

Chapter One

He strode across the deck of the ship, scanning the gear, the crew, and equipment.

As expected, everything was in order.

Lorenzo “Ren” Santoro crossed his arms over his chest. He hadn’t expected anything less. Being second in command of the research vessel *Atalanta* was a job he relished. He’d always loved being on the water. The Navy had ignited that love, and becoming a Navy SEAL had deepened it.

Right now, the ship was in port in San Diego. He liked it most when they were at sea. Surrounded by miles and miles of ocean as far as a man could see. No one, and nothing, to bother him.

He headed down the staircase, boots *thunking* on the metal.

“Hey, Ren,” a crew member called out. Like Ren, the man was wearing the ship’s uniform—tan cargo pants, and a dark-blue polo shirt with the ship’s logo on it—a circle with a crashing wave inside it.

“Everything ready for our guests, Rob?” Ren asked.

“Yes. The cabins and staterooms have been cleaned, the storage area is ready for their gear, and the main lab is all set up.”

“Good work.” Ren slapped the man’s shoulder. He walked past the built-in crane at the back

of the ship, then the submersibles strapped down to the deck.

The *Atalanta* was a hell of a research vessel. Owned and funded by a billionaire dedicated to ocean research, they had some of the best crew he'd ever worked with, and all the gear and equipment they needed.

They were currently docked in the Port of San Diego, waiting for their latest clients—a combined team of scientists that were working on a naval project. The hush-hush project was sponsored by the Office of Naval Research, but the scientists were civilians from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

The project was classified. No doubt some sort of new tech that the Navy was testing.

Ren had high-level clearance, since he'd initially been a Navy SEAL, but then after that, he'd been recruited into the covert Ghost Ops program. Only the best of the best of the special forces in the country had been invited to join. His former commander, Vander Norcross, was a legend.

He paused, his hands on his hips. Some of the missions had been...rough. They'd been sent into some of the worst places on the planet, to do the seemingly most impossible missions.

For years, he'd thrived on that. On taking risks, challenging himself, on outrunning his past.

But then he'd learned he wasn't invincible.

He shook his head. That part of his life was over. He'd retired several years ago, and figured he'd do something like working private security. But it had turned out that he'd needed something different. Working on the *Atalanta* suited him best.

Ren scanned the ship again, then his gaze shifted out over the water to the horizon. Memories were flitting around in his head today, it seemed. He wouldn't even be here, standing on the deck, if it wasn't for the military. The military had saved his life. He'd grown up with no father. He'd had his mom and *abuela*, but even they hadn't been enough to stop his slow slide into

trouble.

He'd been an angry teenager, looking to prove himself.

It hadn't been until he'd met Tom Bradshaw that his life had changed.

"Ren?" another crew member called down from one of the upper decks. "Chef is losing his shit. Says he didn't get all the supplies he ordered."

Ren sighed. Their temperamental Russian chef loved to complain, about everything.

Thankfully, the man could cook. "I'll talk to him, Fredrik."

Fredrik looked relieved. "Good luck."

Ren crossed the deck, part of his brain automatically cataloging and checking that everything was in place. His thoughts turned back to this newest project. They would be setting sail in the morning. This afternoon, they'd get the Naval team settled, and their gear stowed. Ren also wanted to make sure the main lab was set up to their specifications. The ship had a hydro lab too if the team required it.

Captain Shroff was planning their route to Hawaii. It would take them five days, including a few stops along the way for the scientific experiments.

His cellphone rang and he pulled it out of his pocket. When the name "Captain America" flashed on the screen, he grinned and pressed it to his ear. "Hey, Tom. I was just thinking of you."

"Ren, I wish we could've caught up while you were here." Tom trained SEALs at Coronado.

The man was twelve years older than Ren. He'd already been working his way up in the Navy when he'd caught a teenage Ren trying to steal his car.

