



LISA
KESSLER

PIRATE'S
PARADOX

Love is the ultimate paradox...

The background of the entire cover is a photograph of a man from the chest up. He is wearing a dark, shiny leather motorcycle jacket that is open, revealing his bare, muscular torso. He is also wearing a thin chain necklace with a small pendant. The background behind him is a stylized, purple and pink cityscape at night, with a full moon visible in the sky. The overall aesthetic is edgy and romantic.

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Magic Dark, Magic Divine
Night's Bliss
Bad Moon Rising

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*This one is for Rae, D. Ann, Meka, and Mia.
Thanks for all your support, late-night Write Owls!*

Chapter One

Caleb Graves tapped his index finger against the charts, checking his figures again.

The tide patterns he'd graphed should be fiction. Tidal waves didn't happen in Savannah. Yes, the sea level was rising, and flooding was becoming more common in Savannah and around Tybee Island every year, but this new pattern of erratic tides he'd been charting was even more startling. If his calculations were right, River Street could be facing a tsunami-like storm surge soon, without a hurricane.

"I'm heading home." Colton clapped Caleb's shoulder as he walked past, toward the gangplank of the *Sea Dog*. "You'll turn off the generator before you go?"

"Aye," Caleb muttered without lifting his gaze from his charts.

Colton groaned and came back over. "The *Sea Dog* repairs from the battle in Glasgow were finished up last week, but you're *still* the last one to leave the ship. Go home and rest, mate. You look like shit."

Caleb sighed and lifted his attention from the table up to the quartermaster.

Colton was probably the tallest of the immortal pirate crew. His brown hair was short, and concern shone in his eyes. He also wasn't immortal anymore.

Caleb had to keep reminding himself of his friend's change in status. Colton had fallen in love with a mortal woman and decided not to take another drink from the Holy Grail that had kept the crew from aging since 1795. Now every time Caleb noticed a new line on his friend's face, it was a reminder that there would be more, that someday, Colton would leave this world.

Colton claimed he had no regrets. He and Skye wanted a family. And

they were about to have one any day now.

“How is Skye feeling?” Caleb wasn’t a great conversationalist. It wasn’t from lack of care. He would die for any member of the *Sea Dog* crew, if death were possible.

“Like a house.” Colton’s eyes sparkled with affection. “I’m bringing her some of One-Eyed Bob’s fried shrimp and hushpuppies with a side of raw oysters. Read somewhere the oysters might bring on labor.”

“Old wives’ tales, mate.” Caleb shook his head. “There’s no scientific proof for that. The baby will come when its lungs are ready and not a day sooner.”

Colton chuckled. “Can’t hurt to try, though, right?” He went to the gangplank and glanced back over his shoulder. “Ever thought about taking a night off and enjoying yourself? Love is in the air for this crew lately. Some company other than those books might be good for you.”

Caleb smirked and tapped the stack of books on the table. “My books are all I need, Quartermaster.”

“Don’t forget we’ve got the generator if you need it,” Colton said as he left Caleb behind.

Caleb swiped his hand and adjusted his table light with a chuckle. He didn’t need the generator. His Ever Brite solar-powered desk light ran on batteries charged by the sun. He’d been charging it all day. His latest middle-of-the-night QVC purchase had tickled him with its usefulness.

He couldn’t say the same for some of the other products he’d ordered during insomnia-powered shopping sprees. His Arctic Cooling Hat had been no match for the humid Savannah summer sun, and his copper-lined socks didn’t seem to give him the energy boost they promised, either.

He settled back into his work on mapping the tide levels. The gentle lapping of the Savannah River against the wooden hull of the *Sea Dog* soothed him. Their original ship had sunk at the mouth of the river in 1795, but the crew had already taken a sip from the Grail, so instead of perishing with the ship, they’d all washed up in Savannah.

They’d all stayed, except for the captain.

Ian Flynn had migrated to Atlanta in search of amassing even more treasure in the form of commercial properties. They’d been seeing more of the captain lately since the crew had begun working with a top-secret agency of the government. Department 13 handled paranormal threats, and the crew freelanced for Agent Bale, stealing relics, breaking up covens

delving into dark magic, and fighting hidden sects of religious zealots.

While Caleb enjoyed sailing on the open ocean in the replica of their Spanish Galleon, their last outing to Scotland had left him shaken. They'd almost lost the ship and their gunner, Greyson. Unlike Colton, Greyson had taken another drink from the Grail. He was immortal and still had had his life stolen from him for a few minutes in a sword fight with a demon.

And Caleb still had no explanations for it, which baffled him and rocked his beliefs to the core. The realization that they were maybe not as immortal as he'd believed left him unsettled, as if the sands beneath his feet were shifting underneath him. He couldn't find his sure footing anymore.

Which made this latest surge in rogue waves and flooding near the Atlantic coast even more troubling.

Footsteps echoed on the gangplank connecting the ship to the shore. Without raising his gaze, Caleb called over, "Forget something, Quartermaster?"

"I'm actually looking for Drake Cole."

Caleb jerked his head up, surprised to hear a woman's voice.

A Black woman with long braided hair stepped down onto the deck. She was maybe a hand taller than five feet, but the aura of power around her made her seem anything but small. She wore black jeans with a teal top and a matching turquoise pendant hung from her slender neck. Bangle bracelets jingled on her slender wrist as she came closer.

"Drake's gone home." Clearing his throat, Caleb rose from his wooden chair. His joints reminded him he'd been sitting for far too many hours today. "You are?"

She lifted her chin slightly, and the moonlight caressed her regal features. "I'm...Miss Bianca. He owes me a favor."

Caleb raised his eyebrows. She couldn't be much older than the college undergrads he taught at the university, but her mannerisms seemed formal. No, that wasn't quite right. More performative. It made him curious, but he did his best to rein it in.

His work required all his focus right now. "I will let him know. I assume he knows where to find you?"

"Yes." She turned, and he settled back into his chair, reexamining his diagrams.

He waited for her footsteps to thump across the deck and back over the gangplank, but instead, they came closer to his workspace.

When he looked up, Miss Bianca was on the other side of his table, peering down at his notes. He studied the soft line of her cheekbones and the way her jawline met her chin, the way her lips pursed together in thought.

His mouth went dry. He cleared his throat. "I'm studying the inconsistent tidal patterns."

"I can see that." Her dark eyes lifted to his face, and his heart stuttered.

She was beautiful, but also projected authority, not through hard edges or coarse tones. It was in her gaze. He'd heard the term "old soul" tossed around, but he'd never given it much thought. Logically, a soul couldn't be any older than the body which contained it.

But there was a wisdom in her eyes that spoke to him.

She crossed her arms. "Maybe you could call Drake now. It's urgent."

He tilted his head and followed her gaze to his papers covering the table. "You recognize these charts?"

She pointed at his sheet listing the dates of the full and new moons. "Yes. The inconsistencies in the high-tide levels will keep getting worse unless..."

"Unless we can scientifically locate the center of the schism." He lifted his eyes from the charts with a smile tugging at his lips. "I've been trying to cross-reference records of underwater earthquakes, but the fault line doesn't track with the course of these rogue wave patterns."

Caleb got up without realizing he was going to move. He pulled out one of his charts, labeling the dates and the tide levels during the recent floods along the Savannah River, eager to share his theories with someone. "Have you been studying these as well?"

She eyed him, and the corners of her mouth curved, enticing him with the hint of a smile. "Not exactly."

Caleb frowned. "I don't understand. How can you recognize the irregular tide patterns without charting them to get a control group for comparison?"

She chuckled, and the beautiful sound combined with her wide grin disarmed him for a moment, making him forget what he'd asked.

She dropped her hands to her sides, the bangle bracelets jingling. "I've been having recurring dreams about what's coming. I think I can stop it, but I need to talk to Drake."

Dreams? Caleb cocked a suspicious brow. "Drake is our ship's carpenter. I'm not certain he'll be able to build something large enough to stop a tidal

wave headed for our coast.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Could you just call him? Tell him I’m here. He owes me a favor. He’ll come.”

Caleb sighed and took out his cell phone. He located Drake’s number and waited for him to answer.

After the second ring, Drake said, “Caleb?”

“Hello.” He stared at the beautiful, confusing woman standing in front of him as he spoke. “Miss Bianca is here on the *Sea Dog*. She says you owe her a favor.”

“Is she all right?”

“Yes.” Caleb nodded. “She says it’s urgent.”

“Tell her I’m on my way.”

The call ended, and Caleb hesitated for a moment before he tucked the device back into his pocket. He couldn’t help but wonder what the connection might be between his friend and this woman. He’d never heard Drake mention her before. “He’ll be right over.”

“Thank you.” She walked away to the railing, and again Caleb caught himself at war with his curiosity.

He gathered up his documents and set his heavy antique sextant on top to keep them from blowing away before following Miss Bianca. He stopped beside her, unsure what to say.

“Do you often dream about the tides?” It seemed a logical question given the circumstances of her visit.

“No.” She turned his way and smiled, her gaze wandering over his face. “Do you?”

“Never.” Gods, she was beautiful. Her inspection of him made him think he’d offended her with his questioning. He forced himself to focus on the river below. “Sorry if my asking made it seem... I’m actually very curious about your dreams.”

The moonlight danced in her eyes. “Are you immortal, too?”

He coughed, shocked by her question. “How did you...?” He shook his head rapidly, struggling to regain his equilibrium. “No. It’s not possible. Why would you...think that?”

She put her hands on the railing, leaning into it as she peered down at the river. “Because you’re friends with Drake, and he used to be, so...” Another smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “I figured that raised the chances that you might be older than you look, too. Scientifically speaking.”

He laughed. The sound surprised him. He didn't usually find anything particularly funny, but there was nothing usual about Miss Bianca. "If I told you I was, would you..."

"Tell everyone?" She pointed toward River Street. "And who out there would believe me?"

He reveled in the way the moon and stars sparkled in her eyes. "If I told you the year I was born, would you believe it?"

She arched a brow. "That would require you trusting me enough to share."

"Did Drake already tell you?"

"Are we really going to dance around this all night?" She laughed, and he wanted to bottle it up and study the way it lit up the world around her. She shook her head. "You're an interesting pirate, and you haven't even introduced yourself yet."

"Forgive me." Caleb straightened, realizing his social misstep. He offered his hand. "I'm Caleb Graves. I'm the navigator of the *Sea Dog*."

She took his hand in a firm grip. "Good to meet you, Caleb. I'm Diana Williams."

His brows pinched. "You told me your name was Miss Bianca."

"Oh, it is if you come to the Botanica Shop like Drake did." She studied him for a moment. His confusion must've been written on his face because she smiled and added, "Miss Bianca is more like my metaphysical title." She pointed to his stack of books. "Like a pen name."

That he understood. "So, Drake called on you for...magic?"

Caleb did his best to keep his features neutral, but his only belief system rested in science. Yes, he'd seen things he couldn't readily explain while working for Agent Bale and Department 13, but just because he hadn't discovered a rational explanation yet, that didn't mean one didn't exist.

"Yes, he did." She went to the table, peering at the spines of the books. The breeze carried her scent, tempting him to move closer. She smelled like a mixture of patchouli, lavender, and...he couldn't place it. Fresh with a quiet power like the tides he'd been studying.

He cleared his throat. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"You don't strike me as a man who often reads grimoires and mythology." Her smile warmed her features and brought an addictive sparkle to her dark eyes. "Where did you get these?"

Department 13 was a top-secret division of the government, so he

couldn't tell her directly. "If you must know, Miss Bianca, I've been comparing the stories about massive floods throughout history and looking for any pattern similar to the erratic tides we're experiencing now."

The corner of her lips tilted up, making his breath catch in the hopes she might smile again. "I'm just Diana right now."

"Forgive me, Diana." He liked that she entrusted him with her real name. There wasn't time to examine her motives beyond the idea that he might know more about her than Drake did, but somewhere deep in the shadowy depths of his soul, a warning whispered through his mind.

Mortals were brief lights in this world.

And Diana's light would cast a long shadow.

He muted the foreboding thoughts. "I meant to ask. What kind of dreams might require the favor of a pirate?"

"The ones that seem to be leading me out into the ocean." She pulled a leatherbound ledger free from his stack. The spine read, *Lost Civilizations*. It was one of the books he'd borrowed from Agent Bale and Department 13.

She opened the cover as she went on. "It started a couple weeks ago. There's a flood, or a tidal wave. And then I keep seeing these numbers. I wrote them down and..." Her finger slid down the table of contents. Her gaze lifted to his face. "I finally figured out they're longitude and latitude coordinates."

He frowned, moving closer. She was at least six inches shorter than him, making it possible to peer over her shoulder to see the book. "It's highly improbable that the numbers would be a mapping. Have you ever navigated a ship?"

"No." She glanced up at him, shaking her head. She wasn't kidding, and his denial of her dream hadn't seemed to shake her certainty. Flipping the pages, she stopped on the section referring to Atlantis.

He frowned. "I doubt Atlantis is rising and sending a tidal wave to Savannah."

"If you're so sure, then why do you even have a book like this out here? Obviously, you're searching for an answer that must be eluding all your scientific explanations, right?" She sighed and turned around.

He hadn't realized he'd stood so close to her until now. His gaze wandered over her flawless brown skin until he noticed a tiny freckle just above her right eyebrow. It reminded him of a star. A single unique marker

in the map of the cosmos. A guiding light in the darkness.

He took a step back and cleared his throat. "I assure you, there is no evidence Atlantis ever existed. It's a fictional story to demonstrate the danger of man's own ambition."

She continued scanning the pages, again undeterred by his dismissal.

The wind blew across the deck, carrying the roar of an engine with it. The familiar rumble of tires on the cobblestones drew Caleb's attention. He looked at the dock as Drake got out of the cab of his truck, and a young woman with a long braid of silver hair got out of the passenger side. His girlfriend, Heather Storrey.

Caleb approached the gangplank as they came across. "Good to see you both."

"Hey, Caleb." Drake nodded, but his attention was on Diana. "Give me a minute."

He walked over to their guest, leaving Caleb and Heather behind.

Caleb glanced over at Heather. "Do you know Miss Bianca?"

Heather was a renowned psychic medium, bringing messages to her clientele from the other side of the veil. Caleb didn't believe in such things.

More than likely, Heather was very intuitive and able to read her clients emotions. She might even believe the messages she received were from the dead, but there was no scientific method to prove that spirits continued after bodies failed.

She turned her attention on Caleb. Her ice-blue eyes and non-pigmented skin gave her an ethereal appearance. "I know *of* her, but we've never met before. I knew her aunt. Mother Lorenda used to own the Botanica Shop in Savannah. She was always kind to me, and her magic and connection to source were both very strong."

Caleb couldn't mathematically quantify either of those statements, but he let it go for now. Drake glanced back at them and waved for Heather to come closer. Caleb followed.

Drake placed his hand at the small of Heather's back, bringing her to stand beside him. "Heather, I'd like you to meet Miss Bianca. She's the one who helped me trade my immortality for the root that brought you back to the land of the living."

Caleb blinked. He'd known Drake had lost his immortality, but he'd never discussed the process or how it had come to be. Hell, he hadn't even known Heather had died.

Diana's dark eyes met Caleb's, and there was the spark again. She'd found a way to accomplish the impossible, and he couldn't scientifically prove or explain any of it. Her gaze dared him to try.

Heather shook Diana's hand. "It's nice to finally meet you. I knew your aunt. She was gifted. She'd be so proud of you. I wouldn't be standing here right now without your magic."

Diana chuckled, shaking her head. "I'm actually a graphic designer. My auntie left me the Botanica Store, but that's not really what I went to college for."

Caleb arched a brow. This woman of magic had attended university. How did she weigh her metaphysical world with the sciences taught in school?

She was a mystery, full of contradictions and unique facets he'd love to explore.

She was also mortal.

No good could come from this.

Chapter Two

Diana Williams followed Caleb into the galley on the big pirate ship with Drake and Heather close behind them.

The space appeared to be both a kitchen and dining area with two long tables and benches filling the center of the room and all the appliances and prep areas around the edges.

She'd grown up in Savannah, so she'd seen plenty of odd things in her life, but chatting with immortal pirates on a Spanish galleon was strange. Even by Savannahian standards.

If the information she'd found at the Maritime Museum was correct, the original *Sea Dog* ship had sunk at the mouth of the Savannah River in 1795. These men had been here since the early days of the city.

Her gaze flicked over to Caleb. He looked to be maybe thirty-five. *Maybe.*

His dark wavy brown hair was a little long, just past his broad shoulders. The cuffs on the sleeves of his blue button-down shirt were rolled up, exposing his tan, chiseled forearms and a big fancy diving watch around his wrist.

Although his clothes were telegraphing college professor, those arms were telling another story. This man worked with his hands, and it wasn't at a computer or a lectern.

She forced her attention back over to Drake. He was a little taller than Caleb, with blond hair and guns that an Avenger might envy. "When I made you that root bag on such short notice, you said you owed me a favor. I need to call in that marker."

Drake nodded. "Heather's standing here today because of you. Whatever you need, I'll make it happen." He frowned. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

“No.” She shook her head slowly. “But I think Savannah might be.”

Caleb came a little closer, his dark blue eyes pensive and ponderous.

They tempted her to get lost in them, in him.

Her last boyfriend had dreams of making it big in New York, and she was a hometown girl. They’d split up after graduation, and until now, she’d been too busy to date. All her energy had been focused on getting her freelance graphic design business up and running, and then her auntie had passed away, leaving behind her beloved Botanica Shop.

Diana bottled her pent-up hormones and took a seat on a stool across from Drake.

Caleb had already made it clear he didn’t believe in her dreams. She’d met his kind before, but she couldn’t help but wonder how he rationalized his immortality. He couldn’t measure that with the quadratic formula or the table of elements. If that wasn’t magic, then what was it? How did he make sense of it in that beautiful mind of his?

Heather stood behind Drake, and Caleb took the stool beside him. Diana scanned their faces and sighed inwardly. This shouldn’t feel like a job interview, and yet...

Drake rested his elbows on the table. “What can I do to help you?”

“You can get your crew over here and sail me to the coordinates I give you, no questions asked.” Diana crossed her arms and lifted her chin a notch, switching gears into her no-nonsense Miss Bianca mode.

From a young age, her aunt had encouraged her intuitive gifts. “People come to you for direction,” she would say. “You point the way when they come to the crossroads. Be solid in your convictions. Trust your inner knowing, Diana.”

This was her Miss Bianca persona. And Miss Bianca didn’t have time or patience for mundane bullshit. Diana just wanted the nightmares to stop so she could sleep again.

Saving Savannah from a deadly tidal wave would be a huge perk.

Drake sat back on his stool and glanced at Caleb. “Have you seen the coordinates?”

“No. Not yet.”

She focused on Drake as she took a slip of paper from her pocket and set it on the table. “These are the two numbers I keep getting.”

Caleb looked up from her notes. His gaze locked on hers, his bright blue eyes reminding her of the sea. “How would this spot have anything to do

with the rising tides?”

“The dreams haven’t shown me that part yet.” She shrugged. “If you can get me out there, I think I’ll find the answer.”

He straightened up, shaking his head. “There is nothing out there to find. These coordinates will take us out into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. We won’t even be near the Tristan da Cunha islands. The only thing we’ll find is fish.”

Could he really know that without punching the numbers into a computer or something? How many times had he navigated across the Atlantic Ocean?

Drake frowned and bumped Caleb with his shoulder. “Why are ye being such a dick?” He gestured to Diana. “She helped me save Heather’s life. I owe her a favor, and if going to these coordinates is what she’s requesting, then I’m going to need you to take us there.”

The navigator turned her way again. “I’ve been studying the erratic tides using actual science, and while I agree there is the potential for a catastrophic wave to hit Savannah, the answer is more likely to be a fault line, a massive volcano, or even the calving of an ice shelf. Taking the *Sea Dog* to the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and waiting for a beautiful woman to have a prophetic dream is *not* going to save Savannah.”

“I call bullshit.” She crossed her arms, doing her best to ignore the fact he’d just admitted he found her attractive. She’d thought he’d been too wrapped up in his books to notice her.

But this attraction simmering between them would have to wait. This was too important for a distraction, and besides, he might look like a hot man in his mid-thirties, but she knew he was far older than he seemed and was probably lugging around more than a couple lifetimes’ worth of emotional baggage.

She’d keep her distance from this one.

She narrowed her eyes at Caleb. “If you’re so sure it’s being caused by something you can measure through science, explain to me why you have a grimoire of spells and a leatherbound journal that mentions Atlantis in the table of contents?” She raised a brow, daring him to challenge her. “I think you can’t find a scientific explanation, so don’t write off these coordinates as nonsense. I don’t usually have recurring dreams, and I didn’t know you were already tracking the tides. This wave is coming. What can it hurt to try to find the source?”

A muscle jumped in his cheek. She'd touched a nerve. He glanced over at Drake. "This is *your* favor. You should call the crew to vote on this folly." He met her eyes, his voice deep and even. "I vote no."

He walked out of the galley, leaving Diana behind with Drake and Heather. She shook her head, trying not to notice the way his jeans fit his ass just right.

She looked across the table, to Drake. "You didn't put any restrictions on your favor. And no matter what your navigator says, these coordinates might be our best chance to stop the storm that's coming."

"I agree." Heather rested her pale hand on Drake's shoulder, but her eyes were on Diana. "Caleb is very intelligent and has multiple doctorates in the sciences. It rattles him when we stumble into situations that his logic can't solve."

"I noticed." Diana nodded. "He doesn't have to like it, but I have to get to those coordinates. I can feel it. The answer is there. It's calling to me."

Drake stood and stepped away from his stool. "I'll get the crew together and take a vote. How soon do we need to set sail?"

"As soon as possible." Was she really going out to the middle of the ocean on a pirate ship with a bunch of people she didn't know? Her best friend Michelle was going to give her an earful when she told her about it.

Something about standing here on this ship felt right, though.

And it wasn't like they were *all* strangers.

She'd helped Drake trade his immortality to power magic, and she'd worked with Greyson, the ship's gunner, a couple of times, most recently to remove a hex on a dead man's gun he'd bought at an auction. While she didn't really *know* Heather, she'd heard of her before. That must count for something.

Diana cleared her throat and added, "I can be ready to sail on Friday." That meant she had two days to finish designing the logo for her parents' restaurant and the new ad for the real estate company she'd just landed. Thinking out loud, she asked, "How long will this trip take?"

Drake shrugged. "I'm not sure. Caleb will have to chart out our course first."

"Ballpark?" She raised a brow.

"He said the coordinates are in the middle of the Atlantic, so maybe a week or two if we're going out and back." He took Heather's hand, but his attention stayed on Diana. "How long will we be out there before you get

your sign? Any idea what we'll need to do once we get there?"

"I wish I knew." Her eyes wandered past Drake through the open galley doors, to the table out on the main deck where Caleb sat hunched back over his charts and graphs.

Drake turned, following her gaze. "He'll come around. I'll give you a call tomorrow."

"Thanks, Drake." She gave Heather a polite smile as she tipped her head. "Great to meet you in person, Heather."

"Likewise." She grinned. "See you soon."

Diana walked out of the galley and across the deck, but as she passed Caleb, she stopped. "Just want you to know, we both want the same thing."

She didn't wait for a response. There wasn't time to argue with him anyway. She crossed the gangplank onto River Street without looking back.

With her feet back on firm ground, it made the realization that she would be sailing away in two days very real.

Was she really going to do this? She went to her car and got inside, drumming her fingers against the steering wheel. It was too late to start second-guessing herself now. There was too much to do.

By the time she parked in front of Williams Southern Kitchen, her nerves were shot. What was she going to tell her parents? She didn't even know for sure how long she'd be gone. And how could she explain the reason for the trip?

She sat in her car looking through the main window, at her mom standing behind the register handing someone their change.

Her parents opened the restaurant shortly after they got married. She was their only child, and probably spoiled, although she'd never admit it. Either way, they weren't going to be happy about her leaving town with a pirate crew.

Maybe she'd tone that part down.

She got out of the car and went inside with her laptop tucked under her arm.

She needed their approval on the new logo, then she could add it to the restaurant's website and update their banners for the food delivery apps, too.

If everything went smoothly, she should have everything up and ready before she set sail tomorrow.

"Hey, Mama," Diana said as she came through the door.

“Hey, baby.” Her mom eyed the laptop. “You got the new logo finished already?”

“I did.” She scanned the restaurant for her dad. The two servers were taking orders, but no sign of a tall Black man with silver hair and a smile that put Denzel to shame. “Where’s Dad?”

“We had a late delivery this afternoon. I think he’s still taking inventory.” She headed for the kitchen, and Diana followed.

She wanted her folks together for her announcement about the Atlantic cruise, otherwise she’d have to tell the story multiple times and it would be harder to keep her blurred details straight. She wasn’t going to lie, but she also wasn’t ready to tell them the whole truth.

Hell, she didn’t know the whole truth yet because the universe saw fit to only give her part of the story. Once she found the destination her dreams had shown her, she was counting on the cosmos to give her a big reveal.

Not that she wanted to prove herself to Caleb.

Not much, anyway.

She pushed his thoughtful blue eyes from her mind and opened her laptop. Time to get to work.

Chapter Three

Agent David Bale reclined back in his black leather executive chair and rubbed his eyes. He had to be missing something here, or at least he hoped he was.

According to the documents Caleb Graves had just emailed over to Department 13, a scientific answer to the rising tides headed Savannah's way still eluded him.

Caleb had spent the better part of his nearly three centuries on earth devoting himself to scientific studies. If *he* couldn't find an explanation for the impending flood, David had to believe there was a paranormal trigger of some kind.

Caleb resisted everything metaphysical, so the fact he'd resorted to requesting some of David's tomes from Department 13's extensive metaphysical library meant he was desperate for a lead. He'd also mentioned a woman named Diana Williams had paid the crew a visit with prophetic dreams and coordinates, asking that they set sail to the center of the Atlantic to find the answer to the rising tide issue.

David didn't recognize her name, but that didn't mean she wasn't a powerful psychic. One of the functions under the umbrella of Department 13 was to catalog the country's psychic practitioners. They occasionally needed to reach out to individuals with rare skill sets to assist in recovering paranormal artifacts for their DC vault or detecting any new paranormal phenomena.

In the past, they'd subcontracted with psychics, energy healers, intuitives, empaths, shamanic healers, channelers, hoodoo practitioners, root doctors, and other light workers with metaphysical abilities most people wouldn't believe existed.

He'd never worked with Diana Williams personally, but after a few

keystrokes on his tablet, he located a file on her. She was a twenty-nine-year-old intuitive who'd recently inherited her great-aunt's Botanica Shop in the outskirts of Savannah.

He had plenty of information on her aunt as well. Mother Lorenda had practiced healing magic for over fifty years in Savannah. The department had listed some of her specialties and documented some successful rituals.

Diana's metaphysical name appeared to be Miss Bianca. She'd only owned the Botanica Shop for about a year now, and according to the sparse notes he possessed, she usually worked with Met Agwe, a water Loa. *Interesting.*

David glanced back at Caleb's email.

Miss Bianca was requesting the crew take her out to sea on Friday. He checked his calendar. *Tomorrow.* She was eager to get out there.

He was surprised the crew had agreed. They'd just finished rebuilding their ship after the last mission they'd undertaken for the department had almost destroyed it. David grabbed his cell and pressed Agent Aura Henderson's name. She now headed up their Savannah field office and she'd hired the gunner from the *Sea Dog* crew, her boyfriend Greyson Till, as a freelance field agent to assist her. Together they'd been handling paranormal flare ups in the southern region of the country. Lately, she'd been transporting books and documents between Department 13's library and Caleb Graves.

She answered with her typical all-business tone. "Henderson here."

"It's Bale." He stared at the empty chair across from his desk like she might appear in it at any moment. "Has Greyson told you about the crew's trip out into the center of the Atlantic?"

"Yes, sir," she replied. "I was going to suggest I might sail with them to keep the department informed if we find anything out there to explain the danger headed toward Savannah."

He nodded, his lips curving up slightly. "I was thinking the same thing. Have you talked with Miss Bianca about her dreams? Maybe there's some imagery that could give us a time frame or a mythology to dig into. I feel like I'm missing a piece here."

She hesitated for a moment, her tone softening. "I have no concrete evidence of this, but I have a hunch if you'd like to hear it."

He arched a brow and nodded. "Please."

"I've been with the crew for a few months now, and Caleb has been

restless since they docked back in Savannah. Something about the encounter with the demon and the Tyrfin sword has him...I'm not sure frightened is the right word, but he's been combing through documents, and I noticed one book he hasn't returned yet."

"Which one?"

"The one on extinct civilizations. He'd call them mythical or fictional, but regardless, he still has it, and he's always working." She paused, lowering her voice. "Greyson and the crew are worried he's not sleeping."

"Interesting." David picked up his pencil, jotting a note to himself. "And your hunch is?"

"I think Diana Williams isn't the only one having dreams. I think whatever is out there in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean is calling for a man of science and a woman of magic." She cleared her throat. "And given what we know about the...key...I'm leaning toward Atlantis. It would also explain why it's affecting the tides."

He dropped his pencil and rubbed his forehead. "Shit."

The legends of the sunken city mentioned a key made from Orichalcum, a metal only found in Atlantis. The Orichalcum Key not only opened the gates of the city, but also had the ability to control the tides.

"Exactly," she replied.

"What about Greyson?" David asked. "How much does he know?"

"Everything." Her all-business tone returned. "He reports directly to me and he won't breach our confidentiality."

"Even when it comes to his own crew?" David groaned. This was the kind of situation that he'd dreaded from the moment Aura had requested to hire Greyson as a freelance field agent.

Yes, the gunner was a weapons expert and had proven his value multiple times over the past two years, but now his loyalties would be tested, and while the pirate was in love with Aura, he'd probably never had to keep secrets from his crew before.

She cleared her throat. "I trust him, sir."

He rolled his eyes. David trusted very few people in this world and he wouldn't count any member of the immortal pirate crew among them, but Aura did, and that would have to be enough for now. He stared at his notes. "Do you think Caleb found the notations in the book about the Orichalcum Key?"

"I'm not sure, sir. But if Atlantis is calling both of them, my hunch is that

someone has taken the key. Maybe that's why Caleb can't find a scientific explanation."

"And if the rogue waves are headed to Savannah..." His voice drifted off as Aura finished his thought.

"The key could be in Savannah someplace."

"And Atlantis wants it back. Damn it." He rocked back in his chair. "If it's in the city, I need you on the ground, not out in the middle of the Atlantic on the *Sea Dog*."

"You can send a team down to handle that," she countered. "I think Greyson and I should sail with the crew and protect Caleb and Diana. If Atlantis really is reaching out to them, then they're the only key we have in a sense."

She was right.

Ever since Aura had taken a drink from the Holy Grail and faced down the demon from her past, she'd become his right hand. She already had instincts and intuition it had taken decades for him to develop, and she was also cool under pressure. If he ever chose to retire from the department, he could be grooming his replacement right now.

He filed that thought away. With the help of his charmed healing herbs, he'd worked for Department 13 for more than one lifetime so far. He wouldn't know what to do with himself if he retired anyway.

"Fine." He straightened up in his chair. "I'll lead a team into Savannah and keep our feelers out for any rare keys up for sale on the dark web. Keep me informed about what's happening on the ship."

"Will do, sir."

He ended the call and stared at his notes.

Oddly, Atlantis had been back on his radar recently. He clicked a few file folders on his tablet until he found the article he'd saved in the file on Atlantis. A shipwreck had been discovered off the coast of Sicily a few years ago. Historians had dated the ship and armor on board as being nearly three thousand years old.

That wasn't what had brought the shipwreck to his attention. It had been the cargo.

He skimmed the details for the inventory list. Orichalcum rods, and plenty of them, had been on board. The rare metal, supposedly only mined in Atlantis, still gleamed in its unique red and gold.

A crease formed on his brow as he enlarged the photo of the rods.

Could one of them have been the key to the gates of Atlantis?

The wreckage had puzzled historians because the ship had sunk so close to the harbor. The notes referred to a sudden storm or possibly a rogue wave. Both were unlikely for that area, just like Savannah was an unlikely location for a tsunami.

If that boat had been carrying the Orichalcum Key, and if the artifact did in fact control the tides, it wasn't a big leap to postulate that maybe Atlantis wanted the key back, sinking the ship.

But the shipwreck had been discovered in 2018. Why had it taken four years for the tides to react?

He tapped the end of the pencil on his desk as he pondered his rapidly evolving theory. According to the notes, they'd recovered thirty-nine Orichalcum rods from the sea floor and sent them to be studied...inland. What if the key had only recently come to Savannah?

A city on a waterfront where Atlantis could easily reclaim its precious key.

It was a hypothesis he could pick at while they searched Savannah for a needle in a haystack.

He got up and headed for Kingsley's office. Maybe his shamanic programmer could come up with some kind of device to detect the rare metal. It was worth a shot.

Chapter Four

Caleb pulled off his wet T-shirt and dropped it into his automatic opening hamper.

The shirt landed on top, but the lid didn't open. He pushed it through, rolling his eyes when the battery-operated lid finally slid open. This gadget had never worked like it had in the ad on television.

He'd finished his crunches and pull-ups, wishing he could clear his head, but that ship had sailed a couple of weeks ago when he'd decided sleep was too dangerous.

Not that he'd ever been a solid sleeper anyway. He'd had a few bouts with insomnia over the decades, but this was different. He made a conscious choice not to sleep now. This was the longest he'd ever gone without any sleep at all. Fourteen days would've been impossible if he hadn't taken a drink from the Holy Grail. His mind wasn't sharp, but this wouldn't kill him.

When they'd returned from Scotland, the *Sea Dog* had been in tatters. The main mast had been cut down, the galley crushed, and the top deck had suffered huge, gaping holes.

Caleb had felt similarly broken.

He'd held his friend Greyson as he'd died, and then witnessed the moment he'd come back to life. Greyson should have been immortal, unable to be killed unless his head was torn from his body. Yet, he'd had no pulse, no signs of life after being struck down by a mythical Norse sword. Which could mean that curses could actually be real. Magical blades could really cut through any material. Impossible. And yet...

The mental stress had morphed into dreams of mass destruction, a flood of biblical proportions, and a siren's song calling for him by name from the depths of the dark water, dragging him out to sea and drowning him.

He'd woken from the dream in a cold sweat numerous times before he'd simply opted not to fall asleep anymore. His body was impervious to injury, so sleep was more of a formality than a necessity.

Of course, he'd caught himself nearly dozing off at times. And maybe lately his mind hadn't been as quick as he'd been accustomed to, but the nightmares had ended.

Until Diana Williams had stepped on board the ship.

Now his crew was readying for a trip to the center of the Atlantic Ocean to wait for her to get some sort of message. It made no logical sense. Even if Atlantis were real, which all scientific explorations had determined it was not, the city could not speak to an alluring graphic designer, even if she welcomed it.

But he'd been outvoted, and they needed him to navigate the journey. *Damn it.* He'd been trapped into this waste of time and energy, when he should be searching for a way to save Savannah from destruction.

His frustration swelled again. He clenched his jaw and started a set of burpee reps. The burn in his arms and legs stole some of the fire of his emotions. If nothing else, using this physical regimen to keep from sleeping had him in the best shape of his long existence.

His cell phone rang, interrupting his rhythm. He grabbed a towel to wipe the sweat from his face and pressed accept. "Hello?"

"It's Duke." He paused. "Are you all right? You sound out of breath..." he added with an apparent smile in his voice. "Did I *interrupt* something?"

Caleb rolled his eyes. "I was exercising." He set the towel aside. "Is there a problem?"

Duke was the first mate, Captain Flynn's right hand. He was also the largest man on the crew and had probably been recruited by Flynn solely for his size, at least at first.

He'd been the captain's insurance against mutiny.

They'd found Duke in Nassau. At first, Caleb had assumed he was Bahamian, but his accent wasn't right. He later learned Duke's boyhood home had been on one of the Polynesian Islands. Through the centuries sailing together, Caleb had come to know that Duke had a protective streak for the underdogs and a sense of loyalty that made him a true friend through thick and thin.

From the time they first met, Duke had seen Caleb and his books as a curiosity, but he'd taken to looking out for Caleb in a fight. In trade, Caleb

had helped Duke learn to read and write. Since settling in Savannah, Duke eventually went on to finish a degree in history at Savannah State University.

“I don’t know if there’s a problem. That’s why I’m calling you.”

Caleb’s mental synapses were too exhausted to play this guessing game. He sighed. “Are you asking if *I* have a problem?”

Duke cursed under his breath. “What is going on with you, mate? You’re not yourself.”

Where to begin? He hadn’t told a soul about his nightmare. He didn’t usually keep anything from his crewmates, but in this case, he didn’t want to relive the horror and he also didn’t want to see pity in their eyes. He prided himself on his complete reliance on science, and the fact that a dream, the ramblings of his subconscious mind, had unsettled him wasn’t something he wanted anyone to know.

Maybe he had a touch too much pride. Something to examine another day.

“I’m fine,” he reassured Duke. “But thanks for the call. Will the *Sea Dog* be ready to weigh anchor in the morning?” Caleb glanced at the ceiling with a smirk at his smooth change in subject.

“Aye. She’s ready to set sail.” Duke’s already deep voice dropped even lower. “Why are ye avoidin’ my question, Caleb?”

“I told you I’m fine.” His doorbell sounded, startling him. He chastised himself for the brief jolt of adrenaline. The lack of sleep was beginning to trigger some anxiety. “Someone’s at the door. I’ll see you in the morning, mate.”

He ended the call and strode to the entry to answer the door. He rolled his shoulders, shaking off the skittishness. He might not be the biggest man on the crew, but he was still six feet tall, and he’d been working out to help himself stay awake. Plus, he was immortal.

He had nothing to fear.

Except the dreams. The dreams shook him to his core.

...

The door opened, and Diana nearly choked on her tongue.

Caleb stood in front of her half naked, and his chest was...impressive. *Damn*. Forget a six pack. This was at least eight or ten.

He cleared his throat, and she popped her gaze up to his face, her cheeks

heating slightly. Maybe he hadn't noticed her ogling. "H-hi," she stammered and tugged her best friend forward. "This is my friend Michelle."

She'd been friends with Michelle since middle school. Michelle was taller than Diana by a few inches, and the knot on top of her purple head wrap made her seem even taller.

Michelle offered her hand. "Good to meet you."

"Likewise." Caleb shook her hand, but his gaze lingered on Diana. Her blood warmed in spite of her best intentions to ignore her hormones. She wasn't usually distracted by a good-looking guy, but she'd never met anyone quite like Caleb before.

Which was exactly why she'd convinced Michelle to come with her tonight. She didn't trust herself to stay on point, and there were some things they needed to discuss before they sailed away from shore.

She waited for him to invite them in, but he was still blocking the doorway. Suddenly the image of a half-dressed woman popped into her head. His forehead was sweaty, his face flushed. Shit, there might be a completely naked woman inside.

She raised a brow. "Is this a bad time?"

"No." Surprise shone in his eyes for a split second before he shook his head. "I just finished working out. Why are you here?"

She struggled to bite back a smile. "Can we come inside?"

"Oh." He stepped back to allow them past. "Of course."

Diana walked by, tipping her head back to look up the wide staircase. Massive bookcases were scattered around, covering most of the walls she could see. There was even one up on the landing of the stairs. Drake had mentioned Caleb had a handful of doctorates, but she'd never imagined this kind of collection of books.

Earlier, when Drake had told her the crew would sail for her coordinates in the morning, he'd also let it slip that the only nay had come from Caleb. He was the ship's navigator. She needed to be able to trust he was actually taking her to her coordinates. If they were really in the middle of the Atlantic, she'd never know if they had actually reached them.

So, she'd convinced Drake to give her his address so she could confront him, to make sure that they all were on the same page.

Next, she'd picked up her best friend, Michelle. She barely knew Caleb, and there was no way she was going to show up on a strange man's

doorstep alone. Or at least that was the rational excuse. The truth was, Caleb appealed to her in a very non-intellectual way, and this trip was too important to be mixing hormones into it.

Michelle whispered under her breath, “The Carnegie Library doesn’t have this many books.”

Caleb cleared his throat, motioning for them to follow. “The library is actually right through here.” He walked them into his oversize study and cleared empty shipping boxes off his desk. “Please make yourselves comfortable. I’m just going to get a clean shirt.”

Without waiting for a response, he scooped up the boxes and left the room.

“He’s hot, Di,” Michelle murmured, watching the door where he vanished. “Why’d you bring me along to third wheel?”

“Because he’s hot.” Diana rolled her eyes. “I need to talk to him about the dreams I keep having, but it’s hard for me to concentrate around him. And now I’ve seen him without a shirt on. That makes it worse.”

