

## Prologue

Half a day of media training had not prepared her for this. A camera flashed to the left. Then, right. A bright light blinded her and she shielded her eyes. Words disjointed from sentences found their target, as questions were fired from every direction.

She cleared her throat. 'There's no cause for alarm. Halcyon Seas has temporarily lost engine power and this has affected communications.'

The level of noise rose significantly. 'Outrage.' 'Incompetence.' 'Disaster.' The reporters were after a sensational story.

'One question at a time,' the press liaison said with authority.

It was the relatives she felt sorry for. They weren't getting a chance to ask their questions.

'Carolyn Stanton. The Telegraph. Halcyon Seas is drifting in the Indian Ocean. What is her expected course? And what action has been taken to tow her to safety, given the danger of entering unsafe waters?'

'Halcyon Seas had left Seychelles and was headed for South Africa when Captain Moore reported a loss of engine power. Sea conditions were moderate giving us no cause for concern. It's routine for tow boats to be sent from the nearest port to assist a ship with engine failure.'

'So, you don't know where she is, or where she's headed, since losing power more than twenty-four hours ago?'

The noise in the room grew. Anger. Distress. The roar of a wounded animal. She wanted to reassure the relatives to tell them everything was under control, but she couldn't. Not yet.

*Let the relatives speak,* she wrote in a note to the press liaison. He nodded.

'Fiona Hardy. Travel and Cruise. Halcyon Seas has been branded as an innovative concept in retirement living. What measures were taken to protect these vulnerable, older people from the risks associated with cruising?'

'The residents of Halcyon Seas are no more at risk than the guests of any cruise ship. If anything, they are better cared for as our staff have come to know them well and can anticipate and respond to individual needs.'

'Did you anticipate how they would survive on a ship without power, drifting for days in the Indian Ocean?'

Bursts of light around the room. Flash. Flash. It was hot with so many people crammed together. She held the desk for support.

'Adrian Buckley. Daily Mail. In 2021 A Turkish ship was hijacked by pirates just off the coast of Nigeria. The first thing the pirates did was disable most of the ship's systems. Have you considered that this ship of pensioners has been taken hostage by buccaneering pirates?'

The sensational headline had obviously been written already with no evidence to support it. 'No, we have not, because that is highly unlikely.' Would it be inappropriate to laugh? To make light of it? Of course, it was preposterous.

'Let's take some questions from family and friends.' Press liaison came to the rescue.

'Kate Flynn. My brother and friend are on the ship.' The woman's voice warbled with nerves or emotion. 'I've been following social media... trying to find out. An announcement was made *Safe Haven*. I looked this up. It means pirate attack.'

The room fell silent.

## Chapter one

### Ten months before

Alice Wagstaff gasped for breath. Breathe. Deep breaths. But her body wasn't listening. Her fingers tingled and she felt as though her knees might give way. Less than twenty minutes to get on the connecting train to London. Or, she could cross the platform and go back the way she had come. Back to her bungalow in Norfolk where there was nothing and nobody to disturb her.

*Get a grip, Alice, you can do this.* Kate, her old school friend was having a surprise 70<sup>th</sup> birthday party in a hotel at Canary Wharf. How would she explain her absence? Worse – what would her daughter Rachel say if she admitted defeat? I told you so – that's what she would say. Her breath had slowed a little and although her heart was still racing, she felt a little steadier. Alice checked the printed travel route crumpled in her hand. Platform four. She still had fifteen minutes to get on the train to London.

'I've missed you,' Kate shouted above the music – a band of older musicians with a young female singer. 'If you lived in London we could meet for the occasional lunch.'

Alice sipped her Pornstar Martini. A pretty pink with a slice of passion fruit floating on top. It was nectar. Kate threw back her shot of Prosecco, reminding Alice that one had been served with the creamy cocktail. This is perfect, Alice thought, as she started to feel a little fuzzy around the edges and she remembered Rachel's first Barbie doll. Pretty in Pink.

'Rachel's trying to persuade me to move closer to her in Bethnal Green.'

'Good for her. I don't know why you moved out to the sticks in the first place.'

'It was right at the time. Tom loved living there.'

Kate put her hand over Alice's. 'We all miss him.'

‘Maybe we should have made more of an effort to become part of the community—joined clubs or something. I didn’t really think about life after Tom.’

Kate snorted. ‘You could join the W.I.’

‘Every time I visit the post office the woman behind the counter suggests I join. That or a knitting group. There’s even a friendship group for no-mates like me.’ Alice took a slug of her cocktail.

