

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Dale Mayer



SEALS OF  
HONOR

Bronson

BOOK-30

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## **About This Book**

Training in underwater recovery techniques, Bronson didn't expect to recover a body, particularly one with a knife embedded into a diver's back. Down in Mexico, often anything goes, but he's been on many dives in his life and has been through a lot of this country, yet at no time had he seen this scenario.

Her missing brother being found sends Robin deep into grief and guilt. Her brother had been much older, living a risky lifestyle on the fringe of society in a small coastal Mexican town. She'd arrived six months earlier in an attempt to help him get his life together.

Finding out what happened is paramount. Yet, as the twisted tale unravels, the betrayals and secrets finally come to light. Bronson and Robin must protect themselves, before the wrong person finds out exactly what they've discovered.

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# PROLOGUE

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**B**RONSON MANCHESTER SURFACED on the ocean at the side of the Zodiac. He looked around to see the rest of his team rising out of the water too. He'd been doing special underwater training for recovery operations all week. But he hadn't expected to see three of his team members here.

It had been a great week, as Marshall, their dive instructor, spoke to the team. "Okay, check your gauges. We're going down for one more dive, and that'll be it for this week." He added, "This one will be more for fun than anything. You guys have worked hard all week, and I'm really proud of your progress." It took another little bit to get everybody geared up and back in again, and then down.

As Bronson floated underneath, letting his body weight just take him down, they were in about seventy-five feet of water, and a couple old wrecks were around here that they were looking forward to playing in. He wanted to just have a chance to enjoy this dive. He loved scuba diving, always had, and it was definitely his thing.

Something was just so very special about it all—the feeling of weightlessness, the weird sensation of seeing the surface above your head, yet going farther and farther down, the oddity of landing on the ocean floor and realizing that you're probably the only human to have ever stepped in that actual spot. As he came down, he looked for his buddy and saw Gavin off to the side.

They were both two-year SEALs, each having just arrived at Coronado to join Mason's team. And, hey, it wasn't just one team anymore; Mason had multiple teams, but Bronson was doing this extraordinary water training so they could do more of the dive trips.

He loved it and would have taken a career in this easily. He even thought about it afterward. Maybe, when he retired, he'd go down to the Bahamas and have a dive shop somewhere. Gavin signaled that he was heading off to the right. Feeling quite amiable and not really caring where they went, Bronson followed his buddy. It was only smart to dive in teams of at least two, though he found that anything more than four was a lot to keep track of. It was easier when something went wrong though. To go alone was fine if you were on a mission. Not necessarily the smartest idea, but it was definitely needed and necessary at times.

As they moved forward, they headed to the wreck, where Gavin disappeared down the hatch. Bronson stayed on the outside, looking to see what kind of barnacles and interesting algae grew here. Things like that always blew him away, fascinated by the set of circumstances that created these microecosystems in the water. When he didn't see Gavin pop up again, Bronson headed inside the shipwreck, just in time to see Gavin coming toward him, but obviously something was wrong.

Bronson watched, following his buddy's hand signals, as he pointed behind him, then turned and headed back to where he'd come from. As Bronson joined him down there, Bronson saw the other divers on the opposite side of the wreck, so they weren't in the same part as he and his partner were. Gavin pointed to his tank and his regulator, signaling that he had to go up, but he also signaled that he wanted Bronson to look at something here.

Following Gavin's hand signals again, Bronson headed into the depths of the ship, which had been pretty well destroyed by the years. There was no real belowdecks portion anymore; it was just what was hidden underneath some of the rotten wood timbers. He saw what looked like a flipper. He headed closer and then his heart started to pound, as he realized what he was looking at. It was an actual diver's flipper, with another to match, both connected to two legs.

A man was underneath the rubble. Bronson grabbed the man and noted that, without a face mask or regulator, he was long dead.

# CHAPTER 1

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**B**RONSON MANCHESTER STUDIED the facial features of the dead man stretched out in front of him, not for the first time. The divers had gone down to recover the body, now floating on the surface of the water, and brought him back up to the boat.

Their scuba instructor, Marshall, had cried out, “Dear God, that’s ... Jason Rancher. He’s a regular diver around here. Almost a local at this point.”

“Yeah, well, I presume he didn’t usually dive with the knife in his back,” Bronson noted, his tone caustic, as he pointed out the obvious weapon.

Marshall shook his head, obviously disturbed.

“Presumably he had enemies, given the way he ended up,” Bronson added.

“I thought people liked him,” Marshall noted. “He seemed to relate with the tourists.”

“Not everybody,” Bronson stated quietly, “or he wouldn’t be sporting that weapon.”

With a nod of his head, the instructor turned away from the body. “We need to bring in the authorities.”

“Yeah, I presume he wasn’t part of your instructor group,” Bronson said.

Marshall shook his head. “He was at one time but hasn’t been for a couple years. He became too unreliable, and there was some trouble, and it just wasn’t working anymore.”

“Interesting. What does he do for a living now then?”

“I don’t know,” Marshall replied, “but, like a lot of people around here, he manages.”



As they got closer to shore, they heard a shout. Marshall looked up and frowned. “*Uh-oh*, now we’ll have trouble.”

“Why is that?” Bronson asked.

“It’s his sister, his much younger sister. Lot of years between them, and they seem like they’re pretty close. Instead of big brother looking out after her, she seemed to be watching out for Jason. This won’t go well.”

“These things will always be hard,” Bronson noted, his tone low. “Loss isn’t easy on anybody. And murder multiplies that.”

“And on her, it will be even worse,” Marshall added. “It was just the two of them.”

Bronson nodded, as he studied the woman approaching. Long-legged, lean, and wearing a dress that flowed around her ankles, her hair was flying up behind her. “She looks a little familiar.”

“She’s a dive instructor too,” he stated, “and a really popular one at that.”

The wry tone of his voice suggested something about her popularity, maybe because she was pretty. The fact was, she was beautiful. Stunning. “Military as well?”

“Yes, but that’s because she specializes in certain types of equipment,” he explained, “especially testing them. Research of some sort.”

“Interesting. She looks young for it.”

“She is young for it,” he confirmed, “yet she’s damn good at her job. She was born in the water, quite literally.” Bronson continued to watch her, as Marshall nodded. “Both of her parents were instructors, and they worked for a private company for a long time, doing exploration and mapping of the ocean floor. She headed into the same field. Unfortunately her brother, Jason here, has had some issues lately,” he related, looking down at the dead man. “So, she took some time away to spend it with him.”

“What kind of issues?” Bronson asked, intrigued, considering Jason had obviously been murdered.

“He was a drunk,” Marshall stated, “although I really don’t want to be telling tales.”

“He is clearly the victim of foul play, so any tales you want to tell—”

“It’s just that he was struggling. I mean, it will be an issue for the local authorities of course,” Marshall murmured, “but I can tell you that he went a little bit off the rails when his wife died.”

“That’ll do it,” Bronson noted sympathetically.

“Jason swears she was murdered,” Marshall added, in a quiet tone, shaking his head. “That’s why his sister came to join him.” As he looked overboard, the woman waded toward them. “Robin, wait,” he called out.

She glared at him. “Is that my brother?” He nodded slowly, and immediately grief churned her features. “Damn it. What the hell happened?” she demanded.

Bronson hopped into the water and walked toward her. “Hey. I found him down below on a dive. We were doing a training session.”

She looked at him and nodded slowly. “That makes sense. Did he have all his gear with him?”

He hesitated. “No mask. No regulator. ... It wasn’t an accident.”

She stared at him for a long moment, not comprehending. “What do you mean?” she asked, her voice going faint.

“I mean, that he was stabbed,” Bronson murmured. “I’m pretty sure he would have died from the injury alone, long before he ran out of oxygen.”

She stared at Bronson in shock, then turned to the boat. “Jesus, Jason.”

“So he’s your brother?”

She nodded slowly. “Yes. ... I came here to spend some time with him.”

“You’re a dive instructor, I hear?”

“Among other things,” she replied, with a wave of her hand. “Please don’t go on about how young I am for it.” He frowned at her, while she glared at him. “I’ve heard it over and over again, and I’m just sick of it.”

“You are young,” he confirmed, “but, if you started early, you’d still have a good dozen years under your belt.”

“More than that actually. Well over a dozen years under my belt,” she stated. “Why isn’t Marshall bringing Jason in?”

“I assume he’s waiting for the authorities,” Bronson shared quietly.

“I want to see him,” she said abruptly.

“You can, but I’m not sure this is necessarily how you’ll want to remember him.”

“I’m not a child,” she snapped, her tone crisp. She walked around him in the water and called out to the instructor. “Marshall, bring him in. I want to see him.” When the dive instructor hesitated, she shook her head. “If I can’t do anything for him, then there’s no reason not to see him. He’s my brother, and, if he died from foul play, ... you know that investigation will be something I’ll want a hand in. I’d just as soon see for myself what the truth is before it gets twisted.”

Bronson turned sharply to stare at her.

She glared at him again. “Don’t you start either.”

“I haven’t started anything yet,” he replied, “but it sounds like you don’t think he’ll get a fair investigation.”

“He won’t,” she declared. Then she stopped and took a deep breath. “He’s had some issues lately,” she admitted. “He got himself into some trouble, and some of that trouble involves the local police.”

“I’m sorry,” he murmured.

“Me too.” She sighed. “And this being Mexico, it’s just that much more of a problem.”

“Yet they’ll still have an investigation.”

“Yeah, they will, but that doesn’t mean it’ll go anywhere.”

“Got it,” he murmured. “Is he an American?”

“He is, but he’s been down here for the better part of the last two years.”

“Since he lost his wife?”

She shot him a look. “You pick up information quickly.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “You tend to think about things like that when you find a dead man. You wonder about his family and what brought him here to this point.”

“His wife died of breast cancer. So, to get away from the memories, he ended up losing himself in the bottle, among other things. He’s been pulling himself back out slowly, but, in the process, he managed to make a lot of enemies,” she murmured. “I know that some of the memories he made here won’t work in his favor.”

“Right, so they’ll say it was his lifestyle that led to a bad end. Case closed.”

“Exactly.”

“I thought the instructor ...” And then Bronson hesitated.

She looked at him, frowning. “What?”

“I thought Marshall told me that the wife was murdered.”

“My brother believed she was. He railed how the treatments she received were not the right ones.”

“And was there any truth to that?”

“It’s hard to say,” she said, “but honestly I don’t think so. I think my brother just couldn’t accept the fact that nothing could be done to save her.”

“Which is not an unusual response to extreme trauma,” Bronson murmured. The instructor brought the boat closer to Bronson, who grabbed the rope tossed at him, then walked the boat closer to the shore. As soon as it was close enough for her, she hopped in and immediately knelt over her brother.

Bronson saw the grief in her expression, as she studied Jason’s features. With the instructor’s help, they shifted him ever-so-slightly, so that she could see the knife in his back. It was buried deep, clear to the hilt.

“God.” She stared at it. Then she sat back and looked up at the instructor. “Did you call it in?”

He nodded. “I had to. You know that.”

“Sure,” she muttered. “I mean, in theory, that’s the process.”

“They’re not all corrupt,” Bronson said, and again she nodded absently. But there wasn’t any conviction in her tone when she next spoke.

“No, they’re not. Not all of them.”

Bronson understood. When you’ve had one bad experience, it was easy to color the entire thing with prejudice. She got up and slowly made her way to the hull of the boat. He reached up a hand to help her out onto the soft wet sand. Without even thinking about it, she accepted the assist. He wondered whether she’d even seen his hand or just the dead body of her brother.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured again.

“Where was he found?” she asked abruptly. “Could you take me there?”

He stared at her for a long moment and then nodded. Since she was a diver herself, she would probably go either way. Better if he went too, always diving in pairs. “I could, but will that help?”

“It would help me, if nothing else,” she replied. “Closure is pretty important in these things.”

He nodded. "When do you want to go?"

She smiled. "Right now. How long are you here for? You're here training on something, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Yeah, and I'm supposed to head back out to the ship tonight."

She frowned at that. "Can you get your shore leave extended?"

"I'll have to talk to somebody, but it's possible, under the circumstances."

"Then please do, if you can. I want to see where my brother was murdered. I'll go get a boat and meet you back here."

He winced, watching her leave, just as Gavin stepped up behind him.

"Hey, buddy. I'm pretty sure you could stay for another day, if you want to. We also know that life happens." At Bronson's silence, Gavin added, "Call Mason. He would understand. You could probably catch us at the next port, and, considering that we're heading home to Coronado anyway, I don't see that as a problem. Take a couple days, help her out, do what you need to do," he suggested. "If it were me, I'd do it. Besides, I understand her point about wanting to see where it happened."

"I do too," Bronson admitted.

"If it was your brother, you'd want to go back out again."

"Sure, but, if I don't go, then I could still make the ship."

"Maybe, but I suspect it won't be quite so easy as all that." At the teasing tone in Gavin's voice, Bronson turned back to study his friend's face in suspicion, then pivoted to see where Robin had got to. "Why is that?"

Gavin grinned at him. "Because I saw the way you looked at her."

“She’s just had a hell of a shock and a loss,” Bronson replied. “How am I supposed to look at her?”

“Like you did, as if you cared. Besides, everybody knows you’re a real softie.”

He frowned. “And that means I looked at her how?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Gavin said, with a knowing grin. “Come on. Let’s go make the phone calls.”

And, with that, the two of them headed back in. It didn’t take long to make arrangements, and, sure enough, Bronson was given the time off without an issue. It wasn’t even time off, per se. As soon as they realized that Gavin and Bronson had found the body, the navy immediately issued a stay order for forty-eight hours, so that they could assist the local authorities, as needed. That wasn’t a huge amount of time, but it should be enough.

If nobody else would take notice or would give a damn about this man’s murder, Bronson would. He did feel like he needed to be here for another day or so, just to make sure Robin didn’t do anything stupid or get herself in trouble. At least she could also help give Bronson an idea of who could possibly be part of this murder. Not that it was his job. Particularly since Jason was an American citizen, so the consulate would get involved, and that wasn’t exactly a pathway Bronson wanted to go down either. But an investigation should be properly carried out.

With his obligation to return to the ship dealt with, Bronson headed back down to the beach; it was mostly empty now. He stood on the shore and saw no sign of anyone around. He glanced around and muttered out loud, “Surely they wouldn’t have cleared out that fast?”

But oddly enough it was as if somebody had spread the word, and, instead of being curious, they’d all disappeared. He checked his watch and frowned. Now it was happy hour. Yet that really didn’t matter because, in Mexico, it’s almost always

happy hour somewhere. He shook his head, wondering where the sister, Robin, had gone.

As he turned around to look again, he saw her standing at the edge of the waves, watching him. He'd been too engrossed to notice her arrival. He walked a few steps back off the main sandy area toward her. When he reached her, he said, "I have forty-eight hours."

She nodded. "Oh, good. We might not even need it." Her smile brightened at his news. "I appreciate it though."

He shrugged. "I was more concerned about the fact that the investigation might be derailed."

"You can't derail what won't ever get started," she murmured.

"Is it seriously that bad here?"

"Lots of times it is. You'll get some people who care and a lot of people who won't. It's just easier in a case like this, when it's a gringo who's always drunk and causing trouble anyway. Most everyone will be happy that he's out of their hair."

Bronson winced. "That's rough."

"I warned my brother time and time again," she said, her voice tight. "I talked to the instructor about where Jason was found," she added, with a deep sigh.

"Oh, good. Then you know the location."

"Good destination for a fun dive." She shot him a hard look. "No, I just know where to take the boat to."

He nodded slowly. "When do you want to go out there?"

"Right now would be good," she snapped. "I did say that earlier. I've been waiting, watching to see if you would come back or just take off."

He held up his hands. "Okay, I just thought you might want to catch your breath a little. Do you have a boat available?"



She nodded. “Yes, this way.” She turned, heading down the beach toward the marina.

“What about diving gear?” he asked her.

She turned to look at him and gave him half a smile. “Now that, I have plenty of.”

He followed behind her, wondering if this was the smartest idea.

“Don’t worry,” she added. “I won’t try to kill you down there.”

He frowned. “That’s an odd thing to say.”

“Not really, my brother was accused more than once of trying to kill somebody underwater.”

Bronson stared at her, his eyebrows rising.

“I know. I told him many times to leave this area, since it’s been bad mojo for him. Told him that repeatedly,” she murmured.

“It may have been something other than bad mojo for him,” Bronson noted. “Sometimes you just get a reputation you can’t beat.”

“And that is exactly what happened here,” she stated. “He was a good man, but, when he got drunk, he wasn’t somebody who could be counted on.”

“Is that what happened? Some sort of accident? Where he was responsible?”

She nodded. “Yes, this recent one wasn’t fatal, thank heavens, but it could have been. I’ve heard other rumors of times in the past where bad things did happen because once he got his drink on ...”

“I presume he knew how to hold his drinks.”

“Too well,” she agreed, “and it led people to get on his boat, when he was too far gone to stop but not so far gone that

anyone could tell. Then he got the reputation that it wasn't safe to go on the water with him."

"And was that his only source of income?"

"It was." She nodded. "So, after that, things got a little bit uglier."

Bronson tilted his head. "That's a pretty hard path to come back from."

"There's no coming back from it now either," she stated morosely, staring out at the water.

He followed behind her quick steps. "What will you do now?" he asked her quietly.

"See if I can find out what happened to my brother and then go back to my own life."

"And that's dive training, I understand?"

"Yes, but more than just dive training," she explained. "I work with one of the companies building the recovery equipment for big ships on the ocean that are in trouble. I'm working with that kind of line, that type of equipment. A much higher level of danger."

He was fascinated by that. "I haven't been involved in that type of offshore operation."

"Nobody has, only a couple specialized companies. That's about it. It's partly what I've been doing with the military—bringing in extra training to try and help you guys do it yourselves, with some of the new equipment," she explained.

"And this company handles most of that?"

She looked over at him. "It's my uncle's company. He started it with my parents."

"And your parents passed away?"

"They were killed in a dive accident," she noted, her voice tight.

"Ouch," he murmured.

“Yeah, so I guess that diving is in my blood.”

“It sounds like—” Then he stopped himself from saying anything anymore.

“Go ahead. You can say it,” she told him. “Believe me. I’ve thought of it myself a couple times already this afternoon.”

“Yet Jason didn’t die from a dive accident.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “My brother was murdered.”

“Did you know he was going diving today?”

“He goes diving every day, but today? ... Jason didn’t go diving today. He’s been missing since the day before yesterday.”

Bronson stiffened at that information.

She nodded. “That’s also not an unusual thing for him, if he’s deep into his drink, but I had already been searching the bars and his usual haunts, trying to find where he might have ended up. I got nowhere.”

“Did you contact the police?”

She snorted. “I did talk to a cop, but, as you can imagine, when your brother has a habit of disappearing from one moment to the next on a bender, really nobody cares at this point.”

Bronson murmured, “Everybody should care, but it’s also easy to understand their perspective.”

“I know, but, whether I understand it or not, it doesn’t change the fact that he’s still my brother.”

“And you also know that, because of the way he was killed, chances are it happened fairly quickly.”

She nodded. “I checked his tank. He still had oxygen.”

“So he was murdered not long after he went down.”

“The thing is, what I’ve found out is that he went out with friends, and they told me that they got separated.”

“Diving? Yet they didn’t come back and tell anyone?”

She shook her head. “His friends weren’t exactly the most upwardly honest people in the world. Nor the most sober, depending on the time of day.”

“Sure, but aren’t they the first place anybody’ll look to see if there was a problem?”

“They swore Jason got separated and never showed back up again. When they were out of oxygen themselves, they came back and basically had a wake in his honor.” Bronson just stared at her, slack-jawed. She shrugged. “What do you want me to say?”

“I want to talk to them. That’s for sure.”

“I already talked to them, and, when I told them his body had been found, they just nodded, as if to say that was what they expected. Oh, and *Condolences for me, but, hey, isn’t it great that I have a body, so I can get closure.*”

“Wow,” Bronson muttered under his breath.

“It’s a different world out here,” she said. “Not only are the dive people collectively different but the country too. They’re all different.”

“No, you’re right,” Bronson agreed. “I haven’t seen it in action, not when it comes to a missing diver like this though. Most people would call the authorities and would get a rescue team out there to search for him.”

“Not in Mexico,” she declared, “and not this area of the country. Also the other members of his dive party were happy he’d died doing what he loved. As far as accidents—true accidents in particular—go, the numbers here are terrible, but alcohol plays a large part in that. They have that happening a lot here.”

“And nobody’s bothered to make those numbers drop?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “Only when the gringos get involved, and there’s trouble along that line, does anybody realize the numbers are anything but normal.”

“And again that’s not a great thing to hear.”

“No, but you’ve got to get used to it,” she stated. “If you hadn’t come across his body, chances are nobody else would have for quite a while.”

“I thought it was a popular diving area?”

“It is, and, depending on where you found him, it may say something about whether he could have been found sooner or not,” she noted. “But honestly? Even if someone had found Jason, chances are they might have just left him there too.”

“I guess there are a lot of superstitions in this area, aren’t there?”

“More than you know,” she muttered. “There’s also a certain kind of callous disregard for life, and, considering how Jason got when he was drinking, it’s more of a *he knew better, good riddance* response.”

“You really think somebody would have just left his body out there?” To Bronson, that sounded more than horrific.

“It’s possible,” she confirmed, “and it’s also possible that, if anybody saw something, ... they may have just bolted and tried to forget, hitting a bottle to drown their memory, never going back because they were too scared. And don’t forget,” she murmured. “I saw Jason a couple days ago. So he hasn’t been there all that long. Therefore, it’s not all that likely anybody had seen his body. You saw him, and you brought him up, and, for that, I’m very grateful.”



ROBIN TRULY WAS very grateful and knew she owed Bronson an apology for being as short-tempered as she was. It was all the wasted time and effort she had spent trying to save her brother over the last few months, only to find out somebody had deliberately taken him away from her, which made her so

angry. It should make her sad, but instead she felt this high level of anguish, churned up with frustration, and, at the bottom of it all, anger.

She'd worked so hard to get Jason clean and sober. She had managed to get him mostly off the drugs, but the booze had proven to be a much harder foe. And it had driven her batty trying to figure out what to do next. But it wasn't to be. Everything she'd done had been for naught. It was too late. Jason was dead and gone.

The odd thing that really got to her was the sense of unrest that she felt about him. She wasn't superstitious in the least, but she'd always felt like her parents had died in a way that made them still roam the earth, dissatisfied with the investigation, so now to have her brother be murdered just added to it. There was no need for it; Robin couldn't help her parents any more than she could do anything for her brother. It was way too late for any of that.

She made her way to her boat down on the second dock, and, as she hopped on, she looked back to see that not only had Bronson followed her but he was busy untying the ropes. She waited until he was on board and then started the engine and headed out. The afternoon started to wane.

He stepped up beside her. "Are you sure you want to go today?"

She pointed at the gear she'd collected. "You ever done any dives at nighttime?"

"Sure. Not usually searching for anything though."

"What difference does it make?" she asked caustically.

"It's dark down there. Not everybody is willing to go out in the dark. In this part of the ocean, it's almost always dark down there. Topside we still have a couple hours," he noted. "I think we were about half an hour, forty minutes for the trip."

"That's about right," she agreed, with a nod. "You seem to navigate pretty well."

“Not necessarily, but I’ve done a lot of diving.”

She didn’t say anything, just kept her attention focused on the water.

“What is it you’re hoping to find?” When she hesitated, he continued. “Are you thinking there’ll be any evidence?” There was no derision in his tone, but there wasn’t anything supportive either.

“I don’t know what I’ll find,” she admitted. “Nothing probably, but I need to go. I just ... Maybe I just need to place it in my head. My brother was an excellent diver.”

“But he didn’t die from diving,” Bronson reminded her.

“No, maybe just from his choice of friends.”

“And yet they didn’t see anything?”

“No, they didn’t see anything. And they didn’t do anything. And nobody bothered to say anything to me.”

“They didn’t come tell you?”

“No,” she confirmed, “but then I’ve also been very busy. I realized he was missing last night, but he had quite a few haunts and watering holes that he routinely traveled to and, in general, wasn’t the easiest person to keep track of.”

“Which,” Bronson noted calmly at her side, “is another reason to be angry about the whole scenario. You put your life on hold and came here, trying to save him from himself, and no doubt were ready to wring his neck yourself many times over, just out of pure frustration, but now somebody did the job for you ... and for real.”

She snorted. “If that’s a joke, it’s not funny.”

“It’s not a joke,” he murmured. “It’s just an observation. I had a younger brother who was hell-bent on ruining his life. When he was sixteen, he was into drugs. At seventeen, he was breaking and entering to pay for his drug habit. And, by eighteen, he thought he was smart enough to hang with the gangs,” Bronson shared, his voice torn. “I tried so hard to save

him so many times. Got him off the drugs, off the booze, out of the stealing, and then he joined the gangs, and I lost him.”

“Ouch.” Robin stared at him, empathy in her gaze.

“Sometimes you just can’t save somebody,” he murmured.

“Yeah, I was getting to that point with my brother, but I worked hard on him, and he was often doing so much better. I thought maybe I had a chance. When I couldn’t find him last night and heard that he was missing, I figured he was probably off on a big bender, so it would be that much harder to get him straightened out again. I was pissed off,” she admitted. “So angry that he would take all my hard work and throw it down the tubes without a thought.”

“Right.” Bronson nodded. “Which only served to make it even harder when you found out he was dead.”

“Exactly,” she agreed. “I’m not to blame. I know that, but, at the same time, you always wonder if you could have done something more. Guilt is a rippling thing, and the reality of his death hasn’t even set in yet.”

“Been there, done that too,” Bronson said, his voice softening. “It took a really long time for me to accept that I did everything I could for my brother, but I couldn’t get him out of the gang. He felt like he belonged there, felt like he had a place in a way he apparently never had before.”

“And did his own gang kill him?”

He shook his head. “No, he was killed in a shootout, in some gang war.” Bronson stared off in the distance. “It doesn’t matter how or why. It still seems so senseless, such a waste of a life, and I’m still angry about it,” he admitted. “And, like you said, it doesn’t change things a damn bit.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she agreed. “It’s as if they’ve got this wish to die.”

“It’s more like a wish to not live, I think,” Bronson clarified.



She turned and stared at him, and then spun back around, keeping her eyes on the water ahead. “I hadn’t considered it that way, ... but I think you’re right.”

## CHAPTER 2

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**R**OBIN WAS AMAZED at how calm and accepting Bronson was, as he stood at her side. But then she'd already pumped the guys on his team for information after he'd left. They all told her the same thing. He was cool and calm under stressful scenarios, and he hadn't hesitated for a moment to bring the body back up, and he would certainly be fine to go diving with her. They didn't say too much about his history, but she already knew what group was here training.

It just saddened her that everything about her life right now revolved around her brother, and still it was all for nothing. She shook her head, and, when Bronson spoke, she realized he'd seen the movement in the darkness below.

"Still not the smartest idea," he added.

"Nope, it's not."

"But you won't be persuaded, is that it?"

"No, I won't," she replied sadly.

"And why is that?"

"Because I can't help but feel that there's something to find. And I know that'll just make me sound like I'm crazy."

"No," Bronson replied, "but it does sound like somebody who is desperately hoping for evidence that may not be there."

Such a note of caution filled his voice that she turned to him. "What if it were your brother?"

"I would have gone out immediately."

"Exactly," she noted. "We'll get down there in decent time, and we'll see a setting sun when we get up."

"And the cloud cover?"

“I’m hoping it’ll piss off,” she stated, with a heartfelt reaction.

He chuckled at that. “It might, but not too quickly.”

“A little bit of shadow and rain won’t bother me.” She turned toward him, eyeing him directly. “Will it bother you?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m okay to go.”

“So why is it I get the feeling that you’re coming along more to make sure that I don’t do anything stupid than to find something about my brother?”

“I’m okay to take a look. I can tell you that I did look at the time, but I didn’t see anything. Plus, as his death has been a shock to you, I do want to make sure you stay safe.”

“Right, well, thanks for that. As to whether we find anything, I guess the trick is whether anybody’s been there since.”

“Is it a popular place?”

She shook her head. “No, just mostly locals. Somebody bringing a friend over, that type of a thing.” Looking ahead, she added, “It’s not the most common area, and honestly a lot of people think it’s haunted.”

At that, he stared.

She shrugged. “I know, and the fact of the matter is, that’s another reason nobody cared. ... Jason always said that, if he died in the water, I’d better leave him there.” She took a deep breath. “And yet I’ve disturbed him.”

“So the locals will think that, if anything’s going on, it’ll be because you retrieved his body?”

She nodded. “There is that chance, yes. Yet it’s almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy too.”

“Like what? You believed he would die in the water?”

“Jason did,” she stated sadly. “But the trouble is, my brother drank and used to do drugs and was on the water all

the time, so it was almost a no-brainer to think that's where he'd end up."

"Right. But the fact of the matter remains, he didn't drown in some accident."

"No, and that's the part that's really bothering me. Somebody put a knife in his back."

"I know you mentioned this before, and I hate to ask," he began, "but does he really have any enemies?"

"Too many to count," she replied cheerfully. "That's the thing. He was not a nice drunk."

"Sure, but there are enemies, and then there are enemies ready to do the job."

"And, to that, I have no answer." She turned to face Bronson. "I spent a lot of time with my brother, and there are tons of places that I couldn't go to if he was with me. Countless bars and even restaurants that we weren't allowed to enter because of his reputation and past actions."

"Which is saying quite a lot for here really, being a tourist area, dependent on the foreigners."

"I know, right?" she said, nodding her head. "People here have long memories, but, if enough money passes through hands, you can do pretty much anything you want. However, if you screw over the locals to the point that they're prepared to ban you, and even your money's no good, then you know that it's bad news."

"Finding out about how bad it's gotten can be tough."

