

DEMONIC
DISCIPLES

A muscular man with short dark hair and blue eyes is the central figure. He is shirtless, showing his well-defined muscles. He has several tattoos: a large, intricate black and white tribal-style tattoo on his left shoulder and upper arm, a smaller black tattoo on his right shoulder, and a tattoo on his right forearm. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a serious expression. Behind him is a large, glowing red moon in a dark sky with some clouds. The overall tone is dramatic and intense.

DAGON

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LISA CARLISLE

DAGON

DEMONIC DISCIPLES



LISA CARLISLE

LISA CARLISLE BOOKS

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Dagon

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DAGON

A reclusive demon meets his fated mate...

When I see a boat approaching my private island, I swim out to investigate. No one can invade my sanctuary. I plan to throw them off course—until I discover what’s happening on board. A man is accosting a woman. I shift into a giant sea serpent and destroy his boat in my fury.

There’s something is different about the woman I rescue. I can’t hear thoughts the way I do with other humans. It’s refreshing after all the selfish nonsense I’ve had to endure from others.

I bring her to my island and discover **she’s my fated mate**. When she recovers, our connection is strong. I invite her to stay and explore, and she agrees to do so for a few days.

That’s not long enough. She’s the one—the one who can free me from my obligations to hunt. She can’t leave me—**even if I have to force her to stay**.

As Above, So Below.

The hunt is on. Six demonic brothers, sworn by evil to maintain the balance of nature by eliminating the creatures that bring chaos to it. Driven only by their primal instincts to find their mates so they can protect, possess, and procreate with them. Only a blood moon eclipsing through the night sky will seal their bond and free them to chase their new prey. They’re cruel, dominating sinners with hardened souls, immense power and dynamic presences that won’t let anything stop them from finding and claiming their destiny.

CHAPTER 1



DAGON

The moon cast an eerie glow on the creature I pursued through the shadowy streets of Boston. Its sinister silhouette crept at the edge of my vision, teasing me before it slipped away. We had clashed once before, but now, as I closed in on my elusive prey, it was clear I held the upper hand.

Rage simmered beneath my skin, and my lips curled into a sneer. “I’m coming for you,” I whispered, my words laced with dark promise.

As we crossed a bridge, the creature’s briny, licorice stench tainted the crisp ocean air. The odor was unmistakable, confirming it was a purgatorian. Those elusive beings could cloak themselves as clouds during the day, but during the full moon, they could shift into other forms. This monster now chose a grotesque, shadowy form with bat-like wings, red-rimmed eyes, serrated teeth, and jagged claws—a vision that could spark horrific nightmares in humans. For me, it was simply the mask of an adversary, no different from a Halloween costume.

My claws extended, and I struck with a swift motion, slashing into its back. The creature shrieked, piercing my ears. It turned on me, eyes burning with caustic fury, and then let out a ferocious roar as it lunged. I ducked and evaded its monstrous assault, then countered by tackling it, using all my force as I shoved it against the railing.

The purg lost its footing as it sailed over the edge. It howled as it descended, the sound fading the farther it fell. I glanced down in time to see the creature hit the surface of the ocean,

before it was swallowed and silenced. My lips curled in victory as I visualized every bone in its body shattering.

Another purg taken down. My chest heaved as I caught my breath. Despite my triumph, weariness gnawed at me. Time to go home.

Shifting into the form of a black mamba, I slithered into Boston Harbor, seeking refuge on my private island. As I glided away from the city with far too many humans, the cool water soothed my scales. I swam toward my sanctuary, a temporary escape.

How long could I remain there in blissful solitude before duty propelled me to hunt once more? As a demon in the royal legion, I was tasked with hunting purgatorians. The endless cycle of the repetitious game suffocated me with the weight of my obligations.

My only escape lay in bonding with my destined mate, which would free me from the duty to hunt. Yet, the prospect of finding my mate was slim considering my self-imposed isolation.

The moonlight guided me home, its soft glow shimmering on the ocean's surface. The rhythmic crash of waves against the jagged cliffs welcomed me back home with its lulling song.

The private island had a spacious home, filled with modern comforts that were the spoils of the former owner. He'd swindled others to amass his wealth and fund his lavish lifestyle. I'd tricked him in turn, using my abilities to read his mind to gain what I wanted. What did it matter? Humans meant nothing to me. I was a prince of hell, a demon who stoked chaos among them. And his island provided something I desperately craved—solitude. Now it was mine.

As the island approached, my strokes quickened. I shifted back into human form and then stood upright. My feet touched the familiar sand and pebbles, and I walked the final feet to the shore. I emerged from the ocean and stepped onto the land with lush forests, the only place where I truly found peace.

After the battle with the purgatorian, I looked forward to a restful night alone and in peace. The swim through the ocean had cleaned me of the filth of battle, but I didn't want a speck of the vile creature's scent to linger. I took a long, hot shower to ensure it was gone. After I dried and dressed, I cooked dinner for myself. Tonight, it was chicken, spinach, and rice, paired with a white wine. I appreciated a good meal and spent the time preparing one for myself whenever possible. After I ate alone in my dining room, savoring each delicious bite, I moved to the living room and enjoyed an amaretto on ice as I sat in front of the crackling fireplace.

Another day done, another obligation fulfilled.

The next morning, sunlight drifting in through my cabin's windows woke me. I took my time to stretch and wake before facing the start of another day. Once I climbed out of bed and out of the cabin, I walked along the shore. Movement on the horizon caught my eye. Was that a boat? I stood and narrowed my eyes. It was indeed the shape of one, bobbing in the distance. I stared longer, watching to see where it was sailing.

It appeared to be heading toward my island. I scowled and then gritted my teeth in irritation. No way in hell or on earth would I let anyone step foot onto my land.

Hastily removing my clothes, I shifted into my black mamba form. I slithered over the cool sands and into the ocean. I glided gracefully beneath the water toward the boat, an invisible threat looming beneath the surface.

No one would step onto my property, especially a human. They were the reason I took to this island to begin with. My ability to read their minds provided an unfortunate insight into their dark and twisted thoughts. Walking ids.

Determined to protect my sanctuary, I propelled forward, sinking deeper into the depths of the sea. Then I calculated my next step to prevent them from stepping onto my land.

CELIA

Roger's fingers trailed down the side of my arm as I gripped the railing and stared out at the vast sea. I tried not to recoil and jump away from him, yet every muscle in my body coiled with tension. I hoped I was misreading his intentions, but since we'd come out on his boat, they were becoming increasingly clear and unsettling.

"Is that an island ahead?" I squirmed away from him, using the observation as a distraction and to evade his touch.

Squinting into the bright sunlight, I pointed ahead. Was that a solid mass on the horizon or just my hopeful imagination?

Hopeful for what?

I'd come out here on a boat with this wealthy benefactor more than twice my age who promised to finance my research through marine expeditions. We'd met at a fundraising event where I was networking since I was new to New England and looking for a job. He was so suave and acted so generous with his offer to introduce me to the right people. He'd invited me out on his boat today to show me around the area and get to know my interests better.

I'd leaped at the opportunity but should have considered his motives. Since we'd set sail into Boston Harbor, his inappropriate behavior had escalated. His eyes devoured me with a lecherous stare that made my skin crawl. Worse, was the touching. He'd invaded my personal space more and more often, seizing opportunities to touch me. I cringed. Why hadn't I thought this through more? At least with it being October, I was bundled up with layers to brace myself against the cool

ocean breeze and not dressed in clothing that exposed more skin.

I'd evaded and avoided his suggestive remarks and touches so far, hoping he'd get the hint, but it didn't seem to be working. Unease gnawed at me, amping my awareness of where he was at all times. I couldn't let down my guard, not even for a second.

Had I made a terrible mistake by going anywhere with him?

After all, we were alone out here, floating on the ocean. I had nowhere to go unless I wanted to swim back to shore, and that was a dangerously long distance. Although I was a decent swimmer, I didn't know how far we were from land and whether I'd have enough endurance.

Don't jump that far ahead. Just be straight up with him—you're not interested.

Right. I should stick with the truth.

From behind me, hands grabbed me roughly by my upper arms and spun me around.

"Celia, why do you keep avoiding me?" His voice had a flirtatious undertone, but his blue eyes were as cold as the ocean wind.

"What are you doing?" I attempted to turn out of his grasp.

He bent down without warning and mashed his lips on mine.

My heart rate shot up to the clouds. I pushed his chest. "Stop!"

He continued to grip me by my arms, pressing me against the railing of his precious boat.

"What did you think this was?" His voice dropped to a low, sinister hiss. "An outing funded solely out of the goodness of

my heart?”

I jutted my chin up. “What else would I think?”

“Don’t be naïve, kitten. That’s not how this goes.” His eyes sharpened with a predatory gleam. “You need to offer me something in return.”

A shiver crawled up my spine. The once-charming facade of the wealthy man who’d matched my enthusiasm about exploring the oceans crumbled, replaced by one more terrifying. How had I never noticed how much he resembled Jeffrey Epstein with that graying hair and square jaw before now?

“What do you want?” I asked.

The second I heard the words slip from my mouth, I winced. Wasn’t he making it clear? My heart raced and panic slithered through my ribcage. How could I get out of this situation?

“What I want?” he repeated in a low, mocking manner. Then he pressed himself against me and tried to kiss me again.

I struggled against him, pushing away, but then he grasped my wrists.

“Get off me!”

As I leaned away from him, my upper body teetered over the railing. I glanced at the churning ocean water below. Hell no, I wouldn’t want to end up there. But I didn’t want what was going on here on this deck either.

“This is how it’s going to go. We’ll sail up to my cottage on the coast of Maine and stay there for the week. If I’m pleased with how we spend the time getting to know each other, I’ll finance your research for six months.”

Oh goodness, no. I wasn’t about to whore myself for him.

“Absolutely not.” I struggled to squirm out of his grasp.

“What other options do you have?” He sneered. “None. You need me.”

Like hell I did.

“We’ll be alone for a week, and nobody will bother us.”

Why didn’t I tell someone where I’d be? Not that I had many people left in the world who cared for me. My parents were long dead, and I didn’t have any close family left. My best friend and I had a falling out when she betrayed me and slept with my boyfriend. Hence, one of the reasons for my new start in a new place—which wasn’t off to a good start.

Darkness passed overhead as if a shadow crossed the sun.

“What the—” his eyes widened in horror.

I turned my head to see a dark mass emerge from the ocean and gasped. A sleek, sinuous creature coiled with a graceful curve before the sun. Roger shoved me away from him with such force, I fell over the railing. As I plunged toward the ocean, I screamed.

When I hit the surface, the impact jolted me. The unexpected, frigid water stole my breath.

Then survival instinct kicked in, and I struggled to swim to the surface. With my wet jeans, sweater, coat, and boots, it was a slog to even move my limbs.

Once I broke through, I gulped for oxygen, the taste of salt water on my tongue. I searched around me to get my bearings. The dark sea creature was gone, and the gleaming boat stood alone, floating on the surface. It started to sail faster—away from me.

Roger wasn't going to leave me out here to fend for myself, was he? Without a life vest or a phone, which was stowed away in a drink holder on board.

"Roger!" I called and waved my hand over my head.

A shadow cut from the surface. I gaped at what appeared to be a sea serpent unfurled from the depths of the ocean and crossed against the backdrop of the sun. As the enormous creature rose, water dropped from its form and spilled back into the ocean below.

It emerged more as it approached the boat and then crashed onto the surface of it with brutal force and a deafening echo. Splinters of wood and debris launched in all directions, and I ducked under the surface to avoid being hit.

More startling booms resounded around me as if the sea creature was battering the boat. I held my breath for as long as I could until the pressure for oxygen grew too intense in my lungs, then I burst through the surface to breathe. The boat was in tatters, floating debris on the ocean. Where was Roger? Panic engulfed me. The creature seemed determined on destruction. I had to get away from there as quick as possible before being hit by debris or its colossal form.

I swam in the direction where I thought I'd spotted an island. My wool coat and boots weighed me down and slowed my movements. I shed the coat from my arms and slid the boots off my feet so I could move easier without being so encumbered. With adrenaline coursing through my veins, I swam as fast as possible.

The more distance between the remnants of the vessel and me, the more panic threatened to claim me. I was alone out here in the ocean without having any means of calling for help. How

long would I be able to survive in this cold water? How long before my arms and legs burned out from fatigue?

Think. Think!

I'd gone through water survival training. What could I do? One of the techniques I'd learned many years ago returned to me. It involved removing our jeans to use them as a flotation device. It wasn't something I never thought I'd have to do in a scenario like this, yet here I was treading water in the open sea.

Here goes. I unfastened my jeans and slid the zipper down with shivering fingers. Sliding my jeans off over these legs while I treaded water in temperatures much cooler than in the pool where I'd trained was much more difficult. Several minutes stretched passed before I'd managed to do so, and by the time I had, my heart was pounding.

Breathe slowly. Reserve your energy.

I tried to stay calm, and I fashioned my jeans into a flotation device that I wrapped around my shoulders. Then I slowly fluttered my legs as I swam toward that island. At least I hoped I was heading in the correct direction. Without any landmarks other than the position of the sun, it was iffy.

Still, I couldn't give up. I had to keep moving—or else I'd face a watery grave. And drowning alone in the ocean was a cruel way to die.

CHAPTER 2



DAGON

The pieces of the vessel scattered across the ocean's surface. Although a fierce rage still rippled through my veins, the sight of the destruction I'd caused satisfied me.

When I'd approached the vessel in black mamba form, I was assaulted by the man's thoughts. My gift—or curse—of the ability to read minds was one of the main reasons I avoided others. Although demons like me encouraged humans to act on their dark desires, I couldn't turn off my ability to read their minds. What he'd intended to do to the woman was abhorrent. It was too much. To be engulfed by wicked thoughts like his was suffocating. I couldn't read her thoughts, which was unusual, but her fear was palpable.

Her cry had shattered the stillness. I'd extended my head through the surface and surveyed the scene. He'd grabbed her, causing her to cry out in pain—and he'd liked it. This repulsive human threw me into a destructive rage. I'd swelled my size so that I appeared like a massive sea serpent emerging from the sea.

I meant to terrify him, so he'd release the woman, but what he did next was unexpected. He threw her overboard.

Worse, I read his desperate, despicable thoughts as clear as the sun on a cloudless day. By sacrificing her, he thought I'd go for her and leave him alone. Essentially attempting to save himself.

How wrong he was.

This pathetic human deserved no mercy.

I propelled myself from the depths of the ocean, my colossal form crashing onto his precious boat with a resounding impact. The vessel trembled beneath the weight of my fury as I unleashed one fierce blow after another. The man cried for mercy and begged for pity, a futile plea to my ears.

I didn't kill him, though. That would be too easy. Instead, he'd have to face the same fate that he'd subjected the woman to when throwing her into the sea. He clung to a piece of his broken vessel, which was more than she had. I turned around.

Where was she?

I sank beneath the waves and shrank back down to the size of a black mamba and blended into the dark shadows of the water. Swimming from the rotten human, I searched for the woman. His cries grew fainter as I glided through the sea in a serpentine manner, the waves sliding over my sleek scales.