The memory made Ren smile. Tom was a regular Captain America. He was clean-cut and broad-shouldered. A man who lived and breathed his values, and always did the right thing. He

regularly told Ren that it was an honor to serve his country.

He'd seen something in Ren. Something Ren hadn't seen. As a teenager, he'd believed he was only good enough to run with the other troublemaker kids he had grown up with. He'd been on the verge of turning from petty crime to much, much worse.

He blew out a breath. But Tom had changed everything. The man had challenged Ren to join the military. He'd told him to stop pretending to be a tough guy. That tough men and women wore uniforms.

And the toughest of the tough were the Navy SEALs. Ren had joined the Navy on a dare, and his life hadn't been the same since.

He'd found a purpose, a sense of belonging, and a family.

He smiled. Tom had become a mentor, best friend—hell, even a bit of a father or brother figure. Not that Tom would ever admit that.

Usually, when Ren was in town, they tried to connect, but they were both often busy. “Next time, Captain America, you can buy the beers. And grill me a decent steak.”

“If you weren't married to the ocean, I'd see you more,” Tom complained. “You're always on some adventure out at sea. We haven't seen enough of you.”

Ren gripped the back of his neck. There was a reason for that.

And that reason was five foot six, with long, brown hair, freckles, and brilliant-blue eyes.

“The sea is a demanding lady.”

Tom snorted. “I know. Halle misses you, too.”

Ren's hand squeezed on the phone. *Halle*. His best friend's daughter. Tom had married his childhood sweetheart young, and they'd had Halle while they were in their early twenties. Then they'd divorced before Halle was ten.

She was now a beautiful twenty-three-year-old. She'd studied Marine biology over on the East Coast, and was now doing some post-graduate studies locally. Ren had avoided her the last few years.

There was no way he'd ever betray Tom's trust. And he'd already come very close to crossing that line.

He needed to get a handle on the fact the woman who dominated his dreams was his best friend's daughter.

"I can't thank you enough for arranging your ship to take this project," Tom said. "It's vital."

Tom had called in a favor. The Navy project needed a research vessel, and Ren happened to work on one. The Office of Naval Research usually utilized the Scripps Institute's ships, but they were currently all out at sea on other projects.

"You know I'm happy to pull strings for you," Ren said. "You still haven't told me what this project is, though."

"You'll find out soon enough."

At that moment, two nondescript, white vans pulled up at the dock. People started getting out. One guy was gawking at the ship—he was tall and lanky with wire-rimmed glasses perched on his nose. Stereotypical scientist.

Then Ren watched a woman round the vehicle and bend over a box of gear.

Ren arched a brow.

She had a spectacular ass. She was wearing navy-blue shorts that lovingly hugged her *derrière*. He couldn't see the rest of her, and he wondered if it was as good as the back view.

It had been a while since he'd felt the shimmer of desire for a woman. Hell, it had been a long time since he'd had sex.

Hard to have an active sex life when the only woman he pictured touching was off limits.

“I have another surprise for you.”

Tom was still talking.

Ren dragged his gaze off the woman’s ass. “Oh?”

“It’s been killing me not to tell you.”

The woman straightened and turned.

And every one of Ren’s muscles locked.

It couldn’t be.

Long, brown hair danced in the breeze. She smiled widely, then laughed at something one of her team members said. The breeze carried the sound toward him.

“Halle’s on the team,” Tom said. “She’s their marine biologist.”

Shit. Ren couldn’t respond. His gaze was frozen on her.

The rest of Halle Bradshaw was as gorgeous as the back. Her T-shirt clung to slim arms and full breasts.

Now desire rocketed through Ren—hot and sharp.

Fucking hell.

“You get to spend the next week with my little girl, Ren. On that ship of yours, you won’t be able to get away from her.”

Ren’s hand squeezed the phone so hard the plastic creaked. “Right.”

Then Halle lifted her head and their gazes clashed.

Halle Bradshaw smiled as she walked up the gang plank of the *Atalanta*.