"It has been tough," she admitted. "I thought for sure that he'd gotten over his wife's death, but then I got down here to find that he's turned it into a huge conspiracy theory that he got sucked into himself."

"You don't think there's any truth behind his accusations?"

"No, I don't. I was there at the hospital when she was diagnosed. I was also there at his side when she died," she

explained calmly. “There was nothing nice about it, but there was also nothing suspicious or underhanded, as far as I’m concerned, either.”

“So, it was all normal treatments?”

“Yes, he did bring her down here after her diagnosis to do some experimental treatments, but my understanding is not many happened. When I came down to visit and check on her, she told me that she’d refused to do anything else and that she wanted to die in her bed. I was there the night she died. It was just the three of us, and she passed away peacefully in her sleep.”

“So, it’s not as if any of these experimental treatments in Mexico killed her or something.”

“In her weakened state, anything could have killed her at that point. She was already pretty well gone. I know for sure that she didn’t want to make the trip down to Mexico, but Jason had insisted. Such desperation had filled his tone at the time that she had finally given in, even though I knew she was just exhausted and wanted to spend her last days peaceably.”

“How long did she last down here?”

“About six weeks,” she replied. “Surprisingly, I think it was an easier six weeks on my brother, where he had some degree of acceptance and wanted to spend what time he had with her, but there is nothing easy at that time of life and death.”

“No,” Bronson murmured.

She glanced at him. “You seem to be very calm and accepting about everything. You don’t even ask a lot of questions.”

“I was holding back,” he said.

“Ask away. I don’t have any secrets where my brother is concerned. He was a complete and utter fuck-up, and I can’t change that now,” she stated. “All the same, he was my brother, and I loved him.”

“Why didn’t he go into the family business?”

“My uncle wouldn’t have him anymore,” she said bluntly.

“The booze?”

“Yes, that and he had a wandering eye and kept having affairs with the staff. My uncle would end up having to replace the women because they’d be useless when Jason broke up with them.”

“*Great*,” Bronson noted. “An all-around nice guy.”

“An all-around guy who liked to live his life to the fullest, with no concern for the turmoil he caused everybody else. After he got married, he calmed down some, but my uncle was long over him by then and didn’t want to give him another chance. Then, after his wife died, Jason just wasn’t really employable,” she murmured.

“And that’s tough too.”

“It was because I ended up supporting him half the time, and I couldn’t always do it. So there were some days where he ended up in even rougher shape.” She groaned. “I shouldn’t have to be responsible for my older brother, but I was. That didn’t feel good, and it just made life tougher.”

“Did he blame you?”

“No, he didn’t blame me. He was the opposite, but that was almost worse, you know? He’d go on and on with stuff like, ‘I’m a shitty person. Don’t waste your time. Don’t waste your money on me. I’ll just drink myself to death, and the world would be a better place.’ He’d say that kind of thing all the time. It was awful.”

“So he was depressed.”

“Definitely on the depressed side,” she muttered. “I understood. Yet I also understood why my uncle didn’t want anything to do with Jason. Uncle didn’t even want to be kept up-to-date on how things were going down here. He’s a bit of a hard-ass too, but he wouldn’t have gotten where he is without that, I suppose.”

“So he got the company through the impact of your parents’ deaths.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “He did, and that was a pretty rough time period, as they had just taken out some big loans to buy new equipment, so he had his hands full making it work. He had to work hard to keep the company afloat during the transition.”

“And were you working for him at the time?”

“I was just completing my degree in marine biology.” He raised his eyebrows, and she shrugged. “I finished it early.”

“Are you one of those genius people?”

“Genius? I don’t know if that’s the right term,” she muttered. “I think people sometimes mistake dedication and hard work for gifts like that. I just chose to do double class loads and work through the summers on my studies, so I finished a couple years early, that’s all. I had my degree by nineteen.”

“Right.” Bronson nodded. “So you added extra courses and kept at it through the summers. I can see how that would work.”

“Exactly, but nobody wants to ever think of that. They always just want to say, ‘Oh, she’s gifted. She’s supersmart. She had it easy.’ But the real fact is, it wasn’t easy by any means. I was just willing to work harder. I do love my field, and I wouldn’t waste time. I spent a lot of my hours studying the textbooks and research papers, instead of reading fiction, watching TV, or going off with my friends,” she muttered. “I was also raised in the industry, so I already knew a lot before I started. So I had just gotten my degree and started working with the company, right when my parents died.”

“So it was recent?”

She replied, “They’ve been gone twelve years.”

“Even twelve years sometimes isn’t long enough to get over losing your loved ones.”

“For my brother, it wasn’t. I’m thirty-one, and he’s forty-five—or was forty-five,” she corrected. “That fourteen years made a big difference. My parents never expected me to be interested in diving. I don’t know if that was a sexist thing or just a worn-down parent thing. So, when I took to diving at a young age, I think they decided I would just travel with them. With Jason, they stayed home with him, pretty much interrupting their lives for their firstborn,” she explained, but there was a smile in her tone.

“So maybe you got the better part of that deal.”

“I definitely did,” she agreed, with a nod. “I got the better part of that deal. I think my brother knew it too, but the two of us were close regardless.”

“And that’s good,” Bronson murmured, “because you did get some time with him. He died way too young, but at least you got some years.”

She nodded. “What about your brother?”

“He died really young, at eighteen, so he never really got a chance to grow up.”

She sighed. “There’s no good age to die.”

“No, there sure isn’t.” Bronson grimaced. “Unless you’re somebody who’s suffering terribly, and there’s nothing that can be done. If that’s your future then, I’m sure some of those people would choose to go early.”

“I think I’d probably deep-six myself in the ocean, if that were the case,” she declared suddenly.

“Not everybody would understand that.”

“No, because, in so many people’s world, suicide is a crime,” she noted. “I wonder how those people feel though, when it comes to having one of those awful lingering diseases.”

“I think everybody has faith, up until the time that it’s really being tested on a personal level, and then people tend to reevaluate. In some cases, they remain full of faith, and they



carry on. In other cases, they must shuffle and move quickly in order to reevaluate just what's real and what's not real in their current world."

"And that's a nice way of saying that people change their minds," she noted with a laugh.

He gave her a smile, his teeth flashing in her direction. "We should almost be there," he said, changing the subject, as he looked out in the distance.

"Are you seeing any signs of location," she asked curiously, "or are you just guessing?"

"A bit of both," he admitted, pointing to the craggy shoreline. "I tend to remember landmarks."

"Good for you, because not very many people do."

"I'd just retrieved a body," he noted. "So it's almost like a slow-motion response of all I needed to do and of what I needed to observe and remember." When she looked at him, he shrugged. "It's my training," he murmured. "I can't help myself."

"Right, you're one of those super trained special ops guys, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Something like that."

"If my brother had to fall into a bad circumstance, at least somebody decent hauled him out of it."

"I am sorry for your brother, especially since he sounds an awful lot like mine."

"And you couldn't do anything to save him either, could you?"

"No, and yet you always wonder. If I'd gotten there earlier, if I'd stayed home a little more, if I'd come back? ... You know."

"Were there a lot of years between the two of you?"

“He’s been gone about seven years now, so he would have been twenty-five,” he recalled, with a wistful smile. “I’m thirty-four, so nine years were between us. Not as many as you two but enough to have my brother not really give a shit about what I said or about really getting to know me.”

“And that’s the thing, isn’t it?” she asked. “We can do everything we can, but, if they aren’t interested in what we have to say and if our presence doesn’t matter, you just end up being the bad guy in their world.”

“And, even when you are closer to them and part of their world, they still want to prove themselves and to get into things that are just too hard to get them out of,” he shared regretfully.

“This whole thing with my brother is bringing up bad memories in your world,” she noted.

“Oh, those memories are never far from my thoughts anyway,” he admitted. “There’s an awful lot of good things in life, and I do enjoy remembering the good times I had with him. ... But I always feel like there was more I could have done, if he would have let me, and of course that’s the cruncher. He just wouldn’t let me. He was so bound and determined to go his own way, and, if I told him left, he went right. Sometimes I’d say right just to make him go left. Yet, as soon as he realized what I’d done, he’d get so angry and would make a point of deliberately getting into trouble to prove he was a badass. However, he wasn’t a badass. He was just insecure, and that made all the difference,” Bronson said, with an ugly sigh.

At that, he shook his head, then looked around, pointed, and announced, “Hey, I think we’re here.”



BRONSON HAD ALREADY checked over his gear and was fully strapped in, his flippers on, as she set the anchor. She turned and looked at him, one eyebrow raised. She didn’t say anything, then headed over and picked up her gear. She

quickly checked her tanks, slipped on her gear and her flippers. Then, with a nod at him, fell backward off the boat. He quickly joined her underwater and stayed just ever-so-slightly behind.

When she turned and looked at him, as if asking for directions, he knew he needed to show her where they were heading. As they moved toward the sunken boat where he'd found the body, he took the lead and slipped ahead. He had taken a quick look while he was here the first time, but he hadn't really found anything. A second chance to take another look was golden.

His headlight was already on, but Bronson had a secondary flashlight that he now turned on and slowly searched the outside of the boat on that side. But nothing was here, except years of marine life. He understood why her brother would have said to leave him in the water if he died, although not a lot of people necessarily wanted to think of marine life chewing away on their loved one's flesh. There was a ghostly elegance in this deep dark space. A peacefulness of eternity.

Slowly marveling at the world around him, he took her to the room where he'd found the body. In his mind, he could see it floating gently, flippers first and Jason's face tucked in around the edge. Bronson moved closer, then turned, saw her watching him, and pantomimed where the body had been, just with his hands. She nodded, understanding fully what he meant, then using his secondary flashlight, he carefully shone it all around the area. But there was nothing. That area looked just the same as everything else. Finally he turned and looked at her and lifted his shoulders. She nodded and pointed upward, and, with that, they slowly headed back.

After they popped up through the water's surface, he asked, "Are you satisfied? Did you accomplish what you wanted to do?"

"Not particularly," she replied sadly. "There really isn't anything to see. At least now I know where he'd been when he had died. It was one of his favorite dive spots."

“Any particular reason why?”

“No, he just really liked the ship.”

“But other sunken ships are around,” Bronson mentioned.

“Yes, but I don’t know why he liked this one, just that he did.”

“Okay. Are you ready to go back?”

She stayed above the surface as she looked around, and then her shoulders sagged, as if realizing nothing else could be done. She nodded. “Yeah, I guess so.” And, with that, she struggled onboard. He took off his tanks, lifted them up into the boat, and then pulled himself up to sit on the seat beside her.

“Thank you for coming,” she said.

“Not a problem.”

“I didn’t really expect to see anything.” She stared off in the distance. “Yet there’s always that thought that, *if I don’t look—*”

“I get it,” he stated, his voice quiet in the cool air. “Come on. Let’s go home.”

She nodded. “The least I can do is get you back and take you out for dinner.”

“You don’t have to,” he replied instantly.

“No, you may say that, but, in my world, I actually do. You didn’t need to come all the way out here, and I probably could have found it myself, knowing some of his favorite haunts, but now I know for sure.”

“Maybe, but nobody else would have given you the details I could provide—although there weren’t many.”

“It’s all right.” She started the engine, pulled up the anchor, and the two of them sped back toward shore. “You can go back to your ship tonight now.”

“I have forty-eight hours regardless,” he murmured. “And more if I need them because the ship’s heading home.”

“Fine. I know a great burger joint.”

“Burgers here, where there should be fresh seafood?”

“Or we can do seafood too,” she said, looking over at him curiously. “You choose.” She then named two places, neither of which he was familiar with.

“I don’t know either of them,” he replied, “but I am hungry.”

“In that case,” she noted, “we’ll go to Kings because the portions are huge. Just let me jump in the shower and change, and I can pick you up.”

“Now that sounds appealing,” Bronson agreed.

## CHAPTER 3

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ROBIN WASN'T EVEN sure why she'd been insistent about taking Bronson out for a meal, except that she hadn't really wanted to lose contact with him. Maybe it was the fact that he'd brought her brother to shore. Maybe it was the fact that he hadn't argued about going back out and showing her exactly where they'd found the body. She had almost a fatalistic feeling to having him in her life right now. It was a link to her brother, and, although it didn't make any sense, she seemed to be struggling to cut it loose.

Her brother would probably laugh at her and say, *Don't be an idiot. I was always headed for this, and you knew that. Better now than later.* She frowned at that thought, as she stepped out of the shower and quickly dressed.

She grabbed her shawl, just in case the threatening storm hit. As she made her way to the front door to slip on her sandals, she checked her watch. "Just in time." She slipped her purse over her shoulder and stepped out of her first-floor apartment, just as Bronson walked toward her.

"Hey." She frowned. "I was going to pick you up."

He shrugged. "It wasn't hard to figure out where you lived. Everybody in this area seems to know."

"*Sure* they do," she said, a little oddly disquieted. "But why would you come here?"

"Because the restaurant is closer to you than it is to me," he noted. "So otherwise you'd come clear to me, just in time to turn around and backtrack again."

She had noted that, but it seemed no other way around it. She shrugged. "If you're ready, we can head out now." He nodded, and she asked, "Did you manage to get a shower?"

“I did. Nothing like being in the navy to make shower times fast and efficient.”

“Have you spent much time on subs?”

“Lots of time on subs,” he noted, with a smile. “It’s not my preferred place to be though.”

“You like the fresh air too much?”

“Yeah, and I like lights and windows and being able to see out,” he shared. “I get that some three hundred thousand active-duty people in the US Navy spend most of their days in submarines, but it’s not exactly my thing.”

“That’s important too.” She smiled. “We don’t all have the same strengths. That’s why the world is so marvelous.”

“I agree.” He pointed out the few landmarks that he knew about. “I understand that was pretty cool back in the day.” As she led the way down the street, they drew glances from others. “Are you well-known here?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, yes, and not necessarily in a good way.”

“Because of your brother?”

“Yes,” she murmured. “People didn’t like me trying to stick up for him and encouraging people to see him in a different light. Once they made up their minds, it seemed like I could do nothing to change it. But I tried hard, and that in itself didn’t necessarily go over too well.”

“Ah, ... nobody really likes to have their minds changed.”

“No, they sure don’t.” As they walked into the restaurant—more of an open-air shack—she smiled. “Don’t be put off by the appearance because the food is really good, and there is lots of it.”

“That’s what really matters.” Bronson sat down on the bench, and she took the seat opposite him. “Do we get menus here?” he asked, looking around.

“Not likely,” she murmured. “Chances are, they may not even come over and take our order.”

“Because of you?”

“I haven’t been here in a while,” she noted. “I’m sure the news is out about my brother now.”

“Maybe, but they won’t outright ignore you, will they?”

“Depends whether or not they’re afraid that I’ll start in on them again,” she admitted ruefully. “I can be a little intense.”

“We can all be intense when it comes to family,” he noted comfortably. Just as he finished speaking, a waitress walked over and gave him a flirtatious smile and in English said, “Hey, I haven’t seen you here before.”

He smiled. “First time, but”—and he motioned over at Robin—“she told me that it’s great here.”

At that, the woman’s smile dimmed a little, and she nodded. “I heard about your brother,” she said quietly. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” Robin replied, her tone low. “Can we get two of the Friday night specials, even though it’s not Friday?” she asked humorously.

The waitress gave them the briefest of smiles. “It’s not on the menu, but I’ll see what I can do.”

At that, they ordered beer to be served with their meals, and she disappeared.

“That’s the thing about places like this,” he murmured. “You really must be a local.”

“Or with a local,” she added, with a smirk.

“And is that what you would consider yourself now?”

“No, and, after I leave this time, I probably won’t be back, at least not to stay.”

“How long have you been here now?”

“Six months,” she stated. “I had to leave a couple times because work called, but I’ve always come back. So, although I’m not local, with my brother being a local and with me being



around as much as I have been, I've gotten to know a lot of the best spots to eat."

"I would come back for a visit," he noted. "This place has a lot of quirkiness to it."

"It's got a lot of the Mexican vibe to it," she added, her tone almost harsh.

"You haven't had a great experience here, have you?"

"No, and I can't blame the locals for that," she admitted finally. "I mean, as much as I want to, I'm not justified in doing so."

"And it's tough," he agreed. "Just because you want to doesn't mean you get to."

"Exactly," she muttered. "My brother really did mess things up, and I doubt anybody here will care one bit that he's dead and gone. So, my wanting someone to give a damn now is just asking to be disappointed yet again."

"You're right. They'll probably be glad in a way when you leave, since it will be one less problem."

She winced. "I know, but is that the best we can do in life though?" She twisted to look at him. "Dying or just leaving, so that we're not a problem for other people?"

"That is a common denominator in suicides," he murmured, "but it wouldn't make me terribly happy to think that was the legacy I left behind."

"Me neither," she agreed. "I've been too much of a workaholic, and I know that's partly why I feel responsible. If I'd come earlier, if I'd spent more time, if I'd—"

"Stop it now," he said, reaching across and grabbing her hand gently. "You did what you could. There's only so much anybody can do when somebody like him and my brother are hell-bent on joining their loved ones who have passed before them, one way or another."

“I think that is probably what he was trying to do,” she confirmed sadly. “He really loved his wife.”

“Not everybody recovers from that kind of loss.” Bronson gently squeezed Robin’s fingers. “For some, ... it’s like losing the other half of themselves.”

“That’s true, and, in my parents’ case, they went together. So I didn’t see their grief, just my own. Thankfully I suppose,” she murmured. “Not that it was any easier because what we had was a double whammy, losing not one but both.”

“And you just had your brother left after that?”

“And my uncle,” she added. “My brother was already dealing with his wife’s illness, even twelve years ago, but he still had her, so he was nowhere near as affected as I was with our parents’ passing. He had somebody to hold him at night, whereas I didn’t. And that seemed to make it just that much harder.”

“I suppose you were trying to be there for your uncle too.”

“Honestly, we were so busy dealing with our emotions, and Uncle was in such a mess looking after the financials of the family business that he just needed to know that I wouldn’t be a problem or require anything of him,” she explained, with a sad smile. “A lot of time death is like that. Everybody is so busy coping that you just need to cope along with the rest of them, so you don’t become part of the problem in the process.”



AT THAT, THE waitress returned and placed two beers on the table. Bronson picked one up, smiled at the coldness, and took a healthy slug. “Now that goes a long way to make it a good end to the evening.”

“Even though it was a shitty day.” She picked up her beer, studied it, then took a smaller sip.

“You don’t usually drink beer, do you?”

“Not usually, but I kind of needed it tonight.”

“One beer won’t hurt you,” he noted, “and you’re well within walking distance of home.”

She smiled and nodded. “That’s true.”

“So, after you bury your brother, will you go back to work for your uncle?”

“Maybe. It’s become a pretty huge company.” She shared the name, and his eyebrows shot up. “Exactly,” she replied, “hence the training with the military.”

“That is a huge company,” he noted, “with a great reputation.”

She nodded. “That’s one of the reasons that I work with Uncle. The other is, I’ve been working with him since I was little.” She gave a weak smile. “It is what it is, and I more or less enjoy the life. I’m not always the happiest about the traveling, and it’s only a little bit, but I get to stay home quite a lot of the time. Uncle was pretty upset at me for coming here to deal with my brother, but I’ve stayed in touch and still done jobs for him here and there.”

A shout came from the far side of the bar. He followed her gaze to see a couple men cheering and throwing back what looked like shots. She immediately turned slightly, so that her back was to them. “Problems?” he asked.

“It could be, more so for me than you.” He raised an eyebrow at that. She hesitated, and her tone went terse, “Depending on the day, it could be they’re cheering over my brother’s death.”

“I see,” Bronson said. She tried hard to relax, but that seemed to be almost impossible. “Do you want to leave?”

She looked at him and then shook her head. “I’ll get used to it.”

“Still, that doesn’t mean you must do it tonight.”

She looked at him and smiled. “Are you always this nice?”

He shrugged. “Some things should just be universal. Regardless of what they thought of your brother, he was still your brother.”

“Very true.” Then she looked up and smiled. “Dinner is here.” Two large seafood sampler platters were placed in front of them, with a wide variety of seafood on them and lots of it. Bronson’s stomach lit up in appreciation, and she smiled. “You definitely won’t starve down here.”

“That’s one of the big advantages,” he murmured, “not to mention the prices.”

She added, “As long as you’re a local. The prices go up as soon as they realize you’re a tourist.” He looked up at her, one eyebrow raised. She nodded. “Two prices, two menus.”

“I guess that’s probably not all that uncommon.”

“Maybe not.” She motioned at his food. “Eat while it’s hot.”

## CHAPTER 4

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**R**OBIN PICKED UP a piece of fish and took a big bite. Even though she wasn't hungry and, given her mood, figured it would taste like sawdust, it was surprisingly good. Unsettled by everything that had gone on, she felt her grief still striking hard inside her, and, with no chance to even let it go, she didn't feel a bit like eating but knew she needed the energy.

If only she could close down everything here and move on with the next stage of her life. Something that she had been chafing at the bit over—until Jason had died. Now she was struggling with the whole idea of being set free all of a sudden, her grief mixing with guilt.

*Nothing like the contrariness of the human condition to really make you sit down and wonder why and how any of us even existed,* she murmured in her head.

By the time she'd finished her piece of fish, Bronson had already plowed through a good share of his seafood platter and was chewing away on his fries. "You really were hungry, weren't you?" she asked.

He nodded. "Plus, it's good too." He gave her a quirk of his lips. "I had a hard time figuring out which order to try things in."

"I always end up taking a bite here and there, so everything ends up a half-eaten mess." She pointed to her plate. "See? So even if you wanted some of this, it's all been tasted, so it's hardly that compelling." Eventually she felt like she'd had enough and pushed her plate to the side, picked up her beer, and had another slug, shuddering slightly at the heavy malt taste.

"It is an acquired taste," Bronson noted. "Do you want a different drink?"

“No, this will be fine. I do drink sometimes. I guess it’s more about being part of the day.”

“Of course it is,” he agreed.

She snacked on her fries and the onion rings, while he completely demolished his platter. She was quite surprised that he could eat that much, but then she didn’t know why, because her brother did so on a regular basis too.

When he was almost done, Bronson looked behind her and then murmured, “Stay calm and don’t look now, but trouble’s coming.” She sank ever-so-slightly into her seat, and he looked at her and asked, “Do you want me to send him packing?”

“No,” she murmured, “this is their place.” He stared at her thoughtfully. She shrugged. “I’ll be leaving, and, outside of the odd visit maybe, it is, indeed, their place.”

“I agree,” he murmured. “I just wasn’t expecting to hear that from you.”

She smiled. “I kept trying to tell my brother that, but he always argued that it was his place too.”

“Remind me. Did she die here? His wife?”

Robin nodded. “Which is why it was hard for Jason to leave, but I don’t want it to be that way for me.” She stared down at her plate. When a shadow fell across it, she stiffened.

“It’s good riddance, you know,” the first of the two men declared.

She looked up to see Carlos, who hated her brother with a passion. But she didn’t say anything, she just waited for him to say his piece. But when he stared at her and didn’t say anything more, she looked over at Bronson.

He pushed back his plate and asked, “Do you want the rest of that to go?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m good to leave now.” But she couldn’t. The two men didn’t shift, and they wouldn’t let her

out of her bench seat, even though they knew she was ready to leave.

Bronson had absolutely no compunction about crowding Carlos, a smaller man, by standing up, forcing Carlos and his buddy both to step back. Bronson stepped over to her side of the table and held out a hand. She grasped his hand like a lifeline, and he helped her up, keeping her close, as he looked at the two men. “Was there something you wanted?” Bronson asked them politely.

The men looked from the one to the other and glared at him. “It’s still good riddance,” Carlos repeated, and he spat on the ground, then turned and walked away.

The second man didn’t say anything, just stared at her with an odd look in his gaze.

She hated that look of hatred, of not belonging, of not being accepted for who she was. They waited to see if there would be any more disturbance from these two—or others—but when Carlos and his buddy left them and when nothing else ensued, Robin noted, “I should bring you with me more often.”

“Do they get more aggressive than that?”

“Sometimes. I don’t know what will happen now that Jason’s gone though.”

“Hopefully they’ll back off.”

“Not likely,” she stated. “My brother wasn’t popular.”

“He’s also dead, so surely there’s no need to be tormenting you about any of it.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice? If only it were the way of the world,” she muttered.

At the cash register, he quickly paid and left a decent-size tip.

“I was supposed to pay,” she protested, as he ushered her out of the restaurant.

“Maybe, but it’s not an issue, and it was better that I maintain an air of male dominance in there.”

She thought about it and nodded. “I wouldn’t have even thought of that.”

“Sometimes it’s a good idea in the more paternalistic societies,” he added. “And, no. ... I’m not trying to downplay your ability to be whatever role it is in life that you choose to be. I just felt like we were on the edge of trouble, and hopefully that would stave it off.”

“And it did,” she said, “so thank you for that. I was happy to not deal with Carlos and his buddy.”

“Did he cause you trouble in the past?”

“Yes, but he also caused trouble for my brother too.”

“They really didn’t get along, huh?”

“Carlos’s brother died on a dive trip with Jason,” she explained. “So maybe there was justification.”

“Right, as you said, a bad scenario all around.”

“Exactly, and absolutely no way to make it any better at this point,” she added. “Best thing for me is to deal with the final circumstances of Jason’s life and his death and move on.”

“What will you do with his body?”

“I’ll have it cremated, then take him out to his favorite dive spot. I guess I’ll put him back in.”

“Maybe the locals will see that as helping to put his ghost to rest.”

“If he has a ghost out there tormenting anybody, it’s because Jason made it such a point of wanting to be left in the water. For most of the locals, that would be an issue.”

“Maybe I should have left him where he was then.”

“You didn’t know. And that wouldn’t have helped anything, would it? Probably would have gotten a whole lot of fish drunk too,” she muttered, with a heavy sigh.



“Did he often dive when he was intoxicated?”

“He had the ability to look and act completely sober, even when he was three sheets to the wind. Lots of people were fooled, all except for me. I knew what he was like on the inside, and I never let him out there. However, it didn’t stop him. He just went with friends all the time.”

“In which case, we’re back to the fact that he was his own worst enemy, and it’s not your fault.”

“And we’re back to the fact that it doesn’t matter that it’s not my fault because I still feel guilty.”



BRONSON KNEW HE could do nothing to make this easier on Robin. “What you need is to get some sleep, then tomorrow start dealing with whatever you can. When you get it wrapped up, head back to your uncle’s place.”

“That’s my thought,” she confirmed, “and it would be easier if it were an accident and not a murder. If Jason had just drowned while out diving, it would be simpler. But somebody cut his life short, a life that I was desperately trying to save,” she shared quietly, as she stared across at the water.

The waves lapped gently up on the beach, a soft soothing sound, even if Bronson’s senses were half geared to see if they were being followed. He was worried that trouble would come her way when he wasn’t around to protect her. “Will those men bother you tonight?”

“I don’t think so.” She shrugged. “They didn’t really bother me before, just every once in a while, when they’d get extra drunk, and they let their grievances be known.”

“Which you can’t really blame them for,” Bronson muttered, “because Carlos did lose a brother too.”

“No, I absolutely can’t. It’s just not much fun dealing with the fallout from my brother’s poor choices. Trouble is, I knew what Jason was like. I knew that, in all the confrontations that I saw, there was plenty of justification for the anger and the

heartache and the fury. I don't know what Jason got into that got him killed, but maybe the real surprise is that it didn't happen sooner."

"And whether that's true or not," Bronson added, "somebody put a knife into him this time, and, for that, of course, there should be justice."

"I don't think anybody here will thank us for finding out who did it either," she noted, "because, if they'll put somebody in jail for that, the locals are just as likely to give him a reward."

"Ouch. Are their ill feelings that deep?"

"Jason was an outsider, as far as they are concerned." She sighed. "And, yes, it was that bad, at least sometimes. I tried, but ..."

"And you need to remember that. You tried, and it didn't work, and now he's gone. You don't know what the outcome could have been because you didn't get to control that option," he added firmly. "But you tried, so give yourself credit for that, and don't punish yourself over it."

She looked up, startled. "I won't. It's just so raw right now."

He asked, "Do you want to check in with the cops?"

She shook her head. "I'll call them in the morning." She led the way to her apartment building.

There, he stopped, looked around, and asked, "Any security here?"

She looked at him thoughtfully. "It'll be fine. I've never had anybody bother me."

"But you weren't alone before."

"And you think that'll make a difference? It's not as if my brother was there to protect me before."

"Maybe not," Bronson admitted, "but you're really on your own now, and somehow I think, for a lot of these men,

especially those raised in a patriarchal image, that changes things.”

“Oh, I hope not,” she said. “I don’t want any trouble. I just want to take care of the family stuff that has to be taken care of, clean out his place, and then ...” She stopped. “You know what? Maybe I’ll do that tonight.”

“Where is it?”

“Jason’s apartment?” she asked absently.

He nodded.

“Just around the corner. It’s a cabin, a shack really. He didn’t get paid much, so it’s kind of appropriate.”

“Let’s go,” Bronson said.

She frowned. “You don’t have to be involved in this.”

“I’m here at the moment. I can’t go to my ship anyway, so I’ve got a couple days of leave. I might as well give you a hand and take a look.”

She hesitated, then shrugged. “Sure, why not? Besides, maybe you’ll see something I don’t, and we can figure out who killed him.”

“We might as well take a look.” He gave a wave of his arm for Robin to lead the way. It was about five minutes away, but it wasn’t what he expected. “Is this a garage?”

“I think that’s what it was originally,” she replied. “As far as I know, this is where he’s been ever since his wife died. Probably because the rent is cheap.” At that, she opened the door and stepped in.

“He didn’t lock it?”

“No, most people don’t lock things down here, at least at this level.” As she stepped in, she turned on the light, showing the full devastation of the small room. She sucked in her breath.

“So, tell me something. Did it always look like this?” Bronson asked her.

“It always looked like a mess but not like this.” She frowned, as she turned around. Nothing was on the shelving on the walls, and everything on the floor had been turned upside down.

