

#### When past and present meet, secrets lie beneath the surface.

In retrospect, perhaps archaeologist Mallory Reeves shouldn't have delivered the divorce papers to her estranged husband mere weeks before her marriage to another man. She knew seeing Adrian again would stir up memories, but she didn't expect so many of them to be good, not after the mess they both made three years ago.

She also didn't expect to want to stay at the dig site on the Yucatan Peninsula. But the lure of the ancient ship and, yes, her sexy ex provide more of a draw than the white picket fence she thought she wanted.

Marine archaeologist Adrian Reeves has good reason to trust no one. His former partner—and former best friend—made off with his last archaeological find. And his wife left him, frustrated by his obsession for professional revenge.

Now both Mallory and his nemesis have returned, and it can't be an accident that they've turned up in the middle of the most important excavation of his career. Seeing her again unearths old pain—and rekindles never-forgotten desire. Now he has to decide if he can trust Mallory again. More importantly, if he can trust himself with her.

Warning: Smokin' hot archaeologists, painful memories, breathtaking underwater scenes and a passion that won't die.

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# Beneath the Surface

M.J. Fredrick

# Dedication

For Trish Milburn, who has always loved Adrian. Thanks for believing!

### Chapter One

By the time Mallory Reeves reached the campsite, the sun had set behind the mountains, giving the crescent of sand below her a red glow. The color matched her mood.

She'd flown hundreds of miles, ridden four hours beside her sullen former brother-in-law Toney, all because Adrian had run off to his dig without signing the papers. Contrary beast that he was, he must have sensed how much she wanted this divorce.

The camp was like so many she'd been to before, only smaller. Even with her eyes closed, she'd be able to map out where everything was. The location might have been a resort, complete with palm trees, if not for the olive-drab tents in a circle, two bigger than the rest, with a fire pit in the center. Along one side of the camp were aluminum barrels raised off the ground on wooden brackets—the water supply. The shower would be over there, a none-too-private nylon-walled tent that could never wash off all the dirt.

Generators lined the other side of camp, silent until the lab was up and running, which would happen once Adrian started bringing up artifacts. Strung from one tent to the next were clotheslines, covered with clothes, mostly male and mostly collegiate. If she looked closely, she could identify Adrian's collection of T-shirts with rule archaeological sayings. She doubted he'd changed that much.

The sound of the ocean on the other side of the dunes washed through the open windows of the truck. The beach was carved from high rocky cliffs. Toney parked on a ledge above the campsite. To leave, they would have to back up the narrow road to turn around.

Other teams stayed in hotels and commuted to the expedition site every day. They had fast food available and running water. Alcohol. She had to marry the one archaeologist who didn't think he was on a dig unless he was living like Grizzly Adams.

Not that he knew who Grizzly Adams was. Being raised in Scotland and living in camps most of his adult life made him weak in the area of pop culture.

About the only area he was weak in.

That and, well, practicality.

Being here was more like being home than the house she and Jonathan had bought. She was no longer the down-and-dirty girl she'd been, looking for clues about ancient civilizations in the writings they'd left behind. Her job translating for Allied Global wasn't as hazardous.

Or as exciting.

She climbed out of the Land Cruiser, scanning the camp for Adrian. She had to guard herself from surprise when he appeared.

No matter how she'd prepared herself for affecting a cool reaction, nothing readied her for the man who approached. He moved with sinuous grace, hard muscled, lean faced, with his dark hair cropped close in what he called his "dig cut", easier to keep clean. Silver-blue eyes glinted in the firelight. Her mouth dried up at the sight of him in the muscle-shirt style she'd always loved, his broad shoulders and sculpted arms tanned dark. She fisted her hands against the memories of stroking her fingers over his skin, casual gestures, sexual ones. She'd never touch him again, and the loss of familiarity weighted her belly. The past couple of years had been good to the man she'd known nearly half her life. The man who'd turned his back on everything she held precious.

Adrian Reeves, gorgeous as ever.

"Mal." He was the only one to call her that. He braced a booted foot on a tree stump, the picture of virility. Unbidden, memories of being wrapped in those arms flooded back, and with them the heat of desire. The one thing they'd been able to do right every time.

Mallory swallowed. "Adrian."

"You look good." His mocking smile took in her mud-spattered boots and pants even as his Scottish burr tickled her nerves. "Never thought I'd see you in those clothes again."

She pushed away her reaction to his look, that jump in her stomach, by recalling Jonathan's expression of surprise when she'd packed. Her need to keep her gear had given him evidence she hadn't put this life behind her as she'd claimed.

"Toney wouldn't tell me what you're looking at. I think he's still mad at me." She glanced after the younger man as he strolled off toward an open-sided tent before she turned to Adrian. "Have you found something good?"

A light came into his eyes, sending the cynicism she'd seen there before scurrying into the shadows. That hadn't changed. Dr. Adrian Reeves loved his work.

"You might say that. Will you be able to stay through tomorrow? I've got some stuff to show you." He rubbed his palms together, grinned, and she caught a glimpse of the idealistic boy she'd loved.

She glanced toward the dunes. On the other side would be the dive boat, the gear they'd need to go out to the site dozens of feet beneath the surface. She could taste the oxygen and feel the regulator in her mouth. The wash of nostalgia was unexpected. Turning back, she shook her head. "I need to get home as soon as I can."

He stepped forward, his eyes scanning her, but she didn't flinch. He was looking for a weakness. She refused to show him one.

"You said that on the phone. What's your hurry?"

#### M.J. Fredrick

God, she didn't want to tell him the truth, not two seconds after she got out of the truck. "I have a life in the States."

"One you were willing to drop to come out here."

"You didn't leave me any choice." She held his gaze for a long time, wanting him to understand he'd inconvenienced her, but also needing to hide how much it hurt her to come.

"Yeah, well, you have to stay tonight. I don't want anyone in the jungle in the dark." He flicked his gaze over her. "You're probably hungry."

He turned away, his body loose limbed, relaxed, the opposite of the tension that ran through her own body.

"Dinner should be almost ready. Let's hit the mess tent."

She fell into step beside him, unwilling to give him the slightest edge. "Let me guess. Chili and beans."

"The digestive tract's best friend." He looked over his shoulder at the Land Cruiser. "You going to leave your bag in the truck?"

She flushed. Over the past few years she'd gotten accustomed to being waited on by bellboys, waiters, valets, but Adrian's gentle prodding reminded her of his rule—everyone carried their own weight in his camp. She backtracked the few steps to the Land Cruiser for her duffel and turned to see Adrian's smirk as he recognized the worn bag.

She swung the strap over her shoulder as they crossed the short distance to the mess tent.

"You're early, as usual," the young woman in the tent told him.

The smirk turned into a full-blown smile, complete with dimples and white teeth. Mallory was glad she wasn't the recipient. It had too much power, and after her long trip, she wouldn't have any resistance. As it was, it sparked a hum low in her belly. The girl behind the table seemed immune.

"Linda, this is Mallory."

He didn't add any more, but the hardness in Linda's eyes told Mallory he'd mentioned her name before. Well, what did she expect, that he'd have glowing things to say about her after Tunisia? Thank heavens she would be out of here tomorrow.

"Mallory. Welcome to our camp."

Mallory wondered if her imagination put Linda's emphasis on the word "our". Linda's smile was tight as she served up a bowl of chili that ordinarily wouldn't have looked appetizing, but after the cardboard burger she'd had on the flight, Mallory's mouth watered.

Adrian motioned her out to the benches set around a campfire. The evening was already cooling. She suppressed a shiver as she stepped gingerly around the crude wood. Facing the flames with her left side away from him, she balanced her bowl on her lap.

"You did bring a sweatshirt?" Adrian gestured to the goose bumps on her arms.

She inclined her head toward the duffel she'd dropped at her feet. She wasn't exactly sure why she didn't want him to see her engagement ring; she fully intended to explain why she was anxious for this divorce. The very thought of that conversation tightened her throat. "I'll get it in a minute."

She took a bite of chili. Either she was hungry or had spent years away from camp food, but she found the lumpy brown glop delicious.

Adrian watched her, amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes.

She looked down to see she'd cleaned her bowl. Embarrassed, she set her bowl aside. When she did, her ring glinted in the firelight.

Adrian stilled beside her.

Funny how she was so tuned to him after all these years.

"What's that?" he asked, his voice flat.

Damn his eagle eyes. She straightened. If she had to choose, she would have waited to talk about this. "My engagement ring."

His lips thinned. "You're engaged." So matter-of-fact, when it couldn't be easy to learn.

Needing something to do, she bent down and unzipped her duffel. She pulled out her sweatshirt, though she was no longer cold. "You had to know there was a reason I came here to get the papers signed."

"When's the wedding?" His eyes didn't leave the ring, but the muscle in his jaw jumped.

"July 21."

"That's-" He calculated, his brow furrowed. "What? Five weeks away?"

"Not quite." She barely restrained herself from squirming under his inquisition.

He set his full bowl aside with a *thunk* that showed his emotions were barely constrained. "Who's the guy?"

"Jonathan Montcroft." She'd never noticed how pretentious his name sounded on her tongue. The man himself wasn't, but Adrian would jump to that conclusion. Half an hour with her ex and she was already thinking like him again. "We work together at Allied Global. He's a linguist."

The raised eyebrow had her blushing even before he asked, "Better than me?"

She resisted the urge to tell him to grow up. "He speaks five languages." But her remark didn't erase the picture his double entendre brought to her mind.

"Five languages. Beats my measly three all to hell, doesn't it?"

"It's not a competition." She was too tired to have this conversation.

"Let me guess." He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "He's the kind of man who wants the white picket fence and two point four kids."

"Three, but yeah." She watched him, so masculine it hurt to look at him. She squeezed her eyes shut. This man had been the joy of her life and her downfall.

"What happened to Smoller?"

She drew back. The animosity between the two former partners had begun with Adrian's accusations that Valentine had taken the ivory casket Adrian and Toney claimed to have uncovered. The casket disappeared soon after and, despite in-depth searching, was never discovered in Valentine's possession. The vehemence with which Adrian went after Valentine had stunned Mallory. She'd tried to reason with him, but that had only made everything worse. He'd accused her of taking Valentine's side over his.

Their marriage had not improved from there.

"I haven't talked to him in months. There was never anything more than friendship between us, Adrian. You know that."

"Not before I moved out, anyway."

She sucked a breath through her teeth. "Or after."

Adrian scrubbed his hands over his face. He sat back, wiped his hands on his hips. "You have those papers?"

Shoulders sagging with relief, she turned away to the duffel at her side and drew out a thick sheaf of papers and a pen. Colorful little flags stuck out from the pages, indicating where his signature was needed.

The two bites of chili Adrian had eaten rose up in his throat and he leaned back to look up at her. Her face was drawn, her eyes anxious as she held out a pen.

Seeing her climb out of the truck dressed in her dig clothes had sent him spiraling back in time, had sent hope tumbling through him. Yeah, he'd known she was coming but sure as hell hadn't expected to see her in her cargo pants and boots, blonde hair swinging behind her in a ponytail, looking like no time had passed.

"Are you happy?" She didn't look it. He'd fallen in love with her enthusiasm and her passion for life, for archaeology. For him. Now something more than three years and a thousand miles separated them.

She almost dropped her pen in surprise. "I will be."

With a nod, he took the pen. If she believed it, he would too. His name looked very final scrawled across the white paper.

He was letting her go. It was what she wanted, so it was the right thing to do. They could both move on.

He was just used to being married. He'd broken habits before. After almost three years apart, this one should be a snap.

"I'll head back to the city first thing in the morning if you can spare someone to take me to the airport. Probably not Toney because he barely said a word to me. I think he was pissed off." She took the papers and folded them neatly into an envelope before tucking them away.

"I thought you might want to dive, see what we're working on."

Mallory tugged at her ponytail and looked across the camp. "I don't do archaeology anymore."

"All right. Never mind, then." He stood. "First, there's someone I want you to see."

10

He led her to a tent, situated away from the center of the camp, a little sturdier, a little bigger than the others. She cast a curious glance at Adrian, but he said nothing, only watched her face as he pushed open the tent flap.

A rush of joy engulfed Mallory at the sight of the old man in the camp chair. She dropped to the ground beside her mentor, Dr. Robert Vigil. He'd aged so much in the short time, his cheeks hollowed, his eyes sunken but still sparkling in delight at her arrival. He was so thin. He'd never been a large man, but now he seemed frail.

He tossed his familiar cloth dig journal on the floor beside her and closed his bony hands around her shoulders, pulling her up for a warm embrace. Just for a moment, she rested her head against his skinny shoulder, all her worries evaporating in the security of his arms. He'd been her anchor when she'd lost her parents, when her marriage had fallen apart. Now he was here—with Adrian.

She opened her eyes to see Adrian watching them and all those worries rained down again.

"What are you doing here?" Dr. Vigil eased her away to look at her.

"I—" She dropped her gaze from the dark brown eyes that always saw too much, that knew her too well. "I came to see Adrian."

She heard the hitch of breath that could be hope or wariness. Dr. Vigil had loved both of them but their constant fighting and their split had been hard on him. Mallory felt guilty—and not a little jealous—that Adrian had kept in contact with him. She'd known the professor since she was a child. But once she split with Adrian, she hadn't wanted any reminders of Adrian, of her digger's past, of the career that destroyed dreams. Because of her need for distance, she'd lost the only family she had left.

"She brought the divorce papers," Adrian said, still near the entrance of the tent. He pulled a cellophane bag of beef jerky out of the pocket where he used to carry his cigarettes. "She's getting married again."

She whipped her head up to meet Dr. Vigil's gaze, knowing if she looked at Adrian, she'd burn a hole through him for beating her to the punch.

The professor's stunned expression lasted only a second before a smile spread across his face, not quite reaching his eyes. "Congratulations, Mallory. I hope he's worthy of you."

She heard the censure in his voice and defensiveness rose. Did he want her to continue pining after Adrian, who couldn't give her what she needed?

Dr. Vigil must have seen the pain in her face because he shifted subjects. "You look wonderful. Doesn't she look wonderful, Adrian?"

Adrian shoved the jerky into his pocket. "She's too skinny."

She scowled, rising. "It's the stress of planning a wedding. This time I want to do it right."

Their own wedding had been an outdoor affair in Greece, and they'd dressed in their dig clothes. Their only concessions to convention were the rings and the flowers in her hair. At the time, the ceremony had seemed the height of romance. They'd been young and wild about each other, certain nothing or no one would ever come between them. She imagined most young couples felt that way, but she and Adrian—she'd been so sure. She glanced at his left hand. Of course he'd stopped wearing his ring.

She folded her left hand into a fist. Now she wore someone else's.

"You might have considered planning it after you were divorced." He'd stopped his laconic lounging and stood straight, tension in the lines of his body.

She stepped closer. "You might have signed the papers before you left civilization. You've had them for months."

They were nose to nose in the small space, his scent washing over her, filling her with a memory of gliding hands and hot skin, while his flashing eyes filled her with another, aching recollection. So many fights, just like this one. This wasn't what love was supposed to be. She drew back, relieved she and Jonathan never fought, never lashed out at each other. Never hurt each other.

Adrian glared a moment longer before he spun and left the tent.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Vigil," Mallory murmured, embarrassed that he'd witnessed such a spectacle, that she hadn't grown up where Adrian was concerned. In that moment, she'd forgotten the old man was there.

Dr. Vigil waved a hand, dismissing it as if it didn't bother him. His eyes crinkled as he looked after Adrian. "It feels like old times."

She glanced toward the opening. "Is he still chasing after the Theophilius boxes?"

Dr. Vigil's gaze sharpened. "He hasn't told you?"

She shook her head.

"He thinks he's found one."

## Chapter Two

Impossible, but it certainly explained why Adrian had left the States without signing the divorce papers. He'd been too eager to get back on the job. Since the dig in Tunisia, this legend had a hold on him. "What on earth makes him think that? On the other side of the world? How can he still be obsessed with this after three years?"

Dr. Vigil folded his hands over his stomach, eyes twinkling. "My dear, if anyone should know about obsession, you would."

She inclined her head in acknowledgement. Her father had been obsessed with pre-Columbian history in the Andes. She'd spent most of her life in camps in the mountains of Peru and Ecuador. Learning Spanish and English at the same time, then learning how to interpret glyphs led to her proclivity for symbology.

And life in tents had led to her longing for a home of her own.

Then she'd married Adrian and pushed aside that longing because she loved him.

"What makes him think he's found one?"

"Perhaps you should ask him that."

"I don't think he'd tell me."

"You underestimate his feelings for you. You'll probably find him out by the dunes."

Mallory folded her arms under her breasts and watched Adrian's silhouette as he sat on the beach in the moonlight, looking out over the ocean, arms looped around his raised knees. Curiosity brought her to the water, a curiosity she'd tried to bury along with her feelings for this man.

That thought had her taking a step toward camp, but he turned and saw her. Now she couldn't retreat without looking foolish.

And she did want to know the story.

She headed down over the dunes and onto the beach, wishing she'd removed her boots so she could feel the sand between her toes. The last time she'd been to the ocean was in Pensacola, before she moved. She'd forgotten how soothing the waves could be. Even Adrian's expectant gaze didn't make her as anxious as it might have.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked when she got closer.

#### M.J. Fredrick

She looked at his boat bobbing at the end of a long portable dock and squinted to make out the name. *The Mysterious Miss M*. Who was Miss M? Probably the Constantinople witch he'd become obsessed with three years ago. "I want to know what you're looking for."

"So you can go tell Valentine?"

She flipped her hair over her shoulder. "I wouldn't have a clue how to find him."

"Really. He wasn't too far from your side last time I saw him." He reached into his breast pocket for his beef jerky.

"I haven't seen him in months." She lowered herself a careful distance from him. "What's out there, Adrian?"

He kept his attention on the surf. "Robert already told you."

"He said you found a second casket. How can that be, all the way over here?"

"Don't know for sure. We haven't gotten that deep."

She pushed her windblown hair out of her face. "Then what makes you think you've found another?"

He braced his arms behind him. "Do you know the legend?"

As if she'd had a choice. Adrian had immersed himself in the legend after he'd discovered the casket. The research left a lot of holes, however, including details of the symbols.

"You told me about the witch Mavaris who lived in Constantinople nine hundred years ago, that people believed she could control the weather and the sea after her lover was killed at sea. I remember something about necromancy too. Have you learned more?"

"Not really. The legend's pretty obscure." He sat forward, dragging one hand over his hair. "When she couldn't raise her lover, she turned to the elements. Apparently she thought she was getting revenge on the gods of the sea or something, taking their power from them. This priest Theophilius had occult leanings, I guess. I don't know how he figured someone was controlling the weather, how he figured it was her, but he managed to kill her, and then he cut her apart and burned her."

"Lovely."

"Yeah, well, she was a witch and it was nine hundred years ago. So he took her ashes and sealed them in ivory caskets. And he sent the four boxes on four ships out of Constantinople."

"And you found one in Tunisia. How could the other one be here?"

He turned to her, the first time since she'd joined him. "So you really haven't been in touch with Smoller."

She blinked. "I told you I haven't."

"He found another ship off the coast of Florida. He has three of the caskets already."

"Three?" Surprise kicked up her pulse. "How?"

"The other casket had been found over a hundred years ago off the coast of Africa. Smoller tracked it down and bought it." He shifted toward her, his eyes glinting with that passion she remembered so well. "He knew what we were going to find in Tunisia before we found it. He went there for that casket."

"How did he know where to find it? How did you find this one? More importantly, how do you know this is the fourth ship?"

His teeth flashed in a brief grin. "I don't. But all evidence points to the fact that it's a Mediterranean ship in the Caribbean, and it appears to be the correct age."

"You said the caskets were cursed, that whoever discovered them faced the consequences."

He chuckled. "And who better to know than me? Didn't I lose everything after bringing up that damned thing?"

And yet he was searching for another. Perhaps one cursed object would invalidate another, if one believed those things.

He rolled onto his hip and popped to his feet. He gave the ocean one last glance before he reached a hand to her. "I'm heading back. You coming?"

She thought about taking his hand, sliding her hand along those calluses. No, he didn't trust her with his secrets and she didn't trust him with her emotions. "I think I'll stay out here awhile."

Another look at the ocean, then at her. "You'll be okay?"

"You never worried about me before. I'm not that different, Adrian."

The inclination of his head told her he thought otherwise.

"Okay. I'll see you in the morning. Good night, Mal."

Adrian pushed open the flap of the tent his brother and Jacob, the fifth member of their crew, shared. The two younger men each sat on a cot, a poker game in full swing, dollar bills in piles on the little folding table between them.

"Too late to get in now," Toney said, his attention on his cards.

"Yeah, don't let Robert see you," Adrian warned. "He'll clean you out."

"Why do you think we're playing in here?" Toney tossed a card in, accepted another from Jacob. "He looks like a nice old man, but he's a shark when it comes to gambling," he told the student.

"And he'll play until he wipes you out or until he's wiped out." Adrian sat on the edge of his brother's cot. "Can you drive Mallory to the city tomorrow?"

Toney lowered his hand and sat back on the cot. "Jesus, Adrian, can't someone else go?"

"Who? I don't want Robert on the road, Linda gets lost the minute she leaves camp and Jacob here can't drive stick." He rolled his eyes at his student. "Or I could take her."

Toney's lips thinned. "Christ, she doesn't know when to stop causing trouble, does she? Right, fine, I'll take her."

#### M.J. Fredrick

Adrian hesitated. Not exactly the answer he wanted, though he didn't want to stop everything to take her himself. Okay, he did, but he couldn't. Even if he missed her. For ten years, he'd had her to talk to on digs, to bounce ideas off of and God, he missed that.

What he wanted was for her to stay, to be curious about the dive, to want to be with him.

"You need to be nice to her," he said to his brother.

"Like she was nice to you?"

"Toney," he warned.

"No!" Toney shoved the table aside and pushed to his feet. "She comes here like nothing ever happened. She's all high and mighty, waving her ring in your face like you were nothing to her and you just smile and take it. Where she's concerned, you have no balls."

Adrian cut a glance to Jacob, who was concentrating really hard on his cards. Scowling, Adrian blew out a breath and took a step back to look outside the tent and see if anyone had heard. No one was around.

"She was my wife for eight years."

"And she walked away." Toney swung on Jacob. "Do you know what she did?"

Jacob shook his head, curls bouncing.

"First of all, she wasn't on the dive that day, okay, she said she had food poisoning. Still seems weird to me. So she wasn't on the ship when we surfaced with the box. When he told her about the box, about the symbols on it, symbols she should have known and understood, she didn't believe him. When Adrian was accused of stealing it and put in prison by his so-called partner, she was hanging out with the enemy. You tell me that's what a wife does."

"You're blowing it out of proportion." Adrian struggled to keep his voice calm as those memories, the ones he'd worked so hard to bury, stabbed through him again. Truthfully, Toney wasn't exaggerating much, not from his own perspective. He hadn't been privy to the more personal, painful episodes.

Mallory had claimed she and Valentine had been working together to get him out of the Tunisian jail. But the pitying look in Mal's eyes, the smug look in Smoller's, on top of the fact that Mallory didn't believe he'd found a casket that was now missing, had been the worst betrayal, the straw collapsing their already strained marriage.

"You know I'm not. Why are you bending over so she can screw you again?"

Adrian squared his shoulders, dragging in every ounce of self-control, which was in short supply these days. "She'll be leaving tomorrow. You'll take her and you won't give her a bad time, right?"

Toney dragged a hand through his too-long hair and eased away. "Yeah, all right. I won't give her a bad time. As long as she's getting out of here. But I won't go out of my way to be nice."

Mallory rolled onto her side in the empty tent, unable to sleep, despite the sound of the rolling ocean, the scent of it. The light from the dying campfire flickered through the nylon wall, at once familiar and spooky.

She looked toward the duffel bag with the divorce papers. Now Adrian had what he wanted, and so did she. She hoped they both lived happily ever after.

Still, how could she leave without seeing the ship? It was only dozens of feet away—okay, straight down, but not out of reach. Beneath the surface, she could touch the past, could touch history.

After she married Jonathan, she'd probably never dive again.

She had to see this ship. It would be asking a lot of Adrian, but he knew her better than anyone. He'd know why she was asking.

She reached for her watch, peered at it before realizing she hadn't changed the time. Nearly half an hour had passed since Linda had left the tent they shared. In Mallory's camping experiences, it meant it must be nearly dawn. Adrian liked his camp up and running early.

Working up the nerve to ask him to take her out on the boat, she pushed out of the tent to see the sun breaking against the purpled Maya Mountains above the camp, though the camp itself was still in dawn grayness. She savored the sight, the newness of the day, the peace of being alone.

Until Adrian emerged from a tent across the camp, shirtless. Mallory wanted to whimper at the perfection of his shoulders and arms, the strength of his chest, that scattering of dark auburn hair there that she'd rubbed her cheek against so many nights.

Since he was looking toward the mountain, he didn't see her. He dragged a hand over his head and tugged on a dark sweatshirt against the cool air.

Movement from inside the tent drew her attention. A tent mate? His brother, maybe. The only person he'd ever shared a tent with before was her.

The question died before it could be completely formed as Linda straightened, tossing her dark hair back. She smiled at Adrian, brushed her hands over his shoulders and walked away in the direction of the mess tent.

Mallory staggered under the unexpected pain of jealousy, willing herself to breathe, falling back into the shadows before Adrian saw her, saw the devastation he'd caused.

A calming breath focused her. She was marrying someone else in a little more than a month. Her jealousy toward Linda, or anyone else who wanted Adrian, was unreasonable. He was a free man now. She had no hold over him.

But she couldn't say he no longer had a hold over her.

"Still want to leave today?" Adrian walked up behind Mallory as she ate her oatmeal on the same bench where she'd had her chili last night. "Toney will take you when you're ready, and he's in a particularly cheerful mood." He rolled his eyes and she laughed. "Unless you want to look at the ship."

Startled, she nearly launched her bowl through the air. When her heart returned to her chest, she set the bowl aside. He was offering her what she'd wanted—at least what she'd wanted until she'd seen Linda come out of his tent. That should have brought up the barrier she needed to be around him. Why it didn't worried her.

"Why would I?"

He dropped to the bench beside her. Too close, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of moving away. "You'll never get another chance like this."

He spoke the words that had played through her mind all night. Scary how well he knew her. "I'm not an archaeologist anymore." Maybe if she said it often enough, she could squash the desire to stay.

He regarded her strangely, as if she'd declared she was no longer a woman. "Once a digger..."

She shook her head. It hadn't taken much to get her to turn from the life she'd always known.

Not much. Just Adrian.

"Not me."

He arched a brow. "You still have your clothes."

That threw her off balance for a second. When she'd pulled them out of the closet, Jonathan had the same reaction. She hadn't let herself think about why she'd kept them when she'd given up every other aspect of her life with Adrian.

He drew away, linking his fingers in front of him. "The woman I used to know would be chomping at the regulator to get down there."

She wanted to see the ship so bad she twitched. "I need to get home."

He reached into the front pocket of his cotton shirt, dragged out more beef jerky. He didn't look at her as he said, "Going out won't take long."

All the yearnings she'd fought the past few years as she'd adjusted to the corporate world reared up, prodding her to take the plunge. For heaven's sake, they'd discovered what might be a Mediterranean ship, thousands of miles from where it should be. She couldn't just walk away.

She eased back, as if her surrender wouldn't mean as much if she acted casual. "I haven't dived since Mexico. And if I dive, I won't be able to fly for twenty-four hours."

A light of triumph glinted in his eyes. Damn. He knew her too well.

"That's okay. You can see it without diving. You got here just in time to try out my new toy." He reached out and waited. Her engagement ring weighed heavy on her finger as she considered the consequences of touching him. Hesitantly, she slid her hand into his.

The shock of his strong, warm hand beneath hers, the current that ran from his skin into hers, made her want to pull away. Sensing it, he tightened his grip and smoothed his thumb over her knuckles. He stopped when he reached her ring. Instead of dropping her hand as she expected, he lifted it for closer inspection. Her heart squeezing, she wanted to cover the ring. This was too hard.

Adrian looked up. "He does well, your linguist."

She didn't respond, couldn't catch her breath enough to speak. It took everything in her to meet the power of those eyes.

"Does he love you?"

God. She pulled back then, missed the warmth of his touch immediately. She didn't want to talk about Jonathan now. "Of course he loves me."

"And you love him."

"Adrian." She looked away, but he crooked a finger under her chin and pulled her attention back. So close. Too close. She felt his breath on her lips, almost tasted the tang of the jerky.

"Answer me."

Why was it so hard to say while she looked into Adrian's eyes? It was true, wasn't it? She swallowed. "I love him."

Pain flashed over his face but he pushed it aside before a responding emotion could rise in her. He dropped her hand and withdrew.

"We're going out on the boat in half an hour. Be ready."

Adrian's heart lurched when he saw Mallory walking down to the dock. Behind him, Toney slammed the ropes against the deck with more force than necessary, making his feelings known, but Adrian didn't turn to look. He continued to stow gear into the boat. He wasn't surprised she'd come—he knew her too well to disregard her natural curiosity—but the effect of seeing her surprised him, like a punch in the gut. She didn't belong to him anymore.

He still considered himself married. The marriage had been over when he had walked out of their house three years ago, but he'd never thought of himself as free. He never thought he'd have to move on.

She'd moved on without him. Why had he hoped she'd wait for him?

He straightened and approached to help her on board, bracing himself for the shock of her soft hand, her bold ring. He reacted as if someone had reached down his throat and squeezed the breath out of him. Bad enough she'd shown up on the first dig he'd led since Tunisia, in a camp where everything reminded him of her and their past. But the sight of another man's ring on her manicured hand ripped his heart out.

She wasn't wearing the ring now. He touched the spot where it had been and looked up at her questioningly.

"I didn't want to drop it in the ocean."

"Of course not." It was a treasure, after all. He gritted his teeth against the resentment of the damn thing, something he'd never even thought she would want or expect.

She tightened her grip on his wrist, just a bit, as she stretched her leg from the dock to the boat, and released him once both feet were on the deck. She was too much of a pro to sway into him with the resulting roll of the boat.

Damn it.

"We're not going out alone, are we?"

He moved away to deal with the ropes, not caring for the skepticism in her tone. "The prof's already on board." He motioned to the pilothouse where the elderly doctor sat in the shade, under his trademark straw hat. "And Jacob and Toney are running the electronics. Linda will stay in camp."

"Are you diving?" She walked over to check the tanks strapped securely to the pilothouse.

"Not this trip."

"How long have you been out here?"

"A little less than a month." He readied himself for accusations, for questions, but they didn't come.

Leaning on the railing, she looked out over the ocean. "Have you found anything?"

He stopped to dig his beef jerky out of his pocket. He pulled a chunk out of the cellophane package and offered her some. She considered it warily but shook her head.

"Nothing we can get our hands on till we get the hull uncovered," he told her.

"So how did they wreck? Can you tell?"

"Not yet." He shook some more jerky out of the pack. "High winds could have knocked them against the cliff, there may have been a sandbar or coral under there at some point. They may have already been at anchor and on land when it went down. We're sending the robot down today."

She stepped close to help him stow the ropes under the benches. The ease with which they fell into the rhythm of the task alarmed him. All his senses went on alert. She must have realized it too, because once the chore was completed, she darted to the far side of the *Miss M*, considered him a minute, then ducked into the pilothouse with Robert.

Damn, the Mallory he'd loved wouldn't have bolted so easily.

They set off, out of the cove, hugging the shoreline, wind whipping the scent of the sea over the deck. Six hundred yards beyond, beneath the cliffs, an equipment-laden barge was anchored over the site.

The barge had taken the bulk of their money but would be necessary once they started bringing up artifacts. Locating the site itself had taken another huge chunk. Now he was short on divers until he could drum up more funding. Ordinarily he was patient with his finds, but this—this was too big. He was anxious to get it logged, get it up and prove himself to Mallory, and beyond that, to the archaeological community.

They pulled up to the barge with a gentle bump. Jacob and Adrian unloaded the submersible camera as Robert and Toney stacked the equipment near the rail. Mallory joined them, looking uncomfortable with

nothing to do. Adrian wondered if that was why she'd helped him earlier, to feel like she fit in. Did it still matter to her?

"Come on, Mal, have a look at my new toy."

He unpacked his newest purchase, the package Toney had picked up at the same time he collected Mallory, a submersible remote-controlled camera.

Mallory traced a finger over a scratch on the casing. "Used?"

"Yeah, but in perfect condition. It'll help us map the area faster, so we can lay the grid and start bringing up the artifacts." He gently plopped the camera in the water.

"Now we watch." He motioned for her to precede him under the roof of the barge, where the professor was already seated in front of the laptop. Jacob and Toney had set up two other laptops and were plugging them in. The area would have been cramped if not for the open walls. Adrian was going to have to close them in soon, before they got hit with a storm. As soon as he got more money.

Adrian edged in beside the prof and picked up the joystick controller to guide the submersible down through the clear water, past darting fish, swaying fan coral. It skimmed above waving seaweed as if it knew just where it was going.

Mallory leaned on his shoulder to see the monitor, her breath rushing against the side of his neck, coming faster in her excitement. With each movement of the camera, she edged closer, as if that would urge the camera deeper. The occasional wave rolling beneath the barge had her breast bumping against his arm. His control slipped another notch.

"There!" She jabbed a finger at the monitor. "Is that something? Go that way."

Her breasts pressed against his shoulder and her hair fell against his ear. Her hand rested on his arm. Every nerve in his body was at attention. He damn near couldn't operate the controller, and not only because she inhibited the movement of his arm.

He turned his head, covering his ear with his hand mockingly. "You want to do this?"

Her eyes brightened despite his sarcasm. "You mean it?"

He pushed back the folding chair, the legs scraping over the rough wood. "Go ahead. Just remember there's several thousand dollars' worth of equipment down there."

He eased around her in the close space, holding his breath so not to graze against her, to no avail. His body came to swift attention as her bottom brushed his groin, and he hung suspended after she took his place in the chair. He stepped behind her, trying not to breathe in the scent of sunscreen and fruity shampoo, resisting the urge to lower his nose to her hair.

"Adrian," she murmured after a few moments of trying to maneuver the camera where she wanted it to go. "How do I—?"

He leaned forward, unable to avoid contact. Effectively embracing her, he folded his hands around hers on the controller, his chest against her back, where he felt the catch of her breath. He wouldn't think

about how soft and fragile her hands felt beneath his as he guided them on the control. He wouldn't think about how her hands had once glided over his body.

He couldn't think of anything else.

Did he have to be so close, so warm, so male? Every breath he took, labored though it was, rushed past Mallory's ear, sending goose bumps over her skin. A wave rolled under the barge and he gripped her shoulder a minute for balance. He smelled of coffee and his own scent, his own flavor that she could taste without even trying, though their last kiss had been over three years ago. If she turned her head...

But she couldn't. Whatever heat remained between them had to be buried. That was why she'd been so eager to get out of here.

Damn her curiosity.

"Look!" Dr. Vigil's voice made them both jump. He leaned into the space that had just been the two of them.

Adrian drew away. Mallory was swamped with a sense of loss that had her wanting to shove away from the computer and jump into the water. Maybe she'd find her wits down there.

She focused on the screen, at what Dr. Vigil had pointed out. Adrian edged closer to make room for the older man. He pressed a button to zoom the camera in. The unmistakable glint of metal showed through the silt and seaweed, and as Mallory maneuvered the camera closer, she could see the curve of a portal.

Ship window? Or oar bank?

The familiar old zing of discovery went through her. This camera wasn't doing it for her. She had to get a closer look. She looked at Adrian, pushing her hair out of her face.

"So," she asked, excitement trembling in her voice. "When are we going in?"

# Chapter Three

Adrian lifted an eyebrow, pretending surprise though the glint in his eyes said he'd expected no less. Damn, she hated to be that predictable.

"You said you hadn't dived in years," he drawled.

That dimmed her enthusiasm. "I don't have my gear, either."

"That we can fix." He scanned the barge and grinned as his gaze settled on his student. "You can use Jacob's."

"Hey!" Jacob protested, and Adrian slapped him on the back good-naturedly.

Mallory looked at her smug ex-husband. Her ex-husband. That was the first time she'd thought of him in those terms. Wow. That—hurt, especially after the thrill they'd just shared.

She needed distance, and none could be found on this barge.

Dr. Vigil jumped in. "Are you going to map the damn site, or are you going to fight about who gets to go in? We have to get that wood covered up before it disintegrates completely."

"All right."

Adrian stripped off his shirt without a second thought, displaying breathtaking muscles, sculpted chest and arms, made that way by hard work. God, he hadn't changed. Mallory's fingers itched to skim over his skin, to rub against the hair of his chest.

"Jacob, get Mallory your suit."

She snapped her attention over to Jacob. The young man's mouth curved down in disappointment, but he clambered back to the boat to retrieve his suit from beneath one of the benches.

"Sorry," she mouthed, fingering the neoprene of his suit with no small sentiment. She hadn't dived since the sinkholes on the Yucatan Peninsula, deep and dangerous even with her experience, and she mourned the fearless person she used to be.

Adrian glanced over at her as he zipped up his own suit. "You're not ready?"

She tightened her hand on the suit. The woman she'd turned herself into no longer felt this pump of adrenaline. Mallory had to admit she missed it. "I'll be ready. Give me a minute."

Her shorts were too bulky to wear under the wetsuit. She was going to have to dive in her panties and T-shirt. Which wouldn't be too bad, but she had to get dressed in front of all these men. She scanned the flat, open area of the barge, seeking privacy, and found none.

She turned, edging as close to the shadows as she could, and shed her shorts, then stepped into the borrowed wetsuit. It was stretchy and tight and she bent a fingernail backwards trying to tug it up, all the while self-conscious in her panties, her legs bare. She kept her hair around her face, hiding from the men, feeling Adrian's gaze.

She wriggled and straightened and zipped before tossing her head back to look at him. He was watching her, but not with desire.

"That suit's too big. You're going to be cold." Frowning, he walked over, tugged at the zipper, pulling the suit away from her skin as she braided her hair.

"I'll be all right." She clipped on her weight belt and turned her back so Jacob could help her into the tanks.

She straightened, the tanks in place, adjusting to the once-familiar weight, to see Adrian squinting at the sun. "Yeah, we're near the equator, but the water temperature is only about eighty."

"You said yourself we're not going to be down there that long. I'll be fine. I can't work if you're going to fuss over me."

"Pardon me." His sarcastic tone bit as he checked his own gauges, then hers, tugged down his mask and shoved his regulator in his mouth.

He stepped off the edge of the barge, down into the water. She waited for him to bob up, signal Toney that he was okay, before she followed. Adrian gave the thumbs-down signal for them to dive.

She had to temper her competitive spirit with the need for safety. She checked her gear once more and went after him.

The water closed around her, quiet, peaceful, familiar. She'd missed this so much. The water was clear, beautiful. The fish that scattered on her appearance fluttered back, flashing silver in the sunlight. She could see Adrian clearly ahead of her, and she kicked off to follow.

How had she denied herself this for so long? The water parting around her felt like coming home, like being held in welcoming arms. The comfort combined with the anticipation of seeing the wreck created a joy in her she hadn't felt in a long time.

Why had she let herself give up joy when she gave up Adrian?

Because she hadn't been able to bear anything that reminded her of him. She still couldn't.

Not something she was going to think about now. She kicked harder and pulled alongside Adrian. He turned to look at her, and his eyes crinkled a little behind his mask, smiling encouragement. Of all the signals they'd developed in their years together, that one pierced her heart. Still lost in that memory, she almost missed his gesture as he pointed toward the ocean floor.

There it was, sprawled beneath them. Enough of a hull remained that she could see oar ports, badly eroded. How deep had this been buried before the hurricane uncovered it?

She moved closer but Adrian caught her arm and pointed. A swirl from her fin had sent up a flurry of splinters where she hadn't noticed the wood was exposed. Her very movement could disintegrate the hull if she wasn't careful. Chastened, she nodded and took the end of the rubber sheet he handed her. Her excitement had overwhelmed her sense of priorities. She couldn't let that happen again, couldn't let herself become invested. She was going home.

Working together in a familiar pattern, they covered the exposed hull, swam about to see if any more remained uncovered, then weighed the sheet down with sand before Adrian motioned to his dive watch.

Time to go up, back to real life.

They swam to the guideline, marked with decompression stops. She'd forgotten what a stickler Adrian was for diving by the tables. Out here, with such a small group, that would be more important than ever. Regret flashed through her as she realized this was her only dive on this site, or probably ever again.

The sadness of the thought stunned her. She'd been ready to give this up forever. Now, with the taste of oxygen in her mouth and blue water embracing her, she wasn't so sure. She hated uncertainty.

Adrian grabbed her arm, startling her. She looked into his eyes behind the mask and saw the exaggerated crease of his brow. She signaled that she was okay, but he continued to watch her closely.

Strange how they could read each other's emotions so well after all this time.

They surfaced and he stripped off his mask. "What's wrong?" he asked, his brow furrowed. "Are you cold? Is it the suit? Your oxygen?"

Amused, she paddled out of his reach when he tried to look at her gauges. "I'm fine. I'm just—thanks for letting me see it."

He looked at her blankly. She swam past him and grabbed on to the barge's ladder. Impulsively, she reached over and kissed his cheek, trying not to think about the stubble under her lips, about the surprise in his eyes. About how she would never again offer such a casual gesture to the man she'd loved. "Thanks."

Heart pounding at her own recklessness, eager to make her escape after the whim, she reached up to Toney and Dr. Vigil who waited to bring her out of the water.

"Your nose is bleeding," Jacob said in alarm, motioning to her face as Adrian hauled himself onto the platform.

She lifted a finger to her nose and drew it away to find it bright with blood.

Adrian sat heavily on the bench beside her and swore. His tone changed as he stripped off his gloves and pinched the bridge of her nose with his waterlogged fingers. "I've got it."

She'd forgotten that she always had nosebleeds when she surfaced. She'd always taken care of them herself. Why was he helping her out now?

"Did you come up too fast?" Jacob asked sharply, handing Adrian a towel. He took it and dabbed the rough cloth under her nose.

"No, this is usual for her," Dr. Vigil said, not hovering like the rest.

She was aware now of Adrian's leg pressed along hers, his arm against her breast. She brushed his hand away to pinch her own nose, to hold the towel herself. He took the hint and moved aside. When she opened her eyes, she could just see the tops of his bare shoulders as he stripped out of his wetsuit.

"What did you see?" Dr. Vigil asked.

"Most of the bow, the port side, buried under a bunch of sand. This is going to be one hell of an excavation."

But Adrian's tone wasn't as excited as she expected. He sounded like a man with too much responsibility weighing him down.

The project was huge. Adrian's responsibility meant he was under incredible amounts of pressure, most of it from himself. The Adrian she knew would handle it or die trying.

She dropped the towel to her side and stood to unzip her wetsuit, remembering too late that she only wore her T-shirt and panties, both now wet and clinging to her. Four sets of male eyes focused on her. Adrian stepped in front of her, his back to her.

"There's an extra T-shirt in that bag there," he said gruffly, his burr a little heavier than usual. "Gentlemen?"

Adrian made sure the other men faced the other way. He hoped to hell they weren't picturing her as clearly as he was. Hell, what had she been thinking? He could see her lacy bra, her erect nipples through the thin fabric of her T-shirt, and could see even more through the sexy little panties. His body responded to the sight, to the familiarity. What the hell was she doing wearing underwear like that out here anyway?

He turned when she cleared her throat. She wore his old, limp college shirt and finger combed her loosened hair. She looked so young, like the girl he'd fallen in love with.

He picked up the bloody towel, wiped some crusty blood from her upper lip. Even now he hated to see her hurting, and she was, beyond the nosebleed. It went deeper than that, and she wouldn't tell him. He wasn't that person for her anymore.

"It's stopped now, I think," he said, stepping back.

She nodded, not looking at him. Was she thinking about the peck on the cheek she'd given him? A perfectly innocent kiss that put him in a perfectly foul mood because for the life of him, he couldn't understand why she would show him affection the day after she'd served him with divorce papers. And it didn't look like she planned on enlightening him.

"I'm going back tomorrow," she said quietly, looking out over the waves. For a moment he thought she meant back to the shipwreck, but she quickly clarified. "Back home."

"Because that's what you want, to be married to a linguist and work in an office and have manicures." He snatched up one of her hands.

She yanked it away. "Yes!"

"And what about passion, Mal? Does he give you passion?" He summoned every ounce of control to look into her eyes as he waited to hear the answer, every ounce of control not to drag her against him and remind her of what they had.

"I had passion once. It wasn't enough."

He hadn't been enough. She didn't say it. She didn't have to. He just hadn't been able to give her enough of himself. He'd known it, but to hear her say it, to remember how he'd let her down—he had to turn away. "I want you—to be happy." The words dragged themselves out of him, and he had to rearrange them so she wouldn't know he wanted to be the one who made her happy.

"Thank you, Adrian. I am."

That statement tore at him as Toney joined them, ready to take them to camp. He had wanted to hear doubt in her voice. There had been none.

# Chapter Four

Adrian watched Mallory walk out of camp after dinner as the others gathered around the fire, Jacob with his guitar. Adrian had always hated the Kumbaya effect of the campfire, so he made his escape. The sun was going down and Mallory still wore his T-shirt and shorts—not enough protection from the dropping temperature. Good-enough excuse. He grabbed a sweatshirt and headed after her.

He found her on the beach, her legs drawn up, her arms locked around them as she stared out at the ocean. A storm was rolling in, close enough to kick up waves and a good breeze, but far enough away that the increasing flashes of lightning were beautiful rather than deadly.

He dropped a sweatshirt into her lap and lowered himself beside her with a grunt, not as young as he used to be.

"Did you get the dive plan done?" She pulled the sweatshirt on, drawing her knees up beneath the shirt and hugging them to her.

"Yeah, it's done. But if that comes in, I'll have to do another." He gestured toward the storm. "There'll be no diving tomorrow."

"What does the weather service say?"

He sifted sand through his fingers so he wouldn't be tempted to smooth a loose strand of her hair that was being whipped by the wind. "Nothing about that."

She anchored her hair with one hand and gave one of those wry smiles he used to love. "Nothing's changed."

But she was wrong. Gone was the impulsive, adventurous girl. In her place was a cool woman who kept her emotions under wraps. Had he done that to her, hurt her so bad that she'd shut herself off to protect herself?

"You always did love the ocean."

"I don't see much of it anymore in Austin."

He fisted his hand around the sand, let it bite into his skin. "No, you're pretty landlocked. You should've kept the house in Pensacola."

She didn't look at him. "I couldn't stay there."

Guilt choked him. Of course she wouldn't be able to. "Not even another house in Pensacola?"

"I had to go where my job was."

And why that job, working for a multinational corporation instead of working for a museum and doing something with her experience? At least she'd be somehow connected to the life she'd once loved. Yes, she was using her language expertise, but that hadn't been the part of the job she'd enjoyed. He was afraid she'd chosen this new path because of him, so he didn't ask. He didn't want to be the reason she'd turned her back on her life's work.

"So is it going to be a big wedding?"

She gazed out over the ocean. "Adrian, you don't really want to hear about this."

No, he didn't want to hear. He had to. "I never knew you wanted a wedding. I feel like." He lifted a hand, dropped it to his knee. "Like I failed you because I didn't know you better."

She turned to look at him. "I'm not getting a divorce from you because I want a nice wedding."

