

Love Overboard

A NOVEL

SHANNON SUE DUNLAP



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Love Overboard: A Novel

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*To my beautiful mother
who dreamed of cruising,
Billie Sue Dunlap*



CHAPTER 1

WALKIE-TALKIE. BATTLE PLAN. BUTTERSCOTCH candy.

Emily Windsor sifted through the mess in her cavernous purse. Her hand dug until she found a well-worn, faded picture. The cheeky grin of her late husband stared back as he stood resplendent in his dress whites and flashy aviator sunglasses.

How she missed that smile.

“Good morning, love.” She smoothed a creased corner on the photo. “Time to launch a new mission. I can imagine the scolding you’d give me. But this match is worth the meddling, Bill. Even you’d agree that sweet girl is worth it.

“Lord”—she pointed her eyes heavenward—“I hope you’re taking good care of my man up there.”

Emily riffled in a side pocket. She grabbed a small set of opera glasses with the words *Golden Years Tour Company* printed on the side. If her calculations were correct, the target should appear at any moment. She peeked around the corner. Her seventy-eight-year-old spine cracked twice as she bent.

“Mrs. Windsor?”

Her jaw tightened at the squeaky voice. She faced the first mate, Peter. His frowsy white-blond hair and pasty complexion combined with his pristine uniform to give him the appearance of a skinny, befuddled ear swab. Was he going to offer her another lecture on the proper

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behavior for cruise ship passengers? It would make the second one this week.

His gaze bounced to the binoculars and back again. “Did you lose something?”

“No, dear.” She stuffed the equipment in her bag and slid the straps over her wrist. “Just preparing for the voyage.”

Three bells sounded on the loudspeaker, followed by an announcement.

Peter pointed at the ceiling. “It’s time for muster. Shouldn’t you head for your deck?”

“Pish-tosh. The ship won’t fall apart if I miss one safety drill.”

She tapped an orthopedic sandal against the carpet. His patient expression brought to mind the nurses in the assisted living facility she’d briefly called home when she’d experienced a slight problem with her heart. He raised his voice and spoke in a slow, measured tone as if she was hard of hearing.

“I. Know. You’ve. Done it. Many. Times. But every. Passenger. Has. To be there.”

“I. Un. Der. Stand.” Emily patted on her best dotting-Nana impression. She patted his elbow. “Now don’t waste your time on me. You have a cruise to launch.” One more pat, and she headed for the elevators at the end of the hallway.

Peter called a goodbye at her retreating back and walked in the opposite direction. She waited until he was out of sight, then returned to her post. Nothing and no one would delay her mission of arranging a love match for Lacey Anderson. In the days gone by, when Emily still held out hope for children of her own, she had pictured a daughter just like the hard-shell, soft-center cruise ship hostess.

Lacey had adopted Emily without permission. The young woman always checked if the septuagenarian was eating well, taking her medicine, and getting enough exercise. It was bothersome in the most endearing way. That kind of mothering soul should have kids to love on, and Emily was determined to find the perfect father for those yet-unrealized offspring.

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She drew a breath, poked her head around the corner, and jerked back. After Emily raised the walkie-talkie and pressed the side button, static crackled.

“All operatives, take your positions. Operation Ambush is a go.”



Lacey froze at the familiar sound. She recognized that voice.

Maybe it was a coincidence. There were lots of people on this deck. Lacey moved again, at a cautious pace this time.

No need to be paranoid. The sweet-but-salty meddler couldn't possibly know where she was. Lacey had avoided Emily Windsor ever since she recognized the gleam in the lady's eye. She used to laugh at the incorrigible woman's matchmaking schemes, but now that they were focused on her, Lacey's stomach quivered like a lifeboat in a hurricane. Romance wasn't on her to-do list. Ever.

Static crackled, and Lacey heard the whispered words she feared.

“Target located.”

She fought the urge to run. It wouldn't be dignified for a Monarch Cruises employee. But that didn't mean she couldn't take evasive maneuvers. She swung on her heel and skulked away.

The shiny faux-wood doors of the ship's cabins zoomed by as she hurried through the connecting corridor that led to the parallel hallway. The heels of her navy pumps sank in the carpet and slowed her progress. Lacey glanced over her shoulder and saw a flash of floral print coming into view.

Not today!

