped him take my comb. He could compel us to kill for him, has that occurred to you?"

Her sister pulled her dark brown hair back from her forehead as she looked up at the ceiling. "He's not usually like that." She met Annika's eyes. "They stole his ship and left him on a deserted island, wounded and

thirsty, with no gun to end his torment. When he discovered they were still walking this earth a few months ago, something snapped inside him. He's been consumed by his desire for revenge." She put her hands on the table in front of her. "I'm not sure what he's capable of right now."

"How did you get mixed up with him?"

Atargatis inspected her fingernails, avoiding eye contact. "He found my comb. He hadn't realized he'd been drinking from the Fountain of Youth yet. He stroked my comb through the water, calling me back through the portal." She shrugged and lifted her eyes. "We fell in love."

Annika's jaw went slack as her brows pinched together. "You were the one who made the decree that merfolk would never again mingle with humans. Have you forgotten what happened with the prince?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Do you honestly think I could forget the father of my child?"

"It took centuries for humans to stop building temples to worship you." Annika shook her head. "When he drowned, you blamed me for constructing the portals and bringing us here. You swam through and went back to Neptune, swearing never to return." Her chest tightened with all the pain she'd been repressing. "And now I find out you've been back on Earth for hundreds of years and never reached out to me?"

"Why would I?" She crossed her arms. "I haven't forgiven you for any of it."

"Why come back at all then?" Her voice drifted off as her gaze locked on her sister's.

"You know why." She rolled her eyes. "It always comes back to the damned combs. If we had left them behind on Neptune, maybe our father could have summoned us back home to help him defend the reef." She sighed. "I never meant to come back to Earth. Who knew a human would find my comb hidden in the pool of the Fountain of Youth?"

"And instead of taking it back from him, you allowed him to keep it?" Annika stared at her sister, wondering how they could even be related.

"I already told you he didn't used to be like...this." She lifted her head, meeting Annika's eyes. "The comb was how we could always find each other. There weren't cell phones. No matter how far his business took him from me, my comb always brought us back together."

"You made a life with this human by stealing from the U.S. government. There are consequences." Annika paused. "Why? Help me understand."

“It started with a message board. The humans made the World Wide Web and Rutger discovered postings about rare treasures.” She shrugged and shook her head. “He’s a pirate. The idea that he could steal his riches appealed to him more than being a shopkeeper or something mundane. One theft led to another and soon there were agents after us. When we discovered where they worked, it was simple for me to get inside. Rutger learned to navigate the dark web instead of the sea, and he was alive again.”

Annika struggled to comprehend that the princess of Neptune was willingly stealing from the U.S. government...for a man. They would lock her up. She’d broken their laws. No. There had to be another way.

She balled her hands into fists. “We need to find our combs and then you have to go back through the portal. It’s the only way to keep you safe.”

Atargatis frowned. “I’m not leaving him behind.”

“They’re never going to stop hunting him. The anonymous life you two had is over.” Annika pointed at the blood on the floor. “And why would you stay with a man who is willing to torture to get what he wants?”

“And you believe that hulking pirate you just promised to take for a swim is innocent? Ask him how many lives he’s taken. Wake up, sister.” She pressed her lips together. “Rutger Morgan is flawed, yes, but I’ve seen the good in him.” Atargatis paused, her voice dropping to whisper. “I’ll fight for him, Annika. Stay out of my way.”

Annika frowned. “Even after what you just saw him do?”

“He knew Flynn couldn’t be killed.”

“So, he tortured him?” Annika wanted to shake her.

“He wants revenge.” She looked up at the ceiling for a moment and back to Annika. “I can still reach him. I know I can. That’s why I can’t go back to Department 13. I’m your best chance at finding him.”

Annika crossed her arms. “We already have a list of all his properties and Aura has equipment to track his movements.”

“Aura?” She pointed toward the door. “The one you just hypnotized to think I got away? You think she’ll still help you when she finds out what you did?”

“She won’t find out.” Annika set her jaw, unwilling to budge.

“You think you’ve got it all figured out.” Atargatis smirked and got up. She came around the table and squeezed Annika’s shoulder. “Good luck keeping that secret from your pirate. I’m not the only mermaid in this room making a fool of herself for a man.”

Annika stood, pushing her sister's hand away. "We need to find our combs."

"Rutger has mine. That's how I'll find him again."

"Why him?" Annika blurted out her question. "He's cruel."

"No." She shook her head slowly. "He's a survivor. He's smart and strategic." She shrugged. "And until he discovered the *Sea Dog* crew was still alive, we made a good team."

"What if that man is gone?"

"You're not going to convince me to give up on him." She went to the door and turned around. "Your comb is in the safe in the back closet. The combination is Neptune. I'll change it remotely in an hour."

"I can't let you walk away." She drew her gun. A bullet wouldn't kill her sister, just slow her down.

She looked back over her shoulder. "I'm not going with you willingly, so you can either chase me or your comb, not both."

Before Annika could respond, a stream of hot water from the sink blasted into Annika's face. She shrieked as she pulled the trigger, but her shot went wide, embedding above the doorframe as her legs became a mermaid tail and she toppled over.

The hydrokinesis magic weakened and the water splashed onto the floor. Annika struggled to drag herself out of the water and recover her human legs, but she was too late.

Her sister was gone.

"Shit." Annika wiped her face and dried the water from her tail until her legs returned. She ran to the back bedroom and threw open the closet. The safe was there, but it had a keypad on the front. She frowned. There weren't any letters, only numbers. How was she supposed to spell Neptune?

She took out her cell and pulled up the phone keypad. Studying the tiny letters beneath the numbers, she pushed the code into the keypad.

The screen flashed incorrect.

Annika rubbed her forehead. *Think*. Her sister had said the combination was Neptune. But the keypad was numerical... She froze, staring at the buttons. Maybe she had meant the planetary coordinates for Neptune. She punched in the numbers and the lock disengaged.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door.

Her abalone comb sat on a small, black velvet pillow in the center of the safe. Relief flooded her in a tsunami of emotions. She hadn't seen her comb

in centuries. It gleamed even inside the shadows of the safe, almost glowing with magic. It wasn't large or flashy, only about the width of her hand, with runes that represented her name carved in the top edge.

She reached in and closed her fingers around it. Tears filled her eyes. She could swim away now. Her sister and the twisted pirate she thought she loved were Department 13's problem. Annika was free.

But there was no joy in the realization. For weeks, she'd been aching to swim in the ocean, to leave the land behind, but now, even with her comb in hand, she couldn't muster a smile.

All she could think about was Duke. What if her sister teamed up with Morgan to come after the crew? What if Duke put himself between the two warring captains?

The thought of Duke being tortured made her eyes burn.

She couldn't turn her back on him now. She wouldn't.

With the comb hidden in her pocket, she took out her cell phone to call Duke.

It was wet and dead. *Shit*. She had a burner phone back at her flat. But calling an Uber was impossible at the moment.

She left the house and walked down the street. With every minute that ticked by, the dread that something might happen to Duke grew.

If he were with her right now, he'd make a remark about living in the present and not worrying about the future.

A sad smile curved her lips. She hadn't known him long, but in that short time, he'd brightened her world. He made her...happy. She hadn't felt that way in...a millennia.

And she would protect him. Somehow.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Duke did his best to keep his eyes on the road, while the captain screamed from the passenger seat as he jerked the dagger free from his eye.

“Fuck!” Flynn coughed and dropped the knife as he pressed his shirt against his face.

“Shit.” Duke shook his head as he glanced down at the bloody blade on the floor. “I’m giving you the bill for getting my van detailed.”

“Worth every penny,” Flynn growled through his teeth. “Morgan is a dead man. Next time I see him, I’ll rip his head off and shit down his neck. Cocksucker tortured the wrong man.”

If only it were that simple. Duke adjusted his grip on the steering wheel. “I know yer pissed, but once the adrenaline wears off, we need to warn the crew. He’ll kill them to hurt you.”

“Do ye honestly think I don’t *fucking* know that?” Crimson spittle flew from Flynn’s lips as he shouted. “We should have killed him when we had the chance! We cursed ourselves by showing that bilge rat mercy!”

A chill crept down Duke’s spine. He’d known Flynn for over two centuries, but this was the first time he’d ever heard the shrill tone of fear in his voice.

“What’s going on here?” He glanced over at Flynn. “What haven’t you told me?”

Flynn broke eye contact, staring out the passenger window. “I thought I caught a glimpse of him last year, but I brushed it off. Then my identity was stolen, twice. I blamed hackers.” He went silent, just shaking his head.

“You think it was Morgan?”

Flynn didn’t seem to hear his question. His voice was distant. “While we were hunting the Tyrfin sword, I bartered with Agent Bale to get a copy of the map to the Fountain of Youth. After we journeyed to Atlantis, I planned

to entice the crew to set sail again so we could find the Fountain and I could be certain it wasn't the same island where we marooned that sick son of a bitch." He paused, his voice softer, almost...beaten. "I didn't believe it was him. I wasted so much time. Now we're all in jeopardy."

Another cold chill crept down Duke's spine. In over two hundred years, he'd never heard the captain admit any mistakes or missteps. As much as he and the rest of the crew enjoyed taking shots at Flynn's massive ego, his confidence and swagger was the mooring that had kept them afloat for over two hundred years, while the world constantly changed around them.

Hearing Flynn admit he was fallible, that maybe he'd been outmaneuvered, shook Duke to his core.

It also sparked a fire in his belly. He was the *Sea Dog's* first mate, and if Morgan wanted Captain Flynn, he'd have to get through Duke first. He pulled into his company lot and turned off the engine. "We have more immortals on our side than he does. Plus, we can warn Agent Bale. He can send agents with tech to help us locate Morgan. Maybe we can lock him up in Bale's vault for eternity."

Flynn turned to face Duke. His face wasn't bleeding anymore, his injuries already beginning to heal, but his eye was still completely red with all the blood vessels burst. "He knows about my treasure. He just doesn't know where to find it."

Duke swallowed the lump in his throat. "Your children are all lost to time. You visit them in the Bonaventure."

"No." Flynn shook his head and lifted his gaze. "I had a woman in Atlanta. Until...a few months ago."

Duke frowned. "You've had many women over the years. They're not family, not your treasure."

"She was different." He pressed his lips together and lifted his gaze. "I was going to tell her the truth about me and the Holy Grail. All of it. I... love her. Or...I did."

Duke's jaw went slack. "After you watched your wife and children and grandchildren all grow old and die, you swore to me that you were finished with mortals. I kept your secret about your family because you didn't want the rest of the crew to go through that same pain. And now you've changed your mind?"

His brow furrowed and a more familiar bite infected his tone. "I didn't plan any of this. It just...happened."

Duke raked his fingers through his hair. “Did you break things off with her?”

“Yes.” He looked up at the roof of the van. “When I started catching glimpses of a man who should’ve been dead centuries ago, I couldn’t risk him finding out about her.”

Duke stared out the window at his building. “I could assign someone from my security detail to tail her. Just to be sure she’s safe.”

The silence dragged out for a minute before the captain finally answered. “Your man would have to be discreet. She’s very...alert.” He looked over at Duke. “And she wouldn’t hesitate to confront anyone.”

“Done.” Duke took out his phone and hesitated. “How do you know Morgan knows about her?”

Flynn crossed his arms, narrowing his eyes as he looked out the front windshield. Duke recognized that look. The captain loathed making a tactical error.

“Well?” Duke prodded again.

Flynn grumbled. “He took my wallet.”

“How would he find out...” Duke’s voice trailed off as the realization hit. “You had a picture of her in your wallet?”

Flynn gave an almost imperceptible nod.

“I’ve known you for a more than a few lifetimes now, but I’ve never seen you carry around any photos of your ladies.”

“She’s different. I told you I was going to tell her...everything.” He shook his head. “We have to find Morgan.” He opened the door and turned back to Duke. “I need to clean up. Can you reach out to Colton? The crew needs to meet us at the *Sea Dog* in an hour.”

“Will do.” Duke got out, walking behind the captain.

