

CHAPTER ONE

The deep blue sea

"You want me to go out with Harry the horrible? You can't be serious."

"I need your help and" Dennis started to explain, but Daniela didn't let him finish.

"This is Harry we're talking about. I came here for a nice relaxing vacation, not to babysit a guy who thinks he's all that."

Dennis sighed. "I know," he said before trying again. Daniella could see his desperation but was unmoved. This was his problem.

"You're a divemaster. You have a certain responsibility to ensure the safety of divers in your group."

"Dennis, I am *a* divemaster, not *your* divemaster. If you force this, I simply won't dive until he leaves, and Harry is leaving the day after tomorrow," Daniela threatened.

She crossed her arms and waited. She was not partnering with Harry, and Dennis had better give her another diver to go with.

Dennis looked at Daniela and realized that he needed a solid incentive to get her to agree. She might look like a pixie with her short black hair and petite figure, but she had a core of steel. Bribery was the only way to go, and at this point, he was ready to offer her anything.

“Do this, and you can dive for free for the rest of your vacation.”

Daniela uncrossed her arms and just stared at him. “Let me get this straight: I can have four boat dives a day for the next ten days at no charge, and all I have to do is dive with Harry for one morning. Why?”

Dennis ran his fingers through his hair in exasperation and explained. Harry Boscombe was the brother of Ian Boscombe, the CEO of Boscombe Travel. Ian had asked Dennis to see if he could get his brother an open water certification as opposed to a resort certification. Harry needed one more dive, and he would pass. After that, Harry would be someone else’s problem. Ian would be grateful and had promised to highlight Dennis’ dive operation in his business. That could mean big business for Dennis. So it all came down to Harry. Dennis needed Daniela to partner him for his last dive as Harry needed one-on-one. He tended to stray away from the group. A divemaster wouldn’t get into trouble and could keep Harry out of trouble.

“So why not use one of your own divemasters?” Daniela asked logically. “Why me?”

"All my divemasters are tied up. Peter was supposed to dive today, but he maxed out in a night dive last night. He didn't get bent, but he can't dive today. I need a divemaster. Please Daniela, I need your help," Dennis begged.

Daniela pursed her lips. She'd decided she was going to help Dennis out, but she still felt imposed upon.

"Okay. One dive. And if I decide to call the dive, it's over."

Dennis smiled broadly. He hadn't been sure that she would cooperate. Daniela Fiorelli was a regular, but he didn't know her outside the dive world. She was a very competent diver, and he had no qualms about diving anywhere with her. She could handle Harry.

Daniela walked out of the dive shop and put on her sunglasses. She'd need to make a dive plan with Harry.

Dani walked down to the dock to the dive boat. The "Wish Granted" was a purpose-made dive boat. It was fifty-five feet long with a fourteen-foot beam. On the aft deck, the sides were lined with open tubes which held air tanks; in front of them were deep benches for the divers to sit on. Dive bags containing equipment could be stored underneath. A six-foot dive ladder was folded up on the fantail. The boat could comfortably carry twenty divers. Only twelve people signed up for today's dive, so there would be lots of room to spread out.

Dani spotted Harry as she neared the mooring.

"... at about eighty feet, there is a great arch, wide enough for two divers to go through at the same time," explained Capt. Dave.

"Sounds great. I can't wait to get there," Harry enthused. "I bought a new camera. I should be able to get some great shots."

"Only from a distance," Dani interrupted.

Harry turned with a frown: "what are you talking about?"

"You're not yet certified, Harry. Even with an instructor, you can't go below sixty feet."

"Welllll, that will be our little secret," Harry said with a wink. "No one needs to know if I accidentally drop below that to get a great shot."

"I'll know."

"As I said... our little secret."

"Harry, Dennis wants me to be your dive buddy today."

"Great!" Harry said.

"And you are not going below sixty feet," Dani concluded.

"Aaaahh, come on," Harry whined. "What's the big deal?"

"I'm a divemaster. By asking me to dive with you, Dennis put me in charge. If you plan on going below sixty feet, against my express instructions, I'll call the dive."