“You’re a grown-ass woman, and you haven’t been on a date since you split from Darius in college.” Michelle crossed her arms, giving Diana a healthy dose of side-eye. “Trust me, Di, a chaperone isn’t what you need.” She pointed toward the door where Caleb had disappeared. “You need some of that.”

Diana smirked and wandered around the cluttered library.

She’d expected to see books, but not this many. Judging by all the science textbooks, he’d obviously been keeping up with the changing technologies and new discoveries happening during the past two hundred fifty years.

It was the kooky gadgets that surprised her, though.

There had been a Roomba charging in the parlor, and the shelves of this library contained more than just books. He could’ve opened his own “As Seen on TV” store.

There were boxed sets of 80s power ballads, a Gopher Grab-it extension pole, a package of ShamWow rags on the edge of the antique walnut desk, and a ceiling fan duster with microfiber-covered tips that Mr. Popeil-like barkers sold at the state fair, leaning against the wall behind his chair.

“I hope you like iced tea.” His deep voice had her spinning around.

His bright blue eyes were locked on her, catching her in his spell. She almost didn’t notice his shirt was wide open, exposing his chiseled torso.

On anyone else, she might’ve thought it was a fumbling attempt at

seduction, some gym rat trying to show off how his protein shakes were paying off, but it wasn't like that with Caleb.

He'd taken the time to roll up his sleeves but likely forgotten to finish buttoning the front.

"I'd love some." She swallowed, discovering her mouth had gone dry. "Thanks."

Michelle got up from her chair, standing behind him as she pointed and fanned herself with a grin. Diana shot her a look and took one of the glasses off the silver tray.

Next to the glasses was a round plastic container with a sugar spoon lying beside it. She looked up at him. "What's that?"

His smile disarmed her completely, and wonder lit up his eyes. "It's a brilliant invention." He set the tray on his desk and picked up the spoon. He tapped it on the top of the plastic container, and the top slid open with the whine of an AA battery-powered engine. "It automatically opens and closes. No mess, and it keeps the bugs out."

She smiled and added a scoop of sugar from the container to her tea. "Three easy payments of \$9.99?"

He raised a brow. "You've seen these on the television."

"Well, not this exact one, but you seem to have a lot of gadgets from late-night infomercials around here." She took a sip of the tea and smiled. "You must watch plenty of television after midnight."

He shrugged a broad shoulder and raised the glass for a sip. His tongue brushed his lower lip as he lowered the glass, and heat pooled low in her belly. Michelle was right. It had been way too long since Diana had been with a man.

Michelle came over and took a glass from the tray before stopping at Diana's side. "I thought we're here to talk about the cruise you two are taking tomorrow."

Diana blinked, tearing her attention off Caleb's mouth. "Right." She lifted her gaze again. "I wanted to find out why you're so against this trip? You were the only crewmember to vote no."

His lips curved into a lopsided smile. "I don't recall you being at the official vote."

She shook her head. "Drake told me. But I want to know, from you, why you are hesitant to sail to the coordinates. You're the navigator. I need to be sure you're going to get me out there."

Michelle cleared her throat. “And as her best friend, I need to be sure you’re going to bring her back to me in one piece.”

His eyes moved between them before he finally spoke. “I feel my time would be best spent in Savannah until I can find a scientific explanation for the erratic tides. Sailing to your coordinates will take time that Savannah might not have.”

Michelle’s smile faded. “Wait, what?”

Diana had told Michelle about her dreams, but she’d left out that Caleb was also tracking very real changes in the tides that could make her dreams a reality.

He glanced at Michelle. “There appears to be a tidal surge headed our way. If we cannot find the source and stop it, Savannah will have to be evacuated.” He turned his attention back to Diana, his eyes clearly full of questions, most likely about how much she’d told Michelle.

Diana sipped her tea, grateful for the cold drink. “Michelle knows about my dreams.” She hoped he understood that meant she hadn’t mentioned anything about immortal pirates.

Michelle set her tea on his desk. “Shouldn’t we be telling someone? The mayor or the governor?”

Diana shrugged. “I don’t think they’d believe us.”

“She’s right.” Caleb nodded, looking over at Michelle.

Something about hearing him finally agreeing with her on something warmed Diana’s heart. She liked being on the same team with him, even if it would be short-lived.

“I still haven’t been able to pinpoint a cause for the erratic tidal pattern,” Caleb said. “Without any science to back up Diana’s hypothesis, we’re left with a dream and some rising tides we can’t predict, and no one is going to take action based on that alone.”

“So why are you and the *Sea Dog* crew taking this so seriously?” Michelle crossed her arms. “I’m missing a big piece here, aren’t I?”

Diana chuckled. “Don’t act so surprised. You know how weird things get in my world.”

“Oh, I’m well aware, but they don’t usually overflow into mine.” She gestured to the door. “If this is real, I should be packing my apartment and moving inland.”

“You’re fine. We’re going to figure this out.” Diana hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. She met Caleb’s eyes. “Can I talk to you alone

for a second?”

He nodded and set his glass down before walking to the door.

Michelle mouthed, “What the hell?”

Diana squeezed her friend’s arm as she passed by and whispered, “I’ll be right back.”

It was shitty to ditch Michelle, especially since Diana had been the one who’d dragged her here, but she also didn’t want to out Caleb and the crew’s immortality if possible. Michelle was used to Diana’s metaphysical gifts and practices occasionally being a bridge too far when it came to what Michelle believed, but immortal pirates would push her friend off the bridge completely, and Diana wanted to avoid that.

She followed Caleb into his kitchen and almost giggled when she noticed all the infomercial microwave cookware on the counter. There was the microwave omelet maker, a quesadilla maker, a smokeless grill, and sitting on the other side of the stove was a Vitamix machine, a dehydrator, and a set of genuine Ginsu knives.

He turned around to face her, his shirt still open. His unruly hair was mussed even though he’d tied back the top. He crossed his arms, giving her a nice showing of his forearms. His expression made it clear that he had no idea how sexy he was.

Maybe getting him alone was a huge mistake.

She pressed her lips together, gathering her thoughts, then whispered, “Is there something I should know about that you can’t discuss in front of my friend? I don’t get it. If we sail all that way and there’s nothing there, that’s on me, not you. What are you afraid of?”

He leaned in closer, keeping his voice down. She tried not to notice the way he smelled like leather and brandy. Too late.

“I’m not afraid. I’m fucking exhausted.” He straightened, putting more distance between them. “I don’t know how much you know about sailing a Spanish galleon, but it’s physically taxing, and the last time we took the *Sea Dog* out, she almost didn’t make it back home. Forgive me for wanting to avoid another damned disaster.”

She frowned, her brows pinching together. “You think we’re going to hit a storm.” Over the years as she’d opened her third eye and developed her psychic gifts, she’d grown to recognize the “knowing” and trust it. And suddenly the image from her dream of a city built of concentric circles surrounded by water filled her mind’s eye. “You’re worried we might

actually find Atlantis.”

He shook his head, his brow furrowing. “Impossible. It’s fiction.”

So he said.

She’d seen that spark in his eyes before he could bury it. She was onto something.

“You’re trying so hard to cling to that belief, aren’t you?” Her crown chakra was wide open, her connection to spirit giving her the extra insight she needed as the pieces came together. “That last trip you took with your crew really has you shaken up.”

Suddenly she saw a tarot card in her mind. The nine of swords. And then it all made sense. He was so burdened with his worries...

“You can’t sleep.” She gestured to the gadgets on the counter. “That’s why you’re buying all this stuff off TV. You’re running from something.”

He blinked, staring at her like she’d grown an extra head. “How could you...”

Diana shrugged and crossed her arms, her hip jutting to the side. “I could tell you I’m intuitive and psychic, but you can’t test that with science, so...”

He came closer, and she took a step back until her ass bumped into the counter. He searched her eyes, and his raw whisper tugged at her heart. “It’s not that I *can’t* sleep. I *won’t*.”

She raised a brow. “Everyone has to sleep.”

“I can’t die.” He shook his head. “That makes sleeping optional. I just need to keep busy.” He broke eye contact, focusing on the kitchen floor. “Why are you really here? The crew already voted to take the journey.”

She reached up to touch his cheek, and he froze as if time itself had stopped. She couldn’t breathe, but it had been an instinctive ache to soothe his pain.

His skin was still warm from his earlier workout as she waited for his eyes to meet hers. The moment his gaze lifted to her face, her heart stuttered. She swallowed the lump in her throat and whispered, “I’m counting on you to get me to the coordinates. Can you do that?”

He studied her face and finally nodded. “Aye.”

She started to lower her hand and turned to leave, but he caught it in his, the touch sending a jolt of awareness through her bloodstream.

His voice was deep and solid in spite of his exhaustion. “Don’t go.”

She raised a brow. “Give me a reason to stay.”

A muscle clenched in his cheek. “I had a dream, too.”

Chapter Five

Her hand seemed so small in his, soft against his rough callouses.

He'd been alone for centuries, but he hadn't noticed until right now, this second, with this woman.

"Everything okay in here?"

He turned around to see her friend Michelle leaning against the entry to the kitchen. Her gaze wandered down to their joined hands and back up to Diana's face.

Her brow arched. "Am I interrupting something?"

"Nope." Diana slid her hand free of his and shook her head. "We were just talking." She looked up at him again. "I should probably get going."

But he'd given her a reason to stay. Hadn't he?

Her friend turned and walked back down the hallway.

Diana lifted her eyes to his face and whispered, "I'll be back in an hour."

"I'll be awake." As if that was news. A half-hearted smile curved on his mouth.

She grinned, and his heart responded, picking up speed. Diana was quickly becoming an addiction. She walked out, following Michelle, leaving him alone in his kitchen.

He'd spoken of the dreams out loud. The realization shocked him. He pulled in a slow breath. Two weeks ago he'd stopped sleeping, hiding from the dream. Part of him believed if he never discussed it, never allowed it to visit him again, the terror would fade away.

Now it lurked in every shadow.

Was he really going to share it with her? He barely knew this woman.

Outside of his crew, he didn't really have any friends he could talk to. He had plenty of colleagues and peers, but no one he would ever confide in. Besides, just mentioning the dream seemed to lend it power.

He paced his kitchen, shaking his head. It was simply the over workings of his subconscious, nothing more. An “undigested bit of beef,” as Dickens would say. If he hadn’t recently witnessed Greyson die, he wouldn’t be unraveling like this.

Or he hoped he wouldn’t.

He glanced down and noticed he’d never finished buttoning his shirt. His focus had been shit since he’d given up sleeping.

“Caleb?” Diana called from the front entry. “We’re heading out.”

He worked on the buttons as he made his way down the hallway, meeting the women in the entryway.

“I’ll see you at the dock in the morning.” But he secretly hoped he’d see her later tonight.

“Yeah.” Diana’s gaze met his. “I’ll see you soon.”

He nodded slowly.

Michelle smiled. “Nice to meet you.”

“And you as well,” he replied.

Diana and her friend slipped out into the night, and he let out a sigh of relief. He wandered back into the library. Then he sat behind his desk and sighed again.

A knock sounded on the door. He frowned. Had they forgotten something?

Before he reached the front door again, it opened, and a mammoth shadow filled the frame.

“Caleb?” His deep voice resonated through the entire house even though he wasn’t yelling.

Duke Proctor.

“Duke?” Caleb’s eyebrows pinched together. “What are you doing here?”

Duke hung his overcoat on the hat rack by the door and turned to face Caleb. “I just keep thinking about this trip, and I’ve never known you to resist a chance to navigate the *Sea Dog*. I want to know why.”

Caleb raised a brow. “You could have asked over the phone.”

“I tried that earlier.” He crossed his big arms and grinned, not bothering to hide his true nautical accent. “But it’s harder for ye to lie right to my face.”

Caleb chuckled. “True.”

He walked back to the library and settled into his chair behind the desk. Duke sat across from him, stretching out his long legs and eyeing the tray

and iced tea pitcher. “Were you...entertaining?”

Caleb grinned. “Don’t look so surprised.”

Duke dropped his head back and laughed. When he finally met Caleb’s eyes again, his lips curved into a sly smile. “We both know you don’t entertain anyone.” He leaned forward in his chair. “Is there a lady in yer life? Is that why ye don’t want to leave Savannah?”

Caleb shook his head. “Not in the way you mean.”

Duke raised a brow. “A gent, then?”

“No.” Caleb chuckled. “I told you before, I already had a great love in my life. Abigail was enough.” And for the first time since he’d left her on that dock back in England, it didn’t hurt to speak her name. He blinked, rubbing absently at his chest.

Duke’s brown skin, black hair, and neatly trimmed beard made his white teeth flash as he grinned. “Then who was here? You didn’t set up a silver tray for me.”

“I might have if you had warned me you were coming.” Caleb steeped his fingers under his chin.

“Fuck you. You can’t lie to me.” He sobered. “So, tell me why aren’t you first in line to fly our colors and leave the land behind us?”

Caleb rested back in his chair. “Because if my calculations are correct, a flood is brewing and it’s headed straight for Savannah. I don’t think the answer to stopping it is hidden in the middle of the Atlantic. What if we set sail and end up having nothing to return to?”

He raised a shoulder. “What if we stay and lose everything?” He shook his head. “At least if we sail into the horizon, we’re doing something.”

Caleb stared at his crewmate. Duke was easily six foot seven, with legs the size of tree trunks and arms that Hercules himself might envy. He’d also taken a drink from the Holy Grail, which took death off the table as far as he was concerned.

The man feared nothing. Caleb envied him.

“The last time we sailed, the *Sea Dog* almost didn’t survive it.” Caleb lowered his voice. “And Greyson didn’t survive. I was the one beside him. He had no pulse.”

Duke nodded slowly. “But he has one now.”

“Damn it.” Caleb ran a hand down his face, struggling to regulate the building anger and frustration. Why couldn’t he make his crew understand? Because they hadn’t knelt in a puddle of Greyson’s blood and watched the

life drain from his body? “We don’t understand how any of this works. Doesn’t that bother you? Before we sail out to the middle of the Atlantic with a woman who wrote down coordinates from her dreams, shouldn’t we know our own limits first?”

Duke’s head tilted slightly. “You’re afraid.”

Didn’t Greyson dying affect *any* of them? They could all suffer the same fate. Why was he the only one who seemed to notice?

Caleb shot out of his chair, pointing at Duke as he shouted, “Maybe we should be fucking afraid!” He shook his head, breaking eye contact. “Has it occurred to you that we could lose our ship? We could *die*, Duke! Real death. And we might not come back like Greyson did! It will just be over.”

Duke allowed silence to settle between them before he finally replied, “Death is just another adventure, mate. Hell, maybe you’d see Abigail again.”

His words hit Caleb’s gut like he’d swallowed a rock.

From the moment mankind had stood on two legs, they’d searched for an afterlife, dreamed of a heaven. And still, thousands of years later, with the advances in science and technology, there was no confirmation of a hereafter.

Abigail was long gone from this world, and there was no next.

Caleb sank back into his chair. “There is no adventure in death, my friend.”

“According to you, but dead men tell no tales, right? What the hell do we know?” Duke got up and walked over to one of the bookcases, his attention wandering over the books. “I think you need this voyage. You need an escape from all these books and computers, and even your precious science.” His gaze pinned Caleb in place. “We did underestimate the damage the Tyrfin sword could do. But we lived to fight another day. That’s enough for me. I don’t need a scientific explanation for what I saw.”

Caleb crossed his arms. “Magic isn’t a real construct.”

Duke huffed, the corners of his mouth turning up slightly. “Keep telling yourself that, mate, but I think the world is bigger than you give her credit for.” He went to the door and glanced back. “Either way, we can’t make this trip without you.”

Caleb groaned and followed Duke to the front door. “I’ll be there.”

Duke clapped Caleb’s shoulder, gripping it with his large hand. “Being out on the open ocean will clear your head. You’ll see.”

He left, and Caleb looked up at the ceiling, shaking his head.

For the first time ever, he didn't want sail into the Atlantic. It would probably be a waste of time anyway.

But he would go because his crew needed him. Above all else, he was loyal, probably to a fault.

...

Diana parked in front of Michelle's condo. "Thanks for coming with me tonight."

Her best friend glanced her way. "You're dropping me off and going back over there, aren't you?"

Michelle knew her way too well. Diana shrugged. "Probably, yeah."

She sighed. "He's handsome, rich, and obviously book smart. I'll give you all that. But, Di, he's got some skeletons in all those closets. He forgot to button his own damned shirt. What is that?"

Diana chuckled. "He hasn't been sleeping lately."

Michelle smirked. "No excuse for flashing us those outrageous abs like that." She fanned herself with her hand.

Diana laughed, giving her a playful shove. "It wasn't like that."

She sobered. "If this flood is real, do you think it'll be safe to be out on the ocean?"

"There's no way I dreamed about longitude and latitude coordinates for no reason." Michelle didn't know this crew had been navigating storms for nearly three hundred years. Diana shrugged. "There's something out there. I have to go find it."

"Then you better be careful." Michelle patted her leg. "Come back in one piece or I'm gonna have to kick your ass."

She chuckled as she nodded. "I will."

Michelle got out and waved before heading to her front door. Diana waited for her to get inside before she backed out.

As she navigated the darkened streets of Savannah toward Monterey Square, the upcoming trip weighed on her. This was really happening.

She was going to sail into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean chasing after a fallen city that scientists and historians couldn't find, all because of a dream.

This might be a bridge too far, even for her.

She rubbed her hands along the steering wheel as she passed another

block.

What if Caleb was right? They could sail for days to the coordinates and find nothing.

But she wasn't the only having dreams.

And something about Caleb's was causing him to give up on sleep altogether.

The universe sent signs, but humanity could only recognize them if they chose to. That was the gift of free will. And that was the difference between her and Caleb. She welcomed the signs, and he repelled them unless he could find a scientific explanation.

She frowned as she parked in front of his beautiful historic house.

Something about the dreams was off. She turned off the engine, pondering the situation. Caleb wouldn't have welcomed messages from the universe into his dreams, so he shouldn't have gotten any. His free will should have kept the universe at bay.

Unless.

If he had something in his possession, something someone else put there, or wanted back, that could be their free will pushing against Caleb. Curses worked in a similar fashion.

She got out of her car and raced up the steps to his door.

He answered the door, this time with his shirt buttoned. "You came back."

His blue eyes looked troubled, but in a different way than when she'd left him before. He looked...sad now.

"I told you I would." She came inside, but instead of heading back to the library, Caleb led her in the other direction.

He turned on the light, and her jaw dropped at the beautiful ballroom area, complete with a grand piano over in the corner. The hardwood floor was polished and the dark green velvet curtains covered the windows from the floor all the way up to the twelve-foot ceiling. There were still bookshelves stuffed full on the far wall, but the room was otherwise uncluttered.

He looked at her over his shoulder. "This is the recital room, although...I haven't had one since...1915, maybe."

Okay, when he said things like that, it made her do a double take. It was easy to look at him and see a man not much older than her. An attractive, intelligent man.

“Do you play?” She pointed at the piano.

“Yes.” He nodded. “I haven’t lately, but it used to be a nice way to wind down at the end of a long day.”

She smiled. “I sing a little.”

“Anything I might know?” He raised a brow. “I could accompany you.”

She hadn’t expected any of this, so it took a second to remember the names of any songs, let alone something she knew. What she blurted out was, “Endless Love.”

“I know that one.” He laughed. “I’m not sure I want an answer, but were you even born when that song came out?”

“I know a million Diana Ross songs.” She grinned. “My mom is a die-hard fan. She named me after her.”

He walked over to the piano and sat on the bench as he opened the keyboard. “I thought you were named after the goddess of the hunt.”

“Nope.” She approached the Steinway, leaning against the curve of the piano. “But Diana Ross is a goddess in her own right according to my mom.”

“Your mom has good taste in music.” His fingers danced up the scales on the keyboard until Diana recognized the simple melodic introduction. She cleared her throat. “It’s a duet. Do you sing, too?”

His smile widened into a grin that made her heart race. “I’m a pirate, lass, we *all* sing.”

She hadn’t thought of that. Weeks trapped on a ship with no entertainment. Of course they sang. He opened his mouth, singing the first line, and goose bumps prickled on her arms. Oh, he could definitely sing. *Damn.*

Her turn. She wet her lips before the melody escaped her throat. He stared up at her from the keyboard as she sang, and although she should’ve looked away, she didn’t.

And strangely, the connection didn’t seem awkward.

She barely knew him, but the emotion coloring the harmonies felt anything but forced. The song was theirs alone. No audience would ever hear it.

Endless love was real in this room.

As she reached the bridge, any hesitation or awkward embarrassment evaporated. She poured her heart into the melody about two hearts beating as one, her bright soprano blending with his warm baritone.

He embellished the instrumental interlude before the last chorus, building the crescendo until her voice soared, filling his cavernous home as she sang about being a fool for love.

She grinned, enjoying the way he kept a steady bass line for her to improvise over, supporting her so she could fly, and then...it was over.

But the bond between them sizzled until the final chord faded from the room.

His gaze didn't falter from hers as he rose from behind the keyboard. "Your voice is...heaven."

Heat crept up her neck and into her cheeks as she shook her head. "I think you inspired me."

"You give me too much credit." He came around the piano and stopped in front of her.

She ached to reach out, to touch him. But this wasn't a date. This was bigger than the two of them. She needed to tamp down her emotions and focus.

Clearing her throat, she broke eye contact and took a step back. "Are you ready to tell me about your dream?"

"I suppose. But it won't change anything." He crossed to the other side of the room. She followed, stopping beside him, at an ornately carved bookshelf. He pulled a volume free and handed it to her. "Dreams are simply your subconscious mind filling time while your body recovers from the day."

She stared at the textbook about REM sleep and smirked. "Maybe you used to believe that, but whatever it was in that dream, it made you decide not to sleep anymore." She placed the book back on the shelf.

He started to walk away, but she caught his arm. His muscles tensed under her fingers, sending a jolt of unwanted desire through her. Her voice came out breathier than she intended. "Wait."

He turned back, his blue eyes turbulent and troubled. "What is it?"

"Just for tonight, I need you to do something for me."

His brow arched. "All right."

Damn, he made it tough to think straight. He was like an immortal, pensive version of the Absent-Minded Professor with an added dose of pirate swagger that had her wishing she'd kept Michelle with her before she surrendered.

She tightened her hold on his arm. "For the next hour, you're going to set

aside all your science and pretend that there might be things in this world that you don't have the tools to weigh and measure. Can you do that?"

The corner of his mouth twitched into a lopsided smile that had her aching to kiss him. The realization startled her almost as much as his answer.

"For *you*, I will do my best."

"Your best?" She grinned, rolling her eyes. "Either commit to it or don't. No halfway here."

He took her hand in his, his gaze softening. "You have my word."

There was a weight to his statement, like he'd given her a physical treasure. She squeezed his hand. "Good. Let's sit down. You can tell me about your dream, and I'll tell you about mine."

He nodded slowly and appeared to be choosing his words carefully. "I'm interested to hear your interpretation."

How much of that was true, she couldn't be sure, but witnessing him trying to stop shutting her down in his usual science-only knee-jerk reaction warmed her heart. He walked her over to an antique couch and waited for her to sit before taking a seat beside her.

He rolled his shoulders back, and then his head, visibly releasing all the tension. When he met her eyes again, he let out a sigh. "I suppose I should start at the beginning."

"That's always a good starting point." She patted his knee and quickly retrieved her hand back into her lap. She wasn't usually a touchy-feely person, but the torment in his eyes made her ache to soothe him.

"We were about a week away from finishing the repairs to the *Sea Dog* when the first dream came to me."

"Drake was talking about repairs, too. What happened? Were you guys caught in a storm?"

He shook his head with another sigh. "Not exactly." He almost smiled. "Since I've given you my word to set aside science for this hour, I suppose I can say we were bringing back a mythical Norse sword that could cut through any material. The demon wielding it nearly destroyed the *Sea Dog*. It's taken us weeks to finish repairs."

She fought the urge to ask for more information. No doubt he was hoping she'd be distracted and forget about his dream. "I'm glad you got it fixed." She clasped her hands in her lap. "Ready to tell me about the dream?"

"I suppose." His tone was clinical, as if he were recalling a grocery list

instead of a nightmare. “There was a storm, ferocious, with waves that towered over the main mast, at least ten stories high, maybe more. It knocked me overboard, and in the dark water, I heard...” He shook his head, warring with himself. “This is ridiculous.”

She cleared her throat. “No science. You gave me your word.”

“So I did.” He lifted his gaze to her face. “Somewhere from the depths there was a whisper. It demanded the key.”

She took out her cell phone and opened her notes app.

He leaned in, peering at her screen. “Have I told you some sort of code?”

She chuckled and glanced up to find him closer than she realized. Her gaze drifted to his mouth and back up to his eyes as she whispered, “Sometimes a ‘key’ in a dream is a symbol of something important, maybe an item you’re worried you forgot or maybe you lost something.”

He nodded slowly without pulling back from her. It was getting more difficult by the second to keep her breathing even with the way her heart was pounding. The anticipation of his touch had her on edge, which was irrational since she hadn’t come over here for a date.

His gaze moved over her face like a caress, but he didn’t make a move to kiss her.

Wait. When had she started hoping he might?

Chapter Six

“I don’t recall losing a key.” He rubbed his hands on his jeans to keep himself from touching her. Maybe it was the lack of sleep, but he’d never been so distracted by a woman before, so drawn to her.

The intensity of the duet had probably stirred up yearnings inside of him. He glanced over at her, chastising himself for trying to make up excuses. The truth was, it was all Diana.

Yes, she was beautiful, but there were plenty of pretty faces in Savannah. No, it was more, something in her eyes, a wisdom and strength that were like a window into her soul.

A poet’s folly.

This was obviously a hormonal response to pheromones... He put an abrupt stop to his train of thought.

He’d given her his word not to draw on science.

She shook her head slowly. “It’s probably not a physical key like the one to your car or your house.”

His brows pinched in confusion. “Then why call it a key?”

“Dreams aren’t an exact science.” Her full lips curved slightly. “You’re not going to jump in and point out they’re not science at all?”

“I’ve sworn off science for the night, remember?” He winked, and she rewarded him with a grin.

“A man of his word. I like it.” She focused on her phone’s bright screen. “It could be a physical key, or it could be a symbol. We might be able to determine more when you tell me the rest of the dream.”

Without science to fill his sails and find his true north, he felt adrift in unfamiliar waters where anything was possible. It left him vulnerable and uncertain.

Just like his dream.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "That's all there is to tell."

She frowned, studying him for a moment.

He lost himself in her beauty, the bow of her lips, the curve of her brows, the shine in her dark eyes. He whispered, before he realized he was going to speak, "You fascinate me." He wet his lips, struggling for words. "I've been alive, learning every detail about this world for over two hundred fifty years, but I don't think I've ever been forced to be a part of it until now. Until you." A smile crept up on him. "I'm glad we met."

She laughed, her lashes sweeping down as she stared at the floor. "Me, too." She lifted her gaze again, her grin softening as she met his eyes. "I know I should go home and get some sleep before the trip tomorrow, but..."

He took her hand in his. "Don't go."

She didn't pull away. Her chin rose, her lips parting just slightly.

Fuck, it had been centuries since he'd kissed anyone. He wasn't sure he still remembered how. He brought his free hand up to caress her cheek. Her skin was even softer than he'd imagined.

"May I kiss you?" he breathed, his immortal heart racing.

She nodded, and he didn't hesitate, claiming her lips.

He groaned as her mouth softened, opening to him. He explored her mouth, his tongue tangling slowly with hers. She tasted like cinnamon and honey. Her lips were soft and addictive. He never wanted to let her go. In fact, he needed more. So much more.

His fingers slid into her braids, holding her tighter. Her hands moved up his chest, making him wish he'd never buttoned the damned shirt. He ached for her touch.

He tilted his head, deepening the kiss as he wrapped his other arm around her.

Time was a meaningless construct now.

Diana was his world. The only reality that mattered.

Her fingertips found the bare skin on the back of his neck, and he moaned into the kiss, his erection pulsing against the confines of his jeans. Fire roared through his veins with a visceral pull he'd never known. He yearned to be even closer to her, to discover every inch of her body and find every spot that made her gasp with pleasure.

When she finally broke the kiss, he had no idea how much time had passed. And he didn't fucking care. His chest heaved as he struggled to

catch his breath. This raw passion was new.

His gaze wandered over her face, her well-kissed lips. "Have I hurt you?"

"No." Her sexy smile reignited the wildfire of desire in his soul. "The opposite, actually." She chuckled as she worried her lower lip. "It's been a long time since I was with anyone, so...I just don't want to get carried away and do something we can't take back."

"You don't want to know how long it's been for me." Laughter boomed from the depths of his spirit. She was a damned miracle he hadn't known existed, and one he definitely didn't deserve. "It feels good to laugh."

"It does." She nodded, her hand traveling slowly up his thigh. He was hyperaware of every touch, as if his body had just awakened from eons of slumber. "I'm assuming you don't have any protection, either, right?"

"Protection?" His mind went to his gun safe as he shook his head. "I have ammunition. Why?"

"No." She grinned, shaking her head. "I mean condoms. Birth control. Protection?"

He blinked with a chuckle. "Sadly, no. I...It's been a really long time for me."

"Wait." She squeezed his thigh. "Do *not* tell me they hadn't been invented yet."

He swallowed that truth and shrugged. "All right."

"No!" Her jaw dropped, and that joyful sparkle in her eyes bewitched him. He wanted to make her happy until the end of time. "You seriously haven't had sex since before condoms?"

"I've been busy." He gestured to the bookcases.

She raised a teasing brow. "I love a good book, too, but really?"

"They hold the secrets of the universe."

She grinned. "Secrets of the universe probably don't keep you very warm at night."

"True." A smile tugged at his lips. "But I bought an amazing electric blanket from QVC."

She burst out laughing, the sound intoxicating him in an instant. Conversation was usually awkward for him, but it wasn't with Diana. She seemed to see the man behind the science. A man he barely remembered.

"I was in love once," he mused. "I left her in England in 1792, and we lost the *Sea Dog* before I could get back to her." He was stunned to find himself sharing parts of his past he hadn't shared with anyone, not even his

crew. “I sent a message for her on another ship bound for London, but the word I received back from her family was that my beloved Abigail had died of tuberculosis.”

Diana took his hand, her touch soothing him in a way the years had never been able to. Perhaps there was truth to the research into the effects of physical human contact on emotional well-being. Again, he silenced his thought process. No science. Not tonight.

Not with her.

Diana laced her fingers with his. “I’m sorry you lost her.”

He stared at their joined hands before meeting her eyes. “I found comfort in my studies and in science. I guess I never bothered to seek solace anywhere else. I’d had love once.” He shrugged. “I thought that was enough.”

Her thumb stroked the edge of his. “Sounds pretty romantic for a man of science.”

“Don’t tell my crew.” He laughed, shaking his head slowly as his gaze went distant. “I’m beginning to realize that perhaps I’ve been hiding behind my science all these years.”

“I can relate to that. I’ve been hiding, too.”

He focused on Diana again, only to find her eyes downcast. He caught her chin, bringing her attention back to him. Sadness lined her eyes. He frowned. “Did you lose someone, too?”

“Not like you did, but...” She sighed. “I was in love with a guy, and I thought he loved me, too. I had my life all planned out. We were going to graduate from college and get married. I saw us raising a family and growing old together.”

Her voice trailed off, and a bitter loathing simmered in the shadows of Caleb’s soul. Some bastard had been lucky enough to win this woman’s heart, and instead of cherishing it, he’d hurt her. He clenched his jaw, aching to punish anyone who ever made her cry.

She pressed her lips together. “We ended up wanting different things. I guess I’ve been too proud to tell anybody how much it devastated me.” She shook her head slowly. “I dove into building my graphic design business and keeping the Botanica Shop afloat, and I never looked back. Michelle and my folks have all been trying to set me up on dates, but I never make the time. I keep myself buried in my work.”

Jealousy was foreign to Caleb, but he was rapidly becoming familiar with

it just sitting beside her and holding her hand. The thought of her smiling and laughing with another man gave him an irrational spike of envy.

He pulled her into his arms and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Maybe we have more in common than I realized."

She chuckled and peered up at him from under her lashes. "We're both experts at hiding from entanglements that might engage our hearts?"

"When you say it like that, we sound like cowards." He grinned. "I like to think we're both gifted at redirecting our energies to areas we can control."

She gave him a nod of approval. "Oh, I like that."

He bent his head down, closing the distance between them until her breath was warm on his skin as he whispered, "In my defense, you stripped me of my science tonight. I had nothing to hide behind."

She smiled, her lips barely brushing his as she spoke. "And you stripped away my emotional armor with that song."

"I am not sorry," he growled as he kissed her again.

She whispered against his mouth, "Only sorry we don't have any condoms."

Her hand slid up his thigh, making him desperate for more of her. He rested his forehead on hers. "I could go get some."

"We could go." She considered him for a moment as a smile curved her lips. "Don't look so shocked. Of the two of us, I'm guessing I'm the only one who has bought condoms before."

He laughed, rubbing the back of his neck. "I just don't want to cause you any scandal."

"Oh please, you scandalized me the second you opened your front door with no shirt on." She shook her head with a grin. "Besides, you're sleep deprived and probably have no business driving anyway."

He thought about countering her argument but stopped short. The science was on her side in this case. "All right."

He stood and followed her to the door, enjoying the way she caught his hand in hers.

This woman was his polar opposite, but something about being near her fed his soul and made him feel truly alive. No longer simply existing, but part of the greater whole.

And the longer he spent with her, the more he never wanted to go back. He feared existing might never be enough again.

...

Diana popped the locks on her Honda Civic and got behind the wheel while Caleb settled into the passenger side and fastened his seat belt.

Being in the confined space, she couldn't escape the scent of his skin, a masculine combination of leather and musk with a dash of the Atlantic.

Or maybe the ocean was a remnant of her dream. Or his.

Their dreams were far from a priority at the moment. Right now, her body was begging for his attention. They'd have plenty of time to talk later when they were on the ship. All she cared about right now was finding a drugstore. It had been years for her since intimacy hadn't involved something battery-operated.

He glanced her way. "Can I buy you dinner first?"

She started to protest, but her stomach growled, eager for his offer. She'd visited her folks earlier, but she hadn't stayed long enough to eat. Okay, she'd waited this long for sex. A few minutes more wouldn't kill her. She nodded. "All right. Where are you thinking?"

"Your choice." He paused and added, "Maybe Bob's Seafood or Williams Southern Kitchen."

She sputtered and stopped at a light before glancing his way. "Have you ever eaten at the Kitchen?"

"They have the best fried chicken in Savannah. The owners are a wonderful couple." He nodded, his smile fading. "If there's something bad about the food, I don't want to know."

"Nothing like that." She laughed, shaking her head. "Oh, the universe is a funny place."

"The universe?"

"Yeah. I don't believe in coincidences." She tapped her hand on the steering wheel, keeping her eyes on the road. "My parents own the Williams Southern Kitchen. I was over there earlier tonight, getting Mom and Dad's approval for the new logo I designed." She looked his way. "And yet, somehow you and I have never crossed paths before."

He shook his head, his gaze locked on her face. "I would have remembered if I'd ever seen you there."

"Small world." She drove through the green light. "But I'm not taking you to meet my parents while we're out trying to find condoms." She shuddered. "Talk about a mood killer."

He reached over, resting a large hand on her thigh. "Let's go to Bob's, then."

She followed his directions and parked behind the restaurant.

She'd heard of Bob's Seafood before, but she'd never been there. Caleb brought her through the back entrance. An older bald white man, about the same height as Caleb, came out from the kitchen.

His face lit up as he approached them. "Caleb, it's good to see you! Are you ready for the voyage tomorrow?"

Caleb nodded and turned to her. "Diana, this is our cook, One-Eyed Bob."

She shook his hand, noticing for the first time that one of Bob's green eyes was slightly darker and didn't move like the other. "Nice to meet you."

Bob glanced at Caleb, patting his shoulder. "Didn't know you were finally dating, mate."

"We're not on a date," Diana corrected. "Just...I'm the one who gave Drake the coordinates."

Bob's eyes widened. "You're Miss Bianca?"

"I am." She nodded with a wistful smile. "I was meeting with Caleb about the trip."

Bob's gaze shifted to each of them before he gestured to a booth in the corner. "Have a seat. I'll get you a platter of shrimp and hushpuppies."

"Thanks, mate," Caleb answered. His hand brushed the small of her back as he guided her to the booth, sending heat back through her bloodstream as she envisioned his touch...elsewhere.

He slid in across from her, but his eyes seemed distant, his expression guarded.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No." He rested the palm of his hand down on the table, his fingers nervously tapping. "Maybe this was a mistake."

She raised a brow. "I thought you like this place."

"I do." His blue eyes swept up from the table to her face as he leaned in closer, keeping his voice down. "But you were right, we're not dating, and I should be preparing for the voyage, not buying dinner and condoms." He shook his head, breaking eye contact. "I should go."

Diana reached across the table and caught his hand. "I don't understand."

His gaze drifted up to her face. "I think I've...misjudged things."

What was he talking about? She replayed the drive over and froze. "Is

this about meeting your friend? Did you want me to tell him we were dating?”

He slid his hand free of hers. “It’s more complicated than that.”

Of course it was. Everything about this man seemed complicated. But instead of frustration, in a strange way, it almost endeared him to her even more. Yes, he was much older than her, but there was an awkwardness in him that made her want to help him.

She wanted to roll her eyes at herself. As if this immortal pirate with four or five doctoral degrees needed her. Really? But as she studied him, the lines around his eyes as he mentally wrestled with himself, she realized... maybe he did need her? He was definitely more comfortable with books and scientific studies than women.

Before he could get out of the booth, One-Eyed Bob approached with a steaming tray. The food smelled amazing. Her stomach growled in agreement.

“Can I get anything more for you two?” Bob asked.

Caleb nodded. “Rum.” He glanced across the table at her. “Would you like a drink?”

She looked up at Bob. “What do you recommend?”

His grin broadened. “My Drunken Pirates are a house specialty.”

She grinned. “Sounds great. Thanks.” He left them behind for the bar as Diana focused on Caleb again. “How long has he owned this place?”

“Last October, Bob’s Seafood celebrated its centennial. He opened it in 1920.” Some of the tension seemed to loosen along the tops of his shoulders as he reached for a hushpuppy.

“Wow.” She scanned the room. There were four other couples scattered around booths and tables, and one older guy sitting at the bar, but Bob had seated them far from the crowd. “How does he keep people from noticing he never ages?”

Caleb’s mouth tugged a little at the corners. Not quite a smile, but an improvement over his earlier distress. He tipped his head toward the front door. “The legacy wall.” He chuffed, rolling his eyes. “We all have to fake our deaths at some point, and then a descendant returns to claim their inheritance. John Smyth, our boatswain, helps with managing the financial matters and transferring of assets. Most of us come back with a beard or longer hair, but Bob...” His voice faded as he looked over his shoulder at the front entrance. “You should probably see it to believe it.”

She took the bait and slid out of the booth. Before heading for the wall, she stopped at his side, meeting his eyes. “Just so you know, when I told Bob we weren’t dating, I wasn’t saying I didn’t like you or want you. We just aren’t a couple...at least not yet.”

His gaze wandered over her face. “I’ve been alive for over two hundred fifty years, but being with you has me...off-balance.”

“You’re alive.” She smiled and patted his leg. “But maybe you weren’t really living, right?”

She left him to chew on that thought as she made her way to the front entrance. When she got to the legacy wall, she laughed, shaking her head as she looked from one picture to the next.

The “founder” was listed as One-Eyed Bob Griffin. The photo looked to be one of the old sepia-toned tintype pictures. In spite of his 1920s attire, he looked more like a pirate. His hair was still silver and very sparse around the sides, but his leather eyepatch combined with a short white goatee gave him more of a piratical feel than the clean-cut version of Bob she’d just met.

The next photo was black and white. He had short hair now, and his eyepatch was offset by a monocle on his other eye. It reminded her of Mr. Peanut on the blue cans. The next picture had no eyepatch, his first glass eye, she assumed. Each time his name was posted a little differently, once as Bob Jr., another as Bob the third, and finally, his current incarnation was Robert Griffin the fourth.

“You can call me Bob,” he said, startling her.

She glanced over at him with a laugh. “You have this right out in the open and no one has ever noticed you’re all missing the same eye?”

He nudged her shoulder. “Didn’t you grow up in Savannah? Folks here expect some quirks and idiosyncrasies. Savannahians would never be rude enough to call them out.” He chuckled. “One obtuse reporter brought it up during our centennial celebration, but a simple mention of chronic genetic ocular issues seemed to satisfy him.” He looked back at Caleb, then to her again. “Our navigator has taken a shine to you. I’ve never seen him out with a woman who wasn’t a colleague of some kind.”