"I realize that." What he wanted to know but couldn't ask was why they'd once wanted the same things but no longer did. "I guess I never really saw the girly part of you."

Another one of those smiles. This one got past his defenses and went straight to his groin.

"You saw quite a lot of my girly parts."

Memories slammed into him and he shook his head to clear them. "You know what I mean. I didn't know you were interested in things like weddings. Hell, I never even saw you in a dress till we'd been married a couple of years." His sister's wedding. The dress had been a gauzy thing inappropriate for Scotland's chilly weather, and she'd been buried under a coat most of the time. He'd happily warmed her after the reception. "I never saw you in underwear like you wore today."

She rested her forehead on her arms, the movement shielding her face. He'd struck a nerve. But it didn't take long for her to toss her head back and look straight at him. "It's a recent indulgence."

"I imagine Jonathan appreciates it."

Her eyes shifted. "We haven't reached that level."

It took him a minute to figure out what she meant. Even then, he couldn't believe it. "What, no sex?"

She took a deep breath, and for a moment he thought she'd refuse to answer. "No."

The two of them hadn't known each other a full day before they'd started ripping each other's clothes off. Not everyone could say their first time was at Machu Picchu. He'd never known a more passionate woman in his life, a more generous one. "How can that be?"

"I was a married woman." She smiled wanly.

Adrian couldn't wrap his mind around it. "And he proposed without, you know?"

She nodded, that Mona Lisa smile curving her lips. "I'm not a kid anymore. I've learned how to control my urges."

"Yeah, but—" Sex had been so much a part of their relationship, he couldn't imagine being in love with someone without it.

Which was why he hadn't had a relationship since she'd left.

"Jonathan-he's not like us. He's steady and patient and reserved."

He dragged a hand over his hair as he gathered the courage to pursue his thoughts. "You fell in love with that."

Her expression gentled, like she didn't want to hurt him. "I felt like I needed the balance."

After him, she meant. They were too much alike, except when it came to what they each wanted. He knew what he wanted, what he needed, but had no idea about Mallory's wishes anymore.

He changed the subject. "You want to go over the dive plan?"

Her look changed to one of pity, as if she had to explain something again and again to a child who couldn't understand. "Adrian, I can't stay."

Was that a touch of sadness in her voice, or was he only hoping?

Her tone became brisk. "In fact, if you'll let me use the satellite phone, I should tell him I'm coming in tomorrow."

"The possessive sort, is he?" He tried to imagine this man who worked in an office, wore suits and didn't go crazy because he wasn't making love to Mallory. No picture came to mind.

"He was worried about me coming down here."

"Thinks I'll steal you back, does he?" It was rather pleasant being on the envied end of things.

She smiled and trailed her fingers through the sand. "No worries about that."

"Ah. He's heard all about me, then."

The smile vanished. "He was my best friend after we split."

The old confidante-to-lover ploy. "So he knows all my faults, I'm sure. That should put his mind at ease."

"It should. Except he remembers how over the top in love I was with you, even then."

Adrian was glad her attention had drifted to the waves because he felt all the blood rush from his head at her proclamation. The things they'd said to each other before it ended—he would have never expected to hear them from someone who loved him, and he sure as hell should never have said them to someone he loved.

If he'd known, he'd have tried harder to work things out, though she'd made it clear she wanted him gone. After he'd hurt her, he knew he needed to go.

"But that's over now."

"Of course. I wouldn't be marrying him if I still loved you." Now she did stand, brushing sand off her bottom. "If I don't see you in the morning, thank you for letting me dive today. It meant a lot. Good night."

A crash of thunder woke Mallory. She heard the sporadic splatter of raindrops against the roof of the tent before a gust of wind rattled the canvas walls and the sky opened up.

She lifted her head and looked around. No Linda. Big surprise. She'd probably trotted over to Adrian's tent as soon as Mallory was asleep. Perhaps the two of them were snuggling up cozy against the rain, the way she and Adrian once had.

Pushing that picture aside, Mallory reached for her duffel on the camp stool at the end of her cot and pulled out her slicker, just in case the tent didn't hold.

Usually she loved sleeping in the rain. Now she stretched and tried to convince herself her tent wouldn't blow away. She'd pretend she was lying in her little house. But four solid walls and a roof that leaked when it rained hard enough was different from being in a tent with rippling walls and a sagging, though so far watertight, ceiling.

Lightning illuminated the tent, followed immediately by an explosion of thunder. Damn, the storm was right on top of the camp. No way was she going to get any sleep tonight. She sat up and watched the wind try to reach beneath the walls of the tent. Whoever had pitched the tent had done a damn fine job.

The ceiling sagged lower. Not good news. When she put her foot down to stand, to push the water from the roof, she ended up in ankle deep water. Hell. That meant the camp was flooded.

She was reaching into her duffel for her flashlight when she heard shouting outside the tent. She splashed across to the flap, unzipped it.

Adrian stood there in his slicker, his face rain-streaked. That was all she saw before he aimed a flashlight past her, inside the tent. "Where's Linda?"

She blinked rapidly as if that would help her regain her sight. "I thought she was with you."

"No, why would she be?" He shone the lamp on her bunk. "Come on. Get your gear. We have to get to higher ground."

She grabbed her duffel, thankfully packed, then fished underwater for her boots. She turned to see Adrian's hand extended. Without thinking, she took it and allowed him to lead her out.

They sloshed through mud and water on their way to the two four-wheel-drive vehicles, luckily slightly higher than the rest of the camp. The others were either already shivering in the vehicles or loading stuff in the cargo area. One slickered person pulled her duffel from her hands and slung it in the back of the truck with the rest.

"Where's Dr. Vigil?" she shouted over the roar of the wind.

"With Toney in the other truck."

"Will we be coming back?"

"Not tonight." He opened the passenger door. She hesitated. Wouldn't he rather have Linda up front with him? When he scowled at her, she climbed in.

The steel body of the vehicle cut the sound of the storm considerably. Mallory glanced behind her to see Linda and Jacob huddled in the backseat, shivering. Adrian swung into the driver's side of the Land Cruiser.

"Buckle up."

He coaxed the engine to life and urged the truck forward.

"Where are we going?" Mallory asked.

"Not far. The roads'll be shit for days after a rain like this. I just want to get up higher so we can try to get a good night's sleep without worrying about washing away."

The vehicles moved at a crawl through the blinding rain, Adrian driving the lead car.

The windows fogged with every breath. Mallory fiddled with the defroster until it cleared the bottom part of the windshield. She reached over to wipe at the condensation with the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

"Mallory, sit back. I'd rather you be buckled than me able to see."

"That's not encouraging."

He flashed her a grin, and she resisted the urge to shout at him to watch the road. "Like old times, eh?"

"Remember that time in Africa you almost drove off the cliff in weather like this? God. Do you even know where you're going?"

"I've always got an escape plan. You know that."

She did. Boy, did she. He'd escaped her easily enough. She twisted in her seat to look behind them. The headlights of Toney's Land Cruiser were barely visible behind them through the torrential rain. She turned and couldn't see a foot in front of the headlights.

"Relax. We're going to get there."

Only then did she realize she was straining against her seatbelt, willing the road to show itself. She had to trust Adrian to get them to safety. Consciously, she rested her shoulders against the seat and closed her eyes.

"Where's your ring?" he teased. "We could use the extra light."

She pressed a hand to her breasts. "I've got it on a chain."

"You feel weird wearing it around me."

"No!"

He glanced over. "You forget how well I know you."

He was right but she'd never admit it. "Not anymore."

"Maybe this site is cursed," Linda murmured.

Mallory glanced at Adrian. He merely shrugged, though a grin tugged at his lips.

They rolled in first gear for what seemed like hours. She felt the press of gravity as they moved up an incline. She prayed that the mud didn't carry them down into camp.

No one in the backseat spoke at all, and after Adrian's admonition, the two of them no longer spoke, either. Mallory couldn't keep her eyes closed long, though. When she opened them, she saw Adrian

looking out the side window instead of the windshield. He rubbed the window with his elbow and inched forward.

"Looks like we'll be okay." He shut off the engine, pulled the brake and reached under his seat for a bottle of Scotch. "Anybody thirsty?"

"No, no. You're getting it all mixed up." Mallory held out the Styrofoam cup for Adrian to refill. She'd decided not to think about how the cup had ended up under the seat since the first glass of Scotch had washed it clean. "Thailand was the typhoon and Madagascar was the mudslide."

Adrian poured, his hand shaking from laughter—and probably none too steady from the Scotch he'd consumed. He gestured with the bottle to the backseat, but Jacob and Linda declined—they were likely too young anyway—so he tilted his head back and poured the last drops in his mouth.

"Nah, you're wrong. Thailand was the mudslide because we stayed in that little hut, remember? The one with the real bed? It was a good thing we evacuated. When we returned, nothing was left."

"Mm." She swallowed. "No. Madagascar was the mudslide because I lost my—" She stopped, not quite drunk enough to blurt out their history in front of Jacob and Linda, both who leaned forward to hear over the pounding rain.

Adrian glanced at her and in the shadows she saw his eyebrow quirk.

"And then we—"

The other eyebrow lifted.

She rose up on her knees and leaned over to him. He turned to allow her better access to his ear, and she took a moment to inhale his scent, rain and man, gathering the courage to remind him. "My diaphragm was lost."

"Ah." He dragged the syllable out as he leaned his head against the window of the door. "Yes. You're right. We had to get—creative until we could replace it."

Even though she only saw his face in flashes and knew he couldn't see hers, she sensed he was watching her. Not knowing what he could be thinking made her uneasy. She shouldn't have brought the idea of sex into his thoughts.

"We had some good times, Mal." The tone of his voice told her just where his thoughts had headed. She needed to divert him.

"So are there any continents you two haven't been on?" Linda leaned between the seats, a welcome interruption.

"Antarctica," they answered together.

"And the best?"

#### M.J. Fredrick

"China." Another answer in unison and this time Mallory looked over in surprise. He watched her steadily. Were his reasons for loving the China expedition the same as hers? If she could see his face, she might be able to tell.

"Why?"

Adrian finally turned to look at the girl. "There are these ancient towers in western China, star shaped, over two hundred of them, and no one knows what they were there for. No one knows who built them or how long ago. When we were students," he said as he flipped a finger between Mallory and himself, "we were part of the team trying to figure it out."

So he didn't think it was the best for the same reason she did. Of course he wouldn't. If such things had been as important to him as they were to her, they would still be married.

"So did you?" Linda asked.

"We think so. We think the string of them represent the 'dmu' cord, which in Buddhism is said to connect heaven and earth."

"So if you don't know the answer, why was that your favorite? You both said so."

Adrian reached over and lifted Mallory's hand from her lap, surprising both women. "We'd just gotten married when we went to China. It was like a honeymoon."

Mallory pulled her hand free. "The dirty, unromantic kind." But it hadn't been. It had been like a fairy tale. Even though she and Adrian had made love a hundred times in the two years before they got married, spent night after night together, something about the ceremony they'd had performed in Greece made everything more magical. God, she'd loved him to distraction.

"How come you've been to all these places?" Jacob asked. "You didn't have specialties?"

"Mine is languages and symbology," Mallory said. "Adrian didn't find his till later."

"Underwater archaeology," Linda supplied.

Mallory grit her teeth at the possessive tone, chided herself for the surge of jealousy. He wasn't hers anymore.

"So you've been all these places, seen all these things," Linda pressed as Mallory swung her legs to the floor and stared out the windshield. "How could you walk away?"

It seemed like everyone in the car quit breathing, waiting for her answer. She struggled to find the words that wouldn't put too much on Adrian. She didn't want to discredit him, especially when his faults had nothing to do with his job.

"It's not all finding old ships." Mallory tried to force a lightness in her tone. "It can be deadly dull at times."

"And working for Global Alliance is nonstop action," Adrian muttered, misnaming the corporation.

"No." She turned to him, hating to hurt him but needing distance between them again. She'd allowed herself to get too close with the trip down memory lane, and it seemed to be having the same effect on him. "But planning for a family is."

He sucked in his breath and tucked the empty bottle under his seat. Again, her heart twisted in pain for hurting him.

"We better get some sleep. There will be a lot to clean up tomorrow." He folded his arms over his chest and closed his eyes, not fooling her for an instant.

Sunlight shone through the window of the truck with a ferocity that matched the storm of the night before. Mallory turned her head from it, burrowing into her hard canvas pillow.

Hard? Canvas? Her duffel?

No. Oh, no.

She sat up so fast she cracked her head on the steering wheel and saw stars, then damn near dropped her head into Adrian's lap. Her hand covering her abused skull, she scrambled across the car, keeping low so not to strike her head on anything else.

She'd fallen asleep on his lap. How would that look? What would he think? She didn't even dare glance at his face in case he was awake and aware. Maybe the quantity of Scotch he'd had last night had him sleeping deeper than usual.

"Good morning," he said in his rough burr, the voice that had greeted her every morning for ten years.

He knew. Mortified, she raised her face to his, blinking tears of pain away. "Good morning."

"Sleep well?" He was taunting her, damn him.

"Yes, great, actually." She rubbed her neck under her hair, surprised none of the muscles protested. "I'm surprised to see you still here."

"I didn't want to disturb your sleep."

"Why-did I sleep there all night?"

He stretched, cracking his back. "Yep."

"Why did you let me?"

Silence hung between them for a long moment. She swore he even stopped breathing before he said, "Mallory."

She raised her hand to stop him, deciding she didn't want to hear the answer after all. "At least the storm is past."

"It did its worst." Adrian shifted, hoping she wouldn't notice the effect she'd had on him, sleeping on his lap, her hand resting by her cheek, high on his thigh. Of course, she'd have to look at him to notice his response to her.

#### M.J. Fredrick

He'd sat motionless for nearly an hour after he woke, barely daring to breathe lest he wake her. He'd watched the sun climb until it glowed on her hair. Resisting the urge to stroke her hair from her face, to toy with her manicured nails, to pretend she was still his, had been nearly impossible.

He knew the moment she awoke she'd run away.

She wasn't going to be able to run far, not for a few days.

"You'd better use the satellite phone to call the airline. You're not going to make your plane."

"I have to get back, Adrian. I have to file the papers and the wedding-"

He shook his head, taking perverse pleasure in her shock. "The roads will be impassable for days. You saw them when you came out here. They aren't much to begin with. When it rains, we're cut off from civilization."

His pleasure evaporated as her anxiety grew. "I didn't plan to be gone more than two days. I have a ton of things to do."

"You'll be home by the end of the week. As for now, we won't even be able to drive. We'll have to walk."

"Walk?"

He nodded toward her window. "It's not far."

She looked down at the camp.

"Be careful when you get out," he said and opened his own door.

"Adrian, you don't understand. There are a lot of details I need to attend to. Maybe we could take the boat. It wouldn't take long, just a couple—" The sentence broke off in a squeal, and he rounded the rear of the truck to see the top of her head drop behind the foliage on the side of the road.

# Chapter Five

"Mallory!" He lunged, flinging himself on his stomach and throwing his hands out, grabbing blindly. He caught and released a handful of weeds, of brush, before closing around skin.

Bony skin. Her fingers.

Scrambling forward on his stomach using his elbows, hanging onto her slipping fingers, he edged over to the side of the road. A trench of mud where the road had slid out from underneath her led him to Mallory. He looked down into her wide eyes, bright with terror.

The drop to the beach below was maybe fifteen feet, survivable, but it would hurt like hell sliding through the brush to get there. He reached down and grasped her wrist. She swung her other arm up to grasp his forearm, her manicured nails gouging his flesh.

"Dig your feet into the side of the hill," he said as soothingly as he could, to calm her. "I'll pull you up."

She nodded frantically, tears streaking down her face.

"You have to help me now." He tried to transmit a serenity he didn't feel. "Put your feet against the hill."

The tension vibrated through her arms as she swung her feet until she could brace them against the cliff. She started walking up, but one foot slipped and she fell free, dragging Adrian forward. Her nails scored his arm as her grip slipped.

"Adrian!" Her voice was strangled with fear, and he fought back his own.

"I've got you. I won't let go." With one hand, he tugged at his belt, hoping the webbed fabric was strong enough, wishing that he hadn't already sent everyone else to camp.

"Adrian." His name came out in three syllables as she struggled to once again brace herself against the hillside. "What—are—you—doing?"

"Wait." With no little difficulty, he pulled his belt free and slung it about the trunk of a nearby bush. He looped his free arm through it to secure himself, then slithered closer to the edge of the cliff. "Ready?"

"No. I think-I'll-enjoy-the view-a little longer."

"Smart ass," he muttered and reached down. Together, her climbing, him pulling despite the mud that threatened his grip and her safety, they got her to the top of the cliff. Adrian flung himself on his back and she collapsed on top of him, breathing heavily, much, he thought, like after a bout of sex.

He closed his arms around her, absorbed her trembling and offered her his strength.

# M.J. Fredrick

Finally she lifted her mud-smeared face to him. "Thank you," she whispered.

He wanted to kiss her dirty mouth, wanted to stroke her mud-and-twig-tangled hair. But he had no right.

He released her abruptly and took advantage of her weight shift to sit up. "Can't have the bride walking down the aisle on crutches, can we?"

The shock on her face had him pulling farther away, then standing.

"If you're up to it, we can head to camp. There's work to do."

Slowly, bracing herself against the side of the truck, she stood. And damn it, her knees sagged. He stepped forward to catch her. She stiffened the minute he touched her.

"I'm okay." She splayed her hand against his chest to push him away. "Once I get the mud out of my bra, I'll be just fine."

He forced a laugh past the image she'd painted in his mind, and once again released her. "We can hope the shower didn't blow away."

"There's always the ocean. I'm fine, Adrian, really. Just a little shaky. Good thing you're a good driver or we might have all gone over last night."

"I hate to tell you, Mal. The road was about six feet wider last night." He nodded toward the cliff. "We could've gone down in a mudslide."

Cautiously, she crept back to peek over the side and gasped.

"There will be a lot of that until things dry out a bit. So till then, you're stuck here with me."

Mallory limped into the camp, eschewing any help from Adrian, and grimaced when she saw the destruction. She couldn't identify her tent from the others. All of them sagged with rainwater and lay tangled against the sand dunes that separated the camp from the sea. Twisted aluminum poles stuck up from the sand, marking the places the tents had once been.

Linda was directing cleanup, which at this point meant finding someplace that didn't have standing water so they could set up the mess tent. She turned when Adrian walked up, looked him over, then turned to Mallory.

"What on earth happened?"

"A little accident," Adrian said.

"If the mud was on your back instead of your front, I'd think we'd made a mistake leaving you alone up there." She flashed Mallory a grin that confused her. She thought Mallory and Adrian had been fooling around and she was winking at Mallory? No jealousy at all? "Especially after that walk down memory lane last night. I'm telling you, this site is cursed."

Mallory decided the best defense was to ignore her. She stepped forward. "How can I help?"

"Why don't you guys clean up first?"

Adrian glanced around. "I think the shower tent is on the bottom of that pile over there."

"Use the ocean." Linda inclined her head toward the beach. "It'll get most of that gunk off."

Mallory grimaced at the thought of bathing in salt water; it would itch like hell later. But she had mud in her bra, down the front of her pants, in her hair, her ears. She had to get cleaned up.

And she'd left her clean clothes in the truck up on the hill.

The hell with it. She was heading for the surf.

Adrian came on her heels, also without a change of clothes. "Your stuff in the truck?" he asked.

"Yep. Yours?"

"Yep."

"So no points for planning ahead, huh?"

She stopped dead when she reached the apex of the sand dune and looked out at the *Miss M*, tilted at a thirty-degree angle in shallow water. Adrian swore and ran past her, shouting for Toney and Jacob.

The five of them working together got the boat righted. They found no significant damage, other than water in the gas tank. Adrian stepped away, grease from the gas and water filter now layered on top of the dried mud.

"So much for taking the boat to the city to catch your plane," he said over his shoulder. "The filter should dry in a day or so. Looks like we're stuck here."

She struggled to hold on to her frustration. It wasn't his fault they were stuck here, right? He hadn't called the storm on them. He couldn't have known the boat would be swamped.

Tears burning her eyes, she turned away, not wanting him to see her cry.

Adrian moved in front of her and put his hands on her shoulders. She tensed at his touch and he dropped his hands away, his face grim through her blurred vision.

"It will be all right. Two days at the most. Two days won't make that much difference."

She wished the wedding was the entire problem. No, her real problem was staying here with all the memories of what they'd once been.

"You'll feel better after you wash off. Come on." He headed into the gently rolling water, peeling off his shirt. She turned away. The rippling muscles, the bronzed skin was too familiar.

He noticed that she balked. "Come on, Mallory, it's not like you've never seen it before, and we're not exactly going to get this mud off with our clothes on."

She folded her arms and glanced behind her. The others had gone to camp, leaving them alone. Her nerves simmered.

"I'm not going in with you if you're going in naked."

He straightened, unzipping his shorts. "That's a first."

# M.J. Fredrick

Damn, damn, why did he have to go and say something like that? Now he had her remembering more than one time they'd gone into the surf shamelessly and made love in the waves. She could feel his arms around her, feel his body push inside her. "It's not a good idea."

"We're adults." He shoved the shorts down and her face heated as she averted her gaze. His tone held the slightest hint of a taunt. "You said yourself you'd learned how to control your urges."

Not where he was concerned. Even mud-splattered, he was-

No, she wouldn't think about it as she walked into the surf. She gritted her teeth against the squeal—the rain had cooled the water significantly. It was an ice bath.

Even the waves didn't get to the mud inside her blouse. Adrian stood a distance away, like a sea god, his arms raised, hands folded behind his head, the water lapping at his bare hips She turned and unbuttoned her blouse, unhooked her bra to wash the mud embedded in the lace. Dropping to her knees and crouching to hide beneath the water, she scrubbed at the fabric, lamenting the effect the mud and salt water would have on the expensive garment.

"I can help you with that," Adrian said, too close.

She whipped around, wrapping her arms around herself. Cautiously lifting one hand, she shoved her muddy hair back from her face and glared.

He moved toward her, and her eyes were drawn to a deep dimple in his cheek beneath the reddish stubble. Okay, actually her eyes were drawn elsewhere, but she forced herself to focus on the dimple.

"Go. Away."

"A fine way to treat the man who saved your life," he teased.

The tide flowed out and she caught a glimpse of bare hip. She had to get away from here, now. She didn't trust her hormones. They remembered Adrian and wanted to party. Distance. She needed distance.

Still underwater, she tugged on her dirty T-shirt, giving herself another layer of defense. It wasn't enough. His eyes flicked to the bra in her hand and she flushed. Damn it, she would not let him get to her. She rose and moved deeper into the water, holding his gaze, daring him to keep his eyes on hers and not glance at her breasts, no doubt clearly defined under her wet shirt.

He met her dare, his eyes only flicking to her cheek. "You have mud just there."

Slipping his hand under her wet hair, he stroked his thumb over her cheek. She lost the will to pull away, slap him, any of the things she should do. She just looked into his eyes helplessly as he lowered his head.

A wave swept past them, and her ring floated free of her shirt, floated between them on its chain. Only then did she find the strength to yank away.

"Adrian," she said, at once chiding and regretful. "It's—it would be a mistake." She walked out of the ocean, her shorts still full of mud. Maybe Linda was right. Maybe this site was cursed.

Mallory was still shaking as she helped put the camp in order, a cumbersome task, but one that left plenty of time for thinking. For a moment there, she'd wanted nothing more than to kiss Adrian, to feel his familiar mouth, the scrape of his stubble against her skin and the heat that had been between them.

She had forgotten all about Jonathan. A woman in love didn't do that. Especially when her reason for forgetting her fiancé was a man who had hurt her.

She found Adrian settling Dr. Vigil in his tent. She softened when she saw the old man and smiled at him. His night in the truck had taken its toll—he looked exhausted. Adrian was good to look after him before he righted his own tent.

"I'm sorry to interrupt. I need the satellite phone. Or is it still in the truck?"

"Linda had it last. Ask her."

She crossed her arms, feeling the need to explain. "I'm calling the airline and Jonathan."

Adrian nodded, bending a leg of the cot in place, not looking back. "Go ahead. Just don't tell him what we have out here."

It took her a moment to realize he wasn't talking about the two of them and their almost-kiss. She gaped. "Surely you don't think Jonathan—"

He straightened and turned, exasperated. A fine sheen of sweat coated his skin. She hadn't noticed it was all that hot. Now she did.

"I tell everyone the same thing, Mal. Don't get your panties in a knot."

"Can't," she muttered, shoving aside the tent flap. "They're still too muddy."

Adrian snorted a laugh and she flounced out.

"It's good to see her again," Robert said with a sigh, reaching in his breast pocket for the bottle of pills. "Good to hear the two of you bantering again."

The pain must be bad after spending the night in the Land Cruiser. Robert never took the pills in front of anyone. Adrian pretended not to see. "It's called fighting, Prof, and don't get used to it." He tested the cot's stability, pressing both hands in the center. Either it was stable or had sunk deep enough in the sand. How the scrawny old man could sleep comfortably without padding, Adrian had no idea. "She's not the same person. Neither am I."

"Surely that can only be a good thing."

Maybe, if they'd grown to want the same things. But no, if anything, the gap between them was wider than before. He needed this find; she needed a home.

"There's no going back." He hefted himself to his feet and walked over to the chest where Robert kept his books. It had survived several continents and a mudslide—had it kept the books dry in last night's storm?

# M.J. Fredrick

The professor rose, quicker than the old man had moved in a long time, but Adrian already had the lid open. He breathed a sigh of relief to see the books intact, no water damage. And yet the old man hovered at his shoulder.

"They're fine, not even a drop got to them," Adrian said. The prof had had some of these books for decades and they were valuable. Surely that was what had him nervous. Adrian shut the case and walked out of the tent to see Mallory with her head bent, one hand holding her hair back, the other holding the phone as she spoke to her fiancé.

Jonathan answered on the second ring. "Mallory! Are you calling from the airport? What time will you be home?"

Guilt flushed through her at the sound of his voice. She battled the emotion. She'd done nothing to feel guilty about.

"Um, no."

Walking a short way out of camp, she explained to him what had happened last night, leaving out that she'd spent the night in the car with Adrian and had almost let him kiss her in the ocean. The whole time she spoke tension wound inside her, and she wondered at it. This was something beyond her control. She shouldn't be worried about disappointing Jonathan when she couldn't change anything.

"I'll be home in plenty of time for the wedding, don't worry." She laughed, but he didn't.

"Adrian seems awfully hospitable considering you came down there to serve him with papers. He did sign though, didn't he?"

"They're signed. Once we present them in court, I'll be legally free."

"And you're happy about that."

It was so unlike Jonathan to need reassurance. She wasn't even sure how to offer it. "Of course I'm happy about that. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Seeing Adrian hasn't brought back old feelings?"

At that moment, Adrian stepped out of Dr. Vigil's tent and their gazes locked. "Is that what you're worried about?" she managed.

"You didn't fall out of love with him, Mallory."

Of course. He'd been there, seen every stage of her grief. "I don't love him anymore, Jonathan. I promise. I better go," she added quickly, wondering why she couldn't say she loved him with Adrian listening. "The phone is for emergencies only. I'll let you know when I'm coming home. Bye!"

She hung up and swung on Adrian. "Are you eavesdropping?"

He snorted. "Didn't hear anything good."

"What did you expect to hear?"

He turned away. "Something that makes me think you love him and aren't just making excuses not to go home. Look, I'm too tired to fight tonight. I'm going to turn in. Tomorrow I want to go check on the ship."

"How can you? We have no boat." She flushed at the slip. It wasn't her boat. Of course it was too much to hope he'd missed it. Adrian cocked a brow.

"We have a skiff with a motor. Not big enough to get you to the city, but big enough to get out to the site." One corner of his mouth lifted. "You want to go with me?"

She hefted the phone in her hand. She was stuck here anyway, right? Might as well. She nodded, trying to hide her anticipation.

The sun glowed over the glassy surface of the cove as Mallory and Adrian readied the rubber skiff to enter the water the following morning. His muscles ached, both from pulling Mallory up the hill yesterday and cleaning up the camp. The place had been a disaster. Even with everyone helping, the task had consumed the day. And yet everyone had been in a good humor about it, Mallory too.

"When will the rest of your crew come?" she asked.

He hesitated. He'd always been able to talk to Mallory, but they were divorced, after all. And there was so much he needed to share with her. "This is my crew."

She straightened and braced her hands on her hips. "Adrian, you can't do this with five people."

"It's all I can afford. Get that end, would you?"

She bent to lift a corner of the skiff, not taking her eyes from him. "You're funding this yourself?"

He shrugged, hating dredging up this memory, especially with her. "After Tunisia, I was the treasure hunter, not the archaeologist. No one believed I didn't steal that casket. So between me and the professor, we funded this trip ourselves."

She dropped her end of the boat and stared in shock. "Where did you get the money?"

He shook his head. "Robert took out a trust fund I never knew he had, and I approached a publisher, told them what I'd found, just not where. They gave me a hefty advance to write the book."

"And you used it to fund the excavation." Her voice sounded hollow with disbelief. "You aren't going to be able to do much with only four divers."

He smirked. "I'm hoping once I start uncovering artifacts, I can get more funding, though it will be tricky to ask for money and keep the find a secret at the same time." He grinned. "You could come back for your honeymoon."

"Oh, yeah." She rolled her eyes. "Jonathan would love that."

Glad to get off the subject of his financial difficulties—which were never out of his head but never appealing to think about, he jumped on the new topic. "You don't mind that you won't scuba dive anymore, or snorkel or hike?"

"There's more to a marriage than that."

He climbed in the boat and reached for the tanks. She was so careful not to touch him, which only made him want to touch her, to see what would happen. He didn't want to encourage her to cheat on her fiancé, but he wanted her to know she was making the right decision about divorcing him. The way she'd looked at him earlier, almost letting him kiss her, he was pretty sure she wasn't.

"It seems like you need to have something in common."

This time she snorted as she turned to grab more gear from the dock to load into the skiff. "We had tons in common and it didn't do us any good. All Jonathan and I need is a common goal."

"Which is?"

She did look at him then. "A family."

The idea of her carrying another man's child was like a punch in the gut. Well, hell, he'd asked for it. He turned to regain his balance. If he hadn't been so selfish, so focused on his career, he could have given her the children, the home she wanted. He could have watched her grow heavy with his child and felt the pride of it.

He scrubbed a hand over his hair and looked away. Who the hell was he kidding? He'd make a terrible father. What did he know about being a dad? He sure as hell hadn't learned good parenting skills from his family.

So he'd taken the easy way out and given up the woman he loved so he wouldn't have to face the challenge, wouldn't have to risk failing something as important as a child. And now he was paying the price.

Okay, the skiff was just too damn small. Once their dive gear was loaded on it, Mallory and Adrian barely had room to sit across from each other, and with the first swell, they'd be bumping into each other. Why had she said yes?

Because there was a centuries-old shipwreck just yards away, that was why.

The motor made conversation impossible, thank God. She used motion sickness as an excuse to face forward, away from him, but felt his gaze as he guided the boat out of the cove toward the barge. If only she could filter out how much of her anticipation and excitement was for the dive, and how much was from being with Adrian again.

If only she resented not being able to go home.

They bumped up against the barge, which had weathered the storm well. Mallory jumped out to secure the skiff, eager to put distance between them. He lifted the diving equipment to her and climbed out at a more leisurely pace, smiling, like he knew why she was in such a damn hurry.

After all, once they were in the water, there was no danger of conversation.

"So. What do you and Johnny do for fun?" Adrian asked, zipping his wetsuit up over his chest.

Mallory didn't watch him dress this time. She was too busy wondering at the sarcasm in his tone. "What do you mean?" she asked coolly.

"Well, you said you hadn't been diving in a couple years, and I know how much you love it. I was just wondering what Johnny considers a good time."

"His name is Jonathan and we have a lot of fun together." She hated that he was making her defensive.

"I'm sure you do. I'm asking how."

"Um." She shifted. "We go to museums and galleries and parties. We watch a lot of plays and movies." She smiled. "He likes karaoke."

"Why are you changing who you are for him?"

She turned away, digging in her bag for a band to secure her braid, scared to look at him, to let him know he spoke her own concerns. "I'm not, and I resent the implication."

"Yeah?" He leaned closer. "Does he go hiking with you? Swimming? Any of the things you love to do?"

Jonathan didn't, not saying that an active lifestyle was too tomboyish, but reacting with disapproval whenever she suggested they go diving or camping. Mallory would never admit it to Adrian. Yes, Jonathan was a touch old-fashioned, but they had the same goals and that was important.

"What has he done for you?" Adrian pressed.

"He let me come here and get this out of my system." She picked up Jacob's suit, wished she didn't have to strip to get into it. Being around Adrian made her vulnerable enough. "What about you and Linda? She doesn't dive, right? What do you do for fun besides the obvious?"

He choked out a laugh. "You think I'm sleeping with Linda? She's just a girl."

Mallory stiffened, even more defensive. God, she hated that feeling. "She's old enough. And she seems to adore you."

He shook his head with a wry grin. "She's in love with Jacob. Are you blind?"

Apparently. She'd never even seen the two of them together, other than that night in the back of the Land Cruiser. "Then why was she coming out of your tent before dawn?"

"I don't—" His mouth twisted, incredulous. "She was cutting my hair. She cuts my hair once a week. I don't sleep with students. What kind of person do you think I am?" He looked at her, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "You were jealous."

The taunt in his voice only inflamed her temper. "Please. I'm engaged."

"To a man who doesn't sleep with you."

"I don't sleep with him." Why did she feel the need to clarify?

"Because of me." His tone was smug.

"God, your ego!" She tugged at the suit and staggered, off balance. Adrian caught her arm, not hard, just enough to have her stumbling. She breathed in his scent, her body responding to his proximity. Her pulse pounded with anticipation as she forced herself not to look at his mouth.

"It's still there. Do you feel it?" His voice was a low rumble and his breath caressed her skin.

Her nerves jumped with longing to feel his mouth against hers. "It was never our problem." Her own voice trembled, to her shame.

"No, faithfulness was."

She looked up at him, her temper spiking. "I was never unfaithful to you."

"Not with your body." He flicked his gaze over her. "But you were with your heart, where it counted." He motioned with his finger for her to turn.

Silently, he hoisted her tanks onto her shoulders, double-checked them, and she did the same for him. It was a trick to perform the task without touching him, but she managed. Even the wetsuit wasn't barrier enough.

She understood what he meant about her being unfaithful and wished she didn't. But she hadn't stayed by him when the Tunisia dive dissolved, damaging Adrian's reputation in the field. Their marriage had already been hanging by a thread at that point, and everything she'd done to help Adrian had been met with bitterness and resentment. He'd been angry she'd gone to Valentine Smoller. But she didn't know who else to turn to for help when Adrian had been arrested for the theft of the casket no one could find. She should have listened to him when he insisted that Valentine had taken the artifact. Every time she'd gone to the jail on Adrian's behalf, he'd berated her and accused her of wanting Valentine and his money, so she had finally taken what was left of her pride and gone home. He'd followed soon after and almost seemed disappointed when he didn't find her cheating on him with his former partner. They'd fought, and he'd left for good.

She should keep that in mind. Remembering the good times when she was with him was too easy. And too dangerous.

He straightened, adjusting his tanks while he studied her. Her nerves were about to snap. Mistake, mistake, mistake. She should not be out here alone with him.

"What?" she snarled.

He grinned. "You never could handle the silent treatment."

"You never were much for giving it." Their fights had been raucous and hurtful. And frequent there towards the end. "Let's check the site." She took the regulator between her teeth and went into the water.

# Chapter Six

Mallory knew she was in trouble when she couldn't flex her fingers. She glanced around the ocean floor, searching for Adrian.

Nitrogen narcosis wasn't causing her numbness—she'd experienced that once in Greece. This was something else, cold, maybe, but she had to go up, now. Even though she'd been down such a short time, she still had to make the decompression stops on the way up.

Why would the cold affect her today when it hadn't yesterday? Jacob's suit was too big, yes, and allowed so much water into the suit that her body couldn't warm, but she hadn't had the same weakness on her other dive. The water was colder since the storm but shouldn't have this much of an effect.

She signaled to Adrian, motioned up. His brow furrowed behind his mask. She mimed a shiver and swam toward the guideline Adrian had created last night, marked with decompression stops. She tried to grasp it, but her fingers were too stiff. Hesitating, she decided not to hang on, instead finning her way to the first stop. When she treaded water, she only floated away from the line. She paddled back to wrap her arms around the rope but drifted up. Damn. She couldn't stabilize herself. An experienced diver should be able to control her movements.

And then Adrian was there, swimming in front of her, closing his hands around hers on the knot in the line, his eyes dark with concern.

She waved him off, urging him down, but he shook his head. As her shivers became uncontrollable, he guided her to the next decompression stop and wrapped his arms around her to warm her. Tension only made the shivers worse, so she tried to relax, but relaxing meant snuggling against Adrian's body, something she couldn't do for her own sanity.

That didn't mean she didn't want to. But she couldn't.

By the time they reached the last decompression stop, she was so stiff her joints ached. This was the longest stop, twenty minutes that felt like twenty years. She had to relax in Adrian's arms or she'd never make it to the surface. Hesitantly, she eased forward until her mask bumped his arm. He read her intentions, as he always had, and gently folded his arms around her, giving her one last chance to back away before he tightened his hold. His embrace didn't make much difference in temperature but made her feel safe. Her breathing evened, her shivers subsided.

She'd forgotten how Adrian used to make her feel safe.

He guided her to the surface, helped her out of her gear. Her jaw was clenched so tight he could barely get the regulator out of her mouth. Once he unzipped her wetsuit and the wind hit her, her shivers became uncontrollable. He grabbed a big towel from the bench, wrapped it around her for modesty, then tugged her wet clothes off. She was too cold to protest. He pressed her arms to her sides to hold the towel in place, before he stripped off his own gear with less finesse than usual.

He opened up the towel and stepped closer. Against her. Naked skin to naked skin.

And they were alone in the middle of the ocean.

His skin was cool too, but heated quickly against hers. He'd always been so warm to the touch, and she burrowed into his chest without thinking as he chafed the towel against her back, blocking the breeze with the thick terry.

Slowly she became aware of the swell of her breasts teased by his chest hair, her belly pressed against the hardness of him, and she could feel his awareness as well. She turned her head and her lips brushed his chest. God, she wanted...

He jumped back as if burned. She snatched the towel just in time, lifting her eyes to his. His eyes were hot with something indefinable—anger? Pain? He swung away and snatched up his clothes before climbing into the skiff, leaving her cold, confused and naked.

Linda stood at the dock when they pulled in. Great. On top of being confused over her feelings for Adrian, Mallory had to deal with someone the minute she got off the boat, though at least she'd learned the truth about her relationship with Adrian. She started past the girl without a word, ignoring Adrian as he tied off the skiff, needing distance.

"Mallory, there's someone here to see you." Linda turned to follow her.

"What?" Mallory pivoted, her mind yanking back to the present and not to the scene on the boat, the heat of Adrian's body.

Linda pointed, and Mallory whirled to see a man standing on the rise overlooking the beach, watching her.

Jonathan, neat and tidy in a tropical shirt and creased khaki shorts.

Holy hell. This curse thing was making more and more sense. She smoothed her hair, knowing the ponytail was in all sorts of disarray, hoping Jonathan wouldn't glean why. She wiped her palms down her shorts and realized they were Adrian's trunks. Would Jonathan see in her face that she'd just been in Adrian's arms, skin to skin?

Before Jonathan could see her hesitation, she gathered herself and charged up the hill toward him, all too aware of Linda's—and Adrian's—open curiosity.

Halfway up the rise, she remembered she wasn't wearing her ring. Shit. He would notice. She reached in the neck of her T-shirt—Adrian's T-shirt, damn it—and pulled the chain free, letting the ring dangle.

She stood before her fiancé, awkward, ill at ease in her own skin and her ex-husband's clothes, her body still humming from Adrian's embrace.

Jonathan gave her a soft kiss before looking past her to the boat.

"Jonathan! What are you doing here?" Okay, that came out a little more accusatory than delighted. She winced.

"I came to bring you home." He glanced at her, then at the boat. Mallory refused to turn to see if Adrian was watching them.

"How did you get out here?"

"The roads weren't as bad as I was led to believe." Jonathan nodded toward the boat, and still Mallory refused to turn. He plucked at the shoulder of the too-big T-shirt. "What is this you're wearing? I didn't see you pack these things."

She couldn't control the flush that crept across her skin. "They're—not mine. I didn't have anything suitable to wear under the wetsuit, so I borrowed them."

Jonathan reached down, twirled the string of the trunks around once. "They're a bit big."

She forced a laugh and stepped away, trying to remember the last time she'd felt uncomfortable around Jonathan. "Yeah, well, you should see the wetsuit."

He studied her before he lifted a finger to her upper lip. "You have blood there."

She raised the back of her hand to her nose self-consciously, found flakes of dried blood. "It's stopped now. It's all right."

"What do you mean?" Concern creased his brow, and he tilted her chin back.

"When I dive, I get nosebleeds. It's no big deal."

She had to wonder why it was so easy for him to touch her and so hard for her to touch him. And not just in front of Adrian. Being near Adrian, who was so physically demonstrative, who she had to stop herself from leaning into, reminded her how she didn't do that with Jonathan. The problem wasn't that she was uneasy with him. Maybe she was just keeping her hands to herself because she knew she wouldn't have a physical relationship with him till she was divorced from Adrian. She didn't want to give him the wrong idea.

Now she could.

With some effort, she slid her hand down his arm, twined her fingers with his. She didn't miss the surprise in his eyes and suppressed a niggle of guilt that maybe she was covering up the emotions that had been roused when she was with Adrian on the barge.

Footsteps vibrated on the dock behind her and that damn Scottish burr followed. "Aren't you going to introduce me?"

Resisting the urge to jump back from Jonathan, she tightened her fingers on Jonathan's hand as if he could ground her, but he pulled away to shake Adrian's hand, leaving her to watch the two men measure each other. "Adrian Reeves, Jonathan Montcroft."

She expected Adrian to be a jerk, but he was his charming, hand-pumping, give-me-the-funding-Ineed self. Jonathan, on the other hand, was reserved. She sensed the tension running through his body. As hard as this was for her, it must be harder for him.

"I've heard a lot about you, Johnny. Probably not nearly as much as you've heard about me." Adrian clapped her fiancé on the back and turned him toward camp. His burr was thicker than usual. Yep, charming mode. "Can we get you something to eat? I'm starving, myself. Diving does it to me every time."

"What is it?" Jonathan motioned out past the boat.

Adrian's eyes crinkled and he tilted his head. She'd never realized Adrian was so much taller than Jonathan. "A ship. An amazing site. Mal is fortunate to get some time on it."

"Well, her time's up." Jonathan forced a smile. "I've come to take her home. We have a wedding in a few weeks."

"Yeah, sure, I know. You've come to take her, you say?" Adrian looked from Jonathan to Mallory and she knew what he was thinking. She would never have let Adrian get away with that possessiveness.

"We have a flight tonight at nine."

"I can't fly tonight," Mallory blurted. "I just dived. I can't fly for twenty-four hours."

"What?" Jonathan's tone was sharper than she could ever recall him using.

Adrian countered, inclining his head indulgently. "Well, you see, when you dive, nitrogen-"

"Yes, yes, I know," Jonathan interrupted in a manner that had Adrian looking at her curiously. She shook her head and gave a small shrug. "Well, all right. I'll change the tickets to tomorrow night. Mallory, if you get your things and return your clothes to whoever you borrowed them from, I'm sure we can get a room in a hotel in the city."

"Um." She cast a look at Adrian, feeling out of control—that roller-coaster thing again. She didn't want to be rushed off, swept away. She needed some closure here, not with Adrian necessarily, but with archaeology. "We could stay here. We could take you out on the boat and you could see the ship with the VideoRay."

Both men turned to her, eyes wide, jaws dropped in identical expressions.

Creepy, really.

Then she realized what she'd said. She was forcing the three of them into at least eighteen hours of togetherness.

They both started talking at once.

"We can't—"

"Mal, I didn't really want—"

"Where would I sleep?"

"The filter hasn't dried out yet."

She held out her hands to stop the words. "Okay, okay, bad idea. I just thought, maybe, Jonathan would want to see what it is I used to do." If she could get Jonathan to understand her love for the science, maybe she could return to it, at least now and again.

Not with Adrian, though. That would just be miserable.

Adrian's defensive posture dropped at that, and Jonathan's expression softened as he turned to her. "I'd love to see it."

She smiled, couldn't help being self-conscious about it as Adrian rolled his eyes behind Jonathan.

"Let's eat, then we'll see if the boat will start," she suggested.

If it didn't, they'd be spending the night for nothing.

No amount of diving could make Adrian hungry right now. He couldn't eat as he sat across from the man Mallory had chosen over him.

Okay, Jonathan wasn't as obnoxious as Adrian had imagined. He looked less thrilled to still be here than Adrian felt about him being here. But he was doing it for Mallory, and that earned bonus points in Adrian's eyes.

She'd chosen this guy, after all. The least Adrian could do was hope for her happiness if it couldn't be with him.

Mallory's eyes brightened when Robert joined them, looking curiously at Jonathan. She scrambled to her feet, and Jonathan followed more sedately—Adrian figured the guy to be at least ten years older than her—to greet the professor.

"Dr. Vigil, this is my fiancé, Jonathan Montcroft," she said. Adrian imagined she stumbled a bit over the word *fiancé*.

He didn't imagine the glance Robert shot him. Neither did Mallory. Adrian lifted his shoulder in a half shrug.

"Jonathan is spending the night," he told Robert. "We're going to take him out to the barge in a bit so he can see what we have."

Robert opened his mouth to say something, looked at Mallory and closed it again. "That will be nice," he said, his tone precise, polite.

Only when they were halfway through the meal did Adrian understand Mallory's eagerness. Robert had been like a father to her after the death of her parents, and Robert, estranged from his own family, saw Mallory as a daughter and Adrian a son. Now she was seeking his approval of her new fiancé as she would from her parents.

Adrian had to make sure Robert gave it.

# M.J. Fredrick

He was relieved Jonathan's hands weren't all over Mallory, though he had a hard time believing the man could not touch her. Hell, even now, Adrian couldn't stop touching her.

Unable to take another bite of the sandwich that had turned to sawdust in his mouth, Adrian stood. "I'll see if I can get the boat started. Come down when you're done."

The first thing Jonathan did when he stepped onto the gently purring Miss M was to reach for a life jacket. Mallory blinked at him a moment, before she reached for one herself. She hadn't worn one the whole trip, but she didn't want him to look foolish in front of Adrian.

A glance at Adrian told her that her intervention was too late. But he didn't say anything, just prepared the boat to launch.

Only Dr. Vigil joined them, though Mallory sensed the others wanted to come along too, just to see what would happen between Adrian and Jonathan. So far they'd mostly just ignored each other in the politest way possible.

Jonathan was nothing if not polite.

"Mallory, can you give me a hand up here?" Adrian asked as he stepped into the pilothouse. She recognized that tone. He didn't need help any more than he needed more attitude. He wanted to talk. Three guesses what the subject would be.

"Can't Dr. Vigil help you?" she asked sweetly from her seat by the rail. She did not want to have to explain to Jonathan what she and Adrian were discussing.

Adrian poked his head out of the pilothouse door and looked squarely at her. "No."