She took a right and almost plowed into the noisy group of passengers filling the space. They pounded the back of a large, bearded man with a T-shirt declaring, in lime-green letters, “Walter's 40th Wedding Anniversary.” Lacey straightened her white hostess jacket and sidestepped with a smile, her body pressed against the wall. They passed without acknowledging her, as she preferred—part of the invisible but efficient service customers bragged about when they reached home.

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Another crackle.

Where were they? Why couldn't she lose them?

Lacey craned her neck to see past the rowdy cruisers and spotted a pint-size head with a mass of frizzy gray curls under Walter's chubby arm as he stretched with a groan. Forget conducting herself with decorum. She bolted like a three-year-old at bath time and rushed down the hall. Taking a hard left, she slammed into something tall and unyielding.

"Whoa," a man said as they collided.

Two large hands grasped her arms as her nose pressed into a broad chest covered in the white Monarch polo. It must belong to the fitness director. He was the only male crew member with such a well-defined torso.

"Sorry, Sven." She ducked behind his muscular physique, hoping her pursuer would pass without discovering her. "The Shippers are after me."

"What's a Shipper?"

Lacey's insides clenched at the voice. It definitely didn't belong to Sven, but she knew that butter-smooth baritone. She just refused to believe what her ears were telling her. The man turned, and she looked up into the symmetrically perfect features of Jonathan King. It was a face she had worked hard to forget. Chocolate-brown hair, dark and twinkling eyes, one straight nose that had never seen a fight, and a pair of lips that were full enough to be kissable yet manly.

"Lace?" His eyes widened as he stared down at her. "Is that you?"

"Hello, Jon." Lacey eased away, but he reached out and pulled her in for a bear hug.

"How long has it been? Two years?"

A riptide of old emotions swept through her as Jon crushed her body against his. Lacey's heart pounded so hard she feared he might feel it. She concentrated on breathing.

In and out.

In and out.

In and in.

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No, wait. That wasn't right. How could her brain still be this affected by the man? She stood straight as a broomstick with her hands at her sides and waited for the hug to end.

"Two and a half," she said in a muffled voice from inside his embrace. "But who's counting?"



He was counting. It had been two years and seven months since Lacey Anderson walked out of his life. Correction—she bailed off the boat without so much as a goodbye. Jon held Lacey a few seconds longer than an ex-boyfriend should, enjoying the way she fit against him, her head tucked under his chin. Then he finally noted she wasn't reciprocating and let her go.

She could have posed for a cruise commercial with her shapely figure and spotless uniform. Her honey-blond hair was twisted in a sophisticated knot at the nape of her neck. Was it still as long as he remembered—from when it was normal to give the silky strands a mischievous tug?

"How have you been?"

"Very well, thank you." Her tone stayed in business-friendly mode. "What are you doing here? I thought you were working the Scandinavian route."

"Been keeping tabs on me?" Jon bumped her with his elbow and grinned.

"No." Lacey stepped away—out of bumping distance. "Someone happened to mention it once."

Jon also withdrew a step and studied her like a stranger instead of the woman he still dreamed about from time to time. He'd known she worked on this ship when he took the assignment and had wondered how Lacey would feel when she saw him again. Gazing at the model of politeness in front of him, he still wondered.

"Meet the new cruise director." He gave a slight bow. "The old one backed out at the last minute, and I got a promotion." Technically that

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was true, if he counted his predecessor floating face down in the Atlantic without a pulse as “backing out.” “I was in the right place at the right time.”

“I’m sure you’ll do fine.” Lacey raised her left eyebrow so it pointed in the middle. “You were always good at whatever job you tried.”

Jon recognized the look. He’d been the recipient of that snarky eyebrow on more than one occasion. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“On the contrary, the MS *Buckingham* will benefit greatly from your varied talents. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to swing by the dining room on the way to my muster station.”

She fake-smiled and scooted around him without making physical contact. His old flame was sending signals loud and clear, none of them good, and for the life of him, he didn’t know why. Shouldn’t he be the one with a grudge?

Two years and seven months ago, they’d finished a long sailing stretch and taken the mandatory vacation period the cruise line required of all the employees. Whenever he’d tried to have a “defining the relationship” conversation in the past, she’d always put him off. But he’d sensed her softening in her unguarded comments about *their* future. He and Lacey had made a dinner date for after she returned from visiting her family. Jon had practiced his speech a dozen times, trying to find the most sincere, nonthreatening, romantic way to say “I love you.” But all his preparation had been in vain. She never showed, changed her phone number, and requested a transfer to a different ship. His pulverized heart required months of soul-searching and midnight prayers to recover.