She smiled at the old pirate cook. “I think I’m the opposite of anyone he usually hangs out with. I’m not sure yet if that’s good or bad.”

He nodded, his gaze turning to the founder’s wall again. “He’s a romantic, no matter what he tells you.”

She chuckled. "How do you figure that?"

He gave her a thoughtful smile. "From the stories I've heard, he gave his heart to a woman once before, and he's never thought to take comfort in another. He'd claim he was too busy with his books and didn't have time, but deep down, I think he just thought he'd never love another." He shrugged. "Only a true romantic would believe that."

"Maybe." She glanced over at Caleb. "He doesn't make it easy."

"Nothin' good ever is, right, lass?" Bob disappeared into the kitchen, leaving her with her thoughts.

Being with Darius in college had been very easy, but at the first sign of distress, when he'd wanted to chase a job in New York and she'd wanted to stay close to her family in Savannah, he'd walked away like she'd been nothing more than a way to pass time.

Their relationship had been convenient and fun, but in the end, it had been far from good.

Suddenly her vision clouded as she stared up at the wall of photos, blinking back tears. Once she got her emotions under control, she turned around, her gaze landing on the handsome man in the corner booth.

Caleb had a strong jaw and chiseled features. His shoulders were square, and from what she'd seen earlier, his body was toned, teasing her to explore every inch of him.

But his broody, introspective nature was the opposite of her usual type.

He looked up as she approached the table. "Well?"

She shrugged as she scooted into the booth. "I'm impressed. I can't believe more people don't notice."

He nodded. "Bob chooses to stay hidden right in the open. He has to fade away and return more than any of the rest of us. He was nearly sixty when he drank from the cup, so every twenty or twenty-five years, he has to reinvent himself and 'inherit' his restaurant."

She glanced back toward the front door. "He said people are too polite to ask, but I still can't wrap my head around no one noticing they're all the same guy."

"We often see what we want to, right?" He met her eyes. "Whatever makes us more comfortable."

That was an understatement. She'd missed all the signs with Darius.

She took a sip of the Drunken Pirate Bob had left for her and studied Caleb for a moment. "How often do you...reinvent yourself?"

“I can usually get twenty to twenty-five years before people start to tease and chatter about my anti-aging genes. Then I know it’s time.”

Diana munched on some shrimp and hushpuppies as silence descended on them.

If they could stop this tidal wave and save Savannah, where would it leave her and this pirate? Unlike him, she would age, and eventually, he’d be alone, left behind again.

Although the Holy Grail had stopped time for Caleb and his crew, they couldn’t stop time from passing around them. Death still came for the rest of the world.

He wiped his hands with the napkin. “Maybe my lack of condoms saved us from making a rash decision.”

Diana’s gaze shot to his face as she raised a brow with a laugh. “Oh, I would’ve been the best decision you ever made.”

“I feared as much.” His crooked smile sparked heat low in her belly. “My books would *never* satisfy me again.”

Coming from anyone else, she might’ve laughed, but from him, understanding the way books were his entire world, her heart melted.

And while it was intoxicating to imagine a relationship with a man willing to make her his world, a shadow of warning whispered through her mind.

If she allowed this connection between them to grow, he would lose her, and he would be forced to face the loss for the rest of time.

He was right. This was for the best.

But she didn’t have to like it.

Chapter Seven

David Bale woke up before the sun.

His hotel bed in Savannah had been comfortable enough, but he needed to get to the *Sea Dog*. They'd be setting sail at sunrise.

So he left his team behind at the hotel and drove to the River Street dock as the sky was just beginning to lighten. Within an hour, the sun would peer over the horizon.

He got out of the car and headed for the *Sea Dog*. The Savannah River was still a busy port, even after hundreds of years. Research vessels, shipping barges, and commercial fishing fleets all stopped in Savannah every day. The replica of the 1790s Spanish galleon was impossible to miss.

Colton, the ship's quartermaster, had built the replica with the help of Drake, the ship's carpenter, and when they weren't sailing off to steal artifacts for Department 13, Colton made a living giving school tours and occasionally renting the deck for weddings and events.

Today, the ship would be heading for the coordinates provided by a psychic he hadn't met in person yet. He aimed to change that this morning.

David approached the dock, scanning all the activity on the main deck. His agent, Aura Henderson, noticed him and crossed the gangplank. She still favored all black clothes, but her dark brown hair was longer than when she worked in DC with him. Her ponytail bounced behind her, matching her determined strides.

She stopped beside him, facing the ship. "Good to see you, sir. Your team is already in the city?"

He nodded, his eyes on immortal pirate crew carrying supplies across the deck. "Any chance I can meet Miss Bianca before you set sail?"

"Sure. I can find her for you."

She turned to go, but David stopped her. "Wait. Is the whole crew sailing

on this voyage?”

She shook her head. “Skye is due any day, so she and Colton are staying home.”

Although Colton still went by his title on the first *Sea Dog* ship, this reincarnation of the sunken vessel belonged to him. Colton was the captain here. The crew’s original leader, Ian Flynn, was captain in name only these days.

David looked at Aura. “If Colton’s staying ashore, who is going to captain the ship for this voyage?”

Aura rolled her shoulders back and met his eyes. Above them, on the bow of the ship, a tall man stopped and crossed his arms as he stared down at them. His copper hair was tied back, goatee trimmed, and he wore his immaculate, antique frock coat.

“Agent Bale,” he called down. “I wasn’t aware this mission involved you.”

David’s eyes cut over to Aura. “Flynn?”

“Just this one time, sir.” She nodded.

He laughed, shaking his head in disbelief. “He may never relinquish the power back to Colton.”

“I doubt that,” she replied as another man came up behind Flynn. He was a head taller than the captain and probably outweighed him by fifty pounds of muscle. Duke Proctor, the first mate. Aura glanced at David. “Duke is supporting his leadership for this voyage *only*. There’s no way Flynn would try to usurp Colton without Duke in his corner.”

Duke had been Flynn’s first mate since the 1700s. He’d been the captain’s insurance against mutiny back in the day. These days Flynn pirated in commercial properties as the CEO of Flynn Enterprises.

“All right.” David nodded to them as he asked Aura, “What about Heather Storrey?”

She tensed, drawing a sigh from David.

Now that many of his team knew he had dated Heather for a while, they often jumped to conclusions about his motives for seeing her. He was getting sick of explaining himself every time he mentioned her name. He’d been the one to break off their relationship, and in the end, when she’d fallen in love with the *Sea Dog*’s carpenter Drake, David had wished her well. He’d meant it.

“Is she on the ship?” he asked again.

“Yes.” Aura searched his eyes. “She’ll stay in the cabin during the daylight hours, but she’s eager to sail, and we think her psychic gifts might come in handy. Why?”

“I’d like to speak to her, too, before you set sail.”

Aura crossed her arms, and her gaze bore into him. “Is there a problem I should know about? I’m still an agent for Department 13.”

He felt for Agent Henderson. Her relationship with Greyson, the ship’s gunner, made her very close to the crew, but she was also an agent of the United States government. Her loyalties were being stretched to the breaking point.

“There’s no problem.” His attention shifted back to the ship. “But I still need to talk to them both.”

She finally nodded. “I’ll send them over.”

Aura boarded the ship again while David checked his messages on his phone.

A few minutes later, Heather crossed the gangplank with a young Black woman he assumed must be Miss Bianca behind her. Heather’s albinism left her skin with no pigment, and her long silver hair was in a thick braid over the front of her shoulder. It was good to see her again even if her ethereal beauty still disarmed him a little more than he’d like to admit.

“Hi, David.” Her ice-blue eyes were full of questions. “Aura said you needed to tell us something?”

She was all business, which was just as well. He nodded. “Yes. Thanks for meeting me.” He turned to Miss Bianca and offered his hand. “I’m Agent David Bale.”

Miss Bianca took his hand in a firm grip. “Heather tells me you work for a part of the government that no one knows exists.”

His gaze cut to Heather’s face. She raised her brows, daring him to lie. He released Miss Bianca’s hand. “We protect Americans from paranormal threats, so we are a top-secret division, for obvious reasons.” He focused on Miss Bianca. “I knew your aunt Lorenda. I’m sorry for your loss.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

This woman was younger than he’d expected. According to his files, during the crew’s search for the figurehead of the *Flying Dutchman* last year, she’d managed to trade Drake’s immortality to power a spell that brought Heather back from the dead.

Powerful magic for someone in her...he’d guess late twenties. Maybe

thirty.

“I wanted to ask you some questions about your dreams.” He glanced at Heather. “And since you’re accompanying them on this journey, there’s a spirit I want to connect you with. She might be of some help.”

Heather was one of the best psychic mediums he’d ever come in contact with, and in his division, that was saying something.

Heather’s body language softened slightly. “All right.”

He turned to Miss Bianca. Her long braids hung down her back, and he imagined her gray Scallywags concert tee was probably a hit with Keegan, the ship’s pilot. His Southern Rock band was big around Savannah. Small world that this psychic turned out to be a fan.

David focused on the task at hand. He’d spent most of the night reading everything he could find on Atlantis in the Department 13 libraries in preparation. “Can you tell me what you saw in your dream? It might help us in our search.”

She glanced at Heather and back to David. “Your search for what?”

So Aura and Greyson hadn’t told the crew that he and his team were going to be searching Savannah for any sign of the Orichalcum Key. Good to know.

He took out his small notepad and pen from his coat pocket. The department had plenty of gadgets and electronic tablets, but he could think better with his old school pad and pen. “We’re looking for a legendary relic with the ability to control the tides.”

“The Orichalcum Key.” Miss Bianca’s lips curved, probably catching his surprised expression before he could bury it. “Caleb had one of your books that mentioned Atlantis.”

“I see.” He jotted down her name and lifted his eyes. “The dream?”

“There was a massive gate in a wall that was miles long. I stared up at it, and these numbers kept forming. Then a wave even bigger than the walls cast a shadow over me. I’d wake up coughing and sputtering like I’d almost drowned.” She crossed her arms. “It took me a couple of weeks to figure out they were longitude and latitude coordinates.”

His gaze rose from the notepad. “Any sign of a key in your dreams?”

She hesitated for a second before shaking her head. “No. I’m sorry.”

But his gut was screaming she knew more than she was saying out loud.

Why would she hide something? She’d mentioned reading one of the books he’d loaned to Caleb. Maybe it was that simple. He’d let it go for

now.

“Thanks for the information. If you think of anything else, the crew knows how to reach me.” He glanced over at Heather. “If you get a chance while you’re out at sea, we had an agent in Department 13 who used to specialize in lost civilizations. Her name was Rose McNamara. If you connect with her, she might be a resource for this mission.”

Heather’s lips curved into a thoughtful smile. “I’ll see what I can do.”

David tucked his notepad and pen back into his pocket. “I’ll be in touch with Agent Henderson if we locate anything here in Savannah.” He took a step back and looked at Miss Bianca. “Good to meet you.”

She turned to board the ship again, and David looked at Heather. “Miss Bianca’s aunt was a powerful root doctor in Savannah. She’s crossed over, so if you can connect with her, she might be able to help you once you reach the coordinates.”

“Mother Lorenda.” Heather glanced at the ship and back to his face. “I knew her.”

He should’ve guessed. Savannah’s metaphysical community was tight knit. “Good. I wanted to be sure you were aware. Since Miss Bianca is her descendant, Mother Lorenda has a vested interest in getting you all back safely.”

“It almost sounds like you care.” Heather’s gentle smile sent a pang of regret through him. He still hated that he’d hurt her, and maybe deep down, he regretted losing her.

He sighed. “You know I do.” His gaze shifted over to the ship. “Have a safe trip.”

“We will.” Heather walked away without saying goodbye.

David’s cell phone buzzed with a text. He took it out and glanced at the screen.

We found something interesting on a shipping manifest.

David gripped his phone tight as he turned for his rental car. The Orichalcum Key might be closer than they realized.

Chapter Eight

Diana stood near the front of *Sea Dog*, watching the federal agent get back into his car. He'd asked about the key, and she'd almost mentioned Caleb's dream, but her intuition had pinged not to share that detail. It wasn't her story to share anyway.

Heather approached and stopped beside her. "He means well, but sometimes he's so devoted to all his department protocol's, he loses sight of what's most important."

Heather seemed to know Agent Bale pretty well, but it was none of Diana's business. Instead she asked, "Can you really connect with specific souls on command like he suggested?"

Heather looked her way with a warm smile. "David wishes I could, but it's not like I have an 800 number to the other side." She chuckled. "If the spirit wants to share information with me, then they're more likely to connect with me, but I can't find a spirit and force contact. It's not quite as simple as dialing a number and leaving a voicemail."

Diana grinned. "Thank goodness. The last thing I need is to be fielding calls from the dead."

Heather turned around and pointed to the stairs leading below the deck. "Come on, we can talk shop in my cabin while they finish helping One-Eyed Bob stow all the provisions for the trip."

"Sure." Diana went inside and took a seat at the small table with two chairs.

The cabin was very small, but Heather had made small personal touches. There was a small bowl of crystals in the center of the table, blackout drapes over the porthole window, and a laptop closed on the bed.

Diana laughed. "The laptop looks a little out of place on a pirate ship."

"I can't be out in the sun much during the day, so I'll be counting on the

satellite internet to keep me busy.” Heather grinned. “I doubt it’ll be fast enough for gaming, but at least I can read and write, maybe watch some videos I downloaded.”

Diana crossed her ankles and rested her forearm on the table. “I’ve heard stories about you around the metaphysical community, but you’re nothing like I pictured. I never imagined you’d be a computer gamer, or be a pirate’s girlfriend, or...” She shrugged. “I guess I just imagined you as a reclusive medium who brings messages from the dead.”

She arched a brow with a sparkle in her light blue eyes. “Just because I make a living from my psychic gifts doesn’t mean that’s *all* I am.” She gestured to Diana. “There’s probably more to you than just Miss Bianca, right?”

Diana examined her fingernails for a second and finally lifted her eyes. “My name is actually Diana Williams. I’m a graphic designer, but when Drake came to the Botanica Shop...”

“You’re Miss Bianca there.” Heather nodded. “Your family knows about your gifts?”

“Yeah. My auntie trained me, but...” She shook her head. “Wait, are you reading me?”

Heather laughed. “If you’re asking if your aunt Lorenda is here, her energy is all around you, but she’s not speaking to me right now.” Heather sobered. “I’m just offering you a shoulder if you need it. This is bound to be a long trip, and since Atlantis seems to be reaching out to you in particular, I wanted you to know my door is always open if you want to talk.”

“Thank you.” Diana smiled, hoping she was covering her mixed-up emotions. She and her aunt were the only two in her immediate family with any psychic gifts. Since her aunt had passed away, Diana had been on her own with the metaphysical side of herself. “I’ve been busy with starting my graphic design business and haven’t really focused on the spiritual practice so much. Part of me was ready to give it up before the dreams started.”

“I’d love to see your designs sometime.” Heather studied her for a moment. “You know you don’t have to choose. You can still be a graphic designer and just use your psychic gifts to help people on the side. I’m sure no one expects you to pick up where your aunt left off. This is your journey to take.”

Diana’s lips curved into a thoughtful smile. “Are you sure my aunt Lorenda isn’t floating around in here?”

Heather chuckled, shaking her head. "This is all coming from me."

"Thank you." Diana met her eyes. "I really appreciate it."

"Anytime."

A knock came on the open door, and Diana twisted around to find Caleb filling the doorway. "I don't mean to interrupt." His gaze flicked from Diana to Heather and back again. "But when you're finished down here, we're about to shove off. Just thought you might want to be topside for it."

"Thanks." Diana smiled. "I'll be up in a minute."

Heather waited for him to disappear before coming closer. "I don't know what you did to get Caleb on board with taking this trip, but he almost seems eager to set sail."

Diana decided against telling her about the kiss. Heather had been kind, but she barely knew her. She smiled and stood up. "Caleb is really..." She searched for the right word. The man had the body of a superhero, the mind of a scientist, and the quirky spirit of a unique soul she might grow to treasure. Was there a word to embody all that? "Interesting."

"He is definitely that." Heather chuckled with a nod. "He's also loyal and driven." She lowered her voice. "And it's nice to see him lifting his head out of his books."

Diana wasn't ready to comment on that. Last night, she'd gone home alone. They hadn't fought, and there had been no drama. He hadn't appeared to be upset when she'd come on board a few hours ago. In fact, he'd taken her hand and showed her around as if they hadn't almost had sex the night before. She had no idea where this was going.

"I better get up there. I don't want to miss the sunrise." Diana smiled as she left the cabin. She liked Caleb's crew. They all seemed to accept him and resisted the urge to try to change him. It was also obvious they'd noticed his interest in her and welcomed it.

Didn't they recognize the immortality issue brewing between them?

When she reached the top of the stairs, Captain Flynn was standing next to Keegan at the helm. Diana gave herself a mental pat on the back for keeping her cool when Caleb had introduced her to their ship's pilot.

Keegan was the lead singer of her favorite local alt rock band, the Scallywags. She had some of their merch and loved his sea shanties he sung as encores at their concerts. It had never remotely occurred to her that those sea shanties were being sung by an immortal pirate.

She'd never led a mundane life, but this was pretty far out there, even for

her.

Caleb approached her with a smile and his compass in hand. “Are you ready?”

“I think so.” She grinned. “I packed some Dramamine just in case.”

“It’s going to be a clear day.” He laughed, and his voice took on a touch of his piratical accent that made her pulse jump. “Just keep yer eye on the horizon, lass. You’ll find yer sea legs soon enough.”

Okay, the accent added a little dusting of bad boy to the mix, making it even tougher to keep her distance. She’d already been struggling to stop obsessing over their kiss the night before. Now they were going to be trapped on this boat together for days.

She smiled. “I bet you don’t use that accent at the university.”

He shook his head. “It slips out on board the ship. Does it...bother you?”

“No.” She bumped him with her shoulder. “It’s pretty sexy for a college professor.”

He took her hand, sending a spark of awareness through her entire body. “I’m the Sea Artist here.”

She raised a brow as they walked toward the apex of the front of the ship. “I didn’t know you were an artist, too.”

He squeezed her hand with a laugh. “Not in the sense you mean. In my day, the navigators were called sea artists because we read the stars and the sea and plotted the course for the ship based on our readings. We didn’t have the technology we do now.”

She pointed at the compass in his other hand. “That doesn’t look like technology.”

“Habit.”

He stared into her eyes long enough to elevate her heart rate before Captain Flynn shouted from behind them, “Anchors aweigh! Drop the sails!”

Diana slid her hand free from Caleb’s and turned around to see Greyson and Drake scrambling up the ropes on one side of the main mast.

They were easy for her to remember because she’d known them before this trip, from the Botanica Shop. Greyson was the master gunner and Drake was the ship’s carpenter, Heather’s boyfriend.

On the other side of the mast, the captain’s first mate, Duke, and John, the boatswain, raced up toward the crow’s nest at the top of the mast. John was tall and slender with dark brown eyes and black hair that he kept tied back

in a ponytail. He was one of the few in the pirate crew who still wore a gold hoop earring. It wasn't big and flashy, more like a nod to his lifetime of piracy. Their hands and legs moved in a quick rhythm in time with the bouncing ropes, never missing a rung.

She grinned. "I'd love to try that sometime."

Caleb raised a brow. "Too dangerous for your first time at sea. They can rush because they can't die."

And there it was, her reminder that while she and Caleb had some chemistry cooking up between them, it would never change the passage of time. He'd stay thirty-something forever, and she would not.

She looked up at the carpenter. "Drake's not immortal. Not anymore."

"True." Caleb nodded. "But he's got two hundred years of experience on those ratlines."

"I almost killed myself getting stuck up there," Agent Aura Henderson said as she approached them on the bow. Diana had met her briefly, but they hadn't had a chance to really talk yet. She shook her head slowly. "I'll leave the high wire act to the pirates this trip."

Diana studied the agent for a moment. "Agent Bale told me he had a team searching Savannah for the Orichalcum Key. Why are you on the ship with us?"

Aura glanced her way with an arched brow. "You cut right to the chase. I like that." She pointed up at Greyson. "My guy committed to the crew before he ever met me or Department 13. He's not going to let them sail without him." She focused on Diana again. "Besides, if we find something at the coordinates you gave us, I'm here for backup. I've got some experience dealing with otherworldly events and creatures. You might end up needing me."

It was a good line, but Diana wasn't fooled. She crossed her arms. "So it's not because my dreams might lead us to the lost city of Atlantis? I would bet the U.S. government would be pretty interested in what might be down there."

Aura's eyebrows shot up before a barely there smile curved her mouth slightly. "Atlantis is part of it. You're more psychic than I realized."

Diana pursed her lips with a shrug. "Just observant."

Caleb's hand brushed the small of her back. "Aura works for Agent Bale, but she's also Greyson's partner. She's not here to spy on us."

"I'm not accusing anyone of spying." Diana glanced his way and then

back to Aura. “But I did get an interesting vibe off Agent Bale. If Atlantis is out here, he wants to see it.”

“If we find it without him, he’ll be disappointed for sure.” Aura nodded. “He comes across cold sometimes, but he’s a good guy. Just very focused on our mission to protect Americans from paranormal threats. It’s personal for him.” She shrugged. “I better go finish setting up the satellite link with Harmony. I just wanted to make sure Greyson made it up in one piece.” Her eyes met Diana’s. “I’ll see you around.”

She turned and walked away, and Diana fixated on the brightening horizon.

In spite of what Aura had said about Agent Bale, Diana didn’t regret her decision not to mention the key in Caleb’s dream. If he wanted Agent Bale to know, he would’ve told him.

She glanced over at Caleb. “Can we go all the way up front, or do you need to stay with Keegan?”

“Sure. I could help you up on the railing if you want a *Titanic* moment.”

Her jaw dropped as a grin tugged at her lips. “You’ve never used a condom, but you’ve seen *Titanic*?”

He laughed and shook his head slowly. “No, I haven’t seen it, but I’ve witnessed plenty of students tour this ship and sneak away to become ‘King of the World.’”

She drank in the sound of his laughter and the eager spark in his eyes. This ship was probably the only place on the planet that had remained unchanged for him. Sure, he might have some new navigational tech and a generator for electric light, but this was still his domain that time had forgotten.

His sanctuary.

He took her hand again and led her to the bow. Above them, the men straddled the main mast. The largest one, Duke, if she remembered his name correctly, shouted a countdown. At exactly the same time, the men freed the main sail from the ties. The canvas dropped, snapping as the wind caught it. The ship creaked, moving faster down the Savannah River.

Diana smiled. “We’re on our way.”

“We are.” He studied her face, leaning closer.

Half of her wanted him to kiss her, almost ached for it, but the other half was screaming for her to keep him at arm’s length. There was no future for them. He had forever and she...didn’t.

She turned to face the horizon. Words couldn't do it justice.

Seeing the beginning of a new day and sailing into it made everything else pale in comparison. It did make her feel like the king of the world. She moved to the railing and climbed up. Caleb's hands caught her waist steadying her. She hadn't been off-balance, but she appreciated his effort to keep her from going overboard.

The dark murky waters below parted as the *Sea Dog* sliced through the surface of the Savannah River toward the open ocean. The sunlight glistened on the water as the sun began its ascent into the heavens. Her journey was underway.

No turning back now.

Chapter Nine

Words failed him as Caleb struggled to memorize Diana's profile.

Beautiful wasn't a big enough word for the artistry in the angles of her high cheekbones and the glorious joy emanating from her wide smile as they sailed into the new day. Her long black braids hung down her back, and the morning sun sparkled in her eyes. She was a goddess.

As if she could hear his thoughts, she glanced his way with an infectious grin that made his heart race. She raised a brow. "You didn't warn me how amazing it would be to sail into the sunrise."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Words don't do it justice."

"True." She leaned into him slightly, the warmth of her body making him ache to hold her and never let her go. She pointed at the waves as they entered the Atlantic. "The way the sun is peeking over the horizon and the light dances on the water reminds me of the stories my aunt used to tell me about water elementals. The flashes of light are like the sparks of invention and magic of possibilities." She met his eyes. "Like anything is possible."

He brought his hand to the small of her back, and when her arm moved around his waist, his pulse raced with the realization that from the depths of his soul, there seemed to be a part of him yearning to be near her, to bask in the light of her free spirit.

It made no sense, really. He was a man of science. The sun wasn't actually lifting up out of the horizon. The earth was spiraling around it. But for once, he simply enjoyed seeing the world through her lens.

If magic really existed, she would be the embodiment of it.

And for the first time in over two hundred years, he yearned for something his books would never be able to supply.

Affection.

Why now? For lifetimes, science had been his constant companion. He'd

had love once with Abigail before he ever took a sip from the Grail. That had been enough. Some people never found it. He had.

He'd marked the experience off as if it were just another item on his life goals. Companionship seemed unnecessary in the face of lifetimes of knowledge and discovery.

But he'd never met anyone like Diana. He wanted to know everything about her.

He wanted *her*.

Fuck. What was he thinking?

He wasn't thinking.

That was even more terrifying.

"Are you all right?" She nudged him. "I can't believe you're passing up the opportunity to tell me the sparkles are just the sunlight refracting off the water?"

"No." He tightened his hold on her and shook his head as he stared out at the horizon. "I like your explanation better."

He didn't recognize himself.

She rose on her toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Don't worry. I won't tell anyone."

He chuckled and looked over at her, his gaze falling to her full lips. "They would never believe you."

Her grin widened as her eyes wandered over his face. "You surprise me."

"How so?"

She shrugged and faced the water again. "When we first met, you dismissed me and my dreams. You didn't even want to go on this trip. What's changed?"

Everything. He followed her gaze to the endless horizon. "I'm fairly certain it's related to your influence. No one else has ever encouraged me to ignore science before."

She squeezed his waist and looked up at him. "I'm going to take that as a compliment."

He smiled. "Good."

Someone coughed behind them, and Caleb turned to find Drake rubbing his chin. "Don't mean to interrupt, but Flynn needs you at the helm."

Caleb nodded and turned to Diana. "I'd better go."

She grinned and stepped back. "I'm sure we'll bump into each other again. The boat's not *that* big."

He nodded and forced himself to turn around. He already missed the heat of her body close to his. The intoxicating energy of desire was fresh and new and...addicting.

...

Diana watched his ass as he walked away before looking over at Drake. "I saw you running those lines earlier. I'm impressed."

He laughed, shaking his head. "It's second nature to me now." He paused. "Is this your first time sailing?"

"Does it show?"

He had a deep laugh that made her smile. When they'd first met, he'd been frantic about getting his hands on magic to save Heather. Diana still didn't know why he'd been so sure Heather's life had been in danger, but the root Diana had made for him must've worked because Heather seemed to be in perfect health. And now she was a member of the crew along with him.

"Do you ever worry you might fall, now that you're mortal?" Diana asked.

He shrugged. "I move fast up there, but I'm always careful. I've never fallen, and I don't plan to." His eyes sparkled. "But Heather won't watch our ratline races. She's more worried than I am."

"I'd love to try it sometime." Diana grinned. "I work out at the cirque gym in Savannah. Mostly trapeze and aerial work, so I feel like I could do it without falling."

"Best view on the ship up there." He squinted, looking up at the lines. "I could show you."

Diana gasped. "Really?"

"Sure." Drake nodded. "We won't go up far, but you could give it a try."

Diana followed Drake over to the right side of the boat.

She wasn't sure if it was starboard or port or whatever they called it, but it didn't really matter.

He stopped and looked over at her. "We usually take a running jump and start climbing, but I could boost you up."

"A boost would work." She reached her arms up toward the ropes, and Drake gripped her waist, lifting her until she grabbed the lines. Funny how his touch didn't send electricity through her bloodstream like every tiny caress from Caleb did. Drake seemed more like a big brother or a cousin.

There wasn't the same chemistry.

Hanging by her hands, she contracted her core muscles and pulled her legs up to the ropes. So far so good. She kept her focus on the next rungs of the rope ladder.

The old hymn her grandmother used to sing about climbing Jacob's ladder filled her head as she placed her hands up on the next rung, pulling herself a little higher.

From below, Drake called, "That's it. Hold on tight and I'll join you."

Caleb's voice surprised her. "What the hell are you doing?"

She peered down at the deck, shocked to see she was probably about three stories up already.

Drake crossed his arms. "She wanted to try climbing the lines. I was teaching her how."

"You're going to get her killed." Caleb shoved him back and jumped up to catch the lines. The entire webbing of ropes bounced, making her squeak as she tightened her grip to keep from being thrown off.

Caleb reached her in three minutes tops. She was impressed.

Concern shone in his eyes. "Are you all right?"

Diana chuckled. "I was until you turned into Tarzan and almost bounced me off the ropes."

He studied her face as a sheepish smile started to tug at his lips. "Sorry. I..." He shook his head, hooking his forearm through the rung so he could free his other hand without falling. He rested his hand over hers and again sent a little zing of energy and desire shooting through her entire body. "I'm...out of practice."

She raised a brow. "I don't know, I thought you were pretty fast racing up here."

"Not with the lines. With..." He paused, clearly struggling to find the right word. "...feelings."

She shouldn't have liked hearing he had feelings for her. They were complete opposites. He was all science and material proof, and she had learned to put her trust in intuition. Beyond that, there was the ocean of time between them. He was probably born at least two hundred years before her.

In spite of all those obstacles, there was definitely a connection growing between them that she was having a tough time denying.

"I thought we decided we were not making any rash decisions. We're

concentrating on searching for a city you think is make-believe. Right?”

His gaze wandered over her face, and she swore disappointment flashed in his eyes before he squeezed her hand and went back to gripping the ropes again. For a split second, she'd never felt so alone. She was miles away from her family and friends and dry land back in Savannah, sailing into the unknown.

She stared out at the horizon, enjoying the way the wind blew through her box braids. The ship bobbed as it cut through the water, adding to the dreamlike quality of the moment. The sunlight sparkled on the water ahead of them, beckoning them to follow.

“I wish I could see this voyage through your eyes.” His voice was soft as if he didn't want to break the spell they found themselves under.

She smiled, without taking her eyes off the horizon. “It wouldn't make any sense to you. I just put my whole life on hold to sail to coordinates that came to me in a dream. There's no logical reason for me to be on this ship, but if I wasn't, I would've missed this sunrise.” She risked a glance his way to find him staring at her. “I'm right where I'm supposed to be. I know that to the depths of my soul. I don't understand why yet, but I trust that I will when the time is right.” She shrugged, facing the horizon again. “I guess if I had a little more of your passion for concrete facts, it would help me keep my feet on the ground and build my business.”

She waited for him to agree and come back with a barrage of scientific facts firmly based in this material plane, but he didn't.

“Science has been my savior over the years, but it's never made me feel the way I do with you.”

She turned, and his blue eyes seemed to open a window into a soul that had seen more lifetimes than she could imagine. She rested her weight into the ropes and hooked her arm through, freeing her hand to catch his. He interlaced his fingers with hers.

His hand was larger than hers, calloused and rough. She suddenly had the image of yin and yang, opposites that create balance. Her gaze rose to his face.

“I'm not going to live forever like you.” She searched his eyes. “There's no future for us.”

“I know.” He broke eye contact, staring down at their hands. “But I can't reconcile these feelings.”

She leaned in closer to him, the rope biting into the crook of her arm.

“What if we just pretend on this trip that you’re mortal like me?”

What was she doing? But now that the words were out of her mouth, she caught herself hoping he’d agree.

He met her eyes. “I think that’s a fool’s game. The trip will end. And it will...hurt.”

She lifted their joined hands. “I’m going to tell you a little secret that you’re not going to want to believe.”

A corner of his mouth pulled up and his eyes sparkled. “All right.”

“We were both having dreams about whatever is happening with the tides. We’re both a part of this, and we’re right where we’re supposed to be. My aunt used to always say that ‘everything is in Divine order,’ and I believe that with my whole heart.”

A crease formed on his forehead, and she could almost see the cogs in his beautiful mind churning. “Even if I were to throw science overboard and admit our dreams might be connected to this voyage, how would pretending I was mortal be a part of some divine plan?”

“It wouldn’t be.” Laughter bubbled from her throat. “It’s a horrible idea.”

Confusion lined his features. “Then why did you suggest it?”

Her smile softened as she studied every angle on his face. “Because I’ve never met anyone like you, either. You make me laugh and frustrate me, and I want to lie to myself and say we can ignore the immortality issue. Deep down, I think the chance to be with you would make the pain at the end of the trip worth it.”

He lifted their joined hands and pressed a kiss to the back of hers. “I could forget my immortality for a few days.”

Her heart skipped a few beats. Were they really going to do this? She raised a brow. “You know there’s a good chance we’ll be kicking ourselves when we get back to Savannah, right?”

He freed his hand from hers and brought it up to caress her cheek. His smile stole her breath as he whispered, “I can run the probabilities later.”

She laughed as he pressed a slow, tender kiss to her lips that had her toes curling inside her shoes. His tongue brushed her lower lip, a temptation.

He pulled back, resting his forehead on hers. “Now can I help you down?”

“I can do it myself.” She started moving down to prove her point.

She tipped her head to look up at him and found him smiling at her. Heat pooled low in her belly as the voice of reason warned she was getting into

treacherous waters with this man.

But she shoved the thought aside. They'd both dreamed about Savannah being pummeled by waves before they'd even met. She had to believe there was a reason destiny was drawing them together.

Hopefully, it wasn't to smash them against the rocks.

And if that truly was her fate, she was going to live every day to its fullest. She was through hiding behind her work.

It was time to live and love again. Even if it would only be for a few days, even if it meant heartbreak in the end.

Chapter Ten

David entered his hotel room and sat on the edge of the bed with a groan.

The shipping manifest Kingsley had discovered was a dead end. David tracked the lead back to the dock on River Street, but the irregularity in the paperwork ended up being an innocent mistake instead of a cover for a smuggled shipment of Orichalcum.

He pulled out his cell phone and pressed Aura's name. She was probably a few miles out in the Atlantic by now.

"Agent Henderson," she answered.

"Are you alone?"

"Just a minute." Her footsteps thumped through the other end of the line, the wind whistling. Then came the sound of a door closing, and the background noise vanished. "I am now. Did you find the key?"

"No. But I need to tell you something that's been on my mind. This needs to stay between us."

She didn't immediately agree. *Greyson. Damn it.*

David didn't begrudge her finding love, but it complicated his work. Seeing Aura happy was nice. But trying to navigate his relationship with the immortal pirate crew now that one of them was straddling the line with Department 13 was giving him a headache.

He ran his fingers through his hair. "Until I know more, there's no sense worrying Greyson since it might concern one of his crewmates."

"Did something happen?"

"Maybe? I'm not sure." He clasped his free hand around the back of his neck as he stared at his black shoes. "Remember when the tides first started rising and I took a trip to the Yucatan during the equinox?"

"Back in March." She paused. "Did it have something to do with the Orichalcum Key?"

“It was just a hunch, but I met with an Arcturian during the equinox at the Chichen Itza pyramid.”

“Aren’t the Arcturians...extraterrestrials?” She cleared her throat. “That’s not really our jurisdiction.”

“I’m well-aware.” David got to his feet, pacing the room.

He’d never forget the Arcturian’s wide, inhuman eyes that appeared to be filled with a galaxy of stars. It had unsettled him at the time, and just remembering it had his palms sweating.

The extraterrestrial hadn’t threatened him in any way, but he had projected images into David’s mind as easily as if they were just sharing vacation photos. He wasn’t sure any of his magic or talismans could protect him from a being like that.

He cleared his throat. “The director of Department 51 set up the meeting for me. I’d been digging into our library about legendary relics that could control the tide. When I stumbled across the Orichalcum Key, I started researching our records on Atlantis. There were mentions about the concentric circles of the city, advanced architecture, and the red Orichalcum metal that couldn’t be found anywhere else... It reminded me of the way the ancient civilizations had created structures and circles to catch the light during the equinoxes, like Stonehenge and Chichen Itza. What if Atlantis had brought their technology with them?”

“From another galaxy?” Aura paused. “Did the Arcturian know anything about Atlantis? Did they have anything to do with building the city?”

“No. But my hunch about otherworldly science was right. He said that unlike the Arcturians, the Atlanteans didn’t come to the planet to explore. They came to colonize.”

“Whoa. Wait.” Aura coughed. “They were aliens?”

“Apparently. I have no way to corroborate the Arcturian’s story, but I don’t think he had any reason to lie to me.”

She sighed. “Wow. All right. So...are they still here?”

“I think most of them were destroyed with their city.” He stopped in front of the window and stared down at the dark parking lot below. “But if they came here with a mission to colonize the planet, it’s not a stretch to assume some of their descendants are still here. They must’ve procreated with humans. There are probably people in the world right now with a touch of Atlantean blood in their veins. The alien gave me a vision of a Black woman with long braids.”

“Wait.” She paused. “Diana? Do you think she’s a descendant of Atlantis?”

“I keep circling back to her dream. The tides get erratic, and she starts having dreams that include longitude and latitude coordinates. What if Atlantis is calling for the key and only her descendants can hear it?”

“But why now?” Aura asked.

“Remember the Orichalcum rods that our lab studied from that shipwreck? Maybe one of them was the key. It could be that as long as that key is underwater, the tides remain stable.”

Aura was quiet for a minute. He checked to be sure the call hadn’t dropped.

She finally spoke. “I think we’re assuming a lot based on the legend that the key controls the tides.” She cleared her throat and added, “If the city was originally buried under a tsunami or a tidal wave, then the key must not have worked, right?”

“Or that’s what destroyed it. What if someone had smuggled the key out of the city on a boat like the one that was just recovered? Once the boat sank and the key was back underwater, the tides returned to normal, but it was too late for Atlantis.” He turned from the window and resumed pacing the length of the room. Since he’d joined Department 13, he’d come to trust his intuition, to lean on it, and right now it kept focusing on this thread, so he’d keep pulling until he found the end of it.

“Maybe these coordinates will take us to the answer,” Aura said.

He doubted it would be so simple, but they could hope so. “Keep an eye on Diana. She might be more connected to all of this than she realizes.”

“Will do, sir.”

He ended the call and set his phone aside.

If he was right and Atlantis was calling her descendants, then Diana wouldn’t be the only one having dreams. He went to the window again. How many descendants could be out there?

If most of the Atlanteans had been killed when the city had sunk, it would be safe to assume only a few remained out in the world, and they could be anywhere.

This was like searching for a needle in a haystack.

He picked up his phone again and called Kingsley. His English accent was clipped. “Have you found the key?”

“No.” David rubbed a hand down his face. “Can you pull up the notes on

the Orichalcum rods from the shipwreck? I know we already determined none of them were the key, but maybe we made a mistake.”

Keyboard clicks filled the line as Department 13’s head shamanic programmer worked his magic. He clucked his tongue. “I’m reading through the findings now, and I don’t see any glaring errors. Is there something specific I should be looking for, or would you rather I guess?”

His sarcasm was as sharp as his accent. David chuffed. “I just want to be sure we didn’t inadvertently send the key to Atlantis to a museum.”

“According to the review documents here, three different experts from our lab tested the metal pieces for metaphysical properties and cleared it.” He paused, and David could almost see his judgmental stare over his glasses. Finally, he added, “I’d be far more help if I understood what you’re trying to accomplish.”

“If I knew, I would tell you.” David rubbed his forehead. “I can almost hear the seconds ticking by before a wave wipes out half of Savannah, and we don’t even know what the key looks like. We need to figure out if we made a mistake, or if there’s more Orichalcum out there that we don’t know about.”

Kingsley’s keyboard clicks picked up on the other end of the line. “Now *that* could be something I might be able to search for.” Before David could ask, King added, “Call me back in the morning. Hopefully, I’ll have some results to share.”

“Thanks, King.” David ended the call and set his phone aside.

For all of King’s demons, his drinking, poor excuse for parenting, and bad attitude, the man was a genius on a computer. Add in that he could use his shamanic abilities to weave the spiritual realm into his programming algorithms, and he’d become an indispensable member of David’s team at Department 13.

If anyone could find a rogue shipment of a rare red metal only found in Atlantis, it would be Kingsley Pratt.

Until then, he and his team would continue to search around Savannah and hope they could stop the impending destruction.

Chapter Eleven

Caleb stepped out of the shower in his cabin and dried off.

Showers while sailing still seemed like a luxury to him. This wouldn't have been possible on the original *Sea Dog*. They'd had a head, of course, a tiny room with a toilet that had a hatch which opened into the ocean, but the concept of a standing shower on board hadn't been imagined at that point.

He towel-dried his hair and attempted to contain his curls by brushing them back into a low ponytail he secured with an elastic band. He shaved and quickly dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt. According to his cell phone, he had a few minutes before he was meeting Diana in the galley. He took his laptop out of the case and carried it to the map room where he'd have a little more space.

