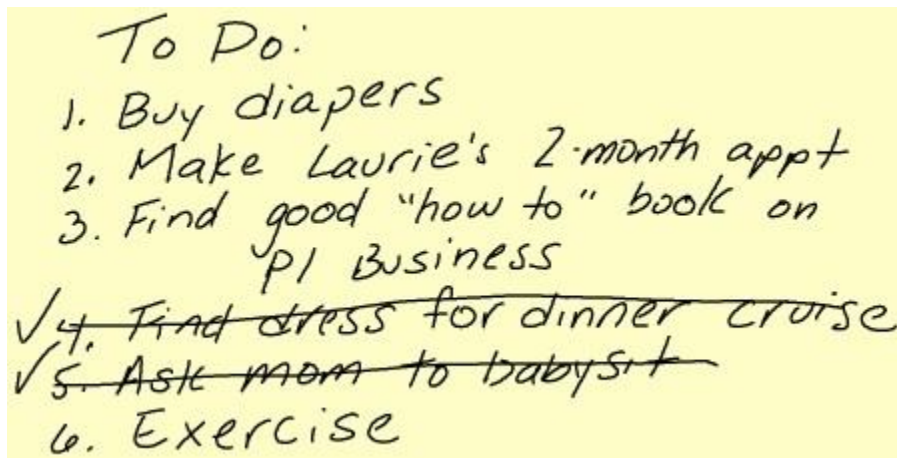


Chapter One

At Sea



I stared into the bathroom mirror and wondered how I'd failed to bring a hairbrush along on the San Francisco Bay dinner cruise. I ran my hands down the length of my mop, trying to tame the frizzies. If I put a little water on the problem, would it help or make it worse?

The door to the restroom flew open. Sara, one of the moms from my new mommy group, appeared. She looked worse than I did. Her lipstick was smudged and her hair had the volume of a lion's mane.

"Oh my God! Kate! I didn't know you were here." She took a step back toward the door, then hesitated, looking like she'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

She was so prim and proper at dinner. Probably doesn't like to be seen looking so ruffled, but hey, if you can't look bad in the ladies room then there's no safe haven.

Sara ran her hands along the front of her black cocktail dress, which was wrinkled and wet, then squinted at her reflection. She jumped into action, grabbing a paper towel and fixing

the smeared lipstick. “Your husband’s been looking everywhere for you. The captain’s called an ‘all hands on deck.’”

“My hands too?” I asked, wiggling my fingers under the faucet to activate the automatic water flow.

Sara scrunched her mouth in disapproval.

“I guess I’m not up on ship rules,” I said to her reflection.

“Everyone has to go back to their tables, now!” She grabbed another paper towel and frantically scrubbed at the wet section of her dress.

I stopped fussing with my hair and shifted my gaze from Sara’s reflection to Sara.

If everyone was supposed to be back to their tables, what was she doing here?

“Why?” I asked.

“There’s been an accident.”

Goose bumps rose on my arms. “What kind of accident?”

“Helene fell down the back staircase.” Sara motioned me toward the door. “Come on, come on.”

We made our way through a dimly lit corridor toward the main dining hall. The cruise ship held roughly seventy-five passengers although tonight it was only about half full.

The change in atmosphere was immediately noticeable. Not to mention eerie. The dance floor was empty and the music was off. We crossed the bar area, which moments ago had been packed, and hurried to our dining table.

Most of the passengers were seated at their tables. The chatter that had animated the room was subdued.

I spotted Jim standing alone at our table, gripping the back of his chair. He surveyed the room. When he saw me, his expression relaxed a notch, going from grim to serious.

I hurried to him and reached for his hand.

He embraced me. "Kate! I was worried."

"I need to find my husband," Sara said as she rushed past us and headed for the main stairwell.

"What's happened? Sara said Helene fell down some steps. Is it serious?"

"I'm not sure. The captain asked everyone to return to their dining tables. Didn't you hear him on the microphone? Where've you been?"

Before I could answer my elbow was jugged by Evelyn, another mommy from our group. She was eight months pregnant with her second child. Her blonde hair was pinned neatly back, and her green eyes flashed enhanced by the lime scarf she wore. The scarf was arranged to draw the eye toward her protruding belly, which she proudly stroked.

"Kate! How awful! Did you hear about Helene?" Her lips curled a bit, almost as if she were suppressing a smile.

Why was she smiling? Almost gloating.

"Sort of. Is she all right?"

"Ladies and gentlemen," the captain's voice boomed over the microphone. "Please take your seats. We will be a bit delayed in docking in San Francisco due to an unfortunate accident aboard. The U.S. Coast Guard will be joining us shortly. Thank you in advance for your full cooperation."

Evelyn squeezed my elbow and flitted off to gather her husband. Jim pulled my chair out for me.

“Coast Guard? What’s going on?” I asked.

Jim’s lips formed a line. “I was at the bar getting a Bud, when the brunette –”

“Sara, Miss No-Nonsense?”

“No. The other one, the one with the...with the...” Jim waved his hands around. “Fluffy dress.”

I nodded. “Margaret.”

