

HER
Master
DIVER

A Masters Men Series Book



SANDRA S.
KERN S
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

HER MASTER DIVER

by

Sandra S. Kerns

Published by Sandra S. Kerns, LLC at Smashwords

Editor: Joy Clintsman, [Big Sister Edits](#)

Copyright 2014 Sandra S. Kerns

Cover design by: Itsy Designs

Discover other titles by Sandra S. Kerns

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. No part of this book may be copied without permission from the author, except for excerpts used in reviews. To request permission please contact the author at sandrakerns.com. Thank you for respecting the hard work of the author.

Dear Reader,

Even in thoroughly proofed and meticulously edited books, errors and typos can slip through. If you find an error in my book, please feel free to send a personal note to me at sandrakerns.com. I endeavor to give you the best book possible and am always interested in your comments.

Happy reading,
Sandra

Acknowledgements

To June, my friend, who without her outside of the box thinking, Blaze would not have the interesting career she does. Her willingness to do computer research for me was how I found the shipwreck information and career information I needed. Thank you, June!

As I was researching shipwrecks, I found an interesting man who was generous with both his knowledge and spirit. A special thank you goes out to Dr. John de Bry, PhD, Director for the Center for Historical Archaeology, and his wife who graciously invited me into their home. John was patient and made my research experience one to remember by allowing me to ask all the questions my heart desired. I wouldn't have half the information I needed without them. The twinkle in John's eyes when he spoke of La Trinité added to the enjoyment I had while writing this story.

Prologue

She leaned against the desk and smiled down at the professor. How he got a PhD in anything she couldn't imagine. He was dense as a petrified rock. The comparison was fitting since he was an archaeologist, or at least that's what his credentials said. She thought the female doctoral student he'd inherited after her advisor died had more on the ball than the man in front of her did. Still, he was the one who could get her what she wanted.

"This is perfect, darling," she said, trailing a blood-red fingernail down the side of his face.

"I thought we were going to dive for the Santissima Concepcion," he said as he licked his lips.

She noticed how, his eyes never made it to her face. He might be questioning her, but his arguments would be minimal. The man was such an easy mark it was almost criminal to take advantage. Then again, she was a criminal, so it didn't really matter.

"We are, but this way we don't have to worry about all the red tape. If you can talk the dean into getting us on the dive for La Trinité, we can piggy back and not worry about the rest," she said moving behind him. She leaned closer, stroking her hands down his flabby chest. At least, this way she didn't have to watch him salivate while she worked her magic. She had to stop herself from recoiling when he reached behind the chair and slid his hand up her thigh.

"The people on the project are going to be serious archaeologists and master divers. I'm not sure I'll be able to slip away unnoticed."

"Your job is to get us on that boat and to make sure Collins is on it as well. She could come in handy. The rest, you leave to me," she said, thinking about the other things she'd already done to make this acquisition happen. Killing the first man she had tried to talk into a partnership jumped to the forefront of her mind. That had been very satisfying. The self-righteous prick had it coming. The way he looked down at her ambitions had been infuriating. She refocused on the job at hand.

"I'm not," he paused as she dipped her hand lower. "Not sure how I can do that. The dean is, um, uh, difficult."

The man was so easy, she thought listening to his labored breathing. She nipped his ear before whispering in it.

"Tell him you want to do it to honor Gaston. He'd love that, wouldn't he?" She increased the pressure and speed of her hand.

"Yes, yes!"

Chapter One

Blaze wanted to scream when she glanced at the display on her cell phone. He had to be kidding. Hadn't he gotten in enough digs today? She hadn't even unpacked. Hell, she'd barely gotten in the door. Taking a deep breath, she pushed accept and greeted the caller with saccharine sweetness.

"Lazaro, what can I do for you?"

"I don't care how you wheedled your way onto my project, but you'd better be prepared. This is important. I won't have some newbie screwing it up."

So much for the sweet approach, she thought.

"*Excuse me?* I didn't screw anything up on the project and you know it. You were there."

"Don't play dumb, Collins, it doesn't suit you. I mean the expedition planned to dive for La Trinité. I've been working on this for years. We finally have all the backing and approval we need. I will not have all that work wasted by someone playing archaeologist."

Blaze stared at the phone. What?

"First, I'm not playing at being an archaeologist, I am one. I may not have my PhD yet, but I take my work very seriously. Second, I don't know anything about this expedition." She left the, *but I'd like to*, part out.