“So do you think this is just in response to his death? I don’t know what you would even call this,” Bronson noted quietly. “Anger, anguish, joy, or is this something else?”

“I have no idea what this is,” she admitted, shocked. She turned and stared at him. “Jason never had anything, so there was never anything to steal. He didn’t care about security or locking his doors. Often enough, he had people out there ready to come after him, and they all knew he lived here. So there was no point in his trying to stay hidden. He got beaten up a few times, but it was never severe enough for him to do anything about. But this? I don’t understand it at all.”

“It seems more like somebody was looking for something,” Bronson suggested.

She turned and looked at him. “I don’t know what though.”

“So tell me. How often did he dive?”

“Every day. I think he would have died or committed suicide if he couldn’t have.”

“Really? So he went out every day of his life?”

“Yes, sometimes two or even three times,” she stated. “He lived for diving, and he worked at the dive shop for a little pocket money, just so he had access to the supplies he needed.”

“Which makes sense, kind of.” Bronson stood in place, hands on his hips, as he studied the devastation around them. “Not a whole lot here, is there?”

“Nope. Just the one room.”

Under the mess he noted a single mattress on the floor and, with no dresser or closet, Jason must have used the shelving to hold his clothes. “TV’s gone.”

“He didn’t have a TV,” she replied. “He hocked it a few months ago, since I came back. The DVD player too. Pretty much anything that was of any value he got rid of.”

“So what about this stuff here?”

“It was mostly just memorabilia and things that he collected along the way. I bought him a clean blanket and a clean set of sheets.” She stared downcast at the floor. “I used to do laundry for him every once in a while. But the last couple weeks, he was in a downward slide again, and I told him to get his butt over to my place and do laundry himself, but he refused.”

“How about with all his diving? Any chance he found something of value?”

“Like what?” she asked angrily, raising both hands in frustration. “I don’t know.”

“What kind of diving did he do?”

She looked over at him. “All kinds, but, yeah, he would have done some treasure hunting too,” she admitted, with an eye roll. “But he would have sold any find to get some cash for drugs or alcohol. If he had found anything from other dives, other divers, or from sunken ships, he certainly would have immediately brought it to the surface and sold it.”

“Any chance he found anything valuable and was killed for it?”

“Like what?” she asked, staring at Bronson. “Even if Jason had located something of value, why not just steal it from him? Why kill him?”

“So let’s just consider that he can’t say anything about his find—or maybe it took two people to bring it topside,” Bronson suggested. “Maybe he made a deal with somebody

that Jason would show him where the item was and that they'd split the money from the sale or something like that."

"But then why that shipwreck?" she asked. "People have been on that dive scene for decades."

Bronson nodded. "I don't have any reason to think anything in particular. I'm just tossing out ideas."

"So you're looking for a motive, outside of the fact that everybody hated him?" she asked.

"Yeah, ... I guess I am. Because, of all things, if many people truly hated him—and had for a long time, as it seems—then they also would have had lots of easy opportunities to go after him. So why kill Jason now?"

She studied Bronson's features. "I hadn't considered that," she admitted. "I guess I was so hung up on the thought that everybody already hated him so much that, of course, somebody in his world had killed him. So it didn't occur to me that there could be another motive."

"There's always motive," he noted. "It's just a matter of finding which one is relevant in Jason's case."

"And, in his case, there are just too many options and too many suspects," she muttered.

"You can look at it that way, or we can try and figure out what it was that brought on this attack," Bronson noted. "And maybe it was just something simple. Maybe it was simply a case of somebody who was finally fed up with Jason. Maybe he said something that upset someone, and they went out for a dive, and it was just enough."

"Maybe," she agreed, "but it was premeditated if someone had to take him out on a dive and brought a knife along like that."

"But it was a diving knife," he pointed out.

"I know," she murmured. "Still, why would you have an argument down there?"

“Maybe Jason did something he shouldn’t have.” Bronson shrugged. “Maybe he joked around and tried to lock somebody into a cabin on that wreck and wouldn’t let the guy out or something. I don’t know. However, killing him down there and leaving his body does make some sense, if you want to make it difficult to find his body. It’s just by sheer luck that Gavin and I found Jason while on a dive.”

She shuddered. “None of those scenarios are things I even want to contemplate.”

“Did Jason ever fool around like that? Was he ever somebody who would put somebody else’s life in danger as a joke?”

She shook her head. “No, he was always a very safe diver,” she murmured. “Until the booze got a hold of him, then everything pretty much went straight out the window.”

“So, at this point in time, had Jason become an unsafe diver? Would he have done anything to jeopardize somebody else’s life?”

“I wouldn’t have thought so, at least not on purpose,” she replied. “I’ve never seen that kind of behavior in him before.”

Bronson nodded. “Good enough.” He stepped over a bit of the mess here in Jason’s apartment and pointed. “He almost had a bathroom.” Almost because nearly half of the back wall was damaged, and there was even a hole completely through the wall to the outside.

“Yeah, and it’s been like this since forever. I think it’s one of the reasons Jason stayed here. He probably paid no rent for this space, or, if there was any, it’s got to be so minor that he could afford it.”

“I can’t imagine paying for this place,” Bronson muttered.

“Exactly, and it’s not like there would have been any competition for renters.”

Bronson shook his head. “It’s a disaster.”

“Yes, it is.” She looked down at all the mess on the floor. “Honestly, even just a couple garbage bags would clean this up. It all looks to be trash.”

“And that’s probably exactly what you’re looking at here,” he agreed. “I saw a couple boxes outside. We can just do it now, if you like.”

She looked at him gratefully. “Would you mind?”

“No, come on. Let’s just deal with it right now.”

Into one box, she sorted what was deemed still good, and, into the other box, they piled up all the garbage. Bronson quickly took it out to the garbage can and emptied it, then came back, and they refilled it three more times. By the time they were done, he looked at the small box of things that were supposedly deemed worth keeping and asked, “Do you want that?”

She stared at it and shook her head. “I don’t even know why I saved any of it. I mean, even the sheets are pretty worn already.”

“If they are washed—”

“His were washed on a regular basis, and that soap can really play havoc on the fabric.” She shook her head. “I don’t really know what to do with the rest of this.”

“It’s no big deal. I’ll just throw it in the Dumpster, along with the rest of it.”

She shuddered. “Shouldn’t there be something of his life left though?” she cried out, staring at Bronson. “Something worthwhile?”

“Yes,” he agreed. “You’ll find it in your memories. It has absolutely nothing to do with the bits and pieces of a material life that went down the drain.” His tone was calm, almost serene, in the eerie darkness surrounding them.

“God.” She kicked the box closer toward him and sighed.

A man behind them asked, “Hey, what are you doing?”



Bronson turned around to see an older man, standing nervously behind him. Robin stepped forward, so her face showed in the light, and the man looked at her and relaxed.

“Oh, it’s you. Sad to hear about your brother, chica. He wasn’t an all-bad man.”

As compliments went, that was nothing to write home about, but Bronson could see that it was given with as much or perhaps more empathy than anybody else around here had offered her.

She nodded. “I know he wasn’t. ... I was really trying hard to help him.”

“We all knew it. Yet family, what can you do?” He looked over at Bronson.

“This is the man who found my brother,” she explained. The older man nodded. “And we’re just trying to clean up my brother’s mess.”

“That’s nice,” the landlord replied. “I appreciate that. I would just throw it all in the Dumpster anyway.”

“Which is pretty well what we’ve done,” she admitted. “Nothing here is worth keeping.”

“No, and, even if there were, a few guys have already been through here pretty fast to take anything of value.” The old man shrugged. “Yet I don’t know when your brother last had anything of value in here.”

“Thank you for letting him stay here,” she said. “At least it kept a roof over his head.”

He smiled. “We used to be friends,” he murmured, “before the booze got him.”

She nodded. “And I appreciate that you didn’t throw him out, like so many would have.”

“It was tempting,” he admitted, with half a smile. “Then I saw how bad he was and knew he’d have no place else to go.”

Now he's finally at peace. So let him go, let him go back to the ocean, where he belongs."

She nodded. "I'll have him cremated and then will take him back out to the same spot."

He smiled. "That sounds real good. You know that's where he wants to be." And, with that, he smiled sadly at her, looked around the room, and shook his head. "It's a sorry night." And, with nothing else to say, he quickly slipped out the door.

"You've obviously met him a couple times before."

"Yes," she replied, with a light nod. "Every time I came looking for my brother and couldn't find him, I'd usually find him passed out on his bed, telling the world to go away."

"At least your brother had somebody advocating for him, besides just you."

"I know." She attempted a smile. "There haven't been too many people, but there have been a couple."

"And that helps to restore your faith in humanity," he noted quietly. With the room more or less cleaned up and just needing to be swept out, Bronson stated, "There's really nothing here, is there?"

"No, ... he lived a very bare-bones existence. If he were back in the US, he would have been on the streets and homeless. It just breaks my heart to think of him in that lifestyle. Here, he at least had this, and he had his job and his hobby."

"What about his job? Do you think anything of his is there, like in an employee locker or whatever, that needs to be cleaned out?"

She frowned as she walked out of the empty room, followed by Bronson, who closed the door that barely even shut properly. She replied, "Right, I should hit the dive shop in the morning,"

"What time does it open?" Bronson asked, as they slowly walked their way back to her place.

“Six.”

Surprised, he said, “Wow, not much opens at that hour in Mexico.”

“No,” she agreed, “but a lot of expats are down here, who don’t think much of the rules and regulations up in the US, so they come here to live the life they want. And a few of the shops here accommodate them.”

“Oh, trust me. I’ve met lots of expats in bars all over the world,” he noted, with a smile.

“They’re not all that bad,” she murmured. “And Chet is a bit of a character, but he had a soft spot for my brother too.”

“Sounds like Jason found some people to make his life worth living.”

“I guess.”

When they reached her apartment, Bronson added, “Look. Let me know when you’re up, and then we’ll meet up and go to the dive shop together, okay?” She stared at him, and he shook his head immediately. “Don’t even think about making any excuses. There’s no reason for me not to come with you. I’m in this far. I may as well go all the way.”

“Says you, ... but I appreciate the support, so thank you.”

As she headed inside, he asked, “You’re sure he didn’t find anything on any of his dives, *huh?*”

She stopped, looked at him, and shook her head. “You’re still thinking about a motive?”

He nodded. “Yeah, kind of. I guess I’d like to think that Jason looked forward to something in his life, so his days were more than just missing his wife or having people hating him or beating him up or threatening revenge or whatever.”

“He didn’t ever say anything to me.” However, she stopped, looked puzzled for a moment, then frowned. “He was excited about something for a while and told me that he was

on to something. But he was always on to something, you know?”

“And, even now, you don’t think it was serious?”

“I didn’t give it a thought at the time.” She stared at Bronson, while considering his question. “It was just more of the same, you know? But I hope, for his sake, it was something great. It would be nice to think that something in his life made Jason happier. Of course he was always out scavenging things. But when I did ask him about it a few days later, he immediately said that it was nothing and that I was better off if I didn’t know. So I assumed it had to do with either booze or drugs, which I definitely didn’t want to know about.” She grimaced. “So I never asked him about it again.”

“And with his history, that would be a reasonable assumption.”

“Maybe it was,” she muttered. “Let’s just say that I was happy to let it rest.”

He nodded. “But, if he did find something and if it was something that he didn’t want you to get involved with, it’s quite possibly something that could have gotten him killed.”

“Let’s hope not,” she said, “but we can ask more about it tomorrow.”

## CHAPTER 5

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APPROACHING THE DIVE shop early the next morning, Robin wasn't at all surprised to see Bronson there, waiting for her. She smiled, as he held up two steaming cups of coffee and handed her one. She looked at it in appreciation. "You definitely have some local contacts to know where there's coffee at this hour."

"Yeah, it wasn't that easy."

"What about your hotel?"

He shook his head. "Nope, not until six-thirty a.m. And we chose to meet just a little bit too early for that."

"Ah, yet you managed to figure it out somehow. So I'll just be happy about it and count you as resourceful."

As they approached the dive shop, he looked around. "I didn't even notice this yesterday."

"It's been here for, oh, probably ten years. ... No." She shook her head at that. "A lot longer, maybe twelve years."

At that, a man hailed from behind them. "Nearly fifteen."

She turned to find Chet coming toward them.

"Hey, are you heading out diving this morning?" he asked curiously.

"No, I'm not," she replied. "I'm sure you heard about my brother."

He nodded. "News like that travels fast."

"With no small amount of glee, I'm sure," she quipped.

He looked at her, gave her a flat stare, and stated, "You know what your brother was like, and you don't have to hear it from anybody else," he declared. "Sure, some will be

cheering, others saying, *Good riddance*, but that doesn't change the fact that he was still your brother."

"Thank you, I appreciate that," she murmured.

"So what are you here for then?" he asked, as he opened the door wide, hooked something on the top to keep the door open, then turned on the lights inside.

"I thought that he might have some of his belongings here that I needed to pick up," she replied.

He turned toward her. "He's got a locker in the back, but I don't know if anything's in it or not," he murmured. "You're welcome to go check it out, if you like."

"Thanks. We cleaned out his place last night."

Chet snorted. "That wouldn't have taken all of five minutes."

"A little bit longer than that," she noted. "We hauled off a lot of junk, and it also looked like the place had been tossed."

"And that was probably the locals, celebrating the fact that he was gone, plus checking to see if they could take anything to settle up some of the ill will between them."

"That's what we figured," she stated. "It's such a hard legacy."

"But it was his legacy, not yours, so don't get caught up in it," Chet warned her again.

"You have quite a pragmatic attitude for so early in the day," she said, laughing.

"I've known your brother for a long time, and I tried before you to get him to clean up his act, and I couldn't make him do it. So I'm really not surprised that he didn't respond all that well to your efforts either. When the drink gets a hold of a man like that, it's pretty hard to do anything about it."

"No, you're right. It's tough. The worst part is that sense of feeling like a failure."

“Which you’re absolutely not,” Chet declared. “You’re a sister who loved him. He knew that. He used to tell me all the time that he felt bad about ruining your life, by keeping you down here, and that he wanted to send you home, but you refused.”

“He was hardly ruining my life,” she protested, staring at Chet. “You never mentioned that before.”

“What was I supposed to say?” he asked, with a snort. “Your brother didn’t want to go anywhere or to do anything anymore. This life suited him, and all he was doing was putting in time, before he could rejoin his wife. So whoever killed him did him a favor in a way.” He turned his sharp gaze to Bronson. “So what does any of this have to do with you?”

She rushed in to answer for Bronson. “He’s the man who found my brother’s body.” At that, Chet nodded, but his gaze remained focused on Bronson, as Chet studied him. “And?”

“And,” Bronson answered for himself this time, “I’m sticking around to help her out for a few days.”

“Ah, so it’s not so much about finding out about Jason as much as it is to get to know Robin.”

“Not at all,” Bronson corrected Chet. “A fact of the matter that everybody seems to be forgetting or doesn’t care about is that her brother was murdered.”

“Yeah, he was murdered, and it could have been by a dozen different guys. I’m kind of surprised only one stab wound was in his back,” Chet stated loudly. “Jason scuttled with the law more times than I could bail him out, and the locals hated his guts.”

“Not all of them though. His landlord didn’t appear to,” Bronson argued.

“No, that’s true. They did have a decent relationship,” he admitted, “and Jason and I were fine, but not everybody felt the same way.”

“No, but his money was still good whenever he spent it, I would imagine,” Bronson added.

“Yeah, mostly, and that was part of the problem. He had just enough to get himself into trouble all the time. I kept him in dive gear and supplies, but, other than that, he only had his pension. But at least he had that much,” he said. “Still, for a guy like him, with double the addictions—three if you count diving—it proved to be too much in a way because it kept him in booze and drugs. If he had been a little more broke, he would have had to work more, and maybe that would have helped him kick the habit. But down here? He could live off his navy pension.”

“How long was he in for?” Bronson asked in surprise. “That’s the first I’ve heard about it.”

“Twenty years,” he replied, looking back at Bronson. “And then he ended up getting out early on a disability.”

“What was his disability?”

“He got a brain injury,” Chet added. “I don’t know how bad it was, though it never stopped him from diving. However, it certainly seemed to give him some behavioral issues within the system. It was enough that he had the choice of taking the disability pension or taking a desk job. The option was always clear for him. A desk job would have killed Jason.”

“Right.” Bronson nodded. “At least he got to enjoy a few years anyway.”

“He did, indeed.”

At that, Chet turned toward Robin and waved her into the back. “Come on. I’ll show you where his locker is.” As she followed him, she cast a look back at Bronson and asked, “Are you coming?”

He nodded. “Sure.” And he fell into step behind them.





BRONSON THOUGHT SOMETHING was odd about Chet, but then anybody who'd spent as many years down here dealing with the locals and the tourists and who had carved himself a whole new life had a right to be himself and to be different from everyone else. Obviously Chet must have made some big life changes to make this work for him here, and that was both good and bad because it gave him a certain independence that was good, yet it also made him wary of anybody coming to rock the boat. And that was bad.

The three of them walked into the back room, past crates and crates of gear that still hadn't been unpacked. Bronson was amazed at the sheer volume of it. "Wow, you must do a booming business," he muttered.

"I do. Why do you ask?"

"You've got an awful lot tied up in inventory," Bronson muttered, as he looked around.

"Any business must have a certain amount of inventory. Deliveries can be hit-or-miss down here, and quality can be varied. So, when I get a chance to bring in the good stuff, I do. It's a bit of an investment," he admitted, "and, so far, it's worked out well."

The whole thing made Bronson appreciate the size of the business and see it in a different light. "It's a pretty amazing operation. I could see me doing something like this when I retire."

"It's a popular area," Chet replied, over his shoulder.

Bronson stopped, when he saw the two up ahead, motioning at a series of lockers, then Chet pointed to one. "This is his."

"His locker isn't shut," she stated, stepping forward.

"He was never very good about closing it. Kind of like his apartment door," Chet noted, with an eyebrow raised.

She nodded. "It just seems odd that it wouldn't be closed."

“I just got here, so I haven’t even been back here until now.”

She flipped the door fully open and said, “It’s completely empty.”

“When was the last time you saw it?” Bronson asked her.

“I saw it last week,” she replied, “and it was stuffed.”

“With anything in particular?” Bronson asked.

She shrugged. “Honestly it could have just been garbage for all I know.”

Bronson nodded. “Anything here that’s making you feel uneasy?”

At that, Chet looked at him. “What’s to feel uneasy about?”

Bronson gave him a steady stare and repeated once more, “Jason was murdered.”

“Yeah, he was murdered,” Chet said, with an eye roll, “but do you have any idea how many people wanted him dead?”

“Probably a lot, but nobody seems to care about the fact that somebody did the job.”

“No, that’s true,” Chet agreed, with a nod. “It’s partly just the way things are done here.”

“And partly his horrible reputation?” Bronson asked, cocking his head.

“Yeah, honestly there’s a reason why we prefer to live here. A lot fewer rules and limitations, and not nearly so many people trying to tell you what you can and cannot do.”

“And when something does go wrong, hardly anyone gives a damn?” Bronson asked.

“Exactly, and Jason knew what it was like as well as anyone,” Chet stated calmly. “The bottom line is, he’s dead. You can raise Cain all you want, but nobody will appreciate it.”

“Message received.” Bronson nodded, then looked over at her. “And?”

She shrugged. “I mean, there’s really nothing here to clean up of his life.”

“But you knew that,” Bronson stated gently.

“I know. I know,” she muttered, “but I keep expecting to find something, some evidence of his life, but it’s as if it’s all gone.”

“What about that scenario he got involved in a while back?” Bronson asked. She frowned at him, not necessarily getting his hints. “When he found something.”

“Oh, yeah.” She turned to Chet. “He got really excited a while back,” she explained. “Do you know what that was about? He told me how he had found something but didn’t elaborate, yet said it would be a big payday.”

“No, I never heard anything like that.” Chet relaxed against the back door. “What was it about?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “When I asked him about it later, he told me that it wasn’t something he wanted me to get involved in.”

Chet just stared at her.

“Right. I don’t know,” she muttered. “It just feels like something I should have checked into a little more now.”

“If Jason had wanted you to know about it, he would have told you something more.”

“And yet, what if he was trying to protect me?” she asked, with a wry tone.

“From what?” Chet asked.

“I don’t know. What if he found something valuable, and somebody stole it? What if he found something that wasn’t so much about being stolen, but that people may not want him talking about?” she suggested.

“So, you’re looking for a motive for the murder?” Chet asked, frowning.

“Sure, I mean, he’s still my brother. He still died under very suspicious circumstances, and I would still like answers.”

He continued to frown at her, his fingers clicking away on the metal locker door. “You know that heading down that pathway is dangerous, right?”

“And yet,” she added, “it’s hard to let go of.”

“Maybe hard to let go of, sure,” Chet agreed, “but this isn’t a nice orderly little seaside town in the US. Here, people don’t take kindly when you start investigating shit like that. I’m not saying he was involved in anything. You certainly know about his druggy past. For all I know, he went back into that.”

“I hope not,” she said immediately. “I worked really hard on that aspect.”

“Sure, but he never really got off the drugs,” he reminded her. “He just got to where he couldn’t afford them anymore. So, even if he did find something that would give him an easy payday, you know what he’d do with the money. He’d spend it immediately. And I sure never saw him with any money to spare.”

“No, I know.” She scrubbed her face. “I don’t even know what I was expecting to find. But, after last night, I just realized that he had a locker here and thought I should probably clean out.”

“I appreciate the thought,” Chet noted. “Honestly it hadn’t really crossed my mind. I would have just left it as is until some future day, when I had some use for the space. At the moment it’s of zero value, so it’s all just sitting here.”

“And yet all that’s just sitting here is nothing,” she noted.

“Right, so sentimental value and all that,” Chet replied, with a nod.

At least he didn’t give her any argument, which Bronson appreciated, because it made it easier to deal with her if she

wasn't terribly traumatized. Bronson didn't know why he was still hanging around her, except that something was endearing and almost familiar about her. Because of his own brother, Bronson understood what she was going through. He knew how it felt to lose a brother in a senseless act of violence, and, maybe in some way, Bronson could help minimize some of her pain—although it sounded like her brother had done an awful lot to cause all kinds of trouble in her life, just by being himself and by living the kind of life that he led.

Sometimes Bronson wondered if it would be better if everybody just walked away and let troubled people live their lives, without family rushing in to try and save them. In his brother's case, Bronson often thought that his brother got worse because he knew Bronson was there, reaching out a hand. Yet his brother didn't want a hand. His brother wanted to be a *big man*. He had to exude that he was all grown up, even if it was only a façade. He wanted to be the big guy, the tough guy, not just some eighteen-year-old punk trying to find himself. And, if he had lived long enough, his brother would have eventually gotten his head together.

But, as it was, he didn't make it to that stage in life, and the results were permanent. In Robin's brother's case, at forty-five, Jason already knew what it was like to have a life, but he deliberately chose not to have one that Robin could make peace with. Nobody's family would have made peace with Jason's lifestyle.

Maybe that was just because he no longer cared, or maybe he could no longer change. For someone that far gone, it was hard to see anything else in life. Maybe, if he'd managed to find a new partner, it would have been enough to give him a reason to care because obviously his family wasn't enough for Jason. And Bronson knew that was a realization Robin would no doubt have to come to at some point in time.

It wasn't an easy one. It wouldn't ever be easy to find out that your brother loved you but just not enough. Yet, in the end, that's what it boiled down to. Bronson could sympathize on both sides, but that didn't help anybody.

## CHAPTER 6

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**A**FTER THE VISIT to the dive shop, Robin led the way to a small beach and a huge log. She slumped down on top of it and looked up at him. “So now what?”

“Now I’ll wait around long enough to find a place open to go get breakfast,” he replied. “Will you come with me?”

She shrugged. “I’m not even sure I could eat.”

“Did you get any sleep last night?”

“I did.” Yet her tone was morose. “I feel like I shouldn’t have, like I should have been churned up by guilt. Instead, the fact is, I got some decent sleep.”

He sat down, picked up her hand, and stared at her. “Look. I know that we’re expected to feel guilty. And we’re expected to be torn up with grief and all that,” he shared. “It will hit you when you think about the future and when you realize Jason’s not in it. However, at the same time, you also must be honest and realize there’s a part of you that is relieved to have it over with. The fact that he died, that he’s dead and gone? That realization is likely to make you feel terribly traumatized, and what you really need to do is understand that it’s okay. That your feelings are valid and need to be allowed.”

“How can that possibly ever be okay?” she asked, staring at him.

“Because it’s normal, that twin pull of grief and relief. I think that’s true of anybody who is dealing with a long slow death, like your brother,” he explained. “And don’t tell me that he wasn’t dying because he obviously was. He was poisoning himself or whatever you want to call it, but it was a slow and very torturous end to a life of nothingness. Surely he was depressed enough that he must have thought about committing suicide?”

She nodded. “He mentioned it a couple times, but I don’t know of anything recent.”

“No, but you know, by living as he was, that the atmosphere wouldn’t be good. You did everything you could to change it, and it couldn’t be changed. Now it’s over and done with, and you are left to move on and to pick up the pieces.”

“How do you live with the fact that he was murdered and nobody cares?” she asked Bronson, staring at him. “If it were your brother, you wouldn’t leave that unturned.”

“What if you find out who the killer is, and yet there’s still no justice for Jason’s murder?” Bronson asked.

“I don’t know,” she murmured. “That would be a hard one.”

“And yet you’re aware of the problems inherent here with the authorities and yet are okay with the system that runs down here.”

“The thing is, it runs.” She huffed. “I mean, I didn’t like it, and it took me a long time to even comprehend how it worked, but Jason had made it very clear that rocking the boat wouldn’t help anything. As far as he was concerned, this was the best life for him. ... It’s not just the fact that he died,” she added. “He was murdered, Bronson.”

“And you can’t believe it to be just a senseless murder by a random person?”

“Not really,” she whispered.

“Fine. So how do you want to solve it?” When she looked at him in complete shock, he shrugged. “I’m here for another day or so, and I don’t imagine it could be all that confusing,” he suggested. “But what it’ll do is stir up a hornet’s nest, and that could make it dangerous. So, if you’re going to do this, let’s ask the questions while I’m around, so at least I can watch your back.”

She winced. “I don’t even know where to start,” she muttered.

“What about the friends who went diving with him that last time?”

“I already talked with them—twice. They told me that he didn’t come up for air, and they were too drunk to go back down looking for him.”

“Which is also part of the problem, isn’t it? Because nobody really wants to say anything.”

“No, they don’t. Nobody will rock that boat you spoke of. Nobody wants to say anything. Nobody ever wants to get involved here,” she stated bitterly. “The bottom line is, if you get yourself killed, *You got yourself killed, and you probably deserved it. Good riddance.*”

He winced at her sharp tone. “And you’re probably right, but let me talk to them.”

She stared at him, then shrugged. “If they’ll talk to you, then fine. For all I know, they might just kick us out of there.”

“Then let’s go get kicked out.” Bronson gave a one-arm shrug. “And I also would suggest we talk to the authorities sometime today.”

“Yeah, they’ll be a joy and a half too,” she snapped, and then she groaned. “It’s just sad. I mean, literally nobody cares. You want somebody to care when you die. You want to know that somebody cares, that somebody will miss you, that somebody will look after the fact that you were murdered.”

“Did Jason care?” Bronson asked curiously.

“No.” Her shoulders slumped yet again. “He didn’t give a damn about anything.”

Bronson sighed. “And that could have been the booze talking, the drugs talking, the pain talking, the depression talking. We don’t know. All I remember is thinking about that with my brother. I don’t know what happens when we die, and nobody does until it happens. Still, I went through some



scenarios after my baby brother was killed, and it helped some. Maybe it'd help you too." He paused, like waiting for her permission or something.

"Sure, why not?" she said, with an airy wave of her hand.

"One theory is there is no afterlife. If so, then Jason feels no pain, feels no urge to drink away the pain, has no memory of his wife or you. While the separation from your brother hurts you, at least you can tell yourself that he's no longer in pain of any fashion."

She sighed. "There is that."

"On the other end of the spectrum is heaven. I particularly liked that view, even if nobody has any concrete evidence. But being surrounded by my family who went before me, even all my pets growing up, and feeling no pain, having no money worries, surrounded by peace and tranquility, it all sure has its selling points. ... I was younger back then, not so jaded, so that option helped me the most."

"As long as there is diving in heaven."

Bronson laughed. "To be heaven, it would have to have water and oceans and lakes, right?" When his humor fell flat with her, he added, "Which isn't the point because, of course, you care, so do what it takes to help you through this mourning period. You don't like to travel, so that is out. You're a workaholic already, so I'm not sure that your career would be enough added to or different in your schedule for you. I've heard of art therapy, if that appeals, or you can always go talk it out with a shrink or a good friend. Although, in your case, diving would probably soothe your soul the best. That and finding closure as to who did this to Jason. However, even years later, you will still miss him, and that will matter."

"Does it?" she asked. "I don't think it mattered to him."

"No, it didn't seem to because his booze mattered more, maybe because his own pain and grief was too much to handle. Did he deserve to get killed? We hope not," Bronson stated. "But you know that there'll be a lot of people who say

just his lifestyle alone was enough to get him shot or killed. But this was no drunken accident. It's not as if he drove his car over a cliff while drunk out of his mind."

"He didn't have a car," she murmured.

"And he wasn't high as a kite and walked off a building rooftop either. That knife in his back was proof enough. Although ... maybe we should check with the local coroner, see about any autopsy?"

Robin snorted. "Yeah, good luck with that."

"I don't know," Bronson added. "Jason was an American veteran. Maybe I should run that by my boss," Bronson murmured.

Robin shook her head. "Don't get your hopes up. I don't see Mexico giving a flying fig about what the US Navy wants. Just saying ..."

