

## *Overboard*

by

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Was she hallucinating? A voice, out in the middle of the ocean? But then it came again.

“Hold on! I’m nearly there!”

Ash opened salt-stung eyes, to have them immediately speared by the sun peeping over the horizon. She squeezed them shut, made the huge effort to turn her head, and opened them again.

Through the sunspots she saw a big catamaran sailing yacht backing slowly towards her, sails flapping free, a man crouching on the boarding step of the nearest transom. Twin outboards mounted on the bridge-deck backboard idled in reverse. Between them she saw the yacht’s name in raised olive-green and shiny metal letters: *Peridot*.

Overwhelming relief, before everything went black.

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Kneeling on the cockpit floor with a bucket of hot water, Jeff gently sponged the salt off the naked young woman. To be so cold, she must have been in the warm tropical ocean for a long time. She’d be dehydrated; he’d have to wake her up enough for her to swallow some liquids.

He found it impossible to remain detached as he washed her. She was slender and small, a bit over 160 centimetres, but nicely curved and toned. Her shoulder-length hair would probably dry to blonde. He was sure she’d come up a beauty when the blue tinge to her skin faded. Her age could be anywhere from eighteen to mid-twenties.

He stood up, supporting her, gave her as vigorous a rubdown as he could with one hand, then picked her up and carried her to the bed.

“You’d have to be the best piece of flotsam I’ve ever picked up.”

Then he went to reset the sails, punching a button on the GPS in passing to log the time and exact position of the pickup.

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Ash woke to a reddish glow of sunset. She was dry and warm, in a comfortable bed, dressed in an oversize man’s T-shirt. Her eyes were gummy from some salve, and the muscles in her hands and arms ached, but she felt okay otherwise. Physically, anyway. She had a vague memory of being shaken awake to drink water, followed by warm milk and honey.

She smelt something delicious, and was immediately so ravenous she couldn’t help moaning.

“Ah, the Sleeping Beauty awakes.”

A man came to stand over her, looking down with warm brown eyes. He was tall and lean, with a bare well-muscled chest and shoulders. His concerned, tanned face sported a short

dark-brown stubble. A face she thought she could trust. His thick tousled hair was a shade lighter than the beard.

“Thank you so much for rescuing me,” she croaked, cleared her throat and added, “What’s that wonderful smell?”

“Minestrone. I thought that’d suit you best after your ordeal.”

“Hell, yes! I’m drooling. But I need the loo first. *Urgently.*”

He chuckled. “Think you can walk?”

“With a little help, maybe.”

He pulled back the covers, swung her legs to the deck, helped her up and supported her to a door he opened to reveal the head. In spite of her internal discomfort, she couldn’t help noticing how well she fitted under his armpit.

“Right. Now to work it—”

“It’s okay. I know this model.”

He raised his eyebrows — nice eyebrows — but didn’t comment.

When she emerged, he was setting two large steaming bowls on the cabin table.

“Okay,” he said. “Introductions, dinner, then tell me how you came to be clinging to a Styrofoam fruit tray off the Great Barrier Reef. I’m Jeffrey Barrett.”

“Ashley ... Lennox, former housewife. Call me Ash.”

Those eyebrows went up again. “I sense a story in that pause, Ash. Eat up, and call me Jeff.”

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Jeff served coffee, then sat and looked at her. “So?”

She sighed, and said, “I guess it really started four years ago. I was with my parents on holiday in Christchurch, Enzed. We were having lunch when the big earthquake struck.

“The roof and upper floor fell in. My parents ... were killed, but I got off with bruises.”

“I’m sorry. To lose them so soon...”

“Yeah.” She gulped. “Anyway, I knew Dad was rich, but had no idea *how* rich. As the only child, I came into an obscene amount of money.”

“And then the fortune hunters started circling?”

“No, I kept it secret. When I married David Maloney, he knew I had money, but he didn’t guess how much until he sneaked a look at my tax return.

