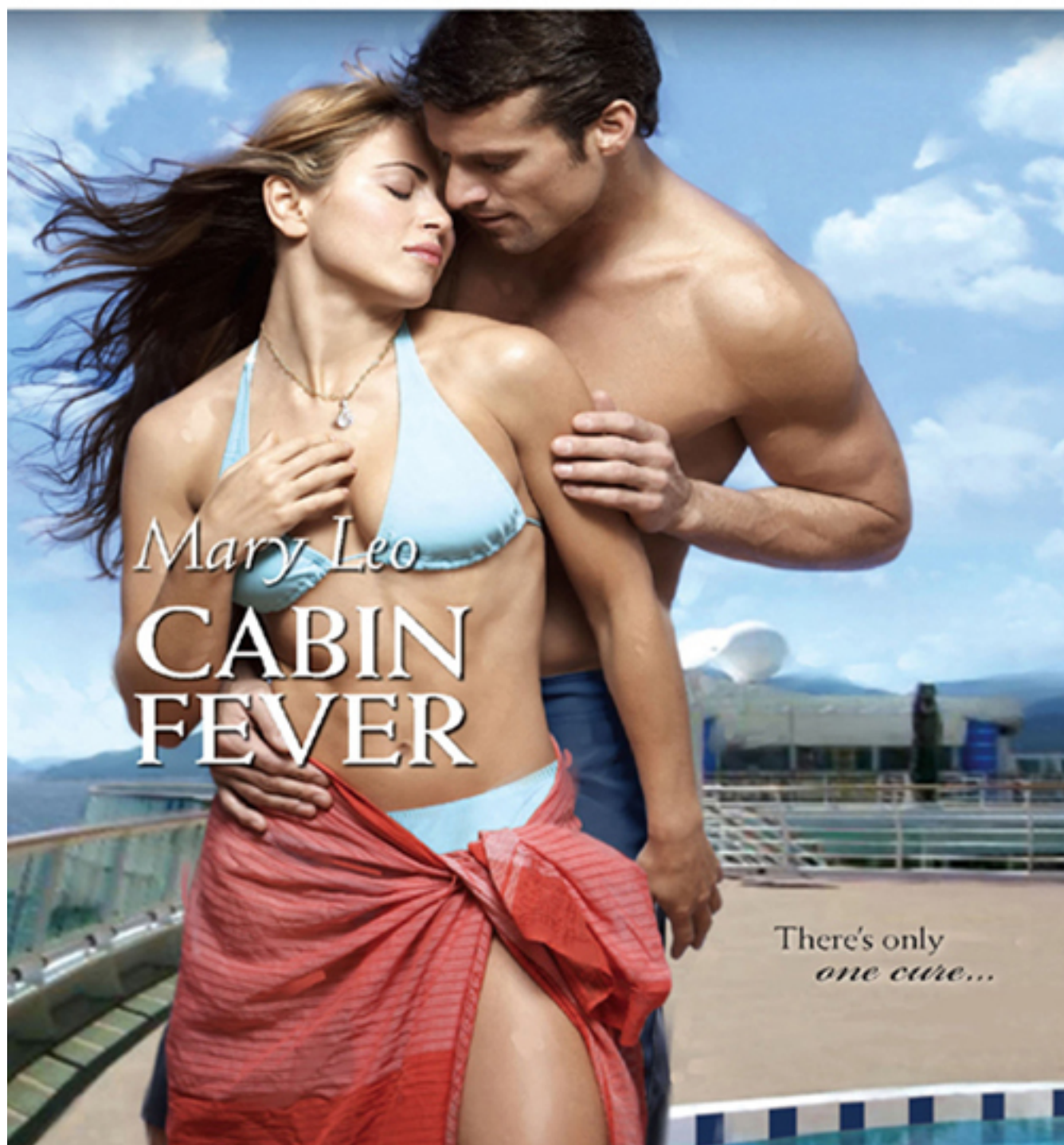


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Sometimes you need someone to teach you the things you already know. . . Becky Montgomery's husband was a real catch. And when he died two years ago, she buried her emotions—and her needs—with him, and buried herself in her job. Sailing aboard the cruise ship *Alexandra's Dream* for a weeklong vacation with her two children and a painfully exacting mother-in-law, Becky figures a Christmas holiday doesn't seem like the time to start dipping her toes into the sea of love. But when she finds a pendant that's supposed to bring her luck—and meets Dylan Langstaff, the ship's charismatic diving instructor—she may be ready to take the plunge. Dylan has charmed a lot of women in his time working aboard *Alexandra's Dream*, but there's something different about Becky. It's changing the way he wants to live. . . just the way something about him is changing the way she wants to love. . . .

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Mediterranean NIGHTS™

Mary Leo
CABIN FEVER



TORONTO • NEW YORK • LONDON
AMSTERDAM • PARIS • SYDNEY • HAMBURG
STOCKHOLM • ATHENS • TOKYO • MILAN • MADRID
PRAGUE • WARSAW • BUDAPEST • AUCKLAND
For my daughter, Jocelyn, and my son, Rich...
all my love

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank Kathryn Lye and Marsha Zinberg for offering me this great series, Janet Wellington for always being there when I need her most, my niece, Dionna Phillips, for being the beautiful visual inspiration for Tracy Irvine, my husband for coming up with the core conflict for my hero/heroine, the other eleven authors of this series who shared their ideas, thoughts and concerns on our loop, with a special shout-out to Ingrid Weaver for writing a fabulous opening book, Diana Duncan for starting the loop and keeping us informed throughout the process, and Marcia King-Gamble for generously sharing her intimate knowledge of cruise ships.

PROLOGUE

THE QUARTER MOON sat high in the sky as Alexandra's dream slipped peacefully through the dark waters toward her next destination. She was an elegant vessel with sleek lines, a graceful chipper bow and a somewhat squared stern. This was her long, lazy repositioning voyage from Piraeus on the Greek coast to Miami Beach, Florida, where she would spend the winter months in the Caribbean.

Patti Kennedy sat alone in the crowded back office of the ship's library, looking through a cardboard box filled with the remaining reproductions of antiques that the police and the FBI had left behind. Ariana Bennett, the ship's librarian, had decided to send the larger pieces, a bust of one of the Caesars, a Greek vase and an Etruscan plate to a friend of hers who was interested in antiquities. She had asked Patti to go through the box one last time to see if there was anything she might want to keep.

Patti couldn't sleep and decided at one in the morning that now was the time to go through the box. Her mind still raced with recent events aboard the ship that had brought her to this moment and she needed to find closure. She also needed to assuage the feeling of guilt she shared with other senior cruise staff. As cruise director, Patti felt she should have had some awareness that a smuggling operation had been taking place on board the ship during their entire Mediterranean segment.

The incidence had also eroded trust among staff members. Patti didn't know who to believe anymore. First Officer Giorgio Tzekas had been arrested for his participation in the smuggling—an involvement partly motivated by gambling debts. Then there was Mike O'Connor a.k.a. Father Pat Connelly, who had smuggled aboard black market antiques and displayed them with the reproductions he used for his library lectures. Both men worked for Anastasia Catomeris, who had set up the scheme to frame Elias Stamos, the ship's owner and her former lover.

According to Ariana, Anastasia, or Tasia, had given birth to Elias's child, Theo, forty years ago. Even though Elias had generously paid support for his illegitimate son, that wasn't enough for Tasia. She wanted Elias to acknowledge Theo publicly as his son. Elias eventually did, and now father and son were busy building a relationship, despite Tasia and her devious ways.

But it was Mike O'Connor who had fooled everyone, even Gideon Dayan, the head of security. He'd had his suspicions but could find no evidence the guy was a fraud. Thanasi Kaldis, the hotel manager had actually defended the man at one point.

Patti sat back in her chair when she thought of Thanasi, and played with the silver necklace she'd found in the box. The man owned her heart, but there was no way she could even tell him, at least not in the foreseeable future. For now, it was enough they worked together and besides, as cruise director she didn't have time for a love affair. But she could dream, couldn't she?

The necklace slipped out of her hands to the floor, and when she bent over to retrieve it, a clear blue light flashed from the teardrop pendant.

"That's odd," she said out loud.

There was only a small window in the office, but as she glanced through it, she caught the sliver of moon winking in the dark sky.

As she sat upright again holding on to the silver pendant a shiver swept through her and she rubbed her arms to get rid of the tingling sensation.

When she carefully placed the pendant down on the desk in front of her, she remembered the Greek legend Mike O'Connor had said was attached to the pendant. It was something about the moon goddess and her love for the sheppard, Lexus, and how the sun god, jealous of their love, had the shepherd killed. The silver pendant was supposed to hold the diamond that had been in the clasp of a magic cloak the goddess had made to conceal her lover. After Lexus's death, a teardrop from the moon goddess hardened over the diamond and covered it. The moon goddess told one of her

attendants to hide it where she and Lexus had spent their days together and whoever found the pendant would have good luck, especially in love.

“That’s it!” Patti said, grabbing the pendant.

The rest of the stuff could be sent off to Ariana’s friend but the pendant, even though it required a little polishing and a few repairs would serve as a fun way for the crew to get past the scandal.

She’d hide it in a randomly selected stateroom and make a game out of it for the passengers. “Find the pendant and find your true love” or “Whoever finds the pendant will be lucky in love,” or something like that.

She’d have to get the details worked out, but she was hoping Ariana could help her with that. Now that Ariana had found her own true love, a former Italian undercover police officer, perhaps she would know what slogan to use.

She wanted to go to Ariana’s cabin and talk about it right now but she knew she needed to wait until morning.

Patti grabbed the necklace closed the box of reproductions, turned out the light and headed for her own cabin, tired but feeling content.

As she walked by a bank of windows and gazed up at the crescent moon, she had to smile at the romance of it all. It was childish to think a piece of inexpensive jewelry could change a person’s life, but with all her heart she wished and hoped it was true, not only for the passenger who would find the pendant, but for her, as well.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ONLY REASON Becky Montgomery had agreed to this Caribbean Christmas cruise aboard Alexandra's Dream, with her late husband's family was because of Laura, her fifteen-year-old niece. The girl knew her way around Becky like no one else, especially when it came to dealing with Becky's mother-in-law, Estelle, the matriarch of the family.

"You don't even have to see her," Laura had said with that assuring voice of hers. "You know how much she hates the sun. She'll probably stay in her cabin all day sleeping, or annoying the staff telling them how to run things. Besides, I need you and the kids to keep me sane. Between my mom nagging me all day and Grandma reciting the proper rules of etiquette over and over again I might end up hurling myself overboard. You wouldn't want that on your conscience, would you?"

