

Love at Sea

A Love Lost and Found Romance

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Love at Sea

Until now, Tom Giacano had never gone anywhere. Never done anything. It wasn't that he lacked the means to do so, he just never had, preferring instead to remain ensconced in his stable, predictable life.

Until it wasn't.

Predictable.

Nor stable.

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Tom had planned Anne's surprise fifty-fifth birthday down to the minutest detail. All their friends attended and toasted her double nickel to much fanfare. One week later he dragged home after a soul-sucking day at the office, where too many people wanted too many things, to a nothingness that threatened to swallow him whole. She'd never said a word, never given a hint. He sat stone-faced at the kitchen island—which sported new multi-earth-toned granite Anne had insisted they needed and that he'd only made the final payment on recently—staring at the computer-typed note, re-reading it for the fourth time. *Christ, couldn't she have at least handwritten it?*

“Tom, the party was truly lovely. You went all out, and I thank you for that. I am sorrier than I can say, but I simply can't continue to pretend I still love you. Can't pretend I'm happy. I haven't been for some time. And I think if you're honest with yourself, neither are you. Somewhere along the path I lost myself, and I must go find her. I've only taken what is mine and what I could fit in the car, as well as a bit of money to help me get started in a new place. I want to be fair, and I hope you will be too. Don't try to call me. I won't answer. I must do this alone. I hope you find yourself, too. Anne.”

Once the initial shock wore off, he realized she was right. He'd also lost himself along the road of thirty-five years of married life. When he said, “I do,” apparently he'd said, “I don't” to all the dreams of his youth. Dreams, it seemed, he could no longer even recall. *Surely I had some?*

What had happened to that bright-eyed kid who dreamed of adventure, like the swashbuckling heroes of the movies he loved? Had he really allowed fifty-six years to slip by without even once stepping foot outside the mid-sized, landlocked area where he grew up? He hadn't even gone away for college, choosing instead to attend the University of Athens and live at home, where he met and married Anne, the only girl he'd ever dated.

Now, he vowed to change all that, hoping in the process he could grow into who he truly wanted to be—whoever that turned out to be—and secretly dreaming Anne would see his progress and come back.

A few days after his wife's departure, Tom stopped by the break room for a coffee refill. His mind jumped from idea to idea, grasping at possible ways he might go about discovering his passion. Lost in thought, he startled at a voice behind him, having not heard anyone enter.

"So, Tom," Jonah began. "I heard about Anne. Tough break, man."

Tom ducked his head, not really wanting to discuss his personal life with the playboy of the team.

"Say, have you ever been sailing?" Jonah asked.

Tom shook his head. "No. I've thought about it, always wanted to, but just—"

"Oh man, you should! Last year on vacation I went to Casablanca." He pulled out his phone and began flipping through picture after picture. "I *lived* on this tall ship for two full weeks." He shoved the phone at Tom's face, displaying a picture of an elegant vessel that reminded him of pirate ships he'd seen in movies as a child.

"Yeah, we learned how to sail that sucker and work as a team. And don't get me started on shore leave. Man, the babes at the Mazagan Beach Resort." Jonah flapped his free hand, fanning his face as if it were on fire. "Best trip of my life."

"Don't you need to know how to sail at least a little to do that?"

"Nah, man. You get some shots and a passport, then go on a two-week training sail. They've even got some that sail all the way around and past the Cape of Africa. You can go as far as your time and money will take you."

"Did you do that?" Tom asked over the rim of his coffee cup.

"What, train? Of course—"

"No," Tom said, interrupting what he knew would turn into a long, drawn-out explanation. "Did you sail around Africa?"

"Ah, nah, man. Just my two weeks along the coast of Morocco. I ain't got that kind of money ... or time."

"Yeah, no, me neither," Tom replied. But the wheels had started to turn. He flashed on a memory long forgotten. His dad had given him a remote control sailboat for his tenth birthday celebration week on Lake Lanier. He spent hours guiding it around the protected cove close to their cabin, pretending he was Captain Tommy, the fiercest pirate on the high seas.

When Tom asked his dad if they could rent one of sailboats being hawked by the vendors along the shore, his dad refused. Too dangerous, he'd said. So Tom had never done more than sit in a dingy watching his dad fish. Heck, he hadn't even fished—he hated touching the slimy worms, hated killing them by skewering a hook through their bodies. He swore he could hear them scream. His dad had called him a sissy-boy on that trip, and Tom hadn't wanted to go again after that.

That memory slammed him like a stone wall. It was followed by the niggling memory of wanting to sail.

Tom refreshed his now cold coffee. “I need to get back to it before the boss comes looking for me.”

Jonah called after Tom as he walked away. “Man, check out that sailing thing. It’s the bomb.”

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Two days later, unable to shake Jonah’s words, Tom researched sailing while behind his closed office door. He found he could learn to sail, albeit on a small vessel, on Lake Chapman, right there close to home. Not waiting to talk himself out of it, he dialed and made an appointment for Sunday. *I’m doing this, damn it!*

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Tom returned home from that first outing sunburned and totally head-over-heels in love with sailing and filled with a life-energy unknown to him. The instructor at the lake suggested that if he really wanted to learn, he should head to Lake Lanier for a more intensive lesson on a larger vessel. After rubbing aloe vera on his toasted skin, Tom googled sailing schools and lodging on the big lake located about an hour from home, the same lake where his father had failed to teach him to fish. He made a reservation for the following Saturday at The Clipper, which seemed to have good online reviews. He also booked a room for the weekend in a little cabin camp right next door. It might have been the same place his family used to visit, but like most of his childhood memories, this one was stored in a tightly locked box in his brain.