‘In London, you would have the theatre, art galleries, a Freedom pass to use on public transport.’

Alice knew that Kate was right. The quiet cul-de-sac of bungalows was perfect nine years ago but in the five years since Tom died, it had felt like God’s waiting room.

‘I was just telling Alice that she should move back to London,’ Kate said to her brother Gideon when he joined their table.

‘I don’t think the East End’s ready for the two of you. Kate’s bad enough on her own. Talking of which, I came to refill the birthday girl’s glass. Another Pornstar ladies?’

Kate wagged her eyebrows at Alice. ‘I’m game if you are.’

‘It seems a bit decadent. But this cocktail is heaven. I’m tempted to have another.’

‘Go for it, Alice. It’s a special occasion. I have plans to completely indulge myself. Cocktails at sundown, a different destination every day.’

‘Are you going on a cruise?’

‘He’s signed up for this forever cruise package. You know - retirement living but on a cruise ship.’

Gideon rubbed his hands together. ‘What a life. Everything that you need to live well. All of your meals provided. Staff tending to your every need and you get to see the world.’

‘Isn’t it expensive?’

'If you do the sums, it works out cheaper than a care home, not that any of us are anywhere near that stage of life but a great way to live from - say ... seventy, to the end of your days whenever that might be. If you have a decent home to sell it's affordable. Okay, nothing to leave as an inheritance but better to spend your money on living the good life than throwing it away on ludicrous care home fees. Let me get you another Pornstar.'

'That's adventurous of him.' Comparing herself to Gideon Alice couldn't believe he was only five years younger than her. If only she had a little of his courage. 'Your baby brother is still a looker.' They watched Gideon's slow progress across the room as one woman after another intercepted him with a kiss or a hug. 'I remember you having status as Gideon Flynn's sister.'

'It was a nightmare. All of those lovelorn girls trying to befriend me hoping to get an introduction to my Rockstar brother.'

'Did his fame ever extend beyond Bow?'

'Absolutely. Bow, Bethnal Green, Hackney. Do you remember that gig in Canning Town?'

'The one where we got talked into serving behind the bar?'

'Yes. How did that happen? I remember there were lots of gangster types. I don't think we got paid. I always felt responsible for my little brother. He got himself into some questionable situations. We were probably serving behind the bar that night to get him out of trouble.'

Alice laughed. 'I know what you mean. He may be sixty-four but to me, he will always be your annoying little brother.'

'Believe me – he's still annoying. A great dad though.' Kate nodded to where Gideon was now sitting opposite a young woman their heads bent together. 'That's his daughter

Paige. She's having problems at work. His girls rely too heavily on him. To be honest, I think he's a bit of a soft touch where they are concerned. Paige has him around her little finger.'

'What about their mum?'

'The marriage didn't work out but they split amicably. His ex lives in Spain. They jointly own and manage a restaurant there. It doesn't look as though he's going to get our drinks.'

'I'll go.'

'No. Let's dance.' Kate pulled Alice to her feet.

'Brown Sugar,' Alice yelled as the band played the opening to their favourite Stones song. She kicked off her shoes and boogied with Kate to the dance floor. Dancers parted to welcome the birthday girl and her friend. Alice danced with abandon – throwing her arms wide, then above her head, twirling, jumping, laughing. They were ageless. Free-spirits. Children of the sixties born to rock. Alice's children, Rachel and David, were old beyond their years, they didn't know how to have fun.

Alice was taking a break from dancing to cool down when an announcement was made by the female singer.

'Sorry to interrupt. I have an announcement to make.'

The birthday speeches had finished some time ago, Alice wondered if there was another surprise for Kate. Everyone was waiting to see what it could be.

'Would Alice Wagstaff please make her way to the foyer where her daughter is waiting for her?'

There was a cheer from the crowd and then the singer introduced the next number. Alice felt like a teenager humiliated in front of her friends. It was only... oh dear, twelve-twenty. She had agreed to meet Rachel at twelve. Why couldn't the silly girl just come in and say hello to Kate?

THE FOREVER CRUISE by Deborah Klée

‘I’m sorry you have to leave so early,’ Kate said, kissing her goodbye.

Alice, always in bed by nine-thirty, didn’t consider it early but it looked as if the party was far from over. ‘I just have to find my bag.’

‘Do you want me to go and tell Rachel?’

‘No, it’s fine. I’ve probably left it at the table.’

Fifteen minutes later, someone found her bag in the ladies where she must have abandoned it after reapplying her lipstick. Rachel was not amused.