"If I go, I may have to hurl myself with you," Becky had told her. There was no doubt in her mind that she would be going on any cruise with Estelle Montgomery. The mere thought of being trapped on a ship with the woman had given her instant heartburn.

"Then we can save each other once we hit the water. Please, Aunt Becky. You have to come. I'm your favorite niece and I'm begging you."

"You're my only niece."

"That may all end soon if you don't come on this cruise."

"Are you threatening me?"

"I'm desperate."

"You're fifteen. All fifteen-year-olds are desperate."

"Yes, but I've got Estelle and Kim for my role models. My desperation is on another level."

That was the precise moment when Becky's resistance had tumbled and she had agreed. She always was a sucker for an underdog and she really felt for Laura.

However, now that the departure date had actually arrived, Becky was having second thoughts. The suitcases were packed, the shore excursions were purchased, and Becky had secured a neighbor to come in and water the plants, feed Brad and Angelina, Sarah's lovebirds, play with Lance Armstrong, Connor's tabby cat, and walk John Wayne, the family bulldog. Now Becky wasn't so sure this whole thing was such a smart idea. She was so nervous about the adventure that the Mickey Mouse pancakes she'd made for her kids for breakfast had given her the dry heaves, and the headache she'd been trying to ignore since waking was now about to blow her eyes out of their sockets.

Still, the fact remained, she had made an agreement with Laura and it was too late to back out...or was it?

Wouldn't a simple phone call to Estelle solve all her problems? She could merely say she was really sorry, but she and the kids couldn't make it this year...or next year, or ever.

Becky sat down at the table with her favorite mug filled to the brim with hot tea and a bowl of dry Cocoa Puffs cereal, her favorite breakfast treat, and seriously pondered the idea as she watched her seven-year-old daughter Sarah gently eat around Mickey's ears. She liked to save them for last.

"I think this whole thing is dumb," Becky's ten-year-old son, Connor, announced. He hadn't touched his food.

"You think everything is dumb," Sarah countered.

"Yeah, including you," he shot back.

"Please, kids. Let's try to be nice to each other while Mickey's at the table." Becky liked to discipline with whatever aid she had at hand. Usually she used the various pets as negotiating tools, but for some reason they weren't in the room.

"Mom," Connor reasoned, rolling his eyes. "These are pancakes."

"It doesn't matter. They represent Mickey, and while he's a guest at our table, there's no arguing."

“Whatever,” Connor said, stabbing the pancake with his fork.

Becky stared at her young son. Laura had convinced her to agree to the cruise, but there was another reason that it might not be a good idea in the end: Connor. She hoped the trip would bring him out of his shell. Ever since his dad had died almost two years ago, Connor had slipped further and further into his own world, and now he hardly spoke or ate. And when he did converse, he was usually sarcastic or contrary. She’d tried everything she could think of to get him to come around, but nothing seemed to work for long. He seemed more distant with each passing day.

Becky watched as Connor made little circles with his fork in the syrup, not really eating, his mind obviously somewhere other than the present.

“Connor, two more bites, and finish your milk, then you can leave the table,” Becky said, knowing he just wanted to get back to his room.

Without saying a word, he did as he was told, then picked up his dish, placed it in the sink and left the room.

“Don’t worry, Mom.” Sarah patted Becky on the back. “Mickey understands why Connor’s so sad and he’s not mad at him for not liking the pancakes.”

Becky’s eyes watered as she hugged her sweet little girl.

“THE PURPOSE OF A CRUISE is to relax, especially a Caribbean cruise,” Lacey Garnett told Becky. “Take in the sights. Float on a breeze. Enjoy yourself.”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have a mother-in-law like Estelle Montgomery,” Becky snapped.

The two women were standing in front of their shop, Frock U, a trendy boutique in Hillcrest, the uptown district of San Diego. Lacey turned the lock in the door and they stepped inside.

“She’s technically not your mother-in-law anymore. She’s simply your kids’ grandmother.”

“I know, you’re right, and I do want to keep that relationship strong.”

“Good. Then sit back and enjoy the perks.”

Becky flipped on the lights and the little shop came to life with color and bling. The women knew all about fashion trends and were constantly on the lookout for the next big craze.

“But I’ve hardly spoken to Estelle in two years, other than those phone calls every other week so my kids can keep in touch with their grandmother,” Becky said, putting her purse down behind the counter. She started to fold some T-shirts. “It’s just that she’s so controlling. Last week I received a detailed outline on the appropriate attire for each formal dinner and event on the ship. Not for my kids, but for me!”

“She’s just being helpful.”

Becky stopped folding and glued her fist to her hip. “No, she’s not. Helpful is what baggers do at grocery stores. Helpful is when you open a map in the middle of New York City and someone steps up to point out the way. Telling me what to wear on a cruise ship suggests that I don’t have a clue even though she knows I co-own a fashion boutique!” Becky’s arms were flailing now.

“I think you’re reading too much into this. Maybe she’s changed, but because you never really talk to her, you can’t see it. I still think she was simply trying to be helpful.” Lacey joined in the folding.

“Impossible. Her spots go all the way down to the bone.”

Lacey walked closer to Becky. “Hey, shouldn’t you be home right now, packing all those outfits for all those dinners and events or something? Doesn’t your plane leave in, like, three hours?”

“I’m not going.” Becky walked over and picked up the retro rotary phone behind the desk and started dialing.

Lacey stopped her mid-dial. “You need this vacation. Your kids need this vacation.”

“I know what I’m doing. I’ll take the kids to Disneyland for a long weekend. I don’t need a family cruise. We don’t need a family cruise.” Becky put the phone down, grabbed her purse and pulled out her cell phone. Lacey snatched it from her hand. Becky was getting really angry now.

“You can’t meet a guy in Disneyland,” Lacey said.

Becky stopped struggling. “What?”

“A guy. A man. Someone with a penis...who’s available. Guys at Disneyland are most likely going to be there with their families or girlfriends.”

“I don’t need to meet a man, Lacey, I’m perfectly happy with my life the way it is.” Becky stared at her best friend and business partner incredulously. She couldn’t possibly be serious. Could she?

“No, you’re not perfectly happy. I can tell. You need a guy. If only for a couple of nights. Just some meaningless sex under the stars to relieve some of that tension.” Lacey took a couple steps back, giving them both some breathing room. Becky did the same.

“I am not tense!” Becky snapped. “All right, maybe I’m a little tense, but meaningless sex certainly won’t fix it. Besides, I’m a mother. I have responsibilities. I’m fine.”

“I know you when you’re fine, remember? We’ve been friends since we could walk, and you are far from fine. I love you to death but you’re an overworked, single psycho-mom who can’t even take the morning off on the day she’s supposed to be flying to Florida. You’re wound up so tight, if someone gives you a nudge you’ll spin for the rest of time.”

Becky’s eyes watered. There was truth in Lacey’s words, but she didn’t want to admit it, and she definitely didn’t want to think about “sex under the stars,” even though—if she was being absolutely honest—she did long to be held again in a man’s arms, and kissed and...

Lacey walked forward and hugged her tight. “It’s okay, honey. I know you’re hurting, and you don’t want to see Estelle, and you miss Ryder. But Becky, he would want you to move on. It’s been almost two years since he passed away. You know he would want you to be happy.”

Becky pulled away. She couldn’t even think about having a relationship with a man...not yet. It was too soon, wasn’t it? “I can’t. It’s not time yet.”

“Okay. I understand. I do. But at least get on that plane and go on the cruise. Relax a little. Hey, maybe you can find some new merchandise for our shop while you’re on Saint Thomas Island, some exotic dresses and jewelry. I hear it’s a fab place to shop. Go discover some struggling designer and bring his or her designs to the States. Look at this as a working vacation. Would that make you feel better about it?”

Becky thought about it for a moment, and the idea actually sounded good. “You know, we could use a little more color in this place to go with all our plans for next year.” A smile spread across her face.

Lacey grabbed Becky’s purse, slipped her cell phone back inside and handed it to her. “You better get going if you want to make that plane. That designer is out there on some island waiting for you to discover him...if you know what I mean.”

Becky smiled and took her purse. “I get it, but I’m really not ready for romance. Honest. Besides, I’ll have my kids with me.”

“They can’t be with you every minute.”

Becky gave her a look. “I’m a dedicated mom.”

Lacey walked her to the front door, turned and hugged Becky. “And I’m a dedicated friend. Remember, sex doesn’t equal romance. You can keep your heart perfectly safe and still relieve some of that tension all bottled up inside. Having sex is healthy.”

They separated. “Okay. I’ll consider the sex, but only on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“Can I have the meaningless but healthy sex in a cabin? I’m not one for public displays.”

“Honey, you can have sex in a vault for all I care, just make sure you don’t come home without it.”

“I’ll do my best,” Becky said, going along with the idea to placate Lacey. Secretly she had no intention of having sex with anyone.

“You’re lying. I can tell when you’re lying, but it doesn’t matter because I’ve thrown the idea out into the universe, and once it’s out there, only the moon, sun and stars know what will really happen. It’s out of your control.”

Becky never believed her somewhat mystical friend, but this time a slight shiver washed over her as she walked out of the store. For some reason she felt as though Lacey’s wish had truly been ordered and she couldn’t help wondering if the universe was listening.

ALL THE NUDGING in the world couldn’t keep Connor from being anxious for most of the flight from San Diego to Miami Beach, Florida where they would board Alexandra’s Dream for their cruise. While Sarah, the girly-girl who already knew how to work Becky’s new digital camera better than Becky did, had busied herself on the flight with the continuing adventures of Ken and Barbie on holiday—her dolls and outfits had been carefully packed in her backpack. Connor had sat with his nose in a Lemony Snicket novel, speaking to no one.

Sarah was such a clever and easy child that sometimes Becky would forget that she was only seven years old. Nothing seemed to faze her, and her laugh was infectious. She had an imagination that knew no bounds, and a curiosity that kept Becky busy trying to figure out answers. She could read by the time she was four, and wrote her first story when she was barely six. Her teachers couldn’t keep up with her, and most of her classes were at advanced levels.

Connor, however, had changed dramatically since his father’s death two years ago. Gone was that happy, carefree little boy who loved to swim and play baseball and ride his bike for countless hours. Connor’s approach to life was more somber, but then, so was Becky’s.

