

Love Overboard

Chapter One

Ivan Rasmussen swirled the last of his coffee around the bottom of his mug, looked past the prow of his ship to the sloping green lawn of Camden Harbor Park, and wondered for the hundredth time in the past two hours what the devil had happened to his cook, Lucy. She was never late. Until now. Now she was beyond late, and because she was his friend as well as his cook, he was worried.

He squinted at a flash of color and movement toward the top of the hill, and unconsciously let his mouth fall open at the sight of a young woman rolling down the grass embankment. She came to a spread-eagled stop when she reached the cement footpath at the bottom, and she uttered an expletive that carried across the short span of shoreline, bringing the first smile of the day to Ivan's lips.

Stephanie Lowe, the woman Ivan had been watching, struggled to her feet, adjusted her battered backpack, and scowled at the grass stains on her knees. She was looking ahead to a whole week of cooking for Ivan the Terrible in exchange for free plumbing repairs to her bathroom. And if that wasn't awful enough, she was the one who had to bring Ivan the good news that his usual cook was taking an impromptu vacation.

"Lord, I'm such a dope!" Stephanie muttered, smacking herself on the forehead, broadcasting her thoughts to all watching. Nothing like making a memorable entrance. If one more thing went wrong, she was going home. The heck with it all, she thought. She wasn't crazy about this deal anyway. She'd seen Ivan only once, but he'd made a lasting impression on her. He was over six feet with gray-green eyes and strawberry blond hair. And at the time of their meeting he'd been all packaged up in a custom-tailored, navy pin-striped suit that had made him look more like a chairman of the board than the captain of a schooner.

Stephanie searched the crowded harbor for the *Josiah T. Savage*, gasping when she realized it was directly in front of her, tied to a floating dock at the end of the cement path. It would be the last of the windjammers to leave the harbor, she thought with an inward groan-- late to leave Camden because it was waiting for its cook. Unfortunately, its cook had suddenly decided to get married. Double unfortunately, its cook was her cousin Lucy.

Lucy had provided her with a few vital statistics on the *Savage*. It was a windship. A tall ship. A hundred-year-old, two-masted, coasting schooner with seventy feet of deck length, carrying twenty-two passengers and four crew members on six-day cruises along the islandstrewn coast of Maine. Lucy's description of her captain had been equally brief. Ivan Rasmussen, she'd said, was better known as Ivan the Terrible because he was terribly handsome, terribly eligible, and terribly slippery. Stephanie had her own reasons for believing he was terribly rotten.

She took a quick survey of the ship and spotted Ivan standing on deck, coffee mug in hand, looking at her as if she'd just dropped off the planet Mars.

Get it together, Stephanie, she told herself. Life was filled with trade-offs. If you packed away a whole bag of cookies, then you had to wash them down with diet root beer. This was just another of life's cans of diet root beer. Cousin Lucy worked as a cook on Ivan's windjammer. That morning cousin Lucy had decided to run off and marry Stanley Shelton. Stanley Shelton was a plumber. Stephanie desperately needed a plumber. Simple, right? Cousin Lucy got a honeymoon, and Stephanie got a toilet. Okay, no problem. Piece of cake. There was no reason to be nervous. Ivan should be happy to have her aboard, she reasoned. Where else would he get a cook on such short notice? She was actually doing him a favor.

Besides, after what he'd done to her, he deserved to eat her cooking for a week. Anyway, how hard could it be? She'd just whip up forty or fifty peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and send all the passengers off to an island in the dinghy. It might even be fun... a week on the high seas with the wind at her back and the salt spray in her face. It was going to be an adventure. A new experience.

She approached the boarding ramp and looked up into Ivan's eyes, deciding they seemed only mildly predatory, more curious than anything else, narrowed against the glare, shaded by thick curly blond lashes. His hair was longer and lighter than Stephanie had remembered it, curling over his ears and along the nape of his neck. He'd grown a beard since she'd seen him... very close-cropped, oddly dark compared to his hair, and overwhelmingly masculine. He wore faded, frayed cutoff jeans that Stephanie admitted were perfectly proper but seemed sinfully erotic, molded to Ivan's male contours.

