

Cruising to Danger

Helen Yeomans

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Burner phone

January 20, 7:01 a.m.
+12128473741
Ship leaves Thursday. Liaise with Luna.

January 20, 1:09 p.m.
+13127289064
Gun?

January 20, 9:01 a.m.
+12128473741
Kitchen supervisor. 3128014672

Chapter One

The ship was white with splashes of color on its funnel and flanks. It promised sun and fun and a respite from winter.

The boarding ramp zigged and zagged its way up the side, carrying three thousand heat-seeking tourists from dock to deck seven. As Erin McLean turned from the second zig into the second zag, the salt air filled her nostrils. She stumbled and time tumbled backward twenty years and she was transported across the continent to Halifax, and Maddy's voice called, "Bet you can't catch me," and—

"Whoa, young lady, everything okay?" A male voice.

"I'm so sorry," Erin turned slightly, regained her footing and looked squarely into the bluest eyes she had ever seen. She smiled. "Thanks for the catch."

The man laughed, his teeth white in a tanned face, and next to him she glimpsed a dark face staring up at her from a small boy with heavy black brows.

"Everything all right?" asked Jackie.

Erin nodded. "I'm fine, Gran. Don't you love salt air?"

"It's the ozone," replied Jackie.

They reached the deck and waited for the fifth passport check since entering the terminal building. Erin turned again to face blue eyes. "Thanks again."

"My pleasure. Edward Diaz. This is Marius, my son." Erin nodded and Jackie smiled, "Hello, Marius."

Erin pulled herself together and introduced herself. "And this is my grandmother, Jackie Ross."

Diaz's eyebrows went up. "Hard to believe," he said with a smile. Jackie was sixty-three but didn't look it. She laughed and turned away, presenting her passport to the deck officer.

An hour later, bags unpacked, they sat on their balcony surveying the harbor, well pleased with their accommodations. The cabin held twin beds, a long counter and mirror on the opposite wall, and a shower and toilet round the corner, along with built-in closets and shelves, a fridge and a small safe. It seemed roomy.

They touched wine glasses. "Thanks for dreaming this up, Gran," said Erin. "It's going to be super." She laughed. "Could you believe that photographer?" They had passed out of the security area into the ship

proper and were immediately blinded by a flash. A slight bearded man smiled showing off-white teeth. "Philip Unthank," he said. "Ship's photographer. You can see your pictures this evening on the grand concourse." He had handed Jackie a card.

"Thank you very much," Jackie had replied. "Next time, give us some notice, if you don't mind."

"Ooh." He stepped back with a hurt look, but the two women had moved on. He turned to the next group.

Now Jackie dug out his card, glanced at it then dropped it on the table next to her chair. "Tell me, what upset you on the plane? You were texting for half an hour. Problem at work?"

Erin grimaced. "No. Hatcher died. My loser."

"That's too bad," said Jackie insincerely.

"I'll just have to find another one."

Jackie began to study the ship's events newsletter, two copies of which had been tucked into the inbox next to their cabin door. After a minute she said, "They don't waste any time, I must say. Have you ever played Texas Hold'em?"

Erin stood. "Let's explore, shall we?" She returned inside, and Jackie sipped her wine.

"In a moment, sweetie," she said as she finished the daily guide. She heard the rattle of pills in a bottle. "Got a headache?"

"It's nothing."

More and more passengers came aboard, all ages, sizes and nationalities. Yet the ship seemed uncrowded. "Probably because there are so many decks," said Erin. They had started on the top deck, where they found a jogging track, took a tour of the spa and booked appointments for themselves for the next morning. On two separate decks they found swimming pools, tennis and basketball courts, specialty restaurants, bars and a video games center. Then they went down to deck seven for a walk. You could cover a mile in just under three circuits, according to a plaque near one of the doors and by the time they'd finished the third circuit the ship had begun to move. They stopped at the railing to watch.

"I shouldn't think you'd find many losers aboard ship," said Jackie.

"Oh Gran, I'm not looking. We're going to rock this cruise, right? We're going to have a great time."

Jackie patted her hand. "Good. You understand, Erin, I don't mind if you choose not to keep your dad's fortune. At least, I do, but it's your choice. If you wanted to give it all to charity, I could live with that." She

glanced at her granddaughter, whose face had taken on a closed look. "But to give it away to the most worthless person you can find is just . . . demeaning."

