

ADRIFT

by Micki Browning

CHAPTER ONE

The deck rolled beneath her feet as another swell hit the boat broadside. Meredith Cavallo shifted one foot slightly before the other, rocking her hips to absorb the motion. If only everything else in her life could be weathered as easily.

The wind had picked up since the fourteen scuba divers had plunged off the commercial dive boat and into the water above Key Largo's famed Molasses Reef. She scanned the water's surface, looking for bubbles. They'd been down about forty-five minutes and should surface soon.

Most of the divers were experienced, but she worried about one couple from the Midwest who had just earned their certifications. These waves were going to be a problem when they surfaced.

Sweat dampened the back of her neck. She pulled an elastic out of her shorts pocket and wrangled her dark hair into a braid, while mentally reviewing the emergency equipment stowed onboard.

A bigger swell slammed into the LunaSea, forcing Mer to hop to keep her balance. Scuba tanks clanged against each other as the boat settled into the trough.

"Brace yourself," Leroy shouted from the wheelhouse.

She grabbed the safety rail above her head. The boat shuddered as another wave smashed into it.

Two tanned bandy legs appeared as Captain Leroy Penninichols descended the aluminum ladder connecting the upper and lower decks. "That'll make a rabbit smack a bear," he said.

Mer crinkled her brow. "You realize that wouldn't end well for the rabbit, right?"

The portly captain stepped onto the lower deck. "Why are you always so damn analytical?" Merriment hid behind the gruff words.

"One hardly has to be analytical to see the problem with a mismatch of that magnitude."

An ever-present plastic straw barely extended beyond the thatch of silver-streaked dark beard that covered the bottom half of his face. "Yeah, well, I'm still rooting for the bunny."

Of course, he was. Mer smiled. Leroy always cheered for the underdog. That's why he'd taken her under his wing when she signed on as crew two months ago. Since then,

she'd alternated between teaching scuba and acting as his first mate.

Leroy brushed past her and stepped into the sunshine. The bottom deck resembled the bed of a pickup truck. Benches lined the port and starboard sides where divers sat to don their gear. Two "dry" tables occupied real estate in the middle, although dry on a boat was a wish rarely granted. A platform at the stern supported two swim ladders. Today, one remained lashed in place, while the port ladder hung in the water.

He leaned against the table and oriented himself like a sunflower to the sun. "You aren't on an old tub in Antarctica anymore, Cavallo. You may want to try toasting that pasty skin of yours a little."

Mer dragged a tube of lotion from the backpack she kept stashed up front. "My research was in the Arctic. Big difference."

"North Pole, South Pole. What's it matter? Neither one is paradise."

She took off her crew shirt and slathered a gob of sunblock on her face and around the edges of her red Speedo tank. "You can't meet Santa at the South Pole."

"My, aren't we feeling feisty today? And all this time, I had you pegged as lumping Santa together with the Tooth Fairy, leprechauns and honest politicians."

A glimmer of movement caught her attention. "Diver up." She stood and pointed off the starboard side of the boat. "About thirty yards out. Just ripped off his mask." She shimmied out of her shorts.

Leroy shielded his eyes. "That one of ours?"

Three other dive charters bobbed in the choppy seas, all on mooring balls even further from where he'd come up.

"No idea, but we're definitely closest." She grabbed her mask, fins, and snorkel in one hand and signaled to the diver by placing her fist on the top of her head. She waited for him to mimic the signal to let the boat know he was okay. Instead he spit the regulator out of his mouth and started thrashing the water, fighting to stay above the whitecaps.

"Diver! Inflate your vest," Mer shouted, shoving her feet into her fins.

"He can't hear you," Leroy said.

She pulled the mask strap over her head. Leroy handed her a bright orange flotation device with a line attached to it. "You'll have to swim it out to him. Get him to the current line and I'll tow you back in."

Mer's heart beat faster. She clutched the seahorse pendant around her neck, and then took a steadying breath. "Keep pointing at him. These waves will hide him."

The next wave drove the stern close to the surface and Mer stepped off the boat. The initial shock washed the heat of the sun off her skin. The surging water pulled at the emergency flotation she carried and threw off the smoothness of her strokes as she swam away from the LunaSea. A particularly large wave welled beneath her. She tried to aim for the diver, but couldn't see him.

She spun in the water. Leroy stood on the deck of the LunaSea still pointing. Mer corrected to her left and swam like a life depended on her.

As she closed in on the flailing man, she removed her snorkel. "Diver, are you okay?"

The question was rhetorical, but it gave Mer time to assess his condition. Big guy. Ill-fitting equipment. Too much white showing around his unfocused eyes. All clues he was in over his head.

"Help me! Keep it away from me!"

She splashed him in the face. It startled him, and for a moment he stopped struggling and focused.