At the end of the table, he opened the computer and clicked on his email. Normally, he wouldn't bother with it again, once a day was enough in his book, but right now he needed a distraction to keep him from going to Diana's cabin and knocking on her door.

They'd only been apart for a couple hours, but he was already eager to see her again. This attraction was new and addicting.

He should've been reminding himself she was mortal, but instead he'd floated the idea to set aside his immortality for this trip. No one was more surprised than him when she'd offered the suggestion, and although he was fairly certain this was a terrible idea, he hadn't hesitated to agree to the charade. It was irrational and would only lead to pain in his future, but he couldn't seem to force himself back to face reality.

Maybe it was being out on the open ocean that made the rest of the world vanish from view. It was easier to delude himself into believing the *Sea Dog* was his world and that Diana could be a part of it.

He shelved the thought.

He'd been struggling to find his footing ever since he met her.

So he clicked through his emails, deleting the spam, then he opened his eBay dashboard. A few auctions he'd been watching were ending tonight. Normally, the last-minute bidding gave him a high. But after holding hands with Diana on the ratlines and kissing her lips, suddenly winning bids for new gadgets or historical pieces from estate sales wasn't nearly as thrilling.

Lately his purchases had been geology-related. A year ago, it had been British antiques, pirate doubloons, and flintlock pistols. Most were knock-offs, but he enjoyed discovering the truth behind each piece. Recently, his online purchases leaned toward geodes, crystals, and mysterious rocks that the seller had obviously mistaken for something else. Each winning bid brought him the gift of a small mystery to solve, and when he had eternity to fill, studying and cataloging rocks did help pass the time.

After placing more bids and answering a couple of university emails, he checked the time again and smiled. Not much longer now. He closed the laptop and stood.

"There you are."

He looked up to find Diana in the doorway.

Her smile took his breath away. She had tied her long braids up into a bun on top of her head, exposing her slender throat, making him ache to caress her skin.

"You look...like...the sun...rising." He stood up with a chuckle. "I mean to say, you're beautiful. I'm apparently very out of practice with courting."

Her grin widened as she came closer. "Is that what you're doing?"

"I'm not sure if it's working, but I'm trying." He shook his head, wishing he had a little more swagger, like some of his crewmates. He'd never wished for that before. *Ever*.

What was happening to him?

Diana walked toward him as he reached for his bag. She was wearing a pair of denim shorts and a Scallywags concert tee.

He laughed. "Keegan's ego is going to outgrow our ship."

She grinned and peered down at her shirt. "I packed it before I knew he was on your crew." She met his eyes again. "I still can't believe all those shanties he sang were...originals."

Caleb crossed over to her. "He didn't write *all* of them."

He slid his laptop back into the bag, and his fingertips brushed against a smooth, cool metal. He grabbed the obelisk and pulled it free of the

computer bag. He rotated it in the light. It really was a striking piece of metal.

He turned around to show her. "I forgot I had this in my bag."

Diana came closer, inspecting the reddish metal. "What is it?"

"A rare metal of some kind. I haven't had a chance to study it and determine the origin. An ad kept surfacing beside my email and on my web browser. It's supposed to be from a shipwreck. After seeing it over and over, my curiosity peaked, and I finally clicked on it." He watched the way the light shimmered on the surface like an ocean of fire. "They claimed it had energetic properties to help with electronics, but I doubt it can be scientifically proven. Maybe when we get back, I can do more research."

Her lips curved. "Let me guess, you have a degree in geology, too?"

"Just a bachelor's degree, but I'm proficient." He dropped the trinket back into his bag and then dropped it back on the chair. When he looked up again, Diana's smile was gone. A crease had formed between her brows as she reached up to rub her temple.

Caleb went to her, taking her hand. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm not sure." She shook her head slowly. "I just got a wave of...dread. Like a warning."

"A warning?" He frowned, scanning their surroundings. Everything seemed in its place. No sign of smoke from the power outlet or the scent of melted plastic. Could the generator be malfunctioning?

"I don't think it's this room." She pointed to his computer bag. "I think it's the little obelisk."

"I don't understand." He raised a brow. "It's an inanimate piece of metal."

"My intuition is telling me it's more than that." She shrugged, meeting his eyes. "My aunt used to tell me that being psychic wasn't about getting a jolt of energy or flashes of the future. The universe isn't usually going to turn on a bright neon warning sign."

He struggled to understand. "You got a message?"

"Not exactly." The corners of her mouth twitched. "Being a psychic means being open to spirit and trusting your gut when it tells you something. It's like an inner knowing. When my intuition speaks, there's a reason."

He glanced at his bag. "And it's telling you my obelisk is...evil?"

"No." She shook her head slowly. "More like, it's warning me that it's

powerful.” She paused, until he looked at her. “I think it could be dangerous.”

He ground his teeth, biting back the urge to explain that metal was incapable of influencing good or evil. Instead, he nodded and said, “I’ll leave it in my bag.”

He struggled to even entertain the premise that it could possibly pose a threat of any kind. But he trusted Diana.

The realization surprised him.

She held out her hand to him. He took it, drinking in the wisdom in her eyes. It wasn’t like the knowledge he found in books. Hers was an insight and perception, a confidence and faith in something that couldn’t be proven mathematically or in a science lab.

She squeezed his hand. “Thank you.”

He raised a brow. “For what?”

“For giving me the benefit of the doubt.” Her smile widened. “I’m sure trusting someone without any physical proof must be hard for you.”

It should be. But it wasn’t. Not with her.

“It’s...new.” He cleared his throat. “If we don’t get to the galley soon, all the food could be gone. This crew eats like a small army.”

He put his computer bag back in his cabin and then led her to the upper deck.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Keegan called him over. “Hey, mate, there’s some bad weather headed our way. We might need you to chart a course further south to avoid it.”

“I can do that.” Caleb stared out at the horizon. The sky was still blue. Maybe Keegan had been listening for a forecast? He met Keegan’s eyes. “Let’s eat, then we can get the crew together for a starboard tack. I’ll map a new course to reach the coordinates once we’re out of the path of the storm.”

Keegan looped a line around the peg on the wheel and grinned over at Diana. “Fine T-shirt, lass.”

Diana laughed and rolled her eyes. “I didn’t realize the lead singer for the Scallywags would be on this boat.” She met his eyes. “I’ve been to a few concerts. I love your encore shanties.”

Keegan’s smile softened. “I will mourn leaving the band behind when it’s time to die again. Singing with them has been a highlight this time around.” He tipped his head. “I better get inside. Char’s saving me a seat.”

He jogged toward the galley, and Caleb couldn't help but notice Diana watching him go. Jealousy gnawed at his insides, surprising him. Not that he thought Keegan would entertain any other woman's affections. His heart and soul belonged to Dr. Charlotte Sinclair.

No, this was all about Caleb, and wanting Diana to be his.

He blinked at the realization, nearly coughing with surprise.

Diana looked his way. "Are you okay?"

He was not. But he nodded anyway. "Yes. I'm fine. Let's eat."

He walked her into the galley and slid onto the end of a bench across from One-Eyed Bob. The cook had a bright new smile after investing in new veneers during this lifetime. "Good to see you both." He adjusted his eye patch and focused on Diana. "Are ye enjoying the voyage so far, lass?"

"Yes." She nodded, holding her bowl up while Caleb filled it with Bob's seafood jambalaya. "It's been amazing."

Bob chuckled. "Heard you were already up on the lines today."

"I was." Her gaze snapped to Caleb for a second, and back to the cook. "Caleb was worried I might fall, but I train at an aerial gym in Savannah, so I think I held my own up there."

"She's a natural." Caleb filled his bowl.

At the other end of the table, Keegan and Duke, the first mate, needled each other until Duke's deep laugh echoed through the galley. Usually Keegan sat with Colton, their quartermaster, but for this trip Colton had stayed back in Savannah with his expectant wife. His absence was definitely impacting the energy of the crew.

Caleb peered over at the second table. Captain Flynn chatted quietly with John, the boatswain, and Harmony, his fiancée, and across from them, Drake and Heather were engrossed in discussing some kind of black sails video game for the computer.

Diana rested her hand on his thigh under the table, surprising him. He glanced over at her and noticed her questioning expression.

"You seem distracted," she said.

"I'm all right. Just seems odd to be at sea without Colton on board." That much was true, even if it wasn't the total sum of the weight on his shoulders.

Until now, he'd never noticed the crew was changing around him.

As his crewmates fell in love, their seafaring family grew, but in doing so, it also magnified the loneliness of those who hadn't found a special

someone.

Finding someone to care for hadn't been on Caleb's radar in centuries. Knowledge had been his only priority. He rested his hand over hers on his leg as he looked at her. "It seems my crew has been changing, but I was too caught up in my books to notice."

She leaned in closer and whispered, "They're not just alive, they're living."

He chuckled, shaking his head as he stared into her eyes. "You might be the wisest person I've ever met."

Her laughter buoyed his spirit. "I don't know about that, but before we left Savannah, I made a commitment to participate in life instead of burying myself in work and waking up twenty years later to find out it passed me by."

He shook his head, unable to hold back his smile. "Try waking up after two hundred fifty years."

Thunder cracked outside, and Keegan stood up. "I think that's my cue. We need to tack thirty degrees starboard to sail around this storm."

Duke lifted his bowl and finished off his jambalaya. He set it aside and got up. "Let's get it done, mates."

Before anyone else moved, Captain Flynn rose, his piercing blue eyes scanning the crew. "I'm the captain of this ship. No one touches a sail until I give the command."

"Fuck you, Flynn," Greyson grunted, lifting his spoon to his lips. Their gunner had one pistol in his shoulder holster and one on his hip, but Flynn didn't back down.

"Curse me all you want, no one takes us off course." He walked out of the galley without another word.

Caleb frowned. "I'll be right back." He got up, leaving Diana in the galley as he searched after the captain.

Flynn stood on the bow. The angry wind billowed his frock coat out behind him as he stared into the darkness.

Caleb stopped beside him. "We can reach the coordinates without sailing through the storm."

"We could sail around the world and eventually reach them, too. That's not the point." Flynn turned and narrowed his eyes at Caleb. "You're the navigator of this ship, not the captain. You have no business giving the pilot orders."

Caleb rolled his eyes as a raindrop hit his forehead. “We don’t have time for a pissing contest. This storm will be on us soon, and then it will be too late to change course.”

Lightning flashed behind Flynn, lighting up the hard angles of his profile. “I thought *you* of all people would see the importance of this voyage. We will go down in history. Remembered forever instead of fading through the ages without a trace.”

Caleb frowned again. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Atlantis!” Flynn yelled over the wind. “Stories have been told for centuries, and we could be the ones to discover it! Finally. Our names would be part of the fabric of legend. We would be woven into the tapestry of history, never forgotten.”

Where was this coming from? Caleb didn’t have time to psychoanalyze his captain. He pointed toward the galley. “Diana is mortal. We can’t take this kind of risk!” he bellowed over the thunder. “You already sank the *Sea Dog* once. I won’t let you do it again.”

Flynn crossed his arms. “I know you’re growing fond of the woman, but she’s not part of my crew, so she’s none of my concern.”

Frustration burned through Caleb’s bloodstream. He balled his hands into fists. “Then think about Drake and Heather. They’re both crew and mortal, too.”

Flynn stared out over the bow, clenching his jaw. Without making eye contact, he replied, “You’re confident we can tack around the weather and still reach the coordinates in the next forty-eight hours?”

“Do you have a fucking dinner reservation?” Caleb shouted. “What do you have up your sleeve, Captain?”

He glared at Caleb from the corner of his eye. “History, Caleb.”

Greyson yelled, “Do we have a heading or are you two just going measure your dicks while we sink to the bottom of the bloody Atlantic?”

Caleb looked over his shoulder to find Greyson and the rest of the crew behind him.

Flynn spun around. “We’re not sinking anything.”

He bellowed out his orders, and Drake and Greyson ran up the lines on the starboard side while Duke and John took the port. Keegan gripped the wheel at the helm.

Caleb started to double check his GPS coordinates to gauge if thirty degrees would still keep them out of the line of the storm when Diana

appeared at the doorway to the galley, together with Heather.

He crossed to Diana as the rain began to fall in earnest. "You should go below the deck. I'll let you know once we outrun this weather."

Diana studied him for a moment, and he half expected her to object. She took a step closer. "Are we going to sink?"

"No." He shook his head. "I won't let that happen. But it's probably going to be rough water for a bit."

Heather shielded her eyes, peering up at the lines. She groaned. "I can't stay here and watch Drake on those wet ropes. Maybe I can distract myself on the computer." She looked at Diana. "You're welcome to join me."

"I'm too wound up to focus." Diana shook her head. "Maybe later?"

"Deal." Heather smiled and then hustled through the rain and disappeared down the steps to the lower deck.

Diana took Caleb's hand. "Be careful, okay?"

He tightened his grip and started to smile. "We've seen worse squalls. Try not to worry."

She didn't look comforted by his words as she gestured up to the angry sky. "Doesn't this remind you of your dream? Maybe whatever is out here doesn't want us to reach those coordinates. It was clear earlier. How do you explain this sudden storm?"

"They come up quickly on the Atlantic." He settled into the science he'd soaked up while studying climatology like a second skin. "The water is warm, so when the air temperature..."

"I didn't mean literally." Diana grabbed both of his hands, demanding his attention. "I know this is hard for you, Caleb, but I need you to pretend this isn't science-related. Think about your dream. You told me there was a storm."

He blinked. He hadn't slept in so long. Could he remember the dream clearly? They were rarely clear anyway, simply the subconscious mind clearing the cache of unnecessary information.

It was easier to live with that explanation than to examine the terror of the dream.

He twisted to look over his shoulder, studying the sky. Lightning arced through the thick clouds, sparking a memory.

He faced Diana again. "This isn't like my dream. There was a storm, yes, but it was huge waves flooding the deck, not rain." He searched her eyes. "This is just a weather system passing through."

Her gaze flicked to the sky behind him and back to his eyes. “Okay.” She released his hands. “I’ll go below and see if I can read or something.” She took a step and stopped, looking back at him. “Be careful.”

“I will.”

He waited for her to vanish down the steps before focusing all his attention on Flynn.

The captain had pushed the *Sea Dog* too hard during a typhoon in 1795, and they’d lost everything except their lives. The crew blamed Flynn for the loss, but secretly, Caleb had always shouldered some guilt over their ship sinking.

He’d prided himself on his navigation skills, but none of his charts or weather readings could convince the captain to change course that night. Caleb had warned him they needed to wait out the storm at sea, but Flynn had been insistent that they reach Savannah that night.

When the high winds had smashed the hull into the rocks near the mouth of the Savannah River, the *Sea Dog* had taken on water and had sunk into the Atlantic.

And although it had been the captain’s decision to try to push through the storm, Caleb still felt like he’d let his crew down.

His gaze was still locked onto Flynn as lightning flashed around him.

Caleb didn’t understand why the captain was suddenly interested in burning their names into the history books by discovering proof of Atlantis, but it wouldn’t be at the cost of the ship.

Not this time.

There was precious cargo aboard.

And her name was Diana.

Chapter Twelve

Diana closed her eyes and struggled to meditate while the ship tipped and groaned under the stress of the storm.

At least she wasn't throwing up. *Yet.*

She'd never sailed before, but as she understood it, if she was going to be prone to sea sickness, it would've already happened.

The ship lurched, and her amethyst geode fell off the side table. She'd almost left it at home, but at the last minute she'd tossed it into her bag, just in case. Amethyst was a handy crystal to relieve stress and promote calm and tranquility, but it was barely making a dent in her unease with this rocking ship.

Her eyes popped open, and she slipped out of the bed to grab it before it rolled away. She caught it and breathed a sigh of relief.

Anxiety licked at her insides, but she reminded herself that the universe wouldn't have sent her those coordinates only to see her drown before she got to them.

She wished she knew what she was looking for, though.

Her intuition told her it had to be Atlantis. Agent Bale had almost said as much. He and his team were searching for the key. So what was her part to play in all this?

She'd grown up working with Met Agwe. Her aunt had helped her strengthen her connection with the water loa, but this dream had been different. It hadn't felt like an entity or a spirit, it was more like...a beacon. Like a lighthouse sending out a warning to anyone who could perceive it.

The dream hadn't brought a personal message meant just for her. It had been a vision of a monster wave heading for Savannah, followed by coordinates and a miles-long stone wall.

When Caleb mentioned he'd had a dream, too, she'd expected his to

mirror her own.

But his had involved a storm and sinking below the waves. Drowning. His had been so troubling that he stopped sleeping altogether.

When the wind and rain had started tonight, she'd worried Caleb's dream was coming to fruition and she'd led them out to a watery grave. Panicking wasn't going to help anything, but meditation seemed like a stretch while the ship was tilting back and forth like this.

Meditation had never been Diana's strong suit, but over the years, she'd found some hacks that helped. Automatic writing was one of them.

At first, she'd struggled with doubt, wondering if she was concocting the prose on the page or merely taking dictation, but as she did it more, her ability to tap into the spirit world grew, and now she trusted her inner knowing.

Her hand flew across the pages in a messy scrawl that felt like a download directly from the universe.

She set the geode beside her on the bed and reached for her notepad and pen.

With her eyes closed, she allowed her hand to just keep writing and turning pages. Gradually, reality faded into the background as she feverishly wrote pages and pages of notes.

She silently asked open-ended questions about her dream, the coordinates, and her calling to this place in the middle of the Atlantic.

By the time she set her pen down and opened her eyes, the creaking had stopped.

She held her breath, waiting for the ship to rock again, but the choppy tilting back and forth seemed to be over.

She flipped her notebook pages back to the beginning, scanning the scrawled lines. Automatic writing was messy since her eyes were closed, and sometimes it took a while to decipher words when lines crossed over on top of one another, but one line kept repeating randomly on page after page.

Goose bumps rose on her arms as she read it again. "Find the key."

Agent Bale was searching for the Orichalcum Key back in Savannah. She didn't have it. She continued reading through the pages, looking for anything that might be useful.

After circling a few things, she noticed a name she didn't recognize. She frowned. Names were unusual when she was doing automatic writing, and added to that, she'd never heard this one before. *Weird*.

Rutger Morgan.

She took her phone from her pocket and googled the name, but nothing came up.

Then someone knocked on the door.

She closed the notebook and looked up. "Come in."

Caleb stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He was soaking wet, but his smile made her heart race. "We cleared the storm."

"I noticed." She gestured around the room. "We're not rocking and rolling anymore." She dropped her hands back into her lap and chuckled. "You look like you had the time of your life."

He sat in one of the chairs at the tiny table. "It's always thrilling to battle Poseidon."

She raised a brow. "So, you believe in the Greek god of the ocean, but Atlantis is fictional?"

"Turn of phrase." He grinned, shaking his head. "There are no gods in the ocean, but it sounds more epic than saying we avoided a meteorological event."

"Riiight," she teased, giving him a playful, disbelieving nod. "Did you come down here to let me know it's safe to go to sleep?"

"No." He offered his hand. "I was coming to invite you topside to celebrate with us. Everyone is too keyed up to sleep anyway."

She laughed. "You're soaking wet."

"So is everyone else." He helped her to her feet. "You don't have to stay long if you're tired."

She put her shoes on as she spoke. "I'm probably too 'keyed' up to sleep, too." She tapped her notebook. "I did some mediating, and something out here is really persistent about needing that key. How are you going to reconcile all this when I'm right and Atlantis is real?"

"We could make a wager." His smile widened. "If you're right and it's real, I'll buy you dinner at the Pirate's House, and if I'm right, and we discover nothing but miles of Atlantic Ocean, then you can buy me a new textbook I've had my eye on."

"Now I'm curious. Which book?"

He shook his head, and a wet curl of brown hair dropped into the middle of his forehead. Seeing the passion in his bright blue eyes mesmerized her.

The corner of his mouth curved into a lopsided smile. "You'll know soon enough. Even with this new route, we should reach the coordinates

tomorrow night or, worst case, by early the next morning.”

“You sound pretty confident.” She wiggled her foot into her second shoe and bent over to tie it.

“I am.” He nodded as he walked her to the door. He opened it and stepped back to allow her to pass. “After you?”

“Thank you.” She glanced over her shoulder at her notebook on the bed. She’d figure out the riddles later.

For now, she wanted to celebrate being alive.

The music got louder with every step they climbed.

When they walked onto the main deck, Keegan had a guitar and sang while Duke and Greyson harmonized. Heather and Drake were dancing a waltz in spite of him being just as wet as Caleb. Seeing them laughing made Diana smile.

This crew made a great team.

Caleb took her hand. “Would you like to dance?”

Diana chuckled, trying to picture this handsome bookworm dancing. “I don’t know how to waltz or whatever dance they’re doing.”

“Good.” He laughed. “I don’t, either, but I used to be able to jig.”

“A jig?” Diana shook her head. “Is that supposed to be better?”

He laughed again, and her heart fluttered. His smile did something to her. It was addictive, the way his blue eyes sparkled. “I’ll teach you. It’ll be fun.”

How could she resist? She took his hand. “Let’s do this.”

He grinned and led her to the center of the deck just as Keegan finished his song. It still seemed surreal that she was on a pirate ship with the lead singer of the Scallywags, but here she was, learning a jig with an actual pirate.

No one would believe her if she told them.

Caleb called to Keegan, “Give us something upbeat! I’m going to teach her to jig.”

Keegan arched a brow. “Now this I have to see.” He glanced at Diana. “Our navigator hasn’t danced since we lost the last *Sea Dog*. He might not remember how.”

She laughed. “Then I don’t have to be nervous.”

Captain Flynn and his first mate Duke approached, towering over her. She kept her chin up, maintaining eye contact. She’d spent her whole life being short. These guys weren’t going to intimidate her.

Duke had dark skin, a deep mahogany tone somewhere in between her dark brown and Caleb's warm peach tone. He had a close-cut goatee, but it wasn't edged with the same precision as the captain's. Although his size and stature projected power and dominance, his obsidian eyes shone with bottled-up laughter, giving away that he was holding back a smile.

Flynn turned to the rest of the crew. "The jig isn't meant for two. Get yer arses over here."

Her head snapped toward Caleb. "I can't dance with everyone. I've never danced a jig in my life."

Duke took her other arm. His voice was a deep rumble. "The secret is, if you miss a step, just skip. No one here is going to know the difference."

She laughed and looked at Caleb again. "I'm going to regret agreeing to this, aren't I?"

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "I won't let you get lost."

Something about the way he said it seemed like he meant more than just this dance.

And she believed him.

Keegan strummed his guitar and called out, "Ye olde pirate classic. Sing along!"

He burst into "A Pirate's Life for Me," and after heartily booing his song choice, the crew started to move.

Caleb laughed as he bobbed, bending his knees, down and back up, then he caught her arm and she watched his feet, mirroring his moves. They circled each other, and she took Duke's hint and skipped through her missing steps.

They switched directions and hooked their opposite arms before another crewmember caught her other elbow and Caleb moved to the next partner.

She looked up from the polished boots to find One-Eyed Bob grinning. "Yer a fine dancer, lass."

She laughed and skipped around again. "I'm just trying to keep up."

Bob winked. "Yer succeedin'."

And just like that, Drake had her other arm. He was almost a foot taller than the ship's cook. "Good to see you again."

Her braids bounced as her confidence grew, and she put more heart into the moves. "You never told me you were such a good dancer."

"To be fair, I was preoccupied with protecting Heather when we met."

Before she could respond, they switched partners again.

It was dizzying and frenetic. And she loved every second.

This was a celebration of life, of surviving the storm, of sailing into the unknown, and for the first time, she didn't feel like a guest on this ship.

She felt like one of the crew.

Finally, Caleb caught her arm again. A fine sheen of sweat covered his brow, and his cheeks were flushed with color as he smiled. "Had enough?"

Right on cue, Keegan finished the song, and everyone cheered. He took a bow and straightened up again. "How about something a little slower so these old men can catch their breath?"

He started singing his own arrangement of "Blackbird," and Caleb drew her in close as they swayed to the music.

His clothes were still damp, but having his body pressed against hers warmed her all over. She closed her eyes while Keegan crooned about waiting for this moment to arrive. She'd never imagined a moment quite like this one.

Caleb's breath teased her ear as he whispered, "I haven't danced in...too damned long."

"So I've heard," she replied.

He pulled back enough to see her face. "Did they tell you that?" He rolled his eyes with a chuckle. "Gossipin' pirates, the lot of 'em." His real accent came through loud and clear, and suddenly it was easier to see him as a wayfaring pirate instead of the studious professor. He got close again and murmured, "Thank you for dancing with me."

Her heart melted as she whispered, "Thanks for teaching me."

Silence settled between them.

She closed her eyes, listening to his heartbeat as he led her in a slow, swaying circle. The deck rocked, but he kept her steady, guiding her until the song finished.

She stepped back, clapping for Keegan, but she couldn't take her eyes off Caleb.

They'd already agreed there wasn't a future for them, but there was something about him that lured her back in. Something that made her want to renegotiate their agreement. She wasn't sure she wanted to leave this connection with him behind when they got back to Savannah.

He took her hand and walked her away from the rest of the crew, toward the front of the ship. "I want to show you something."

“Okay.” She followed him to the bow.

He placed her against the railing in front of him. The heat of his body radiated against her back as he bent closer until his cheek was pressed to hers as he pointed up at the stars. “See that bright star to the north?”

“I think so.” She nodded, her heart racing. Having him this close to her was too much temptation.

He took her hand in his and lifted it, pointing it slightly to the right. “And that one there?”

“I see it.” She smiled.

“And see its match on the other side?” He moved her arm to the left.

It took her a second, but then she saw the twinkling star. “Yes.”

His voice was soft and deep, intimate. “That’s Orion’s belt. He was the goddess Diana’s lover, and after his death, she brought him into the stars to live forever.”

She stared up at the fathomless night sky, imagining what it must’ve been like for Caleb to lead an entire crew solely by his ability to map the stars. She turned her head to look at him.

Her nose brushed his as she whispered, “You’re amazing.”

“You make me want to be.” He shook his head, his lips curving slightly. “I’m just an old pirate.” He searched her eyes. “I’ve chased the stars for lifetimes, but they pale in comparison to your light.”

She rolled her eyes, heat flushing her cheeks. If anyone else in the world had just said that to her, it would have been a cheesy pickup line, but Caleb’s bright blue eyes were sincere.

This man, who had navigated the world by these stars, would rather look at her.

“Kiss me.” She didn’t recognize her own voice. It was raw and soft, needy.

He held her cheek in his rough hand and closed the distance between them.

His lips caressed hers at first, his tongue skimming her bottom lip. She opened to him, enjoying the taste of his mouth. His other arm moved around her waist, pulling her in tight to his chest. She moaned into the kiss as her heart pounded in her ears. Her fingers slid into his hair.

She needed more.

He broke the kiss, his forehead resting on hers. His voice was husky, almost a growl. “Come to my cabin.”

She nodded, eager to ignore the foreboding whisper in the back of her mind reminding her of the insurmountable obstacle between them.

Mortality didn't bow to love.

So she wouldn't fall in love.

She'd enjoy the time they had together and carry it as a memory in her heart.

Easier said than done, but right now she wanted this man, and nothing was going to keep her from him. She'd face the consequences later.

He took her hand, leading her back toward the stairs below the deck, when something broke through the haze of lust. *Consequences. Shit.*

She squeezed his hand. "Caleb, wait."

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and turned toward her. "Is something wrong?"

"Condoms. Are there any on the ship?"

His lips curved at the corners, and her worry evaporated. He raised a brow. "In the interest of research, I bought some before we got on board."

"Research?" She lifted a brow, trying not to laugh. She'd never met anyone like Caleb. He made her heart flutter in a way no one ever had before.

He nodded. "I'm afraid I wasted one. I wanted to be sure I understood how to apply it."

Laughter bubbled from her throat. "If you play your cards right, I could *apply* it for you."

He blinked, and she realized while he wasn't a virgin, this man hadn't had sex since...she didn't want to think about how long it had been, but it was safe to say the last woman he'd been with probably hadn't been very experienced. Maybe she hadn't even touched him, at least not in the way Diana was imagining.

She brought his hand to her lips and kissed his knuckle, her tongue sliding along his skin. The hunger flashing in his eyes had heat smoldering low in her belly.

He tightened his grip on her hand and bent to claim her lips. His tongue tangled in a hungry, urgent dance with hers. He groaned as he pulled back. "We better get to my cabin before I take you right here."

She laughed as they ran down the hallway until he opened a door. She stepped into his cabin, and he closed the door.

He turned around and caught her in his arms, fusing his lips to hers. She

ran her hands up his chest and around his neck and surrendered to passion.

Reality about their future could wait.

This moment was all that mattered, and right now, she was about to seduce a pirate.

Chapter Thirteen

Caleb broke the kiss long enough for Diana to lift his shirt over his head, and claimed her lips again.

Kissing her was like breathing. He needed her as much as he needed oxygen. He'd never yearned for anyone like this before.

Her hands pressed on his chest, and it took a moment for him to realize she was pushing against him. He took a step backward, breathless as his brows pinched together. "Have I hurt you?"

She shook her head, her well-kissed lips curving at the corners. "Not even close."

He relaxed slightly, coming closer to her again. "Then why..."

She placed her index finger on his mouth, silencing him. "Because if we keep up that pace, this is going to be over too soon." She wet her lips, and his erection strained against his jeans. Her gaze moved up his torso and finally met his eyes. "I want to savor this."

Half of him was so eager for her, he didn't care if it was over quickly, but the other half never wanted to leave this room. He planned to explore every inch of her body and discover every tender place that made her pulse race until she begged for release.

She took his hand and led him to the bed.

His cabin was a modest size, with a double bed, a table and two chairs, and a small bathroom with a shower stall.

She rose up her toes and brushed a kiss to his lips, whispering, "I'll get the lights. You take those pants off."

He'd only been with three women before, and they had all been before 1790, so her instruction not only shocked him, it also turned him on. He watched her go to the nightstand and click on the small lamp, while he unfastened his pants.

She went to the door and flipped the switch to turn off the overhead light as he stepped out of his jeans and underwear. He straightened as she approached.

Her gaze wandered up his body, and he caught himself wishing he could read her mind. Was he a disappointment?

He didn't have to wonder long.

"Damn, Caleb." Her eyes locked on his as she shook her head. "You've been hiding behind your books for far too long."

He shrugged. "No one has ever distracted me from them until I met you."

"Maybe I can make you forget books altogether." She took off her top and dropped it to the floor.

She wore a black bra that plunged in the front, offering her breasts up to him, making him ache to feel their weight in his hands, to knead them and toy with her nipples. His erection pulsed as he took a step closer, but she placed her hand on his chest. "We're taking this slow, remember?"

He was about to lose the very tenuous grip on his control as she unbuttoned her pants and slowly slid them down her shapely legs. She turned slightly to bend down and stepped out of them, exposing a black thong that matched the bra.

His erection throbbed at the sight of her exposed ass. She was curvy in all the right places, tempting him to touch her.

Centuries had passed him by while he'd treated his physical desires as a nuisance, relieving the pressure with his hand in the shower. This desire she kindled in him was far from a nuisance. It was a blazing fire that eclipsed the rest of the world. Diana became his world.

She ran her hands up his chest. Her touch sent ripples of fire through his body.

He brought his hands to her hips, his voice a raw whisper. "You are a fucking vision, Diana."

She smiled and raised a brow. "And I still have my underwear on."

She teased him with a kiss that was much too soft. He wanted to crush his mouth to hers, to taste every inch of her flesh, to lose himself in her.

But she apparently had other plans.

"Sit on the edge of the bed," she whispered.

He could deny her nothing. He sat on the bed, his erection pulsing, eager for her attention. She came closer, pushing his knees apart as she stood between them.

He looked up as she unclasped her bra and slid it down her arms. Her breasts were too tempting. Whatever shred of self-control he'd had was gone at the sight of her nipples hardened into tight nubs. He slid his hands around the backs of her thighs and pulled her in closer, taking one breast into his mouth. His hands glided up over the curve of her ass as her back arched into him.

He could feast on her for eternity and never get enough.

She was a miracle, a gift, a treasure. And he was a pirate plundering her.

He turned his head, claiming her other breast, swirling his tongue around the tip and sucking at it, drinking in her moans.

Her fingers threaded through his hair, and her grip tightened, pulling, taking his desire from hungry to famished. How had he survived without this passion? He caught the thong at her hips and pulled it down, eager to explore the rest of her body. It slid down her legs, and she stepped out of it, bending to kiss him as he ran his hands up her thighs.

She pressed him back onto the bed, kissing him as he laid on the mattress. Her lips trailed down his neck. She murmured against his skin, "Where's the condom?"

"Nightstand," he whispered.

She stood up, and he almost grabbed her to bring her back. He'd never wanted anyone so badly in all his long life. This was a desire he'd never known, and a whisper echoed from deep in his soul that he was sailing into uncharted waters.

And he'd foolishly believed he'd mapped every sea.

...

Diana found the condom and tore the foil packet open.

She didn't take it out, though, not yet. She wasn't through with her seduction of her pirate.

Hers?

She pushed the thought aside. This was no time for introspection. She was swimming in her physical senses right now, and she had no intention of giving that up. She wanted to make this last for as long as she possibly could.

There was something heady about seeing the desire in his eyes and making him wait. It gave her a power she'd never wielded before.

With the condom at the ready, she looked down at Caleb, relishing the

hunger in his eyes.

She ran one finger down his chest, watching his face as she knelt between his legs. His lips parted like he might speak, but she didn't wait for him to ask questions. She set the condom next to him and then traced her finger along his shaft, gripping the base. Keeping her eyes on his, she sucked him into the warmth of her mouth.

He shivered, closing his eyes and grabbing fistfuls of the comforter. She hummed around him as she worked her lips up and down his length, enjoying the way his hips bucked into her. A little faster, and she'd have him orgasming. She cupped his balls in her other hand, and his entire body tensed. Her thumb brushed his sac, teasing him higher.

He clenched his jaw, gasping through his teeth. "Enough. I'm too close."

She reached for the condom as she slid her lips up his length until he was free of her mouth. His erection pulsed as she rolled the condom over the tip and down his shaft.

Desire swamped her, and she pressed her thighs together. She ached to feel him filling her, to be as close to him as she could get. Caleb sat up, and she straddled his lap.

No more taking it slow. She needed him.

His erection entered her, stretching her until he was buried inside her. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he claimed her lips again, his tongue exploring her mouth.

He felt so damned good, like he'd been made for her.

His rough hands gripped her ass, kneading her cheeks as she ground into him. Then he stood up. She moaned into the kiss, weightless in his arms as he pumped his hips up into her.

He broke the kiss, his voice a breathless whisper. "I'm so close."

So was she. She brought one hand down from around his neck and slid it between them, finding her clit as she whispered against his lips, "Faster, Caleb."

He turned around and laid her back on the bed. He stayed on his feet, lifting her legs up while she rubbed herself in time with his rapid thrusts. The sound of their bodies colliding added to the feverish ache for release.

"Don't stop," she gasped.

"No chance."

He thrust into her faster, pressing even deeper as her pleasure reached a fever pitch. Her inner muscles clenched around him as she surrendered, and

her orgasm stole her breath.

Caleb gasped her name as he slammed his hips into her one last time and froze as he erupted deep inside her.

She trembled, still unable to catch her breath.

Shit.

Sex had never been this good. It was the power, too. She'd never been with guy who let her take the lead like that. Or maybe it was that he made her feel safe enough to try.

Either way, she'd never felt sexier than tonight, on this pirate ship.

Caleb slid free from her and took off the condom. "I'll be right back."

He disappeared into the bathroom, giving her a nice view of his ass. None of her professors in college had had a body like that. *Damn.* She pulled back the covers and snuggled under them.

Caleb came back and got in bed beside her, wrapping her in his arms. "That was..." He shook his head. "I don't remember it being so... incredible."

She laughed and lifted her head to see his face. "To be fair, I've had sex more recently than you, and it wasn't as good as this, either."

He brought his hand up to caress her cheek. The tenderness and wonder in his eyes made her heart all melty in spite of the lies she'd told herself about just enjoying him for right now.

"I never want to leave this bed," he whispered.

She smiled, turning to kiss his palm. "Think Flynn can get us to the coordinates without you?"

He chuckled. "Sadly, no. Although he probably thinks he could."

She settled onto his chest and closed her eyes. "I'm glad your first time with a condom didn't ruin everything."

"Nothing could have ruined being with you." He kissed the top of her head. "Besides, it's been so long for me, I felt like a virgin all over again."

Silence settled over them while his words sank in.

She had so many questions. Why had he never dated again, or even had a one-night stand? Surely, he'd had college girls who made passes at him over the years.

It wasn't really any of her business. This arrangement that they would pretend a relationship was possible while they were on the ship was her own fault. This wasn't a real relationship.

But she did wonder. She focused on the steady beat of his heart, her eyes

drifting closed as she spoke. “You said you’d been in love before you drank from the cup. Were you married?”

The question was out of her mouth before she could stop herself. Did he have kids? Had he outlived everyone? She hoped she wouldn’t regret her curiosity.

“Yes.” He kissed the top of her head again. “Abigail was the one who taught me to read the stars. Her father worked for John Dolland in England. He held the first patent for the achromatic doublet and started to produce telescopes. His lens design gave us the magnification we needed to see the heavens up close.”

“An achromatic...what is that?”

His thumb stroked her back as he spoke. “It’s two glass lenses that bring in different wavelengths of light into a single focus. It gave us the ability to see into the galaxy.”

She paused and finally whispered, “She showed you the stars.”

He nodded. “She did.” He sighed. “You’ll probably be surprised to find that I became obsessed with the study, and it led me to become a navigator.”

She chuckled, peering up at him from under her lashes. “You? Obsessed?”

“Are you teasing me?” He laughed, and her heart fluttered.

She loved to hear him laugh. Biting on her lower lip to hold back a grin, she asked, “Who, me?”

His gaze wandered over her face. “In a way, the stars brought me to this moment. We never would have met without them.”

She pondered his words, the truth of them washing over her, drowning her in the sea of time. He would’ve been dead centuries ago if his obsession for the stars hadn’t inspired him to become a ship’s navigator.

She lost herself in the blue sea of his eyes, and her head tingled in a way she associated with her automatic writing. That moment when her crown chakra opened and the connection with spirit became a trust that moved her pen across the page.

“My aunt used to say we’re all made of stardust,” she whispered. “After she died, I started to imagine her when I look up at the stars. She made it home.”

He brought his hand up, cupping her cheek. “In the vastness of the universe, there is an order we still don’t fully understand.” He searched her eyes. “What are the chances that we would ever find each other through all

the miles and the centuries of time?”

Her heart pounded with the weight of his words. “Are you saying you believe in destiny?”

He dragged his index finger along her lower lip, his voice a broken whisper. “A week ago, I would have written you a dissertation on why fate is a fictional premise to make sense out of random coincidences.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “And tonight?”

“Tonight, I would say...maybe I have been hiding from the magic of this world.”

She kissed him, slow and tender, and heat prickled the back of her eyes.

His words meant more than she could articulate. They came from different times and different backgrounds, and yet, this bond between them was undeniable.

Her psychic gifts ran in her mother’s side of the family. Her aunt had the gift, and Diana had been born with psychic abilities, too. It hadn’t been anything she asked for, and she’d gone to college determined to live in the “real” world. She’d worked hard to keep Miss Bianca very separate from Diana Williams. Just as Caleb had buried himself in books, virtually removing himself from the rest of humanity.

They’d both been hiding in their own ways, but the universe had brought them to this moment for a reason. Maybe together, they could figure it out.

She broke the kiss and rested her head on his chest.

His fingers stroked up and down her arm in a slow, comforting touch that soothed the churning thoughts in her mind. Everything about being naked with him seemed different and new. Back in college she’d imagined marrying Darius, but their connection had never been this intimate. Usually, sex had ended with one of them getting dressed and hustling out, either to get to work or go back to studying.

But this afterglow was intoxicating, and taking the lead tonight had been exhilarating.

Maybe she’d found a new maturity, or maybe it was this man.

She’d never felt so cherished, and they barely knew each other. He made her feel safe.

And maybe that was the most dangerous part.

Chapter Fourteen

Kingsley rapped his knuckles on the doorframe as if David hadn't noticed him lurking there.

He looked up at the tall, lanky Brit. "Do you need something?"

King took that as an invitation to come inside and settled in the chair opposite of David's desk. "I'm surprised to see you here. Did you already find the key to the gate of Atlantis?"

"No. Believe me, you would've heard." David smirked. "We didn't find anything in Savannah, but I got another alert about a strange weather pattern in the Atlantic, so I wanted to check some things here."