Tom returned to Lake Lanier each weekend for three months, feeling a freedom that had evaded him until now. He felt light, almost airy, as if a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders. The excitement of the wind in his thinning gray hair and the spray on his skin ignited a fire deep within.

As he made the call that would forever upend his world, his hand shook, but not from fear.

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After checking the balance in his 401K and confirming with HR that he did indeed meet the qualifying rules that would allow him to take an early retirement, he walked into his boss’s office.

“Marshall? We need to talk.”

“I was just going to call you, too,” his boss said. As usual, he launched into his spiel without waiting to hear why Tom was there. “We’ve got a monster project coming in that’s going to need your expertise.”

Tom allowed his boss to prattle on for a few minutes, while second-guessing himself as to whether this was the right decision. Marshall outlined the details of the new project—yet another data tracking system for some Fortune 500 company Tom disdained. Knowing he’d be expected

to manage it, Tom's neck muscles tightened and began to ache, drawing his shoulders toward his ears, confirming that this, indeed, was his best move.

"We'll need to pull a team to—"

"Marshall," Tom interrupted, holding up a hand, unable to withhold any longer. "I can't take the project."

"What?"

"I won't be here."

"Won't be where?" his boss repeated, a frown arching across his forehead. "Did I forget about a vacation?" He paused while flipping through the paper calendar on his desk. "Wait ... don't tell me you're retiring. I can't lose you, too. You're my best Senior Program Manager."

Tom shrugged. "Sorry, boss. I'm retiring."

"Holy hell! You're the third one this month. How am I supposed to run a business if everyone keeps leaving?"

"I guess that's the downside of having a seasoned staff."

"Is it me? The money? If it's the money, I can talk to HR. See if we can get you a bump."

"It's not you and it's not the money. Since Anne left, I've been doing a lot of thinking. I'm still young and have a lot of life left to live ... things to do. I want to get started now while I'm able to enjoy them."

A heavy sigh sailed across the desk and landed like a perfectly tossed pebble. It felt great to be so well-thought of his boss would try to convince him to stay.

"How long do I have you?"

"Two weeks."

"Two—Damn! You're serious." Marshall's tone indicated he understood the finality of Tom's decision. He shook his head and chuckled. "I predict you'll be bored and crawling back within two months. Whatever will you do with all your spare time? You don't even golf."

"Wheels are already in motion for my first trip."

"Trip? Where you going?"

Tom grinned perhaps his first genuine smile in quite some time, he realized, other than when he was at the rudder. *Maybe Anne was right.* "To sail the seas." Even as he said it, fear blended with panic and excitement to the point he actually tingled.

Not thirty minutes after Tom walked out of his boss's office and settled into his own, Jonah poked his head through Tom's open doorway.

"You're retiring?" Jonah charged across the room and slapped him on the back a bit too hard. "Congratulations!"

The speed at which news traveled in this office never ceased to amaze Tom. "Thanks. Yep, time to do something for myself."

"So you're going to Morocco to sail, like I told you, eh?"

Tom thought about the chance chat that had set his sights on the horizon and felt gratitude. "Well, yes, I'm going sailing, but not to Morocco. I always wanted to visit Australia, so I decided

to combine them into one journey. I'll spend nine days training on a tall ship off the coast of Sydney. Then we'll anchor in Tasmania, where we'll spend three days exploring. After that, who knows? Maybe I'll hitch a ride on a tall ship and never return."

"Holy wow, man! Way to rock it!" Jonah said as he strutted out the door.

For several hours Tom's colleagues paraded through his office one or two at a time expressing their congratulations. And something else. Was that envy he spotted in their eyes? In his entire life, he'd never been envied by anyone. He decided he kind of liked it.

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Tom arrived at the Atlanta airport bright and early, ready for his first-ever flight. Since he'd never been anywhere, he had to request a rush for his passport, which arrived just in time. The journey across the Pacific to Australia would take just under twenty-four hours, including a brief stop in Los Angeles. He had a new set of headphones on hand so he could pass the time catching up on some in-flight movies.

At the two-hour mark during the flight out of LA, he paused *Crocodile Dundee*—cheesy, he knew, but he'd never seen it and figured to gain a little knowledge about his temporary home—and rose to stretch his legs. He ventured to an empty row and slid into the window seat. The view wasn't what he expected, although he hadn't really known *what* to expect. It was a cloudless day, but below, all he could see was what he assumed to be the undefined vastness of the ocean. Although he suspected it must surely be moving beneath him, it looked more like a vast stretch of blue-gray sand, reaching from horizon to horizon and covered in little dunes of murky green, black, and tree-bark brown. The fear of flying he'd been hauling since take-off, lifted, replaced with excitement. He felt lighter, calmer. A random line of lyrics floated into his head ... *born in the sign* ... He stopped abruptly and frowned when he realized he couldn't remember the words. *Something about water and sea animals? Who wrote that song anyway?* That song had always been one of his favorites because he was a water sign. Now, it bothered him that he couldn't remember the words. He reminded himself that he didn't put much stock in astrology, but resolved to look it up once he had internet.