This wasn’t the first time Flynn had fallen in love, but none of his previous relationships had involved telling anyone the truth. And Duke couldn’t imagine Flynn ever sacrificing his own happiness to protect any of them. He enjoyed the affection, but from what Duke had seen, the partnerships had never been equal.

Instead of opening his text messages, Duke clicked on the photo gallery. Annika’s blue eyes smiled back at him from their day in Forsyth Park, and his heart stuttered.

The captain wasn’t the only one navigating uncharted emotional waters. Now that she had her comb, he wasn’t sure he’d ever see her again. The

thought made his chest tight. He'd left so much unsaid. He pressed her number.

And it went directly to voicemail.

He rubbed a hand down his face. Did it really take losing her to realize how much he would sacrifice for one more smile, one more kiss?

Fuck. Leave it to him to survive on this planet for over two hundred years without getting tangled in love's net, only to fall for a mermaid.

He clenched his jaw and closed the photo gallery. He needed to warn the crew about Captain Morgan. There wasn't time to obsess over whether or not he'd see Annika again. He didn't usually get caught in the trap of worrying about the future, but his anchor to the present seemed to be slipping.

He busied himself typing a text to Colton while he sent up a prayer to whoever might be listening to keep Annika safe and bring her back to him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

David got into his rental car at the Savannah airport and headed for Brunswick. Aura had the CIA operative in custody at the satellite facility.

Morgan and Holli had escaped custody.

The guilt and disappointment had been plain in Aura's voice, and although he'd reassured her they would apprehend them eventually, nothing he could have said would have changed her attitude. Aura often put more blame on her own shoulders than she deserved.

She didn't seem to understand that while he did want to see Holli and Rutger Morgan punished for stealing artifacts from Department 13, and most likely selling them on the dark web, Eric Gross was the more pressing threat. David needed to determine who the undercover CIA operative had been reporting to, before Department 13 lost their shield of anonymity.

When he pulled up to the nondescript warehouse building, Greyson was on his way to his car. The long-haired pirate changed direction and came toward David. A muscle in his cheek jumped as he clenched his jaw. "Did Aura tell you we lost Morgan and Holli?"

"Yes." David nodded. "I've already got a team trying to locate them."

"Good." He looked back at the building. "We're going to have our hands full protecting our crewmates who are mortal now." He met David's eyes. "Morgan's going to be a challenge since he's immortal. You'll have to lock him up somewhere."

"I'm working on that aspect, but we should have an adequate holding space in the next couple days."

"Good." Greyson looked over at the door to the warehouse and back to David. "What about Holli? Did Aura tell you her real identity is Atargatis?"

"The oldest mermaid on the planet." David nodded. "She's also not from Earth, which adds another wrinkle to this process. Technically, I can't jail

an extraterrestrial. I'll have to turn her over to Department 51."

Greyson shrugged. "Not really any of my business. Captain Morgan is my target." He patted David's shoulder as he passed by. "One problem at a time, right?"

David nodded, wishing it could be so simple.

When he stepped into the field office, Aura was in the far corner of the dimly lit windowless warehouse, illuminated by a single yellow light. Eric Gross was bound to a metal chair. He was the perfect mole for the CIA. He didn't stand out. Average height and slender build. His light brown hair and brown eyes made him blend in.

Aura looked up as David approached. "You're just in time, I dosed him with truth serum about fifteen minutes ago."

Eric's head rested on his chest as he mumbled something about how they worked for the same people.

They probably needed to wait another five minutes for the full effect of the Sodium Pentothal to kick in, so David gestured to Aura to come over. He turned his back on the prisoner as an added precaution. Many of the CIA's operatives were expert lip readers. He kept his voice low. "You told me Morgan headbutted you after Greyson took Eric Gross to the van. Why didn't anyone else grab him before he got away?"

Aura sighed, matching his soft volume. "Duke was carrying Flynn over his shoulder so he was too slow, and Annika was with Holli."

David frowned. "How did Holli get away?"

Aura paused, rubbing her forehead. "I..." She shook her head slowly and met his eyes. "I'm not sure. It's all fuzzy. Maybe I have a concussion from the headbutt? The Grail already healed the wound, but I was sure he broke my nose."

It would have healed a concussion too. David had been reading up on merfolk on the plane ride down from D.C., and according to the files at Department 13, every mermaid had different abilities, so it made it tough to pin down.

"Could Holli have become invisible? Maybe that's how she got out."

"Wouldn't Annika have known if she had that ability? She would've bound her to keep her from escaping while we couldn't see her go, right?"

"I don't know." He met her eyes. "I know Duke trusts her, but we don't really know anything about Annika except that she's the younger sister of Atargatis. They both could have supernatural abilities."

Aura's brows pinched together. "But if she vanished..." She rubbed her forehead and lifted her gaze again. "I don't remember anything about leaving the house, except that Morgan and Holli escaped."

"If Annika was still there, she could have helped her sister escape."

"Her sister stole her comb." Aura crossed her arms. "Why would she help her?"

"Because they're still family." He looked at the ground and sighed. "I don't know anything for certain, but we need to find her and get answers."

Eric Gross started humming from his chair. David walked over and bumped a chair leg with his foot to get Eric's attention. "Sorry we had to bring you in like this, but I need to know what you saw in the preservation department the other day."

The CIA spy lifted his head, his pupils slightly dilated. "Holli's not... she's not human. I was in the locker room when I heard her talking to Ben. She was asking him if he remembered when she started at the department. I came around the corner and she had him pinned on the table. She opened her mouth wide... Too wide. Her teeth were...pointed, like shark teeth. She bit him and I ran." He scanned the shadows around his chair and whispered, "She's not human."

"And who did you report to at the CIA? How much have you told them?"

"Just some emails to my lead." His head started to droop again, but it popped up suddenly. "Right pants pocket... I was supposed to show him what's on my flash drive."

David frowned and searched the pocket. He withdrew a thumb drive and handed it to Aura. "See what's on it."

She headed for the big computer and David stopped in front of Eric's chair. "I'm going to take you back to Washington with me."

"Am I in trouble?" he asked. "We work for the same government. Why are you hiding your division? You have weapons that could save the world."

"Or destroy it." David crossed his arms. "That's why I can't allow the CIA to know we exist."

Eric's head started to droop again as he answered. "I won't tell. I keep secrets really good...ask anyone."

"Sir?" Aura interrupted. "You should see this."

David crossed to the other wall where Aura had a black and white security video playing.

Holli came on the screen while Agent Ben Rhodes worked on the

container for the mermaid comb. She came up behind him, opening her mouth as her teeth seemed to elongate with sharp tips. Her attack was as smooth and swift as any shark as she sunk her teeth into his neck.

“Holy shit,” he whispered.

Aura nodded. “It was on the flash drive. We need to be certain Eric hasn’t uploaded this anywhere yet.”

“If he did, we could say it’s manufactured film footage.”

“Maybe as a last resort.” She looked over at him. “But any special effects person would be able to look at this and know it hasn’t been edited.”

“I’ll check in with Kingsley and see if he was able to get the malware into the CIA’s server.” He patted her shoulder. “You did good work, Agent Henderson. You saved us all.”

“I wish I could have brought you Holli too.”

“We’ll find her.” He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. Although his belief in his own abilities to run the department was still shaken, he needed to put forth a confident front for his agents.

She looked over at the chair where Eric Gross had dozed off. “How are you going to transport him back to Washington? He won’t go willingly once the drugs wear off.”

David took out his phone and sent a text to Brenda.

Retirement protocols will need to be performed on Eric Gross at the field office in Savannah. Get Petra on the next plane.

“I’m going to need you to stay with him until Petra gets here. We’ll wipe his memory of Department 13 and leave him in Savannah.” He straightened up. “I saw Greyson outside. Will he be back soon?”

“Colton called the crew to the *Sea Dog* for a meeting with Flynn. I’m sure they’re warning everyone that Morgan is still alive.” She paused. “We could use some extra manpower here until we catch him. The crew has three mortal members now with Drake, Colton, and Caleb. If Morgan finds out...”

David sighed, shaking his head slowly. “We’re still finding more items Holli stole from the vault, and we’re going to have to find the real artifacts and bring them back. I can’t afford to lose any manpower.”

A crease formed between her brows as she narrowed her eyes. “The *Sea Dog* crew have saved our asses and recovered items we couldn’t have taken legally. You can’t turn your back on them now.”

David ground his teeth at her warring loyalties. “I should call you and

Greyson into D.C. to help, but I'm not. That's all I can offer right now."

She looked like she wanted to respond, but she didn't. Definitely for the best. He didn't want to pull rank on her, but he would if she kept pushing. He went to the door and looked back. "I'll text you Petra's ETA once I have it."

"Yes, sir." Her tone was ice-cold.

He walked out into the chilly wind and sucked in a slow breath. Compared to the winter in D.C., Savannah was almost warm. He looked up at the sky and tried to calm the tempest brewing inside of him.

They would get through this...somehow.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Duke stood behind Captain Flynn on his right-hand side, as he had for centuries. His silent protector, especially when the news wasn't good. The shock on his crewmates' faces said it all.

"Do you have any idea where Morgan might be?" Colton put his arm around his wife's shoulders, pulling her in a little tighter to his side while she cradled their new little baby, Ace.

The baby was only a few months old and he already resembled his papa. He had Colton's strong chin and straight forehead, but Skye's unique eyes.

Flynn paused, staring at Colton and Skye long enough that Duke cleared his throat. The captain finally shook his head and looked at the rest of the crew. "We'll take shifts watching his house here in Savannah, but I doubt he'll return there." Flynn's feet had healed and his strides were long and even as he paced the deck in front of the crew. His eye was still red, but the swelling and the cuts on his face were gone.

Whatever fear Duke had witnessed in the captain earlier was buried so deep, Duke was second-guessing himself. Maybe he had imagined it.

Flynn was no one's favorite crew member, but he was a damned fine captain.

"Morgan will most likely find a new home base, but he won't leave Savannah." Flynn stopped pacing, facing his crew. "He's obsessed with revenge. That's where he'll make a mistake, and we need to be ready. Until he makes his move, everyone must be alert and careful." His gaze landed on John and Harmony. "Harmony, do you have the ability to hack into the traffic cameras? Maybe you can catch a glimpse of him."

She nodded. "I think I can. It's monitoring it that will be tricky. Maybe we can go over them with a time lapse."

She took John's hand and wandered away, muttering about programming

terms Duke would never understand.

Flynn faced the rest of the crew. “No one stays on the ship alone until we’ve turned him over to Agent Bale for safe keeping. Is that understood?”

Duke scanned the nodding heads of the crew, but his gaze froze on Eli. Their youngest crew member had struggled more than most of them with immortality.

And right now, Eli was glaring at him. Why?

After Flynn finished his discussion with the crew, Duke headed straight for Eli and put a hand on his shoulder. “Something wrong, mate?”

Eli stepped back and Duke’s hand slipped off. “I thought you were smarter than this. You went to college, studying history...” He clenched his jaw, his true accent bleeding into his words. “But yer just repeatin’ it over and over.”

Duke narrowed his eyes. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Eli gestured to the crew scattered around the deck. “I don’t see your beautiful mermaid anywhere. So where do you think she might be?”

“She’s searching for her comb to keep herself from being under Morgan’s control.” Duke frowned. “What are you hintin’ at?”

“Yer under her spell.” He shook his head. “That’s what they do. They whisper the words you want to hear, and they make you believe they mean them. She probably didn’t tell you they have supernatural powers.”

Duke narrowed his eyes. “How could you possibly know that?”

Eli shook his head, staring into the distance. “I went to California for a while and crossed paths with a mermaid.” His gaze snapped back to Duke’s face. “And if I hadn’t taken a sip from that Grail, I’d be a dead man right now. We’re cattle to a mermaid, nothing more. They manipulate us to their benefit.”

“You’re wrong.” Duke cracked his neck, fighting to keep his emotions in check, but hearing the disdain in Eli’s voice had him on edge, eager to defend Annika. “She told me everything. She’s stronger than humans, she can communicate with sea creatures, and her singing voice can hypnotize a human.”

“Like you?” Eli arched a brow. “Like I said. Yer under her spell.”

Rage flashed red hot through Duke’s chest as he balled his fingers into tight fists. “Ye don’t know the first thing about her, so I suggest ye shut the fuck up.”

