

Chapter 1

Port Rock, Maine

Present Day

This doesn't look promising, Addison Lonike thought as the twenty-seven-foot Boston Whaler headed toward the orange life raft bobbing on the choppy waters. Now that summer was coming to a close, people were attempting to squeeze a few more precious days of sailing out of the season.

Her heart sank as she performed a quick head count. When the distress signal had come in to harbor patrol, the pilot of the crippled yacht had radioed that four people were aboard. "I see only two survivors," she called as Sidney Rawlings guided their rescue boat around the raft, attempting to use the larger vessel as a break wall to give the smaller dinghy a little relief from the gusty wind and pummeling water. As far as pilots went, Sidney was one of the best. If anyone could handle navigation in a dangerous situation, he was the man. A few seconds later the raft scraped the side.

"We got 'em!" Addison called as she threw out a line to secure the smaller craft. Joined by a second crewman, she worked to bring the survivors aboard.

Two sopping wet people, a man and a teenage girl, collapsed on deck. Both were shivering and blue from the cold. Addison quickly snuggled them both in thermal heat wraps.

"My w-wife," the man stuttered frantically, "and m-my s-son are still in the boat."

Paramedic Jim Witkowsky quickly scanned the water. "I don't see anything," he called over the lashing gale. "What happened?"

The man shook his head in confusion. "I don't know. We were cruising along just fine, heading toward the mainland. Then there was some—"

“Some sort of explosion,” the teen filled in, eyes welling. “From the engine room, I think. There was a lot of smoke and fire.”

The kid’s father broke back in. “I sent a distress signal that we were going under. I—I managed to get the life raft out and inflated, but the cruiser started sinking.” Face contorting with pain, he shrugged helplessly. “It just went over on one side.”

The boat wasn’t what concerned Addison. The fact that two people were still in the water did. Unless they had life vests, there was little to no chance of survival. “You said your wife and son were still aboard,” she broke in.

Still half in shock and suffering the effects of hypothermia, the man nodded. “Brenda and Sheldon. They were below decks, in the galley fixing lunch. Barbara w-was with me. I’d been giving her lessons on piloting the boat.”

The girl’s face scrunched up as the realization set in. “They never had a chance,” she said, sagging to the deck. A tear slid down her pale cheek, and then another. “There was a big hole in the hull and it just went under.”

Addison winced. *Damn it.* The rescue effort had just turned into a recovery mission. If there was one thing she hated, it was fishing dead bodies out of the water. The Mayday call had come in roughly half an hour ago. Though they’d headed out within minutes, the exact location of the wreck was unknown, preventing them from reaching the area sooner. The chances of locating more survivors had just gone from slim to none.

“It must have gone down fast, and straight to the bottom,” Witkowsky continued. “There’s no way . . .”

Jaw tightening, Addison elbowed her crewmate. The last thing to say in front of the family was that there was no hope. But Witkowsky was a newbie, and he still had to learn the finer points of empathy when in an emergency situation.

“There’s always a chance. Last year a woman survived underwater, in an air pocket of a sunken boat, for more than twenty-four hours.” She cut a glance toward the shivering man. “How much time has

passed since the boat went under?”

Still a bit dazed, the man shook his head. “I—I’m not sure. Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes. It didn’t go under fast but kind of rolled on one side and floated. Then it went under.”

Addison did a quick mental calculation. The average person had six to ten minutes for survival if completely immersed. Given the frigid temperature of the bay, hypothermia and shock would immediately set in, lowering the body’s temperature. It also meant that cellular metabolic processes would begin to shut down, slowing heart rate, pulse, and respiration. At this stage, the body would actually take longer to undergo brain death. That factor alone might have bought the victims below a few precious minutes.

But those minutes were quickly ticking away.

The girl looked up at her, desperation written across her young face. “Is there any way to get down to them?” she asked hopefully. Even as she spoke, her gaze found and fixed on the diving equipment the rescue vessel carried.

Witkowsky shook his head. “We should probably wait for backup from the coast guard before we proceed with any diving.”

Addison wasn’t listening. Her mind had already been made up. The girl couldn’t be older than thirteen, fourteen at the most. Having lost her own parents at an early age, Addison knew how it felt to suddenly have family members ripped away far too prematurely. There was no way she’d let the chance pass without attempting to do all she could to change the course of an already tragic day.

