



## CHAPTER 1



*MAYDAY. MAYDAY. MAYDAY.*

Emily Windsor's seventy-eight-year-old bones sounded a silent warning. She twisted an empty butterscotch wrapper in her wrinkled fingers and tried to pinpoint the problem. Her mission in life was finding lonely people a love as sweet as her own had been. She should be chomping at the bit to have a ready and willing candidate. But this case seemed a little too . . . what was the word?

*Easy.*

A petite figure sat in a padded chair a short distance away. The pretty redheaded woman picked at the gold lace edge of her lavender ball gown. A lopsided tiara sparkled atop her curly locks.

Emily shoved the wrapper in her pocket and combed a hand through her own unruly mop of gray hair. "I'm sorry, dear. We'll get started soon."

Geraldine Paroo's five-foot-ten frame filled the chair beside her. The retired librarian raised a red pen, crossed through a word in her paperback novel, and straightened the cat-eye spectacles on her nose, more than content to read as they waited for the others.

The ladies faced their new protégé from one side of a long table like a reality show's judging panel. A harried waitress zipped through the MS *Buckingham*'s elaborate dining room with a freshly laundered pile of tablecloths. She cast them a confused look but said nothing. A shout

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from the pier below drew Emily's attention to the windows. They had mere minutes before a fussy crew member demanded they vacate the ship for zero count. All passengers must be off before the new cruise guests started loading.

No time to waste. But two of the Shippers were missing.

Emily reached under her chair and tugged a walkie-talkie from her large black purse. Static crackled as she pressed the button. "Daisy, have you found Althea yet?"

"Coming," a breathless Southern drawl answered. "We're outside the dining room."

The ornamental wooden doors to their left opened, and fashionable Daisy entered in a black silk blouse and matching skirt. Her chin-length silver hair swung as she towed her smiling roommate, Althea, behind her.

"Sorry, y'all." Althea scrunched her smooth Creole skin into an apologetic grimace. Her generous hips swayed. "I got waylaid by the first mate. Peter kept trying to escort me off the ship."

"Never mind that." Emily waved her over. "Our client is waiting."

Daisy hurried to a seat at the opposite end of the table from Gerry, but Althea swerved and headed for the young woman.

"Just let me grab a hug from our Abby-girl." She squeezed the redhead so tight the tiara slipped onto the young woman's forehead.

Abigail O'Brien adjusted her crown. Her lips parted in a lighthearted smile. "I don't normally dress this fancy for an interview, but I have to greet the children in a few minutes." She brushed her hands down her lap. "Thank you for considering me. Getting help from our ship's famous matchmakers is a real honor."

Althea huffed as she made her way to sit in the middle beside Daisy. "I don't understand why we're doing this. We've never interviewed anyone before. Let's cut the fuss and get to the romance."

"I must admit"—Daisy folded her hands in her lap—"I also don't see the need for a formal inquiry. Why must we go to all this trouble?"

Gerry grumbled. "I was hoping to write another chapter in my novel before we debarked. Is this really necessary?"

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Emily remained silent because she didn't have an answer. This meeting was a last-ditch attempt to shush her cantankerous bones. The charming young woman in front of them was not only willing but asking for assistance. After setting up multiple uncooperative couples, Emily should count it a blessing to have someone enlist their services.

*Am I being contrary, Lord? You deposited this precious child in our laps. I should be raising the sails, not dropping anchor. What's the matter with me?*

No voice from heaven, angelic choir, or burning bush answered. Even a gentle whisper would've been sufficient. Emily tapped her thumb against the table. She didn't care for the silent treatment.



Abby zeroed in on the head Shipper's agitated thumb. She didn't know them well, but these ladies used to like her. Had something changed their minds?

The silver-haired tribunal stared her down. She averted her gaze from the long table of senior citizens to the muddy brown waves of Galveston Bay outside the windows. Why had she assumed they'd jump at the chance to orchestrate her happily-ever-after?

"What makes you think we can help you?" Gangly Gerry at the end thumped her polished black oxford on the floor like she was marking the seconds it took their examinee to answer.

Abby fidgeted. The cruise ship's dining room waited in all its pristine glory for the new passengers making their way through security. No one should be in here less than an hour before boarding time. But nothing deterred these four women. This boat was their home, and even the captain quailed at telling them no.

Abby gulped. "You . . . you're the Shippers. Experts at relationships. If anyone is lacking in the romance department, you ladies are the ones to call. Everyone knows that."

