

Chapter 2: The Lieutenant.

The Sunken Galleon was a rather posh joint in the financial district of downtown Coolsville. The building was all white, with a model galleon sailing the high waters of the roof above a small sign that proudly displayed the shop's name. It must have been two stories high, at the least. And, judging from the windows on the street, the building had a basement. That gave me an idea.

"Why don't you head inside? I want to check on something."

Daphne paused and looked back at me for a moment before shrugging and going on in. I walked to the back of the building and found what I was looking for, a small basement window that opened up next to another building. Around the corner like this, someone would have to be looking into the alley before the window would be spotted. I checked around in the garbage and layers of grime near the window without success. Whoever had broken in had either gotten in a different way, or had been very careful to not leave any evidence behind. In my experience, that meant either a pro or an inside job. It was too early to rule out either case just yet.

Inside I found the shop to be set up exactly as I expected: neat and tidy. Flashes of red and blue came from every corner of the store, while in the center stood a man-sized replica of a Spanish galleon. Now, I can't tell a speed boat from a rowboat, but even I could see that the thing was clearly *not* meant for speed. The size of its round-bellied hull bigger than a pig at a state fair was plainer than the nose on my face. But what it *would* hold would be tons of treasure. Just thinking about it brought up long-lost memories of my misspent youth reading about pirates, buccaneers and the Spanish Main.

But that was enough of finding my lost time. I had to focus on the case. I could see Daphne looking around as best she could, but she was not finding much. Or so I thought until she looked up and called to me in a puzzled voice that sent my internal alarms scrambling.

"Freddy, does something look off to you?"

"What do you mean, doll?" I glanced around, but didn't see what had tipped her off.

"Well, where's the display stand for the Pearl? I mean, if he was going to show it to his friends and the world, then shouldn't it have somewhere to display it?"

I was completely thrown. Of course there *should* have been a display case around somewhere for that pearl. It would be pretty obvious too, if he was trying to make it the centerpiece of his collection. So, to repeat the question, where was it?

Then it hit me like an express train at midnight. The Pearl was supposed to go into the Galleon. Excited by that idea, I immediately set to searching the display in the center of the shop for any sign of the pearl. Daphne, catching wind of what I was on about, hunted on her side of the statue. I finally spotted what I had been looking for part way up the case: A reinforced section of glass molded to look like part of the top hull near the tiny wheel of the ship, where an empty pillow sat naked and alone.

"Here, doll." I felt rather vindicated in my quick locating of the Pearl's former resting place.

"Oh Freddy, that was brilliant." Daphne cooed as she slid around the base and joined me.

We spent several minutes examining the case. We checked for signs of broken glass, we looked at the back of the case to see if the screws had been tampered with, we even checked

for signs of booby traps and found three, all disarmed. It was then that I decided we were dealing with a professional. I repeated my assumption out loud and Daphne nodded.

"It fits Fred. The thief might have gotten lucky at getting in here undetected, or an inside job, but the lack of tampering and the disarming of all the booby traps? I can't imagine the Marconi's telling everyone about the booby traps."

"So, either it was someone very close to them indeed, or it was an inside job." I smiled. "And I know just the man to put us on the lead of whether a professional is in town or not."

The Coolsville Precinct is a large brick building near City Hall. The town was large enough that it required twenty officers to keep tabs on everything, from the gambling hells near the port to the tourists walking in the park. I entered the precinct with Velma and Daphne, having picked the former up at the library where she'd been hunting down research for me.

"I looked at the Mermaid's Pearl." She spoke rapidly to me as we made our way past the desk. The bored guard let us past without a second look, we'd been there enough times.

"And, what'd you find?" I dodged a harried rookie rushing by with a mug of coffee, heading for the captain's office.

"Well, the Pearl was originally found in 1213 by a fisherman off the coast of Greece. He held onto the pearl for five years before selling it to a Crusader on his way to Jerusalem. However, while on the island he contracted a nearly fatal disease and was sent home. After such time, he eventually sold it to his lord, a Henry of Lancaster, who gave it to his wife. After some years the family fell onto hardship and the pearl was sold to a business man in the late eighteen-hundreds. The business men took it to Europe where it was nearly stolen by the Germans during their hunt for Archduke Ferdinand's assassin. He smuggled it out of the country but lost everything when his boat sank in the harbor from an engine fire. He barely escaped with his life and the pearl in his pocket. After which, it ended up in the auction house in Chicago where the Marconi's bought it for almost a million dollars."