“Or?” Eli shrugged. “Never mind. Just know if she’s cast her spell, ye

won't know until it's too late. Take it from me, once a mermaid has what she wants, you'll never see her again."

Eli walked away and Duke fought the urge to chase after him and explain that he'd never even heard Annika sing. But he didn't move.

And in spite of Duke's best efforts, Eli's words rattled around in his head, kicking up the dusts of doubt.

Duke looked over at River Street. Tourists took selfies with the *Sea Dog* in the background, drunks wandered out of the bar, and the shops bustled with activity. He took out his phone, but there were no missed calls and no text messages. No word from Annika.

Maybe she hadn't found her comb yet.

He clung to that thought, refusing to even consider the other option. That she did have it and had swum away.

...

By the time Annika walked back to her flat, the sun was dipping on the horizon, but the damage was done. Her skin was sunburned and hot, and the blisters on her feet were back. She needed to swim in the saltwater.

Not until she knew Duke was safe.

She got inside and took off her shoes, cringing as they skimmed the tops of her sore feet.

The welts were raw and red. She slid her pantleg up and groaned. The blistered skin reached up past her ankles to her calves. She rubbed her forehead and was instantly reminded the welts were climbing up the inside of her arm too.

The wounds ached and itched, but she could manage them for now. She had her comb now, so healing would be possible soon. She went to the dresser and took out the burner phone she kept hidden there. She opened the contacts and frowned.

She didn't have Duke's number memorized, and the phone she had it saved in was a wet paperweight now. *Damn it.* At least she could get a Lyft to River Street.

She went into her bedroom and changed into dry clothes, then tackled her hair. Once she had it in a tidy braid, she ordered her ride and headed downstairs to wait. With any luck, she'd be with Duke before the sunset.

On the sidewalk, she curled and straightened her toes inside her loose-fitting clogs while she waited for the ride.

She couldn't help contemplating her choices.

She should be diving into the Savannah River and swimming out to sea, healing her ailing body, but she couldn't shake the horrific images of Captain Flynn from her mind.

Rutger Morgan was still out there, and if he came for Flynn again, Duke would try to defend him. She had no doubt of that fact. Duke wouldn't hesitate to lay down his life for any of the crew. It was in his nature.

He'd helped her even after she'd shot him.

But who had his back?

She would, but she wasn't sure she'd be much help right now. Soon, she wouldn't be able to walk.

The Lyft driver pulled over and she got into the car. He smiled as he pressed a button on his phone. "River Street, right?"

Annika nodded. "I need to get to the dock. Fast."

"I'll do my best." He raised a brow. "Anything for five stars."

"Thank you."

He drove his Sentra back out into traffic and flew through a few yellow lights until they were finally on the uneven cobble stones of River Street.

She pointed to the *Sea Dog*. "That's it."

After leaving him five stars and a healthy tip, she did her best to keep from limping. Her feet throbbed inside the shoes.

When she crossed the gangplank, only Duke and Flynn were on the deck. Duke smiled and came to her, wrapping her in his arms. Her breath caught as a stab of pain shot through her shoulder, but she didn't loosen her hold. He was safe. She breathed his scent into her lungs and closed her eyes, wishing the moment could last.

He whispered into her hair, "Are you hurt?"

She sighed and stepped back. She held up her arm, exposing the red welts. "I need to swim."

His brows pinched together. "You didn't find your comb?"

She took it out of her pocket. "I have it."

Confusion lined his brow. "But you haven't dipped into the water?"

She shrugged. "I needed to be sure you were safe first."

His voice was hushed as he cupped her cheek. "You didn't have to do that."

She put her hand on his chest over his heart. "You protect everyone, but who protects you?"

His eyes sparkled as he bent to kiss her. She hummed into his mouth, savoring the taste of his full lips and the warmth of his tongue tangling with hers. His fingers slid into the back of her hair, cradling her head as he deepened the kiss. Her heart raced as she moved her hands up his broad chest.

“Save it. Morgan could be watching us right now.” Flynn grumbled behind them.

Duke broke the kiss and looked back at the captain. “I don’t give a fuck. Besides, weren’t you going to rip his head off?”

Flynn ground his teeth and shook his head. “This is piss poor timing to fall in love. I need your head in the game.”

Love? Annika glanced at the captain. Had Duke confided in his friend? Did he feel this same connection she did? This primal need to be near him was so new. When they were apart, she found herself aching for his crooked smile and pining for his touch.

Duke ignored Flynn’s comment as he took her hand in his. “Why do you already have sores again?”

“I’m not sure. Usually, I have more time on land before I notice a physical toll on my body. I’ve never been out of the water as long as I have while I’ve been searching for my comb. I probably just need to spend more time in the sea.”

“We should get you in the water.” Duke turned to Flynn. “You were going to Drake and Heather’s house anyway, right?”

“Aye.” He nodded. “All the mortal crew members are protected.” His icy-blue eyes landed on Annika. “Go swim with your mermaid. We need her at full strength in case Morgan brings her sister into this fight.”

Annika wanted to believe her sister wouldn’t attack them. Atargatis had said she would fight to protect Morgan, but unless the *Sea Dog* crew attacked him, she doubted her sister would take the offensive and hunt them.

Flynn’s determined strides echoed across the deck as he left the ship.

Duke squeezed her hand. “I’ve got a swimsuit in my cabin.”

A smile teased her lips. If her body weren’t covered in welts, she would’ve suggested they spend some time in his cabin first, but sex would have to wait for now.

He scooped her up and carried her down the stairs to his cabin. After setting her down on the edge of the bed, he was naked in seconds, his back

to her as he reached for a pair of board shorts. Instead of putting them on, he clenched his ass cheeks and looked over his shoulder, catching her staring.

“Just checking I had your attention.” He grinned.

She laughed, savoring the warmth that spread through her body. She couldn’t remember ever laughing or smiling so much in her long life. Being with him made her happy. This was the future she wanted. How could she go back to her solitary existence?

He pulled his shorts up and sat on the edge of the bed beside her. “Is everything okay?”

She lifted her gaze and took his hand. “I’m trying to stay in the present, but...I don’t want this to end.”

“Little secret?” He brought her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. “I don’t want it to end either.” He stood and pulled her up with him. “Let’s get you in the water.”

She pulled her mermaid comb out of her pocket and held it up. “Will you protect this for me?”

He hesitated for a moment. “You trust me with that?”

A smile tugged at her mouth. “I trust you with my life.”

His lips caressed hers as he took the comb from her hand. She’d never offered her comb to a partner before. She did trust him.

She might even love him.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

After stowing her comb in his safe, Duke followed Annika down the pier toward the water.

The sunset was fading from the sky and the stars began to twinkle overhead. Fog rolled in from the river, casting a dreamy veil over the yellow streetlamps along River Street.

He checked the area for any onlookers. Other than a few tourists on the other side of the street, no one was near the water.

Annika followed his gaze. "Should we wait until it's darker?"

He shook his head. "I think we're safe enough." He glanced down at her pants. "You should probably take those off."

She nodded, a smile tugging at her lips. "That's why I asked if we should wait. Humans seem to be very modest when it comes to naked bodies."

"Even if someone notices and calls the police, we'll be long gone by the time they get here."

She smiled and lifted her shirt off over her head. His eyes widened with surprise and his blood shot to his groin at the sight of her bare breasts. He remembered her telling him how mermaids have orgasms and it was all he could do to keep his hands to himself. His grip on his self-control was tenuous at best.

She studied him as she started unbuttoning her jeans. "Why are you making that face? Are you worried? Didn't you just say the police wouldn't get here in time?"

"Aye." He chuckled as he adjusted himself in his shorts. "Just didn't realize you weren't wearing a bra."

She rolled her eyes with a playful smile. "Mermaids don't wear shell bras like the cartoons." She slid her pants down her legs, revealing she didn't have on underwear either.

As his gaze wandered down her body, he noticed the welts and hives. Most were clustered on her feet and ankles, but a few had moved up her calves.

Being on land was slowly killing her.

She sucked in a breath and dove in with a splash. He pushed the dark thoughts away and embraced the moment, following her into the Savannah River.

The cold water was a shock initially, but he warmed up as he hit a steady pace swimming. He couldn't see her in the murky water. He popped his head up and searched the water.

Suddenly, someone grabbed two handfuls of his arse.

He flinched and she burst up through the surface right behind him. Her laughter was pure magic. He turned around, shaking his head. "Best looking shark I've ever seen."

She kissed him, humming into his mouth. "I couldn't resist. You look good in the water."

He kept his legs churning as he deepened the kiss and brought his hands up to cup her breasts. He circled the hardened tip of her nipple with his finger before raking his rough thumb across it. She moaned into his mouth and he almost sank.

He fought to maintain his focus, both on treading water, and making his mermaid come. *His*.

He scraped her bottom lip with his teeth as he growled. "If I could drown...I'd die a happy man."

"No dying," she gasped as she arched her back, jutting her breasts into his hands. Her tail churned the water, brushing his legs as she kept them both above the surface. He worked her nipples, aching to lick them and suck them into his mouth. He pinched the tips of her breasts and her entire body stiffened against him as she gasped his name.

He nearly came with her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and her tail kept them both afloat as she rested her forehead on his. "You remembered...how mermaids..."

"Aye." He stole another kiss and whispered, "I've been thinking about it ever since ye told me how mermaids orgasm."

Even in the fading light, the afterglow on her face made him ache to please her over and over again. Her body pressed against his erection, and she smiled. "Maybe we can find a private place on shore to finish this."

His legs were already beginning to tire. He scanned the shoreline and sighed. "Closest beach is Tybee Island, and it's a few miles away. Not sure my legs have it in them."

She grinned and released him. "You're with a mermaid." She took his hand. "I can swim it for both of us."

He laughed and coughed as she started dragging him slowly through the water. He managed to right himself, and kicked, attempting to assist in the swim. A mermaid tail was far more efficient than his human legs, but he couldn't let her do *all* the work.

Annika kept looking over at him, and her deep blue eyes sparkled with joy. This was her world and he loved that she was sharing it with him, even though he was definitely slowing her down. "Sorry I'm so slow, love."

She smiled, shaking her head as she glided through the surface of the water. "It feels so good to be weightless again, I don't care how fast we're going."

He tugged her hand, slowing them further until they stopped and treaded water again. She frowned. "What's wrong?"

He chuckled. "Just wanted a second to soak up the happiness in yer eyes. You've missed the water."

She nodded. "But it's more than that." She paused, bringing her wet hand out of the water to caress his cheek. "I've never shared it with anyone before. It makes me happy that you wanted to swim with me."

He shook his head as he lost himself in her eyes. "Thank you for sharing all this with me."

She kissed him, parting her lips as he explored the warmth of her mouth. He realized he'd forgotten to kick his legs, but she kept her tail moving for both of them. The sea bubbled around them as he cupped her face in his hands, savoring the taste of her soft lips. When he broke the kiss, words were on the tip of his tongue, aching to be voiced. He loved her.

Before he could say it, she whispered, "Hold your breath."

He filled his lungs with air, and she plunged him under the water with her. She swam so fast, pulling him along, it was disorienting. He'd grabbed onto a dolphin's fin before, but this was even faster. If he weren't such a strong swimmer, he might've panicked, but he kept his body tight, holding his breath. The moment he ached for air, she took them both back to the surface. His chest heaved as he fought to catch his breath.

"Holy shit," he gasped out as his eyes widened. A black and white tower

looked out over the ocean from the shore, the light at the top spinning. “That’s the Tybee Lighthouse.”

She nodded. “I can swim faster underwater.” She took his hand. “Come on.”

Since Tybee Island was the closest beach to Savannah, it was usually busy, but now, after dark, it appeared to be deserted. He kicked his legs as they swam toward it.

Once he could stand and touch the sandy bottom, he stopped.

Annika frowned. “Why are you stopping?”

“We left your clothes back at the pier.” He scanned the shoreline. “I should probably get out first and be sure we’re alone before I carry a naked mermaid out of the ocean.”

“Okay.” She released him. “I’ll wait for your signal.”