After returning to his seat, and snuggly strapping back in, he pulled one of the sailing books from the bag at his feet and continued the research he'd started pre-flight.

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The screech of tires on runway jolted Tom from a fitful airplane sleep. He opened his eyes to the Sydney airport. After retrieving his bags, he stepped into the blinding sun and glanced around, hoping to find a taxi just waiting to whisk him to his destination. Luck was on his side and a bright orange one pulled up in front of him. A young man in shorts and flip-flops jumped out and loaded the bags into the trunk with barely more than a "G'day mate." *Or is that boot?* Tom thought, practicing his local lingo.

Tom climbed into the backseat and instructed, "Sydney Harbor Marriott, please."

Ready to begin this adventure, Tom scoured the skyline, amazed at the size of this ocean town, gawking as only a true tourist could. When the taxi neared the Sydney Harbor Bridge, he gasped at the majesty of the Sydney Opera House. The wings of the roof rose up like the billowing sails of a tall ship. Although he'd seen it in pictures, nothing had done it justice.

The cab driver pulled into the covered check-in area and parked. As Tom reached over the seat to pay, he caught a glimpse of someone unloading his bags from the trunk. Tom jumped out of the cab.

"Wait! Those are mine," he said, reaching for the bag sitting on the curb.

"No worries, mate. Got ya covered." When Tom hesitated, the crisply dressed man waved toward the sliding doors. "Go on, register."

Tom eyed him for a moment longer, then reluctantly went inside to the elegantly appointed counter. The reflection of a massive floral arrangement glistened in the black marble.

After escorting Tom to his room, the bellhop waited, hands laced across his middle. Tom slid a folded bill into the man's hand, damned proud of himself for having researched all aspects of this trip, down to the customary tip for every conceivable type of service.

Tom raced to the patio door like a little kid and flung it open, breathing in the damp, salty air. The sounds of the bustling city blended with those from the harbor, filling the air with a delightful cacophony. He lounged on the balcony for an hour before crawling into bed, exhausted from his flight.

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The morning sun blazed in through open blinds awakening Tom at sunrise. He bolted out of bed so energized to finally be out on the water sailing he skipped breakfast.

At check-in on the dock, Tom's excitement bubbled out as he struck up a conversation with a tall, lanky man whose ebony skin shone under sun-bleached dreadlocks trailing down his back.

"Hi, I'm Tom."

The man took Tom's outstretched hand, and his powerful grip almost took Tom to his knees. "Agwe," was all he said through a full-toothed grin, exposing a set of perfectly aligned, brilliantly white teeth.

"What's Agwe?"

"My name, mon, my name. It means Spirit of the Sea." The man's thick Jamaican accent required all Tom's attention to comprehend.

"Well, then pleasure to meet you. Are you on this ship, too?"

A rolling barrel laugh burst from the man's throat. "Am I on it? Mon, it's me ship."

Tom lifted an eyebrow. Childhood images of pirates that had made their way into his living room via the solitary television his family shared, flitted through his mind. Now, he was intrigued. *Add an eyepatch and my captain could be one of them.* Interesting indeed.

"It is your first time?"

“Oh, I’ve been sailing for about a couple of months now. But only on a lake, never out in the ocean.”

“Well ...” Agwe dragged the word out. “Pay attention, and you just might live to tell your children about taming the high seas.” He laughed again and strode away, leaving Tom bug-eyed and slack-jawed.

Tom wiped sweaty palms on his shorts and approached the check-in table, his confidence a bit shaken.

A pretty young woman—not much more than a girl really, sporting a deep tan and pixyish dark hair with a greenish-blue streak down one side—sat at the table with a pile of forms. She flashed a brilliant smile and blinked eyes that matched the ocean. “Well, hey you.”

Her familiar, deep southern accent threw Tom for a second, but then he smiled at her. “You’re not from around here are you?”

“How’d you guess? No, I’m from Alabama. Came over here three years ago for a two-weeker like you’re goin’ on and ain’t never gone home,” she said, her voice filled with an airiness that reminded Tom of the breezes on Lake Lanier. “Agwe hired me on as a mate.”

“We were practically neighbors then. Name’s Tom Giacano, from Georgia.”

“I’m Danie.” She searched for his name on a list that covered less than a single page. “Found you!” She handed him a stack of papers.

“You gotta fill these out. You can go on into that room over yonder.” She pointed behind her. “Grab yourself a coffee and pastry while you wait for Agwe. He’ll be in shortly.”

Tom took the forms and pen, dipping his head in acknowledgement. “Thank you kindly. So, you’ll be on the boat?”

She giggled. “Well, first, it ain’t a boat. It’s a ship. And yes, I’ll be out there with y’all.”

How is this little slip of a girl going to be of much use trimming the sails?