I picked up a bit of hesitation in her voice and I prompted her to continue.

Velma sighed. "Well, here we leave the facts and go into the legend behind the Pearl. Rumor has it that every female wearer of the necklace has vanished without a trace, leaving the pearl behind, or it somehow being rediscovered soon after their disappearance, and always near a large body of water, usually the sea. According to the legend this is because the original discoverer of the pearl wrested it from a mermaid's treasure after a dare to save his life. He won the dare and the pearl, but the mermaid was so furious at losing that she hurled a curse on the pearl. There's an actual text of the curse, somehow surviving after all this time, which reads:

On this great Pearl I cast my spell

The magic within shall upwell

Where the bearer of life shall befell

The curse of the sea shall they forever dwell

*Their skin shall turn bright
Their legs take flight
In the water they shall alight
And they shall learn in hindsight*

*Beware those that wear the Mermaid's Pearl
For ill-fortune on you shall unfurl.*

"...And that is the Curse of the Mermaid's Pearl. To be honest," Velma continued, pushing her glasses further up her nose. "I'm surprised I was able to find the translation at all. It's not a well-known item, not like the Hope Diamond at least, and the curse is rather obscure."

"Sounds like a bunch of made-up nonsense by a lone fisherman sitting round the fire trying to out-do his friends." I grunted sourly. "Not particularly helpful to this investigation yet, but keep it in the file. Maybe we'll get lucky."

"Not a problem at all, Mr. Jones." Velma nodded professionally as she tucked her notes back into her bag.

A familiar face arrested my attention, and I raised a hand in greeting. The lieutenant waved back and returned to his phone conversation, so we made our way to his desk and sat down to wait. A large brown hound with black spots came around the corner, a Great Dane. He came up to Daphne and stuck his head in her lap, looking for attention. She giggled and scratched the brute behind his ears.

"Hey there Scooby. What have you been up to?" she clucked like a mother hen.

"Rothing Ruch." Scoob barked back. He sat up straighter and shrugged his massive shoulders, moving Daphne's hand lower to get right between his shoulder blades. The dog moaned happily and pushed harder into her hands.

"Thank you." Lieutenant Rogers finished politely to whoever was on the other end of that phone and set it back down.

"Fred Jones, my favorite private investigator. How can I help you today?" Norville "Shaggy" Rogers had a high-pitched voice that broke into a squeak when he was excited about something.

I grinned and gave him the pitch. "Officially, we're looking for a missing item of interest to our client and checking to see if any persons of interest have crossed your desk recently."

I leaned in closer and dropped my voice, "Unofficially, we're trying to recover a missing Mermaid Pearl and wondering if any reports of a professional in town had turned up."

Shaggy leaned back in his chair, looking thoughtful. "Nothing like that's turned up so far, but most professional hitters are pretty hard to spot until after they've gone to ground. What caliber are we talking about?"

"Minimal." I told him. "There's no sign of forced entry on the doors or the case, and the thief knew enough to remove the booby traps set in the bottom of the case."

Shaggy frowned. "Can't rightly recall the last time I remembered someone booby-trapping their own jewelry. Normally they keep stuff like that in a safe at night."

"It is a bit odd, and I will confront them with it later, but right now it gives us a window to two suspects. One is that it's an inside job, and the other is that it was a professional job. We're looking into the professional angle first, and then the inside job."

Shaggy nodded. "Can you tell me much more?"

"Well, if you can get a day or two off, or even a couple of hours after shift tonight, we could use Scooby's nose at the crime scene to see if he can determine where the criminal fled after snatching the pearl."

"We can do that." Shaggy said confidently. "After we stop for dinner on the way, we'll meet you...where was it?"

"The Sunken Galleon." I looked at him disbelievingly. "Are you ever going to *not* think of your stomach?"

"Nope." Shaggy said cheerfully. "I'll be sampling heaven's delights for some while yet."

"All right. Well, be careful out there, and try not to eat your finger. *Again.*"

"That was only once, and I was eating one of the Diner Specials. *You* try holding one of those things together while eating. It's a wonder more people don't bite their fingers there."

"Uh-huh." I stood up, Velma and Daphne following suit. Scooby looked up disappointedly. He must really have been enjoying the attention.

"See you at the crime scene." I told him, just before I walked out.

"I'll be there." He called back.

I couldn't help but wonder what we'd find there; perhaps the answer to this whole thing, or at the least, a direction in which to start searching.