Why I bothered to go after her perplexed me. After all, what did another human matter to me? The destruction they caused dwarfed anything I was capable of. But something about this woman drew me toward her. Why couldn't I read her thoughts, yet I could sense her fear? Curiosity grew stronger than my apathy. I reached out to sense her.

The thread of her pulsing energy guided me through the water, her presence growing stronger with each passing moment. Driven by this inexplicable interest, I swam towards her. An enigmatic connection to her intensified, demanding my attention, commanding me to recognize its significance.

Of what?

As I swam closer, a wave of realization flowed through me. She wasn't just another human. Our connection was something more. Something deeper. Something primal.

She was my mate.

The revelation struck me like a bolt of lightning exploding through the dark of night. How could she be out here, struggling to survive in the vast ocean?

A desperate fervor pushed me to hurry. I swam as fast as possible, following her life force like it was a lighthouse guiding my way. And when I came within a couple of dozen feet from her, I extended my snake head above the surface. She was choking. Her gasps for air were barely audible above the sound of the waves.

She thrashed her arms as if struggling to stay afloat. I couldn't see her face though, as her back faced me. She was in trouble, and I had to act fast.

I shifted back to my human form. As I approached, I extended my arm. When I touched her shoulder from behind, she screamed.

CELIA

“Don’t be afraid,” a voice urged from behind me in a deep, reassuring tone.

My breath came hard as I treaded water, and my pulse jolted up to a thousand beats a minute. Something had just touched my shoulder—which now sounded like it was *someone*.

I thought it might have been Roger or whatever that creature was that had destroyed his boat. When I turned, I faced a man staring at me from blue eyes brighter than the sea as he floated before me. Drops of water cascaded down his face, tracing the contours of his chiseled jawline. His hair appeared to be dark blond, slicked back by the water and gleaming beneath the sunlight.

I gaped and stared at this stranger who appeared out of nowhere in the sea, leaving me spellbound.

“Wha—where—where did you come from?” I stammered through my shivers as the frigid waters took its toll.

“I heard shouting,” he stated in a matter-of-fact tone, not answering my question.

My mind raced, questioning his sudden appearance, still trying to process this surreal scene. Here I was, in the middle of the ocean, face-to-face with a man who seemed to have emerged from the depth of it.

Why would a man be out here? Was he some type of mer-creature? No, of course not. Was I losing my mind? I might have swallowed too much salt water and started hallucinating.

“Am I imagining this?” I asked aloud. Did I fabricate seeing an enormous creature emerge from the sea as well and destroy

Roger's boat?

"No."

I blinked as I treaded water. Could he have come from Roger's boat? That didn't seem likely, considering I hadn't noticed him before. Where was Roger or the fractured boat? I glanced ahead but didn't see anything. I must have swum farther than I thought. Confusion washed over me like a crashing wave, my mind struggling to comprehend the enigma before me.

"Are you...human?"

He smiled, his lips curling into a breathtaking expression that melted my apprehension. "Do I look human?"

"Yes." I pursed my lips. "But you could be some kind of...mer-creature." Did I really just utter that out loud? Sure, as a marine biologist, I was aware there were many more species in the ocean than what we were aware of. In fact, discovering one would be my greatest dream. Whatever I'd just seen emerge from the ocean would have fascinated me if it hadn't been so destructive, leading me to fear for my life. Had I slipped into another realm with creatures I hadn't yet known existed? No, that was more likely a sign of hallucinating.

But he seemed so *real*.

He chuckled, a rich and melodic sound. Great, now he was laughing at my ridiculousness. Meanwhile, I must have been losing my mind while trying to figure out how to survive in the ocean.

"No, I am not a mer-creature." A hint of amusement gleamed in his eyes.

"Then what are you?" My voice lowered to a whisper.

A wave splashed my face, taking me by surprise. He gripped my forearm as I choked. I sputtered out saltwater that irritated my lungs and coating my tongue.

“We can talk later,” he declared in an authoritative tone. “Do you want me to help you or not?”

His offer hung in the air like an echo. The option of trying to survive out here alone was even less appealing. Swallowing my reservations about this mysterious ocean man, I uttered, “yes,” in between coughs.

He moved his hand down to capture mine. A tingle of sparks where our palms met surprised me. He paused, staring at me with an uncertain expression that must have mirrored my own, but then a more determined one returned.

He turned and began to swim. A minute or so passed as he swam with powerful kicks through the ocean. I attempted to pull my weight, but he had enough force to propel both of us forward. Whoever he was, he was an incredible swimmer. Wait, what happened to my jeans that were helping me stay afloat? At some point, they must have slid off my shoulders. They hadn't been that effective or reassuring, though—not like the solid grip of this man. Could I trust a stranger who appeared out of nowhere in the sea, promising to help me out of my desperate situation?

The alternative was to fight the tide on my own.

“Where are we going?” I called out.

After a few more forceful kicks, he replied, “My island.”

Was it the one that I had been trying to reach? That gave me a flicker of hope.

As he guided us to safety, my unease lifted. Something about him was so compelling, so alluring, like he had a magnetic

pull. Understanding who or what this mysterious man who appeared out of nowhere was gnawed at me, but any valid explanation slipped through my grasp like water through my fingers.

He stopped swimming. “I need to get a better grip on you.” Pulling me closer to him, he circled his arm around my waist and then resumed.

With this intimate closeness, we glided through the water together. As he said, it was easier than him dragging me by holding my hand. The sensation of swimming alongside this stranger was surreal.

A part of me wondered if this was truly happening. Maybe I’d lost consciousness after Roger pushed me off the boat, and this visualization of a man here to save me was something I’d fabricated as I slipped away. Was I dying?

Or was I already dead?

I lost sense of time as he powered on through the waves and I tried to keep up. He did most of the physical work to push us forward. And then ahead, a landmass with trees finally appeared before us. I blinked. Was it truly there? Or was I succumbing to another delusion, my mind conjuring a place of refuge in this unforgiving sea?

With each forceful stroke, the island grew closer, the lush colors of autumn foliage beckoning me like an oasis in a desert. That comparison reminded me of my growing thirst, which had increased after swallowing salt water.

As we approached the shore, my heart raced faster. The water turned shallower, and the waves gently carried us forward to the pebbled beach.

“We can stand now.” He pulled himself upright.

I repositioned myself, eagerly anticipating solid footing beneath my feet but went under.

Strong arms grabbed me and pulled me back through the surface. He pulled me toward his bare chest. “Are you okay?”

I gasped for air. “Yes.” With a weak smile, I added, “I’m not as tall as you.”

He stared down at me with his intense eyes. “That’s okay, I’ve got you.” He lifted me into his arms as if I was no heavier than a handful of seaweed. As he strode forward, I grew increasingly aware of how I was pressed against the bare skin of his impressive torso.

Instinct led me to curl closer to this mysterious man who’d rescued me. The exhaustion of fighting to survive out there had taken a toll, even if he did most of the work while we were headed to shore.

As we approached land, I felt sheepish for cradling against this stranger. “I think I can stand now.”

“Very well.” He put me down gently in the water.

My toes brushed the sand, and I stood. The water reached my shins. He took my hand as we walked the rest of the way. His support was helpful, as every step felt like treading through sludge in my exhausted state. I glanced over at him. He was huge. Perhaps a foot-and-a-half taller than me and sculpted with honed muscles. I’d never seen anyone quite so impressive.

And also naked.

I scanned down his nude body, instantly zooming to his impressive girth. I snapped my gaze away before being caught staring inappropriately.

Turning my focus back to my goal—land—I quickened my steps as I splashed through the final few feet. Once I emerged from the ocean and felt the pebbled shore beneath my feet, I cried out in relief.

When I turned to my rescuer, he glanced at me with wonder in his eyes.

“Where are we?” I gazed ahead at the island covered with trees ahead.

After a few seconds, he replied in a near whisper. “Home.”

CHAPTER 3



DAGON

I inhaled her alluring fragrance as we walked away from the ocean, the sound of the waves lapping against the shore behind us. Although the salty scent of the sea covered us both, it couldn't hide her feminine aroma, one that sparked a low burning brushfire that coursed through my veins, searing me with the certainty that she was the one.

But how? It was only a scent. I didn't know this woman, and she didn't know me. How could she be the one—my *mate*?

The beauty of my island unfolded before us with the vibrancy of October in New England. The trees showed off their brilliant colors, a final display of red, orange, and yellow, before they'd bare their branches for a long, cold winter, covered in snow. As I gazed at my island, enigmatic sensations rolled inside me, convincing me that everything had changed.

As I'd told her, it was home—my sanctuary and escape. And now, as my mate, it would be hers too.

Although I couldn't read her mind the way I typically could with humans, the faint blush on her cheeks gave her thoughts away. She wasn't thinking of the land, although she turned her focus on the scenery.

"Does my body bother you?" I asked with a hint of amusement.

She kept her gaze averted, glancing anywhere else around the island but at me.

"No," she replied softly.

"Then why aren't you looking at me?" I asked, intrigued by her innocence.

She heaved an exhale and then turned to meet my eyes.

“You’re not wearing any clothes. I wanted to give you some privacy.”

I chuckled at her reaction to my nudity. “You’re free to look at me all you like. I don’t mind.”

“Oh.” She bit her lower lip. “Um...”

“You’re not wearing any pants,” I pointed out as my gaze lowered to the smooth expanse of her pale legs and then up to the pair of pink cotton panties that were partially see-through while wet.

“Yes, I um, took off my coat, boots, and jeans in the ocean as I thought it would make it easier to swim.”

“Uh huh,” I replied with a slow nod, moving up to the outlines of her nipples pebbling beneath her wet gray sweater.

Then she tipped her head and stared at me with wonder.

“Can you tell me who you are now?”

“Yes. I’m Dagon,” I replied, using one of the many names I went by.

“Dagon,” she repeated with a nod. “Interesting. I’ve never heard of that before. I’m Celia.”

Her lower lip trembled. She wrapped her arm around herself, and it was covered in goosebumps. Her eyelids fluttered, and she stumbled.

“Are you all right?” I asked her, moving closer to her.

“Just a little woozy.” She raised her hand to her temple. Then her eyes drifted closed, and she collapsed.

I leaped forward and caught her before she fell onto the rocky shore. Lifting her up into my arms, I carried her away from the

beach. The ordeal in the ocean must have taken a toll on her. Not only had she struggled for her life but had to swim to shore with me. I needed to get her inside where she could rest and warm up.

As I stepped onto a path into the woods, which would lead to my house. I gazed down at this fragile human. She had dark hair that clung to her skin in wet strands, a heart-shaped face, and full pink lips that were starting to turn blue from the cold. The bottom one was larger than the top, and I had the urge to steal a kiss right then. That would have to wait. What was more important was ensuring she was safe and cared for. A primal instinct to protect her stirred an unfamiliar tightness in my chest.

I followed the stone path with fern and moss flanking both sides that led to my house. Its gray stone blended in harmony with the natural stone on the island, and I referred to it as a cottage.

Celia's eyes fluttered open as we walked, and she gazed up at me with wonder.

"What happened?" she asked softly. Her brows pinched together as she appeared to make sense of the situation. "Why are you carrying me?"

"You fainted," I replied in a gentle tone, keeping my pace steady. "I'm taking you inside my cottage so you can rest."

She tried to blink her eyes open wider as she gazed at the unfamiliar landscape around her.

"I need to call someone. A creature... the boat."

Her emotions were amplified with confusion and distress. She struggled to come to terms with what was going on while exhaustion clawed at her.

“Shh,” I murmured, brushing that unpleasant idea aside. “You need to take care of yourself first. You are cold and exhausted. You could have drowned. Everything else can wait.”

“But... something bad happened out there.” Her voice trembled with worry as her eyes darted around. “There was a serpent—”

I cut her off, saying, “Celia, you need to rest.” I’d unintentionally scared my mate, which was the last thing I wanted to do. To calm her distress, I used my power of persuasion. Although she struggled against the urge to sleep, she soon succumbed to her body’s overwhelming need and nestled back into my arms.

As I carried her inside the stone house, a strange feeling stirred inside my chest. Holding her felt natural. The feel of her warm body filled me with a peculiar ache. I wanted to care for this stranger, protect her, and destroy anyone who ever threatened her with harm. This fascinating new instinct throbbed inside me with instincts that grew fierce. I yearned to return to the ocean to find that human who’d attacked her. I’d ensure he never made it out alive. I never should have left him to his fate.

But first, I had to ensure her wellbeing. Her skin was dotted with goosebumps. I needed to get her out of her wet clothing and dry her off as best as I could.

I laid her on a plush sofa in front of the unlit fireplace and walked away to retrieve some towels. A powerful force snapped inside me as if I’d whipped—I didn’t want to leave her.

How foolish. I was only going to another part of the house and would be right back. Shaking my head, I tried to find a thread of common sense in this perplexing new development. My life

couldn't turn upside in the matter of a few minutes, could it? It was likely closer to an hour now since I'd sensed my mate out in the ocean. Still, one hour was a blip in the endless universe. It couldn't change so much so soon.

Could it?

I rushed to my room to put on a pair of black drawstring pants and then hurried to a closet to retrieve a stack of towels. As I did, I questioned these strange feelings. How could they soar up in me so hard and fast? I knew nothing about this woman except her first name. Yes, I sensed the bond between us, but I never predicted it would hit me with such a ferocious impact right from the start. I ran my hand through my hair as I tried to sort through it all. When I'd left the island earlier, I never expected that a chance encounter in the ocean would upend my entire world and I'd return with someone. Yet here she was—my mate.

When I returned to Celia, I stared at her for a minute or so, fascinated by this mysterious beauty who was mine. Or at least she would be when we got to know each other better.

I dried her hair as gently as I could. Then I gathered another towel to dry off her legs. Her sweater and panties were drenched. They had to go. It wasn't easy to pull the sweater over her head, but I managed. Unfortunately, she had another base layer beneath it. That one was easier to remove. Now she lay on my sofa, only in her wet, pale pink panties and bra. Blood rushed through my veins, heading straight for my cock. I groaned and forced myself to focus on helping her, not gaping at her beauty or inhaling her musky female fragrance.

After I removed her bra, my gaze roved over the tight buds of her nipples. I dried her upper body as gently as possible. Then I turned my attention to her panties. I slid them slowly over

her hips, then had to lift her hips to manage removing them. A vision of how I'd do the same thing when seducing her left me frozen for a moment.

Now she lay just as naked as I was, and I couldn't ignore her enticing scent. The urge to wake her rose. To kiss her and take her and truly make her my mate...

I squared my jaw and shoved that thought away. For now.

After drying any remaining dampness from her soft skin, I pulled out a soft white blanket from an oversized basket next to the sofa and covered her with it. She needed to warm up.

Then I turned my attention to the fireplace. I stacked some logs and stoked a fire. Soon, the crackling sound of wood and the warmth from the hearth filled the room. I poured myself amaretto on ice from the bar in the next room and returned to sit across from Celia. The soft glow of the fire illuminated her sweet face. She appeared at ease now. No fear, no worry, no confusion or exhaustion.

Her breath deepened as she drifted into a deep slumber.

"Sweet dreams, my mate. When you wake, it will be the start of a new adventure for us both."

Although she'd want to return to wherever she came from, I couldn't let that happen. She was my mate—the one who'd break my obligations to hunt and free me of the responsibilities as a member of the Royal Legion. The universe had brought us together, and that was something I couldn't ignore.