The sun was shining, and the salty scent of the sea that she loved, filled her lungs. She was

heading out to sea. Doing what she loved.

The ship was impressive. The hull was painted a crisp navy-blue, and the superstructure on top was a brilliant white. Right at the top of the *Atalanta* was the main mast topped with several large white balls she knew housed the radar and antennas.

She stepped onto the deck.

It was hard to pay much attention to the ship. She was also going to see Ren.

“Look at this ship.” Sammy, a fellow scientist with a heavy Brooklyn accent stepped up beside her. “Nice.” Then she looked past Halle. “Something else is mighty fine, too.”

Halle turned her head and saw Ren.

Lorenzo Santoro.

He was six feet of hard-packed muscle. His black hair was thick, with its usual, tousled look, and his skin tanned. The man loved being outdoors. He had a chiseled face, and deep, brown eyes that looked warm and velvety. The man was pure sin. Designed to make a woman’s mind go foggy.

And imagine wicked things.

Just one look at him and her pulse went crazy. Like it always did when she saw him these days.

Not that she’d seen much of him lately. He’d been avoiding her very neatly for the last three years.

Once, he’d been a staple in her life, and then...

Well, then they’d shared the hottest, most life-altering kiss of her life on her 20th birthday.

Since then, Ren had gone AWOL. Always out on the ship, or off helping military buddies, or conveniently unavailable. The last time she’d seen him was about six months ago at her dad’s

place, when she'd turned up unexpectedly. Ren had said hello to her and left ten minutes later.

Her fingers curled into her palm, and she lifted her chin.

She'd given him time. She'd dedicated herself to her studies and college life. She'd tried not to think about him.

It hadn't really worked out as well as she'd hoped.

They were adults. They could work this out. She missed him.

She knew she might be young, but she knew all too well that life could be short. Losing her mom had painted that picture in the starkest possible way. She wanted Ren back in her life.

She pinned on a smile. "I know that something mighty fine."

Sammy blinked. "Really?"

"Really. He's my dad's best friend." Halle strode across the deck.

Ren stood watching her, looking wary.

God, butterflies took flight in her belly. Why did he have to look so good? "Ren," she said.

"*Surprise.*"

"Halle." A small smile tipped his lips.

She threw her arms around him. Oh, it felt good to hug him.

His muscular arms closed around her. She closed her eyes and breathed him in. Ren always smelled like the ocean. "It's so good to see you."

He pulled back, his dark gaze meeting hers. Then he lifted a hand, like he was going to touch her face. But a second later, he let his hand drop to his side. "It's good to see you too, Ariel."

Her heart squeezed at the pet name. "I haven't watched *The Little Mermaid* for a really long time."

He grinned. "God, you loved that movie. Used to drive your dad crazy."

She hummed a few bars of “Under the Sea”.

Ren snorted.

Oh, it felt good to talk with him. Joke with him. She’d missed that so much. “You know I prefer older movies now.”

He shook his head. “Preferably black and white, and corny.”

“Hey.” She slapped his arm. “Don’t pretend you don’t love them as well.”

She’d been so happy when she’d discovered their mutual love of old movies and TV shows.

He stepped back. “So, you’re part of this Navy project?”

She nodded. “It’s part of my master’s project. I’m not working on the main project, but I’m assessing its impact on marine life.”

He smiled at her again. It was sexy and panty-melting, and she pressed her thighs together.

“You and your dolphins.”

“Not just dolphins,” she said. “I love all marine life. Fish. Seals. Even sharks.”

“No one likes sharks, Halle.”

“Sure, they do. They’re majestic creatures.”

Ren shook his head.

“Halle?” Sammy stood there with a brow raised. Behind her was the rest of the team.

“Ren, I’d like you to meet my team members,” Halle said. “Everyone, this is Lorenzo Santoro.”

Ren inclined his head. “I’m second in command of the *Atalanta*. If there is anything you need while you’re aboard, I’m here to get it for you.”