"Regardless," Bronson replied, "this was deliberate and personal, not some shotgun spray into a crowd. This was somebody down there in the depths of the water—meaning, our killer was a diver too—someone intentionally taking care of your brother and ending his life in a way that is fundamentally wrong. And, if you could have saved Jason, you would have." With that, he phoned Mason, got him on his first attempt, then explained things as they stood.

Mason groaned. "Good news and bad. I have a contact there, but don't hold your breath. Hang on. I'll call now."

Bronson waited for a surprisingly short time, and Mason came right back on the line. "Yeah, we don't have any standing, even with a retired navy man murdered in Mexico. And the coroner has no plans to do an autopsy, deeming it a murder, complete with the murder weapon."

Bronson sighed. "Thanks for checking."

"Keep me updated," Mason added, then disconnected.

Bronson looked over at her but she'd apparently heard enough. She hopped to her feet. "Let's go." Then she stopped,

looked at her watch, and added, “Okay, let’s get breakfast first.”

“Nobody’s up yet, right? I mean, Jason’s diving buddies.”

“No, they won’t be. Or, if they are, they won’t be talking yet.”

“Fine, breakfast first.” It didn’t take long to reach her destination, and they waited at the restaurant as it was just opening up. He asked, “Did you talk to your uncle?”

At that, her phone rang. She checked her cell phone screen, then looked back at Bronson in amazement.

“Don’t tell me that’s your uncle.”

“It absolutely is.” She answered the call. “Hey, Uncle Jerry. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” he said, “but I’m worried about you. How are you holding up?”

“Yeah, I’m holding up okay,” she replied. And she was. Sleep had helped. “I know Jason was on a destructive pathway. I’ve heard it all. And, since his body was found, believe me. I’m hearing it a lot more, much more than I really wanted to.”

“Of course he made a lot of enemies.”

“Yeah, I’ll come back to the States in a few days. We cleaned out his apartment, his residence, well, such as it was, last night,” she shared, choking over the word “apartment.”

“And his locker?”

“Yeah, his locker too, just now at the dive shop. I still should talk to the cops, and nobody has a clue who would have killed him.”

“I’m sure. Go easy on the cops. They don’t have much to go on.”

“I know, but it would still be nice to have answers.” She listened quietly for a long moment as he tried to make her feel

better, and then, when he finally ran out of words on the other end, she said, "I'll talk to you later, Uncle Jerry." And, with that, she hung up.

"Sounds like he's of the same opinion."

"*Everybody* is of the same opinion," she snapped bitterly. "My brother's life was a mess. He was heading down this pathway, whether I'm ready to accept it or not."

"I think you're more than ready to accept it," he clarified, "but you would like answers."

"I would," she agreed, "yet apparently that's asking too much."

"Well, accepting his death is one thing. Accepting his murder is something else altogether."

"Exactly."



AFTER BREAKFAST, BRONSON followed Robin to where her brother's dive friends hung out. When she knocked on the door, one of the men opened it and immediately stared at her, a glimmer of resentment in his eyes. She winced at the hostility. "Hey, I don't want to disturb you, Julio, but we have a few questions about what happened when you were out diving."

He looked at her for a long moment, shifted, and looked at Bronson. "Who are you?"

"A friend," he replied equally bluntly. "We're trying to figure out who murdered her brother."

"Doesn't matter who murdered her brother," he declared. "Good riddance."

"Maybe so," she replied calmly, "but it's hard to believe he deserved to die."

"He didn't," Julio replied immediately. "He didn't deserve to die." He stared at them as if he expected them to take that as the gospel truth.

“How long did you guys look for Jason?” Bronson asked.

He shrugged. “We stayed up on the surface for maybe forty-five minutes. But, once his oxygen was gone, no point waiting any longer.”

“Did anybody go back down to look for him?” Robin asked him.

He shook his head.

Bronson stared at Julio for a long moment. “Why not?”

“We were drinking,” he admitted bluntly, “and were past the point of being able to go back down.”

“And you aren’t the kind of drunks who make that type of decision well under the influence?”

“No, definitely not,” he confirmed. “We all had an agreement that, if and when we got to a certain point of drunkenness, if somebody does go in, nobody goes after him.” He hesitated, then looked at her and over at Bronson. “Like him, when we drink, we drink hard. Way too many of our friends haven’t come back from dives,” Julio told them. “You make all kinds of decisions when you are drunk that you wouldn’t make when you’re sober, so we had a pact between us. We agreed not to go into the water afterward.”

“Because lots of your friends have died in similar ways?” Bronson asked, for clarity.

Julio nodded. “Most of the deaths were people who were drunk and who thought it was a good idea to go down and look, but really? Half the time the supposedly missing person is already on another boat because somebody else already found them, or they are already dead, and there’s nothing that can be done. Now we set timers when some drunk idiot goes off on a dive, and, if you don’t come up before your tank is useless, you don’t come up.”

“And, of course, Jason knew that ahead of time?” Bronson asked Julio.

“Always,” Julio stated emphatically. “You can ask anybody. They all knew. And there have been just enough people who have managed to come back up that everybody knows there is no help for them but themselves at that point.”

“Right.” Bronson nodded. “But Jason was normal going down?”

“He was normal going down.”

“And how many of you were there?”

“The three of us,” Julio replied. “Jason went for a dive, and Sanchez and I were on the boat, still drinking.”

“He didn’t go down with a partner?” Robin asked in surprise.

“No, wanted to go look for something. He told us that he saw something there the other day, and he wanted to go take another look.”

“He also said he found something here a few weeks back.” She leaned in closer. “Do you know what that was?”

“I don’t know, but he got really excited about it. He told us all about it too. But then he went really quiet afterward, so we figured that it might be a really big score, and he didn’t want to share. Caused us a bit of hard feelings for a while,” he admitted. “But then, when he still didn’t say anything more about finding something, we figured he was just blowing hot air, shooting his mouth off, you know? Your brother came up with some pretty tall tales sometimes.”

“I know,” she agreed. “So you don’t know what it was he was after?”

“Honestly I’m not sure. He did mention a weapon one time. Then another time he said something was worth a lot of money.”

“Is that why he went down there?”

“I have no idea”—Julio shrugged—“but he wanted to go back to that location.”

“I understand that you two shared the one boat. That he was trying to buy it from you, but I know Jason had money problems. So, it remained your boat, and that was the only way he could get back out there, I guess,” Robin noted.

“Primarily, yeah. That’s what we thought too. I told him that I’d take him back to wherever he wanted to go, but he said it was dangerous.”

“Dangerous in what way?” Bronson asked.

“No clue,” Julio stated cheerfully. “I figured he just meant that the dive itself was dangerous.”

Bronson frowned. “Not that the find was dangerous to bring it to the surface or because it would make somebody else angry or that it was worth so much money that it would be dangerous to even have it? Anything at all like that?”

“No, that’s not the impression I had,” he replied. “But who knows? Ever since that started, your brother was acting a little weird.”

She stared at him. “Weird how?”

“I don’t know, just a little weirder than usual,” he said. “Jason kept wanting to go back to that spot. We had lots of other dive places that we liked to go, but he wanted to go to that one spot.”

“So why did you humor him on that day?”

“He gave me twenty bucks,” he told her, with a shrug. “Most of the time your brother didn’t have enough money to even put food on the table, but he said it was time.”

“Time for what?”

“To go and get whatever it was he thought he wanted,” Julio said.

“So how do you know that he didn’t get it?” she asked.

He stared at her for a long moment. “I don’t know. ... Other boats were in the area,” he offered suddenly.

“Which boats?”

“Hernandez was over there with a couple guys.”

“Some tourists?”

He nodded. “Two guys.”

“Were they diving the same shipwreck too?”

He nodded. “I know your brother was upset when we got there because he started to swear, and Jason was worried that they would get his prize. I asked him what it was, and maybe he should have told me because, when he went down, I never saw him again.”

“And he wouldn’t tell you?”

“No, he wouldn’t tell me,” Julio stated, “and I was getting kind of angry at him because of it, but he stayed mum.”

“Have you been back there since?”

“No, no way. I don’t go where people have died.”

“So now what? Now you won’t go back there at all?”

“No,” he declared, with a shudder. “He died there. It’ll just become the next haunted spot,” he explained. “Some people will pay extra for that, but I don’t want anything to do with it.”

“Who would pay extra?” Bronson asked curiously.

“Tourists. They love the haunted spots. It’s one of the reasons that we rarely tell them of these locations because, unless you’re prepared to go, there’s no point because, sure as hell, that’s where they’ll want to go.”

“All of them?”

“Not the female tourists who are diving,” he noted. “Women are much less likely to want to go on a ghost hunt or to go diving in a ghostly area like that,” he shared. “But you can always bet that there would be some guy who wants to go. So, better that you just don’t tell them.”

“And yet this was already considered a haunted area, right?” Bronson asked Julio.



He nodded. “Yeah, it’s one of the reasons I don’t like to go there. And ... that guy died there about ten years ago, so I know not very much will be left of his body.”

“Right, just bones,” Robin stated.

He nodded. “Just bones.”

“So, do you have any idea who all was out there on that dive in the Hernandez boat?” Bronson asked Julio.

“No. Like I said, the boat was there, and it looked like they had two divers out.”

“White men?”

“Yeah, it usually is,” Julio replied. “They come down for the diving, hire local people to take them out to interesting places, give us enough money to make it worth our while, and sometimes they come back for another visit to the haunted spots. Sometimes they move on to another location.”

“Right,” Bronson muttered. “It would be nice to have an idea who those two guys were.”

“They were at the pub last night, laughing and drinking pretty heavily,” Julio said. “Them and the boat crew.”

“Which pub?” Bronson asked Julio.

“The same place you were last night.” Julio snorted.

She stared at him. “I didn’t see them.”

“They came in afterward.”

“Anybody hear anything?”

He hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah. They were doing a lot of laughing about the haunted shipwreck.”

“Interesting,” Bronson noted. “But, of course, they didn’t say anything helpful, did they?”

He shook his head. “They didn’t say nothing that was bad. And, if they did say anything about Jason, they didn’t mention his name.”

“But they were all there at the same time?” she questioned.

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“You didn’t question them either?”

“We asked if they saw a diver down there, and they told us no. They were drinking too,” he admitted. “And when we told them who was missing”—Julio winced and looked over at her—“you know how that goes.”

“Yeah, I do.” She stepped back. “Thanks for letting me know.”

“Hey, tough deal.”

“It is.”

“It’d be better if you’d just let it go,” he added.

“Wouldn’t that be nice? However, that’s not the easiest thing to do. He’s still my brother.”

“He’s still your brother, but your brother was a loser,” Julio declared. “He was my friend, and I know he was a loser, but I still loved him. And I’m sorry about what happened.”

“Me too,” she muttered. “Thanks, and, if you hear anything, let me know.”

“I don’t know what you expect me to hear but sure.”

“I don’t expect anything to turn up. I know how the law looks at it here,” she stated, with a headshake.

Bronson looked over at her and could only imagine how the lack of any kind of penalty for the murder of her brother must impact her. He gently laid his hand on her shoulder. “Thanks for letting us know,” Bronson told Julio, as he turned Robin away from the house.

As they walked away, he waited for the guy to close his door, but Julio took quite a while. Finally Bronson looked back to see that they weren’t being watched any longer. “Are you okay?” Bronson asked Robin.

“Feel like shit,” she said.

“Does that make sense, the pact they made?”

“Unfortunately it does,” she admitted, “and Jason did mention it to me.”

“Interesting.”

“You have to understand how they lived and how the bottle was king. But somebody still stuck a knife in his back,” she stated, with a sigh.

“And yet you seem to be less upset about it.”

“No, I think I’m finally coming to realize how much the lifestyle Jason chose to live would impact him,” she noted. “That’s heartbreaking.”

“Do you want to track down who those guys were on the other boat and talk to them?”

“I feel like I need to,” she admitted.

“Probably so,” Bronson agreed.

“And what about you?” she asked. “Are you leaving today?”

“No, if I were heading back, it would be tomorrow,” he noted, “so I’m here to help you out for now.”

“It’s not your fight. You know that, right?”

“A man’s been murdered, and I get that he wasn’t necessarily a good man by any of today’s standards, but he was still an innocent party in this.”

“That’s how I look at it,” she admitted. “Thanks, I’ll take all the help I can get.”

“Do you feel as if you’re in any danger now?”

“I don’t think so. I think both the locals and the cops are just hoping I’ll go away very soon and stay away.”

“You will, but let’s go to the cops first.”

She looked at him in surprise. “You’re not expecting any answers from them, are you?”

“Nope, but it’s all due diligence.” And, with that, he turned her toward the police station.

## CHAPTER 7

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WALKING OUT OF the police station one hour later, Robin could feel her hopes of getting answers dissipating fast. “I didn’t expect that to go any differently than it did. Unfortunately.”

“They certainly didn’t have much information, did they?” He walked beside her. Close but not touching. Supportive.

“No. *He’s dead. What else do you want to be told?*” she repeated, with grief suddenly choking her. “He wouldn’t even confirm that a knife was in his back. I saw it sitting in an evidence bag off to the side.”

“That’s something at least.”

“It’s something, but it’s not anything helpful,” she snapped.

“The fact that it was even in an evidence bag should make you feel a little better.”

“Maybe,” she muttered. “I just feel like they don’t really care. If they did, forensics should have had it. But I doubt any of that happens here.”

“They probably don’t care, unless the murderer is another white man,” Bronson suggested. “Then maybe they would care a little. Because that would have proven that their locals weren’t involved, and, therefore, they could go about their business and prosecute somebody they would all like to see behind bars.”

She grimaced. “It’s not even that but getting actively involved in cases like this slows down the tourist dollars, and everybody here needs those.”

“I heard that too.” Bronson placed his arm on her shoulders, his hand giving her a gentle massage. “Life has

thrown you a curve ball.”

“A couple of them,” she noted. “I keep thinking about what Jason might have found.”

“Or maybe didn’t find?”

She nodded.

“You want to go back?”

She turned to him and said, “No, and yet, yes.”

He shrugged. “It’s a beautiful day, and I’m always up for a dive.”

She grinned. “You’re serious?”

“Why not? ... And if there is anything that we need to do before we go take a closer look, then let’s get it done first.”

She stared at him. “Are you always this easy to get along with?”

“Why not?” he asked. “I’m here. I’m diving, which is something I love to do. Your brother was living a life I would have loved,” he shared, “except for the drunken and drugged and then murdered part.”

“I know,” she agreed. “I’d often thought that someday I’d retire with my own little dive shop somewhere down in the Caribbean maybe.”

“Right.” Bronson laughed. “So maybe we need to figure this out, just so we can preserve our dreams of the future.”

“Hey, I like that.” Impulsively she gave him a hug. “I really do appreciate that you stuck around.”

“It seemed like the right thing to do at the time,” he murmured.

“I don’t know if that’s how very many people would look at it, but I do appreciate it.”

“Now what do we have to do in order to head out? Plus, I was wondering if we’ve asked all the questions we need to.”

“I think we need to talk to the guys who were at the bar last night,” she added, “the ones out diving at the same time.”

“Makes sense,” Bronson said. “Just the one hotel in town is where I’m at.”

“Yeah, I know. So they were right there while you were sleeping?”

“That’s not exactly encouraging.”

“Unless they didn’t sleep at all.” She smiled. “We get lots of guys who stay up all night and party on, and then they can’t sleep. It’s almost as if they’re on this heavy bender that they can’t quite kick.”

“And then what?”

“Then they’re usually down at the beach, sleeping.”

“I didn’t see anybody when I walked over here.”

“I doubt it. It’s usually the younger ones.”

And, with that, they headed for the hotel. As they got to the front desk, she smiled at the guy behind it. “Hey, Rico. Have you still got a couple divers here, white guys?”

He nodded. “Yeah, but news around here is that they’re often drunk,” he offered, with a smile.

“How long are they staying?” Bronson asked.

“They’re leaving today,” he replied. “Why?”

“I just wondered,” Robin said, “because they were out diving at the same time and place where my brother died.”

Rico nodded. “I heard that rumor too.”

“You think it’s only a rumor?”

“No, they were talking about the dive, something about the ghost.” Then he frowned and added, “I don’t know. I didn’t hear it all, but there was definitely something about a ghost.”

“Yeah, they say my brother will haunt the place where he died.”

“You must get his body back,” Rico stated, studying her carefully. “He wanted to stay in the ocean.”

“That’s the plan,” she replied, “but it will go back after he’s been cremated.”

“But you’ll take him back?” he asked her.

“I was planning to throw his ashes into the ocean over the shipwreck.”

“Good, good,” he said. “You should do it soon.”

“I can’t get the body back from the police yet.”

He frowned at that. “Why not?”

“Because it’s a murder,” she said, holding tight to her exasperation.

He shrugged. “So, I mean, dead is dead, right? He’s dead?”

She winced at that. “You’re right about that,” she murmured. “I think they’re just hanging on to it for form’s sake.”

“Ah, to make it look like they’re doing something? Yeah, that makes sense.” Rico nodded. “You should get it back by tomorrow.”

She nodded and gave Rico a wave. As they walked up to the hotel room they were looking for, Robin murmured, “It’s all so simple for them here. ... It’s an easy way to look at life, isn’t it?”

“After you left the office, I did ask the cops when you could have the body,” Bronson noted. “They told me that you would be notified later today.”

“That we can have it today?”

He shrugged. “I assume, but I don’t know for sure. Where will you get it cremated?”

She winced at that. “I’ll have to hire somebody to haul it to the closest crematorium. Jesus, I don’t even know where that is.”



“Could be Mexico City, but what do I know?”

“No, it shouldn’t be that far. I think there’s one in the next city.”

“Hopefully. It would be good for you to get that taken care of before leaving here.”

“Yes, I know.” She wrapped her arms around her chest. “That’ll mean another trip out.”

“So, we’ll go talk to these divers, and then we will go take another look at what it was that your brother was dealing with out there at the shipwreck. Then we can do one more trip after the cremation.”

“Do you really think they will let us have the body that fast?”

“I think so,” he replied. “They probably don’t have the facilities for long-term storage, so they must do something.”

She winced at that. “I hadn’t thought about that, but you’re right. They probably don’t.”

At that, they hit the second floor, and they knocked on the hotel room door. It opened almost immediately, and the guy was midstep and stared at them. “Hey, I was just stepping out. What can I do for you?”

Robin introduced herself and then Bronson.

The guy managed to look suitably sad. “I heard about your brother. I’m really sorry about that.”

“So, you guys didn’t see him down there? You didn’t have anything to do with him?”

“No, we sure didn’t, but we weren’t so much inside the wreck as we were around it,” he replied. “On the outside.”

“Right, so you don’t have a clue if anybody else was there?”

“Only the two boats were out there. I figured the other one was his friends,” he said, using his fingers to make quotation

marks in the air. “Or whatever passes for a friend here.”

She nodded. “Had you ever met Jason before?”

“Yeah, I saw him a couple times before. We’ve been coming here twice a year for the last couple years,” he shared.

“What about that dive spot? Do you always go there?”

“It’s one of my brother’s favorite spots, and we’re going back out there to the same shipwreck to dive all day today too,” he said, with a shrug and a head nod into the room. “I don’t really care either way. I mean, I just like to dive. We usually do a couple of the usual spots, the most popular places, but we also try to check out new places when we’re here.”

“So, an odd visit this time?” Bronson asked.

She turned to look at him. His tone was fine, but he was right. This seemed to not be their normal visit, so an odd one.

“Yeah,” the tourist added. “My brother is having some tough times at home, and I just wanted to get him away for a couple days and give him a break.”

“That was nice of you.” She gave him a bright smile and stepped back. “In that case, we’ll let you go. Thanks for the information.”

“Not that I could do anything to help your brother,” he added, “and that’s sad all around, but diving accidents happen.”

She nodded. “You guys look after yourselves while you’re out there today.”

“We will.” He smiled in return. “Sorry we couldn’t help you.” Then he turned and walked away.

On the surface everything sounded right.

As soon as they stepped outside, she shook her head. “Everything he said sounded right, and everything seemed right, so why do I feel like it’s not?”

“In what way?” he asked cautiously.

“Just the way he was a little too, I don’t know, flippant over it all.”

“I agree with you there,” Bronson replied, “but I really don’t know who these guys are.”

“No, I don’t either. Although we do have their names now.”

He asked, “How do you figure that?”

“Because I saw it on the register, when I was chatting with Rico.” She laughed and told him their names.

“Wow, let’s sit outside for a minute, and I’ll send Mason a message,” he murmured.

“What good will that do?”

“We can get a rundown on what’s going on with these two.”

“Will it help us? I don’t know this Mason guy.”

“One of my bosses, but, more than that, he’s a friend. He’s dealt with all kinds of cases that are fairly unusual. Plus Jason’s a veteran. That should account for something.”

“Well, if Mason can help, that would be great, although I don’t know why we’re investigating these guys.”

“Because they were on the scene at the time,” Bronson noted, “and just because they say they didn’t have anything to do with Jason’s murder, is that reason enough to believe them? Not in my book,” he replied, with a smirk.

“Are you—”

“Relax. We’ll do the tiniest inquiry into two potential material witnesses before they leave the country. That’s not a biggie at all.” He pulled out his phone and quickly texted the names to Mason, then explained how these two were involved.

His phone buzzed with a text. He read it and shrugged. “He’ll get back to us. No guarantee that we’ll get any

information, but, if these guys are in a criminal database, Mason will share whatever is available.”

“Good enough.” She looked around. “Let’s pick up lunch to-go and then I suggest we go out to the shipwreck and take a look again.”

“We should have done this last night,” he noted.

“Yeah, I didn’t know that there was a chance whatever he found was out there,” she murmured. “It all just seemed so far beyond belief.”

“I get it,” Bronson said. “Sometimes life is like that.”

“It is, but I’m hoping that maybe we’ll get answers this time.” And that’s what they did.



IT WAS EASY to recognize the spot again. This time the morning sun shone on the water like glass. Bronson looked at the panorama and couldn’t say anything for a minute. “It is absolutely stunning out here.” He stared down at the ocean floor, shining through the clear water. “Amazing to find it so clear here, yet, the deeper you go, the darker it gets.”

“Yeah, because over here, it’s still shallow.”

He nodded. “We have what? Another couple miles and then it drops off pretty deep, right?” Robin nodded. He watched the ground slowly disappear beneath them, as they got closer and closer to the shipwreck location. When she finally shut down the engine, he leaned over and said, “Nope, you can’t see anything here, can you?”

“No, not here, which is also why the wreck stayed where it was for so long undisturbed,” she murmured. “There was no reason for anybody to dive here necessarily. Yet, once somebody did, and the shipwreck was found, nobody really cared to come out and check on it or raise it. So this spot just became popular with the divers.”

“Part of not salvaging it is probably because it’s not a particularly interesting historical wreckage that anybody really cares about,” he murmured.

“Exactly,” she said, “people only like what’s fascinating in terms of history.”

“I think the wreck itself is great,” Bronson noted. “It’s been a lot of fun diving around here, which we got to do all last week.”

“And you just came to the shipwreck site on the last day?” she asked curiously.

He nodded. “Exactly, otherwise I wouldn’t have seen your brother at all.”

“Makes you wonder how long he could have been hidden there,” she considered sadly.

“You don’t have to worry about that now because we did find him,” Bronson stated. “With any luck we can deal with the cremation tomorrow.”

“Maybe, but that seems awfully fast.”

He privately agreed, but it seemed like everybody wanted to deal with Jason’s death quickly and get his body returned to the ocean and out of their lives. That fact alone made Bronson suspicious, but, in a place like this, with their particular beliefs and lifestyle, plus the kind of life that her brother led, maybe it made sense after all.

As soon as they geared up, he looked at her and warned, “See you down below, but don’t get out of my sight.”

She laughed. “Remember who you’re talking to,” she told him in a teasing voice. “I should be telling you that.”

“I may not have been born in the water,” he stated, “but I can tell you that I’ve spent more than my fair share in dive hours. I still love it, but I’ve never become complacent about the danger.”

“Good,” she agreed. “You never should be complacent. There’s way too much to live for, and a stupid accident is no reason to lose it.”

“All accidents are stupid,” he noted, preparing to slip overboard.

Just before he did, she declared, “All accidents are stupid, but some are stupider than others.”

On that note, he laughed and fell backward into the water. Once under the boat, he saw her swimming toward him. He waited for her to catch up to him. Then the two of them headed down to the same spot where he and Gavin had found her brother.

It seemed odd to come back again today, but he’d meant it when he said that he’d always come back here to dive because it was a beautiful location. Plus, if one had to die somewhere, this was not a bad part of the world to be in. There was joy in seeing the underwater world.

Something was so fun and fascinating about all the various fish that swam by, completely oblivious to all the problems of humanity. The fish were just doing their thing, trying to find their next meal, while remaining safely in a group in order to best stay out of the mouths of nearby predators.

At the same time, an awful lot could be said for a beautiful clear day topside. Down here, things got murky very quickly, but knowing the sun was up above, waiting for them when they finally broke through after the dive, made him smile. They had brought a big lunch with them, so they could stay out and could do multiple dives, if need be. He really appreciated somebody like Robin, who was fully versed in taking precautions and planning for all potential events.

The only thing that would have made him a little happier was if they could have had somebody they knew and trusted to stay in the boat above. That had always been his one fear in the diving world—that he would break through the surface looking for his boat, only to find it long gone. No need to

suspect that would happen here, and, even if it did, he knew they could quite possibly make their way back to shore, even though it was a distance away. But that was the shore they had come from. Other land was much closer.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and he looked over to see her pointing at the ship up ahead. He smiled, then nodded, giving her a thumbs-up, as she started off ahead of him into the bowels of the ship. He followed right behind. Her long form gracefully cut through the water ahead of him. It was obvious that she'd spent a lot of time in the water. She was totally comfortable with it and with the gear. Never hesitating, she did her safety checks before each dive and then ran through them again, almost like rote. It made him smile to think of somebody else who loved the sport as much as he did.

There was a lot to be said about somebody with the same kind of hobbies. He toyed with the idea of seeing her because she was a beautiful woman and somebody he was already connecting with on a level that he hadn't anticipated. His own family history was something he hadn't expected ever to share with anybody, and yet it had seemed completely appropriate and timely to tell her about his brother. It wasn't something he really ever expected to want to share.

As they headed deeper and deeper into the ship, moving toward where he had found Jason's body, Bronson realized just how much he and Robin had in common.

Now, whether that was good or bad, he didn't know, but he was fully prepared to explore the idea as much as he could, as long as she was on board.

## CHAPTER 8

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**R**OBIN LED THE way back down to the shipwreck site, where Jason had been murdered. As she passed through the first part of the broken and aged old hull, she turned to look behind her to ensure that Bronson was still with her. He was right there beside her. He gave her a thumbs-up, using the universal signal that everything was fine, and, with that, she headed down deeper into the bowels of the ship.

She would never again look at this ship or any other the same way, not after losing her brother here. Regardless of his self-sabotaging tendencies, he had still been a good man and had a lot of life left to live. She had to believe that he hadn't done anything stupid enough to get himself killed, but—if the truth came out, and he had—she would just deal with it.

It was looking pretty slim that they would find any answers to this whole mess. A large part of her just wanted to walk away and to grieve over her loss and to commiserate with her uncle about how she could have done nothing to help Jason. He'd lived his life on the edge; he'd made a lot of enemies, and very few people would mourn his passing.

That hurt, but it was also a fact of life that she just had to deal with. It was also a sign of where he had lived and how he had lived that the cops here didn't seem to give a crap—proven by her recent visit to the police station.

She had a little bit of time left here in Mexico to search through the wreckage of Jason's life to see if she and Bronson could turn up further details for the cops. If she could find any information, she'd pass it over to them. However, even if any evidence were found, she wasn't sure that Jason's killer would be brought to justice. ... And that was something she knew she would have a hard time reconciling.



Her uncle and the others had made it very clear that Robin could have done nothing more to help her brother. And so, if the local law enforcement decided to shelve Jason's murder case, then she would just have to accept that sometimes justice sucked and that sometimes there just wasn't any to be had. She got that; she really did, but she had to do everything she could first. Which is why she was here once again, taking a look at the area where Jason had died.

She didn't know what could possibly even be here. However, if Jason had made some sort of find here, maybe it had contributed to his death. Yet, even if he had seen something down here, what possible difference could it make to anybody?

Besides, thousands of tourists did dives in this area. And nobody would listen to anything her brother had to say. But then she thought about the two tourists who had been diving in the same area at the same time and how she had felt something was off about them, when they spoke to the one man at his hotel room. If nothing else she had to follow through with this much and see if there was anything to go on.

The fact that Bronson was here with her helped a lot because it confirmed that she wasn't crazy in thinking that this other motive idea was even a possibility. That he was just humoring her was also possible, but she wouldn't look at that right now. He had stood by her side right from the beginning, and she appreciated it. She hadn't expected such kindness from a stranger and, in fact, hadn't even thought that anybody would do something like that.

Her world had always been very independent, and, although she had her uncle, she'd never had very many others she could depend on. Yet even her uncle, always incredibly busy, wasn't someone she could call on for help and expect it every time. Sure, he was always going to be there if she needed a job or financial support in the short run, but emotional support wasn't really his thing.

Even when her parents had died, Uncle Jerry had found it very hard to fill her needs, but then who could? She'd lost both parents in one fell swoop, and that wasn't something that anybody else could handle for her either. She'd had to grieve solo. It had taken time, but she'd gotten there eventually. However, she'd also become a little distant with her brother afterward and found it very difficult to just let him go and be himself. And look what happened when she did, even though she'd tried so hard to reel him back in these last few months?

She gave herself a mental shake, knowing full well that this wasn't the time or the place to get sidetracked. It was important that she and Bronson stayed safe on a dive, so she needed to focus on the matter at hand.