No matter what Celia wanted, I couldn't let her leave my island.

CHAPTER 4



CELIA

*A*s I emerged from a deep sleep, I tore myself from the fringes of a dark nightmare. Roger's advances, the sea creature, throwing me overboard into the frigid ocean...

And a man saving me in the sea.

Was that real?

With that thought, I gasped and my eyes popped open. My heart rapped against my ribs while I panted hard. The room was unfamiliar yet cozy, with plenty of seating, bookshelves, and an impressive stone fireplace. The scent of a recent fire lingered, although none remained.

I was on a sofa, covered in an off-white faux-fur blanket. When I lifted it, I gasped—I was completely naked. I covered myself once more, although no one was around to witness my nudity.

Confusion swarmed in my brain. Where was I? And what happened? I tried to piece together how I'd ended up here—and lost my clothing. After what had almost happened with Roger, my mind leapt to a dark place. I didn't sense that I'd been violated, and I would have, right?

Then I remembered being saved from the ocean. I pulled together a sharper image of the man who'd appeared out of nowhere in the sea and saved me. The blue eyes. The chiseled jawline. My god, he was beautiful and huge and—what did he say his name was? Daron? No, something like that, though. More like dragon. Oh, right, Dagon. He swam us here to the island, and he, too, was stark naked, and the most impressive man I'd ever seen.

Had I imagined that? The last thing I remembered was reaching the shore with him, then waking in his arms as he carried me. But then...nothing.

Was I dead? Why else would I envision a man swimming out of nowhere to save me? Maybe I'd fabricated him saving me as a comforting thought in the final moments before I drowned.

I took a deep breath. It felt like actual breathing. I assessed my internal systems. Besides my lungs appearing to function, my heart beat with a steady rhythm beneath my hand. I tipped my head to focus on hearing. Birds chirped a happy song outside. I inhaled, and the lingering scent from the fireplace reminded me that I still had a sense of smell.

So, I seemed to be alive.

Where was Dagon? I glanced around the room. Could he be in this house or hotel or wherever we were? I couldn't go looking for him like this. Where were my clothes?

I stood, and had to pause, still woozy. Wrapping the blanket around me, I went in search of my clothing. Ah, there they were hanging near the fire—my bra, panties, shirt, and sweater. I touched them, and they were warm and dry. What a relief. I hoped that them hanging here to dry was the sole reason for waking undressed. I dressed and then draped the blanket back over me to cover more of my exposed legs.

Then I ventured out of the room, curious as to where I'd ended up. It appeared to be a spacious house with multiple rooms and levels with vast windows leading out to the trees outdoors, many in shades of orange and yellow. The polished oak furnishings appeared expensive. Everything was neat. As I explored a dining room with a long mahogany table, a delicious aroma propelled me to continue my exploration. The

scent of eggs and coffee stirred my appetite and guided me down the hallway.

In the kitchen, Dagon stood facing the stove, cooking a seemingly ordinary breakfast amid such extraordinary circumstances. My gaze traveled up. He was as tall as I remembered. Now, however, he wore clothes—a pair of low-slung black drawstring pants and a long-sleeved, fitted, blue underlayer.

“Hello?” I announced my presence as I approached.

He turned around and fixed a steady gaze on me. The blue of his eyes was even more pronounced by the bright blue of his shirt. And his gaze was so intense, I sucked in a breath.

A warm smile spread over his face.

“Good morning, Celia. I hope you’re hungry.” He motioned to the stove with a spatula. “I made plenty of eggs.”

“Yes, please. I’d love some.” When was the last time I ate? I assumed it was the morning after the incident on the ocean, but for all I knew, I could have been here for a week. And my empty stomach could attest to that.

“Good.” He nodded with approval. “You need to restore your energy.”

“Dagon,” I said, my voice sounding oddly unsure. “Why did I wake up naked?”

A glimmer of amusement flashed in his eyes.

“You were wet and freezing. I had to get you out of your clothes and warmed up.” His brows arched as his gaze lowered. “Don’t worry, I didn’t do anything—” he paused “—inappropriate.”

He met my eyes once more, and heat rose in my cheeks.

“I didn’t mean that.” Although I pretty much did, needing to make sure. “Ah, thank you for helping me.” So many questions about him remained, and there were so many things that I had to take care of. A part of me wondered why I wasn’t freaking out more about this situation and ending up here on this island with this mysterious stranger. Something about him seemed to calm my fears.

I glanced around the kitchen, looking for a phone or laptop or some means of how I could communicate with the outside world. “Do you have a phone or computer I could use?”

His smile vanished. “Why?”

“I need to make a couple of calls.”

When I pictured why, I frowned. Roger might still be out there, lost at sea. A part of me hoped he was—or that he’d drowned—after what he did to me.

My shoulders tensed and fingertips trembled. Ashamed by my thoughts, I shoved that away. “I was out on a boat with someone when we—” Should I really tell Dagon that an enormous sea creature emerged from the ocean and destroyed our boat? He’d definitely think I’d lost it. I touched my head for any lumps.

He raised a spatula. “You need to take care of yourself first before you worry about anyone else. Coffee?”

“Yes.” But my mouth was parched. I swallowed. “Could I have a glass of water, please?”

“Of course. I’ll take care of you,” he said in a lower tone that whispered of a promise.

Tingles stirred inside me, which I attempted to whisk away with reason. Why would he say that? He didn’t even know me.

Still, it felt good to be treated this way by a gorgeous man, especially after what I'd been through. He brought me a glass of cold water, and when he handed it to me, our fingers brushed. The mere touch sent a new wave of strange vibrations whirling low in my belly.

I took the glass and guzzled the cold water quickly at first. The salt water had dried my mouth. Then I sipped it more slowly.

A minute later, he returned with a plate heaping with more scrambled eggs than I could ever eat, buttered toast, and bacon.

"I hope you're going to eat too," I said.

He fixed a steady gaze on me before replying. "Indeed."

Once we had coffee, water, and breakfast plates, he sat across from me.

I took the first bite of fluffy eggs. "Mmm, these are delicious."

"I'm glad you like them."

Although I had so many questions, hunger delayed them. I was ravenous, as if I hadn't eaten for at least a day. The urge to shovel forkfuls of eggs and bites of toast was hard to control, but I struggled to have table manners.

Once the cutting pangs of my hunger subsided, I paused between bites.

"I'm still so curious about who you are, Dagon. And how you found me like that in the ocean."

He fixed his magnetic blue eyes on me for several heartbeats, which made my own seem to pound with more force.

"Do you believe in fate?" he asked.

I shook my head, scrunching my nose. “No. Not really. I’m a scientist.”

He cocked his head, and his expression brightened. “Really? What kind?”

“A marine biologist.”

His brows drew closer together in question. “You study the sea?”

“Yes. And the life within.”

Like a sea serpent that bursts through the ocean’s surface and destroys a boat.

His eyes gleamed wider. “Fascinating.”

Was it? I took a sip of coffee. Maybe caffeine would help me sort through my confusion and help me figure out my next steps.

A playful grin tugged at his lips, drawing my attention to their absolute carved perfection. “Maybe I’ll change your mind about fate while you’re here. Let me at least show you around the island. I’m sure there’s plenty that would interest someone who studies the sea.”

Although the invitation enticed me, I hesitated. “I don’t have proper clothing to do so.”

“I’ll find something for you to wear.”

“Okay, but I still need to make a call first.”

He exhaled slowly. “I don’t have a phone.”

I sighed. Now what?

“Did you see anything—*unusual*—before you found me?”

“Like what?”

A gigantic sea serpent destroying a boat.

“Never mind.” After a few more seconds while I tried to figure out what to do next, I revealed, “I was out on a boat with a man. When it went down, we were separated. He might be in danger.”

Dagon fixed a probing gaze on me, and for a moment, I thought his eyes flickered with a crimson hue.

It was gone. I must have imagined it.

“What are you trying to do?”

I shrugged. “Notify the Coast Guard or someone. Let them know he’s out there if they haven’t found him yet.” I glanced around and threw my hands up. “I can’t stay here and not do anything.”

Dagon’s lips turned downward into a scowl. He tapped his fingertips together.

“I have a radio. I’ll let them know.”

“Thank you.” Then I cocked my head. “Where are we?”

His lips quirked into a mischievous smile. “My island.”

Okay, so I wasn’t going to get anywhere with finding out the name of his island, but at least he’d deal with the situation with Roger. I didn’t want to begin to try to explain what had happened, not only with the sea serpent that had attacked the boat, which they might think was a prank, but with the monster on the boat who had attacked me. An icky sensation crawled over my skin just thinking about it.

Dagon went up to his study to radio them. After a few minutes, I headed up. The door was open to a vast study on the second floor with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and a picture window that spread over the island. It looked gorgeous out

there with the brilliant colors of the trees. Dagon sat at a desk but turned to me when I entered.

“I thought of something else to tell them.”

“What’s that?” His brows pulled together.

“I need to find a way back.” I shrugged and gave him a sheepish grin.

He fixed his ever-present intense eyes on me. “I’ll take you wherever you need to go.”

“You have a boat?”

“I do.”

Okay. Since I wasn’t in a rush to leave this mysterious man or this fascinating island just yet, that worked for me. Besides, he promised to show me around, and I was utterly intrigued.

“Thank you. For breakfast, for taking me in—for saving me.”

His eyes warmed. “You’re welcome.” He motioned out the window. “If you’re up for a walk, I can show you around my island.”

His island. Once again, I wondered who exactly he was. Each time I asked him, he found a way to avoid answering. Would he ever reveal his secrets?

DAGON FOUND a pair of black leggings that fit me and a pair of women’s socks and boots. An unexpected pang of jealousy hit me. I didn’t want to know who they belonged to. He then did as he promised, giving me a tour of the island, which was utterly enchanting.

When he reached out for me to take his hand, I did so, and electric tingles danced up my arm. We walked along the

shoreline like new lovers, although we'd only just met. How could I feel so strangely connected to someone I didn't know?

Farther up the shore, we passed his boat, which was tied up, and I exhaled with relief. Seeing it gave me confidence that I wasn't stranded here.

I peered down where the waves lapped the sand. Whenever I spotted a small creature burrowing through the sand, I stopped to observe. The cool ocean breeze gently caressed our faces, and the morning sun bathed the landscape in warm hues, accentuating the vibrant foliage of the trees.

Dagon seemed to know the island intimately, guiding me through hidden paths that led to breathtaking viewpoints and secluded coves.

"It's breathtaking." I circled around and then gaped at him.

"Do you live here on this island alone?"

"I do."

I searched his eyes. "Why?"

He broke eye contact. "You don't know what I've seen, Celia. What I've lived through." His mouth turned into a grim line. "I came here to escape what happens out there." He gestured outward to an unfixed point on the horizon. "To free myself from all the ugliness of the world."

I couldn't fault him with that logic. His admission drew me to him. What caused him such pain? Was there anything I could do to lessen it?

One hour tumbled into the next. He was right—the island and all its mysteries fascinated me, but not as much as the man who inhabited it alone. My attention was as attuned to his presence near me, which was almost impossible to ignore. Not

only due to his massive size but something so alluring, so charismatic.

The sun set early this time of year, which meant I shouldn't linger too long. But Dagon nudged me to climb a cliff with him where we watched the sun sparkle over the island and the sea.

"It's beautiful," I whispered.

Dagon gazed at me, his eyes holding a mixture of emotions. "Yes." His voice carrying a hint of something deeper.

Locked in his captivating gaze, I couldn't turn away. My pulse raced, and the air between us seemed to crackle with palpable heat. He reached up and caressed my cheek. I curled toward his palm as if entranced.

He traced his fingertip along my jawline and down toward my lip. "You're the one," he said in a tone just above a whisper.

My breath hitched, and a delicious shiver traveled up my spine. Although I questioned why he could think of something like that so soon after meeting me, I didn't want to ruin this magical spell. All I wanted was more of what held us together here now, while the rest of the world seemed to disappear beyond the horizon.

He bent down and moved toward me. My heart thundered with heady anticipation. And then—his lips brushed mine.

That small touch stirred something fierce in me. I wanted more.

But it was over so soon. His mouth hovered near mine, our breaths mingling in this highly charged space.

"You don't need to rush back home," he said, his voice low and edged with sensuality. Then he bent down and kissed my

forehead. “You can stay here on the island with me.”

CHAPTER 5



DAGON

As I waited for Celia's answer, my pulse raced with anticipation. I'd never extended an invitation like this before, yet here I was welcoming her to stay in my sanctuary. This place was where I went to escape humans, and now I was inviting one to live with me? Madness.

Her hesitation made me anxious, and my palms heated. Would she reject me? The rejection of a mate had to be the cruelest punishment in existence—there would only be one mate for me. If she didn't want me, then... I gulped.

"I'd love to stay a bit longer," she replied in a soft tone.

"Stay as long as you'd like." I struggled to sound nonchalant.

She released a thoughtful sound. "Maybe a few days?"

At first, a lightness filled my chest. Then a weight settled. Only a few days? That wouldn't be nearly enough time. I wanted her to stay with me permanently, to be my mate. But I couldn't push her too hard or too fast. I'd have to woo her to convince her to stay. Treat her well so she'd never want to leave me. Show her all the wonders of the island so she'd never want to live elsewhere.

"Of course," I replied with a slow nod. "That sounds perfect. You're free to explore as you wish. I'm sure due to your profession, you'll appreciate the wonders that surround us."

Her eyes brightened. "That sounds amazing."

OVER THE NEXT FEW HOURS, I showed her around the island, taking her to hidden coves, both sandy and rocky beaches, and

serene forests. Despite the chill of the October day, she marveled at the natural beauty of the land. As we walked the perimeter of the island, the waves gently lapped at the rocky shore.

She stopped and kneeled. “Ooh, a tide pool.”

Water enclosed by rocks. What was so special about that?

“Come look, Dagon,” she said, beckoning me toward her.

“You can find so much life in these.” After I bent down beside her, she pointed. “See those crabs scuttling through the sand? These tiny ecosystems are amazing.”

Crabs? Amazing? I thought she might be joking, but her eyes were bright with delight.

“They must be hardy creatures to survive the harsh winters,” I said.

“Certain species head into deeper water and bury themselves in the sand to hibernate.”

I gazed at her, studying her in a new way. Not only was my mate beautiful but she was also kind-hearted and intelligent.

“You have a deep connection with nature. It’s clear by the way you speak about it.”

“It’s true,” she admitted with a nod. “I could spend hours out here exploring not only the life in the water but on land as well. Even the shifts between low and high tide are fascinating. You’re lucky to live on such a fascinating island.”

Luck had little to do with it. I’d won the property from a human with too much bravado, cash, and a reckless gambling habit. He shouldn’t have gambled something he wasn’t willing to lose. Little did he know my abilities to read his mind.

Despite what I’d seen in others, even I had been disturbed with

the depravity of his actions. He was one of the worst humans I'd come across. Lying, stealing, and bullying others in order to get what he wanted, including the property, so I felt no guilt in claiming it as my own. He then tried to have me killed, so I returned the favor and destroyed him. What he didn't deserve was the kindness of a quick death. I should have prolonged it for much longer.

Celia didn't need to know the sordid backstory. "I appreciate it a great deal," I told her as I stood. "Where do you live?"

