

CHAPTER ONE

Meredith Cavallo had questioned her decision to stay in the Florida Keys plenty of times over the past few months, but never while standing on the deck of the *LunaSea*.

Two days remained until Thanksgiving and she had a lot of blessings to count. She had only to look around her. The waves above French Reef sparkled in the late morning sun, a welcome contrast to the squall that had passed through last night. She drew a big breath of salty air. No. This was home.

At least for now.

Next month, charter boats would be full of divers on their winter holiday, but today a family of four made up the entirety of the *LunaSea's*

manifest. That left plenty of elbow room on a vessel large enough to accommodate twenty-six divers.

Mer scanned the water out of habit. They had the dive site to themselves and the divers had splashed ten minutes earlier. The reef was shallow. They had at least another half hour to explore.

Captain Leroy Penninichols poked his head out of the engine hold. An ever-present plastic straw peeked beyond his silver-streaked beard. "Maggie wants to know what she can make for Thanksgiving." A slight drawl tempered his baritone voice.

Mer gathered the tools at the edge of the hold. "Not a thing. I've got it covered."

"She said you'd say something like that." He pulled himself out of the hold and onto the deck. Sweat dampened his T-shirt and he wiped his hands with a rag. "I'm supposed to insist."

"Really. I got it." The toolbox was its usual jumble and Mer sorted the equipment into specific compartments. "Recipes are just like experiments."

"How many of these have you done?" he asked.

"Experiments? Lots."

"I meant Thanksgiving dinners."

"Before this one?" Mer asked. "None."

Leroy folded the rag and placed it on the camera table that rose from the rear of the deck. "Oh, goodie. I'll tell Maggie to make pies...and maybe the turkey."

He dropped the lid of the hatch. It slammed with a metallic bang and she flinched.

"Sorry." He indicated her leg. "That still bother you?"

She found herself rubbing her thigh and forced herself to stop. The wound had healed. "What bothers me is your skepticism regarding my ability to construct a pie."

"You don't even look like you know how to eat one."

"Well, if your waistline is any indication, you have enough experience for the both of us."

He patted his belly. "The proper terminology is baked, not constructed. Do you even have a cookbook?"

"That's what the Internet's for."

"Great. We'll bring the dressing, too."

"It's stuffing. It goes in, not on." The last wrench properly sorted, she shut the toolbox and snapped the latches. "Seems pretty self-explanatory."

She slid the heavy box under one of the aluminum benches that ran the length of the deck on both sides of the vessel.

"How about we all just go out to dinner?"

Mer shielded her eyes against the November sun. Still no bubbles, but a dark shape in the water caught her attention. She stepped onto the bench to gain a better vantage and pointed off the starboard side. "Any idea what that is? I can't make out it out."

Leroy glanced over his shoulder and then turned, giving the object his full attention. "Looks like we got us a square grouper."

Her curiosity stirred. "I've never heard of a square grouper. Are they indigenous to the Keys?"

He shook his head. "How can someone as smart as you act like a calf at a new gate?"

"It's a logical question. The Arctic Ocean and the Florida Straits have completely different environments."

"This isn't your old research boat, so before you warm up for a lecture I'm not interested in, don't." Leroy picked up the gaff. "A square grouper is a bale of marijuana, not a fish."

"Oh." The news disappointed her. "I didn't encounter any of them in the Arctic."

The current pushed the black object toward the *LunaSea*. Smaller than a bale of hay, it appeared to be wrapped in black trash bags and bound with twine. When it was close enough, Leroy leaned over the side, hooked it, and pulled it to the swim platform. Together they dragged it onto the deck.

Mer dropped to her knees next to the sodden bale and ran her hands over the contours. It felt as if there were smaller squares inside. "What now?" she asked.

He stowed the gaff. "When we're on our way back to the dock, I'll alert the Coasties. They'll come pick it up."

"Why wait?"

"No sense announcing to the world what we've got on board. You never know who's looking for their lost property." He squinted toward the horizon. "Or what they'll do to get it back."

