

Chapter One

Sushi and Cruise Ships

Yancy Dellacort never planned to be single again. Never thought that his companion of the last thirty-five years would run out of months and then days so quickly. The cold, unfeeling hand of fate reached out and crushed his perfect life with such ferocity that for months he wasn't sure continuing by himself was worth the effort. Nevertheless, he had promised her that he would soldier on and, following his friends' urging, he was shoved into the daunting task of finding a companion via the cesspool of online dating.

His initial foray into the digital dating universe lasted less than three weeks. He had spent the weekend writing a comprehensive, coherent, and truthful profile only to have dozens of semi-literate responses flood his inbox. Clicking on some of them, Yancy noticed several of the photos were the same, despite the person having a different name, profile, and even one where the person wore sunglasses.

Their profiles were full of typos, misspellings, and comments that made absolutely no sense. Many of them had photos that were easily ten years younger than the actual person. He met several of the women at a group cocktail party sponsored by the website and commented about the differences and discrepancies. No one was willing to admit to their true age even after he confronted them.

Three different women at the cocktail party had identical photos, and in one of the shared pictures, he could clearly see the old date from a live newscast captured on a television in the background. The newscast added five years to the photos. When he questioned the women about the accuracy of their dates, one of them took him aside and cautioned him about asking too many questions.

He met a woman online who worked in the same building as his accounting firm. They arrived at work at the same time five days a week. Yancy didn't know her name, but she had hair as white as a sheet of paper, she wore glasses that were thicker than the average magnifying glass, and had been discussing social security with one of his partners. Her online dating profile lopped off a dozen years, had a photo of the woman with luxurious red hair, and of course, no glasses.

Yancy deleted his profile and blocked the site from his email and smartphone.

A month later, after several unsuccessful dates arranged by coworkers and friends, he went back online with a new profile, not as fraudulent and misleading as all the other ones on the site, but not one-hundred-percent truthful. He found some great photos from a trip to Jamaica with him fifteen pounds lighter, with a great tan, and wearing a swimsuit that emphasized his manhood. They were only three years younger than him, but his receding hairline hadn't moved any further back from his forehead in that time.

Instead of senior staff accountant, he gave himself the title of Chief Financial Officer, and claimed an income that was more than he could ever make in five years. He figured that if it ever came down to comparing tax returns, he could dazzle his way through it just as he'd danced around IRS adjusters for his entire career.

He was only a few months short of sixty. In his profile, he stated his age in the mid-fifties. For hobbies, he checked skydiving, scuba, and waterskiing, never having tried any of those sports but friends who had used online dating insisted that athletic people had a much high rate of success in finding partners than those who checked quilting, cooking, and crossword puzzles.

He assumed that the responses were just as full of inaccuracies, fakes, and outright lies as they were before. Nonetheless, he went on a few dates. One woman drank herself into a stupor before their appetizers were served in a restaurant that offered a twenty-five-dollar baked potato as a side dish. Another claimed to be six foot tall. Yancy was six foot one. In reality, the woman was half a foot shorter, and that was with high heels.

He dated two different women who only wanted sex. Neither was unattractive, but Yancy didn't feel ready to resume that part of his life.

Once again, Yancy abandoned the dating site and was becoming convinced that life as a single man was preferable to an online career of worthless emails, annoying texts, and expensive dates that ended with his signature on a credit card receipt for a meal that was cold by the time he ate it.

Yancy once swore that he would never take another cruise. His last seafaring adventure was a one-way trip to Alaska from Seattle with their return leg on an airplane. The sun shone for exactly fifteen minutes, and that was on the day they departed from the Port of Seattle. There was so much rain that the onboard swimming pool overflowed, the infirmary was packed with ankle sprains and concussions from guests slipping on the rain-soaked decks, and the gift shop sold out of cheap ponchos and hoodies.

However, as the first anniversary of his wife's passing approached, an offer for a singles-only cruise popped into his email. He was about to delete it, but a junior accountant who occupied the cubicle next to Yancy was standing behind him while he reviewed the woman's work on a complex spreadsheet.

She grabbed his hand off the mouse before he had a chance to click and send the offending message to the trash folder. "That's your answer, Mr. Dellacort."

Holding his hand in the air, Yancy shook his head. "Marla, what did I tell you about that Mr. Dellacort business?"

The woman smiled. "My bad. Look Yancy, I know it's been almost a year, but you're still young and in good shape. Online dating is a three-ring circus with nothing but clowns. Cruising is for singles with money, and we're talking about six-figure incomes. My cousin went on one of those cruises and met a man who she married three months later. She'd just turned fifty-seven, and the guy was sixty. Life doesn't end at sixty. You just have to reinvent yourself."

Leaning around him, she pointed at the photo of the ship—the Wind Seeker. "Wow, that's one of their newest vessels. I did some work for a rival cruise company before coming here. They've got a great reputation for quality and service. And with less than a thousand passengers, it's almost like having your own private yacht."