"At the moment, in Salem, Mass." She rose, and we resumed walking the shore. "Just a short-term rental. I moved here to explore the New England coastal waters and am looking for new opportunities." Her expression contorted as if remembering something unpleasant, and I sensed her mood darken.

"Is that what you were doing when I found you?"

Her lips twitched and then tightened into a grim line. "Yes. Or so I thought. And then I was thrown overboard."

My fingers dug into my palms, but I forced myself to remain calm. That human didn't deserve any mercy.

"By whom?" I asked, although I already knew the answer. She wouldn't know I'd witnessed what had happened.

"A man who wasn't what he seemed," she replied, her voice laced with bitterness. "He brought me out to discuss an opportunity to finance an expedition, but there was a catch. He wanted more than I was willing to give."

Rage throbbed in my veins as I struggled to control my anger. That man was a monster, using and exploiting her. I wanted to track him down and ensure he paid for hurting Celia, but I had to keep my emotions in check.

Then, I questioned my own motives. Was I any better? I was offering her the freedom to explore and study on my island, but the catch was that I wanted her to stay as my mate, which would help me escape my royal obligations. Was I being selfish too? Yes and no. Yes, because I couldn't bear the thought of her leaving, and no, because I desired to protect her.

My jaw clenched as the urge to protect her and avenge her over what happened grew stronger. "Where is he now?"

She blinked and closed her eyes. "I don't know. He's the one you told the coast guard about. I'm not sure he survived, and to tell you the truth, I don't care after what he did."

I didn't tell the coast guard anything, since I never made that call. She didn't need to know that, though. Let the man rot at the bottom of the ocean.

Trying to keep the anger from my voice, I replied, "It sounds like he doesn't deserve to after what he did to you."

She gazed down at the shore and nodded. "We reported him missing, so my conscience is clean." After a heavy sigh, she added, "We encountered something out there. It might sound peculiar but..." She paused and took a deep breath. "A giant sea serpent came out of the water and bashed his boat. It did so over and over until it destroyed it."

Celia glanced at me with an expectant expression, as if waiting for my reaction.

"That's—incredible. I'm glad you're okay." Although I schooled my voice not to reveal anything, I heard the strained tone.

"You don't seem that surprised," she noted, slanting her head. "Have you seen anything like that?"

“A giant sea serpent?” I grunted. “I’ve seen whales, dolphins, seals—but never a sea serpent that destroys boats.” It wasn’t exactly a lie since I couldn’t see myself head on.

We walked in silence for several seconds before Celia said, “If I’m going to stay here with you, I have to know who you are.” She peered closer, curiosity shining in her eyes. “Who are you, truly? How were you so deep in the ocean?”

Fuck. Would she keep pushing to get the truth? I calculated my response carefully, wanting to reveal as much as I could without scaring her away.

“I’m part of a royal legion,” I began cautiously. “A special type of militia. My five brothers and I are entrusted with certain responsibilities.”

Her brows arched as if she was intrigued. “Like what?”

“I can only reveal so much,” I replied with a half-smile. “But I was returning from an engagement when I found you.”

“But that doesn’t...” Her eyes narrowed as she shook her head. “It doesn’t explain...” She pushed her hair back as if frustrated.

Before she asked another question, I said, “I told you what I can reveal, Celia.” Then, to change the subject, I said, “After dinner, we’ll have to head back outside. You can see the stars much better out here than you can back in the city.”

CELIA

What a peculiar and fascinating man.

After Dagon and I explored the island, we returned to the stone-accented cottage. He showed me to a room where I'd be staying, one that was down the hall from his on the second floor. It had sage green walls, a queen-sized bed with plush white bedding and an abundance of fluffy white pillows, and a bureau with clothing from the previous owner. He'd ended up with a lot of belongings, including some women's clothing. Although it was strange for him to own a house with someone else's clothing still in it, at least he didn't describe her as an ex-girlfriend or wife.

Not that I truly understood why that would bother me.

We didn't meet up again until dinnertime. It was a delicious meal of baked chicken, roasted potatoes, and a side salad which he'd prepared himself

“Do you bring the food out here yourself?”

“I pick some things up when I head to the mainland.”

“How often do you do that?”

He flashed a mischievous smile. “Whenever I need to.”

I had about a zillion more questions about living alone on this island. From what I knew about Dagon so far, it would be futile if I launched them at him all at once. He'd answer what he wanted, when he wanted—and *if* he wanted.

Still, as we wandered outside after dinner, I couldn't help probing whenever possible.

“So, you’re in a royal legion. I’m not entirely sure what that means. Where did you grow up?”

Dagon smiled playfully, and his eyes shimmered like the ocean under the moonlight. “Some of my secrets must remain a mystery, at least for now. But I will say that being part of the royal legion grants me unique privileges.”

“Like this island?”

“In a way.”

I nodded, respecting his boundaries while more curiosity stirred about his origins. He was shrouded in mystery, which made him all the more captivating.

As we strolled, I marveled at the enchantment on this island. When I’d stumbled onto it yesterday, it was in relief at finally being ashore. As we explored and I searched for signs of life in hidden nooks, I grew more captivated by this wondrous world where he lived all alone.

It might be nice to wander on summer nights, but this fall evening air was crisp. The blanket I had draped around my shoulders provided some warmth against the cool October breeze but didn’t block it entirely. We reached the highest point on the island, overlooking the vast expanse of the ocean below. The moon’s reflection danced on the water’s surface, creating a breathtaking dance of light and shadow.

I glanced up. “You’re right about the stars. There are so many visible out here. It’s breathtaking.”

“It is indeed.”

When I glanced at him, he wasn’t looking up but staring at me. His intense gaze sent a delicious shudder through me. Something about him utterly entranced me.

He stepped closer and cupped my cheek. My pulse instantly shot up. Then he bent down and claimed my lips with his. Sparks ignited deep within, stirring a wild need in me I'd never experienced.

Dagon reached his hand behind my neck and tipped my head back. Then he slipped his tongue between my lips. He kissed me hard, leaving me breathless, igniting a fire deep and low in my core.

Time seemed to slow down as we explored each other's lips, our bodies drawn together by an irresistible force. I melted into his touch, and a surge of desire washed through me.

His fingers traced down my throat, traveling over my collarbone and then down to brush my breast. My nipples pebbled, turning sensitive with need. As our kiss turned more passionate, we grasped for each other, and I shed more inhibition.

I reached around, roaming my hands over the contours of his massive body. Wow, he was unlike any man I'd ever met. So big and so built. I'd seen how muscular and cut he was when he'd stepped out of the ocean naked like an ancient god, but feeling the smooth hardness beneath his skin was on another level.

The more we kissed and explored each other, the more I wanted. Heat coiled inside, bringing attention to the tingling need between my legs. I wanted more, period.

Dagon broke from my needy lips and lowered himself to drop kisses down the side of my neck.

I exhaled a slow, shaky breath. "Dagon," I whispered.

He moved back to my throat, covering my jawline with more kisses as he trailed over to my mouth. His tongue stroked

mine, flicking and teasing until I was breathless. He placed both hands on my hips and guided my body closer to his. Reaching around, he groped my butt and pressed me against his body. The hard line of his erection against my belly was unmistakable. A low, feral sound escaped him.

He pulled his lips a fraction from mine and gazed at me from half-closed eyes. "I want you so bad, Celia," he uttered in a dark, rich, velvety voice. His warm breath mingled with mine. "Be with me tonight."

My breath came out in short rasps. There wasn't anything I yearned for more at that moment. After two frantic heartbeats, I managed to hiss, "Yesss."

CHAPTER 6



CELIA

*W*e returned to the cottage at almost a breakneck speed, so different from the leisurely stroll earlier. A question haunted me as we rushed back. Would I even be able to be with someone so well endowed?

By the time I stepped into the foyer, I was breathless with anticipation. Dagon circled halfway around me, gazing at me with the intensity of a predator. The feral passion in his eyes melted away my concerns.

In the next moment, he rushed to me, and we came together with a fierce grasp.

As we headed deeper inside, we yanked at each other's clothes. Half of them were shed on the stairway alone, leaving me in only my panties and bra, and him only in black boxers.

He stopped me there on the stairs with his intense stare and then moved down to kiss my neck. I dropped my head back as he moved his lips down my collarbone, and along the top of my breasts just above the cups. Then he continued down my torso—down, down... When he planted a kiss on my soaking wet panties, I inhaled sharply.

A low moan escaped him. "You smell so good. I bet you taste even better." With that, he used his teeth to nudge one side of my panties over.

My breath came quick as I waited in anticipation. When he tasted me with a slow glide of his tongue, I dropped my head back and moaned.

Then I remembered where we were. I lifted my head, glancing around quickly to make sure we weren't being watched. After

all, we were out in the open, but then again, we were alone in this house. On the island. *His* island.

He distracted me with the magic he was doing with his mouth, and soon I didn't care if an entire football stadium could see us. I wouldn't do anything to stop him.

Then he pulled away, reached for my panties, and tore them off with a ripping sound.

I sighed. Holy hell, that was hot. Incredibly exciting. "That's the only pair I have," I half-protected.

"I'll buy you new ones." His eyes gleamed with dark promise. Then his lips quirked into a devilish smile. "Until then, you'll have to go without."

When he buried his head between my legs once more, I forgot about clothes, panties—everything. My brain couldn't hold any more thoughts except the mesmerizing experience. My body had never felt so alive before.

Every part of me seemed to vibrate with anticipation and throb with desire. He played with me, teasing until I was a gasping, moaning, needy mess on the stairs. I held onto the railing so tightly, I thought I'd rip it out of the banister.

When he applied more pressure, I was done for. The pressure built inside me so much, it was explosive. I climbed higher and higher until my body quaked with pleasure and then I broke, gasping his name.

DAGON

When Celia shattered beneath me, my cock throbbed. I wanted more. More of her sweet honey on my tongue. More of her trembling with pleasure at my touch. More of her surrendering her body to me.

I wanted to fuck her in every which way. Mark her. Make her mine.

“To my room,” I commanded.

“Yes,” she agreed in a low rasp. Her legs quaked as she brought herself to stand.

While she walked up the stairs with only her bra remaining, I had a view of her full ass. My cock twitched, and I groaned. An urge rose to get her on her hands and knees so I could taste her again from behind before I rammed my shaft inside her. It would have to wait until we got to my room. I’d have more room to spread her out across my bed and take her. I reached up and squeezed her ass—a simple touch for now.

She glanced over her shoulder with a surprised but pleased smile. Then her gaze lowered. “You’re still dressed.”

“So are you.” I motioned to her bra.

She reached around to her back and unhooked it, then she tossed it on the stairs before me. “Not anymore.”

I rushed up after her, and she squealed as she headed into the room I indicated was mine. I followed her and nudged her back onto the bed, fully naked and gazing up at me from under half-hooded eyes, just the way I wanted her.

“Beautiful,” I murmured, taking in her velvet-smooth skin, lush breasts, and hard, pink nipples.

While I slid my boxers down my hips, her attention lowered. She bit her lower lip. My cock sprang out, unbelievably hard and ready, and her eyes widened.

I kicked my boxers off and then grasped my erection, sliding my hand down. “Is this what you wanted to see?” I asked in a low, sensual tone.

“Ye-yes,” she stammered, as if suddenly unsure.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

She took two more breaths before replying. “You’re quite big.”

“Then we’ll have to make sure you’re nice and wet before I fuck you.”

Her eyes gleamed wider as if a dark excitement surprised her.

“Show me your delicious pussy,” I demanded.

She opened her legs, somewhat self-conscious at first. Her slick folds gleamed with her arousal.

“Good girl,” I replied. Then I slid over her and covered her body with kisses from her neck down. I circled each hardened nipple with my tongue until she squirmed on the sheets beneath me. The scent of her arousal drove me near feral. I’d never been so hard before. My body recognized something about her that it had never encountered, driving up my instincts to claim and protect. I wanted to mark every inch of her as mine.

So I did, moving down her body, searing her with my touch. I swirled my tongue around her inner thighs, teasing her as I worked my way up to her sweet pussy. As I worked her with

my tongue, I added one finger and then another, helping to get her ready for me.

As she writhed on the bed, her sighs and moans echoed around my head. She reached her fingers through my hair, but when her limbs tightened, she then grasped for the sheets. Her lower body rose off the bed, and she bucked with more force. When she cried out again and exploded on my tongue, I almost came with her.

While she recovered, I pulled away. She lay on my bed, eyes half-closed and expression soft with rapture.

“So hot,” I whispered. I was unbelievably lucky that this stunning woman was my mate.

I moved over her and pressed the head of my cock at her entrance, teasing her.

She gasped. “Condom?”

I wanted to feel her bare and fill her with my seed, but that would have to wait. Respecting her desire, I grabbed a condom from my nightstand drawer. When I tore it open and rolled it on, she smiled at me with gratitude.

Then I returned to her welcoming body, and she wrapped her arms around me. As I entered her tight channel, she gasped. Her tightness clamped around my girth. Her breath came out in short pants.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“Breathe,” I directed her. “Relax.”

She nodded and took a deep breath, then exhaled. Slowly, I eased in, letting her adjust to my presence. When I was fully

inside her, I paused. She felt like hot, tight silk around me. So exquisite, so right.

I lowered my forehead to hers. Heat radiated from her skin.

“Are you good?”

“I’m ready.” She held onto my shoulders.

Pulling out of her gently, I then drove back in. I rocked in and out of her, slowly at first, letting her adjust to the pace. She arched her body, moving against me. She felt exquisite. So fuckin’ right.

I rocked in and out of her while she canted below, grasping me. As I did, the certainty that she was the one drilled into me. Nothing had ever felt like this. It had never felt so good. So right.

When I lifted her hips off the bed, the friction at this angle drove her wild. As I thrust into her, her moans increased. I quickened the pace, fucking her with a near-feral drive. She thrashed beneath me, her fingernails digging into my back.

Then she cried out my name and shattered. As she pulsed around my cock, it was too much. Too overpowering. The intense pressure coiled inside, and I growled as I exploded deep inside of my mate.

CELIA

Last night was unexpected. As I wandered around the island for a quick walk after breakfast, I replayed each delicious moment. Sure, I'd fantasized about what it would be like to be with Dagon, especially after we'd kissed, but it was a thousand times hotter in reality. First with that kiss on the cliff, then pausing inside on the stairs, and then continuing in his bedroom—both last night and this morning.

Dagon treated me to a hearty breakfast again, spoiling me in the most wonderful ways. He was taking care of a few things and would join me after lunch, so I had the morning to wander the island on my own, exploring the diversity of life along the shore.

Being out here alone also gave me time to think, and one of the things that boggled me most was the man I'd spent the night with—if he was a man indeed. After we explored each other's bodies thoroughly last night, it left no doubt that his body was human. I recalled one of my first thoughts when he swam up to me in the sea, and I wondered if he was some type of mer-creature. How foolish that was. He didn't have fins or a tail or any body part that indicated he was anything other than a man—but yet...

There was something different about him. He'd revealed being part of this Royal Legion. Could it simply be that he was royalty?

WHILE WE ATE sandwiches at lunch, it started to pour. Lightning flashed across the sky, which was soon followed by thunder.

“Looks like we won’t be heading back out anytime soon,” Dagon pointed out.