He nodded and started walking into the shore. It suddenly occurred to him that he was unarmed. If he crossed paths with Morgan, he’d be at a disadvantage. He should’ve thought about it before, but being with Annika was more intoxicating than his best rum. He’d been preoccupied trying to make her happy instead of focusing on the potential danger lurking in the darkness.

Too late to do anything about it now.

He rolled his shoulders back and stepped out of the waves and onto the beach. There were blackened fire rings which were still warm, but no sign of anyone else. He raised his hand, waving her in.

Nothing could have prepared him for the sight of her mermaid body beaching on the shore. She thrashed her tail, dragging herself up the sand with her arms. He rushed to her side and scooped her up, away from the water. Within seconds, her tail transformed into two legs right before his eyes.

He didn’t want to admit it, but it felt good to have his feet back on solid ground. She must’ve felt the same way about being in the water. They really were from two different worlds.

He carefully set her down on the beach. She smiled up at him. “You grew up on an island like this, right?”

“Except mine wasn’t a barrier island. I never saw a mainland until the day I stowed away on that ship, lifetimes ago.” He rarely thought about his boyhood days. So much time had passed, it almost seemed like someone else’s story now. He took her hand and walked with her farther down the

beach.

“Did you have beaches like this?” she asked.

He nodded. “We had amazing beaches.” A memory came up that he hadn’t thought about since leaving Samoa. “We used to collect shells and play Haka Moa.”

He kept scanning the quiet shoreline. While Annika had no inhibitions over walking nude down a beach, he didn’t want to have to explain it to the police. And if some drunk guy showed up making trouble, or worse yet, Morgan, Duke was unarmed.

It made him punchy.

She nudged him with her elbow. “What’s Haka Moa?”

“Kids game.” He stopped her and dragged his toe in the sand in a circle around them. He bent his left leg and reached down to catch his ankle with his hand and put his free hand behind his back. “You grab one leg and then we hop and bump each other until someone gets knocked out of the circle.”

He was about to release his ankle, but Annika grabbed her leg and hopped toward him, bumping him back toward the line in the sand. His eyes widened and he laughed as he struggled to stay upright and inside the circle. “Yer too distracting naked.”

She bumped him again. “Or I’m stronger than my big pirate.”

Hers?

He lost his balance and stumbled backward, landing on his ass in the sand just outside of the circle.

Annika laughed and sank to her knees beside him. “Are you all right?”

He reached up and pulled her down to him, rolling over so he covered her body with his. He grinned. “I am now.”

He kissed her, enjoying the way her nails grazed his back as she moaned. He couldn’t get enough of her. He was definitely hers.

“Hey!” A beam of light hit Duke in the face. “What’s going on here?” The light flicked to Annika’s face and Duke was glad he was covering her. The man stumbled in the sand and shouted as he came closer. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” Annika smiled. “We’re kissing.”

“I can see that.” The man sounded older, like One-Eyed Bob. He cleared his throat. “See that it doesn’t go any further than that, or I’ll have to take you in for indecent exposure. Besides, the tide is coming in and it’s bringing a storm with it. You should get on your way.”

“We will.” Duke squinted into the light.

Finally, the officer turned around, speaking into his coms. “Couple of kids necking. Beach is secure.”

Annika kissed his chest and whispered, “I won.”

Duke arched a brow as he looked down into her eyes. “I didn’t know you had this competitive streak.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. “I can’t remember the last time I played a game.” She caressed his cheek, her expression softening. “You make me happy.”

He turned his head, pressing a kiss to her palm. His pulse raced as he whispered, “I liked hearing you call me yours.”

“Does that mean you’ll be mine?”

He chuckled. “I’ve been yours since the night you shot me.” He kissed her again and stared into her eyes. “I know you can’t stay on land for long periods of time, but I don’t care. I want to make this work...” He shook his head slowly. “I’m tryin’ to say... I love you, Annika.”

He half expected her to shove him off and race into the waves, but she didn’t.

“I love you, too,” she whispered.

Hearing those words made his chest tight and his eyes hot with...tears? He also couldn’t stop smiling. In his long life, he’d never uttered those words or heard them said back to him. He wanted to stop time and stay in this moment forever.

Instead, the sky opened up, pelting the beach with a deluge of rain. Her eyes widened as her body transformed underneath him. *Oh shit. Her tail.* His heart pounded as he got up and scooped her into his arms.

He hustled his mermaid toward the water, splashing through the waves without slowing, until they were up to their chests in water. Laughter bubbled up from his throat as he looked up at the storm. “We’ll have to watch out for sudden rainstorms.”

“This is going to be complicated.” She grinned.

“I don’t care.” He shook his head. “I’d face a million storms to be with you.” And he meant every word. He kissed her forehead. “Let’s go home.”

She splashed her hand on the surface of the sea. “This is my home.” Her smile faded.

He caught her chin as he settled her down into the ocean. “I know we’re from different worlds. Nothing about this relationship is going to be easy,

but it'll be worth it."

"I hope you'll always feel that way." She took his hand. "Come on, I'll swim you back to Savannah."

He dove into the wave and as her fingers slid through his and their grip on one another tightened, a warmth spread through his chest. They were together. That was all that mattered. He kicked his legs, although her tail did most of the work.

He'd watched Captain Flynn and Keegan fall in love with mortals and witnessed their pain when they'd lost their past partners to time. Like Flynn, he'd made promises to himself to never tread down that dark path. He kept relationships physical, never laying his heart on the line.

But Annika was immortal too, and he'd let his emotional barriers waver. Now, he couldn't imagine a day without her in it. It was intoxicating. And to know she felt the same way about him made it even stronger. He wanted to get out of the water and shout to the world that he loved her.

Something bumped his leg and he kicked out in surprise. "Fuck!"

Annika slowed and a dolphin leapt over them, splashing back into the water on the other side. She laughed and met his eyes. "I asked him to help you back to Savannah."

He'd forgotten one of her gifts was communicating with sea creatures.

"Are ye gettin' tired?" Duke raised a brow.

There was a devious sparkle in her eyes as she grinned. "No, but we're only about a mile away and if I'm going to race you for the dock, I wanted it to be fair."

He chuckled as the dolphin bumped him with its nose. In the past, he'd played with dolphins in the water before, but he'd never had one approach him so boldly. Annika must've told the animal it would be safe. He gripped the dorsal fin and met her eyes. "What do I get when I win?"

"Me."

She was all he wanted.

He kicked his legs and his new partner took off, sailing them through the water. Duke tucked his head, protecting his face from the sting of the saltwater while the dolphin cut through it. He turned his head to catch a breath. Annika was keeping up beside them. He hadn't thought to ask what she would win. It didn't matter. He would give her anything to see her smile.

Anything.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

It was dark when David parked outside the nondescript warehouse in Brunswick again to meet Aura.

He glanced over at Petra in the passenger seat. She had long, wavy auburn hair and red-rimmed glasses that matched her crimson top. She had an aura of confidence around her that some people found intimidating, but David took comfort in her self-assurance.

“Thanks again for flying down here,” he said. “I thought if we can perform the retirement protocols here, we can leave him at the Savannah airport. I bought him a ticket back to D.C. He can go back to the CIA with no memory he was ever inside Department 13.”

“Just doing my job.” She turned his way.

“I appreciate it,” he said. She was an integral part of the occult division of Department 13, specializing in magic and rituals, both things he felt weakest at, so her competence reassured him.

Her dark brown eyes seemed to peer directly into his soul. “We can’t have him telling everyone about us, right?”

He nodded. “I still appreciate it. I know you won’t have your usual wards and safety nets here.”

She shrugged. “There’s more magic to draw from in Savannah than D.C. anyway, if I get into any trouble.”

They got out of the rental car and David walked her to the door. Before he could punch his code into the keypad, the door opened.

Aura’s posture was stiff, like they were suddenly a military organization, and she needed to stand at attention. “Thanks for coming so quickly, Petra.” Her eyes barely flicked his way. Maybe she was still angry he wasn’t sending more backup to protect the pirates.

They entered the building and the lock on the door clicked behind them.

Petra headed for the corner where Eric Gross sat, still bound to the chair. She went right to work removing crystals and oils and the vial containing the Water of Lethe to help him forget.

Lethe was one of the five rivers of the Underworld, flowing around the cave of Hypnos. All who drank from the water lost their memories, but Petra's spells would contain the loss to his time inside Department 13, so he would still know who he was and possess all his memories from before he'd walked into the department.

David focused on Aura again, noticing a guilt-ridden look in her eyes. "If anyone is responsible for this, it's me. I hired Eric."

Greyson came over to stand next to her. "Save yer breath. She won't let this one go until it's made right."

Aura shook her head. "It's not the guilt, not completely..." She looked over at David. "The timeline doesn't make sense. I remember Morgan headbutted me and took off, and Annika's sister brought me a washcloth and an ice pack." She broke eye contact, focusing on the CIA operative. "I told Annika I needed to bring Holli back to Department 13..."

"I was there, right outside at the van, and I never saw Holli leave." Greyson locked eyes with David. "I would have seen her."

"She could have gone out the back door." David frowned. "Did Annika see her go?"

Aura shrugged and rubbed her temple. "I don't remember... It's like my memory jumps to me walking to the van already knowing Holli and Morgan escaped."

David clenched his jaw. "Mermaids aren't human. They're stronger than us and they usually have supernatural gifts."

"Gifts? Like what?" Greyson asked.

"Some can control water, like hydrokinesis. We've got documentation about some that had more psychic gifts like communicating with animals, moving objects with their minds, and hypnotizing humans with their voice."

Aura's brows pinched together. "Are you saying this fuzzy memory in my head could be because of Annika?"

He met her eyes. "I'm saying it's possible she told you her sister escaped and sent you outside."

"Holy shit." Greyson shook his head. "I saw Morgan escape, but when he ran out of the door, I couldn't get to him because I was still securing our CIA prisoner. But I'm telling you, no one else left that house until Aura

came out.”

She looked at Greyson. “She was helping us, or at least that’s what Duke thought. Whose side is she really on?”

“That’s the question we need answered.” David crossed his arms.

Aura grabbed her gun and slid it into the holster. “I’m going back to the *Sea Dog*. Maybe Duke and Annika are still there. I need answers.” She looked over at David. “You and Petra can lock up once she’s finished with Eric, right?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Let me know if you figure anything out.”

“Will do.” She slipped out of the building with Greyson and David went to the far corner, where Petra was putting the final touches on her work area.

Eric Gross pulled his eyes from her and focused on David. “It’s too late. I’ve been giving my reports to my division lead for weeks. Killing me isn’t going to keep Department 13 hidden.”

“We’re not going to kill you.” David stopped beside Petra in front of Eric’s chair. “You’re being retired, that’s all.”

“Retired?” He frowned.

David arched a brow. “Agent Rhodes never mentioned our retirement protocols to you?”

“No.” He shook his head quickly, tugging at his bonds. “If you let me go, maybe I can encourage the agency to keep your records sealed.”

David crossed his arms, gave Petra a nod, and looked at Eric again. “We’re going to let you go. And when we do, you won’t remember ever hearing about Department 13, let alone stepping through our doors.”

Petra took a blindfold from her worktable and smoothed it out before she tied it around Eric’s head. She tightened it and patted his shoulder. “Try to relax. If you fight, you’re going to have a horrible migraine, but the end result won’t change.” She adjusted the blindfold so that a glass bead sat right over his third eye in the center of his forehead. Once she was happy with the placement, she looked over at David. “Can you hand me the Water of Lethe? It’s in the blue vial.”

David picked up the slender glass vial. Most people would mistake it for a swanky perfume bottle. He handed it to Petra and took a step back to stay out of her way. In all his years in the department, he’d never witnessed the retirement protocols being administered. He wasn’t sure he wanted to.

His pulse thrummed as he cleared his throat. “Should I wait outside?”

Her dark eyes flicked toward him. “This magic isn’t contagious. It’ll only affect the person anointed with the Water of Lethe.”

“All right.” He tried to settle his nerves. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No.” She closed her eyes. “I just need to concentrate.”

She started to chant. The words were Latin and...something else he didn’t recognize. Gradually, the center bead in the blindfold around Eric’s head glowed a more vibrant purple.