Turning to walk to the room, Tom caught sight of a strawberry-blonde ponytail swinging like a pendulum above the most perfect backside he’d seen in years. At first, this thought shocked him, but then something in his brain shifted. *Haven’t even looked at another woman in decades. Guess I can now.* He released a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

He scanned his shipmates, counting seven men and three women, one of them the owner of that ponytail, equally as enjoyable to look at from this angle. He surmised he was the oldest by at least two decades, except for ponytail-lady. *She looks to be closer to my age.* Better late than never, he figured.

After grabbing a steaming hot cup of black coffee, he took a seat across from the pretty lady and flipped through the papers. When he reached one with “Limited Liability” in large, bold, red ink across the top he paused to read every word. His heart raced and pounded in his temples. “Not liable for any injury sustained while on Cool Change. If needed, you can be airlifted back to Sydney at your own expense.”

In his line of work, preparedness was a natural as breathing, so he wasn’t worried about the money. Travel insurance would cover the cost. No, the insides of his mouth went dry and his

stomach quaked as an image of being flung over the bow assaulted his mind. *Maybe I should re-check my travel insurance.* He gulped his coffee, trying to wash down the fear of drowning, scalding his tongue in the process.

He glanced around the room, comparing himself to the rest of these would-be sailors. *Damn, I'm old. They must think I'm crazy.* He came close to standing up and leaving. *No! I've come this far, damn it. I will see this through.* His gaze drifted over to Ponytail as he thumbed the simple gold band on his left ring finger. He couldn't quite face taking it off. Not just yet.

"Okay, sailors! Listen up." Agwe's resonant voice bounced off the walls of the small room. Eleven sets of eager eyes turned in his direction.

"Today, we learn the lay of the ship, assign cabins and work details. Tomorrow, we sail into the Tasman Sea. Cool Change will be your home for two weeks. Anything over the thirty-three pounds you're allowed on board you can store at Billy Goat Locker—they give me passengers good rate." He pointed out the door, apparently to the dock. "When you return, all tanned and strong, you pick up. Questions?"

Six hands shot into the air. He noticed Ponytail's wasn't one of them. Tom waited also, thinking he'd let someone else ask all the stupid questions. *Maybe she's doing the same?*

"Do we sail at night?" one of the women ventured.

"Yes, we sail non-stop till we dock off Tasmania in nine days."

Tom watched as her eyes widened. *Guess I'm not the only one feeling apprehensive.* Maybe all were equally clueless and naïve.

"Anyone afraid of heights?" Agwe asked and two hands went up, one belonging to a rather rotund man who didn't look like he could climb anyway.

What on earth is a man like that doing sailing?

"Okay, no tower look-out for you. We cannot have you spinning out up there and falling into the ocean. Even if the sharks need to eat, too." His laughter was met with stone-cold silence. Tom would swear Agwe winked at him before calling on another person.

"How do we use the bathroom?" That question came from a man-boy who appeared too young to shave.

"The head," was all Agwe said, leaving what that meant for another time. The ship master outlined some of what to expect in the daily life as a sailor.

Tom thought he was prepared. After all, he'd researched this, reading three books on the topic. He'd packed enough anti-motion sickness pills to last more than the full fifteen days. And "always prepared" was his motto, so what could go wrong? Prepared, that is, until Agwe covered details Tom hadn't considered—like the possibility of a tsunami. An image of a twenty-story-tall wave crashed through his mind and he felt seasick while still on dry land.

"You will learn that your time on the seas is a dance with the forces of nature. Learn that dance and you will change in ways you cannot possibly imagine. Ignore the dance, and the next two weeks will be nothing but drudgery, and perhaps even hell. The sea ... she is always in motion, always in flux. One minute calm, the next a monster.

“Now, let us meet your crew.” Agwe waved to the door and five men and one woman entered. “You have already met Danie, my First Mate. Second in command only to me.” He jabbed his thumb into his chest and then proceeded to introduce the five men, who became a blur of bleached-out hair and brawny bodies.

“You will rotate through all of the work assignments, except you two landlubbers who do not like heights. You two will get extra kitchen duty, or perhaps latrine. We shall see.” He winked at the larger man whose mouth had sagged open. “Just kidding. There is always something for everyone to do on board ship.”

Agwe peered at his clipboard before continuing. “Let us go ‘round. You mates will spend two weeks in close quarters, so is best to know one another before you got no choice. Tom—tell us who you are, where you are from, how long you been sailing, and what you would like to get out of this voyage.”

Age before beauty I guess. Tom stood and looked around the room, rubbing his palms on his shorts, even though they were oddly dry. “Name’s Tom Giacano, from Athens, Georgia. I recently retired from Project Management after thirty-two years.” *Shit, this makes me sound even older.* “Uh, I ... Let’s see ... sailing experience would be spending every weekend for the past three months on Lake Lanier on daysailers and catamarans. This is my first ocean voyage and I seek ... adventure?” His voice lifted on that last word indicating how unsure even he was of this. *I sound like an old idiot. Is it too late to get a refund?*

“Adventure you say.” Agwe clapped his hands and roared. “Well, you certainly will have that here.” He pointed at the man-boy who’d asked about the bathroom. “You next.”

As each trainee and crew member introduced themselves, Tom grew increasingly nervous. That couple is planning to sail around the world after this. Even that heavy guy knows more than I do. I’ll probably slip off the deck and get eaten by a shark. Or tangle my neck in the halyard and strangle when no one’s watching. He again wiped his now sweaty palms on his pants.