"Oh mercy." The dainty Daisy on the opposite end pushed a glossy silver lock of hair behind her ear. Her soft-spoken tone hearkened back

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to humid summer nights and sweet tea on the veranda. “Our work is supposed to be a secret. Did you say everyone knows?”

“Maybe not everyone. Just”—Abby tilted her head—“most people employed on the MS *Buckingham*. You ladies reconciled our last cruise director with his long-lost sweetheart and even caught a rogue detective smuggling cocaine into the States. It’s hard to keep that kind of success under wraps.”

Emily, the short but commanding woman in the center, drummed her fingers on the table. Her hair stuck out from her head like it was boycotting conditioner. “This might make operations more difficult if the general public is aware of our intentions.” Swatting a drooping curl, she continued. “We need to exercise more stealth. Gerry, make a note.”

The tall woman flipped open her laptop and began typing at lightning speed. “If the cat’s out of the bag, there’s no sense trying to stuff it back in. You’ll just end up with a scratched face.”

“I hate cats.” Althea unwrapped the waxed paper from a gooey, chocolate-covered caramel and took a bite. “They always act like they know better than me.”

“I’m inclined to side with the cat.” Gerry raised her hands from the keys. “Even with my allergies.”

“Don’t get my dander up.” Althea crumpled the candy paper and tossed it on the table.

“Better than cat dander.”

“Ladies.” Daisy reached down the table to quiet her squabbling compatriots. “We have company.” She fetched the discarded litter and tucked it in her purse.

Abby repressed a chuckle. It wouldn’t do to offend her interviewers. An uninformed person might mistake these women for a doddering, unfocused quartet, but she knew better. They were clever enough to spend their golden years on a cruise ship instead of in a retirement community. Smart and savvy, the Shippers made the impossible happen.

For Abby, finding true love was proving to be the most impossible of quests.

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Emily studied her. “Most clients resent our interference. At least in the beginning. You’re the first person who’s ever sought us out.”

“I really want to get married,” Abby admitted without a hint of embarrassment.

“Why?”

“I haven’t thought too much about why.” She laughed. “Don’t most little girls love to stick a curtain on their heads and pretend to walk down the aisle? Not very women’s lib, I know. But true. I guess I want to get married because”—she wrinkled her nose—“it’s lonely by myself. I’d rather have a partner. Someone to share things with. That guaranteed one person who’s always on my side. My best friend.”

“Not all husbands are friendly,” Daisy drawled.

“Another reason I came to you.” Abby waved at the line of ladies. “I need the experts to help me choose wisely. Past experience has shown my taste isn’t always trustworthy.”

The dining room door whooshed open, and a white-blond head poked through. “Mrs. Windsor!” First mate Peter’s frantic blue eyes widened in horror as he scurried to their table. “Why are you still on board?” He skittered around Emily’s chair like a nervous hamster. “Ladies, I’m begging you. Please vacate the ship for zero count.”

“Forgive us, Peter.” Emily slid her walkie-talkie into her roomy handbag. “We had important business.”

The statement warmed Abby’s heart. Her love life was important to these ladies, even though they barely knew her.

“But it’s turnaround day,” Peter said.

“Sorry, baby.” Althea side-eyed Emily. “We’d have been off the boat an hour ago if *somebody* hadn’t called an emergency meeting.”

He gaped at his phone. “It’s 11:54 a.m. The VIPs are boarding in six minutes.”

Daisy flipped open the miniature pendant watch she wore on a gold chain around her neck. “My timepiece says 11:52. Have no fear, Peter. We’ll make it.” She rose from her seat with the noble grace of a queen.

He sputtered. “I’m not sure that antique—”

Althea wiggled a finger. “Don’t discount something just because it’s

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been around awhile. Daisy told me that Masterson heirloom has kept time for a century without losing a second.”

Daisy’s lips quirked. “It wouldn’t dare.”

Emily folded her hands on top of the table. “You see, Peter. We have eight minutes. More than enough time. Why not let us stay aboard on turnaround day? You know we’re going to walk down the gangplank and come right back up again.”

The finicky employee shook his head. “It’s not protocol. Because you’ve received special permission from the owners, you ladies are allowed to leave your belongings in your cabins. But zero count is a non-negotiable. We can’t let the new passengers onto the ship until the old passengers are off.”

“Are you calling us old?” Althea’s eyebrows puckered, along with her mouth.

Four pairs of Shipper eyes drilled into him.