Eric struggled against the bonds on his wrists. “Please. No!”

Petra didn’t seem to hear him. Her chants grew in volume as she opened her eyes and circled his chair, first clockwise, then counterclockwise. Her gaze was distant as her words came faster and faster. The purple in the center of Eric’s forehead pulsed.

She finally stopped in front of Eric and lifted her hands, closing her eyes and calling on the Goddess Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses and Memory from Greek myths, to sift through his memories.

David wasn’t as versed in magic as Petra, but he understood some of her words now. She was searching through his Akashic Records, the compendium of all universal events in a person’s life—past, present, and future.

David always pictured them being in a huge room lined with battered metal file cabinets.

Eric Gross no longer struggled against his bonds, in fact, his head started to loll forward, his chin resting on his chest. David didn’t know if he’d passed out, or if he’d fallen asleep.

Petra settled into the chair she’d placed directly in front of Eric and continued her whispers and mumblings to the spirit realm, plucking memories and replacing them with a new timeline. It kept the person from searching for the lost memories.

Usually, the retiring agent would give the Occult Division their requested memories to be implanted. Director Paul Harrison had told David he’d asked to fill his head with a life spent working in the pit of a Formula One racing team.

David still hadn’t figured out what he’d want to remember. He took that as a sign he wasn’t ready to hang up his badge just yet.

Quietly, he went over and sat in Greyson’s chair at the security camera panels. It would take Petra at least another three hours to finish the ritual,

and he wasn't about to leave her alone.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The air was thick with fog by the time Duke helped Annika out of the water and up onto the dock next to the *Sea Dog*.

"I win." He grinned.

Annika laughed. "I beat you back here."

"Aye, but I was the first one on the dock."

"Technicality." She took his hand and placed it on her thigh. Her legs were back. "You may not have noticed, but I'm a little bit competitive."

He dropped his head back, laughing. He wanted to know everything about her, and now he had eternity to find out. Being in love was new and intoxicating and addictive.

While she got dressed, he noticed the fog glowed on the deck. The lights were on?

Someone must be aboard. He started to reach for his cell before he remembered he'd left it in the safe in his cabin.

Annika came to his side. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm not sure." He pointed at the ship. "Someone's on the *Sea Dog*."

She tensed, suddenly all business. "Do you think it's Morgan?"

He narrowed his eyes, wishing he could see through the mist. "I doubt it. He wouldn't have turned on the lights. He'd want to surprise us." Duke took her hand. "Maybe someone forgot something, or they got news from Agent Bale about Morgan and your sister. I left my phone in the cabin, so I can't text anyone to find out."

They hurried along the wooden dock and crossed the gangplank. Duke relaxed when he saw Greyson and Aura. He scanned the deck for any other crewmembers, but no one else was around. He focused on Aura. "Did you finish with the CIA spy?"

"He's being dealt with," she replied.

Greyson was staring at Annika and he didn't look happy. Duke's smile faded. "What's going on?"

Aura's full attention was on Annika. "Greyson and I wanted to talk to Annika about what happened earlier when we were all at Rutger Morgan's place."

Annika released Duke's hand. He glanced over at her but her expression was distant, cold. What was he missing here?

He looked at Aura again. "I don't understand. I took Flynn out to my car and Greyson had the CIA spy. Then Morgan and Holli got away, right?"

He studied Greyson and Aura. They didn't nod or agree.

Aura lifted her chin a notch. "I have a gap in my memory. That's why we're here. I remember Morgan headbutting me and running out the front door, but the next thing I can recall is walking out to the van and telling Greyson that Holli escaped."

Duke frowned. "Maybe you have a concussion."

Aura crossed her arms. "Or a mermaid mesmerized me with her voice and planted the idea that Holli escaped."

Greyson added, "I saw Morgan escape, but Holli never came out that door."

Duke shook his head, rejecting their theory, but Eli's words came rushing back.

Mermaids mesmerize humans.

Annika had told him she could communicate with sea creatures and that her singing voice could hypnotize humans. But she wouldn't have used it on Aura. She was there to help them find her sister.

Duke narrowed his eyes at Aura. "Annika came to help us capture Morgan and her sister. Why would she make you believe Holli escaped if it wasn't true?"

"That's what I've been asking myself." Aura's gaze flicked over to Annika. "It wouldn't make any sense, unless it wasn't really *us* that she was there to help."

"Don't make an accusation without any evidence to back it up." Rage smoldered in his gut as he took a step toward Aura.

Greyson got between them. "Think about it, mate. I was watching the door, and the other mermaid never appeared."

"Maybe she escaped out the back door." Duke was grasping at strings, but he couldn't face the other explanation.

Aura's tone softened. "If that were true, why didn't Annika stop her?"

Duke frowned and turned, facing Annika. "Tell her she's wrong. How did your sister get past you?"

Annika's expression was distant, but her eyes sparkled with tears as she lifted her gaze to his face. "I couldn't let Aura take my sister until I talked to her."

The wind left his sails. He frowned in disbelief, shaking his head. "What are ye saying, love?"

She broke eye contact, focusing on Aura. "I'm sorry. It was a spur of the moment reaction. I...I never intended..."

"To use mind control on me?" Aura crossed her arms. "Morgan wants to kill this crew and you returned his most dangerous weapon to him."

"It wasn't like that." Annika frowned. "I had every intention of turning her over to you after I'd spoken to her." She crossed her arms. "My sister left the faucet running after she brought you that washcloth. She used her hydrokinesis and scalded me in the face with hot water and she escaped. I didn't *let* her go."

"Forgive me for having a tough time believing anything you say." Aura shook her head. "At least you admitted it." She started for the gangway and stopped, meeting Duke's eyes. "Be careful with her. Who knows what she's planted in *your* head?"

Greyson clapped his shoulder as he passed by, following his fiancée to the dock. Duke's fingers twitched, eager to punch something and relieve the adrenaline flooding his system. He sucked in a deep breath and finally looked over at Annika.

He tried to sort through his conflicting emotions, unable to trust any of his memories.

Could the overwhelming love he'd felt for her on the dock be a fantasy, all part of some mermaid magic?

His voice was gone. All he could manage was a raw whisper. "Why didn't you tell me what happened?"

...

The pain in his eyes stabbed into the depths of her soul. She shook her head, regret swelling inside her chest. "I wasn't trying to hide anything from you." She searched his eyes. "I really didn't think it mattered. Atargatis attacked me and escaped. That's not much different than Aura thinking she

escaped a few minutes earlier.”

He ran a hand down his face and blurted out, “Eli warned me not to trust a mermaid.”

His words were like a verbal slap. They also sparked a red-hot flame of rage. Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t you dare judge me.” She poked her finger into his chest. “How many people have you *killed* to protect your crew?” Her voice was tight and growing louder as she went on. “I didn’t *hurt* anyone. I wanted to understand why my sister was protecting Morgan. She claims she loves him. I thought she was foolish, but really, who am I to judge?”

His eyes widened at her jab. *Good*. He hurt her and she wanted to make him hurt, too.

“Would I kill to protect my crew? Yes. Have I in the past? Yes.” Duke balled his hands into fists. “But I have *never* betrayed them. You and I are supposed to be partners, but for all I know, you sang to me the night you shot me and told me I would help you recover that fucking comb. That would make more sense than me seeing that desperation in your eyes that called to me.”

For a moment, she couldn’t breathe. Could he really believe their love was all a lie? That she’d tricked him into caring for her? The pain was too much to bear. She buried it, shielding herself with her rage. She had been reckless, offering her heart to a human.

But she had. And now he was ripping it to shreds.

“I guess there’s nothing else to say.” She spun around to leave, refusing to allow him to see a tear spill down her cheek, but he caught her arm.

“So, it’s true?”

She looked up into his dark brown eyes and her wounded heart bled. Could he really believe she would have “made” him love her? If he believed that, maybe he’d never really loved her at all. She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Let me go.”

He jerked his hand away, like touching her burned his skin. “Was this all a lie?”

A tear escaped the corner of her eye. “Not for me.”

She sprinted for the railing, diving off the edge and into the water. Her tail split the fabric of her pants and she swam away. Her hot, salty tears blended with the seawater as she made her way out into the Atlantic.

She stripped off the shirt and kept going, unsure where she was headed.

All that mattered was getting away, far from the man who'd broken her heart. How could she have been so foolish as to believe a human might care about her, even love her?

She swam for miles before she slowed, but she still couldn't outrun the loss.

Duke's smile taunted her every time she closed her eyes. She wanted to be angry at his lack of faith in her or in his own emotions, but the only rage she could muster was at herself for ever using her voice to manipulate Aura in the first place.

She'd known it was wrong, but she'd naively thought she could save her sister from loving a bad man.

Now, she understood that love could distort your vision. She'd already imagined an eternity with Duke at her side. She would visit him on land, he would meet her in the ocean, and they would laugh wherever life took them.

How wrong she'd been. Duke's loyalty would always be to his crew, and now that she'd betrayed Aura, she would never be accepted as a part of that family.

And she shouldn't want it.

Never love a human.

That had been her first mistake.

No more.

She'd swim as far from Savannah as she could get. In fact... Maybe nowhere on this planet would be far enough to escape this heartbreak.

The merfolk left on Earth could find a new warrior to fight for them. She turned and swam toward the portal. Humans called it the Bermuda Triangle, but at the bottom of the ocean was the gateway to the universe.

Coming to Earth had brought nothing but guilt and pain, and now that Duke had reminded her how to laugh, she wasn't eager to go back to her bleak existence here.

It was time to go home.

Chapter Thirty

Duke watched the sun setting into the horizon as they sailed away from Savannah.

The thirtieth sunset since Annika had swum away.

He chastised himself for counting. It only made the hole in his heart wider. There was no escaping the emptiness. She haunted his dreams while he slept and he spent his days feeling like an empty shell. He went through the motions, but he was still numb.

Falling in love with her had been so fucking easy. At first, it had been a quest to make her smile, and soon he'd been addicted to hearing her laughter. How could he have been such an insufferable asshole that last night?

He'd been so shocked to discover she had used her powers on Aura and hadn't confided in him. It had shaken his foundation. Eli's earlier warning about mermaids had clawed its way to the surface and he'd said things he couldn't take back.

And then she dove into the sea.

As if seeing that tear slide down her face hadn't been enough, he'd also discovered later that her comb was still locked in his safe. If she'd really hypnotized him to love her so that he would help her find her comb, why would she have left it with him?

She wouldn't have.

He was a fool.

And now she could be anywhere.

Footsteps on the upper deck snapped him back into reality. They were setting sail for the open ocean. Normally, that would fill him with eager adrenaline, but today there was no thrill in it. No escape from the abyss of numbness.

A month had passed since Morgan had attacked Flynn. The crew was staying diligent and aware, protecting their mortal crewmates, but so far there had been no sightings of Morgan.

The bastard had forever to take his revenge, so the threat might never pass now that they knew he hadn't perished on that island.

Rutger Morgan was many things and determined was at the top of the list. He'd be back for his revenge. Eventually.

They had happier things to focus on right now.

Today, Drake and Heather were getting married.

Duke was happy for them, but seeing everyone glowing with love in their fucking eyes made it tough not to dwell on thinking about Annika, about what could have been. He'd been kicking himself in the ass for weeks over the way he'd acted that night. Instead of letting her explain herself, he'd grabbed onto Eli's warning with both hands.

A few hours earlier, he'd told her he loved her, but the second they'd hit a bump in the road, he'd lost faith in it.

He didn't fucking deserve her.

He spun the dial on the safe and opened the door. Her comb still sat on a velvet pillow in the center, taunting him. He could go dip it in the water right now and she'd have to return for it. He resisted the urge. She would have returned on her own if she wanted to see him.

But being apart got harder every day. And every day he missed her more.

He picked up the comb and sat on the bed, turning it over and over in his hand. Her name was etched into it in a language he didn't recognize.

He ran his finger over it and closed his eyes, imagining the sparkle in her eyes as she'd knocked him on his ass playing Haka Moa on the beach during their last night together. If he could talk to her one more time, he would apologize for being an insufferable asshole. For accusing her of toying with his mind. And he would tell her how much he loved her and missed her.