"You can't do that," Harry argued angrily.

"Yes, I can and I will. Both our lives depend on it. We are going to plan this dive, and we will dive the plan. Period. Do you understand me?"

Harry turned to Capt. Dave, hoping that he would override her.

"Don't look at me," the ship's captain exclaimed. "I only drive the boat."

Dani stood there, arms crossed, waiting. "Well?"

"Fine. I won't go below sixty feet," Harry agreed petulantly.

"Good." She turned and boarded the ship. She wanted to check her gear, making sure that everything was ready and functional now before they left the dock instead of out at sea when she couldn't do anything about it.

Harry watched her go. "Bitch," he muttered.

Capt. Dave now realized that Harry was a spoiled brat. He'd have to keep an eye on him.

"We'll be leaving in ten minutes," he called to all the divers before stepping aboard. The next few minutes were a scramble to get all the gear aboard and stowed away. Most of the divers were already assembling their equipment: BCDs were slipped over tanks; regulators were attached; gauges checked.

The lines were released, and the ship was underway before everyone was satisfied. Some divers slipped into the bottom half of their wetsuits before joining their friends up on the flybridge. It would take forty-five minutes to get to the dive site. When Capt. Dave called out the ten-minute mark, meaning they would be there in ten minutes, it was time for the site briefing. Dani had been there several times, but she still listened to the lead divemaster. He was a local and probably dove this site a few times a week: best to listen to the experts. She noticed that Harry was barely paying attention; he was too busy flirting with one of the female divers. Figures, she thought. He'd scarcely listened when she'd outlined the dive plan.

Once the ship was secured to the mooring buoys, it was time to get into the water. Harry went in first. He didn't wait for Dani but swam out to the buoy. Fortunately for him, he waited for her to catch up. They both did one final gear check and then flipped over and followed the line down to the bottom at forty feet. The water was clear, and visibility was over one hundred and fifty feet. Sun was shining, and the colors were spectacular. As soon as they reached the bottom, Harry took off, leaving Dani to follow. It actually wasn't too bad. Harry stopped about fifty feet from the line and started taking pictures. Like any new diver, he stood in the sand, upright as though he were on land. Dani stayed out of the shots and focused her attention on any possible hazards. Harry surprised her as he didn't touch anything or stick his fingers in any dark holes. After thirty minutes, Dani got his attention and signaled him to check his air gauge. He had less than one-third of his tank left. Time to go. He nodded his acquiescence and pushed hard off the bottom. He kicked up enough silt to quickly enclose Dani in a whiteout.

Great, she thought. Someone really has to teach that man some sea manners. She didn't panic. It wasn't the first time that Dani found herself in a silt cloud. She slowly backed away from her previous position. After about twenty feet, she stopped. She was still in a whiteout. She turned ninety degrees and kept swimming. That didn't help. Well, she knew where the surface was, so she slowly ascended. The silt didn't dissipate as she rose. This was strange. She made the requisite safety stop at fifteen feet for three minutes. She had to put her dive computer up against her mask in order to read it. She'd never been caught in such a completely blinding effect. At the three-minute mark, she slowly rose to the surface, breathing evenly. She knew that Harry hadn't come back to

look for her. He'd pretended that she didn't exist. He would get a lecture on sea manners and dive safety as soon as she was back aboard. She was also going to give Dennis her opinion as to her erstwhile dive partner's self-centered behavior. The man was a menace.

She raised her fist as she neared the surface. She couldn't tell where she was and didn't want to hit her head if she was under the boat. When she finally had her head above water, she filled her BCD to stay afloat. That done, she looked for the 'Wish Granted'.

All she could see was the ocean. She turned around. If the boat wasn't in front of her, it should be at her back. To her horror, the boat wasn't there. This was a diver's worst nightmare: to be out in the ocean after the boat had left. For a moment, Dani panicked. She was alone in the water. She looked down nervously, looking for sharks. The water was so clear she could see to the bottom. Silt does not settle that fast, she thought. Putting her face down, she looked around: there was no silt cloud at all. She straightened up and looked for the buoy to which the down line was attached. No buoy.