“The ship is going to sink just like the Titanic and we’re all going to freeze to death in the water.” Connor looked up from his book as the plane made its final descent. “I think we should turn right around and go back home.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “There aren’t any icebergs in the Caribbean, silly. They would melt. And I looked up Alexandra’s Dream on the Web—we each get our own lifeboat.”

Connor shook his head and made a face. “Yeah, well, maybe we’ll get locked in the bottom of the ship and won’t be able to get out to find a lifeboat, and we’ll all drown.”

“Then I’ll get an ax and break the lock,” Sarah declared while making hand gestures as if she were breaking the lock at that very moment. Sarah liked to give a demonstration for clarity whenever possible. “Then you and Mom can take my hand and I’ll lead you to the lifeboats.”

“Like you would know where to go.”

“Of course I would. I’m Wonder Girl and I can do anything!”

“Oh, yeah.” Connor turned in his middle seat to face her. Sarah sat next to the window, while Becky was on the aisle. Connor had insisted on the arrangement because he didn’t want to see what was going on either down below or on the plane. “If you’re Wonder Girl then why didn’t you fly here on your own?”

Without missing a beat Sarah said, “I thought about it, but it would mess up my hair.” She primped her naturally curly blond hair. Usually it fell into her eyes, but today she had worn a lavender-and-pink sparkly barrette that matched her outfit to hold it in place. She also wore lavender sandals, and Becky had polished her nails a bright pink to match her backpack. Sarah was a fashion diva.

Connor burst out laughing, and Becky was finally able to relax a little. It had been a long flight, but the journey was just beginning. If this little incident was any indication of things to come, she was hoping that Sarah would continue to use her magic on Connor to get him to lighten up. Of course, the way Becky was feeling, she could use a sprinkling of Sarah’s magic herself. Her stomach was still in a knot and her nerves were wound tight. She had wanted to buy a drink during the flight, but she just couldn’t justify it with her kids sitting next to her, so instead she tried to simply ignore her own apprehensions...not the best solution.

The plane landed and Becky escorted her children to baggage claim, then they caught a cab to the cruise ship without crisis. Connor, although somewhat distracted, was at least cooperative, while Sarah skipped her way through the entire journey.

It would be the first time Becky and her kids had ever been on a ship. They'd seen them before, docked in San Diego, but knowing they were going to be living on one for a week was exciting. They stood in line on Pier Five at the Port of Miami, filling out forms, then gave their luggage to a stevedore and handed an agent their passports to check. Connor kept lagging behind, studying the exterior of the ship, while Sarah bounced around in happy anticipation. The heads of Ken and Barbie popped out of her backpack, as if they were doing their own happy dance.

BECKY KEPT BOTH Sarah and Connor close as they went through the embarkation process, which was held in a comfortable covered area on the pier. There was even a band playing island music in the far corner, and a private seating area for the VIP group, which Estelle had seen fit to bestow on Becky and the kids. However, Becky was sure all this executive treatment came with a high "you owe me" price tag. She could only speculate what that might be.

Becky kept the kids close by her side, not wanting them wandering off before they even found their cabins. Her ticket stated that she and her kids had a penthouse with a veranda.

Sarah had looked it up on the Web, and when she discovered the cabin had a DVD player, she insisted on bringing along *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Cars* and various other movies to torment Becky and Connor with during the cruise. Becky brought along *The Princess Bride*, the one movie the entire family could agree on, even Connor. They'd all seen it countless times, and could quote from it, but there was something almost magical about the movie that usually put them in a good mood.

Sarah had this belief that anyone they met who loved the movie as much as they did would eventually become part of their family, and so far, Sarah had been right.

Becky, of course, was hoping to distract her from watching so many movies with all the water activities this cruise had to offer. After all, it was billed as *A Creatures of the Caribbean* encounter, a chance to get up close and personal, and Becky intended to take full advantage of every encounter offered...well, at least within reason. She had already signed up for a dolphin encounter—too good to pass up—and snorkeling around a coral reef sounded like fun. But she'd been forced to leave herself and the kids open because Estelle had her own plans, and Becky knew better than to try to disrupt those. The ship was scheduled to drop anchor at Grand Turk Island, the Cays, Tortola Island, St. Maarten and, of course, Saint Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands. She was sure Estelle had plans for each stop, only she hadn't yet bothered to tell Becky.

Once they stepped on board and into a huge lobby with glass elevators, large baskets of fresh flowers everywhere and enough room to accommodate half the people on the ship, Becky let out a sigh of relief. They had actually made it. Maybe she could, in fact, relax.

A charming woman with dark hair and a warm smile handed Becky a brightly colored brochure announcing an onboard treasure hunt. "Be sure to join in the fun, looking for the treasure," the woman encouraged. "It's all explained in this brochure." Becky noticed her name tag: Patti Kennedy, Cruise Director.

"What's that about?" Connor asked Becky, obviously curious.

Becky handed the brochure to Connor instead. "Here. You read it and tell us what it says."

"Is it a real treasure?" Sarah asked. "Like in *Pirates of the Caribbean*? Will we be rich if we find it? I'd like that. Then Mommy could stay home more and only go to work when we're at school."

A pang of guilt ripped through Becky. She really had been working too many hours since Ryder had died. It wasn't about the money; Ryder had left them more than enough to be comfortable. Plus each child had a college trust fund. The Montgomerys had set that up as soon as the kids were born.

But work was the only thing that seemed to keep Becky from thinking about Ryder. It hadn't been very fair to her kids. She could see that now, especially with Connor.

She made a promise to herself to spend every moment of this adventure with her kids. Perhaps, in some small way, that would make up for all those long hours they had spent with their babysitters.

She let out a heavy sigh, suddenly seeing the cruise in a whole new light. She watched as Sarah took Connor's hand and pulled him in closer so she could see the pictures on the brochure. Connor didn't put up any resistance. He merely opened the brochure, lowered to her level and began reading.

"May I see your boarding papers?"

Startled by the deep voice, Becky looked up and into the impossibly green eyes of the handsome man standing in front of her.

"What?"

"I'm here to escort you to your cabin."

She handed him the papers.

"Oh, I see you're in a penthouse, Ms. Montgomery."

"Becky." She felt her cheeks heat up. Now why had she wanted to tell him her first name?

"Welcome aboard. Follow me."

Becky tapped the kids' shoulders to get their attention and they all fell in line behind the man. She caught bits and pieces about the treasure hunt as Connor kept reading while they walked. It looked as if they were being given the VIP treatment with a special escort, something Estelle had likely set up.

As they walked, Becky sneaked a glance at their escort. He was very good-looking, dressed in white shorts and a white polo shirt, with the ship's insignia discreetly stitched over his heart, along with a small name tag: Dylan Langstaff—Newfoundland. He wasn't dressed in a steward's uniform, and there was no indication of his title, so Becky could only guess this wasn't part of his regular duties. He looked more like the fit outdoorsy type to her.

"...and the sun god was intensely jealous of the beautiful moon goddess and wanted her all to himself." Connor continued reading the legend in the brochure. "He didn't like it when she was on the far side of the earth and he couldn't see what she was doing. In one of these periods, the moon goddess fell in love with a beautiful shepherd from Arcadia named Lexus..."

Becky could only imagine this cute guy's backlist of women, probably the proverbial "girl in every port" routine. He didn't seem the type who would choose to spend weeks on a ship, working far from home while he had a wife or steady girlfriend waiting his return. No, he definitely looked more like the dyed-in-the-wool bachelor type.

"...they had to keep their love a secret from the sun god and could only be together at night. The moon goddess went to the celestial seamstress Athena and begged her to weave a beautiful cloak of shimmering moonbeams that would shield the goddess and her lover from the eyes of the sun. The cloak worked beautifully until one day when the sun was searching for them, the cloak slipped and nearly revealed them..."

But Dylan was the perfect specimen of the type of guy she had expected might work on a cruise ship: handsome and tall—she guessed just over six feet—wavy brown hair with those natural blond highlights from being out in the sun, thin and tan with muscular arms and straight shoulders. She thought he probably handled the athletic activities the ship offered, maybe helping passengers climb up those rock-climbing walls that were so popular. Connor had been to a birthday party at a rock climbing gym in San Diego a few years ago, and all the men there looked like Dylan—powerfully built, fit, ready for adventure.

"The moon goddess arranged for a blacksmith to make a clasp to secure the cloak and couldn't resist having a large diamond inserted in the clasp. The sun was becoming increasingly jealous because he knew the moon goddess was in love with a human and he was determined to put an end to their relationship..."

Becky kept sneaking peeks at Dylan as he led them into one of the glass elevators, then down a corridor with plush carpeting under their feet, where creamy white doors lined both sides of the hallway. She noticed his hands, the long fingers, his neatly trimmed nails and the silver and onyx ring on his right pinky. Perhaps the ring was a gift from a pining girlfriend patiently waiting for him in some exotic port of call?

“...and once again, the sun god carefully scanned the area with his beam, and this time he noticed a flash of light. When he moved his beam over the same spot, he realized it was the facets of a diamond flashing in the light. He grabbed the diamond clasp and tore the moonbeam cloak from the lovers. Then he struck Lexus, and sent the moon goddess back to the sky. In his anger, the sun god had melted the bronze clasp, freeing the diamond, which the moon goddess snatched up to remember her lover...”

“Here we are,” Dylan said.

“That mean old sun god—I want to know what happened to the poor moon goddess,” Sarah whined. “Did she ever see Lexus again?”

Dylan turned, knelt on one knee to get down to Sarah’s level and shook his head. “No. Poor Lexus died, and the moon goddess cried for so long that the earth was about to be flooded with her tears.”

“Like my mommy did when my daddy left to go to—” Sarah began, but Becky reached out and pulled her back to make her stop talking. Sarah liked to tell everyone that her daddy had left to go to heaven, but he was watching them every minute from his cloud. He didn’t want to leave, but God needed him to be an angel, just like in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Becky was never really comfortable talking about Ryder with anyone, especially not a stranger.

But it was too late. Sarah had already said too much.

Dylan looked up at Becky and his face seemed so full of concern that it took Becky’s breath away. It was neither sympathy nor pity. It was something she couldn’t put her finger on.

Here was this charmer, this obvious babe magnet, yet he seemed to have a soft underside, and for a split second Becky thought she could see into his soul.

Something shifted inside her, something she couldn’t explain.

He looked back at Sarah, and the compassion was replaced by the friendly smile of a man telling a child a story.

