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JOURNEY TO THE TROPICS

By

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Author's Note:

This novel is a work of fiction. All of the main characters are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons is purely coincidental. Though settings, buildings, and businesses exist; liberties may have been taken as to their actual location and description. This story has no purpose other than to entertain the reader.

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And, to my awesome granddaughter, Isabel; may life bring you all the happiness and treasures you deserve. And to my two wonderful sons, Rick and Frank; may life bless both of you. And, never out of my thoughts, Ray and Tim, my brothers, who are always there for me.

Chapter One

Just what we need, snow, she thought to herself.

When he walked into the hospital waiting room the doctor saw a woman of medium height with shoulder-length dark brown hair turn towards him. She had been staring out the window and as the physician looked in that direction, he saw that she had been watching the snow falling outside. It had been a long winter but now it was late April and spring was blossoming. Although the physician knew the snow would be melted by the next morning, it was still an irritation.

As he refocused on the woman, she turned and looked at him with questions in her eyes. And, oh what eyes. He was startled by her piercing blue eyes which seemed to draw him in. The doctor had been practicing for many years and thought he was pretty much immune to anything after so much tragedy and sorrow. But he heard himself gasp as he looked at her. The blue was like the sky on a bright sunny day and he found it difficult not to stare at the woman standing in front of him.

Quickly regaining control, he addressed her.

“Mrs. Noonan? I am Doctor Fisher.”

“It is nice to meet you, Doctor. I know the prognosis is not very good but how is she doing today?”

“Mrs. O’Reilly is not doing well, I am sorry to say. Your mother’s white blood cells were so low we had to give her a transfusion before giving the chemo. I know you have been waiting a long time and I just wanted you to know it is still going to be a while. Perhaps you would like to go to the hospital cafeteria. I can let the nurse know where you will be in case you are needed.”

“Thank you Doctor. I think I will get some lunch.” Sighing Fiona took one last cheerless look at the snow coming down. She followed the physician out of the room and took the elevator down to the hospital cafeteria.

Finding a table near a window in the restaurant and eating her salad she wondered where all the years had gone. She was now fifty-nine and her thoughts drifted to the past when she was only in her forties. She could not believe how time had slipped by so quickly, especially the last eight years.

Fiona loved to travel and had been lucky enough to get a job writing for a travel magazine after her divorce. Not only had she not had any time to be depressed about her failed marriage, but she had been given the chance to see the world while being paid to do it. Most of the time she cruised, which she loved, since touring the world while unpacking once held a lot of appeal to her.

Married not too long after college, she thought she would be wedded forever. Jason had seemed the perfect man for her and their first fifteen years together had been happy. The only factor that had marred her happiness was her husband's insistence they wait a few years to have children. By the time he agreed to try, for some reason Fiona had not been able to conceive. She had gone to the doctor and he had run tests and determined there was no reason for her not to get pregnant. When she asked Jason if he would go to the doctor for tests, he had refused. Fiona had no idea Jason had decided he never wanted to have children and had taken it upon himself to have a secret vasectomy early in their marriage. He knew by having the surgery his wife could never "accidentally" get pregnant. Meanwhile her doctor told her to relax and not worry about it. He thought if it was meant to be it would happen.

With the advent of computers and changing technology, Jason had lost his job. He realized he needed to go back to school to update his skills. Instead he became depressed about his changing life and began to drink. He floated from one mediocre job to another. Meanwhile Fiona took a job at a local newspaper doing a little bit of everything. It was at that time she discovered she had a talent for writing. She began honing her skills which would eventually lead to her travel writing position.

For twelve years she had battled with her husband's alcohol addiction. Many times he would quit, especially when some new drug came on the market that decreased his desire for drink. But inevitably he would fall off the wagon and it seemed as if each time he drank more than previously when he started again.

Jason was never a mean drunk. He just locked himself up in his home office at night and drank. Sometimes he would take off and Fiona would not see him for a week or more. This usually happened after he lost a job and had money to spend. At first she was worried about him but he was always spotted at some local tavern so she knew he was relatively safe. Whenever he did come home he would be very apologetic promising never to do it again. And, of course, she would believe him.

Fiona knew she was not fooling anyone, especially her mother, by trying to hide Jason's drinking. Her friends and family knew she was in denial and although she believed things would eventually get better, they never did.

One afternoon when he had been gone for several days, her friend Kathy had confronted her. "Fiona, when are you going to wake up and leave Jason? Don't you realize he has a girlfriend who drinks as much as he does? All you are doing is enabling him. You are too good of a person to put up with the kind of life you are living."

"Oh, Kathy! How do you know he has a girlfriend? Even though we have not had any relations for a few years, I never dreamed he might be seeing another woman."

"With his alcoholic condition, I doubt if they have any sex. I think it's a relationship based on companionship since they both have the drinking in common."

After being in denial for years, mortified by her husband's betrayal and knowing all her friends were talking about him, she was finally spurred to action. Realizing nothing would change she took the next morning off from work to see a divorce lawyer. The attorney strongly insisted she attend an AA support group meeting before starting any action against her husband. He had seen too many cases where he had begun divorce proceedings and then the addicted spouse had talked their partner out of continuing the action. Sometimes it would be years, if at all, before the divorce would happen.

Taking his advice, Fiona began going to a weekly support group. She discovered there were other people, both men and women, who were going through what she was. Learning that all she was doing was enabling her husband as Kathy had said, she knew she had to be strong and move on with her

life. Three weeks later when Jason had once again been gone for several days, Fiona went back to the lawyer and began divorce proceedings.

That afternoon she had the locks on the doors of their home changed. Spending the evening packing up Jason's clothes, she stored the boxes in the unattached garage. It did not take the attorney long to find Jason's girlfriend's address and confirm he was staying there. Three days later her husband was served with divorce papers and told where he could claim his clothes.

Although he tried several times to contact her, she had steadfastly refused to speak to him and did not answer the door when he came to the house. She wanted nothing to change her resolve. Her AA support group mentor had warned her Jason would try and talk her out of divorcing him. But Fiona knew there was no way she would take him back. Previously she had always acceded to her husband's wishes. However once she made up her mind to do something it was very rare for her to change direction.

Jason finally confronted Fiona in the newspaper parking lot one afternoon. Realizing nothing would change her mind, he finally agreed to proceed quickly. He had already moved in permanently with his girlfriend, Vicky, and felt a lot better not having Fiona constantly harping on his drinking.