Lacey did the abandoning. He should be the standoffish one. Instead, his rowdy pulse could rival a high school marching band at a homecoming game.

“The dining room?” Jon followed as she strode purposefully away from him. “I was hoping to meet the chef before we sailed. You can introduce me.”

Might as well use Lacey to make inroads with the staff. He needed to win people over fast. Then they would let him in on the latest scuttlebutt.

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Work.

That was the reason he was tagging along, not because of any residual feelings he still harbored for the beautiful hostess. Jon ignored the frustrated puff of air she blew from her nostrils and kept up a casual stream of conversation as he fell in beside her.



Lacey hurried, but so did Jon. The infuriating man from her past kept pace with her no matter how fast she walked. She bit her tongue to keep from shouting, “Go away already!”

“How have you been?” he said.

“You already asked me that.”

“Did I? Has the answer changed in the last two minutes?”

One thing hadn’t changed. He could still charm a fish out of the ocean and straight into his net. His presence filled the space around them as the hallway seemed to shrink. Lacey scanned the passage for an escape route, but reason reasserted itself. They were stuck together on this boat, and her contract had three months remaining before she could request a new station. Perhaps cruise ships appeared massive to the passengers, but they were claustrophobic to the employees who lived with each other day and night. Crew members might as well be attached at the hip.

Jon chatted, and Lacey grunted in response until they reached the elevators. The area was empty except for an older woman in white polyester slacks and a long-sleeved paisley blouse, carrying an ancient black handbag. She ran unsteady fingers over her disheveled mass of silver-gray curls.

“Mrs. Windsor?” Lacey stared at the short lady. There was the same floral print she’d spied underneath Walter’s arm as she’d fled down the hall. How had this frail woman beaten her here?

“Hello, Lacey.” The woman’s voice sounded a bit breathless as she greeted her. “So nice . . . to see you. And who . . . is this fine young man?”

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“Jonathan King, ma’am.” He straightened tall and gave her a salute. “I’m the MS *Buckingham*’s new cruise director, at your service.”

“How wonderful.” The pocket-size woman with the poofy mop of hair beamed at him. “I’m Emily Windsor. Tell me, Jonathan—”

“Please, call me Jon.”

“And you must call me Emily. Tell me, Jon, are you married?”

“No, ma’am. Are you?”

“My wonderful husband, Bill, went to be with the Lord. He was a navy captain, and we had fifty-one years of traveling the world together.”

“You must have led an exciting life.”

“I did. But it wouldn’t have been half as much fun without Bill. Trust me, Jon, marriage is a risk worth taking.”

Lacey cleared her throat as she reached to press the call button. “It’s only fair to warn you, Jon. You’re speaking with the ship’s most notorious matchmaker. She lives on board year-round, and no one is safe from her machinations.”

“Machinations!” Emily placed her small, wrinkled hands over her chest. “You make love sound like a trip to the dentist, Lacey.”

“I think I’d prefer the dentist. At least they give you anesthesia.”

Emily’s lips pinched in a sad little line. “You can’t run forever, dear.”

“But I can try.” Lacey winked at her sweet stalker. “Have you taken your medicine today?”

“Oh, pish-tosh.” Emily flicked a wrist. “The bracing sea air is all the medicine I require.”

“Not according to the doctor.”

Emily focused her light-blue eyes on Jon, who was looking bemused and a little startled, and pointed a finger at Lacey. “Don’t let her gruff exterior fool you. This one will take care of everyone else before herself.”

He grinned. “I’m well aware of her softer side.”

The bell dinged as the elevator doors slid open. Lacey leaned inside and pressed the button for the seventh floor, placed a gentle palm on Emily’s back, and pushed her in. “I’m sure I heard the muster

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announcement. You'd better get going. Promise me you'll take your medicine before dinner."

Emily clicked her tongue. "Very well, dear. If it will make you happy."

The doors closed, and Lacey turned to Jon and his ever-present smile. "No time for the dining room." She dashed toward the stairs before he could respond. "I have to tell Chef about a VIP passenger's special cake request after we finish the drill. Nice to see you."

"Cake? I love cake. What kind did they order?"

Jon caught up in two strides, and Lacey finally halted in defeat. No sense wearing herself out if he refused to take a hint. She didn't remember him being this slow on the uptake. Perhaps she should be more direct about her desire to be left alone.

She opened her mouth. "Listen, Jon—"

A text alert dinged.