"I'd rather have root canal than get on a boat with a bunch of fakers and posers." Yancy snatched the mouse and hovered the pointer over the delete button. "Can you imagine being trapped on a boat in the middle of the ocean with a bunch of people who are not who they say they are? Online dating is bad enough, but at least all I have to do is logoff and they go away. What happens at sea? Do you get to throw the fakers overboard?"

"God, you are both stubborn and misinformed." Marla put her hands on her hips and blew out a sharp breath. "First off, online dating sites are inexpensive. Look at the price for the cheapest cabins on that ship. Not a single one is less than two-thousand dollars. That's a hell of a large chunk of anyone's income to invest in dating. Second, there's no way for the people on that ship to hide their age or what they really look like. Photos can lie. In-person meetings make it impossible to hide the truth about someone's appearance."

Yancy was unconvinced. "What about makeup, wigs, elevator shoes?"

Marla shrugged. "Yeah, some folks will try gimmicks like that, but unless you're blind or sitting in a dark room, you'll have no trouble spotting the fakes."

"Okay." He pursed his lips. "So, let's say I book this cruise and meet a woman on the first day. What happens if it doesn't work out while we're onboard? The cruise is seven days long. Now, I'm trapped on the damn boat with someone who sees me as a failed relationship. She'll be talking trash about me to the other women, and that will just make it harder to meet them." Yancy shook his head. "It's a bad idea unless I meet someone and we're a match."

"Yancy, your negativity is only going to work against you." Sighing, she took the printouts from his desk. "From what I hear around the office, you're spending a lot of time at the tavern across the street. Do you really want to meet a woman in a bar?" She took a step back, but stopped and cocked her head to the side. "I thought you didn't drink?"

During his lunch break at his desk, Yancy studied the cruise company's website in detail, letting the meatball sandwich from the lunch cart grow cold and soggy. The company specialized in singles cruises, having converted from a family-oriented operation a few years before. Their ships had the highest rating possible from various websites that rated vessels. Every aspect was considered, starting with the quality of the guests. All of the photos showed happy, smiling passengers holding flutes of champagne. Many of them looked his age.

A nice cabin with a balcony on the Wind Seeker was five-thousand dollars, but it came with a thousand dollars worth of casino credits. The head chef had worked in a Michelin star restaurant, so the food offerings were both unique and tempting. Yancy had been eating out alone for most of the past year and found sushi bars to be the most accommodating to the solo diner. The sushi bar onboard the ship boasted the freshest fish prepared by a team of Japanese masters.

While most of the meals appeared to take place in a huge dining room, they were buffet style, which was not his favorite, but the ship also featured a steakhouse and an Italian restaurant with extensive menu options.

The website was designed to hook new passengers with flashing banners that read, "Meet the love of your life. Depart single, return engaged. We have priests and rabbis onboard to marry you - no extra charge!" Yancy read their blurbs aloud, laughing with each ludicrous claim. Leaning over to the junior accountant, he pointed at his screen. "They even have a supply of wedding rings in all the popular sizes."

"It's the tenth of June. Tax season is long gone. You owe yourself a vacation and a fresh start on your search for a..." Marla raised her eyebrows expectantly. "A wife?"

Yancy was scrolling through the list of available cabins and spun around in his chair. "Let's not get carried away." Turning back toward his screen, he shrugged. "It's tempting. I should ask in the dating site's online chat room if anyone has tried cruise dating."

The junior accountant let out long, exasperated breath. "No. Just go and have a root canal instead."

He logged off a few minutes after six and walked a few blocks to his usual sushi bar. Taking the seat marked "Reserved" in front of his favorite chef, he powered up his laptop and greeted the man in Japanese.

"You drinking or driving tonight, Mr. Dellacort?"

"Convince me to take the train and I'll be drinking."

The chef held up a piece of fatty tuna. "We cut it fresh an hour ago."

Yancy turned to the server who'd followed him in. "Snow Beauty."

"Big or small bottle, Mr. Dellacort?"

"The night is young. Let's go with the big bottle." He looked up at the chef. "And bring a glass for Chef Hiro."

The chef bowed. "You go home by car service tonight, Mr. Dellacort. My treat."

"Hiro, you're truly a prince among men." Yancy logged on to the restaurant's Wi-Fi router and opened the cruise line's webpage. Looking up at the chef, he smiled. "How long have you been married, Hiro?"

"First wife was five years. Married to second wife for six years." The chef sliced off a piece of the fatty tuna and pressed it onto an oblong ball of rice. "Not sure if she going to be here next year. Might have to find wife number three."

"Oh?"

Hiro put down the knife and leaned across the counter. "She wants children."

"And you don't?"

"I want pony. She says, no pony. I want sailboat. She says, no sailboat. I want new car. She says old car still works. No need to buy new car." Shaking his head slowly, Hiro lifted the knife and sliced off another piece of tuna. "I think I need new wife that wants what I want."