Ponytail stood last. “Hi, I’m Suzette.” She gave a little wave, quirked her mouth and leaned her head to one side, in a coquettish way. Tom was instantly transfixed by this elfish woman with pale eyes and an Irish accent that brought to mind images of rolling green hills. A bridge of freckles arched across her nose and cheeks. “I’m on holiday from Tanzania and this isn’t my first voyage. I enjoy sailing with newbies. They remind me how much fun it is to learn new things.”

Tom thought he noticed a kind of sadness behind those eyes that didn’t match her upbeat voice. Perhaps he wasn’t the only one fleeing a broken life.

While Danie stepped them through the list of supplies each trainee was required to bring on board, along with those things to leave behind, Burl—whose muscles bulged like knotty growths on a tree, much as his name suggested—walked among the trainees checking boat shoes, ensuring the rubber grips were sound. It seemed that everyone had read the pre-travel information and was properly equipped.

Danie continued, “You can bring your smartphone, but it’s for emergencies and the occasional blog post of your trip. We’ve got a satellite uplink, but mostly you need your wits about you at all

times. Too much screen-time is a dangerous distraction. We've never lost a sailor and we intend to keep it that way."

A girl, who looked to be the youngest—maybe thirteen—rolled her eyes and huffed out a breath, slumping back into her chair.

A muscled blond with chiseled features named Wall, or Brick, or something like that—Tom wasn't paying enough attention during introductions to know—stood next. "You mates ready for a tour?"

Tom scanned the hull as he and the other trainees followed the man up the plank and onto the deck. As soon as Tom's foot hit the wood, the gentle rock of the water underneath replaced his nervousness with excitement. *I'm really doing this.* He inhaled the sea air, holding the breath longer than needed.

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Tom retched over the side of the ship for the third day in a row, unable to gain his sea legs, even with anti-nausea pills. He'd just finished wiping bile and seawater off his face, when Agwe joined him portside.

"Tom, my friend. I am not sure this sailing thing is working out so well for you."

"I'll get it. I just need ... to ..." Tom heaved again. Maybe Agwe's right. This sign I was born under, this sign of water ... perhaps ... it's some other kind of water, not the sea.

Suzette walked up, saw them, and turned in the other direction. She'd kept to herself the past three days, mostly doing her work in silence, observing.

"She is cute, no?" Agwe grinned and nodded toward where the woman disappeared out of Tom's sight.

Yes, *she is*. Tom thought it but didn't say it, preferring to keep those kinds of thoughts to himself. He didn't want to be crude.

"This ocean life, she ain't for everyone and as they say, 'the teacher will appear when the student is ready.' Perhaps your journey leads elsewhere."

When Tom stood, Agwe handed him two pieces of green cloth that looked like tiny sweatbands.

"But ... you are here now. Try this. These work sometimes better than anything else." Agwe slipped a band onto each of Tom's wrists and lined up a small protrusion over a soft gully between two bones. "When you feel liking barfing, press on one and then the other. If this does not fix you within the day, I am not sure anything will."

Agwe paused and sucked in the salty air, then patted Tom on the shoulder and walked away, leaving Tom pressing on the new buttons attached to his wrists.

An hour later, the heaving stopped and for the first time since setting sail, Tom looked at the water as something other than his enemy. He strolled to the front of the ship and found Suzette lounging with a book. While everyone else wore shorts and some even bikini tops, she dressed in a gauzy white material that covered almost every inch of skin and topped off her outfit with a tan

wide-brimmed hat. Her pint-sized legs stretched out in the sun, the cloth flapping like the sails in the breeze. Not wanting to disturb her, he stood and looked out over seas that had finally calmed. Cool Change rocked gently, not moving in any direction. A lull, Agwe had told him.

“You better now?” Her lilting voice came from behind him.

Tom turned and held up his wrists. “These things are miracles. I think I’m finally ready to get down to this sailing business.”

Moving toward the seat next to her, he asked, “Where’re you headed after this trip?”

She didn’t answer, but instead quirked her mouth to one side, and held up her left hand, a tiny gold band glinting in the sun, and shrugged her shoulders. Tom hadn’t seen the band during introductions and had been too busy heaving to notice before.

Warmth rode up from Tom’s chest and onto his face. “I didn’t mean ... uhm, yeah, I’m married, too. Just making conversation. Sorry.” He turned to walk away, but she called out, stopping him.

“Wait.” Relaxing her face, she smiled a broad, genuine smile that sent sparks of light dancing in her ice-blue eyes. “No, I’m sorry.” She huffed out a heavy sigh and shook her head. “I’m just so used to men hitting on me I keep my defenses up.” She waved to the seat.

He noticed that she hadn’t answered his question so he let it drop. Maybe she just didn’t like talking. They lounged like this until a wind kicked up. Agwe joined them on deck.

“Storm be a brewing, mates.” Agwe pointed to the horizon, then nodded toward the seats. “Life vest time. If it gets bad, you go below deck and the crew will handle everything.”