Jon pulled his phone from his pocket. His shoulders straightened as he scanned the screen. "Sorry, Lace. We'll have to continue our conversation later."

He sprinted past her, taking the stairs three at a time. His attractive form disappeared in a matter of seconds, and Lacey's lips twisted.

"Same old Jon."

Nice of him to remind her why it hadn't worked the first time around. The flighty charmer was always racing away without warning or explanation. And she was a girl who needed explanations. She wanted stability. Craved it. And Jon represented a pulse-racing jump off the cliff of uncertainty. No matter how gorgeous the man was, he couldn't be trusted. Not with her heart or anything else.

Like someone else she knew.



CHAPTER 2

“RENDEZVOUS AT HQ IN ONE hour for new intel.”

Emily Windsor grasped her walkie-talkie while the elevator ascended. Wouldn't the girls be excited to hear her news? She hummed an old love song from the days of crinolines and corsages as she raised her eyes upward.

“This is an interesting development, Lord.” She chuckled. “The air was hot as jalapeños with those two. Did you have me witness their reunion on purpose? I sense a little heavenly intervention. If so, who am I to argue with the Ultimate Matchmaker?”

The car stopped at several floors for other passengers, and Emily tapped her foot with each interruption. The digital display took pity on her, and the number seven lit. She made a token appearance at the safety drill, then inspected the latest group of merry vacationers before heading to her cabin. The most punctual Shipper, Geraldine Paroo, stood waiting in the hall, her lengthy spine as rigid as the book she was carrying.

“Where are the others, Gerry?” Emily unlocked the door, walked in, and dropped her walkie-talkie in the charger on the desk. She smoothed a pucker from the colorful crocheted afghan at the end of her bed.

“I haven't talked to Daisy since breakfast.” Gerry stepped around Emily to settle on the short loveseat by the wall. “And I remember Al-

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thea saying something about bingo. If the game has started, we may not see her for a while.”

Emily straightened the silver-framed photo of her late husband and propped her hands on her hips. “I gave them a whole hour.”

“They’re from Louisiana. The clocks move slower down there.” Gerry lifted the cat-eye spectacles hanging from the chain around her neck, placed them on her thin nose, and opened her book.

Emily snorted as she pulled out the desk chair opposite Gerry and sat. Five seconds later, she was up again, pacing in the tiny pathway from the door to the bed. The timer was ticking, and she was missing half her team. What could possibly be more important? Didn’t they realize it was duty first?

“I can text Althea, but Daisy doesn’t own a cell phone,” Emily grumbled.

“You know why.” Gerry didn’t bother to look up. “She says there’s no one she wants to talk to that much.”

“But it would make everything so much easier. Then we wouldn’t have to use these antiquated contraptions.”

She reached for her walkie-talkie to summon the AWOL members but stopped when someone knocked. She opened the door to find the always-put-together Daisy Randolph Masterson standing in a black linen jumpsuit with matching floppy sun hat.

“I tried to hurry.” Her unhurried Southern drawl contradicted the words. “Did I miss anything?”

“Yes!” said Emily.

“No,” said Gerry.

The delicate Daisy floated into the room on a cloud of magnolia perfume and lowered her dainty self to the couch. “I was in the middle of a manicure when you radioed. Magda can’t be rushed. She’s such a perfectionist. That’s what makes her the best.” She held up her freshly polished nails and waggled them.

“If we can get Althea here.” Emily grabbed the walkie-talkie and raised it to her mouth. “Althea Jones, report to headquarters ASAP. Right now!”

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Twenty long minutes later, Althea's voice sang out in the corridor. Emily opened the door and waited with pursed lips as the substantial girth of the sassy seventy-two-year-old New Orleans native entered the cabin.

"*Gonna lay down my burrrrr-dens,*" Althea crooned.

"Your chronic tardiness is a burden," Emily said.

"I take it you won today." Gerry slipped off her reading glasses and closed her book.

"Two hundred smackers." Althea waved the crisp twenties like a fan. "I cinched the deal with two fat ladies."

"I hope you didn't call them obese to their face," Daisy said.

"It's not a 'them.' It's bingo slang. Number eighty-eight. We call that 'two fat ladies.' I'm hardly qualified to fuss about weight."

Daisy changed her spot to the chair in front of the desk, and Althea settled on the loveseat. She folded her winnings and stuck them in the tight pocket stretched across one of her wide, beignet-loving hips.

"Can we please get started?" Emily struggled to keep her tone even.