"That's all he deserves, Gran."

"Not him, dear," said Jackie evenly. "You. It demeans you." When Erin said nothing, she asked, "Are women included in this windfall?"

Erin shrugged. "Male, female, I don't care."

"Erin McLean?"

They turned to find a trim, middle-aged man in a light-colored suit.

"Yes," said Erin.

"I'm Mr. Tait, assistant to Edward Diaz. Mr. Diaz would like to invite you both for drinks tonight in his stateroom."

Jackie and Erin exchanged a look. "We'd like that," said Erin.

"Six o'clock, deck twelve. A steward can show you." Mr. Tait walked away and the two women turned back to watch the embarkation. The sun came out from behind a cloud. "A stateroom," mused Erin. She smiled at the sky, then turned to her grandmother and looked suddenly younger than her twenty-five years. "How interesting," she said and they laughed together. The sun brought out a touch of auburn in her dark brown hair. Jackie found it oddly comforting.

She straightened. "We're supposed to go to the mustering thingy at four, don't forget. I'm going to have a nap." They parted, and Jackie strolled off to their cabin, a woman of medium height and erect bearing. Jackie looked at life square on and managed to find a lot of fun in it. *You're going to have to pace yourself*, she thought as she lay down and turned on her side.

She had broached the trip at Christmas: ten days in the sun at the end of January. Erin had thought about it during her visit. The two of them had always got on, despite their infrequent meetings.

Jackie lived in Toronto. When Don was alive, they'd made their annual visit to Halifax and Jackie had taken Erin to her softball games while Maddy jammed with her grandfather, piano and bass together. He had died in 2006 when Maddy was thirteen, a terrible time to lose someone you loved, and more importantly, someone who loved you unreservedly. "We're kindred spirits, Grampa," Maddy said once, and Don had hugged her, and asked her to play the Bach piece again. Jackie had done her best to fill the void left by his death but she didn't have the rapport shared by the two of them.

Jackie still missed her husband, vague and sometimes infuriating but always loving. These days, she kept busy with the gym, tennis, choir, friends; and she sold the occasional house, just often enough to maintain

some sort of client list. She mourned her daughter and granddaughter, and worked hard to keep the lines of communication open with Erin. Her younger granddaughter was still the brash, confident girl she had been growing up, but the closed, shut-off look was troubling. She had fallen out with her father after her mother's death, but refused to talk about it.

The cry of the seagulls was a soporific. She dozed.

Erin watched as the ship moved away from land, then resumed her exploration. They had stopped on deck fifteen, so she took the elevator back up, got off and looked around. It suddenly occurred to her that they had seen lots of views from the stern but none from the bow. Standing with her back to the elevators, she faced what the ship's brochure called the Grand Staircase, two wide stairways with arrows up left and down right. On either side were wide corridors closed with sturdy double doors. She tossed a coin mentally and headed for the right one. Beyond it were cabins on each side with wall sconces in between, and the same mailboxes as their own. In the distance the passageway seemed to narrow and she could see a door at the end. She reached it to find a sign on the wall next to it: Please Close Behind You. She went through, closed it, turned and smiled in delight.

It was a tiny deck, the width of the ship at the sharp end, and no more than twenty feet deep. She wasn't alone. A man stood at the railing on the other side with binoculars to his eyes. He had a camera slung over one shoulder and a computer-sized bag over the other. He dropped the binoculars and fished out a tablet, made a few key strokes and dropped it back in the bag, took a photo, then brought the binoculars up to his eyes again.

Erin walked up to the railing. She looked out ahead. Other than seagulls she could see nothing but coastline on the left and open sea on the right. Unwilling to disturb the man and more than happy simply gaze out to sea, she leaned on the railing and enjoyed the feel of the weak sun on her shoulders. She thought about losers and the tiresome business of having to find another one.

"What are you doing here?"

She came back to earth and turned. He'd evidently finished for the moment and was jotting some notes in his tablet.

"I'm enjoying the view," she said. "Most people seem to like looking out the stern, but I'd rather look ahead, wouldn't you?"

He shook his head slightly, absorbed in his work.

She went on. "What are you doing, if you don't mind my asking?"

He glanced up briefly. "Counting birds." She heard "obviously" in his tone. "UN study. We're estimating populations up and down the west coast."

