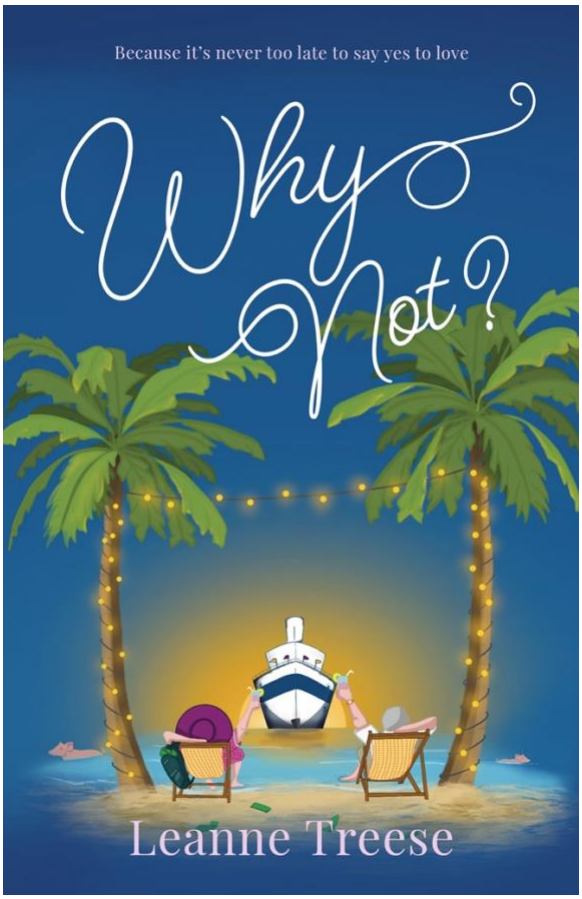
SNEAK PEAK



CHAPTERS 1 & 2

Because it's never too late to say yes to love

CHAPTER ONE

Ellie

"Mom?" Caleb swings his hand toward the box of kittens on the reception area floor. "What's this?" A calico one leaps from the towel-lined box, scurries toward Caleb, and bats his shoelace.

I knew I liked that one.

"What's what, dear?" I say, though I know exactly "what's what." I've been working as a receptionist at Caleb's veterinary practice for nearly a year, mainly—okay, entirely—because of "the incident." I haven't been the best about turning away strays.

"The kittens. Don't tell me."

"You're a vet honey. People who want animals are here all the time." I sweep up the calico kitty and kiss the top of its tiny little head. "Who wouldn't want a cutie like this? I'm calling him Rambo." I turn the kitten, look into his eyes, then maneuver him back toward Caleb. "It's a cute name, right? I think it fits."

"Mom." He spits out the word. After, he rakes his hair, thick and dark like his father's. The tone and the gesture are both things Harrison, Caleb's dad and my husband—*ex*-husband—would do. "We talked about this. I can't keep finding homes for these animals."

"But it keeps working out," I insist. And it does. The pit-bull mix puppies, the black-and-white bunnies, the overly exuberant Labrador. The chickens I'd found on the side of the road. All abandoned or given up. All with new owners. "Even Peanut has a home."

"*You* adopted Peanut."

"Well, of course I did. Peanut has one eye. And he's old. Who in the world would adopt an old, one-eyed chihuahua?"

"*You* Mom."

"Exactly my point." I set Rambo in the box and pick up the stack of pet insurance claims Caleb keeps on about. Like processing them is my job. Okay, fine. It is my job. And I'll get to it. As soon as these kittens have new owners.

He lets out a long sigh, and I can almost hear him counting to ten in his head. *I* taught him that, way back when he was a skinned-kneed, freckled-faced little cherub of a boy unable to control his temper. You're welcome, Dr. Caleb Moore.

He blows out a breath and leans toward me. "I wanted to talk to you about something while the techs are on lunch."

"Of course, sweetheart."

"It's the cruise."

"Just forty-eight hours before I go *bon voyage* to the Bahamas." I pump my fist in the air. It feels like forever since I've been on a vacation.

Caleb pulls at the lapel of his white medical coat. "I don't think you should go."

I wave a hand in his direction. "What are you going on about? Of course I'm going on the cruise." I spy the pile of untouched claim forms and pick them up. "It's not these, is it?"

"No." He takes the pile of documents from my hands and sets them on a different part of the semi-circular reception desk. "Of course not."

"Is it Peanut? Do you not want to take care of him while I'm away?"

"No, Mom. Peanut's fine."

"Then why?"

"How do you know it's not—" he stops a long moment— "a scam."

I hold up my hand. “Don’t even—” I start. I’ve had enough lectures about scams to last me the rest of what might be, at seventy-two, a very short rest of my life.

“Mom,” he interrupts, “you have to admit it’s a little weird how you won this trip out of the blue. What was it on? Some website?”

“Senior Savers,” I say, sitting up so my posture is as straight as possible. “The site provides helpful financial advice. I’ve very much enjoyed the content.” Lie. I hate the content. Things like “Make Your Own Laundry Detergent and Save” or “Increase Your Net Worth with Metal Detectors.” Ugh. No. Of course, I wouldn’t need to be on the site at all if it had not been for—well, the scam.

“But what if it’s a—” He stops, knowing, I guess, how I’ll react if he says the ‘s’ word a second time. “What if the cruise isn’t what you think it is?”

“It’s a seven-day cruise to the Bahamas with a few port stops. The concept is straightforward, even for an old lady like me.”