"Emily, baby." Althea took out a compact and powdered her nose. Her bronzed Creole skin contained fewer wrinkles than a woman half her age. "What's the commotion? You sound like someone set your Spanx on fire."

"I already burned that elastic torture device years ago."

"Ladies." Daisy withdrew a handkerchief from her purse and touched it to both nostrils. "Can we please refrain from public discussions of *underwear*?" She whispered the last word and shook her refined head, her chin-length hair swinging in disapproval.

Gerry readjusted her lanky frame in the narrow sitting area. "It would have been better if you used the term *knickers*, Althea."

Emily poured herself a glass of water, trying to calm her impatience. They were just warming up, and there was no way to focus the girls until they finished clowning around.

Althea laughed and slapped her knee. "Since you were a librarian all those years, I bet you memorized a ton of words we could use."

"Yes, indeed." Gerry nodded as she pushed an errant bobby pin into

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the salt-and-pepper bun on the top of her head. “Lingerie, drawers, unmentionables, skivvies.”

With each new synonym, Althea chortled, and Daisy reared back as if she might faint. Gerry paused between undergarments to take a breath.

Emily clunked the glass down and interrupted the laundry list. “We don’t have time for your ribbing, Gerry. There’s a breakthrough in the Lacey case.”

The unmentionables chatter came to an abrupt halt.

“Do tell.” Daisy sat straighter. “Are things finally rolling with her and Ricardo?”

“Forget him.” Emily paced in the cramped space between their legs with her hands clasped behind her. “We need to recalibrate our sights to Jonathan King, the new cruise director.”

“What happened to the old one?” Gerry dropped her book on the side table.

“Irrelevant. Let’s find out everything we can about Jon. All I gathered is his name and that he worked with Lacey a few years ago. This will mean a whole new round of research—his background, likes and dislikes, temperament, spiritual status, the works.”

Daisy’s nose scrunched at the whiff of more paperwork. “We agreed to match Lacey with Ricardo, the pastry chef. Can’t we stick with him? Why is the cruise director a better choice?”

Emily walked to a long piece of paper stretched from one end of the cabin wall to the other and then motioned to the index of every male crew member on the MS *Buckingham*. The other three stared at the chart with the pluses or minuses next to each name.

“Lacey is our most unwilling client to date. She’s sharp as a tack and evades every attempt to match her. We spent an entire Caribbean cruise choosing a man to set her up with.”

“Yes, so why rock the boat now?” Gerry asked.

“I still say that surgeon from N’Orlins was a good option.” Althea moved to the empty chair closest to the list and squinted. No matter how nearsighted she got, she refused to wear glasses.

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“She’s not allowed to date passengers.” Gerry returned her spectacles to their skinny perch. “How many times must I remind you?”

“Phooey.” Althea rolled her eyes. “Don’t be such a stickler. A cruise line can’t dictate who to love. If she fell for him, she could get a new job.”

Daisy placed a gentle hand on Gerry’s arm before the two could get into another verbal skirmish. “But Lacey takes longer than most to warm up. She has a better chance of forming an attachment with a man she already knows. Wouldn’t you agree, Althea?” She gestured for her roommate to answer.

Althea shrugged and crossed her arms. “I suppose.” She turned to Emily. “Daisy brings up a good point. Lacey already knows Ricardo. Why are you in such an all-fired hurry to switch him with a stranger?”

“We know Ricardo was raised Catholic, but I’m not sure he still attends church. If Jon has a closer relationship with the Almighty, I’d prefer a man like that for my girl.” Emily tapped the chart with her index finger. “We observed her interactions with each candidate, and every time, she remained friendly but professional. I adore Lacey. There isn’t a kinder, more considerate person on this ship, but when it comes to romance, the girl is an ice princess. The only reason we settled on the pastry chef is because she loves his cherry tarts.”

“I could go for one of those tarts.” Althea moaned and rubbed her extended belly. “When do we eat?”

“It’s a cruise ship,” Gerry said. “You can eat whenever the urge hits.”

“But I can’t go alone.” Althea’s eyebrows flew high as the Gateway Arch while her lower lip jutted out.

“Althea. Gerry. Please focus.” Emily tapped the list one more time. “As I was saying, Lacey showed zero interest in the other men, but you should’ve been in that hallway an hour ago. They needed a fire extinguisher for the sparks those two were throwing around. They definitely seemed familiar with each other, already on a first-name basis. And Jon made a telling comment about knowing Lacey’s softer side. I’d give all my cruiser reward points to know what he meant!”