She bridged the short span between wharf and ship, automatically taking inventory of her surroundings, and plastered a hopeful smile on her lips. "Hello."

"Hello," he responded, contained amusement clear in his voice.

There was a flicker of recognition in his eyes, but Stephanie knew he hadn't placed her. She wasn't surprised. He probably swindled women all the time. He probably couldn't keep track of all the people he'd stuck it to. "Stephanie Lowe," she said. "We met two months ago when I bought your house." The very same house that had been falling apart piece by piece ever since she'd moved in, she silently added.

Ivan's brows drew together. Stephanie Lowe, his cook's cousin, the woman who'd bought Haben. How could he have forgotten Stephanie Lowe? Early Alzheimer's disease, he decided. He was suffering from premature senile dementia. He'd seen Stephanie Lowe only briefly at the Realtor's office, but he should have remembered. She'd worn a SpongeBob T-shirt, and she'd been disappointed to find he didn't own a parrot.

She was just as outrageous now as before, he thought. Her hair was short and shiny brown with wispy bangs. It would have been pretty if it hadn't been sticking out in all directions. He supposed she was one of those punk people. He did a mental calculation and put her at fivefoot- seven, noticing she was slim and longlegged, wearing chunky silver, green, and white high-tops, bright pink socks scrunched down around her ankles, a pair of rumpled khaki walking shorts, and an orange tank top that was bright enough to get them through the best fogbank Maine could muster. She was probably

there to complain about the house. Just what he needed to round out his morning.
"Lucy tells me you've been having some problems with the house . . ."

"Problems?" Stephanie felt her control slipping. It wasn't her strong suit to begin with. "Two weeks after I moved in, the front porch rotted out from under me. Then the water heater blew up and flooded the cellar. None of the windows will open, and it's hotter than heck in... " She stopped when she saw the smile spread across his face. "Something funny about a water heater exploding?"

Ivan didn't think there was anything funny about a water heater exploding, and he couldn't understand how so many things could go wrong with his house. He'd left it in perfect condition. He loved Haben. It had belonged to his family for generations, and he would never have sold it if it hadn't been absolutely necessary. He was smiling despite everything because Stephanie Lowe was a sight that inspired smiles.

"I think you're cute when you get all steamed up," he admitted, and playfully patted her cowlick. "Why is your hair sticking up? Is this a new style?"

Stephanie felt the top of her head. "When the upstairs toilet broke, it leaked onto the floor and collapsed the ceiling in the kitchen and downstairs bathroom. When the ceiling fell down in the bathroom, it took the mirrored door off the medicine chest and smashed it on the sink. Since that was the only mirror in the house, I had to comb my hair in front of the toaster."

Ivan stared at her. Maybe she was wacko and was making all this up. No, chances were good that she was wacko, but she wasn't making it up. Lucy had told him about the porch and the water heater, and Stephanie's hair did look as though it had been combed in front of a toaster.

"I'm really sorry," he said. "I honestly thought the house was in good shape when I sold it."

Stephanie bit back a rude word. It wouldn't pay to get vulgar. If she wanted her toilet fixed, she was going to have to spend a week with this rip-off Romeo.

"Actually, the condition of the house sort of explains why I'm here. You see, I hadn't planned on all these disasters. I'd intended to turn the house into a bed-and-breakfast inn, and the plain truth is that until I get some paying customers, I'm going to have a cash flow problem. So when Lucy showed up this morning and told me she was getting married . . ."

Ivan looked pained. "Lucy, my cook, is getting married? Does this have something to do with her being late?"

"Bingo."

Pieces of the puzzle fell together in his mind. "And does this have something to do with your being here wearing a backpack?"

"Right again. You see, Lucy's marrying a plumber . . ."

Ivan groaned. "I've got it figured out. Can you cook?"

"Of course I can cook."