She was in her element, but, at the same time, the murkiness closed in around her, giving her more of a stifling feeling than she was used to. Ten out of ten times she'd have said that she absolutely loved diving, but something was unnerving about it today. Then the purpose of the dive was likely behind that. Nobody would ever trust her brother with their secrets because, when he had the booze in him, he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

She turned once again to check that Bronson was there, and when he gave her a thumbs-up again, she kept on going. When she felt the brush of his hand on her ankle, she turned back toward him, Bronson pointing off to one side. She frowned and backtracked slightly, wondering what he wanted to show her. But then he pointed to another area, and she realized she'd gone down the wrong passageway. Damn. That wasn't good.

With a hard hand motion she let him take the lead. When he approached the room where he'd found her brother, she sank back ever-so-slightly and studied the area. They both had headlights on, which should have allowed them to see at least something, but it was pretty dark and dim here. They had to go close to all the wooden sides to see anything. That's when she noted Bronson methodically going from one bit of wall panel

to another. By the time he'd covered all the walls in this area, he didn't seem happy, as he came back to her and shrugged.

She got the message. *Nothing was here.* She couldn't let go of the disappointment that she'd hoped that there had to be something to find, and yet she had no reason for it except instincts. Maybe it wasn't even instincts but her fervent and slightly desperate wish to find an answer. They needed to cross the *Ts* and dot the *Is*. Even if there were no *Ts* and *Is* in this equation, she still wanted it done right. She needed it to be done right.

She nodded to him, but he went by her, and, instead of going back the way they came, he headed down the pathway where she had earlier wandered into by mistake.

She followed him, wondering what he was up to. And there he did exactly the same thing, checking every wall. Of course that made sense because, if her brother had been here, it wouldn't have taken much for him to have been either forcibly shifted from one room to another or to have floated from one to the other. The tides were constant here, keeping the water gently shifting around them. Even as she looked now, the sandy bottom lifted and shifted with their flippers.

With that, she went down closer and kicked around, trying to lift up the dirt from the floor. It only made the visibility worse.

She moved over to another area and did the same thing but at a different angle. When her leg was grabbed, she glanced around at Bronson, motioning to something. She stopped immediately and slowly drifted toward the area he pointed at. He then brushed away some of the sand. She floated closer to him, and her headlight caught a glint of something shiny.

As in shiny gold. Like a bar of it, which didn't make any sense. Yet she was looking at what appeared to be a bar of gold. How the hell would that have gotten here? She stared at Bronson, wide-eyed, and he quickly used his own flippers and brushed away more and more of the sand. There was only the

one bar of gold, as far as she could tell. There shouldn't have been even one.

He picked it up, hefted it, and nodded. She took that to mean it was real, not that she would know the difference, but she understood it to be very heavy. With the bar still in his hand, he quickly stuffed it into his backpack. They searched the rest of the area. Then he motioned at her to go up to the surface.

With one final glance around to confirm nothing else was here that she was supposed to see, she followed him back up. As they broke through the crest, she twisted, looking for the boat, and then turned to him at a decent clip. She removed the snorkel from her mouth. "Oh my God. Where's the boat?"

He stared at her grimly and then pointed in the distance.

There was the boat all right, but it was heading away from them. "Shit." Robin stared at it, shaking her head. "Well, that's not exactly the way I wanted my day to start."

"Yeah, and you're not carrying a brick of gold in your pack either," Bronson noted.

She looked at him in horror. "Put it down then," she said immediately. "We'll come back for it."

"Nope. I'm pretty sure that's what your brother did."

She stared at him, as the truth sank in. "Dear God. ... Where would he have found it?"

"I don't know, but maybe it was planted, or this site was used as a drop zone, or some other boat went down here. Whatever happened, that's where somebody found it, hid it here, and used the location of this shipwreck as a way to find it later."

"That makes sense," she replied, slowly treading water, as she searched for options to help with their two predicaments now. "A drug-running boat went down over here. As the story goes, they got into a fight with another one, and everybody ended up dying—at least we thought everybody ended up

dying,” she corrected herself. “I only really heard about it from my brother.”

“Is that the reason he always came over here to dive?”

“I don’t know.” Robin frowned and turned toward Bronson. “Yet it wouldn’t surprise me if it was.” Nodding, she continued. “Jason’s definitely the kind of guy who would have been looking for that score. Always said he’d score big.”

“Maybe he found it,” Bronson suggested. “And, if that bar is here, chances are there are more from wherever this one came from.”

“Maybe, but why didn’t he take it with him?” She eyed the shoreline and sighed; it would be a long swim.

“Probably for the same reason you talked about earlier. He usually dived with somebody, and, unless you trust someone, you don’t want to be packing that kind of booty around. Once Jason found it, he would likely make arrangements to come back with someone he trusted. Probably you.”

She winced at that. “He did say that he needed to tell me something and that I needed to get ready for the dive of my life. Then he immediately backtracked, adding something about not wanting to get me involved in his sordid life and dropped it.”

“That would make sense,” Bronson noted.

She stared off into the horizon. “You got any brilliant ideas right now to get us back to shore?” she asked bitterly. “This is not how I wanted my dive to end.”

He looked around, searching for the closest spot. “The nearest land is still about two miles away. I’ve certainly done that ocean swim before. How about you?”

“I’m game,” she said; then she gave a broken laugh. “It’s not as if we have much choice anyway.”

He grinned at her. “That is a great way to look at it. Let’s get to shore, and then we’ll deal with the next problem.”

“Which is?”

“I don’t know yet, but there’ll probably be one.” And, with that note of humor, he started swimming toward shore. She watched as he put back on his mask and snorkel, kept his head down, using his flippers as much as he could, and kept up a slow and steady pace.

“There’s a lot to be said about a guy who can handle real life-and-death emergencies like this,” she muttered to herself. Although she knew she would be tired long before they reached land, if they did keep to a nice steady pace, then they’d be okay. She was pleasantly surprised when he pointed to some rock outcroppings closer than the actual land mass itself.

He pulled up alongside one and asked, “How are you doing?”

“I’m okay,” she replied. “Good thing we’re both in good shape.”

He nodded. “You realize that others will come back looking for you?”

“Are they though?” she asked bitterly. “I mean, aren’t they expecting *not* to find us?”

“They’re expecting to find you underwater.”

That thought was unpleasant, so she refused to consider it.

The distance that had looked doable when they started out now looked not so doable by the time she made it just over the halfway mark. She stopped and just floated in the water for a few minutes.

He stopped at her side. “You okay?” he murmured, his voice concerned.

She nodded. “I am. It’s just ... the shore looks farther away than ever.”

“We’re gaining on it,” he stated, with assurance. “It would be nice if the waves would change direction though.”

She winced at that. “Does wishing like that ever really help you?”

“Often, yes,” he declared, with a bright smile. “In this case, it’ll make a difference between an easy finish and a hard finish,” he murmured. He nudged her toward shore. “Come on. Just keep floating, and use your flippers as much as you can. You just need to keep going.”

“I know.” She sighed. “I’m doing okay.”

“You are. You’re doing just fine,” he stated. “Let’s keep it moving. We don’t want the current to drag us back out, or we’ll lose any gains that we’ve made.”

She winced at that and struck out again. He slowed his pace, which she appreciated, but, at the same time, if one person were to break out and go get help, it would likely be him, and Bronson could help her more than she could help him. She stopped even looking toward the shore. It seemed to be something well past the point of even doable at this stage. The hours stretched out longer and longer, her arms straining at the shoulders. Her thighs burned, and her lungs? ... God, they were screaming at her to stop.

She refused to even think about it though because that would mean that her brother’s killer would win, and that was something she wasn’t at all happy about. Then she remembered the gold in Bronson’s backpack.

She swore at that. If Bronson could do the swim with that damn bar still in his backpack, she could do it without that extra weight. She was a hell of a lot lighter than he was too. And, whether he had the strength that she suspected he had, she didn’t know, and she didn’t care because this wasn’t a contest. This was about endurance. They kept on at the same pace for another twenty-odd minutes, and then he stopped suddenly and turned to look around.

“We got company.” Bronson pointed behind her. She turned and saw another boat, racing in the general direction of them. However, it was doubtful that they even knew they were

here. She looked at it in excitement and started waving her hands.

“Hang on.” Bronson pulled something from his backpack.

Robin thought that maybe they’d already attracted the boater’s attention, but then the boat never seemed to steer at them.

Bronson had a whistle and blew it until the boat slowed down, as if listening and trying to hear what the sound was.

Then the driver caught sight of them. The boat immediately changed course and raced toward them.

She was almost in tears when she saw it pull up, and, sure enough, it was a couple that she knew from the beach. With their help, Bronson and Robin clambered onboard, all while Bronson gave them a running commentary of what had happened.

“They took your fucking boat?” the boater asked in amazement.

“Yeah,” she snapped, “and believe me. I want to know who the hell it was.”

He just stared at her and shook his head. “You weren’t digging into something that you shouldn’t have been, were you?”

She stared at him for a long moment. “I just came to commemorate the place where my brother died,” she said quietly. “I don’t have a clue what else might be going on around here, and all I want to do is put my brother to rest.”

After searching her face for a long moment, the driver nodded, then said, “That’s a good thing because we’re hearing some really ugly rumors.”

“What kind of ugly rumors?” Bronson asked.

He shrugged. “That maybe you’re better off being silenced too. And, no, don’t bother asking me where that rumor came



from because I just heard it in the pub. And people were only talking about Jason because you weren't there."

"Great," she muttered. "So now I have to worry about somebody killing me, even after they killed my brother?" She sat, resting in the bottom of the boat, wishing she were back home in her apartment. Actually she wished she was a hell of a long way from here. She looked over at Bronson, but he was silent. Of course he didn't mention what they'd found, which was smart since there was no way to know if these guys here to save them were involved somehow.

It started to sound like her best bet was to get the hell out of Dodge, if she wanted to have any tomorrows, which she sure as hell did. But it also pissed her off that people would be having those kinds of thoughts about her. "I'm sorry that we cut your dive short," she told the driver, pointing at their gear in their boat.

"Not a problem," he replied, with a smile. "We'll just come right back out again."

"Let me pay for your gas at least," she offered impulsively.

He looked at her, shook his head, and said, "Hell no. After what was done to you guys, no thanks. Just trying to do the right thing. What any good and decent people would do, right? God knows we could sure use a few more of those kinds around here."

She didn't have anything to say to that because, well, ... what could she say? It was true. This place was a shithole full of people who were not terribly concerned about their fellow man. And she knew her brother had been the cream of the crop there too. Morose, she sat huddled up and shivering in the cold, until Bronson carefully shifted his backpack as he turned and wrapped her in his arms.

"Just hold tight," he murmured. "We'll get you back to a hot shower in no time." She nodded and went to answer him, only to find her teeth chattering. Thankfully this couple had a

decent boat, and, although it took a good twenty-minutes to get back to shore, Robin could still not move her sore joints.

She was grateful when they pulled up at the docks, and Bronson half-lifted her and half-carried her off the boat. Then grabbed their gear. She turned and tried to say, *Thank you*, but couldn't manage to get the words out.

Bronson turned toward the Good Samaritans and waved. "Thanks, I've got to get her in." And they just nodded and watched as the two of them left, on foot, with Bronson supporting a lot of her weight. The closer Bronson and Robin got to her place, the colder she got. "I don't think I'll make it," she mumbled, her knees buckling. He gave a strangled exclamation and picked her up in his arms and carried her the last hundred meters.

She was amazed at his strength—or would have been, if she had had any thoughts to spare—but right now the darkness and the cold took over her system to the point that she just wanted to close her eyes and pass out.

"Stay awake," he snapped.

Her eyes immediately bolted open again. "I'm here. I'm here."

"Stay with me now," he muttered. "Do not fall asleep."

She groaned. "I'm so cold," she chattered.

"I'll have you inside in no time." And, sure enough, they were soon inside the small apartment she had rented here. Before she realized what he had planned, he had her stripped down to her skin and got her standing under a hot shower. As soon as he confirmed she was okay to stand without his help, he said, "I'll go get your gear."

She just nodded. The chances of somebody stealing it were high, but maybe not because they would have known that it was hers. Frowning, she didn't know anymore. At least she knew where it was.

And, with that, he bolted. When he returned a few minutes later, she was leaning against the wall of the shower, still trying to get warm under the steady stream of hot water. He now stripped off right down to his skin and stepped into the spray with her.

Only then did she realize that she'd crumpled into a pile on the tiled floor.

"That's not helping," he said. Then he picked her up off the floor and just held her under the hot water, hitting her back, while her chest was snug against his skin.

She looped her arms around his neck and whispered, "Thank you." He didn't say anything. She was delighted to have so much heat coming off him, like being up against a furnace. She craved all the warmth he had to offer. She laid her head against his chest, amazed at the steady pounding of his heart. He stood here, holding her in his arms for at least ten or fifteen minutes, yet didn't show any sign of exhaustion.

She'd never met anybody with that kind of strength before. But, right now, all she could think about was the fact that she was so damn grateful to have it. He was a lifesaver today. And she meant that in the most serious and literal way.



BRONSON NOTED THAT, even ten minutes under the hot water and in his arms, she was still shivering. The shivers were good; it raised her body temperature, but the lethargy on her face was not. His voice harsher than he intended, he said, "Snap out of it, or I'm taking you down to the hospital."

She shook her head free of the water pouring into her eyes, as she peered up at him. "There is no hospital around here."

"The clinic then," he compromised, "or what passes for one."

She glared up at him. "I don't need that. I'm feeling much better."

She started to struggle out of his arms, but he held her easily, letting him know that she was still not quite where she needed to be. “You’re almost there,” he noted. “But, if you get mad and fight, you’ll come back faster.” She just stared up at him, and he could see that she wasn’t quite aware enough of what was going on. “I don’t feel so good.”

He nodded. “If you start vomiting, let me know, preferably before you hit me with it.”

She stared up at him. “I don’t think that’ll happen, will it?”

“I’ve seen it happen before,” he replied. “It happens when exhaustion hits so much that you can’t do anything.”

“I’ve never felt anything like that today,” she admitted.

Bronson felt some of her body heat starting to stabilize. He slowly let her stand on her own two feet and said, “See if you can stand.” She immediately grabbed hold of his shoulders and gently placed some weight on her feet.

“Better.” She nodded.

“Not quite good enough yet, but an improvement.”

“A bath would be better, but this place is too small for a tub.”

As he looked around, he grimaced. “Does anybody have a hot tub close by?”

She shook her head. “No,” she stated, with half a smile, but it was a start. “It’s not exactly hot tub weather down here.”

“Maybe not,” he admitted, “but, when you’re in trouble, it’s one of the best ways to warm up.”

“Agreed.”

Finally, standing under the water, he grabbed the shampoo bottle and started scrubbing her head, lathering up the soap on her hair.

“Before you leave the shower,” he noted, “we need to get the salt out of your hair anyway. I might as well do it now.”

She stood still, while he looked after her like a child. Something was almost disconcerting about a man who could stand with a naked woman in the shower for that time period and not be affected.

It was a new experience for her, and she didn't particularly like it. Obviously nothing was between them, but wow. She hadn't expected complete disinterest. Then again he was looking after her, and that was a completely different kind of interest.

As soon as he had her hair lathered, he shifted her gently under the water and rinsed it off. Seeing conditioner, he quickly applied it in the same process but was much gentler, now massaging her hair.

By the time he was done, he asked her, "Do you think you can warm up in bed now?"

She nodded. "I should be able to."

He still saw intermittent shivers racking her system.

"I'm just so exhausted now."

"That's normal too," he murmured. "Come on. Let's get you into bed." He helped her out of the shower, grabbed a big towel off the rod, and wrapped her up in it. "Now straight to bed," he murmured, assisting her slowly in that direction.

She stumbled once, but, using his body for support, she righted herself and made her way to the bed without argument.

Flipping back the blanket, he immediately tucked her up inside. "I'll get you something hot to drink." And, with that, he headed to the kitchen and put on the kettle.

When he returned, her shivers were still visible. He placed a hot cup of tea on the nightstand beside her. "Now how are you feeling?"

Her teeth chattered, but she nodded. "Better, quite a bit better."

He studied her intently, checking out her color. “You still don’t look great.”

“I’ll be fine.” She shifted under the covers for a long moment, but he shook his head and walked around to the far side and slipped underneath with her.

She groaned. “God, how can you be so hot?”

He laughed. “This is pretty normal for me.”

“Right now I’m seriously jealous,” she muttered.

“Keep close. You’ll warm up fast.” He wasn’t sure that she believed him, but she was doing everything she could to wrap around him. He smiled and just held her close, skin to skin. His body was like a furnace, stoked ever higher and higher, but he could tell that she was slowly starting to respond to his heat.

“Wow, I thought you had pretty quickly turned up the heat in the shower, but I figured it was the water. But now, being next to you like this,” she murmured, “I’ve never met anybody with that amount of body heat.”

“Lots of my friends are like this too,” he noted comfortably, as he held her close.

When she finally relaxed back, she looked up at him. “I know that words like *thank you* don’t really mean all that much in a situation like this, but I do mean it from the bottom of my heart.”

He grinned at her. “Hey, I’ll accept a *thank you* any day.” He chuckled. “It was a pretty strange day.”

“Day?” she repeated. “I don’t even think we’re very far past noon yet, are we?”

He shrugged. “Last I checked we were coming up on noon.”

“Wow, I just want to stay in bed and to forget about life for the rest of the day.”

“And that’s not a bad idea,” he agreed immediately.

“I’d like to see you stay here too, but I still have to deal with my brother,” she added.

“I don’t think there’s anything you must do today,” he murmured. “Remember? We’ve got other problems at the moment. So you need to get back up to par. Do whatever you need to do to get strong and capable right now.”

She winced at that. “Yeah, I’m pretty much at somebody’s mercy, if they wanted to attack me now.”

“Considering the fact that they stole our boat,” he shared, “what if they have any serious understanding of what we found down there? If so, then you can expect them to be back.”

She yawned once and then a second time, as she snuggled deeper under the blanket.

Bronson was burning hot now, which was uncomfortable for him, but, for her, the best thing that she could get was his body heat.

She closed her eyes and murmured, “I just need to rest for a moment.”

He smiled, leaned over, and gave her a gentle kiss on her cheek. “Do that.”

She yawned yet again, tucked up closer to Bronson, and then, closing her eyes, she crashed.

He waited until he thought it was potentially safe to move, then eased from her bed, pulling the covers tight around her. She would miss his body heat if she wasn’t deep enough. Taking a few minutes to ensure that she was out for the count, he stepped away and quickly dressed.

Out in the kitchen, he rummaged to see if there was any food because that was the next thing she would need, and he needed something now. But the cupboard was pretty empty. He did find peanut butter and a partial loaf of bread, so that’s what he had to work with.

He quickly made himself a couple peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, wolfed them down, and then he snatched his phone and contacted Mason.

When Mason answered, his voice was jovial, as if he were outside enjoying life. “Hey. Are you coming back today?”

“Looking for permission not to,” he stated instantly.

“What’s the matter?” Bronson quickly told his boss what had happened. “Good God,” Mason replied. “They took your boat and left you out there to drown?”

“Yeah,” Bronson agreed, “so I’m feeling a little on the pissed-off side right now.”

“Definitely. What kind of shape is she in?”

“Pretty rough, but she’s asleep right now. She’ll need to sleep at least for the rest of the day to even begin to recuperate, and I’m still not sure how safe it’ll be to leave her alone.”

There was silence at the other end, while Mason thought about it. “I’ll get back to you on that. You can definitely stay for a few more days regardless, and you know you have leave coming, if you need to pull it.”

“Right. It’s not exactly what I thought today would be all about.”

“Shit like this happens in our world,” Mason stated.

At that, Bronson snorted, not wanting to wake up Robin. “It’s not supposed to, unless it happens when we go on missions. Then at least it’s halfway expected, and you’re somewhat ready for it.”

“Yeah, unfortunately this sort of thing happens all the time, and occasionally we stumble into it, ... even when we’re not on missions.” Mason sighed. “Do you want backup?”

“I think we’re probably good,” he noted cautiously. “On the one hand, help would be great, but I feel like any more



newbies around here would just cause more attention. Something we definitely don't want."

"What about the gold?"

"Yeah, I've got it, so it'll be a problem."

"You're definitely right there. Listen. I've got somebody I know down in that corner of the world. Let me give him a call, and I'll get back to you later on." And, with that, Mason hung up.

Bronson wasn't sure what Mason's friend would do, but somebody needed to take this gold bar off his hands so he didn't have to worry about it. He wasn't even sure who it belonged to or what it was doing here or who in town was involved in this, but something was going on.

It was a decidedly poor area. Although the locals survived on tourist dollars, they were really people who didn't want to deal with tourists, unless they were specific ones they wanted, like divers with boats.

Other than that, Bronson didn't think anybody here gave a damn about tourists, outside of the money that they brought in. He wondered if that was the same all over the world. He imagined it was probably truer than not.

He walked over to his backpack, put it on the counter, and checked all the windows to make sure that nobody was peering in. One window was closed, or almost closed, so he opened it up to take a look outside but saw absolutely no sign of anybody around.

Feeling a little bit better, yet still not enough, he walked into the bathroom with his backpack, then pulled out the gold bar and checked it over. From the weight and size of it, he was pretty damn sure it was pure. He quickly took a photo and sent it to Mason.

Mason replied instantly with **Watch your back. That's worth a crap load of money.**

Bronson responded with **The better questions are, who does it belong to and why is it still here?**

Mason's text was immediate. **See if you can get a better photo of the shipping markings on it.**

Bronson took another photo, trying to enhance some of the interesting scratch marks. He didn't know anything about gold—or even about what kind of markings these might have been—but this looked beyond old. But then what did old gold look like versus new gold anyway? He shook his head at that, then wrapped it up in a towel and put it back in his still wet backpack, with his dive shoes on top. Then he carried it out to the bedroom and tucked it by the corner of the bed, where nobody would see it on a casual look.

While he was there, he checked on Robin, but she was still sound asleep. Wandering back to the kitchen, he quickly made himself another peanut butter sandwich and then found the coffee and made a pot. Now she would need something much more solid to eat. When the phone rang, it was Mason.

“I have two men coming,” he told Bronson, then quickly gave him their names. “They're former navy guys who now work in the private security arena, but they can be trusted.”

“Are you sure?” Bronson asked. “Because, when it comes to trust around this kind of loot, I'm not very good with it.”

“No, I hear you there. When she's awake, she needs to contact her uncle. This is definitely his kind of thing.”

“I wondered about that, but I need her to wake up first, so I can confirm that.”

“Does she need medical attention?”

“No,” he murmured. “She just needs time. It was a really hard swim, and then the cold set in. She'll be fine, when I get her awake again.”

“Don't let her sleep too long. Hypothermia can kill.”

And, with that, Mason hung up.

## CHAPTER 9

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WHEN BRONSON WALKED back into the bedroom to check on her, Robin opened her eyes and stared up at him. After a moment of confusion, she gasped, as she bolted upright. He immediately sat down next to her. “It’s all right. Calm down,” he murmured. “You’re in your own bed, and you’re fine.”

She sank back into place, then closed her eyes, as if trying to get the weariness out of her face. “My God. That—” Covering her face with her hands, she appeared to be at a loss for words.

He pointed at the fresh cup of coffee he’d brought in with him. “Here. Try to get this down.”

She pulled up the blanket and stared at him, before shifting against the headboard. “I barely remember what happened.” She yawned.

“Let’s just say that might be better for now.”

“I mean, I definitely remember what happened with the boat. But not after we got back.”

“Nothing happened. I put you in a hot shower, and, when I could get you mostly cognizant again, I tucked you into bed.”

She nodded slowly. “I remember something about that.” She looked around, then seeing the indent on the pillow beside her, she nodded. “Something about you being a bloody furnace.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I definitely have a high body temperature.”

“Wow, I’m grateful for it today.” She sat up, looked over at the coffee, and winced. “Is it really hot? Like too hot to drink right now?”

He lifted it, so she didn't have to lean over too far, and handed it to her. "Try it."

She nodded and took half a sip. Finding it doable, she sank back, with a second sip and then a third. "My God, I know I slept, but I'm still exhausted."

"Honestly you're likely to feel that way. It was a long hard swim, and that length of time in the water, along with the physical exertion, we don't get over crap like that too fast."

"I'm so damn grateful that the couple stopped and picked us up." She stared at him, willing the tears not to fall.

"Me too," he said immediately.

At that, she burst out laughing. "I think you could have kept swimming for another hour." She shook her head. "I'm really not used to hanging out with people who can do things way better than me."

"Remember. I've had lots of training."

She didn't say anything because, of course, he had, but, at the same time, it wasn't the same as her training. Under these kind of conditions, people often didn't do so well. "I appreciate it," she murmured, as she took another sip of coffee. "Not only could you handle the situation, but you also make a mean cup of coffee."

At that, he grinned at her. "I must confess that I've also pretty well cleaned out your peanut butter and jelly sandwich ingredients."

She stared at him and winced. "I guess there's really not much in the way of food in the house, is there?"

He shook his head. "Nope, but, if you're not sticking around much longer, no point in doing too much food shopping."

"That's what I was thinking the other day," she admitted. "Once my brother disappeared and didn't show up again, that's one of the thoughts I had. If I wouldn't be sticking around, no point in buying groceries. I know it was a stupid

thing to be thinking about, while my brother was missing, but I guess it's just a coping thing.”

Bronson nodded. “Yeah, that's exactly what it is. I could run over and pick up some takeout for now.”

She nodded slowly. “Maybe that's the best idea. I'm not ready to get up and go be social with anybody just yet.”

“Also ... we have a couple guys coming. Mason, one of my bosses, has arranged for them to come and collect the gold.”

Her gaze widened. “My God.” She threw back the covers, but he held out a hand to stop her.

“Stop. You'll get the shivers all over again.”

She'd already felt it working into her system again, before he got the words out. Frowning, she collapsed back on the bed. “So much for being better.”

“You're not *that* much better, but you're getting there.”

She wasn't even sure she could believe him. “So the gold really did come back with us?”

He nodded. “I didn't want to leave it behind.”

“Why is that?” she asked, studying him curiously.

“Because I think it's probably why your brother was killed.”

She sucked in her breath and nodded slowly. “I guess that makes the most sense, doesn't it?”

“It makes the most sense, and yet, at the same time, we don't really have any idea who's involved, do we?”

She shook her head. “Could be any of the divers here.”

“And it was just a few weeks ago that Jason was talking about making a score?”

“Yes,” she agreed. “And that's the problem.”

“Not necessarily. I think he was trying to figure out what to do with it. He had it hidden enough that he didn’t have to worry about it,” Bronson thought out loud. “Once he’d found it and had put it someplace that he thought was safe, then it was just a simple matter of trying to figure out what his options were.”

“It would explain why he seemed so upbeat lately and why I thought I was finally getting to him.” She smirked, shaking her head. “But I wasn’t getting to him at all. He just found something that he thought would either get him out of this life or maybe change his life somehow. I don’t know what he thought.”

“Honestly, he probably wasn’t thinking about changing his life at all,” Bronson noted calmly. “He was probably thinking only about the fact that he’d found something that he’d probably been looking for, for a long time.”

“That’s quite possible,” she said, her voice sad. “My brother had a lot of things going for him, but he wasn’t really thinking long-term about anything.”

“Right, and none of that’s really his fault. It’s who he was,” Bronson stated, his voice definitely on the calm side. He nudged her. “Coffee. Keep drinking.”

“If I drink, then I’ll have to get up and go to the bathroom,” she reminded him.

“Maybe, by that point in time”—he smiled—“you’ll be warm enough to make it there and back without breaking out in full shivers.”

“I don’t know.” Even now shivers visibly ran over her body.

“But the sooner we get some food into you, the better.”

She looked over at him. “There’s some cash in the cupboard, maybe even in my wallet.”

He looked at her. “What for?”

“To go get us some dinner,” she replied. “I don’t know how much you still have on you, but I can more than pay for a meal. Particularly after you saved my life.”

He shook his head. “Nope, not going to happen. Do you care what I get you?”

She shook her head. “I don’t care. I just want food.” He nodded and quickly disappeared. She stayed huddled under the covers, and, once he was gone, she flipped them back, got out of bed, made her way to the bathroom, and gleefully emptied her bladder.

Immediately afterward, she felt a hell of a lot better. She made her way to the bed again, feeling the shivers already taking over her body. She’d had hypothermia before and knew the signs.

Knowing that people were on their way to her place, she left her bed, grabbed underclothes, leggings, a T-shirt, and a sweater. After dressing, she then climbed back into the bed again. She laughed. “I look like an idiot,” she muttered. But she almost felt warm, and maybe, by the time Bronson got back with the food, she’d be a new person.

All that did was bring up memories of what she’d already been through and how absolutely cavalier someone was to steal the boat. She and Bronson had put up the standard symbols, noting divers were below, so anybody in this neighborhood would have known without a doubt that somebody was down below. She would never have forgotten to put out the signs, much less steal another diver’s boat, and neither would any other experienced diver, like Bronson had proven to be. It was a lifeline for the kind of work she did. And, with that thought in mind, she considered her uncle and what she would tell him.

He might have some idea of what to do about the gold, but, if it was being collected soon, it might be better to not even bring him into it. He’d spent his life dealing with this kind of stuff too. And, of course, her brother was a chip off the old

block when it came to discoveries, which would explain his excitement on the weeks just before his death.

God, what a fool she was. His change of mood had nothing to do with her and everything to do with what he'd found. And yet somebody couldn't even let him have that. They were all about taking it for themselves and obviously had no clue where it was now. Otherwise it would not have still been there on the shipwreck.

And now she had more to worry about because she didn't know who'd taken the boat, and that meant that whoever had was still out there and was likely to come after her, especially if they heard she'd survived. For a moment she contemplated her chances of staying hidden until she could leave. But, with no arrangements made to pick up her brother or to even cremate him, staying hidden wasn't likely.

While still trying to decide what to do, she heard an odd sound outside. Immediately she froze. Was it Bronson returning? She checked her watch and frowned. "No, that was a little too fast," she muttered.