He bent his head and she studied him while he worked. He was quite tall, taller than Erin, thin, dark-haired, around thirty. He wore thick black-rimmed glasses and a thick cardigan. Erin herself had on a thin sweater. The cardigan brought to mind nineteenth-century invalids with weak lungs.

He seemed to have nothing further to say, and her watch showed it was nearly time for muster stations, so she turned for the door—in time to see it latch. Positive she'd closed it herself she walked over. She heard the other door shut decisively and found that Cardigan Man had gone. When she opened her door, the double doors at the far end of the passageway were swinging closed.

The muster station was a rapidly filling theater and they found seats and looked around. The room held perhaps a thousand, and young crew members in life jackets stood on one side of the stage. This was muster station number three, and she wondered if one and two were as big.

The occupant of the aisle seat next to Jackie left to join others further up. An older man immediately claimed the seat then stood back for a younger woman. She began to edge past Jackie and Erin said "We can move along." But the woman looked back. "It's okay, dad. You go there and I'll go up here." She edged past Erin and sat down with a thump. "What, is there a penalty for failure to show? How interesting can a lifeboat drill be?" She was in her mid-thirties, with a good-humored look and an appraising eye.

"I think it's where we learn what to do if we get overturned by a tsunami," said Erin lightly. Jackie frowned at her. Then the man on her other side said, "Stick with me. I was an extra in *The Poseidon Adventure*."

"Chill, Gran," said Erin.

"I was just a kid," the man added, as though that might be reassuring. Jackie smiled.

"Dad. Nix the reminiscences," said the woman. She made their introductions. "We're the Harknesses. I'm Bertha. And that's my dad, Robert. He lives in LA and I live in Alaska. We thought this would be a great way to get together."

Jackie and Robert were chatting. He looked like a pleasant guy, Erin thought, with a mustache and thick hair going grey, and a deep voice.

“Gran doesn’t like the water,” she said in a low voice.

“So she takes a cruise,” said Bertha, as though that explained everything.

“She wanted sun and so did I. And we’re the same as you. We thought this would be a good way to have a visit.” She forbore to add that cruise packages compared very favorably with Florida vacations. “Gran lives in Toronto and I’m in northern BC. It was her idea and I’d rather be here in late January than up north.”

“No kidding.” Bertha made herself comfortable. “So, Erin. How are you liking it so far?” And before Erin could respond she added, “Have you been Unthanked yet?”

The ship’s photographer had evidently annoyed others as well. Erin and Bertha exchanged survivor looks as a burst of loudspeaker static reduced the crowd noise. The life jacketed crew members dispersed to various parts of the theater and an officer walked on stage and welcomed them aboard. His audience settled in to learn all about lifeboat drills and muster stations and how to put on their life jackets (“Duh?” Erin looked at Bertha, who shrugged).

Forty minutes later the show was over and the officer exhorted them all to have a wonderful cruise. The life jacketed crew disappeared.

“Let the fun begin,” said Robert. Passengers made a dash for the exit and stuck there, in a logjam of bodies. Erin made a mental note to find seats at the back if they ever came for a show. The four of them filed into the aisle and joined the stream moving toward the exit. “I think I’m all introduced out,” said Bertha to Jackie. “We must have met twenty or thirty people since we came aboard.”

“We actually started meeting people before we came on board,” said Erin lightly. “We don’t waste time.”

“It began on the bus,” said Jackie. They had taken a bus supplied by the cruise line from the airport to the ship. “Someone introduced himself and his family and you know how those things go, we all had to.”

“Plus the guy on the boarding ramp,” said Erin.

Bertha looked skeptical. “Guy on the boarding ramp? Does that count? Was it a proper introduction, with names?”

“Absolutely. I stumbled into this guy with gorgeous blue eyes.”

“It paid off,” said Jackie smiling. “He’s invited us for drinks.”

It was silly, giddy conversation, good filler while they waited to leave. Erin felt a little gauche in Bertha’s company and hoped there were people her own age on board. They came out into the lobby of the theater and made their goodbyes.

“We’re sure to bump into each other again,” said Robert, and Jackie waved as they turned away.

"Sounds good to me," she said to Erin.

"Gran?" Erin was preoccupied.

"Yes, dear?"

"You did want to come on the cruise, didn't you? It wasn't just me. Or the prices?"

"Of course I wanted to come. It was my idea, remember? Much more fun than Florida."