“When he saw I give thirty grand a year to charities, he went apeshit. Then I made the mistake of telling him to calm down, I could afford it, and it didn’t even touch the principal.”

“I think I can see where this is going.”

Ash nodded. “David is a top-gun real-estate agent. Mainly because he’s very charming.”

“So are a lot of sociopaths.”

“Indeed. This was near the end of our first year of marriage, and I was starting to see through the charm. David suggested a cruise for our first anniversary, ‘to rekindle the flame’.”

Jeff raised his eyebrows, picking up the quotation marks in her bitter tone.

“Go on.”

“It rained last night. That kept everyone indoors.”

“We had a balcony suite, on the top deck. David called me out on the balcony, said he had a surprise for me. Ha!

“He sure did. He picked me up and *threw me overboard!*”

“Hell! It’s a wonder you survived the fall!”

“I was lucky. I used to be the school swimming champ, so I knew how to dive. It nearly knocked me out, though, and ripped off my nightdress.

“I went so deep, I thought I’d never regain the surface. But that probably saved me from being sucked into the propellers.”

“You poor kid! But how come the Styrofoam tray?”

“Maybe they threw it off the ship with other rubbish. It frightened me to death, when I saw it blowing along before the wind. My first thought was *great white shark*, but then it sailed past about ten metres away, and I swam like hell to catch it. That saved my life.”

Jeff grinned. “It sure did. I had to prise your fingers out of it. You’ve probably still got Styrofoam crumbs under your fingernails — hey!”

Ash had been conscious of a TV whispering away behind her. She saw Jeff snatch up a remote and key up the volume. She whipped around as a voice said, “Mr Maloney, can you tell us about the last time you saw your wife?”

David’s artistically ravaged face filled the screen. “She — she went out on the balcony of our suite. Said she wanted to watch the sunrise...” He choked.

Ash choked, too, but with rage. “What a bloody *actor!*” she snarled.

“If only I’d gone with her! B-but we’d drunk a bit too much the night before, and I dozed off again—”

“Liar! We only had a couple of wines!”

“—thought she must have gone to breakfast, but I didn’t see her there. When she didn’t turn up for lunch I got worried, and informed the captain. He had the ship searched, and it wasn’t until about five that he raised the alarm.”

David began blubbering.

A serious-faced announcer replaced him. “An air-and-sea search will commence at first light tomorrow, offshore from Bowen and following the ship’s route south...”

“Cunning bastard!” Ash spat. “He’s made sure the search’ll be *hundreds* of kilometres from where he threw me over!” She spun to face Jeff.

“You’ve seen how smooth he is. How can I prove I didn’t just *fall*? It’ll be my word against his!”

Jeff gave her a cat-got-the-cream smile. “Ash, guess what? I’m a marine scientist. I took a GPS reading when I picked you up. If you can tell me the approximate time he threw you over—”

“Ten thirty-five pm.”

“Precise, good! I can calculate where it happened, to an accuracy of a couple of hundred metres, using my knowledge of the tides, currents and wind direction.”

Ash stared at him.

“He’s just condemned himself by lying on camera to a couple of million people.” Seated, he bowed to her. “Your Honour, here is my expert witness.”

Ash laughed. Then it turned into a hiccup, then a flood of tears.

“He-e-y...”

Jeff jumped up and flung his arms around her. She yelped, her eyes wide with panic.

“What—?”

“Sorry. Flashback.”

“Oh, Ash. *I’m* sorry. But I’m not going to throw you overboard.”

She tried to stand, but her legs collapsed under her and she began to shake.

“Let’s take a break.” He picked her up, carried her out to the cockpit, sat down and cradled her on his lap.

“You did that without even breathing hard.”

“Well, you’re not exactly a heavyweight.”

“David went *eeerr ... oof!* when he picked me up. Weak bastard. Hope he did his bloody back in.”

“You know what? I think he did. He looked like he was holding himself pretty carefully on the TV.”