No boat. No buoy. No silt. What was going on? She looked around again, a complete three-sixty. In the distance, there was some white on the water. A sail. Whatever was going on, her first priority was now to get the sailboat's attention. She pulled a mirror out of her thigh pocket and angled it to catch the sun.

Loaran had needed to get away for a few hours. The pressures of office made it more and more difficult for him to take a few hours away. He cherished every moment

he and his flight could steal and just go out to sea. All the sails were unfurled and billowing in the slight wind.

He noticed a white funnel cloud off the starboard. Strangely, it wasn't moving. This was unheard of. They were all grigor and would investigate any unusual occurrence for evidence of the Black. As he ordered the ship to turn, the funnel slowly dissipated. They would still investigate. As they approached the area of disturbance, the lookout yelled out: "man in the water." Loaran took out his telescope and scanned the surface of the water. There was someone in the water waving a long yellow stick to get their attention. The man looked encumbered with odd apparatus. What was he doing in the middle of the ocean without a boat?

As they approached the man in the water, their well-rehearsed rescue drill was put into effect. The longboat was detached and launched. The sails and anchor were lowered to stop the ship. Once that was accomplished, the men lined up on the starboard side to watch the longboat row out to the floating man.

Dani had been watching with relief. She was extremely lucky that a boat was right where it needed to be to rescue her. The longboat finally reached Dani, and the men pulled her board. They were obviously shocked by her appearance.

"Thank you. You have no idea how happy I am to see you," she enthused. The men just stared as she removed her mask. She unclipped her BCD and let it fall to the bottom of the boat. She then bent over and slipped off her fins. All that was left was her red wet suit.

She rubbed her short hair and smiled at the sailors. "We can get going. I'm not going to rock the boat."

The men shook off their stupor and rowed back to the ship.

Loaran was shocked when a woman climbed aboard: she was wearing red. From the neck down, her form-fitting garment was red. This color was not used in clothing. It was too rare. He didn't know what to think. He needed to learn more before he would allow himself to hope.

He reached down to grasp her hand to help her aboard. She reached for his wrist to get a better grip, so his grasp was around her wrist as well. He pulled her up harder than she expected, and she toppled and arms.

"Oof. You don't know your own strength," she exclaimed as she pulled.

"You're lighter than I thought," he answered with a grin.

Dani's eyes opened wide: "I think I like you already," she said with an answering smile.

"Good to know. I am Loaran," he introduced himself with a slight bow. "This is my vessel, the 'Dawn Star'. Welcome aboard."

"Thank you for rescuing me. My name is Dani Fiorelli. It was a lucky thing for me that you were around. I could've been in big trouble."

"How is it that you were out here without vessel?" Loaran asked.

"I don't know. I was diving when my dive buddy took off. When I surfaced, everyone was gone," she said in a bewildered voice. "There was a boat with twelve people aboard. They wouldn't have just left. I don't understand what is going on."

Loaran was angry: it was a death sentence to be abandoned in the ocean. When he found out who had done this, he'd make sure that the punishment was severe. Meanwhile, he needed to know who she was and where she came from.

"You're safe now. We'll be back in Mokunar in no time."

"Mokunar? Where is that?" Dani asked.

"You don't know Mokunar? Where are you from?"

"I live in New York, but I was diving in the US Virgin Islands."

Do any of you know these places? Loaran asked his men. They all answered in the negative. He quickly went through all the information, especially the red clothing. Cautiously, he asked: "Is New York anywhere near Kansas?"

"Of course not, silly. Kansas is fifteen hundred miles from New York. Where are you from that you don't know that?"

"I am the leader of Mokunar, and it is far, very far from New York or Kansas."

"Well, so are the USVI. Do you think you can get me back there? I only have ten days of vacation left, and I don't want to spend that traveling."

Loaran knew he'd have to explain, but he needed time to assimilate this information. Dani was the 'One', or rather one of the 'Ones' since he knew of two others.