

# The Adventures of B.J. Craft

By Michael J. Allen

## Episode One: Once Upon a Ruin

The new antagonist glared up at BJ, blinking the cursor in irritation. He—or perhaps she if the tapping cursor were any indication—refused to come to life on the page. Behind him, another foot tapped in synchronized impatience. “This is supposed to be our vacation. Can’t you leave that damned laptop alone for even one day?”

“You should know by now that inspiration happens when it wants to,” BJ said.

“That doesn’t look like inspiration. That looks like writer’s block.”

“She’s being stubborn.”

Morgan rolled her eyes. “I swear, you pay more attention to that laptop than you do to me. You promised this cruise would be just us—not you, me and your mistress.”

BJ opened his mouth, gesturing toward the laptop but unsure what to say. She’d called his writing a mistress more times than he could count, and she wasn’t even really wrong. He closed the laptop and smiled.

“Thank you. Can we please go to dinner now?” Morgan asked.

She’d dressed in a brand new scarlet gown that seemed either one size too small or strategically tight. Dark curls framed a face done up with movie star level makeup. Her lips pressed their color-coordinated paint together in a hard line.

“I should get dressed.”

She folded her arms.

“Do you want to go ahead while I change?” BJ asked.

Morgan gestured at the laptop. “You’d never show up. Besides, the Captain invited *you*.” She rolled her eyes. “He’s your *biggest* fan.”

BJ offered an apologetic smile and rushed to dress. She had every right to be impatient and frustrated. She’d reminded him twice with plenty of time for him to get ready, but the siren’s call of his keyboard had made them late. Guilt gnawed at the edges of his gut. *And I’m supposed to be paying more attention to her this trip. At least I haven’t made her cry yet, so I can still make amends.*

BJ donned his suit—he’d accidentally left his tuxedo at home—gave her an exaggerated bow, and extended an arm. She let out a frustrated breath and stormed out of the cabin ahead of him. He glanced back to see if he’d forgotten anything. The laptop on the little stateroom desk called to him, his antagonist taunting him.

He followed Morgan out the door. She eventually took his arm in the elevator and by the time they entered the grand dining room they looked the happy couple he wished they were. Whoever had designed

the grand dining room of the *Fate's Kiss* had been a huge Titanic fan. Crystal chandeliers, polished wood, and old world wallpaper wrapped the room. Silverware, tuxedoed wait staff, and tablecloths shone each in their own way.

*How would I describe this in a novel?*

Morgan cleared her throat, tugging him toward the large table at the high end of the hall. The titanicesque décor suffered assault by kids in Disney t-shirts and rumpled teenagers practicing their best screw off looks. Morgan stopped moving, and he all but collided with her.

Captain Boone rose. "I feared seasickness had taken its toll. Everyone, this is the New York Times bestselling author, B. J. Craft."

BJ smiled. "More importantly, this is my inspiration, the beautiful love of my life, Morgan."

A round of appreciative coos and husband nudges circulated the table, but it seemed Morgan wasn't in the shopping mood. BJ stepped in ahead of the waiter, drawing her chair out. She sat, waiting for him to scoot it forward, but a curious looking older man caught his eye.

*A cowboy in a tuxedo, the man's mutton chops and handlebar mustache set him—*

"BJ?" Morgan said.

BJ cleared his throat and pushed in her chair. "Sorry, love."

Dinner went better than expected, and he followed it up by taking her dancing. Time, exertion and a good number of alcoholic umbrella drinks bought him her smile. They adjourned to their cabin, and when she initiated he gave pleasuring her his complete focus.

He awoke in the middle of the night. Morgan half sprawled across him with a pert little smile. Unfortunately, he needed a trip to the bathroom. With exaggerated care, he took an increasingly excruciating ten minutes to slide out of her repeatedly tightening grasp. Once relieved, he returned to their bed only to be drawn off by the dark laptop on the desk.

He booted it up and found the tapping cursor where he'd left it. *Maybe if I write something further on, she'll come into focus.*

His fingers took over.

"Damn it, BJ."

He glanced at her, noting the rising sun through their outer window. *Shit.*

"We're supposed to be taking that Mayan excursion today. You couldn't just sleep one night with only me. You had to get up and write."

"Actually, I had to use the bathroom."

She got up, wrapping a sheet around herself and glaring. "So instead of returning to my warm, loving arms, you chose that thing. It's no wonder I'm still only your *girlfriend*."

"I'm sorry, I—"

"Save it. Now I'm going to have to put up with you yawning and nodding off all day. I only chose this excursion because I thought ancient ruins *might* keep you with me in the here and now."

She stormed into the bathroom and locked the door.