Since their incomes had never been very high, the only asset they had of any worth was their home. This factor, coupled with no children, kept the divorce very simple. Fiona decided she wanted the house, since it would help her net worth. She had been putting some money into a 401K at work and the newspaper had also contributed to the fund. With the backing from her investments she remortgaged her home.

Over the years they had built up a little equity in the house, so even her new mortgage payments were not much more than they had been paying. Some of that was due to the fact that mortgage rates had gone down quite a bit from when they originally bought the house. She wondered why they had never bothered to refinance with the lower rates. She realized Jason had always insisted on controlling their finances, and would have never listened to her advice.

She was able to pay Jason for his half of their home which meant he no longer had any control over her emotionally, physically or financially. She knew he would probably drink his part of the money up in no time, but that no longer mattered to her. Her mother, Maggie, had wanted to loan her the money she needed; but Fiona refused. Actually she had felt empowered when she was able to refinance the house loan in her name alone.

“Mom, you know us O’Reilly’s always need to be self sufficient. I love you dearly, but this is something I need to do for myself. I am just sad that after so many years of marriage we have so little to show for our time together.”

Her mother had always been proud of her. They had always been close. When other mothers had trouble with their teenage daughters, Fiona had been a pleasure to be around. Maggie would offer advice but had never interfered with her daughter’s decision making. She felt the only way Fiona would ever be a strong person was to take responsibility for her own actions. That was not to say, her mother had not offered guidance. But since their relationship had no control issues, the two women had formed a strong bond.

It was not long before Fiona and Jason were in the lawyer’s office signing the final papers. Since she had started the divorce proceedings, she was the one who would have to go to court. As long as Jason signed the papers, as he was now doing, his presence in the courtroom was not required.

Fiona had wanted separate lawyers, but her husband had refused. Not wanting to waste money for two lawyers, Jason had insisted they use the same one. Fiona’s attorney did not think it was a good idea. However with so few assets to divide, he had agreed. It was the first time they had been together since she had refused to talk to him in the newspaper parking lot.

Her husband had very little to say and signed the documents quickly. Also included was the paperwork needed for her to obtain possession of their home. Her attorney told her she needed to be in court in two days to finalize the agreement and then after thirty days, the divorce would be final. The closing, giving her sole ownership of the house, would take place the day after her court date.

Although a little irregular, Jason had given power of attorney to the lawyer to handle the sale. He did not want to be around Fiona again and told the attorney he would pick up his check after the closing was over. Awkwardly they both got up to leave at the same time. Realizing they would be walking out to the parking area together, at that point she assumed it did not matter any longer.

Their cars were parked right next to each other and as she started to open her door she heard Jason say, "Thank God I had enough sense to get a vasectomy right after we married. This would have been so messy with children."

Fiona's jaw dropped as she looked at her soon to be ex-husband with real hatred for the first time. She could not believe he had been so cruel and had made such a life altering decision like that without consulting her. She had finally accepted the fact that there would be no children in her life and now that she was almost sixty years old, she realized she could never undo the hurt Jason had done to her.

Finding herself at her mother's house as soon as she left the lawyer's office, she told Maggie what her husband had done. The two women cried for what might have been. Her mother knew Jason had cheated her daughter out of the happiness of having children. However, since there was nothing either woman could do about it, Maggie said a silent prayer of thanks that Fiona had divorced Jason now rather than later.

A few months after her divorce, Fiona discovered that sometimes it did not rain but poured. Her father suffered a massive heart attack while sleeping. Her mother had awakened to find her husband and best friend dead. They were so happy and had such a close relationship. She did not know how she would live without him.

Maggie had been inconsolable for weeks. Stopping by to see her mother every day, Fiona always found her crying. Her mother had lost all the joy she used to have with life and even refused to go out with her friends. "They are all couples and I don't fit in anymore."

“That is not true, mother. You have lots of single friends and what about the senior center. You always went there several times a week to play cards. Here it is 3:30 p.m. and you have not even dressed for the day.”

“What’s the point? I am not going out, so why get dressed?”

Fiona knew her mother was extremely depressed over her husband’s death and finally went to Maggie’s doctor to see if he had any suggestions.

“These things take time. I offered your mother some depression medicine but she refused to take any. The best thing you can do for your mother is to be there for her. Eventually it will get better, but you don’t get over a loss like this quickly. She will always be sad about your father’s passing but after awhile she will begin to remember the good times as well as the sadness. You should enlist her single friends to help her, too. But gently at first.”

So either Fiona or one of her mother’s friends showed up at her door every day. Not wanting them to see her in such a state forced Maggie to start dressing again since she never knew who would show up at her door. And eventually she started playing cards again. She also started volunteering at the local hospital two times a week. By filling her days in this manner, only her nights were lonely and filled with loss. But, as the doctor predicted, many happy memories of her marriage began to fill her thoughts.

A few months later both mother and daughter, hating to live alone in empty houses, decided to live together. By this time Fiona had taken a new job at a travel magazine and knew she would not be home very much. She realized it was going to be a hassle trying to find someone to take care of her home and yard when she was away. Her mother, not wanting to worry about the upkeep of her house as well, agreed that a condo might be the answer. Since mother and daughter had always been compatible, and knowing Maggie always gave Fiona the space she needed, they decided to look at condominiums for sale.

A new condo building was just being built on the shores of Lake Michigan near where they lived. After looking at the floor plans, they put their houses up for sale. They each bought a two bedroom condo next door to one other. Since the condo was still under construction, they had the builders convert the

two places into a single unit. In this way they would live together but still were afforded plenty of privacy.

Maggie made a lot of money on the sale of her house and insisted she wanted no mortgage on their new home. Fiona gave her mother the cash she made on the sale of her house to help pay some of her share of the condo. It was not a lot of money since she had recently financed. However Maggie did not need her daughter's funds and paid the condo off with her own resources. Knowing she would not live forever, she wisely invested Fiona's assets for her inheritance. Meanwhile she told Fiona she could pay the property taxes each year and the monthly condo fees which gave her daughter the sense she was also contributing to their living arrangements. Owning the condo free and clear, Maggie knew she had secured her daughter's future.

Chapter Two

Fiona continued her musings on how quickly time had passed since her divorce. With her new job she had not seen her ex since that long ago day in the attorney's office. Her friend, Kathy, told her he had married his girlfriend, Vicky, not long after the divorce was final. Amazingly the two of them had quit drinking when Jason had a health scare a couple of years after that. Maybe getting away from me was the best thing that ever happened to him Fiona thought.