He stood and opened their cabin door. “The goddess Artemis came to visit the moon goddess and convinced her to stop crying before she destroyed everything on earth, and she agreed, but not before she shed one final silver teardrop that hardened around the diamond. Then she sent the jewel off to be hidden, but she said she would always cry one day a year for Lexus.” His voice turned into a whisper. “And she still does, but on the very next night—” he waved an arm over his head and grinned “—the moon goddess sends a cascade of moonbeams and shooting stars across the sky to remind everyone of Lexus.”

“So when we see a shooting star, that’s the moon goddess reminding us of Lexus?” Sarah asked him, wide-eyed.

“You bet it is,” Dylan answered, still smiling that dazzling smile.

“Right,” Connor mumbled, slumping down on the sofa.

“Don’t pay any attention to my brother. He’s no fun anymore.” She motioned for Dylan to bend down so she could tell him something, then she blurted, “He doesn’t even want to read about Harry Potter. He doesn’t like movies, not really, and he won’t play *Wonder Girl* with me.”

Connor pulled a pillow up over his head.

“I knew there was something different about you.” Dylan winked at Sarah.

As Sarah did her cute *Wonder Girl* pose, Becky could tell Dylan had won her heart. And could win Becky’s if she wasn’t careful. It was his eyes. He had those sensitive, innocent eyes, but Becky

knew it had to be something he could turn on and off at will. He worked on a cruise ship. He was trained in the art of making people, especially women, feel special. Wasn't he?

Becky put her arms around her daughter's shoulders, and pulled her in tight from behind. She suddenly felt as if this man had learned enough about her family. "Thanks for escorting us to our room, and finishing the story. I think I can figure everything out from here."

"Okay. But don't hesitate to contact someone if you need assistance, Ms. Montgomery." He turned to leave, but then stopped and slowly turned back around. "Oh, there's one more thing about that diamond the moon goddess hid." He directed his charm at Sarah. She stared up at him as if he were telling her a special secret.

"What is it?" she asked, never blinking. He had her full attention. Even Connor slipped the pillow off his head.

"It's hidden somewhere on this very ship. In one of the cabins, to be exact, and whoever finds it will have good luck." Dylan looked directly at Becky. "Especially in love."

A slight shiver danced up her spine as she stared into those magical jade-colored eyes of his, and for a moment she actually considered Lacey's advice. But before she could genuinely second-guess herself, the oh-so-charming Dylan Langstaff was gone.

CHAPTER TWO

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you pulled this off, Patti, that this treasure hunt idea is actually happening.” Thanasi Kaldis walked up behind Dylan, who was handing out brochures in the lobby with Patti Kennedy, the cruise director.

“Look at them,” the ship’s hotel manager continued, “half the people aren’t even glancing at their brochures. I still say that no one will bother looking for that silly pendant. I thought the whole idea was rejected, Patti.”

Thanasi was in his late forties, wore his navy-blue blazer over meticulously pressed whites; he had a crop of black wavy hair and a charismatic smile...most of the time. However, at that precise moment he directed a teasing scowl at Patti.

“It was never rejected,” she told him in a confident voice. “You must have dreamed that, so stop your stressing. Just go with it. Besides, it’s going to be fun.”

Patti, also dressed in a navy blazer and whites, was a brown-haired dynamo who had celebrated her thirty-ninth birthday in Venice on a gondola, alone. If Dylan had known about it beforehand, he would have surprised her with a party or dinner. They’d become friends, and he hated to hear that his friend had been so alone on her birthday, especially when she loved people so much and wanted nothing more than to see everyone around her happy.

Her title usually went to a man, but Patti was possibly the best cruise director Dylan had ever worked with. She anticipated the needs of the passengers and was always looking to enhance their cruise experience. Plus she was just fun to be around.

She turned back to a young couple approaching her. “Find the hidden pendant and receive extra perks the entire cruise!”

Dylan watched as the woman took the brochure, glanced at it then stuffed it into her large straw handbag. Perhaps Thanasi was right. The pendant hunt could be a complete bust. He hoped not, though. He’d liked the idea, and he would be taking part in a few fun excursions set up for the passenger who found it.

Patti turned to Thanasi. “Somebody will find the pendant and the entire ship will be buzzing about it. It’s romantic. And you might want to lighten up—our passengers don’t need to see an officer frowning.” The smile she offered would have melted anybody’s heart.

People filed by happily, but Thanasi was still scowling Patti’s way. She was right, Dylan thought. Not a good image. He could tell that all the hotel manager could think of was possible damage to the cabins as the passengers searched for the pendant.

When the idea had been discussed at an activities planning meeting, Thanasi had voiced his concerns. But even then Dylan thought it was simply his way of teasing Patti. As if they were school kids on the playground and he was vying for her for attention by being uncooperative.

One thing Dylan simply didn’t understand was why Thanasi didn’t just tell Patti he was attracted to her. The entire crew could see it, and it was obvious Patti felt the same for him. Dylan decided what the man needed was a dose of good sex to help him lighten up, but Thanasi went by the book, and apparently that book didn’t include onboard romances.

“Find the pendant and find your true love,” Patti said to a group of twenty-something women. They each took a brochure. One of them mumbled something and they burst out laughing as they walked away.

“See, look, they think it’s a joke,” Thanasi announced.

“Hey,” Patti said softly, so only Thanasi could hear, “I’m working here. If you can’t help, then maybe you should just leave.”

Thanasi stared back at her for a moment as though trying to think of something clever to say, but before he could respond, a petite lady with white curly hair and a bright pink visor walked up to

him and tapped him on the shoulder. “Could you please tell me where my room is located? It’s my first cruise and I’m not very good at this sort of thing. I’ve been waiting for a steward, but they all seem to be busy with other people.”

Thanasi smiled at the woman, then turned on his charm as he bowed, his entire demeanor transforming. “I’d be delighted.” He extended his elbow, she slid her arm through the crook, and off they went. “Let me tell you about Alexandra’s Dream,” he said, but Dylan could tell by his tone that he was still a little irritated about the pendant search.

Patti had told Dylan about the necklace she and librarian Ariana Bennett had found among the personal things of Mike O’Connor, the guy who’d been posing as a priest and smuggling stolen artifacts aboard. Apparently the pendant was left behind with a few other reproductions after the police investigation. The whole scandal had required a deft PR campaign to keep the cabins on Alexandra’s Dream at capacity although Dylan had a feeling the press coverage had also gained the cruise ship a few new bookings.

He loved his job and really didn’t want to lose it. Being in charge of the ship’s dive staff paid well, and in the world of cruise ships, it was a tough job to come by. It was his first real managerial position and allowed him to teach water sports and diving, and run a few of the water-themed activities off the ship.

Dylan was happy the ship wasn’t docked somewhere and he was out looking for another job. If that had happened, it would have given his brother the perfect excuse to press him even more to return home.

His absence was a sore subject between them, even though Dylan tried his best to make up for it by sending half his pay home to Newfoundland every month, something he’d been doing for the past eight years, never missing a month. And besides, jobs were still scarce in his hometown, further confirming he was doing the right thing. It gave him great comfort to know that at least his mom didn’t have to worry about money.

But, he admitted, a job shortage wasn’t the only reason he was reluctant to go back. The place had too many sad memories, and Dylan was doing his best to avoid them.

He loved the routine of welcoming passengers and a week or so later bidding them farewell and getting ready for a new group. But today’s boarding had been different. Today he’d felt a totally unexpected personal interest in one of the passengers—the woman he’d just escorted to a penthouse suite.

Becky Montgomery.

He remembered what the adorable, little blond-haired angel had told him about her mommy crying when her daddy left, just like the moon goddess who’d flooded the earth with her sad tears. How could any guy leave that perfect little family, let alone such a fine-looking woman as Becky? And from what her little girl implied, Dylan assumed it must have been one nasty divorce, and her mom hadn’t taken it well. The hurt was still there in her pretty eyes.

Plain as day.

The son seemed distant, maybe still harboring feelings he didn’t quite know what to do with. A boy needed a father, though Dylan would bet a year’s salary his mother bent over backward to keep those kids safe and happy.

Strange, how he’d picked up on all of that in just those few moments.

Then he stopped himself. Stopped the feelings that had rushed through him as he’d been thinking about the beautiful woman, the charming little girl and the obviously troubled boy.

He admitted to himself this could be trouble. Big trouble. He couldn’t deny he felt a strong attraction to her, but there were strict rules about passenger/staff onboard relationships.

He’d never broken that rule before, but Becky Montgomery might just cause him to bend it a little if he wasn’t careful.

He could only hope she and her kids hated water sports.

“BUT WHY DO WE HAVE TO wait until after dinner to go to the pool?” Connor asked, giving his suitcase a little kick while he stood in front of the twin beds.

“Can we at least unpack first?” Becky liked settling in when she was in a strange place.

“Don’t you want to look for the pendant first?” Sarah asked, still hopeful.

“No, I don’t want to look for that dumb old pendant,” her brother grumbled.

“Well, I do,” Sarah said, and flung herself across her bed.

A knock at the door stopped further arguments as the kids ran to answer it, nearly tripping over themselves trying to get to it first.

When they opened the door, both Sarah and Connor squealed with laughter and excitement. Their cousin Laura slowly entered the room, both kids hanging on her.

“Mom wanted me to wait until dinner to see you guys, but I couldn’t wait. I am so happy you’re here.” The kids tumbled Laura to the floor in a heap of tickles and laughter.

Becky couldn’t believe her eyes. All Laura had to do was walk into the room and Connor’s whole disposition changed. Whatever magic Laura was dispelling, Becky wanted the potion.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Becky echoed.

“Save me, Aunt Becky,” Laura spluttered as she tickled Connor’s belly. Sarah lay on Laura’s stomach, one hand tickling Laura under the arm. Laura fought to get her off, but Sarah was persistent. Finally, after a few minutes, both Connor and Sarah rolled away, scrambled to their feet, grinning from ear to ear. Laura stood, then walked over and gave Becky a warm hug.

“Let me look at you,” Becky said as they pulled apart.

Laura backed away and Becky was pleasantly surprised by how much this fifteen-year-old had grown. She had almost reached Becky’s height of five-seven and her hair was a rich golden-brown cut short and shaggy around her face. She definitely looked like a Montgomery with those thick eyebrows and that chiseled nose. Her skin had cleared up and was now glowing, and although she was several pounds heavier than Becky had remembered, it seemed to suit her well. However, her makeup was rather thick and her clothes were simply too tight, but Becky didn’t care if she wore vampire makeup and arrived in a toga. She was thrilled to see her, and instantly realized just how much she’d missed her.

