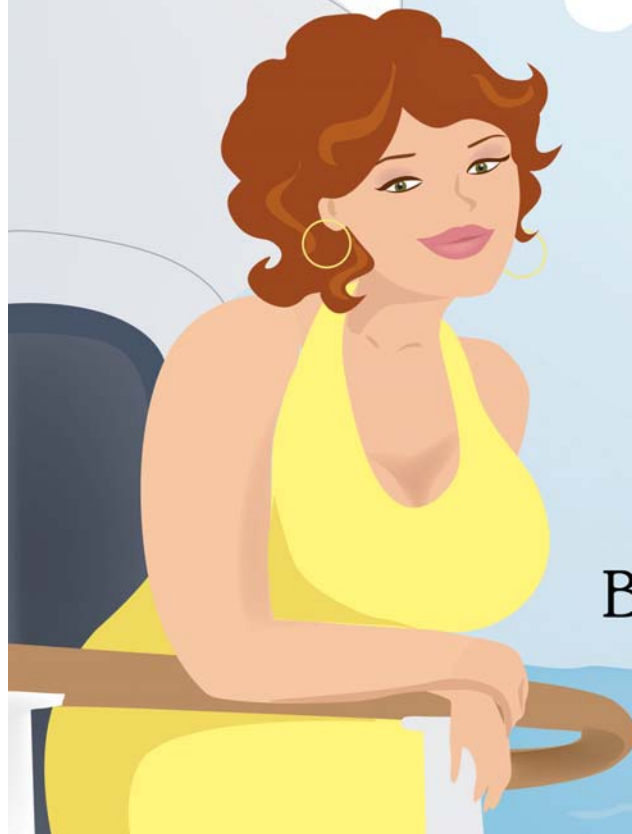


# Big Fat Lies



Judy  
Bagshaw

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Judy Bagshaw

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## Big Fat Lies

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## **Dedication Page**

To my family, who never ceases to amaze me—and that's  
no lie!

*“Oh what a tangled web we weave  
When first we practice to deceive.”*  
Sir Walter Scott  
Marmion, 1808; Canto vi. Stanza 17

# Chapter One



**S**ofie Peterson staggered up the gangplank, pushed along with the chattering, excited wave of travelers boarding the cruise ship. She breathed in the excitement, and felt a familiar stomach clench of nervousness that she quickly squashed down with a mental kick in her pants. She wouldn't be afraid. She was here to have fun.

"Welcome aboard the HMS Carribea!" A pretty blonde with a too-white smile stood at the top of the ramp, her starched, trim uniform showing her as part of the crew. "I'm Cindy, your cruise director. The stewards will show you to your cabins. Hello. Welcome aboard..."

The patter went on. Sofie was dizzy with the confusion of the crowds, the noise, the ceaseless activity. Negotiating the confusion of corridors amidst such mayhem was a challenge. After taking yet another wrong turn, she felt her muscles tensing with the beginnings of panic.

"Get a grip, woman," she muttered, then was relieved to find herself in the right corridor.

Once in her cabin, she closed the door and breathed in the

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quiet. She had done it. She was here, about to embark on the maiden voyage of her new self. The new and improved Sofie Peterson.

She opened her suitcases and pulled out the sexy, bright yellow halter dress she'd specifically purchased for this first night on board. It was part of her new cruise wardrobe, purchased to show off her 5'8" zaftig figure. She stripped off her jeans, t-shirt, and bra, then pulled the cool cotton blend over her head. It took a bit of careful adjusting to get her double-F chest secured into the cleverly engineered dress, but the end result was well worth it. A long look in the mirror showed a drop-dead sexy redhead.

Her short, naturally curly auburn hair was a soft cap framing her open, intelligent face. Her hazel eyes sparkled and the large smattering of freckles across her nose added an impish cuteness to her overall look. "Look out, world. Here comes Gorgeous!" She grinned at herself and applied lipstick to her full lips.

There was frantic banging on her cabin door and she opened it to reveal a tall, slender woman with a pained expression on her face.

Even in distress, Libby Washington was gorgeous, with skin a deep café au lait. Her eyes, which were huge in her heart-shaped face, were framed with lashes Sofie envied. She wore her hair in a short Halle Berry cut that accentuated her long neck and square shoulders. Her body was made to show off designer clothes. In fact, the only physical aspect she shared with Sofie was her height.