But now she had her mother to worry about. One morning her mother had awakened to discover a lump in her right breast. After several tests, including an ultra sound and a lumpectomy, the dreaded diagnosis was cancer! And it was a Stage 4 atypical form that did not often respond to treatment. The doctor said it could quickly form in her lungs, so they needed to watch for that.

After she healed from the surgery there would be rounds of chemo in three week increments and then radiation. Since the cancer was rare, the doctors had no idea how she would respond to treatments or if it would even slow the progression of the disease.

Maggie was receiving the last of the chemo treatments and although she felt good when they first started, she was now beginning to feel the effects of the poison entering her body. And a recent test revealed the cancer had spread to her lungs. Realizing she was not going to get better, but only prolonging the little time she had left on earth, she had gone through the stages of grief rather quickly.

At first there had been denial and then anger that her condition had overtaken her. Finally she had tried bargaining with God. "If only she could have enough time left to know Fiona found happiness with someone..." And then the terrible depression hit and she could hardly get out of bed in the morning.

Maggie went through the last of the chemo treatments because Fiona had insisted. But, she was reaching acceptance of her fate and really did not want to go through with the radiation therapy. Maggie just wanted the agony of prolonging her life to end. Spending some quality time with her daughter was

now what she looked forward to. In addition she did not want her brain all fuzzy from drugs before she had time to get all her affairs, including funeral arrangements, in order.

Fiona did not need to go on another trip for awhile since she had plenty of back articles she could write. All she wanted to do was spend as much quality time with her mother as possible. Her employer had no problem with her new schedule. Her pieces were well received whether about cruising or some other travel related subject. As long as she continued submitting articles to him, he was happy.

After lunch in the hospital cafeteria, and with a heavy heart, the afternoon passed and she was finally allowed to take her mother home. Maggie had been given several anti-nausea pills and she was sleepy from the medication. Tucking her mother into bed she sat holding her hand for about an hour.

By the time they had arrived home the earlier snow had already melted but Fiona knew it was too cold to sit on their balcony. Getting a glass of wine from the refrigerator she sat on the loveseat that overlooked the lake. She watched as the moon began to rise, casting a light on the water that seemed to create a path right to her balcony door. Sometimes when she stood in certain areas of her home and looked out at the lake, it almost seemed like she was standing on the balcony of her stateroom on some cruise ship looking out at the ocean.

Fiona and her mother had been so close over the years they could read each other's thoughts. The two of them had researched Maggie's disease together. They both knew the treatments and risks and the eventual outcome. This last chemo treatment had really taken a toll on Maggie. Fiona had a feeling her mother was going to refuse the radiation treatments. Many times when the person dying had reached acceptance, the family members were still stuck back in the denial phase. This was not the case with Fiona. She had gone through the stages of grief almost as quickly as Maggie, although she did not think she could ever reach acceptance.

Now all she wanted was what her mother wanted--meaningful time together before the end. She realized how lucky she was to have a job that would allow her to do this. She would work when her mother was sleeping and spend quality time with her when she was awake. Feeling a lot better after

coming to terms with the reality of the situation, she was finally able to sleep soundly for the first time in weeks.

The condo's dining room had a balcony door that overlooked the lake and the next morning as they ate breakfast, her mother began talking about her treatments as she looked out at the water.

“Mom, I know what you are going to say. You do not want radiation. I will agree to anything you decide. I do not want to argue with you about anything. I just want our last days together to be as happy as possible.”

Looking at her daughter she said, “Thank you, Fiona, for that. I worried how I would convince you about not doing radiation treatments. Tomorrow we can run some errands together. I need to see my lawyer and stop at the funeral parlor. I have already made some preliminary inquiries so it should not take too long. You know the doctor said I still have five or six months left. Maybe you and I could take a cruise together somewhere.”

Trying not to wince at her mother's words, Fiona went into her office to work while her mother went to make some phone calls.

The next morning Maggie was feeling much better. Probably a combination of knowing there would be no radiation treatments, the effects of the anti-nausea pills, and her daughter's reaction had helped her feel at peace for the first time since her diagnosis. They spent most of the morning on her mother's errands and both were relieved when all the details were worked out. That afternoon her mother had taken a long nap while Fiona researched a cruise they could take in the very near future.

When they had converted the two condos into one, the two of them had tried to respect each other's space. Consequently Maggie's bedroom and office were on one end of their home and her mother's bedroom and den on the other side. There was a large living room, dining room and kitchen between their private living areas. Although their bedrooms were far apart, ever since her mother's illness, she would awaken at any unusual noise she heard coming from Maggie's bedroom. It was the same reaction a mother would have if her child was ill.

Two weeks later she had narrowed down the trip they would take to three cruises. Feeling a sense of accomplishment she went to bed around 10:00 p.m. At midnight she was awakened by her mother's moaning and gasping for breath. Rushing to her room, Fiona saw her mother throwing up into the wastebasket she kept near her bed. As she laid back down in her weakened condition, she realized Maggie was burning up with fever as well as having trouble breathing. Rushing to call 911, Fiona quickly dressed as she waited for the ambulance.

Wanting to ride with her mother in the ambulance, the attendants quickly talked her out of that idea. Realizing they were right, she knew she would be much better off driving her own car while following them. She did not want to be stranded with no way to return home. Putting some personal items into a duffel bag, she followed the attendants into the elevator down to her car in the garage.

Holding her mother's hand in the ER cubicle, they had finally stabilized Maggie and were able to move her upstairs. The diagnosis was pneumonia. It was 3:00 a.m. before they finally settled Maggie into her room. There was a lounge chair that could be converted into a bed for a patient's family member, but Fiona pulled a regular chair up to her mother's bed so she could hold her hand. It was almost two hours later when out of exhaustion she put her head down beside her mother and fell asleep.

At 6:00 a.m. Fiona felt her mother stir and awoke immediately. Maggie was smiling at her and with a raspy voice said, "I love you my darling daughter with all my heart. You have been the most precious thing in my life. Please, have a happy life. I hope you find someone to love as much as I loved your father." With a sigh, while squeezing her daughter's hand, Maggie closed her eyes.

At first Fiona could not process what had just happened. Running down the hall, she shouted for the nurses on duty. The doctor on call gave her the bad news a little while later. Her mother had slipped into an irreversible coma. She was now hooked up to life support but the diagnosis offered no hope.