The gaff had torn the outer wrapping. Mer tugged at the plastic and enlarged the hole. "It looks like a bunch of duct-taped bricks."

"Let me see." He unfolded his pocketknife and stabbed one of the bundles. White residue clung to the blade when he extracted it.

"Not that I have much experience with it," Mer said, "but I'm pretty sure that's not marijuana." The breeze fluttered the outer plastic and Mer glimpsed the corner of a clear plastic freezer bag stuffed between two of the

silver bricks. "There's more than drugs inside." She dug into her shorts pocket for her cellphone and opened the photo app.

"Not enough to be a marine scientist? Now you're an archeologist, too?" Leroy teased.

"Never hurts to document things *in situ*. Sometimes it's not the item so much as what's near it that's important. Besides, there's a whole field dedicated to nautical archeology." She tugged on the baggie but it remained wedged. She yanked harder. The plastic ripped, flinging a small circular object end-over-end until it clinked onto the deck. Leroy stomped on the disk before it disappeared off the edge of the dive platform.

Mer's attention remained glued on the stained piece of paper that peeked out from the plastic. She nudged two bundles aside to avoid tearing the brittle page and gently removed it. Names covered the sheet. "That's odd." She laid it across her lap and snapped a couple of photographs.

"Bet I got you beat." Leroy examined the coin in his palm and held it out to Mer.

She placed the list on the dry table, where it fluttered in the breeze. Mer weighted the page with her cellphone so it wouldn't blow away and took the coin. It felt warm and heavy in her hand.

Sun glinted off the portrait of an elaborately coiffed man. "Seventeen thirty-three? I didn't think they dated coins that early." She flipped the gold piece. Latin words circled a coat of arms topped by a crown and Mer read them aloud, "*Initium sapientiae timor domini.*"

"Wisdom begins with the fear of God," Leroy said.

She gaped at the captain. "I don't know what surprises me more. That I'm holding a coin that's nearly three hundred years old or that you know Latin."

The thick thatch of beard hid his smile, but his eyes crinkled. "Guess you ain't the only huckleberry on the bush."

A glint drew her attention back to the bale and she placed the coin on the table next to the list. "There's something else." She pushed two of the bundles apart and dug out a small electronic device. "What do you suppose this is?"

Leroy snatched it out of her hand and dropped it on the deck. "GPS tracker." He brought the heel of his Croc down on the device and smashed it. "Call up the divers. Good chance we're about to have company." He disappeared up the ladder that accessed the bridge deck.

She sprang to her feet, grabbed a dive weight, and rapped it three times against the handrail of the swim ladder that hung in the water.

Thirty seconds elapsed and she repeated the emergency recall.

Now all she could do was wait.

Mer scanned the horizon, squinting behind her sunglasses. The glare made it difficult to see. The itch of someone watching her prompted her to spin, but she was unable to locate the cause of her unease. She refocused on the water's surface, searching for the trail of bubbles that would reveal the divers' locations. She hit the ladder again. Imagined the sound traveling through the water. Willed it to alert the parents and their eleven-year-old twins, Grace and Logan. Bring them back.

She rubbed her thigh and did the math. The divers had been down twenty minutes. Even if they returned immediately, it could still take them several minutes to swim back to the boat, plus a three-minute safety stop before they'd surface—if they heeded the signal at all.

Another minute ticked by. Still no bubbles.

A tiny dot separated itself from the horizon.

"We got company," she shouted.

CHAPTER TWO

A moment later the captain was at her side.

"There." Mer pointed. "Three o'clock. Moving fast."

Bubbles broke the surface along the port side of the *LunaSea* and inched toward the ladder. The family's daughter surfaced first and handed up her fins. Mer grabbed the blades and helped Grace up the swim ladder and steered her to the bench. "There you go." Mer kept her voice bright. "Let's get you out of this gear." Her fingers flew between the buckles and loosened the vest.

The mother, Lydia, surfaced next. Once she climbed aboard, Leroy walked her to the bench and guided her tank into the rack as she sat. Mer leaned close to the woman's ear and spoke low so the girl wouldn't hear. "I need you to stow your equipment and take your daughter into the V-berth. Stay there until I let you know it's safe."