“N-no, ma’am.” Peter retreated. “I meant, I . . . I—” His gaze moved in a wild circuit and landed on Abby. “Aren’t you supposed to pass out refreshments to the VIPs while they wait to board?”

“Yes, sir.” She hopped from her chair. “I’m sorry.”

“We can’t risk offending our first-class patrons. Hurry!”

Abby wadded the skirt of her voluminous ball gown and prepared to run.

“Wait.” Emily lifted a hand.

Abby flopped back onto her seat.

The older woman glared at Peter as if chastising him for the interruption. “Abby, we’ll get more details from you later, but give us a twenty-second summary of what you want in a man.”

Abby grinned. “How about a carbon copy of the last husband you found. The guy you matched with my buddy Lacey was a dream come true. Sweet. Considerate. Funny.”

“Tall, dark, and drop-dead everything.” Althea sighed. “If Jonny had been a few decades older, I’d have kept him for myself.”

Abby pointed at Althea and winked. “I’ll take one exactly like him, please. Except for the tall part.” She stood to her full height of five foot

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two. The fact she wore tennis shoes under her billowy satin dress didn't help. She rotated in a slow circle. "I'm vertically challenged. I want to look up to my husband in the figurative sense, not the literal. Someone *medium*, dark, and dreamy is fine with me. No one over five foot ten, please."



Spencer Masterson's six-foot-plus frame allowed him to see over the stares of the waiting passengers. He tugged the lapel of his charcoal-colored business suit. A determined sea breeze whipped from one end of the pier to the other, attacking the straight black locks of his carefully styled hair. He pushed the wayward strands into place and smoothed the knot on his navy-blue silk tie.

A man in a floral shirt and Bermuda shorts grumbled beside him. "Who goes on a Caribbean cruise in that getup?"

"I wish *you'd* wear that kind of getup." His female companion tittered.

Spencer rolled his shoulder and pretended he didn't hear their unguarded conversation. A flimsy velvet cord separated the preferred customer line from the teeming mass of regular passengers. The Monarch Cruises VIP experience lacked a few finishing touches.

He checked his watch and sent another text to the office. It took two people to cover his caseload during this little excursion. His jaw clenched as his to-do list ran through his mind. If he concluded this business on the first day at sea, they could charter a plane in Cozumel and fly to New Orleans in time for the trial on Friday. He stuffed the phone in his pocket and shifted the bag of legal briefs to his other hand.

"Excuse me, sir." The woman behind him in the austere gray suit spoke. "The child is hungry." She motioned to the five-year-old at her side.

He glanced at the blond-haired girl in the intricate lace dress who looked nothing like him. His daughter. One hand held the diamond-studded locket around her neck as she grasped her governess with the

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other. Her confused blue eyes absorbed the surrounding pandemonium. A twinge of guilt hit him. Had she eaten breakfast? He usually made do with a cup of coffee.

"Madeleine"—he crouched to her height—"did you eat this morning?"

She blinked. "Y-yes, sir."

Did she think he was reprimanding her? They'd spent only holidays together for the past two years, and he knew next to nothing about being a father. How did one go about communicating with children?

He brightened the pitch of his voice. "Would you like a sna-ack?" The last word squeaked like a cartoon mouse.

Madeleine covered her mouth and giggled.

Heat singed Spencer's neck. He stood up and gestured to Ms. Blanchet, the expensive caregiver his executive assistant had hired from the most prestigious agency in New Orleans. "You're the governess. Didn't you bring any food?"

"Of course I did." The woman straightened her already rigid shoulders. "But you made it clear mealtimes were nonnegotiable."

Spencer stared. Ms. Blanchet's poise remained unruffled. And Spencer stared more. She wavered and tugged open the large leather satchel at her side.

"Perhaps one granola bar won't spoil her lunch." She unwrapped the all-natural, sugar-free snack and passed it to the child. "You said we'll be on the boat for no more than two nights. Correct?"

"Yes. I should complete my business soon. We'll fly from Cozumel to New Orleans."

"Thank you," the little girl murmured.

Spencer's gaze took in the pocket-size stranger below him. His ex-wife's decision to live in New York during their two-year separation meant he'd had few opportunities to spend time with Madeleine. Now that the divorce was finalized and Priscilla had agreed to give him sole custody, he would do everything in his power to make sure his daughter was happy. But how?

Madeleine chewed on her granola bar without complaint.