"Are you trying to tell me you just happened to get a job with L.A.M.P and it had nothing to do with this?" Lazaro bellowed through the phone. "Get real. Your purpose for taking a sabbatical and being here is to get your advisor a spot on my project and we both know it."

If the man didn't stop yelling at her, she was going to wring his neck the next time she saw him.

"No, my advisor died. I got a job here because I needed one and there was an opening for someone with my skills."

"If he died, how did he worm his way onto my boat for the dive?"

"What?"

"You heard me. Dr. Schemer, his assistant, and you are now part of the team."

"I'm diving for La Trinité?" The question came out as a whisper. Really? Her dream dive was actually going to happen? Excitement bubbled up from her toes all the way to her head.

"As if you didn't know."

His sarcastic tone extinguished her earlier delight as if he'd thrown ice

water on her.

“I didn’t know. I didn’t take a sabbatical; I left school. Working with Schemer was impossible after Dr. Gaston who had such a passion for our research and work. I haven’t talked to Schemer since I left Texas and didn’t know he knew I worked here? Why he would want me on the dive, I have no idea. Maybe he thought it would help to know someone who worked here? Whatever the reason, it won’t make me turn down the opportunity to dive for the ship I’ve been dreaming about for ages. Not on your life.”

“Make sure you know why you’re there. I abhor treasure hunters and I won’t have one on my boat. I’m not after La Trinité for anything but historical knowledge. Anything else belongs to the state of Florida and France, period.” He disconnected.

Blaze clutched the phone so tight it hurt her fingers. The desire to throw it across the room was strong. Instead, she picked up the six-pack from where she’d set it on top of the cooler just inside the door. With a sigh, she pushed the door closed with her foot, stepped over the pile, and walked to the kitchen. She twisted the thermostat so the air conditioning would kick on. She definitely needed help cooling off after that conversation.

“Thank heaven,” she murmured snatching a bottle from the six-pack. She popped off the top and took a long drink. The beer cooled her insides as the air conditioning worked on the outside of her body. Blaze swore she could feel the carbonation fizzing clear down to her toes, similar to the joy she’d felt when Lazaro told her she’d be diving for La Trinité. Unfortunately, he’d had to add his little insult before hanging up.

Opening the fridge, she placed the six-pack inside, closed the door, and leaned against the cool metal in hopes it would turn her full boil to a slow simmer. The cool air helped.

The air-conditioning in her truck consisted of rolling down the windows. Having left her vehicle locked up tight for a week in the Florida sun, had made the drive home uncomfortable to say the least. Hot wind blowing on her as she drove home did nothing to assuage the humid heat weighing her down.

Humidity wasn’t the only thing bothering her. Diving and cataloging at a wreck site the past week had been amazing. The boat’s captain was the problem. She rolled her eyes remembering the other members of the crew calling him Buff. Okay, she would admit he was in good shape, but using it as a nickname? Come on, who did that? When she’d needed to get his attention, she’d stuck with Captain or Lazaro.

His nickname didn’t really bother her. It was that he watched her

constantly.

His attention wasn't flirtatious, more like searching. It felt like he was taking her measure. More often than not, she caught herself meeting his gaze and lifting her chin in challenge. His response was a slight twitch at the corner of his mouth and a dismissive shake of his head before he moved his gaze elsewhere.

For some reason, she'd never been able to work up the courage to ask him what the problem was, and that irritated her even more. She was no coward. Her overbearing older brothers could attest to that fact. However, Lazaro's intensity had kept her off balance all week. Then there had been his parting words. *Are you looking for answers or treasure? Decide before coming on my boat again.*

He had walked away before she had recovered enough from the insult to reciprocate.

The insufferable lout, she thought pushing off from the refrigerator. Who was he to question her motives? Delving into the past and digging up answers for people was her passion.

"Aughhh."

Why was she wasting her time thinking about one egotistical male? He wasn't worth her time, she needed to unpack and take a long hot shower.

She walked back to the front door and picked up the cooler she'd dropped. After stowing the few items left inside in the fridge, she looked at her bag and equipment by the front door. She was sweaty, salty, and had sand in places it didn't belong. Shower first clean up later. A shower would help wash her irritations away and refresh her spirit.

"Then I can plan for La Trinité," she said aloud. Hearing it made it even more exciting. She danced down the short hallway of her house thinking about the upcoming dive.