The woman's eyes held questions, but she nodded.

Mer returned to the stern.

The boy bobbed on the line that floated behind the boat and struggled to remove his fins. Mer could feel the other boat racing toward them. She motioned to him. "Logan, I need you to hurry."

He replied, but the regulator in his mouth muffled his words and he took it out. "It's stuck." He put his face in the water so he could see the strap.

Blake surfaced a yard from his son and spit out his regulator. "There better be a good reason you're shortening our dive. I paid good money for this charter."

"Emergency. I need you and your son on the boat," Mer said. "Pull off your son's fins and push him to the ladder."

"They're expensive fins."

A boat engine rumbled like distant thunder. Growing louder. Closer. Mer's jaw tensed. No time to argue. She dove into the water and popped up next to the boy.

"Hey there, Logan. Let me see if I can help." She inhaled a few shallow breaths and dove beneath him. Her hands circled his ankles and ripped the fins off his feet. She hooked them over her wrist, then broke the surface and pushed him closer to the boat. "Up you go."

The sharp report of a gunshot rang out. Mer froze. She knew that sound. Her leg throbbed.

The boy twisted in the water. "What was that?"

She grabbed his arm. They had to hurry.

A blow struck Mer from behind. Logan's father flailed for the ladder, not caring that his son was closer. She twisted and dodged his arm as it came around in another wild stroke. His knee slammed into her belly and drove the breath from her lungs. Then Blake was upon her, pushing her underwater in his panic.

Mer lost her grip on Logan. Salt water stung her eyes. The father thrashed the water above her head and her lungs burned.

The first rule of rescue was not to become another victim, and if Blake fell backward in his panic, two hundred pounds of man and an aluminum tank would smash into both Mer and Logan. Kicking away from the danger zone, Mer yanked the boy out of the way and surfaced, gasping for air. Fear widened Logan's eyes. His buoyancy compensator kept him afloat, but he wasn't moving.

Blake scrambled up the ladder. Leroy latched onto the father's tank valve to steady him as he lurched aboard the vessel.

Mer faced Logan. "We have to get on the boat. I'll help you."

Without his fins, the boy lacked the propulsion to move himself quickly through the water. Mer grabbed the ladder with one hand and stretched her other arm toward him. "Give me your hand."

Leroy leaned over the edge. "No time like the present, Cavallo."

"Get ready to get us out of here. I'll help Logan on board and stow the ladder."

Leroy nodded once and disappeared.

Mer clutched the shoulder of the boy's vest and drew him the last few feet to the boat. She wrapped his fingers around the rung of the ladder and swung behind him, her arms outside his, protecting his body with her own. "What say we get out of here?" She kept her voice calm as she prodded him up the ladder. Nothing wrong. No madmen hurtling across the water to intercept them. No one shooting at them. Just a typical day on the water. Her vision narrowed until all she saw was the path to the V-berth.

"See the opening to the lower deck?" She didn't wait for a response. "I need you to go down there." She peeled his fins off her wrist and gave him a gentle push. "Go on."

The growl of the high-powered boat grew louder. Low profile. Built for speed. Close enough, now, to distinguish two men in the cockpit.

Mer heaved the rope to raise the swim ladder and secured it. Leroy fired up the engines and she raced to the bow to unclip the boat from the mooring ball.

"Off line," she shouted.

The *LunaSea* surged forward. Wind tore through Mer's wet clothes as she sidled along the gunnels and swung back onto the main deck. The father cowered in the corner, still in his gear. The rest of his family huddled in the V-berth, staring at Mer through the hatch.

Mer dropped to her knees next to Blake. "You need to go below." She loosened the straps of his buoyancy compensator and undid the waist buckle as if helping a child. "Let's get this tank off you."

He didn't move.

She bit the inside of her lip to keep from venting her frustration.