Stripping out of her EMT uniform, she began to put on her diving gear. Every minute that ticked away was another one lost. Though she usually didn’t bother with a wet suit, today she’d awoken with a nagging feeling she should be prepared to go into the water. She was already wearing hers on when the distress signal came in. *Call it Mer-tuition*, she thought, putting on the heavy oxygen tank and mask.

“Tell Sidney to hold it steady,” she called.

The pilot was already one step ahead. “I’ve got it here,” Sidney yelled back, throttling the engines down into idle.

Addison gave him the diver's signal for "all systems go." "I shouldn't be long, Sid."

Sidney nodded. "Will do. I've radioed the coast guard that we've made contact and are commencing with recovery efforts. We've got the go-ahead if we think we can handle it."

Witkowsky speared them both with a look of pure disbelief. "Sending a single diver down into an unknown situation definitely isn't a good idea. At least two need to be in the water in case something goes wrong."

Addison tossed him a nod. She already knew what Witkowsky didn't—that the sea was a mermaid's natural environment. She was actually safer in the water than out of it. Nevertheless, it always took an event like this to break in a new member of the team. A freshly minted paramedic, Jim had fewer than two weeks with harbor patrol under his belt.

"It's your first time out with the team, so I'll cut you some slack for your disbelief in my diving capabilities."

"Lonike is our most experienced diver," Sidney cut in. "And since she's the captain of this vessel, she outranks both of us. Going into the water is her call." He paused a moment, then added, "If she can't handle it, no one can."

Witkowsky shook his head. "Fine. But I want my protest logged."

"Your concern is duly noted." Addison hated to pull rank, but when lives were on the line, she'd do whatever it took to do her job. The chief had wanted to gauge how well Witkowsky performed under her authority before letting him in on her true identity. The guys she worked with had to be trusted to watch her back when she went into the water. "When we return to the mainland, we'll sit down with Chief Simms and have a little talk."

Witkowsky pulled a sour face. "You bet we will."

Addison ignored him. She didn't have the time or inclination to quibble. Recent events concerning her kind had made it necessary to keep a very low profile. Now that the Mer had begun to emerge from Ishaldi, the powers that be weren't exactly welcoming to the newly revealed species. Mer were still viewed as aliens and were treated as such. One of the conditions for release from the government's A51-

ASD complex was that she and her two sisters had to keep a low profile among the civilian population. They would be allowed to resume their lives in Port Rock—as long as they lived and acted like regular people.

But that was proving to be difficult. As much as she tried to mimic landlubbers, she just wasn't human.

Heading down the side boarding ladder, she eased into the water. Although she'd learned years ago to dive the human way, she found all the heavy equipment annoying. Disappearing beneath the waves, she stopped when she was about fifty feet below the surface, deep enough under the water where no one could see her.

Without hesitating, she ripped off the mask and mouthpiece. Giving the unnecessary items a quick wink, she quickly worked a little Mercraft. A small flare surrounded the items, and then they were gone. The heavy tank across her back soon followed.

Freed of several things to carry, Addison stretched out and made a slow roll through the water. The change from her human form to that of a Mer occurred in the blink of an eye. One moment she had two legs. The next moment a spark of bright colors raced like wildfire across her skin. Her wet suit melted away, leaving her completely naked. The lower half of her body had also changed, becoming a beautiful multicolored tail. It took less than thirty seconds for the metamorphosis to complete itself. She was, again, a creature who belonged and thrived in the cerulean blue waters of the deep sea.

Addison nodded with satisfaction. All those hours she'd spent practicing her magic had finally paid off. With just a thought and a little push of energy from the crystal she always wore around her neck, she could make small objects appear and disappear at will. Tessa, her older sister, had taught her that trick. Although it had taken much trial and embarrassing error, she'd finally gotten the hang of the spell. She had no clue where it all went, but when she wanted it again, she simply had to think about it and everything would return.

Free to swim unencumbered, Addison dived toward the bottom. Though the day was clear and warm, the waters were cold and murky, strangely devoid of fish and other sea life. It was as if the creatures

sensed something had gone terribly wrong and had abandoned the area.

Minutes later, the wreckage of the yacht loomed into view. The craft had turned almost completely upside down as it sank.

Putting her tail in motion, Addison swam toward the crippled vessel. As the girl had stated, there was indeed a gaping hole in the hull. A thin stream of gasoline and oil eddied up from the exposed engines. The sight saddened her. A family outing had turned tragic in the blink of an eye. No doubt the coast guard would salvage the yacht to determine the cause of the accident.