Which just left her with options that she didn't like one bit. She slipped free of the bed and snuck into the kitchen, so she could take a look to see who was there. Just as she walked into the living room, she saw a head appear in the corner of her window, only to bump ever-so-slightly out of the way, as if ducking down. At that, she raced to see who it was. She didn't dare go outside. That would be a disaster, considering her condition, but she was desperate to see who was there.

Even as she raced back to the bedroom to see who was coming, another sound came outside. As she turned slowly to watch the door open in front of her, Bronson walked in. He stopped, looked at her, and asked, "What wrong?"

"I thought I saw somebody peeping in the window."

Immediately he dropped the bags of food on the counter and asked, "Which direction?" She pointed and he disappeared.



She was on the ground floor, which was the only reason that she would have seen anybody at her windows, but it also didn't mean that anybody was actually looking for her. By the time she figured out that maybe she'd mistaken what she had seen, Bronson came back inside.

"Come on. Let's eat."

"Yeah, I'm not even sure I have the stomach for it now." She stared down at the food.

"There's no point in *not* eating," he stated. "You need the strength. You've got to have some fuel in the tank."

He didn't say for what, but the reason was implied. She nodded, sat down at the table, and picked up a burrito.

"It will be fine," he reassured her.

She shook her head. "I'm not so sure about that. We're in a seriously weird position right now."

"The important thing is to deal with your brother and then leave as soon as you can."

"I want to leave immediately, but you're right. I do have to send him off properly. ... Are we going to tell the police what happened with the boat?"

"No," he replied instantly.

She winced. "Do you really think that's the right thing to do?"

"I do," he replied. "Mason agrees and also suggested that you should call your uncle."

She looked at him, a bright smile on her face. "I was hoping that would be an okay thing to do. In fact, I was sitting here, thinking about it, while you were gone."

"It sounds like it is a good idea," he said, "as long as you trust him."

At that, she stopped and frowned. "What do you mean by that? I've never *not* trusted him," she noted.

“And that’s often all we have to go on,” he noted. “So, if you’re comfortable with it, then call him and let him know what’s happening. I don’t know how you feel about telling him about the gold. I have photos of the bar, but he doesn’t need those. It might be safer for him to not know about this.”

She nodded. “That’s true, but he needs all the info. He’s not so much a treasure hunter as just fascinated by wrecks and that sort of thing.” She shrugged. “He does know about my brother and his penchant for getting into trouble.”

“Of course, particularly if Jason had been trying to do a little treasure hunting himself.”

“I don’t even think he was doing that so much as trying to find a way to make something of his life.”

“Or just get through the days.”

She winced. “Or just get through the days,” she agreed. “Jason’s never been a particularly brilliant or ambitious guy. That makes it hard because you want him to do so much more, but he didn’t care to, so what was the answer?”

“Just to let him go do his thing,” Bronson replied instantly. “You did that, so no guilt.”

“Yet I feel really empty,” she murmured, staring at him.

“Of course you do,” he agreed. “Nothing like being the person left behind, wondering if you could have done more or had just not seen something that was there.”

And once again she was struck by how similar their experiences had been and just how much he really did understand. It was infinitely reassuring in a way that she couldn’t really understand. “I hate to say this, but it’s oddly comforting that you’ve been through something like this,” she murmured, “and I know it must have been a horrible time in your life, but your experience is heartening in a way.”

“We never really expect to meet other people who get it, do we?” he asked, his smile reaching across the table and warming her heart.

“No. That’s exactly it. I wouldn’t think that anyone in the world could begin to know what this is like, and, of course, the details are different, but it really does offer me some kind of solace that I really can’t explain.” She finished eating the burrito in her hand, then got up and poured herself a second cup of coffee. “Do you know when the guys you’re expecting are coming?” As she watched, Bronson polished off two more burritos for himself. “Do you want the rest of this?” She pointed at the food remaining on her plate.

He shook his head. “No, but I’d be happy if you ate it.”

She shook her head. “Not right now.”

“Okay then. Save it for later.” Just then his phone buzzed, and he looked down and nodded. “The guys who Mason sent are here.”

She stared at him nervously. “And how do you know it’ll really be those guys?”

He smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ll check them out first. Sit tight, and I’ll go get them.”

And, with that, he disappeared out the front door.



AS IT WAS, Bronson recognized one of the men. They exchanged greetings, and Bronson asked, “Do you guys have any idea what you’re doing here?”

“Nope, just collecting something,” replied the one guy who Bronson knew, sporting a bright smile. “Something that other people will want.”

“Yeah, that’s one way to put it. Come on in.” He led them inside, where he introduced them to Robin.

She smiled. “Hey.” The two new guys looked at her, all wrapped up again with a blanket. She shrugged. “Almost drowned today. Probably would have except for him.”

They turned to look at Bronson, as he shrugged. “Let’s just say somebody tried to kill us.”

Realizing that they deserved more of an explanation than he wanted to give, he quickly told them what happened. They were not impressed.

“Does this have to do with what you guys found?”

“We’re assuming so,” Bronson replied, “so make sure you take this very seriously.”

“Yeah, will do.”

Bronson went to his backpack and pulled out a small box.

When she saw it, she nodded. “Oh, that’s a better idea.”

He smiled. “Yeah, they just need something to pack it around in.” He held it out, and, as the one guy went to take it, he felt the weight and whistled.

“Wow, only one thing has this kind of weight.”

At that, Bronson nodded. “So now you know that something is here that other people might decide to kill you for.”

“We’re not alone either,” the lead guy stated, “and we’re heading straight out to the ship offshore.”

“Good enough,” Bronson murmured.

“I do wonder if we shouldn’t be telling the authorities about it though,” Robin suggested.

Bronson shook his head. “They can deal with the navy on the way out there. We’ve already been to hell and back over it, and we’re not out of here in one piece yet ourselves.”

She nodded immediately. “No, you’re right. I have no idea what these bars are worth either.”

“I’m sure your uncle can tell you, although we weren’t in international waters.”

“No, but we also don’t have a wreck identified where it came from,” she reminded him.

“That would be some of the research that we’ll do when we get back to the States,” Bronson added, “and I’m still not

convinced it even came from a wreck.”

“Where do you think it came from then?” she asked, frowning at him.

“Not too many types of transactions require this amount of gold, but drugs would be one of them.”

She winced at that. “Good God. You’re thinking about that drug runner’s boat that went down.”

Bronson nodded. “And it was a little too close for it to not be something like that. In which case, they would not hesitate to kill you,” Bronson reminded the two special couriers.

“No, and chances are they are the ones who took out my brother,” she murmured. She looked over at the two men, her face grim. “So now that you know what the job is, you may not even want it.”

They both just grinned at her. “We’ll be fine,” the taller of the two said. Then he turned to Bronson. “It was nice seeing you again.”

“Yeah. Thanks for coming. Take care, ... and watch your back.”

With that, the two men left.

She frowned over at Bronson. “Are you sure they’ll be okay?”

“Maybe not, but like they told us. They’re not alone. Plus, we can have Mason confirm its arrival.” In fact, with them gone, he quickly texted Mason. **Package just left.** Then he turned and looked at the burrito in front of her and asked, “Are you really not going to eat that?”

She smiled. “No, I’m stuffed.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Hell no.” And she started to shiver again. He looked at her, concerned. “Yeah, I’ll head back to bed now,” she said. “And honestly I’m glad that thing is gone. I don’t ever want to see it again.”

“You probably won’t,” he noted.

“But we still don’t know who it belonged to or where it came from.”

“And again you’re not alone in trying to figure it out,” Bronson told her. “Now get some sleep, and tomorrow we’ll deal with your brother.”

She checked the time, then groaned. “Maybe we could still do it today.”

“Why?” he asked. “What’s the rush?”

She looked back at him, shrugged, and said, “Maybe there isn’t one. I guess I can’t help him anymore anyway.”

“Go to bed,” he ordered gently. “Tomorrow we’ll deal with the rest.”

And, with that, she got up and headed to the bedroom. She was soon tucked into bed, trying to get warm, but was determined to try and stay awake. However, that didn’t last very long, and, within minutes, she was out cold again.



BRONSON WOKE SUDDENLY and stared around him. He was in Robin’s bed, beside her. She was tucked up under multiple layers of blankets. He’d be sweating profusely, but she appeared to be at a perfect temperature. She also slept deeply, which he was glad to see. He slid out of bed, used the facilities, washed up, and then stepped into the living room, wondering what was bothering him.

Outside of the fact that they’d been left to die in the ocean, they were both still largely okay. They’d successfully passed off the bar of gold that had likely been the cause of her brother’s death, but anyone wondering if they’d found it wouldn’t have known that.

He moved around the apartment, realizing just how accessible these ground-floor apartments really were. He could see so much outside, which also meant that anyone outside

could see him. It was a disconcerting thought. For someone like him, it wasn't bad, and, as much as he hated to say it, he didn't like the thought of a woman living alone in a place like this, without male protection. This was definitely not the most secure location in the world, where the locals and the cops alike didn't seem concerned about the safety of residents or visitors, as Bronson would have expected.

Locking the door behind him, he walked outside down to the beach. There he stood on the docks, studying all the boats that came in. The one that they'd been rescued by was here, empty and just bobbing gently in the water. He walked down and took a closer look at it.

Although he'd taken a look at it on the journey home, he'd been more concerned about getting Robin back safely. And he couldn't take as close a look even now as he would have liked, not being alone. As he turned and looked around, he kept hoping to see the boat that she had rented, the one stolen from them, but there was no sign of it.

He knew Mason had contacted the local authorities about their missing rental, but, so far, it hadn't shown up. Bronson wasn't surprised, and, of course, the mariner would be damn pissed about the boat. Bronson wondered if maybe that same boat was one her brother had used as well. Robin didn't know, and neither did Bronson.

Satisfying himself that nothing was untoward about the boats or the docks, he raced back to her place and put on a pot of coffee. Just as it finished dripping, he heard her calling out from the bedroom.

He walked into the room, holding a cup of coffee, which he placed on the nightstand, then sat down on the bed beside her. "Hey." Bronson searched her face, studying her color and overall appearance. "How are you feeling?"

"A hell of a lot better," she said. "Tired, but more of a bone-weary kind of exhaustion than a sleepiness."

“That’s a good sign,” he noted. “If you’re all slept out, then you should get up and move around. You’re likely to be quite achy too.”

She winced at that. “Yeah, I have been since I woke up yesterday, but I was secretly hoping it would be over today.”

“Not likely,” he muttered, “and, chances are, it’ll be worse today. I’ve already been down to check out the marina, and everything looks normal.”

“Yeah, our stolen boat will be long gone by now,” she said. “If nothing else, they’ll just do what they can to change its appearance and move it on to another marina farther up the coast. Or worst case, they’ll sink it.”

“It’s a small boat anyway,” he stated, “so it wasn’t expensive, at least as boats go. I’m still fuzzy on the ownership. Was it a rental or was it Jason’s?”

“A rental. Jason couldn’t afford food, much less a boat. However, he had been paying Julio when he could so that he could buy his boat off him. Knowing Jason’s money situation, I’m sure it amounted to just renting Julio and his boat, then renting one at the marina if Julio was taking tourists out somewhere else.” Robin shook her head. “That’s my theory, based on the little bit I knew about. Otherwise I have no idea. So, I’m not sure where that stands.”

He nodded. “Mason did text this morning to say that he contacted the police.”

She sighed. “So now we have double the reason to go down there and to see the cops today.” She went to push back the covers and sat up. “Oh, wow,” she murmured. “Definitely on the achy side.”

He nodded. “We don’t have any food for breakfast, but there’s a little bit of bread and peanut butter left.”

She snorted. “You can have that. After a cup of coffee, I do need my caffeine, I’ll brew some herb tea. That’s bound to help my aches and pains.”



“Sounds good to me.” He nodded.

She headed to the bathroom, and, when she later came into the kitchen, holding her coffee, she looked a whole lot better.

“You’re moving easier.”

“I am, and it feels better.”

He poured her a second cup of coffee, and they sat down. He had a notepad.

“What’s that for?” She motioned at the notepad.

“Things we need to get done today.”

She looked at him in surprise. “Are you my keeper now too?” she asked, startled, as she looked down at the empty notepad.

“Nope, just ready to help. I’ll start by taking notes, so shoot with the list.”

Rolling her eyes and not buying it for a minute, she played along. “Stop by the police station. Arrange my brother’s cremation.” She looked around the kitchen and frowned. “Shop for a few basics.” He continued to write, as she listed a few things to buy. When he added a couple others, she leaned forward and asked, “What’s that?”

“Follow up on the gold bar,” he murmured. “Follow up on our rescuers.”

She stared at him. “You think they had something to do with stranding us?”

“No, not at all,” he replied truthfully. “But they didn’t say very much, and I don’t know whether they saw what happened, assumed something happened, or were just completely innocent bystanders who happened along and came to our rescue.”

“I’m going with the last,” she said. “They weren’t friends with my brother, but I don’t think they openly hated him, like some people did.”

He nodded. “How satisfied are you that we found the most likely reason that Jason was killed?”

“Absolutely satisfied,” she replied. “What I don’t know is if any more bars are down there.”

“I don’t think there are, not in that shipwreck. However, others could be close by,” Bronson suggested. “I still believe your brother likely found that gold bar and brought it there for safekeeping, then kept the location of the rest in his head.”

“So, why move that one?”

“So he could find it more easily,” he murmured. “Then once he had a chance to go back and get more, he would have needed help. However, by bringing in help, your brother was wise enough to know that he would likely stir up some big trouble.”

“Not to mention the fact that the drug runners were probably still looking for their gold,” she murmured. “We have had groups running back and forth in the past that we often wondered who they were and what they were doing here.”

“Did your brother know any of them?”

She thought about it, then shook her head. “A couple times he literally just got up and we left, like in a restaurant, because he didn’t like the company.”

“Which would be smart, particularly if he had a secret,” Bronson murmured.

She nodded. “But nobody who knew him would really believe my brother had a secret,” she noted. “He wasn’t exactly the most trustworthy person himself. Plus, he was a total blabbermouth when drunk, which was his usual state.”

With that, Bronson added a couple more things to the list. She looked at him, saying nothing, until he read off what he’d added. “Arrange flights home,” he noted succinctly.

“Add calling my uncle to that, would you?”

With the list done for now, and the rest of the coffee gone, Bronson stood. "Come on. Let's go get some food."

"You know you don't have to stay here and babysit me, right?"

He chuckled. "No place I'd rather be right now."

She studied him, then smiled. "Thank you for that. It's actually one of the nicest things anybody has ever said to me."

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and replied, "We all need a friend sometimes."

"Hey, and sometimes we even need a rescue."

He chuckled. "Very true." His hand dropped to his side as they stepped outside, then she turned and locked the door.

Shaking her head, she mentioned, "It seems useless to even lock the door."

"I don't know about useless," he replied, "but, if nothing else, it makes it a little bit slower for somebody to get in." And, with that, they headed out to breakfast.

## CHAPTER 10

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**R**OBIN STARED AT the police officer in shock. “Of course we aren’t making it up. What do you think happened to our boat?”

“Honestly, senorita, I think you probably didn’t put the anchor down, so, when the winds came up, your boat drifted away.” She just stared at him, nonplussed. This was not what she had expected. She glanced over at Bronson, but he was studying the police officer intently.

“Nobody showed up with an empty boat. Is that what you’re saying?” she asked.

The police officer nodded immediately. “There have been no reports of a boat showing up anywhere, and, if you had placed your dive markers out, as you’re supposed to, nobody would have taken it.”

She snorted, as she sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. “They wouldn’t have taken it, unless they wanted to cause us distress,” she pointed out. “If we hadn’t been given a lift when we were, there’s a good chance we wouldn’t be alive today.”

He just stared at her, but there was absolutely no giving in to her implacable gaze.

She was nothing but a white female, causing trouble over a dead brother, who had caused them a ton of it. She could see that the cop just wanted her to go away. “When can I have my brother’s body?” she asked abruptly.

“Now, preferably as soon as possible.”

She glared at him, her shoulders stiffening.

“We don’t have facilities for keeping bodies, so you need to deal with it.”

“Right. And I’d like a copy of the police report.”

“What report?” he asked, looking at her in astonishment. “About your boat?”

“Obviously you aren’t going to write up a report on the missing boat, which was a rental.”

“So the marina’s boat,” the cop interjected immediately. “My brother owns the marina.”

And that was their next problem, of course, because everybody here was more or less related or good friends with everybody else.

She nodded. “What about investigating Jason’s death?”

“What is there to say? He was out diving and fell on his knife.”

She stared at him, a growing pit of rage building inside her. “Seriously?”

He just gave her that look.

She turned to Bronson, who just continued to stare at the officer, and she added, “It’s an interesting way to handle a murder in your local area.”

“You say it’s a murder. I don’t. For all I know, it’s suicide. He wedged that knife against the wall down on the ship and pushed himself against it.” The lazy cop raised both palms. “Or maybe he hired somebody to kill him. He was a bucket with a hole in it. A hinge with all the screws missing. He was a mess, and you and I both know that. Plus, even if somebody did kill him, we have too many suspects, and most of them are long gone.” He declared, “It was not one of our locals.”

She hopped to her feet and walked out of the station, without another word. She was literally vibrating with anger. It was not quite what she had expected. She had been prepared for a poor and lackadaisical response, but she had never dreamed that they would dismiss the murder so casually. As Bronson stepped up behind her, she snapped, “They can’t even write up a report?”

“I did get a copy of what he had written down,” Bronson told her, “and a photo, but that’s about it.”

She shook her head. “They don’t care. They just don’t care.”

“No, at this point, they clearly don’t. Let’s go take care of your brother.”

They walked over to where the body was being held in the medical clinic and entered the cooler. As soon as the attendants saw her, they were immediately all business. They took her money and printed out a receipt. They would ship the body to get it cremated.

Taking care of that aspect was fast and simple. It seemed that everybody wanted the body disposed of as quickly as possible. The cremation would be done the next afternoon, and she could collect the ashes after that.

“We have to go into the city to pick up the ashes,” she shared, turning to Bronson.

“We can do that, either on the way to the airport or before that.”

“Right, and we must make arrangements to get home.”

“What about your rent?”

“It’s paid till the end of the month. It’s month-to-month anyway, so, if I’m not here at the end of the month? Believe me. They won’t care.”

“Good riddance all around?”

“You have no idea,” she murmured. She stood outside once again and looked around. “I never want to come back here again.”

“You’ve also spent a large chunk of time here.”

“Many months, not a large chunk,” she corrected.

“Okay, but many months of your life here with both sweet and sad memories.”

“Yeah, you could say that.” When her phone rang, she pulled it out and answered it. “Good morning, Uncle. I’m feeling much better, thank you.”

“Good, good,” he said gently. “And the arrangements?”

“Yes, arrangements have been made, and we can pick up his ashes tomorrow afternoon. Although, at this point, I’m not too sure what to do with them. Jason wanted to go back to the ocean, but I doubt anyone would rent me a boat now.”

When her uncle asked for the name and the location of the cremation facility, she provided the address and the phone number. “What will you do?”

His voice was strained as he replied, “I’ll arrange to have his remains sent over here. Then one of our ships will take him out to the ocean and drop him there. You know that’s where he’d like to be.”

She smiled at that. “Thank you. I know he’ll like that.”

“And you don’t need to be dealing with his mess anymore,” he stated. “Now what’s the news on that gold bar?”

“I haven’t heard any news yet,” she said, as she turned toward Bronson. “Did you get an update from Mason on it?”

He shook his head, pulled out his phone, and told her, “I’ll send a text now.”

Robin spoke to her uncle and relayed Bronson’s message. “He’ll ask for an update now.”

“Does he trust these men?”

“I believe so,” she replied. “Honestly just the fact that it’s gone is all I really care about.”

“You don’t think any more were there, right?” her uncle pushed.

“No, I don’t think so, but that doesn’t mean there wasn’t some within a mile or so of there,” she guessed. “Remember about eighteen months ago when those two ships collided out there, and a big fight erupted between a couple drug runners?”

“I hope all the drugs floated out.”

“Yeah, the cops thought it was a drug deal gone wrong, yet there were some rumblings about gold bars back then.”

“It’s not an uncommon way to convert money,” he noted. “And the fact that your brother found one bar means there are probably more.”

“Sure, but that’s also most likely what got him killed,” she said.

“No, I hear you,” he murmured. “Just keep the location marked for the future. Maybe someday, when we’re bored, we’ll come back with a large metal detector and see if we can find the rest of the hoard.”

“Maybe,” she replied, “but that’ll be a long time away for me. I have absolutely no intention of coming back here ever again.”

Her uncle sighed. “I’m sorry it was such an ugly trip. What are your plans now?”

“Going back to Coronado,” she stated. “I know you’ve probably handled all the paperwork required for that last job, but I need a few days to just stay at my place and decompress.”

“You can come back on board if you want. We’re heading out to Malta.”

“Not right now.” She yawned. “But who knows? Give me a few weeks.”

“Good enough, you know you’re welcome whenever you like.”

And she did; she absolutely knew that. She also had a training schedule and a lot of diving she wanted to do herself. After she hung up the phone, she looked over at Bronson. “We didn’t get flights booked yet.”

“Nope. We can do that next.” As they headed back to her place, he checked the availability on his phone. “A couple



flights leave Sunday.”

She nodded. “Are you okay to travel back together?”

“Absolutely. We’ve been together the whole time, so why not?”

“It’ll seem really odd to not have you here every time I turn around,” she noted.

He chuckled. “I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not, but the fact of the matter is, you and I both have to return to whatever we call a normal life these days.”

“Yes, we do. What’s normal for you?”

“Training, missions, education, more training, more missions, more education.”

She chuckled.

“And you?” he asked.

“I’m supposed to be gearing up for a new dive session and a bunch of training coming up,” she shared. “I’ll be spending the fall on a trip with my uncle, and, of course, in between I’ll be doing a bunch of other stuff. I’m collating a lot of the research that we have collected over the years, and that’s a big job. Working with the software developer to get a program together that suits our needs will mean I’m huddled up somewhere for months, if not years,” she admitted. “With intermittent breaks to get back to my favorite hobby of course.”

“I hope so,” Bronson said. “It sounds to me like the hobby is why you do this.”

“It is, indeed, and it’s not really my hobby. It’s my career,” she corrected. “But Uncle also knows that it’ll take a lot of work to do all this research, then compile it and make it into something that’s viable for publishing. That’s a priority for him, so I have agreed to do it. However, that’ll also take away a big chunk of my time.”

“Does it matter where you do it?”

She shook her head. “No, not really. I mean, I could go anywhere in the world theoretically. I don’t have any particular reason to go anywhere. . . . If my brother were still around, I might have stayed close, but . . .” She let her voice fade out because nobody needed to have the rest of it verbalized at this point.

Bronson nodded. “Makes sense.”

They went to his hotel and checked out, carrying his stuff back to her apartment, she said, “We can just book the flights online, right?”

“Yeah, that’s faster and easier, no doubt.”

“They may not be any cheaper though. If we want cheaper, we must go into the city.”

“That I don’t want to do,” he replied, “at least not before we have to.”

“My uncle will arrange for my brother’s ashes to be shipped home, so we don’t have that to deal with.”

“Perfect.” He nodded. “In that case, it sounds like we have the rest of today and tonight then.”

She winced at that. “And that’s not enough time to find out what happened to my brother.”

He stopped, turned around, and faced her. “And how important is that?”

She hated to say it, but it did matter. “I would really like answers,” she admitted.

“And if you can’t get answers?”

“I don’t know,” she murmured. “If I can’t, I don’t want to stay longer, but not using the time we do have seems like letting Jason down.”

He stared at her and then added, “You also need to consider how dangerous it’s been.”

“I know, and I’ve kept that in mind, but still ...” Then she frowned. “I know it sounds foolish, and maybe it is, but it’s also heartbreaking.”

“People often don’t get answers in murder cases, even in the best of situations. And nobody here is willing to cooperate.”

“I think that’s one of the hardest parts,” she noted. “My brother had a lot of failings, but he was still a human being and someone I cared about very much.”

“Let’s confirm the tickets are booked, so we have a time set to leave,” he suggested, “and then, if you want to keep investigating, we can.”

She brightened for a moment, then her shoulders sagged again. “But I wouldn’t have a clue how to start.”

“That’s always an intrinsic part of the problem,” he noted. “It’s not as if we have too many open leads to follow up on.”

“No, we don’t,” she agreed. “If the cops don’t find the stolen boat, then that lead is dead too.”

“Even if they do find the boat,” he murmured, “it won’t help.” She frowned at him, so he explained further. “We have no way to prove that whoever took the boat is the same person who may have brought it to shore. Anyone could say they found it adrift and brought it in, just saying it was lost.”

“Right.” She shook her head. “This is a really poor area, so nobody would even bring it in to be claimed. Either it would be disguised and kept or it would be sold or traded to somebody else who would take it over and maybe get rid of it some other way.” She shrugged. “I don’t really know how that works, but it’s too valuable to just turn over to the cops, even if his brother does own a marina.”

“And,” Bronson added, “if the locals found it and thought the boat was yours or your brother’s, they definitely wouldn’t care about sinking it or whatever.”

“So, in that case,” she said, “I’m not sure what other lead we have to chase down.” She thought about that, as Bronson focused quickly on arranging their flights. With flights booked and paid for and confirmations received and sent to Robin’s phone as well, she sat back and took a deep breath. “Okay, that at least feels positive.” She frowned as she looked around. “I need to deal with everything I’ve got here.”

He asked. “How much do you want to bring with you?”

She shook her head. “Nothing—but I do have my dive equipment and my brother’s spare set.”

He nodded. “Do you want to try and sell that to the dive shop here, or do you want to take it with you?”

“My equipment goes with me,” she declared immediately.

“Are you taking that on the flight?”

She frowned at that and then shook her head. “No, I’ll arrange for all of it to be shipped to my uncle, I guess.”

“Good. In that case, what about your brother’s stuff? Do you want that to go too?”

She slowly shook her head. “No, I don’t think that’s necessarily the best idea.”

“It doesn’t have any sentimental value?”

“Not to me, and honestly it wasn’t the best quality, and we’re already overwhelmed with dive equipment. I’m not sure that Chet would want it, but I’ll check with Uncle first.” She quickly texted her uncle and asked his opinion. His response came back with a simple **No, just deal with it however you can.**

“Let’s go down to the dive shop,” she said. “Maybe Chet wants it.”

“Or donate it to the man whose boat was stolen,” he suggested, looking over at her.

She nodded. “That’s where it should go.”

“Right, we’re supposed to go talk to the guy at the marina anyway, so let’s go there first,” he said. “Then, if there’s no joy out of that visit, we’ll head to the dive shop.”



BRONSON WASN’T AT all surprised to see that the marina owner was less than happy to see her. But he did say that the boat was covered by insurance.

She nodded. “In that case, the loss isn’t something that’ll personally affect you then.”

He shrugged. “No, but I do hate to see one of my boats go missing.”

“Of course.” They said their goodbyes, and he called out behind her, “Are you leaving town now?”

“Tomorrow,” she replied, with a nod, and saw a whisper of relief on his face. “I didn’t ever intend to cause trouble, you know?” she murmured. “I was just trying to save my brother.”

He nodded and then, in a surprisingly compassionate tone, he replied, “Some people just can’t be saved.”

As they headed over to the dive shop, she muttered, “I never was very open to listening to that advice.”

“When you care about somebody, it’s not surprising that you fight when people tell you to just give up on them.”

“True enough.”

As they walked back into the dive shop, the owner, Chet, looked up at them in surprise. “There you are. I’ve been hearing all kinds of rumors.”

“Yeah?” she said. “Most of them are true. What have you heard?”

He shook his head at her. “Did you guys really have the boat stolen from you while you were diving?” He turned to look at her and frowned. “Didn’t you put out your diving markers?”

“Of course I did,” she snapped. “So that just goes to tell you how people felt about the fact that divers were underwater.”

Chet swore at that. “If that gets out in public, we’ll have a hell of a time.”

“I know,” she agreed. “It’s not good for diving, but, at the same time, I think it was fairly specific.”

“In what way?” he asked, crossing his arms and looking at her.

“It was an attempt to kill me and Bronson, as per the rumors in the pub.”

“You think somebody did it on purpose?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, obviously Jason’s already dead,” she stated bluntly.

He nodded. “So what was the point of stranding you?”

“Maybe a message to get the hell out of town, if we survived.”

“And will you listen?”

“We’re listening,” she declared, with a touch of spirit. “We’re flying out tomorrow.”

“Good.” Chet nodded.

Bronson wasn’t too sure what to make of Chet’s response because there was a little bit too much emphasis. “So I guess everybody here will be glad to see the back of her, *huh?*” Bronson asked the shopkeeper.

“Not her so much as her brother.” Chet shrugged and turned to Robin. “What are you doing with his dive gear?”

“I was wondering if you wanted it,” she noted. “It’s his spare set, so not as good as what most divers want.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Are you trying to sell it?”

“No.” She shook her head. “You were good to him. I was just thinking I would give it to you.”

“Sounds good.” His smile cracked his face. “I must admit that he did owe me some money.”

She winced at that. “He wasn’t exactly the best when it came to paying his bills.”

“No, he wasn’t. Though most of the time he made good on it eventually. It just took a while sometimes.”

She nodded. “We’ll bring it over for you.” She turned to Bronson. “Maybe we’ll do that right now.”

“We need to because we’ve got your apartment to clean out too.”

“Oh, right, you’ve got your place,” Chet noted. “If you’ve got anything you want to get rid of, just let me know. I might know people who could use it.” Chet nudged her arm gently.

She turned and asked, “What?”

“The police took Jason’s good gear, what he’d been wearing, when he was killed.”

She frowned at that. “We need to get it back.”

At that, he shook his head. “If it’s still there.”

“Well, crap,” she said. “Why are you just now mentioning this?”