What had happened to the five or six months she and her mother were supposed to have? What about their cruise? Her mother just could not be in a coma. Knowing Maggie had a living will and had not wanted any extra measures taken to keep her alive, she knew she had to respect her wishes.

Since there were only some distant cousins who lived out of state, Fiona called her friend with the news. Kathy and her husband, Eric, rushed to the hospital as soon as Fiona called. Not wanting Fiona to be alone with her terrible burden, they sat with her throughout the morning while the paperwork was taken care of. Finally it was time for her to say her last goodbyes to her mom. It was not long after that the life support was turned off, and her mother died.

Maggie was gone! She spent the next week in a daze. She still could not believe they had been cheated out of their last few months together. She realized Maggie was now at peace, but she was definitely not resigned to her death. Everything was a blur as she carried out the funeral arrangements her mother had recently made. Kathy and Eric stood by her side the entire time. Fiona was stunned when Kathy said she thought it was nice of Jason and Vicky to come and pay their final respects.

“What are you talking about?”

Her friend realized that Fiona was in shock when she was not even aware her ex-husband had spoken to her at the wake. Worrying about her, Kathy spent the next couple of nights at Fiona’s place. Drinking wine together they relived many of their childhood memories of growing up with Maggie. More than anything, remembering the good times helped her. The pain was excruciating but somehow she knew that as much as she would miss her mother, probably going quickly without the days of agony she would have endured was the best in the long run. At least she had been there for her mom’s final moments.

Fiona realized no one was ever ready to let go of someone they loved, but not being able to talk to her mother ever again was almost unbearable. Nights were the worst. She kept thinking her mom was coming down the hall from her bedroom to tell her something. And many times during the day she turned thinking Maggie was standing beside her. Emotionally she was a wreck. She now realized how painful and difficult the situation had been for her mom after her husband had died. She knew she would always have the good memories of her mother to treasure but that did not comfort her now.

What was it that Maggie had said about finding someone to love? No way, thought Fiona. What her mother and father had was an extremely special relationship. But, in her opinion, that was not the norm. Besides, even if she found someone to love and who loved her, she knew she did not want to take a chance on happiness. Losing someone you love so much was almost unbearable. And, since death was inevitable, why risk opening your heart to someone only to be hurt or disappointed.

A few days after the funeral, Fiona met with her mother's lawyer but there was really nothing for her to do. Everything had been left in order and probating the will would just take time.

Fiona was astounded however by her inheritance. Not only did she own the condo free and clear, her mother also had left her a sizeable amount of money. If she invested her funds wisely, while only living off the interest, she would not have to worry about working for the rest of her life if that was her decision. But she liked her job. She decided she would spend the summer enjoying the lake and her friends while writing articles for her magazine. In the fall she wanted to be traveling again. By that time she knew she would be ready for new adventures.

Meanwhile she had decided to sell the condo. There were too many memories of her mother in the place and it was way too big for her now. Saying she would have no trouble selling her home, even though it would take a special buyer, a realtor friend placed it on the market. There were always people looking for her size condo on the lake. And the money she would make on the sale of her present condo would be quite substantial since she and her mother had lived there for three years and the building had sold out the first year.

Meanwhile she made an offer that was accepted on a two bedroom condo that had recently been put on the market in her building. She loved where she lived, but just did not need such a big home. A two bedroom condo would be perfect. There was enough room to put a sofa sleeper in the second bedroom for guests as well as her office furniture.

And so Fiona got on with her life. She spent a wonderful carefree summer with her friends. Kathy and Eric owned a cabin cruiser and they spent many fantastic weekends on the boat. Many of her

cronies tried to fix her up with men they knew, from divorced to widowers. Some of them became companions on casual dates. But when they realized Fiona was not interested in them except as friends, they moved on.

Accepting her life as it was, she decided she loved her gypsy lifestyle. She still missed her mother and felt the ache in her heart every morning when she awoke. But not having a man in her life did not bother her at all. After the way Jason had deceived her, she did not know if she could ever trust a man again. She knew there were many good men around. Eric was a perfect example. But how do you go about finding someone trustworthy? She had trusted and believed in her husband and look where that had gotten her. No. She definitely was not interested in a relationship with any man. Not liking to dwell on anything negative for too long she let go of thoughts of some man changing her life.

Chapter Three

September was rapidly coming to an end. Fiona was just entering her condo, after spending one of the last really warm days on Kathy and Eric's boat, when she heard her phone ringing. She knew it had to be her boss with her latest assignment. And she was ready. Playing with her friends all summer had been fun, but now she was ready to travel again.

She was right! It was the managing editor at her magazine, Jordan Frye, calling.

"Hi, Jordan. What's going on?"

"Hi to you, too, Fiona. I hope you had fun amusing yourself this summer. Are you ready to get back to real work?"

"So all those articles I sent to you this summer were not real work?" she said laughingly to her editor. "Actually I can hardly wait to start traveling again. What do you have for me?"

"I have got something I am working on overseas for the first of the year but right now the Caribbean is calling. And before you say anything, I know you have done the Caribbean many times, but this is a little bit different assignment."

"Different? How could anything about the Caribbean be different? You know there is hardly an island I have not been to."

"I know. But this is a sort of round table seminar. Let me explain. As you know the cruise industry is into big expansion plans right now especially with building mega-cruise ships. One of the biggest cruise ship lines is looking for some input on how to draw new travelers to cruising. They have invited one critique writer and a companion of his or her choice from the top six travel magazines to sail on a five night cruise to the Bahamas. They expect you to meet as a group on both of the sea days. You will also dine together in the evenings so you can discuss any ideas you generate. On the days in port you will be free to do whatever you want. This includes any complimentary shore excursions you care to go on. You will be stopping at both Freeport and Nassau."

“I have to take back what I just said, Jordan. I have been to Nassau quite a few times but, unbelievably, I have never been to Freeport. Imagine going to an island I have missed. I guess it will not be too boring especially with writers from other important magazines. But there could be a lot of ego involved. And let me correct you, Jordan. I know many people think that area is the Caribbean but technically the Bahamian Islands are in the Atlantic Ocean.”

“I stand corrected, Fiona. And you are also right about the egos. I have never met anyone who is more compassionate and open than you are. You have a lot of confidence and do an excellent job but some of the others could have a huge sense of self. I hope it doesn't get in the way of the spirit of cooperation the cruise ship owners are looking for. I have already heard Brody Graham and Peter Morrison have accepted. Those two should really make the trip interesting for you. And Miriam Decker is also going. The trip is less than a month away. You are expected to fly to the Port Canaveral area the day before. That way there should be no unexpected travel problems to interfere with you getting to the ship on time.”