Tom looked where Agwe had indicated, but saw nothing but blue, not even a cloud. He did as he was told and strapped on a life jacket. In the short time that took, the wind had risen and dark clouds formed in the distance. A jagged strike of lightning broke the horizon, followed by a deep, ominous rumble of thunder. The crew came on deck, lowered and secured the mainsail, then each of the smaller sails. They clipped safety harnesses to their life vests to keep from being washed out to sea. Agwe had outlined this procedure during orientation, but Tom had seriously doubted such a thing would be needed. Now he gawked, frozen in place.

Burl yelled at him, “Get below deck. Now!”

He turned and realized that Suzette had already gone, apparently needing no convincing.

Tom gripped the step railing as the ship began to pitch. He lost his footing when it dipped, and he swung over the rail but didn’t let go.

“Where the hell did that water come from?” The large landlubber passenger, the one who was afraid of heights, huddled in one corner, gripping a rail bar. His eyes held a look of terror Tom didn’t quite comprehend.

It’s just a little storm, right? What am I missing? The thoughts had barely floated through his head when a rush of water sloshed over the coaming and through the open hatch, soaking him. Tom caught a mouthful of salty water and coughed.

“Hold on!” Agwe yelled from above.

Tom didn’t need prompting. He wrapped an arm through a rail and braced as another deluge of water hit him full in the face. He came up gasping. *How did I think I could do this? I don’t even like*

to swim. The shrieking wind almost drowned out the whir of the bilge pump. For the next two hours, he fought to stay upright as the ship lurched and pitched and groaned. Then just as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped, the violent seas replaced with a rolling rocking motion. And silence except for the pump.

Agwe called down, "Everyone okay?"

Soaked passengers called back as they assessed the injuries: lumps on heads, one twisted ankle, cuts and scrapes. They'd been lucky. No one was dead. All were shaken. Tom longed for dry land.

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I want to go home. Tom warred with himself while doing his required shipboard chores. It had been two days since the massive storm nearly capsized them a hundred miles out from Sydney. The ship had sustained some damage, but still limped toward Tasmania.

Water. That's all Tom could see. Water, now calm from horizon to horizon, flat. Not a single cloud broke the monotony of the crystal blue sky. A peaceful scene, but Tom was anything but peaceful on the inside.

I'm an idiot. I shouldn't have come. What was I thinking? These thoughts, and others, had hounded him since his near-drowning—at least in his mind—in the hull of this ship. He couldn't seem to break the almost mantra-like repetition.

"You've been awfully quiet." Suzette's musical voice startled him back to the present.

Tom turned and gave her a pained expression. He hated to admit his failure to this sprite. "Do you know that song about Brandy and his love and lady being the sea?" he asked her.

"Of course, *Brandy*, by Looking Glass. A song from *our* time. The youngsters on this ship probably wouldn't know it." Her gentle smile warmed his heart.

"I had actually convinced myself that I was meant to sign up for one of those cross-ocean voyages on a tall ship. That storm shook that crazy idea right out of me. Maybe my call to water, this sign under which I was born, isn't the sea. Although I can relate to that song, it's not me."

"I'm a water sign, too. I sail because it's so vastly different from my day-to-day life. Sailing is the one place where water is everywhere. So unlike my home in Tanzania."

Tom looked at her puzzled. He'd forgotten that part of her introduction. Now he wondered how this freckle-faced Irish girl had ended up in Africa.

"Being out here, battling the forces of nature, is a choice and a privilege, but it isn't for everyone. I certainly wouldn't want to be out here longer than two weeks," she added.

"I still love sailing, but right now all I want is dry land. Perhaps I'll stick to smaller bodies of water. And much smaller boats."

"Dry land, eh? You haven't seen dry land until you've been to the Serengeti in dry season. Perhaps you're right then about the sea not being for you." She looked out over the water, and Tom's gaze followed hers.

Tiny white caps now broke the surface as the wind lifted and billowed the sails.

“Don’t give up on a dream so easily.” Suzette turned back to him, the sun glistening off her moist eyes. “If not this water, there’s something else. You just have to look and be ready.”

Tom watched her turn away, the yellow gauze of her pants fluttering, wrapping around her delicate thighs. *What are you doing?* He brought himself up short at the idea that he was looking at her in this way. *You’re married for Christ’s sake. But am I? Really?* He gave his ring a bitter twist, pulled it off, and stuffed it into his pants pocket.

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Although plodding, the next few days brought them ever closer to the exotic-sounding island of Tasmania. Tom and Suzette shared several moments on deck and below. At least he thought they were moments. But his thoughts kept returning to the fact that she was married.

The night they dropped anchor off the shore of Tasmania, Tom stood at the railing watching moonlight flicker on the water. The sight, like tiny bits of jewels, was one he wanted to commit to memory. In case he never returned. As he breathed in the ocean air, he felt someone next to him and startled. Gasping, he grabbed the rail, tacky with dried sea spray.

“It’s beautiful out here, isn’t it? Magical almost.”

When Tom realized Suzette was standing only a breath away, he paused and released a heavy sigh. “I sort of lied to you before. I told you I was married ... and I am ... or I was. She left me a few months back and I took up sailing.”

Suzette laughed, and it was like warm honey pouring over his battered heart. “That’s okay. I lied too.” She flicked her eyes in his direction, catching his gaze in a playful stare.