He shrugged. “I assumed his possessions would be shipped with the body, but you’re right. I didn’t even think of it.”

Bronson pulled out his phone and said, “Let me call them.”

He stepped away to talk on the phone.

## CHAPTER 11

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**R**OBIN LOOKED BACK at Chet and said, “Hey, looks like this turns out to be something I can’t give you.”

Chet shrugged. “You know what the cops are like. If there’s anything of value, they’ll take it and keep it.”

“Yeah, I suppose it went to the cops because Jason wasn’t one of them.”

“No, if it was somebody local in the family, then everybody would get their gear back but, in your case, not so much.”

When Bronson returned, he shook his head. “Somehow Jason’s gear is not there. They told me it never came in.”

She snorted. “It was on the body.” But then she stopped and asked, “Or was it?”

“Remember? He had no face mask—although his tank was still with him,” Bronson stated. “Jason must have worn his gear down to the shipwreck. So who had it afterward?”

She frowned at that. “What do you want to bet that there was absolutely no record of it in the police department?”

“And, without evidence, you can’t even blame them,” Bronson noted.

“I sure as hell can,” she snapped bitterly.

“But that’s a moot point by now,” Chet noted.

She looked back at him and shrugged. “Hey, whatever.”

Chet asked her, “Have you cleaned up the rest of his gear?”

“At his apartment? Yes, we did, such as it was. I’m just going through my place now. We’ll bring his spare set down.”



“Good enough.” Chet nodded. “Remember. If there’s anything else to give away, keep me in mind.”

“Will do,” she agreed. And, feeling like a fool, she headed back to her place. “Why didn’t we think of that?”

“I don’t know,” Bronson admitted. “I guess I just assumed that you were taking possession of his personal items.”

“And I thought the cops were taking possession of it. Besides, at least his tank came in with him, so the cops should have it in evidence.”

“Why would anybody else want to take it?” he asked.

“Because it’s valuable,” she murmured. “Around here, that’s reason enough.”

“Right,” he muttered. “So it’s just one more piece that we’ll never get an answer for.”

“I’m pretty sure the answer is that somebody local took it to pay for something that Jason owed him.” Her tone had just enough bitterness for him to reach out a hand. “I know. I know.” She moaned. “The sooner I’m out of this place, the better. My attitude is going downhill very quickly.”

“It’s been a really tough few days,” he murmured.

“It has. Can I ask for your help to clean up the rest of my apartment?”

“Of course. I presume it came furnished?”

“It did, which is one of the reasons I took it instead of sitting in a hotel or trying to sleep at my brother’s.” Bronson stared at her in horror. She nodded. “Hence the apartment. Plus, I was planning on working most of the time anyway.”

“So then your uncle paid for it.”

“I paid for it, and he reimburses me, though I haven’t submitted those receipts yet.”

He laughed. “Nice to know you have enough money to go this long without it.”

“I’ve been working for my uncle for a long time,” she noted. “I’d like to think I give good value for the money he pays me.”

“I’m sure you do,” Bronson replied. “And really the research is where your heart’s at, isn’t it?”

She frowned at him. “How do you figure that? You’re right, but most people don’t see it.”

“No, but when you talk about preparing the reports, compiling the data, your voice changes.”

“Yeah, I really do enjoy it,” she admitted. “I like to dive for the fun of diving, but the research and the animal life that we see down there, the whole ecosystems, that is what thoroughly fascinates me.”

“So, it’s not about finding buried treasure on hiatus?”

“No, I’ve never had that as part of my conscious thought process anywhere along the line.”

“What about your uncle?”

“I think anybody who’s been on the ocean for as long as he has is certainly full of many stories. He found a couple wrecks that were important historically, and that’s of more value to him. I think, in this case, what happened to my brother would be what interests him the least.”

Back inside her apartment, she stopped and groaned. “How does one accumulate this much stuff in such a short time?”

With his help, they quickly pulled everything out of the bedroom, packed up her clothes except for an outfit for tomorrow, and then started loading up anything in the living room and the kitchen that was Robin’s.

Bronson noted, “Not all that much here. Plus you’re shipping some of this.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I’ll take it all to the airport and pay extra freight for it—just so it’s clear that it’s a company expense.”

“Good enough.” He sorted through what he thought would stay with the actual apartment and the rest that needed to go with Robin. “There isn’t much, but there is some food and stuff in the kitchen.”

“The coffeemaker stays behind. It was actually here, the dishes too. I’m happy to leave behind any of the food for the gal who will come in and clean.”

After a couple hours and several trips to divvy up stuff that she thought various people could use, they returned to her apartment. He looked around and shrugged. “So, outside of a good cleaning, I think we’re done.”

Robin nodded. “I’ve got a local woman who cleans for me on a regular basis anyway. So I’ll just ask her to do a final cleanup.” At that, she stepped a little bit away, brought up her phone, and called the cleaning lady. When Robin was done, she smiled. “That was easy. She’ll come in Monday. I told her that, if any food was left that she wants, she can take it with her.”

“That’s a great way to handle it,” he said approvingly.

She smiled. “It’s not all bad news.”

“Nope. Now what do you want to do tonight? Any nightspots you want to visit?”

“Not particularly,” she replied. “There are a couple good restaurants around that I wouldn’t mind hitting one last time.”

“Done,” he said easily.

She laughed. “Anything to do with food is good with you, isn’t it?”

“Sure is.” He gave her a big grin. “We did miss lunch after all.”

She stared at him, wide-eyed. “We did and never got to the shopping.” She looked at her watch and grimaced. “But, if we eat now, it’ll be at the wrong time. It’ll be too early to make it through the rest of the night, and it’ll be too late to do with

only just one meal. I suppose we could go into the city for a quick trip to take some time.”

“If you have things to do there, fine, but, if we’re going there tomorrow already,” he noted, “that’s probably not an issue. Is there any other place you want to go?”

She turned and stared out at the water. He placed his hands on her shoulders, gently massaging them. “If you want, we can rent a boat and go back out onto the water.”

She sighed. “I feel like I haven’t said goodbye, and we won’t get his ashes until tomorrow.”

“You’re not getting them at all, remember? Your uncle’s having them shipped.”

“Right.” She stared down at the picture she unexpectedly held in her hands. “I don’t know. I guess I wouldn’t mind going back out, just not diving. I’m not ready for that. Just a chance to say goodbye.”

“Done. So, we’ll go back down to the marina, rent a boat, and, if you want, we can even pick up something and eat it out there.”

“No,” she said. “Let’s have dinner when we get back. I don’t want it to be a long trip out there. It just feels incomplete.” As he waited in silence, she sighed. “Chances are it will always feel incomplete because I don’t have any answers.”

“You do whatever you need to do,” he stated. “This is all part of your grieving process, you know?”

“I’ve not really had time to get down to the process of grieving,” she admitted, staring out at the water still. “It is a beautiful afternoon.”

“Perfect, let’s go.”

She sighed.

“What’s the problem?” He stopped and waited.

“What if something goes wrong?” she asked. “I guess a part of me is a little scared.”

“About going back? We don’t need to go there.”

“About going out period. It’s hard to forget what happened.” He understood instantly, as she knew he would.

“In that case,” he suggested, “all the more reason to go out and to put that fear to rest.”

She wrapped her arms around her chest. “Easy for you to say.”

“Listen,” he began. “It’s worth doing. This is your life. It’s your future, and we don’t want to have any remnants of your past marring it.”

“How do we not?” she asked. “I know I slept and had a nasty day, but it’s always in the back of my mind. Like, what if we hadn’t made it? What if they hadn’t found us. What if? ... You know?”

“Of course I understand,” he confirmed, his voice rough, “but we did make it.”

She nodded. “But sometimes that’s not quite enough.”



BRONSON WRAPPED HIS arms around Robin’s shoulders and pulled her in for a hug. “It’s a beautiful day. It’s not a very far trip. We’re not going to dive. We will take the boat over, and we won’t leave it. You can stand there for a moment and say goodbye to your brother. Whatever it is you need to do. If you have something of his as a memento that you want to toss into the water, grab that. Whatever it is you need to do, don’t be afraid,” he stated. “Then we’ll come back, and we’ll go out and have a nice dinner. Then we’ll spend the night, pack up the last of the stuff in the morning, and head into the city. How does that sound?”

She smiled at that. “Sounds like a plan—but only because you’re with me.”

“That’s why we’ll do it because I would hate for this to be the last real memories that you take from here or that you take of your brother.”

She nodded, but it was hard to mistake the shivers.

“Come on. Let’s go before you change your mind.” He didn’t drag her, but it seemed like he was in a way, as they headed out the door and back to the marina. He walked into the tiny office and rented a boat, even though the guy just looked at him in surprise. He shrugged. “She just wants to go out and say goodbye.”

“Would have thought she’d done that already,” he muttered, but he gave them a boat because, of course, Bronson had tossed out the money, and money bought anything and everything around here, no matter who it came from. Outside in the boat they’d been given, she quickly got onboard. He threw off the ropes, hopped onboard, started the engine, and pulled away from the wharf.

Once they were underway, she settled down considerably. “It is a beautiful day,” she murmured.

“It’s a gorgeous day.” Bronson smiled back at her. “So relax. We’ll have a nice quick trip.”

“Did you rent it just for a couple hours then?”

“I rented it for the afternoon,” he stated.

“Why so long?”

“Just in case you want to sit out there and have a nap or something. Besides, it was only a couple bucks extra.”

“The prices always were really cheap,” she noted. “It’s one of the reasons it’s so popular as a dive spot. Speaking of which, what about the two guys, the other divers in your hotel?”

“What about them?”

“They were supposed to leave today, weren’t they?”

He nodded. “I wonder if they did.”

She shrugged. “They probably did, but so many divers come in and out of this place all the time that there will just be two more to replace them.”

Something nagged at the back of his mind, but he kept his thoughts to himself as they passed several other boats out on the water, mostly people fishing. By the time he came to the coordinates, he mentioned, “It should be about here.”

She stood, looked around, and nodded. “It is, indeed.”

“Now, the question is, what do you want to do?”

She thought of the picture of her brother that she had on her and nodded. “I want to go up to that end of the boat and talk to him.” She headed to the bow, at the front behind the railings, then sat down in the sun. Bronson stayed where he was at the wheel and just waited for her, thinking he should have brought some cold beer or something. It was a gorgeous day, and, for all intents and purposes, they were alone out here.

He saw boats in the distance, but no one was close. He gave her half an hour, and then he clambered up front and sat down beside her. The tears rolled down her cheeks. Wrapping an arm around her, he pulled her into him and held her close.

She leaned back against his chest and let her arms drape over his. “I just feel like it was such a waste,” she murmured.

He kissed her cheek. “A waste that isn’t your fault. You did what you could.”

“Yet it doesn’t seem like it was enough.”

He knew perfectly well that he could say absolutely nothing to change how she felt. Losses such as this were just facts of life. Sometimes there were no answers or good results, no matter how much effort you put into something.

Finally she looked up at him and smiled. “I think we can go now.”

“Okay, ... as long as you’re ready.”

She nodded, and, with his help, the two got up and made their way back to the wheel. She sat down on the red bench, turned her face toward the sun, and murmured, “I don’t know, brother. You lived the life you wanted to live, but there’s a lot more out there to enjoy.”

The wind picked up around them for a moment.

Bronson chuckled. “Maybe that’s your brother, talking to you.”

“Maybe.” She smiled. “He’s probably telling me to stop being foolish and to get my ass home, where I belong.”

“Did he go diving with you much?”

“Not that much in recent history,” she shared, “and mostly because of me. I wasn’t all that comfortable going out with him because he just wasn’t very stable. I kept trying to get him out on his sober days, but that didn’t work. Back when things were better, we dove together a lot.”

With that, Bronson turned the boat toward shore.



## CHAPTER 12

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AS THE DOCKS came within sight, it was hard to hide her relief. When Robin glanced over at Bronson, it only confirmed that he already knew how she felt. “I wonder if I’ll ever get rid of that feeling.”

“Once you’ve had an accident in the water,” he noted, “it’s hard to get over it. Eventually though it’ll fade. It just takes time.”

She nodded. “I hope so,” she replied cheerfully, as she stood, facing the wharf a couple hundred yards away. As they got closer, she noticed a group of men gathering. “I wonder what they’re up to.”

Bronson glanced over at them and shrugged. “No idea.”

As they grew closer, the group dissipated. She jumped off onto the dock and grabbed the rope, and one of the guys offered to tie it up for her. She smiled and said, “I’m good, thanks.”

Instead of smiling back at her, he turned on her. “What’s wrong with me helping?” he asked, his voice ugly.

She looked at him, frowning. “Nothing, but I was always taught that, if you go out with a boat, you look after it yourself.”

“Most ladies,” he said, with a slurred voice, “would let a man help.”

She didn’t know what to say to that and glanced back at Bronson, who was frowning at the man even as he quickly shut off the engine and stepped up beside her. Bronson put his body between the two of them. “Come on. We need to go return the boat.” With that, he got her away from the guy.

“What’s his problem?” she muttered.

“Who’s to say? Chances are it’s nothing.”

But, from his tone of voice, she knew something was going on that he didn’t like, and he was doing his utmost to get her out of there. At the office, they quickly returned the boat key, and, with all the paperwork taken care of and the boat checked over, he led her away.

“I still don’t know what that was all about.”

“I don’t either,” Bronson agreed, “but no point in hanging around to find out.”

Although she was ready to argue, there was no point, as they were leaving anyway. So they just needed to get through their last evening peaceably. Then, with any luck at all, she could put this part of her life behind her. “Come on. Let’s go get dinner.” She noted they weren’t heading back to her place, so they would walk straight to the restaurant. “Are you trying to avoid showing people where I live?” she muttered.

“No, I would just like to avoid having any trouble on our last night here.”

She nodded. “Agreed. And by the way,” she added, looping her arm with his, “any chance you’re interested in maybe going out for coffee or something when we get back to Coronado?”

He smiled and squeezed her arm. “Absolutely. I thought that was a given.”

She snorted. “Nothing’s a given in this world anymore. You must make things very clear.”

“Agreed.” He nodded. “And, in the interest of clarity, yes, I absolutely want to spend time with you when we get back to base.”

“I won’t be on base though.”

“No, but you won’t be far away,” he stated smoothly.

“I suppose you’ve already looked up where I live.”

“Sure have—and you’re not that far away.”

“Good,” she said. “In that case, the first meal is on you.”

“Done.”

She studied him for a moment. “Boy, are you always this easy to get along with? You’ve already paid for almost everything here, and it should be me paying for the next meal.”

“You can if you want,” he replied, with a shrug. “I can’t say I’m particularly bothered either way.”

She laughed. “See? There you go again, being way too nice and agreeable, no matter what.”

“That’s just me being me.” As they got to the restaurant, he chose a table out on the balcony, ever-so-slightly away from the loud live music going on inside.

“It is pretty early still,” she noted.

“Do you want cocktails first?” he asked.

“Sure. As long as it’s not beer, that’s fine with me.” He quickly ordered a beer for himself and a gin for her. She laughed. “How did you know I drink gin?”

“I saw a picture of you with a drink with your brother.”

“Yeah, that was a while ago though,” she murmured.

“Maybe, but gin is gin.” When the drinks came, he settled in somewhat.

She looked around and said, “Those guys really set you off, didn’t they?”

“There was something *off* about the whole thing,” he stated. “I don’t like anomalies, and it didn’t look right.”

The terminology made her smile. “No, I hear you there, and my uncle would agree with you.”

He smiled at her. “Sometimes when you talk about your uncle, I feel like I know him somehow. I think I like him already.”

“I think you would like him,” she agreed. “He’s quite a character, and he’s also ex-navy.”

“In that case,” he replied, with a bright smile, “I’m sure I would.”

“Maybe you’ll get a chance to meet him when he comes,” she noted. “Maybe you can take some time and go for a dive with us.”

“I would surely love to.”

“At least I can tell my uncle that you know how to handle yourself down there.”

“I should,” he said. “I’ve spent a lot of my time in the water.”

She nodded. “Back to that,... so, when you retire, you’re considering having a dive shop somewhere?”

“Maybe, but a whole lot different than Chet’s, and it’ll be a long time into the future.”

“That’s my uncle’s dream too, but I don’t think he’ll ever make good on it,” she stated.

“Of course not. He’d have to give up what he’s currently doing, and he’s not ready for that yet,” Bronson replied.

“No, that’s for sure.” She smiled.

“You lost your parents and now your brother, but I’m super glad you have your uncle.”

“It is what it is. He’s a good guy.”

At that, the waitress came by, just to drop off some water and the menus. “I’ll give you two a few minutes,” she said and left.

After Robin looked at hers, she shared, “I don’t know about you, but I’d like a really big platter of nachos.”

“Sure. That’ll be our first course.”

“If I know this place, it will probably be our only course.” She laughed.

They sat quietly together, enjoying the music and the surroundings.

“I’m not at all upset to be here right now,” he said. “Obviously there are better circumstances, but, all in all, this right here is pretty nice.”

“True,” she murmured. “It is beautiful.” At that moment, she realized his energy had changed, as he studied something behind her. She stiffened at the change in his countenance.

“Just stay calm, okay?”

“Shit, I was hoping to get out of here without a problem.”

“I’m still hoping to,” he added, “but I think somebody else is looking to cause trouble.”

“Why? Because of my brother again?” she asked bitterly.

“Maybe, or maybe something else entirely. I’m not exactly sure.”

She didn’t turn around, but it was hard not to. “Tell me when it’s safe to look,” she murmured.

“You won’t have to turn,” he noted. “They’re getting nicely drunk on the side table.”

“Sure, poor man’s courage.” She snorted.

“If that is what you call it”—he shrugged—“but some people are just the type to get ugly when they get drunk, and others must work themselves up to it.”

Just then the waitress returned with an enormous over heaped platter of tortilla chips and a mess of toppings, while she made fresh guacamole beside them. With that done, the waitress disappeared.

Bronson stared at the platter and said, “I’m glad we ordered this. I’ve never had fresh guacamole made right in front of me before.”

“It’s really good,” Robin murmured. “So enjoy.” She reached for a handful of chips, and he chuckled as he dug into

the guacamole.

He smiled. “We like the same things.”

“I think we all like the same things here.”

“I don’t know about that,” he disagreed. “I’m fairly adventurous when it comes to food, but most of my family is not. Seriously lame.”

“I’ve always been adventurous,” she replied. “Traveling the world the way we do, the food’s just a little bit different, no matter where we go.”

“It always is, isn’t it?” Bronson smiled. “As long as you’re open-minded, then you can enjoy so much.”

And, while all the words were correct, she found that his tone was off. “Are they talking about us?” she whispered.

He nodded. “About your brother. The trouble is, it has to do more with what he found.” She stiffened, and he nodded knowingly. “Don’t turn around though,” he warned.

“You keep saying that,” she snapped softly, yet relaxed back. “That’s not such an easy thing to do.”

He tossed her a smile, his gaze ever watchful behind her, as he reached for another handful of chips.

“As long as you’re eating,” she guessed, “I’ll presume that’s a good sign.”

“It is, but it seems like the guys keep coming and going.”

“Jason always had trouble with a group of four or maybe five of them,” she noted. “Most of the time they left me alone. Only when I was with him did they get disagreeable.”

“That’s probably who it is then,” Bronson noted. “One’s a really tall, lanky guy with long stringy hair, and another one has long braids down his back.”

“Yeah, that’s two of them, and partnering with them will be a pair of brothers, who are much chunkier, heavysset even,

and they both always have a cigarette hanging from their mouths.”

“Yeah, both of them are there too.”

“That’s four of them,” she stated. “So, if you see a fifth hanging around with them, I’m sure it’s the same group.”

“And what do they normally do?”

“They were always after Jason for something. But sometimes it was just hassling him about money he owed them and hadn’t paid back. Other times it was about Jason taking over fishing spots that they wanted. Sometimes it was about running him out of here just because they didn’t like him.”

“Interesting,” Bronson noted.

At least they were undisturbed for the bulk of their dinner. Finally she pushed away her plate and declared, “Now I’m officially full.”

“Good,” he said, as he pulled the nacho tray toward him. “Then I don’t have to share the rest.”

Her laughter peeled out, natural and full of humor. By the time she finished, she was wiping away tears from her eyes. “Oh, I needed that.”

“Obviously, because it wasn’t all that funny,” Bronson added in a dry tone.

She grinned at him. “You’re a good guy to be around. You’re easy to be with. You’re funny, and you’re a good man for a gal to have in her corner.”

“You’re about to find out again,” he warned her once more, as he picked up another chip, his gaze on whatever was happening behind her.

“Are they coming over?”

He nodded. “Yeah, they sure are.” He took money out of his wallet to cover dinner, tucking it under the big nacho tray, and said, “That’s just in case.”

“In case what?”

“We may have to make a hasty exit,” he explained, “because I don’t feel like having this place get destroyed because of these guys.”

She frowned. “What are you talking about? They generally don’t get physical.”

“You mean, they’re just the kind of guys to talk a lot?” She nodded. “Tonight they’re wearing brass rings, and one is whipping a chain. So, yeah, this time it’s about to get physical.”

Her heart slammed against her chest, and she bolted to her feet. When the waitress sauntered over, he pulled the money out from under the tray, handed it to her, and said, “Your tip is in there too.”

She smiled at him, glanced nervously off to the side, and then in a low voice told them, “You guys need to leave.”

“We are,” he replied, reaching out a hand and grabbing Robin’s, pulling her behind him. They went down the beach way and away from the restaurant.

“Are they following?” she asked.

“Oh, they’re following all right,” Bronson confirmed. “The trick is to make sure that we pick the right location for the ambush.”

She stared at him. “There is no good location. You know that. Everybody here is on their side.”

“Even the dive shop owner?”

She shrugged. “He won’t want to get involved, and he won’t thank us for getting him involved.”

“Right, and the law doesn’t give a crap, so, *huh*.” He thought about it for a moment, as they kept walking down the beach.

“What are you thinking?”



“Worst case scenario is we’ll drive into town tonight.”

“We could, if you think it’s that bad.”

“Oh, I think it’s definitely that bad. I just don’t think we’ll get that option.”

“Oh, crap,” she said. “I’m really not much of a fighter.”

“No, and maybe that was partly what they were hoping for. Maybe they thought I wouldn’t do anything. I don’t know,” Bronson stated, “but I suspect that, as we get around this corner, we’ll find them waiting for us.”

“But what do they want?”

“Anything and everything, but most likely the location of the gold.”

“How would they even know that we found it?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, “but I can sure as hell imagine that, if they even *think* we know, they’ll want to beat it out of us.”

“We can’t let them know,” she replied urgently.

“No, and my friends have already delivered it to the military,” he added, “so, depending on who and what is involved in all this mess, it’s not our problem right now.”

“It is if they’re coming after us,” she argued.

He looked at her and nodded. “True enough, but that won’t save us right now.” And, with that, he led her in a different direction.

“They’ll still find us,” she warned.

He nodded. “And again it’s all about picking your spot.”



GIVEN THE OPTIONS, he didn’t have too many great places to face an angry gang like that. He hoped it would be just the five. If they rustled up more friends, it would be a compliment to Bronson, but it would be a hell of a lot harder to handle.

And one thing he had to do was make sure she got out of here safe. He glanced over at her. “I guess you’re not up for a run to your place, are you?”

“It won’t help,” she noted. “The bastards know where I live.”

“I know. The chances of them trying to burn the place down aren’t great though.”

She frowned at that. “Jesus, you’re scaring me now,” she murmured, racing at his side.

He pointed off to the right. “I think they’re probably around that corner,” he shared.

And, sure enough, as they walked toward it, the five men stood there, sneers on their faces, just waiting for them.

Bronson nodded to them, as he kept walking past them, pulling Robin along with him. “Good evening, gentlemen,” he said calmly.

The two brothers stepped in front of him. “We want to have a talk with you.”

Bronson looked at them in surprise. “Me? I don’t even know you.”

“Yeah, but we heard you brought in some guys and took something really valuable out of here.”

“If that’s true, and the guys took something valuable away, then, whatever it is, it is gone. So what’s it got to do with you or me?” Bronson asked curiously. He was genuinely wondering if they had any clue what had happened here or not.

“We know he found it,” the tall man said. “We know he found the gold.”

At that, Robin stiffened and stared at him. “What the hell are you talking about? My brother?”

He nodded. “You can lie all you want. You’re probably just the same as your brother. But we know differently.”

At that, Bronson stood up beside her. “I’m not sure what you think you know,” he replied cautiously, “or why you would think you should come together as a gang to accost her about it.”

“Because,” one of the men snapped, “we want the gold.”

Bronson stared at him a long moment. “If there’s gold, where the hell do you think it would be hidden? Her brother didn’t have two cents to rub together.”

“No, but he was hiding something,” the thug replied. “The son of a bitch kept telling us that we’d all be sorry and that it was his. Only his.”

“What was he going to do with it?” she asked curiously, her body close to Bronson’s for support.

“I don’t know what he would do with it. Probably sell it and get drunk again,” one of the men said, with a sneer. “Your brother was a loser.”

“I know,” she stated, “but he was my brother, and I loved him.”

One of the men stepped back and snorted about her loyalty.

She frowned. “So I’m not sure what you guys expect from me, but I don’t have any gold.” Then she added, “If Jason found any, I don’t know what he did with it.” Theoretically everything she said was the truth.

“We want to know where it is,” the man with the braids demanded.

“Where what is?”

“Don’t be stupid,” he hissed, as he popped out a knife.

She looked at the long blade and swallowed hard. “I don’t know anything about what my brother might have found. There was nothing of any value at his house, nothing that pointed to any kind of road map or treasure hunt.”

“What about the men who were here?” Braids asked.

“I don’t know. They work with him.” Robin looked up at Bronson.

He nodded. “They were part of the training mission that I was on when I arrived here originally. After I found Jason’s body, I stayed to help out Robin.”

“Yeah, of course you did,” one of the men quipped, with a sly look at her. “I mean, she is pretty, isn’t she?”

“She’s very pretty,” Bronson confirmed, crossing his arms over his chest, a bored look on his face. “But that has nothing to do with being a decent human being.”

One of the men glared at him.

Bronson added, “Now, if you don’t mind, we’d like to pass. She’s leaving tomorrow.”

“What about you?” one of the men asked.

“I’m leaving too. We’re flying back to Coronado together.”

He nodded. “Good riddance.”

At that, Bronson didn’t say anything, but he waited to see if the men would do something or not. There was a hesitation among them, and he wanted to take advantage of that. “Nice talking to you guys.” Bronson stepped forward, but suddenly the guy with the braids and the knife stepped forward.

“You haven’t fooled me,” he said.

“What?”

“She knows exactly where that gold is, and, as a matter of fact, I think you guys have it hidden. You’ll take it out of here tomorrow, and we’ll never see it.”

“Even if we had it,” Robin noted, “what makes you think it should be yours?”

“Gold like that, from the drugs,” he replied, “it belongs to whoever has enough power to keep it.”

“We just want to sell it and buy a new boat,” Braids said. The other men nodded immediately.

“That’s nice,” she replied, with a heavy sigh. “Listen. If my brother somehow hit the jackpot, he didn’t tell me. He certainly didn’t leave anything behind where I could find it. You undoubtedly have seen that shithole he lived in, and definitely nothing of any value was there. I never saw anything resembling treasure. He lived and he died, and there is literally nothing to show for it.”

“Of course not.” Braids sneered. “In that case, we’ll just convince you a little more to tell us the truth.”

Bronson realized that they really wouldn’t let her go. “You don’t want to do that,” he replied quietly.

“Oh, we do. If nothing else we’ll have some rough fun with her, and we’ll finally get something back from her shithead of a brother.”

She stiffened at that. “Seriously? That’s all you can think about right now? Here you go from talking about gold to talking about rape?”

“It won’t be rape,” he stated. “Or at least you won’t be telling nobody about rape after we’re done with you.” He gave a coarse laugh.

She glared at him. “Jesus, I already said we’re leaving.”

“Yeah, tonight’s your one final chance to tell us the truth then, isn’t it?” Braids pressed on. “We want to know where that gold is.”

“And if I can’t tell you?”

“I guess you’ll just take whatever punishment we decide on.”

“Christ,” she muttered, but Bronson placed a hand on her shoulder.

“You can try,” Bronson told the gang, “but you better make sure that you give it your best shot right off the bat,” he pointed out, “because you won’t get a second chance.”

They just stared at him, and at least one of them shuffled uneasily, but Bronson kept his eye on the guy with the long braids and the knife. That guy was a killer, and Braids didn't give a crap about who or what got in his way. Everybody else was willing to be talked out of doing this thing that they had somehow gotten themselves talked into. But not him. No, Braids was the big push behind it all.

With a smile, Bronson looked at him and said, "So bring it on."

The guy just grinned at him and slowly twirling the knife in his hand. "You just think that your shit doesn't stink like every other gringo around here," he spat. "We're so sick of you guys coming down here with your money and buying your way through everything we've got here. We don't need you guys. You all need to just go away, go back to whatever country you came from, and rot," he snapped. "We don't want you here."

"Well, you want our money all right," Bronson stated. "You just don't want all the company that goes with it."

"No, we sure don't." He looked over at Robin. "Did you know your brother was sweet on my sister?"

Robin looked at him and shook her head. "No, I didn't know he had a girlfriend."

"She wasn't his girlfriend," he snapped, with a growl. "I broke them up pretty damn fast and shipped her out of here. She's back at the village, where the rest of the family is. She used to work at the bar, but she got this idea that she could save him."

"Oh, so, in other words, you have multiple reasons for being pissed off at Jason," Bronson noted. "That figures. So all you're really angry at is the fact that he's not here so you could carve him up yourself." Then he stopped, looked at the glaring man, and added, "Unless you already did the job, but he died too fast for you, and you wanted a little more blood."

Braids just kept glaring at Bronson.

One of the brothers laughed. “No, but we would have if we caught him,” he declared, with false bravado.

