

A romantic couple, a man and a woman, are shown in a close embrace, looking at each other with smiles. The man is wearing a teal t-shirt and a watch, while the woman is wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans. They are standing outdoors in a tropical setting with palm trees and a clear blue sky. In the background, a large white lifeboat is visible on a platform. The overall mood is romantic and serene.

KAREN MALLEY

SOMETIMES
YOU NEED
TO BE SAVED

LOVE
IN A LIFEBOAT

A CHESTER COUNTY COUPLES NOVEL

Love in a Lifeboat

Karen Malley

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Cover Art by Nicola Martinez

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2025

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0508-8

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my loving husband Ray, who was more than happy
to take me on a cruise to help research this story.

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1

"Congratulations, Jan!"

Jan whirled around in her desk chair to find her coworker, Emily, her face lit with excitement. Emily was always excited about something. "What for?"

Emily practically bounced on her toes, clearly thrilled she knew something Jan didn't. "Didn't you hear? You won!"

Jan's stood and grabbed Emily's arm. "No way! The cruise? Are you serious?"

Emily's head bobbed up and down. "The email just came out. I can't believe you didn't read it."

"I was in the middle of a project." A project that wouldn't get finished any time soon if Emily was telling the truth. "I never thought my concepts would be good enough, so I almost forgot about it." Jan sat back in her chair and clicked open the email. Sure enough, there it was in black and white. The two winners of the cruise. Janice Richardson and Kyle Richardson. Her heart dropped. Not Kyle. Anyone but Kyle.

Emily leaned over Jan's shoulder, close enough that the scent of her citrus shampoo tickled Jan's nose. "How weird is it that the two people who won share the same last name? Huh. I never thought about it

before. Are you related to him?"

Jan rolled her eyes before turning back to Emily. She'd been asked that question at least a dozen times since Kyle started at the agency. "No. Richardson is a common last name. In a company of 500 people, it's not unusual there would be more than one person with the same last name."

Emily tucked her hair behind her ear. "Guess that makes sense. Do you know him?"

Oh, she knew him all right. Well enough to realize they wouldn't spend two minutes together on the cruise. "Not really."

"Well, I guess you will after you spend two weeks together. Gosh. You're so lucky. I wish I could go on a cruise. I'm not nearly good enough, but I'm learning so much."

Despite her trepidation about going on this trip with Kyle, Jan couldn't help smiling at the younger woman. "You're doing great. I didn't understand much when I first started, either. Still, I never expected to win."

"You and Kyle will have a super fun time."

"I hope so." They might, but not likely together. "What do you know about him?"

"He seems pretty chill." Emily flipped her hair over her shoulder. "Anyway, gotta fly. I'm meeting my bestie after work, so I better finish on time." She practically skipped down the hall.

Jan fell back against her chair. Emily's energy level was downright exhausting. Jan stared at the email. When the CEO announced the cruise contest, she

submitted her concepts, but never in a million years did she expect to win. She needed to call Beth. Beth worked at the agency until about a year ago when she left to open her own business. Except for a few additions to the agency in the past year, Beth knew all the same people Jan did. She'd have a thing or two to say about Kyle.

Jan missed seeing Beth in the office every day, but their friendship was still strong, even if Beth did try to get Jan to go to church with her entirely too often.

Beth picked up on the first ring. "What's up? You never call in the middle of the workday."

Jan couldn't keep the excitement from bubbling up inside her. "You won't believe what happened."

"Well, don't leave me hanging. Tell me."

"Addison-McCann landed a huge account with the King Star Cruise Line. They held a contest to design their new logo and branding concepts. The two people with the best concepts won free tickets to a fourteen-day cruise. They believe their marketers need to experience the cruise line for themselves in order to truly capture their brand."

"And you're calling me because you won, right? That's so exciting!" Beth squealed.

Jan couldn't help the flutter in her stomach. "It really is."

"You must be so proud. I always knew you were one of the best in the business. I'm glad the King Star folks recognized you for the talent you are. Who else won?"

Jan frowned. "Kyle Richardson. Of all the bad

luck."

"Oh, come on. He's a decent guy."

"He's a player."

"Not necessarily." Beth was silent for a moment.

"Are you still annoyed he asked me out?"

Jan huffed "Of course, not. What guy wouldn't ask you out over me? Sure, I had a little crush on him when he first joined the company, but he was out of my league. Do you remember the girl he brought to the first Christmas party?"

Beth laughed. "Oh, right. The one whose dress was cut down almost to her belly button?"