"You owe me a Pimm's cup." King tossed a manila folder onto the center of David's desk. "I don't have a current location, but I think I know where the key might be. Or at least where it was."

David straightened in his chair and flipped open the file.

Inside were printouts from dark web message board entries about red metal and an obelisk someone claimed could be a key. He skimmed a few more notes Kingsley had documented about household IP ad targeting and lifted his gaze to King's face.

"Is there a way to find out who they were serving the ads to? Seems like they were trying to be specific."

"Yes." King nodded slowly. "But it will take time for my crawlers to discover that information. I have narrowed down the location for the seller, though. Check the end of the file."

David flipped to the end of the folder and rocked back in his chair. "They were in Savannah."

"To be accurate, sir, they could still be there."

David ran a hand down his face. "None of this gets me any closer to the key."

“That’s not true.” King got out of his chair and stood over David’s desk. He fished out another sheet of paper and pointed at a highlighted line. “Our seller was posting from this internet provider. I have a new scan running during to triangulate the location. Once we find the seller, if they already sold the item, they could tell us who they sold it to.”

“And if they aren’t willing to share that information?”

He tipped his head. “After you connect with them, forward me the location. I should be able to hack into their computer and see if I can gather that information for you.”

David raised his eyebrows, surprised by his programmer’s sudden eagerness. “It’s not like you to volunteer for extra work.”

King crossed his arms. “You forget my daughter lives in Savannah. I won’t see her life destroyed by an angry ocean. I’ve been a poor excuse for a father, but I’ll do whatever I can to protect her, even if I’m not a flashy field agent.”

David chuckled. “I haven’t slept in two days. I’m not feeling very flashy.” He held up his phone. “Have you been tracking the weather patterns? The tidal surge that was headed toward Savannah has apparently changed course.”

King frowned, and deep lines formed on his forehead. “I’m not a meteorologist, but...how is that possible?”

“It shouldn’t be.” David set his phone on the table. “Unless this seller you found has moved the key out of Savannah.”

“Into the ocean? That makes no sense.” King’s phone pinged. He pulled it out of his pocket, tapping the screen. He lifted his head with a self-satisfied smirk. “My crawler has just plucked a needle out of that haystack for you.”

David leaned forward, resting his forearms on his desk. “I’m listening.”

“Apparently the provider is registered to a Rutger Morgan.” His gaze rose from the phone screen to David’s face. “I’ll have an address in a few minutes.”

David stood, clenching his jaw against the exhaustion. “Good work, King.”

“Thank me after you have the key in hand and the crisis is behind us.” King turned and hurried away, leaving David to arrange for his flight back to Savannah.

He stared at the tablet on his desk.

The storm pattern was gathering strength out on the Atlantic.

They were running out of time.

Chapter Fifteen

Caleb stepped out onto the top deck, smothered by the thick heaviness of the stifling humidity.

Hot wind blasted his face as waves pummeled the ship and saltwater spray stung his cheeks. The rest of the crew struggled to tie down the sails.

Flynn was shouting something, the veins in his neck protruding with the effort, but Caleb couldn't make out his words over the shrieking squalls.

The *Sea Dog* tipped to the starboard side as Caleb pushed through the gusts to reach the helm. Keegan battled the storm for control of the wheel, fighting to maintain their course.

How had the storm come on so suddenly? Why hadn't he noticed the ship listing to the side?

Caleb looked down at his clothes. When had he gotten dressed? His last memory was...

Diana. They'd been in his cabin. The hair on his arms rose with goose bumps in spite of the balmy temperature.

Oh shit.

He stumbled to the railing and peered down at a massive whirlpool sucking the ship down toward the dark depths of the ocean.

He'd been here before.

Wake up. Fucking wake up! Please. Wake up!

He leaned over, staring down into the water. The wind whipped his hair around his face, but it didn't mar his view of the massive wall and the concentric rings at the bottom of the ocean.

They called to him, like a siren's song.

"Come home," they whispered.

Against his will, he climbed over the railing of the ship, but someone grabbed his hand.

He turned to find Diana standing there.

This part of the dream was new.

“Caleb, no!” she shouted, pulling his focus away from the insatiable allure of the dark water.

Even with the wind tugging at her long braids, and worry lining her eyes, she was a vision.

He forced himself to look back at the lost city calling to him. “Do you hear it?”

She pulled harder. “Don’t do this.”

He focused on her again. “I can’t die.”

“Please don’t. You won’t come back from this.” She shook her head.

“I will.” He leaned toward the void, breaking free of her grip.

And then he jumped.

But the fall wasn’t what he expected.

The dark water closed around him, filling his lungs.

He tried to scream, the pain and panic drowning him as surely as the Atlantic saltwater.

How was this possible? He’d taken a drink from the Grail.

“Caleb?”

He gasped, flinching as his eyes popped open.

Diana stared at him, her brows pinched. “Are you okay? You fell asleep.”

“The dream.” He wiped sweat from his forehead, his heart racing as his chest heaved for air. “I was drowning. Sucked into a whirlpool, a vortex. When I fell into it, the tempest collapsed and the water suffocated me.”

She ran her hand up his chest. Her touch soothed some of the panic. “You can’t drown, remember?”

“Aye.” He nodded. “I remembered in the dream, too, but that didn’t change the outcome.” He met her eyes. “You were there this time. That was new.”

“Was anything else changed?” she asked. “Dream interpretation isn’t one of my strong suits, but we could try.”

He tried to recall details, but they slipped through his fingers, dissipating like fog. He started to shake his head and stopped. “Wait. I heard something. Not a voice, but...” His gaze locked on hers. “Something was down there, at the bottom of the ocean.” He was drifting miles from his wheelhouse of science and provable theories. He shook his head. “This is why I shouldn’t sleep anymore.”

“Or we should try to figure out what it all means.” She rolled over like she might get out of bed. “I did some automatic writing earlier, and a name popped up. It didn’t mean anything to me, but maybe it will to you.”

He slid his arm around her waist. “I’m not ready to leave this bed.”

She chuckled and looked back at him. “I like it here, too, but we need to try and connect the dots while the dream is still fresh in your head.”

He never wanted to think about the dark vision ever again, but for her... he’d endure anything. He didn’t allow himself to dwell on the realization of what it might mean. “If you think it’s best.”

“I do.” She got out of the bed, treating him to one last look at her naked body.

If he didn’t have a reason to live before, he did now. She picked up her clothes and started getting dressed.

As she fastened her bra, she peeked at him over her shoulder, and a sexy smile teased her lips. “The sooner we figure this out, the sooner we can get to the coordinates. I’m feeling pretty confident you’re going to owe me dinner.”

He grinned. “I’d rather have you naked in my bed.”

She arched her brow. “Maybe both.”

“Both.” He got out of bed. “I’d like that.”

Secretly, he’d love it.

He tasted the word in his mind, studying it. The last time he’d thought about loving someone, he’d already been married. Love had come later in those days. Marriages had been arranged, and partnerships had formed based on political and financial gains.

Relationships progressed differently now. And any progression with Diana would be complicated by his immortality. It didn’t matter. Love wasn’t part of their arrangement anyway.

The dark water swelled in his mind again, and the taste of saltwater burned the back of his throat, sending adrenaline slithering into his bloodstream. Could the dream be a warning?

Impossible. Dreams were figments of the subconscious dumping stress and fear like a computer download. He’d suffered through bouts of insomnia throughout his long existence.

This was nothing new.

Although, that wasn’t entirely true. The recurring nightmare was new. He tried to think back to when it had started, but through the fog of sleep

deprivation, the days had blurred together. He couldn't put his finger on the first time the dream had appeared.

Not that it mattered. Dreams were inconsequential data dumps, nothing more.

He clenched his jaw. But what if his books were wrong?

...

After they were dressed, Diana led Caleb back to her cabin.

She grabbed her notebook and started flipping pages.

He took a seat at the small table, raking both hands back through his wavy hair. His dream had obviously unsettled him, and he seemed eager to explain it all away as an overactive imagination. Encouraging him to remember and reexamine it was a big ask.

She kept turning pages, skipping her notes about finding a key until she got to the page with the name. It was a long shot, but it had to be a clue.

Rutger Morgan.

She couldn't remember a time she'd ever gotten a name she didn't recognize during a meditation. She pulled the other chair around and sat next to Caleb, pointing to the name she'd circled on the page.

The color drained from his face as he lifted his gaze. His eyes seemed haunted as he shook his head. "This is impossible."

"Do you recognize the name? I tried to Google it on my phone, but nothing came up." She waited for him to respond. He broke eye contact, staring at the name again.

"He's dead." He carefully turned the pages, scanning her notes as he mumbled, "Long dead. You couldn't possibly know him." He didn't seem to be talking to her, more like he was thinking out loud. "It's not a common name." He finally looked her in the eyes. "Could someone on the crew have mentioned his name? Maybe that's how it turned up in your notes."

She shook her head slowly. "That's a name I would've remembered. I've never heard it before."

His gaze wandered over her face, and confusion filled his eyes. "You wrote this while you meditated?"

She nodded. "Yes. I close my eyes and just write. I try to keep my hand moving, and I don't analyze anything until the meditation is over." She pressed her lips together, pausing for a few seconds to give him time to soak in her words. "These messages come to me from my spirit guides,

sometimes from angels or my higher self.”

He took her hand, holding it tight, like a lifeline. “Rutger Morgan was our captain before Flynn led a mutiny and took command of the ship. He had a short temper and a cold heart. We called him a ‘floggin’ captain.’ He’d whip his crew first and ask questions later.”

His words made her cringe. She squeezed his hand. “I’m glad Flynn convinced you to fight.”

“After Flynn took control of the *Sea Dog*, we marooned Captain Morgan on a deserted island.” Caleb pushed her notebook further away from him, as if looking at the name hurt his eyes. “We sailed back to Scotland, and some crewmembers, probably loyal to Morgan, went ashore and never came back. That’s where we found Greyson, and then Drake after we docked in England. Only Flynn, John, Keegan, and I would remember Morgan. He’s long dead by now.”

Diana stared at the page. Why would she have written his name if it wasn’t important? It didn’t make sense. There had to be a reason.

She met his eyes. “This isn’t a coincidence or a trick. Why would my guides give me the name of a dead pirate captain?”

He stared directly into her soul. “How can he have anything to do with this key?”

“I’m not sure.” She shrugged. “What if he didn’t die?”

Caleb chuckled, but there was no joy in it. “Even if he lived out the rest of his days on that island, he’d still be dead. We left him behind over two hundred years ago.”

Diana took out her phone as an idea began to take shape. “Turn off your science brain for a second.”

A laugh escaped him. “My science brain?”

“Yes.” She peered over at him with a smile, relieved to see some of the panic fading from his eyes. “I need your analytical mind to pretend magic exists in the world, just for a minute.” She finished her Google search on her phone and placed it in front of him. “You drank from the Holy Grail and gained immortality, but that’s not the only enchanted item rumored to grant eternal life.” She scrolled through the results. “There’s the Elixir of Life, the Fountain of Youth, the Balm from Gilead, the Philosopher’s Stone, buckthorn from Gilgamesh, and a golden apple from Norse mythology. You drank from the Holy Grail. If that’s real, then it’s not a huge stretch of logic to believe that some of these other things might be, too. Maybe he found

one on that island.”

“Impossible.” He tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling.

“How can you be so sure?” She hated pushing him like this, but the sooner he could at least entertain the idea that his previous captain could be involved with this key business, the sooner they could find out what might be waiting for them at her coordinates. “Did you search the island before you dumped him there?”

“No.” He shook his head and looked over at her. “But it was uninhabited. Even if one of those other items were real, how would one of them have gotten there?”

“Maybe it’s something natural, not a thing you can carry around.” She shrugged. “Maybe it was on that island the whole time.”

A muscle jumped in his cheek as he clenched his jaw. He puffed out a breath and leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. “If I’m pretending magic exists and all of this is real, then I guess it could be possible there might be something on the deserted island. But even if I were to believe Morgan still walked through the land of the living, what would he have to do with a key?”

“I don’t know, but I didn’t pull that name from the sky.” She stood up and crossed to the porthole, staring out at the endless sea. Lightning flashed through the dark clouds. They seemed closer now. “He is involved in this somehow, or they wouldn’t have given me his name in my meditation.” She looked back at him. “Maybe Heather can help us.”

Caleb frowned. “If I’m to ignore all science, and believe Heather actually speaks with the dead, I’m not sure how that helps us. You just said he could be alive.”

His unshakable commitment to science might’ve been adorable if they weren’t in the middle of the ocean, sailing around a storm, and searching for coordinates that could lead to Atlantis or a metaphysical key of some kind.

Right now, she needed him to trust things he couldn’t see or explain through mathematic formulas.

“If we give Heather this name, she might be able to tap into spirit and find a soul who knew him or knows of him. He’s connected to all this. I can feel it.”

She started for the door, but he caught her hand. “Diana, wait.”

She turned around. “What’s wrong?”

“Something else was different in the dream.” He swallowed, his voice taking on a rough edge. “A voice whispered to me from the depths of the vortex at the bottom of the sea. It said, ‘Come home.’”

The hair on the back of her neck rose as she picked up her notebook. She flipped to the final page from her meditation and handed him the journal.

Her final two words were simple. “Come home.”

Caleb frowned, lifting his eyes to her face. “Our home isn’t in the middle of the ocean or at the bottom of it.”

She wet her lips, her mouth suddenly dry. “One way or another, we’re both part of this puzzle, and we need to figure out how we fit in. Fast.”

...

Caleb shifted in his chair and wrestled to suspend his disbelief while Heather and Diana spoke in hushed tones at the table in the map room.

He trusted Diana and Heather, but he’d spent lifetimes finding his place in this world, carving out meaning through discovery and knowledge.

He thought he understood how the fucking world worked.

Now all those facts were tumbling down around him like a house of cards, leaving him rudderless in an unfamiliar sea without any stars to guide him.

As if she could hear his thoughts, Diana looked over at him. “We’re going to figure this out. I promise.”

She focused on Heather again, and an unexpected smile curved his lips.

He was wrong. Yes, this was uncharted territory, but he wasn’t lost. She was his star. And somehow, he would navigate them through this storm.

He crossed the room and sat down beside Diana. “I might have an idea.” Both women looked at him, and he cleared his throat. “If we assume my dream is more than simply the ramblings of an overburdened subconscious, could it be a siren’s song?”

Diana frowned. “I thought sirens lured men into the water and drowned them.”

“Yes, traditionally.” He paused, mentally grappling with this fictional tale he was attempting to believe could be real. “But whatever is out there in the water called you, too. You’re not a man or a sailor. I’m postulating that maybe you and I both heard the call from the depths. Me in the nightmare and you in your meditation, because...you and I are sirens, too. That’s why we could receive the message.”

“He could be on to something.” Heather’s light blue eyes locked on his face. “Like a frequency only you two can hear?”

“Yes.” He nodded slowly. “Something like that. A broadcast meant only for sirens.”

Diana shook her head. “But neither one of us came out here to drown anyone. How can we be sirens? I’m not following.”

He wasn’t sure he was, either, but he crawled further down the rabbit hole anyway.

Leaning forward in his chair, he rested his forearms on the table. “What if there *is* something down there at the bottom of the ocean that’s looking for that key? And what if it’s sending out a coded message, and for whatever reason, you and I are the only ones close enough to hear it?”

Diana stood up, rubbing her forehead. “I need to think about this.”

While Diana paced the length of the table, Heather focused on him. “Let’s assume there’s some truth to your theory.” Her gaze darted to Diana and back to him. “I don’t believe you’re sirens. But there must be something that connects you two since you’re the only ones who can hear it, and that common thread would also bind you to whatever is down there.”

Diana came back to the table, shaking her head. “I’ve always had a connection to the water. I work with Met Agwe, ruler of the oceans and rivers. When the dreams about the wave hitting Savannah started, I thought the warning came from my Loa, but Caleb doesn’t share that connection.”

Heather shrugged. “Maybe we’ll discover the tie that binds you both when we get to the coordinates—”

Something cracked, like a sonic boom above them, followed by shouting.

Caleb jumped out of his chair and headed for the door. His ears still rang from the noise, but one word pierced through the ringing.

Fire.

Chapter Sixteen

Diana followed Caleb up the stairs with Heather right behind her.

Nothing could have prepared her for the chaotic scene.

High above them, flames devoured the top of the main mast, blasting out through the crow's nest. Crewmembers sprinted out of the galley with fire extinguishers hanging from their belts.

"Cut the sails!" Captain Flynn shouted. Blood trickled down the side of his face from a gash in his forehead. A large splinter of wood was still buried in his forearm.

What the hell had happened?

"Wait here." Caleb ran for the galley before she could reply.

Smoke stung her nostrils as she turned to Heather. "How did... Were we struck by lightning?"

Heather shrugged. "I'm not sure."

Char and Harmony climbed the stairs and stopped behind them. Diana glanced back at them. She'd been introduced to them when she came on board, but she hadn't interacted with them much other than during the dancing. Harmony had a petite build with olive skin and dark brown eyes. Her straight black hair was tied back in a ponytail sliding down her head, and beside her, Char wore comfortable-looking sweatpants and a tank top as she put on her glasses. Both women looked like they'd just woken up.

Harmony peered up at the mast, squinting as she cursed under her breath. "Had to be a lightning strike."

"How do you know?" Diana glanced her way.

The wind pulled some strands of Harmony's hair free from her ponytail. "I've sailed my whole life. Lightning is deadly for wooden ships." She frowned. "But the *Sea Dog* has a lightning rod. It should've contained the jolt and sent it down to the conductor plate in the bilge."

It was like she was speaking a foreign language.

Char nodded. "It doesn't make any sense."

Although Harmony was a high-powered investment broker by day, she apparently knew plenty about boats, just like Char, who was a historian at the Maritime Museum.

Harmony moved past them and headed for the lines.

Diana kept her attention on Caleb and the captain. She couldn't hear them over the storm, but Caleb had returned from the galley with a hose over his shoulder, and both men appeared to be shouting.

"I'll be right back." Char squeezed past Diana and hustled through the gust of wind to Keegan at the helm.

Diana hated feeling useless. There must've been something she could do. She stepped out onto the deck, and a raindrop hit her forehead. Maybe it would start pouring and put out the fire. She could hope.

The strong pull of the wind made crossing the deck to Caleb's side a challenge. When she finally reached him, she called out, "Can I help?"

Captain Flynn shook his head. "Not unless you can climb up there and cut those sails down before the flames reach them."

"I can put the fire out." Caleb narrowed his eyes. "With our skeleton crew, it could take over a day to rig the sails again if you cut them down and let it burn itself out."

"At least we'd still have them." Flynn looked up at the men blasting the blaze with the fire extinguishers.

They were barely making a dent. Each time they snuffed a flame, another sprung to life.

Flynn looked at Caleb again. "I'm not going to let you blow our fresh water supply to put out a fire."

Diana glanced at the angry waves. "Couldn't we use seawater?"

They both looked at her. Flynn shook his head. "That would require a large pump, which we don't have."

As if the cosmos had heard their dilemma, the sky opened up.

Raindrops came down like tiny missiles. They stung her face as she looked up to check the fire again.

"All hands on deck," Flynn shouted. He grumbled under his breath. "You were supposed to be sailing us *around* this storm, Caleb. Seems we're heading right into it."

Caleb shook his head. "It's changed course."

Flynn arched a copper brow as water dripped from his nose and chin. “Are you telling me the storm is following us? I thought you were a man of science, navigator.”

“I am.” His blue eyes locked on Diana’s. “But there seem to be more forces at work out here.”

The crewmembers who had been up on the mast fighting the fire came sliding down the wet lines, one by one hitting the deck and jogging toward them.

Duke stopped at the captain’s right side. “Yer injured, Flynn.”

The captain jerked the wooden shrapnel from the lightning blast out of his arm as he narrowed his eyes at Greyson. “You had the best view up there. What happened? There’s a lightning rod at the tip of the mast. The electricity should’ve been grounded down in the bilge.”

Greyson wiped his nose as he shook his head. “The rod is melted down to a nub. It doesn’t make any sense, but there must’ve been more than a few blasts that hit it tonight.”

Caleb frowned. “That’s impossible. The chances of lightning striking the same spot multiple times like that would be astronomical.”

Greyson looked at Caleb and shrugged. “I can only tell you what I saw.”

Diana’s stomach twisted.

Caleb would never believe it, but something wanted them out here. It was calling both of them to a spot in the middle of the Atlantic and trapping them here. There was no scientific explanation for any of this.

Whatever awaited them, it was clear it wasn’t going to allow her and Caleb to slip away, and if she couldn’t figure out what it wanted soon, they might not make it back to Savannah.

Her vision blurred with tears at the thought of never seeing her mom again, or hearing her dad laugh at his own jokes, or telling Michelle she might be falling for a pirate.

Caleb took her hand, snapping her out of her despair. “The fire’s out for now, but I want to check something below the deck. I’ll walk you to your cabin.”

“Whatever’s happening here, it affects both of us.” She squeezed his hand and shook her head. “Where you go, I go.”

He didn’t fight her. “I need to stow the hose first.”

She followed him to the galley. Once they were out of the rain, she pulled her braids around her shoulder and tried to wring out some of the water.

Hopefully the rain wouldn't ruin them. It took half the day in the stylist's chair to put them in, and she wasn't an expert at braiding them herself.

Was she really worried about her hair right now? She stared out at the sheets of sideways rain coming down. She had bigger problems to face.

Caleb stopped beside her. "I feel like I've landed in some kind of paradox world where science ceases to exist. That fire shouldn't have been possible."

She slipped her hand inside his, lacing their fingers together. "I think the answer lies in the connection we share with what's out here. If we can figure that out, maybe we'll be able to find the key to ending this..." She pointed at the storm. "Whatever it is."

He looked over at her. "I need to check the ground plate in the bilge. If everything is intact as it should be, then I..."

He didn't finish the sentence, but he didn't have to. She could see the fear in the depths of his eyes. This was a phenomenon he couldn't explain. He'd be operating without the safety net he'd depended on for almost two hundred fifty years.

She squeezed his hand. "Lead the way."

The sooner she could get Caleb to let go and consider there might be some magic in the world, the better a chance they had to survive this.

And she had every intention of surviving.

Somehow.

...

Caleb descended the stairs, past the crew's quarters, down to the gun deck, and down one more flight, to the dank bilge.

The musty scent of mold strung his nostrils as he walked the length of the ship, toward the copper square in the center of the hull. In spite of the rough seas, the *Sea Dog* didn't seem to be taking on any water, and he didn't notice any new leaks. He knelt down, focusing all his attention on the ground plate.

The simple tech hadn't changed much since William Harris Snow had developed his lightning conductor for ships in 1820. When lightning struck the rod at the top of the main mast, a thin wire diverted the energy blast down to this piece of metal. The ground plate then dispersed the electrical charge out into the sea. Sometimes the blasts could kill fish that were close by, but the ship and the sailors on board would remain unscathed.

Caleb hovered his hand a few inches above the plate.

It should've been hot.

It wasn't.

He straightened up and followed the copper conductor wire up. "If the connectors were broken at some point between here and the top of the mast, we would've had a fire at the disconnection point, not at the top of the ship."

His brain wrestled against the conclusion he was being forced to consider. He turned to Diana and rolled his shoulders back, wishing he could shed this uncertainty as easily.

"Everything appears to be in working order." He swallowed the lump in his throat, focusing on Diana. "Do you have a theory about the lightning?"

Even with her clothes soaking wet, and her mascara smeared, she was a vision. She took his hand, her thumb caressing his knuckles. It was a comfort that he'd never realized he wanted, or needed. A partnership. The caring in her eyes made something in his chest ache.

"I think this storm is coming from whatever is down there. It doesn't want us to go around it. We have to sail through it."

"A sentient storm?" He bit back all the reasons why that was impossible. Anything was possible in this uncharted sea he found himself drowning in.

"Maybe." She shrugged. "I think we'll know more when you get us to those coordinates."

He tightened his hold on her hand as a cold shiver of fear shot through him. "If my dream is a message, then we might find a tempest we can't escape."

Her full lips curved at the corners. "Doesn't seem like it's going to allow us to turn around right now anyway."

He chuckled, shocked that she could inspire laughter when it seemed that fear might choke him. "You are a wise woman, Diana."

She pulled him in for a soft kiss and whispered, "We're going to figure this out."

He nodded, resting his forehead on hers. "Yes, we will." We. Metaphysical magics and science seemed like stranger partners. He tried not to analyze it and instead aimed for surrender. Only one thing was certain. "I won't let anything happen to you."

His words surprised him at first. He'd never considered himself a protector, but something about her had awakened shadowed parts of himself

he'd never realized existed.

His dream flashed through his head again. The moment he had stared into the abyss, he'd been willing to let go of the railing because on some level he'd understood it would save Diana.

Could that have been the message?

If so, he would follow through when the time came with no hesitation. He knew that now. He'd sacrifice anything to keep her safe.

She stepped back and squeezed his hand. "Let's get out of these wet clothes. I need to start making some lists and see if I can find the connection we're not seeing yet."

"I should check our course heading." The thought of working with the GPS and his compass soothed him. Back to a safe harbor, even if it was short-lived.

Chapter Seventeen

David double-checked the numbers on the house against his notes one last time before he knocked on the door. It matched.

He stared up at the two-story home on the edge of Savannah's historical district.

It was a red brick structure with old double-hung sash windows. Spanish Moss draped from the branches of the live oak tree in the front yard, and a rose bush was in full bloom by the door.

There was nothing remarkable here.

He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting from someone selling a rare precious metal on the dark web, but this wasn't it. He rapped his knuckles against the ornately carved wooden door again and held his breath. Maybe Kingsley's information was wrong.

He looked up at the house again, and a shadow moved across the upstairs window.

Someone was home.

David kept his eye on the windows.

Nothing.

He jogged around the house as the back door swung open.

A tall man in blue jeans and a black T-shirt stepped out. His dark brown hair was tied back in a ponytail, a full beard fell just past his collarbone on his chest, and when his gaze locked on David's, he noticed the man's wide-set violet eyes.

Something about him seemed familiar, but David was certain he'd never seen him before.

This was a face he wouldn't forget.

"Excuse me. I'm trying to reach a Rutger Morgan?"

"Must have the wrong house." His voice was deep and menacing. He

locked the back door and started walking down the street, away from David.

David followed. "It's very important that I find him."

"Sorry, mate." There was a trace of an English accent. Not common in Savannah.

"I'm a special agent for the federal government." David hurried his pace, closing the distance between them. "Can I ask you a few questions?"

The man spun around, narrowing his eyes. "I got nothin' to say to you."

"I can get a subpoena." David held his breath. Legally, he could go through the motions and garner one, but they took time and extra finesse on his part to keep their paranormal investigations secret.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" The man crossed his arms, his biceps stretching his tee. "I don't know any Morgan."

"Are you sure?" David gestured to the house. "According to the deed, Rutger Morgan is the owner of this house."

He shook his head. "He died a hundred years ago."

David raised a brow. "So you *do* know him."

"Know *of* him." The burly man chuffed. "Yer twistin' my words. I rent this house. Tough to meet a dead man." He dropped his hands to his sides and clenched his fingers into large fists. "I don't have time for this foolishness." He turned around and started to walk away again.

David called out, "I'm here because you've been trying to move a piece of Orichalcum. I could arrest you, but I'm more interested in where it came from and who you sold it to."

The man stopped in his tracks, his shoulders rising slightly as he looked back. "We're finished here."

Damn it. David took out his phone and fired off a text to Kingsley.

Get me everything you can find on Rutger Morgan. Birth records, death certificate, I want to know his fucking blood type.

As David looked up, the man rounded the corner and disappeared behind a building.

He sucked in a deep breath, running a hand down his face as he mentally gathered the few facts he'd collected.

The man had an accent, possibly from across the pond. Judging by his reaction to David mentioning Orichalcum, he knew more than he was sharing. Most people wouldn't even be able to place that it was a metal.

This guy had known exactly what David was talking about.
His phone buzzed.

I'll have a profile work up to you within two hours.

David scanned the eaves at the back of the house as he started walking back to his rental car. No security cameras were visible.

He checked the street in both directions.

He was alone.

This would be a huge break in protocol...but he approached the back door anyway.

Although very few people knew about the existence of Department 13, they still had to obey the federal laws. That was how David had gotten tangled up with the immortal *Sea Dog* crew in the first place. If a team of pirates was ever caught breaking the law, he could keep his department shielded from prosecution.

He held out his hand, feeling for any magical wards.

The man had seemed anything but mystical. However, looks could be deceiving.

Once David was sure there weren't any spells to alert anyone to his presence, David fished his lockpicks out of his jacket pocket and gripped the knob.

Ten seconds later, he stepped inside and locked the door behind him.

The kitchen was immaculate, nothing out of place.

It also appeared to be the original fixtures. No dishwasher, a tiny fridge with the compressor exposed on the top, and cabinets with oversize brass knobs and hinges. The counters were made of white tile, and the linoleum was trimmed in yellow flowers.

It was like he'd stepped back in time to the 1920s. He had a tough time imagining the big burly guy paying to rent such an outdated house.

He thumbed through the mail. It was mostly advertisements and a couple magazines all addressed to a Sampson Bane.

David walked into the living room and frowned.

No sign of a bachelor sectional with cupholders or a wide-screen television. An antique red velvet settee with ornately carved cherrywood accents sat near the window with a matching chair on the other side of the room.

Shaking his head, he went down the hallway.

Kingsley had tracked an ISP to this address. There had to be a computer someplace.

But then the lock in the kitchen turned.

Fuck.

David rushed to the front door and slipped out, listening from the other side.

Keys hit the kitchen counter. The refrigerator opened and then closed with the added clunk of the stainless-steel handle locking into place again.

It didn't appear that Sampson noticed he had had a visitor.

David whispered an incantation and cast a blurring spell.

It would slow time for anyone within a hundred yards. He'd be able to peek into the window and then escape in what would seem like less than a second to anyone caught under the spell. As the words left his lips, he peered through the glass into the living room.

The bearded man had a beer bottle poised over an iced mug, preparing to pour. Apparently, his "important business" had been a trip to the liquor store.

Could this really be someone with the capabilities to target ads to a single IP address and traffic rare metals on the dark web?

David jogged back to his car and released the blur spell. When he got into the rental, his phone rang. Agent Henderson's number lit up the screen.

He accepted the call. "Agent Bale."

"We're having some problems out here, sir." Noise and shouting came through behind her. "I'm turning on my video."

His eyes widened at the scene.

Aura was somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, soaking wet, and sheets of rain were still falling. The new waterproof cell phones were a good investment for the department. Lightning flashed, followed by the crack of thunder.

"You're in a storm."

She shook her head. "We keep trying to sail around it, but..."

"It's following you," he finished.

She nodded. "That's why I called. I need to tell Diana your theory about her connection to Atlantis. She's a strong psychic, and maybe with Heather's help we can figure out a way to escape this before it sinks us. The main mast has caught fire twice, and I'm not sure how much more the ship can withstand."

He rubbed his forehead, quickly weighing pros and cons. “You can’t tell her about the Arcturians. The director of Department 51 would have to make that call.”

“I won’t mention them. Thank you, sir.”

The sky lit up behind her, casting a ghostly silhouette on the torn sails.

His pulse jumped at the image. His best agent was in the middle of the Atlantic, and he’d put her out there. “Do whatever you have to. I want you back in one piece.”

“Understood. I’ll report back later.”

The call ended, leaving him staring at a house with a dead owner and a tenant who wasn’t talking.

Somehow all of this had to be connected, but he couldn’t see it. Not yet. But he would.

He sent Kingsley another text.

When you finish the background check for Rutger Morgan, I need the same report for Sampson Bane.

David tossed his phone onto the passenger seat and started the car.

He had some research to do.

Chapter Eighteen

Diana scanned her notes for the millionth time.

Heather sat across from Diana and Caleb at the table in the map room. At Heather's suggestion, Diana had separated her paper into two columns, one with her name and one with Caleb's. Underneath, they'd written their birthdays, their astrological signs, their blood types, and a few desperation options like favorite color and food.

No matches.

Heather scanned the lists as she spoke. "Agent Bale mentioned an agent from Department 13 who had crossed over a few years ago. Her name was Rose McNamara, and she specialized in ancient civilizations. I connected with her last night, and she kept repeating the word descendants. She showed me a vision of a wall and a key that could only be turned by a descendant."

Caleb frowned. "A descendant of...?"

Heather lifted her gaze from Diana's notes to his face. "Atlantis. I think she was warning me that only someone with Atlantean blood will be able to turn the key."

A jolt of energy shot down Diana's spine. Her hand trembled, and she dropped the pen, resting her head on her hands. "What if that's the reason why we're the only two on this ship having the dreams?"

The door opened, and Aura stumbled in. She was drenched and pale, but there was a ferocious determination in her eyes that seemed...contagious. "I've been looking for you."

"Is the storm getting worse?" Diana asked, then shook her head. "Wait. I don't think I want to know."

Caleb looked up from his GPS, seemingly surprised to find Aura in the map room. "If we continue on this heading, we should reach the coordinates

within an hour.”

Diana squeezed his thigh under the table. “I hope the ship will still be in one piece by the time we get there.”

Saying the words out loud made her heart race.

As anxiety intensified, it stole her usual coping mechanisms.

The core knowledge that she was part of a huge fabric that made up the universe, that she was protected and on her path, it all evaporated and left her feeling more like a vulnerable bunny in the forest, about to be devoured by every shadow.

Aura crossed the room and took a chair next to Heather. She looked at Caleb and Heather before finally focusing all her attention across the table, on Diana. “Fair warning, this was difficult for me to wrap my head around, and I work for Department 13.” She glanced at Caleb and back to Diana. “A couple months ago, Agent Bale had a meeting with a...non-human entity during the equinox. After we recovered Orichalcum rods from an ancient shipwreck earlier this year, we didn’t have enough information beyond the legends that claimed the metal could only be mined in Atlantis.”

Non-human entity had to be a nice way of saying extraterrestrial. There were instances within the metaphysical community of people channeling intelligence from other galaxies, but Diana hadn’t formed any real opinion about the existence of alien races.

Did she believe it was possible they could exist? Definitely. And she was almost as certain that Caleb would not.

She ran her hand up his thigh, willing him to keep an open mind as she asked Aura, “Was this...being...from Atlantis?”

“No.” Aura paused. “But he’s been on our planet for a very long time and witnessed the rise and fall of Atlantis. I guess you could say he was...aware of Atlanteans. According to his conversation with Agent Bale, his kind came to Earth to explore, but the Atlanteans came to...colonize.”

Caleb shook his head. “You’re saying the Atlanteans were really aliens from another planet?” He leaned back in his chair, shaking his head again. “Impossible. Aliens are not waiting for us in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. We really don’t have time for this—”

Aura interrupted him. “The being had knowledge that the Atlanteans mingled their bloodline with humans. It’s safe to assume that some of their descendants weren’t in the city when the wave demolished it. Agent Bale was given a mental image of a living descendant...”

She didn't have to finish the thought. Diana's inner knowing brought her to the same answer.

Diana whispered, "It was me."

In a cosmic way, it made sense. She'd always had a connection with the water. Even her Loa was a water deity. Maybe all of it was always a bond to a city she'd never seen and a people she'd never known.

Aura cleared her throat. "When Agent Bale met you, he believed you were the one in the vision. I'm telling you this now because I think you're the only one on this ship that might be able to find that key before this storm sends all of us to the bottom of the sea."

Diana could almost feel the weight of the burden settling on her shoulders.

All these lives, this ship, her hometown. Her vision blurred as she stared down at the table, trying to see her list.

"Do you think *I'm* the key?" A tear slipped from the corner of her eye. She lifted her gaze. "Maybe the Orichalcum is the blood of the Atlantean race."

"No." Caleb's hand covered hers under the table. "Orichalcum is a red metal. I have the piece in my computer bag, remember?"

"What?" Aura's eyes widened. "You have Orichalcum onboard?"

"Supposedly it's authentic." Caleb shrugged. "I haven't studied it yet to be certain."

"I need to see it." Aura stood up. "That could be the Orichalcum Key that controls the tides."

Diana wasn't so sure. "If it is, it doesn't look like any key I've ever seen." She stared at her list as an idea took shape. Maybe this was what she and Caleb shared. She looked at Heather. "When you communicate with energy on the other side, does it have to be human?"

Heather arched a silver brow. "Are you asking me if I could talk to an alien race?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe?" Diana pointed to her list. "If I had ancestors from Atlantis, maybe Caleb did, too. Maybe that's the bridge that we've been searching for?"

The more she considered it, the more it made sense. What if Caleb was descended from a traveler who'd navigated the stars? It was poetic in a way. He'd always been drawn to them, just as she had been to the water.

"I can try." Heather closed her eyes, and Diana held her breath. Could she

reach a dead Atlantean?

It would've sounded funny a week ago. Although Diana had a connection with the spirit realm, this still seemed way too big. Aliens had been a bridge too far for her, but now...

The ship creaked, tilting deeply on the right side.

Aliens seemed as plausible as a sentient storm, pushing them to a lost city.

"We're wasting precious time." Caleb shook his head and stood up. "Let me get my bag from the cabin. The Orichalcum rod is inside. I'm happy to show it to you."

Diana followed him to the door. He frowned. "I'll be right back."

"Where you go, I go, remember?" There was no way she was letting him out of her sight.

Even though he might think his dream was simply an overburdened subconscious, her gut was telling her it was a premonition.

And if she was right, she might be the only one who could keep Caleb from drowning.

...

When they were inside his cabin, Caleb closed the door and took her hands in his. "Whatever Agent Bale saw, it wasn't proof of anything."

She brought her hand up to caress his stubbled cheek. "I don't need proof. I can feel it. Can't you?"

He searched her eyes, wishing he could alter this collision course with disaster they seemed to be trapped on. "All I feel is terrified I won't be able to protect you from whatever is coming."

"Remember when you told me the stars led you to this moment? I think you were on to something."

He chuffed, breaking eye contact. "Poetic ramblings."

"Bullshit." Her lips curved at the corners with the hint of a smile. "You've waited centuries for this moment to arrive. All your life. This is the moment, Caleb."

"Now you're being poetic." He pressed a kiss to her forehead and closed his eyes, making a vow to put her safety above all else. He met her eyes again. "It would be helpful if the aliens had told us what's expected in our moment."

Diana's laughter filled his heart and soul. Her smile shone brighter than

the stars. “Wouldn’t it be great if life worked like that?”

“Science and math give me answers that can be replicated. I’m not sure how to handle any of this.” He lost himself in her eyes for a moment, before the ship groaned, snapping him back to the dire present. “I guess I should start with the Orichalcum.”

He went to his chair and slid his hand into the computer bag to take out the metal.

A jolt shot up his arm as he pulled it free. He dropped the obelisk of red Orichalcum on the floor, frowning. “It shocked me.” He knelt down, studying the red obelisk. “It’s hot to the touch, too.”

Diana frowned, too. “Do you have a shirt or something we could wrap it up in?”

“Yes.” He went to his duffel and brought a sock over. He wrapped it around the end and picked up the shard again, inspecting it slowly in the light. “It makes no logical sense, but...” He stole a look at her before focusing on the metal again. “...what if it got struck by lightning?”

“Could be.” Her eyes locked on his. “How close are we to the coordinates?”

The coordinates. She was a genius. Maybe the close proximity of the metal to its source was generating a chemical reaction within the Orichalcum. The science behind it seemed flimsy at best, but it seemed more plausible than magic.

“Let me check the GPS.” He took her hand with his free one and headed for the map room when the ship tilted so steeply, he almost lost his footing. He steadied Diana, his heart racing. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. We better hurry.”

When they entered the map room, he laid the Orichalcum on the table and looked at Aura, who’d been waiting for them there.

“Be careful, the metal is hot, and getting hotter,” Caleb said.

She nodded and inspected the red obelisk while he grabbed his chartplotter GPS. Maybe it was Diana’s influence, but he already knew without consulting his tech that they had reached the coordinates. He confirmed his suspicion, and a strange sense of peace settled over him. He didn’t pause to examine it or its origins.

Now was the time to act.

He went to the table and retrieved the Orichalcum.

Aura frowned. “Where are you going? I just sent the photos to

Department 13. We can get more information in a few minutes.”

He shook his head. “We don’t have time.”

Diana came around the table and caught his arm. “What’s going on?”

He met her eyes, and a painful ache resonated through his chest. *Regret.*

“You were right. This is my moment.”

Realization shone in her eyes, and her grip tightened. “Talk to me.”

He went to the door. “I know what to do. Stay here.”

“No.” Diana’s brows pinched together. “I’m coming with you.”

He didn’t fight her.

The ethereal peace had evolved into a sense of purpose that eclipsed any fear. He would do what he must, and he would keep her safe.

When he stepped out on the top deck, they faced a cyclone of wind and rain.