Why the vessel sank wasn't her concern. She needed to locate the remaining passengers. Even though it had been foolhardy, she'd practically promised the girl a miracle. She intended to deliver one, if at all possible.

And with a Mer in the water, anything's possible, she reminded herself.

Reaching the interior of the cabin wasn't going to be easy. A diver wearing full gear would find it almost impossible to wriggle beneath the yacht and into the interior of the cabin. It was a tight fit even for a mermaid, but Addison somehow managed to squeeze through.

Amazingly the galley's emergency lights were still functioning, lending an eerie illumination to the swamped interior. The body of a woman floated nearby.

Addison swam through the narrow space, checking the woman's pulse. Nothing—she was cold, motionless. One look at her empty expression and gaping mouth told her the spark of life had been snuffed out.

But the child . . .

Addison looked around. It took a few moments for her sharp gaze to pick out the little boy floating among the debris of cushions from a nearby bunk. With soft blond curls fanned out around his head, he looked like a doll abandoned after a day's play.

Her heart squeezed painfully. *Oh no.* He couldn't be more than five or six. She reached out, laying the tips of her fingers at the pulse point of the boy's throat. *Please, oh, please,* she thought, stilling her own breath and striking out with her sixth sense. The final sparks of life were rapidly fading. She wasn't

sure how long he'd been deprived of oxygen, but deep inside she felt his desperate struggle and sensed his lungs burning with the need to drag in a precious breath of air.

Giving thanks to the goddess that the child still had a chance to survive, Addison pressed her mouth over lips that were cold and unmoving. As an empath, she had the ability to generate energy within her own body and then remanifest it in physical kinetic form. The soul-stone around her neck began to glow softly as she filtered living electricity from her body into the boy's motionless figure.

Seconds later the child's eyes fluttered. He coughed, then gasped for air. The lungs in his chest expanded, filtering out seawater and taking in pure oxygen. He was awake, but only on a peripheral level.

Relief whirred along her nerve endings. *You'll be all right*, she mentally telegraphed. Under the enchantment of a mermaid's kiss, the boy was capable of comprehending her silent words. The spell was only temporary and would last until his lungs again drew oxygen above the level of the water. He would have no memory of her in Mer form.

Smiling with relief, Addison gathered the little boy into her arms, though it took a bit of creative maneuvering to get back through the narrow passage and away from the sunken wreck. Guiding the child toward the surface, she quite forgot that she'd doffed her diving gear.

Seconds later their heads popped above the water. Bobbing with the waves, Addison swam toward the rescue boat. She saw Jim Witkowsky lean over the edge, pointing her way. "There she is," he called, "and she's not alone."

Catching hold of the ladder, Addison hefted half her body out of the water before lifting the limp child toward Witkowsky's waiting hands.

The man and his daughter stumbled toward the semiconscious boy even as Witkowsky began resuscitation efforts. "Sheldon!" the man cried from behind the paramedic. "Come on, Son. Breathe."

A moment later the child heaved out a stream of bile mixed with water. A splutter, followed by a healthy wail, rolled past his blue-tinged lips. And then he was breathing, above water and on his own.

Witkowsky gave a quick thumbs-up. "I think he's going to make it."

The man gathered the boy into his arms. "Thank God," he murmured against the wet matting of hair

pasted to the child's forehead. "He's alive."

But not everyone's eyes were on the rescue efforts taking place. Even as she clung to the ladder while watching events aboard unfold, Addison had the uneasy feeling she was being watched. She looked up to see the girl's gaze fixed upon her. A look half of horror mingled with fascination colored the teen's expressive features.

Addison winced, giving herself a quick mental slap. She'd just made the worst blunder a Mer could make: She had let humans see her in her true form.

The teen raised a hand and pointed her way. "D-daddy, something's not right," the girl exclaimed in a shaky voice. "That lady has a tail!"

Everyone looked—and gaped.

"Holy Mother of God," Witkowsky exclaimed, eyeing her exposed breasts and slender hips. "She's naked as a jaybird."

For a few beats, Addison couldn't think to react. The tension throbbed between them for a minute or so. It didn't take a mind reader to know what everyone aboard was thinking.

Sidney Rawlings gave his errant crewman a slap upside the head. "Stop staring. You're being rude."