"Exactly. And the girl he brought last year wasn't much better. Yes, he's incredibly attractive, but he's clearly only after one thing. He likes gorgeous women and likes to show them off. Trust me. There's no way we'll get along on this cruise. This could be the longest two weeks of my life."

"Don't say that. It will be fun. I'm not well acquainted with Kyle, but from what I remember, he's a pretty nice guy. This could be the chance for him to get to know you."

Jan groaned. "It doesn't matter. The guy is shallower than a puddle in August. Don't get any ideas. This cruise is not some romantic excursion. It's about advancing my career. If this goes well, you could be talking to the newest director in the company."

"Life is about more than work."

Jan sighed. "I realize that. But I'm not interested in Kyle anymore. I want a guy who cares about more than a pretty face and a perfect body. Going on the

same cruise doesn't mean we'll spend much time together. The ship is enormous. I probably won't even see much of him. Besides, he's my biggest competition for the director position, considering he also won the contest."

"I suppose that's true. When do you leave?"

Jan scanned the email. "In two weeks."

"But you'll be gone over Thanksgiving."

"That's fine. It means I won't need to choose between spending the day with my mom and her latest deadbeat boyfriend or my dad and stepmom and their moody teenagers who don't want me around. Lying out by the pool with a fruity drink in hand sounds like much more fun."

"That's probably true." Beth paused for a beat. "Wait—you'll be gone for your birthday too!"

"It's not a big deal."

"It most certainly is. It's not every day a girl turns thirty."

Jan frowned. "I don't need to celebrate. It's just another number." One she'd prefer to forget. Turning thirty without even a prospect of a boyfriend was downright depressing.

"Nonsense. We'll figure something out," Beth said. "I have a client call in a couple of minutes. We'll talk later."

Jan disconnected and opened the King Star website. Better to think about the cruise instead of her impending birthday. She'd studied the website previously, analyzing their current brand strategy, but this time her focus was different. She scrolled to the

upcoming cruises to find the one she'd be taking. The ship left from New York, cruised to Bermuda, and continued further south to seven different islands. What an amazing adventure. She closed the browser and headed to the fourth floor. If she was spending two weeks with Kyle, it was time to learn a little more about him. Even with his horrible taste in women, he might at least be decent company.

She exited the elevator and moved toward the cubicle area where Kyle sat. Two voices carried over the cubicle walls.

"I can't believe you won, man," a male voice said. Jan stopped on the other side of the cubes. This could be her chance to learn a thing or two about her competition. The voice sounded like Martin, one of the copy editors. He continued. "I wish they held a contest for the editors. You brand-concept guys get all the glory."

Yep, definitely Martin. She stepped closer to hear Kyle's reply.

"Yeah, sorry. Editing isn't as exciting."

"This could be your ticket to the director position."

Jan's stomach clenched. Kyle was gunning for the promotion. Her promotion. Ugh. This trip could be a disaster. Still, there was no reason she'd spend any time with him. The ship would be filled with people. Potentially even other singles. She'd ignore Kyle, study everything about the cruise line, land her director position, and enjoy it to boot. It would be perfect.

"Are you allowed to take anyone with you?" Martin asked. "Could be an awesome romantic

getaway for you and your girlfriend."

Jan didn't wait to listen for more. So much for Beth's idea. Kyle was attached. Of course, he was. Probably another gorgeous shallow model-type. All the better. It would make it easier to ignore him on the trip. She hadn't considered whether she could take a guest. Not that there was anyone to take. Her on-again off-again relationship with Alex never got serious enough for her to invite him on a two-week vacation. Besides, she'd never hear the end of it from Beth if she brought it up. Alex made it obvious he wasn't interested in a relationship. Still, he kept her from being lonely when he was in town. She frowned. She'd had no contact with him in almost six months. How sad was it that he was the closest thing she had to a possibility for a guest?

Still, this trip was about work. She couldn't let any guy impede her goal. She'd get the promotion whether or not Kyle wanted it.

~*~

Kyle shook his head. "No, Courtney and I broke up a while ago. I'll be going solo on this trip."

Martin clapped him on the shoulder. "Sorry, man. She was hot."

Kyle grimaced. "Yeah, she's definitely attractive, but we want different things out of life. We grew apart since I rededicated my life to Christ earlier this year."

"You were too preachy for her, I take it?"

"Perhaps. I also realized she only cared about

herself. Yes, she's gorgeous, but it's insane how much time she spent getting ready for any outing. And such drama over simple things like a broken nail. I don't need that," Kyle said.

"Maybe you'll find a new girl on the cruise."