“Guess not,” I agreed.

He cocked his head and flashed a suggestive smile. “I can think of other ways we can pass the time indoors.”

I laughed. “Last night wasn’t enough? Or this morning?”

He fixed me with a steady gaze and caressed my cheek. “I could never get enough of you, Celia.”

My breath caught. Damn, he was captivating. And I was still a bit sore. After all, I’d never been with someone so big. He’d filled me so much, I didn’t think I could take it at first.

To get a hold of my bearings, I smoothed my hands over my lap and glanced around.

“Perhaps we should do something else. Play a game or do a puzzle.”

His eyes twinkled with amusement. “Whatever you like.”

After lunch, we found a stash of classic board games on the top shelf in one of the closets. Although Dagon had suggested a more sensual activity, he appeared to enjoy himself during a game of Scrabble and then chess.

While Dagon prepared a beef stew, I read quietly for an hour or so. I offered to help, but he insisted I sit and relax, so I did with a hot cup of tea.

Eventually, the scent of the simmering meats and vegetables wafted from the kitchen, stirring my appetite.

“It smells delicious,” I called to him.

“Good. It will be ready soon.”

We ate hearty bowls of stew with warm crusty bread while we chatted over dinner, and the meal was every bit as tasty as it smelled.

“How did you learn to be such a good cook?” I asked.

He took a sip of his red wine and put down the glass. “I’ve lived alone for a long time, so I had to learn to take care of myself.”

I wondered why he chose to live on his own. Had it always been by choice? I took another bite, and the flavors exploded on my tongue.

“Mmm, so good. I wish I was such a good cook since I also live alone, but I often scramble to put something together that’s quick and easy—or get takeout.”

“I enjoy the process of preparing meals.” He furrowed his brows. “You don’t?”

With a sheepish grin, I shook my head.

“I guess you put your passion into your work.” He rubbed the stem of his wineglass, a slow move that struck me as sensual. “Tell me more about what you do.”

It took a couple of seconds for me to pry my gaze from his hand and drag my thoughts away from how he’d used it so skillfully last night. Once I started to explain more about my research and the importance of protecting the oceans, I thought he’d regret asking. But he listened intently and asked questions when he didn’t understand something. His interest wasn’t feigned, which was something I’d often encountered when I went on too long talking about the underwater world that fascinated me.

After dinner, we sat by the fire and sipped port wine. I leaned against him and curled my legs up on the sofa, savoring the

warmth of the fire and his body.

Dagon kissed the top of my head. “I’m glad you stayed here.”

“Me too,” I admitted. My time here on this wondrous island with Dagon was rushing by all too quickly. A few days suddenly seemed far too short to spend on this island—or with Dagon.

But I couldn’t stay here forever. I needed to get my life on track. Not only did I need to find a job or a research opportunity but a more permanent place than my short-term rental.

And I would have to deal with the aftermath of what happened to Roger. That bitter reminder left a sour taste on my tongue. I took a sip of the port wine and shoved thoughts of him from my mind. He’d done enough damage, and I wouldn’t let him spoil my short time here with Dagon.

THE SKIES CLEARED up the next morning. After another passionate night in his bed, Dagon and I spent much of the day outdoors, where I observed more of the island, only returning inside to rest and eat.

All too soon, the sun descended, leaving the sky blazing with a tapestry of warm colors that rivaled those of the autumn leaves. As we sat on a rocky outcrop listening to the waves lap against the shore, I leaned against his shoulder.

I took a deep inhale, and the salty scent of the ocean soothing me. “I’m going to miss it here.”

When Dagon turned to me, I lifted my head from his shoulder.

His blue eyes darkened with raw emotion. “You don’t have to leave.”

I smiled and brushed his biceps. “You don’t have to say that. I wasn’t fishing for an invite.”

“Stay with me, Celia,” he urged, his voice husky. “Not just for a few days.”

I blinked at him. “What?”

“You can move here.” He motioned around us. “Explore the ocean to your heart’s content. You wouldn’t have to worry about a thing. I’ll take care of you.”

“Dagon, I—” Placing my hand on my chest, I added, “I don’t know what to say.”

“Just say yes.” In a lower tone, he added, “Stay here with me and be my mate.”

“Your mate?” I shook my head. Although his words filled me with an unexpected thrill, it was so sudden. Not to mention the language he used was odd. “What do you mean by your mate?”

“My partner and my love.” He took my hand and caressed the palm. “The only one for me.”

My mouth opened and closed. “But you just met me.”

He shrugged. “That doesn’t matter. I knew you were the one when I first met you.”

More confusion swirled within. This was happening so fast. I chewed on my bottom lip while trying to make sense of this unexpected conversation. “We met while I was struggling in the ocean.”

“And that’s what drew me to you,” he admitted. “I sensed your distress and came to help you.”

I pulled my hand away from his and raised both of mine to my temples. “What do you mean you could sense my distress?”

He paused and stared out at the horizon. “I can sense your emotions but can’t hear your thoughts.” He motioned between us. “I think it might be because of the mate connection.”

“The mate *what?*” His explanation added more confusion. Why was he talking about hearing thoughts?

He searched my eyes before continuing. “Celia, my brothers and I have always known that there is a mate out there for each of us. When we find ours, it changes everything. Not only will we want to do all we can to protect her, but it also frees us from our obligations as part of the Royal Legion.” He took a deep breath and then exhaled. “When I met you, I knew you were the one. My mate.” He reached over and squeezed my thigh. “Don’t leave tomorrow. Stay here and be with me.”

His words hung in the air, and I struggled to comprehend them. What he said was bizarre, if not downright insane. A part of me yearned to say yes and explore exactly how our lives could be if I stayed here on this island as his lover—or his mate, as he called it. But the more rational part of me questioned if I was mad to even consider such a question. I had goals to pursue. I couldn’t drop everything because of a couple of hot nights with a gorgeous guy—especially with so much mystery about him.

And hadn’t I just barely survived an incident with another rich man promising me one thing but wanting something else? What would Dagon want in return for his generous offer? I’d already given him my body freely. Could he have another motive? Or was he just lonely living here alone?

“It’s too soon, Dagon,” I finally said, my voice barely above a whisper. “We just met. I can’t abandon my life to jump into a

relationship with you.”

He winced, the hurt visible in his eyes.

“I’m sorry.” I added, “But I can’t.”

CHAPTER 7



DAGON

*M*y hands curled with the urge to smash them against the rock. Anger simmered like a tempest in my veins. How could Celia refuse me? I'd been so kind to her, treating better than I'd treated anyone, and yet, it wasn't enough.

How could she dismiss the offer to live here with me in this beautiful home and this private island where she could explore the ocean to her heart's content?

After standing, I said, "I need space." Then I walked away from her.

"Wait!" She rose, but I didn't wait to hear what she had to say. She'd said enough. She ran up behind me and grabbed my arm. "Dagon, don't leave. We can talk about this."

Talk about what? How could she pummel my invitation back into my face? I'd received the message—no. I pushed her hand away and continued on toward the woods. She didn't follow.

As I stomped over fallen twigs and leaves, crunching them underfoot, fury churned in my gut. I'd given her a choice. I'd offered her everything she could want. And still, she'd rejected me. It was unacceptable. What more could she possibly desire?

The cutting sting of her refusal echoed in my brain, refusing to give me any peace. Instead, I walked and walked, remaining outside until darkness draped over the island and the stars mocked me, twinkling in amusement at my pain.

When I returned home, it was well after midnight. I crept into the house. She'd left a light on downstairs for me. I rushed up the stairs two at a time, ignoring the vivid visual of the passion

we'd shared right there on the stairwell. When I entered my room and saw she wasn't there, I heaved out a heavy exhale. Whether it was in relief or regret, I didn't know. Did it matter? My feelings wouldn't change anything. She didn't want me.

After I crawled into bed, I couldn't find peace. I tossed, restless with anxiety about the coming morning. Celia would leave come morning. Leave the island. Leave me.

Not if I could find a way to stop it.

I'd found my mate and wasn't going to give her up so easily. If she wouldn't stay with me willingly, then I had to ensure she had no other option.

I formulated a plan. Only then was I able to find a few hours of sleep.

When the earliest rays of dawn entered through the windows, I dressed and left my room with a new resolve. First, I grabbed the radio and hid it under a removal floorboard in a closet. Then I slunk out of the house quietly so as not to wake her. I dragged the boat into a cave, hiding it with brush.

WHEN SHE FOUND me reading in front of the fire a couple of hours later, she said, "Good morning, Dagon."

I grunted in reply.

"Did you sleep okay?" she asked in a gentle tone.

"No," I snapped.

"Dagon..." she began and ran her hand through her hair.

"Let's talk about what happened last night."

"You made yourself clear," I replied in a curt voice. "There's nothing more to say."

Celia stared at me with a perplexed expression. I tore my gaze away, refusing to meet her eyes, and returned to my reading. The words blurred as I couldn't focus on any of them, not when I was so torn up by her rebuff.

She huffed. "I see you're still angry with me. I'm going for a walk to give you more space."

I didn't say anything. She bundled up, walked out the door, and closed it behind her. Although she was gone, the tension between us still loomed in the room.

After several minutes, she returned. "The boat's gone."

"Oh?" I arched my brows but didn't look up.

She walked over to me and asked, "What's going on?" Her voice edged higher with wariness.

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at her. "You were so eager to leave me after I was kind to you. What are you planning to do—steal my boat to get away from me?"

"No, of course not." She turned her hands over so they were palms up.

"It's not going to happen," I snapped. "The boat is gone. The radio too."

Her eyes flickered with disbelief as what I'd done appeared to dawn on her. "You can't be serious. Why would you do that?"

"It seems like a perfectly reasonable response," I replied without emotion.

"Reasonable?" she repeated. "Are you joking?"

"Absolutely not."

"What are you trying to do? Keep me here against my will?"

“If that’s what it takes,” I retorted, unable to suppress my frustration any longer. Pointing at her chest, I snapped, “I offered you everything, and it wasn’t enough. You still want to leave me.”

Her eyes narrowed. “So—you think it’s okay to keep me here as—your *prisoner*?”

My ribs tightened around my heart, but I wouldn’t yield.

“If that’s what it takes,” I repeated.

“How *could* you?” Her voice lowered with incredulity, as if I’d betrayed her.

“How is it any different from how you’ve betrayed me?”

Her mouth dropped open wide. “What?”

“You had your fun, a little island escape.” I motioned around us. “And then you were so eager to cast me aside.” I hated the hurt conveyed in my tone. I wasn’t a feeble human who could be hurt by a woman. Yet, what her denial did to me made me feel more human than I thought possible.

“That’s not at all true,” she denied.

“I’m not like you.” With a sneer, I added, “I don’t want to save oceans or animals. And least of all—*people*.”

“Dagon, why are you acting like this?”

“This is who I am. I’m not some weak mortal you can play with, Celia.” I raised my chin. “I’m a member of the Royal Legion. A demon prince.”

She gaped at me for several seconds. “Are you out of your mind?”

I snorted. “Surprised at who you’ve been sleeping with?”

She blinked twice and then shook her head. “*A demon?* Come on, I don’t believe that for one second.”

With a grunt, I gestured in her direction. “Believe what you wish.”

Her expression twisted with conflict as she appeared to try to make sense of what I told her. She tipped her head and studied me. “But you are different somehow, aren’t you?”

“Of course.”

She swallowed and asked, “Not human?” in a lower voice.

“Of course not.”

Her eyes widened and then brimmed with pain. “When I asked you who you were the day you found me in the ocean, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I told you what I wanted to reveal at the time.” I crossed my arms. “Now I see no reason to hide anything. I’ll tell you everything. My brothers and I are all demons,” I confessed.

“All princes of hell.”

“What are you saying?” Her mouth opened and closed. “You can’t be serious.”

“You’re a scientist.” With a gesture outward at nothing in particular, I added, “You must be aware that there’s more to the universe than what you see before you.”

Celia paced in a circle and wrung her hands.

“You think you’re a demon?”

I exhaled slowly, trying to keep the rising frustration under control. “I know what I am.”

“Oh god.” She placed her hand on her temples. “Now I know you’re messing with me—or you suffer from delusions.”

I let out a mirthless chuckle and shook my head. Humans could be so ignorant. I sensed her confusion. “One of my abilities is being able to hear other’s thoughts. That’s why I’ve isolated myself here—to get away from them and all their darkness. But I can’t read yours, *sweet* Celia. I can only sense your emotions.”

She arched her brows with skepticism. “What on earth does this mean? No one can read minds. Why do you think I’m your mate?”

“I don’t think it, I *know* it. That’s why I asked you if you believed in fate. Why else would we be brought together during such an extraordinary encounter?”

She brought her fingertips to her lips. “You can’t truly believe all this, Dagon. And you can’t think that me being your mate means you can force me here against my will. What about what I want?”

“I listened to what you want.” I raised my chin. “You want to explore the oceans. Protect them. Make a difference. I’ve given you the opportunity to pursue your dreams here, to take care of you, to give you everything you could ever want. And how do you respond? You reject me.”

She shook her head. “That doesn’t mean you can keep me here.” She stepped backward, her eyes shining with resentment. “I won’t let you do this. If you ever cared about me, you’ll let me go.”

Her words hit me like a dagger, each one cutting deeper into my soul. “Don’t you see—I *can’t* let you go. My brothers and I are tasked with obligations I loathe until we find our mates.”

“Obligations? What on earth are you talking about now?”

“We must hunt purgatory angels until we find our mates.”

“Oh my, now you’re talking about angels. And what—
purgatory? What? No, don’t explain. I can’t handle another
wild story.” She turned in a semi-circle. “I have to get out of
here. Away from you.”

When she walked away, I grabbed her arm. “You can’t leave.”

Her eyes widened, showing fear. “Your eyes. They’re
glowing...and...red.”

I was losing control of my emotions. She couldn’t leave me.
“Don’t you see, Celia?” I struggled to regain my composure.
“You’re my mate. You’re the key that frees me. You’re *mine*.”

“I’m not yours. Not a possession. You’re using me to get what
you want,” she accused, her voice laced with pain.

I winced, and the weight of her words pressed on my
conscience. “It’s what I need.”

“It’s selfish and wrong and—”

“How so?” I stopped her. “I’m giving you everything you
desire.”

“Except a choice,” she retorted, her eyes flashing with
defiance. Then she yanked her arm out of my grasp and
walked away from me.

CHAPTER 8



CELIA

J barely kept it together as I stormed out of the cottage, away from Dagon. He betrayed me. Lied to me. How could I have been so naïve to fall for his charms?

How could I have been so blind to not see what he truly was? No better than Roger. Maybe even worse.

His words echoed in my head like the chorus of a haunting tune. I groaned and shook a fist at the clouds as I rushed to put more distance between us. Who did he think he was to think he could keep me prisoner?

Delusional. That's what he had to be. A demon prince? Either he was losing it or I was.

But his eyes. The way they glowed with that crimson hue was unnatural...

Could it have been a trick of the light? Not likely.

Whatever was going on, whatever he was, I had to find a way to escape.

Returning to the shoreline where I'd last seen the boat moored, I placed my hand over my eyes to shield them from the sun and searched the sea. Narrowing my eyes, I prayed that I'd see a sign of the boat floating out there. At least it would give me a chance to escape. I'd swim to it if I had to.