“This is Sammy Sorvino,” Halle said.

Her dark-haired friend nodded. “A pleasure.”

“And this is Fitz Armstrong.”

“Hello,” Fitz said, in his posh British accent. He gave his glasses a nudge and swallowed. “I’m warning you now, I suffer from terrible seasickness.” He held up an arm, showing off several patches pressed to his skin. “These are supposed to help.”

Sammy snorted. “I think you’re only supposed to wear one, Fitz.”

“I’m taking no chances.”

Ren raised a brow. “It should be smooth sailing, Fitz, but if not, I have a few tricks to help you out. And seasickness usually only lasts the first twenty-four hours, until you adjust.”

Fitz’s nose wrinkled.

“This is Ryan Hughes,” Halle continued.

Ryan straightened, and gave Ren a nod. He had well-cut, blond hair and could be overconfident to the point of being a pain, but he was a good engineer.

Halle smiled. “And this is Professor Davis. He’s in charge.”

“Mark Davis. Thank you for having us, Mr. Santoro.” The professor held out his hand. He was in his fifties, about five foot nine, with a slim build. He was always frowning, like there was a problem that needed solving. His hair was black, with gray at the temples. “We’re excited to get to work on our testing.”

Ren shook the man’s hand. “Welcome aboard the *Atalanta*. It’s a pleasure to have you with us. Please call me Ren. I’m here to make sure everything runs smoothly.”

“And you know Halle.” It was Ryan who spoke. He was frowning at Ren, and didn’t look happy.

Halle hid her eye roll. Ryan had asked her out a few times, and she’d tried to tell him she wasn’t interested, firmly but politely.

“We’re family friends,” Ren said.

“We need to get our gear aboard,” Professor Davis said.

Ren nodded. “I’ll have my team help you, and show you where you can store everything.” He lifted a hand to wave at some crew members on the deck.

“There are a few things I want to bring on board myself,” Ryan said. “I don’t want anyone touching them but me.” He straightened, his chest puffing up. “Our project is highly classified.”

Ren stared at the young man like he was an insect. “Knock yourself out.”

Halle coughed. “Ryan, Ren probably has higher clearance than you do.”

“What?” Ryan looked startled.

“Ren was a Navy SEAL,” she said.

“Really?” Sammy drawled.

Fitz blinked. “That’s a very dangerous profession.”

“I’m retired now,” Ren said.

“And he’s done other very badass stuff that’s very, very classified,” Halle continued.

“Halle,” Ren said, before he looked at the others. “I’m just a sailor on a research vessel these days. Let’s get you all settled. We’ll get your gear aboard, then I’ll hand out your cabin assignments.”

“I’m keen to see the lab, as well,” Professor Davis said.

“Sure thing. It’s fully equipped.”

As the *Atalanta* crew members arrived, Halle listened to Ren issuing orders. He just had an innate authority that told you he could handle any situation. She watched the way his muscular body moved. His polo shirt was fitted enough to cling to his muscular chest and biceps. Tingles traveled all over her.

“Girl, you’ve been holding out on me.” Sammy murmured.

Halle wrinkled her nose. “He sees me as a little girl.”

Sammy looked her up and down. “That would be impossible.”

“He’s my dad’s best friend, Sammy.”

“Oh.” Sammy nodded sadly. “That puts you in the DNT zone.” She slapped Halle’s shoulder.

“Do not touch. That sucks.”

Halle usually liked Sammy’s forthright nature, but now was not one of those times.

She dragged in a breath. She was here to work, not focus on the man she couldn’t stop thinking about. Her work was important to her, and she wanted this project to be a success.

She had no idea what she wanted from Ren. *Liar*, a little voice whispered in her head.

Closing her eyes, she tried to settle herself. She would do her work, and spend some time with Ren. He was important to her.

And if he kissed her again, well, she wouldn’t say no.

He couldn’t avoid her when they were both on the same ship together.