"Don't worry, I've got it." Her fingers fumbled with the remaining clips. She peeled the vest from his body and dropped the tank into the rack, snapping the bungee cord around the valve. The last thing they needed was a forty-pound tank rolling around the deck. Although at the moment, hitting him on the head with it held more than a little appeal.

She knelt next to him again. "I know you're scared." The *LunaSea* swung sharply to port and her hand shot out for balance. "We all are. But I need you to help me. Help your family."

Another shot rang out. Adrenaline flooded her body. Mer grabbed Blake's chin and forced him to look at her. "Your children need their father. Like it or not, that's you."

He swatted her hand away. "I know how to take care of my family." He stared at her a long moment before he crawled toward the berth.

Mer ran her hands through her hair. They were hopelessly outclassed. Even at top speed, the *LunaSea* pulled twenty-four knots. Respectable, but not racing material. Not like the sleek cigarette boats favored by smugglers. The narrow beam and long hull of their pursuers' go-fast boat enabled them to hurtle through the water at more than eighty knots.

Leroy steered the dive boat in a wild zigzag across the water. The harbor loomed closer, but not nearly close enough.

The go-fast boat steadily gained on them.

Mer climbed up to the bridge. Leroy had his hands on the controls. His head swiveled back and forth between the smuggler's boat and safe harbor.

"You know how to give a distress call?" he asked.

Mer grabbed the radio and keyed the mic. "Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is Mer Cavallo of the dive boat *LunaSea*." She released the button and waited for a response. A male voice crackled across the air. She could barely make out his words over the whine of the engines, the wind, and her pounding heartbeat. "Request immediate law enforcement assistance."

The two men were too far away for Mer to get a description, but close enough to see the driver raise his arm. He fired another shot. The bullet struck the railing by Leroy's head. They both flinched.

"We are being pursued and fired upon. Repeat. They are shooting at us." Mer's voice climbed an octave as she reported their coordinates and approach path to Port Largo.

Without waiting for a response, she slammed the mic into its cradle. "Be right back," she shouted.

Sweat moistened her hands and she slid down the ladder rails, landing on the deck with a shin-banging thud.

Another shot. This one aimed at her. She ducked. Tried to make herself as small a target as possible.

The V-berth to her right offered safety. A place to hide. She turned her back to it and dashed toward the bale.

The plastic-wrapped bundle sat in the open on the stern. Mer slid behind it. She pressed her back against the camera table for support, wedged her feet against the water-soaked bale, and pushed. Her legs strained. The bale barely moved.

The driver raised his arm again and aimed. She scrunched lower. The open transom of the boat left her exposed. The only thing between Mer and a bullet was a sodden bale of drugs. The very thing she needed to get off the boat.

Her hand went to the pendant around her neck. With a growl, she redoubled her efforts. The table leg bit into her back as she shoved the bale across the skid-resistant deck, making agonizingly slow progress. Finally the bale teetered on the edge of the swim platform, and with a final jolt it fell into the churning whitewater behind the *LunaSea*. The dark plastic disappeared under the wake. For a horrible moment, Mer thought the bale had sunk, but then it popped up and bobbed on the swell.

The captain of the go-fast throttled back and broke away from the chase to retrieve the bale.

Mer's entire body shook as the adrenaline ebbed, leaving her weak-limbed and unable to get up. The angles of her seahorse pendant dug into her palm and she forced herself to relax her grip.

Fifty yards away, the smuggler pulled his boat alongside the black bundle and idled. The dark-haired passenger leaned over and tried to raise the bale into the boat. He couldn't do it on his own and the captain left the helm to help. Together they pulled the contraband into their vessel.

Leroy coaxed every bit of speed from the *LunaSea* he could, and it bumped and slammed across the waves. The distance between them and the smugglers grew. Mer drew a deep, steadying breath, but blew it out in a huff of renewed fear.

What if it wasn't the bale they wanted?

She clambered to her feet. Her cellphone was wedged in the corner of the camera table, still trapping the tattered remains of the list of names. But the coin was gone.

The flutter of fear returned. She had to warn Leroy. They weren't out of danger. Not yet.