Half an hour later, feeling human again Blaze returned to the front room. After cleaning up the mess at the front door, she started a load of laundry, took inventory of her pitiful pantry, and pulled open the refrigerator. After staring at the mediocre contents for a minute, her stomach growled its discontent.

"Fine, I'll order a pizza," she said.

Grabbing her cell phone, she scrolled through her contact list but before she could choose the pizzeria's number, her doorbell rang.

Although, Marie was a peach of a friend and landlady, Blaze wasn't in the mood to visit tonight. She didn't want to do anything except be a couch potato

and think about this new project. The bell rang again. If she went to the dock with her pizza, she wouldn't be able to hear the doorbell. Resigned to opening it this time, she pasted a smile on her face and turned the knob.

"Marie, I--" the rest of her thought disappeared in shock.

"Hey, baby sister. How's my favorite element doing?"

"D-D-D--"

"Dos," her brother said placing a finger under her chin and pushing her mouth closed. "Are you going to invite me in, or make me eat this entire pizza out here by myself?"

"What, how, why?"

Dos gave her that killer smile as his damned eyebrow hiked up over his left eye and he leaned closer. "Invite me in and I'll tell you."

Shaking her head, she finally stepped back and let him inside. "I'm going to kill Brooke," she mumbled as he walked by.

"No you're not. Besides, it's not her fault. She didn't cave the first time we called her, but we were suspicious. I had some of my old buddies in the Texas area do some recon for me. When it was clear you weren't in Texas anymore, we made a conference call to your alter ego. Hey, with the three of us badgering her at the same time, she didn't have a prayer, and you know it."

Rolling her eyes at the familiar scenario, Blaze followed him as he talked. They ended up in the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and put the six-pack of non-alcoholic beer he'd brought to go with the pizza next to her leaded version before grabbing a bottle from each carton.

"She still shouldn't have said anything. She promised."

When he closed the refrigerator door and turned that damned brown-eyed gaze on her, Blaze knew he understood, but wasn't pleased.

"Sometimes promises need to be broken. If anyone understands, you know it's me."

Unable to argue knowing what he'd been through, she didn't try. The family was all just thankful he was alive.

"Fine, give me those," she said, taking the bottles that already had condensation building on them.

"Great, let's move on. Can we take this outside to eat? I'm finding I prefer the humid heat to the air conditioning."

She opened the bottles, pulled some paper towels off the roll, and led him out the sliding doors toward the dock. His whistle brought a smile to her face.

"Okay, how do I get a place like this on my pension?"

"You befriend your advisor's widow," she said without thinking.

"I'm sorry, Blaze. I didn't mean --"

Blaze waved him to silence. “It’s okay. I’m sure Brooke filled you in on Dr. Gaston’s death and his wife’s offer to me. Plus, I totally get the being blown away by the view. I still can’t believe I live here sometimes.”

They walked to the end of the dock and sat down. Neither spoke until after they were halfway through a piece of pizza.

“Why don’t we start there?” Dos said.

Blaze wanted to pretend she didn’t know what he meant but couldn’t. Lying to her brothers never worked. That was why she had made Brooke promise not to tell anyone she was leaving school. It wasn’t a lie. It was more a defense mechanism to give her some time to deal with things.

“I live here because Mrs. Gaston offered me the place at a ridiculous rate. Well, free actually.”

“Free is good,” Dos agreed. “But why did you need a place in St. Augustine, Florida when you are working on your PhD at Texas A&M?”

Blaze stalled for a minute by swallowing her bite of pizza and then taking another drink. This was why she hadn’t told anyone except Brooke. She knew how disappointed they would be.

“I quit,” she said and winced waiting for the explosion. When her brother didn’t say anything, she glanced sideways at him.

Where Ace would have exploded and Tres would have stared at her as if she’d gone insane, Dos was looking out over the ocean calmly chewing on his pizza crust. She should have known he would simply wait.

“I tried to keep working after Dr. Gaston died, but nothing made sense anymore. I couldn’t focus. I could barely make myself go to the classes I had to teach. Every time I walked by his office, I broke out in a cold sweat.”

“Did you talk to anyone about it?”

“Yeah, I’m really into psychobabble,” she grumbled glancing at him. She noticed a quick grin on his face.

“I didn’t say it had to be a shrink, though I’ve learned they can help some times. What about friends or family? You should have known we’d be there for you.”

She shrugged. “I do. I just couldn’t. For the first time in my life, I wanted to hide from the truth. Talking about it would only make it real. If it became real then I’d have to face the fact that I’d lost the only person who really understood my passion.”