"Thank God!" She pushed her way past Sofie. "I have to pee." And she disappeared into the compact bathroom.

"Hi to you, too," Sofie said through the door. The response was muffled, but it was an infinitely relieved person who emerged a few minutes later.

"That feels so much better." She plunked herself down on one of the single beds in the tiny cabin. "I thought for sure my bladder was going to burst before I got here."

"I wondered if you were going to get here at all, Libby. You were supposed to meet me at the hotel last night."

Libby flashed a coy smile. She was Sofie's best friend, and the school nurse at the elementary school where Sofie taught fourth grade, and Sofie had seen that look often.

“I had a date last night.” Libby waggled her eyebrows.

“So you told me. It must have been some date.”

Libby just grinned her cat and canary grin.

Sofie returned her smile. “You naughty girl, you.” Libby’s varied love life was a source of constant wonder to her.

“I grabbed a shuttle flight this morning.” Libby yawned and fell back on the bed. “I’m beat!”

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Sofie pulled her reluctant roommate off the bed. “Get changed into something sexy and let’s go show the fellas on this cruise how lucky they are.”

“Ooh, that’s my girl.” Libby zinged another megawatt grin at her. “I’m glad you’re starting the cruise with the right attitude.”

Sofie hugged her. “I’m glad you made it. It wouldn’t be any fun celebrating my divorce without you.”

Libby laughed and then gave her friend a once-over. “I see you’ve got your ‘jump me now’ dress on already,” she said. “We haven’t even left the dock yet.”

Sofie did a spin to show off her outfit. “No sense waiting. I have nine wasted years to make up for.”

“That’s what you get for marrying a gay man.”

“He wasn’t gay when I married him.” When she realized what she said, she blushed and shook her head. “That didn’t come out right. I mean, I didn’t know he was gay when I married him.”

“The bastard,” Libby said. “I bet he knew, all right. Face it, Sofie, he used you.”

“I know, I know.” This was old ground.

“He was too much of a chicken-shit to admit his proclivities to that meddling simp of a mother of his, so he married you to satisfy her, and in the process, made you miserable.”

“Look, I was only twenty when I met him. It wasn’t like I was fighting them off back in Sander’s Corners where I grew up, so I really had no experience to compare to. He and I went all through school together and had a lot of fun when we dated, we liked the same things—”

“Including men.”

Sofie glared at her friend. “Besides that. I mean, you know—music, movies, theater. He was the one who planned the whole wedding, and it was wonderful. My mother loved him, but then he

could sit and talk cooking with her for hours. I couldn't do that."

"Sofie, Sofie." Libby shook her head. "Such an innocent."

"Not any more." She planted her hands on her generous hips and struck a seductive pose. "This is the new and improved Sofie Peterson. I'm big, I'm bold, and I'm beautiful, and no man on this entire ship will be safe from my many wonderful charms."

Libby's laugh was rich and throaty. "Who is this vixen, and where's our shy little school teacher?"

Sofie grinned and twirled in front of the mirror. "Wouldn't the staff at school have a cow if they saw me now?"

"They would at that. That red hair, those curves, the air of confidence. You've blossomed into a bombshell, girlfriend."

Sofie stopped, overcome with emotion. "I have, haven't I?" she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Libby moved closer and put her arms around her friend's shoulders, then pulled her into a hug. "Yes, you have."

They stood for a moment in their quiet embrace, then with a sniff, Sofie pulled back. "Hurry up and change, girl. I have some men to meet!"

A few minutes later, Libby was clad in white shorts and a white halter top that emphasized her long, slender legs and her complexion.

Sofie whistled and grinned. "We are two hot tamales, aren't we?"

"That we are, girlfriend," Libby replied. "That we are."

Their cabin was at the very end of a long corridor near the bow of the ship. As they headed toward the main lounge, they passed several doors, some open while people arrived to settle in, others closed, awaiting their tenants. Libby and Sofie exchanged pleasantries with fellow passengers they passed, and chattered with one another.

"Nice mix of people," Sofie said.

"Looks like. I hope there are lots of cute, available men!"