The sudden flash of the last time I'd been in the ocean struggling to survive returned to me. Would I really take a chance with a destructive, boat-smashing sea creature out there?

I snorted. I had better chances of sailing past a sea serpent in the vast ocean than confined by someone who wanted to keep me as a prisoner on his private island.

A demon? As if they existed. No way, I didn't believe it. Not only that, but a demon prince. Royalty. Ha! He was definitely mad.

An image of his red eyes burned into my mind's eye.

Contacts? But how did he get them to change? No, I wouldn't fall for whatever trick that was. I wasn't sticking around to hear another one of his twisted stories. I had to find a way off the island.

But without a boat...

I turned from the sea. Escaping might be difficult without a boat, but I wouldn't give up. I'd find a means of communicating to the outside world. I'd let them know this bastard was keeping me a prisoner here and beg them to come get me.

The boat had to be somewhere. The radio too. Unless he put the radio into the boat and let it drift to sea. Then, I'd be screwed.

Would he do that, though? He'd not only be keeping me a prisoner here, but himself. What was with this cruel game he was playing?

To think straight, I needed to calm down. A walk would help me do so, and then I could think more rationally. Reacting and panicking wouldn't work.

After a long walk searching for options and keeping an eye out for the boat, I ended up ruminating over the mistakes that landed me in this mess. The radio had to be inside somewhere. Otherwise, it could get destroyed by the elements.

I returned to the cottage and headed right for Dagon's study. As I searched for the radio in drawers, cabinets, boxes, my frustration rose. Panic started to creep in like the rising tide. I cried out in frustration as I threw books off the shelf, searching for something—anything. He had to have some means of communication.

Who the hell lived on a private island without a cell phone or the internet?

“What are you doing, Celia?” Dagon questioned from the doorway.

The shadow of his large form blocked much of the doorway, but I refused to look at him.

“Leave me alone.” I freed one bookshelf after another of its contents.

He didn't say anything, just watched me destroy his study. Once every shelf was emptied, I turned to him and demanded, “Where is it?”

“Where's what?” His brows drew closer.

“The radio.” I threw my hands up. “The boat!”

He exhaled with a heavy exhale. “You won't find them.”

A frustrated squeal escaped me as I rushed over to him and pushed his chest. “You can't control me, Dagon.”

His lips pulled into a strained sneer. “I didn't say that I would.”

“You think you can keep me here to help you? You're wrong. I won't stay. I won't help you. I'm not your possession, and I sure as hell am not your *mate*. Every minute of every day you try to keep me trapped here, I'll spend trying to find a way to escape.”

“Why?” He seethed. His expression warred between confusion and anger. “Is it so bad being here with me? I thought we both enjoyed our time together.”

“Yes, when I was here under my free will.” I pointed at his chest. “You don’t attempt to control your partner. You don’t manipulate them and lie to them and make up stories to try to keep them there.” I punctuated each by poking at his hard chest. “So, Dagon, you can promise me everything in the world that you think I want.” I gestured outward with an undermined wave and then turned away from him. In a lower voice, I promised, “But I’ll never—*never*—be yours.”

I pushed by him and exited his study. Fortunately, he didn’t follow me. I spent the rest of the day stalking the island as I tried to figure out my options. Maybe there was another boat hidden. I had to be vigilant and keep searching.

As the evening sun dipped below the horizon, it took all the heat. The cold drove me to want to seek warmth inside the cottage, bathe in comforting heat beside the fire, but then I’d have to be closer to him. He’d win. I’d be returning right into his lair, just as he wanted.

Hell—freaking—no.

Determined to find a way to escape his island prison, I wouldn’t go back. How could I have been so enchanted by this place—and the man who inhabited it—when now all I wanted was to flee from them both?

What I needed was sleep. Often when I faced a problem at work or in my life, I’d tell myself to sleep on it. The problem was easier to solve in the morning.

Finding a suitable place to rest outside here in October wasn’t as likely as it would have been in the summer, but it could

have been worse. At least I wasn't facing a winter blizzard. It wasn't cold enough that I'd die from the elements. I had a coat on that I'd found in a closet and would wrap it over me like a blanket.

With more searching through the forest, I found partial shelter under the roots of a huge, fallen tree. After sweeping aside as many twigs as possible, I curled up into the fetal position and covered myself the best I could with my coat. It might have been foolish to be out here in the cold of night, but it was better than being trapped inside with a man who wanted to dominate me.

Then I tried to clear my mind to get some sleep. Tomorrow would be the start of a new day and with it, I had to find a way out of this unfolding nightmare.

DAGON

After Celia stormed from the cottage, fury burned inside me with volcanic rage. I drank whiskey on the rocks in front of the fireplace and seethed. How dare she reject me? I had offered her everything she could ever want, and she threw it all in my face. The bitterness of rejection gnawed at my ego. Let her search for a way off the island. She wouldn't find one. I'd made sure of that.

Despite my anger, worry crept in. Was she all right out there?

I dismissed my concerns. She was probably sulking in frustration somewhere. Good. Let her come to her senses.

Staring at the flames, I chastised myself. I shouldn't have let her leave the cottage to begin with. I could have used my abilities to persuade her to stay. But they weren't absolute. Humans had free will, and she had a strong mind. Besides, I didn't want to be with someone whose mind was so pliable. One of the things I'd liked about her as we got to know each other was hearing her share her passions. She was curious and caring and smart. Why ruin one of the best things about her with one of the worst things about me?

As the hours passed, and she didn't return, my concerns rose, adding more turmoil to my already wretched state of mind. Despite the warmth from the fireplace, the cottage seemed colder and emptier without her.

My instincts battled with my pride. The draw to seek and protect my mate grew stronger. I balled my hands into fists and pounded one on the armrest. Damn these emotions she'd stirred in me. I'd never felt this way about anyone before, let alone a human.

It was no use trying to forget her. I wouldn't be able to get any sleep knowing she was out there in the cold—or worse, doing something foolish like trying to swim from the island.

Abandoning my stubborn pride, I left the cottage to search for her.

The night was dark, the moon hiding behind a veil of clouds. Using my supernatural abilities, I reached out to tap into the energy surrounding me. My heightened senses guided me toward her, and I homed in.

She was cold and afraid. My heart panged. I was the cause of her distress. What kind of monster was I to treat my mate this way? Guilt gnawed at my conscience.

Maybe I'd reacted too harshly...

While I followed the mental connection to her through the woods, leaves rustled and twigs snapped in the dark silence. Shame swarmed me as I searched.

Eventually, I found her curled up asleep beneath the roots of a towering tree. Her unease continued to play out in her dreams, tormenting us both. Overwhelming regret smothered me. What had I done?

I thought by keeping her on the island, I'd be content, finally free of the burden of hunting vile purgatorians. But seeing Celia in such a vulnerable state shattered me. This wasn't how things should be between us. She was right—I shouldn't attempt to manipulate my mate.

I should be caring for her, protecting her—not keeping her as a possession.

Gently, I lifted her into my arms, and her coat dropped to the forest floor. Her skin was cool beneath my touch. I bent to retrieve her coat and cover her the best I could and then

cradled her against my chest. She stirred, slowly awakening in my arms. Her eyes fluttered open, and when she fixed her focus on me, she gasped. The fear in her eyes—eyes that had once looked at me with passion—shattered the last reserves of my anger. All that remained in me was a boulder of regret.

“Shh,” I whispered. “It’s okay. I’m bringing you inside where it’s warm.”

“I don’t want to be near you.” She cursed from her quivering lips and then struggled to get out of my arms.

Those words almost destroyed me. The consequences of my actions weighed as heavy as a yoke.

“I know.” After swallowing a thick lump in my throat, I added, “I was wrong to try to keep you here.”

I put her on her feet, and her coat fell to the ground.

Her eyes searched mine.

“What does that mean?” she asked, her voice barely audible.

After picking up her coat, I handed it to her.

“It means that I’ll bring you back home tomorrow. I won’t force you to stay.”

She stared at me as if gauging my sincerity. After raising her chin, she demanded, “Why have you changed your mind?”

I took a deep breath and inhaled her scent. It flooded me with more primal instincts to care for her.

“Because I care about you and your happiness.” With a rueful shrug, I added, “This is new for me, and I don’t know what to do with these feelings. But I do know I want you to be happy—even if it’s not with me.” I released a heavy exhale. “Even if it means I have to let you go.”

Her eyes flickered with emotion, but she took a step backward.

“Is this a trick to get me to come with you? A way to exploit me?”

Her accusation ripped me, but it was well deserved. “No.” I placed my hand on my chest. “I swear to you, Celia, I am not lying or trying to deceive you.” Although the urge to step closer to her rose, I didn’t want to frighten her further. “Please, return to the cottage with me so you can warm up. I swear that I’ll bring you to Salem tomorrow.”

She cocked her head. “How? Where’s the boat?”

I exhaled. “Hidden in a cave on the other side of the island.”

She turned away and balled one hand into a fist.

“I knew it was here somewhere. How did I miss it?”

“Celia,” I begged. “Please.” I turned my hand up in a placating manner. “I’ll give you all the space you need tonight. You won’t even see me until we’re ready to sail tomorrow. Just come back inside.”

She faced me once more. As I waited for her reply, anticipation swarmed. Would she curse me out once more and declare that she’d rather be out here in the cold all night?

I took a small step closer and said something I’d never said to a human before. “I’m sorry.”

Her chest rose and fell as she appeared to wrestle with her decision. Then she raised her gaze to meet mine. “Okay.”

Immense relief flooded me. “Thank you.”

We returned to the cottage, trekking through the darkness of the woods. I followed behind her so as not to make her uncomfortable. She tripped on tree roots, but I dashed forward

with supernatural speed to catch her before she crashed to the ground.

As I lifted her, cradling her as I had when I'd picked her up from the ground, she blinked at me.

"How did you reach me so fast?"

"Speed is one of my strengths."

"What else?"

Staring into her eyes, I said, "I also have sharper vision than humans and can see better in the darkness.

Her eyes widened. "It's true then? You're not human?"

I shook my head. "No."

She narrowed her eyes. "Demons exist?" Her voice was edged with incredulity.

"Yes."

"You've been telling me the truth?"

"I have," I declared.

She dropped her head backward. "Wow."

"Let me carry you back," I pleaded. "I'd hate for you to trip in the dark and get hurt."

She stared at me for several seconds and then nodded. As I carried her back to the house in silence, an intense yearning rose. This would be the last time I'd ever hold her in my arms. But I deserved it; I drove her away.

When we reached the cottage, she said, "Thank you."

For what? I couldn't believe she'd find any reason to be kind after what I'd done. She had a good heart, something I wasn't accustomed to.

She went up to her room, closing the door softly behind her, while I stared after her with longing.

After several minutes, I followed up the stairs. I pressed my hand on her closed bedroom door and bent my head to it. The intense desire to be with my mate became overpowering. If I wasn't such an idiot, she'd be sleeping in my room with me. But I blew it.

Forcing myself to fight the urge to knock, I pushed myself away from her door.

"Goodnight, my sweet Celia," I whispered. Then I pushed one foot after another down the hall and away from my mate, as my heart splintered in agony.

CHAPTER 9



CELIA

Dragon kept his word the next morning. A big part of me doubted him. But he'd left a breakfast warmed for me—blueberry waffles with Vermont maple syrup—as well as a note that read:

WE'LL LEAVE whenever you're ready. I'll give you space. Just knock on my door in the study when you want to go.

~ D

P.S. I'm sorry.

AFTER I ATE two waffles covered in sweet maple syrup and drank coffee, I went to find him in the study. He was cleaning up the mess—my mess. I'd upturned the contents of the office inside out, frantic in my desperation to escape. Although I didn't regret it, a small part of me felt ashamed of how I'd lost control.

I stepped inside the office and picked up a couple of books, then placed them on the shelf.

When he noticed me there, he turned. "You don't have to do that."

I shrugged one shoulder while I gave him a sheepish look. "Perhaps I went a little overboard."

"So did I."

The air between us was mournful with regret. "I guess we both have a bit of a temper when pushed," I said.

He gave me a reserved smile.

“Thanks for breakfast.” I exhaled. “I’m ready to leave whenever you are.”

With a solemn nod, he replied, “I’ll get the boat ready.”

THE MORNING SUN shone brightly over the calm water as he steered the speedboat off the shore. I glanced over my shoulder, one last look at an island I’d never forget. It first offered me a safe refuge in a moment of intense duress when Dagon brought me here. Then, I relished the pampered treatment as he took care of me and cooked for me. All the hidden nooks and mysteries of the island fascinated me. But when Dagon trapped me here, that private land became a prison, drowning me in despair when I thought I was trapped.

So much had happened over such a short time, leaving me chagrined. What happened on the island was reflected in my relationship with Dagon, which had undergone a similar transformation as he turned from rescuer to villain.

And now?

The silence between us was palpable, and the implications of what had happened loomed heavy, twisting me with turmoil.

Still, I couldn’t resist sneaking a glance at his handsome profile as he faced the horizon. He wasn’t human but a demon, if what he claimed was true. He definitely had incredible abilities that allowed him to move faster than any human and see with acute clarity in the dark. He also claimed to be able to read the minds of humans—but not mine. And this mysterious bond he said connected us? That was beyond my understanding.

Oh my, he fascinated me, perhaps more so now than ever. Although he'd done so from the moment he appeared in the sea shrouded in mystery, my interest continued to grow. But I hated myself for it—and hated him for making me feel this way.

You've made countless mistakes since you stepped alone onto a boat with Roger, I scolded myself. Don't add succumbing to Stockholm syndrome to the list.

What I needed was space from him so I could clear my head and go back to my life again—even though a part of me feared I'd never be the same.

“Do you regret your decision?” I found myself asking, unable to contain my curiosity any longer.

“Which one? I regret the way I handled many things.” He grunted, keeping his gaze fixed ahead.

“Letting me leave, for one. Doesn't this mean you'll be stuck with some obligation?”

“Yes, to hunt purgatorians.”

He mentioned those strange sounding creatures again. “What are they?”

“They're fallen angels who cause chaos on earth. My brothers and I hunt them to keep the universe in balance.”

His resigned response surprised me. It was clear he was hurting too. A part of me wanted to reach out and comfort him, but I knew better than to let my guard down so easily.

“Tell me more,” I prodded.

He gave me a quick glance. “You're not afraid?”

I let out a short laugh. “Fear is one of the many emotions that have dominated my mind since I stepped onto the boat with Roger and then faced a sea serpent.”

Dagon’s mouth twitched and then his expression hardened.

“What is it?”

He stared ahead with a resigned expression. “That was me.”

“What was you?”

“The serpent.”

I blinked at him. “What are you talking about?”

“I can change my appearance, Celia. Shift into other forms.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Like a massive—*sea creature*?” This couldn’t be real. Then again, I didn’t think men could appear out in the middle of the ocean or run super-fast or see in the darkness, and he’d displayed all those traits.

“Yes. I’d just returned from battling a purgatorian and saw a boat headed toward my island. I shifted into a black mamba and swam out. My plan was to make sure the boat wasn’t coming to my island. If so, I’d steer it off course. But when I heard your distress and read his mind...”

My ribs tightened over my chest. “What did you read?”