Regaining self-control, Addison belatedly pressed an arm over her bare breasts as she slid back into the water. "Shit," she grated under her breath. Talk about having one's stupid hanging out. Even though her elaborate scale pattern afforded a bit of modest cover, above the waist she was still completely exposed.

During those gut-wrenching minutes when she'd been underwater, her only concern had been to save the boy's life. Eager to get him to the surface, she hadn't given a second thought to making sure she came up in the same equipment she'd gone down in.

It really was a mega screwup.

Washington, DC

“Are you kidding me?” The words popped out of Captain Mason McKenzie’s mouth before he had a chance to even consider the repercussions.

Secretary of the Navy Adam Webber raised a single disapproving brow in response. “Do you see a smile on my face, Captain?”

Mason quickly shook his head. That was not the right way to respond when speaking to a superior officer. “No, sir.” He didn’t dare say another word. Instead, he silently chastised himself. *Pull yourself together*, he thought. *This isn’t a joke*. It wasn’t his job to question the judgment of a superior.

Even if he didn’t agree with his instructions, he’d follow them to the letter.

Webber nodded. “Then I take it we’re on the same page as to your orders?”

Suppressing a flinch, Mason didn’t hesitate. “Yes, sir. I am perfectly clear on the matter. You want me to recruit a mermaid to the USET team.”

This time Webber allowed the briefest hint of a smile to cross his weathered, craggy face. “It sounds as if I’ve gone mad, I know, but this comes down from the highest level. And we both know who that is.” Giving his balding head a scratch, he tapped the paperwork spread out on his desk. “I have to admit I was more than a bit skeptical when I got word the A51 sciences division of the bureau had gotten hold of a living, breathing alien life-form. But given what has recently transpired over these last few months, we can no longer turn a blind eye to the facts. The Mer, as they call themselves, are here, and they’re here to stay. How we deal with them through the coming months is going to be crucial.”

Mason nodded. “I understand, sir.” To keep his mind focused, he did a quick mental review of all the classified information he’d managed to ingest since agreeing to lead the Undersea Search and Exploration Task Force, the US government’s first step toward first quelling and then controlling the threat of the Mer who had created a stronghold for themselves in the Mediterranean.

Barely four months had passed since the initial discovery of the species, which seemed to center around the lost civilization of Ishaldi. Concealed under the sea for almost two millennia, and guarded by a mysterious sea-gate, the indigenous species was not friendly toward humans. The team Mason led had been implemented to operate outside naval operations already in place in the Mediterranean. To date, the

USET team's attempts to engage the Mer in diplomatic talks had been unsuccessful.

Webber kept on going. "We already know that the leader of the rebel Mer, Queen Magaera, doesn't wish to negotiate with our representatives at this time."

Mason inwardly winced.

Every time they'd sent a diver into the waters surrounding the sea-gate, one of Magaera's soldiers had responded with an immediate intercept. A couple of his men had come close to drowning when their equipment was sabotaged. The rogue Mer were fast, sneaky, and ruthless.

Secretary Webber shuffled through his paperwork. "According to the boys at the A51, they have technology and abilities we can't even begin to touch. Short of lobbing a nuke toward the island, we have to be very careful how we proceed in the future." A snort escaped the crusty old sea dog. "That damn fool acting as adviser to the queen—what's his name?"

"Massey," Mason filled in. "Jake Massey. He's the archaeologist who put together the initial team looking for that place." According to intelligence, Massey was acting as some sort of ambassador to Magaera.

Webber shook his head. "Right. Anyway, given their actions, we're regarding the Mer as a potential enemy. We can't forgive the recent attacks on our soil, along with the loss of human lives. The biggest disadvantage is that we don't really understand what we're up against."

"It's true our first contact wasn't successful, though we did get to see the, ah, creatures in action in their natural environment. They are quite impressive."

"Formidable would be a better word," Webber grouched. "We can't touch them in the water."

Mason forced his features to betray not a hint of incredulity. "And so you're asking me to recruit a mermaid?"

Webber looked at him, unperturbed. "Exactly."

Nonplussed, Mason leaned back in his chair. He needed a few minutes to digest the request.

A lot of things had winged through his mind when he'd been summoned for the meeting. The emergence of the Mer was still very hush-hush, known only to those in the upper echelons of government.

And despite recent failures to breach the island, they weren't giving up. The covert operation, presently known only under the code name "Sea Horse," would go forward.