"For twenty-six people?"

"No sweat. Just point me to the microwave." The grin returned to Ivan's mouth, and the corners of his eyes crinkled. At least Lucy had sent him someone with a sense of humor.

Stephanie's pack slipped, and Ivan reached to get it, his hand momentarily trapped between the padded strap and the smooth, warm skin of her bare shoulder. He took a moment to enjoy the feeling and wondered what it would be like to kiss her. She had a very kissable mouth, he decided. Soft and feminine, perfectly shaped. Her eyes were blue and wary, shaded by a fringe of black lash and topped with eyebrows that looked like bird wings. The flush on her cheeks told him she was also feeling some attraction, and the set to her chin told him she had no intention of succumbing to it.

Just as well, he thought, hefting the pack onto his own shoulder. She was sort of an employee, and he made it a rule never to mix business and pleasure. Of course, he was the direct descendant of a famous pirate, and as such he was supposed to break a few rules now and then. He motioned toward the forward hatch. "I'll show you to your quarters. Watch your head and always go down the ladder backward."

Stephanie followed him belowdecks and found herself in a fairly large room that held the shape of the prow of the ship. Polished oak banquettes lined the walls and were spanned by a massive triangular table. Brass lanterns swung from the ceiling just as they must have a hundred years ago. A copper jug filled with wildflowers sat in the middle of the table, and red-and-white-checkered curtains fluttered from open windows.

"Breakfast and supper are usually eaten here," Ivan said. "Weather permitting, we eat lunch topside." He pointed to the back corner of the room. "This is the galley."

Stephanie nodded, taking in the small sink, oak counter, black iron woodstove across from the sink, the spice racks lining the wall, pots, pans, utensils, and sprays of dried herbs hanging overhead. "Very cozy," she said. "Where's the kitchen?"

"The galley is the kitchen."

Stephanie felt her heart stop. He had to be kidding. "Yes, but where's the stove? Where's the refrigerator? Where's the food processor?"

Ivan's mouth tightened a fraction of an inch. "This is the stove," he said, pulling Stephanie into the tiny galley. "This is all we've got. Have you ever cooked on a woodstove?"

Who did she look like, Annie Oakley? Of course she'd never cooked on a woodstove. Until two months ago she'd lived in Jersey City. People didn't cook on woodstoves in Jersey City. At least, not the people she knew. Most of the people she knew didn't cook at all. She guessed that wasn't the answer he wanted to hear, so she decided to lie. "Don't worry," she said, "woodstove is my middle name."

Dollars to doughnuts she can't boil water, Ivan thought. At least she had the guts to lie. He was thankful for that. It was a start.

"I have to go up to cast off. We're already late getting out of the harbor." He gestured to a short red curtain over one of the banquettes. "That's your bunk. You can get settled in, and I'll be back as soon as I can get free. Keep the coffee going, and you'll probably want to take inventory of the food Lucy's stored in for the week."

What she really wanted to do was put her hands around Lucy's neck and squeeze. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine down here . . . taking inventory."

She took the backpack from Ivan and went over to check out the red curtain. Behind the curtain was a narrow bunk built into the wooden wall of the ship. It was nicely made up in crisp white sheets and a red plaid woolen blanket. Lucy's belongings were neatly packed away in a small storage area over the bunk. Fortunately, she and Lucy were the same size, and it would be possible to supplement her meager wardrobe with Lucy's meager wardrobe.

Stephanie went back to the stove and peered into the two blue enamel coffeepots. They were full to the brim and steaming hot, and the combined aroma of woodstove and fresh coffee almost knocked her to her knees.

She didn't know what she'd expected, but it wasn't this. She'd expected the Love Boat, maybe. Something slick and touristy. This was slick in a good way, she decided. There was a feeling of solid reality to it. It was immaculately clean, carefully restored, and everywhere she looked there was quality. It was impossible not to get caught up in the magic of the ship. Not only did she feel transported back in time, but she was overwhelmed by the atmosphere of warmth and well-being that filled every space of the forward cabin.