“You’re beautiful,” Becky told her.

“I’m fat,” Laura countered.

“Aren’t we all?”

“Not my mom. She’s perfect.”

“Impossible. Nobody’s perfect.”

“Tell that to my grandmother.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Can I watch?”

“Only if you hide any and all sharp objects first.”

“It’s a deal.”

They hugged again, laughing, then parted. Sarah joined them and tugged on Laura’s hand. “I want to find the magic pendant.”

“How could you ever find it on this big ship?” Connor said with more than a little sarcasm as he stepped closer. Apparently it didn’t take long for his mood to change.

“Yeah, but somebody has to find it,” Laura suggested, ignoring his crankiness and supporting Sarah’s excitement.

“And it won’t be us,” Connor scorned. “Nothing good ever happens in this family.”

Laura tousled his hair, and Connor let her, but Becky could tell his attitude was deteriorating quickly. “Oh, I don’t know. We’re all on this cruise together. That’s something good.”

“You know what I mean.” He moved away from her hand. “I mean to my family, like me and my sister and my mom.”

“Well, maybe if we find the pendant, your luck will start to change,” Laura said.

“I seriously doubt it.” He walked away and plopped himself down on the sofa.

“If we all think positive thoughts, maybe we’ll have a better chance of finding it,” Laura decreed, sitting next to him.

Connor shrugged. “Whatever.”

Sarah looked pensive for a moment. Becky could tell she was trying to figure something out. Suddenly her face brightened. “Thoughts like raindrops on roses, and whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens?”

“Don’t get her started,” Connor whispered.

Ignoring him, Laura added, “Sure, whatever makes you the most happy.”

Suddenly, Sarah started singing “My Favorite Things.” Connor slid down on the sofa. Laura joined in the tune, then got up and grabbed Sarah, spinning her around, laughing. Becky joined in, as well.

When they’d finished dancing around the room, and bugging Connor whenever they got the chance, his attitude picked up slightly.

Becky relished the fact that Laura had such a positive effect on her kids. She knew Connor was just as thrilled as Sarah to see his cousin, but he purposely didn’t want to show too much enthusiasm. However, it was almost impossible when Laura was in the room. It was as if he was fighting against his true self and couldn’t trust his own emotions. As if he was afraid to be happy.

It tore Becky apart.

At least so far it didn’t seem to be affecting his schoolwork, and he still participated in some school activities, so she didn’t think he needed a therapist yet. However, if this family cruise didn’t change his somber disposition, she had already decided to make an appointment with a good family therapist when they returned home.

“I think I’m going to find the pendant and we’re going to be the luckiest family in the whole world,” Sarah announced.

The chances of them finding the pendant were next to zero, Becky figured, but Laura’s enthusiasm was infectious. Becky wished, for Connor’s sake, that by some miracle the kids would find the pendant.

“This is bogus,” Connor mumbled. “We can think positive thoughts for the next million years and we still won’t be able to find it.”

“No deadbeats allowed,” Laura insisted, grabbing hold of Connor again and tickling his belly. He smiled briefly, but then turned away. Becky knew Laura was working her happy magic on him, and the ice was at least melting around the edges. “Come on, Connor, have a little faith, at least for a few hours. You don’t want to break our positive vibes, do you?”

Connor shrugged.

“I sometimes believe six impossible things before breakfast,” Sarah said.

Connor stared at his sister then rolled his eyes. Becky knew how much he hated it when she quoted from Alice In Wonderland. It was one of those movies Sarah had watched over and over until Becky couldn’t take it anymore and had actually pretended to lose the darn thing for two whole weeks. When she found it again, Sarah was into The Little Mermaid, thank you very much.

“Tell you what,” Laura said to Sarah. “What would make you the happiest right now?”

Sarah thought for a moment. “Swimming!”

“I don’t think we can do that right now, so what else?”

She thought again. “A really big chocolate ice cream cone with sprinkles.”

“That’s something we can do,” Laura confirmed. She turned toward Connor. “And what would make you happy?”

“Nothing,” Connor grumbled.

“Come on, Connor. There must be something.”

“No. I don’t want to.”

“You don’t want to be happy?” Laura argued.

“No. I don’t want to play your stupid game,” he announced, and stomped into the bathroom and shut the door.

“Connor,” Becky called after him, but the only thing she heard was the lock turning in the door. Laura gave Becky a quizzical glance, but Becky didn’t respond.

“Pickles. Those great big sour ones,” Sarah said, her eyes dancing.

“Pickles?” Laura asked.

“Connor loves pickles,” Becky told her.

“Then let’s get you a double-scoop ice cream cone and Connor the biggest pickle on the entire ship.” Laura grabbed Sarah’s hand and headed for the door then stopped. “If that’s okay with your mom.” She looked at Becky.

“It’s perfect,” Becky said, “In the meantime I’ll stay here with Connor and we’ll unpack.”

Sarah looked up at her mother. “Tell him he can have the bed next to the wall if he wants. I don’t care.” And with that, she and Laura went skipping out of the cabin, leaving Becky alone with Connor.

Suddenly, Becky realized the ship was moving. It was almost surreal. She glanced out the sliding-glass doors that opened onto the huge, private patio. Not only were they moving, they were well away from port and headed out into open water.

She had wanted to be on deck with the kids when they sailed away, a glass of champagne in her hand, toasting this cruise meant to appease her mother-in-law and somehow bring her son out of his shell. But instead she was in her cabin, alone, with no champagne in sight, and a somber Connor locked in the cabin’s bathroom. She sighed, knowing it would be a few minutes before he’d emerge. Becky had learned to let him have his quiet time. Time to think. But she was worried her ten-year-old spent way too much time thinking.

She gazed out the sliders. At least the view was spectacular. Dusk had descended and the sky was ablaze with color, the lights from Miami fading in the distance, but Becky didn’t seem to really care. The person who now held the power to make this trip work or turn it into a complete nightmare wasn’t Estelle, it was Connor. Becky was terrified that she’d lost her sweet son, and she had no idea how to find him again.

Connor walked out of the bathroom, staring down at the floor. His smile was gone, replaced with his usual scowl.

“Your sister said you could have the bed next to the wall,” Becky told him.

“Whatever,” Connor mumbled. But Becky could see that he was happy about the turn of events. She watched as he pulled his suitcase closer to the bed, unzipped it and began sorting out his clothes.

While Connor figured out just what drawers he wanted, Becky continued to unpack her own bag. Connor was a neat freak, as his dad had been, and it would take him the next couple of hours just to make sure all his clothes were lined up properly in the drawers and in the small closet.

He liked to keep his clothes color-coordinated, and his shoes lined up according to usage, with his flip-flops closest to the door. Clothes were never something he took for granted, but a statement of his mood, and lately Connor favored camouflage military attire. However, when he’d packed he’d taken along one orange tee, which Becky saw him hang in the back of his closet. She couldn’t figure out why he’d brought it along. She knew he would never wear something so bright.

The suite had ample closet space, but Becky had packed light. When she carefully hung up her turquoise cocktail dress, a memory flashed of the day she’d bought it for the company Christmas party. She hadn’t wanted to go, but Ryder had insisted saying it was good for them to get to know some of his employees at Wireless Technologies. They had actually shopped for the dress together, and when she’d tried it on, his eyes had lit up and she’d known she’d found the right dress.

Afterward, they had hurried home before Connor had to be picked up from preschool. They had made love on the stairs leading up to their bedroom. The buttons on her silk shirt had popped off, and Ryder hadn't even bothered to remove his pants.

When they were both spent, they lay sprawled across the steps, Ryder's knees and shins sporting rug burns and her own elbows a little raw. Memories of the waves of pleasure that had surged through her still brought a flush to her cheeks. She was convinced that had been the precise moment she'd conceived Sarah.

The turquoise dress never did get worn for the company Christmas party. Estelle and Mark, who owned and ran the company, had sent Ryder to New Jersey on urgent business, so Becky had made her excuses to Estelle. But Estelle had insisted she make an appearance for Ryder's sake, and even sent over a car on the night of the party.

But Becky was stronger than both Ryder and his sister Kim. She knew how to say no to Estelle and mean it.

As her fingers touched the dress, a classic style, it slipped off the polished wooden hanger and onto the floor. Becky picked it up and reached for a satin padded hanger from the other end of the closet. It would prevent the gown from sliding off and ending up in a heap on the closet floor.

As she pulled the hanger toward her, something glittered in the center of the pink satin. At first she thought she was seeing a reflection from the hook, but as she slid the hanger closer, she saw that something was wrapped around the center. On further inspection, she realized she was staring at what had to be the moon goddess's pendant.

As she reached for it, Connor's voice startled her. "I've looked everywhere in this darn room and it's not here." His voice was heavy with despair. "We're just unlucky, that's all. We're one unlucky family."

Becky had become so lost in her memories that for a brief moment she didn't know what he was talking about. Then reality came rushing back.

She pulled the pendant off the hanger, walked into the next room and leaned against the doorjamb. Spinning the necklace around her hand, she said, "Now, just what were you saying about us being unlucky?"

CHAPTER THREE

“I DON’T CARE what you have to do, but if you ever want to see your son again, you’ll find my diamond.” Sal Morena’s voice was harsh and menacing and it made Tracy Irvine shake right down to her very core.

“How do I know he’s all right?” She pleaded into her cell phone, tears streaking her face. “I need to talk to my son.”

“He’s fine,” he said lightly. “Never been better. A boy needs his father. I don’t know why I stayed away so long.”

“A court ordered you to,” Tracy reminded him.

“That was your fault,” he yelled. “If you weren’t cheating on me, none of that would have happened.”

She wiped the tears away with shaking fingers as she remembered the beatings she’d suffered. Being involved with Sal and his scheme scared her more than she could imagine, but she knew she had to be strong for her son.

“I never cheated on you, Sal.”

He laughed and her knees went weak. “Don’t lie. It won’t help the situation. You’re a whore. Everybody in Vegas knew it, but I was just too blind to see it. Hell, if it wasn’t for that blood test I got on this kid, I wouldn’t even know he was mine.”

“He looks just like you.”

“Yeah, lucky kid.”

“I want to talk to my son,” she repeated, forcing herself to sound calm as she sat on the floor of her tiny cabin and nervously picked at the tan carpet. The floor was strewn with brochures announcing the silly, gimmicky pendant hunt. Brochures that she hadn’t even finished passing out because Sal had tried to call her several times on her cell phone. It was only now, after the ship had left the pier, that she had time to finally take the call.