He ground his teeth, forcing his feet to move. Adrenaline dripped into his bloodstream as he neared the railing, already knowing what he would see.

It was exactly like in his dream.

In his peripheral vision, Flynn shouted something, but he couldn’t hear him over the roar of the storm. Peering over the edge of the ship, a dark funnel of water awaited him, called to him.

He tightened his hold on the key, digging deep for determination to blot out the sudden surge of fear.

This was the only way to save Diana, the ship, his crewmates, and Savannah.

Diana tugged on his arm until he looked back. She shouted, “Don’t do this, Caleb.”

He answered as he had in the dream, “I can’t die, remember?”

Witnessing his nightmare play out in real time reinforced the destiny of this moment. The idea of fate and a predestined future was no longer a fictional premise.

“Please don’t.” Her dark brown eyes pleaded with him as she shook her head just like she had in the dream. “You won’t come back from this.”

“I will.” Instead of leaning into the void, he bent to kiss her.

Her mouth was soft and warm, churning the emotions filling his heart.

Had he lived through centuries to find this amazing woman only to lose her? It didn’t make sense.

Nothing made sense anymore.

She broke the kiss. “Throw the key. Put it back where it belongs.”

It might work. But if it didn't, they'd never find the key again. He shook his head. "It's too risky. I need to be sure Atlantis gets the key."

He looked at the swirling ocean again, his throat tight as vivid memories of the taste of saltwater stung his throat. Although he'd drowned in 1795, the Grail kept him from dying, but the terrifying experience had stuck with him. Drowning wasn't something easily forgotten.

"There's got to be another way." She caught his cheek, turning his head to look at her. "Time to use that amazing science you love so much. How can we get you down there and then back up to me?"

He blinked as her words sunk through the haze of destiny.

Duke pushed through the wind and rain and stopped beside him, peering over the side of the ship. He straightened, shaking his head. "We're sailing right into a vortex. We're fucked."

Caleb looked from Diana to Duke as an idea formed. He grabbed Duke's arm. "We need some rope."

"How is that—" He cut off the thought. "Doesn't matter. I'll be right back."

Duke leaned into the tempest and headed for the helm while Caleb focused on Diana again. He took her hand and squeezed it. "I need to tell you something."

"No." She shook her head as water dripped from her nose and chin. "You don't get to tell me goodbye. This is the part where you tell me some scientific fact that will lead us through this mess."

"I don't know of a science that could explain any of this." The ship pitched to the starboard side, and he caught her in his arms.

The timber of the hull groaned under the pressure of the turbulent tide.

Staring into her eyes, all the facts and numbers he'd cherished faded in the brilliance of this woman. She'd broken him out of his self-imposed prison and had shown him how to live again.

Diana cupped his wet cheek. "I can't believe the universe brought us together for our story to end here." Her voice cracked. "I *refuse* to accept that."

Behind her, Duke approached with a bundle of ropes over his shoulder.

Caleb bent to kiss her, his tongue parting her lips. She clung to him, making him wish there was another way. Tempting him to chart a course as far from this spot as he could.

But there was no outrunning this storm.

He savored the sweet taste of her mouth, memorizing this moment in time.

When he opened his eyes, he let his heart do the talking. "Maybe this is only the beginning."

Duke stopped in front of them. "Now what?"

Caleb released Diana and lifted his chin. "Now you're going to tie me to the anchor and drop it to the bottom."

"What?" Diana's eyes widened. "No!" She shoved Caleb back a step. "What the hell are you doing?"

Duke shook his head. "I'm with her. This isn't a good idea."

"I need you both to trust me." He turned to Diana as his inner calm returned. "Can you find Flynn? I need to talk to him."

Her eyes narrowed as she crossed her arms. She didn't move.

He set his jaw. "You asked me to come up with a plan that could bring me back up. The winch on the anchor can do that, but only if Flynn keeps the ship afloat."

She shook her head slowly. "I will never forgive you if this is just an errand to get me out of the way." She spun around and walked into the wind.

Caleb watched her go and then focused on Duke. "I've got to make it all the way to the sea floor. Those knots will have to be tight."

They headed for the bow of the ship.

This would be the most difficult part of the plan.

The anchor was on the other side of the railing. He and Duke would have to climb over the side and stand in the netting between the hull and the bowsprit. The bowsprit pole extended out from the bow, allowing them to rig the sails. It wasn't made to hold up two grown men, especially when one of them resembled a mountain.

"I've known you for centuries, and I never took you for a daredevil type." Duke looked at the whirlpool threatening to suck the entire ship into the hungry vortex and shook his head with a humorless laugh. "This is risky, even for two pirates who drank from the Holy Grail."

Caleb studied the worn and weathered netting on the front of the bow.

He couldn't ask Duke to climb over. He'd be lucky if the sun-rotted rigging could hold his weight. Caleb smiled at his friend and crewmate. "I can tie the knots. You stay here and make sure the anchor gets all the way down."

“You sure, mate?” Duke arched a brow. “How will we know when to bring you back up?”

Fair question. Caleb turned the dial on his diving watch, setting it for ten minutes, then looked over at Duke. “Ten minutes should be enough.”

Diana ran toward them with Flynn right behind her. The captain stopped beside Duke and crossed his arms. “She tells me you’re going under the water?”

Caleb fished the key out of his pocket, careful to keep the sock between his skin and the hot metal. He held it up.

The obelisk glowed.

A few days ago, he would have ached to study this phenomenon, but now he just wanted to return it. To take it home.

He shouted over the wind, “Once this key is restored to its rightful place, I believe the storm will vanish. Until then, I need you to be certain the ship stays at these coordinates.”

“And if you’re wrong?” Flynn countered.

“Wait ten minutes. Once Duke raises the anchor, you can sail away from here.”

Diana shook her head. “I’m not going anywhere until you’re back on the ship.”

He pulled her into a tight embrace, clinging to her in the storm.

The way she fit in his arms warmed him all over. She was his safe harbor. He brushed a kiss to her forehead and forced himself to let her go as he took in every angle of her beautiful face, committing it to memory.

Holding her gaze, he said, “I’ll see you soon, Diana.”

He wrapped the obelisk and slid it back into his pocket, then went to the railing.

Gripping it tightly, he put one leg over and then the other. The whirlpool roared like a voracious lion, while the hungry wind whipped through his hair. He looked up at Duke. “Toss me the rope once I’m on the anchor.”

Duke dropped the spool of line on the deck. “I’ll watch for your signal.”

“Ten minutes, navigator,” Flynn yelled. “Then I sail away to save the ship and crew.”

Caleb nodded.

Diana came to the railing as he slid his boots into the wet riggings. The ropes whined with the added weight, but they still seemed sturdy.

He looked up at her and smiled. “Just the beginning.”

She pressed her lips together, the sparkle gone from her eyes. “Be careful.”

“I will.” He wrapped the rope around his waist and got to work.

He wasn’t the strongest knotter on the crew, but he could tie a bowline.

He leaned his weight into the ship while he tested his knot. The bowline would pull tighter as his weight on it increased, so if he lost consciousness, the knot wouldn’t loosen while they pulled him back up.

Duke fed him the rest of the line, and he looped it around his shoulder until he held the other end of the rope. Quickly, he tied the other end to the anchor, crisscrossing it around the iron arms until he finished a clean hitch knot.

Caleb looked up to find Duke inspecting his knots. Caleb smirked. “They’re not perfect, but they’ll hold.”

“You better hope so, mate.” Duke shook his head. “Pretty ballsy, professor.”

“I’m not a professor today. I’m all pirate, mate!” They laughed in spite of being perched on the precipice of doom.

Diana leaned over the railing. “Caleb!” He met her eyes, and she shouted, “Don’t forget you owe me dinner!”

He smiled up at her, his heart lurching in his chest. He’d forgotten their wager.

Somehow in the chaos of the storm, he’d forgotten that he could be about to discover the lost city of Atlantis.

Before he could answer her, the anchor tremored as the chains moved, lowering him into the tempest of the vortex. He kept his gaze locked on her beautiful face as he descended into the eye.

Suddenly the sea collapsed in on itself, wrapping him in its deadly embrace as the world went dark.

Chapter Nineteen

“Tell me you got into the computer.” David checked his mirrors again as he turned into a darkened parking lot overlooking River Street.

“I did.” Keyboard clicks rattled on the other end of the line. “And would you also like to know what I discovered?”

David rolled his eyes. “Yes.”

“Very well.” The clicking silenced and some papers shuffled. “Rutger Morgan owns quite a few properties. So far, I’ve located property deeds in Savannah, Georgia; Washington, DC; New Orleans; Charleston, South Carolina; and Vero Beach, Florida.”

David plotted the cities out, mentally searching for anything connecting them. “That’s a big area to cover.” He ran a hand down his face. “What about Sampson Bane?”

“That’s where things get interesting.” All the background noise ceased, and King’s voice seemed almost eager. “Our new friend hasn’t existed long. Although he’s got a social security number and a birth certificate, there’s no digital footprint until a year ago.”

“Do you think Sampson could be Rutger?”

“I haven’t found anything linking them yet, but the first traces of Sampson appear to be from last year. He opened a bank account and then a credit card, which he used to buy plane tickets to Italy, where he then chartered a boat and toured the Mediterranean Sea.”

“Did you get into his computer?”

More keyboard clicks. “My spyware is crawling, but I don’t have the... wait.” He hummed. “I think I have the IP he targeted for the ads.”

Finally, a lead.

But King didn’t say anything else.

David frowned. “Is something wrong?”

"I'll double check this, but...his target was in Savannah."

"He was trying to sell Orichalcum to someone in Savannah?"

"Yes." King paused. "And it appears he was serving the ads to someone we know. Caleb Graves."

"You're shitting me. He sold the key to Caleb? I'll reach out to Aura again. If Caleb can tell me where to find it at his place, I can go collect it and see if our metaphysics lab can figure out how to use it to put the tides back into a normal rhythm."

David took his notepad and pen out of his pocket, flipping to a clean sheet. He put his phone on speaker and started jotting down the cities where Rutger Morgan owned property while he asked, "Is there anything else I should know?"

"I did find a couple of interesting tidbits on Mr. Morgan in the FBI database." He cleared his throat. "They were investigating him a few years back for pirating software, but they never brought charges, at least not yet."

A digital pirate.

Pirates.

David popped the plunger on his pen, staring at the city names he'd written. "Other than DC, the one thing these cities all have in common is piracy."

"I don't follow."

David skimmed the list again. "These were all busy ports for pirates."

"They're also busy tourist destinations. He could be renting them as vacation rentals."

That was true. Maybe David was taking too big a leap, but...his gut instincts were still telling him he was on to something. "Let me know if you turn up anything else. I'm going to reach out to Aura again."

David ended the call and stared at his notes.

In order to own all these properties, Rutger Morgan had to have money. So why would he be targeting ads for Orichalcum to Caleb Graves? There was a piece missing from this picture.

He pressed Aura's name and waited.

"Henderson."

"It's Bale." He picked up his notepad. "I just got off the phone with King, and the ads for the Orichalcum were being targeted to Caleb. Only to Caleb."

"We're way past that, sir. I just sent you some photos of the Orichalcum

obelisk that Caleb bought. He brought it with him in his computer bag.”

David put her on speakerphone and opened her text. The photo downloaded, and he frowned. “It looks like it’s glowing. The pieces we recovered didn’t do that.”

“They also weren’t near the coordinates from Diana’s dream.”

David set his notes aside, enlarging the photo. “If that’s the key we’ve been looking for, we need to get it in the water and see if the tides respond.”

“Already on it, sir.” She sighed. “Against my advice, Caleb is on his way to return the key.”

“Return it?” David frowned again. “I don’t understand.”

“He’s been having dreams, too.”

“Are they the same as Miss Bianca’s?” he asked.

“No. He saw a city at the bottom of the ocean. He thinks he needs to take the key down to Atlantis. Dropping it in the ocean wasn’t an option.” She paused. “Whatever he’s doing down there, he better hurry. He told Flynn to wait ten minutes and then sail us out of this weather. Caleb is convinced he can’t drown. He tied himself to the anchor.”

“Damn.” David shook his head and wished he had his bottle of Tums from his desk drawer. “Call me back. I want to know the status.”

“Will do, sir. Did you have any luck tracing who was pushing the ads?”

“Yes. But so far, he’s not talking. The internet provider lists the homeowner as Rutger Morgan, but the man I spoke with goes by the name Sampson Bane. I’m still digging to see if there’s any chance they could be the same person. Morgan has been under FBI surveillance in the past for digital piracy, maybe he bought a new identity.”

“In my experience they usually go for something less unique. Todd Wilson, Bob Evans, something that would pull up thousands of potential suspects.”

David nodded. “True, but in this case, I don’t think hiding from the feds is his ultimate goal. He didn’t run when I identified myself. In fact, he baited me to get a subpoena.” David shook his head. “Until I know more, this stays between us.”

“Understood. I’ll keep you updated on Caleb’s status.” She ended the call.

David pulled his rental around and circled back toward Sampson Bane’s house. He could grab some antacids on the way. Until he heard back from Aura and found out if Caleb was successful and the threat from a monster

wave was past, he wasn't going to sleep anyway.
He might as well stake out Bane's place.

Chapter Twenty

Diana stared at the place where the water had folded in on itself and swallowed Caleb.

At first, she'd thought he'd saved them all as the funnel smoothed out, but the wind kept swirling, and gradually the whirlpool grew again, voracious, and formidable.

Captain Flynn and Duke stood on either side of her, keeping an eye on the time. Flynn pivoted to face the rest of the crew who were at the ready at the top of the mast. "Stay alert! On my order, we drop the sails!"

Diana snapped her head in his direction. "You can't leave Caleb down there."

He shook his head. "We won't. We're bringing him back up." He nodded to Duke. "Weigh anchor."

"Aye." Duke crossed the deck to the turnstile on the other side. He and John pressed a button and somewhere a motor roared to life. They pushed the rungs on the turnstile, and link by massive link, the chain came up out of the sea and wound around the spool.

Diana held her breath, watching for the first sign of the anchor.

Caleb had assured her he couldn't die, but he'd been underwater for over ten minutes now. Could the water from the Holy Grail really sustain him without air for that long?

How did it work?

While her thoughts spiraled in her mind, a tiny whisper filled her head. *Come home.*

She blinked, checking over her shoulder.

No one was there.

She focused on the water again. How far down had Caleb gone? More and more heavy iron chains came up, but no anchor. No Caleb.

Her chest ached. Yes, she'd bargained with herself and with him that anything that happened between them on this trip would stay on the ship. There wasn't a future for them in the real world. But apparently her heart didn't give a shit about whatever deal she thought she'd made because it was tearing in two at the thought of Caleb drowning, of seeing his lifeless body hanging from the anchor when it came up.

Tears stung her eyes. She'd never met anyone like him. He was quirky and intelligent, and at the same time, sexy in the best he-had-no-idea-he-was kind of way.

And somehow, even though they had opposite backgrounds, it was easy to be herself with him.

Out of all the stars in the galaxy, he was hers.

And she'd watched him tie himself to an anchor and sink to the bottom of the Atlantic. She wanted to scream.

But right at that moment, the tip of the anchor came into view. She held her breath. Another foot and another, and then the rope.

With nothing tethered to it.

She ran to the front of the bow screaming, "He's still down there!" She had one leg over the railing before a big arm caught her waist.

"You can't swim down to the bottom of the ocean, lass."

"Let me go!" She fought as he pulled her back onto the ship. She turned around, glaring at Duke. "You're his friend! How can you leave him down there?"

Duke shook his head. "He set the clock for ten minutes, not me."

Flynn shouted orders and narrowed his eyes at her. "We save the ship. Caleb drank from the Grail. He'll be fine."

"You're in-fucking-credible." She pointed at Flynn, shaking her head in disgust. "He's in the middle of the Atlantic without a boat. Grail or not, you can't leave him like this."

Come home.

It was that voice again.

She massaged her temple as Heather approached. Her ice-blue eyes shone with compassion as she rubbed Diana's back, keeping her voice low. "We won't sail all the way back to Savannah, just out of the storm. We'll wait for Caleb." Heather straightened, raising her voice at Flynn. "Isn't that right, Captain?"

Flynn seemed to ponder her words, and finally, he nodded. "Aye. Once

we're safe from the clutches of the vortex and the storm, we'll drop anchor."

The sails fell from the main mast overhead, and the wind snapped the canvas as the ship creaked. Feeling the pull taking them away from the coordinates sent a panic through Diana. She broke free from Heather's comfort as Greyson and Drake came down from the ratlines.

Diana ran to Drake and grabbed his arm. "I need a boat."

His brow furrowed. "You're on one."

"No." She shook her head. "I need one to stay behind and wait for Caleb."

Drake looked at the captain. "We could lower her in the pinnace. Caleb could row them back once he comes up."

Diana didn't know what a pinnace was, but as long as it floated, she wasn't going to be picky.

A muscle jumped in Flynn's cheek. "We've only got one fully rigged pinnace on board. There's no way she could keep it out of the mouth of that vortex. It'd be certain death."

His words made sense. She didn't know how to sail a boat, but everything inside of her told her he was still wrong. And every second that passed, she was sailing farther away from her destiny. From Caleb.

Diana crossed the deck to Aura. "Do you believe Agent Bale spoke to an alien who showed him an image of me as a descendant of Atlantis?"

Aura's brown hair whipped around her face as she scanned the rest of the crew before meeting Diana's eyes again. For the first time on this trip, Diana wished she had Michelle at her side. Who was she kidding? Her best friend would be first in line to tell her this was too risky.

"Yeah." Aura finally nodded. "Agent Bale wouldn't have told me about it unless he was certain of what he saw."

"Then if I really have Atlantean blood in my veins, whatever it is down there isn't going to kill me." Diana made eye contact with each crewmember, daring them to fight her on this.

Aura took a phone from her pocket and handed it to Diana. "If you're determined to do this, take this with you."

Diana took the smartphone and frowned. "I'm probably going to ruin it if I get wet."

Aura tucked her hair behind her ear. "This is Department 13 tech. It's waterproof, and it'll reach us or Agent Bale. Keep it with you. Once you

find Caleb, you can call in the cavalry.”

Duke shook his head. “You aren’t seriously going to leave her in a rowboat on the edge of a vortex.”

Diana looked at him, and while she appreciated his concern for her, he didn’t understand this convergence of intuition and destiny.

Heather came toward her and took her hand, her gaze going distant. “Your aunt Lorenda says follow the blackbird. She’ll be right there with you.”

Diana’s eyes stung with tears.

Blackbirds were traditionally viewed as symbols of magic and change, but her aunt used to tell her stories about adventures that came from following them. No one else knew about them, least of all Heather.

Keegan’s song popped into her head. He’d sung “Blackbird” last night. It couldn’t have been a coincidence. These were messages, validation that Aunt Lorenda was with Diana on this journey, helping her from the other side. Knowing that shored up her confidence.

Diana turned to Flynn. “About that boat.”

...

The rush of cold water shocked his system as Caleb fought to hold his breath.

His heart raced, his instincts screaming to breathe, but he resisted the urge. Barely. Almost two hundred fifty years ago, he’d gone down with the ship and lived to wash up on the shore of the Savannah River.

Somehow, he’d survive this, too.

When the massive anchor hit the sea floor, he opened his eyes.

Shit.

He couldn’t see anything in the darkness. *Damn it.*

He’d been in such a rush to save the day, he hadn’t thought to bring a light of any kind. His hip burned, reminding him of the Orichalcum Key in his pocket. He reached in and pulled it out. The glow from the red metal illuminated the area around him for a few feet.

A shark darted by, and he gasped without thinking. Water stung his lungs as he struggled to cough. His ears ached from the pressure, and panic kicked in.

But in the middle of the storm came a whisper, *Come home.*

While he scanned the sea floor for any sign of the source of the voice, he

realized he was no longer struggling for breath. In fact, he wasn't breathing at all.

Did he still have a pulse?

The wrath of the storm above didn't reach down into the depths. The calm and silence here should've been a relief. Instead, it had him on edge.

He brought his other wrist up near the obelisk. His watch showed seven minutes until the anchor would bring him to the surface again. He had to hurry.

After a few tentative steps, his gait became steadier. Gravity was different down here. He was still lighter than on land, but he wasn't floating back up. Maybe it was his water-logged lungs helping him stay grounded.

He'd have to study the phenomenon later.

When he reached the end of the line that tied him to the anchor, he held up the red obelisk. Further ahead, something else sparkled in the dim light.

He blinked, waving the Orichalcum in front of him. Something flashed in the distance again. It wasn't his imagination. He checked his watch. Six more minutes. He could make it.

First, he'd have to untie the line.

He slid the key back into his pocket and worked his knot free. The rope drifted down, brushing his legs until it settled on the sea floor. He took the obelisk back out and pushed his legs. Kicking his feet off the ground, he swam toward the glimmer of light.

Lifetimes ago, Duke had taught Caleb to swim. He'd found it comical that Caleb had agreed to sail without ever swimming before. These days, Caleb might not be able to keep up with an Olympic swimmer, but he wasn't slow.

A glowing crimson arch rose from the bottom of the sea.

And the whisper he'd heard before became a clear voice like the chime of a bell, "Complete the circle."

He slowed and lowered his feet to the murky ground. His hair danced around his face as he searched for...he wasn't sure. He'd assumed he'd see a wall and an opening to slide the key into. Using his free hand, he wiped some moss and debris away from the red arch.

His eyes widened as he brought the glowing Orichalcum Key closer.

It was a golden tablet of some kind, set into the rock. He held a bachelor's degree in philology, which entailed the study of the linguistics of ancient languages, but he didn't recognize the logograms in this lettering. It

looked similar to the Cuneiform of the ancient Sumerians with its lines and logo-syllabic script, but he'd never seen any petroglyphs like this before, and he didn't have time to try to decipher them.

Why hadn't he brought an underwater camera? If this archway really was the gate to Atlantis, this would turn the science community upside down. They would make history just like Flynn had hoped. Caleb should be documenting it for posterity, but he couldn't muster the passion he normally would have expected.

All he cared about was finding a way to calm the tempest that was threatening to pull Diana, the *Sea Dog*, and his crew to the bottom of the Atlantic.

He ran his hand along the curve of the stone structure, or what was left of it, and his finger poked into a small hole.

Could it be this simple? He carefully slid the obelisk inside. It was a perfect fit.

Nothing happened.

He turned back in the direction he'd come. It was too dark to see if the water had calmed. Something shimmered, and he snapped his attention back to the stone where he'd inserted the key. Now it glowed red. And beyond it, more stones rose from the sea floor, stretching further and further around the bottom of the Atlantic.

A circle within a circle and another and another, the walls of each towering over him. In the dim light it seemed they were never-ending. He would have wept if he were topside.

How had this massive city remained hidden from the world all this time?

The sea floor trembled beneath his feet, and the clear voice like a bell returned. *Enter and all will be answered.*

He checked his watch again and blinked.

Ten minutes until the captain weighed anchor. Had time turned backward? Impossible. He looked up at the glowing city and almost laughed. None of this was possible.

Maybe he'd already drowned.

The thought made him hesitate.

Diana.

A week ago, he would've sacrificed anything for this discovery, this new knowledge, but he wasn't that man anymore. He cared for more than science and math and history.

He cared about her. The memory of her smile filled his head.

He turned to the glowing city. Could he speak in this place?

We hear you.

He blinked. This time, the voice was inside of his head. Telepathic?

The blood of Atlantis flows in your veins.

He looked back in the direction of the anchor and checked his watch. It still ticked away seconds, but the minutes weren't responding.

Time passes differently here.

If that was true, maybe he could explore for a minute. *Has the water stilled?*

The key is in place.

That wasn't exactly an answer. He turned to swim through the arch, but something stopped him. A barrier. He frowned, reaching out with his hand to touch it. There was nothing concrete to see in the red-and-gold glow, but there was something that was keeping him out.

Complete the circle. Turn the key.

He swam back to the tablet on the side of the arch and grasped the end of the obelisk.

It wouldn't turn.

Complete the circle. The union will turn the key.

Frustration bubbled in his chest. *I don't understand.*

The voice whispered, clear as a bell through the watery depth, *We called you both.*

The onslaught of riddles was trying his patience. Both? Then it came to him. Diana. Of course. She'd had the dreams, too. *Wait.* She'd drown.

She's mortal. He shook his head. *She can't breathe down here.*

A deeper voice answered, more like a guardian than the chime-like voice that had welcomed him, *Do you breathe?*

If these were aliens from another planet as Agent Bale had suggested, Caleb didn't have time to explain the need for oxygen to feed a human's brain. *I don't need to breathe anymore. I can't die. She can. I can't bring her here.*

The ground rumbled under his feet again, and the deep voice growled, *Then we will.*

Caleb's pulse raced, answering his earlier question. His heart was in fact still beating. And he needed to get back to the ship and keep them from bringing Diana down here. He'd delivered the key. That would have to be

enough.

He swam away from the golden red glow in the direction he believed he'd left the anchor, but it was gone. *Shit*. He checked his watch again. Thirty minutes had passed? *No. Fuck*.

They'd pulled up the anchor twenty minutes ago.

Time was an illusion down here.

He looked back to see if anyone had followed. Their last words had seemed like a threat, but if the *Sea Dog* had already weighed anchor, then they already had Diana far from this place.

She was safe.

Our world relies on balance. Give and take.

That voice again. Not the clear bell. This was the deep, threatening voice.

Caleb turned around. The glow from Atlantis was visible in the distance now. *Then take me*.

Silence.

Just when rational thought started to intrude on him, Caleb heard the response.

What do you have to offer for her safety?

His watch? *Shit*. He didn't bring anything of value with him. But he'd give anything to keep them from drowning Diana. Without another second of hesitation he answered, *Take whatever you wish. I'd die for her*.

Accepted.

Chapter Twenty-One

Diana's braids whipped through the wind as she watched the *Sea Dog* shrink in the distance.

Behind her, the roar of the massive whirlpool reverberated through her chest. Fear attempted to bury its barbed talons into her, luring her to check and see how close her tiny boat sat on the edge of destruction.

She didn't surrender to terror. Instead, she took a deep breath and started to sing, "Two hearts, two hearts that beat as one."

With each line of "Endless Love," her voice crescendoed, growing in volume as her confidence swelled. Love was the most powerful force in the universe, and this time, the words reverberated with new meaning.

She could almost see Caleb sitting behind the keyboard of his piano as the memory of the way he'd harmonized with her filled her head, and something sparked within her.

Defiance.

She was Diana Williams, niece of Mother Lorenda, and descendant of Atlantis, and this was her moment.

Fuck this storm.

She wouldn't give it the satisfaction of her fear.

She gripped the sides of the small boat, and her voice soared as the current sucked her skiff into the depths.

The raging wind stole her song as she plummeted, but the impact she'd expected never came.

When she opened her eyes, Caleb cradled her in his arms. Underwater. She was at the bottom of the ocean. It couldn't be real. Maybe this was another dream? His hair floated around his face as he smiled.

Caleb?

Disoriented was an understatement. Where was the boat? Was she dead?

Maybe she was knocked unconscious. Was she imagining his face while she drowned? *Am I dead?*

No, love. I can't explain it. His eyes were locked on hers, but his lips didn't move, yet she could hear his voice. *I'm not sure we're alive, but I'm pretty damned sure we're not dead, either.*

She laughed, although there was no outward sound. She reached to touch his cheek, to be sure he was real and not a hallucination. *You can hear my thoughts?*

Some sort of telepathy, but we're not alone down here. He lowered her feet to the ground and took her hand while she scanned the area, searching for anyone else.

He'd said they weren't alone. Were the Atlanteans still alive? She had no sense of direction down here, but in the distance behind Caleb, something glowed an orangish-red that reminded her of the Orichalcum Key when they had neared the coordinates.

Atlantis. Holy shit.

They found it.

Then she remembered. The phone.

Did she still have it? She patted her pants pocket. The square bulge was still in place. If they lived through this, she'd be able to call the ship.

She tried not to say, or think, anything about the device from Aura.

She wasn't sure how this telepathic communication worked, but if they really weren't alone, she didn't want anyone else to know about the tech in her pocket.

Diana looked at Caleb and pointed at the light. *Is that Atlantis?*

I'm not sure yet. Whatever it is, it's ancient, and their written language I saw on those walls isn't anything I've ever encountered in all my studies and books.

There was that beautiful mind again. Even at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

She squeezed his hand. *I thought the key was supposed to fix the tides.*

I think it will once we can turn it. He looked at her, his hair floating around his face. *They said our union would turn the key. Something about completing the circle.*

That must be why she was down here. They needed her to help Caleb turn the key. Then what? Would the magic keeping them alive without breathing vanish? Would they drown before they ever reached the surface?

She shook her head slowly. *What happens after we turn that key?*

I don't know. He searched her eyes. *But right now they need us, so that key is our only leverage.*

And if the Atlanteans could speak telepathically, then they were probably listening to everything she and Caleb said or thought. She wished she understood how this all worked. She looked over at the glow. If everything was connected and there were no such things as coincidences, Caleb drank from that Grail for this reason, and making that magic root for Drake had been the first step to bringing her into Caleb's orbit.

This was their moment.

But she would fight with her entire soul to be sure it wasn't their last.

She looked at Caleb. *Whatever happens next, I need you to trust me and follow my lead.*

He nodded. *I'm ready if you are.*

Her fingers laced with his as they walked toward the golden reddish glow in the distance. Her heart pounded as they neared the glow, and the walls from her dream came into view.

She wished they were higher up so she could see the concentric circles, one inside the next like she'd witnessed in her dreams. The walls glowed an eerie golden red like the small piece of Orichalcum had done on the *Sea Dog*. Only this was brighter, almost like daylight on the floor of the sea.

How had this massive structure gone undiscovered all this time?

It didn't make any sense. None of this did.

She stopped and tugged on Caleb's hand.

When he met her eyes, she pointed to the glowing city. *Before we turn the key, we need some answers from them.*

His brows pinched. *I thought we wanted to calm the ocean.*

She could almost hear her aunt's voice in her head as she struggled to explain it to Caleb, *The first rule of working with an entity is setting boundaries. Otherwise, you could be making a bargain you never intended. We need to understand what it will cost us to turn the key and what the outcome will be.*

He started to open his mouth and then seemed to remember they were at the bottom of the ocean. *It may be too late for that.*

Diana's eyebrows shot up as she studied his face. *What did I miss?*

He shrugged, looking toward the glow. *The voice said it called us both, and I told them you would drown if they brought you here. I offered myself*

in your place. He met her eyes. *I said I would die for you.*

A drip of adrenaline hit her bloodstream. She took both of his hands in hers, searching his eyes. *Did they reply?*

I think so. He nodded. *They said they accepted, and then you sank down. I caught you, and somehow, you're alive like me. None of this should be possible.*

He'd offered these beings, whatever they were, his life. Damn it. But he was still upright. Of course, they needed them to turn the key. Then would they kill him?

She fought the urge to swim for the surface. They'd never make it past the current of the whirlpool anyway.

She had to think.

And just like that, a wave of calm swept through her like a gift.

All the years of her aunt's training came rushing through the panic, giving her a ray of hope. *No more making deals. Let me do the talking, all right?*

He nodded. *Understood.*

A smile crept up on her. If they lived through this, they did make a good team. *Let's meet some ancestors.*

They made better time swimming.

Caleb stopped in front of a golden tablet embedded into a glowing Orichalcum arched wall. Probably the gate to Atlantis. Her heart pounded as he pointed to the exposed end of the obelisk poking out from a small opening, and she nodded.

Diana set her shoulders and embraced the calm oneness with spirit that she enjoyed as Miss Bianca. *How did you make contact?*

They spoke to me.

She waited for some other voice in her head, but nothing came through. Staring at the key, she sent out her question. *Why did you call us here?*

A deep voice answered, *To return the key.*

It worked. She'd had plenty of metaphysical experiences in her life, but she'd never been trying to make contact with an entity at the bottom of the ocean. This was new, but for now she did her best to keep her surprise and shock from showing. Their lives depended on her negotiation with these beings. She gestured to the obelisk. *You have it. Why are we still here?*

This time, a lighter voice responded, the tone pure like the vibration from a singing bowl. *The key must remain beneath the sea, or we cannot be hidden.*

Diana sifted through the statement, searching for the riddle within, the true meaning. *The key is returned, back under the sea. Why did you need to bring me here?*

The deeper, commanding voice answered, *To turn the key.*

I can't do that until I understand why we are the ones to turn it, and what will happen if we do as you ask.

No words this time.

A sudden deluge of images assaulted her mind, dropping her to her knees.

Beside her, Caleb clasped his head in both hands, apparently under attack as well.

Diana fought to sort through the millennia of time being downloaded into her memory. She caught glimpses of alien crafts diving into the oceans, traveling underwater at speeds no manmade craft could match. Then the barrage of time and images flashed, from Greece, the Roman soldiers, and the Vatican. Wars left cities burning, and she screamed. Or she thought she did. The pain and pressure in her head had her stomach in knots.

But the otherworldly history lesson didn't stop.

They were above the water again. Tall slender beings in golden robes walked the cobblestone streets of Atlantis. Their skin was a warm brick red and shone in the sunlight, like the Orichalcum stone circles of the city. Artisans worked feverishly, carving and etching their words into the walls. Time flashed forward. A wall of water came toward the gates, Atlanteans screaming, scrambling though the city. Boats in the distance were pulverized by the ferocity of the massive tsunami.

She sensed the time shifting again. They were back at the bottom of the sea, hidden from humanity. Was she back in the present? She blinked, searching her surroundings.

They were inside the walls of Atlantis as they were today, at the bottom of the Atlantic, and someone she intuitively knew as their queen stood at the center of this stone circle, wearing a pointed crown. Her long red hair spilled down her back like flowing lava from a volcano. A fiery liquidity had the hues changing like a smoldering fire.

Suddenly the empress looked directly at Diana and approached her. Instinctively, Diana lowered her gaze, but the queen lifted her chin. Her touch sent involuntary tremors through Diana's body, like electrical pulses.

Diana's head pounded as she stared into the watery blue eyes of this monarch. *Who are you?*

I am called Anki on this planet. Anki's eyes seemed to have a tide like the ocean, the color swelling to a deep blue and rippling to a lighter color, fluctuating like the fire in her hair.

Caleb groaned, his face lined with pain. *Universe...in Sumerian.*

Diana would've been impressed if her head weren't about to explode. More flashes of time burst through her head. The plague and masses of motionless bodies followed by a cry for freedom from the French Revolution and then an atomic bomb exploding on Hiroshima. Then the visions became erratic, faster, mundane lives of faces she didn't recognize over and over with no order and no end.

She was going to vomit. *Why call us here...to kill us?*

Anki pressed her lips together, and the parade of visions ceased. *I thought you wished to understand.*

Now that the pain in her head was receding, Diana studied the form in front of them. Anki seemed translucent, like a hologram of some kind.

Caleb took Diana's hand. *Are you all right? I don't—*

Diana pressed a finger to her lips to shush him. Recognition sparked in his eyes as he nodded. The last thing they needed was for Anki to try to help them understand anything again.

Her mind obviously ran at a higher frequency than theirs.

Shifting her focus to Anki, Diana thought out a more precise question. *What will happen when we turn the key?*

Anki looked back at the glowing city. *The key keeps Atlantis hidden from the beings of Earth.*

Caleb got to his feet and helped Diana up. He turned to the Atlantean. *Are you a ghost? Did you perish when the city sank?*

Anki's head tilted to the side, more like a curious puppy than an alien that had nearly killed them a few moments ago. *We chose to move our city to the depths of the ocean to enable our people to travel home through the under-sea portals.*

Did you travel through the portal, too? Diana crossed her arms as the pieces of the puzzle came together. *Wait, that's why you needed us, isn't it? Your people can't turn the key because you're not physically on Earth with us right now. That's why you sent the dream.*

Caleb studied Anki and frowned. *How is this accomplished? Is this a hologram of some kind? Did you perish in the tidal wave?*

We are multi-dimensional. The water in Anki's eyes rippled. *And I did not*

perish, although many of our kind did. We came to this planet to make a new home, but your numbers were too great here. We couldn't blend our people. The children of Atlantis were more human than Atlantean. Anki's lips curved into a wistful smile. We abandoned the mission and left the city behind. Unpopulated. Hidden. Then an earthquake shook the walls. The jolt freed the key and splintered some of the walls.

The Orichalcum rods Agent Bale had found must've been fragments of the wall.

Diana lifted her chin slightly, unsure why she was trying to look taller in front of an alien hologram. *After we turn the key, will we be free to swim to the surface?*

Anki blinked. *You wish to stay on Earth? You are both children of Atlantis. I can bring you home.*

Caleb looked back at the city. *Our kind has been searching for Atlantis for centuries. If you've abandoned it, why keep it hidden from humanity?*

Anki moved them further inside the walls so fast, Diana's ears popped.

Now they were at the center. Abandoned dwellings and buildings were surrounded by massive, towering walls. It reminded her of a ghost town, in an underwater alien kind of way. A lost city.

The writing they'd seen on the golden tablet at the entrance covered the interior of the stone walls, but now the engravings glowed red. Pulsing with power.

Although she'd never seen the language before, somehow, she understood the meaning.

They're spells. Diana's vision blurred as she took them in. *Magic.*

Caleb shook his head. *They're a map of the galaxies, of time itself.*

They are both. Anki spread her arms, gesturing to the glowing walls, miles of them. *We have shown you the history of humanity's destruction through wars, famine, and disease. If these records were ever translated by humans, they could destroy the tapestry of time and all existence. This is why our city must never be raised from the sea. It is why when the key is removed from the water, the oceans will retrieve it even if that means destruction on the land until the key is back underwater. The Atlantean focused on Caleb and opened her hands. Come home, child of Atlantis. We have the knowledge you seek.*

Caleb looked at Diana, the torment plain in his eyes. The opportunity to have every answer that even math and science hadn't been able to provide

must've been the greatest temptation for him.

Diana looked at Anki again, and her bell-like voice filled Diana's head. *Your gifts could be unlocked, and the power of the universe would be at your command.*

It was Diana's turn to be tempted. Clearly, those aliens possessed technology so advanced that it would be indistinguishable from magic to anyone on Earth.

Why did she want them so badly? What could two humans matter to this magical alien race?

Caleb stared at Anki, and although Diana hadn't known him for very long, she recognized that look. He was trying to figure out how all of this worked and what it meant.

Before she could distract him, he shook his head. *If humans are so destructive and dangerous, why didn't you destroy the city? Why are you trying so hard to keep it hidden?*

Diana paused, waiting to see if Anki would answer, or if this was the moment that she lost her patience and forced them to turn the key.

The reds in Anki's hair smoldered as her ocean eyes moved between them. Finally, she focused on Caleb. Suddenly, he winced, and Diana grabbed his hand, glaring at the Atlantean. *What are you doing to him?*

He stumbled back a step, rubbing his forehead. *She just rifled through my memories like a Rolodex.* He smirked and shook his head. *It's like an address book that turns.*

I know what a Rolodex is. Diana kept her attention on Anki. *How can we help you when we don't know if we can trust you?*

Anki shook her head. *I needed to know how to explain myself so that you will understand the answer to his question.* She turned to Caleb. *The writings on these walls are like the most precious books on your shelves. They are irreplaceable. The authors have long since transitioned to the stars. Our kind travel here to study.*

Now she was speaking Caleb's language.

It needs to be protected. He looked at the carvings on the walls and started to go back to the gates.

Diana caught his hand and looked at Anki. *Before we turn the key, I need an assurance of safe passage to the surface.*

Anki's expression darkened. *We already have an agreement with the man.*

Diana looked at Caleb, wishing she could shake him, but what good

would it do? What kind of agreement had he made with this otherworldly being and how could she get him out of the bargain? Damn it.

She faced the Atlantean again, drawing on all the mystical power Miss Bianca could muster. She'd communicated with spirit through her automatic writing, her intuition was tapped in for identifying signs, and her work with her Loas came naturally, but this was something from another planet or galaxy, and she didn't even know which one.

Either way, they needed her help to turn that key, so this was her only bargaining chip. *I didn't give him the power to make an agreement on my behalf. What can you give me to prove I will be safe after I help him turn the key?*

Anki's haunting inhuman blue eyes focused on Caleb, lingering for a moment. When she turned to Diana again, she waved her hand. *You have a token.*

A token? Diana looked around, but she didn't see anything new around her.

In your pocket. Anki gestured toward the end of the key she wanted them to turn.

Caleb raised his brows, while Diana patted her pockets.

One had the rectangular bulge from the Department 13 phone Aura had left with her. She frowned when she felt something in her other pocket.

She slid her fingers inside and withdrew a...comb.