Maybe she would take another chance on him.

He just needed her to come back...

His eyes snapped open and he quickly put the comb back in the safe, closing it before he could change his mind. Using her comb wouldn't fix anything, it would only break whatever trust she might still have in him.

But damn it, he fucking missed her, ached for her. He'd spent his long life living in the present moment, and taking the future as it came, but right

now, the present hurt, and he caught himself longing for a future with her in it.

...

Annika swam aimlessly through the frigid waters of Neptune.

Time passed differently on her home planet than back on Earth. Here, the days lasted about sixteen hours, and it would be almost one hundred and sixty-five Earth years before Neptune rounded the sun.

How long had she been gone from Duke's world?

She burst through the surface of the blue water and took a breath. The icy winds roared, stinging her face. She stared up at the silver orb filling the night sky, Triton.

Unlike Earth, fourteen moons orbited Neptune, but Triton was the largest, and the one traditionally wished upon. She should've been wishing to forget Duke altogether. Maybe then her heart would stop aching.

Instead, she caught herself hoping she might see him again someday.

Why couldn't she get him out of her head?

A splash drew her attention as one of her younger sisters surfaced. Tatia peeked up at the moon and back to Annika. "Did I interrupt something?"

Although Tatia was younger by at least a century, they'd both seen eons come to pass. Tatia's hair was a slightly darker shade of blue than the oceans of Neptune, and her eyes had a more violet hue.

"Not really." Annika shook her head. "Is something wrong?"

Tatia crinkled her nose. "Oh, please. You couldn't have missed all the whispers through the reef, right?"

Annika rolled her eyes. "Are they still talking about me?"

"Yes." Tatia reached for her hand. "You've been home, but...not. It's like you left half of yourself back on Earth. I'm worried about you."

"I'll be fine. It's just going to take time to get him out of my system."

"We could go back through the portal and check on him."

Annika raised a brow. "Since when do you want to visit Earth?"

She shrugged. "It must be amazing there. Atargatis is still there, and you were there for... I lost count of how many years passed."

The temptation to see Duke again was almost more than she could bear. "He thinks I hypnotized him with my voice to make him love me. That's why I can't go back."

Her head tilted. "You told him that if you did, you would have to plant

something to cover the truth, right?”

That was how Aura had discovered she'd been manipulated. Annika had planted the idea that her sister had escaped, but Aura had no memory of the event happening. “I didn't really get a chance to explain how it all worked.”

Her brows creased. “I thought you loved him.”

“I do.” She blurted out, before making the correction. “Did. I *did* love him.”

Tatia practically glowed as she grinned. “You still do.” She sobered slightly. “Why are you staying here?”

Her sister was baiting her. Annika groaned. “It's not that simple. I didn't fall in love with any merfolk like you did. He's human.” She shook her head. “He's better off without me.”

Both of Tatia's eyebrows shot up. “You can't really think that. You're one of our best warriors. Does he know how rare it is for a human to catch your eye? And then to win your heart, too? Makes him a very lucky human.” Before Annika could argue, Tatia put up her finger. “Wait. Without thinking about it, tell me why you're not swimming back through that portal right now.”

“Because nothing has ever hurt me as badly as hearing him ask me if I tricked him into loving me.” Annika broke eye contact, blinking back tears. “Happy now?” She risked a glance at her sister. “I never want to feel pain like that again.”

“So, you're willing to give up feeling that good again, too?”

Her words washed over Annika like a tidal wave. The winds blew her hair across her face, protecting her from her sister's gaze. “What if I go back and he's moved on?”

“Then you can too, because you'll know you tried.” Tatia brought her hand down to caress her swollen belly. Annika was going to be an aunt again. Soon. Tatia smiled. “I'll go with you. You don't have to do this alone.”

Annika shook her head. “No. Yemaya told me you're going to deliver soon.”

Yemaya was their older sister. In the brief time she'd been on Earth with Annika and Atargatis, the humans had begun to tell stories of her, elevating her to the Goddess of the Ocean and the fertile mother of the world. In truth, she usually could help with fertility issues, and often delivered babies for the merfolk on Neptune.

Annika took her younger sister's hand. "Your baby should be born here, not on Earth."

"But you'll still go?" she asked.

"I'll think about it."

Her sister reached over to tuck Annika's hair behind her ear. "Love is a rare gift and it's worth the risk." She searched her eyes. "You've been on Earth so long. Maybe that's where your future awaits. Neptune is your past."

Was that why she hadn't acclimated to being home yet?

Because this wasn't it anymore.

Duke was home.

But what if he sent her away?

As if she could read her mind, Tatia caught her hand. "You're too brave to allow fear to steal your chance at happiness. Love is a risk, sister."

Annika stared at her. "When did you get so wise?"

Tatia laughed. "I'm not so little anymore. I've been around."

Annika pulled her in for a hug. "Thank you." She released her sister. "I'm going to miss you."

"So, you're going back?"

Annika shrugged. "I did promise to take him down to see a shipwreck. I've never broken my word before."

Tatia's eyes sparkled. "You shouldn't start now."

Annika chuckled. "Maybe not."

Tatia splashed her hand in the water, her gaze going distant as if listening to something Annika couldn't hear. Tatia had the gift of telepathy among the merfolk. Annika recognized the look on her face. Someone else was talking to her across a long distance.

She blinked and met Annika's eyes again. "I need to go. I promised my children a story before they sleep." She took both of Annika's hands in hers. "Whatever you decide to do, I wish happiness for you, sister."

Annika embraced Tatia and closed her eyes, digesting her words. She let her go, and Tatia dove below the surface.

Annika took a deep breath, imagining Duke's smile and the way he held her in his arms.

There was a very real chance he wouldn't believe her, but her sister was right. She had to try. She sank into the water and swam deep into the frigid depths until she came to the glowing portal deep beneath the sea.

The pulsing blue glow lured her closer. Steeling her resolve, she swam through.

She'd promised to take Duke down to see his old ship and she intended to follow through. He might not be willing, but she was going to find out.

Chapter Thirty-One

The stars twinkled overhead while most of the crew gathered up close to the bow.

Duke stood next to Eli, as far from the ceremony as they could get. Nearly every one of his crewmates was in love now. Everything was changing.

Drake had his blond hair tied back at the base of his neck and he'd cleaned up his frock coat and polished his tall, black boots. He looked like a piratical prince, and Heather was a vision. Because of her Albinism, they'd planned for an evening ceremony, and under the pale moonlight, in her long lavender gown, she glowed as if she'd stepped into a spotlight. Drake beamed as she approached him and took his hand in front of Captain Flynn.

While the couples celebrated Drake and Heather's union, a thick bitterness grew in Duke's soul. He'd had a taste of that satisfaction, that love, and he'd lost it.

Captain Flynn called out over the wind, "Before yer crew and yer captain ye have made yer vows. Ye sealed yer pledge with yer rings and now, as Captain of this vessel, I pronounce ye husband and wife. Ye may kiss yer bride."

The captain rarely allowed his true accent to be on display, but his emotions were clearly stirred up. Drake dipped his bride and the crew cheered as they kissed.

Duke clapped as he looked over at Eli. "Are ye next to be struck by Cupid's arrow?"

Eli smirked. "Not if I can help it." He sobered and added, "I signed on again as a roadie for Metallica's new tour. I'm leaving Monday."

"We'll miss you, mate."

Keegan strummed his guitar, singing Johnny Mercer's "I Remember

You” as Drake waltzed with Heather across the deck.

Eli’s gaze tracked them as he shrugged his shoulder. “Not sure about that. Everyone’s settling down. Hell, Colton’s got a baby.” He shook his head with a crooked smile. “Pirate’s life for me. I’m not ready to give that up. Fair winds and full sails, right?”

Duke chuckled, nudging him with his shoulder. “Whatever makes you happy, mate.”

One-Eyed Bob came out of the galley with a three-tier cake on a rolling cart. He waited for the song to end before calling out, “Can I get some help with the rum fountain? Food’s in the mess hall.”

Duke started to go when Eli caught his arm. “Duke?”

He turned back. “Yeah?”

“I’m sorry about...the mermaid.” He shrugged. “For what it’s worth, I didn’t want to be right about her.”

Duke clenched his jaw. “You weren’t.”

He frowned, pulling his hand back to his side. “I thought she worked her mind powers on you and Aura.”

“She admitted to hypnotizing Aura, but I jumped to conclusions about everything else.”

“I doubt that.” Eli smirked with a shake of his head. “I think you dodged a bullet.”

Duke narrowed his eyes. “If she was using me to help her find her comb, then why is it still locked in my safe below the deck?”

Confusion lined Eli’s forehead. “You have her comb?”

“Yes. She trusted me to keep it for her.” Duke crossed his arms. “I acted like an ass, and I don’t deserve her.” Duke watched the others walk into the galley. “She shouldn’t have messed with Aura’s head, but we all make mistakes.” His gaze cut over to Eli. “Mine was allowing your poison about mermaids to influence me.”

Eli set his jaw. “For your sake, I hope you’re right, but I stand by what I said. I’ve been in a mermaid’s clutches. They don’t see humans as their equals.”

“Generalizations will get yer ass handed to you eventually.” Duke walked away before he said something he couldn’t take back.

He congratulated Drake and Heather as he entered the galley.

The food smelled amazing, but he couldn’t sit across from so many happy couples. Their joy only deepened the hole in his soul.

He took his plate of Bob's signature seafood jambalaya and found a spot along the stern of the ship to lean against the railing. He stared up at the moon and wished he could turn back time. Every day, the urge to use her comb to call her to him grew.

But breaking her trust wouldn't solve anything.

...

Annika pushed her body through the warm waters of the Atlantic toward Savannah.

It got harder to contain her nerves with each mile as she neared the Savannah River. What if she explained herself and he still rejected her?

Her sister had claimed she'd feel better for knowing that she'd fought for the man she loved, and that might be true, but it would reopen the wound that was just beginning to numb. She wasn't sure she'd recover if he still believed she'd tricked him into caring for her.

She slowed as the dock came into view.

It was dark now, so she wouldn't attract any attention when she popped her head out of the water. She scanned the shoreline, but the dock where the ship should be...was empty.

How long had she been gone?

Annika sighed, studying the other ships on the edge of the river. She needed clothes.

A tugboat sat quiet and dark a few yards farther down the river. Maybe she could find some on board, or at least some rain gear. She swam over and pulled herself up the anchor line.

By the time she got on board, her legs were back. She wobbled at first, but quickly regained her muscle memory.

She still didn't know how much time had passed on Earth, but it had been forty-five days on Neptune without any legs. Being rusty at walking was probably normal.

The tugboat didn't have any living quarters, but she did find a large raincoat that fell to her mid-thigh. Close enough. This was a smaller vessel than the *Sea Dog*, without a gangway. She hopped over onto the dock, relieved that her legs seemed steadier now.

Without a cell phone or a watch, she didn't know the time, but she'd been in the world of man enough to make a good guess. The souvenir shops and candy stores were closed, so it was most likely after nine o'clock, but a bar

on River Street was still open, so it wasn't three o'clock in the morning yet either.

If she could borrow someone's cell phone, she could reach her assistant to get a duplicate key to her flat. She headed toward the loud music of the bar when a light on the horizon caught her eye. She frowned, walking further down the boardwalk. It was tough to see in the dark, but as it got closer, the white sails almost glowed in the moonlight.

The Sea Dog.

Echoes of orders to "come about" and "hoist the main sail" carried across the water.

She ducked behind a pallet of shipping crates to stay out of sight. If Duke was going to reject her again, she didn't want an audience.

From the shadows, she waited while they tied the lines to the iron cleats on the dock. Up top, men were tying the sails on the main mast. Finally, a couple of crew members crossed the gangway in formal wear. Sort of?

He was wearing a frock coat that could have been made centuries ago, and she was in a lavender dress covered in lace and pearls. The woman had a bouquet in one hand and a long, thick braid of silvery-white hair down her back. They held hands, laughing and smiling as they crossed over to River Street.

He bent down and scooped her up into his arms, carrying her to a truck as more crew members exited the *Sea Dog* behind them. She stayed hidden, waiting to see Duke, but he never appeared.