Dagon turned to me and gave me a forlorn expression. “You wouldn’t have made it back alive.”

I inhaled sharply. “He planned to kill me?”

Dagon gave me a somber nod. “If you didn’t cooperate, he would have forced you—and then after he’d was done, he’d get rid of you.”

My gut churned and breathing turned shallow.

“You could really read his thoughts?”

“Yes. He planned to say that you leaned over the rails to take a closer look at something in the water and fell in. He would claim he tried to save you, but he couldn’t find you.”

“My god.” It was my turn to stare ahead at the sea. “He truly was a monster.” With a rueful laugh, I added, “He ended up throwing me into the ocean, anyway.”

A glimmer of land loomed on the horizon. I was finally going home.

“I wanted to destroy him. He threw you into the water like a sacrifice, as if it would save him. So, I wrecked the boat and then shifted back to this form to find you—and then discovered you were my mate.”

“Wow.” I lowered my head to my hands and pressed my fingers to my temples. “That’s a lot to take in.”

“I know. But I made a promise to myself not to keep anything else from you. Even though I know it’s too late, and I’ve already pushed you away.”

A twinge of regret churned in me, but it was dwarfed by so many questions. I tried to process what he revealed—and understand what he was. Despite the relief I felt at having my freedom back, there was still a tug of longing in my heart. When I caught glimpses of the man beneath that steely exterior, I was torn between my better judgment and the unexplainable connection we shared.

“I wish I hadn’t asked you to call the coast guard to search for him.”

Dagon stared at me. After two heavy breaths, he admitted, “I didn’t.”

“What?” I gaped at him.

“I didn’t contact him. I knew what he was. A true monster. He didn’t deserved to be saved.” With a shrug, he added, “Who knows who he would have attacked next.”

Part of me was relieved while the other horrified. I shelved it for later. My mind could only process so much. After several minutes of speculating, I needed to understand more.

“You said you can shift into different forms?”

“Yes.”

I slanted my head. “Can you show me?”

He nodded. After he turned off the engine so we floated on the sea, he started to remove his clothing. I gaped at him, still mesmerized by the perfection of his body before I forced myself to tear my gaze away.

“Ready?” he asked.

When I turned back, I replied, “Yes.”

Dagon was in his breathtaking human form one second but gone in the next. A rippling in the air seemed to linger with his translucent form before it faded. Then on the deck of the boat was a black snake. I cried out and jumped backward.

It was true.

My heart pounded, echoing in my ears as I stared at him. After I blinked slowly, the snake was gone and Dagon was back—in his human form.

“Wow.”

“Are you afraid?” he asked as he dressed.

I swallowed and ran a hand through my hair, which batted around my face in the breeze. “Amazed? Stunned?” I shook

my head and released a low sigh. “I don’t know what I am—or what to think.”

He nodded. Once he was dressed, he returned to steer the boat.

For several minutes, I stared out to sea. Then I turned to him.

“You say I’m your mate, which I’m guessing is some predestined kind of connection I doubt I understand.”

“Something like that.”

Then I asked, “Did you ever care for me?”

His stony veneer flickered with conflicting emotion. “Yes. Immensely. I still do with all my being. But my way of doing so was flawed, and I went about everything the wrong way.”

The sincerity in his voice struck a chord in me. It was hard to reconcile the moments of his kindness with the manipulation that had followed. And then there was what I saw with him shift into. He’d destroyed the boat I was on with Roger.

Another reason why he didn’t notify the coast guard came to me. “Did you kill Roger?” I asked.

Dagon’s jaw hardened. “No. But I should have.”

We lapsed into silence as we sailed into Salem Harbor. The familiar landmarks in the distance brought comfort in my turmoil.

As we docked the boat, a sense of relief filled me. He climbed out first and offered his hand. I took it and stepped onto solid ground. Finally free.

Despite the bitter sting of yesterday still fresh in my mind, a strong sense of gratitude rose. Without Dagon intervening, I might not be alive.

Without forethought, I launched myself at him and wrapped my arms around him. “Thank you.” With a sheepish grin, I added, “For most things.” Not everything.

He held me close and tipped his head down. When I pulled away, his expression was contorted with pain.

“I’ll get you a taxi.” He walked down the dock and flagged a cab. When I caught up, he handed the driver a wad of cash. “Take her wherever she wants to go.”

That was a relief. I had no money, no credit card, no phone. Everything had gone down with the destroyed boat.

“Goodbye, Celia.” The mournful note tugged at me.

“Goodbye.”

Then I climbed into the cab and gave my address. Once the driver pulled away from the curb, I turned back over my shoulder to glance at Dagon in the rear-view mirror. He stood there watching as we left. Was I making a mistake?

Don’t be foolish. You can’t have feelings for a demon who deceived you and held you captive.

Right. Maybe in a few days I’d find clarity. Because with the nagging thought biting at me that I was throwing away something incredible, I sure the hell needed all the sense I could get.

THE NEXT FEW days passed in a haze of mixed emotions. I tried to distract myself from what had happened with Dagon by focusing on moving ahead, starting with finding work. In the back of my mind, I worried about the police knocking on my door with questions about Roger. Had his body not yet been found? Perhaps it was a good thing I hadn’t told anyone

about me going sailing with him. Did he tell anyone? Maybe no one had reported him as missing yet. He did say we'd be going to one of his houses for a week. When I recalled his smarmy manner, I cringed.

If the police eventually asked me about Roger, I'd reveal what he had done to me. But I'd leave out details about Dagon. How could I really explain that part anyway when I was still trying to process it myself?

A few days passed, but I couldn't shake Dagon from my mind. A more promising note was when I landed an interview at a research institute. If I landed that job, then I could move on to the next search for an apartment.

The interview went well. Although they were interviewing others, I kept my fingers crossed.

As I returned to my small rental unit that I paid for by the week, I noticed a man who appeared to be in his forties leaning against the brick building. He was dressed in an impeccable gray suit. Something about his presence made me uneasy. When I rushed to the front door, he approached me with a serious expression and said, "Celia Hartstone?"

My guard immediately went up.

"Celia, we need to talk about Leviathan," he said, his voice low and authoritative.

I furrowed my brow. "Who?"

"He goes by many names and appearances. You might know him as Dagon."

My chest tightened. "What about him?"

"My name is Uriel," he replied. "I'm here to warn you about him."

I blinked at the sudden shock of hearing his name.

“How do you know him?”

Uriel scowled. “We go way back. And not in a good way.” He gestured ahead of us. “Let’s walk.”

Curious, I joined him as we walked away from my rental down the street.

I cocked my head. “What do you want to tell me?”

Uriel fixed a steady gaze on me.

“He’s not what he seems. He’s incredibly dangerous.”

“Why do you say that?”

He leaned forward. In a lower tone, he asked, “Do you know what he is?”

I contemplated how to respond but before I did, Uriel stated, “A demon.”

Although that’s what Dagon had told me, hearing it from someone else was jarring. This wasn’t a discussion I ever thought I’d have—or believe was possible.

“Ah yes, he mentioned that,” I replied in a forced, nonchalant tone. I adjusted my stance and twisted my hair over one shoulder, growing more uncomfortable with this conversation.

“And how do you know?”

“Because we’ve been at odds for a very long time. While he and his brothers attempt to lure humans into dark behavior, we encourage them to do the opposite. There’s a better way. That’s why I’m here talking to you.”

I blinked at this enigmatic stranger. If Dagon and his brothers were demons, could this man be an—angel? Before I could

formulate that into a question without sounding crazy, he continued.

“You need to stay away from him. Don’t let him influence you to do things you’d regret.”

Had Dagon persuaded me to do anything wrong thus far? I couldn’t think of anything. Rather, he’d taken care of me and encouraged me to explore the island as I wished. As Uriel continued in a tirade against the brothers, accusing them of manipulating and deceiving humans, I was surprised by how much it bothered me. Yes, I’d witnessed some of Dagon’s terrible moments—his rage when destroying the boat, the fury when I’d rejected him and he claimed he’d keep me there—but he’d also saved me from Roger and rescued me when I was in trouble. I’d also experienced his kindness and consideration. He couldn’t be all bad and darkness then, could he?

The more Uriel rallied against Dagon, the more I grew defensive of him. Maybe I was being foolish and allowing myself to be manipulated, but I didn’t think so. It felt right in my heart.

“I appreciate your concern, but I’m fine,” I said. “He’s gone, and I don’t expect to see him ever again.”

“You need to be cautious,” Uriel insisted.

“I am and I will continue to be.” With that, I said goodnight and turned away, my mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions.

CHAPTER 10



DAGON

J couldn't stay away from Celia.

When I'd returned to the island, the emptiness of it engulfed me. I forced myself to endure it for three long, cold nights before the acute longing to be near my mate drew me to abandon the solitude I so craved.

Back on the mainland, I wandered through the crowded streets of Salem as the mate bond compelled me to protect Celia. But I had to respect her wishes and remain at a distance. The crisp October air carried the scent of autumn leaves, and the pumpkin spice seemed to waft out of many of the establishments. Halloween festivities were in full swing, and the town was alive with colorful decorations, costumes, and laughter.

Groups of people dressed as demons, witches, and other supernatural beings roamed the streets, reveling in the festive spirit. I scoffed at their attempts to mimic immortals, creating caricatures of what they didn't comprehend.

Their thoughts assaulted me. Yet, it wasn't the usual blast from horrible humans and their selfish drives. These ones were simply enjoying themselves with family or friends, which made being around them easier to endure. In fact, I envied them for their ability to be carefree and enjoy time with the ones they loved.

As the night wore on, my footsteps led me to a quiet corner of the town where I'd found her address. The moon, now almost full, hung high in the sky, casting a mournful glow. Outside her apartment, I stopped and leaned against the brick wall of a nearby building. Although her shades were drawn, I sensed her

inside. She wasn't happy as I expected her to be but filled with a sense of melancholy. I missed the time we'd spent together on the island when her joy was infectious.

What would she do if I rang the bell? Would she let me in? Or turn from me in fear, tell me she didn't want to see me ever again, and slam the door in my face? Yes, that was the most likely scenario.

Being so close and unable to even see her was torture. A part of me was missing, and I didn't know how to tolerate it. There had to be a way to escape this torment.

I marched away, swamped with distress. As I returned to the commercial part of town, I passed many stores advertising supplies for witchcraft or connections to witches. That gave me an idea. I was in a town full of witches. Maybe one could help me break the agonizing bond to my mate.

At this late hour, many of the shops were closed. But as I headed to the waterfront, not far from where I'd said goodbye to Celia, I spotted a shop with the lights on.

When I stepped inside, chimes announced my arrival in the otherwise empty shop. The air was thick with the scent of herbs and incense, and a sense of ancient magic lingered in the air.

A woman stepped out from a back room. Her long silver hair cascaded over her shoulders, contrasting with the raven black of her flowing robe, which was adorned with intricate embroidery.

"Sorry, we're closed," she said. "I was just about to lock up."

I reached out to read her. Yes, she was a witch. And more so, a powerful one. I sensed a deep connection to magical energies within her.

“Please, you have to help me,” I pleaded in a near whisper.

She studied me from piercing, pale green eyes as if peering into my secrets. “Help you with what?”

I hesitated, unsure of how much I should reveal to such a powerful being, but desperation clawed at me.

“I need to break a mate bond.” Even stating the words pressed on me like a stack of stones.

Her lips pursed as she considered my request. “Breaking a mate bond is a powerful and dangerous task,” she warned.

“Why do you wish to sever such a rare, magical connection?”

As I pictured Celia, my heart panged. “Because my mate doesn’t want me.”

CELIA

Why couldn't I shake Dagon from my mind?

No matter how much I attempted to distract myself, my thoughts returned to him. I'd done well at my interview and thought I'd get a call for a second one any day now. That encouraged me to start looking for a more permanent apartment nearby.

Yet, despite the excitement of building a new life, I wondered what he was doing. Was he sitting before the fire, alone? Did he loathe me for leaving? A part of me wished I'd stayed, despite all the common sense hammering into my brain of how that was foolish.

Salem was abuzz with excitement. Several establishments hung lanterns that cast both light and shadows dancing below. The aroma of pumpkin spice and apple cider wafted from nearby cafes, a sure sign of fall, and I sampled the offerings often.

I tried to get into the spirit, join the vibrant energy that exuberant visitors dressed in costume brought to the town. The Haunted Happenings scheduled all month kept the enchanting, spooky vibe buzzing day and night. What heightened the allure this year was the upcoming eclipse of a blood moon. Advertisements on many windows noted the spiritual significance of the event, ranging from shedding the old to make way for the new, to the symbolic nature of balance in the world. Good and evil, night and day, harmony and chaos.

And still, surrounded by revelry, I thought of Dagon. The ache for him wouldn't fade. Everywhere I walked, I was struck by

reminders. Anyone who dressed in the costume of a devil or demon triggered memories, questions, speculation...

Everything I'd thought I'd known about the rational, scientific world was thrown into disarray. Demons walked the earth. I slept with one.

An even stranger question plagued my mind. Had I fallen for him too?

I sighed. Too late now. I'd made my choice and left him. That was a good decision, right? One Uriel would approve of.

Then why did it feel like a mistake?

ON THE NIGHT of the eclipse, I wandered the crowded streets, full of those in costume. Chatter and laughter surrounded me as people in elaborate costumes passed.

The sense of being watched made my skin prickle. I turned around, searching for the source among the revelers, but all I spotted were costumed vampires, witches, zombies, and a demon, which made me think of Dagon again. Sigh.

The sky above darkened, and the blood moon rose, casting a brilliant hue over Salem. The air pulsed with a vibrancy that I swore felt like magic simmering in my very veins.

As the night grew darker, a sense of loneliness engulfed me. No matter how I told myself to be reasonable and rational, I missed Dagon. As the eclipse of the blood moon began, casting an eerie glow through the night, the ache in my heart deepened.

The eclipse deepened, and the moon's diminishing glow cast an otherworldly sheen on everything it touched. My heart panged for Dagon. My soul called out to him. Despite all

rational thought, I yearned for him. He was the one—the only one who'd ever made me feel so appreciated, so cherished, so wanted. I never should have ended things that way.

Once the eclipse swallowed all light of the moon, I stood in the darkness and ignoring the surrounding revelry. Instead, I listened to a quiet whispering deep within. It grew louder, encompassing me with a truth I could no longer ignore. I knew what Dagon meant. We were connected. Bound together by something greater than I could ever understand.

We were mates.

Now what?

That insight shattered me. I hailed a taxi to return to my apartment. All I wanted was to shower, unwind, and then sleep. I'd figure out how to deal with this revelation in the morning.

As soon as the taxi drove away, a black sedan pulled up. Something about it set me on edge.

Two men wearing dark colors stepped out and walked over to me.

“Hello Celia,” one said.

Wariness rose. They looked ordinary enough, nondescript thirty-somethings. Still, I remained wary.

“Who are you?”

They ignored my question. One shoved me into the backseat.

“You're coming with us.”

I tried to scream, but the other one covered my mouth. As I tried to fight back, they easily overpowered me. Then they bound my arms and legs with rope and threatened to cover my

mouth with duct tape if I didn't shut up. Fear rose, piercing me with dread.

Desperation surged through me. The first thing that came to mind was the one who'd saved me before.