"Look at me." She pointed at her eyes with two fingers, treading water beyond his reach. She didn't

recognize him from the boat. "Look at me. I'm here to help. Let me help you." She extended the flotation toward him. "Grab hold."

He reached for it just as a wave swamped them. The diver choked on the brine. In renewed panic, he lunged at Mer, intent on using her body as high ground.

She submerged herself, and then popped out of the water behind him, grabbed his tank, and clamped her knees around it. "It's okay, I've got you." She spoke close to his ear.

The diver twisted, his fingers clawing at her.

Snaking her left arm around him, she mashed the inflator button. Air rushed into his jacket. "You're okay. Everything's going to be fine. My name's Mer. What's yours?"

His body rose above the water, and some of the tension left his face.

"Rob. My name is Rob Price."

"Rob. Pleasure to meet you." She used the cheerful voice she used with small children and drowning men. "How about we get you back to the boat?"

He jerked upright. "We gotta get out of here!"

"I'm going to tow you in. Can you help kick?"

"It's getting closer."

His alarm quickened her pulse. "What's getting closer?" The ocean had plenty of docile animals that looked like man-eaters to the inexperienced, with just enough real dangers to keep things interesting. She dipped her face in the water and scanned beneath them. Nothing. "How are you feeling?"

"Not good. Nothing's right."

Crap. Wrong answer. "What's going on?"

"I'm— My— Did you see that?" He pointed behind her.

His fear infected her. She twisted but didn't see anything. "What? What did you see?"

He tensed, shuddered then went limp.

"Shit." She moved quickly, and pulled him backward until he floated face up on the water. She stripped her mask off, hooked it over her arm, and then checked to make sure he was still breathing. The waves pummeled them, but at last his chest rose.

The boat bobbed nearly a hundred feet away. "Why is it always the big guys?" She yanked the weight pockets out of his vest and let them fall the thirty feet or so to the ocean floor. Grabbing the tank valve, she towed his limp body toward the LunaSea.

"Couldn't be the size of a turtle." She spoke to calm herself. "Nooooo. You had to be a flippin' whale shark."

The current worked against her. "Oh, and for the record?" She struggled to keep his face protected from the waves. "It'd be really nice if you'd mentioned what I'm protecting you from."

She swiveled her head, searching for threats. The wind wailed in her ears and blasted spray into her face. She focused on the LunaSea. Kicked harder.

At last, she reached the end of the orange current line and Leroy pulled her the last twenty-five feet. The ladder slapped the water with the passage of each wave.

The buckles on Rob's vest held fast as she fumbled in the water to release them. Finally, they yielded and Mer freed the unconscious man from his equipment.

Leroy leaned over the stern and grabbed Rob's gear. "I've been timing the waves. Wait for the next one to pass and grab the ladder as quick as you can."

She yanked off her fins and flung them toward her captain. "Catch."

Mer fought to keep Rob on the surface and they bobbed in the water just beyond the back of the boat. She'd only get one chance at doing this without injury and she'd have to move fast.

She imagined carrying him like a sleepy child; his arms draped over her shoulders, his face against her neck.

Only she had to grab the ladder, find her footing and wedge her leg between his, or the force of the rocking boat would slam them back into the ocean and slap them with the metal ladder for good measure.

"Here it comes, Cavallo. Get ready," Leroy said.

Mer inhaled a deep breath, felt the power of the water swell beneath her. As the wave ebbed, she swam toward the boat, planted her foot and drew her arms in to pin Rob between her and the ladder. Another wave hit, raising the LunaSea's stern in the air. Gravity pulled at Mer, doing its best to drag her back into the sea. She gripped the ladder. Her biceps strained until Leroy seized Rob under the armpits and hauled him onto the deck like a gaffed fish.

Before she had time to readjust, the swim step plummeted toward the water and hit with a teeth-jarring thud, then dragged her beneath the surface. She held tight as the boat righted itself and her head broke the surface just as another wave crested. She spit out salt water and clambered up the ladder, pausing at the top to catch her breath.

Emergency equipment littered the deck like flotsam. She hurried to the bench and shed her gear.

Leroy leaned over the now-conscious diver. His tense face made Mer's pulse race.

Rob clawed at the oxygen mask on his face. "Tell her!"

Leroy brushed the man's hand aside and resettled the mask.

Mer gripped her pendant. "Tell me what?"

"He says he was diving the Spiegel Grove."

"Impossible," she said. "We're five miles away and the current's going the wrong direction."

"That he was diving the Spiegel and there was a...."
Leroy struggled to find the right word. "Presence."

"A presence? You mean like a ghost? Please." She pursed her lips.

He shook his head. "I know. Except, just after you went in, the Sea Dragon radioed they're missing a diver off the Spiegel." He nodded to Rob. "This one."