It was halfmoon-shaped, carved from abalone shell. She turned it over in her hand. It was beautiful. She'd never seen anything like it, but how would it assure she'd be safely returned to the boat?

She looked at Anki. *I don't understand.*

Anki tipped her head. *A mermaid's comb. When you brush it through the water, the mermaid will appear, and as long as you have it in your possession, they will obey your command. The merfolk guard the portals between galaxies and dimensions. If I do not return you to the surface, a mermaid could. Consider this gift...* Her face went blank for a moment as if she were accessing a file or something, then she blinked and added, *An insurance policy.*

Diana hoped her jaw wasn't on the floor. She stared at the comb, tempted to swipe it through the water just to see a real mermaid. They couldn't be real. Wouldn't someone have seen one? Caught an image on a deep-water submersible camera. Somehow she was walking on the bottom of the

Atlantic and conversing with an alien, so mermaids being real wasn't that big a leap.

She slipped the comb back into her pocket and then took Caleb's hand. *I guess we should turn the key.*

He nodded, his fingers lacing with hers. *I'm ready.*

Anki led the way back to the front wall of the city.

Diana took it all in, trying to commit every detail to memory.

Sea moss grew over technology that would've seemed otherworldly for the time period during which Atlantis had been above the sea. Barnacle-covered water pumps stood at each opening to another outer circle. The perimeters were littered with broken shards of pottery and remnants of weapons. The wood had disintegrated, leaving behind arrowheads and the sharp tips of spears.

An abandoned shoe caught her eye. A small sandal. Her chest tightened. A child. How many had perished before they could be taken back to Atlantis? Obviously, some of the humans carrying Atlantean blood had survived, ancestors of both her and Caleb, but there must have been casualties, too.

This wasn't something she could ever write down or tell people about, but she never wanted to forget. There was a part of her that was connected to this place. And her soul wanted to be able to visit again through meditation or her dreams.

Besides, no one would ever believe she'd walked through the Sunken City without drowning.

When they reached the key, she hesitated for a moment.

Would it be hot like it had been on the ship? Maybe not, since it was in the cold saltwater. She grasped it, and a zing of energy shot through her arm.

It didn't hurt like an electrical shock, but the connection she'd felt earlier was magnified. Caleb covered her hand with his and met her eyes, giving her the faintest of nods. Suddenly a circle flashed through her mind, followed by another and another. Was Caleb seeing it, too? A union. A man and a woman, both descendants of Atlantis, forming a duality. An unbroken interconnected circle was complete. Yin and Yang.

Together, they turned the key.

The ground rumbled under their feet, and the glow dimmed as the massive walls sank back into the sand.

Anki's image faded, too. *Thank you. You saved us all.*

Chapter Twenty-Two

Caleb coughed, spewing saltwater from his lungs.

He squinted at the setting sun. The sun? They weren't in the water anymore. How? He pushed himself up from the bottom of the...the pinnacle from the *Sea Dog*. How did it get out here? How did they get inside?

They. Where was Diana?

He spun around and scrambled to the other end of the skiff. She was soaking wet, propped against the bow, but her eyes were closed, her body motionless. *No!*

His heart raced as he scanned the horizon for help, but there was nothing but sea for miles around them. He scooped her up into his arms. "Diana? Wake up, love." She didn't move. Her skin was cool to the touch. "No. Please, no. I told them to take me."

His throat clenched as his heart tore in two. He held her close and pressed his mouth to hers and puffed air into her lungs. He drew back, whispering, "Come on, Diana. Please, love, breathe."

Nothing. Fuck. No. He took a deep breath and tried to fill her lungs again. He straightened up, counting the seconds. Finally, she coughed. An elated smile curved his lips as relief washed through his entire body. They were out of the ocean and alive.

She groaned and turned her head, coughing the Atlantic out of her body. Struggling to catch her breath, she looked up into his eyes.

His voice was raw as he whispered, "Are you okay?"

She stared at him, and a crease formed on her forehead. Caleb looked her over for injuries, but she seemed unharmed. Her eyes widened, and she choked on a laugh, shaking her head. "You can't hear my thoughts anymore. I guess I got used to thinking at you down there."

"True." He chuckled. "Your thoughts are your own again." He caressed

her cheek. “We made it out. I can’t explain how we got here, but I’m grateful.”

She nodded, reaching for her neck. “My throat is like sandpaper.”

“Mine, too.” He tried to clear it as he scanned the horizon. “I don’t want to think about how any of this was accomplished.”

Diana sat up, patting his hand. “This boat wasn’t magic. I made the crew give me this so I could wait for you.”

“You got in a lifeboat, alone, on the edge of a massive whirlpool...” He rubbed his chest as his heart warmed. “For me?”

“Yeah.” She shifted on the bench. “Where you go, I go, remember?”

He frowned. “You could have died.”

“I was pretty sure the universe didn’t bring me all the way out to the middle of the Atlantic just to kill me.” A faint smile curved her lips. “Besides, you didn’t think I was going to let you out of dinner at the Pirate’s House, did you?”

He grinned. “It would be my honor.” He stared down at the water. “We walked inside the walls of the legendary city of Atlantis, and we have no way to prove it exists.”

She nodded, wringing the excess water from her braids. “I’m sorry you didn’t get to study it. I could see how much you wanted to.”

He lifted his gaze to her face, ready to agree with her, but instead, he shook his head. “When she flooded us with all the knowledge of all times and galaxies, the only thing I wanted was more time with you.”

Her smile widened. “And here we are, trapped in a rowboat in the middle of the Atlantic. Wish granted.”

“This wasn’t exactly how I was picturing it.” He laughed and picked up the oars, sliding them through the rings on either side of the boat. “There are some rations and water stored in the compartment built into the bow. The Azores aren’t too far. I’ll get you back to land.”

He dipped the tips of the oars into the water, adjusting his grip.

The massive whirlpool was gone, and the storm clouds had passed. Atlantis was safe again. The seas were no longer searching for the Orichalcum Key.

They’d done it.

“Before you get busy rowing...” Diana slid her hand into her pocket and took out a phone. “I could just call the *Sea Dog* to pick us up.”

He raised a brow. “That’s been soaking in saltwater. It’s probably just a

paperweight now.”

“This is no ordinary cell phone.” There was a playful sparkle in her eyes that hypnotized him. “It’s Department 13 tech. Aura said it’s waterproof.” She powered it up and grinned as she flashed him the screen. “It’s working!”

He could watch her all day and never tire of the view. Seeing the joy on her face tied him in knots. She made him forget he was rowing *away* from one of the biggest mysteries in the modern world. He didn’t care anymore. All he wanted was to see her happy.

Diana called and then tucked the phone back into her pocket. “They’re on their way. Greyson said he can ping the GPS on this phone.”

“The extraterrestrials we just encountered had no idea you could have just phoned home.” He waited for her to laugh, but when she didn’t react, he rolled his eyes with a sigh. “Shit, you probably weren’t even born when *E.T.* came out.”

She started to grin and finally giggled. “I’m just busting your balls. I know about *E.T.* phone home.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “But I wasn’t born yet.”

He shook his head with a chuckle. “How can you make me feel so young and very old all at the same time?”

She wagged her fingers playfully. “Magic, remember?”

Oh, he would never forget. He would treasure this adventure with her until the end of time. He pulled the oars back inside the boat. “I guess that’s it, then.”

She nodded, watching the sunset. “I guess so.”

But he didn’t want it to be so. He wasn’t ready to give her back to the real world. Maybe he’d never be ready. How could he return to standing behind a lectern at the university or proving theories in a lab? She’d given him a taste of living. He couldn’t accept just existing anymore.

He studied her profile against the watercolor sky. “Tell me about your life in Savannah. What will it look like when we dock?”

She glanced his way and shrugged. “I’ll have to catch up on client work, so emails, making graphics, and hopefully the printer already delivered the new restaurant menus to my folks. Once I get all that done, I’ll have to take care of the backlog of orders at the Botanica Shop.” She hesitated like she might say something more, but she shook her head instead. “What about you?”

He didn't want to think about it. Imagining her sinking back into a life that didn't include him sat in his gut like a bitter pill. He hadn't been lying when he'd said he would die for her.

Somewhere along this journey, she'd awakened his heart and stolen it from his chest. His mouth went dry.

He loved her.

But they'd already discussed that a real relationship wouldn't be possible once they got back to Savannah. Her mortality was something love wouldn't be able to conquer. Unless she drank from the cup. Some of the other women had. Would she consider it someday?

"I know we agreed to some kind of 'what happens on the ship stays on the ship' arrangement, but I think we've already breached the terms since I just held your hand at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean far from the ship." He wet his lips. "I'm trying to say, I'm not ready for you to walk out of my life." He leaned forward and took her hands in his. "I know it will be difficult as time passes and I don't age physically, but I don't care about that. All I care about is you. I don't want to miss a smile or a laugh, or the way the light shines in your eyes." He shook his head, his tone softening. "Please, Diana. Don't ask me to walk away."

...

Diana stared into his bright blue eyes while her heart pounded in her ears.

She'd always dreamed of finding someone who made her feel like she was their favorite person in the world. Someone who would be willing to make sacrifices and compromises for her and believe she was worth it.

But she'd never imagined it would be a centuries-old pirate with a penchant for late-night television shopping. A man of science and math. Of absolutes.

That moment when the anchor had come out of the water without Caleb, she had been ready to jump off the ship to find him. It had been a visceral, primal need to save him. She'd never experienced anything like it before. She'd never met anyone she'd been so willing to lay down her life for. That depth of emotion was new and unfamiliar. She'd stood up to Captain Flynn and the rest of the crew all on her own to wait in a row boat on the Atlantic Ocean for this man.

And somewhere in the depths of her heart, she'd known he would've done the same for her. He'd told the Atlanteans he would die for her, and

she'd nearly climbed over the railing of the *Sea Dog* for him. They were a team. She loved him.

Love.

"I want you in my life, too." She shook her head slowly. "We haven't even known each other for two weeks yet, but already, it would kill me to hurt you." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "So I don't see how we can make it work. Someday, I'll take my last breath and you'll be...left behind."

"It doesn't have to be like that." His voice dropped to a whisper. "You could drink from the Grail."

He was offering her immortality.

She pressed her lips together, forcing her mind to slow down.

On the surface, it seemed enticing, to never get sick or grow old, but then she thought about Michelle and her cousins, and the children she'd always thought she would have someday, and her heart sank.

She couldn't outlive her own children, and her friends and family.

Could she?

"I..." She searched his eyes, wishing she could give him another answer. "I don't think I can."

There was a pang of regret in his eyes, a sadness he couldn't hide from her, but he squeezed her hands and forced a gentle smile. "I understand. I do." With his gaze locked on hers, he brought her hands up, kissing each one. "It doesn't change how I feel. Today is all that matters. I love you, Diana, and I will for whatever time we have. You're my true north."

That was the most romantic thing anyone had ever said to her. And it wasn't just words with Caleb. He wore his heart on his sleeve with her. She could see the honesty in his eyes, the hope.

How could she ever walk away from him? Even if it was in his best interest, to save him from the pain of watching her die someday, how could any other man measure up? An image of some kind of multi-function only on TV measuring tape popped in her head, and her heart almost burst in her chest.

She was ruined for all other men. Caleb was her heart's choice. Her eyes burned with hot tears as she squeezed his hands. "I love you, too."

He fused his lips to hers, their tongues tangling with an urgent passion that stole her breath.

Even soaking wet with sand in her shoes and other places, there was

nowhere on earth she'd rather be. Kissing him was like coming home, like finding the missing piece of her soul.

They'd just discovered Atlantis and turned the key to keep it protected.

If they could do that, surely, they could navigate a future together. *Somehow.*

His hand slid under her shirt, up her back, and suddenly she ached for him to be even closer. His touch sent heat through her bloodstream until she yearned for more. She straddled his lap, and he growled into the kiss, his hand sliding lower to grip her ass.

She broke the kiss and rested her forehead on his. "If I didn't have sand and salt in uncomfortable places, this could get out of hand really fast."

His sexy grin set butterflies off in her stomach. "Aye."

Hearing his piratical accent did something to her, too. She raised a brow. "You usually hide that accent."

"Don't let all my degrees fool ye." His eyes held a playful spark as he stole another kiss, his teeth grazing her lower lip. "I look forward to plunderin' yer bounty later, love."

Diana dropped her head back and laughed. After meeting an alien at the bottom of the ocean and somehow not drowning, laughing felt damned good.

She grinned at him and shook her head. "Never dreamed I'd be dating a pirate."

He arched a brow. "Not just a pirate." He cleared his throat, his Savannahian accent in full force. "I'm also a tenured professor."

Her grin widened. "My parents will be happy to hear that."

His smile softened. "I can't wait to meet them."

Real life soaked through her wet clothes as she untangled herself and got back over onto her bench across from him again. Sails came into view on the horizon. The *Sea Dog* was coming back for them. She hadn't expected them to leave them stranded out here, but just being able to see it in the distance relieved some stress she hadn't realized she'd been carrying. "We'll have to get our stories straight on how we met."

He nodded with a thoughtful expression. "We also need to work on our story for the crew about what we found at the bottom of the sea." He pointed to the sails on the horizon. "Flynn had his sights set on making history with the discovery of Atlantis. He's not going to be eager to keep it a secret, and he'll be pissed we didn't come back with proof of its

existence.”

“We could tell him we didn’t find it.” She looked over at the ship. It looked so small from here.

“Aura and Agent Bale both know you’re a descendant of Atlantis.” Caleb lifted his gaze to her face. “Aura was also there when you offered the hypothesis that I might’ve had the dream because I carried Atlantean blood in my veins, too.” He rubbed his chin, lost in thought. “But we turned the key, so no one will find it now. Even with the coordinates you provided, they won’t be able to see the city. We watched the entire city sink beneath the sand.”

She started to nod. “Unless the key comes loose again.”

He shook his head. “I don’t believe Anki will allow that to happen again.” His eyes narrowed. “Do you recall any of the images or information they dumped into our heads?”

Did she?

Diana sucked in a breath, allowing herself to relive the moment. “Yeah, a little. I remember seeing the city and the Atlanteans entered through a portal...it was underwater.” Her eyes widened as more memories returned without the pain of the initial assault. “I thought I caught a glimpse of merfolk guarding the portals.”

She half expected Caleb to laugh, but he surprised her by nodding slowly. “I saw them, too. There were extraterrestrial visitors from multiple galaxies traveling to this planet through the depths of our oceans to avoid humanity’s eye. It appeared all the encounters on land have been navigational miscalculations on the aliens’ part. Perhaps if the colonization plans of the Atlanteans had succeeded, our world would be ready for their technology and telepathic communication.”

“Maybe.” Diana wasn’t convinced, though. Maybe it was human nature to hunger for power, to dominate and rule. “Whatever happens, we can’t let anyone find Atlantis. If there’s any chance humanity could ever translate their writings, who knows what damage we could do?” Diana massaged the center of her forehead right over her third eye. “So what are we going to tell Flynn and the crew?”

He was quiet for a few seconds, his attention on the *Sea Dog* as it neared them. “I think we tell them the truth.”

Her eyes widened. “Won’t Flynn keep searching for it?”

“Probably, but he won’t find it.” His blue eyes locked on hers. “We

shouldn't tell them about the information Anki filtered into our minds."

"About the portals and merfolk?"

He nodded. "About extraterrestrials using our oceans in general. I don't know if Department 13 has submersibles, but I don't want to find out."

"Sounds like a plan." She dug the abalone comb out of her pocket and inspected it in the sun. "And what about this? Anki said it could call mermaids."

He studied it without taking it from her. "Do you think it's authentic?"

She rolled her eyes. "Are you saying we just had telepathic conversations with aliens, but calling real mermaids to help us is impossible?"

He laughed and she swore his face pinked up a little. "When you put it like that, I suppose merfolk could be real even though I've never seen one in my over two hundred years on this Earth." He sobered, focusing on the comb again. "If the comb really does control a mermaid and they know the locations of portals through time and space, it might be best for Department 13 to keep it out of human hands."

"I'm torn between trying to use it to see if we meet an actual mermaid, or just dropping it back into the sea so no one else gets their hands on it." The image of it being discovered by a deep-sea diver or a drone submersible popped into her head. She put it back into her pocket. "Maybe you're right. It would be safer in Department 13's vault."

"They're getting close now." Caleb stood, waving his arms and signaling the approaching ship.

Diana smiled, consciously committing the picture to her memory.

Seeing him in the setting sun, with the wind tugging at his wet shirt and messy, curly brown hair and his soaked pants hugging his muscular legs and ass made her smile.

Yes, the future might get complicated, but right now, in this moment, they were alive and in love.

And that was enough.

Chapter Twenty-Three

After they were safely back on board the *Sea Dog*, Drake and Greyson tied the pinnace back into place, while Caleb and Diana approached the helm.

Duke wrapped Caleb in a tight hug and stepped back with a grin. “You wiley bastard! You survived.”

Caleb chuckled. “We drank from the same cup, mate.”

“That we did.” Duke looked at Diana and grinned. “Glad you’re still with us, too, lass.”

Her dark brown eyes flicked to Caleb before she focused on Duke again. “I’m not ready to leave this world just yet.”

Flynn approached, his gaze wandering up their bodies. “Well? Did you find the Lost City?”

Caleb wrapped his arm around Diana’s waist, drawing her in closer to him. “Yes.” The captain started to smile, but Caleb lifted his free hand, shaking his head. “We returned the Orichalcum Key, and the city vanished under the sand.”

Flynn sobered, and a muscle in his cheek flexed. “The entire city of Atlantis just...vanished?”

Diana nodded. “Yeah. We watched it sink into the sand.”

“Unbelievable.” Flynn pulled his hair back from his forehead, blowing out a pent-up breath. “Un-fucking-believable.” He pivoted, pointing his finger at Caleb’s chest. “How could you allow this to happen? I told you what was at stake, and you let our chance at cementing ourselves into history slip right through your fingers. I expected more from you, navigator.”

“Ease up, Flynn.” Aura maneuvered herself in front of the captain and said to Diana, “Did you bring anything back that might help us understand what’s down there?”

Diana took the phone from her pocket and handed it back to Aura. “We saw the concentric circles, and the city was massive, but it’s gone now.” She reached into her other pocket and brought out the comb, handing it to Aura like a consolation prize. “We did find this.”

She left out the part about Anki giving it to them, but that was just as well. Caleb ran his thumb in a circle on her warm skin along her waist between her shirt, hoping his touch gave her some silent support.

Aura took the abalone shell comb, studying it. “Interesting. It looks like...” She lifted her gaze. “Did you see any mermaids down there?”

“Mermaids?” He quickly shook his head. “No.” Caleb gestured to the front of the ship. “The ship’s figurehead Marina is the only mermaid I’ve ever encountered on the Atlantic.”

He wasn’t lying. Anki had mentioned the merfolk protected the portals, but he and Diana didn’t encounter any while they had been below the surface, and Anki had kept her word and returned them to the boat, so they hadn’t needed to summon a mermaid.

Judging by Aura’s expression, Department 13 was well aware of the existence of mermaids and the merfolk. The rest of the crew didn’t look nearly so convinced.

Duke chuffed. “If mermaids existed, we would’ve found one by now.”

Flynn nodded his agreement, and Caleb didn’t try to sway them. He wasn’t completely certain he believed it, either.

Aura looked at Diana. “Do you mind if I keep this for now? We could study it. If it turns out to be mundane, I’d be happy to return it. If they determine it’s an authentic mermaid comb, it may take longer before you get it back.”

Diana looked at Caleb before answering Aura. “We were thinking if it’s real and it can really signal mermaids and control them, maybe it would be safer locked up in your vault.”

Aura nodded slowly. “I can make sure that happens.”

Diana nodded. “Good. Thank you.”

Caleb turned to their dour captain. “We’re going to get showered and changed.” He gestured to the water. “It appears the tides have settled now, so I’ll plot our course back for Savannah.”

Flynn walked away, cursing under his breath, and muttering about missed opportunities and the true meaning of immortality. Caleb didn’t bother responding. All that mattered was Diana.

He led her down the stairs to the lower deck, and down the hallway back to her cabin.

At the door, he stopped and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Are you sure you're all right with Department 13 keeping the mermaid comb?"

Diana nodded with a hint of a smile. "I already got what I really wanted."

"Is that so?" He raised a brow.

She caught her fingers in the front of his pants, pulling him even closer. "Yeah."

He bent to kiss her lips, and the rush of desire reminded him they were alive.

Somehow, they'd survived a trip to the bottom of the ocean and back.

Together.

Without breaking the kiss, he reached behind her and opened the door to her cabin, guiding her inside as his tongue parted her lips.

He kicked the door closed behind them and maneuvered her to the small bathroom. She pushed his shirt up, and he tugged it off over his head, fusing his lips to hers again.

She was his oxygen, his everything, and he couldn't get enough of her.

Diana popped the button on his pants and lowered the zipper. He groaned into her mouth as her fingers closed around his shaft, stroking him slowly. He wanted to be buried inside her.

Condoms. He broke the kiss, his voice a hungry whisper. "I need to get a condom."

She caught his bottom lip in her teeth and sucked it, making him ache for her. "Meet me in the shower."

He nodded. "I'll be right back."

"Hurry."

"I will."

She went into the bathroom and turned on the shower, while he tucked his rock-hard erection back into his cold, wet pants. He opened her door and stepped into the narrow hallway, almost running right into Aura.

"Oh, there you are." She smiled. "I had a couple questions about where you found the comb."

Caleb managed not to scream, "Get the fuck out of my way." Barely.

He shook his head. "I need to get something from my cabin. Maybe we can catch up later."

Aura stepped aside, and he rushed past, but she followed. "You didn't

seem surprised when I mentioned merfolk earlier. Did you already know this was a mermaid comb?”

There wasn't enough blood in his brain for all her questions. “I don't have time for this now.”

“You said you hadn't seen anyone down there, so I'm wondering what a mermaid comb might've been doing in Atlantis. Did someone or something give it to you?”

Caleb opened his cabin door and looked back at her over his shoulder. “We didn't see a mermaid.”

Aura nodded, crossing her arms. “Who *did* you see?”

Shit. Caleb shook his head. “I'm not talking about this now.”

He shut the door and went to the bedside table, ripping open the drawer.

“I guess I'll catch up with you later,” Aura yelled through the door.

Caleb grabbed a condom and stuffed it into his pocket.

Keeping secrets from Department 13 was going to be harder than he realized, but it barely pinged on his radar at the moment.

He peered out and checked the hallway.

All clear.

He hurried back to Diana's cabin and closed the door behind him. Steam wafted out of the open bathroom door, beckoning him closer.

She was inside the small glass shower stall with her eyes closed while the hot water hit the back of her shoulders. Her braids were tied up on top of her head, and the water trailing down her naked body had his erection threatening to break through his zipper.

Her eyes opened, and she smiled as she turned around to face the showerhead. “I think there's room for you in here.”

He set the condom packet next to the sink, stripped off his wet clothes, and slid in behind her, flinching as his back brushed the cool glass. He wrapped his arms around her from behind and chuckled. “Not much room. I'll have to stay very close.”

She leaned her head back against his chest and looked up at him. “I'm not complaining.”

He brought one hand up from her waist, cupping the weight of her breast in his hand. She closed her eyes, leaning back into him. His erection nestled into the cheeks of her ass as he pinched her taut nipple and allowed his other hand to move down her abdomen.

After all they'd seen today, all the risks they'd taken, they were still

together.

Alive.

He had no scientific explanation for any of it, and instead of being frustrated by the unexplainable events, he was grateful.

With every fiber of his being, he was so very grateful for her safety, for her life.

His fingers settled at the juncture of her thighs as he dragged his mouth along her shoulder and up to her ear. "You are my treasure."

She reached up behind her, lacing her fingers around the back of his neck. Her hips ground into him until he was throbbing against her ass. The view of her naked wet body writhing against him was almost enough to make him lose control, but he'd left the condom on the sink for a reason. He wanted to make this last.

His teeth grazed her earlobe as he growled, "I want to explore every part of your body and find every secret place that brings you pleasure."

"This...is a good...start." She gasped as he stroked her faster.

"We're just beginning, love." He nipped at her neck, kneading her breast and enjoying the way her body tensed as she surrendered to pleasure. He'd never wanted anyone so desperately in his long life. He rocked his hips slightly, sliding his shaft between her cheeks.

"Don't stop," she moaned, her grip tightening around the back of his neck.

He dipped his fingers inside her and then found her sweet spot again, rubbing her until her knees wobbled and her orgasm stole her breath.

She reached down and caught his wrist. "My turn."

She turned around to face him and kissed his lips, humming into his mouth. "You're so sexy."

Fuck, he loved that she thought so. They moved around so he could rinse out his hair under the showerhead. He shivered as her fingers explored his chest while he massaged the shampoo out.

She traced the one raised scar near his collarbone. "This happened before you drank from the Grail?"

He opened his eyes, peering down at the mark. "Aye. Parting gift from Captain Morgan, Flynn's predecessor. I fought him while the rest of the crew took on the crewmembers who were loyal to him." He caught her hand and brought it to his lips. "Maybe that's why you got his name in your meditation."

“Maybe so.” But she didn’t look convinced.

He lathered his hair and leaned back into the water again, groaning as her finger circled the tip of his shaft. She closed her hand around him and stroked his length with slow, steady pumps.

She pressed warm kisses along his scar, her tongue teasing his sensitive flesh until he was on the brink of exploding. He caught her wrist and pulled her to her feet. “Not yet.”

He fused his lips to hers, their tongues tangling with an urgency that heated his bloodstream. He needed her. *Now*. They weren’t going to make it to the bed. He bent his knees and caught the backs of her thighs, lifting her up to straddle his waist. The tip of his erection brushed her hot and wet opening, testing his will.

He didn’t have much left.

He carried her out of the shower, resting her ass on the edge of the bathroom sink, and then grabbed the condom package and tore it open. She placed her hands behind her, reclining slightly on the small sink. He could see all of her, and he ached for every part.

“I can’t get close enough to you.” He rolled the condom on with one hand, while he explored her folds with his other.

Her moans threw gasoline on the fire of his desire. Once he had the condom all the way on, he plunged into her, gripping her ass in both hands as he buried himself inside her completely. He breathed her name as her nails dug into his shoulders.

“You feel incredible.” He watched himself slide in and out of her as he rubbed her clit, enjoying the ache in his shoulders as she struggled to hold onto him.

Her hips bucked. “And you...were made for me.”

“Yes,” he growled into her mouth as he claimed her lips and brought one hand up to cup her breast. He wanted to explore every part of her body, but he was so damned close. He slowed his thrusts and broke the kiss, dragging his lips down the curve of her neck. She dropped her head back, arching her back, and he bent to take her nipple into his mouth.

Her fingers threaded through the back of his hair, the pull only intensifying his need to satisfy her. She gasped, grinding her hips into him. “Don’t stop.”

He lost his tenuous grip on his self-control, pounding his hips into her as he toyed with her clit. Her inner muscles clenched as another orgasm

consumed her. He pumped into her over and over until he finally surrendered to the pleasure, erupting deep inside her. He broke the kiss, fighting for air as he lost himself in her eyes.

“I love you,” he breathed.

Her lips brushed his. “I...can’t speak.”

He chuckled, nuzzling her mouth. “Good.”

Once he caught his breath, he pulled out of the sanctuary of her body and slid the condom free, dropping it into the trash. He helped her down from the sink and wrapped her in a towel.

He’d never been this intimate with anyone before. He liked it, patting her dry and kissing droplets from her forehead.

She smiled up at him. “I’ll meet you in bed.”

He shook his head as he grabbed a towel for himself. “Don’t move.” He dried off quickly and threw his towel over the shower rod, then picked her up, enjoying the little gasp of surprise that escaped her lips as he carried her to the bed.

“I can walk,” she whispered into the crook of his neck.

“I’d have to let go of you then, and I’m not ready for that.” He laid her in the bed and spooned her, pulling her in close to his chest. “I’m not sure I’m going to be able to stay awake.”

She covered his hands on her abdomen. “Atlantis has its key now. The dream should be over. We got the message.”

He pressed his lips to her shoulder. “I’ll miss my late-night QVC binges.” The sound of her laughter made him smile. “I love hearing you laugh.”

She peeked back at him. “When I first met you, I never dreamed you had a sense of humor.”

He shrugged. “I’d forgotten how to live until you came into my life.” He bit lightly at her neck. “Thank you for reminding me.”

She chuckled, snuggling against him. “I’m exhausted. I’ll take my braids out and wash my hair in the morning.”

He kissed the soft spot right below her ear. “Sweet dreams, love.”

Her breathing slowed into an even rhythm as she surrendered to sleep.

Caleb breathed in the scent of her skin. Her body fit perfectly in his arms like she’d been the missing piece to complete him. When they got to shore, there would be challenges. He’d have to win her parents’ approval, and he’d already met her best friend, Michelle.

Sadly, he was fairly certain he hadn’t left a great impression with her.

But all of it seemed small compared to the love bursting in his immortal heart.

Immortality was the one thing that worried him.

It was easy to pretend the ending of their story wouldn't matter, but he already cared more for her than for himself, and he suspected that that love would grow with each day they spent together.

However, there would come a day when she was no longer in it, and he would never be able to escape the grief or join her in the great unknown.

She hummed in her sleep, breaking him out of his dark thoughts. He smiled, and for the first time in weeks, he welcomed sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Why would Caleb and Miss Bianca be hiding something about Atlantis?” David stared at his cell phone, then back at the convenience store as he waited for Sampson Bane to exit.

“Her name is Diana, sir.”

He shook his head even though Aura would never see it. “If she wanted me to call her that, she wouldn’t have introduced herself as Miss Bianca.”

“Fine.” Aura lowered her voice. “I don’t know why yet, but I know they’re not telling us the whole story of what happened down there. Somehow Diana went to the bottom of the ocean with Caleb and lived. It shouldn’t have been possible. Also, I sent her with Kingsley’s special juiced-up, waterproof smartphone just in case she needed back up, and I just found a recording of some strange sounds. It wasn’t whale calls or dolphins, but it wasn’t human, either. They weren’t alone down there.”

The convenience store door opened, and a big, broad-shouldered man came out with a brown paper bag. Sampson Bane. David waited for him to get to the corner before starting his engine to follow.

“Maybe they don’t remember. If something was down there, it could have wiped their memories.”

She mulled that over for a second. “But they had memories of the city, and they explained why it needed to remain hidden. Plus, Diana brought back a mermaid comb. I never realized they were actually real. Maybe we can have our techs test it for authenticity.”

The comb grabbed his attention. The legend behind the mermaid’s comb claimed that anyone who possessed it could summon the mermaid who owned it with one stroke of the comb in the ocean. The mermaid would do the person’s bidding in order to reclaim their comb.

The Arcturian David had met in the Yucatan during the equinox had been

searching for a mermaid comb.

If this piece was proven to be authentic, it could be a bargaining chip.

David ran his tongue across his teeth, bitterness drying out his mouth at the thought. He didn't know the mechanics behind the connection to the merfolk and the legendary combs, but if the combs wielded that kind of power, he would be bartering with a being's freewill, and that didn't sit well with him.

"Bring it in for study." He rolled the car down the narrow street, keeping a good distance behind from Sampson.

"I will." She paused. "My gut says someone gave this to her. What are the chances they just found it sitting next to the Lost City of Atlantis? It's not like mermaid combs are just laying around like seashells, right?"

He made a right turn, tailing Sampson, and cursed under his breath as his car started to rattle on the cobblestones of River Street. "If they're hesitant to share that they met someone or something down there, I wouldn't press it. We've got the coordinates. We can always send a team down in a submersible later. If Atlantis is down there, it's not going to walk away anytime soon. I'm tracking the suspect who sold the Orichalcum piece to Caleb. Does Caleb still have it?"

"No." She lowered her voice. "It was the key, and they left it down there. The whirlpool and the storms are gone now, so it must've worked."

Shit. If the Orichalcum Key was gone, he didn't have the physical evidence to leverage with this guy. "I'm glad you're safe. Get me the comb and we'll have the team run tests."

"Okay. We should be docking in two days. I'll get the comb to the DC office once we're ashore."

"Thanks, Henderson. Good work on this one." David parked, watching Sampson enter a pub.

He got out of the car and slipped his phone into his pocket.

Even if he couldn't charge this guy, he could still find out why he'd been targeting Caleb and how Sampson had come to have the Key to Atlantis in his possession. He wouldn't know David didn't have the physical evidence. David would just have to be sure he didn't tip his hand.

River Street was quiet, bathed in yellow streetlights as he jogged across and pulled the door open.

The dimly lit pub had a lineup of bands pinned to the wall with the Scallywags listed for next month. David smirked. Keegan had just piloted a

pirate ship to Atlantis, and in a few weeks, he'd be singing with his southern rock band in this dive.

Immortality didn't seem to weigh him down much.

And now Keegan had love, too.

David didn't begrudge the *Sea Dog* crew, but he might've envied them a little. Even his own agent, Aura Henderson, had found love. He used to date a little, but he had to keep too many secrets. A relationship didn't seem possible given his line of work and his ageless lifespan.

Maybe deep down it was just easier to be alone. *Maybe.*

His quarry was settled in a shadowed booth in the back corner of the pub. David approached and slid into the other side.

Sampson narrowed his eyes. "Was wonderin' if you'd have the balls to show yer face instead of tailing me in your car."

"And here I am in the flesh." David flagged a server and ordered a whiskey on the rocks. Once they were alone again, he focused on the big man seated across from him. "I know you were targeting ads for the Orichalcum Key to Caleb Graves. What I want to know is, why?"

"I know more about Mr. Graves than you ever will." His eyes shone in the dim light as he leaned in closer. "And I still don't see a subpoena in your hand. Why is that exactly, secret agent?" He smirked as he rested back against the booth with a raised brow. "Why are you *really* here?"

David ground his teeth, struggling to remind himself they were in a public place, and he didn't know who this man worked for. "Your stunt could've brought a tsunami to Savannah's doorstep. I want to know how you procured the Orichalcum and why you wanted to sell it to Caleb Graves."

He studied the man's expression, but the mention of the tsunami didn't seem to affect him. Sampson didn't even point out how rare a tidal wave would be or ask questions about why Orichalcum could control the tide. Which meant that he'd probably known.

Sampson took a swig of his drink and shook his head. "Savannah was never in danger." His gaze locked on David's. "I knew Flynn and his crew were working for someone in the government. You, I s'pose. Anyway, I figured the navigator wouldn't be able to resist the rare trinket. The wave was coming for them. Not Savannah."

The server placed David's drink in front of him. He turned the glass, waiting for her to return to the bar. When they were alone again, he lifted

his gaze. "I ran some background checks on you."

Sampson knocked back the last of his drink and chuckled. "I'm squeaky clean." He placed a twenty-dollar bill on the table and slid out of the booth. He stared at David. "And you're not the only one with connections. I know you work for a division of the government that most people don't know even exists." He winked and added, "And you're older than you look."

David kept his expression neutral, but on the inside, he was impressed. People rarely surprised him after all these years, but he hadn't expected this.

He also needed to find out where Department 13 might be leaking information and plug it. "Then you must know I can't let you buy and sell magical artifacts that could harm American lives."

Sampson shook his head. "I've got no beef with you or the government, but if you try to stand between me and that fucking crew, I will *destroy* you."

David took a big swallow of the whiskey, relishing in the warmth spreading through his abdomen. "You talk tough, but even a tsunami wouldn't kill them."

"Oh, I don't want them dead." He put his hand on the table and leaned in. "I want them to *wish* they were dead."

He straightened up and smiled, flashing one gold tooth. "Stay out of my way, *Agent Bale*."

David froze, watching the sea of people gathered around the bar and the television screen part as Sampson came through.

David hadn't told him his name. So who did?

He finished the whiskey and put a bill on the table before following Sampson out. When he exited onto River Street, he jogged after him. "Sampson, wait."

The big guy stopped and turned around. "Yer a tenacious bastard."

David nodded slowly. "Among other things. I take my job seriously, and I've contracted with the *Sea Dog* crew when it's necessary to retrieve relics we can't legally procure. If they've done something illegal, something worthy of wanting them dead, I need to know."

Sampson crossed his arms with a cold laugh. "No loyalty among thieves." He stared out at the river and shook his head. "They took something from me that can never be replaced, and I've waited a very long time to even the score." He looked at David. "I only discovered they were in Savannah a year ago when I saw the news story about the Tybee lighthouse going dark."

He sucked his teeth and turned to the river again. “Where that crew goes, chaos follows.” He eyed David. “I’m doing you a favor, mate.”

He walked away, and this time, David let him go.

The night the Tybee lighthouse had gone dark was the night he’d found out about Dr. Charlotte Sinclair’s deadly psychic abilities. Almost two years ago, she’d defended herself and Keegan from twenty fanatics from a dark religious cult, killing every member in the process. All without ever lifting a finger. They’d been trying to steal the Holy Grail. It was still safe because of Dr. Sinclair and Keegan.

Department 13 had cleaned up the mess as best they could before the authorities had gotten involved, but they’d had no way to replace the light at the top of the tower.

News crews had been paying for tips from locals. Maybe someone had seen something and that’s how Sampson had found out. He’d assign an agent to look into it.

Between the potential mermaid comb and the apparent leak in his department, Sampson Bane was sliding down David’s priority list.

He’d keep an eye on him, but for now, hopefully knowing he was being watched would keep Sampson from trying another stunt like dangling a mythical key with the power to control the tides in front of a curious immortal pirate.

David headed back to the pub.

He needed another drink.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Diana woke up early and carefully slid out of bed while Caleb still dozed.

He seemed peaceful. No nightmares.

Maybe it really was over. Atlantis was safe.

They'd done it.

She headed into the bathroom and got to work on her poor box braids. Taking them out took time, but it was nothing compared to getting them put in. She'd have them out in a couple hours. Once she got in the rhythm, the process became a meditation of sorts. She worked quickly as, one by one, her box braids vanished, and her shoulder-length coils took over. She threw away the synthetic hair extensions and peeked out of the bathroom.

Caleb was still asleep.

After forcing himself to stay awake for so long, she figured he had plenty of catching up to do. She had just gotten her hair braided before the trip, thinking it would mean she wouldn't have to fuss with it again until they got back so she hadn't packed her hair products.

She never dreamed she'd be walking across the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean at the time.

If she still had her detangling brush, she might be able to salvage this. She rummaged through her bag and let out a sigh of relief when she found it at the bottom. She took the brush and a hair tie into the shower and picked up the travel two-in-one shampoo Caleb had left in the shower.

Why did guys think one step was better than two? She stepped back under the warm water and massaged her scalp, trying not to moan.

It felt so damned good to get the salt and sand out of her hair. Once she had it all rinsed out, she grabbed her brush and went to work pulling her hair back into a low ponytail at the base of her head. It was still wet now, but if she could find a bandana or something to use as a headscarf, she

should be all right.

When she stepped out of the shower and toweled off, she put on her bra and panties and poked through her suitcase for a pair of jeans and a clean shirt.

Caleb stirred from the bed, stretching. “How long have you been awake?”

“A couple hours.” She turned around and picked at her curls. “My braids didn’t survive our underwater adventure, and I’m not great at braiding my own hair, so it’s just going to have to be in a ponytail until I can get home and have Michelle’s sister braid it again.”

His sleepy smile made her knees weak. “You’re beautiful.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m half naked and don’t have any makeup on, either.”

“I stand by my observation.” He winked and got up to head for the bathroom.

If he ever figured out how sexy he was, she was going to be in for trouble. She got dressed and looked up as he came out of the bathroom, ready to ask him about something she could use for a headscarf. Instead, she forgot what she was going to say, distracted by his bare chest and toned abs.

Damn, Caleb. She chuckled and shook her head. “Do you have a bandana or something I could use?”

“Of course I do. I don’t wear it around much anymore, but I never sail without bringing it along. Habit.” His crooked smile had her heart racing. “I *am* a pirate, love.” With the towel hanging low on his hips, he went to the door. “I’ll be right back.”

When the door closed, she fanned herself and fought back a giggle. Had she ever been this silly over a guy? Not that she could remember.

It actually felt really good.

Caleb came back to the cabin wearing jeans and a T-shirt that wasn’t so tight it was a second skin, but he did fill out the shoulders and the sleeves nicely. He handed her a dark burgundy, almost violet-colored bandana. She took it and folded it over, inspecting the embroidered edges. This wasn’t a cheap cotton square from a chain store.

“Is this linen?”

He nodded, his lips curving at the corners. “It’s my lucky headscarf. I was wearing it the night we took the *Sea Dog* from Rutger Morgan.”

There was that name again. Maybe the note in her journal from her

meditation had been a brief moment of clairvoyance, a knowing of something to come. This moment.

She met his eyes. "Are you sure about letting me borrow it?"

"Certain." He tipped his head slightly. "I'd be honored."