Dagon, I reached out, although I knew it was useless. He was far away and couldn't read my mind the way he read others.

I'm in trouble.

CHAPTER 11



DAGON

*B*eneath the fading light of the blood moon, I walked along the waterfront to the witch's shop. She'd explained that the magic in the air during the night of the lunar eclipse would be strong. We might be able to harness the power needed to sever the mate bond. Although breaking my connection to Celia engulfed me with dread, it was a necessary cruelty. I couldn't tolerate the acute pang of a longing that couldn't be fulfilled.

As I approached the front door, a strange tension coiled at the base of my neck. I rolled my shoulders and opened the door. The chimes tingled.

"Welcome back," the witch greeted me.

My senses suddenly heightened, and a jolt of panic ripped through me.

It was Celia. She was terrified. I turned and ran out of the shop, the door closing behind me. My ribs tightened around my lungs as I searched in one direction and then the other. Panic threatened to swallow me like never before. Something was wrong. She was scared and I'd never felt so powerless before.

After taking a deep breath, I exhaled and attempted to reach out and read her thoughts. It was futile. I growled and curled my fingers into fists. Why would I be cursed to read all the nonsense in the human minds around me, but I couldn't do so in the one who mattered most?

I headed toward a main road, searching left and right. Where was she?

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and attempted to ignore the sound of the traffic and Halloween revelers. Celia and I had a connection. I should be able to sense her emotions if nothing else. If I could tap into our bond, maybe I could find her.

I envisioned an invisible thread that guided me to her.

When I reopened my eyes, I followed instinct more than any actual guidance. My heart pounded as her fear intensified my own. What was the cause behind it? Or who?

The trail led me winding away from the crowds and down to a secluded warehouse. The door was locked. I broke through it with ease and entered the building. As I stepped deeper into the shadows of the darkened space, the beat of her emotions grew stronger. She was close.

Continuing to follow it, I spotted Celia beneath a florescent light sitting on a wooden chair. My heart lurched in my chest.

A man stepped before her.

“What aren’t you telling me? How did you survive?”

She pursed her lips and glared at him, revealing nothing.

When he stepped beneath the shard of light that spilled from an overhead bulb, I recognized him—the man whose boat I’d destroyed. He held a knife in his right hand, letting it hang menacingly at his side. My hands clenched and jawline hardened.

“What happened to that monster? It destroyed my boat!”

I should have destroyed him as well and cursed myself for not doing so. How dare he terrify her this way?

His thoughts assaulted me with their violent intentions. He’d survived by being saved by another boat, but then paid them

off not to reveal anything. He wanted time. He needed to ensure Celia was dead before so she couldn't rat on him for what he did. Now, he planned to silence her. For good.

Every muscle in my body coiled with the instinct to tear this monster into shreds, but first, I had to strategize. Although I sensed Celia's fear, she eyed him with steely determination, as if she wouldn't ever let him break her. My love for her surged to greater heights.

Love? Where did that come from?

This wasn't the time to dissect my feelings.

Although I wanted to tear this murderous human's limbs off and snap his neck, I took a deep breath to steady my raging emotions. I'd terrified her in the past with my destructive fury. I had to prove to her I wasn't just a vicious beast.

While not letting him hurt her...

I took another inhale, and her scent filled me, suffusing me with calm.

Stepping into the light, I announced my presence. "Pardon me, am I interrupting something?"

She gasped. "Dagon!"

Her captor spun and aimed his knife at me. "Who the hell are you?"

"A prince of hell," I declared. "And if you even fathom hurting my mate again, I'll destroy more than your pitiful boat."

His eyes widened so much the white was almost fully visible around the irises. His hand shook. But then he launched at me with the knife as a desperate shriek escaped him.

“No!” Celia jumped out of the chair and onto his back while I twisted to evade the blade.

He spun around, trying to shake her off of him. I punched him in the jaw. As he stumbled to the ground, both she and the blade scattered across the floor. They both reached to grasp it.

I grabbed him by the throat and lifted him in the air, using one hand. “Now, what did I say about hurting her?” I said in a cold, calm tone while I sensed my eyes glowing crimson.

He grabbed at my arm, trying to scratch his way out of my hold. He turned his glare from me to her. “I’ll kill the bitch.”

I tightened my hand around his windpipe, struggling to maintain any self-control before finishing him. He kicked out in a desperate flailing, sometimes meeting my legs. The contact just increased my fury.

“See you in hell.” My grip tightened. Oh yes, I would enjoy destroying this monster, watching as the life seeped from his eyes.

“Do it,” Celia pleaded. She stepped beside me, holding the knife in a shaky hand. “He was going to kill me!”

He kicked out at her, and I snapped his neck. His body sagged forward. I opened my hand, letting this human garbage drop to the cement floor.

She released the knife, and it clattered. “Oh my god.”

I rushed over to comfort her. “You’re safe, Celia. He’s gone.”

She turned to me, tears streaming, and wrapped one arm around my neck. I pulled her close and cradled her against me. As I held her there, I rocked her gently. I ran a hand over her hair and repeated variations assuring her she was safe and he was gone.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner.”

She sniffled. “How did you find me?”

“Our connection with the bond,” I explained. I’d been so close to severing it. If I’d gone a few minutes earlier or she’d been taken a few minutes later after the bond was severed...

No, I wouldn’t think it. She was now safe in my arms, and I’d do whatever I could to keep it that way.

“Oh,” she said in a low tone. “Will you explain it to me more one day?”

“I’ll tell you everything I know. No secrets.”

“No secrets,” she repeated and nodded.

“And the first thing I have to tell you is that I’m sorry. I’ll never do anything to hurt you again.” I wiped away a tear that rolled down her cheek. “This mate bond is only part of how I feel connected to you. A much bigger part is that I love you, Celia.” I took a heavy inhale. “And I always will.”

She placed her hand on her heart, and her eyes glistened. “You love me?”

With a solemn nod, I replied, “With all my being.”

With that, she threw her arms around my neck. “I’ve fallen in love with you,” she murmured against my chest.

I couldn’t believe it. Celia loved me? Those were the most magnificent words I’d ever heard. A sense of contentment rose within. My mate was with me once more. I held her close, grateful for the moment especially after almost losing her.

“Dagon?” she whispered in between a shuddering breath.

“Yes?”

“Take me home,” she pleaded in a soft voice.

“Of course.”

“No, I mean—take me home with you.”

CHAPTER 12



CELIA

T

he sun lowered on the horizon as I walked the shore with Dagon. We held hands as the sun set, the temperature dropping fast without the sun's warmth. The ocean breeze rolled in with its distinctive scent, and waves crashed against the shore in a lulling rhythm before swirling back out to sea. Sea air brushed over my lips and tongue, and I tasted the salt.

Three weeks had passed since I returned to the island with Dagon, and I was still adjusting to living on the island. I hadn't gotten the job I'd hoped for, so I was open to new opportunities that came with my seaside home. The island had become my sanctuary as well, and I understood why he relished his escape to solitude here.

He'd killed Roger and saved me. When I'd told Dagon about the two men who had taken me to Roger, Dagon had "taken care of them" as well. I had mixed feelings when he told me that, but he'd insisted they could be a threat and swore he'd never let anyone hurt me. That was a strange comfort after the ordeal.

I didn't want to know the details of how exactly he'd taken care of them. Seeing the crimson flash in his eyes as he held Roger up with one arm and then snapped his neck wasn't something I would ever forget. I'd been wrestling with whether I'd have to stab him, and if so, how? Dagon saved me from having to make that decision, and for that, I was grateful. My mind already had a lot to wrestle with, and I didn't want to add more to my conscience.

The truth was I was relieved they were dead—all of them. Otherwise, knowing they were out there, possibly plotting

vengeance against us both wasn't something that would be easy to live with. Dagon lived in a harsher world than I'd known. By being with him, I'd be exposed to darker elements. Or maybe not. He had gotten rid of the corpses by sailing them out to sea and dumping them in deep water—another aspect of this mess that I was grateful he kept me out of. He took care of me, and I loved having someone who thought about me in that way.

“What are you thinking, my love?” Dagon asked with a squeeze of my hand.

“Oh, too many things,” I replied with a sigh.

“You've worked hard all day. It's time for you to unwind.” He angled his body toward mine and touched between my brows.

“This means you're worrying about something.”

“I'm not,” I said with a grin. “It's hard to turn my brain off.”

“And that's why I like to find new ways to distract you.” He spun me toward him and pressed my body against his large, imposing one. “What do you say we go back inside, where I can warm you up near the fire?”

When he bent down and kissed me, a gentle heat unfurled within. His alluring musk mixed with the scent of the sea, two fragrances that could both excite and calm me. As he stroked the back of my neck, claiming me with a possessive hold, my body tingled. His kiss started slow and languid as he explored me, but it soon turned demanding and he claimed my mouth in his domineering, yet gentle way that I loved.

Coming back here with Dagon was the right decision. No regrets.

After he pulled away, my breath came quicker.

“That sounds like an excellent idea to me,” I replied with a smile.

He scooped me up in his arms, and I yelped.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” I said with a chuckle.

“I like to surprise you.”

“You do indeed.” I stared up at him as he carried me in his arms back to the cottage as if I weighed no more than a handful of pebbles. Supernatural strength was just one of his many abilities that wowed me.

Dagon had shared more about his abilities with me, including some horrific encounters with his ability to read minds. Something that was sadly not surprising was that humans could be responsible for the most monstrous acts of all. The vile things he must have encountered on a regular basis, leading him to want to seek refuge away from all, tugged at my heart. Who would want to be saddled with that capability?

“You take such good care of me,” I added with gratitude as he stepped onto a trail leading through the woods back to the cottage. The branches of all but the evergreens were mostly bare and would remain that way until spring. It would be a long winter on the isle, curtailing some of my outdoor research, but I’d find other ways to gain knowledge. The oceans were vast and my pursuit to explore all I could about them could never be satiated.

“Of course.” He nodded. “I love you.” He swallowed, his blue eyes flickering with vulnerability.

It felt like jellyfish swimming inside my belly. I’d never get tired of hearing him say that.

He stared into my eyes with a soulful expression and then gave me a solemn nod. “And I’ll do everything in my power to

protect you and make you happy.”

“You already do,” I assured him with a smile.

The aspects of being a demon’s mate was still mysterious and as fascinating as he was. As he carried me toward the front door, I cupped his cheek and then leaned up to kiss his hard jawline. Once he carried me inside and placed me onto the sofa, I squirmed upright.

I straddled his lap. “I want to be able to take care of you as well, Dagon.” I leaned over and kissed his neck.

He reached for my waist and released a low rumbling sound that often came out when he enjoyed what I was doing to him. I loved discovering all the new ways that made him moan that way.

“You’ve already done so much for me,” he said in a rich, deep voice. “You brought light into my darkness.”

“And you brought love into my life,” I said as I pulled back to stare into his eyes. “I love you, Dagon.”

He cradled the back of my neck once more and kissed me. The twitch of his erection between my thighs stirred need deep and low in my core.

When we broke apart, I inhaled deeply. “I need to change my answer to a question you asked me long ago.”

His brows drew closer together. “What question was that?”

“When I asked you how you found me in the ocean, you asked if I believed in fate. I said no. I’m going to have to revise my answer.” With a widening grin, I added, “Absolutely.”

His eyes brightened with pure delight.

I gave him a saucy look and said, “How about we continue this in the bedroom?”

“Oh yes,” he growled in a near-feral tone, scooped me up, and carried me up the stairs.

As I glanced down the stairwell and beyond, where we’d christened so many areas of the cottage, I grinned with satisfaction. I’d chosen well.

EPILOGUE



DAGON

The winter had been a time of warmth and coziness, spent by the fireplace, as we lay wrapped in each other's arms each night. When we heard a snowstorm was coming, we stayed in a luxurious hotel in Boston to avoid being battered by the elements on the island. We ended up staying in the suite for three weeks. When not holed up in our room, exploring each other's bodies, we dined downtown and took day trips along the coast and down to Cape Cod.

Now, with the arrival of spring, we returned to the island. Everywhere, life was beginning to stir after a long slumber. Wildflowers bloomed, trees budded, and the cold winter air was replaced by a softer, balmy spring breeze.

"I'm glad to be back," Celia said.

"Mmm," I agreed. "Walking along the shore here with you is one of my favorite activities." I reached down and squeezed her butt. "But not *the* favorite."

She laughed. As we passed through a wooded section, she pointed to crocuses emerging. "Ah, a sure sign that spring is finally here."

"That means you'll be back to exploring outdoors in no time."

Throughout the winter, Celia had shared her excitement about upcoming projects. She had more funds at her disposal as what was mine was now hers. I was glad that she didn't have to rely on the "generosity" of men like Roger, who would provide funds with a catch. He was among the worst of humans, and I was glad he was no longer a threat to anyone. His body and those of the other two men had not been found.

Her excitement to change the world for the better was contagious as she eagerly planned her outdoor research expeditions for the spring. Her passion for not only exploring the oceans but cleaning it up and saving the creatures that inhabited it was infectious—even for a dark, brooding curmudgeon like me.

As we talked about what she was looking forward to doing first, she said, “You could join me.”

“And do what?” I shrugged. “I don’t have your education, your experience, or your training.”

“But you have so much more.” Her eyes widened with fascination. “You’re able to explore the ocean in other forms. You can *breathe* underwater. That’s amazing. You can experience so much more than I could ever contemplate, even if I was in scuba gear.”

She captivated me with her enthusiasm. The truth was, I’d go anywhere with my mate, not simply to protect her but to be close to her. The need to be around my love grew with time—as did my love for her.

Celia had driven away the dark days of loneliness and duty. Being around her light made being around others’ darkness more tolerable. Not only did she brighten into my world with her sunny personality and curious mindset, but she saved me from the duty that had plagued me. No longer did I have to bear the burden of hunting purgatorians. That responsibility rested with my brothers. Would they ever be as fortunate?

“How about I steer the boat?” I suggested. “And you lead the expeditions.” With a wink, I added, “I promise I won’t turn feral and destroy this vessel.”

She smiled. “In hindsight, that worked out well for me in the past.” Then her eyes glimmered with sensuality. “And I like it when you turn feral.” Her lips quirked. “In certain cases.”

I chuckled. “I wonder which ones?” I pulled her into my arms. “Maybe we should experiment with exactly what you like.”

She arched a brow. “I think you’ve already found that out—multiple times.”

I pressed her body against mine and glanced into her eyes. “When it comes to you, my beautiful mate, I’m always eager to experiment.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Thanks for reading Dagon. Want more steamy paranormal romance? I have more with demons as well as shifters, witches, vampires, gargoyles, and even rockstars! Check out the Underground Encounters series and more at lisacarlislebooks.com.

*DAGON IS part of the Demonic Disciples multi-author series. **As***

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USA Today bestselling author Lisa Carlisle loves stories with misfits or outcasts. Her romances have been named Top Picks at Night Owl Reviews and the Romance Reviews.

When she was younger, she worked in a variety of jobs, moving to various countries. She served in the military in Okinawa, Japan; backpacked alone through Europe; and worked in Paris before returning to the U.S. She owned a bookstore for a few years as she loves to read. She's now married to a fantastic man, and they have two kids and two crazy cats.

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