As she was speaking, Blaze realized her voice was rising, her eyes burning, and every muscle in her body was tight. The second the last word left her lips, her brother’s strong arm wrapped around her and pulled her to his side. He didn’t say anything. He just held her. The tears she had held back

for so many months threatened to spill over her lashes but she fought them back.

Crying wouldn't change anything.

"Thanks," she said after a few minutes and pulled out of his embrace. When she met his gaze, she saw concern heighten their usual dark-chocolate color. To stave off any more supportive words or hugs, she smiled and shrugged. "He was a good man."

"No doubt," Dos said, turning his attention back to the ocean. "You've never made it easy for anyone to get close to you. Based on the way you talk about him and the fact you respected and cared about him, I'm sure he deserved it. What about his wife?"

"What about her? Marie is a sweetheart. She used to invite me over to their house for dinner. She would laugh at the stories we told about different students and their never-ending excuses for lack of effort. It was obvious they loved each other. When he would tell me stories about them diving on various projects when they were younger, he always got this little smile on his face, and his eyes were so animated."

"I'm glad they had a good life, but what I meant was how is she doing now? Did she ask you here as a way to keep his memory alive?"

Blaze thought about it for a minute.

"To be honest, after the funeral and the police insisting it was nothing more than a heart attack, I think she needed to get away from everything and everyone who reminded her of him. When she called a couple of months later with the offer for me to live here, she sounded as lonely as I felt. I didn't have to think long. I had to get away for a while. I'll probably finish my studies some day, but I needed a break from academia for now."

Once again, she waited for her brother to chastise her. Of course, her brother proved how wrong she could be again. He glanced at the two pieces of pizza still in the box.

"I can't eat anymore, how about you?"

"I'm good."

"Let's put this away and then you can tell me what you do with your time now. First, you have to help me up," he said setting his bottle down. "I left my cane in the car and sitting here's made me stiff."

"Okay, old man, don't worry. You might be a foot taller, but I'm strong as an ox."

"Don't get cheeky, little one."

Blaze laughed, feeling better than she had in ages. She helped Dos lever himself up, then gathered the box and bottles. They teased each other as they

walked back to the guesthouse.

“Okay, kiddo, spill. You might live here rent free, but I know you. Without a job, you would go stir crazy in a week. No, make that two days.”

“True. I work at the Lighthouse Archaeological Maritime Program, better known as L.A.M.P. They focus on the stories of our nation’s oldest port city, but they are also involved in other archaeological investigations, too. They’re active in educating the community. I’ve helped with a few of the classroom presentations. Teaching elementary students gave me an unexpected thrill, considering I didn’t like teaching classes at university. Of course, the fact that the kids get excited about everything probably helped. However, most of the time I work with the conservator on the restoration of items found on dives and digs. I also work part-time at a local dive school as a dive master.”

“That’s my little element. We’ll never find any moss growing on you.”

“Cute, but you’re right. I do manage to keep myself busy. After this past week though, I could use a couple of days off.”

“What happened?”

Blaze shook her head. “Nothing really, I went out on a field project. It was a dive and we found some interesting items. There was even an old book of sorts in almost perfect condition. It’s amazing how the cold temperatures of the water can keep things so well preserved. An airtight box held the book. I found that fascinating considering the book is hundreds of years old. Too think something from hundreds of years ago could be like a vacuum is remarkable.”

“If it was all so great, why are you irritated?”

“Who said I was irritated?” she asked, but didn’t look at him. When she did glance at him, that damned eyebrow was hovering again. “How do you do that?”

He laughed. When Dos broke down and really laughed, it was a joy to hear. Blaze couldn’t hold back a smile.

“I’m sorry, baby sister, but you are an open book. Your emotions scream from those gorgeous blue eyes you get from mom. The way your hands are constantly in motion like your father’s is a dead giveaway as well. In this case however, your comment about needing time off did the trick.”

The *like your father* reminded her of their differences. As close as their family was, they were diverse, as well. Her brothers all had their mother’s heart and *their* father’s gut instincts. That’s how they were always able to read everyone.

“Fine,” she said sending him a mock glare. “It was the captain of the boat.

He had a way of getting under my skin and I don't mean in a good way."

"Introduce us and I'll teach him some manners," Dos said, sitting on the sofa across from the chair she sat in.

"Please, I don't need my brother running interference for me anymore. Besides, he didn't do anything. Not really."