“That is fine with me Jordan. Can you get me on an early morning flight? I assume I will be staying in Cocoa Beach? The last time I was there I had two shore excursions planned but one was filled, and I always wanted to get back there to do it. There is an airboat excursion that takes you through the central Everglades and there are supposed to be a lot of alligator sightings. I always thought that would be a lot of fun.”

“No problem Fiona. My secretary will email your travel arrangements sometime this week. And another thing, since this is the off season if you want to do a second cruise on one of their other ship lines, the purser's office on board the ship will make the arrangements for you. That will still get you home before Thanksgiving.”

After Fiona hung up she began thinking about what Jordan had said. Home for Thanksgiving...well that certainly did not hold any appeal for her this year. She had been invited to Thanksgiving dinner with Kathy and her family, but at this point she did not want to commit to anything.

Fiona knew there were a couple of big ship companies that owned several lines, which they marketed under separate names. She always smiled when she heard someone say “Oh, I don’t like that particular line. My favorite is…” When in reality, both of those lines were owned by the same parent company.

Brody Graham and Peter Morrison! Now that made for an interesting combination. Rumor had it the two men had been living together for years, although they worked for rival publications. The two of them were considered the top travel writers in the industry. But they never seemed to agree on anything, so most people could not picture them together. They lived and worked in New York City so they had their pulse on many things in the travel industry as it first broke.

Fiona had also heard from some source that the two men always traveled with their own butler/masseuse. She had laughed when she heard that, thinking that butlers had gone out with the nineteenth century. However, being able to get a massage whenever the spirit moved you was a different matter. Fiona thought of a massage as a luxury, rather than a necessity. She also knew both men were in their mid to late sixties and had been writing travel pieces for years. She wondered if there was anything they did not know about travel.

She was not looking forward to cruising with Miriam Decker however. The woman was a spinster in her early fifties. She traveled everywhere with her mother, Emma, and it was known the two women argued constantly. She could be very malicious at times, but wrote with such brilliance people often overlooked her churlish ways. Miriam lived in Los Angeles and many thought she saw herself as the “Hedda Hopper” of the travel industry.

There had been a rumor circulating for years that Miriam had been secretly married when she was younger. However it was said the man had left her when she would not stand up to her mother and admit they were married. There were also stories he had died in an accident. Whether or not any of these stories were true was debatable. Fiona thought she was probably just an “old maid” who had circulated that

rumor to make herself look more sympathetic. On a personal level, Miriam could be just down-right mean. Fiona was not looking forward to spending time with her.

She wondered who the other two writers would be. She guessed she would find out soon enough.

It did not take long for Fiona to discover the identities of the others she would be working with. A couple of days later her travel arrangements arrived by email, as well as a list of who was on the panel.

Bryan McManus was bringing his wife Diana. Fiona did not know much about Bryan so she “Googled” him. Bryan was in his mid fifties and had built a respectable reputation as a travel writer. He and Diana had recently married, she for the first time, after spending years building their careers in the San Francisco area. Diana was about the same age as her husband, and worked at the same magazine as he did. She was a well known award winning photographer who had traveled the world on photo assignments. Obviously they had a lot in common. Fiona wondered what had brought them together.

This was quite a mix of people from the travel writing industry who would be on board ship with her. Finally, there was a man named Devlin O’Neill. She could not find out much about him. His biography said he was fifty-two and had been a Network and Telecommunications Manager before retiring two years ago. He had traveled all over the world for his job, so she guessed that qualified him for the work he did now. He worked for a magazine in Chicago, as did Fiona, so she concluded he probably lived somewhere around the Chicago area.

Fiona thought it was interesting that, of all the people invited, she and Devlin did not have traveling companions. Thinking out loud, Fiona realized Devlin was seven years younger than she was. I guess I do not have to worry about him coming on to me. Maybe we can become friends since it seems everyone else is matched up. But, in truth, Fiona was so used to traveling alone that if they did not pair up it would not bother her. She liked being on cruise ships as well as having a cabin to herself. And since you could be seated with others at meals, she always had companions to talk to while dining.

Chapter Four

It was 6:00 a.m. on a Friday when Fiona jumped out of bed as her alarm went off. Her suitcase and carry-on bags were packed by the door, as well as her computer which went everywhere she did. As she looked out the window, she saw that it was still dark; an indication that winter was not far off. Gone were the summer days when the sun rose early.

She had ordered Supershuttle to arrive at 6:45 a.m. since her flight was at 9:00 a.m. Milwaukee's airport was small enough that one-and a-half-hours before the flight was plenty of time to arrive. She had programmed her coffee pot to brew just before she awoke. Pouring herself a cup, she went into her bathroom to put on her make-up and got dressed. Fiona liked to shower in the evening since it saved her a lot of time on travel mornings. By 6:30 a.m. she was washing her coffee pot and cup and with a last look around, locked her door, and waited patiently for the elevator to come. She was headed for the indoor garage. There was a door there which led to the outside driveway where the van would pick her up.

She did not have long to wait. It was less than five minutes when she saw the blue colored van that would take her to the airport. Traffic was not too heavy and by the time she went through security and arrived at her gate it was 7:45 a.m. She still had a good hour before take-off, so she took out her computer to check for last minute instructions from her office.

Before she knew it she was on her way and touched down in Orlando a little after noon with the time change. She had made a reservation for the airboat ride at 3:00 p.m. since she knew it would take a good hour to drive there. After she got her rental car, she stopped at a fast food seafood restaurant for a fish sandwich. She ate while she drove and made it to the attraction with fifteen minutes to spare.

As she entered the driveway Fiona saw an old beat-up wooden building that contained a bar with a restaurant serving a few sandwiches. There were three pool tables and a deck overlooking the water. It looked like the type of place that saw a lot of motorcycle gangs. The water looked like a meandering

river and Fiona noticed the absence of trees. She was definitely in the heart of the central Everglades. After buying her ticket at the bar, a woman directed her outside to the deck and down the stairs to the airboat.

The boat was bigger than Fiona expected. There were benches and the first one in the front seated two people. Then there were four more that seated four people each. The boat held eighteen individuals and the driver sat in a seat high up in the back near a large enclosed fan which propelled the boat. Since there were a couple of persons sitting in each of the four regular benches, and the first one was empty, Fiona decided to sit up front.