Mallory narrowed her eyes at the back of his head when he withdrew into the pilothouse, but smoothed her features before Jonathan noticed. "I'll be right back," she said in the same sweet tone, maneuvering to her feet more awkwardly than usual with the added bulk of the life vest. She grasped the railing outside the pilothouse, more to diffuse the tension running through her body than to keep her balance. She refused to enter, so she stayed in the open doorway. "The boat started easily enough. What did you need?" she asked through her teeth.

He bent his head down, glancing over her shoulder at Jonathan. "He's not going to puke on my boat, is he?"

Just as she thought, he didn't need any help. He'd only brought her in here to razz her about Jonathan. "I doubt it." God, she really hoped not.

"Can he even swim?"

"Why? Planning on pushing him off the boat?"

He gave her a disgusted look and turned his attention to the controls. "He seems a little nervous, keeps looking at the water. Can he?"

"I—" Truth was, she didn't know.

"That's something you should know about the man you're going to marry," he chided, reading her thoughts and pushing the throttle.

Mallory jostled a little, did everything she could to keep her balance, never easy around Adrian.

"Knowing everything about each other didn't save our marriage," she shot back and looked toward the stern and Jonathan, who was gripping the rail and grinning.

He loved her. She knew that much, and that was all that was important. She started to go to him but Adrian grabbed her arm, pulling her inside.

"I thought you understood I didn't want word about this getting out."

She blinked. He thought Jonathan was a security risk? "He won't say anything."

"Maybe not on purpose, but damn it, Mal, this isn't a sightseeing trip. I can't have him going home blabbing about what he saw here."

She widened her eyes mockingly. "You are going to throw him overboard."

"No, of course not," he said quickly before he realized she was joking, then he scowled. "Just downplay it, all right? He's a linguist, not an archaeologist, right?"

Yes, but he wasn't stupid. Still, he wasn't known for his discretion, and the wrong word to the wrong person could expose the secret Adrian had sacrificed so much to keep. She returned to Jonathan hoping she hadn't destroyed Adrian's chances again.

# "So what are we looking at here?"

Jonathan crowded a little closer to Adrian to look at the computer screen, and Mallory tensed as Adrian did. She couldn't have come up with a worse idea, or for a more selfish reason. Just because she didn't have the courage to tell Jonathan she wanted to stay—or Adrian, for that matter—she was putting them all through hell.

"Nothing, yet," Adrian said, and she recognized the strain in his voice. "It takes a bit for the submersible to get down there."

"Less time than it takes us to get down there, though," Mallory said brightly.

Both men looked at her. Jonathan gave her an indulgent smile.

She hated indulgent smiles.

God, she'd made her choice and she didn't have the nerve to speak up.

What were her options? She had to speak up, or live the rest of her life married to a man, always wondering...

No, not about Adrian. This wasn't about Adrian. This was about the life she'd known and loved since she was a child. The longer she stayed here, the longer she wanted to stay, the more unwilling she was to walk away.

# M.J. Fredrick

"Are you seeing this, Mallory?" The excitement in Jonathan's voice gave her hope, for just a moment, that he could love this life too, but he would never understand her obsession. She would do to him what Adrian had done to her, leave him behind for something she needed more.

That thought alone should have given her the courage to end it, to walk away from everything the two of them had built, the future they'd planned.

But she was a coward.

She lifted her head and forced a smile, then looked past Jonathan to the screen, where fish flitted around the camera, investigating the invader.

"Do they do that when you go down there?" Jonathan asked.

She shook her head. "No, they're wary of us."

"When we were off the coast of Mexico, that time, though," Adrian interjected, "they were all over the place. Most beautiful fish you've ever seen. Remember?"

Sensing Jonathan's discomfort at Adrian's reminisces, she made a noncommittal noise. Adrian glanced back and she glimpsed his grin.

"We're coming up on it now." Adrian turned his attention to the joystick, guiding the camera deeper.

"What is that?" Jonathan pointed to the black substance that shone in the light from the camera.

"The tarp we used to cover it." Mallory realized the mistake too late. "I forgot. We won't be able to see it."

"We have to cover it to prevent it from disintegrating," Adrian said.

"Did it not disintegrate before?"

"It was pretty well buried," Mallory said. "We think one of last summer's hurricanes uncovered it."

"Amazing." But some of the enthusiasm had leached from his voice. Damn it, she couldn't believe she'd forgotten about covering it.

Still, Adrian outlined the length of it for Jonathan's benefit, coasted the camera past how far they suspected the bow and stern extended.

"A Spanish galleon, you think? A treasure ship?"

Mallory gnawed on her lip. If he were an archaeologist he would realize this site was too small to be a galleon.

"Not a treasure ship, too small," Adrian said. "Exactly what she is remains to be seen." He eased away, coaxing the camera up with the tips of his fingers on the joystick. "Sorry you couldn't see more."

"Ah, well." Jonathan pushed back, too, and stood. "I probably wouldn't have known what I was looking at."

Or cared, Mallory thought with a lurch of her heart. If he cared, it was only because she did, and that wouldn't last long. She felt courage building, but of course she couldn't do this in front of Adrian. She

wasn't even sure she wanted Adrian to know. But how else would she explain her sudden availability to work on the dive?

Jonathan walked over, cupped a hand under her elbow. "Are you all right?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Adrian glance over sharply. She nodded.

"I'm fine."

"Sure? You look a little flushed."

She glanced at Adrian, hoped he wasn't listening. He wasn't. He was swearing and fighting with the joystick.

She turned from Jonathan. "What is it?"

"The camera is hung on something."

"What?"

He scowled and shoved to his feet. "Hell if I know."

"Well, we can't leave it down there."

"My dive gear's on the skiff. I didn't think to get it."

"Jacob's is here." She nodded toward the corner of the barge where she'd shed the suit and tank when she'd stripped earlier, after she'd gotten so cold. Her T-shirt and panties were tossed on top as well. She'd been so flustered after the encounter with Adrian, she'd left it behind, only wanting to get back to camp where she could have some space.

The snap of Adrian's head told her he'd noticed her discarded clothing, also. Jonathan turned to see what they were both looking at.

"No." The sharpness of Adrian's tone attracted Jonathan's attention. He walked to Mallory, stopping between the suit and Jonathan. "You're not going down there after what happened earlier."

"What happened earlier?" Jonathan asked.

Adrian kept his attention on Mallory. "She got chilled. The suit doesn't fit right, lets too much water in. I haven't checked for tears."

"My body can't heat it fast enough," Mallory explained, pulse thudding as she waited for Jonathan to see her clothes tossed on the wetsuit. That Adrian came to her rescue surprised her and softened her toward him. "It'll only be for a few minutes, Adrian. You spent too much on that to abandon it, and you can't fit in Jacob's suit." She said the last over her shoulder as she walked to the suit, gathered her panties and stuffed them in her pocket. She picked up the suit, held it in front of her as she inspected it for tears, her heart pounding at the near miss.

"Is it dangerous?" Jonathan asked, anxiety creeping into his voice.

She looked up and wondered if it had been a near miss, and if her own guilty conscience put that strained look on Jonathan's face.

"She could become hypothermic," Adrian said, through gritted teeth.

"I'll be fine." Her tone was just as tense as she looked around the barge for some privacy but knowing she wouldn't find any. What would Jonathan think if she stripped here in front of them all? There was no help for it, though she moved behind the bench that held the laptops. That was some barrier as she stripped to her underwear and stepped into the suit, tugging it into position. To Jonathan, she said, "He won't let anything happen to me."

Adrian glared at her a moment, then motioned for her to turn around so he could help her into her tanks. He tapped the gauge to let her know he'd checked it. "You don't have too long."

"I don't need much time." She pulled the mask over her face and tumbled into the water.

Only after she was in the water did she realize she hadn't said anything to Jonathan.

It took just a moment to dislodge the camera from the seaweed it had entangled in, but her short decompression time gave her the time, and courage, to do what she needed to do. She hated the relief that accompanied the thought that at least she wouldn't be tying herself to staid, safe Jonathan.

# Chapter Seven

"He's a nice guy."

Since when did her conscience have a Scottish burr? Mallory turned from coiling the rope on the deck to face Adrian. Jonathan had gone to help Linda with dinner, leaving her alone with Adrian. She unconsciously braced herself for his criticism of Jonathan before she remembered he'd just complimented him.

"Yes, he is," she said. "You don't have to sound so surprised."

He rested a foot on the bench at the stern. "So why are you breaking it off?"

She whirled on him. If he saw it, did Jonathan?

Adrian straightened, holding his hands in front of him in a calming motion. "Don't worry, I don't think he realizes it. He doesn't know you as well as I do."

She dropped to a seat by the pilothouse, her head in her hands. "I don't want to hurt him." Unbidden, Jonathan's proposal played in her mind, how eager he was, how pleased. *God, Mallory, what are you thinking?* 

Adrian sat beside her. "I can't say that won't happen. The man loves you. Deserves you more than I expected. Worried himself half to death when you were down."

"Which is why I have to end it."

"Mallory." He rested his hand on her wrist. "Not that I'm all anxious for you to get married because I'm not. But you need to understand why you want to do this. What about the white picket fence and the three kids?"

Yes, why did they no longer seem as important—at least the picket fence? The wedding they'd planned together, the house they'd chosen...nothing held the appeal it had before she came here. And the babies in her mind's eye had Adrian's silver-blue eyes. "I want to go back to archaeology, and I know I can't do that and be married to him, not without doing to him what you did to me."

"Ouch." He withdrew his hand, sat back.

She rubbed the hand he'd released over her eyes. "You know what I mean. Putting the job before the marriage. It's not fair to him."

"But you need to remember that you walked away from the job, wanting everything this man can give you. You come here at the peak of the excitement. You're forgetting all the hard work, the struggles. I don't want you to make a decision like this based on emotion." He pushed to his feet. "At least sleep on it." She leaned back to look up at him. "I thought this would make you happy."

He frowned. "Why would you think that?"

"I know the idea of me moving on wasn't easy for you."

"I just want you to be happy, Mal. I want you to get what you want."

He hopped onto the dock and walked away.

What the hell was he thinking, pushing her toward Jonathan like that? She wasn't happy, and God knew he didn't want her with anyone but him.

But Jonathan was willing to give her all she desired. She might think she didn't need it anymore, but Adrian wanted her to be sure.

Because even if she was sure, he couldn't guarantee she'd come back to him.

"Where am I going to sleep tonight?" Jonathan asked as they ate dinner around the fire.

Mallory sat beside him but not next to him. She was already breaking away. Did Jonathan recognize that? Adrian wished he didn't feel this hope at seeing it.

"Jacob and I are already roomies." Toney's eyes crinkled with wicked humor. "You could bunk with Adrian."

"I don't think so," Mallory said quickly, and Toney laughed.

"He could put a cot in with me," Robert said. "It's just the one night."

"I'll get it set up." Adrian rose and nodded toward the beach. "It's a nice night for a walk on the beach."

Mallory glared at him until Jonathan cupped his hand around her elbow and drew her to her feet. Adrian remembered a different reaction when the two of them had had chances to be alone. No one ever had to suggest it, and, after catching them in compromising positions more than once, people learned not to follow them. Their hunger for each other hadn't waned over the years, and Adrian wished his hand was on her arm right now.

"He's right. We have our own private beach right here," Jonathan murmured. "Let's take advantage of it."

Okay, Adrian didn't want that picture in his mind, and apparently Mallory thought the same because she blushed a bright pink and turned her head as she walked past him.

"You're different out here," Jonathan said once they reached the other side of the dunes, the camp behind them.

Mallory's pulse kicked at his observation. He knew what she planned to do. She wasn't ready, didn't have the words, couldn't make him understand yet. So she stalled. "Really? How?"

"You're so much more adventurous, more sure of yourself. I never would have expected the woman I knew to jump off that barge to go after the camera."

She rubbed her hand over her arm, wishing she'd thought to bring a sweatshirt against the sea breeze. "I was the logical choice."

"Right, but." He stopped, shook his head. "Alone, in the ocean, nothing there to protect you. If anything had gone wrong, I couldn't help you. Adrian couldn't help you."

Adrian would have found a way, but she didn't say it. "I've done things like that all my life."

"I understood, I guess, in theory. It was just unsettling to watch."

She didn't know how to respond, was grateful when he started walking again.

"You miss it, don't you?"

Finally, a chance to be honest. "More than I thought."

"You want to stay."

She sucked her breath in through her teeth, laced her fingers together and turned to face him, still walking. "It's not possible." That would mean working with Adrian, being vulnerable to him. She never had resisted that too well.

"But you don't want what you thought you wanted now."

Another chance to be honest. "No."

"You still love him."

"Of course I don't." The denial came easier than she expected.

His brow lowered solemnly. "I saw the underwear on the barge, Mallory. I know the two of you were out there alone. I saw the way you looked at each other, how you communicated without talking. I remember all the things you told me you loved about him. I saw them today when he looked at you." His matter-of-fact tone cut deeper than accusations would have.

"The underwear—it wasn't what you think." She pushed her hand through her hair. "I just got out of my wet clothes. There was nothing sexual."

"With Adrian, who you told me yourself you made love to the first day you met, and never stopped, even when you hated each other."

Adrian had been right about the whole confiding-in-Jonathan being a mistake. He knew all her secrets, all of Adrian's as well. She shut her eyes and sought an answer that would appease him. "We were together ten years." And had been as close as two people could get. "I didn't strip to tease him. It was all very—businesslike." Until he took her into his arms.

"So you're denying you love him."

"I'll tell you what I told him. I wouldn't have said yes to you if I still loved him."

Her tone must not have been very convincing, because his face fell. God, she didn't want to hurt him. "He thinks you still love him, too?" She pivoted and took a few steps down the beach before turning to him, flinging her arms out to her sides in frustration. "Jonathan, you've met him. He's arrogant. Of course he's going to think I still love him."

Jonathan approached and curved his hands over her shoulders as he looked into her eyes. "But you can swear to me, after being here with him, that you don't."

"I don't. I swear."

Jonathan drew her against him, nuzzled her mouth with his. Mallory drew away when he touched his tongue to her lower lip. She couldn't. She couldn't kiss him with Adrian's face clear in her mind, his warming touch so recent. Jonathan was a good man, but there was no thrill in his arms.

She'd forgotten how much she loved the thrill.

On impulse, she asked, "Would you go diving with me?"

"What?" He pulled back, blinking.

"I miss it. Will you let me teach you?" If he could say yes, maybe she wouldn't have to end it, maybe she wouldn't have to hurt him.

But she knew his answer before his eyes shuttered.

He released her and backed away. "I couldn't do something like that."

Her heart dropped. "Not even if it's something I love to do? You wouldn't do it for me?"

"Mallory, it's very dangerous. You should be relieved it's not something I want to do. I don't think it's something you should do. You could die." He stroked her arm slowly, reverently.

Meant to reassure her, she knew. She longed to move away but didn't want to hurt him. "What's the difference between dying of old age after a life of doing nothing and dying doing something you love?" She heard Adrian's voice coming out of her mouth and cringed.

Jonathan took her arms again. "Because you'll be living those years with me."

That was what she wanted, wasn't it? A long, peaceful life with the man she loved, with the children they created from their love? And she shouldn't base the future of their relationship on the answer to one question. But that one question encompassed so many things.

"You do want to stay." For the first time in their relationship she heard anger in his voice. "What can you find in a place like this?"

She looked toward the ocean. "I need the mountains, I need the sea. I need to dive."

"You need Adrian."

She shook her head sharply. "No." Not because of Adrian but because of the woman she used to be. The woman she'd turned her back on.

The woman she missed.

"I can't think about what my life would be like if I never went diving or hiking or any of those things again. What will I do with myself?"

"You'll be a wife and a mother and we'll have our friends around us. All those things will fulfill you. You won't need diving or hiking, or Adrian."

He was so earnest, so sad. She felt like a selfish bitch. All the things he was saying—she wanted those things. The security, the love. The pretty little house they'd found on the edge of the Hill Country. But just like she had to wonder if she missed archaeology because of Adrian, she wondered if she wanted Jonathan because of the things he offered.

And now she craved adventure. She had to blend the person she used to be with the person she'd become. Until she did that, she couldn't be with either man.

"I can't stop being who I was, not even for you." Her heart ached. She was turning her back on a good man.

Jonathan's expression grew stony. "You're going back to Adrian."

"No." He couldn't figure into this. That wouldn't be fair to Jonathan. With shaking hands, she pulled the chain over her head, let it spiral into her palm, ring first, before pressing it into his hand. She looked into his eyes, her own vision blurred. "Thank you. For loving me. But unless I do this, I'm not me anymore, and that's not good for either of us."

Where the hell was the mouthpiece for his regulator? Adrian tore through his tent searching for the octopus. He knew he'd put it in the same place as always—on a dive, he had to do that or things would be too easily mislaid. And this damn thing was impossible to replace out here in the back of beyond.

He walked out of the tent, calling to Toney, just as Jonathan came over the rise of the sand dunes. The set of his shoulders, the tension in his steps told Adrian Mallory had called it off. For a moment, he rejoiced.

Jonathan saw him and changed direction, straight toward him. Before Adrian could work out what was going on, the other man plowed a fist into his face. Surprise dropped Adrian to the sand. He brought his hand to his mouth to check for blood before he looked up at Jonathan.

"What did you do to her?" the older man demanded.

Adrian rose slowly, body tight, on alert now. Damn, he wouldn't have thought the other man had it in him. His admiration for the man grew a bit more. "I didn't touch her."

"She's chosen you over me. What you have to offer"—he spread his hands to include the camp with a contemptuous expression—"over what I have to offer."

"She's staying here?" Joy washed through him, though he struggled to hide it from the other man. The man he'd beaten.

"Don't act like it's a surprise."

# M.J. Fredrick

"Okay." Adrian couldn't stop himself from looking to the dunes, waiting for sight of Mallory. What would she think of her fiancé's violent reaction to having his heart broken? "I knew she was missing it, but I didn't know she wanted to stay here."

"Hell, why should you know?" Pain darkened the other man's eyes before he turned away. "She doesn't even know what she wants. But at this point, it's not me."

Past Jonathan, Adrian saw Mallory struggle over the rise of the sand dunes. He looked at Jonathan. "My one regret was that I never fought for her."

"Now's your chance." Jonathan started for Robert's tent. "I'd like to leave tonight."

Adrian shook his head. "You'll never find your way through the jungle in the dark. Toney can show you the way into town in the morning."

Jonathan sucked in a breath as if to protest. Then he looked at Mallory, who stood still, watching the two men. Jonathan nodded and ducked into Robert's tent.

Adrian looked up when Mallory stepped out of the tent she shared with Linda the following morning. He tried not to appear as though he'd been waiting to get her alone, to find out what her take was on the whole Johnny thing.

He didn't expect to see her with her duffel over her shoulder, her face tear streaked and pale.

He pushed to his feet. "Where are you going?"

"Home." She didn't look at him.

She rested the duffel on the bench in front of her. He recognized her defensive posture but didn't sense defensiveness in her calm tone, though he heard the tears.

"I thought—"

"I'm not staying." She said it like he should have known all along.

"But—" He gestured to the tent behind him just as Jonathan stepped out, straightened, regarding them as if they were bugs he'd found in his shoes.

"I'm going home," she said, quieter now as Jonathan passed them to get to the SUV he'd rented. "I don't imagine it will be hard to get a job with my qualifications."

Before he could twist that arrow from his heart, she widened her eyes, looking horrified by her thoughtless words.

"I didn't mean—"

"I know." He did. Still didn't hurt any less. After all, he couldn't waltz in somewhere to get a job, not with his reputation in tatters.

"I just—as exciting as this find is, I don't think it would be good for the two of us to work together. And if I go work on another dig, I can know for sure—" She glanced around, looking for Jonathan. Once she saw he was out of hearing distance, she continued. "—if it's the archaeology I miss." Goddamn. Another bull's eye. She'd always been a sharpshooter where he was concerned. "And if it's not?"

She lifted her chin, met his eyes. "It is. Good luck, Adrian. Let me know—how it goes," she said, a catch in her voice.

"Are you sure you want me to?"

She forced a smile. "Of course. I feel like I have a stake in this."

He took her hands in his and leaned close to kiss her cheek. "Be happy," he whispered.

The sentiment had her clouding up and turning away. Without answering, she climbed into Jonathan's rented Range Rover and he drove off.

Adrian swam over and struck his brother's shoulder. Toney turned sharply, looking past Adrian for danger. Adrian hit him again, to focus him, and gestured toward the silt.

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A glint of metal.

This could be it. The ship's hold, where he could have everything he wanted and more.

Together the brothers brushed at the sand, revealing more splinters. Adrian frowned. A medallion? The metal came into sight again. No, something was attached to it, another loop, so that the artifact was about the size of his palm. He dusted to reveal an engraving on the medallion—a square cross. He looked past it for more clues to what part of the ship they were in.

Before he could investigate further, his dive alarm went off, damn it. Toney brought over a basket. As gently as he could, his heart pounding, his breathing coming faster than recommended for this depth, Adrian slipped his hands under the object and lifted it, careful with the sudden weight of the water on the fragile object. He motioned for Toney to wait. He wanted to keep an eye on it as he ascended, even if it had to make the decompression stops with him. If he could find something, anything to prove it was Mediterranean...

Mallory had left three weeks ago, too soon. As excited as he was, the one thing lacking here was Mallory. After what he'd put her through, she deserved to be in on this.

Decompression took about a year longer today than any day in the past, and he had to employ every archaeologist fiber of his body not to touch, to stroke the medallion, to reassure himself it was real.

Finally, the light filtered through the water and he finned toward the top, Toney behind him. Robert came over to the edge of the barge, alarmed.

"Is something wrong?"

Adrian wondered if the grin on his face was as goofy as it felt. When it came to archaeology, he certainly never managed a poker face. He heaved himself up on the barge, removed his flippers with forced nonchalance before getting to his feet.

"Adrian?" Robert pressed.

Adrian walked over to the crank, flipped a switch and waited to see his prize in the sunlight. Linda, Jacob and Toney joined them as they watched the water stir, the shadow of the basket moving through the water.

He went to his knees to bring the basket up to the barge, barely aware of Robert's hand on his shoulder as he leaned over to inspect it.

"Is there more?" Robert asked.

"We need help," Adrian said, barely registering the question.

"We're short of funds."

"I'll find a way." It meant everything.

Twenty minutes later, when Toney guided the boat into the cove and Adrian saw Mallory waiting on the dock, her blonde hair shimmering in the late-afternoon sun, he understood.

This was right. It was meant to be.

# Chapter Eight

Adrian didn't wait for Toney and Jacob to tie the boat off before he leaped to the dock. He barely registered the vibration of the dock beneath his feet as he strode toward her.

"Adrian, I-"

He didn't let her finish. Damn, she was so pretty, even windblown, even with the flash of uncertainty he saw in her eyes. He took her face in his hands, stroked his thumb over her cheek and kissed her. Surprise had her tensing for a second, and he feared she might pull away. Instead, she relaxed, just a bit, and he came home.

She was as soft, as sexy as he remembered. Her taste hadn't changed, her mouth moved beneath his the same way, as if those three years had never passed. He dipped his tongue into her mouth, and hers rose to meet him, glided along his, so right, so right.

He rubbed her hair, regretting the calluses on his fingers that snagged on her hair, her skin. Her fingers closed on his bare shoulders, her nails digging in briefly before sliding under the straps of his shirt, and he was lost. Dropping his hands to her hips, he drew her against him, wanting to sink into her, wanting her hands on him, everywhere.

Slowly, it came to him where they were, why they were standing here, and he lifted his head to smile. "You came back."

She looked a little dazed, her mouth swollen, her eyes dark with a passion he remembered too well. She blinked, lowering her hands from his shoulders.

"Adrian, I—"

"Come see what we found." He slid his hand down her arm to take her hand and guide her to the *Miss M*. She resisted at first, then followed him, trying to ignore how everyone else was watching them with interest.

What the hell had she done, coming here? Mallory swayed on the dock and watched Adrian beckon her. Once she'd reached home, she'd put her feelers out. The offers had come in fast and furious, but all she could think of was getting here to help Adrian. She waffled for a long time about how much help she'd give him. The cashier's check in her bag was the least she could do. Staying to help excavate was the most.

After that greeting, she didn't know how wise it was to stay, even as everything female inside her proclaimed they were ready to set up camp. Had he been so glad to see her? No, something in his eyes told her there was more. Something out there had gotten his juices flowing.

Something out there always did.

She approached the boat at his urging, refusing to look at the curious crew as Adrian swung aboard and offered his hand.

She took it in the name of expedience, ignoring the heat that infused her from the point of contact. As soon as her feet hit the deck, she pulled her hand away. He didn't notice, so engrossed was he in showing her what he'd found.

The realization washed all pleasure from his kiss away. She wasn't here for that, anyway. She was here for the find.

He presented the medallion and turned to watch her reaction. Despite herself, she caught her breath and gripped the edges of the basket. "That's not Spanish. See the imprint? It might be a buckle. Look here." She motioned to the slender piece of metal, separate from the medallion and the attached loop. "Is there more?"

He shook his head, his attention on the artifact. "There wasn't time to find more. A bunch of splinters."

She skimmed her fingers over the air just above the ancient article, wanting to touch it, knowing she shouldn't. "We need more resources."

"I'm calling Jeff at A&M, see if he can get us some students."

She stepped back as Adrian dismissed the others, sending them with the artifact. He stayed with Mallory. She tensed, knowing what was coming.

He didn't speak right away, leaned on the railing of the boat, looking out over the waves before he turned to her. "Why are you here?"

She'd planned what to say. "I needed to finish this." This time. She wanted to say more, but he gave her that smile, that one that started in his eyes, creased his face, flashed those white teeth, infusing his being with joy. The rest of her words stuck in her throat.

"I hoped you would," he murmured.

"Not for you." She had to make sure he knew that. She didn't have the safety of the barriers between them anymore, not unless she could hold her own with him.

He nodded, not expressing any surprise, masking whatever he was feeling. He'd always been good at that, though she thought she knew him well enough to read him. Not today.

"Not for this, either." She gestured toward the ocean. "For me." Leaving Jonathan had been hard, but being alone hadn't been as hard as she expected. That had been the most empowering revelation yet. She reached into her pack for the envelope there. "I took out my savings. And since I cancelled my wedding, I got my deposits back. I want you to use this to help with whatever you need, hire more divers, get more equipment, whatever."

He took the envelope, his eyes not leaving hers. "Mallory."

"This is important. It's important," she repeated, and inclined her head toward the envelope.

He drew out the check, and his eyes bugged. "No hillside wedding, this."

"No."

He held the envelope out, his lips thinned, no trace of joy remaining on his face. "Mallory, I can't take it."

"I want you to have it."

He hesitated. Clearly he needed the money but was unwilling to accept it on her terms. "I'll keep it on one condition."

She tensed at his tone. "What?"

"That you stay." He folded the envelope, creasing it between his thumb and forefinger. "That you help with the dive."

She drew her lower lip between her teeth, saw his eyes follow the movement. "I don't know."

He took a step toward her. "What have you got to go back to?"

She moved away and studied the deck beneath her. "Adrian, staying here, with you, is not a good idea." She hated admitting that weakness.

"And yet you want to." The burr deepened.

She lifted her chin. "If I stay, this"—she flipped her finger between the two of them—"can't happen. I learned my lesson the hard way, Adrian. If I stay, it's professional behavior only. Deal?"

He cocked his head just the slightest bit, almost a challenge. He tucked the envelope in his back pocket and reached out to her. "Deal."

Toney waited for Mallory on the path from the shower that evening, his jaw set mutinously. He looked so like Adrian, though his hair was longer, thicker, his features softer. It might be argued that he was the better-looking brother. Good genes certainly ran in that family. As did an excess of testosterone.

Toney's stance was rigid, confrontational. She slowed, wary.

"Why are you even here?" he demanded.

The words were like bullets, hitting their mark one after the other. She eased away, wishing for another layer of protection, at least another person as a buffer. Toney could carry a grudge so she had been careful to keep her distance. She wasn't afraid of him, but she'd worried this would happen.

"I'm here to help."

He folded his arms. "Why? Why now? You're not helping. All you're doing is giving him hope when you're just going to walk away again."

She couldn't deny it. "I don't mean to give him hope. I just want to see him succeed."

"Why? What does that matter to you? If he fails again, are you going to turn your back on him like last time?"

"Toney—"

He took a step closer. "You thought you saw the worst of it, right after, when the police arrested him and accused him of stealing the casket. Yet here you were snuggling up to Smoller, when he was the one who took it."

"I wasn't. I was trying to help." And there had never been proof that Valentine had taken the box, but she wouldn't prod Toney with that reminder.

"So you were helping by driving Adrian out of his mind? Good thinking. Yes, he became driven, obsessed, maybe even a little paranoid, but it was all for you. He thought you thought he wasn't good enough. You know what he went through with our father, and you go and walk away and make him think he screwed up. Then you proved it by filing for divorce. You broke his heart and now that you see he's back together, you've returned to do it again."

"Stand down, Toney."

Adrian's quiet voice behind her made her jolt. How much had he heard? How much of that was true? In trying to save herself, had she destroyed the man she loved?

Toney's hot gaze flicked over her shoulder at his brother, and he pressed his lips together.

"Apologize," Adrian commanded.

"No," Mallory said softly, not looking at him, not trusting herself to look at him. "He doesn't have to."

She made it to her tent, leaving the brothers to face off, before she burst into tears.

Movement outside the tent a few moments later had her sitting up and wiping at her eyes. She didn't want Linda to see how upset she was. After all, Linda was on his side, right? Or worse, what if it was Adrian? After Toney said all those things to her—all those true things—how could she look him in the eye?

Dr. Vigil poked his head through the tent opening. Mallory tugged the T-shirt down her thighs, offered a tight smile she didn't feel. Dr. Vigil's smile was more benevolent as he sat on Linda's cot, movements slow and stiff. He'd gotten so old in the past few years. Her heart constricted over the time she'd lost with him because she'd bolted.

"Did you hear all that?" she asked, her voice tear-roughened.

"Enough."

"He's right, isn't he? It's my fault. I walked away. All this time I blamed Adrian."

Dr. Vigil folded his hands over his knees. "I've known the two of you since the beginning. I watched you fall in love, and I watched you fall apart." His smile was tinged with sadness, and his eyes glazed over as if he was seeing into past, happier times. "One thing you've always been is equals, even in blame. He trusts you, Mallory, despite everything. Don't betray his trust. It's all he has left."

"You're wrong. He doesn't trust me. How could he? He doesn't know me anymore."

Dr. Vigil inclined his head indulgently. "You haven't changed as much as you might think. If you're looking for it to work this time, you're going to have to think about that. You're both going to have to learn from your mistakes."

"I didn't come here to get back with Adrian." But the words she'd said so often sounded hollow to her own ears.

Dr. Vigil stood and gave her braid a playful tug. "You and I both know better. Think about it, Mallory. Adrian will need you."

The old man left the tent. Mallory stared at the flap as it fluttered closed, wondering how she'd fooled herself with her reason for returning. She wanted to belong, more than anything, to step right back into the role she'd walked away from. That wouldn't be as easy as she'd hoped.

Mallory approached the *Miss M* cautiously the next morning. She'd barely slept, unsure of how to face Adrian and Toney after last night. She should have gone to talk to Adrian after Dr. Vigil left, but she was wary of being alone with him, especially with her emotions so close to the surface. If she had, they both might have slept better. Her nerves were scraped raw by the words Toney had spoken, which had played over and over in her head all night.

On deck, Adrian snarled at Jacob. Mallory could see by the surprised look on the boy's face that his temper wasn't a common occurrence. This was going to be fun.

"Adrian, can we talk?" she asked from the dock.

He didn't turn but continued securing the computers under the bench. "I want to get out there, Mal. Can it wait?"

"I really need to talk to you."

He straightened with a huff of breath. "What?"

"Adrian, can we just talk?" She shoved her hair back with one hand. "The ship will still be there in ten minutes."

With a scowl, he hopped onto the dock, his long legs carrying him too close to her. She didn't ease away though her heart gave a kick of alarm. She wanted to retreat for her own sanity, didn't want to breathe in the scent of him—sweat, salt, sea—not when she needed to keep her wits about her to talk.

To apologize.

He folded his arms over his chest. "Look, if this is about Toney, I tore him a new one. He never should have talked to you like that, and he'll apologize."

"This isn't about Toney. It's about me and you. I'm sorry. About last night, about three years ago. I'm sorry."

He stared, head angled to one side. Wow, she'd made him speechless. She hadn't been able to do that in years.

# M.J. Fredrick

"Toney was right. I was wrong not to be there for you the way you needed. I put my own needs above yours because I thought I was right and you had lost your mind."

A corner of his mouth kicked up. "Are you saying I was right?"

She stiffened, hesitating before giving him that victory. "I'm saying I was wrong, and I should have trusted you. I should have listened. I wasn't who you needed me to be, and I'm sorry."

"So what does this mean?" He sobered and shifted his hands to his hips.

Did he realize how intimidating that stance could be? He was already a big man, but with his elbows out... Though she knew him better than anyone, she wanted to take a step back. She swallowed. "It means I want to put the past behind us. I know it's not easy to do, but if we're going to work together, we need to forgive each other. It's a lot to ask, but I hope we can."

"All right then." He swiveled, then looked over his shoulder at her. "Are you ready to go?"

"All right then? That's all you have to say?"

"It means I've put it behind me. That's what you want, right, not to talk it to death?"

Okay, her own fault for bringing it up before diving. His mind wasn't on her apology. She squared her shoulders. Maybe her words would sink in later. Regardless, she would keep the past in the past and not linger on the bad or the good. Resolved, she followed him onto the boat.

Adrian laced his fingers behind his head and stared at the ceiling of his tent that night, Mallory's words replaying in his head, the despair in her eyes burned into his memory. She really hadn't thought she'd done anything wrong, and Toney's words seemed to have hit her like a blow. He'd be lying if he said he hadn't resented her for her actions at the time, but his own sins had been far worse than the ones he attributed to her.

He understood wanting to leave the past behind them, but for him it was impossible. It was a weight he needed to bear, to remember so he could never repeat that mistake.

Mallory sensed Adrian's growing frustration as the days passed, felt it herself. Archaeology was not a job for the impatient, but the lack of funds hung over their heads. Because of the fragile nature of the ancient wood, they couldn't remove the sand with a blower, so they had to sweep it away by hand. Because of the depth, they couldn't stay on the bottom too long and were only able to dive twice a day. Four divers couldn't make too much difference with those limitations.

Excavating the wood was going to be next to impossible. Even with the gentlest of movements, the ancient wood dissolved into splinters, especially from the starboard side, which had been exposed longer. They'd be lucky to be able to salvage one timber, and that would have to be from the port side. Along with the buckle, they'd found some coins and part of a crucifix, celebrated when they were able to pinpoint them as Byzantine. But they couldn't celebrate long—there was more work to be done.

Jeff hadn't contacted Adrian about sending more divers and that weighed on Adrian. He worried Jeff had lost faith in him too, but wouldn't risk sending the artifacts they'd found to him. He couldn't spare any of them to go to Jeff personally.

So they dove as often as possible and learned as much as they could about their ship, sitting around Dr. Vigil's tent night after night, studying his books.

Mallory waved her brush farther to the left as they continued excavating what they now had decided was the captain's quarters, since they'd discovered an inkwell and erasing knife. Even then, that was presuming the captain had that level of education. Still, the quarters were at the stern of the ship, which was clue enough. She left Adrian and Toney to continue excavating the quarters while she pursued her hunch.

Her body clock reminded her that her bottom time was running out and Adrian would be coming to get her. She didn't let that pressure her to hurry, though. She wanted to save as much of this ship as possible so there was no doubt in anyone's mind where it had come from.

No more wood. She fanned again and found the ship was curving upward.

She'd found the bow.

Her heart thudding, her breath coming faster than was wise through her regulator, she swam laterally, following the line of the ship with her eyes before lowering herself to sweep again.

It would be here if it still existed. Please God, let it still be here.

The alarm on her watch sounded. Two minutes. Damn it. She forced herself to keep steady. Whatever was under the sand would be fragile. She couldn't let the time pressure or her excitement rush her. Just a glimpse was all she wanted for today.

Adrian swam by on his way to the line, carrying tools to send to the surface. He stopped to motion her along, so she waved him over and pointed at the sand beneath them.

She didn't have to tell him what she was looking for; the fact that she was looking was enough. He tapped his watch and sent her a warning look before he went to work beside her.

There. A glint, something under the sand. She dropped her brush and began digging with her hands around the edges of the metal to uncover it, knowing she needed to surface, but needing to see this first. Adrian must have sensed her desperation and worked hurriedly too. Toney and Jacob swam over to remind them it was time to surface, but seeing Mallory's focus convinced them to join in.

More of the metal came to light. It was huge, and as they uncovered it, Mallory could see the carvings, the sinew of a lion's neck, the point of a tooth in an open mouth, the wave of a mane.

Again, her watch alarm sounded. They were overdue on their ascent. They had to go now or risk their health. Mallory held up a finger when Jacob tried to pull her away. One thing she wanted to see before she returned tomorrow. She followed the sand up, gauging the scale with her eyes, and swept away sand.

There it was. The lion's eye, in glinting stone. The stone was difficult to identify in this light, but it was intact. She gave Adrian a triumphant look, before she helped him cover the find with the heavy rubber tarp.

Elation rose in her chest. She spiraled up through the water as they ascended to the first decompression stop. She couldn't bear the wait, wanted to rip her regulator out and scream her joy to the whole crew. She wished she could dance and sing and laugh. The last thing she needed to do was dangle on a rope above the site, unable to do more work on it for hours.

She looked at Adrian hanging across from her and saw the glow of righteousness behind his mask tempering his own excitement.

When Adrian surfaced, he could tell by the vibrations coming off Toney and Jacob that they hadn't revealed the find below. Good. Mallory had found it. She'd earned the right to make the announcement. Adrian turned to help her out of the water and she ripped off her mask with a squeal.

"God, can you believe it? It's perfect!"

Adrian swung her into his arms, absorbing her joy to balance out the relief thrumming through him. She looked up, her eyes bright, her smile brilliant, staggering him more than the find below them. Not one ounce of wariness shadowed her eyes, so he didn't hesitate. He dropped his mouth to hers.

He tasted the salt on her skin, the slight chemical taste of the Heliox, and her taste, hot and familiar.

Just as he felt she was about to soften against him, he became aware of the sudden silence around them. He released Mallory and stepped away.

She didn't take her eyes from him and looked a little off balance as she raised the back of her hand to her nose and pulled it away clean. No nose bleed.

"Well, what is it?" Dr. Vigil demanded, breaking the silence. "What did you find?"

Mallory hadn't looked away from Adrian. He nodded to signal her to go on.

"You did it, Adrian," she said, her voice husky. He'd like to think the kiss had something to do with that and with the dark shine in her eyes. "This is it. It's the one."

"But you found it. Tell them."

A smile spread across her face as she turned to the professor. "We located the figurehead. We didn't get to uncover it all, but it looks to be intact."

Adrian shifted his attention to his mentor in time to watch him pale, then turn bright red with joy. Now he embraced Mallory, released her to embrace Adrian, before he hugged them both together, blubbering something about being glad they were both here for this.

Adrian wouldn't have wanted to share this with anyone else.

The party on the beach that night would have been wilder if Adrian had let his divers drink some of the champagne Dr. Vigil broke out. But drinking increased the risk of the bends, so Adrian insisted they

abstain. He wanted to uncover the rest of the figurehead tomorrow, photograph it and perhaps bring it up the following day.

He'd have something tangible to show for his sacrifice.

The celebration was getting to be a bit much. Besides, he needed to go write all this down for his book. That responsibility wasn't something he wanted to think about, but always hung in the back of his mind. He'd written magazine articles throughout his career, but writing a book was overwhelming.

He'd barely set out his notebook when Mallory pushed her way into his tent without preamble, a plastic cup of diet soda in her hand. "It seems a real shame that you can't have a little drink to celebrate."

He didn't have the energy to try to figure out why she'd followed him. "I want to get that figurehead out of the water more than I want a glass of champagne. There'll be plenty of time for that later."

She acknowledged the fact silently and sat across from him, again uninvited. She had an agenda. He didn't expect to wait long to find out what it was.

"You and Toney seem to have made peace," he remarked.

She shrugged. "There's a truce. I'm sure we'll get along just fine the more I leave him alone and the more I leave you alone." She set the cup on his table. "Have you thought about how you're going to get the wood up?"

"It's looking pretty hopeless. I just want a few good photographs, then we can start removing it. We should have enough to carbon date, and maybe if we're lucky we'll find something intact on the underside."

"You don't seem very excited."

He folded his arms on the notebook. "Sad, I know. The biggest find of my life, and all I can think about is how long can we afford to stay out here, even with your contribution."

"We could get corporate sponsorship. We wouldn't have to give details-"

Aha. There it was. Now she wanted to bring in the big guns. He turned to the papers in front of him. "No. I'm doing this myself. We can't risk anyone else knowing what we have here. I won't lose it again."

She drew her lower lip between her teeth as if considering what to say next. "But we need more people. If someone gets sick or hurt, it's going to slow everything down."

He leaned back in his camp chair and laced his fingers over his stomach. "Look at it this way. The fewer people in camp, the fewer I can drive nuts."

She accepted his attempt at humor with a half smile of her own. "Too late."

"Look, I appreciate your concern, but really, I don't want you to worry." He sat forward, shuffled his papers.

She frowned. "I'm part of this dive, Adrian. Of course I'm going to worry."

"But it's not your dive." He watched the pain flash across her face and swallowed the regret that washed through him. But he had to be sure she knew he was calling the shots, to remind her he couldn't

give up that much control. "You dissolved our partnership when you asked me to sign those papers, Mal, no matter how much money you contribute."

Mallory squared her shoulders, unwilling to show how much his words hurt. She'd done her best to be a part of this team. Now he was claiming she didn't have a voice. Like Dr. Vigil said, she was accustomed to being his equal. Apparently he no longer saw her as such.

She held his gaze as she stood. "I was only trying to help. I won't forget my place again."

She turned blindly out of his tent and went to find Dr. Vigil. He was in his tent, and three sheets to the wind, though he still pored over the books she'd brought.

"You doing okay in here?" she asked, ducking under the flap. She'd watched him age over the course of the dive. Something else that worried Adrian, no doubt.

"Do you know that the masthead has a pipe running through its mouth?" he asked, eyes bright when she entered. "The marines would use that to shoot fire at their enemies, terrifying them with the sight of an animal spitting fire."

"It's the proof he needs," Mallory murmured, sinking to the chest containing the professor's books, her knees weak with the realization that Adrian's dream was coming true.

"You don't have to come and keep me company," he said. "Go party with the other ones."

"I'm not much in the partying mood."

He lifted a white eyebrow. "Fought with Adrian, huh?"

She didn't deny it but couldn't admit it.

"You'd always come talk to me after you fought with him and always pretended it didn't bother you." He stepped behind the privacy screen to change.

She flushed. "Surely that wasn't the only time I talked to you."

"No, of course not. But I would know when you'd had a fight."

She sat on one of the camp chairs and ran her fingers over the top of the waterproof chest. "Nothing's changed."

"You still love him."

Great, he would take her comment to mean that. She'd barely admitted to herself she still loved Adrian. She wasn't ready to admit it to her mentor.

"He still loves you. I haven't seen him so relaxed in three years." He came from behind the screen in old-fashioned cotton paisley pajamas. She hid her smile, not hard to do after his next words. "He needs you. You're good for him."

"He couldn't think I'm coming back to him just because I joined the dig."

"Of course he thought it," he replied gruffly. "Why wouldn't he? You break up with your fiancé over diving? What kind of fool reason is that? You and I both know you're still in love with Adrian."

As much as she wanted to prove him wrong, she couldn't. "All the reasons for me leaving are still there."

"And those are?" He hobbled stiffly to the table with its decanter of whiskey. She'd always thought he'd watched too many old archaeology movies, the way his tent was set up with its rough comforts, almost Hemingway-esque.

He offered her a drink. She accepted, sipped, savored the punishing burn. "He's emotionally unavailable. He gets so wrapped up in his work, I don't matter—no one else matters. I need to matter."

Dr. Vigil made his way to his cot and sat down heavily. "Mallory, when two people like you, people with such strong personalities, get together, there are going to be fights. But look at the two of you now. You're together, you block out everything else in the room. You bring out the best in each other."

She took another sip. "And the worst."

"Maybe." He conceded the point with a lift of his glass. "But no matter what you were fighting about, you had respect for one another. You respected the job and you respected the intelligence."

"It didn't stop us from saying hurtful things." Even the memories of the words made her heart squeeze. She'd never talked to anyone like that in her life. But she'd said them to the man she loved.

"No, but you're older now. You've learned control. I'd like to think that I made the two of you the archaeologists you are today, but the truth is, you made each other, with your competition and your drives. You can't deny it."

"I don't." There had been a time when she'd been so happy. She'd thought no one deserved to be so happy. "I just don't want to forget the way he hurt me."

"I know you must feel that way, but Adrian loved you more than anything in his life."

"Loved. Past tense." She edged toward the tent opening. If she didn't remind herself of that, she might be tempted to fall into old patterns, no matter what lessons she'd learned last time. She couldn't bear that pain again.

Something was off, something was wrong. Adrian realized it the minute the ship came into view the following day. It wasn't covered, for one thing. Had the currents shifted in the past twenty-four hours, had they pushed the rubber sheet off the ship? He scanned the site and saw the tarp flipped back, not rolled as if it had been pushed by water.

As a result of being uncovered, much of the ancient wood had dissolved into the water. His stomach clenched. The more wood he lost, the more the integrity of the site was compromised. He couldn't afford that.

He finned over to a curved shape rising out of the ocean floor. That hadn't been there yesterday, had it? Or in their excitement over finding the figurehead, had they missed it? His heart rate picked up when he realized it was an amphora, and he reached for it.

#### M.J. Fredrick

A slender shape shot out of the mouth of the amphora. Shock blended with the sharp pain in his arm and he dropped the amphora as he jolted backwards.

Shit. Shit. Fucking moray eel had made its home in the ceramic vase. Adrian had been too distracted to notice. Hell and damn.

Before he could turn to inspect the damage, Mallory was beside him, squeezing the wound closed. His blood drifted into the water in a dark cloud. Mallory's brow furrowed in concern as she realized they were in danger.

Sharks.

With his free arm, he motioned to Toney and Jacob, then to Mallory, and pointed up. They needed to get out of the water in case a nosy shark came to investigate. Mallory looked at him a moment before she took his other hand and clamped it over the wound on his triceps. He didn't dare look to see how bad the damage was; he couldn't risk letting more blood into the water.

Mallory swam to the others, signaled what had happened and motioned them to go up. The two men exchanged a glance, then nodded before ascending to the first decompression stop.

And Mallory swam to him. What the hell was she doing? He gave her his worst scowl, but she merely pushed his hand away and covered the wound with her own. So she squeezed a little harder than she should have—her way of getting revenge?

She gave him a questioning look and mimed swimming. He nodded. With her hand firmly on his arm, they swam up to where Toney and Jacob dangled near the decompression line. Mallory scanned the water, before looking at him again. He made a half-assed okay sign and her frown deepened.

He hated to admit he was getting weaker. His arms felt like lead and he could barely keep his eyes open. But whether it was from loss of blood or the poison moray eels were said to have, he didn't know. He did know that Mallory's grip kept him focused.