“Wait. So neither of us is married?” It was his turn to laugh. *Of course I’m married. Aren’t I?* He thought again. “Here I’ve been avoiding you because ...” He stopped at what he knew would sound ridiculous.

“Because ... what?”

Although Tom couldn’t be entirely sure in the dim moonlight, he would swear she winked at him.

“Because I think you’re one of the prettiest and most intriguing women I’ve ever met.” There, he’d said it. His heart soared and then swooped into his belly as he waited for a response. *What the hell am I doing?* Feeling like an imbecile, he wanted to dive over the rail and disappear into the sea.

But then she smiled, deep dimples punctuating her pale cheeks. “Thanks. You’re not half bad yourself.”

Now his heart pounded, fluttering out a rhythm of possibilities. An electric silence pulsed between them. Tom wondered about her ring, but assumed if she wanted him to know she’d tell him, so he simply waited.

She finally broke the silence like the wind billowing the sails. “My husband died four years ago.” She paused, her gaze returning to the sparkling ocean. “Four years. Nine months. Three weeks. And ten days ago.”

“I’m ... so sorry.”

She shook her head. “Don’t be. I found out he wasn’t the man I’d believed him to be. A whole closet full of secrets. Left me an insane amount of money I didn’t even know he had.”

She huffed out a heavy sigh before continuing. “I spent a year sitting around our cottage in Galway, wallowing and wondering about all the things I hadn’t known about the man I’d married. Until I bored even myself. Fifty was too young to do nothing, so I joined the Peace Corps and went to Tanzania. I remembered how much I’d loved the country and its people when we went there on safari several years ago. After six months, I returned to Ireland, sold the house and almost everything I owned and moved there permanently.” She shrugged before continuing. “No kids, parents gone, nothing that would tie me to Galway.”

“And here I thought *my* mid-life crisis was intense.”

She moved closer and leaned her head on his shoulder. Tom lifted an arm and placed it around her waist, hesitantly, trying to not scare her off. Instead of pulling away, she nuzzled into the crook of his arm, before shifting and gazing up at him.

His body knew before his mind what he was going to do and he leaned in, kissing her softly, as if it was the most natural thing. He was alive. For the first time in a very long time, something beyond sailing exhilarated him and lifted him to a dizzying height.

They stayed entwined, lips exploring for what seemed like a long time. The sound of someone clearing their throat caused Tom to look up. Agwe was disappearing around the side of the cabin toward the hatch. Tom laughed and leaned back, staring into Suzette’s eyes.

“What do you do for the Peace Corps?”

“I work with this amazing organization called Save The Rain.”

Tom wrinkled his brow while a new idea about water tickled his brain, and asked, “How does one save the rain?”

“I use my engineering background to help villages gather water so school children don’t have to spend so many hours each day doing it. It’s challenging, but more rewarding than anything I’ve ever done.”

Tom shook his head. “School children?”

“Tanzania is this amazing country, but it is incredibly poor. Many villages have no access to potable, running water. It’s quite a sight to drive through rural areas and see people of all ages walking alongside the road carrying jerry cans. Instead of attending a full day of school, many children walk to and from distant gathering locations to help their families have enough clean water.”

Tom’s mind drifted back to his home in Georgia and long weekends spent watering his quarter-acre of green grass. Well, green if he watered it. If he didn’t, it would scorch and turn brown. He was suddenly consumed with guilt over his wastefulness.

“I had no idea. I’ve really never been anywhere except home and,” he said, waving his arm toward the rest of the ship, “and here.”

“You should really get out more. There’s a whole world of adventure a plane ride away.”

“I always wanted to go to Africa when I was a kid. I’d watch Wild Kingdom, pretending to be one of the big cats chasing a hyena.”

“The Maasai call the Serengeti ‘land that goes on forever’ or ‘endless plain.’ The land stretches for miles, broken only by scattered acacia trees. In dry season it looks like an undulating sea of tawny brown as the breeze flutters the tall prairie grasses. You could drive right past a lioness without ever seeing her because her color blends perfectly.”

“Really? They’re just roaming around loose?”

Suzette laughed. “It’s not a zoo. People pay big money to go on camera safari to see the wildlife. I’ve been a few times, always a different park. But if I go to the Serengeti, it’s always with my brother, Proseba.”

“You have a brother in Africa?”

She laughed again. “Not my literal brother. He adopts everyone who safaris with him. You spend a lot of time together and he makes it fun. I’ve been on the Serengeti three times now—twice to see the great migration of wildebeest and once during the dry season. The different seasons make it like going to two entirely unique places.”

Tom listened, his mind painting a picture from her words.

“I would love to do that sometime,” Tom said, wondering when that time might be. The idea of driving around amidst wild beasts chilled him. “What kinds of animals can you see?”

“Many of the larger tour groups—those in buses, mostly—seek the Big Five—lions, leopards, rhinos, African elephant, and the deadly Cape buffalo. Tour companies actually stole that phrase from African hunters. They refer to these as the five most dangerous animals to hunt on foot.”

Tom looked at her thinking she must be trying to fool him. “Buffalo are that dangerous?”