"You have a one-track mind."

"Yeah, but what a track!" They both laughed.

So absorbed were they that at the turn in the passage, they failed to notice a passenger coming around the opposite way. Sofie collided with a hard wall of humanity.

“Damn!”

“Oof!” Her balance was off in the high-heeled sandals she wore and she lurched hard to the left. In the next moment, she landed dazed on top of the man whose face was now buried in her ample cleavage. His muffled expletives finally awoke her to the position she was now in.

“Now that’s a unique way of saying hello,” Libby said.

Sofie laughed and felt Libby’s hands digging under her arms, trying to help her up. But it was awkward in the narrow passageway with limbs tangled as they were. Another explosive expletive told her that her knee had hit a sensitive spot on what she now determined was a large, muscular man.

“God, I’m sorry,” she said, once she was able to get up on her feet. She straightened her dress and shimmied all her parts back into it where they were supposed to be.

“Why the hell don’t you watch where you’re going?” said the dark-haired thirty-something male who rose before them.

“Me?” Sofie choked back a laugh at the man’s glower. Even scowling, he was gorgeous. Dark hair, piercing eyes, strong jaw, and she noted, quite kissable lips. Lips that at this moment were frowning with annoyance. “It takes two, buddy. Why weren’t you watching?”

He glared, poised to say something, and then a sheepish smile wiped the anger from his face, making Sofie’s breath catch in her throat.

“Fair enough,” he said. “The name’s Finn.” Rubbing his elbow, he took in Sofie’s form from top to bottom. “Finn Baxter.” He held out his hand.

Sofie glared at the hand, but then shook it with reluctance. She was conscious of how large his hands were, and how firm his grip. His garish Hawaiian shirt covered broad shoulders, a thick chest, and well-muscled arms. He was, in a word, gorgeous. “Sofie Peterson,” she said, then gestured to Libby. “My friend, Libby Washington.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Finn took Libby’s hand in his.

“Are you all right?”

“My dignity’s shot, but overall I’m okay, I guess.” He grinned, obviously beginning to see the humor in the situation.

“It wouldn’t have happened if you had been more careful,” Sofie said.

“Look, lady, I was minding my own business. You were the ones so busy yakking you weren’t watching where you were going.”

“You’re saying this is my fault?” She stepped up to him, her face pushed forward into his, her hands planted on her hips.

Finn adopted the same belligerent stance. “I’d say that about sums it up.”

“Look, you—” She got no further, because suddenly Libby’s hand was on her arm.

“Now, children. Let’s play nice.”

Sofie glared at her friend and then back at Finn. “He should apologize,” she said.

“Why me?” he said. “I wasn’t the one who started this whole thing.”

“Excuse me?” Sofie was winding up again.

“Does it really matter?” Libby said, pulling Sofie back. “Someone just be big enough to say sorry first.”

“Then it should be her,” Finn said stubbornly.

Sofie was incensed. She knew exactly what he meant by that. He meant she was big—huge—gigantic. It was his subtle little dig at her size. Well, screw him! “Sorry!” she said. *Sorry I didn’t knock your block off!*

“Yeah, sorry,” he said.

“That was very good, children,” Libby said. “Now, let’s go, Sofie. Hope we see you around, Finn.” And the two girls moved on, Libby pulling a recalcitrant Sofie along.

“Oh, stop pouting,” Libby said.

“I’m not pouting,” Sofie said.

“And I’m not going to fight with you.”

“Fine!”

They walked the rest of the corridor without speaking and then Libby said, “He was cute, though.”

“He sure was,” Sofie said wistfully.

Libby grinned at Sofie.

But the wistfulness faded quickly. “He was also insufferably rude, and obnoxious, and self-centered, and, and...”

“Cute?” Libby piped in.

Sofie made a face at her friend. “He wasn’t that cute.”

Libby laughed. “Whatever you say,” she said. She nodded her head toward the ship’s main lounge, from which they could hear the sounds of chattering voices and revelry. “Shall we?”

“Let’s,” Sofie said with a grin. Grabbing Libby’s arm, she said, “Look out, fellas, here we come!” And the two girls strode into the gathering.

They had just begun a whirlwind of introductions, when Cindy-the-cruise-director called for everyone’s attention.