"I'm not going on the cruise searching for a girlfriend." Kyle picked up a pen and spun it in his hand. "I'm going to have a fantastic vacation and learn everything I can about the King Star brand."

"And try to grab a sweet promotion while you're at it."

Kyle grinned. "Yes, that too." He swiveled his chair toward the computer screen and peered at the email. "Do you know Janice?"

"Yeah, she goes by Jan. She was tight with Beth Tarrington. Remember her?"

Kyle swiveled back around and pointed his gaze at Martin. "Yeah. Super-rich woman whose dad is a senior partner at Henry, Chase, and Tarrington. I asked her out when I first started here. She turned me down flat."

"Yeah, you're not in her league. Her family is a big deal around here."

"I gathered that. So Janice is Jan, her sidekick?"

"Yep."

Kyle groaned. "Great. Just what I need. Two weeks with an entitled, spoiled woman. She probably thinks her friendship with the Tarringtons will get her the promotion. Probably didn't even earn the spot. I imagine she's been on a hundred cruises already."

Martin's brow furrowed. "I'm not sure. She

doesn't quite fit the type."

"Either way, it doesn't matter. It's a big ship. I'm sure we won't even run into each other."

2

Jan dropped her bag on the floor and flopped on the sofa. Pepper jumped up and nuzzled her hand. Jan pulled the cat into her lap, stroking her silky fur. "What will I do without you for two weeks?"

Pepper settled against her, purring at the attention.

"More importantly, what will I do with you for two weeks while I'm away?" She pulled out her phone and searched local kennels. Holy cow! Cat boarding cost at least \$20 a night. At fifteen nights, it would be at least \$300. So much for a free trip. She'd ask Beth and her housemate Erin to watch Pepper for her while she was gone. Beth would be busy getting ready for her big night tonight, but maybe she could catch her for a few minutes.

She shot off a text.

Do you have a second to chat?

A moment later, Jan's phone rang.

"You're still coming to the play tonight, right?" Beth's voice was breathless.

"I wouldn't miss it, why?"

"Jason has something up his sleeve. He's been acting funny all week."

"Maybe he's nervous since it's opening night."

"That's crazy. He's been acting in community theater for years now. This is our third play together, and I've never seen him like this before. I want you to tell me what you think after the show."

Jan laughed. "I remember having a conversation like this last fall. Remember when you wanted me to go with you to his school's fundraising carnival to check him out?"

"Yes, I remember." Beth's smile came through in her voice. "He's so handsome in his magician's suit. Wow. That carnival feels like forever ago."

"Yeah, you guys have been together a long time. I'm happy for you. He's a good guy."

"He's a good guy because he loves God," Beth said.

Irritation rose. "So you can't be a good person unless you're a Christian?"

Beth's sigh blew into the phone. "I didn't mean that, and you know it."

Jan lifted Pepper off her lap.

Pepper yawned, stretched, and leaped off the sofa.

"I know you think I need to change." Of course, she would. There was so much about Jan that needed to change. It wasn't a simple thing to do, though.

"I love you just the way you are, but becoming a Christian would make your life so much better."

Jan stood and moved to the kitchen. "Going on a two-week cruise and getting a promotion will make my life better. Speaking of which, would you and Erin be willing to watch Pepper while I'm gone?"

"It's fine with me, but let me check with Erin."

Hold on."

Jan opened the fridge to survey the contents while she waited.

A moment later, Beth returned. "No problem. We're happy to host your furball."

Jan grinned. "Awesome. Thank you so much. She's a sweet cat. You'll love having her around."

"If you say so. Now I better go. We're supposed to be at the theater by six. Doors open at seven."

"Yes, you told me already. The show starts at 7:30, but I should come by 7:00 to get a good seat. Stop being nervous. You'll do great. And I promise I'll keep an eye on your boyfriend to figure out why he's acting funny."

"When you put it like that, it sounds weird."

Jan laughed. "It is weird. But you're weird. That's why you're friends with me."

"I guess so. See you tonight."

"Break a leg."

Jan rummaged through the fridge. Jackpot. She still had some leftovers from the other night when she'd visited Beth and Erin. Erin was an amazing cook and always sent leftovers home with Jan. Jan was a decent cook, but she'd rather eat Erin's cooking any day. She wasn't as addicted as Rusty, Erin's boyfriend. She couldn't help smiling, thinking of the two of them. Erin and Rusty were so cute together. And Erin's son, Oliver, was absolutely adorable. He'd turned two a few months ago and was a tiny ball of energy. Erin experienced some rough times in the past, but her life was certainly good now. It gave Jan hope. No matter

what her mother said, there could be a guy out there for her. Like Rusty, or like Jason. A guy who would love her for who she was. She scowled. Not likely she'd find a guy who didn't think she should lose weight. Well, it didn't matter now. She pulled the container of leftovers from the fridge and popped it in the microwave.