“I want my diamond,” he insisted. “That bastard Giorgio Tzekas owes me. He’s in prison, but my payment is still on that ship and I want it.”

Sal had loaned Giorgio Tzekas, who had been the first officer of the ship, a lot of money. Tzekas had been going to pay him off with the diamond, but had been arrested before it ever happened.

“It’s a big ship, Sal. It’s going to take time.”

“Honey, the longer it takes, the more the kid and I are bonding. How old is he now? Five? Six? He’s a pretty smart kid.”

Her mouth felt dry and her throat tight. “He’s five, Sal. He just turned five.”

“Yeah? I bet he knows what a whore is.”

Tracy squeezed the phone tighter, praying she could keep her voice calm, not let him hear her fear. “Sal, put Franco on the phone.”

“Let me see if I can say this in words you might understand. Find my damn diamond!” He swore, and then her cell phone gave her those sweet tones to indicate that the caller had hung up. Tracy called him back several times, but Sal never answered.

She slowly pulled herself up from the floor and began picking up the brochures, when suddenly it was as if a light had gone off somewhere inside her head. Why hadn’t she made the connection before? She quickly skimmed the brochure again, excited about the possibility.

Could this be the necklace she’d been looking for? The necklace that was hiding Sal Morena’s diamond? She’d heard that water sports instructor—Dylan somebody or other—mention how Patti and Ariana had found the pendant among Mike O’Connor’s things. He was that fake priest who’d smuggled real antiquities among the reproductions he lectured about when Alexandra’s Dream was cruising the Mediterranean. She’d simply assumed it was a piece of costume jewelry. However, now

that she saw how big the silver teardrop was in the brochure, her heart skipped a beat. She knew with every fiber of her being that she was actually looking at Sal's hidden diamond. The coincidence was too strong.

Could she really get her hands on the pendant? One of the passengers would need to find it first, of course. There were almost a thousand passengers on board and all she had to do was find the one wearing that pendant. God help her, she would do whatever it took to steal it away so she could get her son back.

There was a knock at her door. Two of the other dancers were calling her for the bingo game they were working together. The other dancers seemed to love the extra duties they had to perform, but she'd been secretly dreading them, especially bingo. But now she was thinking of ways she could take on more duties.

That way she'd have greater exposure to passengers.

"Coming," she yelled through the door as she touched up her makeup in the mirror above the small dresser. When she looked human again, long chestnut hair combed behind her ears, golden eye shadow caressing her brown eyes, red-apple on her lips, she opened the door, smiling. "Can I take the floor first? I really can't wait to meet our passengers."

"Sure," one of the dancers said. "But I thought—"

"Never mind what I said before. I'm loving all this extra duty. It's exactly what I need to, um, get over a really bad relationship."

The other girls started comparing bad breakup stories as the three of them made their way to the Bacchus deck and Caesar's Forum casino. With each step, Tracy could feel hope blossom as she formulated a plan to find the passenger with the pendant.

BECAUSE THE KIDS WERE SO excited about Becky finding the pendant they wanted to eat dinner early and at the Garden Terrace buffet instead of the formal dinner in the dining room. Of course Estelle wanted nothing to do with casual dining, but relented when the kids were so persistent.

Laura, Connor and Sarah had all insisted that Becky wear the pendant to get her luck started right away. She had contacted Patti Kennedy to report that she'd found it, and within thirty minutes a steward had brought her another large basket of goodies—there had already been one in the room—and a list of the perks she and her family were entitled to. Becky hadn't had time to go over everything, but was definitely considering the free massage in the spa.

Of course, the leaflet also made it quite clear that the pendant had to be returned at the end of the cruise for even more surprises. Sarah couldn't wait to see what those were.

Reluctant to attract attention as they made their way to the Garden Terrace, Becky compromised and told the kids she would wear the pendant once she had a chance to tell the rest of the family.

Laura had helped her convince the kids of the plan. The reality was, both Becky and Laura knew that if Becky took all the attention away from Laura's mother, Kim, and her grandmother, Estelle, on the very first night of the cruise, the rest of the trip would probably turn ugly.

The dining room was surrounded by large picture windows and the tables were positioned in tiered seatings. There was a relaxed attitude about the place that Becky liked. She didn't have to worry about what she wore, or if her kids were using the proper fork. It was the first night of the cruise, and now that she had found the missing treasure, she was feeling rather comfortable about the entire adventure.

That was until the rest of the Montgomery clan walked up to the table and everyone began a marathon of hugs. Estelle was wearing some sort of purple cowboy hat, matching purple jacket and leather pants, her blond hair perfectly styled. Then there was her ex-husband Mark. According to Laura, he'd only agreed to come on the cruise because of his grandkids. He and Estelle had recently

divorced after being married for nearly forty years, and Estelle was probably going to use this cruise to try to win him back. She hated losing a fight, and theirs had been a whopper.

Mark looked his usual handsome self, dressed in a white polo shirt and khaki shorts, brown deck shoes and no socks. His face had aged since Becky had seen him last, but in a good way. The lines around his steel-blue eyes only added to his charm. For what it was worth, Becky had always liked Mark, even though he would sometimes push Ryder too hard. It amazed her how much Ryder had resembled his father, and for a brief instant a wave of sadness washed over her until Kim, Laura's mother, emerged from behind Mark, hanging on to what had to be her latest boyfriend.

He was briefly introduced as Bob Ducain. He was an average-looking guy, with thinning gray hair and enough of a stomach that even his loose-fitting island shirt couldn't disguise it. He had a ruddy complexion, pale blue eyes, and a smile that seemed to lack sincerity. There were gold chains around his neck and gold diamond rings on each pinky. No doubt Estelle had handpicked this guy for Kim. He must have been from one of her social clubs, or the son of a wealthy friend. At any rate, in Estelle's eyes, he was probably Kim's perfect match.

"I hate buffets," Kim announced before she even sat at the table. Her hair was its usual shade of blond, hanging straight down her back. She wore a Chanel black-and-white sleeveless sweater, a black short skirt and sandals. Kim was somewhere around Becky's age, thirty-six, but Botox had removed any hint of aging, so she still looked as if she was in her twenties. She had the same blue eyes as her dad, and a perky paid-for nose that she'd changed at least two times.

Kim bent over and briefly hugged Sarah and Connor, then continued to whine about the buffet. "The food is never good, and I have to serve myself. I hate it."

"You sit and I'll fix you a plate," Bob offered, pulling out a chair for her to sit on. Then he took off toward the rows of steaming food.

Kim made herself comfortable and glanced over at Becky, who was across from her at the large tan-speckled table. Kim sat with her back to the buffet. She obviously didn't even want to look at it. Instead of sitting by her mother and new boyfriend, Laura sat next to Becky, while Sarah and Connor moved down to the end of the table to sit with Estelle and Mark.

"Isn't he great? He does everything for me. I don't know how I ever got along without him," Kim remarked to Becky.

Laura turned sideways in her chair and rolled her eyes at Becky.

Becky nodded as if she was listening, but her attention had fallen on Dylan Langstaff. He had just walked across the room toward an officer dressed in white who was talking to a few passengers standing in the food line. Dylan looked even better than she had remembered from that afternoon. His hair was somehow darker in the dimmer lighting and his demeanor even more friendly and casual. He had the look of a genuinely nice guy. Someone Becky wouldn't mind getting to know, as a friend, of course, but she was sure deep down he must be a flirt.

So why was she so attracted to him? A little voice inside whispered, Because he makes you feel something. And it had been a long, long time since she'd felt anything for a man.

Kim droned on. "I know he's not very pretty, but I find that the cuter the guy is, the more he's into his own needs."

Becky heard herself saying, "Uh-huh." But she didn't believe that for a moment. Dylan was over-the-top cute, and from the way he'd treated her kids, she just knew he was a guy who didn't think of himself first.

There was a commotion of some sort right in front of Dylan, who just happened to be standing next to Bob, who was busy piling fried chicken on a plate. Suddenly a rather large woman staggered into Bob. He froze, still clutching his plate of food.

"And I just don't have any time for that kind of guy in my life," Kim said, while a waitress poured her an iced tea.

“Uh-huh,” Becky mumbled as she watched Dylan grab hold of the woman from behind. She was so large he could barely get his arms around her. From what Becky could tell, the woman was choking on a piece of food and Dylan was administering the Heimlich maneuver, pushing air up from her diaphragm and into her throat.

“So, naturally, when I met Bob at Mom’s charity auction three months ago and he told me how he loved to pamper women, well I just had to have him all to myself.”

“Yeah. That’s great,” Becky agreed. Half of the people in the room were watching Dylan, while Bob just continued to stand there motionless, both hands on his plate as though he was annoyed at the interruption.

Becky stood and was ready to try to help that poor woman and Dylan when something flew out of the woman’s mouth and landed on the floor in front of her.

“We’ve been dating ever since, and let me tell you, he really knows how to care for a woman, if you know what I mean.” She sighed as if to make her point.

Becky let out the breath she had been holding and smiled. “You don’t say.” She watched as Dylan and what looked like two women from the ship’s medical team, helped the now-panting woman into a chair.

Bob turned back to the buffet and continued moving down the line, filling his place.

“But I know you’re still mourning my dear brother, so you couldn’t possibly be interested in anyone, could you?” Kim asked with a flourish.

Becky stared at Kim for a moment in complete silence and disbelief. It was as if someone had rung a bell and everyone had turned their attention to Becky, waiting for her reply. Even Laura stopped what she was doing to listen.

“I, uh, no, definitely not. I’m not interested in anyone,” Becky spluttered. But Laura, who had also been watching the whole incident between the choking woman and Dylan, threw Becky that kind of look as if she knew better.

Becky was just about to set Laura straight, when Kim reached across the table and grabbed Becky’s hand. “You poor thing, but I understand. No one can replace my brother. If you ever need a shoulder to cry on, just call me and I can put you in touch with some of the best shrinks in San Diego. I’m here for you, Becky. You can always count on me.”

“Thanks,” Becky muttered, slowly pulling her hand away.

“We’ve got something to tell everybody,” Sarah blurted in a loud voice.

“Let’s get our meal first,” Becky countered, hoping that would be enough to stifle her excited daughter.

“But we want to tell everyone now,” Connor chimed in.

Becky was glad Connor seemed kind of excited about the whole thing, but she just wasn’t in the mood to show the pendant off at that exact moment. Besides, now that the room had settled down again after that poor woman’s near-death experience, Becky didn’t want everyone to now turn their focus on her.