She took a wad of folded papers from her pocket and smoothed them out on the counter. While she'd been packing and Stanley had been checking out the toilet, Lucy had frantically prepared a detailed six-day schedule.

"Okay, everything I need to know to be an A-one ship's cook," Stephanie said. She narrowed her eyes at the menu. According to Lucy, she was supposed to begin by making yeast rolls for supper and fish stew, biscuits, chocolate chip cookies, and fresh fruit for lunch. Stephanie checked her watch. Eleven o'clock. She looked at the woodstove and thought authenticity had been carried a bit far.

Ivan squatted at the top of the ladder. "How's it going?"

"We're stopping at a fast-food place for lunch, aren't we?"

He grimaced and left.

"Does that mean no?" Stephanie called after him.

A young man swung down the stairs Tarzan style. His T-shirt was three sizes too large, and his baggy shorts hung precariously low on his hips. He struck a negligent pose against the stairwell and looked at her over the top of his dark glasses.

"Ace," he said with a crooked grin. "I'm here to answer your every need."

Ivan reappeared. "He's here to do your dishes and peel your potatoes. He's nineteen and walking on very thin ice." He gave Ace a stern look and vanished.

"The captain runs a tight ship," Ace explained. "And I'm kind of a loose sort of guy."

"You know anything about working this woodstove?"

"Sure."

"Good. You're in charge. I do the cooking, and you do the wood stuff."

Ace took a chunk of wood from the cache under the stove and flipped it into the air. He spun around and caught the wood onehanded. "I'm good with my hands," he said, giving Stephanie another crooked grin.

This poor kid has watched too many Tom Cruise movies, Stephanie thought. He had him down pretty well, too, except Ace's nose was larger, making him seem closer to Snoopy doing Joe Cool.

"Okay, Ace, I'm going to give your hands a chance to make lunch. I think we'll have an abbreviated menu of fish chowder and biscuits. I don't suppose we have twenty or thirty cans of fish chowder lying around somewhere?"

"Don't suppose we do."

"Okay," Stephanie said, "then we'll go to plan two. Find a recipe for the blasted stuff." She fumbled in the cabinet drawer for Lucy's recipe book and tore out the chowder page. "You assemble the soup ingredients, and I'll get started on the biscuits." Her eyes opened wide at the biscuit recipe. "Twelve cups of flour? I'll need a cement mixer to make this recipe."

Ace plunked a huge earthenware bowl onto the counter and gave Stephanie's waist a squeeze. "This is the bowl Lucy uses for biscuits," he said, dropping a kiss on Stephanie's shoulder.

Stephanie waved a large wooden spoon at him. "This is the spoon Stephanie uses for smacking knuckles. Kiss me again, and you'll never play the piano."

Ace looked insulted. "How can you resist me? I'm a cool dude."

"Listen, Ace, I'm going to level with you. I don't know diddly about cooking for twentysix people, I've never been on a ship before, and this is the first time I've seen a woodstove up close. I'm doing this so my cousin Lucy can have a honeymoon, and.. "

"Lucy got married? No joke?"

"She's marrying Stanley Shelton, the plumber."

Ace looked impressed. "It's always nice to have a plumber in the family."

"My sentiments exactly."

He took a cauldron from a ceiling hook and set it on the stove. "Lucy's a real good guy, and any cousin of Lucy's is a cousin of mine. I'm gonna help you out here."

An ally! Stephanie felt weak with relief, but there was one more thing she had to find out.

"Can I ask you a question? Isn't it hard to see in here with those dark glasses on? You aren't doing drugs, are you?"

"Not me. I'm too cool to do drugs. I'd take these glasses off, but I'm getting glare from your socks." He gave Stephanie a meaningful look. "So you think it's going to work out between us?"

"Yup. I think we're going to be a great kitchen team."

"Mmm. And what about romance?" He pointed to the bunk on the opposite side of the table. "We're roomies, you know."

"Sorry, romance is out of the question. I'm not into romance. You're very tempting, but I took a vow."