“We’re soon leaving port.” Cindy-the-cruise-director’s chirpy, syrupy cheerfulness was a fingernail on Sofie’s blackboard. “So it’s time for our lifejacket drill.” She gestured to the two doorways leading out to the deck. “You can see the stewards at the doors. As you file out to the deck, they’ll hand you a lifejacket. Put it on and move to the forward deck. Also, as a precaution, I need to inform you there is a small storm a few miles out from port. Nothing to worry about, but we want you to feel secure.”

Sofie didn’t. “A storm? Oh my God.”

“Cool!” Libby rushed to the railing.

Sofie stayed behind, hanging back near the door, her stomach doing flip-flops. The discomfort was almost forgotten as she watched the flurry of activity on shore while the ship was freed from the dock and their cruise began. Excitement rippled through the crowd, and the flip-flop in her stomach got more pronounced. She pushed her way through the throng to get to Libby, who was leaning over the railing, her eyes wide with anticipation. “Lib, I don’t feel so well.”

Libby looked at her. “You look fine. You’re probably just excited. Nervous butterflies, maybe.”

“I guess.”

The ship was now pulling away from shore and cheers erupted from the people lining the railing

And suddenly Sofie knew this wasn’t merely a nervous stomach. Nausea engulfed her and her skin blanched. On unsteady legs, she willed the contents of her stomach to stay where they were as she moved as quickly as possible toward her cabin. Now that the ship moved freely, the up and down motion on the wind-swept

water was more pronounced and Sofie's distress was greater.

*God, please just let me get to my bathroom.*

She reached the final corridor leading to her room, one hand **clamped** over her mouth, the other on the wall steadying her. Her stomach heaved, but she swallowed hard and prayed for sanctuary. As she rounded the last bend before her room, she once again found herself knocked without warning to the ground.

A familiar voice snarled, "You again!" just before she spewed the contents of her stomach and passed out.

Libby had lost track of Sofie in the crowd on deck. The excitement of pulling away from shore, and the thrill of looking out to open sea, kept her glued to her spot at the railing, pushing any concern about her friend's whereabouts from her mind.

The brisk breeze carried a salty tang she savored with each deep breath she took. The sun felt warm on her face and she closed her eyes to bask in its rays.

"How charming."

She opened her eyes and looked at her admirer. He was very tall and quite slender, well tanned and impeccably groomed. His silver-gray hair was thick and boyishly long, framing a face that showed him to be younger than his hair color would first indicate. His blue eyes twinkled with amusement, and Libby noted, admiration.

"Charming?" She shot him the chilliest of her cool smiles. The one that usually sent men scurrying away before they came within ten feet of her.

"Utterly." He flashed his even, white, too-perfect teeth at her and extended a well-manicured hand. "Simon Landrich at your service."

"Libby Washington." She placed her hand in his, and he squeezed it, then caressed her knuckles with his thumb. Libby's knees went weak.

"Please tell me you're not traveling with your husband?" He moved a step closer, still in possession of her hand.

"And if I were?" She looked up from the corner of her eye and gave him a teasing, coy look.

"I'd be heartbroken." He lifted her hand and kissed it. "To find

a jewel on board, and then be denied a chance to bask in her glory, would be a shame.” A second kiss followed the first.

Libby’s heart thumped erratically in her chest and a luscious wave of sexual heat rippled through her body. She felt languid and electrified at the same time by this intense, attractive gentleman.

“I’d hate to be responsible for any suffering.” She shot him a sexy grin. “I’m traveling with my best friend, Sofie. No husband.”

“Wonderful!” His eyes swept over her.

“And you?” she asked, running a scarlet tipped fingernail down his shirt-front. “Who are you traveling with?”

His eyes followed her finger and he grinned a wolfish grin of sexual awareness, making Libby’s knees turned to Jell-O. “I’m unfettered, beautiful lady. And never more glad of that fact than at this moment.” He released her hand and offered his arm. “Would you do me the honor of a stroll about the deck?”

Libby slid her arm through his and wrapped her other arm over, pulling herself tight to his side. He smiled and placed his free hand over hers. Arm in arm, they began a slow walk along the deck. For the moment, Sofie was forgotten.