“Hey, you are sitting in my seat.”

Fiona looked up and saw a man with sandy hair a little under six feet tall with brown eyes staring at her from the dock. He was very physically fit and she figured he spent a lot of time in the gym.

“I did not see your name on this bench, Sir.”

“Well maybe not, but I was sitting there. I just went to use the bathroom. What did you do with my sweater?”

Fiona was beginning to think this was one of the rudest men she had ever encountered. Looking beside the bench, she did notice a sweater on the floor of the boat.

“Look. I am sorry. I got in the boat and this seat was empty. I did not see your sweater. I don’t know what the big deal is. There is room for two on this bench.”

Reaching down beside her, Fiona grabbed the sweater from the bottom of the boat and handed it to the man.

He never even said thank you. Instead he mumbled something about needing leg room and then plopped down beside her.

Except for the man sitting next to her, the ride could not have been more exciting. It was everything and more than Fiona had expected. As they left the dock, they went under the bridge of the highway and they immediately saw seven alligators sprawled all over the slight incline in front of them.

“Those aren’t real are they?” Fiona asked. They looked like they were just posed there for the beginning of the ride. But she should have known better, when two of them slid into the water and made their way towards the airboat.

“Of course, they are real,” the driver responded deridingly and she heard the man beside her snicker at her mistake. She knew if she ever ran into this man again, she would be mortified. But she also realized, since it was highly unlikely to happen, she had no reason to worry.

“Okay everyone. See those ear covers on your seats. You better put them on because the fan can get very noisy. I will be going very fast and then we will stop and drift for awhile. There is no backwards on this boat so sometimes I have to move fast and the noise can be quite deafening.”

For the next forty-five minutes Fiona was exhilarated. They flew around the bends of the river sometimes skidding sideways. She saw herons, egrets and sand hill cranes along with the ever present pelicans. But most exciting were the twenty nine alligators she counted in and out of the water. The pilot told them not to make sudden moves when they got close to the alligators because they were known to jump into the boats looking for prey. They got so close to some of the gators that she looked right into their eyes which had a yellow dead-like look. It was an absolutely perfect day and with the adjustable ear covers in place she could ignore the noise as well as the man sitting next to her.

Fiona was disappointed when the ride ended. She could have continued for another hour. It was definitely one of the more fun things she had done on her travels. She had gone on a swamp tour in Louisiana once, but that had been a pontoon boat and this had been much more exhilarating.

After their ride they walked back into the bar and exchanged their ticket for a free can of soda and deep fried alligator tail, a delicacy in these parts! Everyone said it tasted like chicken, but personally Fiona thought it was so mild it really did not have a taste.

It was after 5:00 p.m. when she checked into her hotel. Since the cruise ship was paying for her room she was staying at the oceanfront Hilton in Cocoa Beach. She decided to get some thoughts down about her adventure that day on her Word program because she knew it would make a good article. The

since her body was still on Central time she took a walk along the beach. It was after 8:00 p.m. before she finally made her way into the hotel bar to have a glass of wine and order some dinner.

As she was placing her order Fiona looked up and gasped as she saw the impolite man from the airboat walk in. When he saw her looking at him, he went to the other end of the bar and sat down. Her dinner did not take very long. She spent her time waiting by watching CNN on the bar television set. Normally she would talk to the bartender about local things but she wanted to avoid looking at the man at the other end of the bar. She could hear him quietly talking to the bartender. Without glancing his way she left as soon as she finished eating.

Chapter Five

The next morning Fiona was awake by 7:00 a.m. She knew she could not board the cruise ship until noon. She had been able to turn in her rental car at the hotel the previous evening and had made a reservation for 11:00 a.m. to take the hotel shuttle to the port. So she had plenty of time to kill.

Not ready for breakfast, she decided to take a walk. She had just started out and had stopped to look at a shell when she saw a man walking behind her. Oh, no. It couldn't be, she was thinking!

As he passed by, not thinking what she was saying, she blurted out, "Why are you following me?"

When the man saw who it was, without saying a word, he turned around and started walking the beach in the opposite direction.

By the time Fiona got back to the hotel she realized she only had an hour before her shuttle. She knew she would get plenty of food on the ship, so she ordered toast and coffee from room service as she jumped into the shower. She had not felt too bad while out by the water since there had been a little breeze; but the Florida humidity had definitely wilted her. She was glad she had put on a sundress, instead of slacks, for her walk because it was now wet from sweat and pants would have been much to warm.

Putting on a pair of tan capris and a white short-sleeve blouse, Fiona found it was almost time to board the shuttle bus to the cruise terminal. As she walked to the lobby she spied the man sitting there next to the only empty chair in sight for the shuttle area. There was no way she was going to get away from him. With a sigh Fiona realized he was probably going on the same cruise as she was.

"Well, I guess there is no escaping it," she said as she sat down next to him. "Since ours is the only ship in port today, I guess you are going on the same cruise as me."

“Apparently so. Look I do not mean to be rude. I think we got off on the wrong foot yesterday. Thinking I would never see you again I just did not bother to talk to you after our altercation. My name is Devlin.”

“Not Devlin O’Neill, the travel writer?”

As she watched the puzzled frown on Devlin’s face, Fiona burst out laughing. “My name is Fiona Noonan.”

“Oh, no! You’re kidding? But why would you joke about that?”

“Do you think we could start over?” Fiona asked as she stretched her hand out to him.

“Absolutely,” he said as he took her hand, shaking it in agreement.

“Who knows? Maybe someday we will become friends and laugh about how we met,” Fiona said chuckling as she shook his hand.

“I certainly hope we will not become rivals like Brody and Peter. Although I hear they are pretty friendly when they are alone.”

“What is your cabin number, Devlin?”

“I am on the Longitude Deck Eleven in 1122.”

“I am on Deck 11, too. I am right next to you in 1120. I bet they put all of us together up there. The higher up top, the smoother the ride and it is obvious they want us to be comfortable. And that is where the suites are located.”

“I guess they are really rolling out the red carpet for us. I know it is the off-season but those cabins are really nice. There is a separate sitting area, our own balcony, refrigerator, walk in closet, and whirlpool bath. I checked out the layout of the ship online.”

“I did, too. I cannot tell you how many cruise ship cabins I have been in with just a shower. That whirlpool will be like heaven. And I am glad we decided to be friends. Since our cabins are right next door we will probably be seeing a lot of each other right from the start. That could have made for a very uncomfortable trip if we were not talking.”