“It appears they have a history.” Daisy took a packet of peanuts from

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her purse and passed them to Althea. “How do you think they became acquainted?”

“I overheard Lacey mention he was good at his job.” Emily walked to the end of the long paper and picked at the tape holding it on the wall. “She’s worked for Monarch for over four years. The logical assumption is they sailed together on a different ship in the past.”

The scent of peanuts wafted through the air as Althea crunched. “You know how workers on a cruise ship can be. It’s like a dating reality show from the moment we leave port.”

“Small wonder,” said Gerry. “They spend day and night in close quarters for a six-month stretch. It would be difficult not to grow attached to someone with that much togetherness.”

“Or get sick of someone.” Althea twisted her lips, and Gerry stuck out her tongue in response. Althea ignored her and turned her attention back to their fearless leader. “What type is this new man? How does he look?”

Emily sighed dreamily. “He reminds me of the classic Hollywood movies when men wore suits and stood up as a lady came to the table. Tall, dark, and every other cliché you can imagine. Jonathan King’s shoulders stretch for miles, and his easy way of talking exudes confidence.”

“Yes, please.” Althea clapped.

“But more importantly, the man is smitten. He kept his eyes glued to Lacey no matter how fast she marched without sparing him a glance. He’s the one.” Emily’s chin bobbed as she pulled the last bit of tape off the old candidate list and crumpled it. She tossed the wad into the waste can by the desk and motioned to the woman beside it. “Daisy, get me that roll of butcher paper in the closet. Time to make a new battle plan. This match will be our crowning achievement. I feel it deep down in my bones.”

Gerry took out her laptop, and the Shippers settled in to chart a new course for Lacey’s love life, whether she wanted it or not.

Their little club name came about a few weeks into their friendship. Althea had said every team required a proper moniker. Her first

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husband played hockey, and she suggested the Wedding Ringers—referring to players who can turn the tide of a game with their skills. A casual observer might dismiss Emily and her friends as the sweet little old ladies on the boat, but they were the ones making things happen.

Daisy had protested that the term *ringer* was a little crass. They were in the romance business, not a sports franchise. It was Gerry who brainstormed the name that stuck: the Shippers, because they were all about relationships. It sounded nautical and didn't give their true purpose away.

Emily didn't care what they were called so long as they got the job done. And intuition told her she'd found the right match for Lacey Anderson.

Handsome, mannerly, and charismatic, with an honest smile. A man with nothing to hide.

He was perfect.



CHAPTER 3

“CRUISE DIRECTOR IS THE PERFECT cover.” The man lounging across from Jon tugged on the front of his wrinkled Hawaiian shirt as its buttons made a valiant attempt to join the overextended fabric. He threaded a hand through his graying hair and leaned back in the office chair. Reid Collins looked more like a retired accountant from Baltimore than a now-private detective who’d spent thirty years in the FBI.

Jon forced his attention away from the white T-shirt peekabooing from the gaping holes in the man’s outfit—though he was grateful for the barrier it offered from the skin beneath—and adjusted the stapler on his desk. “Not that I object to the job, but why is it perfect?”

“You have the run of the ship, and no one will question you for being up in people’s business. Watch for the warning signs. People traveling alone. Passengers arriving from a day in port with large amounts of luggage. Jumpy crew members.”

Jon typed into his computer. “Have you noticed anyone suspicious?”

“Lots.” Collins popped a piece of gum in his mouth. “You can’t dismiss anyone. I remember one drug ring I busted on a cruise ship in ’99 was headed by a seventy-year-old grandma. She tried to plead senility.”

Jon made another note. “I met a woman like that today. She lives on board the ship.”

“Did you catch her name?”

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“Emily Windsor. A very friendly lady. But I doubt she has anything to do with this. Too nice.”

Collins smirked. “You’d be amazed how many nice people I’ve slapped the cuffs on through the years. Have any of the crew appeared overly interested in the missing cruise director?”

“No. More like relieved he’s gone. I don’t think they cared for Newberg much. Apparently, he was great at schmoozing the passengers but was a stuck-up snob to the employees.”

“I understand he died while everyone was off ship for repairs.” Collins yanked a small notebook from his pocket and flipped the pages. “Dexter Newberg. Age thirty-two. Found floating in the ocean with enough cocaine in his system to choke a horse. The police wrote it off as an accidental drowning due to overdose.” He snapped his gum. “Good thing Monarch’s general manager still had my number and gave me a call. How ’bout you give me some background on this case in your own words?”