Margaret was wearing a ballet tutu. I wish I could say it looked as ridiculous as it sounded, but the truth was it looked fabulous. Margaret was super tall, pencil thin, and had shapely legs. She looked as if she could have stepped out of a children’s book – a cartoon character with spindly spider legs and a ruffle at her waist. But the gold top and shoes added something indescribable to the outfit. Making the cartoon Olive Oyl look glamorous and runway-ish.

“Yeah, Margaret,” Jim continued. “She ran up to us, looking a little dazed, and said Helene fell down the back staircase. Said she was unconscious –”

“Unconscious?” I felt a shiver run down my spine.

Jim pulled out my dining chair. “The captain asked if there was a doctor on board.”

I sat down and let him push my chair in.

We were the only ones at our table. Earlier, we had dined with all the parents from my new mothers’ group: Sara, Helene, Margaret, Evelyn and their husbands.

We had christened them: Sara was Miss No-Nonsense; Helene was Lean and Mean, Margaret was Tutu, and Evelyn was Preggers. We referred to the husbands as Cardboard Cut-out Numbers 1 through 4.

Now, it felt almost irreverent to have given everyone a nickname.

“Where is everybody?” asked Jim.

I shrugged. “Helene, we know about, so her husband is probably with her, right? Wasn’t Margaret’s husband –”

“Alan?”

“Yeah, Alan, isn’t he a doctor?”

Jim frowned. “A podiatrist.”

“Okay. Well, med school and all. Maybe she twisted her ankle. Did you see the heels she was wearing?”

Jim tried to hide his smirk by sipping his beer.

I pushed his shoulder. “What’s so funny?”

“You. We just heard that Helene may be unconscious and you’re worrying about her shoes!”

“I’m not worried about her shoes! I’m wondering what happened to her and where everybody is. I mean, the woman practically kills herself wearing some ungodly high heels, just to please some man, who probably laughed at her –”

Margaret descended the main staircase and closed the distance on our table. I cut myself off despite Jim’s snickers into his beer. She raised her hand in acknowledgment and sat down grim-faced.

“Where’s Alan?” I asked.

“With Helene,” she answered.

I shot Jim a smug look, which he ignored.

“How is she?” Jim asked.

Margaret’s eyes clouded over and she shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know.”

We sat in awkward silence. I perused the other three tables in the dining room. The parties at each table were as somber as we were. The four-hour dinner cruise on the San Francisco Bay had now been delayed indeterminately and nobody looked pleased about it.

Margaret fiddled with a cocktail glass that lingered beside her half eaten dessert. She lifted the glass and examined the contents. Only two melting ice cubes remained. She stirred them with her straw, hoping, I suppose, to release any vodka that might be clinging to them. After a moment of disappointing results, she returned the glass to the table. Her eyes flicked toward the bar.

“Can I get you anything?” Jim asked.

Margaret flushed. “No. God, no. Thank you.” She picked up her discarded navy cloth napkin and wrung it.

From the main staircase Sara and her husband approached. Behind them Evelyn and her husband were struggling to keep up. Evelyn had one hand on her pregnant belly and the other on her husband’s shoulder. They took their places at our table in silence. The men smelled of cigar smoke and looked relaxed. In contrast, both women had pinched expressions.

Now, there were only three vacant spots at our table. Helene’s, her husband’s, and Alan’s. My eyes fell on Helene’s empty spot. Sara gave me a tight smile, then put her hand on Margaret’s to stop her fidgeting.

“Everything will be fine, you’ll see,” Sara said to Margaret.

Margaret lowered her eyes and nodded.

Suddenly we felt a bump and the ship jostled back and forth. Everyone in the dining room turned toward the sound. Through the starboard window we could see the U.S. Coast Guard vessel had arrived. Crew members were roping the smaller craft to our ship.

The Coast Guard quickly boarded our ship and disappeared out of sight with the crew members.

Margaret cleared her throat and eyed Evelyn. “Does anyone know what happened? I mean, did she just slip or what?”

I had noticed that the woman hadn’t been very chatty with Evelyn throughout the dinner and now wondered what the look Margaret had flashed her might mean.

Evelyn shrugged and returned Margaret’s look evenly. “How would I know? Ask Sara.”

Sara pressed her shoulders back and sat a little taller.

“She was really out of it,” Evelyn continued, rubbing her extended belly. “How much did she have to drink anyway?”

“I didn’t think she had that much, did she?” Margaret asked.

Helene’s empty place seemed to dominate the table. Her dessert plate still held the untouched apple turnover. The ice cream had melted and run over the edge of the plate onto the navy and white place mat. Next to the plate, two drained cocktail glasses loomed, and in the tall wine-glass only the stain of red wine remained.

A strange hush settled on our table.

Howard, Sara’s husband, slouched into his chair and casually slung his arm around the back of Sara’s. “Looks like we’re going to be here awhile.”

Everyone at the table looked at Howard, and then followed his eyes to the starboard window. The night and bay were dark except for a troubling light that was converging upon us.

“Oh good!” Margaret exclaimed. “That must be the hospital boat for Helene.”

The craft nudged itself alongside us. Silence descended on the entire dining room as letters on the boat came into view: “SFPD.”