“The first time I stayed in a mobile tent camp, I met a young Maasai warrior who was our guard. We weren’t allowed to walk alone in camp after dark and the first night as he walked me to my tent, he shone his flashlight into some bushes far ahead. He said, ‘Buffalo. Very dangerous.’ When I asked him what he was most afraid of he waved his hand toward the hidden creature. ‘Buffalo. Many hunter killed—more than all other animals.’

“I could hear snorting and foot stomping coming from the bush. He told me ‘Maasai warrior not fear lion’ and explained that lions were actually afraid of them, because they used to hunt the males with nothing but a single spear, returning with its head, in order to become a man.”

“Wow. I had no idea.” The night winds shifted and picked up, whipping the tethered sails above his head.

“What do they call a gazelle on the Serengeti?”

Tom looked at her, puzzled. “Uh, a hooved deer?” he replied, shrugging his shoulders.

“Cheetah Burger.” Her laughter bounced off the night sky, delighting Tom.

She stifled a yawn and Tom said, “I guess it’s getting late.”

She took his hand and leaned in to kiss him. “Not *too* late.”

Her intense gaze met his, leaving no doubt she wanted him to join her. He followed her to her stateroom and quietly closed the door behind him, leaving his former married self behind forever.

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A blaring foghorn yanked Tom from a deep sleep and he awakened to find himself curled around Suzette's tiny frame. It felt right. Right in a way Anne never had. Sex with Anne had been perfunctory, when it happened at all. She had been his first. His only. Never had he questioned whether he was missing anything. Now, he knew he'd been missing everything.

Suzette stirred and rolled toward him. "Guess that means it's time."

"We could ... uh ... call in sick."

"Are you kidding?" She laughed and rose with seemingly no inhibition whatsoever, despite her fully exposed, alabaster skin. "It's Tasmania—one doesn't sleep through Tasmania!"

Tom, however, wrapped a sheet around himself, watching her every move, as she slid into blue gauze pants and shirt.

"Come on. We don't want to miss the transport."

"You go ahead. I'll be right there."

"Suit yourself," she said, and stepped out of the room.

Once she was gone, Tom dressed quickly. He peeked both ways outside her door before racing to the head. *Good, no one saw me.* This thought was immediately followed by, *who cares? I'm a grown man and if I want to sleep with a beautiful woman, no one has a right to say I can't.* He ran to his room and threw on clean clothes.

They spent the next three days wandering the island, often just the two of them, sneaking away from the others, exploring on their own, while exploring each other. A plan began to form in Tom's mind.

At the end of the third day, they walked back to the dock, arm in arm. Tom's entire body buzzed with the excitement of this new experience. Before he could reveal his plan to Suzette, she pulled him to her.

"I'm too old for games." Suzette paused and tilted her head, studying him. "Come back to Tanzania with me. Save the Rain can always use an experienced project manager." She paused again, hesitating. "Unless, you're in a hurry to get back home."

Tom creased his brows into a puzzled frown. "I could do that? Don't I need some kind of work visa or something?"

"You can stay in the country up to three months on a travel visa. Come with me and learn more. If you like it, you can work out the details. And by the way, we're all volunteers."

"That's not a problem."

"Then it's settled." She turned and climbed into the skiff that would take them back to the ship for the final eleven hour sail back to Sydney.

Settled? How can it be settled? Can I really simply not go home? Do other people do this kind of thing?

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Tom cradled Suzette in his arms on the last night of their adventure. He watched her as she slept, seemingly perfectly comfortable sharing her bed with him. He'd been watching her since the moment he met her, but now he felt a keen connection, unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Although he'd known her less than two weeks, it seemed as if he might be willing to follow her anywhere.

The next morning, Tom and Suzette walked off Cool Change together, hand-in-hand. When he left home over two weeks earlier, he thought his call to water was about sailing. He knew now that he'd been wrong. He was certainly stronger, but the man who boarded Cool Change was not the same man who disembarked. It was hard to believe, but he'd needed Anne to push him out of his safe cocoon in order to find himself. And to find Suzette.

While his fellow trainees-now-sailors returned to their normal lives, for only the second time in his life, Tom didn't know exactly what awaited him. He was headed for parts unknown with a woman who already held his heart in her hands. He was, indeed, called to water, but that call turned out to be so much more than he could have imagined.

A joy filled his heart and he pulled Suzette into a bear hug. The teacher had indeed appeared when this student was ready. "Thank you for being right where I needed to find you."

Tom was now home in a way Georgia had never been. Home in his skin, home in his heart.

The End

A reader who shares what they read with family and friends is the number one way of spreading the word. I humbly thank you for your support. Reviews are the lifeblood of an author. If you enjoyed *Love at Sea*, please take a moment to leave a review on Amazon, Bookbub or Goodreads, or wherever you prefer.

Also, be sure to check out my Women's Fiction, second chances love story novel, *Bridge to Us*, available at BridgeToUsBook.com

Since 2014, more than 30 of Jeanne's short stories and essays have been published in a variety of publications. Jeanne is currently working on her second and third novel at the same time—yes, crazy. When not writing, she gives back to the writing community in many ways, including serving on the board of her local guild, Saturday Writers, a 125+ member organization. She also spends her spring and summer writing by the pool or caring for her yard-full of tropical plants. She resides in St. Charles, MO with her fiancé and two dogs who believe they are tiny humans.