Yancy laughed. "Let me know when you find a woman who wants the same things as you."

"You still looking for new wife?"

Closing his eyes for a moment, Yancy opened them and sighed. "Honestly, I'm not sure what I'm looking for anymore, Hiro."

The chef cut one more piece of tuna and laid it on the plate. He added a small pile of wasabi and several chunks of marinated ginger before handing the plate to Yancy.

"You eat toro, drink sake, and forget about women for a while." Hiro winked at him. "The more sake you drink, the easier it is to forget. Trust me. I have sake when I come to work and more before I go home. Forgetting is good sometimes."

The waitress returned with the 750ml bottle of unfiltered Snow Beauty sake and two glasses that she placed alongside the sushi. Shaking the bottle to mix the liquid and minute grains of rice into a thick cloud, she twisted off the cap and filled the two glasses halfway. Yancy handed one cup to the chef and the held the other in midair.

"Kampi." He smiled and gulped the icy beverage.

Hiro echoed the toast and took a sip. "Too many customers right now, Mr. Dellacort. You be here for a while?"

Yancy refilled his cup and nodded. "No place else to go right now, Hiro. Just you, me, and a big-ass bottle of sake."

As the evening diners flowed into the sushi bar, the hostess did her best to keep the seat to Yancy's left unoccupied. He'd done her taxes this year and refused to charge her anything as long as he had privacy in the sushi bar. Seated at the far end, he could relax without having to deal with strangers who, unlike him, wanted to make conversation. Most evenings, the hostess was successful keeping the last available seat unoccupied by putting a Reserved card on the bar by that seat. Occasionally, the restaurant got too busy, and she was forced to seat someone there, apologizing profusely to Yancy after they'd eaten and left.

Earlier that afternoon, the hostess had taken a reservation for eight that was due to arrive moments after Yancy sat down at the empty, nine-seat sushi bar. The party of eight walked in the door just as he was refilling his sake cup for the third time. All women. All Asian. All taking a seat at the sushi bar.

Yancy closed his laptop and slid it to his right, covering it with his napkin.

The woman who'd taken the normally vacant seat turned and wished him good evening in Japanese. Yancy replied in kind and then asked, in English, if the group had ever eaten there before.

"I eat here at least twice a week, and I'd be happy to give you some recommendations."

"This is our first time. We work at the Embassy. We arrived together on June 1st from Tokyo." She turned and spoke in Japanese to the other women. "Are you alone?"

By any definition of the word, she was stunning. Short-cut black hair, green eyes, and the most perfect smile a dentist could ever hope to polish. Yancy's words stuck in his throat. Coughing into his napkin, he managed to throw his voice back in gear.

"Yes." He nodded. "Yes. I'm alone. But my friend, Hiro," Yancy glanced at the chef. "Is the best company a single man could ask for." Balling up his napkin, he placed it to his right and held out his hand. "Yancy Dellacort, certified public accountant and sushi expert."

The woman hesitated for a moment and then shook his hand. "I am Ritsuko Takajima. I am the senior embassy translator. These other women are from the Technical Services division." She smiled. "My job is to teach them English."

Yancy looked down the line of women into seven pair of eyes that were locked so tightly on his face that he could feel the pull of their collective gaze as though gravity had shifted.

"They look very young to be in the diplomatic service."

Ritsuko turned and translated his comment, which brought blushes, chuckles, and downward glances from the group.

"Kiko, on the far end, is the youngest. She will be thirty-years-old next month." She sighed. "I am thirty-nine and still unmarried."

In a split second, Yancy did the math in his head, estimated the odds, and decided the sushi could wait.

"I'm twenty years older than you." He shrugged. "Okay, almost twenty-one."

"You are married?" She pointed at his wedding ring.

"I was." Yancy had almost reached the point of acceptance in the grief process where he no longer hesitated to talk about his late wife's fate. Even chatting with Marla at work, a lump would form in his throat and he would change the subject. However, he'd already had a few drinks and his tongue was loose. "Thirty-five years. She passed away a year ago."

Ritsuko took his hand. "I am so sorry for your loss."

"Thanks, but I've moved on." He held her hand up closer to his face. "You have beautiful fingers. Not just the nails, but your skin is so smooth that even the smallest wrinkles seem to fade away."

"You are a hand expert, Mr. Dellacort?"

"Please, call me Yancy." Taking a deep breath, he slowly released his grip on her hand until she pulled it away. "I've always had a thing for women's hands. True beauty begins at the fingertips."

Blushing, Ritsuko folded her hands in her lap. "Did your wife have beautiful hands?"

He nodded. "Soft as a baby's cheek. She filed them to perfection but never used nail polish."

"So, she must have been a beautiful woman."

Yancy sighed, drank the sake from his cup, and then smiled. "Okay, enough of my past. Let's talk sushi."