Two hours later, Jan settled next to Erin as the house lights dimmed.

The curtain opened, and Rusty, Jason, and Beth appeared on stage.

For the next ninety minutes, Jan laughed and cried at the antics of her friends. When the show ended, she and Erin sprang to their feet along with the rest of the audience, clapping wildly.

"What a wonderful show." Erin's eyes were focused on Rusty, who blew her a kiss. She beamed and continued applauding.

"It really was, even if you are a little biased." Jan shook her head at the obvious affection between the two of them.

The cast took another bow and Jason moved to the front of the stage. The audience quieted and returned to their seats.

Erin's hand flew to her mouth.

"What's your brother doing?" Jan whispered.

Erin practically bounced in her seat. "I knew he planned to do it tonight, but not on stage."

"Do what?"

"Shhh! Watch!"

Jan turned her attention from Erin back to the

stage.

Jason's voice rang out over the audience. "Many of you have attended our productions here at the Chester County Community Theater for years. This is my eleventh production, and I've been blessed to be a part of this community. Many of you were with us last fall, when I played Detective Andrews, who was secretly in love with Countess Wentworth, played by the lovely Beth Tarrington." He gestured to Beth, whose face flushed red, even under all the stage makeup.

She did a little curtsy and joined Jason at the front of the stage.

What was Jason up to?

"Opening week of last fall's show last year marked the beginning of our relationship. Our first kiss was on this stage. Because so much of our relationship has taken place on this stage, I thought it only fitting the next phase of our relationship begins here as well."

"Is he doing what I think he's doing?" Jan whispered to Erin.

Erin nodded and her eyes filled with tears.

Jan turned her attention back to the stage.

Jason dropped to one knee and took Beth's hand.

Beth's eyes widened.

"Beth, you are the light of my life, and my greatest blessing. I want to close my eyes with you beside me every evening and wake up to your face every morning. I want to live my life with you by my side." He pulled a ring from his pocket and held it out. "Will you marry me?"

The theater was silent as all eyes stared at Beth.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Yes, yes, of course, I'll marry you!"

Jason slipped the ring on her finger, sprang to his feet, and captured her mouth with his.

The audience, only a beat behind, rose and burst into a second round of applause.

Jan stared at the stage in astonishment. Beth and Jason were engaged. Sure, she figured it would happen one day, but she didn't expect to be a witness.

Erin grabbed her and hugged her. "Beth will be my sister-in-law!"

Jan laughed and gave Erin a squeeze. "Congratulations. I'm sure she'll be a great addition to the family." Beth was so blessed. Jason was a great guy. Would it ever work out for her? She didn't get much time to wallow in self-pity, because moments later, Jason and Beth arrived, and she was swept up in the congratulations.

Jan hugged Beth, who was grinning from ear to ear. "I think I figured out why Jason has been acting strange lately."

Beth laughed. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure this explains his behavior."

"Were you surprised?"

"Shocked. I told him I wanted to take things slow. Since the last time I got engaged after only six months of dating, I told him we needed to date at least a year before I'd consider it."

Jason draped an arm around Beth's shoulders. "So I waited a year and a day. But no more waiting. I want a very short engagement. How about a Christmas

wedding?"

Beth's eyes nearly bugged out of her head. "You can't be serious. That's in six weeks! I couldn't possibly plan a wedding in six weeks. My mother spends more time planning a cocktail party."

Jason's brow wrinkled. "OK, we'll wait until New Year's. But no longer. I've been waiting for an entire year now. You told me a year before getting engaged. No one said anything about waiting to get married. How hard can it be to pull a wedding together?"

Jan and Beth caught each other's gaze, and both rolled their eyes.

"Men," Jan said.

"Always clueless," Beth said.

Jason's gaze flitted from one woman to the other. "What am I missing?"

Beth took his hand. "You've met my mother. There's no way to pull off a Tarrington wedding in that amount of time."

"Let's not. We'll make it simple. We'll only invite our closest family and friends."

"Easy for you to say. Your family is tiny."

Jan stepped away, letting them figure out their wedding plans. She turned to Erin, but she was deep in conversation with Rusty. Jan slipped out of the auditorium. Alone.

A gust of November wind brought a flutter of leaves across the sidewalk, and Jan pulled her coat tight. Sure, she was happy for her friends, but it was hard being the only single person around the blissful couples. Would she ever find the right guy? Maybe she