## Chapter two

Marianne Moore had finally got the summons. She was going to captain a cruise ship. It had taken six years of study, a Master's degree in engineering, ten years' experience obtaining a license, and a further five working as a staff captain. If only her father was alive to hear the news. He always believed in her. From the day he told her she could be anything that she wanted to be. 'I want to sail around the world and be captain of the ship,' six-year-old Marianne had said. That was all she had ever wanted to do.

Marianne checked her appearance in the mirror – smart but glamorous. She had a penchant for very high stiletto heels. In the years that she worked as a ship's engineer, Marianne liked to indulge her femininity and the habit had stayed with her. She applied a vibrant lipstick and pouted at her reflection. Not just gorgeous – she was about to become a ship's captain. She waved her arms and swayed her hips. 'I've finally done it, Dad. Captain Marianne Moore.' She hoped that she would be allocated The Royal Ionian's biggest, newest ship but that was unlikely. Still, no harm in aiming for the moon. Wasn't that what she had always done?

Counting Crow's *American Girls* blasted from the speakers of her BMW sports car, as Marianne took the coast road. It was too early in the year to have the roof down but Marianne was bursting with energy and needed the open top or she might just combust. Her long blond hair caught in the breeze and she swept it off her face. *Captain Marianne Moore. Woo Hoo!* She pulled in to the staff car park, changed trainers for stilettos slung her discarded shoes onto the back seat, and tamed her windswept hair.

The glass-fronted building, home to the executive team of The Royal Ionian was one that Marianne had visited on previous occasions – mostly for interviews. She checked her letter again just in case she had misread it. No, it definitely said that she was being offered



the position of captain. A Libby Braithwaite, Chief Operating Officer, had signed the letter, a name unfamiliar to Marianne.

‘If you wait over there, someone will come down to take you upstairs,’ the receptionist said.

A captain, Marianne recognised, came out of a lift and was about to walk by when he caught sight of her, or rather her stilettoes, and then his eyes slid up her uniform to her blond mane. ‘Marianne. Good to see you.’

She stood up so that she was looking down rather than up. This captain had once been her junior. ‘Gary,’ she nodded.

They were saved from an awkward exchange by a woman coming to claim her. ‘Miss Moore?’

‘We must catch up sometime,’ Gary said and Marianne followed her escort into the lift.

A woman in her forties and a heavy-set man with a florid face sat behind an enormous oak desk with a green inlay - Libby Braithwaite and Patrick Dunn. They were not forthcoming about their roles and were a bit evasive when Marianne asked outright.

‘We’ll come to that when we explain the setup. It’s complicated. Tell us first about your experience.’

As Marianne talked through her resume, she felt Patrick’s scrutiny. They had her CV in front of them so she wasn’t telling them anything new. Maybe they were interested in how she presented herself. Marianne delivered her CV as if she was auditioning for Hollywood. When she had finished Patrick nodded enthusiastically. ‘I think that you will be perfect.’

That was all they wanted from her? It was a bit different to the other five captain interviews she had endured. The thought *Why* had come into her head but she had batted it back not wanting the thought goblins to rain on her parade.

Marianne beamed. ‘Thank you. Can you tell me which ship I will be captaining and when we are due to set sail?’

‘Halcyon Seas. She leaves Florida on 7<sup>th</sup> March. It’s an exciting new venture for us all,’ Libby said.

‘I haven’t heard of Halcyon Seas. Is she a new addition to The Royal Ionian?’ Marianne couldn’t believe her good fortune, a brand-new ship. They must hold her in much higher regard than she realised.

Patrick grinned at Libby. ‘The first ship in a new fleet.’

Marianne was confused, she had not heard of a new Jamboree cruise line. ‘A new fleet?’

‘Sorry, I should have explained from the outset. This is a completely new venture. Ground breaking. It is, you understand, commercially sensitive. Patrick and I have got so used to talking in code making sure no information gets out that we didn’t even tell you – the captain of our first ship. This is so exciting.’ Libby paused to take a sip of water.

‘I thought you represented The Royal Ionian.’

‘We are part of the Jamboree group but Silver Seas is a new line, jointly owned by Jamboree and McIntyre Retirement Living USA. The first cruise ship to offer a retirement home for the over fifties. Halcyon Seas is a small ship, nothing like the size of The Royal Ionian cruise ships. Full capacity is 148 passengers but we are making all of the cabins single occupancy except for couples and so it is more likely to be sixty to seventy residents.’

A lump formed in Marianne’s throat. She was being fobbed off with a freakin’ retirement home. Of course, she was perfect – she was a woman! They were fucking well signing her up as a care home manager. She clenched her teeth.