*At least she's quiet. Unlike her mother.*



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One dubious benefit of his ex-wife's constant criticism had been that it left him in no doubt of her desires. Spencer had been a full-time father for all of three days and still hadn't a clue what his little girl wanted. Would Madeleine tell him if she needed something? Or would their relationship resemble his own childhood? Always passing messages through a bevy of servants and employees.

*God?*

Spencer swallowed. The awkward sensation of seeking help from an invisible Creator rankled his Masterson pride. He'd been taught to never show weakness to anyone. But he'd recently realized the value in relinquishing things to Someone greater than himself.

*I'm new at this whole prayer thing. If you're listening, I could use assistance. Please help me be a father she can trust and depend on. I have no idea where to start.*

A musical voice sounded behind him. "Welcome to the MS *Buckingham*, dear honored guests."

He turned to find a diminutive young woman dressed in a long purple gown like a princess from a fairy tale. Her fiery hair curled around her face, and her smile beamed with a warmth to match. She held a silver tray with bottled water.

He would have responded, but she wasn't looking at him. Her twinkling eyes were fixed on Madeleine. She dipped in a curtsy and held out the tray to his daughter.

"Would you care for water, Your Majesty?" She spoke the words in a fake British accent and without a trace of irony, even though her own tiara listed to the side.

Madeleine shook her head. "No, thank you, ma'am."

The wannabe princess stood tall, if five foot two could be considered tall. Her compact but shapely figure turned his way as she lifted the tray. "Water, sir?" The pesky breeze whipped her red hair, and she twisted her full pink lips to puff it away. "Sir?"

"No." He'd paused for only a second, but it bothered him. Why was he so distracted? As the most reputed lawyer in New Orleans, he was never at a loss for words.

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She moved to the next passenger in the VIP line. Spencer forced his attention away and focused on the mammoth ship in front of him. The pristine white sides towered above them. Crew members rushed along the decks with armloads of miscellaneous items. A twisting mass of tube slides rose from the pool at the front end of the ship. Near the gangplank, a mariachi band stood in black suits with gold embroidery and wide red ties, filling the air with spirited music. It was a giant, floating amusement park.

Spencer squinted at the festivities. “It baffles me why Daisy is living in a place like this.”



## CHAPTER 2



THE SHIPPERS STOOD ON THE pier. Semitrucks rumbled in the distance as forklifts unloaded pallets of perishables. The crowd of excited cruisers undulated like an ocean wave, jostling each other in carefree abandon.

A random elbow bumped Emily. She tottered forward, the hard pavement rushing to meet her.

Gerry grabbed her in a death grip. “Careful, now.” She hauled her up and blocked Emily’s smaller frame from the crowd. “Where’s your cane?”

“I don’t need that sissy stick.”

Gerry had honed the art of silent disapproval during her many years as a librarian. Her thin lips pinched. She eyed her friend like she would an overdue book.

Emily shuffled her feet. “I’m fine. Truly.”

“A few months ago, you were in the infirmary with a heart arrhythmia. You should take precautions.”

“I can lean on one of the railings for support.”

“Forget the railings, honey.” Althea slipped a soft hand around Emily’s free arm. “Lean on me. I’m much cushier. We can chat about cute little Abby.”

Daisy raised her perfectly plucked eyebrows. “What do y’all think of our latest candidate?”

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Althea shrugged. "I like her."

"Liking her isn't the problem," Emily said. "Can we help her? Our last match required so much effort, we took a break after the wedding."

"I'd hardly call two weeks a break." Gerry snorted. "And we all saw you making mental notes. I bet you already have a list of prospects for Abby."

Emily didn't bother denying it. The other ladies knew her well. She lived and breathed her mission.

Daisy opened her clutch purse and withdrew an embroidered handkerchief. "It makes it easier if she fills out her own background information and preferences. Saves us hours of legwork. My vote is yes."

"You normally don't say much when we choose a client, baby." Althea looped her other arm around Daisy's. "What's different this time?"

Her roommate considered before she answered. "She's spunky but with a gentle spirit. Plus"—the short lady looked up at Althea—"I know how it feels to be a buttercup in a world of long-stemmed roses. My late husband loomed over me. I suggest we find her someone height-appropriate so she doesn't spend the rest of her life with a permanent crick in her neck."

"Sounds good to me," Althea agreed. "I vote yes too."

Emily bounced on the rubber soles of her orthopedic sandals. "What about you, Gerry?"

"It's obvious you're itching to get started." Gerry dragged the strap of her computer bag over her shoulder. "Let's quit lollygagging."