“Your mom’s right,” Laura said, getting up. “Let’s have our dinner first.”

Estelle, of course, supported Connor and Sarah, not Becky.

“But the kids seem to want to tell us something now. We should see what they have to say.”

Becky stood.

Mark stood. “I say we should honor Becky’s wishes, Estelle.” He walked to the buffet, taking Connor with him.

Laura went over and took Sarah by the hand, then led her to the buffet. They passed Bob, who was returning with a plate of food for Kim.

“Fine,” Estelle conceded. “Bob, darling, you did such a good job with Kim’s plate, do you think you could do the same for me? It’s been such a long day that I think I’ll pass out if I have to get up and pick out my own food.” She peeked over at Kim’s plate. “No chicken, darling. Do they have any

baked white fish? I would love a little baked fish. It digests so easily and my poor little tummy has been slightly upset ever since we boarded. Do you think you could find some, dear?"

Bob nodded. "It would be my pleasure, Estelle."

Becky shook her head and walked away from the table, knowing perfectly well that by the time this dinner was over, Estelle would have everyone at the table waiting on her, including Becky.

She headed straight for the nearest buffet, grabbed a white plate and began the process of deciding what she wanted to eat. Her stomach was actually growling for food.

"There's this great broccoli salad you should try," a voice said just behind Becky's right ear.

Becky turned to see Dylan's tanned face smiling at her.

"I saw what you did for that woman," Becky said, ignoring his opening suggestion, "You were incredible. How is she doing?"

"She's fine. Resting in her stateroom."

"You saved her life. That was amazing."

"Thanks, but she was the amazing one. She never put up the least resistance. That's what saved her."

"I'll remember that the next time I'm choking."

His grin widened. "Good idea."

There was a moment of awkward silence while Becky searched for something to say. "Where is that salad?" she stammered at last.

She loved broccoli, but ever since Ryder had died, she found herself eating more and more comfort foods like pasta and homemade breads. She'd put on about ten pounds in the last two years, even though she still worked out with weights. But the strange part was, she didn't seem to care about the added weight. Or maybe she simply didn't have the time to think about it.

"On the other side of this station," he said, eyes shimmering like pools of sea-green water, and a smile that could make a girl swoon. But she wasn't going to be one of them. Nope, not her. She knew better. Besides, she wasn't ready for romance, especially with this type of guy. His interest had to be all PR. It couldn't be real. Or could it?

She didn't want to reflect on that. She had her kids with her, for heaven's sake. What would they think of their mother swooning over some man who would sail off again at the end of their cruise. The whole thing was ridiculous. She needed to stop these crazy thoughts right now, before her fantasies got completely out of control.

And she'd start with the broccoli.

"Never mind. I'm not really that fond of broccoli," she said without flinching at her little white lie, meant to prevent him from accompanying her to another buffet station.

"I would have thought you were."

"Is there a broccoli type?"

She was sure there was a teasing glint in his eyes. "Well, actually, there is."

"And just what would that be?" He had her smiling now. She liked how easy it was to talk to him.

"She usually has an athletic body, strong arms and an equally strong opinion on matters that count. She eats whole grains, avoids most carbs and never eats anything with hydrogenated or trans fats, but she loves gelato, all flavors, and only has it when she's on vacation. By the way...Artemis deck, Just Gelato. Best on the ship."

Becky turned back to the cornucopia of steaming food and added a square of lasagna to her plate. She considered lasagna the perfect food, at least lately. "And you've done research on this broccoli-woman theory, have you?"

"It's just an observation. You can tell a lot about a person from the foods they eat."

He followed her down the line as she added scalloped potatoes to her plate, and then some kind of stuffing with thick, creamy gravy. She figured this would do the trick. He was looking for a broccoli babe, and right now she was the carboholic.

“And what if a person doesn’t eat vegetables? What does that say about her?” She stopped and turned to him. He looked down at her plate, which was now a mess of carbs swimming in brown gravy. She felt a little of the gravy drip off her plate and onto her toes.

He gave her a sly smile, reached over, swiped the dripping gravy from the side of her plate, and quickly licked it off of his finger.

“They make the best beef gravy on this ship,” he said, wearing a pirate’s smile. Then he turned and walked away.

Becky watched him for a moment, angry at his audacity, but also charmed by it at the same time.

She spotted a waiter, apologized and handed him her dripping plate, then, wearing her own pirate’s smile, she went in search of the broccoli salad.

DAMN IF HE DIDN’T RUN into Ms. Becky Montgomery. And damn if he didn’t have to go right up to her and start a conversation. Dylan couldn’t understand why he hadn’t left as soon as he’d seen her. No. Not him. He’d had to joke with her, laugh with her, and even flirt a little. All right, a lot.

Dylan walked back to his cabin as if he were late for a meeting. He didn’t talk to anyone, nor did he gaze out at the full moon that seemed to hang just out of reach in the black sky. If a staff member had seen him swipe that gravy off her plate and lick his finger, he’d be on the carpet in no time. What was he thinking?

That was the problem. He wasn’t thinking. Not rationally, anyway. He was being led by his emotions and he knew his emotions always got him in trouble. He had to be more logical about this. After all, it couldn’t lead anywhere. She was a passenger.

It had been a long day and he was eager to get to his cabin. He had to admit that when he couldn’t get a good hold on that choking woman at first, dread had crept in and almost made him want to give up entirely. He hadn’t felt that way since he was a little boy and his dad used to take him out fishing off the coast of Twillingate, in northern Newfoundland. It was crazy, but at the time he just couldn’t bear to watch all those cod suffocating around him. He would try to push as many as he could back into the water, and his dad would scold him for doing it, so he stopped. But he never got used to it. Never got used to the thrashing, their need to breathe, their gasping for breath.

He’d had the same feeling with that woman. He’d had the power of life and death in his hands, and for a moment it had scared him to the point of wanting to run. But he hadn’t, and that’s what he needed to hold on to. He hadn’t run. Not this time. He had stayed the course and gotten her through. And because of him, she would enjoy the rest of the cruise and the rest of her life.

He needed a drink to calm down, to stop the internal shaking, but instead he just walked at a fast clip, ignoring everyone around him. He wasn’t rude. He would nod when it was appropriate, or smile when someone looked his way, but for the most part he kept his head down and his feet moving forward.

When he finally reached the crew’s quarters, he unlocked the door to his small cabin and shut it behind him. Then a sense of ease took hold and the shaking began to subside. He took a deep breath and let it out again, then searched for his cranberry juice, poured himself a tall one, sat in a comfortable dark blue chair, pushed off his white shoes, opened his shirt and let the day fade away.

Too bad that the minute he closed his eyes Becky Montgomery came into focus.

“Damn her,” he said out loud, and slammed his now empty glass down on the small coffee table, got up and went in to take a long, hot shower.

THE PLATES HAD BEEN CLEARED from the table and the kids were pestering Becky to make her announcement about the pendant. She was still reluctant.

“It’s time, Mom,” Sarah urged “You have to tell everybody now.”

Estelle, Kim and Bob were at the other end of the table chatting about something that seemed to occupy all their attention. Mark sat sipping his coffee, staring out at the people passing by, seemingly oblivious to anything but the thoughts whirring around in his head.

“Yeah, Mom, you promised right after dinner,” Connor insisted. “Well, it’s after dinner now.”

He was standing next to her, pulling at the necklace’s chain, trying to get it out from under her sweater. Becky kept moving his hands away. The whole thing suddenly seemed ridiculous. She really wanted to just give the thing to one of the kids and let them get all the attention.

She leaned over to Laura. “How about if I slip it to you and you tell everyone you found it?”

Laura turned to her. “It’s all yours. You need the good luck more than I do. Besides, I want to see the look on Grandma’s face when you tell her you found it. She called the captain this afternoon and asked if he could somehow arrange it so that my mom could find it, as a joke.”

“You’re kidding. What did he say?”

“I don’t know, but he invited her to take a private tour of the ship.”

“She’s unbelievable.”

“She’s Estelle. Now, please, show her the pendant.”

Reluctantly Becky pulled the necklace out from under her sweater. Holding the teardrop pendant in her hand, she took another good look at it. She had to admit that although the silver teardrop was rather large and heavy, the necklace looked as if someone had worn it every day for their entire life. If she wasn’t careful, the chain might fall apart with one good tug.

Sarah and Laura had been so excited when they returned that afternoon with ice cream and pickles that Connor had caught their enthusiasm and it still showed on his face. She simply had to go through with this for his sake. It was almost as if the pendant had its own little magic effect on Connor.

“Everybody, quiet please.” Connor held out his hands as if that would make his grandmother and aunt stop their conversation. Instead they simply glanced at him and continued talking.

Laura stood. “Mom. Grandma. Aunt Becky has an announcement.”

Suddenly, Bob, Estelle and Kim began laughing, but never turned their attention to Laura.

Then Mark reached over and grabbed Estelle’s arm. “Becky has something to say.”

Estelle looked up at Mark, pulled her arm from his grasp, mumbled something to Kim, leaned back in her chair, rested her hands on her lap and swung her hair off her shoulders. Apparently comfortable, she looked at Becky and said, “You have my complete and undivided attention, dear. What is it that you want to say?”

Becky felt like a total fool and wanted to simply disappear. She mindlessly slid the pendant back and forth on its chain and thought of a million things she’d like to say to Estelle. Hurtful, mean things. Things that had been on her mind for years. She thought maybe she could do it right now. Clear the air. Get the hostility off her chest.

But instead Sarah came to her rescue, preventing her from putting her foot in her mouth and possibly spoiling the rest of the cruise. “My mom found the moon goddess’s pendant in our cabin! Mom found it! Isn’t she lucky, Grandma? Isn’t my mom the best?”

Sarah beamed as she hugged Becky tight around the neck.

Becky let go of the pendant and it settled heavily on her chest. She put an arm around Sarah to steady her as she knelt on the chair next to Becky’s, and put her other arm around Connor, who stood beside her. Both kids wore grins that encompassed their entire face.

“That’s the missing pendant that everyone’s been looking for?” Kim asked with a large dose of sarcasm.

“Yes,” Becky said, bringing her kids in even tighter.

Estelle slipped on her glasses to get a better look. “But, darling, it’s so tacky. And here I thought it was going to be worth something.”

Becky could actually feel Connor’s enthusiasm waning as his body slumped against her.

“But it is worth something,” Becky protested. “It’s meant to bring good luck to the person who found it.”