He pulled some onions out of a vegetable bin behind the ladder. "This is going to ruin my image. And my self-esteem is shot to hell."

"Life is cruel," Stephanie said, counting out twelve cups of flour. She looked around the small galley. "Where's the butter?"

"Ice chest's on deck."

She wiped her hands on her shorts and gave him a thumbs-up sign, deciding he was a good guy... a little weird, maybe, but not mean.

She went topside and discovered they were almost out of Camden Harbor. She'd watched the schooners come and go over the past two months, usually from an upstairs window or from the widow's walk on the top of her house. The big wooden boats were eerily quiet for their size. Not having the power of an inboard motor, Ivan

relied on a yawl to move them through the flotilla of pleasure craft into open sea, where the sails could be unfurled.

The rigging creaked and clanked in the breeze, and the town of Camden looked very small, hugging the waterline, the steeple of the Chestnut Street Baptist Church sparkling in the morning sun. From this distance the mountains seemed to push against the town's back. Wisps of fog caught in the treetops on Mt. Battie, and Stephanie could see patches of yellow, orange, and red, where autumn leaves had already begun to turn. A gull rode a clanging buoy, oblivious to the noise. Passengers sat topside, watching the gull, watching Ivan at the helm, waiting for the sails to go up. And in an hour they'll be waiting for lunch, Stephanie thought with a groan.

Ace smiled at her when she returned to the galley with the butter. "I was afraid you'd gone overboard."

"No. Just took a minute to enjoy the scenery." She peeked into the steaming brew on the stove. "What is this?"

"Lucy's fish chowder. I followed her recipe, but I think she must have left something out. Do you think it smells funny?"

It had passed smelling funny, Stephanie decided. It was more in the category of frightening.

"What are those little round things floating on top?"

Ace stared into the pot. "They look like fish eyes."

"Omigod."

"You think I should have cut off the heads before I put the fish in the hot water?"

Stephanie clapped her hand over her mouth to squelch the laughter. She composed herself as best she could. "Nah, why waste a perfectly good fish head? This will be fine. We'll . . . um, strain it before we serve it."

"We might not have to do that," Ace said.

"Most of the folks on this cruise are pretty old. They probably can't see so good. We could tell them they're beans or something."

Ivan came halfway down the ladder and stopped in midstride, immediately backing up a step. "What are you cooking down here, rubber boots? It smells like the fish-processing plant in Rockland on a bad day."

"You think you can do better?"

He was sure he couldn't do any worse. "I'm not really an expert at this," he said gently, "but I think if you reduced the heat somehow, so it wasn't boiling so furiously . . ." He held his breath and hoped the fumes wouldn't peel the varnish off the walls.

"I think you're right." Stephanie gave the pot a clonk with her wooden spoon. "We're going to reduce the heat right away." She looked at Ace. "How about turning down the wood?"

Ace stared at her, his eyes hidden behind the silver-black lenses. "That's the problem. You see, the wood control dial is broken."

Stephanie looked at Ivan. "The wood control dial is broken," she repeated with an absolutely straight face.

Ivan nodded. "Well, that explains it." He inched his way back up the ladder, wondering what he'd done to deserve this. He'd cheated on his U.S. history exam in seventh grade, he'd wheeled Mary Ann Kulecza out of her panties in eighth grade, and he'd padded charitable contributions on his income tax. Now it was all coming home to roost. God had sent him Stephanie Lowe.

"After you turn the wood down, you should probably try to snag some eyes," Stephanie told Ace.

"That's going to be tough. They're hidden under all this scum."

An hour later the ship was heading due east, pitching through open seas. The scum had been ladled off, and the fish eyes slopped in the broth, mercilessly bashing themselves against the side of the big metal pot while Ace hunted them down with his spoon. Sweat rolled in rivulets along Stephanie's back and collected on her upper lip as she stood guard over her baking biscuits.

"Any problems?" Ivan called down. "Folks are getting hungry."