Despite the words whirling through his mind, he saved his document and shut down the laptop. She exited the bathroom still powered by such a full head of steam that it streamed out of the little room behind her. She refused eye contact, slamming everything she touched.

BJ yawned.

Morgan stiffened.

He hurried into the bathroom, hopeful a shower would set him to rights. Mayan ruins offered a lot to excite him. Added to a few energy drinks and a gallon of coffee, he ought to be able to make a good showing of it. Morgan had left by the time he exited the shower. A quick check found no note. He looked over the excursion schedule.

*Just enough time for breakfast and some of that coffee.*

BJ met the perky, adorable woman designation by name tag as Olivia, Activity Director, and other ruin goes after four cups of coffee. He scanned the crowd for Morgan, not really surprised that she still intended to give him a cold shoulder. She wasn't hiding in the crowd. He waited, scanning the deck for her approach.

"All right, our ride's here," their excursion leader said. "Everyone stay together."

He glanced around for Morgan one last time. She hadn't shown.

*If I back out now I could probably get another few chapters done.* He chewed his lip. *No. I agreed to this, and besides the expense, when am I going to get the chance to visit Mayan ruins again?*

He grinned in anticipation and followed the group down onto the waiting ferry. Olivia started off by telling them the ferry ride would take almost an hour. He tipped his hat forward and leaned back, abandoning anything else she might've said for a few extra winks. Olivia woke him when they arrived, leading him over to the bus behind the rest of the group.

BJ stepped onto the full bus. Olivia followed close behind him, her frown matching his own. "Everyone please have a seat. If you have an empty spot, please raise your hand."

No one raised their hand.

Olivia turned to the bus driver, speaking in Spanish. "Why don't we have enough seats?"

He grinned at her and shrugged. "The other bus broke down, Miss. This is the biggest we had available."

She scanned the seated passengers, ostensibly trying to figure out something while she chewed a lock of hair. "Guess I can stand the whole way, but I'm afraid we don't have enough seats."

*Guess I get to write after all.*

"Stay here please." Olivia ran back to the ferry but didn't catch it before it pushed off. She called out, but the bobbing of the driver's head suggested his headphones had his attention. She rushed over to another like dressed woman.

BJ dismounted the bus and joined them.

Olivia turned to him. "Toni's got room for you on her tour."

BJ gestured. "How long until the ferry returns?"

"It's drop off only. It won't be back," Toni said.

BJ shrugged. "Okay. Guess I'm on Toni's bus."

Toni laughed. "This is a horseback tour. Is that okay? You're not afraid of horses or anything, are you?"

BJ smiled. "Not in the slightest."

Olivia apologized once more and headed off with the bus tour while Toni led BJ into a large building and its rear corral. Another cruise ship employee worked with awkward looking tourists, trying to get them onto horses. BJ eyed the animals, evaluating them until he found a mare he liked. He walked up to her, stroking her neck and talking soothingly.

Toni hurried to join him. "Um, I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

"BJ," he said.

"This mare's a bit skittish. Maybe you should let one of us—"

BJ swung up onto the saddle with a practiced motion and patted his horse's neck. "We'll be fine."

The tour eventually started at a slow walk. Jungle foliage pressed close to the riding path, knocking hats off inattentive riders and generally making sport of the tourists. They stopped in occasional clearings while one guide or the other gave a quick description of the plants, animals or what they'd see in the next section of path. Ruins soon peaked out from the jungle. Some of their paths brought them close, but it wasn't until the fourth section that they arrived at a full-scale ruin.

Toni directed them to tie up their horses with those of an earlier group. Her partner led everyone forward into a wide clearing filled with ruins of broken stone and a few still-standing buildings. They wandered the ruins in ones and groups. People guarded one particularly large temple, charging anyone entering with a camera for the privilege of taking pictures.

*I'll have to remember that one.*

BJ wandered through the ruin enraptured by carved pictograms still visible on the old stones. He tried to read the Mayan markings with what he remembered from his third series' Egyptian hieroglyph research. The complete difference in symbology prevented any real translation, but he played with the symbols, telling himself a little story as he went along. He wandered through the chambers until a particular pictograph made him snort.

A figure, possibly a priest, held a quill to parchment flanked by rows of supplicants with empty platters.

"Never fails, no matter how much you write they always want more. Keep at it, brother." He kissed his fingers and patted the priest's carving. Pain seared up his left arm. His vision swam. He staggered back against another wall, turning his arm over to find a glyph burned into his inner forearm.

A swollen, black-edged burn raised a rune-circled quill upon his flesh. "What the hell?"

"You'd better hope not."

BJ spun to find the reticent antagonist he'd imagined glaring at him over folded arms.