When the captain finally came over the gangway to the dock, she stepped out from her shelter, walking toward him. Did he hate her now? She smirked. He'd never liked her to begin with.

His eyes narrowed as she came closer, his copper brow arching. "What are *you* doing here?"

Steeling herself, she lifted her chin under the yellow light of the streetlamps. "I'm looking for Duke. Have you seen him?"

His judgmental gaze wandered up from Annika's bare feet to the top of her wet hair. "Why would I tell you?"

Annika groaned inwardly and struggled to keep from shoving him into the river. "Because I need to talk to Duke. It's important."

Captain Flynn crossed his arms, studying her. "Don't you think you've hurt him enough? He's just beginning to heal. Do us all a favor and swim away. Weave your spells someplace else."

“It wasn’t magic.” His words were a dagger in her chest. Maybe coming here had been a mistake. She still wasn’t sure how much time had passed here on Earth. Maybe Duke had moved on. He was probably better off without her. She swallowed the lump in her throat. “I love him and I owe him an apology.”

Flynn didn’t say a word, but he looked over his shoulder, up to the top of the mast of the *Sea Dog*.

Annika tipped her head back, following his gaze, and narrowed her eyes. There was definitely a pair of broad shoulders up in the tiny bucket at the top of the main mast.

The captain took a step closer and gripped her arm. Her eyes snapped to his face. His intense blue eyes bored into her. “Duke is the closest thing I’ve had to a friend since I lost my brother more years ago than I care to count. Hurt him again, and I’ll make you wish you never came to Earth. Do we understand each other?”

She jerked her arm free of his grasp. “I’m stronger than you and just as immortal. Don’t threaten me.”

“I don’t need to be stronger, lass.” The corner of his mouth quirked up and his nautical accent came through clenched teeth. “I’m a fucking pirate captain, and that was no empty threat. Think twice before ye board that ship. If ye didn’t come for forever, best ye get back in that water.”

He walked away without another word.

She stared up at the crow’s nest, her pulse quickening. Forever with Duke didn’t seem long enough. Just seeing him again mended her broken soul.

But would he feel the same?

One way to find out.

She quickly crossed the gangway. Her bare feet kept her progress silent. She peered up at the main mast. There wasn’t a ladder or steps leading up to the crow’s nest, only a netting of ropes.

“Need a boost up to the lines?”

She jumped and turned around to find an elderly man with an eye patch. “Bob? You’re the...cook?”

He chuckled and patted his chest. “One-Eyed Bob at yer service.” He looked at the top of the mast and back down to her face. “Duke hasn’t been the same since ye left.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Is he still angry?”

Bob rubbed the back of his head. “I can’t say for certain, but I’ve never

seen him so fixated on the water.” He met her eyes. “Almost like he’s looking for someone.”

Her heart fluttered. “How do I get up there?”

“There’s a trick to it.” Bob grinned. “Might be better if I call him down to you.”

“I’m stronger than a human, so I can pull myself up some ropes.”

“Lines, lass. On a ship they’re lines.” He held up a finger, like something just occurred to him. “I’ve got a stool. That should work. I’ll be right back.” He disappeared into the kitchen area and returned with a metal step stool. He placed it on the deck below the lines. “Ready?”

No. But she was going to climb anyway. She got to the top of the stool and stretched her arms up, grasping the ropes. She reached for the next rung and then pulled her feet up.

“That’s it, lass,” Bob said from the deck.

She looked down, but he was already carrying the stool back into the galley. As she climbed higher, the lines swayed and bounced, making her slow her pace. She narrowed her eyes, focusing on the ropes ahead. A gust of wind hit the lines and creaked.

She glanced down and let out a surprised squeak. She hadn’t realized she was so high above the deck. Hooking her arm through the lines, she closed her eyes and reminded herself that she was immortal.

A fall would hurt, but she’d heal.

“Annika?”

Just hearing his voice say her name had her heart melting. She looked up, directly into Duke’s dark brown eyes. The base of the crow’s nest was at least twenty feet away from her. She tried to force her body to move, but she was frozen in place. The wind snapped through the lines, and suddenly hanging on was the best she could do.

She hated to admit it, but she needed help. “I think I might be stuck.”

“Hang on.” He climbed over the railing of the nest and stepped into the lines. Although she had strength on her side, Duke had finesse. He seemed to anticipate the wind and the bouncing and twisting of the rungs on the lines.

He stopped beside her. “I’ve been looking for you, fantasizing about seeing you again, but I never would’ve guessed you’d be caught in the lines of the *Sea Dog*.”

And just like that, she remembered how to smile. “I had to see you.”

“I could’ve come down to you.”

She tightened her grip on the lines. “I wasn’t sure you’d want to see me.”

A gust of wind made the lines groan. Her bare foot slipped through the ropes, and her hand came loose. Duke caught her wrist and placed it back on the line.

He looked her over and back to her face. “What are you wearing?”

“I just got out of the ocean. This was all I could find on that tugboat over there.”

She expected a smile from him, but it didn’t come.

“Come on, I’ll help you down.” He moved over her and wrapped one arm around her waist, supporting her. His lips brushed her ear as he coached her. “Put your feet on top of mine. I’ve got you.”

She did as he instructed and placed her hands next to his. Shadowing him made her understand the rhythm to the lines better. Maybe next time she wouldn’t get stuck.

If there was a next time.

When they got to the bottom, he jumped down and reached up to help her to the deck.

“Thank you.” She checked around for Bob, but they were alone. She looked up at Duke.

He still wasn’t smiling. Maybe Bob had been wrong. Maybe he hadn’t been waiting for her to come back.

He walked below and she followed him to his cabin. He dug through his chest of drawers and tossed her a pair of grey sweatpants, followed by a white T-shirt. “You must be freezing.”

She pulled on the pants. “It’s so much colder on Neptune. Even winter here seems warm.”

“Neptune?” He raised a brow. “The ocean wasn’t far enough away. You needed a galaxy between us?” Before she could reply, he sat on the edge of the bed beside her. She ached to reach over and touch him, to be sure this was really happening, but she didn’t move. Duke stared at his hands. “I’m sorry for everything I said that night. I was shocked you didn’t tell me about what happened with Aura. Maybe a little hurt too, that you didn’t confide in me. Eli from my crew said something about mermaids brainwashing humans and...I should’ve let you explain.”

Her vision blurred, hearing the words she’d dreamed he might say. She wished she could go back in time and make different choices. Swallowing

the lump in her throat, she took a breath and looked over at him. "I never should have used my voice on Aura. I panicked that she was going to take my sister before I could understand how Atargatis ended up with that horrible human." She couldn't fight the urge to touch him any longer. She placed her hand on his thigh and he lifted his head, meeting her eyes. "If I had kept my head, I could have proved to you I hadn't used my voice on you, but..."

He placed his hand over hers, the touch sending an electric charge through her bloodstream. "Well, if I had taken a breath and thought about it, I would've realized it didn't make sense. If you were only using me to get your comb, you wouldn't have left it with me."

"The comb." Annika blinked. She'd forgotten all about it. All this time, he could have used it...but he didn't. Her brows pinched in confusion. "If you were missing me too, why didn't you use it to call me back?"

He took her hand from his leg, lacing his fingers with hers. Feeling the connection with him cracked her open with hope that maybe this wound could be mended. "If I ever saw you again, I wanted it to be because you missed me, not because I forced you to come back by using your comb."

Her gaze wandered over his face as she leaned in closer, whispering, "I've missed everything about you."

He brought his free hand up to caress her cheek. She couldn't help nuzzling into his touch. She'd never missed anyone like this before.

He searched her eyes. "Why didn't you come back?"

She sighed, wishing she had a better answer. "Fear."

His lips almost curved, making her ache to see his smile again. "I don't believe it. My warrior mermaid isn't afraid of anything."

Hearing him call her his warmed her all over. She shook her head. "I was afraid you might not want to see me, and I couldn't take that kind of pain again."

His thumb stroked her cheek as he shook his head. "I've been practically living up in that crow's nest watching the water for any sign of you. If you give me a second chance, you have my word, I won't waste it."

He kissed her so tenderly that every part of her ached for his attention. He laid her back on the bed, his hands slowly popping the snaps on the raincoat as he growled against her lips. "I need you."

She ran her hands up underneath his shirt, exploring the warmth of his chest. She whispered the only word she could find through the haze of

desire: “Yes.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Duke opened the raincoat, exposing her breasts as he pressed hot kisses down her neck to the center of her chest.

He kneaded them, enjoying their weight in his hands as he pressed them together so he could lick each nipple while watching the pleasure play out on her face. He sucked one into his mouth, flicking the tip with his tongue, while pinching the other. She cried out, writhing beneath him as her back arched.

He kissed his way lower and caught the waistband of her sweatpants. “I want to explore every spot that makes you come.” He pulled the sweats off, dropping them on the ground. His gaze wandered up her legs to her core. He lifted her leg up over his shoulder, and traced his fingertip slowly around her opening before parting her folds. She gasped as he circled her clit and whispered, “I have to taste you.”

She tipped her head up as he lowered his and gave her a long, slow lick. He groaned into her as he toyed with the hardened nub. Her hips rocked up toward his mouth as her fingers fisted in his hair, holding him tight to her. With one hand, he slid two fingers inside of her, and with the other he unfastened his pants, relieving the ball-crushing pressure. He stroked himself as he fed on her core, peering up only to find her eyes on him. So fucking sexy.

He lifted his head slightly, his voice a raw declaration. “I’m so hungry for you. Come for me.” He buried his face back into her, thrusting his fingers into her faster as he teased her clit.

Her hips bucked and she cried out his name as her orgasm rocked through her body, her inner muscles clenching tight around him. He sucked at her gently through her aftershocks, waiting for her to relax.

Finally, he pulled his fingers free and kissed his way up her body. “Don’t

move. I need a condom.”

His nightstand seemed to be miles away and he was hard enough to cut diamonds. He tore open the foil packet and rolled the condom down his shaft. He returned to her, admiring the glow on her face as he grasped her hips and pulled them down to the edge of his bed.

She wet her lips as the tip of his erection brushed the heat of her opening. “I want you.”

Her admission, her desire for him made it impossible to take anything slow. He gripped her ass in his hands and tilted her hips as he slid into her. He closed his eyes, drinking in the way her body fit his perfectly.

It was all he could do to keep from exploding the second he entered her. No woman had ever had this effect on him. When he opened his eyes, she was sliding her hand down her body. He gripped her ass tighter as he thrust into her and growled, “Can’t...get close enough.”

Her fingertips explored her folds as he slammed his hips into her faster and faster.

Watching her fingers working in time with his hips was his undoing. Their bodies slapped together once, twice, three more times and he froze as he exploded deep inside of her. Her inner muscles clenched tight, her orgasm peaking with his.

Her arms were tight around him, her lips brushing his ear as she whispered, “I never stopped loving you.”

He closed his eyes, shaking his head. “I love you, too. Forever.”

She pressed a kiss to his neck and whispered, “Good.”

He chuckled and drank in the magic of this moment, this second chance at a happiness he never dreamed of.

When he could move again, he slid free from her and removed the condom. “Be right back, love.”

He dropped it in the trash can and returned to the bed, scooping her pliant body into his arms. He laid her at the top of the mattress and spooned her, wrapping his arm around her waist.

Her hair smelled like the ocean, like Annika.

He brushed a kiss to her ear and whispered, “Please don’t be gone when I wake up. I’ll be so pissed if this was all a dream.”

Her laughter still made him warm all over. “If this was a dream, don’t ever wake me up.”

...

The sunrise came through the porthole, hitting Annika's face like a spotlight.

She awoke with a jerk, shielding her eyes before she remembered she was in Duke's bed. She'd never slept next to anyone else before. It was a human tradition, for land dwellers.

But she had to admit, the warmth of his skin against hers and his slow steady breathing behind her was...nice. She wasn't human, but Duke didn't seem to care.

She would need to visit the water for a few days, but maybe they could arrange rendezvous points. If Duke met her with clothes and her phone, it would be so much simpler than how she'd been living on Earth for the past...she wasn't sure how long.