She tugged and they swam up the line to the next stop. He shook his head, as if that would erase the effects of the bite. Mallory hung on, scanning the water. The good thing about the Caribbean at this depth—clear as a bell. They could see sharks coming from a long way off.

He lost his grip on the line. She caught him with her legs, wrapping them around his, holding him to her. He tried to give her a leering grin as his hips nestled intimately against hers, but couldn't manage an effective one with his regulator in his mouth and the muscles in his face refusing to obey his command.

Finally they reached the barge. The three of them worked together to haul Adrian up on the platform. Mallory shed her gear with amazing efficiency before she tugged at his torn sleeve to see the damage.

Her face paled above her bloodied nose, and he turned to look. The skin over his triceps was shredded. Blood oozed down his arm, coating his skin.

"He took quite the chunk out of me, yeah?" he asked and blacked out.

He came to with a start when Mallory spilled some liquid fire on the wound, and he sat up with a scream.

### "I'm sorry."

Her tone was unapologetic. She'd stripped her wetsuit down to her waist and leaned over him in a bright bikini top. That could do for some distraction from his present pain. Someone had peeled his suit off as well. "The bacteria in those eels' mouths are bad. We have to kill the germs."

"I am not a germ." The slur in his voice surprised him.

Mallory ignored him and took a syringe from Robert. Adrian barely opened his mouth to protest when she jammed it into his arm.

He swore. "Is this payback? Geez, Mal, I didn't know you had a vindictive streak."

She gave a small smile, her attention still on the wound. "I can't say I'm not enjoying this a little. But you'll be glad for the shot. I'm going to stitch you up."

"Why don't you give that job to someone I wasn't married to?" He glanced around the barge and saw Jacob and Robert back away. He cast Toney a pleading glance before turning his attention to Mallory.

Her eyes sparkled as she threaded the blunt-looking needle with coarse black thread. "Why, don't you want it to be pretty?"

"I'm afraid you'll make me look like Frankenstein's monster."

She smoothed her hand over his skin. "I'm very proud of my work. Don't worry." She prodded his skin near the injection. "Numb yet?"

"No. Look, I don't know how good of an idea this is," he added as she edged closer, parting her legs around his hips as she inspected the wound. Okay, maybe not such a bad idea.

"It's a four-hour drive to get to a hospital. And I let you stitch me up when I fell and split my chin in Mexico." Tilting her head back, she showed off the thin white scar.

He brushed his thumb over the scar and sighed. "All right. I'm ready."

Sucking her lower lip between her teeth, she placed a damp palm on his arm, pulling the skin taut. "Hold still."

She scooted closer, surrounding him with the smell of ocean and sunshine beneath the coconut scent of her sunscreen. He would focus on that and not on the effect of her body wrapped around his as she tried to get a good angle to stitch his wound.

"Don't take this the wrong way," she said, and stuck the needle in his arm. Yeow.

The thread tugged at his skin and he winced, but the pain wasn't enough to kill his growing desire. Soon the whole crew would know it.

"Mal." A lump rose in his throat and he swallowed. "Maybe there's a better way?" When she looked up at him, he flicked his eyes to his lap.

She followed his gaze and scowled. "You've got to be kidding me."

#### M.J. Fredrick

"I can't help it my body doesn't know we're divorced." Hell, part of the reason he was aroused was because he hadn't been with anyone since he left their house in Pensacola.

She wasn't looking at him anymore, but he could see her blush along the part in her hair. "Your body should know you just got bitten by a moray eel."

"My body prefers pleasanter sensations."

She jabbed the needle in a little sharper than he cared for. "Tell your body to get control. We have a long way to go here," she said through her teeth.

Forty-two stitches. Mallory flexed her cramped hand against the rail of the boat and glanced at Adrian, who rested with his head against the pilothouse and his eyes closed, his skin pale beneath his tan. He needed to get into town, to a real doctor, though she hoped her stitches wouldn't have to come out. She didn't want him to endure that pain again.

Part of her had relished the revenge of sticking a needle repeatedly into the man who had hurt her, kind of a direct voodoo effect. Part of her—the part that she wasn't ready to set free—wanted to bury her face in his chest and take a deep breath, feel his arms around her while he assured her he was all right.

Funny how easily her old instincts kicked in. All of them, especially the ones she felt around Adrian.

But now Adrian wouldn't be able to dive for a few days; the muscle in his arm was damaged. He'd be short a diver and they'd fall behind schedule. They couldn't afford to do that, either time-wise or budgetwise.

"We need to go into town, today. Get you checked out by a doctor and get those divers."

He opened one eye. "Afraid you might lose your investment?"

She drew back. "That's a pretty awful thing to say."

He groaned and twisted away, keeping his arm still at his side. "Yeah, I'm an asshole. I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that."

"No, I didn't. And if you weren't in so much pain, I'd pop you in the arm."

He sucked in his breath through his teeth. "By the time we get to the city, it will be too late. The doctor's office will be closed."

"It's barely ten in the morning."

"I can't drive standard, not with this arm."

"I think I can find the way." Whoa. Had she just volunteered to take him? To be alone with him not only for the eight-hour round-trip drive, but overnight as well? They couldn't go and come back in one day. Driving back through the jungle tonight would just be foolish. "Or Toney could go with you. Or Linda."

"Linda gets lost the minute she steps out of camp." His voice was slurred, either with exhaustion or the poison. Mallory knew that no matter her protests, she would be the one to go with him. "And I need Toney here to watch the site. It won't be so terrible, you and me. Like the old days."

## Chapter Nine

Yep, the bad old days. Mallory's last time to drive a stick shift was when Jonathan was shopping for a BMW Roadster. The linkage had been much tighter than in this old Land Cruiser. Calisthenics were required every time she shifted. With the state of the roads, she couldn't get above third anyway, especially without jouncing Adrian about. She couldn't even hope that he might fall asleep, since every time he bounced in his seat, he sucked in a breath through his teeth.

The tension in the car stretched as the miles passed slowly.

"How's the book coming?" she asked, too loud, and they both jumped.

He chuckled. "It's not."

Was he laughing at her skittishness or her question? "You never were particularly patient when it came to things where you had to sit down." He had barely been able to sleep inside their little house in Pensacola. One would have thought she'd put him in a cage, the way the house vibrated with his restless energy. He'd signed on for the first dig that came along. Her choice had been between being left behind in her little house and going with him. She'd gone, abandoning her house, her dream. That time. "You must have been pretty desperate for the money to agree to write a whole book."

"Once I knew what I'd found, I had to."

"If you announce this find, you'll get all the funding you need for excavation."

He grunted, and her stomach clenched. "I'm not announcing until I find the box and it's safe. I don't want anyone else to get their hands on it."

"Anyone else meaning Valentine Smoller."

"He has the other three boxes and if he knew I was after this one, he'd be all over it."

"Why? Just to foil you? He doesn't hate you, Adrian." Gears ground as she pulled the Land Cruiser into second.

"That's what he told you. Anyway, it doesn't matter. He wants the boxes. That's why he partnered with me in Tunisia."

She'd spent time with Valentine after the Tunisia disaster, when Adrian had been so driven to find the box. Mallory had found Valentine nothing but supportive. "But why do you think he wants the boxes?"

"Aside from the fact that they're priceless on their own? Clearly Theophilius believed they needed to be separated. Smoller believes they need to be reunited, for whatever reason."

"That's only a myth. How many myths have we heard in our lifetimes?"

"They're what drives us, these myths, finding out how true they are."

Stubborn Scot. "But it won't get us funding to get more divers. Only facts will do that, and we have to stick with that. We're scientists, Adrian."

"More divers means more chances for a leak." Frustration tinged his voice. "That's why I have Toney and Robert. I know I can trust them. And I checked out Linda and Jacob before I brought them on."

"And me?"

He turned so his back was against the passenger door. He considered her a moment before he said, "I trust you the most."

His words staggered her to silence. He observed the effect of his words, then turned to the jungle.

After everything, the hurtful words, the accusations, the ultimatums, he trusted her? She fought the tears of loss that burned her eyes. She couldn't let him see her cry.

"The publisher," she said after making certain her voice wouldn't crack, and she chanced a look sideways. "You trust them as well?"

He lifted an eyebrow as if he would be that stupid. "Of course not. They think I'm diving off the coast of Africa."

"Are you sure we're going the right direction?" Mallory asked a short time later, battling through lowhanging vines and a road barely wide enough for a bicycle, much less a full-sized SUV. "I have no desire to be stranded and live on a diet of Spam."

He grinned, looking up from the map jostling on his lap. "It's a wonder you came back to archaeology, then."

She tightened her grip on the wheel. "It certainly was easy to get used to hot water and refrigeration." "And diamonds the size of my eyeball."

She gritted her teeth at the comment he'd made under his breath. "I wasn't marrying him for money. I thought we'd decided to leave the past in the past."

Adrian reached for his beef jerky and grimaced as his shirt sleeve pulled against the wound. She'd noted a ton of packages of jerky in his duffel when they'd loaded the car. Quitting smoking after nearly two decades must have been driving him out of his mind. She was glad she hadn't been around for the early stages.

"This isn't the past so much as me figuring you out all over again."

She sighed and cranked up the air conditioner, which struggled to combat the humidity. He had never been much for introspection, not where their marriage was concerned. He could dig for hours on an ancient artifact, but he'd expected their marriage to come easily. "I became a different person after we split."

"You were a different person before the split," he retorted without hesitation.

She swung to look at him, braking at the same time. "What?"

He lifted his good hand, like it wasn't a big deal, like he hadn't meant to say it. "All you talked about was the house, what we could do to the house, what we could buy for the house. You changed."

God, not this argument again. After all this time, didn't he get it? "Adrian, it was my first house. Ever. Mine." The one she'd planned to live in for the rest of her life, with Adrian. The one she'd planned to raise their children in.

The one she sold after he left.

"You had houses before."

"Rent houses, temporary, wherever my parents stopped long enough to teach before the next grant came through. Never something that was my own, that I could put my stamp on. Surely you remember how much that meant to me." He had to remember—she'd told him this a hundred times—how she was tired of never having a home base. And he'd been willing, even excited when they found their little house. He'd been so happy she was happy. That hadn't lasted long. She glanced over to see the muscle in his jaw working as he stared out the window, before he turned to her, his eyes dark, sad.

"I didn't know you anymore."

She smacked her palm against the steering wheel in frustration. "You didn't try. You didn't stick around. The first call that came through, off you went. You're a good man, Adrian, a dedicated scientist, but you were a lousy husband."

"Not what you needed, you mean."

"You knew me best. You knew what I needed and why. You just weren't willing to give it to me."

"I would have given it to you." He scrubbed a hand over his hair and looked out the window again. "I just wanted to wait a little longer."

She shifted and eased off the clutch as sweat trickled down her back. Stupid air conditioner. "A woman doesn't have all the time in the world. After my parents died, even then it seemed too late. Every time you promised something would happen, you never followed through."

"Like what?" he asked, disbelief in his tone.

"The house."

"I bought you the house."

"Which we left for a year." She didn't even try to avoid the next rut in the road.

Adrian grunted as the truck jounced. "It wasn't going to pay for itself. We had to make money."

He could have taught. *She* could have stayed behind and taught. But she'd chosen him over her home. Why hadn't he chosen her over his career? If he'd even tried, would things have been different? "But you tried to take a home-equity loan out to fund another dig."

He held out a hand as if to stave off the accusation. "I thought about it. Thought. That was all."

#### M.J. Fredrick

"You had the paperwork. You'd filled out your part!" God, she'd forgotten how much that had hurt, to find that paper buried in his other work. Not that he'd been hiding it, but that he had made such a big deal about buying her the house, then wanted to risk it for his job—that had crushed her.

He turned and scowled. "So I was a selfish bastard who put my career first."

"You know you were."

He didn't take his gaze from her, making her jittery and secure all at once. "Have I changed?"

"Not where your career is concerned."

He whipped his head around and she caught a whiff of his breath, spicy, different than she was used to, but that immediately brought the taste of his kiss to her lips.

"It never mattered to you as much as it mattered to me, finding the box, finding the truth."

She met his eyes. "No."

"Why not?"

The emotion she'd held back since she'd arrived in Belize broke through. "Because you were more important than a damn box, because we were more important." Her throat strained as she pushed the words out while choking on tears. "But you couldn't see that and you let it eat through you. Let it eat through us as well." She wished for a radio, a CD, anything for a distraction.

"I needed it. You knew that."

She swallowed so her voice wouldn't break. "You used to need me more."

"You couldn't be everything for me, Mallory."

She could almost hear the snap as he lost control of his temper.

"And clearly, I couldn't be everything for you. I couldn't make the sacrifice you needed me to make. I guess Jonathan could. What did he give up for you, Mallory? How did he prove to you that he loved you more than your parents did?"

Damn, he'd taken it too far. Adrian pulled himself back, physically, emotionally, hating himself for making her eyes sheen, her jaw clench. Her parents had been killed in a mudslide in Nicaragua a few years after she'd married him. Her devastation had slain him. She'd cried for months, leaning on him for the first time in their relationship. He could still feel her in his arms, smell her tears. Never had he felt so helpless. That was when he'd bought her the house, hoping to make everything better. Instead, it had been the beginning of the end.

"I'm sorry, Mal, I didn't mean-"

She waved off his concern, bumping his forearm and snatching her hand away. "It's been five years since they died."

And he'd thought she'd meant to leave archaeology, leave him, after only a few years of marriage. She'd been that upset. Her parents had been archaeologists who carted her around the world before she decided to follow in their footsteps. At that point, he would have done anything to keep her with him. What changed in the intervening years?

The silence that followed was interminable. Damn it, he didn't want to hurt her again. He didn't want her to regret returning.

Okay, yes, he knew she hadn't come back to him, but here she was, with him, working side by side with him again, something he'd never thought would happen, something he'd missed more than he cared to admit.

See, this was why he wasn't good at communicating. He'd tried a conversation and ended up at an uncomfortable dead-end. How did he get out of this topic? "That was a stupid thing for me to say," he ventured.

She waved him off, her jaw so tight he thought she'd crack some teeth. He'd just wanted her to see she was being unfair. His timing was shit—they were alone, unable to escape each other's company for another few hours. She was probably tempted to drop him in the jungle, though.

Back in the old days, he'd make it better by nuzzling her throat, seducing her out of a bad mood. He could count on one hand the number of fights that hadn't ended in sex. But maybe it was good that he didn't have that crutch, that neither was able to walk away. If they hadn't walked away from each other three years ago, maybe they would have had this discussion then, maybe they would have worked things out.

Maybe they'd still be together.

"Your parents weren't bad people. Just single minded."

She cast him a look that singed his good intentions. "You'd know about that."

"I'm sorry, Mallory," he said. Again she waved him off. "I'm apologizing here. Pay attention. I think it may be a first."

A smile twitched her lips. "I suppose I should be honored."

"You should be." He nodded emphatically, relieved that his charm had worked, if not his seduction.

She eased the car out of gear and pulled the parking brake. Automatically, he looked around, though he knew there were no cars for miles.

"What?"

Mallory shifted to look at him. "Look, Adrian, we share a past, but if this is going to work between us, we can't live there, all right? We have to start fresh, like we were never married, never—" She bit off whatever she was going to say and looked around. "We can't be taking trips down memory lane. It's too painful. So I'm just here as an archaeologist, no different from Dr. Vigil."

He tried the smile again, but she looked away before he could offer her that comfort. "I hate to tell you, but the prof and I often discuss the past. It kind of goes along with being an archaeologist."

#### M.J. Fredrick

"You and Dr. Vigil don't have the past we do. Don't be a stubborn ass, Adrian. Can we just keep our conversations professional?"

Damn, he loved a challenge. He wondered if she realized just how she was challenging him. He nodded, not agreeing to what she thought he was agreeing to. "No more stubborn ass."

She snorted and put the car into gear.

She didn't talk for a long time and he wondered if she remembered how he had loved her or if she only remembered how he'd hurt her.

"You did an admirable job of stitching him up," the doctor told her after inspecting Adrian's arm, four hours after they'd left camp. Mallory's own arm was sore from shifting, her leg cramped from the clutch. At least Adrian wouldn't have to relive forty-two stitches.

The doctor, a bearded American in a tropical shirt, walked over to the aluminum-fronted cabinet to put away the gauze. "I've given him another antibiotic shot and have rewrapped the arm so he doesn't tear anything loose. He needs to keep it that way at least a week. No diving for at least two. And see that he takes these antibiotic pills."

Mallory stepped back, her ears ringing with the news. They couldn't afford to lose their most experienced diver, no matter how many other divers they hired.

Adrian took the bottle of antibiotics, bounced them in his palm. "Doctor, I can't stay out of the water that long. We have a limited window here, and I have to go in."

The doctor shook his head. "You shouldn't get those stitches wet, and you won't have full use of your arm, in any case. The two weeks will go quickly enough." He walked out, dismissing them.

Adrian pocketed the pills and hopped off the exam table. "Let's go get checked into a hotel." He looped a companionable arm, his good one, around her neck. "It'll be a nice change to get a real shower, yeah?"

The weight of his arm across her shoulders was so familiar, she almost found herself tucking her head in the crook of his neck, a move as natural as breathing, once upon a time. Pulling away would be the smart thing to do, but that would let him know her thoughts had veered into dangerous territory. Best to play it off, pretend it didn't matter. But the gesture put her on guard. Was it casual, or did he plan to take advantage of their time alone to make her want more than just the ship?

Because that was so far out of the realm of possibility.

It was.

"You can't shower," she reminded him. "You can't get your arm wet."

"Where there's a will there's a way."

Arrogant man. No doubt he was cooking up some scheme to get into the water himself. Damn it, she was going to have to play wife.

Adrian managed to get reservations at a nice hotel within walking distance from the beach. Mallory had thought they wouldn't be able to get one room, much less two, but he sweet-talked the desk clerk into adjoining rooms. Mallory frowned, silent, unreadable, on the way up the elevator, then didn't say a word to him as she peeled off to go to her own room.

Once in his room, Adrian stopped at the connecting door and placed his palm on it, imagining her on the other side, tossing her duffel into a corner, stripping off her clothes as she headed for the shower. She never had managed to do just one thing at a time.

He couldn't stand here fantasizing about her. He turned from the doorway that was nothing but a temptation and picked up the phone to call the campsite.

No answer. They must be out on the boat. Adrian glanced at his watch. A little later than he would dive, but his brother always lived a little closer to the edge than Adrian. He'd left strict instructions for Toney to keep an eye on Robert, make sure he continued his medicine, make sure he didn't work so hard. The old man shouldn't even be here, but Adrian couldn't make him stay away. And the prof had refused to let anyone else in on his secret. Adrian wished the old man would at least tell Mallory, so Adrian could talk to her about it. As much as he longed to confide in her, he wouldn't betray Robert's trust.

He sat in the low-backed chair and rubbed his hand over his jaw, the rasp surprisingly loud in the quiet room. The thickness of his stubble surprised him, and he looked toward her room. Mallory had a good idea there, with the showering. He should clean up before dinner.

Mallory shoved her hair away from her face and opened the connecting door at the knock. She should have shut it again, right there.

Adrian leaned against the jamb on his good arm, bare-chested, head tilted, that stupid charming smile quirking the corner of his mouth. "I need help."

Wariness rose, along with other, baser emotions. She folded her hands together to resist running them over his shoulders. She'd always loved his shoulders. Her tongue curled in her mouth as she remembered the taste of him. "With what?" Okay, that didn't come out as casually as she'd hoped.

"I can't get my arm wet and I can't wash my hair one-handed."

"You want me to wash your hair."

He lifted his eyebrows, charm on high. "Please."

That would require her getting closer and, God help her, she'd have to touch him. Her brain battled with every other nerve in her body that wanted to jump up and down at the chance and scream, *Yes, please*.

"We can try to fashion a sleeve. Do you have a plastic bag or something?" She looked past him into his room. He'd dumped his duffel out on his bed. Maybe he'd been thinking the same thing. Maybe he wasn't just trying to seduce her. "No. Do you?"

She shook her head. Okay, if he was coming to her as a last resort, maybe she could be impersonal and help him out. "How do you think we should do this?"

He straightened, and while his smile disappeared, his eyes glinted. "I thought I could get in the tub. Make it easier for you to reach."

That sounded reasonable. Anything that kept her clothes on sounded reasonable. She'd thought he'd want her to strip down and get into the shower with him, but maybe he'd gotten the message that she was not here because of him. His learning curve must have improved.

She made a twirling motion with her finger. "Okay. Let's go."

His eyebrows climbed higher, just for a second, as if he hadn't expected her to cave so easily, then he turned and led the way into the bathroom.

The teeny tiny bathroom.

He leaned over the tub to start the water running while she tried to figure out what to do with her hands, what to look at besides the play of muscles across his back. He straightened, turned away from her and shucked off his shorts.

"Are you kidding me?" He was already sporting an erection. "Can't you control that thing?"

With a flex of muscles he bobbed it at her before stepping into the tub, his injured left arm on the edge of the tub near her. "It remembers you."

She snorted. "It's just going to have to savor those memories. Let me get something to rinse your hair." She ducked out of the room, spotted the ice bucket on the dresser and, for a moment, considered actually filling it with ice before dumping it over Adrian's smug head. How could she blame his body's obvious reaction when her own body hummed from the sight of his? She sucked in a breath, like before a dive, and turned into the bathroom.

Adrian sat in the tub, long legs drawn up, looking ridiculous and so male all at once.

All that breath whooshed out of her lungs and she twisted around to the sink to find the shampoo.

"Looking for this?"

Lips quirked with enjoyment at her discomfort, he wiggled a small plastic bottle. Smirking herself, she turned the sink on full blast, stuck the bucket under the faucet, then dumped the cold water over his head.

He sputtered and wiped a hand over his eyes. She set the bucket down, snatched the shampoo from his slick fingers and squeezed the contents into her palm. Already anticipating how his short hair would feel against her skin, she rubbed her hands together.

"Lean your head back so you don't get soap in your eyes."

Yes, she was stalling. But when he eased back, well, she wasn't thinking about how his hair would feel against her skin anymore. She dragged her eyes away from his still-impressive erection and met his gaze that told her, damn it, he knew everything going through her head.

"Say one word and I'll leave you in here."

He pressed his lips together in an exaggerated gesture of silence, so she bent over and scrubbed her hands over his hair, blocking out the sensation of the short bristles against her skin, the hum of pleasure in his throat. Her gaze drifted to his forehead, the lines there even in rest, his lashes resting on sun-kissed cheeks, a gentle smile curving his soft lips.

"Feels nice," he murmured as she lathered his hair.

She released him, considered rinsing her hands in the water of the tub, but there was no place in the tub where he wasn't. She reached over to turn on the faucet and rinsed her hands before she refilled the bucket.

"Warm this time, please," he said, without moving, his gaze intent on her when she moved to kneel by his head. And damn it, she recognized that look, used to live for that look.

"What? It's warm." Knowing she had to get out of here and fast, before she did something stupid, she snatched a washcloth from the edge of the tub, tossed it over his eyes and poured the water from the bucket over his head, working the lather until it was gone. Drawing away, she jumped to her feet. "Okay, you're good."

Adrian whipped the wet cloth off his face and sat up, sloshing water onto the floor. "Mal, wait. I can't reach my back."

Oh, for— But she hesitated in the doorway, eyeing him to see if he was serious. As if to demonstrate, he flipped the washcloth over his shoulder and slapped it against his broad back.

With a grumble of frustration, she stomped over and grabbed the cloth. She spread it over her hand and thrust it at him. "Soap."

He fumbled the wrapped soap out of the soap dish and held it up to her helplessly. Her gaze on his, she took the packet, lifted it to her mouth and tore it open with her teeth.

"Lean forward."

He did, and once again she hesitated. All that sun-browned skin covering an expanse of muscular back, shoulders she'd ridden upon in playfulness, had clutched in passion, had clung to in sorrow. She wasn't touching him, though. The cloth was touching him. The heat of him seeped through, the strength of him, the masculinity. She stroked the cloth in broad sweeps, from one shoulder to the other, down the indentation of his spine, stopping just at the small of his back before gliding up his right side, under his right arm. He wouldn't be able to reach that either, so she shifted around to reach across his chest.

And caught her breath to see the way he looked at her. All playfulness was gone now. His eyes had darkened, his lips parted, his breath came hot against her cheek.

"Mallory."

Her gaze was riveted on his mouth for one terrible moment of longing before reason returned. Time to go. Now, or it would be too late. She dropped the cloth into the water and bolted.

A shower of her own didn't clear her head. When another knock came at her door, more than an hour later, she still hadn't gathered her wits. She should have known better than to think she could handle being alone with Adrian. And what devil had compelled her to put herself in a room with naked Adrian?

Who'd only gotten better with age. How was that possible?

Yes, part of the reason she hadn't gathered her wits was because her ridiculous imagination kept wondering what would have happened if she'd stayed.

Now she opened the connecting door with equal parts trepidation and anticipation. Maybe more fortysixty.

The dim light from her bedside lamp cast shadows over his face, shrouding him just for a moment before he stepped through the door, clean-shaven, bearing food, smelling better than a man had the right to smell. Apparently she had developed x-ray vision, because she could see right through his thin T-shirt, the kind he'd been wearing since she'd known him, to the muscular chest beneath.

"I hope you don't mind if we eat in your room," he said, holding the white bag aloft. "I've been working."

Right. That could keep her mind off dangerous paths. She glanced past him into his room and saw yellow paper from a legal pad scattered from table to dresser to bed. "Writing?"

"Yeah." He passed her to set the bag down on the table by the window and opened the drapes to look out on the beach.

"You don't use the computer?"

"Computers have batteries that die."

"Yeah, if you don't plug them in." She closed the door.

"While I don't like to admit to being an absent-minded professor..." He trailed off as he unpacked the bag.

Enticed by the appealing spicy scent of the food but wary of the man, she moved closer. She tried to recall the last time she'd seen him clean-shaven. She closed her fingers against a desire to stroke the smooth skin, against the memory of how his strong back felt beneath her hands. "What is it?"

"Meat pie. Smells good." He lifted a paper-wrapped package to his nose.

"Mm." She sat, took the bottle of beer he handed her, careful not to brush his fingers with hers. The bed was not three feet away, and they were alone. She was too conscious of their past behavior whenever temptation presented itself, too conscious of how easily she remembered how he felt inside of her. She returned to that safe topic. "So did you get a lot of writing done?" Or did you obsess over what might have happened as I did?

He snorted. "It's not as easy as I thought it would be."

She took the thick, greasy meat pie in both hands and bit. The taste was even better than the smell, the sauce thick and spicy, the meat tender. "You've written before."

"Articles." He sopped up some of the grease from the pie with the pastry. "Not something meant to be four hundred pages long."

"You've never been at a loss for words."

"Talking is completely different." He chuckled.

The rumble of it skittered right over her nerves. "So how far are you?"

He rolled his eyes and took a bite of pie, then set it on the waxy bag and held up his fingers. Six of them.

"Page six?" Adrian was not a procrastinator.

He wiped at his mouth with a paper napkin and nodded glumly. "It's kicking my butt."

Huh. Adrian Reeves never admitted defeat. "Can I read it?" Okay, where had that come from?

His eyes flashed in the dim light. "You want to?"

His agreement was shocking. He'd never allowed her to read his articles till they came out in the trade publications. A sense of competition had run deep between them; they'd be on the same digs, but submit separate papers on each. If her paper ended up in a more elite publication, well, the interlude would be unpleasant until he could best her with the next paper.

So she was surprised to find herself reading his work after a dessert of potato pone, a kind of bread pudding with sweet potatoes. She curled her legs in front of her as she tried to get comfortable in one of the low-backed chairs in his room, squinting to decipher his handwriting. She shifted, glancing at the bed. No, if she lay on the bed, which would be more comfortable, he would get the wrong idea. After the bit in the bathroom, she didn't want to tempt fate. Or Adrian. "Your handwriting has gotten worse."

Focused on the pad in front of him, he grunted. He'd slipped on glasses when she hadn't noticed, silver-rimmed ones that, if she was honest, looked really sexy in a professorial kind of way.

She tapped the bridge of her own nose. "What's this?"

He glanced up, his eyes incredibly blue behind the lenses.

Definitely sexy. She tried to hide the hitch in her breathing.

"Your nose," he drawled.

"Are you getting old, Adrian?"

He took off the glasses and set them on the table. "Too many term papers."

"You never did like teaching."

"Despised it." He dragged out the words, in case she had any doubt. He set the pad aside and folded his arms on the table, nodding toward the pad she held. "So what do you think?"

She tossed the pages toward him. "It's too dry."

A corner of his mouth quirked. "Ironic for a book about underwater excavating."

She would not react to that sardonic grin. She was a grown woman who could resist his arrogance. Even that was a turn-on, always had been. "Exactly. It reads like a textbook. It's not going to be a textbook, is it?"

"No, but—"

"You need more emotion in it. You love diving, you love excavating. Let it show." Nothing of Adrian was in the words she'd read, none of the passion she knew so well. "This can be a breakthrough book that not only students of archaeology will read. Spice it up."

His brow furrowed as he picked up the legal pad and studied it. She wondered if even he could read that chicken scratch. "How can I do that?"

"Write the way you talk. You, Adrian, not Dr. Reeves, professor of underwater archaeology. If you can do that, I think it will come easier." She stretched her arms over her head, cracked her spine. "I'll read it again when you're done if you want."

He tossed the pad onto the table and folded his hands over his stomach. "Why are you helping me?"

"What?" She flipped her hair over her shoulder, surprised.

"After what happened between us, why are you helping me?"

That was not an easy question. She drew one leg up on the chair in front of her, as if that would give her another layer of protection against him. "Just because I can't be married to you anymore doesn't mean I don't want to see you succeed."

"That's kind, I suppose. I just never thought of us as, you know, being able to stay friends."

"Why not?" She looked at him sharply, heart squeezing.

"Well, we used to be able to talk, kind of like we have the past few days. But I always thought if we'd still been friends when we were married, we would have been able to work through a lot of the stuff."

Her throat burned with tears for missed opportunities. Where would they be now if they could have worked things out then? Would they be in Belize or in Pensacola or someplace else? Would they have a child? She'd always wanted to see Adrian with their child.

"Friends don't hurt each other the way we did," she said instead, standing and walking to the connecting door. "Good night, Adrian."

Friends don't hurt each other the way we did.

The words played themselves over and over in Adrian's head as he lay sleepless in his big bed, sensing her on the other side of the wall. He knew what she was talking about, even though he'd hoped she'd forgotten.

But she couldn't have. He'd left bruises on her body and tears in her eyes.

They'd been fighting in their little house in Pensacola. Nothing unusual, they fought all the time in those days. He didn't even recall what this particular fight was about, and that dragged at him, too. His mouth had been punishing when he'd pressed her up against the counter and kissed her. He still felt the way her soft lips had been crushed beneath his, and he rubbed at his mouth with the back of his hand to erase the sensation.

They'd ended nearly every fight with lovemaking, so he could only hope that the reason he'd kissed her was to advance the peace. He could only hope.

She'd kissed him back but had been just as rough as she used her teeth. She had been the one to start tearing at his clothes. He was sure he remembered that right. Then they'd been naked and ravaging each other, first on the countertop, her head banging on the cabinet, then on the floor. Her nails scored his biceps as he drove into her with a violence he hated to claim.

Rough sex wasn't unusual for them. Hell, most times they ruined at least one piece of clothing in their eagerness to get at one another. But this time was different. When he climaxed, he felt nothing. Not relief, not joy, nothing. He'd backed away from her, saw the tears in her eyes, saw the marks on her arms and hips that would become bruises from his touch.

This wasn't the marriage he wanted. This was his parents' marriage, and he'd lain awake too many nights listening to his mother cry. He wouldn't do that to Mallory.

He'd left that day and never came back.

Friends don't hurt each other the way we did.

He should make her go home before he hurt her again.

He wasn't going to be able to sleep, not with that image in his head. He rolled out of bed and walked over to open the sliding glass door onto the balcony. The rhythm of the waves, the scent of the sea had never failed to calm him, but being up here—he was too far away. He needed the sand, the water.

Mallory was right-he wasn't meant for four walls.

Wishing for his sleeping bag, he grabbed a towel instead and headed downstairs.

The beach was mostly empty this late—it had to be close to two in the morning. But there, knee deep in the surf, illuminated by the moon, stood a blonde in a thin T-shirt, facing the open water, arms stretched over her head.

Mallory.

The feeling hit him hard, like a kick in the chest. Mine.

# Chapter Ten

The surf had done its trick. Mallory finally felt calm enough to go inside, go to sleep, not dream of Adrian, of everything that had happened since she'd decided to come to Belize, of all the doubts that plagued her mind. She'd been so careful constructing that wall around her emotions when it came to Adrian. But after the conversation in the truck, the incident in the tub and the talk in her hotel room, she felt that mortar crumbling.

Before, she'd talked herself into believing she was here for the ship. Now...God. She knew exactly why she had returned.

She was a glutton for punishment.

She turned to walk out of the surf and saw Adrian sitting on the beach, legs folded in front of him, arms looped over his knees as he watched her, that grin curving his mouth, his teeth glinting in the moonlight.

Defensiveness kicked in, battling the punch of pleasure, of excitement at seeing him—and losing. She had to keep her head. She had to. What would she risk if she lost it? "What are you doing down here?"

"Couldn't sleep."

He pushed to his feet in a fluid movement, moved toward her as she stepped out of the waves onto the packed sand. Even while her brain told her to stop, to slow, to turn away, her legs carried her forward, the wet hem of her T-shirt—his T-shirt—catching on her bare legs as if trying to remind her why she shouldn't be doing this. She didn't pay attention, focused only on Adrian's eyes.

He lifted his hands, curved them on either side of her face, his fingers rough against her skin. That maddening grin taunted her even as he lowered his head and she rose on her toes.

Just that, just his kiss, the taste of him, the feel of him, easy but still carrying the punch of lust, was enough to chase doubts from her head. No future. No consequences. Only she and the man she'd loved since she was twenty.

He stroked her jaw with a callused thumb, combed his fingers through her hair. She whimpered and deepened the kiss. He caressed her hairline, the line of her throat, his rhythm unmistakably sexual, his pace slow, gentle, savoring. This new, older Adrian had learned some control himself.

She eased against him, coasting her hands up his bare arms, caressing the defined muscles there, feeling them ripple as he slid his hands down to cradle her hips, bring her against his arousal.

Suddenly three years apart felt like an eternity. With only a step and a little shove, she dropped him to the sand and came down on top of him, straddling his lap. She found his mouth again with hers, so easy, tracing the line of his lips, hungry to taste him as she edged her hips closer to nestle his erection, gliding her hands up over his naked chest, revving her own desire.

He bent and brushed his lips across her throat as he coasted his palms up her thighs. The sizzle that went through her charged him as well. He pressed his lips against her ear. "I've missed you, Mal."

She dragged her teeth over his earlobe. "Yes. God, yes."

He drew back just enough to look into her eyes. "I don't want to make love to you out here. Not where anyone could come up. Not when we have two beds waiting."

His thumbs traced circles on her thighs, below her panties. His eyes brightened when he realized she wasn't wearing shorts underneath the T-shirt. But those lazy circles jangled her nerves so much she didn't know if she could stand, much less walk to the hotel. Nitrogen narcosis had nothing on Adrian Reeves.

"You have to stop that, or don't stop." She pushed her hips closer, urging his touch higher, needing relief, release.

With a grin, he dragged his palms down her thighs to her knees before he gave them a gentle shove to move her off him. "Let's go." He dumped her off his lap, rolled to his feet and reached to help her up. She clasped his hand and stood, swaying close, brushing against him. He drew in a sharp breath.

The grin flashed again before he led her to the hotel. They were breathless by the time they reached the lobby. He shushed her giggles as they echoed off the walls of the empty place. Sandy footprints marked their path as they hurried to the elevator.

When it dinged, the doors slid open with a whoosh. He crowded her inside, against a corner and parted her legs with his knee. The hair of his thigh tickled, arousing her, as he covered her mouth with his. He stroked his tongue deep as he slid his hands under her T-shirt, gliding over her waist, teasing her with the proximity of his touch. She moved into him just as the door dinged again, opened, and he eased out, his hands on her hips to guide her into the hall.

"Your key?" he asked against her ear.

She reached inside the neck of her shirt and tugged out a chain with the keycard clipped to it. He slipped it over her head to unlock her door, then turned to pull her inside, dragging her T-shirt over her head while he circled her toward the bed, then lowered her to it.

This kiss was deeper, hungrier, as if the last of his control had escaped its leash. He closed his palm over her breast, the sensation both alien and familiar. She bowed into it, opening her mouth on a moan. His tongue delved deeper, his hips pressing into hers, his arousal undisguised. She shifted on the bed so he was poised at the junction of her thighs. He pushed against her once, twice, before rising off her.

"Adrian, no," she protested, reaching for him.

He merely cocked his head in amusement, then shucked his shorts and knelt over her again, to drag her panties down her legs. She glided her fingers over his stomach and felt his skin ripple before she closed them around his length, sliding from base to tip, dragging a shuddering groan from him before he pushed her hand away. She held her breath, waiting for the next step.

Well, she knew the next step, but with Adrian, she couldn't be sure what form it would take.

He took her face in his hands, kissing her with the same tenderness he'd shown earlier. With gentle prodding, he laid her down on her side, stretching out beside her. His eyes never left hers as he lifted her thigh over his hip and entered her.

All the foreplay, all the arousal, melted away. No longer did she feel desire as such, only an overwhelming sense of right. This was where she belonged. With Adrian. In his arms, in his bed.

In his life. She felt complete.

She wanted to close her eyes, but he watched her with such intensity. He had to feel it, too. And if he did, what then?

He shifted his hips. The hunger returned, not as fierce as before, tempered with a gentleness that might have been love. Unable to bear his watchfulness any longer, she took his face in her hands and kissed him as they found a rhythm and rode it till it was no longer enough that he was inside her. Now they needed satisfaction.

He turned onto his back, guiding her over him, hand on her hips. She followed the pulse of her heart, bringing him in deeper and stronger with each thrust. She encountered the edge of his bandage as she sought a handhold, settled on his biceps as he curled up to kiss her breasts, lips skimming sensitive flesh, sending shivers of pleasure through her. Sweat dripped from her onto him. She was surprised she didn't hear the sizzle as it landed on his flesh.

Her rhythm faltered as he sipped her nipple between his lips. She stilled and cupped her hand over the back of his head, holding him to her, pressing against him. He brushed his fingertips up the inside of her thigh and his touch had her driving against him.

The pleasure held her there, on the plateau, for endless moments. Her senses were open to everything, the sound of his labored breathing, the scent of him, the scent of them, the familiar thrust of him inside her. She curled her fingers into his shoulders and arched her back to bring him deeper, seeking what he was so good at giving her.

Finding it, and in the haze of her pleasure, feeling him follow.

"Good to know we haven't lost our touch," Adrian murmured, one arm flung over his eyes as he caught his breath.

Mallory had nestled against him, her cheek against his shoulder, but she moved away now, onto her back, putting distance between them.

More than just physical, he feared. He could damn near hear the wheels turning in her head as she tried to figure out what this meant, what this would mean. He had to stop her from thinking. His first instinct was to distract her with sex, but even as long as it'd been since the last time he'd made love to her, he didn't think he could recover that quickly.

He shifted onto his side to face her, wanting to touch her, unable to read the tension in her body. Would she accept his touch or withdraw? Not wanting to risk it, he tucked his hand under his pillow and watched her do her damnedest not to look at him.

"This used to relax you more," he murmured.

She sat up with a grimace and dusted off the polyester comforter, then reached for her shirt. "All this sand. I've apparently turned into the princess and the pea."

"Mal." He curled into a sitting position and stroked the indentation of her spine before she drew back under the guise of putting on her shirt. God, she was working so hard at not looking at him. "Did I—did I hurt you?" He'd tried so hard to be careful, gentle, loving, but he'd never been much successful at controlling himself where Mallory was concerned.

She shook her head, threading her hair loose from the neck of the shirt. The movement brought her scent toward him. Well, maybe sex wouldn't be out of the question as a distraction.

And more. If she would allow him to touch her again.

"Mallory, I want to hold you." He damn near choked on the words. That was more information than he wanted to hand her at this point, when everything was still so jumbled.

She glanced back at him with a tiny smile. "Let me shower first."

"Be happy to help you with that."

The smile grew bigger as she let her gaze travel down the length of his body, yes, recovering just fine. "This is probably a bad idea."

Hope flared. "I think it's the best one I've had all year."

She spun to face him and held out a hand. Ignoring it, he edged to the end of the bed and tucked his hand around her waist, sliding up her body as he rose. She softened against him as he hardened against her, still naked. He sank his fingers into her bare hips. When she shifted and rubbed up against him, he backed her toward the bathroom.

"Impressive recovery time," she murmured when he reached into the shower to turn on the water without releasing her.

He twisted with a grin. "It's missed you."

Her fingers drifted down his stomach to stroke him. He drew in a breath through his teeth. Flashing a grin of her own, she stepped past him into the shower.

"Mind your arm, now."

Yeah, because keeping his arm dry was what he was thinking about. Still, he guided her to the far end of the tub, pinned her to the wall and lost himself in her.

Minutes later, the water ran cold. Mallory could barely stand. Adrian was pretty damned sure he wouldn't recover for hours when they staggered back to bed. All he had to do was drag down the bedspread and fall into bed, pulling her with him. She nestled in his arms, her breath evening out almost immediately, her arm flung across his chest.

For the first time in a long time, he couldn't sleep, not because he was worried, but because he was happy.

Mallory slid her hand across the empty bed, the sheet cool under her fingers as she woke. She lifted her head from the pillow that smelled of him and looked around, listened for the shower. No water running, and the connecting door was closed. Where was he? Her stomach growled as she rolled onto her back. Maybe he'd gone for breakfast. While that sounded good, well, it probably wasn't wise to spend any more time than necessary in the room. Temptation was not something they dealt well with, clearly.

As she took inventory of her aching muscles, she recalled how they got that way. One thing Adrian had always been was thorough. Just remembering how he had touched her, turned her, filled her, made her want to start all over again.

All the more reason to get out of this room. Pushing the covers back, she dragged her duffel close to the bed to retrieve fresh clothes. She grabbed panties and was digging for a bra when she heard the snick of the lock and Adrian opened the door, in his same clothes from last night, balancing two glasses of orange juice and yet another greasy white bag.

The grin that creased his face had heat spreading through her body. He set the glasses on the dresser, tossed the bag on the nightstand and crawled up from the foot of the bed.

"I thought maybe we'd get an early start, but I didn't think I'd find you still in bed." He slid his hand under the sheet, his thumb stroking the hollow of her ankle before gliding up her calf. "Still naked."

"Adrian." She should have pulled away, but arousal already heated her blood in advance of his touch.

He flicked his gaze to hers, those silver-blue eyes crinkling mischievously. "It'll be a long time before we get a bed again. We'd better take advantage."

Her mind fought for coherence. "When we get back, this is over."

He stilled a minute, his hand on the inside of her knee, pressing it toward the mattress. "No." He stretched out beside her and nuzzled her shoulder before kissing her throat. "You're moving into my tent, with me, where you belong."

"Ade." She pressed her hand against his chest, not really wanting to push him away, but needing the emotional distance.

He only took advantage of the new position to look into her eyes, threading his fingers through her hair, brushing his thumb over her lower lip. "I missed the hell out of you, Mal. I'm glad you came back."

Those words, and God, the look in his eyes that darkened them, melted all her reserves. Even as she cursed her ability to be manipulated so easily by her emotions, she reached for him, lost herself in the sensations of his hands, his mouth. She slid her palms under the hem of his T-shirt and over his warm, hard body, over the curls on his chest, digging her fingertips into his shoulders.

He flipped onto his back, pulling her with him. Her pulse skipped as she braced her hands on his chest and looked down. As he curled into a sitting position, he positioned her legs on either side of his hips. Making a shushing sound, she wriggled his shirt over his head. She didn't want to talk, didn't want to think, just wanted to feel. God, she loved the feel of him, the heat, the strength. She trailed her fingers down his stomach. Even as his skin twitched beneath her touch, he grinned.

"Don't tease," he murmured.

She wrestled with his fly. "You never did know how to pace yourself."

He squeezed her butt. "When I see what I want, I go for it. And you never complained before."

"Not complaining now." She freed his erection and glided her palm over the length of him, then leaned forward, nipping his lower lip. He coursed his hands up her back, urging her closer. Hooking her feet behind his butt, she brought him inside her, covering his mouth with hers as she did, feeling the vibration of his moan from her lips to her toes. Laughing softly at his response, she eased back, brought him deeper. A quiver went through him as she moved over him, and the power she experienced at having him at her mercy only increased her arousal. Her hair fell forward, brushed his shoulder as they found their rhythm, a familiar, sensual dance, one they knew so well, punctuated with gentle moans, quick gasps as the pleasure built, plateaued.

Part of her wanted to remain on this plateau. This would be their last time, after all. She couldn't continue this once they were back on the dig, couldn't risk getting hurt again, getting pushed aside once more. So she wanted to savor even as her body craved the climax.

He took the decision out of her hand, tilting her onto the bed, driving into her, his hand stroking down her side, up her thigh that curved around his hip, shifted so he opened her more to him, plunged deeper, faster, his breath coming quick, his forehead beaded with sweat, his eyes intent on hers.

The orgasm was long and slow, the pleasure rippling through her body, hot and sweet, tightening everything in her, then melting the tension away so that all she wanted was to lie in his arms forever, here in this bed, here with this man.

The words she feared most floated to the surface, and only the strength of her will kept her from murmuring them as she stroked her husband's damp hair when he collapsed over her.

She would not say, "I love you," though she was very afraid she meant it.

"I just need to get my manuscript from next door."

Adrian had moved more quickly than Mal after their lovemaking, had showered and dressed while she still stretched out on the bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering how she'd let this happen. Now both were dressed, packed, fed and ready to hit the road. He walked to the adjoining door and flicked the lock before he swore and stopped.

Mallory looked up from zipping her duffel. "What is it?"

But he'd gone into action, disappeared into the other room. Mallory followed, uncertain of what she'd find.

The room was spotless. None of the yellow papers that had been strewn across the bed, the dresser, the table by the window last night remained. None were in the trash, either.

"The maid's been here," she murmured, even as her heart sank. His notes, his manuscript, even those six pages were hard-earned and hadn't been duplicated. Why would the maid throw out the papers on the bed and dresser?

He was already at the door, swinging it open, scanning the hall. He strode out. Mallory continued searching the room, though why the notes would be in the dresser drawers or his duffel, she didn't know. Moments later she heard rapid-fire Spanish from Adrian, and a defensive female voice. Mallory hurried to the door to see Adrian flip open the maid's pushcart as the tiny wide-eyed woman protested. He leaned in, pawed through the trash, emerged with his face twisted in disgust.

"Where is the trash?" he demanded.

She pointed down the stairs. He scowled.

"In the Dumpster?" he asked the woman.

She nodded, chin tucked back, her gaze not leaving Adrian. "Si."

"Adrian."

He was halfway down the stairs. "She hasn't been to my room yet," he said over his shoulder when Mallory followed.

"So why are we-?"

He turned to face her, hands braced on the handrails of the stairs, blocking the way. "It was my notes, everything. If someone has it, they know exactly where we're excavating, exactly what we've found."

Which meant someone had been watching them in the city to know where they were staying, to know Adrian would be in her room last night. Mallory rubbed at the prickles of alarm that rose on her skin. She suddenly, furiously, needed a maid to have accidentally thrown out the papers.