Ash snickered, and her crying stopped. Jeff brushed her cheeks.

“Don’t waste any tears over that creep. He’s not worth it.”

“They’re tears of *rage!* How could I’ve been so *stupid* as to marry that scumbag?”

“Hm. How old were you when you got married?”

“Twenty-two. Why?”

“Let me offer you some scientific solace. Recent studies have shown the human brain doesn’t fully mature until about age twenty-four. The last bit to mature is the part concerning judgement of risk-taking.”

Ash smiled. “So, I’ve got to wait another year before I can make sensible decisions?”

“Oh, you can learn by experience in the meantime.”

“Hmm.”

Sitting on his lap, their heads were near the same level, and his strong arms around her gave Ash a feeling of peace and safety. Strangely, she felt no embarrassment at wearing nothing but his tee. In fact, she felt so comfortable, she asked, “Can I stay here for a while?”

“On me, or on the boat?”

“On you, for the moment.”

“Stay as long as you like, or until I go numb. Whichever comes first.”

That localised pressure growing against the side of her butt indicated the opposite of numbness. *Think sensible decisions. No one knows you’re out here with this guy. Can you trust him? Change the subject.*

“*Peridot* is a funny name for a yacht, isn’t it?”

“How so?”

“Well, it’s a stone. You know, sinks like a...”

Jeff laughed. “I see. But it’s a longish story.”

“It’s a long night.”

“Okay.”

“My favourite uncle has a cattle station out in Western Queensland. I used to love visiting there in school holidays, and I spent a lot of time fossicking. When I was thirteen, I came across a curious object, an irregular sphere a bit over a metre and a half in diameter, which turned out to be a Pallasite meteorite.”

“What are they?”

“They’re pretty rare. They consist of a nickel-iron matrix containing olivine crystals of peridot quality. Sliced into sheets and polished, some of them are quite beautiful ... and valuable.”

“How come it was just lying there on the surface? Wouldn’t it have buried itself when it hit?”

“Yes, but it came down a million or so years ago, and erosion over that time exposed it.”

“Lucky you, to happen along.”

Jeff nodded. “It was one of the valuable ones. Uncle Bill kindly let me keep it. A few sheets off it paid for my education and bought me this boat, hence its name. I thought *Peridot* sounded better than *Pallasite*.”

“Tomorrow, have a look at the name on the stern. The letters are cut from one of the sheets.” He grinned. “They’re worth almost as much as the yacht.”

Ash bounced on his lap. “Wow! That’s an amazing chain of events, when you think of it.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, a meteorite slams into the Earth, in a spot that later becomes your uncle’s property. Then the land erodes away enough for you to find it, and people consider it valuable, and it pays to make you a marine scientist with your own boat, and both your career and your boat put you out here where I just happen to drift by. I was saved by a million-year-old meteorite!”

He laughed. “That’s one way of looking at it. You could say a falling star saved a falling star.”

Ash sobered. “Oh, I’m no star. I’m just a parasite, really.”

“I wouldn’t call anyone who gives out thirty grand annually a *parasite*.”

“Yes, but it’s Dad’s money. I was thinking a lot about my pointless life while I was clinging to that tray. I decided, if I did survive, I’d have to do something *useful* with my time.”

“What did you come up with?”

“Look at you, for example. You’re doing a worthwhile job, looking after the environment and advancing scientific knowledge, and even using your own resources to do it.”

“Hey, don’t load me down with a halo. I’m also my own boss, a freelancer for James Cook University, and with a lifestyle I love.”

She looked at him in the sunset’s afterglow, noting the humorous crinkles at the corners of his warm brown eyes, the sensitive mouth. What a nice face. “Are you married?”

Those thick eyebrows went up again. “I’ve yet to find a woman who’s prepared to live fulltime on a boat.”

“What, are they crazy?” she blurted. *Oh, subtle, Ash.*

He didn’t answer directly. “You were familiar with the head, I noticed.”