“You hit the nail on the head. Besides, as the only two singles, we will probably get paired up for dinners and optional excursions anyway.”

Soon they were loaded into the shuttle along with two other couples who were obviously on their honeymoons.

Fiona was wondering why Devlin had not brought someone along and would have been surprised to know he was wondering the same thing about her. But before there was time to ask any more questions, they found themselves at the entrance to the port with the huge ship, *Independence*, looming in front of them.

This was one of the biggest ships in this cruise line’s fleet and held well over thirty-five hundred passengers. Fiona was glad it was the off season. She could not imagine getting so many people boarded in a timely manner. Although it was early, there was already a long line in the terminal.

The two of them checked their luggage as soon as the shuttle bus dropped them off. That was the easiest part of cruising. Baggage tags were sent with your travel documents, and you filled them out with your deck and room number. As soon as you drove up to the terminal porters were there to whisk your luggage away. Of course, a small gratuity was always accepted!

After going through the X-ray machines they continued into the cruise terminal and stood in line with their carry-ons. It could take a couple of hours before their luggage would arrive in their staterooms. Fiona always carried some essentials, as well as her computer, through the check-in process.

As the lines moved they saw a special queue for travelers in suites. They moved into that line and were soon at the desk. Their documents were ready since they had filled out pre-boarding papers with their credit card numbers, a few days earlier online. However the woman checking them in asked them to wait for a moment. It was not long before a ship representative came to greet them. Devlin and Fiona rolled their eyes at each other. Being escorted onto the ship was not standard procedure. Obviously, the ship’s crew had been advised to extend them every courtesy.

Whenever a passenger boarded a cruise ship, a photographer took their picture. Fiona had always skipped this since she never bought the photos from her cruises. However the ship's representative insisted their picture be taken and before she knew it Fiona had her first "pairing" with Devlin.

"I don't know why they bothered to take our picture. I never buy any."

"Maybe they want proof we were really on board," Devlin said with a twinkle in his eyes. As long as we came together do you want to go have lunch with me? We can study the ship's lay-out while we eat. "

"That is a good idea. I only had toast and coffee. It would be pretty silly if we went alone and just met up there anyway. With luck by the time we finish eating, our luggage might be in our staterooms. I believe the Lido Deck is two floors down from us. That is where the buffet is, and the only place we can find food this afternoon. Is it okay if I knock on your door in about fifteen minutes?"

"That will be perfect."

The woman showed both of them to their rooms and after extending an 8:00 p.m. dinner invitation at the Captain's table in Michael's Supper Club, she left quickly.

As Fiona entered her mini-suite, she discovered it was just as spacious and luxurious as she had seen online. It is too bad this is such a short cruise. I could easily spend a couple of weeks in this cabin, she was thinking.

After putting her few things away, Fiona washed up and went to knock on Devlin's door. He greeted her warmly and they walked down the two flights of stairs to the buffet. There were a lot of happy excited people piling their plates sky high. Obviously they were looking forward to their cruise and the never ending supply of food.

Going through the buffet line, she noticed they were both eating lightly. They had taken salad, fruit, some vegetables and grilled fish. Then they found a table outside on the quieter side of the ship facing away from the terminal. At first they did not say much to each other as they ate. Fiona saw a short

stocky woman with blond hair and a similar looking older woman, but much heavier, stick their heads out the door. The younger woman glanced their way and, with a nod, quickly returned inside.

“Fiona wasn’t that Miriam Decker who just looked out here?”

“Yes, it was. I have to tell you Devlin, I do not like to talk about people but I was on a cruise with Miriam and her mother two years ago. Miriam is not the friendliest person in the world and all she and her mother did was argue constantly about every little thing. She writes such wonderful articles; you would never guess she is such an unpleasant person in real life. Her mother is even heavier than the last time I saw her. Obviously all her drinking is catching up with her. When I heard she was part of our group, I was not looking forward to her presence”

“Well at least we can keep each other company since all the others seem paired up.”

Fiona smiled thinking how irritating he had been yesterday and how different things were between them today. I guess it just shows you should never judge someone until you at least talk to them, she thought.

“Devlin, I know you are quite a bit younger than I am, and I am not trying to come on to you, but I am really curious why someone as nice looking as you did not bring a traveling companion. I do not mean to be nosy; if you would rather not answer that is fine. I was thinking since we are going to be companions on this cruise, it would be nice to get to know you a little better.”

“I don’t mind telling you a little about myself, Fiona. I was married when I was very young and we had a baby right away. Things did not work out. After the divorce I finished college and then my work consumed me. I guess I was just too busy to have another relationship. I traveled a lot for my job, and whenever I was home I spent as much time as possible with my daughter Molly. We are extremely close and she would have come with me on this cruise but she just got married this last summer and is settling into married life with her husband, Greg. Besides she could not get time off from work. And before you ask, she is a little over thirty years old and an associate professor at Northwestern University

in Evanston, Illinois. Her husband is an attorney. I live in Evanston near them. And now you know everything about me. What about you Fiona? I am also curious. Why don't you have a companion?"

Fiona was thinking that could not be the whole story. Just because he had a failed marriage when he was young, did not mean he was supposed to spend his life as a celibate. She had the feeling there had been another woman in his life somewhere along the line. Although he had not said so, Fiona was correct in her assessment.

Shannon had been the love of Devlin's life. He had met her when he was thirty-six and they had spent six blissful years together. The only thing that had marred their relationship was Shannon's refusal to marry him. Then one morning Shannon had awakened with a terrible headache. Before the week was over she had been diagnosed with a brain tumor and the doctors insisted on immediate surgery. The rate of success for this type of surgery was very high, and so the two of them were very positive of the outcome being favorable.

Shannon had even agreed to marry Devlin as soon as she was feeling better. Then on the operating table, a blood clot had broken loose and Shannon was dead. Devlin could not believe that in less than a week the woman he loved was gone. Shannon had only been thirty-eight! It had taken Devlin many years to get over the pain of losing Shannon. Every once in a while he would still be overcome with grief, but the extreme pain had lessened over the years.

The reason Devlin had snapped at Fiona, and had never excused himself, was Fiona had the same hauntingly blue eyes as Shannon had. Seeing Fiona looking up at him from the boat had brought the pain back so swiftly that Devlin had lashed out at her. So Fiona was right. There was more to his story. Like her, Devlin had never wanted to have another serious relationship. Losing someone was just too painful, and he never wanted to experience that agony again.