"I'll go in the Dumpster if you give me a boost," she volunteered.

But moments later, both of them covered with slime Mallory did not want to identify, they had still come up with no yellow legal paper.

Adrian's expression was bleak as he helped her out of the Dumpster.

"We need to get to camp. Right now."

## Chapter Eleven

Adrian tensed as Mallory pulled into camp behind the other mud-spattered Land Cruiser after six excruciating hours in the car. The rain had started an hour out of town, a deluge that had made the windshield wipers ineffective and the roads mush. They'd been extremely lucky they hadn't gotten stuck— Adrian didn't have the strength in his arm to push, and he sure as hell wasn't going to send Mallory out there.

They'd hardly spoken once it started raining, even though he'd offered to drive. She'd shot him a look, aware of his weakness and the pain he wouldn't take pills for. His excuse was that he wanted to be alert in case she needed him. Plus, since she'd had to drive the whole way, his nerves were jangled. He hated being helpless.

She still didn't believe something subversive was going on, just like last time. He had stopped trying to convince her after fifteen minutes. All that mattered was that she was in as much of a hurry to get to the campsite as he was.

His stomach knotted as Mallory yanked the brake. There was no activity in the camp, but it was still raining like hell.

Beside him, Mallory stretched into the backseat and pulled a windbreaker out of her duffel before shoving the door open. "They're probably in Dr. Vigil's tent. Let's leave our gear in here for a bit."

He pushed open his door and stopped at the fender of the Land Cruiser, keeping himself between Mallory and the camp. It was quiet—too quiet.

"Something's wrong," he murmured.

"Adrian, it's raining." She shifted the windbreaker over her head, held a corner out for him to get under. "They're inside somewhere, reading or playing cards or something."

Adrian shook his head at her offer as he scanned the camp. He wouldn't feel foolish for his concern, not when the hairs on his arms were standing up. "No. Someone would be at the mess tent. It's almost supper time."

"Maybe they thought we'd bring something from McDonald's," she said, trying to make light.

He grunted and reached for her hand, needing the contact with her. They moved past the mess tent, the opening loose and flapping in the wind. "Deserted" was the word that came to Adrian's mind.

No one was in Linda's tent, or his, or Toney and Jacob's.

He turned to her, lifting a finger to his lips. He hadn't figured out what was wrong but didn't want her to call out, to draw attention. She frowned but nodded. Couldn't she feel that something was off?

Maybe Mal was right, they were in Robert's. He kept his accommodations roomy and cozy, perfect for a rainy day.

The rain let up as they crossed the camp, and the sea breezes shifted but no longer carried away the scent of decay. They couldn't. It was too strong right here.

At Robert's tent.

Before he thought about it too hard, he whipped aside the flaps, only then realizing Mallory was behind him. His mind pushed away the reality of what was before him, and his movements turned leaden with dread.

The man they'd both loved lay at an awkward angle on his cot, as if he'd fallen and the cot had broken his fall. One of his legs was bent inward, the other straight, his arms by his side, his head thrown back.

Only when Adrian took a helpless step inside the dim tent did he see the cause of the good doctor's fall.

A gun rested in the palm of one lifeless hand. A dark stain spread on the cot beneath him.

The realization had him spinning to catch Mallory before she saw. He caught her arms, put his body between her and Robert. She fought him to get around him to the professor, but he held her tight, shifting his body, trying to get her out of the tent at the same time. Surely she understood the stench that encompassed them.

"He's gone, Mal. He's gone." The words pushed past the tightness in his throat as he tried to protect her. "He wouldn't want you to see him this way." Damn it, the old man shouldn't have killed himself where someone would find him, where they would find him.

"He's dead?" She struggled in his arms, craning her head around his shoulder. He felt her go boneless, didn't have the strength in himself to catch her before she dropped to the sand in a heap.

"How? Oh my God! Where did he get the gun?" she asked as he crouched before her, burying his own head in his arms.

"It's his." He looked up, not able to focus through his tears. Then he scrambled to his feet, having difficulty finding purchase in the sand.

"Why would he do this?" She grasped his hand and stared at him, her eyes hot with accusation. "He would never do this."

Adrian swallowed the bile that threatened to rise as she gave voice to his thoughts. No matter how bad the pain had been, Mal was right. Robert wouldn't have done this when they were in the midst of their greatest discovery. He wouldn't have given up now.

Would he? He'd waited until Adrian and Mal had left. Which begged the question: where were Toney and the others? They must not know about the doctor—they'd never leave him like this.

"We should call someone." Mal stood with her arms wrapped around herself, her body tight. "Shouldn't we call someone?"

Adrian rubbed his knuckles over his forehead as he reached past his grief for logic. "See if you can find the sat phone."

She didn't move, her focus on the professor. Adrian curved his hand over her shoulder and she turned her gaze to him. The despair he saw in her eyes was another punch in the gut. This man had been a father to her after her parents were killed. He squeezed her shoulder, trying to bring her closer, but she set her feet, unwilling to take comfort from him.

"I'll stay with him," she said.

Christ. He didn't want to leave her here with the smell and the blood. God, there would be so much blood. "Mal."

"I'll stay."

He recognized the stubborn tone but wouldn't leave her with the man sprawled like that. There was nothing peaceful in his death. The sight, the stench, had Adrian fighting a wave of sickness, but he couldn't back off. Taking a gulp of air, he stepped over to the cot and gripped the man's bony shoulders to straighten him on the cot, give him that peace at least. Now he could now see the expression on Robert's face—shock.

"Well, yeah, old man, hurts to die." To leave everything behind, especially when you have something to live for. "Christ." The word was both prayer and question as his vision blurred, as tears ran down his nose to drip on Robert's chest. He scrubbed his face on the shoulder of his own T-shirt and turned his head to look at Mallory. "See if you can find something to cover him with."

She nodded, her face blotchy. She stepped over books scattered over the carpet. "What happened here?"

Adrian glanced over at the overturned chest, the research books tossed about. "Maybe he hit it when he fell." But that didn't make much sense. The professor didn't weigh enough to knock over the cot. How could he have turned over a chest of books? "Mal, the blanket."

"Right." She rummaged through his other chest until she came up with a blanket. "Where's the one you brought him from Scotland?" she asked, handing the solid blue blanket to Adrian.

"His plaid? On the boat, I suppose."

"We should get that."

The look she gave him meant that he should go. Right. He still didn't want to leave her with the body, but she didn't look as disturbed as he felt.

He jogged toward the beach, hating the relief he felt at being out of the tent, away from the body but not from the cloying smell. It was in his nose, on his clothes. He wondered if running into the ocean would wash it off.

He stopped short at the top of the dune. There was no boat. Perhaps the others had gone for help. But why had they left the professor like that? Unless the old man had waited to pull the trigger after they left.

Adrian pushed back the image that popped into his mind, instead focusing on his crew. Surely they weren't diving in this weather. He couldn't see the platform from here, and even if he could, he had no way of getting to them, no way of communicating.

Jesus. He dragged a hand over his hair as tension squeezed his gut, uncertainty rattled his nerves. He hated not knowing what to do next, the feeling only compounded by the grief he felt over losing his friend, worry about finding Toney and the others.

When he returned to the tent, Mallory knelt by Robert's body, her hand on his. She looked up, tears streaking her face, reddening her eyes.

"The boat's gone," he said.

"What?" Eyes wide, she got to her feet. "Where?"

"How do I know?" He regretted the snarl when she recoiled. He couldn't let his own fears feed hers. She'd need reassurance so he'd bury his own concern to give it to her. "Maybe they went for help."

"Why would they leave him without covering him up? They wouldn't do that."

He shook his head, then pivoted and headed for the vehicles.

Mallory watched him go but could no longer bear being alone with Dr. Vigil's body. She couldn't bring herself to look at his body, and the scent permeated everything. She ran after Adrian.

He stood at the passenger door of the other Land Cruiser, a cigarette hanging from his lips, checking the magazine of a handgun. She skidded to a halt, grains of sand digging into her feet. He cut a look in her direction, his expression hard, dangerous.

Unfamiliar.

"Adrian, what are you doing?"

"Something's not right," he said around the unlit cigarette, tucking the gun in the back of his pants. "I'm not walking around unarmed. And if we're going to look for Toney and the others, you need this." He picked up another gun from the front seat, handed it to her, grip first. "Do you remember how to shoot?"

"Yes, but—" She took the gun, heavier than she recalled, and her skin iced. "It's been awhile."

He pulled the lighter out of the dash of the truck, lit his cigarette, took a deep drag. An expression of relief washed over his face, the first she'd seen since they'd left town. He blew out a breath, the action so familiar and, God help her, sexy, a punch of longing shivered through her. Good, normal. She could feel something other than this heavy sadness.

"We're going into the jungle. Stay close."

## Chapter Twelve

After more than an hour of searching and finding no sign of anyone, not even the sat phone, Adrian called a halt to the search. The uncertainty of not knowing about the rest of their crew weighed heavily in Mallory's stomach. They wouldn't have left the professor. She was certain of that. So where were they?

They stopped outside of Dr. Vigil's tent. Adrian stared at the opening, his jaw working. "We need to bury him."

Resistance tightened her body. "Here? In the middle of nowhere? No, we have to take him home."

"We can't do that. We can't even get out of here ourselves, with no boat and the roads turned to mush. Leaving him just wrapped in a blanket—it's not right."

She took a step back, hugging herself as if that would steady her stomach. "He'll be alone."

"He doesn't have any family to visit him, not anymore. We're all he had. Besides, he liked it here. And he won't know the difference. Don't make this harder than it is, Mal."

She gathered herself with a deep shuddering breath, looking out over the dunes, tears running down her face. She turned and nodded. "Let me help you."

They managed to get the professor buried by the cliffs, the physical difficulty allowing them to mask their grief. When they were done, aching and sweaty and sad, Adrian went for a swim, to get the smell of death off his skin. He wasn't supposed to get his stitches wet, but after burying the professor in the rain and hiking through the jungle, well, it no longer mattered. Mallory, sweaty from digging in the packed sand, considered joining him, went as far as following him to the beach but Adrian apparently wanted to be alone.

So she sat in the sand and watched him, sifting the grains through her fingers. He had to be hurting as much as she was. Of course he couldn't share that with her. Not only was Adrian mourning the loss of his best friend, his brother was missing, his boat was gone, along with his way to get to the ship.

Adrian emerged from the ocean, his clothes plastered to him. He scooped up his boots and socks from the edge of the water and walked over, then plopped down on the sand beside her, his gaze on the ocean.

"Aren't you going in?"

She shook her head. "Adrian, we have to find the others."

"I know." A muscle in his jaw jumped as he laced his shoes. He scrubbed a hand over his hair and looked at her. "But frankly, I don't think I can stand to smell you if you don't." He lifted his own drenched

T-shirt to his nose and grimaced. "For all the good it does. I need my pack." He pushed to his feet. "I'll bring yours too."

Mallory dropped her head to her arms after he disappeared over the dunes. Why would she have thought he'd change, that he'd open up to her? Emotionally unavailable as always.

And she was emotionally involved again.

He returned and tossed her pack onto the sand beside her. He stripped off his wet shirt and let it fall to the ground. For the first time since she'd returned to the peninsula, the sight of his bare skin didn't affect her. She was too numb. She stood and walked into the water herself, hoping the water would wash away her sorrow.

She dove under the water, floated on the waves, let them carry her under the overcast sky, timeless. Only instead of washing the memories away, it opened her up so they all to come crashing back. Dr. Vigil had been part of her family as long as she could remember, her father's best friend. He'd gone on every dig with her family, all through the Andes, indulging her curiosity, enduring her jokes. She had chosen symbology at his encouragement, and he'd helped her study to get into the University of Texas.

Then Adrian had joined their team one summer. With his own rocky relationship with his father fresh in his mind, he'd latched on to Dr. Vigil as well. Dr. Vigil had loved it, loved how the young people had included him in their lives. After her parents died, he'd joined their crew and helped them buy their first boat since he didn't have kids of his own.

When she'd walked away from Adrian, Dr. Vigil had stayed, and she'd lost him as well as her husband.

Now Adrian was back in her life and Dr. Vigil was gone forever.

Eating a dinner of Spam in the rear of the truck, cross-legged on top of the sleeping bags in close confines, brought back memories of other digs and almost let Mallory forget that they'd buried the professor next to the cliff a few hours ago, that they didn't know where their friends were.

She set aside her sandwich and sighed. "Have you got a bottle of Scotch under the front seat?" Anything to kill the taste of the meat.

Adrian shook his head mournfully. "I didn't think to replenish my stock after the storm. I wish to hell I had." His hand went to his breast pocket. "Didn't bring any more beef jerky, either." He pulled out the pack of Toney's cigarettes, bounced it in his hand but didn't take one out.

She watched the familiar motions. "When did you give up smoking?" Maybe if she didn't think about the texture of the meat product, she could swallow it better.

He set the pack on the wheel well and stared at it. "A few months ago."

"Why?"

He jerked his thumb toward the cliff. "The prof was diagnosed with throat cancer, and he'd given up smoking years ago. I thought maybe I'm too late, but why risk it?"

"Dr. Vigil had cancer?" The food stuck in her throat, which convulsed as she tried to breathe. That explained why he might kill himself. Mallory wondered at the relief that rushed through her. He'd had a compelling reason, but why now, why here? If his illness had been that bad, she would have seen signs of it. "What was he doing out here?"

He slanted a look at her. "Looking for a ship." Like it was obvious.

These men, always putting their careers first. What the hell was wrong with them? She stuck the spoon in the Spam and slammed the can against the tailgate. "Instead of taking care of himself?"

"Mal, you knew the man." He swept a hand over his hair. "What was more important to him than archaeology?"

Just like Adrian.

He wiped at his nose. "I'm mostly just pissed off that he died this way, that he died alone."

"That you weren't here to stop him," she added softly, wanting to touch him, afraid he'd shake her off. "Do you think it got so bad he had to end it?"

Adrian shook his head. "I was keeping an eye on him, keeping an eye on his pain meds. Nothing seemed to change."

"He could have been hiding it from you."

"Could have. Wouldn't be the first time. And that he waited until I was gone, that makes sense. Though damn it, I don't think he could have thought it through. He knew someone would find him. You'd think he'd realize that?"

Dr. Vigil would have considered the consequences and the trauma for the ones who found him. Which meant maybe he hadn't been the one to pull the trigger. God, she didn't want to think about that, because that meant someone had murdered him, then set the scene to look like suicide. If true, it could explain the disappearance of the others. The thought made her stomach drop like a weight. For the first time, Mallory was afraid. She opened her mouth to say something, but Adrian was already too agitated, and there was nothing they could do about it now, not tonight. She'd keep her suspicions to herself until morning. Perhaps in the meantime she could figure out the next step.

Adrian was restless. Mallory could hear it in his breathing, even as he tried to keep still. They lay side by side in his tent, on top of the sleeping bags they'd zipped together, too warm to crawl inside.

After several moments his tension seeped into her, and he shifted onto his back, muffled a curse when he slid off the edge of the air mattress. He pushed to a sitting position, then out the flap of the tent. She rolled over as he stood in the opening, and saw him wipe his nose.

"Adrian?"

"I can't get the smell out of my nose." He squeezed his nostrils, wiped at them again. He dragged his hand over his face before bracing both hands against the poles above the opening of the tent. "I can't get the picture out of my head."

Wanting to touch him, she crawled to the opening, but he spun out of her reach. She dropped her hand helplessly. He didn't want her comfort, wouldn't accept it.

"I should have been here. If I'd been here, he wouldn't have done it. Why the hell did we have to stay so long in the city?"

Mallory finished the thought for him—enjoying each other, reveling in each other's bodies while their friend suffered and died.

He shoved away from the tent. "You rest. I'm going down to the beach. Will you be okay here on your own?" he asked, almost as an afterthought.

She hesitated, thinking about the wildness, the emptiness around her, the place not twenty yards away where her friend had died. But Adrian clearly didn't want to be near her. "I'll be all right."

He nodded in acknowledgement and turned away. She lay back on the sleeping bag but couldn't relax.

He wasn't back by the time the rain started again, pelting the taut nylon roof. Suddenly cold without his body heat, she curled on her side and waited a few minutes to see if he'd come to his senses. Well, hell. She'd better go look for him.

The rain drenched her before she reached the corner of the tent. Lovely. He couldn't have gotten deranged on a nice, cool, dry evening. She'd barely dried off from earlier.

Of course he wasn't at the beach. She shoved her wet hair out of her face and looked around, squinting against the rain that pelted her hard enough to sting. Shit. Shit. Where was he?

Then she knew. She ran over the dunes, sand sticking to her wet shins, ran through the camp toward the cliffs. There he was, beside Dr. Vigil's grave. He'd covered it with a tarp and knelt beside it, head bowed, water running from his bent head to the tarp. She dropped to her knees beside him and he looked up. In the dim light she could see his eyes were red rimmed. He was crying.

Once again she opened her arms to him. This time he snatched her up against his body, banding his arms tightly about her, and buried his face in her hair. She felt his shuddering sobs, the heat of his tears against her neck. She only held him, let him cry, let him take comfort in her embrace.

## Chapter Thirteen

Sun shone through the blue nylon of the tent, waking Mallory. She reached for her T-shirt and looked over her shoulder at her sleeping husband before she tugged it on. Sand was everywhere, on the bedding, in her hair. They'd stumbled back to the tent last night, turned to each other in sorrow, in need, burning off their restlessness in a way that had seemed crass only hours earlier.

They'd fallen asleep facing each other, touching. Now Adrian slept peacefully, and she needed a shower.

The shower had been reassembled after the last storm—Linda had insisted—and the cistern was full from last night's rain. She pulled the soap and shampoo she'd swiped from the hotel out of her pack and stepped through the nylon flap into the enclosure.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Her heart slammed into her ribs, then dropped to her toes at the brusque Scottish tone on the other side of the nylon wall. She slapped her hand to her chest as if that would keep her heart from jumping out.

"Having a heart attack! Jesus, Adrian! I thought you were asleep."

He flung open the flap. "What are you doing going off on your own?"

"It's broad daylight and I feel gross."

"I woke up and you were gone. Scared the hell out of me." His gaze flicked to her bare breasts.

"You're here now. Keep watch while I shower, all right?"

The look in his eyes made it clear what he intended to keep watch on. She shoved his chest, pushing him out of the enclosure. How many times had they gotten wrapped up with each other in a camp shower? Often enough that people stopped walking by the camp showers without making sure where Adrian and Mallory were first.

He took a reluctant step back. "I'll keep watch. Though it seems a shame to waste the water for two showers." His gaze floated to her breasts again.

With a growl, she shoved again, in no mood for him. She closed the door and dumped water on her head, wishing she could vent her frustration on him.

Keeping an eye on Mallory as she went to his tent to dress, Adrian strolled over to the Land Cruiser, ready to indulge in one of Toney's cigarettes. He didn't have a lighter, so he needed to use the one in the vehicle.

He stopped short as he reached for the door. Footprints circled the truck—not his and Mallory's because they would have been washed away in the storm, or at least softened. No, these footprints were very distinct, made after the rain. They surrounded the truck before disappearing on the hard-packed sand leading to the campground, in the direction of his tent. Terror slammed his heart against his ribs. Someone had been here.

Jesus. Mallory. He ran to the tent, blood roaring in his ears.

Mallory looked up sharply from tying her boots when he entered. "What is it?"

He blew a breath out through his nose, trying to calm himself, wanting to alert her, but not scare her. "Someone's here."

"One of our people?" Her excitement rose as she stood.

"I don't know." He hadn't even thought of that. If it had been Toney, he would have made contact. No, the secrecy made the motive seem sinister. "I just saw footprints outside the truck."

"You didn't—outside the truck?" She closed her hand around his wrist. "If someone is out here, do you think someone may have killed Dr. Vigil?"

"I've considered it." And pushed the thought from his head because that meant danger for his brother. But something in the angle of the entry wound seemed off to Adrian. Robert wouldn't have wanted to look into the barrel of the gun that took his life. Had he shot himself with the gun in his hand, or had he been trying to defend himself? "But why would they kill the old man?"

"I don't know! He caught them robbing or something." Her voice carried over the dunes. "We need to get out of here, go for help." Her eyes widened. "Maybe that's where the others are. They took the boat for help. We need to go." She turned toward the vehicles.

"Mallory." He gripped her shoulders and met her gaze. "Remember how long it took for the roads to dry after the last rain? We're stuck here, at least for another night."

She went white and swayed. "We can't be."

He had to calm her, though he wasn't feeling too calm himself. "If someone planned to hurt us, they could have done it last night."

"What's to stop them from doing it tonight?"

"Because we're going to sleep in shifts. I'll look out for you while you're sleeping, all right? Maybe we should stay in the truck. At least we can lock the doors." Which wouldn't stop anyone from shooting through the windows, but he wouldn't mention that.

She dragged her hands through her wet hair, trying to gather herself. "Why are they doing this? How did they get here and leave if we can't?"

"I don't know. Maybe they had a boat." He motioned toward the beach. "Get your gun and come with me to the truck. I need a cigarette."

She was only a few steps behind him when he walked down to the water's edge, to the debris scattered there.

The cigarette could do nothing to ease the rising panic in his throat. The white and red chunks on the sand were fiberglass pieces of the *Miss M*. He crouched beside one, picked it up, looked at the ragged edge. It had possibly struck a reef somewhere and gone down. Or it could have been destroyed by the same people who may have killed Robert.

His brother, his people, might have been on it at the time. Because he hadn't remained vigilant, his brother might be dead.

He tossed the cigarette aside and gripped Mallory's arm to turn her around, lead her to camp.

"We've got to get our dive gear."

"What? Why? Adrian, your arm-you can't dive. You won't be able to swim."

He stopped, glared, her words barely penetrating the roaring in his ears, the need to know the truth. "I don't have a choice. I think someone blew up my boat."

They found bits and pieces of gear in the camp—most had been kept on the boat or the barge, including the compressor for the air tanks. They found two half full tanks in the rear of one of the trucks, a pair of fins in Toney's tent, another pair in Jacob's. No scuba suits, but the depth off the coast wasn't much, and the water wouldn't be too cold.

Tension built in Adrian's chest as he strapped the tanks across it. He didn't want to dive and find the bodies of his brother, his friends. He was not built for shit like this. Burying the professor last night had used the last of his reserves and he couldn't take anymore.

But he couldn't leave them, either.

He grasped Mallory's arms before they jumped off the edge of the dock, forced him to look at her, forced himself to comprehend the worry and fear in her eyes. He needed to keep her safe too. "We don't know what we'll see. We have no clue where they are. You shouldn't go."

She met his gaze steadily. "You need me down there. I'll be all right."

He brushed his thumb over her bottom lip, then bent down and kissed her, hard. He didn't know how he'd manage without her here.

The water was quiet beneath the surface, almost as calming, as mind clearing as the cigarette had been. They had no idea where the boat had gone down, had only a little air. Their first search would have to yield something. They wouldn't get another chance until they returned with equipment.

The wreck wouldn't be right off the dock. The structure itself hadn't been damaged. They had to swim, and his guess was to swim in the direction of the cove entrance, where the boat would have come in from the barge.

He and Mallory didn't have enough air to make it to the barge itself.

The water was clear; they could see to the bottom without having to swim along it. The closer they stayed to the surface, the less air they used. If he could just calm himself, he could make the half-filled tank last. He was an experienced diver. He could do that.

Mallory, who swam slightly ahead, motioned to him. Ah, hell. What did she see? He approached and saw bits of red and white on the seafloor below. He pulled a dive buoy out of his pocket, used his regulator to inflate it and sent it to the surface. When they came back with help, they'd be able to find the site more easily.

He kept an eye on his gauge as he descended. They had to conserve air for decompression stops, and they'd already used nearly half of what they'd started out with. Shit. They were going to have to do a quick discovery dive and get out.

Mallory watched as he set his alarm. Five minutes was the most they could spare.

They had definitely discovered the site of the accident, and from the scattered looks of things, it had been no accident. The boat had exploded.

Yeah, possibly the compressed air had blown and foul play hadn't occurred, but Adrian couldn't get the image of Robert's body out of his head. He didn't want to bury more friends, but he had to know.

With a disdain he couldn't show on an archaeological dig, he tossed pieces aside, looking for bodies, for anything that would let him know what had happened to his people. He kept an eye on Mallory and said a silent prayer that she wouldn't find anything grisly.

His alarm went off too soon, and he was tempted to ignore it, but they were alone in this wild place. They couldn't risk the dangers of staying down too long. He signaled to Mallory and they slowly rose to the surface.

They didn't have enough air to spend the full time allotted at the last decompression stop, so both were gasping for breath when they broke the surface. He looked into Mallory's eyes, then out over the water.

Where the hell was his brother?

They lay side by side on the beach, panting as they stared up at the sun. Mallory hadn't had to swim that distance in years. Fortunately, the tide had been with them. She didn't think Adrian had the strength to pull her back to the beach. She needed to check his injured arm, but he probably wouldn't allow her yet.

"We need help."

"We have to wait. Being stuck in the jungle would be worse than being stuck here." His voice was strained, as if he was holding on to the last of his own sanity.

"Unless we're killed here." Mallory couldn't stop the panic that threatened to choke her. She wanted to be brave, damn it, to be strong, but everything was just so big and out of control.

"Mal."

She sat up. "No, Adrian. We're miles from anyone, anything. No one is coming to help us, and we can't leave. Our friends are missing, we have no boat, we have no gear. I've never felt so helpless in my life."

"We're fine. Just calm down." He rubbed his hand down her arm, but she was in no mood to be comforted. She jerked away. He stood with a sigh. "We'll get through this. We can do it. We don't know that they're dead. Let's see if we can find the sat phone."

"We could start packing up," Mallory said. "That might make it easier to find."

Adrian tensed at her words, clearly unwilling to admit defeat. "Maybe. It's a lot of work."

"We'll be here for a couple of days."

"Unless we find the sat phone," he reminded her. "Let's just keep looking. Don't leave my sight."

After lunch, they packed the residential tents. Working together, the task didn't take as long as Adrian had expected but was emotionally draining, especially packing up his brother's things. Toney had been the member of his family he worried about least of all. He'd always been able to take care of himself. Still Adrian had managed to let him down.

"Adrian!" Mallory's shout of alarm had him turning, reaching for the gun he'd tucked at the small of his back.

She ran out of the tent she'd shared with Linda, something in her cupped palms.

"What is it?"

She stretched her arms in front of her so he could see the two mouthpieces he'd searched for before she'd left with Jonathan.

"Linda doesn't dive." Adrian looked from the evidence in Mallory's hands to her face.

"Looks like she didn't want you to, either."

What the hell?

Adrian walked through what was left of the camp, avoiding Robert's tent yet again. Everything else was packed up, the only thing they could do as they waited for the roads to dry. He just couldn't bring himself to go back to Robert's tent.

He had to, however. They needed to pack his things, ship them to the States. Adrian would keep his books, unless there was a will stating otherwise. Unlikely, since he was estranged from his family because of his career choice.

Yes, Adrian saw the irony there.

Mallory might want the professor's books, though.

He pulled out the cigarettes, lit one with the lighter he'd found in Toney's tent, a habit as old as shaving, as new as, well, as being with Mallory again. And probably not as bad for him as she was. He drew on the filter, savored the calm the nicotine settled over him.

"Hey." Mallory came up behind him before the cigarette was half gone, placed a hand on his shoulder. "We have to do this."

With one last drag, he tossed the remaining cigarette into the sand. He blew the smoke out on a breath and nodded that he was ready.

Since he'd left the sides of the tent up, the rug and the chair were soaked again. Adrian would carry them to the dock to dry in the sun. He wouldn't think about the blood splattering either of them, the sand around them.

"Oh, no!"

Only at Mallory's cry did Adrian realize that the books they'd left on the ground had been soaked by the storm. In his grief, Adrian had forgotten about them. The mess here might hold the answer to the professor's death. Robert could have been going through them when he was shot. Or the shooter could have been looking for something.

Had Robert surprised a thief?

He wouldn't express any of these fears to Mallory, who knelt beside the ruined books, searching for something to salvage.

Books, texts on everything from Maya culture to shipwrecks to tourist books on the Yucatan Peninsula, were swollen with water, their words distorted. Some of these books Adrian remembered had been old when he'd started working with Robert.

He crouched beside Mallory, who hid her face behind her hair. The hitches in her breathing told him she was crying. He slid a soothing hand over her shoulder.

"They're only books."

"You know what they meant to him."

"I know."

"It's insult to injury. Was he studying when he died? Is that why they're like this?"

"I don't know, Mal. We'll never know. Is there anything that isn't damaged?" He dropped his hand and leaned to look in the trunk, pulled out a stack of books and placed them on the cot. "The ones at the bottom aren't so bad. Look, here's *The Cordemex*."

She almost smiled as she took the big leather-bound book from him, ran her hand across it. "My dad gave him this."

Ah, geez, how could he have forgotten that her connection with the man went back even farther than his own? Even though she hadn't worked with Robert in years, she had worked with him longer, loved him longer. She widened her eyes. "What? I'm okay." Since he wouldn't stop looking at her, she leaned forward to rummage through the trunk. "Anything else in there?"

Adrian pulled out a couple more texts, on the bottom given that Robert didn't use them as much, but the professor hated to travel unprepared for any possibility. Removing the last book from the box was disappointing, like after opening gifts on Christmas morning, only to not get what you wanted.

"Where's his dig journal?" Mallory asked.

"What?" Adrian had just dropped a book on top of another book with a thud and hadn't heard.

"His dig journal. The one I saw him using the other night was red, with kind of a paisley design."

He sorted through the books even though he knew he hadn't seen it. He swore. If someone had killed Robert, that person had his notes. It could be the same person who had taken his manuscript. How much time had passed between his room being ransacked and Robert's death? Had the killer used his notes to find the camp?

"He always had it with him." Panic tightened her voice, making her movements jerky as she looked around the tent.

Adrian reached out a hand. "It's not here."

Her eyes, when she turned her attention to him, were wild. "Someone took it."

"Probably."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "To see what we were up to? I don't know." It was too late now anyway. His secret was out. He eased back on his heels. "What do you want to do with the ruined ones?"

She sighed and trailed her fingers over the spines, reading the titles. "They'll mildew in no time. We'd better burn them."

He knew what that cost her and wanted to touch her, let her know he understood. But she stood abruptly, bumping the cot, and the books he'd stacked there fell to the sand.

A scrap of cloth tumbled out from between the spines. With it, a piece of delicately carved ivory.

A familiar piece of delicately carved ivory. Adrian's blood went cold.

Mallory crouched, picked it up carefully with the cloth and inspected it before looking at him. "What is it?"

"It's from the Tunisia dig." And had no business being here.

# **Chapter Fourteen**

"A souvenir," Mallory said, perplexed by Adrian's sudden stillness. Yes, it was unethical to keep a souvenir from a dig, but considering the circumstances, she could understand Dr. Vigil keeping it.

"Odd that he'd have it. I thought everything from that dig was lost." His gaze rested on the figure, as if he was looking through it into the past.

"Maybe he forgot he had it."

"Maybe." Adrian's jaw tensed. "He usually packed fresh every time, but it's possible. We hadn't been on a dig since Tunisia, so, maybe."

He didn't sound convinced. The way he was staring at the carving unnerved Mallory, so she wrapped it in the chamois, crouched to replace it in the trunk. Adrian held his hand out. She hesitated, looked up.

"I don't have anything else from that trip," he said, his voice soft. "Let me have it."

She placed the ivory in his palm and he curled his fingers around it, then whirled and walked out of the tent.

Mallory closed her eyes when Adrian tossed another book on the campfire. She'd stopped outright flinching, but still believed it sacrilege to burn books, no matter how ruined. Adrian, on the other hand, made a ritual of it, keeping the stack near at hand, throwing one on as soon as the one before was a pile of ashes, like he didn't want the words to get mixed up.

"This would be much more fun with a bottle of tequila." Mallory slumped in the sand, her back against the bench they'd turned on its side.

Adrian pulled a flask from behind him with a flourish. "Something else I found among Robert's things. I'm sure he'd want us to share."

She smiled and took it and sniffed. Just the aroma of the whiskey was enough to have her buzzing, so she took a small swallow. She welcomed the burn, the heat.

"God bless Dr. Vigil." She passed the flask over.

"God bless Dr. Vigil." He took a deeper swallow. "Why did you always call him that? You never called him Robert? Uncle Robert, even?"

She shook her head. "Habit. I grew up calling him Dr. Vigil. Calling him Robert felt wrong. Disrespectful."

### M.J. Fredrick

He lit a cigarette from the flames, then took a long drag. She'd seen Adrian smoke thousands of cigarettes, sometimes because of nerves or when he needed to think. This was a contemplative cigarette. Oddly, the scent of burning tobacco reassured her as well.

"He missed you, you know."

Her stomach clenched. She couldn't bear a guilt trip right now. "Adrian."

"I'm surprised he didn't blame me for driving you off, for making you leave your career."

"You didn't make me do anything I didn't want to do." Except file for divorce. She reached for the flask and took a bigger swallow.

"He loved having you here. He said it felt right. He said it was like old times." His voice rumbled, low and thoughtful.

Her defenses went up, too late. "Don't tell me we've got to stay together because that's what Dr. Vigil would have wanted. Look how easy it's been for us to fall into the same old patterns. Nothing's changed."

Adrian closed his hand over hers that held the flask, needing her attention, needing her to understand. As much as it pained him, especially after today, he had to bring this out in the open. "We've changed. I'm not the same man who screwed you on the kitchen floor."

She turned her head away. She never had liked that word, but there was no other for what he'd done to her that day.

"We made love a lot of places," she said.

"I'm not talking about when we made love. I'm talking about that last time we had sex, there in the kitchen."

Her brow furrowed. "Which time in the kitchen?"

She must have blocked it out. Not that he could blame her. "We were fighting. I grabbed you and put you up on the counter." He could see the marks his hands had left on her arms, squeezed his eyes shut against the vision.

She sighed. "We fought all the time those days. And we always had sex to make up."

"But this wasn't-" Did she really remember it so differently? "You were bruised."

"So?"

"Mallory, I—" He couldn't say the word, swallowed it.

She sat up slowly to look at him. "Adrian?"

"Damn it, Mal, I raped you!" He whispered the word even though there was no one around to hear it.

She stared, and her mouth opened and closed for a minute. "You never did." Her voice was hard, as if she *had* blocked it out, didn't want to accept it.

He had to turn away, though she was riveted to him. "I did. I was angry and I hurt you."

"Adrian, you never hurt me, not that way." She laid a hand against his cheek but he pushed it away.

He wasn't ready for her forgiveness. He hadn't earned it. "I did. I saw the marks on you. I saw the look in your eyes when I left."

She tossed her hair over her shoulder, as if this was the most casual of conversations. "You left marks on me before, and I on you. We were never much for being gentle."

"But I'd never been that mad before. When it was over, I wasn't—anything. Not relieved, not happy, not angry. Just empty."

She went still, sad. "Like our marriage."

"Jesus, Mal." He drew his legs up, dropped his head between his knees. "It was the nastiest feeling, you know? Feeling that way, and looking at you and seeing you hurt. And you don't even remember."

"Those days kind of blended together. We fought, we had sex, kind of like we were trying to hold on to each other the only way we knew how."

As they were doing now. And with that, Adrian knew to win her back, he had to break that pattern. If only he could figure out how.

One question first. "Did you stop loving me?"

She took a deep breath. "I hated you for a while, but no. Not for a long time."

"But you stopped."

Mallory wished he'd stop pressing this, when both their emotions were in such turmoil. She let her pent-up breath out on a sigh, wanting to lie to him, wanting to protect herself. So she had no idea why instead she said, "No."

"Mal." He leaned toward her, eyes glinting in the firelight.

Hopeful.

God, she wanted to kiss him more than she wanted to breathe, more than she wanted to live, but she'd already opened herself too much.

To break the mood, she reached past him for a book to toss in the fire. As she heaved, a piece of notebook paper fluttered out. She was about to toss it in, as well, but Adrian closed his hand over her wrist.

"What?"

"It's Robert's handwriting. And it's torn from his journal."

She ran her finger over the ragged edge of the page. "So? His book, his notes."

He held up the paper so she could see it. "It's numbers. Big numbers. Money."

When she took the paper, he grabbed a stick they hadn't yet tossed on the flames and dragged the burning book out of the fire, scooped sand on it to extinguish it. Mallory turned her attention to the numbers on the spiral paper she held.

Four columns lined the page. The first was dates, the second letters, abbreviations. The third was ratios. The last was dollar amounts, some with minus signs, some with addition signs. Minus signs outnumbered addition signs four to one.

Adrian leaned close and took the paper from her, swearing softly.

"What?"

"I thought he'd quit."

"Quit what?"

"Gambling."

"These are gambling debts?" she asked in disbelief, checking the last column again. Some numbers were five and six digits! "When did he start gambling?"

He lifted his eyebrows. "I don't know when he started, but I thought he'd quit. He got into some big trouble a few years ago, owed the wrong people too much money. He swore he would quit, that he'd learned his lesson."

"It's not that easy with an addiction." She didn't mean to sound accusing, but Adrian had to know the older man couldn't overcome an addiction like this on his own. Did he not see these numbers?

He bristled. "He was a grown man, Mal. I wasn't going to check up on him." He dragged the cooling book toward him with the stick, flipped it open to look for more papers.

"No, of course not." She took the paper. "Where did he get this kind of money? You said he took out a trust fund for this dig."

"He did."

"Are you sure it was a trust fund? Not a big win? Maybe if he'd had a big win, that would spur him to gambling more. And he would have lied to you to keep the gambling secret. Adrian." She dropped her hand to her lap, suddenly weak with a realization. "You don't think he owed someone money and they followed him out here and killed him?"

"No." Adrian shook his head abruptly. "Why would they come all this way? And if they kill him, they're not going to get any money, right?"

"I suppose." Mallory had no experience with it, outside movies, but it made sense. Still, if someone had come to kill Dr. Vigil, that made the most sense. And if the others had seen him... They could be dead, too?

Adrian didn't respond as he turned the charred book upside down and fluttered the pages. He did the same with the next book, and the next, his movements becoming more agitated when he didn't find anything. Mallory reached past him for a book, opened the cover, smoothed a hand along the binding inside, front and back. On the third book she found what she was looking for. A pocket he'd made inside the lining of the back of the book.

A pocket with more spiral papers. More codes. More numbers.

Mallory's stomach pitched as the darker side of Dr. Vigil was revealed.

"How did you know to find it there?" Adrian leaned over to skim the sheet.

"He showed me how to make that compartment when I was about twelve. I didn't always have a diary, you know, in all the places we traveled, but that way whatever I wanted hidden was hidden." She should have known he kept secrets of his own.

Adrian skimmed a finger down the last column. "Damn, Mallory, he owed something like a half a million dollars."

Blood rushed out of her head, leaving her chilled. She couldn't even envision that much money. Owing for her student loans had almost sent her into a panic. "That can't be right." She took the paper. "Maybe these are old debts." But the dates didn't lie.

"Mallory." Adrian's voice sounded hollow as he pointed to a date three years ago, then traced the row across to an addition sign. A big addition sign. One that wiped out all the previous minus signs.

"Three years ago," Mallory murmured through numb lips. "Tunisia."

Adrian flipped through the other papers faster, searching, searching. Mallory dove across him for the stacked books, sliding her hands over the inside covers, finding nothing. She pushed to her feet and ran toward the truck, where they'd stored the salvageable books.

If someone had paid him for information at Tunisia, had they paid him for information about this site? Had he betrayed Adrian not once but twice?

She'd barely flung open the passenger side door when Adrian ran up behind her, breathing hard, and not just from the exertion. With shaking hands, she reached for the first book, found nothing, flung it to the ground, reached for the second.

The sixth book had it, the damning evidence. Mallory recognized it for what it was before she drew it out a quarter of the way.

A check. For a huge sum of money.

Adrian sank to the ground at her feet, the uncashed check in both hands. A check made out to Robert Vigil, Ph.D. A check for six figures.

Betrayed. By the man he'd looked to as a father.

He barely heard Mallory asking him something over the pounding in his ears. She crouched before him, looked into his eyes, touched his arm and repeated the question.

"Who wrote it?"

He shook his head. "Cashier's check from a bank in San Francisco."

She met his gaze. Valentine was from San Francisco. "What's the date?"

"Last month."

"He didn't cash it." She scrambled for an excuse, a reason, anything to lessen the blow. "He may have changed his mind, may have tried to back out."

"That doesn't mean he didn't give out the information. It doesn't mean someone didn't come after him to get the information. Someone may have killed him because of it." Mallory dropped her head to her knees. "Oh God."

"Whoever it was could have killed the others because they saw, or they recognized him." His voice tightened as he spoke about his brother.

"Oh God," she said again, her voice choked.

But something occurred to him and he shoved himself to his feet. "Come on." He held a hand to her.

She looked up, her face tear streaked. "What?"

"I want to look at those papers again."

And there it was. He was right to suspect. The initials on the spreadsheet, next to the sum from three years ago, same bank. Not V.S. for Valentine Smoller, but V.E. for Valentine Enterprises, Smoller's company.

"Smoller," Adrian growled and turned to kick the fire out. "Get ready for bed, Mal. First thing tomorrow we're risking the roads. We need another boat." He waved the check. "And Smoller is going to pay for it."

Mallory woke to the sound of tearing paper. She shifted to see Adrian sitting at the opening of the tent, going through books, ripping open the covers of the salvaged books and tossing them to the ground at his feet.

"Adrian?"

He looked at her, his eyes red from lack of sleep, his hands shaking from it. "I want more proof."

"Adrian." She crawled to the edge of the mattress to put her arms around him and rested her cheek on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

"Why would he do this to me, Mal? Not once, but twice? Didn't he realize what he was doing? That he was sacrificing me?"

The strangled sound of his voice squeezed her heart. Was this how he'd suffered after Tunisia, and she'd walked away? What an idiot she'd been. How much extra pain she'd caused, being selfish. She pressed her forehead to his shoulder, determined to make it up to him, because damn, this was going to do a number on his ability to trust anyone. "I think he did realize. That's why he didn't cash the check."

"Well, he was too late." Adrian shifted away from her. "He already gave them the information that got him killed. I cried for the bastard, Mallory. He was my best friend. I cried for him, and he was stabbing me in the back." He got to his feet and walked away.

He couldn't stay out here any longer. Too dangerous, too isolated, too vulnerable. Adrian strode to the center of the camp, where Mallory was lacing her boots on the bench.

"We're going to Belize City," he told her. "Get everything you need to take with you."

She scrambled to her feet and jammed her hands on her hips. "Are we coming back?"

He was. Right now he wanted her as far away from this place as he could get her. Whatever he needed to do to keep her safe. "I don't know. We need to leave here in fifteen minutes." The banks closed at three. He wanted to get this check there, buy himself a boat and come back to the site. Mallory wouldn't understand that. She was better off in the States anyway.

Without him.

Pushing her away might be even harder than walking away had been because now he knew what he'd be missing.

"Are we going to the police?"

He opened his mouth to ask what good that would do. They'd already cleaned up the camp, so any clues that might have been around were destroyed. But he needed to reassure her, so he nodded.

She headed to the driver side within ten minutes, her duffel slung over her shoulder.

"I'll drive." He moved past her and grabbed the door handle.

She merely shifted her weight to look up at him. "Your arm."

Which she'd inspected last night when they'd come out of the water. Yes, the area along the stitches was red and hurt like the devil, but driving wouldn't kill him.

"I swam yesterday and made love to you last night, twice." He couldn't even force a playful tone into his voice as long as he was considering ditching her in Belize City. "I can handle driving." Because, God help him, he couldn't sit still while she drove for hours. He'd find a way to talk himself out of sending her home.

She stepped back, her brow furrowed in silent concern, but she let him have his way.

She didn't say much once they were on the road either, and he couldn't think of anything to talk about that wasn't about Robert or the site. Most of the ride passed in tense silence.

The Land Cruiser got stuck in the mud three times, so they were filthy when they got to town. They rented a cheap hotel room this time, just long enough for both of them to shower and change. Adrian didn't even look at the bed, already resigned to the fact that he'd made love to Mallory for the last time. There would be no coming back from this, but she would be alive, and that was all that mattered.

Adrian insisted on going to the bank first. The joint account Adrian shared with Dr. Vigil made the transaction simple. Once that was done, Mallory was ready to go to the police.

Time to pick the fight that would send her home. Shouldn't be hard. He'd just revert to the asshole who'd chased her away three years ago.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

He waited until they were on the street in front of the bank, wanting the distraction of other people, of movement, and not of the hope that they could move forward. To keep her safe, he had to shove that possibility out of the picture.

"We're not going to the cops."

"What? Why not?"

He rubbed the knuckle of his thumb between his eyebrows. "What do you think they can do?"

"Find your brother! Find Jacob and Linda! We can't do this on our own. We've done everything we can. And we have to tell them about Dr. Vigil." She walked backwards, facing him, and pressed her hands against his chest to stop him as he turned toward the docks.

He dodged her, her touch, her body, her gaze.

"Adrian." She pivoted, scrambling after him on the cracked sidewalk. "Why don't you want the police involved?" She grabbed at his arm.

Pain shot through him when her fingers dug into his biceps and he jerked away, sending her off balance. He spun to catch her. As soon as her feet were under her, she ripped free, betrayal etched on her face.

Self-loathing slammed through him, piercing his own pain. "Did I hurt you?"

"I'm fine." She waved off his concern. "You don't have a permit to dive there, do you?"

"Mallory."

"And now our friends are in danger because you can't bring the police out there without getting in trouble."

"Is that what you think?" He stared. "You think that I would put myself over their safety?"

She set her jaw stubbornly. "If the government finds out you're excavating without a permit, you can't excavate here anymore. You'd lose everything you put into this dive."

"I already have!" The words burst from him. She flinched from the violence that, damn it, he thought he had under control. "I already have. They're dead, Mallory. They're dead. My brother, Jacob, Linda, Robert. There's no other explanation."

Tears spilled down her cheeks. "They're not. We looked everywhere. We would have found them. Their bodies would have been there, just like Robert's." He shook his head. "His body was a message. The others could have been taken to the barge and killed, dropped into the water where they may never be found."

"Why? Why would someone do something like that?"

He stopped to face her. "Do you understand the money involved here? The amount a collector would pay for one box would make my career for a lifetime, fund any dig I wanted to go on forever. All four boxes, you could buy a small country. It makes the money in Robert's journal look like pocket change." He started walking. He heard her running behind him but he didn't look at her. If he did, he couldn't go through with this.

"Go home, Mallory. Leave. It's what you do when things get too hard, isn't it?"

"Not anymore."

The tightness in her voice made him want to turn, apologize. But her life could depend on him keeping his distance.

"What is wrong with you?" she demanded, right in his ear.

He didn't slow. "I'm going to do this by myself."

"You can't."

"Go home to Austin." He hadn't thought it would be so hard to shake her. Clearly she'd become more stubborn. "I'll let you know what happens."

"Adrian." She stopped in the middle of the sidewalk.

He kept going and prayed she wouldn't follow.

Then cursed when she didn't.

Adrian guided the forty-five-foot yacht out of the harbor, eager to get to the site. The craft was almost more than he could handle on his own, but the lure of spending Smoller's money had been great, and this boat had features that made managing it alone simple.