“Yeah, especially in love,” Laura added.

“Your aunt already found her one true love with my son, Laura, and no pendant will help her find someone to take Ryder’s place,” Estelle chided. “Once you’ve had love like that, you don’t ever want to replace it. Not ever. And someday, my dear naive child, you might be lucky enough to have the same thing.” She turned and reached for Mark’s hand, but he picked up his coffee cup before she could touch him. Estelle instantly withdrew her hand, but Becky noticed.

Laura excused herself from the table. Becky could tell she was upset by Estelle’s thoughtless reprimand.

Connor moved away from Becky, his expression sullen, but Becky wouldn’t let go of his hand. She reached for Sarah’s and helped her slide off the chair. “This is just a game, Estelle, a charming promotion that someone on this ship thought would be fun and romantic. I happen to agree and intend to wear this pendant the entire time I’m on this cruise.” With those words she led her children away from the table.

“Of course, dear—” Estelle began, but Becky and the kids were already on their way to find Laura.

Part of her had wanted to tell Estelle that she agreed with her about Ryder. She would never find someone to replace him, and wouldn’t want to try. But deep down in her heart, she hoped that someday she would be lucky enough to find love again. She hadn’t realized that until she’d heard Estelle’s presumption that she’d never be interested in romance again.

However, Becky refused to allow Estelle to get the best of her in front of the kids. She wanted them to have a good relationship with their grandmother, no matter what Becky personally thought of the woman.

And at that precise moment, it wasn’t anything good.

CHAPTER FOUR

“LAURA, WAIT UP,” Becky called as she made her way through the crowded main lounge, bumping into a woman who didn’t even stop to let her apologize. It was hard moving quickly because Sarah had wanted to be carried so she could play with the necklace around Becky’s neck. At seven, Sarah was too big to be carried, but Becky knew she was dead tired.

Sarah and Connor chimed in for Laura to stop, and she finally did, but Becky could see the torment in her eyes.

Sliding down from her mom’s embrace, Sarah ran to meet Laura.

“She’s my grandmother and I love her, but sometimes she just makes me so mad I want to scream,” Laura said, with the emphasis on “scream.”

“You can scream if you want, Laura,” Sarah told her. “This room is so big I don’t think anyone would notice.”

Becky looked around. Sarah was right. They were standing in the Court of Dreams—a huge space with Doric columns and a sweeping staircase with ornate gold railings and marble steps. A fiber-optic chandelier hung in the center and gave the appearance of suspended stars. Cherubs and clouds were painted on the ceiling and Renaissance-style pink, white and gold upholstered chairs and sofas were arranged in small groupings for passengers to sit and enjoy the opulent space.

What Becky really liked were the huge statues of Artemis, Athena, and Poseidon that flanked a black concert grand piano where a woman, dressed in a flowing pink floral dress, was getting ready to serenade everyone.

The place was fabulous and reminded Becky that Estelle had, in fact, paid for this entire trip. She needed to find a way to get along with the woman for a week.

“Let’s sit down and talk,” Becky urged.

“Thanks, Aunt Becky, but I want to go back to my room,” Laura said.

“Okay, but before you do, can I just say one thing?”

Laura’s eyes were beginning to water.

“You’re a bright and beautiful young woman, and when the time comes, any guy would be lucky if you even smiled his way.”

“Thanks.” A tear slid down Laura’s cheek. “But I know that Gram and my mom think I’m fat, and dumb, and no one will ever love me like Uncle Ryder loved you.”

“He loved you, too, honey. And he wouldn’t want you talking like this.”

“I love you,” Sarah said, looking up all doe-eyed at Laura. “And Connor loves you, and so does Mommy.”

Laura wiped her tears away and smiled at Sarah. “I love you guys, too.”

“Then don’t be sad, Laura. The moon goddess wouldn’t want any of us to be sad. She’s happy ’cause we found her pendant, and she wants us to be happy with her.” Sarah took Laura’s hand in hers.

Connor handed Laura a tissue, then slipped away and sat on a chair by himself.

Laura wiped her tears and squatted eye level with Sarah. “Tell you what, hot stuff. You catch me tomorrow morning and I’ll be my usual happy self. We’ll spend the entire morning in the pool. I hear there are some great activities and super instructors. I’ll come and get you guys early.”

“Before the sun comes up?” Sarah asked.

“Not quite that early, but somewhere around eight-thirty if that’s all right with your mom.” Laura looked up at Becky.

“Sounds perfect,” Becky said, thinking she could use the time alone to explore the ship so she could learn her way around all the decks.

“It’s a date,” Sarah agreed.

“You betcha,” Laura confirmed, giving Sarah a tight hug. Then she stood and walked toward the glass elevators.

She could tell her niece didn’t like having the kids see her so upset. When the little family of three finally walked up to the same bank of glass elevators Laura had taken and Connor pushed the button, Becky thought about her strong urge to lash out at Estelle. She was thankful that she hadn’t, especially in front of the kids. After all, even though the woman was crass and unfeeling, she still deserved Becky’s respect...didn’t she?

TRACY HAD PERSONALLY checked out everyone who had been in that bingo room, then scoped out the casino and the main lounge, but that pendant was nowhere to be found. She reasoned that perhaps no one had actually found it, and considering that half the ship hadn’t even gotten their luggage yet, most of the passengers probably hadn’t stayed in their cabins long enough to start looking for the necklace.

Still, she had hoped against hope that she would be lucky to spot the damn thing dangling from someone’s neck. The brochure had promised so many perks that anyone who found it would be sporting it around like some sort of trophy.

Tracy swiped the card on her cabin door and walked inside. The room was dark. Her roommate was probably still down at the crew’s bar and on her fourth or fifth martini. Tracy had learned a long time ago that if you wanted to thrive in Vegas you didn’t gamble or drink. The same thing went for working a cruise ship. Drinks cost money, not to mention the hangover the next morning when you had to be up to monitor a shuffleboard game or to help somebody climb a rubber mountain. Tracy had danced at the Stardust for five years in Vegas before they closed it down, and she could count on one hand when she’d gone out for drinks or to gamble after a show. Besides, she had a kid to raise.

God, how she missed her little boy. She wanted to hold him, like that woman she had bumped into who was holding onto her kid.

Wait. Tracy flashed on the woman and the little blond-haired girl. That little girl was spinning a silver necklace around her fingers. Could it be the necklace Tracy had been looking for the entire night?

Why hadn’t she focused on it before? She’d been so distraught about not spotting the necklace earlier that she’d given up right when it was practically staring her in the face.

She grabbed her purse and ran out of the room, praying they were still in the lounge.

She punched the button for the elevator, but when it didn’t come fast enough she ran for the stairs, taking them two at a time. The metal felt slippery under her feet and the tinny sound echoed through the stairwell with each step. When she got to the right deck she was almost out of breath, but she swung open the door and ran out as if someone was chasing her.

The room was an expanse of people, but she was only looking for two, a brown-haired woman and her curly-haired child.

Tracy prowled the room, eyes desperately searching for the right features, the right clothes, anyone that even resembled the woman and her little girl.

She climbed a few stairs to get a better vantage point, and frantically continued her search, but with no luck. Then, just as she was about to walk through the lounge one more time, she spotted the little girl’s blond curly hair. The child stood with her mom and a little boy in front of the elevators.

Tracy’s heart raced as she walked as quickly as she could across the room.

People got in her way, and one guy bumped into her, but she just kept walking, praying, holding on to her hope of getting to that little girl.

The area in front of the elevators was crowded, especially since the glass elevators were such an attraction. By the time she reached them, the woman and her children were nowhere in sight. Tracy stood in front of the elevators for a moment and thought about her next move. She would have to be

smarter if she was going to get that pendant, and she would start by asking Patti Kennedy the name of the passenger who found it. Her only problem now was having to wait until morning.

BECKY HAD SPENT MOST of the morning on her private veranda, watching the water slip by along with her angry disposition. When they eventually set anchor near Grand Turk Island for a port stop, she wouldn't move. She had no intention of leaving the ship with the rest of the passengers. It was a fabulous morning with a bright blue sky and an endless sea that reached up and kissed that sky. The sun had drenched her balcony with its warm rays, and Becky soaked the heat up, feeling it deep inside her body. It was wonderful just to lie there, not doing anything, not really thinking anything, floating on a daydream.

She loved it.

It was her cabin that made her edgy. For some reason she couldn't relax when she was cooped up inside that room. Not that it wasn't spacious and lovely, but there was just something about it that made her anxious, impatient to get outdoors.

As planned, Laura had taken the kids for a poolside adventure that had lasted several hours, but now it was time for Becky to go in search of her family.

She was wearing a modest two-piece suit, but ever since she had put on those ten pounds, she mostly wore a one-piece suit—black, of course—when she went to the beach. However, she was feeling a little bold today. After applying another layer of sunscreen, she pulled on a gauzy white sleeveless top and wrapped a bright red fringed shawl around her hips. And even though her thighs weren't as toned as they once were, she didn't have any cellulite, so why not be comfortable?

She grabbed a bottle of water out of the minibar, pulled her hair up in a ponytail, slipped on her large black shades, clasped the pendant around her neck and set off in search of her family.

The swimming pool, or Coral Cove, was on Artemis deck, the same deck as the gelato shop that Dylan had told her about. She had to try it.

She glanced at a small sign that requested guests order only one scoop, and ordered cherry gelato from a friendly girl in her early twenties wearing a bright yellow shirt.

"You found the pendant! Wow! You can have three scoops if you want them."

Becky hesitated for a moment, thinking of the calories, but then remembered she hadn't eaten much for dinner the previous night, just some great broccoli salad, and only had coffee for breakfast. "Sure," she said, smiling back at the girl behind the counter. "Bring 'em on."

When she had her mound of gelato, she sat on a nearby white deck chair to enjoy the sounds and feel of the ship before she looked for the kids. She could hear the water rushing by, people laughing and chatting about silly things as they passed, the occasional announcements about onboard events or port excursions, and the gentle sway of the ship itself when it was under way. The combination seemed to be soothing her restless thoughts. She only hoped it was doing the same for Connor.

Before she could take her first bite of gelato, her bliss was threatened by the Kim and Bob show. The two of them appeared out of nowhere and were headed right for Becky's table.

"Look who's here, Bob, my ill-tempered sister-in-law," Kim teased as she approached Becky. She wore her hair up under a straw hat, large hoop earrings and an outfit that belonged on a runway. The woman really needed to learn what casual attire actually meant.

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