"Mrs. Masterson!" a voice laced with a thick Russian accent beckoned above the clamor. One of the ship's spa employees, Magda, weaved through the passengers. She approached them and extended a black envelope. Her glittery gold nail art sparkled against the dark, heavy paper. "Someone asked me to bring this to you."

Daisy's brow wrinkled. "Who?"

Magda rested her arm on top of her head and scratched her opposite temple. "I do not know. He is not from the boat."

She presented the envelope again. Daisy took it with hesitant fingers

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and surveyed the crowd as if she expected to find the sender. Magda gave a curt nod and left.

“Psssstttt.”

The airy sound drew their attention. A guard with a freckled bald spot on the back of his head sat facing away at the check-in counter. His lazy gaze swung to them. He gestured with a wink. The Shippers brandished their passports and slipped past the line.

“Thanks, Barney.” Emily patted his chubby cheek before heading up the gangplank.

They passed another guard at the ship’s threshold. Mr. Everson stood with hands on hips, feet spread apart. He eyed every passenger from behind gunmetal sunglasses. His honey-brown hair was streaked with gold from hours patrolling the outer decks. Though he wasn’t more than five foot ten, his black polo shirt stretched across toned muscles, the word SECURITY emblazoned in white letters on the fabric.

“Good morning, Mr. Everson.” Althea waved. “Keep up the good work.”

His chin jerked down.

Daisy whispered, “I’ve yet to see that man smile. He’s quite intimidating.”

“We should find him a wife,” Emily said. “She’d soften those rough edges.”

“Let’s finish the case we’ve got first,” Gerry said. “The girl is hankering to get married. I doubt Abby will take long though. It might not hurt to prep our next client.”

The Shippers entered the enormous vessel they’d chosen as home base. Opulent marble floor tiles reflected the light from the crown-shaped crystal chandelier hanging overhead. A winding staircase covered in deep-purple carpet connected the three-storied room. Balconies revealed art-laden hallways stretching in all directions. A musician sat at a baby grand piano, and sweet melodies drifted from under the glossy black lid.

“Home sweet home.” Althea spun in a slow circle. “Hey, Daisy. Take

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a video of me in this dress. I want to show my granddaughter I got her present.”

Daisy tucked the envelope in her pocket, then accepted Althea’s phone. She murmured pose suggestions, and her friend complied. Behind them, a few couples in understated but elegant vacation clothes wandered through the doors.

Emily grasped her purse handles. “The Sovereign Club members are boarding.” She assessed each man walking through the door. “I wonder if any might do for Abby.”

Gerry shook her head. “Cruise ship employees aren’t allowed to date passengers. That could get her thrown off the boat.”

“Like I always say”—Althea unzipped her red, sparkly fanny pack and fished out a piece of candy—“the cruise line can’t dictate who you love. If Abby wants to get married, that’s her prerogative. She can work somewhere else.”

Emily continued to make mental notes of the arriving VIPs, but it was unlikely any of them would be a match for their new client. Not many eligible gentlemen cruised alone.

Gerry sat in a chair and pulled a novel from her bag. “Monarch Cruises knows how to pamper the fancy folks. I wonder how much money big shots pay for the luxury suites and VIP perks.”

“More than I got.” Althea plopped onto a couch. “But thanks to my frequent-traveler miles, I get almost the same perks for free.” She motioned to Daisy and patted the cushion beside her. “Sit down, baby. This will take a while.”

Daisy lowered herself onto the seat and straightened the hem of her pleated black skirt. “I wouldn’t trade the fanciest accommodation in the fleet for the cabin I share with you.”

“Awwwww.” Althea wrapped Daisy’s slight figure in an embrace and jiggled her back and forth. “I love you too.”

Daisy gripped her. “You’re shaking me to pieces.”

Althea stopped jiggling but kept hugging her. “I can’t help it. My best friend is so sweet, I want—well hellooooo, handsome. I haven’t seen a gentleman that fine since we left N’Orlins.”

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The other Shippers turned to the entrance as a tall man in a business suit strode through the lobby. He scanned the room and settled on Daisy. His shiny dress shoes clicked against the floor like a soldier in lockstep. She drooped as he neared and stopped in front of the couch.

Emily didn't care for his calculating gaze. She inserted herself between the stranger and her friends. "Can we help you, young man?"

He ignored her, looking to the shrinking woman seated beside Althea.

"Hello, Daisy." A polite smile crossed his grim face. "Or should I say Mother?"