He pressed his lips to her shoulder. "Not a dream."

She ran her hand up his forearm. "You're awake."

"And you're..." He kissed the back of her shoulder. "Trying to figure out how we're going to make this relationship work?"

She laughed and rolled over to face him. "And you're going to tell me today is all we have to worry about, right?"

He grinned and her heart melted. This was her Duke. Her sweet, funny, human. Her immortal pirate.

She cupped his cheek and he turned to kiss her palm. "We'll figure it out. I'm just happy to know you're back on my planet."

"I crossed a galaxy for you." She arched a teasing brow.

"I'll do my best to make it worthwhile."

Her gaze wandered over his face, memorizing every curve and angle. "It was worth it the second you smiled at me."

He rolled his eyes and his face warmed under her touch.

Her jaw dropped. "Did I just make a pirate...blush?"

"Nonsense." He buried his head into the nape of her neck as he whispered, "I don't have much experience with romance."

A giggle escaped her lips. "And I do?"

He raised a brow. "I think my tough, much-stronger-than-humans mermaid just giggled."

"Lies." She pushed him over and lost herself in the joy of just being with him.

And somewhere in the middle of it all, she realized something...
She was home.

Once they were finally dressed and fed, Duke took Annika on a tour of the *Sea Dog*.

At the stern of the ship, the wind threaded through her hair as she stared down the Savannah River toward the Atlantic. She looked over at Duke. "I still owe you a visit to your shipwreck." She paused. "But I'm not sure how we'll get you down there."

"I'm scuba certified. I'll bring my equipment from my house."

"When?" She'd taken him swimming before, but never to the sea floor. Knowing it would be physically possible made her eager and excited to share her world with him.

"How about tomorrow morning?"

"Duke?" someone shouted. "Are you still on board?"

He took Annika's hand and led her back to the main deck. Aura and Greyson looked shocked to see her. Annika sucked in a breath. Duke cared about these people and if she wanted a future with him, she needed to make things right.

"Annika." Aura's gaze flicked to Duke. "When did this happen?"

"Last night after the wedding." Duke squeezed her hand.

Annika released his hand. "I meant what I said before. If I could go back in time and change my split-second decision, I would."

Aura dropped her hands to her sides. "If you're going to be around this crew, we need to know we can trust you, and I don't know that yet."

Annika lifted her chin. "That's fair. My power only works on humans when I sing, and if you've been hypnotized, I have to plant something into the spot I'm taking. The memories of that moment will be fuzzy. I planted that my sister had escaped, but you don't remember that happening, right? That's how you'll know." She slipped her hand back into Duke's. "But you have my word. I'll never use my powers on any of you again, unless you ask me to."

Aura looked at Duke. "We actually came by because Bob said you spent the night on board. We completed our retirement protocols on Eric Gross. He's been released at the Savannah airport with no memory of Department 13 or anything about his time there. Our only loose ends are Rutger Morgan and Holli Porter. Until we have them locked up, it's not safe to be on the *Sea Dog* alone. They could ambush you here."

“I wasn’t alone.” Duke squeezed Annika’s hand. “So, Department 13 hasn’t been outed to the world?”

“Not yet.” Aura tucked her hair behind her ear. “Just be on alert, okay?”

Duke frowned. “Has anyone seen Morgan?”

“No sightings so far.” Greyson rubbed the back of his neck. “But Agent Bale is having his team check security cameras and hotel webcams. He’ll let us know. Harmony and John have been keeping tabs on her feed from the traffic cameras too.”

“Sounds good.” Duke replied.

Greyson nodded and looked at both of them. “It’s good to see you happy again, mate.”

It wasn’t forgiveness or trust, but it was a small admission that having Annika around might not be all bad, and for now, she’d take it.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Duke's Boston Whaler flew off the wakes as he opened up the throttle on the outboard motor at the mouth of the Savannah River. He was already wearing his wetsuit, and his tanks and gear were up in the bow with Annika.

After about a nautical mile, she looked back and shouted, "Slow down. It's around here."

He idled the engine while she stripped off her clothes and dove into the water. He looked over the side until he could no longer see her fin. His phone buzzed inside the console.

He pulled it out and answered. "Duke here."

It was Caleb. "Just thought you should know that Bob is making a full spread for the whole crew tonight on the *Sea Dog*. He didn't say it was for Annika, but..."

"We both know it's because Annika came back." Duke chuckled, looking out at the horizon. "What about Eli?"

"He left with the band this morning."

Duke looked down at his feet. "Probably for the best. If anyone is a dick to her tonight, I'm tossing them overboard."

"I'll spread the word." Caleb paused and added, "I'm glad she came back. I know it's too early to call a vote to make her crew, but...she makes you happy."

"I love her, mate." Admitting it out loud to someone else felt damned good.

Caleb chuckled. "Call me later."

Duke nodded and peered down at the water. "Definitely."

He ended the call just as Annika came back up. "Okay, we can get there from here."

Duke dropped the cement anchors and turned off the engine. “I’ll be right there.”

He put on his fins, mask, and tank. His heart was already racing with anticipation.

He was about to see the original *Sea Dog*. But if he didn’t get his pulse and breathing under control, he was going to burn through his air too fast. He sucked in some slow deep breaths and sat on the side of the boat. On three, he leaned back and slipped into the depths.

Annika smiled, air bubbles sliding out through her teeth as she took his hand. He followed her deeper into her silent, watery world and turned on the underwater flashlight on his wrist. Seeing her with a mermaid tail, gliding through the water, was beautiful. This was who she was.

And he loved her, all of her.

As they got closer to the bottom, she slowed and looked back at him. When he reached her side, she pointed to a bump on the sea floor.

It was covered in seaweed and barnacles, but as he inspected it, he realized it was the bow of the ship. The *Sea Dog* was lying on her side. He slid his gloved hand along the edge, sending tiny fish scrambling for cover. When he got to the tip, he wiped the sand and seaweed free to reveal Marina’s face. The mermaid figurehead of the *Sea Dog*.

His eyes burned with emotion as Annika swam around, showing him bits and pieces of the past strewn across the bottom of the Atlantic. Part of the hull was on its side, but the gaping hole where it had snapped free of the bow meant he could explore inside.

He shone his light inside and swam into the shadowed interior of the ship he used to call home. Some of their things had survived the wreck.

He found one of Caleb’s compasses and the head of one of Drake’s hammers. His heart pounded as he freed a mesh bag from his belt and dropped them inside. They’d all mourned losing the ship and everything they had, but it wasn’t lost. He was back inside.

When Duke finally found his cabin, nothing was in its place anymore.

He ran his fingers along the floor, searching for the tiny hole. When he discovered the opening, he poked his finger inside and tugged, and then one more time. Finally, the patch pulled free. A thread worn black velvet pouch floated out.

His hands tingled as memories of the nights after a successful plunder, laughing and celebrating with the crew, filled his head. They’d all been so

young back then, with dreams of riches and wives. This ship, battered and broken, covered in sand and barnacles at the bottom of the sea, had been his world.

And this velvet satchel had been his future, or so he'd thought. He clutched it tight in his hand and stuffed it into the bag with the other treasures.

Annika was waiting outside the sunken ship and swam up to the surface with him. He dropped the trinkets into the boat and pulled his mask up, laughing and wiping a tear all at the same time.

She surfaced beside him and frowned. "Are you all right?"

"Lot of memories down there. My home, my life, it's all down there." He looked over at her. "I didn't realize it would affect me like that."

She grabbed the side of the boat and peered inside. "You found things."

"I did." He hoisted himself up and into the boat, then helped her back in. She dressed quickly while he opened the satchel from his cabin. He smiled as he inspected the very antique ring he'd stolen from the Spanish Queen.

"What is it?" she asked.

He knelt in front of her and reached for her hand. "It was from my first plunder as a full member of the *Sea Dog* crew. I saved it in the floor of my cabin thinking I'd give it to my future lady someday. Then I lost the ship and never thought about it again." He looked up at Annika with the sun glowing around her head and caught himself struggling to memorize every shadow and angle of her face, every second of this moment.

He held up a gold ring that boasted a dark blue topaz stone that matched Annika's blue eyes. And before he realized he was going to speak the words fell out of his lips. "Would you be my lady?"

He held his breath, realizing all of sudden that he was still in his wetsuit, with his mask on his head, and they were out in a tiny fishing boat. This wasn't the romantic gesture from the movies. He was fucking this all up.

Annika shook her head. "No." His heart sank, but before he could apologize for making an arse of himself, she bent down and kissed his cheek. "I'll be your mermaid."

His heart melted to his damned feet. He slid the ring on her finger. "And I'll be yer pirate."

He pulled her down into his arms, fusing their lips as his tongue tangled slowly with hers. He would never get enough of her, and he was never going to let her go.

When she broke the kiss and rested her forehead on his, she smiled. “Does this mean we’re married?”

He chuckled. “There’s usually a ceremony.” He arched a brow. “Do mermaids marry?”

“Not with a ceremony. We just commit.”

His heart pounded as he lifted her hand and kissed the ring on her finger. “I commit my life to you, Annika.”

Her eyes shone with tears. “And I commit mine to you, Duke.”

He kissed her again, over and over, growling as her fingers tightened in the back of his wet hair. He needed to get them back to shore so he could get out of this wetsuit. He leaned back and smiled. “I love you.”

She grinned. “I love you, too.”

He was floating around the clouds as he piloted his boat back into Savannah. They wouldn’t have a big wedding like Drake and Heather, but nothing about their union was going to be traditional.

She was his and he was hers and that was enough for Duke.

They stopped at his house to clean up, and he smiled every time he caught his mermaid splaying her fingers out and ogling the ring.

When they crossed the gangway onto the deck, they were greeted by the entire crew except for Eli. Bob had a full spread of blue crab, fried shrimp, and his famous hushpuppies.

Duke had enjoyed countless meals with his crew, but this one felt different. This time, he wasn’t alone. He’d spent lifetimes looking out for everyone else, protecting them, and while it came naturally to him, knowing someone had his back too felt...good.

Annika sat beside him and rested her hand on his thigh under the table. She leaned in close and whispered, “Is something wrong?”

“No.” He kissed her temple. “Everything is finally right.”



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Acknowledgments

Like sailing the *Sea Dog*, it takes a big crew to make these books happen. First, I want to thank my readers from around the world. Thanks for reading, reviewing, and telling your friends about my books. These characters and stories wouldn't exist without all your support.

Thanks again to my editor, Jen Bouvier. Working with you has been a pleasure, even when you do find errors in my math! I love diving into these pirate adventures with you. Thanks for making the process exciting and fun every time.

Big thanks to the entire Entangled Publishing team! From the covers, to editing, to publicity, you make the *Sea Dog* crew sail.

I also need to thank the wordmakers for all the hours of daily sprints. I love writing with all of you!

Big thanks to my intrepid beta readers Denise Fluhr, Heather Cox, and Heather Hand! Your eagle eyes and enthusiasm keep me coming back to the keyboard!

I'm also sending gratitude to my Night Angel reader group on Facebook and my Patrons on Patreon. Your support brings me up when I'm struggling, and you all are seriously the best part of this publishing journey. I'm so grateful to have you in my corner!

And to my husband, Ken, thanks for listening to my endless hours of mermaid talk and pirate lore. Without your love and support, I couldn't keep these stories going. I love you.

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[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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[NIGHT'S BLISS](#)

an Ancients novel by [Mary Hughes](#)

I don't trust vampires. They killed my parents and left me for dead. But when the man I care about grows sick from poison, I've no choice but to infiltrate a Romanian castle filled with evil vampires in search of the antidote. My only saving grace is that I can do things other humans can't. I'm in over my head and my heart. And my only choice is to trust a dark, charismatic creature...or die.

[NIGHTSHADE'S BITE](#)

a Blood Wars novel by [Zoe Forward](#)

Kiera Rossard's secret life just got complicated. She's leader of a rebel vampire society that rescues werewolves during the interspecies war. Everyone wants her dead—vampires and the werewolves who don't know her secret. Starting with notorious vampire killer Michael Durand—the man who sets her blood on fire. So what if vampires bite when they're turned on? And so what if one drop of his blood will kill her? What's life without a little risk?