‘You would have all the usual captain duties,’ Libby said, perhaps reading Marianne’s face, she had never been good at hiding her emotions. ‘It would be no different really.’

‘Why did you think I was perfect for the job?’

Libby and Patrick shuffled their papers and studied their notes.

‘You were recommended to us by the Chief Operating Officer of The Royal Ionian. He said that you were overdue for being appointed to captain through no fault of your own. Apparently, the right opportunity had not come up until now.’ Libby had the grace to look apologetic.

So, she was being tossed from one cruise line to another. A castoff. ‘Obviously, this isn’t what I was expecting. I would have to think it over.’

‘Marianne. *Captain Moore*. This is an opportunity for you to prove yourself as captain. It may be the first retirement cruise ship but the way this industry is going it is likely to lead the way for many more. In a few years most cruise ships will be retirement homes. Let’s face it our demographic has always been the over fifties. It is the perfect solution for later life.’

Patrick chipped in. ‘Retirement living complexes have not had the take up we anticipated, especially in the UK. This is a win-win for the cruise industry, for retirement living, and for older people. So many selling points – the families do not have to visit but will know their loved ones are being taken care of and have a good quality of life. It costs no more than living in a care home. And our existing retirement complexes can be sold off to a developer at a time when housing is in short supply.’

‘The cruise industry is quite frankly in decline. The chief accounting officer and CEO of Jamboree have great expectations of this venture – another reason why you should seriously consider taking up our offer.’

Marianne knew that she would accept the job, although she let them sweat a bit longer. Eventually, when she had negotiated 10k more on the annual salary, Marianne signed a contract. Maybe she should have waited until they had discussed the set up some more but

it seemed that Libby and Patrick were reluctant to share any details until she had not only signed the contract but a confidentiality clause.

‘All of the communications are being carefully managed by Jamboree. You must not share any information on social media unless approved by head office.’

‘What kind of information?’ Marianne had never been restricted in the past and enjoyed sharing information about each cruise with friends, family, and her Instagram followers.

‘The model of operation, costings, and certainly no bad press – at all. This cruise has to be a success. Jamboree and McIntyre have a lot invested – not just finances. We will corner the market for over fifties as a lifestyle choice.’

‘You must have shared some information with the public and what about the crew?’

Patrick answered that one. ‘The marketing team has done a good job; we already have forty residents signed up. The crew was carefully selected and trained long in advance.’

‘The cruise industry is aware of this development. All eyes are on us. Communications have prepared press releases to go out in February. Now, we need to talk through your induction and preparation before Halcyon Seas sets sail,’ Libby said.

She drove home with the roof on. No music. Maybe it wasn't all bad. Maybe this would be her opportunity to show Jamboree what she was capable of. Not just Jamboree, if this venture had stimulated as much interest in the industry as Libby claimed then she would make her name. There would be the opportunity for media interviews once the world knew retirement cruising was the way of the future. Marianne was determined to make this cruise a success. In a year she would have her pick of jobs as captain. She just had to use this opportunity to showcase her unique combination of skills and attributes gained over the past two decades as a captain in training. It was a small ship with a high profile. There was very

little chance of anything untoward happening; it was going to be a walk in the park and next year she would have the job she had always dreamed of.

### Chapter three

Olivia was dizzy from dancing - the balls of her feet blistered, and intoxicated with the sheer magnificence of her life. Raf caught her hand as she twirled and pulled her to him.

‘You’re leaving tomorrow.’ His voice was plaintive. They had known from the beginning that their relationship couldn’t last but that didn’t make parting any easier. ‘Let’s get out of here. Spend the last few hours alone.’

Her flight to Madagascar was early the next morning and Olivia doubted that she would get any sleep. In the past six months she had made friends with people from all over the world. For a girl from a sparsely populated village on the South west coast of Madagascar, Miami with its audacious white buildings towering higher than any Baobab tree, twenty-four-hour noise, and bright lights, was like a film set. And she, Olivia Rose, the heroine. ‘First, I must say goodbye to everyone.’

Raf screwed up his face. ‘You’ll be seeing most of them again on Halcyon Seas but who knows when we will be together again.’

He was right. The six-month training programme was for scholarship students selected for a new venture, a retirement home cruise ship, Halcyon Seas. They would set sail in four weeks. ‘I wish you were sailing with us.’

‘I wish you could stay here with me until your ship leaves.’ This was a discussion that had been repeated almost every day since Olivia announced that she was going home for the month before sailing.