There was a new island on the map in the Mediterranean, one that had seemingly appeared overnight. Somehow, using a technology beyond human comprehension, the Mer had lifted from the bottom of the sea the remnants of an island that had once served as the gateway between the human realm above the water and the Mer ecosphere beneath the waves. A landmass measuring an estimated nine miles in length and girth, the island was shielded by an electromagnetic signal powerful enough to shut down even the most sophisticated electrical equipment. The A51 sciences division had recently identified the energy as radiating from a wormhole at the bottom of the ocean that connected the two diverse worlds. Through a feat of inexplicable engineering, this wormhole led to a Mer domain that literally existed in the center of the planet, albeit on a slightly different dimensional plane.

As it turned out, the area wasn't exactly unknown. Pinpointed in the late 1950s, it was referred to as the M441966 site. Scientists had already noted the area's intense concentration of electromagnetic energy. At the time, theories to explain the presence of this energy ranged from the area's being a geothermal field due to volcanic activity, to the energy's coming from some sort of alien homing signal or beacon. A recent earthquake in the area had apparently shifted the stability of the sea-gate guarding the entrance to the wormhole, which made the area even more volatile.

Mason struggled to keep his thoughts straight. As incredible as the story might sound, it was the absolute truth. And truth, as the old adage went, was often stranger than fiction.

Nobody was expecting these facts that had emerged months ago, thanks to three courageous young women determined to find out the truth behind their origins.

As far as the rest of the world was concerned, the anomaly in the Mediterranean was scientific. The navy's Sixth Fleet, which kept an American naval presence in the Mediterranean, was presently on patrol to keep busy shipping lanes moving without too much disruption. It was proving to be a difficult balancing act, as no fewer than three continents with thirteen nations had direct access to those waters. Soon enough the truth about the Mer would become known to the entire world. The diplomatic and

political ramifications would probably take decades to untangle.

If early encounters held true, then the Mer absolutely intended to reclaim their place in this world as a major seagoing power. Queen Magaera appeared more than ready and able to fight for her people. With Massey's help, she'd recently reclaimed a piece of Mer technology that reportedly gave her control over land and sea. The appearance of the island was proof positive that whatever she'd managed to lay her hands on worked.

Realizing his silence had dragged on too long, Mason cleared his throat. Webber was waiting for a response. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

Webber flagged a hand. "Of course. As the commander of USET, I do want to hear your thoughts on the matter."

The response emboldened Mason. "With all due respect, since we honestly don't know what we're dealing with, would we want to involve a mermaid in a tactical operation against her own kind?"

Webber didn't hesitate. He'd obviously made his decision. "It's as you said, Captain. We don't know what we're dealing with. Logic would dictate that we recruit someone who does. The A51 scientists have an idea, but they're in no position to call themselves experts despite all the tests and experiments they've run on these creatures."

"Then I take it the two hostiles they have in custody are still refusing to cooperate?"

The older man nodded. "Correct. Those women remain firmly dedicated to their queen, and they would rather die than help us out. That leaves the Lonike sisters. As Mer born and raised in our society, they have done their utmost to cooperate with us since their kind, uh, emerged."

Mason had a thought or two about that fact. "In my opinion the government should have kept the sisters confined and controlled instead of releasing them back into society. Yes, I am aware they are basically peaceful and have lived their entire lives in Port Rock. They are even productive citizens, who hold jobs and pay taxes. But that doesn't change my mind about the species. To the core of their DNA, they are still part of an alien life-form that has proven to be particularly deadly. At this point, I consider *all* mermaids to be suspects."

Webber's expression betrayed a hint of annoyance. "Your concerns are noted, Captain—and overruled. These orders have come down from the top, and that's the way it's going to be." His brown eyes narrowed. "If you have a problem with that, you will be reassigned—immediately."

The idea tempted him, but Mason quickly pushed it out of his mind. Being cherry-picked for the command of the covert USET team was more than an honor. If he brought the operation in as a success, the rating of rear admiral, lower half, bestowed by Naval Special Operations, would surely be his next step up the ladder. Intending to go all the way up the chain of command, he had his eye on the chair Webber presently occupied. In his mind it was time for the old-guard politicians to hand over the power to the young pups who actually had experience with the jobs they oversaw.

Alas, those dreams of future glories would have to wait. He needed to focus on the present, and on the unusual circumstances he'd been thrust into.

Mason offered a sharp nod. "I have no problem, sir."