Realizing it was her turn to answer his questions, Fiona looked at Devlin and said, "I have been divorced for quite a few years now and we never had any children."

Devlin noticed Fiona wince when she said she had no children and wondered what that was all about.

Fiona continued, "I am like you, Devlin. I have no intention of getting involved with anyone again. My mother just died recently or she would have come along with me. Having a daughter you are close to has to be wonderful. My mother and I were also extremely close. I live a little north of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, so we live a couple of hours from each other. Now I guess that is enough personal information from both of us. How about we study the ship's layout?"

Devlin could sense there was a lot more to her story than she had let on, but he assumed since they were only going to be friends, he should not press her for the details. He might have asked some more questions about her life if there had been a possibility of them dating. But since that was not going to happen, he let any other queries go. They had just begun forging a friendship after a very rocky start, which he knew was mostly his fault, so he did not want to get too personal.

As they picked up the brochures with the ship's information listed, two men interrupted them.

"Well, well, if it isn't Fiona Noonan. I recognize you from your picture. We "Googled" you so we would know something about you. Who is this man...your traveling companion?"

As she looked at the man speaking to her, Fiona recognized Brody Graham immediately. He was a short stocky man with a bald head. He wore heavy black framed glasses and a bowtie that were his trademark. She had gone to one of his seminars a few months previously, and had been introduced to him, but he obviously did not remember her. And she recognized the man with him. It was Peter Morrison, his rival and supposed companion. He was also short and stocky but had a head full of grey hair and very bushy eyebrows. He wasn't at all distinguished as some graying men were. Like Miriam and her mother, they looked very similar in their manner even though their physical appearance was different. She also noticed Brody's use of the word "we" when describing Peter.

"Hi, Brody. You probably don't remember me, but we met at a seminar you gave last March in New York."

It was obvious from his demeanor he did not remember the occasion.

“I meet so many people at those seminars, Fiona.”

Ignoring his haughty comment, Fiona continued, “Brody, this is Devlin O’Neill. He is also on the panel. And I assume this is Peter Morrison. I recognize you from your pictures. Peter meet Devlin. We were just studying the ship’s layout.”

“It certainly is a big ship,” Brody replied, as the two men shook Devlin’s out stretched hand.

“Would you like to sit down with us?”

“No, thanks, Fiona. I saw you out here and wanted to say hello. It was a long trip and we both have massages scheduled before the lifeboat drill. I know we will see you later. Nice to meet you, Devlin. Peter and I are looking forward to working with the two of you.”

“I’ll bet!” Fiona said as she and Devlin watched the two men go back into the buffet area.

“Amazing how all the writers are finding us here. Those two sure seem a little strange. I guess I should have “Googled” them.

“I am sure you know they work for competing publishers. Brody is sixty-six and Peter is sixty-four. They tend to disagree with what each other says, but the rumor is they live together and have been companions for many years. That would explain why they seem so similar even though they are dissimilar in looks. They live on the same floor in a condo building in New York City so that has fueled the rumor. I am not exactly sure what Peter used to do, but the ‘buzz’ is that Brody helped him get in at another magazine years ago. It was sort of like the sisters Anne Landers and Abby Van Buren working for rival publications.”

Continuing she added, “I hear that they both have their own butler/ masseuse they travel with. For appearance sake there has never been any impropriety, but I overheard our room steward say they have rooms next to each other down the hall from us. I would not be surprised if there was a connecting door. Their butlers are in a room together across from them. They are such big names in the travel writing industry I am sure the cruise company gave them the extra room for their butlers.”

“You sure have done your research on everyone, Fiona.”

“Well, I have been in the business awhile and have gotten to know about some of the top people. If I do not know someone but need to, I just ‘Google’ them. It will not take you long to catch up Devlin. You have only been doing travel writing a short time and have already made an impressive name for yourself.”

“Okay. Enough! Let’s get back to the ship’s layout.”

They discovered there were two decks above their rooms. On Deck Ten, the Latitude Deck, the one below their cabins, was Michael’s “reservation only” supper club where the Captain’s table was located. There was also a pool and the Seashore Theater with a sliding sky dome. The Lido Deck where they were now sitting had the Buffet, Mexican Stand, Deli, Pizzeria and Grille. This deck also contained a pool and two whirlpools.

Besides staterooms the Promenade Deck on Eight had the shops, photographer’s area and several bars including a piano bar. Next was the Caribbean Deck with the library, meeting rooms, computers and two more specialty restaurants. More and more cruise ships were adding specialty restaurants. You needed a reservation and there was a nominal fee involved, but the food quality was a lot better than that found in the main dining rooms. Plus you did not have the massive crowds that the dining rooms held.

Continuing down were three more floors of cabins and the Majestic Deep-Sea Theater which was a three story theater located in the forward part of the ship. The next deck was the Lobby Deck which contained the purser’s office, a bar in a large atrium area and the two main dining rooms, the Barnacle and Spinnaker Restaurants. Finally there was the Main Deck and below that the crew cabins.

“This boat is massive! It will take us some time to explore this whole ship. But right now I want to go back to my room and unpack, if my luggage has arrived. We have the mandatory lifeboat drill in an hour and then we sail. Do you want to go to the “Bon Voyage” party with me after the drill?”

“That sounds like fun. We may as well go to the lifeboat drill together since we go to the same area. We should see our traveling companions there, too. Hopefully we will meet Bryan and Diana since we have not seen them yet. And then maybe everyone will want to go to the ‘sail away’ party with us.”

The two of them returned to their staterooms and discovered their luggage had indeed arrived. It pays to be in the suites Fiona was thinking. Luggage in the lower decks would probably take forever to be delivered. She was always amazed that several thousand pieces of luggage could be delivered as quickly as they were.

Since this was such a short cruise, Fiona had only brought one piece of luggage. As she unpacked, she started laughing to herself as she reviewed her day so far. She enjoyed Devlin’s easy going manner and was very comfortable around him. Since there was a disparity in their ages, as well as the way they both felt about not having a relationship with anyone, taking the romance factor out, they could just relax and enjoy each other’s company. It was a far cry from their response to each other when they first met.

This was Fiona’s first job away from home since her mother died. She still thought about Maggie and missed her every day. But with what had happened so far, and with what she knew of the other writers, Fiona sensed this was going to be a very interesting journey.