“It’s not uncommon for people to sneak recreational drugs on a cruise for party purposes.” Jon closed the lid of his laptop. “But large amounts of narcotics are showing up on Monarch ships with alarming frequency. Two months ago, a drug-sniffing dog unearthed five kilos of cocaine on the MS *Versailles* in the wall behind a crew member’s toilet, and last week, the FBI busted a couple of passengers on the MS *Alhambra* smuggling more cocaine in hollowed-out Virgin Mary statues. Tabloids got ahold of the story and slapped us with the label Ship of Sin. My deacon father strongly objected to that term. After all, we bill ourselves as family friendly and don’t even offer casinos, unlike a lot of the other cruise lines. This situation puts a major dent in our squeaky-clean image. The PR department isn’t happy.”

“Too many scandals, too close together.” Collins nodded. “Be glad you brought in an expert from the outside. Can’t trust anyone on board.”

No. There was one person he could trust. Jon’s thoughts drifted to Lacey. Intelligent and loyal to a fault, she’d be a valuable asset in the search for a culprit. *Maybe I could—*

The memory of Dexter Newberg’s swollen, waterlogged body stopped

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that thought cold. He'd seen pictures of the corpse, and they weren't pretty. The idea of putting Lacey in harm's way was unthinkable. Better keep her as far from this as possible.

Collins spit his gum in the trash can by the desk. "What's our first move?"

"My first move is to give the welcome orientation." Jon stood from behind the desk. "Time to distribute door prizes."



"Hey, babe, can you get me one of those drinks with the little umbrellas?" A middle-aged man with a too-tight T-shirt, a diamond stud earring, and jet-black hair that didn't match his thinning eyebrows stopped in front of Lacey.

"I'm so glad you asked me." She'd perfected the art of answering stupid questions with a believable smile. "But we don't offer beverage service during our welcome orientation. I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"What!" His voice rose, and the female companion holding his arm cringed. "That lifeboat practice took forever, and I still can't get a drink?"

"The muster drill can be a bit overwhelming, can't it?" Lacey made sure her tone was appropriately consoling. "We have bottled water on a table in the hall if you're thirsty, but if you're willing to wait, I promise our cruise director will make this orientation worth your time."

He sucked a giant breath through his nose and tilted his head forward, but his girlfriend tugged on his sleeve. "I'll mention this in my online review." He glared at Lacey as he emphasized the words.

"There's also a phone number for customer service on the card in your cabin." Her smile remained at full capacity. "Have a wonderful cruise, sir."

She left the man with the midlife crisis and found the whole Shipper posse waiting with sympathetic expressions.

"Don't listen to him, sugar." Daisy laid a hand on her arm. "That kind is never satisfied."

LOVE OVERBOARD

Althea wrapped her soft arms around Lacey. “You give me a squeeze and forget all about him.”

“I’m surprised to see you here.” Lacey patted Althea’s back before she let go. “Don’t you usually skip the embarkation meeting? You must have the speech memorized by now.”

Gerry waved her novel. “Never fear. I came prepared.”

Emily stood clasping a pen and a black three-ring binder. “Besides, this embarkation features the new director’s welcome speech. We want to check him out.”

As if on cue, Jon poked his head into the group. “I love it when beautiful women check me out. Be sure to let me know how I rate.” He pointed a cheesy finger gun at her. “You too, Lace.”

Lacey’s eyes started to roll upward, but she stopped them in time.

Jon held two elbows out to the women at his sides. “May I escort you ladies to your seats?”

“Yes indeedy.” Althea grabbed an arm before he even finished making the offer, and signaled for Daisy to take the other.

“How kind of you.” Daisy placed her hand in the crook of his arm. She received his attention as if it were owed her. Jon accompanied them down the aisle, bending his head toward Althea as she chattered. Gerry and Emily followed in their wake, part of the honored procession.

Lacey watched as the group passed rows of sturdy navy-blue couches and chairs until they reached the front. Jon waited while they settled, then walked up the center stairs and onto the stage. He studied the room and rested his gaze on her for a brief instant before he raised his microphone.

“Ahoy, everyone. Welcome to the MS *Buckingham*. Are you ready for the best vacation of your life?”

Hoots and hollers answered.

“You came to the right place. Let me ask another question. Is this the first cruise for anyone?”

Hands rose around the room.