"Off the record, I'm half-inclined to agree with you," Webber grumbled beneath his breath. "But whatever prejudices you've got against the Mer, keep them to yourself. We've got a job to do, and we're going to do it right."

Mason squared his shoulders. After twelve years in the service, he was an expert at performing above and beyond expectations. He might not agree with his superiors, but he'd carry out his duty to the bitter end. *Even if it means going down with the ship*, he reminded himself.

He acknowledged his superior's admonishment with a nod. "Absolutely, sir."

Webber picked through some plain manila folders. "Of the three Mer sisters, we believe this one," he said, passing the selected folder across his desk, "Addison, is the best choice."

Mason took the file, which contained all the pertinent information the government had on Addison Lonike. Although he'd already studied up on the sisters after joining USET, it probably wouldn't hurt to refresh his memory.

Webber still hadn't convinced him that asking one of the girls to join the team was the correct way to go. Sleeper agents were known to be benign for decades before being activated by those they served. The

Lonike sisters' integration into the human world could have been something the Mer planned a long time before their sudden emergence back into the mainstream. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of their kind could already be spread throughout the world, just waiting for the call to arms.

He had no doubt that his superiors had considered all the options as well. Still, they'd chosen to proceed.

"She's a good candidate for this mission," Webber filled in. "She is the youngest, approximately twenty-six years of age."

Mason thumbed through her profile. "This is pretty basic," he commented. "On paper nothing looks out of the ordinary."

Webber shuffled through his own massive pile of notes on the Mer sisters. "On the surface they seem as normal as any human." He began reeling off the stats. "Her father, David Lonike, was human. Half Scots-Irish, half Native American from the Abenaki tribe. He had a small fishing business—one he inherited from his father. His wife, Jolesa, was full-fledged Mer."

Mason inwardly blanched. The idea of a mermaid tail and human legs didn't mesh in his mind. How did they manage that, anyway? He didn't dare contemplate the answer. "It says here that Mer offspring are always female."

Tilting his head, Webber peered over the black rims of his glasses and scanned a few more pages. His folders were considerably thicker than the one Mason held, and he'd obviously gone through the intelligence forward and backward, then forward again. Considering the delicacy of the situation, his couldn't have been an easy decision to make. He had superiors to answer to, as well. "It seems to be a genetic quirk with their species, a way of ensuring the Mer DNA doesn't die off and become extinct," he noted. "From what we can glean, this particular bloodline has been in Port Rock for centuries."

More than a little uneasy, Mason closed his own folder. He didn't like the way Addison Lonike's flashing green eyes seemed to home right in on him through her photo. Nor did he like the fact that interspecies breeding didn't exactly sit well with him. "It's amazing they've managed to hide in plain sight for so long," he commented as a way to remain neutral on the matter.

“The Lonike sisters have done their best to be cooperative,” Webber said, making sure every word was precise and clear. “And without their assistance, we wouldn’t have any idea what we’re up against. But for all we do know, there are still too many gaps to fill in. That’s why I want a Mer on our team. ASAP. We haven’t got the time to guess what’s waiting for us out there in the Mediterranean.”

Mason handed Addison’s folder back. He had to admit the more he learned about mermaids, the less he liked them. “When do I leave?”

Webber’s expression turned grave. “Immediately. A seaman is waiting outside my office to take you to the airfield. I expect you to be back in Washington within twenty-four hours. With Miss Lonike in tow.” He dug through his pile of paperwork and extracted a second folder. “Here are the details of the position we’re prepared to offer her as MTA.”

Mason’s brows rose. That was one he hadn’t heard before. “MTA?”

“Mer Tactical Adviser,” Webber filled in. “It’s noncommissioned, and she won’t have any rating in the team, but she will be compensated. As an EMT and experienced search and rescue diver, she’d be a good fit even if she weren’t a mermaid.”

Without betraying his unease for a second time in front of his superior, Mason pushed to his feet and tucked the folder under his arm. “Understood, sir.” Drawing in a deep breath, he snapped out a neat salute.

Adam Webber halfheartedly returned the gesture. “You are dismissed, Captain.”

Mason nodded once before turning toward the door. There was nothing more for him to say. It wouldn’t have done any good anyway. The decision was made. He had his orders. His opinion had no place beyond this point.

Personal prejudices aside, Mason felt confident he could handle the assignment. If he did his job right, everything would be fine.