

Chapter 1

Ashley, a half-finished glass of Merlot (red wine) at hand, was slumped half-asleep on the sofa watching the late-night news. Her mind however, was on what to do about her husband, William. Due to his lack of interest in her, things between them had deteriorated. Divorce was the obvious answer, but she did not feel comfortable going down this road. Jade, her daughter, had dropped hints that she was showing signs of depression. She was right. Not only had she forgotten things, but sleep had become a problem. Still, how to get out of this situation. A breaking news announcement made Ashley gasp and sit up, almost spilling her drink. A passenger plane with over two hundred people onboard had disappeared over the Atlantic. A premonition of fear swept through her veins.

William had called earlier to say he was on his way home from a business meeting in America. With tears in her eyes, she slumped back down on the sofa. A million things rushed through her mind. Was it William's plane or another one? Had it crashed? or what? At the time of his call, she had shrugged indifferently. She had no wish to see him dead, and this latest news did nothing to ease her troubled mind. Given her situation, despite living in a four-bedroom house in Hampstead, one of the best areas in London, Ashley was not a happy woman.

The following morning, a news announcement confirmed Ashley's worst fears. The missing plane was the one William had boarded. When she broke the news to her daughter, Jade, her face turned white. She would have fallen had Ashley not told her to sit. She then held Jade's hands tight while explaining her father's plane had vanished and believed to have crashed into the sea.

Several days later, Ashley and Jade sat huddled together, watching the television. They were hoping for some good news, but it was not to be. Instead, an announcement said, 'Searchers had found wreckage from the missing plane in the sea, but no survivors.'

Jade cried, “Oh my god, what a terrible way to die.” Ashley held her close. “Yes, it was.” The two women then burst into tears. A few minutes later, Ashley rose and, on trembling legs, went to the drink’s cabinet. On her return with two glasses of brandy, she handed one to Jade. “Here, drink this, darling. It will help settle your nerves.”

On confirmation of William’s death, Ashley took stock of her situation. Sad but true, William’s death would make little difference to her life. Still, one thing was sure. As he had always been careful with his money, Ashley knew she would not have any financial problems.

At William’s funeral, with no body to bury, Ashley and Jade found the experience rather traumatic. As such, both felt relieved when the short service was over.

The following week, Ashley had a locksmith open William’s office safe. Inside, she found an insurance policy in William’s name. When she opened it, her eyebrows shot up in surprise, the policy was for eight million pounds. Although she had known William had life insurance, she had no idea it was for such a large amount. To calm her nerves, Ashley took the bottle of scotch William kept in his desk drawer and poured a quantity into a glass. Then, as she swallowed it, the raw whisky made her gag.

With the insurance money plus a significant amount of cash in the bank, Ashley was now a wealthy woman. She had told Jade about the policy and said, “I’ve set up a trust fund for you with two million pounds. “

Jade’s eyebrows shot up on hearing this. “Are you sure, that’s an awful lot of money?”

“Yes, and I know your father would agree with my decision. Besides, you are a sensible woman, and I know you won’t squander it away.”

“No, I won’t,” she said. Jade’s eyes twinkled as she added, “Who knows, if Brett and I get married, it will come in handy.”

“Oh,” Ashley gasped, her eyes wide open in anticipation. “Is there any chance of that happening? I mean, you two have been together for over two years.”

Jade sighed. "I don't know. Marriage is not something we've talked about. I mean, we are both happy as we are."

"Well, as long as you are happy, my darling, that's all that matters."

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About six months later, while talking with Jade, Ashley said, "I've booked a nine-day luxury cruise through the Greek Islands." Then, seeing Jade's mouth open wide in shock, she added, "I always wanted to go on a cruise, but your father would not hear of it. He said he had spent enough time at sea while in the navy." Before Jade could comment, she carried on. "I checked out various cruise companies, and Regent Cruises sounded excellent. Oh, and by the way, this is not any old cruise. I've booked on the latest and most luxurious cruise ship ever built."

Jade gasped. "But why did you do that?"

"I thought I needed something to cheer me up." She gave a half-smile. "What with your father's death and that disastrous meeting with Peter, I've not been myself."

Jade nodded. "Yes, the least said about Peter, the better."

The incident Jade referred to occurred while she and her mother were on holiday in Turkey and rescued a man from drowning. When he was receiving CPR on the beach, Ashley recognised it was Peter, an old flame before she married William. At the time, Ashley thought it a sign they should get back together. However, when a police friend informed her Peter was under police investigation, that put paid to any idea of them getting back together.

Jade gave a mischievous smile, "Yes. Well, it might do you good."

"Oh, and what do you mean by that?" Ashley asked, furrowing her brow in confusion.

"Well, from what I hear, one is liable to meet all kinds of people on a cruise." Jade giggled. "Who knows, you might meet someone nice. I mean an honest man, not one looking for a rich widow."

Commented [1]: you need a hard break before this for the time jump.

When she noticed her mother's puzzlement, she wagged a finger. "It's no good you looking like that. You know full well what I mean. Everyone knows cruises are the hunting grounds for both men and women." She paused. "Don't you remember the program we watched on the TV about an heiress who got involved with a conman on a luxury cruise?" He pretended to be a German Count.

"Oh, yes, I remember the heiress."

She and Jade laughed, but Ashley remembered some of her single friends' cruise experiences. Whether they had exaggerated, she didn't know. Nevertheless, at fifty-two, with long brown hair and a smooth complexion, Ashley was envied by her friends. They said she looked far younger than her years. The thought of meeting someone nice on the cruise made her smile. Although only a widow for twelve months, it had been far longer since she had made love.

Meanwhile, in Chingford, another upmarket area of London, Stephen, a bank manager, was in a dilemma. Should he take the cruise he and Sandra, his late wife, had booked before she died. She had made him promise he would go, but now, with time getting short, he was having second thoughts. Stephen knew some single women would be looking for a partner/husband on the cruise. However, he had no intention of getting involved with another woman. He shrugged. Maybe later, but not yet. Still, he had promised Sandra, so he went and packed a case.

Chapter 2

Given her cruise started in Venice, Ashley decided to arrive the day before departure. She ~~and~~ would stay in The Palazzo Venart Hotel, where she and William had once stayed.

On the day of her flight to Venice, Malcolm, her late husband's driver, drove her to Heathrow. Since his death, , as she could not drive, Ashley had employed him as her driver.

Once checked in and through passport control, Ashley went to the British Airways Lounge. Here she poured out a glass of Merlot, picked a cosmopolitan magazine, and then made herself comfortable. With her long wavy hair hanging down over one shoulder and wearing a smart beige two-piece suit, Ashley looked poised and elegant. As such, she attracted several admiring glances. Although she appeared not to notice, inside, she bubbled with satisfaction. She knew she would gain more than glances once onboard the ship and laid out in her new swimsuit.

Once sitting in her first-class seat, Ashley accepted a glass of champagne from a smiling hostess. Then, before she realised it, they had landed in Venice. In the arrival hall, Ashley spotted a man holding a Palazzo Venart Hotel sign. When she walked over to him, he welcomed her with a broad smile.

"Welcome to Venice, Mrs Hepworth. I trust you had a good flight?"

"Yes, I did, thank you." Then, to her surprise, the man wheeled her luggage out to a pier on the Grand Canal. As he helped her board a waiting water taxi, Ashley remembered it was the only way to reach the hotel spread out alongside the canal.

As they docked at the hotel's jetty, a thrill of excitement shot through Ashley as she gazed up at the hotel's imposing frontage. Her companion helped her onto the jetty, then took her case and led her to the reception desk.