“Oh, I think you’re lying,” Bronson disagreed, keeping his eyes on the twirling knife. “I think this one already did it. I think he’s still angry and still pissed off that he went down there and didn’t find the gold.”

At that, one guy turned and looked at the man with the braids. “You didn’t, did you?”

Braids shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. You know I didn’t. If there was any gold, you know I would have shared it.”

At that, Bronson laughed out loud, real and genuine laughter. “If you guys believe that shit, you really don’t understand who you have in front of you. Braids here already killed Robin’s brother, and, when Braids didn’t find the gold where he thought it was, he’s now looking at Robin to give him the rest of the answers. But don’t kid yourselves. Braids here shoved a knife in Jason’s back. That’s one hell of a way for a man to die. Not even face-to-face, not even a fair fight. Just all about backstabbing in the dark, like a coward,” Bronson stated calmly.

Braid’s face darkened with anger. “You don’t know anything about it.” He sneered. “Her brother was a big fuck-up.”

“I know he was,” Bronson admitted, “but he was still a man, and he still deserved to face his attacker and to not get stabbed in the back by a partner.”

The other men shifted uneasily.

“What do you mean, Jason’s *partner*?”

“Hey, we’re your partners, aren’t we?” another asked Braids.

One of the men, as if suddenly understanding something was going on, turned on Braids and asked, “Were you really into something with him?”

“Everybody was. You know that, but he was a liar and a cheat.”

“You couldn’t trust him. We know that,” one of the brothers stated. “Once he got the booze in him, he’d talk and talk and talk, but not necessarily anything that anybody could get straight.”

“I know,” Braids replied. “As I just said, he was a fuck-up.”

“A fuck-up that you murdered in cold blood,” Bronson repeated, his hand gently clenching Robin’s shoulder, just to make sure that she didn’t go off and blow it right now.

She stood still, as if shocked, staring at the man in front of her, with a horrified look, but thankfully she remained silent.

The other men started talking all at once.

“Did you really kill him?”

“They never did find out who did it.”

“You shoulda asked him about the gold first.”

“Shut it,” yelled Braids. “It doesn’t matter who did it. Whoever it was did what everybody else wanted to do,” the man with the braids replied, an irritating smirk on his face. “It doesn’t matter. What we want now is the money.”

“The gold, yeah.” One guy turned to look at Bronson. “Tell us where the gold is, and we’ll let you go.”

Bronson smiled. “You guys won’t even get one single gold bar. You want to know why? Because of your buddy here—Braids. He’ll make sure that you all have an accident somewhere over the next few days,” Bronson declared. “Ideally, it will be a big one, like a boat blowing up in the water or some such thing,” Bronson added, with a bright smile.

The guy with the braids shifted uneasily.

“Are you just saying that? Because a boat blew up not all that long ago,” one of the brothers said. “It was one of the drug



runner's boats." At that, he stopped.

Bronson looked over at him and nodded. "Now *that* is starting to make a lot more sense."

"You don't know anything," Braids snapped, with a snort.

"You probably were part of their plan, weren't you?" Bronson guessed. "And, when it all went bad, you ended up losing the whole ship."

"I didn't lose anything," Braids retorted, "and you're just talking out of your ass."

"I might be talking out of my ass, but I didn't kill anybody," Bronson murmured. "Unlike you." Instantly, the two brothers stepped away ever-so-slightly.

Braids eyed the brothers and snapped, "Don't you two even start with me."

"I remember that you were involved with some of those guys, and you told me that they'd done a deal without you and that it all went bad."

"Obviously it did," Braids snapped. "Don't tell me that you believe this asshole. You see? That's why these gringos are so bad for us. All they do is twist their words around."

"Maybe so," the other brother noted, "but you know? Honestly you're more white than Mexican anyway. You spent a lot of years up there yourself."

"We all did," Braids argued. "Don't bring this shit up with me."

"But I remember you talking about the gold. It was you who kept bugging Jason about finding it."

"Sure, I was hoping he'd find it, and he did."

"But he didn't give you the location, did he?"

"No, he didn't, even though we had a rough idea where the boats went down, we never found the gold." Braids growled.

“But downing those boats wasn’t me. I didn’t have any part of that.”

“Yeah, you did,” one of the other men argued, turning toward Braids. “You were part of that drug-running deal. Jason told me about it.”

“See? That’s the trouble with a guy who drinks,” Bronson piped up. “They can’t keep their mouth shut.” He noted that Braids had replaced his knife with a handgun. Braids stood in front of Bronson, smiled, and, without any warning, lifted the gun and fired a single shot that took out the guy who had just questioned Braids about being part of the drug-running deal. The tall man collapsed to the ground, with a bullet in his forehead.

Braids looked over at Bronson. “You happy now?” he asked, then he fired twice more, taking out the two brothers. That left only one more man, who stood here, staring at Braids in shock. “Decide which side you’re on right now,” Braids demanded. “Otherwise you’re getting a bullet, just like them.”

Bronson, now two steps closer to Braids, looked at his last remaining gang member and shared, “Braids will do it anyway. You just won’t know when it will be.”

The guy continued to stare at Braids. “Man, you didn’t just do that. Why would you shoot them?” Then he started to swear, a spat of Spanish ripping from his mouth.

The gunman fired once more.

Bronson had counted the shots, and that was only four, meaning Braids had two more. But Bronson was already on the move, before the gun fired. He tackled the gunman head-on, knocking him down, and with a twist of Braids’s wrist, managed to separate the gunman from the gun, which Bronson kicked away, so Braids couldn’t get it quite so easily. But, dimly in the background, Bronson realized that Robin had raced over and picked it up.

Bronson shifted, straddling the man with the braids, and, using his fist, he landed several hard blows to his abdomen

and chest, and then, with a strong uppercut to the jaw, knocked Braids out cold. Slowly Bronson got back up on his feet.

“This is a hell of a situation.”

The words came from behind them.

“Yeah, it sure as hell is,” Bronson stated, as he stiffened and turned to face the dive shop owner. “I wondered who was behind it all.”

“Yeah.” Chet nodded, throwing the cigarette from his mouth onto the ground, where he smashed it into the sidewalk. There was no missing the handgun he held though. “Not bad,” he noted. “If you’d just stayed out of it a little bit longer, I could have dealt with these guys myself. But, now that you have, I’ll come up with a plausible cover story.”

“Are you involved in this too?” Robin asked, her voice barely a whisper.

Bronson looked over at her and held out a hand, and she raced to his side.

“You might as well put down that handgun,” Chet told Robin. “You won’t get a chance to use it on me. Believe me. I’ll just pop her first.”

Bronson motioned at the gun in Robin’s hand and muttered, “Just put it down on the ground.” She immediately dropped it and moved as close as she could to Bronson. “You were part of the drug-running operation, weren’t you?” Bronson asked Chet.

“Sure.” Chet shrugged. “You really think running a dive shop in this place will pay the bills I have?” He shook his head. “People see what they want to see. ... Nobody ever really sees the truth.”

“The truth being?” Robin asked.

“Your brother worked for me all right, and he was looking for that gold. I figured he’d found it when he got cagey and difficult lately, when he wouldn’t talk to me. That motherfucker was a pain in the ass too.” Chet continued to

circle them. “There were times when a guy has to do the right thing. I couldn’t quite figure out what he thought the right thing was, and I’m not even sure he knew. What he should have done was turn it over to me.”

“And you were hoping that we now have the gold?” Bronson asked, with a shake of his head.

“If you don’t have it, I sure as hell want to know where it is.”

“The US military has it,” Bronson stated calmly.

Chet stared at him. “Fuck.”

“Yeah, there was one bar. One bar and it’s gone back on a naval ship to be registered as part of that whole drug-running thing. They’ll contact the Mexican authorities and deal with it as an international issue,” Bronson explained. “Did you really think I would leave something like that around here for you guys? Look at what’s already happened to us, and we’re just trying to get out of town.”

“Well, Christ, that is still good.” He turned to her eagerly. “Where did you find it?”

“I found it at the shipwreck where Jason was killed,” she replied quietly. “This guy with the braids stabbed Jason, trying to get the gold. I think Jason must have hidden it there, but he kept the location of the rest of it secret. He didn’t tell me. And, yes, that’s the truth.”

Chet looked at her for a long moment. “Your brother was such a fuck-up,” he said, but almost an affectionate note filled his voice. “Of course he didn’t tell you. He probably figured it would be too dangerous for you.”

“It looked like he was getting ready to tell me something at the end,” she shared, “but he never did get there.”

“No, of course not.” Chet shook his head. “My God, I figured it couldn’t be too far away from where he was found—yet it would be far enough,” he murmured. “Jason was always

afraid of somebody stealing it from him. He wanted the credit for it.”

“It would have been so easy to just give him the credit for the find,” she said, staring at Chet, like waiting for a viper to strike.

“It would have been, but then the gold would have been made public, and that was not part of the plan.”

“Was it your drugs that went down?” Robin asked.

He gave her a feral smile. “It was, and, if I didn’t find that gold, I didn’t get paid. And, if I don’t get paid, other people in the chain don’t get paid, and you can bet they are pissed off already.”

## CHAPTER 13

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“AFTER ALL THESE months, I had no idea,” Robin stated, shocked.

“That’s how it was supposed to be,” Chet noted. “Too bad you didn’t leave town already.”

“You’re not kidding,” she said. “I finally find out who murdered my brother, and he turns around and murders his gang buddies so they can’t talk, and then I find out you’re the one behind it all.”

“I’m not behind this,” he argued, “but this turn of events is good. Kick the gun over here.”

“Kick it over yourself,” Bronson replied. Instead Chet lifted the handgun and pointed it at her. Bronson nodded and kicked it over closer.

“You know you really shouldn’t ever argue with a man with a gun,” Chet stated. “We do tend to get a little pissed off.”

“Yeah,” Robin agreed. “Seems like everything happening tonight is all about violence.”

“You did say you were leaving.”

“I said *tomorrow*,” she repeated. “It did take a little bit of time to get shit cleaned up.”

“I was really hoping that your brother would have had it written down somewhere.”

“If he did, I don’t know anything about it,” she declared. “Nobody wants to believe me.”

“That’s because you’re related to your brother,” Chet said. “Nobody trusts you because of him. Not even me and I know better.”

“That’s nice,” she snapped, with feeling. “I am not my brother.”

“And nobody’ll believe that,” Chet said once more for emphasis. “Nobody wants to believe that. As far as they’re concerned, you’re just as culpable as he was.”

“Yet he is dead, stabbed in the back by this guy.” She pointed to Braids.

Chet looked down at him, still unconscious on the sand, then nodded. “I always wondered if it was him.”

“He was part of that drug deal, wasn’t he?”

“He was involved as well, and he wants his money. He figured that he would bypass me and get his money straight from the source.”

“So now what will you do?” Robin asked Chet.

“What will I do?” He gave her a one-arm shrug. “That’s easy. I’ll tell the cops how he attacked me on the street. He was drunk, wielding a gun, trying to shoot me.” With that, he fired one shot, hitting the unconscious man in the heart. “Now he’s dead. Not my fault at all.”

She stepped back, her hand over her mouth, as she stared at the newest dead man on the ground. “My God,” she whispered.

“See? It really doesn’t work out well to cross those of us who are after our money,” Chet stated.

“So was it you who ordered this guy to kill my brother then?” Robin asked him.

“No, I didn’t. Jason was of more value to me alive. I knew he was looking for the damn gold.”

“And he found it, but apparently that secret will go to the grave with him,” she admitted. “All I know is we found just the one bar at the shipwreck.”

“Only one?”

She nodded. "Only one."

"Well, crap." Chet turned and looked at Bronson. "Why the hell did you give it to the military?"

"Why not?" Bronson said. "I knew, as soon as anybody found out, our lives were useless."

"They weren't useless if you had a bargaining chip," Chet stated, "but now you don't even have that."

"You just proved how little use a bargaining chip would have been," Bronson argued, "so what difference does it make? Now at least the military can help work on stopping the drug running."

"I don't think they'll stop it," Chet noted. "It's been going on for way too long. They may shut down one avenue, but another one opens up."

She nodded. "Unfortunately that's very true. I just didn't realize that you of all people were behind it all."

"Not behind all of it," Chet clarified. "If I were, I would be a very rich man. I'm just one tiny leg of it. If I don't make my deliveries and pay my bills, I don't get to live either, and that's just the way life is."

She asked, "So what'll happen to you now without it?"

"I already told you," he said, his voice rough. "I need the rest of it. Maybe I can get you guys to go down there and look for it." He looked like he was contemplating that.

She shook her head. "That won't work."

"Why not?"

"Because we're both expected back in the US tomorrow," she stated. "Remember that part about the US Navy being involved?"

"I don't think anybody will give a shit about you two," Chet stated. "Why would they?"



She snorted. "I think you're back to thinking that I'm like my brother. I'm not. Neither is Bronson."

Chet stared at her, almost not understanding what she was trying to say.

When Robin looked behind Chet and saw the two men from earlier approaching, she laughed. "Honest to God, Chet, I think you forgot to consider that this spot is a nice retreat for our military guys and how Bronson here has friends too, real friends."

Chet snapped, "It doesn't matter what friends he has. Nobody will stop this." He raised his gun and pointed it at Bronson. Just as he went to pull the trigger, another shot rang out. Chet stopped and stared, as blood welled out the corner of his mouth. Then he fell to his knees.

"Dear God," Robin gasped.

Bronson immediately wrapped her up tight, looked at the two men behind Chet, and said, "Good timing, guys. Thanks for coming back, although I didn't expect that we'd need you."

"Yeah, sounds like you did," one of the guys replied. "Man, what a night's work."

"A shitty one at that." Bronson then quickly explained what had happened.

"We got the gist of it," the same guy replied, brushing hair off his forehead. "I swear the cops are really going to hate you."

"Yeah," Bronson agreed. "You're right, and we want to get the hell out of here, before they decide to try and stop us."

"Our orders are to clear the way for you two to leave," the one guy said, "so maybe you'll want to go do that now."

"What about this mess?" Robin asked, as she stared at these two rescuers in fascination.

"We'll clean it up," he said. "No need to worry. We'll tell the cops the truth."

“But they won’t necessarily believe you.”

“Yes, they will, especially if you go away and never come back.” He gave her a sharp look, and she nodded.

“I’d be happy to,” she replied. “Jesus, what a mess.”

“Just for due diligence, do you know where any more of the gold is?”

“No,” she said. “My brother did not leave me any indication.”

He nodded. “In that case, this thing will probably die right here.”

“Not likely,” she disagreed. “It will become yet another rumor.”

“And rumors have a way of growing into myths and legends,” he noted, with a nod. “Go get packed up, get into the city, and fly the hell out of here tomorrow.”

Bronson stepped forward with a hand outstretched. They shook hands, and Bronson added, “Man, this will take some diplomatic finesse.”

“Not really,” he said. “Just a little bit of money.”

“Believe me. Not one of these men will be mourned either,” Bronson stated quietly, but he reached out a hand and grabbed hers. “Come on. Let’s go. We’re driving into the city tonight.”

And, with that, they quickly melted into the darkness.



THE DRIVE TOOK a little longer than expected, and they had to load up Robin’s rental car first, so it was well past midnight before they drove up to a hotel. She looked at it and sighed. “I can’t believe we’re here and safe.”

“Yeah,” Bronson agreed. “Now we just need to see if we can grab a room and get some rest.”

“Especially you,” she said, looking at him with concern.

“I’m fine.”

She shook her head but hopped out with him. They quickly registered and were given a motel room on the second floor. She followed him upstairs and into the room. “I didn’t even think about it down there, but there’s only the one bed.”

“I didn’t think about it either,” Bronson said, “and I’m about to crash anyway, so I don’t really care.”

“No, I don’t either,” she murmured. She walked into the bathroom first, and, when she came out, he went in and had his turn.

By the time he returned, she was curled up on the bed, but it was obvious she wasn’t asleep. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“I will be now,” she murmured. “It’s stupid, but just having the answers makes a big difference.”

“It really does. You’re right about that. I wasn’t sure we would get any before we left, but I’m sure glad we did.” Bronson smiled. “Now you are free to close this chapter, to walk away from the bad memories here, and to let your life move forward again.”

“That will be so good. It seems like I’ve been on some kind of hiatus for the last few months with Jason. I told my uncle that I wanted to spend as much time with Jason as I could to help get him back on the straight and narrow, but clearly I had no idea what I was getting myself into.”

“It’s a good thing. Otherwise you might not have come, and, as bad as it’s been, you might not have gotten that time with Jason,” Bronson noted quietly.

“I never thought of that, but you’re right. At least I did have that time with him, even if it was difficult and ended up being cut short.”

“Exactly.” Bronson got into the bed, rolled over, and tucked her up against him. “Now let’s get some sleep.”

She smiled against his chest. “I already got a nap today.”

“Good for you. I didn’t.”

She chuckled and nodded. “Get some sleep then.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” he murmured, and he closed his eyes. But still he waited, until he knew that she was asleep, and then he slept, closing his eyes and resting.

When he opened his eyes again, it was morning. Bright light streamed in all around them. He shifted and rolled out of the bed quietly, trying not to wake her, as he headed to the bathroom. By the time he got back to her, she was half sitting up, looking around, groggy but awake.

“Is it morning?” she asked.

He checked his watch. “Yeah, but it’s only just after nine. We still have a few hours before our flight leaves.”

“Oh, good.” And she collapsed back down again.

He chuckled but walked over to the bed, then slid under the blankets.

“Hey,” she asked, “did you get some sleep?”

“I did,” he said, pulling her into his arms.

She rested against his chest and smiled up at him. “Not quite where I thought we’d end up.”

“No? Why not?” he asked, as he kissed her gently on the top of her head.

“There’s almost something paternal about the way you do that.”

He froze. “*Paternal*? That was not my intention.”

“But there is something very special about it.”

“*Special* and *paternal* don’t really go together in my book.”

“Oh no, nothing paternal about you. Forget I mentioned it,” she said in an exaggerated voice, followed by a chuckle. He just glared at her. She smiled. “Why does that irritate you so easily?”

“I’m not irate,” he stated immediately.

She just smiled again. “Oh, so that *paternal* thing didn’t really bother you after all. Perhaps I misspoke. Maybe instead of *paternal*, I should have said *protective*. How was that?”

“Better.”

“Now what?” she asked, yawning.

“I would suggest food,” he replied, with that same smile as always.

“I am hungry,” she admitted. Then she slowly worked her fingers across his chest. “Of course I do have another sort of appetite too.”

He looked at her in surprise. “Are you sure about that?” he asked, his lips quirking, as he stared down at her. “We could spend some time getting to know each other first.”

“Oh, I think I know you pretty well,” she replied, sliding up his chest, until she was draped across him. “I know what you’re like in an ugly moment of time. I know what you’re like when I’m hurt. I know what you’re like in a crisis. I even know what you’re like during the day when everything is cool,” she stated. “I haven’t seen a real temper yet, but I’m pretty sure it’s in there. I just think it’s always under control.”

“I generally don’t lose it without reason,” he admitted. “But I do have a temper, that’s for sure.”

“Good. I can’t imagine that I would want anyone who was so absolutely perfect anyway,” she noted. “There has to be something for me to explore and critique.”

He chuckled. “I don’t think you really know all that much about me yet.” He smiled, as he slowly moved his hand down her back and lower.

She shifted, giving him more access. “That’s a good thing, I think.” She leaned over and kissed him, first on the cheek, another on the chin, then his nose, and finally on his lips. “I don’t know how many times you’ve rescued me these last few days,” she said. “However, I must admit to finding it to be a

very unique experience. I've been thoroughly grateful for your particular skill set."

"Hey, you can thank the US Navy for that." He gently tapped her on the nose.

She immediately grabbed his finger between her teeth and bit gently. "Maybe. She licked his finger and pulled it in between her lips, as she sucked on it gently.

His breath caught in his throat, and he whispered, "You do realize you're playing with fire here?"

"I hope so," she teased. "It seems like I've been in the water a lot lately and always in the cold. Maybe it's time to warm things up a little."

"Still chilled, are you?" he asked, both his hands now sliding down her back to cup her bottom. He pulled her up a little higher and kissed her collarbone. "Do you need a little more warmth?"

She propped herself up a little more and nodded. "I need a lot more warmth." She nuzzled him gently. And then she lowered her head, and she kissed him deeply, their tongues gently warring with each other in a mode of exploration and excitement.

When he rolled and flipped her, tucking her underneath him, he gently fingered the T-shirt that she wore. "Did you want to keep this?"

She looked down at it and shook her head. "No, it was just an old one that I use to sleep in."

"Good," he said and ripped the material at the seams.

She burst out laughing. She sat up, her breasts falling free, as she stared at him. "Enjoy, I guess," she said playfully. "See? You never do the expected."

He gently cupped her plump breasts and whispered, "Jesus, you're beautiful."

“No,” she argued. “Definitely not beautiful. I’m a little too skinny, a little too muscled.”

He placed a finger against her lips again and whispered, “No, you’re just perfect.”

And, with that, he drew her closer, so he could reach one of her breasts. He pulled the nipple deep into his mouth and suckled. She cried out and arched her back. His hands, one holding her up, the other exploring her buttocks and the crevice between them, slid down her thigh, then on to her calf, down to her feet, and then back up the front of her. He laid her down and quickly moved his mouth to the other breast, his hands busy exploring every inch of her.

She twisted beneath him. “Good God, of course you’ll be just as dynamite in bed.”

He lifted his head, dazed, as he stared at her. “God,” he whispered, “talk about dynamite.” Then he rolled over, and she pulled him closer and whispered, “We could add a little bit of explosion to some of this excitement.” He smiled, nuzzled her neck all the way up, before drugging her with his passionate kisses. Then he whispered against her ear, “If you’re sure.” Then he slid his hands down to her palms and pulled them up over her head and whispered, “You should know that I was going to wait for Coronado.”

“Hell no,” she said. “Why wait for tomorrow, when there is something we can thoroughly enjoy today?”

And, with that, he entered her in one slow smooth movement—and then froze, as she shifted beneath him. “Are you okay?” he whispered.

She gave him the softest grin. “Never better.”

At that, he started to move, gently at first, slowly enjoying the slide of body against body, whisper against whisper, the soft exhale of bated breaths against each other, until he just couldn’t tolerate it any longer.

He picked up the pace, until he slammed hard and deep inside her. When he felt his own passion riding him hard, he

reached down between them, found the tiny nub, and sent her flying over the cliff almost instantly. With her still trembling beneath him, he plowed into her once, twice, three times, riding her through the waves, before crashing onto the other side himself.

When he came down onto the bed, he pulled her up close and whispered, “Now *that* was a deep dive.”

She burst out giggling, then snuggled up close against him and whispered, “And here’s so many more.”



## EPILOGUE

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**H**ALE RODNEY STUDIED the bomb equipment in front of him. “Well,” he whispered under his breath, “that’s a signature I know all too well,” he murmured.

The woman at his side turned to look at him. “What did you say, Hale?”

He looked up at the instructor. “This is a signature we should all know.”

“Indeed,” she agreed, her tone crisp, addressing all her students in this class. “Built by Mitch Caswell in 2001 and responsible for the bombing of a US embassy in Beirut. ... Built by an American for a foreign country to use against our own people,” she noted. “You’re all here for exposure to history to help you to understand what you see when you find it out there. This isn’t a specialized class. You won’t learn how to make bombs. You won’t learn how to defuse bombs. We have complete departments for that,” she stated, “but the powers that be felt like you all needed to have a bit more awareness of what it could look like, before you ran into them.”

“Yeah, literally,” Hale replied. “Wasn’t this one triggered by a car ignition?”

“It was, but it wasn’t planted on the car itself. The guy who set off this bomb—and we still don’t have any idea who that was—placed it underneath the target’s kitchen. As soon as he got back into his vehicle and turned on the ignition, the bomb was triggered, and it tore apart most of the building,” she murmured. She studied Hale intently. “Have you had any practice with bombs before?”

“Sure, I’ve done my fair share of classes, but I certainly didn’t want to join the bomb squad or anything.”

She stared at him. “*Right.*” She studied him as if marbles were rattling around in his brain.

Hale knew that she had seen his file. He gave her a lopsided grin. “Just because I have some skills in this field doesn’t mean it’s where I want to be.”

She nodded. “Like I said, this is pretty basic, so it’s not exactly up your alley anyway.”

“Hey, it’s never a bad idea to get a refresher,” he stated, studying the pieces. “Just when you think you’ve forgotten all this stuff, it comes rushing back.”

“I hope it always will,” she declared calmly, “because just enough of this shit is going on out there that you never really know who and what is happening behind your back.”

Hale nodded. “But the guy who built and detonated the Caswell bomb was never caught, right?”

“No, he never was. The vehicle was found deserted, still parked outside the gate, the key in the ignition.”

“So he just hopped in, turned the key, and then managed to get out of the vehicle and scuttled away, after setting off the bomb?”

“Exactly. We’re thinking that, in all the chaos of the exploding building, he escaped, which is a fairly common methodology.”

“Of course,” Hale agreed calmly. “Still, it makes it pretty rough when the bomber’s on the run, and we have no more intel on him.”

“Yes, but years of street cam surveillance found him living in Mexico of late,” she shared. “Last I heard, he was heading up to Canada.”

Hale stared at her. “Is there a particular reason you’re telling me this?”

“Yes.” She nodded.

At her pause, Hale realized the room had more or less emptied.

“Because you and three others are heading up to Canada to find him.”

“Whereabouts is he?”

Her lips curled. “Apparently somewhere in Saskatchewan.”

“Where the hayfields are?” Hale shook his head. “Why the hell hide a bomber there, when they can see you coming from ten miles away?”

“For that exact reason, I presume,” she said, with a smile.

“Ah, crap.” He gave her a lopsided grin. “What about you? Are you coming?”

“Not unless you find anything of interest.”

“Interest in terms of this guy?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “I’ve been hunting him for a long time.”

“Ah, so you will be there.”

She gave him a polite smile. “I will be, but I won’t be in the midst of the action,” she explained. “I’ll be on the perimeter, handling the reports.”

“So, will we report to you?” he asked curiously.

“No, I’ll just be there. You’ll still be reporting to your boss, if you have one.” She frowned at that. “Not exactly sure how your side of the op is set up, but I will be there handling my side. All intel shared with your team will be run through me too.”

“Right, so you’re attached to the case, and you want to be the lead on the case.”

“Oh, I like that,” she said, with a bright smile. “Glad to see that you’ve got this because don’t doubt yourself. This is the

hottest lead we've had on this asshole for a very long time, and I want to make sure we get him."

"And then what?" Hale asked.

"Then he comes back here for debriefing."

"And that's if we can get back here for debriefing."

"Exactly," she agreed. "If we can, we need to know everybody in his circle, who could be carrying on his missions. I don't want any more Americans killed because of this asshole."

"What nationality is he?"

She stared at him for a long moment. "That's the problem. He's American, born and bred. However, he was turned quite a few years ago by an extremist mother."

"That's an unusual combo."

"Her second husband was an assassin. And then she ended up with a third husband, who was an ISIS fighter."

"Good God, she just likes terrorists," Hale noted.

"I think it would be safe to say that's a yes, and we're leaving now."

His eyebrows shot up. "Like right now?"

She glanced at her watch. "You have ten minutes to pack up your gear and to meet me outside. We're on a plane heading out in less than an hour."

Hale frowned, staring at her.

"In case you didn't hear me, it's time to move." At that, she walked out.

This was getting exciting.

This concludes Book 30 of SEALs of Honor: Bronson.

Read about [Hale: SEALs of Honor, Book 31](#)

# SEALS OF HONOR: HALE

## BOOK 31



Hale received an unexpected request to join Marsha McConaughey on a special mission. Only four of them would track a terrorist, with a history of blowing up American citizens. The bomber's current plot was foiled, but, in the chaos, he escaped across the border into Canada, giving a middle-finger salute to the first set of cameras on the other side.

Marsha has been hunting assholes like this one for years. It's wearing on her. This is her last job, but she's determined to walk away on a success. This one means more to her than the others. This man took out several members of her team. She wants this asshole. Willingly chasing him into Canada is one thing, but into the backwoods of Prince Albert National Park is another thing altogether.

When the killing spree continues in Canada, the team is more determined than ever to stop this guy—before he kills anyone else—particularly the woman hunting him.

[Find Book 31 here!](#)

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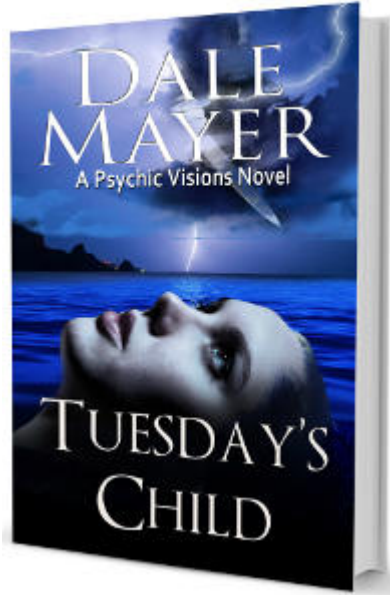
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Cheers,

Dale Mayer

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## About the Author

Dale Mayer is a *USA Today* best-selling author, best known for her SEALs military romances, her Psychic Visions series, and her Lovely Lethal Garden cozy series. Her contemporary romances are raw and full of passion and emotion (Broken But ... Mending, Hathaway House series). Her thrillers will keep you guessing (Kate Morgan, By Death series), and her romantic comedies will keep you giggling (*It's a Dog's Life*, a stand-alone novella; and the Broken Protocols series, starring Charming Marvin, the cat).

Dale honors the stories that come to her—and some of them are crazy, break all the rules and cross multiple genres!

To go with her fiction, she also writes nonfiction in many different fields, with books available on résumé writing, companion gardening, and the US mortgage system. All her books are available in print and ebook format.

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BRONSON: SEALS OF HONOR, BOOK 30

Beverly Dale Mayer

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