‘Let’s make the most of our last night together,’ she whispered and gently kissed the side of his mouth. She could feel the muscles on his face twitch as though between a smile and tears.

They strolled along the beach from Ocean Drive to South Beach holding hands. In the other hand, Olivia dangled a pair of strappy sandals and enjoyed the feeling of cool, soft sand

massaging the soles of her feet. In the distance, the cruise ships lined up on Dodge Island resembled a city. Neither said a word. There was nothing else to say.

She met Raf in her first week, they had arrived together dragging suitcases and trepidation. Like college kids away from home for the first time they had bonded. Just friends at first. Raf's accommodation was in a different block. If they hadn't met at the registration desk it was unlikely that their paths would have crossed. Raf was training as a cocktail waiter and bar manager. He would work on regular cruise ships. No scholarship for Raf, he was smart and came from an affluent American family. A long baleful sound - the trumpet from a jazz band, haunted the night like the cry of an Indie lemur and Olivia shivered.

Raf put his arm around her. 'Stay with me tonight.'

She would have to leave in six hours to catch her flight. 'Won't that make it harder?'

'How could it be any harder than it already is? I love you, Olivia. I can't bear the thought of never seeing you again.' He held her in the circle of his arms and gazed into her eyes. 'There must be something we can do to stay together. To make this work.'

She loved him too. It was impossible not to love Raf. He was kind, funny, handsome, and had become her best friend. But they were from different worlds. She had to be strong, to protect him from his spontaneity, his generous spirit, and romantic notions. Raf belonged with a rich American girl. He was destined to become a cruise director. She was lucky to get a job as a cleaner in what was really an old people's home. If Raf saw her village he would be shocked at how her family lived. It was best to just keep the memory of him. A miraculous gift that was part of this incredible dream life with which she had been blessed. 'If we are meant to be together it will happen. Let's not make any plans. Just see where the tide takes us.'

'I don't want you to go.' Raf dropped kisses on and around her mouth like butterflies settling then taking flight.

‘My bags are packed and so I could ...’

Raf didn’t wait for her to finish the sentence. He grabbed her hand and ran along the sand whooping. He was too fast for Olivia. She let go and gasped for breath. Raf ran for a few seconds and then slowed to a stroll. Watching him, Olivia tried to imagine his life without her, to see him as separate as if she was already sailing away. *No*, she wanted to scream. Her head might talk sense but her heart would break when they had to say goodbye. She ran after him and flung her arms around his back. Raf hoisted her up into a piggy-back and they circled the beach shrieking like children. Olivia started to slide down Raf’s back. He threw himself onto the sand taking her with him. They lay, legs entwined looking up into the night sky.

‘You see that constellation, there?’ Raf pointed.

‘The Little Bear?’

‘Or Little Dipper. Anyway, just below that string of stars, there...’

‘The North Star?’

‘Yes, Miss Know-it-all, The North Star. When we are apart, that is where I’ll meet you. Wherever we are in the world, that same star will be above us both. So, look for it and think of me and I’ll do the same – I’ll think of you.’

They kissed. At first, it was a sad kiss, full of longing and regret but as his tongue flicked against hers, a passion stirred that had to be spent. She broke away, her heart racing, ‘Your place or mine?’

They lay together on his bed watching the sunrise. ‘Do you really, really, have to go?’ he said again.

Olivia replied with a gentle kiss. ‘I’m going to miss you as much as you will miss me.’



‘That is not possible.’ He kissed her again. ‘I’ll see you when you return to Miami to board your ship?’

‘I think it’s better we don’t see each other again. It will only make this harder.’

‘You can’t stop me from waving at Halcyon Seas when she sets sail.’

‘I will probably be busy and won’t even see you but you’re right I can’t stop you.’

Secretly, Olivia was pleased. She knew that she would scan every face on the harbour until she found him.

‘I know you think I will forget you but I promise I won’t Olivia. You are my one and only. My North Star.’

‘You are full of crap.’ Olivia laughed, proud of her American speak.

‘It doesn’t sound right when you say that,’ Raf teased her. ‘I might be full of crap most of the time but not when it comes to you.’

‘I have to go. Now. Really. Let go of me, Raf.’

He rolled away from her and watched as she dressed. ‘Can I see you off at the airport?’

‘Best not. I’ll remember you lying here in bed with your beautiful sleepy eyes.’

When she closed the door of his dorm Olivia felt as though she had shut down her heart. She could never have Raf but there would be no one else for her. Maybe a suitable match found by her parents but Raf would always be her true love.