“Whether this is your first time or you’re an old sea dog like my friend Emily”—he motioned to her on the row below him and winked—“I’ll

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try to keep this short and sweet so you can get out of here and hit the buffet.”

“I’m in no hurry.” On Lacey’s left, a ruby redhead wearing cutoff jeans and a neon pink tank top snickered with her friend. She flipped open the bejeweled case on her cell phone and recorded Jon as he made his speech. “Keep talking, hot stuff.” She perched on the edge of a row, leaned out at a precarious angle with her device pointed at the stage, and pinched at the screen to enlarge the picture. “Whoa, check out the muscles.”

Lacey paused for all of five seconds before she wandered into the aisle and stood a few feet in front of the redhead. After years of being asked to “take a quick picture” for social media junkies, she knew camera angles cold. If she calculated correctly, this should be the spot.

“Hey,” the woman behind her whispered. “You’re in my shot.”

Lacey pretended not to hear.

“Cruise ship lady. Hey!” The woman’s voice got louder.

People shushed her, and she sat on her seat with an offended huff.

Lacey enjoyed the silent victory—until she surveyed the auditorium and saw at least seven other females with their phones out. Call her cynical, but she didn’t think they were recording Jonathan King for informational purposes.

Fine. Let them drool. What did it matter to her? It wasn’t like she’d never been leered at by a passenger. It was part and parcel of working on a cruise ship. Inappropriate people did inappropriate things. Jon was getting ogled. So what?

“Lacey.”

Her attention jerked to the stage, where Jon was motioning for her.

“Can you join me please?”

Lacey smiled bigger and shook her head.

“Oh, come on.” Jon waved his arm a little more.

Lacey shook her head a lot more.

“Looks like she’s shy.” Jon grinned at the crowd. “How about a round of applause for encouragement?”

The crowd cheered and clapped.

LOVE OVERBOARD

“La-cey. La-cey. La-cey.” Jon chanted into the mic, and the audience chimed in.

Her name echoed through the room, and Lacey hurried forward to make it stop. She climbed up the stairs to center stage. The last step was wider, and Jon held out a hand to assist her. She grabbed it and dug her nails into his fingers. His bottom teeth showed as he smile-grimaced and pulled away.

“Can we get another microphone for our fabulous hostess?” Jon called to a worker backstage.

Lacey faced the audience. The house lights were up, and she had a clear view of the entire room. Tiny-Umbrella Man slouched in the sixth row with his arms crossed, still pouting. Leering Lady in the back curled her lips and eyed her with disdain. And the Shippers were front and center, observing everything. Daisy sat with perfect posture, while Althea whispered in her ear. Emily took Gerry’s book, handed her the binder and pen, then raised her phone and pointed it at the stage. A crew member appeared with the extra microphone and passed it to Lacey.

“Don’t worry,” Jon said. “I won’t make you sing.”

“If you value your life.” Her smile dripped honey and her voice retribution.

The passengers laughed and applauded.

“I’m going to let you in on a secret.” Jon leaned out to the crowd and whispered. “This is my first cruise too, at least on this ship, so I wanted to introduce the woman with the answers. Anything I don’t know, she does. Take note of her uniform. She, or any other person wearing this white jacket with gold buttons, is your sailing sage. If you have any questions, please ask.”

“How about a date tonight?” A college-aged guy stood from the front row on the left side and leaned his arms on the stage.

Jon bristled, but Lacey spoke into her mic.

“You’d have to get permission from the captain first.”

The young man stuck his bottom lip out, and his friends jeered as they dragged him to his seat.

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Jon maneuvered to stand between the frat boys and her. “Trust me, you’ll have to take a number and get in line for a date with Lacey.”

“What number do you have?” Another voice from the audience called out.

Jon flinched. “Not high enough.”

The listeners moaned.

He shrugged and looked at her. Their eyes connected.

Suddenly, Lacey’s feet didn’t feel so steady. Had the ship hit a rough patch? It must be motion sickness. *Breathe, girl.*

In and out.

In and out.

She was going to need a Lamaze coach before this cruise finished. For breathing. Not for anything— Whatever.

Lacey tore her gaze away and found the Shippers. They sat in a row like four satisfied cats eyeing a bowl of cream. Gerry scribbled in the binder. Althea fanned herself with splayed fingers. Daisy hid her mouth behind a handkerchief. And Emily popped a piece of butterscotch candy past a pair of smiling lips.

Lacey’s neck tingled like Marie Antoinette’s as she was led to the guillotine. Was it too late to swim back to shore?