The fact that this one had a queen-sized bed in the stateroom was incidental. He'd be sleeping in it alone. The thought made his heart clench. The one person he loved who was still in his life and he'd pushed her away. No matter his intentions, she didn't know and wouldn't forgive him.

She'd probably gone to the police without him, so he needed to be on the watch for them as well as Smoller. Since everyone was out of the way at the barge, Smoller would make his move soon. Adrian would be there when he did.

He'd also replaced his dive equipment with Smoller's money, and while diving alone went against every safety precaution he knew, he had to see what was going on with his site.

A noise below tightened his nerves and he throttled down, lowered the anchor so he could investigate. Probably something had shifted when he hit the open water, butMallory stepped out of the galley as he hit the last step out of the pilothouse. His heart slammed against his ribs. Why wasn't she on the way to Texas, to safety?

She tucked her arms smugly around herself and tilted her chin up, daring him to throw her overboard, no doubt.

He shook his head. "I should have known."

"Known what?"

"That you wouldn't listen. Why won't you listen?"

"To your nonsense? Your arrogant 'I can do this myself' bullshit? What are you trying to protect me from, Adrian?"

She'd seen right through him. His surprise must have shown on his face because she barreled on.

"Yes, I know you were trying to protect me. I'm not an idiot. Is it Valentine? Do you think he'll try to hurt me?"

"No. Yes." He backed up, passed a hand over his hair. "I don't know. I do know that I couldn't keep the others safe and I won't risk you."

She braced her hand against the doorway as a swell rolled the boat. "But you'll let me risk you?"

He blew out a dismissive breath. "I'm no risk."

"Yes you are. I'm not going to lose you again. You can't do this by yourself, so here I am. I'm not walking away. You can throw me overboard or turn around and take me to the harbor, but even then, you won't be rid of me that easy. I love you."

He couldn't be hearing her right, and though his brain told him to turn this boat around and dump her on the dock, his heart wanted to sweep her into his arms and never let go. She loved him. "After everything?"

Stepping forward, she curved her hand over his cheek. "I think it's time for a new beginning. Let's leave the past in the past, all right?"

Stomach churning with joy and fear, he closed his hand over her wrist and smiled down into her eyes. If she meant so much to him, how could he risk her? "Not easy to do. We are archaeologists."

"Oh, you pick now to be funny." She eased closer, her body brushing against his. "On the streets of Belize City you scream at me like a crazy man, but now you want to be funny."

He released her wrist to fold both hands around her waist. His blood heated with her nearness, the scent of her, the softness of her. "I'm done being funny for now. I love you, Mal. Kiss me, woman." Because God knew what lay around the corner.

With a teasing smile of her own, she stretched up and pressed her mouth to his.

"I love you," she said again, dropping back on her heels and releasing him. "Now show me your boat."

Apparently spending someone else's money was easy for him. She was glad he'd bought a good-sized boat, because she never would have been able to stow away on a boat the size of *The Mysterious Miss M*. All she'd had to do here was slip into the head while he released the boat from the dock.

Now she moved past the galley, which housed a refrigerator, dishwasher and stove, down into the sleeping quarters, with its queen-sized bed.

Adrian followed her. "What do you think?"

"Nice bed."

"It is that." He stepped up into the galley. "With a fridge and stove, we won't have to eat much more cold Spam. I sent a boy to the market to stock up. I bought new dive gear as well, but I don't have a suit for you."

"Doesn't matter." She sat on the bed and leaned back on her hands. "I got my own." She nodded toward the closet where she'd stashed her gear.

He looked from the closet to her with a raised eyebrow. She shrugged. "I can't believe you thought you were going to go back and dive alone. You're not usually stupid, Adrian."

"I'm not going back to dive."

This time she raised an eyebrow.

He lifted a hand in concession. "Okay, not just going back to dive. I'm trying to catch Smoller in the act of stealing my site."

"So you think he killed Robert and the others, which I don't believe, by the way." Though Adrian's argument about their possible deaths made chilling sense. "You think he's going to confess to you and let you walk away?"

"No. I don't think that."

"So what? Why would he kill the professor?"

"I don't know. Maybe he thought Robert would let me know he was coming. Maybe he thought I'd hurry up and get the box and get out of the way. I don't know. But I know he's got a hand in Robert's death."

She sat forward. "You expected him to hurt me. That's why you chased me away. What do you think will happen now?"

"Once we're out on the site, he'll reveal himself, one way or another. And I have the Belize Defence Force alerted."

"You do?" Relief washed through her, though she knew what this cost him. By going to the authorities, he'd lost any chance to come back to Belize to excavate. He'd surrendered his site, his treasure to find his brother. If he'd made that choice, he couldn't hate her for her confession. "I went to the police and told them about Dr. Vigil."

### M.J. Fredrick

He stared at her a moment, his expression unreadable, his mouth grim, then he nodded. He might be upset but he didn't hate her.

At least they weren't in this alone anymore.

"Mal." He rested his hands on her shoulders, his forehead against hers, and he closed his eyes. "My brother is out there. I need to find him. I've done all I know how to do. I need your help, all right?"

As if she could deny him.

Reaching the barge only took two hours by boat. No one was there and Adrian battled his disappointment that he'd perhaps been wrong, or at least was too soon. He docked and jumped onto the barge before the sound of the engine had faded over the water. The sun had disappeared below the horizon, but the barge's open design made it easy to inspect. Clearly no one had been here in days.

He returned to the boat and stepped into the galley where Mallory cheerfully arranged fresh pieces of chicken on the broiler pan. He flashed back to one of the happy memories he had of their house, of walking into the kitchen to see her cooking, the feeling of warmth and belonging, of security, that enveloped him. The same feeling washed over him now, diluting the sadness of the past few days, and he moved closer.

"I want to dive the place where our boat went down first thing tomorrow." Adrian needed to make a more thorough inspection, wanted to see if his brother's body was there, but he couldn't say it, not when she looked so happy. He shifted his tone to teasing. "Beats the hell out of cooking over a campfire."

"A girl could get used to this." She sprinkled seasoning on the chicken. "I've actually become a pretty good cook."

He slid his hand beneath her jaw, tilted her head up. God, he couldn't have managed the past few days without her by his side. And tonight, instead of the cramped tent, they'd have an entire bed.

As if reading his thoughts, she stepped back. "My hands." She held them in front of her as she moved to the sink, leaving him bereft. "I'll call you when dinner is ready."

Despite the dining area in the living quarters of the boat, they ate under the stars, balancing their plates on their laps like in camp. Using utensils that weren't plastic was a novelty to Adrian, as was eating something not flavored with campfire smoke. And Mal was right. She could cook and seemed proud of her accomplishment.

Night after night of this, of this woman, how much better would that be than night after night of campfires and a cold sleeping bag?

"I was going to come back," he said.

She looked up from her plate. "What?"

"I was going to get this ship raised, and I was going to come back to you. That's why I didn't sign the papers."

She put her silverware down very carefully. "You were going to come back to Pensacola?" Her voice was guarded.

"Pensacola, Austin." He waved his fork. "Wherever you were."

"Adrian—"

He kept talking, hearing the doubt, the question in her tone. "I had to do this first. I had to end on a bang, but you were with me all the time, in my heart. I named the *Miss M* for you. Once I was done, I was going to quit and come home to you."

"After three years without a word?" She pushed to her feet and walked to the railing, her arms crossed tightly. "Why are you telling me this?"

He put down his fork and leaned back. "Because I don't think you believed me when I told you I loved you."

She lifted a trembling hand to hold her windblown hair away from her face. "Oh, I believed you. I just—if you loved me—no. It's an old fight."

"If I loved you more than I loved my job." He came up behind her, stood close but didn't touch her.

"It doesn't matter anymore." She turned to him. "I said I love you. I want the past to stay there, all right?" She put her palm on his cheek and rose to kiss him softly, an invitation to take it further.

So he moved away. "If we don't fix it, we might break it again."

She shook her head. "I can't think about that now. Everything else hurts too much. I can't go back there. Please, Adrian, let's just move forward."

If only it was that easy.

Mallory stood in the stateroom doorway wearing one of his T-shirts, the SCUBA one that proclaimed him a Sex Crazed Underwater Bad Ass. She'd bought it for him years ago. He'd always liked it better on her, the way the thin fabric clung to her curves and just hit the tops of her thighs. God, he loved her legs, long and smooth, loved skimming his hands over them. He sat forward on the bed and beckoned. She tossed her hair over her shoulder and approached, her hips rolling seductively, a playful light in her eyes. Oh, good. He liked that kind of sex. He surged off the bed to stand in front of her.

Her breath hitched, her eyes flicking to his lips, but she didn't move away as he lowered his mouth to hers. Her taste was hot and salty, so he dived in, cupping her head in his hands. She leaned into his kiss and slid her tongue over his lower lip. With a groan, he took her calves in his hands, parting her legs for his body, hooking them around his hips. She curled her hands around the back of his head as he scooted her back on the mattress.

Shifting her hips, she brought him into the cradle of her own, digging her heels into the backs of his thighs, and his already inflamed desire decimated his self-control. Ticklish, she flinched when he slipped his hands under her shirt, and he smiled against her mouth before he covered her breast with his palm.

She wore one of those insubstantial lacy things that she never used to wear, and he circled her nipple. Gasping, she arched into his touch. He fumbled for the hem of her shirt, bunched it up under her arms, and broke the kiss to look down at her. Damn, she was gorgeous.

She wriggled the rest of the way out of her shirt, the movement causing interesting sensations where their hips met. Sensations he wanted to explore further. But she was moving, her legs tightening about him as she tried to sit up, sliding her hands over his bare chest, her fingers exploring the grooves of muscle, moving so lightly he had to grit his teeth against the pleasure. As she touched him, she held his gaze, as if looking away would break the spell. Okay. So he wouldn't look away, either, even as she leaned in for another kiss.

He linked his arms behind her hips and dragged her closer, positioning her heat right over his erection. He reached down the back of her panties, squeezed, and she rolled against him. Oh, man. Much more of that and he wouldn't last long.

Okay, maybe one more time. He ground his teeth and broke eye contact to slip his hand between them, finding her center of pleasure easily, with the practice of a thousand times. He caught her head with his free hand and dipped his mouth to her throat. As his teeth scraped the sensitive skin above her collarbone, she pressed against him and exploded.

That was all he could take. His hunger for her devoured the last of his selflessness.

"Adrian." His name came out a throaty growl as she reached for him.

The blood pounded in his ears. Now. Now. Now. He reached under her arms and lifted her over him, straddling him, her hair falling between them, stroking his already sensitized skin, feeding his need.

And then he was inside her, driving into her, his hands splayed on her hips, holding her as he nuzzled the line of her throat.

Not good enough. He couldn't get deep enough. He tumbled her onto her back and hooked her legs around his elbows. Her cry broke through his desire-maddened haze. She looked so pale against the dark comforter, and he could see the marks his stubble and teeth left on her skin.

Damn, not again. He would not leave bruises on her again.

"Did I hurt you?" he rasped, struggling for control, for sanity, which hovered just out of reach.

She shook her head, her eyes a little frantic. With shaking hands, he smoothed her hair back, holding still inside her when every instinct told him to take her. He lowered his head to kiss her softly, ignoring her attempts to make the kiss more erotic. With his body buried in hers, he gave her a courting kiss, gentle, exploring.

She eased beneath him, opening to him, wrapping her arms around him, sliding her hands over him in the rhythm of the kiss.

It was the sexiest damn thing he'd ever felt in his life.

He started to move, slowly, easing in and out of her in a pace he'd never attempted and now he regretted the lack. He could feel so much more this way.

She started trembling beneath him, violently, and tossed her head back. He continued the excruciating pace until he drew a keening sound from her, felt the flutter of her muscles around him. He dragged it out as long as he could before they both tumbled into pleasure.

Adrian's movements were jerky as he checked his gear, his jaw locked. They'd anchored over the wreckage of *The Mysterious Miss M* and prepared to dive, to look for some sign of Toney and the others. Fear bubbled in Mallory's own throat. She didn't want to be the one to discover the bodies, but worse, she didn't want Adrian to find his brother, not like this.

But she couldn't ask him to wait. She leaned over to inspect the gauges on his tanks and squeezed his shoulder. He grimaced, turned her to give her own gauges a once-over, then tucked the regulator between clenched teeth and tumbled over the side of the boat.

For the first time since she'd dived this trip, the water didn't calm her. In fact, the deeper she swam, the tighter her stomach knotted. Ahead of her, Adrian's strokes were strong and sure. Determined.

Prayers she thought she'd forgotten how to say bubbled up in her mind. "Please don't let them be down here. Please don't let us find them. Please let them be safe somewhere."

But as they approached the wreckage, she had to wonder where they could be, and how they could have gotten anywhere without the boat or truck.

God, the boat was a mess, her red and white hull splintered, the pieces scattered in some places, piled in others. Adrian swam toward a pile, began lifting pieces, pushing them aside. Mallory watched before she followed. If he found something, she wanted to be there for him.

Together they worked, flipping pieces aside that were heavier than they looked. Mallory found herself holding her breath with each piece of debris, so scared of what they'd find under it. She chanced a glimpse at Adrian, saw only the grimness in his eyes. He didn't even glance in her direction.

Shutting her out again, only this time she was grateful.

In the end they found nothing, though they left no debris unturned. Adrian silently stripped off his gear once they reached the deck. Mallory didn't say anything but waited for him to speak, willed him to cut the tension. But he only stowed his gear and turned into the cabin. When she followed, she saw he had his head in the refrigerator. He pulled out a carton of ice cream and tossed it on the table so it wobbled on its rim, then settled. He opened a drawer with more force than necessary and pulled out a spoon.

He was going to eat ice cream? He couldn't find his brother so he was going to indulge in chocolate. Okay, she wasn't going to wait for him to go first.

"What are you doing?"

"Celebrating." But nothing in his demeanor, his voice, his expression, seemed the least bit joyful. "My brother is not on the bottom of the ocean, at least not here. So we need to celebrate. Grab a spoon." He motioned with his spoon toward the drawer but didn't look at her.

"Adrian."

He scooped a bite of ice cream into his mouth and shook his head. "Don't say it."

"What?"

"That it's too soon to celebrate, that we still don't have any answers, that, Jesus, for all we know, they're in pieces down there."

"Adrian!"

He scooped another spoonful, held it over the container and glared at her. "What? You want me to be positive? Where can they be? They're either dead or taken. I don't know what else to do." He jammed the spoon into the ice cream and stepped away from it, his hands on his hips, his head down. "I don't know what else to do."

"They're safe. They have to be. They're somewhere looking for us. They'll realize we're here and come back."

He didn't look at her. "I wish I could be that hopeful."

She walked up behind him, wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her cheek between his shoulder blades. "I'll hold out hope for all of us."

Adrian's expression was grim, even as he tucked into his eggs and bacon the next morning. His mind was already on the ship below. He'd barely looked at her this morning. Okay, well, since they got out of bed, because he'd been very, very attentive when she'd woken up, almost reverent.

She knew him well enough to know he was going to make a decision that would piss her off.

"I want you to stay on the boat when I dive."

She stiffened at his decision, but made every effort to keep calm. "You can't excavate by yourself." "I can't risk you."

She folded her arms on the table. "Really. What do you think you can get done down there without me?"

He blew out a frustrated breath. "It's a safety issue, not a reflection on your abilities, Mallory."

She lifted a brow. "You stay and I'll go down."

"Ah." He wagged a finger at her. "I was here first."

"But it would make more sense for you to stay. You're stronger. If anything happens while I'm diving, it will be easier for you to bring me up than for me to bring you up."

He rubbed the side of his hand over his upper lip, his gaze steady on hers. Was he considering it? "Okay. We both go. That way I can keep an eye on you." She might have known he wouldn't give up his chance to get in the water. Still, she had to clarify. "We just leave the boat unattended?"

"We secure her to the best of our abilities, lock up everything we can, lash her to the barge, anchor her and hope for the best. Either way is risky, Mallory. I wasn't crazy about leaving you topside alone anyway."

"The alternative is to wait for more divers to show up."

He made a face. "Now's not the time to bring in more people, not until we have some answers."

"So you called Jeff already to hold off on the divers."

"Before we left the city." He tapped the tines of his fork against the plate.

"But you don't want to wait to check the site."

He sat forward, both arms on the table. "I can't wait."

"Then we go." She stood, pushing her plate toward him. "I believe since I cooked, you do the dishes."

After they cleaned up, they donned their new gear and dived. The site was in good shape. Relief damn near buoyed Adrian to the surface when they rolled back the rubber tarp to see the bronze masthead intact. They'd have to wait for Jeff's divers to raise it once this was all done, but knowing it was still there, that it hadn't gone missing, eased his mind. He glanced over at Mallory and saw the smile in her eyes behind her goggles.

They had discussed making the casket their priority over the next few days, so Mallory gave the lion's head a gentle pat and swam down the belly of the boat to excavate a new area.

God, he loved her. He loved the graceful movement of her legs as she finned to stay in place, loved the concentration, the gentleness of her hands as she stroked away the sand. He loved that she'd stowed away to be with him, ignoring his own stubborn high-handedness. Yes, he'd thought he was right—he still wished she'd gone so he'd know she was safe, but he loved that she was with him.

He loved her. So he joined her.

The two of them, in their limited time, weren't able to accomplish much, and the alarm on his watch went off too soon. Together they swam to the first decompression stop, and he twined his legs about hers, rubbed his heel against the back of her calf, letting her know what they'd be doing once they surfaced. Already he could sense the storm above them, stirring up the water. They could make love while the rain pounded. It'd be nice not to worry about a leaking tent.

The minute they reached the boat, he stripped off his mask, spat out his regulator and reached for her. Above them, clouds churned, obscuring the sun. Only the running lights of the boat illuminated them. She laughed and scrambled over the edge of the boat, where her laughter cut off abruptly, a dying echo over the ocean. Alarmed, Adrian heaved himself up and over the side.

### M.J. Fredrick

"Good evening, Adrian." Valentine Smoller sat at the small table, leaning back in the chair, his eyes narrowed. "It's been a long time. Mallory, I'm surprised to see you here after all you told me about Adrian." He looked from one to the other. "The reunion agrees with you."

## Chapter Sixteen

In a split second, Adrian scanned the area. A man approximately the width of a gorilla stood behind Smoller, way too close to Mallory for Adrian's comfort. Two more stood on the barge, stances defensive, armed probably. Past them, Adrian saw another boat, bigger than this, moored to the barge on the opposite side.

"Where's my brother, you son of a bitch?" Adrian stepped forward, grabbing Mallory's arm and pulling her behind him. He whipped his dive knife out of the sheath at his thigh and plunged it into the table, inches from Smoller's hand.

The man behind Smoller tensed, but Smoller didn't do more than temple his fingers and smile. "Your brother and students are with me, all fine, thanks to me. Seems their boat blew up and I came along just in time."

"I'll bet," Adrian growled.

Smoller's eyes widened innocently. "I admit it was bad luck, but then, you're the one who believes these boxes are cursed. I haven't found that to be the case."

"Are they hurt? I want to see them."

"They're fine and you'll be seeing them soon. But first, you and I have business to discuss." Smoller gestured to a chair across from him, waited.

He wanted to believe Smoller's words, wanted to believe his brother and students were safe, but couldn't trust anything what man said. "I have no business with you. I just want my crew returned." Anger tightened his throat so his voice was a growl.

"Really? Is that all you want? You get your crew, you get on your boat and leave the site?"

Adrian went rigid. Of course that wasn't all he wanted. He wanted the site. He'd worked for it, damn it, paid for it. And the sight of smug Valentine Smoller, looking as he had three years ago, cool, righteous... Adrian hated the man having the upper hand.

"You should be aware we alerted the Belize Defence Force," Mallory said, her tone cutting.

Smoller narrowed his eyes as he kept his gaze on Adrian. "Did you really? I find it hard to believe you were ready to sacrifice everything to keep me from having this."

"I was ready to sacrifice everything to get my brother and my crew back," Adrian said through his teeth. "What are you willing to sacrifice?"

Smoller's gaze sharpened. "Do you want me to answer that? Really, Adrian. A lot of trouble just so I can't get my payoff."

Adrian's mouth tightened in a rictus of a grin. "Oh, I'm willing to do a lot more."

"Is that so?" Smoller inclined his head to address the man behind him. "Disarm them."

Adrian's gut clenched at the idea of that man's hands on Mallory. "Don't touch her."

Smoller rolled his eyes at Mallory. "So this is the behavior that excites you, this he-man business?" He turned to Adrian. "Fine. You disarm your wife. And be warned, if I find you missed anything, she will be the one to suffer the consequences."

"Always the gentleman," Adrian muttered, stepping in front of Mal to take her dive knife, blocking her from Smoller's view. She searched his face as he unsheathed the tool that would make a lethal weapon.

As much as he despised the man behind him, as much as every nerve screamed *threat*, Adrian couldn't take the risk of attacking. The men on the barge had weapons, and the man behind Smoller as well. And Adrian didn't know where his crew was. Adrian shook his head almost imperceptibly. He liberated the other knife as well, then placed them on the table, feeling Mallory's frustration and disappointment behind him.

Smoller pushed a whiskey bottle—Adrian's whiskey bottle—toward him in silent invitation. Adrian ignored it.

"Where's my brother?"

"Let's not be tiresome. Let's talk about the ship."

"Let's talk about the man you left dead in camp and the boat you blew up."

Smoller stretched to look around him at Mallory. "You're right, he does have a wild imagination."

Adrian understood that he was trying to appear in collusion with Mallory and refused to let himself be baited. "You do know the professor is dead."

"Your crew mentioned it. I know what the man meant to you." Smoller's eyes glinted, but he didn't offer condolences.

Adrian leaned forward. "You said my brother and the others are safe. I want proof."

Smoller made a clucking sound. "Do you always have such trust issues? Very well. You tell me if you've found the casket and I'll let you see your brother."

"We haven't found it," Mallory said quickly.

Adrian tightened his shoulders, cursing himself for revealing his frustration. Smoller thought he had trust issues. Clearly Mallory didn't believe he'd make the right choices here.

Not the time to dwell on that, not when all his wits needed to be focused on his nemesis. "She's telling the truth. We haven't found anything yet."

Smoller touched the hilt of Mallory's knife on the table, spun it closer to him, though not quite out of Adrian's reach. "I do wish I could believe you, but the way she answered so quickly makes me think you're hiding something."

"We may have uncovered the captain's quarters, but we can't be sure. There's no casket so far." Adrian struggled to keep his tone even, his attention on the knife.

Smoller waved a hand. "This is not news to me. Don't you think your crew told me what I wanted to know? You're talking to me easily enough. I honestly thought it would take more effort on my behalf."

"I just want to see my brother, make sure the others are all right." Adrian felt the strain in his throat as he tried to keep from begging.

"Bargaining, my most useful tool. All right. I see we won't get anywhere unless I give you what you want." He signaled one of his men on the barge, who in turn signaled the boat. Three forms stepped from Smoller's boat onto the flat surface of the barge.

Adrian cast a glance at Smoller. "My eyes aren't what they used to be. I need them to come closer."

Smoller grumbled but called in French for them to approach, then halt. Adrian recognized his brother's shape.

"Are you all right?" he called in Gaelic, the language the two of them had studied as boys to communicate without their father understanding.

"For now," Toney responded in kind.

Relief at hearing his brother's voice had all his muscles quivering. Smoller must have seen it, for he called for the others to return to their quarters, then turned to Adrian.

"I need you to bring it up."

The revelation that his brother was alive may have turned his insides to jelly, but it also hardened his resolve that this man would get nothing of his. "Bring it up yourself, or are you so afraid of the curse?"

Smoller slashed a glance toward Mallory. "Really, Adrian, you're a scientist. You don't believe there's a curse."

"So why do you need me to bring it up? You're surely not planning to offer me credit."

"No, not credit. But I do need your expertise. The crew I used in Florida nearly destroyed the damn thing. I know you'll take the proper care."

"I don't particularly feel helpful."

Smoller spread his hands in front of him. "We both know you won't walk away."

Adrian didn't move, wanted to deny, unable to. Behind him, Mallory made a small sound he couldn't identify.

Smoller rose. "As I thought. Mallory, I'd like you to accompany me to my boat."

She tensed behind him. Adrian felt taut enough to snap in two. "She'll stay here with me."

"So the two of you can plot together? I don't think so." He extended a hand to Mallory. "I think you'll like my boat. This one's nice, but mine is much more comfortable."

She stepped up beside Adrian and pressed against him. "I want to stay with Adrian."

One of Smoller's dark eyebrows arched. "Given what you told me in the past, I would like to say I'm happy for you. In fact, maybe I am. You always were his weakness. That could come in handy."

The hairs on the back of Adrian's neck lifted. He understood the threat in the other man's tone. He realized another man had crossed the barge and stood at the edge, alert, ready to board this boat. Because Adrian loved Mallory more than anything, she was in danger. And he was a prisoner.

"Make sure Dr. Reeves is secure here," Smoller told the man behind him, curving his hand around Mallory's arm. He tugged her to his side with enough force that she stumbled. "Sleep well, Adrian. We're diving at first light."

Panicked at watching Mallory leave in the company of his enemy, Adrian twisted out of the grip of the man who held him. When the man lunged, Adrian gave him a Glasgow kiss, felt the crunch of cartilage against his forehead as he rammed the hardest part of his head against the man's nose. But before he could turn back for Mallory, Smoller had freed the knife from its groove in the table and lifted it to Mallory's cheek.

"I don't need her to be pretty to dive for me," he said in a maddeningly calm voice.

Adrian stilled long enough for Smoller's bodyguards to haul him back, but his gaze never left Mallory.

"If you hurt her," Adrian threatened, his voice a growl, "you'll never be hurting enough."

"A passionate man is your husband," Valentine murmured in Mallory's ear, his tone amused, as she watched Adrian stagger under a blow to the kidney before the two men half-walked, half-dragged him into the stateroom belowdeck. Valentine set the knife down and released Mallory. "It may be a mistake keeping him here."

When he released her, her entire body quivered as if shaking off the remnants of his touch. She tossed her wet hair back to hide her reaction, but she still felt the ice of the steel against her skin. "Perhaps, if you offer him some kind of credit, he'll work for you without you needing to use force."

Valentine considered her a moment. "I don't think you know your husband very well."

She gripped the back of her chair to disguise the trembling of her hands. "We were friends once, Valentine. You were there for me at a very difficult time in my life. Why can't we return to that?"

"Because you've sided with my enemy. I worked so hard to turn you against him three years ago. Why do you suppose I went to all that trouble?"

Bile rose as she remembered the comments he'd made about Adrian in the same friendly tone, eroding her trust in her husband, eroding her marriage. She'd been so stupid. How could she have not seen it? She'd

let her own selfishness support his remarks. In doing so, she'd destroyed her marriage. Three years lost. Now they might be out of time.

"I think it's time for you to see my yacht." He eased closer. "Would you like a roommate?"

She snapped away from him. "Only Adrian."

He eased her toward the stern and up onto the barge. Mallory considered struggling but realized she couldn't win.

"Look," she reasoned. Adrian would hate her for the words she was about to say. "Take over the site, get what you need and leave us alone. Let us go."

Valentine shook his head. "I can't allow that."

"Why not? Did you kill Dr. Vigil?"

He stepped closer. "Do you think I'm capable?"

"I think you're greedy enough to do whatever you need to do."

He stroked a finger down her cheek, unerringly following the line where the knife had rested. "You'd be right." He moved away, drawing her toward his boat, away from Adrian.

Valentine's boat was huge and gleaming. Mallory feared despite her protests that he would insist she stay in his cabin. He'd never made a move on her before, but what better way to hurt Adrian? With a smirk, he led her belowdeck and opened a door. Linda sat shivering on a bed. She looked up with tear-filled eyes when Mallory entered.

"Sleep well," Valentine murmured and closed the door.

Mallory lunged for the shut door and turned the lock for added security.

Not that the flimsy lock would be much deterrent to someone determined to get in.

Mallory was more glad than she expected to have Linda's company, even if the girl was a lump on the bed and wouldn't be much help if someone did decide to come in. Partly jealous because she wanted to collapse on the bed too and partly dizzy as her mind whirled ahead with thoughts of how to get out of their situation, Mallory pushed her hair back from her face and crouched in front of Linda.

"Where have you been? What happened at the camp?"

Okay, too many questions overwhelmed the girl. Tears streaked her cheeks.

The last of Mallory's patience snapped. She gripped Linda's hands. "I need to know what's going on here so we can find a way to get out of it."

Linda pulled a hand free and swiped at her eyes, not meeting Mallory's gaze. God, how bad had it been?

She decided to start easy. "How long have you been with him?"

"I don't know. Four nights?"

"So he came the day we left? The day Adrian got bitten?"

Linda nodded, her attention on her hands. "We'd taken the boat out and it...I don't know. It shuddered and everything went bright and then black. The next thing I knew, I was floating in the water, and a boat was alongside, and someone was pulling me out of the water." She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. "I didn't even see Toney or Jacob until today. They kept telling me they were okay, but I didn't know for sure."

"Where have you been the past four days? Not diving the site. It hasn't been touched."

"We were waiting for you to show up. That man, that Smoller man, wanted to catch you by surprise."

"He did," Mallory grumbled. "And Dr. Vigil? What happened to him?"

"I don't know." The girl's voice was shrill. "I didn't know anything about it until a few minutes ago. I can't believe it." Linda dropped to the edge of the bed, slumped, her hands dangling over her knees. "Why is this happening to us, Mallory? Why?"

But Mallory didn't have the energy to explain it. She just wanted to think of a way to get out of it.

The first thing Adrian did when he emerged from belowdeck the next morning was to look toward Smoller's boat, hoping for sight of Mallory. He'd barely slept all night, worried about her, knowing Smoller could go to her if he chose and Adrian had no way to protect her. He'd gone through dozens of escape scenarios, some of them admittedly ridiculous, but all requiring that his crew have a way to communicate, and he'd been kept from his brother and Jacob.

He didn't see Mallory, but his crew and Smoller's men were on the barge, suited up to dive. Even Linda, who hated to dive, wore a wetsuit. Adrian's crew was carefully positioned so that no one could speak to one another. He still wasn't sure how many men Smoller surrounded himself with. Until he knew, he couldn't come up with a workable plan.

Mallory walked out onto the deck of Smoller's boat in her wetsuit, looking healthy enough, though her movements were cautious as she took in her surroundings.

He hoped she remembered the hand signals they'd learned before they married, a system that had come in handy on dives when they couldn't talk. He tried one now, as discreetly as possible.

He didn't know a sign for Did he touch you? so he motioned, Are you okay?

Mallory nodded once, almost imperceptibly.

Be patient.

A smile quirked the corner of her mouth as Smoller stepped to the edge of the barge. Yeah, she'd signaled for him to be patient often enough.

"We'll be diving in shifts today to maximize our time, now that we have extra divers." Smoller's voice carried across the barge to both boats. "I want the box. The other artifacts aren't important. I want to be out of here before anyone comes snooping around."

Like the Belize Defence Force. Adrian had alerted them nearly two days ago, so where were they? He'd warned them of the possibility of pirates and thought they'd at least patrol the area. He'd yet to see a cruiser. Had Smoller paid them off?

"Two of my men will go with each group." Smoller turned to Adrian as he said this, and Adrian jerked his attention from Mallory and nodded. "Adrian, your group will go first. Your wife will be with me."

Adrian wasn't willing to see what Smoller would do to Mallory if Adrian disobeyed, so he slid into the water and signaled to his two guards that he was ready to descend. With one last look at Mallory, he dove. When they reached the site, one of Smoller's men thrust a wire basket at Adrian and motioned to the site. Fill it and send it up.

Years of careful excavating were ingrained in him. He couldn't make himself dump the artifacts, ivory and bronze and gold, into the baskets the way Jacob, Linda and the guards did. He lifted a cylindrical seal, rubbed his thumb over the end, tried to see the design but couldn't make it out. It had probably belonged to the captain of the ship. If Adrian could only study it, get it to Mallory so she could interpret the symbols—

His dive alarm went off. Out of habit, he swam for the guideline, tucking the seal into the utility belt at his waist, only to be grabbed by the shoulder. He turned to look at one of his keepers, who pointed to the site and the basket. Okay, so he hadn't made much progress, but staying down here could kill him. If he got the bends, Smoller wouldn't send him to the naval base for decompression. He'd let him die a slow painful death.

He pointed to his watch, then up. The other diver shook his head and gestured to the site. Adrian glared at the man a moment, disbelieving, and swam around him.

This time the man closed a hand around his arm. Adrian turned, looked to see Jacob and Linda swimming for the line. He jerked his arm, but the man wouldn't release him. Frustrated, he slammed his fist into the man's mask. Damn, the blow hurt his knuckles, and took too much effort through the water to do damage, but it startled the man into letting go. Adrian headed up the line, only to be stopped short by a hand on his ankle above his fin. Son of a—

Before the man could dislodge him, he swung his other foot around to push it into the man's face. Again, too much resistance in the water to do much damage. This time the other man didn't let go. Instead, he stripped Adrian's flipper off. Damn it.

Adrian twined his arm around the guideline and tried to pull himself up, to no avail.

He unwrapped his arm and unhooked his weight belt. It floated down toward the man as Adrian shot up and out of the other man's grip. Now, however, he was moving too fast to decompress. The only thing that could slow him down was the guideline, which floated just out of his reach.

### M.J. Fredrick

His alarm beeped like crazy at the quick ascent. He felt aches in his body as he reached for the rope again. And again. His fingers brushed it. Almost.

Jacob and Linda climbed onto the barge, dripping and shivering. Mallory looked past them to the water, holding her breath as she waited for Adrian.

"He's been down too long!" Mallory shouted across to Valentine's boat, where Smoller's men stood looking over the side.

"He's probably decompressing," Smoller said, nonchalant.

Not this long. Adrian dived strictly by the tables, always underestimating his bottom time, overestimating his decompression time. He'd been down on the outside range of that time. She wasn't waiting any longer. She strode to the pilothouse, picked up a set of tanks, checked the gauges before buckling them on over her clothes. She found a pair of flippers, strapped them on her feet.

"You can't go in without a suit," Smoller protested.

She spat into a facemask, rubbed the spittle over the rubber seal and slipped it over her head. "Watch me."

She dove in, trying not to gasp as the cold water hit her skin and closed over her head. She swam along the guideline.

Adrian had one arm twined around the rope, his eyes on his watch. He looked up when she paddled toward him. Surprise lit his eyes behind his mask. She tapped her wrist. He nodded, then dragged his finger up and down, questioning her missing scuba suit before miming a shiver. She acknowledged his question by wrapping her arms around herself, then grabbed his wrist to look at his watch. She was chilled to the bone and shaking with relief at finding him at the proper depth, though he'd had about ten minutes more bottom time than he should have.

He wrapped his legs around her, drawing her close, but his body heat didn't permeate his suit, much less her body. He folded his arms around her. Slowly the water between them warmed.

Suddenly, the line twisted, disorienting her. Her first instinct was to cling to it, but it could wrap around her, tying her up. She and Adrian released at the same time, swimming in opposite directions. Out of nowhere, another diver swam up to wrap his arms around Adrian like a linebacker. Stunned, she watched as the bigger man pinned Adrian's arms to his sides, not allowing him to maneuver.

She skimmed her hand down her hip, encountering her clothes. She hadn't taken the time to get a dive knife, and Smoller wouldn't have allowed her to if she had. Adrian didn't wear one, she saw. She was only armed with her wits.

Grabbing the line in both hands, she attempted to wrap it around the attacker's head, but his tanks prevented her from getting close enough to him. She slapped at his head, to get him to release Adrian, luring him after her instead. The man merely swatted her away, as if she was an annoying gnat. Rage darkened her vision as she floated back a few feet. He wanted to hurt Adrian, and she had to stop him. She swam forward again, through the churning water, and reached between his body and Adrian's. Locating the release on his weight belt, she pulled.

His sudden buoyancy surprised him, and he shot up through the water, away from them. Except when he released Adrian, Adrian started to ascend too. Mallory grabbed his ankle, dragging him toward the rope. He closed his hand around it, anchoring himself before swimming upward, toward the underside of the barge. They reached the air pocket where the pontoons lifted the frame of the barge above the water.

"What was that about?" she asked breathlessly. Seawater slapped at their faces. They wouldn't be able to stay long, but they needed a chance to talk.

"He thought I should have been working faster." Adrian's tone was too damn calm for her peace of mind. She grabbed his chin to turn his face toward her.

"Adrian, he was trying to hurt you."

Adrian pulled off his mask. "He was pretty pissed."

His calm aggravated her nerves further. Did he not realize the danger they were in? "We have to get out of here. I don't think Smoller's sane, Adrian. When he talks about the box, his eyes get wild."

"I know." He scrubbed a hand down his face. "Have you been able to speak to anyone?"

"Only Linda, and she's a mess. We need to get her out of here."

"You need to contact Toney, since you're on the boat with him. I'm working on a plan." He kept his voice pitched low, so no one above could hear them. "It'll require a great deal of swimming. Do you think you're up to it?"

She couldn't tamp down her impatience. "I don't see I have a choice."

"I'll leave you messages under here to let you know how the plan is progressing." He motioned to the beam he was holding onto.

"And you want me to do nothing?"

"It's the only way to protect you." When she took a deep breath to protest, he talked over her. "I know you can take care of yourself, but Smoller is not a man to tempt. Trust me."

He pushed her away so he could look in her eyes, then kissed her hard as he moved toward the edge of the barge. "I'll go first."

Adrian surfaced to find himself peering up at several black circles, pointed at him. The barrels of automatic weapons. Talk about feeling out of control. Hands reached in the water and pulled him out before he could warn Mallory. He didn't think Smoller would kill them—he needed them—but looking down a gun barrel was damned unnerving. He turned to watch Mallory surface. Before he could note more than the fact her skin was downright blue, her eyes terrified behind her mask, he was dragged onto the barge. He rolled toward the edge to reach for her. He fell onto his back, helpless, when Smoller grabbed her, pulled

her against his chest, and pressed a gun to her head. Adrian's heart jumped in panic. Smoller had lost his mind and he didn't care who suffered. Well, if Adrian suffered, all the better, and Adrian couldn't imagine a worse pain than watching the woman he loved hurt.

"It's come to my attention, Adrian, that you don't intend to do what you're told." He gestured to the deck behind Adrian. He glanced over to see the man he'd fought with doubled over in pain as his comrades surrounded him. "He ascended too fast. I'm suspecting the bends, but perhaps that is something you planned."

"Better him than me," Adrian said, his gaze on Mallory. He wouldn't take his eyes off her again, as if he could will her to stay safe.

"Actually, yes. You're more valuable to me than he is. However, I can't allow you to defy me like that. There has to be a price to pay." He wrapped his hand tighter around Mallory's ponytail. Adrian saw the skin at her hairline stretch, her eyes widening. He ground his teeth as he saw the barrel press into the soft skin at her temple, when she squeezed her eyes shut as she waited.

"Look," Adrian said, stepping forward, one arm out, blood roaring in his ears as he assessed the situation. He couldn't cross the distance fast enough to knock Smoller aside. If he did, he might still be too late to protect Mallory. "I'm sorry. I didn't plan to die down there today."

"Well." Smoller loosened his grip on Mallory a bit, but Adrian couldn't let himself relax. He knew the man too well. "Perhaps I wasn't clear. But you need to know not to defy my authority."

Adrian's bowels iced when Smoller raised his eyes to Adrian. He saw the cool hate in them. God, no, not Mallory.

"It won't happen again," Adrian said quickly. "I understand, all right? What will it take? Anything—" Panic ripped the last word out of him, even as he knew the price of that word.

Smoller shook his head sadly. "No, I know you, Adrian. You're too headstrong. You need a lesson."

Mallory's whimper floated across the water toward him. He'd make the jump. He'd have to. His whole body tensed as he readied himself, only to snap in shock when the shot rang out.

## Chapter Seventeen

Linda swayed for a moment, her eyes bright with surprise, her hands closing over her chest. Between her fingers, blood blossomed. Mallory watched with horror as the girl toppled and fell beneath the waves. Adrian's anguished cry carried across the water. Mallory's muscles went limp as she followed the movement of Smoller's arm lowering the gun.

Mallory's throat closed in panic, her breath escaping in whimpers. He'd killed Linda for no reason but to teach Adrian a lesson, to teach both of them a lesson. That he was in charge and he'd brook no rebellion. The man she'd known before had been hard, determined, but never capable of murder.

Ears ringing from the gunshot and her own pounding heart, she swung her gaze to Adrian as she allowed Smoller to support her weight on one arm. Her husband still wore his gear, his attention on the water where Linda had gone in, but when he moved toward the edge, Smoller, who'd obviously been watching him too, pressed the gun to Mallory's head.

"Don't even think it, Reeves."

Adrian whirled, his eyes wild as he pled with the man holding her. "Jesus, Smoller. Jesus! She was just a girl, no threat to you."

"And no use to me, either. Easily replaceable." He stroked the gun down Mallory's cheek and she shuddered with revulsion and pain. Adrian's expression was hard as he took in the message.

"Are you ready to dive with me, sweetheart? I'm sure you'll be perfectly biddable."

Terrified, she looked over at Adrian, but his gaze had returned to the water where Linda had gone in. She could see the responsibility weighing on him. If he hadn't been defiant, if he hadn't brought her here...

"Time to go," Smoller said. "Would you like a suit this time?"

Adrian's muscles quivered with tension and fear from the moment Mallory disappeared underwater. He'd seen the rage in her eyes over Linda's murder, and she was descending with the murderer. He was helpless; he couldn't dive again and risk the bends—then he'd be no good to anyone. He had to hope that Mallory had more sense than to act on her anger—she'd always had more control than him—that she now knew what Smoller was capable of.

Hell, he'd known Smoller was a son of a bitch, but he'd never suspected he could murder someone for greed. Once again Adrian searched the surface of the water for Linda. She'd been just a girl, a girl he'd been responsible for, and now she was dead.

If Mallory died too, he didn't want to go on living.

Mallory scanned for sight of Linda's body as she descended. The girl had been wearing her dive belt, so she probably wouldn't surface for some time, if at all. The creatures of the sea could be brutal.

Like the man ahead of her. They were in more trouble than she'd realized.

Anger and fear made her tremble as she swam alongside the two men who accompanied them. She didn't think they'd kill her. He wouldn't risk hurting her here, where it couldn't do as much damage to Adrian.

Nonetheless, she was having trouble breathing, her throat tight, as if the arteries in her throat had expanded to accommodate the adrenaline racing through her body. Her movements were jerky and slow, every muscle in her body tensed to the point of snapping. She didn't know how she'd reach the bottom, much less gather the treasure he wanted.

Mallory shoveled as much treasure as she could into the baskets, barely paying attention to the ancient artifacts that passed through her fingers. She needed to keep alert, had to watch him, to see if she could read him, know what he wanted ahead of time.

She couldn't imagine how Valentine could hate Adrian so much. Why did he want to destroy him, or was that just a side effect of his greed? She must have missed the animosity when they'd worked together, or even afterward, when he'd befriended her. As she dug, she flipped through her memories, found nothing that would point to them all ending up in this situation together.

"Good haul," Smoller said when they surfaced.

Her heart clenched. She'd seen ceramic incense burners, parts of ceramic pots, enameled crucifixes and bronze utensils hauled up in the basket. She would love to get a look at the carvings, study what they said, but she was unlikely to ever have a chance. She was here for her diving ability, not her language. None of what they'd discovered today was important to him.

For the first time she could understand the anger Adrian had felt those years ago in Tunisia. At least no one had died on that excavation.

"As a reward, you and I will have a special dinner to celebrate." He turned, making sure Adrian heard that, before he climbed onto the barge and headed for his yacht.

Mallory didn't want to think of the time she'd have to spend with Valentine over dinner. She would have to sit face to face with the man who'd murdered Linda in cold blood. She was going to choke on her food.

And then he was on deck, carrying a bottle of wine and a picnic basket as if he'd come courting.

She didn't acknowledge him as he set out the dinner, popped the cork on the wine, all under the watchful eye of his hired muscle. She did note that he didn't provide cutting utensils for the meal of fish and salad.

"To a productive day," Smoller said, saluting her with his glass.

Was he even capable of reasoning with? She'd seen him kill today, with no regret. He wasn't going to let them walk away unless she could find his humanity.

"The find will be worth a lot more if you catalogue it properly," she began, toying with the lettuce of her salad. "I've seen some priceless items tossed into the basket like bargains at the dollar store. Each of those things could bring you the money you're looking for, and you'd have the bonus of discovering a Mediterranean ship in the Caribbean. You could live off the money for the rest of your life."

He sat back and considered her. "Is that what you and Adrian had planned to do?"

"I—" She stopped herself. She had no idea what Adrian had planned to do with the money, other than pay his debts, maybe fund another site. "No. Adrian was writing a book."

Valentine's bark of laughter carried over the water. "He can't sit still that long."

He did know Adrian. But Mallory refused to be drawn in by his familiarity. "At least he's not willing to kill for what he wants."

Valentine leaned on the table and stroked a finger down her cheek. She flinched and he laughed. "Are you certain? I know I saw murder in his eyes when I was holding the gun to your head. Hell, if he could see us now, I'd wager he'd want to kill me."

She yanked out of his reach as he twined a lock of her hair around his fingers. "He wouldn't kill an innocent, frightened girl. I never thought you would be capable of something like that. Why would you do it?" The last words came out choked as she thought of the young woman that she hadn't even liked much, but who'd died so suddenly, so violently, so senselessly.

His brows drew together in an expression of sympathy, but she knew now to look past that into his eyes, the flat eyes of a shark. Had he been like that after Tunisia? She had been so upset, she might not have been able to recognize it.

"Adrian didn't leave me a choice. Don't you see?"

How could he think that? "No. I don't. He was bargaining with you, he was promising you he'd follow directions."

"And I didn't believe him. You didn't believe him-I felt the tension in your body."

"Because you had a gun to my head!"

"Yet you didn't think I was capable of shooting anyone." He leaned back, templing his fingers. "I submit that you didn't believe Adrian when he promised he would do whatever I told him to do. Now he will, if only to keep you safe. You must remember that the choices you make, that he makes, will come back to you."

"I trust my husband," she said stubbornly, hoping he didn't see through her doubt. Adrian was out in the field for a reason—he didn't play well with others, especially not the man who stole from him.

"Your husband." He narrowed his eyes, assessing. "I've been meaning to ask you about that. You've spent your whole life looking at the past, but doesn't it get old? I mean, if you're always looking behind you, how can you ever move forward? Here you are, back with the man you walked away from."

She couldn't let him rile her, which was clearly his purpose. If she let her anger overtake her, she might do something stupid and lose her focus. Keeping her focus was key. They had to get out of this alive.

"You held Dr. Vigil's gambling debts over him to ruin Adrian."

Smoller sipped from his wine glass. She might be able to break the glass quickly enough to use it as a weapon. As if reading her thoughts, he edged her glass away from her.

"I had so much more than that to hold over him. Robert Vigil was my father."

Mallory's insides iced at Smoller's conversational revelation. She snapped her mouth closed as her mind raced with the implication. She tried several times before she could speak again.

"Your what? Dr. Vigil didn't have a family." She searched her memories. No, no mention of a family, of a wife, of a child. She looked closer at the man, could see no resemblance, though he was older than Dr. Vigil had been when she'd met the professor.

"Did he know and walk away?" She couldn't imagine the man she knew and loved being capable of doing that. He'd loved her so much. She never would have thought he'd walk away from his own flesh and blood.