She smiled and went back into the bathroom. It was a larger square of fabric than today's bandanas, but she got it tied underneath her ponytail and circled around in front of him. "How's it look?"

"You're beautiful." His blue eyes sparkled.

She fiddled with it a little more in the mirror as Caleb came up behind her. He pressed a kiss to the side of her neck that sent a tremor of desire through her body.

His eyes met hers in the mirror as he ran the back of his fingers along the slope of her neck. "You make a stunning pirate, love."

She stared at her reflection in the mirror, at their reflection.

Seeing him behind her with that loving glint in his eyes had her wanting to pinch herself. How had her life changed so much in such a short period of time? It made her head spin if she examined it too closely. Instead, she vowed to embrace this union.

Tilting her head slightly, she smiled. His lucky headscarf accented her brown skin to perfection. This would work for now.

She turned around and rose on her toes to kiss him. "Thank you."

He wrapped his arms around her, his lips brushing hers as he whispered, "I can't get enough of you."

Someone banged on the door, and Flynn's voice cut through the haze of desire. "Caleb, get your arse on deck. I need a heading. This isn't a pleasure cruise."

Caleb groaned and shouted back, "Aye, Captain." He smiled as he kissed her one more time. "Duty calls." He stepped out of the bathroom, taking her hand. "Come on, maybe Bob saved us some breakfast, too."

Her belly rumbled in agreement, and she laughed. "Sounds like a plan."

...

Caleb took Diana to the galley and then headed for the map room.

With the help of his GPS and computer, he could chart a course in minutes instead of hours. He jogged up the steps and ran over the map with Keegan and Flynn. As they were finishing up, Aura and Greyson approached.

Aura stopped in front of them, but all her attention was on Flynn. “Does the name Sampson Bane ring a bell to you?”

Flynn shook his head. “Should it?”

Greyson looked at Caleb. “Bale says he’s the one who targeted those ads for the Orichalcum Key to you. Do you know him?”

“No.” Caleb thought back to the purchase and frowned. “I paid a consortium. I can’t recall the exact name, but it wasn’t Sampson Bane.”

Aura sighed, shaking her head. “We’re still trying to find out how he came into possession of the key, but he definitely targeted Caleb because he knew him. He knew he would be too curious, and, eventually, he’d buy it.”

Caleb bristled. “Why did he want me to have it? Did he know what it could do? He could’ve destroyed Savannah.”

Aura shrugged. “We’re not sure. Agent Bale tailed him, but he wasn’t doing much talking.”

Flynn was uncharacteristically silent. Caleb studied the captain’s distant look for a moment before he said to Aura, “I’ll check my files, old student rosters, and my emails once we get back to Savannah, but I’m sure I would’ve remembered that name.”

“Thanks, Caleb.” Greyson clasped his shoulder and nudged Flynn. “No wise words, Captain?”

Flynn almost flinched. He narrowed his eyes and pointed to the stairs leading to the top deck. “Time to drop the sails.”

Greyson pecked Aura’s cheek with a grin. “I’ll be right back.” He hurried out and up the stairs.

Caleb focused on Aura again. “If this Sampson person could procure the legendary key to Atlantis, what else might he have at his disposal?”

“I don’t know.” Aura pulled her attention off the stairs where Greyson disappeared and her gaze locked on Caleb’s. “But we need to find out.” She took out her phone and frowned. “I have to take this.”

She left the room, and Caleb collected his things, eager to get back to the galley, back to Diana. He found her in the kitchen, laughing with One-Eyed Bob. They stopped as Caleb came closer, and he raised a brow. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“You’re not.” Diana grinned. “Bob was telling me about how much you used to hate water. I can’t believe you went from that to tying yourself to that anchor.”

Caleb chuckled. “I owe it all to Duke’s swimming lessons.”

“I’ll have to remember to thank him later.” She smiled and wandered over to Caleb, sliding her hand into his. His heart nearly burst from his rib cage.

He glanced at Bob. “I was worried our cook was warning you to run as soon as we dock.”

“Now why would I do that?” Bob laughed, shaking his head. “Ye might be a little studious for my tastes, but that’s why I don’t date ye.”

Caleb rolled his eyes and looked at Diana. “Did you eat?”

“I snacked a little, but I was waiting for you to get here.” She pointed at a pot on the stove. “Bob’s making Brunswick Stew.”

“Go sit.” Bob waved them toward the tables. “I’ll bring you a couple bowls.”

Caleb took a seat next to Diana, and John came in with Harmony on his arm and sat across from them.

Harmony’s ponytail was sliding down her head, and her cheeks were flushed with color, a sure sign she’d been up on the lines helping to drop the sails. Of the new crewmembers, Harmony was the only one with sailing experience. John had always been a man of numbers, but when he stared at Harmony, there was an uncharacteristic devotion in his eyes.

Caleb could relate as he smiled at Diana.

Drake and Heather came into the galley with Duke and Flynn right behind. Keegan was piloting the ship, so he and Char would probably come in once the captain could take over the wheel.

Bob served up his special seafood Brunswick Stew. Instead of pulled pork, it had shrimp and clams, and he seasoned it to perfection.

Diana let out a happy groan and looked over her shoulder at Bob. “This is amazing. I need to bring my folks over to your restaurant sometime.”

Bob grinned. “Tell your mom I’ll trade her stew for some of her legendary fried chicken.”

Caleb laughed and patted Diana’s thigh. “I’ve brought fried chicken from the Williams Southern Kitchen to poker night a few times.”

Conversations cross pollinated until the galley was bursting with noise and laughter. There was a palpable energy when they set sail for Savannah. For home.

And this time, Caleb’s eagerness had nothing to do with sleeping in his own bed. This time, there was an anxious flutter in his belly at the thought of returning to shore with a partner.

Half of him wanted to shout from up in the crow’s nest to the world that

he was in love, and the other half wanted to keep her all to himself and never leave the ship.

Diana patted his leg. "Are you okay?"

He took her hand and nodded. "I think I'm...nervous."

"About what?"

He shrugged. "Meeting your family. Repairing the first impression I made on your friend Michelle." He paused. "Learning how to court someone in the age of social media and dating apps."

Her smile buoyed his spirits. "My parents are going to love you, and Michelle will come around. I'll explain you weren't sleeping when we first met. She'll understand." She squeezed his hand. "Plus, she thought you had outrageous abs, so you have that going for you..."

"Noted." He arched a brow. "I'll be sure to leave my shirt unbuttoned when we see her again."

"No!" Diana laughed and nudged him with her shoulder. "I'm saying she'll think you're a catch. Plus, she'll be so glad you got me home safe. You'll be golden in her book. You'll see."

He lifted their joined hands to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "I just want to make you happy, and I know that starts with *your* crew."

Drake gripped his shoulder. "Speaking of crew..." He smiled at Diana. "I've taken a straw poll, and we all agree we'd be lucky to have you join us if you're willing."

Diana looked at Caleb and back to Drake. "I can hold my own climbing those lines, but I don't know how to sail."

Aura and Greyson came over and stopped at their table. Aura smiled. "If you're not interested in sailing, I'm looking to add personnel to the Department 13 field office in Savannah. You could be an asset with magic for us."

There was a glint in Diana's eyes as she glanced over at Caleb. She was trying to communicate something, but he was sorely out of practice with reading body language. Her grip on his hand tightened, and he interrupted, "Maybe you could make your offers later. We're still navigating our... relationship status."

He stood up and helped Diana to her feet, and together, they left the galley.

Once they were a safe distance away, she let out a sigh. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He led her toward the stern of the ship. "I wasn't sure

what you were trying to tell me, but I figured if you wanted to stay, you'd let me know."

When they reached the back of the ship, he leaned his forearms on the railing and she did the same beside him, resting her head against his shoulder. "It's not that I don't want to be a part of your world or help Aura with Department 13. It's just that...I don't want to lose the footing I have with my design business. The universe keeps pushing me to use my gifts, and now I know I've got Atlantean blood in my veins, too, but I never asked for any of this. I'm not sure I want it."

He looked at her wearing his headscarf and her gold hoop earrings, and his heart stuttered. She looked like a stunning lady pirate, but she wasn't born the 1700s. She had choices. But she didn't get a choice when it came to her psychic gifts or her Atlantean blood. She'd gone to college and started her own business. She'd been able to control those things.

Wanting control was something he understood.

He focused on the horizon again. "You know it doesn't have to be an either or."

She rested her chin on her crossed arms on the railing. "I don't know how to keep all the woo woo from taking over my life."

"Woo woo?" He chuckled.

She looked his way with a smile. "You know, spiritual stuff like root work and crystals, mediums like Heather, my auntie's Botanica Shop. It feels pretty either or to me."

He shrugged. "I've managed to remain a part of this crew while completing five doctorates so far. And in this lifetime, I'm a tenured professor-at-large at the Armstrong Campus of Georgia Southern University. Speaking from my own experience, my life wouldn't be authentic if I had to choose one love over the other. I sail with the crew, I study, and I teach. It's a balancing act."

She nodded, seemingly digesting his words as she faced the horizon. "I guess." Her gaze shifted to him. "Before we dock, we should probably figure out the status of our relationship, too."

"True." He searched her eyes, wishing he had more experience navigating relationships. What was appropriate? Hell if he knew. "Well...I already revealed my feelings, but I suppose I should ask your father for his consent to court you. I could offer a dowry." The way her eyebrows shot up made him take a step back, laughing. "I warned you I was out of practice."

She laughed, shaking her head. "I know, but...offering a dowry and asking for my father's consent to court me is...uncommon here."

He moved closer, wrapping his arms around her waist from behind, enjoying the warmth of her body touching his. "What do you suggest?"

She covered his hands with hers. "We need to tell my parents where we stand, not ask their permission. So..." She tipped her head back against his shoulder looking up at him. "Are we a couple? Monogamous? Just met? What are you comfortable with?"

He kissed her neck. "I feel like we need to start this conversation over. May I?"

She grinned. "Go right ahead."

He slid his arms free and turned her around to face him. He sank down on one knee, and her eyes widened.

She shook her head. "Wait."

He took her hand and winked. "Don't worry. I don't have a ring." He pressed a kiss to her palm and met her eyes. "I love you, Diana Williams. Would you take me as your boyfriend?"

"I love you, too." She knelt down so they were face to face, and her lips curved into a soft smile. "I haven't had a boyfriend in a long time. I have a couple rules."

Caleb nodded. "I would appreciate having a code of conduct."

Her smile broadened. "It's not a code. I just...I want us to always be honest with each other the way we are right now."

"I'd like that, too."

"Good." She swallowed, and her voice softened. "And I want to know where I stand with you if your feelings ever change."

This rule reeked of her ex she'd told him about, the one she'd thought she would marry but had left her behind. A pellet of bitterness heated in his gut as he stood and brought her up with him. "My feelings for you aren't fluid like the tide. Love isn't a word I toss around lightly." He paused, his voice taking on an annoyed edge. "If I ever lay eyes on the man who broke your heart, I'll ruin him for hurting you. That is a promise, love."

She cupped his cheek in her hand, and her eyes shone with tears, only further cementing his oath to ruin whoever caused her pain.

He embraced her and kissed her head. "You're my north star, Diana. I know we have much to learn about each other, but I'm not going anywhere."

She clung to him as the *Sea Dog* sailed onward for Savannah.

Caleb kept his eyes on the horizon, realizing his life was changing, and for the first time he could remember, that didn't fill him with dread.

He couldn't wait to face a million new days with Diana at his side.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Half the crew worked on tying the lines to giant iron hooks on the dock while the other half were at the tops of the mast pulling up the sails.

Diana did her best to stay out of the way, but watching them work was fascinating. Caleb had climbed the ratlines to help Greyson and Duke tie up the mainsails.

Drake was on the dock with the line from the back of the ship, tying it down, while Duke had the other thick line from the bow over his shoulder, dragging the ship closer.

Diana's phone buzzed in her pocket. She took it out and smiled, seeing her mom's number on the screen. "Hey, Mom. I'm back."

"Hey, sugar." God, it was good to hear her voice. "You're coming by the restaurant on your way home, right? Fried chicken special tonight..."

"Are you making biscuits, too?"

Her mom laughed. "Course I am. What time will you be here?"

Diana kept her eye on Caleb as he came down the lines and dropped onto the deck. "A couple hours. I want to drop off my things and change clothes first."

"All right. I'll tell Daddy you're coming by."

"I'm bringing someone with me, too. Is that okay?"

"Someone?" her mom asked with plenty of innuendo.

Diana laughed. "I started seeing someone. He's...I really like him."

"Then we want to meet him," she said without hesitation.

Diana smiled. "See you soon, Mom. I love you."

"Love you too, sugar."

Diana ended the call as Caleb approached. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah," she replied. His shirt was stuck to his chest, making her forget all about fried chicken. She cleared her throat. "My mom wants me to come by

the restaurant tonight. You want to come with me?"

"I would love to." He looked down at himself. "I should clean up first."

"I told her it would be a couple hours." She worried her lower lip. "Not sure it's a very romantic first date to meet my parents."

He tipped his head with his messy curls and a boyish grin that stole her heart all over again. "I believe our first date was over there." He pointed at the bow. "I showed you the stars." He met her eyes again. "If you're ready to introduce me to them, then I'm ready to meet them."

It was so easy to love this man, quirks and all.

"All right. I need to change and clean up, too." Diana tugged on the hem of her T-shirt. "Can you drop me off at my place and pick me up in an hour or so?"

"Sure." He brushed a kiss to her cheek and started for the stairs. "Let me grab my duffel."

She watched him go and wondered if the rest of the crew could see the little hearts that were probably floating over her head right now.

Duke stopped beside her. He had a canvas bag of potatoes over his shoulder and a smile on his face. "Looks like I'm the last single man standing."

She looked up at him. "What about the captain? Isn't he still single, too?"

He laughed. "Flynn plays things close to the vest, but I think he's always seeing someone. The names and faces change, but he's not alone like me."

Diana raised a brow. "Are you alone by choice?"

"Oh yeah." He nodded. "I'm a bear to be around. Wouldn't wish me on anyone."

She rolled her eyes, biting back a grin. "I don't believe that."

"No, it's true." He checked around and lowered his voice. "But truth be told, I thought Caleb would be alone forever, so what the hell do I know?"

She shrugged. "Neither of us were looking for this, that's for sure." She glanced at the tall, broad pirate. "I keep wanting to pinch myself to be sure I'm not dreaming."

His features softened. "Guess we'll be seeing more of you."

She nodded. "Probably. We'll see after he meets my family."

"I'm sure he'll love them." He started for the gangplank leading to the dock. "Take good care of him."

She planned to.

Caleb jogged up the stairs with his bag and smiled at her. Her pulse raced

in answer.

Oh, she had it bad for this guy. She waited for a swell of dread at the realization, for all the little doubts about everything to creep in, and the whisper to be careful, to watch for signs that he could be having second thoughts.

But none of it happened.

She'd walked through the gates of Atlantis with this man. She trusted him with her life, so giving him her heart didn't seem to be so risky.

He took her hand, and together they crossed over from the ship into the reality of her hometown. And they'd face it together.

She might never stop smiling.

...

Caleb checked himself over in the mirror again.

The last time he'd met a woman's parents, he'd been promising a bride price. He wasn't sure what to expect now, but he'd do everything he could to win their approval. They were important to Diana, which made them important to him as well.

He went downstairs into his library and scanned the spines of his books, searching the titles. He smiled as he drew out a pictorial history of Savannah. It was a first edition, and when he'd bought it, it had been a celebration of Savannah after the Civil War. The black-and-white photographs showed a bustling Savannah present-day. Now it was more of a history book. He flipped through the photos, allowing the nostalgia to wash over him at the faces and the unpaved streets filled with horses and buggies.

He'd lived through all these phases. The aftermath of the Civil War and the occupation of Savannah, and finally the restoration of the historic district. He'd loved this city from the first time they'd docked here, and his feelings had never changed, no matter how much the setting did.

He closed the book and tucked it under his arm, grateful for Savannah in a whole new way now. If he'd ever moved, he never would have found Diana. He hoped her mother would accept the small gift.

After one more check in the mirror, he left the house.

He'd decided on jeans and a button-down shirt, hoping it wouldn't be too casual. Diana had texted him her address, and he smiled as he pulled up to an apartment complex and found her waiting outside for him.

She was still wearing his lucky headscarf. Something about seeing her wearing it filled him with pride. She was dressed in a simple sundress that matched the linen bandana on her head with the amethyst earrings he'd given her from a ship he and the crew had plundered centuries ago.

He couldn't take his eyes off her.

She got into his car and leaned over to kiss his cheek. His ancient fucking heart nearly burst from his chest.

"You're stunning," he whispered.

She worried her lower lip as she reached for her seat belt and peered at him from under her lashes. "You don't look bad yourself." Her smile widened. "And you smell amazing."

He chuckled. "One of my finer late night QVC purchases."

"Speaking of purchases, I got something for you." She opened her small shoulder bag and took out a black velvet pouch. "I hope you like it."

He took it from her, fumbling with the drawstring for a second. He'd never received a gift from a woman before, and it jumbled his emotions. He dipped his fingers into the bag and withdrew a small silver anchor on a leather cord. The traditional Admiralty shape was a perfect replica of the *Sea Dog's* anchor. He held it up as he met her eyes.

"Do you like?" she asked.

He nodded and slid the cord over his head, admiring the way the anchor rested over his heart. "I love it." He leaned in and kissed her. "I didn't know I should bring a gift."

She laughed and shook her head. "You don't need any gifts. I drew the design, and a friend of mine made it for me. I thought I'd hang onto it until your birthday, but it turned out so great, I couldn't wait to give it to you."

He looked down at it again. "What made you choose the anchor?"

Her hand caressed his cheek, and he lifted his gaze as she whispered, "When you tied yourself to that anchor and sank into the water, that was the moment I realized I loved you." Her smile widened. "And I wanted to kick myself for not figuring it out until I lost you."

He took her hand and lifted it to his lips as he shook his head. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Good." She leaned in for a kiss and grinned as she settled back into her seat. "I hope you're hungry. Since I mentioned bringing you with me tonight, my mom has expanded the fried chicken and biscuits into a whole menu of treat-our-baby-girl-right entrees."

He laughed and pulled into traffic. “What exactly is treat-our-baby-girl-right food?”

She rested her hand on his thigh, and already, his blood was pumping below his belt. “Well, now she’s added collard greens and black-eyed peas for our good luck, and her signature peanut butter fudge brownie cake for love and passion.”

He stopped at a light and grinned as he looked over at her. “I should’ve worn looser pants.”

She laughed. “Oh, my mom’s going to love you.”

He hoped so.

When they got to the restaurant, he parked on the street and went around to the passenger door to help Diana out. He took her hand, and their fingers threaded together, forming a union he’d never known he wanted this much.

Before they opened the door to the Williams Southern Kitchen restaurant, Diana whispered, “Ready?”

“Aye.” He winked.

Her grin widened. “Eat fast, pirate. I have plans for you later.”

When did he get so damned lucky?

She opened the door, and a beautiful Black woman with short silver hair wrapped Diana in a tight hug. “I’m so glad you’re home, sugar.” She held her out at arms-length, looking her over. “How was your trip?”

“Great.” Diana looked over at Caleb. “This is Caleb. Caleb, this is my mom, Anita.”

Her mom stared at Caleb for a second as a smile spread over her lips. “You’re my Wednesday night chicken to-go.”

He grinned and offered his hand. “And you’re the one who always adds a cornbread muffin to the bag.”

She skipped his hand and pulled him into a tight hug. He peered at Diana over her mother’s shoulder. He’d picked up food from Williams Southern Kitchen almost every Wednesday night for the past five or six years, and somehow, he’d never crossed paths with Diana and never realized that Anita owned the place.

She’d been in his orbit all this time, and he’d never known. Maybe the timing hadn’t been right yet.

Was he seriously contemplating that fate and destiny were real and ran on a timetable?

Her mom released him and stepped back, shaking her head with a happy

smile. "Come on back. Isaac's helping me in the kitchen tonight."

"Wait." Caleb suddenly remembered the old pictorial book under his arm and held it out to Diana's mother. "This is for you."

Her warm smile broadened as she opened the cover. "This is..." She flipped to the section with black-and-white photos of the square where Williams Southern Kitchen now stood. She looked up at him and shook her head. "This is amazing. Where did you get it?"

He fumbled for a plausible answer. "Library sale. At the university. Where I teach."

Diana jumped in to save him. "I told you Caleb's a professor, remember?"

Anita clutched the book to her chest and grinned. "Well, I love it. Thank you." She winked at her daughter. "I like this one." She grinned. "Come sit down before the food gets cold."

The scents coming out of the back of the restaurant had Caleb's stomach growling in response. Anita pushed through the doors, and he and Diana followed.

Anita called over to an older Black man standing in front of the stainless-steel oven. "Isaac, Diana's back, and she brought her...friend."

Diana chuckled. "Caleb's my boyfriend, Mom."

She shrugged. "I didn't want to assume anything."

Her father reached into the oven with two industrial mitts and brought out a cake. He looked back at them and grinned. "Just a sec, honey." He took off the mitts and came over, offering Caleb his hand. "Isaac Williams, good to meet you." He gave Caleb a firm handshake as he glanced at Diana. "You never mentioned a new guy in your life."

She rolled her eyes. "Daddy."

Caleb smiled and released his hand. "It's good to meet you, Mr. Williams."

Her father slid his arm around his wife's waist and laughed. "It's Isaac and Anita."

Isaac smiled at his wife, and the unapologetic love sparkling in his eyes made Caleb look over at Diana. She came over and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Are you hungry?"

That got her mother's attention. "Sugar, take him out to table four in the corner. It's got the place settings ready and ice waters on the table."

Caleb shook his head. "That's not necessary. We can eat back here."

“Maybe you two could.” Isaac grinned. “But my wife and I don’t dine in our kitchen.” He lowered his voice and added, “Besides, the dining room is slow enough tonight that we can take a little break and get to know this guy who caught our baby girl’s eye.”

“Dad!” Diana shook her head and tugged Caleb’s hand. “Come on, I’ll take you to our table.”

They slid into a booth in the corner, and Diana rested her head on his shoulder. “That was a sweet gift for my mom.”

“I was hoping she would give it a good home.” He rested his hand on her thigh. “And secretly I hoped it would help me gain your parents’ approval.”

Diana laughed, rolling her eyes. “Don’t you dare ask their permission to court me!”

He squeezed her leg, drinking in the sound of her laughter. “I’ll do my best to control myself.”

A few minutes later, her parents brought out the food on a big tray and filled the table with a Southern feast complete with the best fried chicken in town, cornbread, baked beans, collard greens, and fried okra.

Her parents peppered him with questions about the university and how he and Diana had met. Thankfully, Diana fielded that one because Caleb realized too late that they hadn’t discussed how much to share with her folks about their trip to Atlantis.

While she was telling them about her dream with the coordinates, the bell on the front door chimed.

Her mother got up, and halfway to the door, she said, “Michelle! You made it. We’re in the corner. Come on in, we’ll pull up a chair.”

Diana hopped up and rushed over to hug her best friend. Michelle released her and bit back a smile. She had on jeans and a tank top with a long black ponytail hanging down her back. “So how come your mom invited me to come meet your new guy instead of you?”

Diana looked over her shoulder at Caleb and back to Michelle. “You already met him, remember?”

Caleb slid out of the booth and walked to Diana’s side. “Good to see you again.”

Michelle’s gaze wandered up from his feet to the top of his head. “You clean up nice.” She raised her eyebrows. “Thanks for bringing Diana home in one piece, and for...keeping Savannah from being washed away.”

Caleb smiled at Diana. “This is the person you should thank. I just

navigated the ship. She told me where to go.”

Michelle nodded. “You seem...less—”

“He’s sleeping better now,” Diana interrupted.

Michelle chuckled. “I wonder why?”

Diana’s jaw dropped. “Michelle!”

Diana led her friend back toward the table and caught her up on what had happened. Caleb trailed behind them, a smile teasing his lips.

Seeing Diana with Michelle, excitedly sharing details about her trip on the *Sea Dog*, warmed him all over. He’d been sailing for so long, it was easy to take it for granted and only remember the hard work and calloused hands. Hearing her describe the storm and the singing and dancing afterward brought back the adventure of it all.

The meal was full of laughter and stories, leaving Caleb to wonder how he had survived so long in this world without a family and friends to share stories and food. Yes, he had his crew, but they all had lives and careers. Caleb had allowed lifetimes to pass him by while he’d buried himself in books and studies.

He’d missed so much.

Or maybe he’d just been waiting...for her.

He helped Diana clear the table while her folks prepared a takeout order. Once he’d stacked the plates and bowls, he added the glasses on top and then lifted the mountain of dishes.

“Are you sure you’ve got it all?” Diana asked.

“Aye.” He turned for the kitchen, and a spoon slipped, which tipped a bowl and sent two drinking glasses over the side. One hit the side of a dish, cracking as he caught it, but the other tumbled to the floor and smashed into pieces.

“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath, setting the stack of plates on a nearby table. Diana came toward him, but he held his hand up to stop her. “There’s broken glass on the floor.”

“I’ll get the broom and dustpan.” She disappeared into the kitchen while he set the cracked glass he caught onto the table.

“Damn, that cut looks bad,” Michelle said.

Cut? He inspected his hand and frowned. Apparently, he’d caught the glass after the rim had hit the edge of the plate. “I’ll be all right.”

She went behind the hostess stand and came back with a clean cloth napkin. “You should put pressure on it.”

“Thank you.” He wrapped it around his hand and winced. It did hurt. At least with the napkin wrapped around his hand she wouldn’t see the cut had completely healed within a couple of minutes. He could take it off later when they got home.

Diana returned with the broom, and he swept up the mess. She eyed his hand. “Did the glass cut you?”

“It’s just a scratch.” He met her eyes. “I’m a quick healer.”

Her eyes flashed with the realization as she nodded. “I’ll take the rest of these back.”

“Give your folks my apologies for breaking the glasses.”

Diana shook her head with a grin. “Please. This place is always testing gravity. You’re not the first to break something.”

She disappeared into the kitchen, and Michelle chuckled. “She really likes you.”

He raised a brow as he carried the dustpan to the trash. “Does it show?”

She crossed her arms. “Tell me you didn’t see the way she was working her hips even though she had her hands full of dishes.”

He laughed. “I’m fond of her hips.”

Michelle dropped her hands to her sides and sobered. “Diana deserves a good guy that won’t take her for granted. Are you that guy?”

“I plan to treasure her as long as she’ll allow me to.” He emptied the dustpan and smiled. “I gave her my heart with no strings attached.”

Michelle checked the door to the kitchen and lowered her voice. “Did she tell you about Darius? How she thought they were getting married and he walked out on her for a job in the big city?”

He’d never met Darius, but he wanted to make him pay for hurting Diana. “She told me.”

“She deserves better.” Michelle shook her head. “I just don’t want to see her hurt again.”

Michelle was protective and a little abrasive, but Caleb liked her. She reminded him a little of Duke from his crew. She had Diana’s back.

“Yes, she does.” He nodded. “I will never hurt her. You have my word.”

Michelle almost smiled. “Good.” She glanced at his hand. “Has the bleeding stopped?”

“It’s sore, but I’m sure I’m fine.” He didn’t remove the napkin. How would he explain the cut being healed? He tightened the knot holding the napkin to his hand and looked up as Diana returned with her mother at her

side.

She smiled and slid her arm around his waist. “We better get going.” She peered at his hand. “We can stop by urgent care and see if you need a few stitches.”

“I’m sure I’m fine.” He smiled at Diana’s mother. “I’m sorry for the glasses.”

Anita swiped her hand through the air. “No worries, baby. Happens.”

“We have plenty more,” her dad said as he came out of the kitchen doors. He glanced at Caleb’s hand and frowned. “We’ve got a first-aid kit in the kitchen.”

“I’m all right.” Caleb shook his head and glanced at Diana and back to her parents. “I’m actually exhausted from the trip, and I need to prep for the week’s lectures at the university, so we should probably get going.”

Diana nodded and hugged her folks. “I love you. Thanks for dinner.”

Her mom smiled. “See you soon, sugar.”

Once they were outside, Caleb silently replayed every conversation, studying his responses for any missteps.

“You’re awfully quiet.” Diana stopped at the passenger door and looked up into his eyes. “No one is upset about the glasses.”

“Oh, it’s not that.” He shook his head. “I just hoped they understood how much you mean to me. I...I want to be good enough for you.”

She brought her soft hand up to his cheek. “You’re better than good enough.” She rose on her toes and kissed him. “You make me happier than I thought I could be.” She opened the door. “Let’s get out of here. I have plans for you.”

He grinned. “My place or yours?”

She paused. “Yours.”

“Done.” He drove the five blocks back to his house and hustled her inside, eager to have her to himself. When he gripped the doorknob, he winced.

She frowned. “Does your hand still hurt? I thought you heal right away.”

“I do.” He frowned and untied the napkin to find the cut still angry and red. The bleeding had staunched for the most part, but it wasn’t remotely healed.

Diana’s brows pinched together. “Why is the cut still there?”

“I don’t know.” He opened the door with his other hand and went into the kitchen, washing his wounded hand. He glanced her way and laughed. “I

don't own any Band-Aids."

Diana wasn't laughing as she inspected his hand. "Could the Grail have worn off?"

"I don't think so. It took almost two hundred fifty years before we needed another sip, and I took one last year." He held up his hand for a closer look. "This doesn't make any sense."

"Wait." Diana leaned on the counter. "Tell me what happened at Atlantis before the whirlpool sucked me down there with you. Did you touch anything?"

"No." He stuck his hand back under the cool water and met her eyes. "I heard Anki's voice in my head. She didn't show herself until you arrived." He tried to recall every moment after he'd hit the ocean floor. "There were two voices. One sounded more like a guardian, and the other was hers."

"Okay, when I got there, the key was already in the gate to Atlantis."

He nodded, staring at the water escaping the faucet. "Yes. I inserted the key, but I couldn't turn it. They told me it would take both of us to close the circle, a union." His gaze snapped to her face. "I told them you couldn't come to the bottom of the ocean or you would drown."

Diana straightened, concern lining her face. "Then you told Anki you would die for me, right?"

"I did say that." He met her eyes. "They asked what I would give to keep you safe, and I didn't have anything with me to barter with. I told them they could have anything."

"That doesn't sound like a bargain." Diana rubbed her forehead. "This doesn't make sense. Tell me what you said again, word for word."

"I didn't agree to anything." He thought back. "They said their world relies on balance and something about give and take. I told them to take me."

"Shit. That was it." Diana shook her head. "Promise me you'll never make deals with non-humans ever again."

"I didn't realize I was."

She nodded. "They counted on that." Her gaze met his. "Then what happened?"

He tried to replay the exchange in his mind. "They didn't take me. Obviously. But Anki asked what I had to offer for your safety. I remember looking at my diving watch and realizing I hadn't brought anything with me. I think I told her to take whatever she wished. And that's when I told

her I'd die for you."

"Shit." Diana frowned. "That's what she accepted."

"But I'm still alive. I don't know what she was referring to." Caleb opened and closed his fingers, still unsure what any of this had to do with his hand.

"I think I know." Diana took his uninjured hand in hers. "They took your immortality, Caleb. They used that energy to keep me from drowning so that we could turn the key."

He took his hand out of the water, studying the cut as he opened and closed his hand. "So right now..."

"You're mortal. Technically someday you *will* die for me because you wanted me to live. This is why you can't make bargains with entities that aren't from our plane. Agreements with the spirit world are binding."

He studied the wound as this new reality sank in. He wasn't healing instantly because he was mortal again. He sat with it for a moment, weighing the feeling before he met her eyes again. "You're saying I agreed to die someday."

"I'm saying they accepted your offer to die in trade for my safety. They took your immortality."

He carefully dried his injured hand. "Right now, I could suffer a fatal wound."

"Yes." She shook her head. "So promise me you'll be careful." Her jaw slackened. "You could've fallen from the lines on the ship today and died."

"But I didn't." He held out his hand. "I did cut my hand, though."

She chuckled, rolling her eyes. "This is serious."

"I know." He pulled her in close with his uninjured hand and kissed her forehead. "I could take another drink from the Grail." The second the words left his lips, he realized something. "Or...I could wait."

...

Diana blinked. "Wait? Why?"

She wanted to wrap him in bubble wrap all of a sudden.

He pulled his curls back from his forehead. "I drank from the cup the first time, not knowing it would make me immortal. I drank from it the second time because there's still so much more to learn from this world, but..."

"But?"

He turned around, taking a few steps away from her. "This might be a

chance for a new start.”

He wasn’t making any sense. She shook her head. “Caleb, you’ll age and die.”

“I know.” He looked back at her. “But we could have a life. A real one. Together.”

Her heart fluttered in her throat as her vision blurred. “I don’t understand.”

He came back over and cupped her cheek as he stared into her soul. “I love you. I loved being a part of your family tonight. I...I want a life with you, and without the weight of the cup in my hand, we could have a family someday and watch them grow up. If I take another drink, I’d have to watch everyone else grow and change while I remained frozen in time. This is my chance to move through it with you.”

“We barely know each other.” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “What if...you hate my favorite band?”

The corner of his mouth tugged up into a crooked smile. “You like the Scallywags and I’ve been listening to Keegan croon for lifetimes.”

She rolled her eyes, laughing in spite of the monumental choice he was proposing. “I mean, what if after a few years, it doesn’t work out?”

He shook his head. “This love is only going to grow. Destiny brought us to this moment, remember?”

Okay, she loved that she’d somehow convinced her man of science to give fate and destiny a fair shot. She blinked. Her man. *Hers*.

She lost herself in his eyes and whispered, “I love you. I just don’t ever want you to have regrets that you chose to give up eternity to spend one lifetime with me.”

“There are very few constants in this world, but even if I lived to see the end of time, I would *never* regret loving you, Diana. Never.”

He fused his lips to hers, and she tilted her head, deepening the kiss. She needed him, needed to lose herself in him, to be one with him.

As if he could read her mind, he bent his knees, his hands sliding down the curve of her ass to the backs of her thighs. He lifted her up onto the kitchen counter, growling into the kiss as he pulled his injured hand out from under her.

She gasped against his lips. “Your hand...”

“What hand?” he groaned into her mouth as he ran his other hand up her thigh and under the hem of the sundress.

She scooted to the edge of the cool countertop, eager for his touch.

He ran his finger along her core over the thin fabric of her thong, and she moaned, aching for him. Their tongues tangled with an urgent yearning as he pushed the thong aside and spread her lips with his fingers. He dipped two fingers inside of her and then circled her clit until she shivered.

“Shit.” He broke the kiss. “Condom.”

She made a mental note to get on the pill again as soon as possible.

Stealing one more kiss, he whispered, “Don’t move.”

He hustled out of the kitchen and returned with a foil packet and a hunger in his eyes that had her squirming on the counter. She loved seeing how much he wanted her.

He tore it open and kissed her again, hard, searing the passion into her heart and soul. He was hers, but she was most definitely his, too. He claimed her with every touch, every kiss.

His hands ran up her bare thighs, pushing the dress up until the tip of his erection brushed her opening. His fingers toyed with her and he pushed his hips forward, entering her completely.

Her head fell back, drinking in the moment. He was made for her, stretching her and pleasing her until she saw stars. His thrusts came harder and faster as his lips and teeth teased the tender skin at the base of her neck.

“You feel amazing,” he whispered against her.

“Don’t stop.”

His fingers worked faster in time with his thrusts until her inner muscles clenched and her orgasm stole her breath. He pumped into her one last time and froze as he erupted deep inside her.

She brought her head up, resting it on his broad shoulder as she closed her eyes and struggled to breathe. “I never...want...to move.”

His breathless laugh warmed her all over. “We...will never have...dinner guests.”

She laughed.

And she loved him.

She’d never met anyone like Caleb, but maybe that was the point. She hadn’t met him until the time had been right. Until they’d needed to save Savannah.

And, in turn, each other.

Epilogue

Two months later

After dinner at the Pirate's House, his payment for her being right about Atlantis, Caleb brought Diana to Forsyth Park.

The crowds had vanished by this time of night, but the water from the fountain filled the silence. He ran his thumb along the back of her hand as they walked down the dimly lit path. Spanish Moss hung from the living oak trees, casting a spell like they were walking into a watercolor painting.

The past few weeks had been a blur of late nights making love, stolen kisses as they'd each run to different commitments for work. But he'd loved and cherished every passing minute. He hadn't realized that drinking from the cup had stolen his appreciation for time.

It took away the preciousness of every second.

And every second with Diana broadened his understanding of everything in the world. He used to believe he'd had everything figured out, that he'd understood the science behind every rock and tree, but she'd changed all that.

She'd welcomed him into her life and her world, even the Botanica Shop. While he'd been quick to deride magic as fiction before, now that he'd witnessed her work and experimented with some of her essential oils and herbs, he'd come to the realization that some things couldn't be explained with mathematical formulas.

Some things had to be felt. Intentions could change everything.

And he couldn't measure the love she kindled in him or count how much it grew with each passing day. Now he understood Colton's choice when he chose to refuse taking another sip from the Grail. He'd wanted a family with Skye, and now they had a healthy little boy. They'd named him Ace, and while he had Colton's facial features, he had his mother's violet eyes.

Skye said the aces in tarot represented new cycles and new beginnings, and their little boy was definitely a new beginning, not only for their family, but for the entire crew. There was a new generation for the first time in hundreds of years.

He hadn't seen the crew this inspired since they'd first defeated Rutger Morgan and took control of the *Sea Dog*. Diana still hadn't given up trying to decipher the meaning behind her writing that name in her journal. She was convinced it had been an omen or warning of some kind, but Caleb was fine leaving him in the past.

The future was too bright to allow shadows from the past to intrude.

"You're quiet tonight." She stopped walking and met his eyes. "That usually means your brain is busy figuring something out."

"Yes." He nodded as a smile crept up on him. "I'm just trying to find words to measure how much these past few weeks have meant to me, but I don't have a formula or a unit of measurement for something so...vast."

"My mathematical pirate." She squeezed his hand. "What we have isn't a treasure you can count." Her grin lit up the night as she chuckled. "I love us. Just being with you. I didn't know life could be like this."

Lights from the fireflies flickered in the shadows under the trees, heightening the magic of the moment. He stopped behind her and pointed them out. "Seeing them makes me feel like a child again, which is a feat since it's been...I don't want to do that math."

Diana laughed and rested back against his chest. "They say fireflies symbolize an awakening, like a light in the darkness."

"They carry the light of a thousand stars," he whispered.

Diana turned around to face him. "You're my light."

For a moment, he couldn't speak. "You make my life mean something." He shook his head. "Marry me."

Diana blinked, and he realized he'd spoken the words out loud. He didn't have a ring. He hadn't planned anything, but the words were honest. They were spoken from his heart. But maybe it was too soon.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "I didn't know I was going to say that."

She searched his eyes. "Did you mean it?"

He nodded without hesitation. "With every fiber of my being."

Her smile sent his heart flying into the stratosphere. "Then let's get married."

She said yes.

For a moment, he was certain time had stopped.

He hadn't intended to propose tonight, but he also had never wanted anything so much in his life. He was going to be Diana's husband. He'd never known this kind of joy. He laughed and picked her up, swinging her around and drinking in the sound of her laughter.

Kissing her over and over, he whispered, "I love you."

"I love you, too," she answered.

When he set her feet on the ground, he rested his forehead on hers and whispered, "I don't have a ring."

She laughed. "I don't care."

He heaved a playful sigh of relief. "I haven't ruined everything?"

"No." She shook her head, and her eyes sparkled with mischief. "It's actually so perfectly you."

He raised a brow, biting back a smile. "Should I be offended?"

"Definitely not." She sobered and rose on her toes to kiss him. "I love the moments when you speak from your heart instead of your head."

"You are my heart." He kissed her lips and whispered, "And I can't wait for you to be my wife."

They walked under the moss-draped trees, in the dancing light of the fireflies, and Caleb committed the moment to memory.

He'd never realized it before, but this was the moment he'd been waiting lifetimes for.

He finally found his star, and her name was Diana.



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About the Author

[Lisa Kessler](#) is an Amazon Best Selling and award winning author of dark paranormal fiction. Her debut novel, *Night Walker*, won a San Diego Book Award for Best Published Fantasy-Sci-fi-Horror as well as the Romance Through the Ages Award for Best Paranormal and Best First Book. Her short stories have been published in print anthologies and magazines, and her vampire story, *Immortal Beloved*, was a finalist for a Bram Stoker award. When she's not writing, Lisa is a professional vocalist, performing with the San Diego Opera as well as other musical theater companies in San Diego. You can learn more at <http://Lisa-Kessler.com>. She loves hearing from readers — LdyDisney@aol.com

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