"Tell them to keep their pants on. You can't rush a gourmet feast like this," Stephanie yelled over the sizzle of coffee splattering on the hot stove. She opened the oven door, whipped out a tray of biscuits, and dumped them in a bread basket lined with a red linen napkin. "Hardly burned at all," she told Ace. "I don't think we even have to scrape the black off the bottoms of this batch."

Ace took time out of his fish-eye hunt to appreciate the biscuits.

"How many eyes have you got?" Stephanie asked.

Ace poked around in the cup sitting next to the stove. "Seven. Looks like I'm only missing one. You think we could have had a one-eyed fish?"

"You keep looking while I take the biscuits up." She assembled a tray of chowder mugs, soup spoons, napkins, and tubs of butter, and set them on the roof of the

midship cabin. She added baskets of biscuits and bowls of fresh fruit, and felt her lip curl involuntarily when Ace appeared with the tureen of fish stew.

"Are you going to eat this?" he asked in a whisper.

Eat it? Was he kidding? She'd inhaled enough fish stew to last her a lifetime.

Mrs. Pease got a peculiar expression on her face halfway through her lunch. She was short and round with dimpled elbows and dimpled knees and short curly white hair. She slid her glasses low on her nose and squinted into her soup. "There's something staring at me in here."

Her husband looked over her shoulder. "I don't see anything."

"Right there." She pointed with her spoon.

"It's a little bitty eyeball."

"That's ridiculous," he said. "What would an eyeball be doing in your soup?"

Ace jumped to Mrs. Pease's side and dipped his spoon into her mug. "Okay, where is it? Where's this eyeball from outer space?" He held the spoon an inch from his nose and studied its contents. "That's not an eyeball. That's a black-eyed pea." He fired the object off his spoon slingshot style, and a seagull caught it in midair. "Seagulls love black-eyed peas," he told Mrs. Pease. He looked at Stephanie and mouthed the word "eight."

Stephanie took a biscuit and avoided looking in Ivan's direction.

"Our captain is staring," Ace said. "You think he knows it was an eyeball?"

"Not a chance."

"He looks intense," Ace said. "I've only seen him look like that one time before. It was when Andy Newfarmer's dog lifted his leg on Ivan's new all-weather boots, and Ivan was in them."

Stephanie nibbled on the biscuit. "What's Ivan like? Have you known him long?"

"Ivan's first-class. Comes from an old seafaring family. His grandfather and greatgrandfather were captains of coasting schooners, and people tell me Ivan's a descendant of Red Rasmussen, the pirate. Supposedly, Ivan's house, Haben, is haunted by the ghost of Red's widow. Lucy said Ivan sold the house this summer."

Great, Stephanie thought, I bought a haunted house. Another point of interest the real estate lady failed to mention.

A gust of wind rattled the sails, Ivan spun the wheel, the ship leaned into the wind and surged ahead, and Stephanie found herself watching Ivan, trying to sort through a

mixture of uncomfortable emotions. As much as she hated to admit it, he was awesome. He stood in calm control with a suggestion of suppressed power in his wide stance and steady hand. His beard hugged the angle of his jaw, making him look like the perfect captain for a ship named Savage. He was a man who felt comfortable with authority and inspired confidence. An hour ago she wouldn't have trusted him to change the kitty litter, and now she was trapped on a little wooden boat, bobbing around in a huge ocean, counting on Ivan to keep her safe. And she was sure he would. Stephanie thought he looked very fierce and wondered if he could also be gentle.

Their gazes locked, and Stephanie felt her face flame. She'd been caught gawking. Actually, gawking wasn't accurate. Drooling was closer to the truth. Cousin Lucy hadn't been kidding when she'd said Ivan was terribly attractive.

Stephanie's heart skipped a beat when she saw him hand the wheel over to the first mate and turn in her direction. Okay, she thought, if he criticizes the soup, I'll apologize. And if he kissed her, she'd drag him down to the galley. The last thought produced a mental grimace. Good grief! Get a grip, she told herself.