*Truly subtle.* “I crewed for Dad on his yacht. We’d do the Sydney to Hobart, and the Brisbane to Gladstone. We never placed, it was just for the fun of it.”

She glanced around. “I’ve never been on a big cat. There’s *so* much more room than on a keelboat, and they’re so stable. It’s a real floating home.” *Subtle, be subtle. Shut up.*

He smiled at her, but didn’t comment. The swelling against her butt was still there. Time to change the subject again.

“We’re anchored. Where?”

“Holmes Reefs, about two hundred kilometres east of Cairns. I’m doing a coral bleaching study, comparing it to the Great Barrier Reef. I’d better cut it short tomorrow and take you into Cairns.”

“No need, as long as you don’t mind my company, and I can help you with your work.”

“Seriously?”

“You know, I have this wonderful image in my mind. David organises a wake for me, and I walk in just as he’s delivering a hypocritical sappy eulogy.”

Jeff gave a wicked laugh. “Almost too tempting. But there’s one problem.”

“What’s that?”

“If you stay lost at sea, they’ll waste millions in taxpayers’ money searching for you. I think we should report in. I’ve got a satellite phone.”

*There goes any doubts I could have about him. No potential rapist would tell the cops I’m alive and in his care.*

When he got through to Brisbane CID, they each recorded their statements. The call ended with an assurance that David would be arrested and charged with attempted murder when the ship docked the next day.

“This calls for a celebration,” Jeff said, producing a bottle of champagne and two flutes.

They returned to the cockpit where he waited courteously for Ash to sit first. She didn’t. He shrugged, and sat down, whereupon she sat in his lap once more.

“Eye level,” Ash explained to his a quizzical expression. He smiled, popped the cork, filled the flutes and clicked his against hers.

“Here’s to a scumbag-free future.”

“Amen to that! I’m sure the divorce will go through quickly. How hard would it be for me to get a degree in some branch of marine science?”

He choked on his champagne. Ash thumped his back.

“What’s your level of education?” he gasped when he’d recovered.

“I did well in science at school, but didn’t follow it up. Instead, I got a dilettante’s arts degree.”

“No problem. You’ve proved you can study, and can afford the fees.” He gave her a suspicious look. “Why this sudden interest in marine science?”

“I like the sea, and I think you need an assistant. A partner. One who knows sailing, would adore living on a boat, and would help you collect and analyse samples or whatever.”

Jeff put down his glass and gave her an intense, serious look.

“Ash, we’ve known each other for *one day*, and you spent most of it sleeping. You made a bad decision over a man before. Don’t you think you’re just grateful to me for saving your life?”

“No! Well, of course I *am*, but I think it’s a lot more than that. I’ve just discovered what I like in a man. I’d never met a real one until now.”

“That’s very flattering, but—”

“We’ll give it a trial period, of course.”

Jeff relaxed, and a slow smile spread across his face. “How about until your twenty-fourth birthday?”

Ash hugged him. “It’s a deal. But only as long as I can stay with you in the meantime. They do online study courses for marine science, don’t they?”

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Ten months later, dawn found the *Peridot* anchored in the tranquil lagoon of a coral cay. Ash and Jeff, sprawled naked in a tangle of limbs on their wide bed, woke with the sun.

“Happy birthday, darling.” Jeff took a handful of peridots from under his pillow and spread them on the sheet, revealing a matching set of necklace, bracelet and ring.

“Jeff, they’re gorgeous! Did they come from the meteorite?”

“Of course. I chose them to match your eyes.”

He gave her a lingering kiss.

Ash surfaced and said, “Does this mean you’ll marry me now?”

“Yes, on one condition.”

“Which is?”

“You make a will, leaving everything to the charities and good causes of your choice, and nothing to me.”

She pulled him down on top of her, wrapping her arms and legs around his hard strong body.

“You drive a hard bargain, but it’s a deal!”