But then they discovered his betrayal of Adrian, and she realized she hadn't really known the man. The idea made her stomach clench.

Smoller looked out over the water, fingers playing with the stem of his glass. "He knew. But the job came first. The job, and after a time, his precious Adrian." He smirked, but she understood the pain in his eyes.

That was why he hated Adrian. Jealousy, and not because of something Adrian controlled. Jealousy over a father's love.

No wonder Dr. Vigil and Adrian had been so close. They were too alike. And Smoller hated Adrian for it. The little bit of food she'd eaten threatened to rise up her throat.

"Just because your father ignored you, you decided to ruin Adrian?"

"No, of course not." Smoller waved a casual hand and reached for his wine again. "I did it for the money. I never did understand why my father was happy to play in the dirt, leave his family alone."

Mallory hated that she could identify with that. She couldn't afford to sympathize with this man. He was a killer. "There are a lot of things you don't understand. Like loyalty."

"Ah, you're talking about Linda." He was amazingly nonchalant about the woman he'd shot.

"She was just a girl and you murdered her!"

All of the humor left Smoller's face as he leaned close to her. "Your lover killed her. Don't forget that."

Mallory brushed off a chill at the expression in his eyes. "I've lost my appetite." She pushed her chair back. "Good night, Valentine."

Adrian was bleary eyed when he walked out on deck the following morning. He'd played Linda's murder over and over in his mind. No matter how he played it, he couldn't find a way to stop him. If Smoller was that desperate for the box, Adrian was powerless to stop him from killing them all.

With Smoller, there were five guards, now that one had been disabled from his fast ascension. Adrian had heard the helicopter arrive to take him away last night. At the first sound of rotors, Adrian had bolted, but the largest of Smoller's men was stationed outside his door, and by the time he'd figured out how to open a window, the helicopter was gone.

He'd stayed awake the rest of the night, torn between replaying how he might have escaped and terrified Smoller had sent Mallory away to fuck with him.

And he'd worked out a plan of escape.

Now he scanned the barge for Mallory. She walked out on the deck of Smoller's boat wearing shorts and a T-shirt, not even glancing at the gear as her crew prepared for their dive. Was Smoller going to let her in the water?

For a fraction of a second, Adrian considered taking his chance today and leaving without her, then coming back. No, not possible. Hell, he was having a hard time getting into the water without her.

"What's the holdup?" Smoller demanded, walking out of the pilothouse of his boat. "We've got to be getting close. I need you down there."

As he suited up, Adrian strained to see past him to Mallory, but she'd disappeared. He shook his head, put the regulator between his teeth and dove.

Smoller was right; they had to be getting close. The wreck had been thoroughly compromised. Adrian's gut twisted to see it. The masthead had been removed, and during the search for the casket, artifacts had been tossed from one part of the ship to another. They'd never learn what they needed to learn from her now.

He'd lost it all on this one, every dime he had, every dime he'd hoped to make. Odd how that was just striking him, the reality of it. Was it sinking in because of the stress of Robert's death and their kidnapping had kept emotion at a distance, or because of something else? Even with his career and credit ruined, the loss didn't cut as deep since he'd found Mallory again. He hoped, if they walked away from this, that they'd walk away together.

This time he'd give her the real wedding she'd always wanted. Maybe she'd still wear flowers in her hair, though. She'd been so pretty with the flowers fluttering around her face, up on that hillside. Would

she want a stateside wedding? And a house. She'd want a house, and kids, and he was finally ready to give them to her.

Kids. He smiled at the thought of Mallory growing large with his child, nursing it at her breast. He'd fucked up once, he wouldn't do it again. Yeah, he could see himself inside that white picket fence, chasing a toddler, mowing the lawn, maybe even getting a dog, settling down.

Damn. Bubbles escaped around his regulator as he smiled again. Maybe he'd had too much adventure in the past weeks to be thinking like this. Or maybe Smoller had done him a favor after all. Adrian grinned.

That single thought snapped Adrian to. Where the hell had that come from? Jesus. Oh hell. His thoughts, which had raced through his head moments ago, now moved sluggishly. He watched his hands float in front of his face, had to concentrate to close his fingers into a fist.

Nitrogen narcosis. Rapture of the deep. But he wasn't so deep, only about a hundred feet. He'd swum deeper than this in the past and not been affected.

The crew had stirred up so much silt trying to get to the rest of the artifacts that when he looked around, he couldn't see anybody, and no one could see him. He struggled to keep focused, like a drunk behind the wheel. He was an experienced diver; he wouldn't do anything dumb like take his regulator out of his mouth and try to give it to a passing fish.

No, he'd only planned a wedding to the woman who had left him.

The woman he had to get back to, or else.

Focus, Adrian.

Okay, well, which way was up? This deep, the sun didn't filter through the water, and with all the silt floating around him, he couldn't see the ground, or feel it with the toe of his fin. Even if he felt it, he couldn't be sure what was real.

This was how experienced divers died. Panic kicked his heart against his ribs. Mallory. If he died, what would happen to her?

He didn't have time to wait for the silt to dissipate. A delay like that could deplete his oxygen before he reached the surface. He lifted his wrist to his face to check the gauge on his watch to monitor his depth. Purposely, he didn't look at the air in his tank. He needed to worry about one thing at a time. Okay. His watch told him he was at ninety-eight feet. Keeping his eyes on the readout, he finned in the direction he thought was up.

Uh, no. Moving slowly, deliberately as he continued to fight the effects of the narcosis, he made a Uturn, swam a few feet before checking the computer again. Huh. Still descending. In one part of his mind he knew he'd be concerned if not for the narcosis. He adjusted his angle and finned on, this time checking his air level. He'd already used almost half a tank. Not good. He didn't have time to find his way out and decompress.

He was screwed.

He kept his breathing shallow, even. He'd better not panic. Even one minute of panic would kill him.

Who knew there were so many possible angles? He'd stopped making such big turns and now just made small adjustments in his quest for the surface. The problem was, he couldn't swim too far to find the depth or he risked losing too much energy and too much air.

The thought hit him that he should find the guideline. If he didn't, he'd surface too far from the boat and Smoller would not come after him.

No, he couldn't worry about that. He had to get to the surface first. Once he had air, he could worry about getting his bearings.

Another wrong turn, and his air supply was dropping fast. How could that be? He checked his computer. More time had passed than he realized as he considered his next move. Damn narcosis. He had less than a quarter tank of air left, as well as the pony tank strapped to his chest. He loved diving, but he'd be damned it he let the ocean get him, so he took every precaution.

With one hand over the pony tank, lest he forget it, he started swimming.

"Where's Adrian?" Mallory demanded, pushing her wind-whipped hair out of her face when the big blond diver, the one she'd nicknamed Brutus, surfaced and stripped off his mask. The water was growing choppy as clouds rolled overhead and she had to brace her feet to stay upright as the boat lurched.

The big man shook his head. "It's cloudy as hell down there. I lost track of him."

A frisson of alarm ran through her, but she battled it with reason. Adrian was the best diver she knew. A little silt wouldn't throw him. But if he couldn't see the guideline, or his dive watch wasn't working... She couldn't lose him, not like this.

She made her way to the pilothouse of Valentine's yacht, encountering one of the other men who folded his arms to block her path. She pushed past him, and he grabbed her arm, fingers digging in. Looking up, she saw he enjoyed her pain, her panic.

"Where do you think you're going?"

She wrenched her arm, but couldn't dislodge him. "To get him."

"I don't think so."

"What's going on?" Valentine asked, coming out of the pilothouse behind her.

"Adrian hasn't surfaced and a storm is coming up."

"Maybe he found something good," Valentine countered. "He has time." He leaned against the doorway. "He's a big boy. He doesn't need you jumping in after him every time he's late. He lived for how many years without you?"

Mallory turned away, fear still churning in her gut, and saw the dark-haired diver's smirk. Her blood iced as his expression told her everything she needed to know. She lunged for him, her fingers digging into his shoulders as his had into her arm.

"What did you do?" she demanded.

Strong hands closed over Mallory's shoulders and dragged her away from the diver and the glint in his eye. She tried to shake off the men holding her but they released her suddenly and stepped in front of her. Toney and Jacob.

"You sabotaged his equipment," Toney accused Valentine. "What was it? His dive computer? His hoses?"

Dread dragged at Mallory, and it was all she could do to stay upright. The wind that kicked up with the approaching storm didn't help, buffeting the water, sending waves crashing into the hull, splashing over the deck.

She almost wished Jacob and Toney were still holding onto her. This man hadn't killed Adrian outright. He had let the sea take him. She knew it had to be something tricky—Adrian was fanatic about triple checking his equipment before he dove.

"Where is he?" Her voice sounded like it came from far away.

"There!" One of the men below pointed, and Mallory shoved her way around Jacob and Toney to look out across the sea, where a diver bobbed in the churning waves, partially floating on his back, his face turned toward the sky.

She gripped the rail. Adrian. At least two hundred yards away in rough water. He couldn't make it to the boat. Knowing Valentine, he would start the boats and head for shore without him.

"Adrian!"

He couldn't hear her, not over the water, but she shouted again.

Slowly, he turned toward her, his movements sluggish. He was exhausted. No way could he swim to the boat. Her heart thudded with fear and the need to go to him. But even as the muscles in her body screamed for her to do something, she knew she couldn't reach him before he drowned.

Beside them, the pilot of Adrian's boat started its engine and headed out to Adrian. She looked at Valentine to see if he'd shout for them to stop, but he didn't. Instead, he set his jaw and watched the rescue.

Adrian flopped onto his back on the deck of the boat, feeling boneless after what had to have been nearly two hours in the water. He stared up at the sky he thought he'd never see again and wondered why it was so watery.

His goggles. Right. Lifting his arm to strip them off took more effort than he would have expected. He squinted up at the muscle that Smoller surrounded himself with. They'd fished him out of the water, so where was Smoller? Where were Mallory and Jacob and Toney?

"Mal?" he croaked.

"Other boat," said the muscle who'd pulled him up, the one he'd heard Mallory call Brutus.

Safe. He nodded and let sleep take him.

Mallory was exiting the head when she heard the shouting. She'd never heard Valentine shout, but he was tearing into someone now, on deck. She hurried toward the stairs because surely the only person who made him that angry was Adrian.

"What the hell were you thinking, Karl? I don't want the man dead!"

Not Adrian, then, but the dark-haired diver. Mallory crept forward to see his shoulders tighten defensively. "He could have killed Jeremy."

"Jeremy acted on his own and probably deserved what he got. I need Reeves alive. I want him to bring up that chest and hand it over. I want him to go home empty-handed and live a long life full of regret for what he can never have. I want to take everything from him the way he's taken everything from me, and I want to do it so he doesn't forget it."

Mallory shrank back when footsteps sounded on the stairs, and she slipped into the head, rubbing at the goose bumps that covered her body. He didn't plan to kill Adrian. That was good news, right? But taking everything away from Adrian... What did he mean? The site, certainly. Her, too, perhaps, though Valentine had to know he couldn't play her the same way twice. Her eyes would be wide open. Valentine had to be aware.

Which meant what? Taking her away from Adrian... Did he mean to kill her? They had to escape, and it had to be now.

# Chapter Eighteen

Adrian couldn't take another chance. He knew what had caused his narcosis; he'd figured it out floating in the ocean, watching the boat approaching.

Someone had switched the gases in his tank. The team had been using Heliox so they could stay underwater longer. Someone had switched his tanks to Nitrox, and he'd had higher levels of nitrogen in his blood, leading to his narcosis.

If he'd gone deeper, he could have died.

Ingenious, really. Anyone who paid attention to him knew he checked his equipment to the nth degree. Gas mixture was not something he'd thought to check.

But the experience had given him an idea.

Last night he'd slipped out the window of his cabin and smuggled three full-sized tanks from the boat, strapping them to the underside of the barge. He might manage a couple more pony tanks, and hope that would be enough. He and Toney could use the pony tanks—they were the most experienced divers. They wouldn't have to go as deep as usual, so they wouldn't use as much air. He just hoped they'd have enough to get to land without having to surface and risk being seen.

He'd gone back after securing the tanks and dumped the extra hoses and regulators overboard, then released most of the air in the remaining tanks. He'd cracked open the gauges and manipulated the needles until they stayed pointing to "full" before he added weights to the straps so they'd feel full. They'd run out of air before the divers descended too far, giving Adrian and the others a chance to escape. They ran the risk of the men surfacing to alert Smoller, and Adrian hadn't decided if that was a risk he was willing to take. If Smoller brought them back, he would not go easy on them.

He'd tried to work out how to get control of his boat, but three unarmed men against six armed—he didn't like the odds, the chance that Mallory could be hurt. If he only had to worry about himself and his brother, that was one thing, but he wouldn't chance Mallory and Jacob. They had a better chance of swimming to safety under the radar, so to speak. So while it nearly killed him to do it, he poured water in the gas tanks of each boat so Smoller couldn't follow them to shore.

He hoped Mallory understood his signal. He'd feel better if they could talk through the plan first, but there was no time. They had to act.

Mallory didn't wait for Valentine to tell her to suit up after Adrian, Jacob and Toney went in. He cast a flat gaze in her direction as she tugged the suit over her clothes, zipped it up. She checked the hell out of her equipment while he watched. They would all know she was aware of their tricks now, and they'd think twice about trying them again.

Her nerves had been jumping since she'd overheard the conversation, and if she stayed around him too long, he would suspect and then act.

Or prevent her from acting.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked as she moved to the edge of the boat. "You need to wait for Karl."

"You want your casket. I want to go home." Before he could say anything, she dove.

Adrian knew if he hung back to wait for Mallory, the two men swimming with him would suspect something. They couldn't turn back too soon, or they risked discovery. He'd have to trust she could catch up, that Toney and Jacob could retrieve the tanks from the barge. They weren't being watched as closely as he and Mallory, a point in their favor. Adrian would keep an eye on the guards, alert for the moment they realized they were out of air. If anyone had to take drastic measures for their safe escape, he would. He was responsible for them all being here.

He saw the diver called Danny check his gauges and slow, straighten as he tapped the plastic casing. Oh hell. Too soon. Adrian looked around for Mallory, for Jacob and Toney, didn't see them. Danny signaled to Brutus, then to Adrian, urging them to surface. Brutus pointed to himself and down, then to Danny and pointed up. Danny shook his head and stubbornly signaled with a sweeping motion for the three of them to ascend. Brutus repeated his message with frustrated movements, before he turned to descend. Adrian followed.

Danny grasped Adrian's calf, pulling him toward the surface. Ahead of him Brutus swam forward, oblivious. How long would he stay that way? Out of the corner of his eye, Adrian saw Mallory swimming forward to help him. Damn it, he had to move now. He twisted, driving his elbow back as hard as he could into his captor's stomach. The blow loosened his grip enough that Adrian could turn and rip off Danny's mask, blinding him as salt water stung his eyes. Danny released him. Adrian drove his fist as hard as he could into the enemy's face.

Crap. Blood spurted out of Danny's nose. Bad news. Danny reached for his dive knife. Adrian slammed a hand into the man's throat, but the water resistance prevented too much force.

The man slid his knife free and slashed it toward Adrian, who swam out of reach. But he wasn't prepared for the backstroke. The tip of the blade sliced the palm of his hand. Damn. More blood in the water. He closed his hand around the stinging wound just as Danny jabbed his knife toward Adrian's chest, falling short, a surprised look in his eyes as he sucked on his regulator, out of air.

Adrian looked over Danny's shoulder into Toney's facemask, to the glint of a diving knife and dangling air hoses. Where the hell had Toney gotten a knife? That was the one thing Adrian had failed to accomplish as he'd crept around the boat last night. He pointed to the knife and lifted his eyebrows behind his mask. His brother shrugged as Danny swam toward the surface.

Mallory approached, fins flipping behind her a bit frantically, and hooked her thumb over her shoulder. He looked past her to the two men swimming after her, drawing Brutus's attention to his comrades.

Shit.

Adrian motioned for Toney to give Mallory one of the extra tanks and go, get away. They needed to take off now or risk being dragged back. If they failed, they wouldn't get another chance. Hesitation flashed in Mal's eyes as she strapped the tank to her chest. He glared in response and gestured toward the shore. When she still refused to leave, he pointed to his brother and then to her.

Now her eyes were mutinous. Oh, for fuck's sake...she wouldn't go. And he didn't have time to force her as the three swimmers approached. Through the water, Adrian saw the glint of metal in the first man's hand. Goddammit. A knife. Toney and Jacob swam up behind the others, quickly disabling them. Toney met Adrian's eyes over the third diver's shoulder. Adrian jerked his head toward shore, assuring his brother he could handle this one. He would see Mallory to shore if Toney could get Jacob there. Toney nodded, motioned to the younger man and started swimming.

Adrian glanced at Mallory, then looped a finger through his own air hose and made a slicing motion. She frowned and gestured to her hip. No knife.

He'd just have to get Brutus's. He turned and swam to confront him.

The cold look in the big man's eyes penetrated his mask as he lunged at Adrian with the knife. Adrian shot an arm out to block Brutus's aim at his chest and felt a burning across his forearm as the blade sliced through his wetsuit.

Brutus surged forward to grab Adrian's regulator. Adrian clamped his teeth over it and felt the pressure in his gums as Brutus tried to deprive him of his air supply. He gripped the wrist that tugged at his mouthpiece as he tried to block the arm slashing downward. He didn't catch it before the blade drove into his biceps. Pain flashed brightly through him as metal scraped bone, but even as he reached for the hilt, Brutus withdrew it, finning backwards.

Adrian had to get some distance between them. With the water resistance, he wasn't strong enough to punch the guy and do much damage, but his legs were accustomed to moving with force through the water. He pulled away and struck Brutus in the facemask with his foot. The man's head snapped backwards, his mask cracked. Then Mallory was there, slicing his hoses.

He didn't have time to question where she'd gotten it. Smoller's crew wouldn't have equipment to replace the damaged hoses, not unless they had some tucked away somewhere. They couldn't follow Adrian's crew into the water. Adrian and his people were free.

Now they needed to head for shore—they didn't have enough air to wait around. Mallory had strapped two pony tanks Jacob had given her to her hips and a full-sized tank to her chest, which made her movements awkward as she swam toward him, motioning to his arm. He lifted it for a better look. The movement caused stars to shoot before his eyes. He lowered it again. Swimming the distance to the shore was going to be a bitch.

First, he had to stop the blood.

With his good arm, he pointed in the direction Toney and Jacob had already headed. She had to start swimming. Hanging around was too dangerous. Blood clouded the water. They were bound to get company soon, either human or finned.

Of course, being Mallory, she shook her head and motioned to his arm again. Her movements clumsy around the tank on her chest, she pulled off the pony tanks. She strapped them to his hips before she pulled free a roll of tape from the first aid kit strapped to her belt. Good girl. He hadn't thought of liberating a first aid kit. She pulled off a strip of waterproof adhesive tape and wrapped it tightly around his arm, first his biceps, then his forearm. The tape closed the wetsuit up temporarily, sealing the blood inside and putting pressure on the wound. Adrian still wasn't sure how far he'd be able to swim; the pain blinded him with each movement of his arm. Even though the knife was gone, he could still feel it rubbing against the bone.

But he'd be damned if he'd be anywhere in the vicinity when Smoller figured out they weren't coming up.

Blocking out the pain and the limited mobility in his arm, he started swimming.

Mallory saw the first shadow about five minutes later. Years of diving experience told her exactly what it was, the flip of the tail, the twist of the body.

A shark, sensing blood.

They were about twenty feet down. The shark maneuvered between them and the surface, sunlight shining around him. The tension in Adrian's body meant he saw it too. He didn't have the strength to fight, though, if it came close. He didn't have the strength to outswim it. She would be the first line of defense if it decided to investigate if they were injured.

She tried to recall what she was supposed to do if the shark came too close. Blow bubbles, though she didn't remember why. Or punch the shark in the nose. She definitely didn't want to try that.

She glanced at her husband, his usually strong movements limited by his injury. But if she had to...

He tried to maneuver between her and the shark. Damn him and his heroic behavior. When she swam above him, making herself the barrier, he tugged at her fin. She turned to see him scowling—a neat trick

with a regulator in his mouth—and gesturing at the shark like she didn't see it. She jerked her hand to him to stay below her. He didn't have the strength but his damn stubborn gallantry kept him from listening.

While they were jostling for position, the shark spotted them.

Mallory swam to intercept it, took out her regulator and pointed it in the direction of the fish, a five footer, easily. The bubbles annoyed the fish and it twisted back the way it had come, clearly not interested.

She turned back with a triumphant grin but went on alert when Adrian pointed behind her, his movement frantic.

Her air tanks absorbed the blow, but she hadn't gotten her regulator back in her mouth. The force of the hit knocked the breath from her. She twisted to see a different shark charging her. She fumbled with her regulator to bring it up to bubble in this shark's face.

The method didn't deter this one, a bigger one, a hungrier one. She shoved the regulator in her own mouth, took a fortifying breath before she popped the fish in the nose, its rough skin catching her glove. White teeth flashed as it whipped its head to circle about, not deterred. Damn. Adrenaline sped through her now, telling her muscles to flee, but Adrian couldn't get away fast enough, and she wouldn't leave him. The adrenaline made her shaky, made her fingers reaching for the stolen dive knife clumsy. But she was able to draw it out, thrust it under the shark's jaw, terror giving her the strength to pull the knife free and plunging it in, again and again, finally killing the animal, watching it sink as she processed what she'd done.

Now she had to get away, fast, before other sharks came to devour their brother. She swam to Adrian, grabbed his good arm, urging him forward. He followed, keeping his eyes over his shoulder, waiting for the sharks to appear.

They didn't, thank God and Mallory's bravery. But the struggle made them use up more oxygen than Adrian had calculated. No telling how far they'd get now before they ran out of air. He would rather do calculations in his head than relive what he'd just seen Mallory do, the helplessness he'd felt as he watched her get attacked. She was so fucking strong, so fucking smart. He'd almost lost her by trying to save her.

Loss of blood was as disorienting as the narcosis. He could hardly kick his legs. Fatigue pulled at him as the adrenaline drained, but he continued to follow Mallory's rhythmic motions. He wasn't even aware how many minutes had passed when his alarm went off, signaling time to change the tanks. He tapped Mallory and gestured for her to turn around so he could check her tanks.

Too soon. They'd used too much air fighting and with the sharks. He handed her a pony tank so he could switch her regulator to the tank she held. She took the pony tank and motioned him to turn around instead. She wanted him to take the big tank.

That was ridiculous. He was more seasoned than she was; he could make the two pony tanks last longer than her big tank.

She gestured to his arm, mimed his inability to swim. Holding a pony tank would make swimming nearly impossible unless they taped it to his chest. If he had the larger tank strapped to his back, his arms would be free.

She was right, though it pained him to admit it. The pony tank would slow him even more. Now he was risking her life because she wouldn't leave him behind. She lifted her eyebrows when he turned so she could help him switch tanks. The weight fell away, to be replaced with half as much. The pressure on his arm immediately lessened. He blew out a sigh of relief. She strapped the tank tightly to his back—pretty amazing with one hand as she held her own pony tank—then he was breathing again.

He nodded thanks and signaled for her to take it easy on the pony tanks. She rolled her eyes behind her facemask, and they started swimming.

He'd estimated that the shore was about a mile and a half from the site. They should be getting close. He was afraid to surface, didn't want Smoller to stop them, but he needed to get his bearings. Again, he tapped Mallory's leg and pointed upward, before he started swimming for the surface. She caught his ankle and tugged, then pointed at herself. He shook his head sharply. He was not going to allow her to expose herself. She jabbed her thumb at her chest, widening her eyes in exasperation, and motioned to his arm again.

He couldn't let her win this one, not when he was perfectly capable of swimming, of seeing. He'd let her win the tank argument because it only made sense, but this—

But she was already gone. He could see her above him. No way could he catch her.

She returned in under a minute and faced him. She pointed to the shore, held up ten fingers ten times and pointed to her foot. A hundred feet? Not bad. They could do that. She signaled, palm out, for him to wait. But...

She mimed waves and rocks, then straightened her arm so her fingers pointed to the surface and jabbed her flattened hand at her palm, fingers first. He frowned. What the hell? He saw her frustration as she climbed her fingers up her upright arm.

A cliff. Hell. He nodded his understanding. They were off course and they were screwed. They had no place to surface.

He wondered if Toney and Jacob had been able to stay on course, and where they were.

Mallory motioned that they had to keep going, that they had to try. He grimaced, thinking of the waves that could pound them against those rocks, waves they wouldn't be able to fight.

They swam up a bit, found a current, which they were able to ride awhile. Adrian's body relaxed since he didn't have to work so hard.

Too soon, they started having to dodge rocks, still carried by the current, which worked against them now. They had to surface.

#### M.J. Fredrick

Mallory pointed at a shadow slightly below them. He frowned at her as she started to swim toward it, tossing away her empty pony keg, unstrapping her other from her hip. What did she think she was doing?

Still, he followed and saw what she saw.

A cave, just beneath the surface of the water. He hesitated. They had no idea how deep the cave was, how long they'd have to swim before they were able to find air. This would be a dive of faith. Their only other option was to surface and chance getting battered against the rocks. No way could he climb a cliff. They didn't have the equipment to do so anyway.

God help them. He dove after her into the cave.

The dark water swallowed Mallory. Panic jolted through her. She reached to her left and her hand brushed Adrian. She swam with her hand on his shoulder until he powered up the lights on his facemask.

She followed, swimming along at his right flank, unwilling to let too much distance come between them. The current of low tide pulled at her. She and Adrian couldn't fight it long. They were already worn out.

Adrian gestured. She looked up at the ceiling. Stalactites dipped into the water. She frowned. With the current, they should have eroded by now. She could see where the seawater had carved them into a comma shape, but they still hung on. Their presence would answer the question of how long this cave had been underwater. She wanted to swim up to them, but Adrian motioned her to follow him. She checked her watch and her depth gauge. They couldn't stay under much longer; they'd use too much oxygen at this depth.

She followed him deeper and saw a hole surrounded by tumbled boulders, wide enough for them to pass through together. He signaled her to go first. Her heart seized in a moment of apprehension, but she swam through.

The gauge on her pony keg went into the red. She had to take shallower breaths, conserve the remaining oxygen. Adrian swam over, checked her gauge, and worry creased his brow. She waved a hand, trying to blow it off. He motioned to his regulator, flicked his finger between them. If she ran out of air, they'd have to buddy breathe. She nodded and hoped they could find an air pocket before that happened. She didn't want to disable him further. They'd already reached the point of no return; they didn't have enough air to swim to the entrance of the cave.

Then even her shallow breaths took the last of the oxygen from the pony tank. Reluctantly, she dropped it and watched it drift down to the ocean floor before she turned toward Adrian. His eyes behind the mask were gentle, almost sad. He offered her his regulator. She took a small breath, tasting him on the plastic and handed it back.

Adrian knew he should have insisted she have the big tank. He couldn't watch her drown. He took a shallow breath and offered the apparatus back. Her legs bumped his as she moved closer to get it. They tangled for a minute, disengaged as she inhaled, then handed it back.

He caught her hand and squeezed before releasing it. If he never again got to tell her he loved her, if he didn't have the breath to make the words, she was going to know. She had to know.

He took the regulator, took the smallest breath he dared, handed it over. He didn't want to watch her die, and he didn't want to leave her here, alone and afraid. He had to stick around to take care of her.

He realized they were swimming up, that the cave was rising from the water. Mallory pointed, and he saw what she saw—waves lapping at the side of the cave. They had to find air up there. He took a regular breath, offered the regulator to her, and they swam toward the side of the cave. They were going to make it. The huge risk—hell, it hadn't seemed as huge when he planned it—was going to pay off.

Adrian surfaced first, carefully, not wanting to hit his head on the roof of the cave, or worse, a stalactite. The cool air touched his face and he breathed deeply, then tugged Mallory up beside him. She came up, choked when a small wave slapped her in the face. She gulped in air, which she released on a joyous laugh.

"We made it!"

He wrapped his good arm around her and pulled her close, pressing his cheek against hers as much as their masks allowed.

The words he'd ached to say only minutes ago, that had come easily when they'd been alone on the boat, ready for adventure, suddenly choked him. He'd pulled her into danger and almost lost her. Could still lose her. "You did great," he said instead.

He drew away to inspect their surroundings. They hadn't just found an air pocket. A ledge jutted out nearby where they could actually get out of the water. He didn't know what could be beyond that, but hopefully a way out that didn't require them getting back in the water. Only about twenty breaths remained in the tank. They'd found this ledge just in time.

He heaved himself onto the jutting rock with no small effort, and Mallory pulled up beside him.

"Wow. Touch and go there for a minute, wasn't it?" she asked as she stripped off her mask, her voice choppy, as if she was unaccustomed to taking regular breaths.

"Made it." He grimaced as he tried to unbuckle his tank.

"Here, let me."

She climbed to her knees and leaned over. Once she tugged the tank free, he stretched out on the smooth rock, filling his lungs in a way he hadn't thought possible moments ago.

"Let me look at your arm."

"Inaminute," he mumbled, letting his eyes drift closed.

"Adrian, I need to see if it's stopped bleeding."

"Burns like hell," he said.

She straddled him and tugged at the zipper of his wetsuit. He closed a hand over her wrist to stop her, but she barely had to twist her arm to break his grip.

#### M.J. Fredrick

"I wish we had blankets," she murmured as she spread his wetsuit open to reveal his wet T-shirt, red with his own blood.

"We'll be okay. Just rest a bit, then we'll see how to get out of here." He grunted, pain slicing through him as she tried to ease the stretchy neoprene down over his shoulder. "Mallory, leave it."

"Can't." She put her facemask on her forehead for the light and leaned down close to the stab wound. "How did you swim with this?"

He tried to twist his arm to get a look, but the skin tugged and hurt too damn bad. "How bad is it?"

"About two inches long, God knows how deep."

He closed his eyes again and let his head fall back to the rock. "All the way through my arm."

She looked up at him sharply.

He lifted his good shoulder and even that took too much effort. "The tip of the knife went all the way through my arm and poked me in the side."

"Adrian!" Her voice echoed off the cave walls.

He opened his eyes to look at her. "Well, what did you want me to do? Surrender?"

"You could have died."

Why was she scolding him? He was too tired to fight. "I was pretty fucking determined not to." He forced himself to sit up, to show he wasn't weak. He squeezed his eyes closed against the lightheadedness that accompanied the movement. "I'll be all right."

Mallory had drawn her knife and aimed it at his stomach. He sucked his gut in automatically.

"Christ! What are you doing?"

She rolled her eyes. "Cutting a strip off your shirt so I can at least wrap it up. It's still bleeding. Sluggishly, but I think it needs to be protected."

She sliced into the knit fabric, pulled off a strip, then skimmed her hand over his belly, making him jump. She smiled at his reaction but was all business again as she wrapped his arm. Leaving his arm out, she zipped up his suit as far as she could.

"Where'd you get the knife, anyway?"

"Toney gave it to me. No telling where he got it."

Adrian grunted. "Come here." He turned onto his good arm, hooked his bad one around her waist and pulled her to him so her back nestled against his chest.

Finally Mallory's pulse began to slow as the realization that they weren't going to die sunk in. "Ade?"

"Yeah?" His voice sounded like he was on the verge of sleep.

She twisted under his arm to face him, even though she couldn't see him in the darkness. "When we were down there, when I thought we might not make it, I promised myself if we did, the first words I would tell you were that I love you." She cupped her hand over his rough jaw. "I don't know what would have happened if I'd died without being able to tell you that one more time."

He didn't answer, instead lifted his hand to her face, stroked his thumb over her cheek and lower lip. He knew her so well, he found her without fumbling, drew her mouth to his.

The sweetness of the kiss swept away the fear of their swim, the worry of what they'd do next. They were together. They'd get through this. She couldn't live without him again. And when he whispered, "I love you, Mal," she started to cry.

Adrian woke facing the ceiling, shivering, to find Mallory huddled against his side. They'd removed their wet clothes from beneath their wetsuits and put the suits back on, but the chill from the rocks and water still permeated their bones.

Bones. He'd prefer not to think their skeletons would be all that was left of them if they didn't find a way out of here.

The swim and the hole in his arm made him stiff as hell, but he didn't want to move and wake Mallory, who slept deeply if her breathing was any indication. He'd let her sleep off her exhaustion. The longer she could put off thinking about their fate, the better.

With his free hand, his injured hand, he reached into his dive belt and pulled the cylindrical seal he'd taken from the ship, the one thing he'd recovered. The lack of light made it impossible to see, but he rubbed his thumb over it. The carved design in the ivory was very faint, but it was his. He wouldn't have the credit for the Byzantine ship, for proving the Mediterranean people had been the first to the New World. Mallory had lost her opportunity to study the symbols on the artifacts they'd discovered.

They wouldn't be telling anyone what kind of person Valentine Smoller was, what lengths he took for his success, his recognition.

If they didn't find a way out of here, then he'd brought Mallory to her death after all.

Beside him, she stretched and huffed. How familiar it sounded, even with the echo of the cave around them. She snuffled and he sensed her looking at him.

"Don't suppose you thought about packing any food," she murmured.

"No. Not even water." He shifted onto his side with a grunt. "Damn, we weren't supposed to be in here."

She sat but kept a hand on his chest. For contact? He wasn't sure why, but he appreciated the gesture. "We'll find a way out."

Funny how the dark did sharpen one's senses. He believed that she believed that. He didn't want to dim her hope. That was all they'd brought with them.

"How's your arm?"

"Hurts like a bitch, but I'll live." How long depended on how soon they could get out of here. He sat slowly, unsure of how low the ceiling was.

"No doubt Smoller thinks we're dead."

"He can't come after us anyway." Adrian told Mallory what he'd done to the boats and equipment.

If Smoller did believe they were dead, they were safe. Once they got out of here, anyway. And then...what? They could pursue justice for the loss of Robert and Linda. Adrian hadn't allowed his thoughts to wander that far. Their priority was getting to safety. "Yeah, so? We can't swim out the way we came, not with no air."

"Right, but this area should have sinkholes, too, right?" Her voice vibrated with excitement, with anticipation. "And if we can find one, we can get out."

He snorted, hating to ruin her plans. "Climb out of a sinkhole? With no equipment and me with a bad arm?"

She tensed. "I could climb out. Get help. Don't forget, Toney and Jacob are out there."

He hadn't dimmed her faith, not that he'd wanted to. One of the things he'd always loved best about Mallory was her ability to hope, be it over a find or over him. But the realist in him had to make her see their chances.

"Wait here." She shifted away. "I'll try to swim as long as I can stay above water, see if there's another ledge like this one, maybe one with a way out."

"Mallory." He grabbed her arm to still her. "I won't risk you."

"What?" She pulled away, irritation tightening her body. "You can't do it. Or you're just going to sit here till we starve to death? I don't think so. I'll be right back." She leaned close and pressed a kiss to his jaw, then his mouth, all by feel.

He grunted again, frustrated with his own helplessness, unwilling to release her. So much could go wrong—she could get lost, drown, become trapped—but what choice did they have? "I wish we had a rope so you could find your way back."

"I'll stay along the wall." She gentled her tone. "I'll be all right."

Before he could offer another protest, she slipped into the water.

Mallory's muscles quivered at the idea of swimming another stroke, but with Adrian wounded, she had no choice. When she'd made her decision to join the expedition, to return to Adrian, she never expected this to be asked of her. She hadn't thought herself capable. She had to dig down to find the fearless girl she'd been, otherwise she couldn't get through this.

Keeping one hand on the cool, slick cave wall, she bobbed along until she found another dead-end ledge farther up, but the ceiling dipped down into the water, blocking her path. Discouragement tore at her. She had to dive to move forward, holding her breath, see what she could find underwater. She surfaced, then dove several times before finding an indentation that might be an entrance to another part of the cave.

Adrian called her name, his voice echoing off the rock.

"I might have found something," she called, and dove again, keeping her hand on the ceiling above her.

162

And when she emerged on the other side, she was blinking at sunlight, and a hand reached down to her.

# **Chapter Nineteen**

Adrian couldn't hear her, not the splash of the water against the rocks, not the sound of her breathing, amplified in this space. His mind whipped through all the possible scenarios—she'd gotten stuck in a tunnel and drowned, she'd hit her head and drowned, she'd dropped from exhaustion and drowned.

All would be his fault. Smoller wouldn't have killed her. He was fairly certain his former partner had a soft spot for her, so Adrian dragging her along on this escape hadn't saved her—it had put her in danger.

He rolled so his feet were in the water, keeping his arm pinned to his side. It had stiffened up in the cold and the wet, but he could feel the blood flowing from it again, trickling down his arm.

How deep was the water here? He couldn't swim in this tight space, not with one arm. But he could hold onto the wall and go after her. He should be able to find his way back if he needed to. He hoped he didn't need to, not if she'd found a way out.

Linda crouched at the opening of the cavern, backlit. Mallory rose from the water and stumbled toward the girl, shedding her dive gear, numb with shock. Linda was alive! Mallory had seen her shot, watched for her body. After the swim that she and Adrian had made, she knew no one with a gunshot wound could have made it so far alone, not without a tank.

But just when she was about to fling her arms about Linda, her eyes adjusted to the light and she saw the gun in Linda's hand, pointed at Mallory. She stopped abruptly. What was Linda thinking?

"Linda, it's me!" Did the girl not recognize her? "I'm so glad you made it—I thought you were dead. God, how did you know where to find me?"

Confusion furrowed the girl's face, shadowed by the swirling clouds overhead. Surely she didn't expect such a reaction while she was holding a gun on Mallory. But Mallory couldn't think of how else to react. She was no Lara Croft. Still, Linda lowered the gun just a fraction.

"We've been combing the area for you," Linda said. "When you weren't at the beach, we started looking at the sinkholes."

So had they found Toney and Jacob? As much as she wanted to know, Mallory couldn't alert the girl to the possibility they were around. Mallory pressed on as the wind kicked up around her, moving closer, keeping the girl off balance, keeping herself between Linda and the opening of the cave in case Adrian managed to follow her. He would freak if he saw the gun and do something foolish.

Or maybe he'd be as perplexed as she was.

"How could you make that swim after you'd been shot?" Mallory held her hands toward the girl as if prepared to examine her. Her wet hair slapped her face in the strong wind, but she dared not take her eyes from Linda and the gun to check the storm's approach. She wished she'd taken more time to get to know the girl. She could use some inside information now to appeal to her. "How have you managed to get around? We need to get you to a doctor."

Linda snapped her gun up, aiming at Mallory's chest. "You idiot," Linda growled. "I was never shot. It was a trick to get you to do what you were told. It didn't work for long, I see."

"You were working with Valentine? All this time?" Mallory knew there had to be a purpose behind the sabotage of Adrian's mouthpieces, but she hadn't suspected this. Adrian had been vulnerable for months—he couldn't have had a clue. Valentine hadn't taken any chances with Dr. Vigil betraying him. He'd inserted his own spy in Adrian's camp, and Adrian, so unlikely to trust, had fallen for it. Of course, Valentine would know just what qualifications Adrian was looking for. "The day Adrian was bitten—had you been down? Did you put the amphora there?" She'd always wondered how the eel had found his new home so quickly.

Linda lifted a shoulder. "I merely moved it from one place to another. If you look at the amphora, it's not even real. I set it out until I had what I needed, put a lid on it and placed it at the site."

"Why?" Mallory had trouble even forming that word, so great was her shock.

"I had to get Adrian out of camp."

"And if the eel had bitten someone else?"

"He still would have left the camp. Especially if he'd had to take you to the doctor."

"What is so important about this site that you'd risk killing someone to help Smoller?"

"He needs the casket."

Mallory shook her head. All this for a simple artifact. "Why? What does he plan to do with it?"

Linda lifted a casual shoulder, but her eyes were still sharply trained on Mallory. "His plans are his plans, but they're important. Because they're important to him, they're important to me."

"Why? Linda, you have to see what Valentine is." Mallory wiped strands of wet hair from her chilled face. Lightning illuminated the sky and every molecule in Mallory urged her to get off this hill. She looked past Linda to the Land Cruiser parked crookedly on the uneven ground, one of theirs. "You have to help me get away."

Linda lifted the gun toward Mallory's throat. "I'm afraid I'm not going to do that. It's taken a long time to gain my father's approval. I'm not going to blow it now."

"Your father." Horrible realization washed through Mallory and she staggered, her bare foot sliding on the rock. "Valentine is your father." She could see it now, in the shape of Linda's eyes, her mouth. So she was Robert's granddaughter. Questions tumbled through her mind at the revelation. But her first concern was her husband. "You set Adrian up." Linda lifted her eyebrows. "He made it very easy."

"He trusted you," Mallory said through her teeth.

"He shouldn't have." Linda looked past her to the clouds above. "Is he with you?"

Mallory shook her head, buying time, unsure of what to do. She needed to protect Adrian. The question was, how? He'd have a better chance on his own because Valentine and Linda would take advantage of his weakness. "I lost him in the cave. We couldn't keep track of each other."

Doubt clouded Linda's face and Mallory watched her make her own decisions.

"You're shivering, and the storm is almost on us," the girl said at last. "We need to get you to the boat." With one last look at the hole behind Mallory, Linda took Mallory's arm. Before Mallory knew it, Linda had cuffed her hands behind her.

Mallory's heart fractured. Adrian was in the cave alone, bleeding, with no tank, no light. She had to get out of the tunnel. She couldn't leave him behind. Which choice would keep him alive?

Valentine might choose to punish her, to punish Adrian. She could be the price Adrian had to pay for taking Valetine's place in his father's life.

It was so wrong, so soon. She'd just found him again, just rediscovered her feelings for him, decided that he was what she wanted, that this is what she wanted, no matter what. They may have been able to work things out. They'd come so close. Why couldn't they have more time?

With great difficulty, pain shooting from his upper arm all down his body, Adrian pulled himself out of the cavern as soon as the SUV drove off. Linda was Smoller's daughter. Damn, he should have seen it before. And because he'd trusted her, Mallory's life was in danger. Smoller had sent Linda to him, he had no doubt. But why?

Another thought struck him. Robert must have realized who Linda was. Had Linda killed him because he'd found out her true identity? If she had, Adrian may as well have pulled the trigger himself. If he couldn't judge character any better than that...

But he needed to focus. He needed to get Mallory away from Smoller.

Barefoot, he crept down to the campsite, the rough ground tearing skin already sensitive from staying too long in the water. Everything was in slow motion because of the blood loss. Ridiculous plans swirled through his head, but at least he recognized them as ridiculous. Shit. He had to stop, think, make a plan. Mallory's life depended on it.

He needed to find Jacob and Toney.

Valentine's boat was tied to the dock at Adrian's camp when Linda pulled the Jeep up to the beach. How had he managed if Adrian had disabled it? Mallory hoped nothing else had gone wrong with the plan. Valentine stood on the deck, hands on his hips, wind billowing his shirt, the triumphant pirate. In front of him, on the deck, sat the caskets, all four of them, smaller than Mallory expected but identical to the drawings Adrian had made repeatedly three years ago. Real. Oh God. She fisted her hands against the desire to go to them, run her fingers over the intricate carvings covering them. But she couldn't give in to the longing to explore them. She needed to concentrate on getting out of here safely, on getting to Adrian.

Valentine had what he needed—now she had to discover why he wanted it. Mallory boarded the boat, her shoulders cramping, her legs shaking, everything shaking as she fought not to break down in front of her enemy. She adjusted her stance on the rolling deck as the boat role the waves in advance of the storm, and faced Valentine with a confidence she did not feel.

"Where's your husband?"

"Dead." Her voice came out stronger than she expected. She didn't realize till that moment that she believed it, and the breath squeezed out of her lungs.

Valentine scoffed. "Surely not. Adrian is too good to die underwater while you survive."

She lifted her chin, tears sheening her eyes as the very real possibility sunk in. "Your men hurt him. He wasn't able to conserve his air."

Valentine glanced at Linda, his face mottling. "Did you see his body?"

Linda shook her head. "I didn't have the gear to go look, and she didn't have an air tank."

"He cannot be dead. He cannot!" He spun, fury in every line of his body. If Mallory didn't know better, she would think he was grieving.

Grieving for the man he wanted to ruin.

Mallory glared at Valentine, her throat burning. "Why not?"

"He was supposed to see this. He was supposed to see my success and choke on it, knowing he'd never match it. How can he see it if he's dead!" Madness brightened his eyes as he wrapped his hand around her ponytail, snapping her head back. She held his gaze. Showing that kind of control would no doubt anger him more. She didn't care. "I still need you here."

He turned her toward the caskets and again the gorgeous artifacts pulled at her. How could she think this way, not knowing how Adrian fared alone in the cave?

"I need you to tell me what they say, what these symbols mean."

"I can't." He tightened his hand in her hair and she winced, ducking a bit to relieve the pressure. "I mean, that's not my specialty. I have no experience with Byzantine symbology."

"I thought you and Adrian worked primarily in the Mediterranean."

Her heart squeezed at the thought of Adrian. "We did, but with Greek and Phoenician ships. And growing up, it was Incan symbology. I'm not the person you need."

He leaned close. "Do you really want me not to need you?"

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She got the message, terror thrumming through her veins. If he didn't need her, she might as well be dead. "I can—look, but unless you have a reference book or something, I don't know how accurate I can be." Though she did want to get a closer look.

"I have some books."

She thought he sounded relieved, but it could have been her imagination. Even as he gave the order to the man standing behind him to get the reference books, Mallory moved toward them. Maybe if she concentrated on this, she wouldn't worry so about Adrian, though God knew how she could help him. Maybe keeping Valentine distracted would be enough.

She crouched beside the first casket, well, the last one, the one he'd pulled up here, if the sediment still clinging to it was a clue. When had he recovered it? The others had been carefully cleaned, but this one was duller than the others, crusted with salt and sand. A wave striking the boat knocked her off balance and she caught herself with one hand against the surface of the casket. Warm, not what she'd expected, especially not out in this weather. She eased away, brushing her fingertips over the scalloped edges.

"I need more light," she murmured, and Valentine snapped out an order to make it happen. She turned toward him. "What do you think the symbols will reveal?"

He squared his shoulders. "I don't want to influence you by telling you what to work for. I want the truth."

"As near as I can get it." Her hand trembled as she reached over to the next case. "Could I—would it be possible to get something to eat? I haven't had anything all day." Neither had Adrian, and after the swim and the blood loss...he couldn't hold out much longer.

"When Linda comes back."

Okay, clearly he didn't want to leave her alone. Perhaps he only had Linda and one man at his disposal. Where were the others? With rest and a plan, she could get away. How far she could get was another question. And if it would be too late for Adrian was the bigger one.

Aware Valentine was watching her closely, she gave her attention to the chests and drew upon her own fears to look grief stricken. Tears blurred her vision and she wiped her hand over her eyes. "They're all different. Did you notice that?"

"I did." He crouched beside her, more colleague than captor. He stroked his fingers lovingly across the same casket she was inspecting. "What does it mean?"

"Not sure yet." Regret punched the breath from her body. Adrian should be here. He believed in this. He deserved to see it. She wished she could look over and see the light in his silver-blue eyes, could see his hands moving over the finds with reverence. She never should have walked away from a man who felt so deeply. Her throat burned as she moved to the next chest, the one that had been damaged when Valentine brought it up off the coast of Florida, and indeed a large chunk was missing. No telling what those symbols could have revealed.

And then she came to Adrian's casket. She recognized it right away from his drawings. God, she wished she'd trusted him before, that she'd believed in him, that she'd helped him study the symbols, the legend.

Three years wasted and they might never get to make up for the lost time.

She pressed her hand to the carvings, letting the sharper edges bite into her palm.

"Does any of this mean anything to you?"

She shot Valentine a glare. "You're the one who's had three of the chests. Why don't you know?"

He scowled, traced a carving of a ship as Linda returned with a clamp-on light, which she attached to the overhang. "I've had to keep them in a safe place. I didn't have the luxury of studying them, not without drawing attention to what I had. What do I have, Mallory?"

With a shaking finger, Mallory traced a circle on the beveled edge of the chest, with four leaf-shaped indentions spreading out from a point in the center. "In Assyria, this symbol meant the four directions of the sun." She glanced over. "What do you know about the meaning behind four chests? Why did they divide her? And why four?"

"They divided her ashes and set them to sea so her followers wouldn't try to resurrect her."

She sank back on her heels. "But Constantine was Christian. Surely he didn't believe anyone but Christ had that power."

He inclined his head in concession. "They'd seen Mavaris do some things even Christ hadn't done. And seeing is believing. Which is why they killed her."

"But why four? Seven and three are the numbers of Christianity. Typically the number four is pagan—earth, air, water and fire, which fits with the legend. But why would a priest choose that number instead of the holier numbers?"

"The legend as I heard is that they separated her heart, her head, her eyes and her reproductive organs. They believed that was the only way to keep her from coming back."

Mallory turned her attention to the chest. These caskets hadn't been carved by a Christian. They were full of pagan symbology, the chaos star, the uroborus—the snake eating itself—and symbols of earth, air, water and fire.

"I need verification from you that these are authentic, and I'll need explanations of each of the symbols before I make my sale."

She sat on her heels, folding her chilled hands in her lap. "And if I'm not inclined to help the man who killed my husband make his fortune?"

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Valentine snorted. "His own paranoia killed him, just as it destroyed him in Tunisia. Once you do this for me, you're free to return home."

She stiffened in disbelief. "To tell everyone you killed Dr. Vigil and Adrian."

He shook his head. "Your word against mine. You have no proof of the former, and if you did, you covered it up when you buried him. And Adrian's death was a mere accident. I had nothing to do with it."

She stood, every muscle in her body tight, ready to spring. "I'll make it my life's work to destroy you."

He chuckled. "You're more like your husband than I thought. Come. You need to get in some dry clothes, and I'll have Linda bring you a sandwich." He closed his hand around her arm, tighter than necessary, and guided her through the door of the boat, down the steps, through the cabin door before closing it securely between them.

She stood on the other side of the door, waiting for him to change his mind, to come in. When it was clear he wasn't coming back, she allowed her muscles to relax. She shivered, cold, exhaustion and fear tumbling down on her like an avalanche. And as she started trembling, she started crying. How was Adrian faring, alone in the dark, hurt, worried that she hadn't returned?

She couldn't imagine her strong husband succumbing, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd lost him.

As the boat rolled over the waves that bumped it against the dock, Mallory shivered on the carpeted floor of Valentine's opulent oak paneled cabin, her back against the door to prevent Valentine from walking in. She'd resisted sitting, but she was so tired, so cold.

So heartbroken.

Only common sense had her dragging the Egyptian cotton comforter from Valentine's bed, wrapping herself in it after she stripped off her wetsuit. She wasn't able to find anything warm in Valentine's closet, and being naked but for the comforter left her vulnerable, but she had to warm up.

She felt selfish about being warm when Adrian was alone, hurt, cold.

No. That was not what she was going to do. She knew this boat because she'd stayed on it before. She knew where Valentine kept the gear. She could refill two tanks without being seen. As rain beat down on the deck outside, she flung the comforter aside, cringing at the cool air hitting her naked skin, and pulled her wetsuit on. The neoprene chilled her skin and she shivered to fight her body's reaction.

She had to escape. Once she was in the water, she could get to the cave, to Adrian. First, she needed to get to the tanks.

She looked for something to jam against the door, but the heavy furnishings, even the Tiffany-style lamp, were bolted down. Growing more and more desperate, and so cold and hungry she could barely think, she scrounged for anything to brace between the door and the bed, to slow anyone who might come in as she crept out the window.

A scratching at the window caught her attention and she snapped her head up. A ghostly image glimmered through the wet glass.

Adrian.

He was dead.

She shook off the thought that she was seeing his ghost and hurried to the window, relief making her muscles weak, clumsy. Adrian was there, flat on his stomach on the deck, in the flesh. With stiff fingers, she fumbled the window open, reached through to touch his pale skin, desperate for the feel of him, rough and real, desperate to reassure herself he was whole.

"Come on, we're going." His voice was rough over the sound of the rain as he held a cold hand to her.

"How?" She took her eyes from him for a moment and sought a foothold to boost herself through the window.

He dangled a set of keys in front of her. "Land Cruiser. Might be tricky in this rain, and we might get stuck, but beats the hell out of being here." He closed his hands around her arms and pulled, his expression determined.

She hesitated. She needed to tell him. He might not forgive her if he found out later that the treasure had been within reach and she'd known all along. "Adrian, he has the last casket. All of them are here."

Adrian's jaw clenched and he blinked the rain from his eyes as he looked past her to the door. He must have been thinking about going after the damned thing.

But Adrian turned his attention to her, tightened his grip on her arm to help pull her free. "We'll come back for it."

She knew what that cost him, that choice. He'd go after Valentine on his own if she wasn't here, no matter how hurt he was. But now was not the time to question his motive.

Both of them were so weak, so tired, and with Adrian in pain, what should have been a simple exercise of climbing through the window took too long, required more energy than they had to give. Desperation showed in the lines around Adrian's eyes, compelling her to shove harder against the nightstand. She pushed herself out the window into the open air and found herself wrapped in Adrian's arms as he knelt on the deck under the driving rain. A shudder ran through him and he pressed a kiss to the top of her head before pulling her to her feet.

"Gotcha," he murmured.

She looked up at his strained smile, and past him, saw movement. Immediately she stiffened, but she realized the danger too late.

"Well, well. I knew the ocean wouldn't take the great Adrian Reeves."

Adrian released Mallory and shoved her against the cabin wall, putting himself between Valentine and her. He was in no shape to fight, and she scrambled in front of him, ready to defend both of them.

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Valentine and Linda—she could imagine Adrian's shock matched her own at seeing Linda alive and aiming a gun—stood before them, and one of the hired muscle stood on the pilothouse, aiming a third weapon at them.

Considering Valentine had seemed upset when she'd told him Adrian was dead, he sure seemed to wish him dead now.

"What do you want with us? You're done with the site. You have what you came for. Let us go." Adrian's voice was weary, and he swayed where he stood, beyond the movement of the ocean. He needed rest, food and a trip to the hospital. He had reached the end of his endurance, and she didn't know how to help him.

"There's something you must see." Valentine reached forward and grasped Adrian's arm.

Mallory turned in time to see Adrian's eyes roll back in his head before he went limp and tumbled over the rail into the water.

### Chapter Twenty

The cold water closed over Adrian's head, his vision darkening as he struggled to remain conscious. He couldn't let himself go under, he had to get to Mallory, had to get her away from Smoller.

Using every ounce of strength, in short supply after this hellish day, he held on to his senses and pushed himself toward the surface. He kicked weakly, needing air, struggling to get to Mallory.

Someone grabbed his bare foot and dragged him downward, beneath the boat. The air punched out of his chest at the sudden movement. He blew out a breath—his last, goddamn it, unless he could kick his way free. He was running out of fight, his body trying to quit on him.

Hard plastic bruised his lips. He jerked his head away but a hand grabbed the back of his head to hold it still. Air bubbles tickled his mouth and reason returned.

A regulator. Whoever was holding him was trying to give him a regulator. He opened his eyes against the salty water as he accepted the regulator, and looked into his brother's eyes.

Oxygen and relief eased his chest and he gripped his brother's shoulder, squeezed as hard as he could. Safe. Thank God. Safe. Toney wrapped his arm around his shoulders, his eyes crinkling slightly, encouragingly, behind his illuminated mask.

Adrian backed away, saw Jacob hovering at Toney's elbow, each breathing through his own regulator, which meant they had equipment. Adrian nodded his relief at seeing the younger man. But now wasn't the time to celebrate. He made the sign for Mallory's name, pointed up. Toney nodded, motioned toward the bow of the boat. Adrian shook his head. She'd been closer to the stern.

Since Toney and Jacob were safe and here, with equipment, they could help him get her back.

Mallory stared at the dark water where Adrian had disappeared. She tensed, ready to dive after him, but Valentine wrapped an arm around her, holding her tightly against his body. The waves caused by Adrian's fall had stopped lapping at the hull, and she strained to hear him surface somewhere, anywhere.

Adrian's body couldn't take another trauma. He was alone, hurt, and she couldn't get to him. Helplessness replaced her earlier relief, and her knees sagged. She'd had him and lost him once more.

Now Valentine shoved her roughly toward the stern of the boat. She slipped on the slick fiberglass, went down hard on her knees and one hand, sending a shooting pain up her arm. The pain dulled her mind for a moment, and only when Valentine jerked her to her feet did she realize she'd missed her chance to go into the water.

Cradling her aching wrist against her, she staggered onto the deck, fighting past the pain to form a plan. She couldn't count on Adrian to help her. He was too weakened by injury and blood loss.

If he was dead, maybe she should just let Valentine kill her so she and Adrian could be together forever.

Only Adrian-even in spirit-would kill her himself if she gave up.

She had to know what she was up against. She scanned the deck, the dock. This would be easier if she knew the odds, if she knew how badly she and Adrian had injured his men. Valentine had a gun, and she couldn't overcome that, but she could outsmart him.

Before she could act, a wave rolled beneath the boat, sending her legs from under her. The rail of the boat rushed up to her, and everything went black.

Adrian, Jacob and Toney reached the beach, up against the cliff, away from Smoller's boat, sheltered from the wind that drove sand across the beach. Already, Adrian's brain whirled, bouncing from one idea to another, trying to figure out how to get Mallory to safety while staying conscious. His head spun and his stomach roiled—if he'd actually had anything to eat today, he'd be puking. Damn, he'd kill for some beef jerky.

"He's got Mallory. Need to get her back. Safe." He could barely put words together. "We have to move."

"They have guns," Jacob pointed out.

"But we have the element of surprise." He swept his palm over his mouth, not wanting to take time, knowing they should strategize but itching to move. "I can't tell how many men they have left. I saw one, in addition to Smoller and Linda."

"Linda!" Jacob's eyes snapped wide. "She's all right?"

Adrian cursed himself for his callousness. He'd forgotten about the boy's connection to Linda. Regretting that he couldn't elaborate now, he waved a hand. "Long story. She's on their side. Always had been."

"No." Jacob shook his head wildly, dislodging curls that tumbled into his face, his brow furrowed. "What?"

"Not now," Adrian said through his teeth, his attention on the boat. No activity. Were they still on board? Had they realized he'd disabled it, seriously this time? They wouldn't be getting far with water in the gas tank. He smacked his brother's arm and inclined his head toward the beach.

The sand dug into his already mangled feet, making each step excruciating. He should have sent Toney ahead to see if Mallory was on the boat, but he couldn't have borne waiting another moment longer. He had to get to her. No one else was coming to their rescue. The storm whipping to a frenzy overhead would keep help away. Beneath his neoprene, he was sweating, partly because the sucker was damn hot and partly because his body was fighting the infection in his arm. But the black suit offered camouflage against the shadowed cliffs and that element of surprise was crucial when he was unarmed and weak.

"Now what?" Toney whispered as they watched for movement on deck, in the boat.

Adrian rubbed his eyes and scanned his memory for anything he and Mallory might have left behind in camp when they packed up. He was certain they'd been pretty thorough—they always had been, especially on remote digs like this. Damn their tree-hugger tendencies.

He'd have to find something on board to battle with and hope only the one bodyguard—looked like Brutus—remained besides Smoller and Linda, though, shit, they were probably the bigger threat. He couldn't write off someone desperate to earn a father's love.

He clenched his jaw and sat back on his feet as he considered.

"We need a distraction so Toney and I can get on the boat, get to Mal," Adrian said.

"We don't have weapons," Toney muttered.

"We didn't have tanks and we managed to escape," Adrian reminded him.

"We had more time then."

Adrian pushed to his feet. "Then we have to think fast. Jacob, you're the distraction."

The kid opened his mouth, but Adrian cut him off with a slice of his hand. "I want to keep you out of danger if I can help it." He'd already risked too much for these boxes. "Go on now. Make some noise."

Adrian drew in a deep breath as Jacob ran toward the boat. *God, keep the boy safe.* As he watched, Jacob slipped into the water, and moments later pounded on the fiberglass hull. Adrian, who'd crept across the beach toward the stern, heard the alarm in Linda's voice—Linda, who he'd mourned, goddammit—and took advantage of the noise to haul himself onto the boat. His weak arm made the task tougher than he expected, and he landed with a *thunk*. He rolled to his feet, searching the deck for a tank, something heavy to swing. Toney landed beside him more quietly, his pony tank in his hand. He rose up and used it to strike the first man through the door in the stomach first, then the chin, dropping him to the deck, unconscious.

It was indeed Brutus, Adrian saw as he closed his hand around a weight belt stored under the bench along the rail. *Please, God, let him be the only one on the boat.* As Toney dragged Brutus to the edge of the boat, Adrian scrambled to the other side of the door. Footsteps approached from the cabin, but Adrian held a warning hand to his brother. They didn't know Mallory's whereabouts.

The first thing out the door was a gun, and Adrian brought the weight belt down with all his strength on the wrist. The gun skittered across the wet deck, the sound almost masked by the cry of surprise and pain.

Linda.

Adrian gripped her injured wrist and dragged her against his chest.

"Hello, Linda," he growled into her ear. "Good to see you healthy. How many on the boat?"

"More than you can handle." She gripped his forearm where Mallory had taped his suit closed and squeezed. He swore as the pain blinded him, and released her, only regaining his breath as Smoller came through the door with Mallory in front of him, her arm twisted behind her so she stood on the balls of her feet, angled across Smoller's chest. Fear and exhaustion darkened her eyes, almost blotting out the pleading.

Christ. Every ounce of willpower kept him from looking in Toney's direction. So far Linda and her father hadn't seen him.

"Hiding behind a woman, Smoller?" Adrian taunted, bracing his feet on the deck as the boat rolled, the waves increasing in intensity as the storm built. "First you send your daughter as a spy to my camp, then you try to protect yourself behind my wife? What kind of man are you?"

"Adrian, no!" Mallory protested, as Smoller swung the gun in his direction.

With reflexes he didn't know he had, Adrian crouched as the shot went off and barreled toward the man, low, knocking both him and Mallory to the deck. Adrian shoved Mallory aside, toward Toney, as Smoller brought the gun up.

Terror clenched Adrian's gut for a terrible moment as he looked into that barrel. It was over. He would die now that he'd found Mallory again.

With a cry of rage and pain, he swung the weight belt, knocking Smoller's gun hand to the side just as a crack of thunder reverberated overhead. He punched the man in the face three times, as hard as he could with his good hand, before Smoller finally went limp and dropped the gun to the deck. Adrian snatched it up and staggered to his feet. He turned to look for Mallory, needing to feel her in his arms, only to see her crouched beside a fallen form, pressing frantically against it in a rhythm he recognized as CPR.

Linda.

Mallory lifted her gaze to his as the rain washed over the boat and she shook her head in despair. The girl was dead.

# Chapter Twenty-One

Mallory opened gritty eyes in a dark room. A quiet beep pulsed, a fan whirred and the sharp scent of ammonia stung her nose. As she focused, hard to do since her brain floated, she took inventory of her body. Dull throbbing in her wrist and side, both bandaged, and an ache in the crook of her arm. The IV.

Another sound registered, soft breathing. She immediately tensed, which hurt every muscle, tendon, even her skin. Memories pierced the haze in her mind and flooded her consciousness. Terror, certainty she would watch Adrian die as he faced off with Smoller, the three of them falling to the deck, the sound of gunshots, looking into Linda's lifeless eyes as her blood ran over the deck.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Adrian had remained conscious while Jacob fiddled with the boat enough that it could hobble along the shoreline, but his skin was cold and clammy by the time the Belize Defence Force encountered them to escort them to civilization. She didn't recall much after that, floating in and out of consciousness herself, only remembering Adrian trying to explain why they had the body of a dead girl and two injured prisoners in the cabin.

Adrian. Exhausted, hurt and still in charge.

She shifted onto her back and her shoulder bumped a warm body.

A familiar warm body. She opened her eyes and slit them against the light coming through the open door to look into Adrian's slack, pale face. Her pulse kicked in fear until she felt his breath, warm against her skin. She rested her bandaged hand on his chest. He grumbled something in his sleep. Ignoring her own pain, she edged closer and pressed her mouth to his, then whispered his name.

He grunted and tried to turn onto his back, too, but flailed when he lost his balance over the edge of the bed. He sat up with a snort.

"Hell of a way to wake someone up, Mal."

"I didn't expect you'd try to squeeze into a hospital bed with me." She smiled, but even that movement hurt. Still, she kept her hand on his chest, feeling the reassuring beat of his heart. "Is there a bed shortage?"

He eased onto his hip, slid his hand across her belly and flinched when his fingers brushed the bandage on her ribs. "I'm not leaving you again."

She couldn't think about that now, how close they'd come to losing each other forever, what it meant for the future. This was not a conversation she could have while who-knew-what pumped into her blood.

The whole thing felt so familiar—how many times had they lain like this in the dark, talking, touching? Never in a hospital room, though. "How are the others?"

"Good. Dehydrated but released. Promised to bring us food later."

"And Smoller and Brutus?"

"In custody and in better shape than they deserve to be."

"And you? Your arm?"

He guided her hand to his own bandaged arm and IV. "Taken care of."

Somehow she doubted that. "Adrian, Linda-"

"Not something I want you worrying about now." He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Go to sleep. We'll talk about everything in the morning."

Which meant he wanted to go to sleep. But even after his breathing evened out, she didn't sleep for a long time.

"You're not supposed to be in here!"

The sharp female voice jolted Adrian awake. He looked over his shoulder to the doorway of the hospital room, where an indignant blonde in scrubs strode through the door, a chart tucked in the crook of her arm. She looked as out of place here as new hospital equipment would.

Adrian reached across the bed to Mallory, only to find the sheets cool. His heart lurched. "Where is she?"

"Sir, I think she—" She moved into the room and set her chart on the table at the end of the bed.

He rolled to his feet in one movement, jolting at the sensation of the needle in his vein and automatically reaching to pull it free. The nurse hurried forward and covered his hand with hers to stop him.

"Sir. Just—you need to calm down, sir." She pressed her other hand against his chest in an attempt to push him back on the bed and glared when he wouldn't budge.

He raised an eyebrow at her, daring her to stand in his way. How long had he been asleep? He shook his head. "God, I screwed up. I took her for granted instead of knowing how goddamned lucky I was to have a woman like her love an idiot like me." He squeezed his eyes shut. "If she'll have me, I'll never be that idiot again. Are you going to take this out, or not?" He jerked his arm toward the nurse, pointing to the IV.

She'd probably gone home to Austin now. How long had he been asleep? Adrian calculated the length of the flight as the nurse unbooked him and pressed a ball of cotton to his arm. He'd have to find her once he got there.

Well, his job was finding things.

Movement near the door caught his eye.

Mallory stood there, in her hospital gown, leaning on her IV pole, her hair a tumbled mess, her eyes watery as she stared.

Relief whipped through him, as mind-lightening as narcosis. He crossed the room and caught her against his chest, bent his head to her throat as he wrapped his arms around her, catching his fingers briefly in her IV tube.

"Jesus, I thought you'd gone," he murmured, breathing in the scent of her, the underlying smell of the ocean in her hair, on her skin.

"I've grown up." She tried to ease away, but he wasn't ready to let her go yet. "I don't run from trouble anymore."

He pulled back to grin at her. God she was so pretty, her hair all wild, her face wet with tears, her eyes shining. "Are you calling me trouble?"

She cupped her hand over his cheek. "More than you know. Especially if you're going to freak out every time I go to the bathroom."

"Dr. Reeves?"

Both of them turned toward the door, and the young man standing there with tousled hair and rumpled clothes, a digital tape recorder in his hand. "Yes?" they asked in unison, and Adrian squeezed her waist in amusement.

"I'm Jordan Gilbert from Archaeology Today," he said. "I heard you have a hell of a story to tell."

Two days later, Adrian stood on the deck of his recovered boat in the sun, running his hand over the smooth wooden rail, acting like a man who'd come home. Jacob and Toney were in Belize keeping watch over the caskets until they could be inspected by the Belizean Department of Archaeology and then shipped to the States, where Adrian and Mallory would study them and Adrian would write his book. Mallory was fairly certain she'd have to play wife and prod him on that one. But now, she'd enjoy his company, their freedom, their newfound appreciation for each other.

"So where are we heading?" She stepped up to the rail beside him, her bare arm brushing his. "Back to the site? Dive one more time?"

"I'm going to sell her."

She snapped her head up. "You are? Why? She's beautiful. We've never had anything like her."

He turned, lifting his hand from the rail to stroke her hair back from her cheek. His smile was tender, tinged with a touch of sadness. "But think of what a beautiful house we could afford."

Shock weakened her knees and she sat on the padded bench, hard. He'd been saying goodbye to the boat. "What?"

Lines of anxiety etched his face as he crouched before her. "Marry me again, Mallory. I promise you I will give you what you need this time."

Marry him again. Her heart gave a kick of longing as she looked into his eyes. Marry him, work with him. She would raise her children as she was raised, and they might grow up longing for the same things she had.

But Adrian loved her. She had no doubt of that, not after what he'd done to keep her safe. And she loved him. She'd never stopped. This past month only proved how much she missed him. Wherever he was would be her home.

A frown creased the skin between his eyes as he waited. "If you say the word, Mal, I'll walk away from this," he said softly.

If she loved him, she could never ask that. She wouldn't want it.

"I don't want you to walk away."

But she hadn't accepted his proposal. She saw him closing in on himself, preparing for the pain of her refusal.

"I'm not walking away, either," she said, just as softly as he'd offered. "You don't have to sell the boat. You don't have to tie yourself to a house. Maybe someday that's something we'll both want, but now I don't want anything but for you to love me, Adrian. That's all I ever wanted."

"I can do that." He stood, reached down to her with his good arm, pulled her close. "I can do that."

"And we don't have to get married again," she murmured, nestling her head under his jaw. "I never filed the divorce papers."

# Epilogue

Adrian closed his hand into a fist on his lap as the cab pulled up in front of the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. He'd been here every day for a week setting up the exhibit to showcase the four Byzantine caskets, but this time he was being strangled by a monkey suit. The people streaming up the wide stairs into the museum were dressed in tuxedos and evening gowns, and he felt like a fraud.

He resisted tugging at his tie, since Mallory had already chided him for it. But damn, he was ready to get out of this city, get back on a site. He needed to get his hands dirty.

He flexed his hand. Mallory slid her palm along his thigh to link her fingers through his. He turned to his gorgeous wife. If living in civilization meant she'd wear things like this, the deep blue dress showing off the glow of her skin, falling softly over her beautiful breasts, looping around her neck and baring the smooth skin of her back, he might give city living a shot.

Okay, maybe not. But he might lure Mallory into the coatroom to get his hands under that dress.

She leaned against his arm. "This is what you worked for, remember. This is what you wanted."

He lifted her hand to his lips, holding her gaze. "A man shouldn't have everything he wants. Seems unfair."

"There's a price to pay tonight." She bumped his shoulder gently with hers. "Get out of the car, Adrian."

He opened the door, slid out, then reached for her. He smiled at the manicure she'd gotten for the party launching their book two nights ago. They'd ended up coauthoring it, and if that didn't prove their marriage was meant to last, nothing did. Neither of them had a small ego and finding a balance had been tough, but they'd weathered that as well as the creative process. He flicked one of her fingernails now, teasing her. She laughed before she leaned into the cab to say something to the driver, the dress draping over her world-class ass. Adrian fidgeted, eager now to get this evening over with and head back to the hotel with his wife.

The trunk popped open. Mallory straightened with a toss of her hair and slipped past him to open the trunk, where she pulled out...his duffel.

She held it by her thigh, the ratty canvas incongruous with her pretty dress.

"What the hell?" He looked from the duffel to Mallory's smile.

"The funding came through for the Etruscan site today. Toney and Jacob are already on-site. So all you have to do is get through this and we can leave right after." She dangled the duffel in front of him.

### M.J. Fredrick

Excitement surged. Freedom beckoned. He could damn near taste the ocean air. "I don't need to get funding?"

"No."

"So why do we have to go here?" He motioned to the building behind him.

She leaned close, chin tilted up, eyes glittering, lips shining with a layer of gloss he was determined to kiss off. "Your moment of glory, Adrian. Just a few hours, soak it in, and we'll be on our way."

He slipped his hand around her bare back. Her eyes darkened, her breathing deepened. He didn't deserve her, this woman who knew him so well, who loved him so much. He'd do everything in his power to make sure he was worthy.

"We can go back to the hotel after this, for a few minutes?"

She looked up at him through her lashes, chiding, but her mouth curved. "We have a plane to catch. A man shouldn't have everything he wants, isn't that what you said?"

But as he followed her up the steps, he knew he already had it.

# About the Author

MJ Fredrick knows about chasing dreams. Twelve years after she completed her first novel, she signed her first writing contract. Now she divides her days between teaching 4<sup>th</sup> grade students how to write and diving into her own writing, traveling everywhere in her mind, from Belize to Honduras to Africa to the past.

To learn more about MJ Fredrick, please visit <u>www.mjfredrick.com</u>. Send an email to MJ at <u>mjfredrick13@gmail.com</u>or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as MJ <u>http://groups.yahoo.com/group/mjfredrick</u>.

# Look for these titles by MJ Fredrick

Now Available:

Hot Shot Beneath the Surface

## Facing It © 2009 Linda Winfree

### A Hearts of the South Story.

Mired in a brutal marriage for far too long, Ruthie Chason takes her courage and her children in hand to flee the trap that has become her life. Yet she's no fool. She knows he'll come after her once he discovers she possesses criminal evidence that will put him away for good—and seal her deadly fate if he ever catches up with her.

Sheriff's Deputy Chris Parker offers emotional refuge, a safe place to begin to reclaim her life...if she can let herself trust the strong, quiet cop that far.

Chris surprises himself when he agrees to act as guardian for Ruthie and her children. He does it as a favor, then finds something about her calm strength soothes his battered soul. Now if only he can silence the demons from his past that make him cautious of falling too fast for any woman.

Their need explodes into a heart-stopping night of passion that exposes their deepest vulnerabilities. But just as they begin to explore how healing love can be, violence tracks them down. And backs them into a desperate corner...

Warning: Contains a to-die-for deputy with secrets in his past, a woman ripe for the love of a good man, and a controlling husband bent on revenge. Deep emotion, passionate lovemaking and violent mayhem to ensue.

#### *Enjoy the following excerpt for* Facing It:

"You said we needed to talk. Of course, I also promised to kiss you senseless once I had you completely alone, and this is the first chance I've had to do that. So what comes first?" She set the plates she carried on the counter and turned to take the glass casserole from him. He stared at her, his eyes blazing with a sudden fire. Her stomach lifted and turned over, a deep fluttering kicking off lower with a series of tiny, stinging aches.

His Adam's apple bobbed with a swallow. "Having you kiss me senseless sounds pretty damn good right now."

The serving dish hit the countertop with a dull thud. She reached for him first. Arms around his neck, she leaned up and kissed him. With a smothered groan, he wrapped her close and plundered her mouth. She met the ferocity of his possession with an intensity of her own, holding his face and sucking his tongue between her lips.

"God, Ruthie." He backed her into the counter, fumbling at the tiny buttons on her blouse. She went for the hem of his cotton polo and tugged it free of his jeans before rubbing her hands up the sleek warmth of his waist and rib cage. He growled in pleasure and kissed her again, giving up on her buttons and shoving the fabric out of his way instead.

Lost in the heated wonder of his mouth, she arched into him, bare midriff brushing against his stomach. The contact sent sharp desire piercing through her, weakening her legs and filling her with fierce triumph. Stephen had not stolen the ability to need and desire from her. She wanted this, wanted Chris.

He stroked his thumbs across the lower edge of her sternum and sensation danced out from the caress. She loved the hot, rough touch of his skin on hers. Nipping lightly at his bottom lip, she scraped her nails along his waistband, just below the small of his back. His knees dipped, his pelvis bumping hers, almost as though his legs had buckled.

"Jiminy Cricket." The rumble of his choked laughter shivered against her mouth. He brushed his palms back and forth over her waist.

She trailed her fingertips across the light stubble on his jaw. "Take me to bed."

"Hell." His breath rushed out on a shocked exhale and his lashes fell. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." She ran her thumb across his lower lip. Leaning closer, she tilted into him and let her tongue take the same path her thumb had. The pale blue of his eyes darkened, grew hot and stormy. "I want you, Chris."

"I don't want to rush this, don't want to mess us up. This isn't why I invited you here-"

She stopped the words with a fingertip atop his lips. "Nothing you could do would mess us up. Do you not get how important you're becoming to me?"

"Ruthie." The warmth of his mouth moved against her skin. "There's-"

"Time for that later." She dropped her hand and leaned in to feather her lips over his. "I need you."

For a long moment, he stared at her before he stepped back, took her hand and led her down the hall. In the dimness of his bedroom, she stood before him, her desire for him making her bold. Holding his gaze, she lifted her hands to unbutton her blouse. Finally, she shrugged free of the thin garment and he wrapped a warm palm around her nape, pulling her in for another of those passion-drugging kisses.

She fisted the hem of his shirt and dragged it upward, over his head. Deeply golden filtered sunlight fell on his torso, highlighting his tightly muscled chest and abdomen. Her mouth dry, she let her hands drift over his shoulders, across firm pectorals, down his arms, to his hands. A long, thin line of puckered flesh ran from shoulder to elbow. He flinched when she brushed it, and she moved her hand quickly to his chest. With scrupulous care, she avoided the scar there, a pale, flat mark at his ribs.

A shaky laugh erupted from his mouth and he buried his face against her hair. His hold at her hips tightened, his fingers seeming to tremble. "Shit, this is a bad idea. I don't know what I'm doing anymore, don't know how to—"

"Chris, stop. It's all right." She whispered the words near his ear. She folded her arms about him and held him closer. With her palms flat on his back, she discovered yet another mark on his shoulder blade, a jagged twin to the one on his arm. She rubbed her cheek against his neck. "Just hold me a moment."

He embraced her, too tightly but somehow just right at the same time. The thin lace of her bra did little to deflect the heat of his skin on her own. She curled into him and scattered tiny kisses along his throat, over his shoulder, all the while playing her hands over his back. Desire with all the burn of fine, smooth whiskey poured through her.

He exhaled hard, stirring her hair. "She ruined me."

Hatred for the unknown woman blazed to life, strong and virulent. Ruthie tamped it away and leaned back to meet his troubled eyes, brimming with mingled despair and desire. "I don't believe that."

"I don't want to be this way with you, awkward and damn near afraid."

"Stop thinking so much. Just...touch me." Taking his wrists, she lifted his hands to her body, molding his palms around the curves of her breasts. Still holding his forearms in a light grasp, she trailed her fingers over the backs of his hands as he shaped and caressed her. Her head fell back and her hair tumbled free from her already messy knot. "Oh yes, like that."

The pads of his thumbs flicked over the lace covering her hardening nipples. Bending his head, he took one into his mouth, teeth grating and tugging through the thin fabric. Need arrowed from the point of intense contact to the throbbing between her thighs.

"I want to go slow, make this so good for you," he murmured. "But it's been a long time, sweetheart, and I don't know if I can."

"Maybe I don't want slow. Maybe I just want you—"

The words died under his mouth and he lifted her against him, before spinning to lay her across the bed and follow her down, his hips between her thighs. "My God, Ruthie, you make me crazy."

"Good." She wiggled against him, her skirt riding high. Denim scratched the tender inside of her thighs. She ran teasing hands down his spine, dipping beneath his jeans to cup his buttocks and pull him into her. Lord, when was the last time she'd felt like this, free and confident, secure in the knowledge a man wanted her? "What are you going to do about it?"

A sound that was half-chuckle, half-growl escaped him and he lowered his head to her breasts once more. "Is that a challenge?"

She slid her hands around to his fly, making short work of the button and zipper. He hissed a curse when she encircled him, stroking and teasing. "It could be."

He makes the rules. She breaks them. This battle of wills just crossed the line...to deadly.

### I'd Rather Be in Paris © 2009 Misty Evans

#### Super Agent Series, Book 2

Elite CIA operative Zara Morgan has a reputation as a loose cannon with a penchant for breaking the rules. Now she's got a chance to prove she can be a competent field officer, but the test doesn't end there. She's been paired with sexy covert ops team leader Lawson Vaughn, a man who lives and breathes protocol.

Methodical is Lawson's middle name. He specializes in high-risk search and rescue, not missions that involve tracking down terrorists. Especially while trying to keep the lid on a partner who has a problem with authority and skates by on wits and bravado.

Even before they get on the plane for Paris they're under each other's skin...and fighting a scorching sexual attraction. Drawn into an unauthorized game of vengeance, Lawson is forced to dance a tightrope in order to protect his partner from their quarry—a terrorist who's about to unleash a biological nightmare on the Muslim world. And Zara is the first target.

With her life, and that of millions of innocent people, on the line, Lawson must become the one thing he despises. A renegade.

Warning: Either you're in or you're out. There's no playing it safe anymore.

### Enjoy the following excerpt for I'd Rather Be in Paris:

He couldn't believe it. Zara was kissing him back.

When she rose up on her toes and sighed into his mouth, all his brain processes shut down. The kiss turned wetter, hotter and when her hands went under his jacket, pulling him in tight, his brain exploded in an array of fireworks.

Jesus, she wasn't just kissing him back, she was inhaling him.

*This is wrong*. She'd just been through a hell of an experience and here he was, jumping at the chance to wrap his arms around her and console her. He was taking advantage of her at a weak moment.

There's not an ounce of weakness in her.

He broke the kiss and slid his lips to her neck. She tilted her head to give him better access, and he buried his mouth in the curve of her shoulder. She hitched her breath in that familiar way, and he enjoyed the response her body gave as she arched into him a little further.

She'd been emitting that whole woman-in-charge aura since the minute they'd walked off the plane at Charles de Gaul. Even up to a few minutes ago, she'd been cool, calm and collected every step of the way.

Jesus, he hated women ball-busters, but this take-charge woman was starting to grow on him. Hell, she wasn't just growing on him. At the moment, with her hands tangled in his hair and her tongue halfway down his throat, he was ready to drop her robe on the ground and let her drive more than his getaway car...

The sound of a motorcycle cut through the lust building in Lawson's body and he stilled, every sense on high alert. He raised his head and listened.

"Lawson?"

He put a finger to his lips and his eyes slid to the left, checking the dark highway. Traffic was light and the bike was still a half-mile away. No sirens, but something about it had his gut knotting and the spot between his shoulder blades twitching.

Lawson tried to place the make and model of the bike. High-precision, high-speed. Ducati.

"Get in the car," he said and hustled Zara into the backseat. For once, she didn't protest or ask why. He ran around to the driver's seat and jumped in, jerking the car into drive and pulling onto the road in a spray of gravel.

Zara's voice sounded calm. Too calm. "Police?"

The motorcycle's headlight hit the rearview mirror. It was picking up speed. He planted his foot on the accelerator while he adjusted the seat to fit him. "Keep your head down."

The Audi was an older model, but the owner had kept it in good condition. It wasn't as easy to manipulate as the Duke but it was damn close. Germans, they knew how to build kick-ass cars.

"Darn it," Zara said from the backseat. Her head was down but Lawson saw clothing flying around. "What?"

"I don't have any underwear."

He was pushing one hundred miles an hour on the speedometer and the bike was still crawling up his ass. The headlight in his mirrors blinded him enough to keep him from identifying whether there was more than one person on the bike, and more importantly, whether or not either of them was armed.

He heard the sound of a zipper from behind him, and Zara muttered something in French. Then the back window shattered and she screamed.

His blood ran cold. Question answered. The men on the bike were definitely armed. Swerving the car from side to side to make them a harder target to hit, he asked the real question burning in his gut. "Zara? Are you all right?"

The second it took her to answer was the longest one he'd ever endured. "I think so," she said, her voice still sounding unnaturally calm. "But there's glass everywhere. I'm afraid to move."

He let out the breath he was holding and zigzagged by a car in front of them. An oncoming car dodged out of his way, horn blaring, but the flustered driver blocked the motorcycle for crucial seconds.

He had two options. Evade the threat or eliminate it. "Get up here and drive."

"What?"

"Come on, you're a woman of action, right? You wanted to drive, so get up here and drive the damn car."

Zara's head rose from the backseat, her gaze catching his in the rearview mirror as she leaned forward. "Stop yelling at me."

Lawson reached back and grabbed her arm, hauling her into the passenger seat. She flailed and fumed and once she'd righted herself, he saw she'd exchanged the robe for her leather jacket and miniskirt. She tugged the hem of the skirt down and sent him a scathing look. "What exactly—?"

"Take the wheel. We're going to exchange places, okay?"

"While the car's moving?"

Lawson flipped the steering wheel up as high as it would go. He set her hand on the wheel. "You're going to slide on top of me, got it? Like you're going to sit in my lap."

Her hand tightened and Lawson saw her shift into spy mode. A second later, she climbed across the gearshift and slid between his legs.

He released the wheel and extracted his body from around hers. "Keep the car on the road, but don't make it easy for them to shoot us again. When I give you the signal, I want you to pull the hand brake and crank the wheel to the left like you're doing a hard U-turn. You're going to turn the car counterclockwise and land on three o'clock. The car will be blocking the road and I'll be facing the motorcycle. Got it?"

She dropped her hand and repositioned the seat. "And what are you going to do?"

Lawson hauled the gun out of his waistband. "My Dirty Harry impersonation."

"Oh God." She gripped the steering wheel in a ten-and-two position. "We're going to die, aren't we?" "No," Lawson grunted, checking the clip in his gun. "We are not going to die. Ready?"

The road ahead was empty of traffic. He moved to lean out the passenger-side window and Zara said, "Wait! What's the signal?"

"I'll yell 'go!""

"My mother is going to spend the rest of her life scandalized because her only daughter died bareassed in the middle of France in a stolen car."

But then she said, "I'm ready."

And Lawson yelled, "Go!"

### Hot Shot © 2008 M.J. Fredrick

Peyton Michaels expected her assignment to be simple—write an article about everyday heroes. Heroes like Hot Shot firefighter Gabe Cooper. She never expected to find herself running up a mountain, a wildfire nipping at her heels, her life in his hands.

And she never expected to be drawn to Gabe. After the loss of her husband in the line of duty, the last thing she wants is to fall in love with yet another man who routinely puts his life at risk.

Gabe has had enough of women who want to make him into someone he's not. Women like his ex, who couldn't handle the heat of his job. Like Peyton, who sees him as a hero when he's just a man doing a job. Except time after time, the pesky reporter proves her mettle. And gets deeper under his skin.

But there's an arsonist at work, and danger is closing in with the speed of a raging brush fire. Peyton and Gabe have to dig deep for what it takes to be a real hero—to find the courage to reach out and grab a forever kind of love. Before it's too late.

### *Enjoy the following excerpt for* Hot Shot:

After the sun went down, their headlamps put out miserly light in the pitch blackness. The only light was the glow of the fire beneath them; the smoke had obliterated the moon and stars. It was too dark to tell if they were still in the open or if they'd gone back into the trees. The ground had leveled off so it felt like they were moving sideways instead of up. Peyton hoped Gabe knew where they were. She was pretty sure he did, at least in relation to the camp.

Though she couldn't see him, she sensed him, and not just because of the noise he made as he climbed, as he breathed. It had to be because they were the only two people on the mountain, right? She would feel this way about any person she was running for her life with, this connection, this need.

It wasn't because he was a man, a strong man. A handsome man. A hero.

Her muscles trembled with every step. Her head didn't want to stay upright on her neck, and sweat soaked her T-shirt through the fire shirt he insisted she wear.

Ahead of her, Gabe crouched and she almost tripped over him. She caught her balance with a touch to his back, damp with perspiration, hard with tension. He stumbled a bit, then stood slowly. She dropped her hand away.

"We'll camp here," he announced abruptly.

"Camp?" She turned back to where the fire glowed below them, reflecting off the smoke in an eerie red light. "But the fire—"

"We're in the black. No fuel."

Where had she heard that before? "We thought we were in the black where the helicopter landed."

He sighed. Another question he didn't want to answer. Then the ground around them was illuminated. She shielded her eyes from the sudden light of his flashlight. He walked around the area, kicking up burned grass and clouds of ash.

"It's cool," he assured her. "No embers."

She was afraid to trust nature, but she did trust Gabe Cooper. In relief, she sank to her knees, fatigue quivering her muscles. "I'm so tired but I don't think I can sleep."

He dropped his pack beside her, sending up particles of soot and making her cough. He lowered himself to the ground next to her with a groan and switched off the flashlight. The darkness beyond the pale beams of their headlamps was overwhelming and silent, and she reached for him, then stopped herself. He wouldn't interpret the touch as being a means for her to regain her balance, like on the climb. He'd attribute it to female hysteria, to cowardice, and that she couldn't bear, for him to find her lacking in any way. She closed her fingers around her pack instead.

"Got any water left?" he asked, oblivious.

"A little."

"Make it last."

She dug out her bottle by feel, shook it to gauge how much water was in it. Less than half, probably. She would only take a sip to wash the dust from her throat. But when the tepid water touched her lips she wanted to gulp it down. Gabe pulled it away from her. In the dark, his fingers brushed hers, bare now, no gloves, and she almost dropped the bottle. At least he couldn't see her fumble as she secured the container and stuffed it back in her pack.

"Tomorrow will be a long day without water." He pulled his pack in front of him and pawed through it.

"I know."

"Ever sleep outdoors?"

"Not in the middle of nowhere."

He turned toward her. "Even in a tent?" he asked, disbelief in his voice.

Was he was teasing? So what if she hadn't slept outside? She hadn't had the desire. Did that make her

### weak?

"Do you have a tent?" she asked.

"A little one-man job. No sleeping bag, but it'll be some protection."

"From what?"

He paused. Then as if it was obvious, explained, "The temperature's falling fast."

"What do you mean, falling? I'm sweating like a pig."

"Lovely," he said, laughter in his voice. "As high up as we are, it will probably get down to the upper thirties. The tent will be some protection for you."

Upper thirties? In July? "For me? What about you?"

"I'll be fine outside. I've done it before."

"Without a sleeping bag?" she asked skeptically. "Or a fire shirt?"

"Well." He swallowed. "No."

"Then you're in the tent too."

He paused again, giving her time to consider what she'd just offered. She was going to sleep in the same tent as a man she'd known a—was it only two days? How could this all have happened in two days?

"It's real small, close quarters," he said. "And I said I'd keep watch."

Was it her imagination or did his voice sound huskier than it had a minute ago? Imagination or reality, it sent skitters down her spine to places long ignored.

Okay, get a grip, Peyton. Yeah, he's a hunk. Yeah, she'd be sleeping next to him, but they'd both be fully clothed and too exhausted to act on any interest. If there was any on his part. Which there probably wasn't.

Not that it mattered.

"Don't be ridiculous. You're exhausted too, and you said we're safe here. In the tent, at least we'll be warm." Okay, her voice was definitely huskier. Probably all the smoke they'd breathed today. Uh-huh, that was it.

The tent couldn't be that small, could it?

Okay, it was. Um. Gabe straightened up from driving the last spike. The tent was no bigger than a coffin and she was going to share it with him. No way they were both going to fit. Maybe she could sleep outside. Hypothermia had nothing on sleeping next to a man who oozed virility. But she was already shivering, though earlier she could have sworn she'd never be cold again.

"Um, I think I'll sleep outside."

She heard him suck in an impatient breath, but couldn't look at him.

"We can sleep with our heads toward the opening, can even leave it unzipped a bit if you want."

He thought her claustrophobia made her hesitate. And she had to admire his patience. She didn't realize he had the resources. He couldn't understand—she wouldn't admit—his size, his undiluted maleness had her heart hammering in her chest.

"It won't be bad, Peyton. You'll be asleep before you know it. And it's going to be too cold out here."

*Come on, Peyton. You ran from a wildfire today, crawled through a cave. You can sleep next to a man you hardly know.* She squared her shoulders and nodded, though he'd turned off the flashlight and couldn't see her.

He took her arm, urging her into the tent. When she crawled inside, feet first, the nylon stretched over hard ground was like the bed of a five-star hotel.

Then Gabe crawled in and sucked all the air out of the tent. Her skin tingled with awareness as he tried to fit in beside her. She scooted toward the seam and still felt the press of him against her back. She held her breath, heard him clear his throat in obvious discomfort as he settled on his side also.

"This, ah, this isn't going to work," he said gruffly, his breath grazing her ear.

She couldn't turn around to look, didn't want to see how close he was, though his shoulder bumped hers as he tried to find a spot for his arm. "Um, what?"

"Maybe you could put your head on my arm. There doesn't seem to be any other place for it."

She lifted her head in surprise and he took that as agreement and slipped his arm beneath. She settled back down, at first hesitant to let the whole weight of her head rest on it. He grunted her name and she tried to relax. His arm was hard and warm and smoky. Just when she thought she was used to the smell, her senses had to come back in full force.

All of them. The change in position brought his chest against her and she wished for the extra layer of his fire shirt between them. His T-shirted chest felt naked and she cursed her fertile imagination.

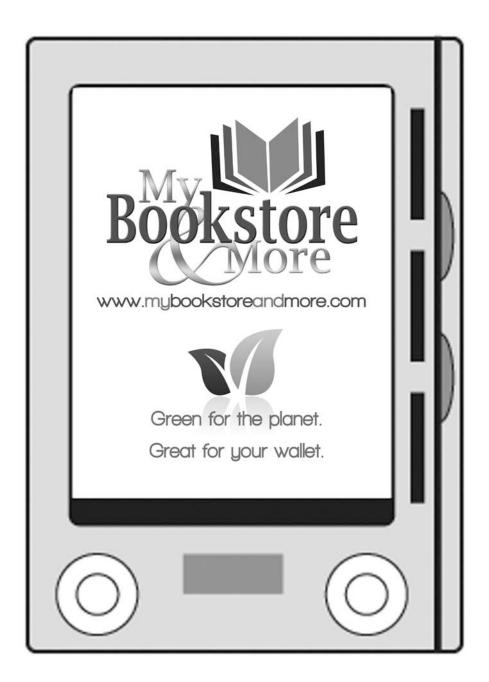
He flipped her hair over her shoulder away from him and she immediately tensed.

"Sorry. It was tickling my nose." His voice was so close, his words teasing the back of her neck. She tensed all over again.

"Oh." She smoothed the ponytail against her throat so no stray hairs would bother him. Then she shifted her hips and bumped her bottom into his groin. Both of them went perfectly still. Then, as if not to draw attention to her movement, she eased her hips away infinitesimally.

"We both have to, ah, relax," he murmured at last.

He placed a hand on her hip and she flinched. He shushed her and slid his arm about her waist, drawing her against his body, spooning her against him, careful to keep their lower bodies apart, which of course only made her focus on it. Had her little bump aroused him and he didn't want her to realize it?



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