One of the kittens leaps out of the box and Caleb picks her up. “But what if the cruise line asks you for money? Or some man does? Or woman, or whatever?”

I close my eyes tight, then open them. My own version of counting to ten. “I’ll say no.”

“Will you? If it’s for an orphan or some person’s child who needs medical treatment or help for some animal?” He pushes the kitten in my direction. “Someone who needs to rehome kittens?”

“Well, that’s easy.” I take the kitten from his outstretched hand. “I hate orphans, sick children, and animals.”

“Be serious.”

“I am serious.”

I know why he's asking these things; I know he has the right to. I've made some mistakes. Doozies. But I need this trip. I'm seventy-two, but I don't feel seventy-two. I don't feel a day over—I don't even know what age. But not seventy-two. And it doesn't help that Harrison, my ex, got remarried eighteen months ago. At seventy-five! To a woman who—get this—is also seventy-five. He could have at least had the decency to marry someone half his age. Then I could mock him. Instead, Lilith is elegant and sophisticated. I'd bet good money that she's never made her own laundry detergent or used metal detectors to increase her net worth.

So, the cruise. I need it. And I'm going. I reach out and touch Caleb's arm. "Look, honey, I appreciate your concern, but I'll be fine. I've learned my lesson."

He rakes his hair again. "Have you?"

"Yes. Of course."

"And you'll be on guard? Suspicious of everyone?" He leans forward. "Especially of anyone asking for money." He pauses. "Or to see your phone. There are lots of scams with phones these days."

"No money, no phones. Got it."

"And people aren't usually nice. I hate to say it, but anyone nice is a red flag."

"I will avoid nice people like the plague." The kitten leaps out of my hands and tumbles back into the box.

"I'm serious, Mom."

"Me too. I have no intention of cavorting with anyone, nice or not. I've packed a bunch of mystery novels. I'm just going to relax."

"Promise?"

The front door swings open and the two techs who work with Caleb step inside.

“I promise.”

CHAPTER TWO

Mark

"You got everything, Dad?" Addison asks. We're in the parking lot of the Brooklyn Cruise Terminal. A monstrosity of a ship, the Carpe Diem III, looms in front of us like a floating hotel.

I pull my small suitcase from her car trunk. "Got everything." A wind gust whips from the Hudson River, blowing my gray hair.

She eyes the suitcase. "That's it? For a week?"

"It'll be fine," I say. It might not be. Whatever. This is not a trip I wanted to take. Addison and Sara gave it to me as a retirement gift after I'd been unceremoniously pushed toward retiring from my teaching job by the new school principal. Things had gotten increasingly digital and computerized; I couldn't keep up.

Addison shifts her gaze from my bag to Carpe Diem III. "The ship looks kind of worn down." She scrunches up her nose. "Sorry. It looked better in the pictures."

"It looks fabulous," I lie. "This trip was a wonderful surprise." A second lie. The trip was not a wonderful surprise, and had Addison not been so excited to gift it to me, there's no way I'd be standing here right now. I like order and routine. I have since I took custody of Addison and Sara, my sister's daughters, when they were just six and four. Routine was required as a single caregiver; I got used to it.

"You have all the notes about Sara?" I ask. Sara has cerebral palsy and still lives with me. Her care can be a lot.

“Yes. I know how to take care of my sister, Dad. We’re both in our forties. We’ll be fine.” Wind whips at us and she pulls her coat tighter. “Better than fine. We're totally going to bond, and I’ll love having someone else in the house again. It hasn’t been that long since Max.”

“I know.” Addison never married, but she and her long-term boyfriend Max decided to part ways months ago. Though the decision was mutual, she hasn’t had an easy time of it.

She pokes her index finger on my chest. “You’re going to have an awesome time.”

Awesome time. Right. I’ve got a dozen non-fiction books on my Kindle and my trusty crossword puzzle book. I’ll pass the time. Not sure it will be awesome.

“An awesome time, Dad,” she repeats. “You deserve it.” She looks at her phone. “Come on. You’d better go. I’m sorry I can’t stay to see you off.”

I give her a peck on the cheek. “No worries. I don’t think I’ll get lost on my way to the boat.”

I start toward the massive and extremely run-down cruise ship. Others are doing the same. Old people, like me, on this “senior cruise” or whatever it is. Part of me thinks Addison booked the trip in the hopes I’d finally find someone. I won’t. And I don’t plan to even look.

I pass a woman leaning against a railing looking at her phone, a pile of bright purple luggage pieces spread in front of her. She’s wearing a puffy purple coat with a matching hat.

I stop. She looks up from her phone, her eyes a color of blue which stand out in the best possible way. Her cheeks are pink, and the bits of hair that peek out from her hat appear to be blond.

I stare for a moment. The woman pushes off the railing and stands tall. “May I help you?” she asks. Her accent is Southern.

I gesture to the bags splayed about her feet. “I was going to ask you the same thing. Are you going on the cruise? Do you need help getting these to the ship?”

She narrows her eyes. “Maybe.”

I tilt my head. “Maybe you’re going on the cruise, or maybe you need help with your luggage?”

She looks at her fingernails. Long and bright pink.

I push my hand out in her direction. “I’m Mark. Happy to give you a hand if you need it.”

She looks at me a long moment before taking my hand and giving it a limp squeeze. “Okay, Mark. I’m Ellie. I could use the help. But this is just a luggage thing.”

Just a luggage thing? What did she think this was? I hold up my hands. “Of course.”

I pick up most of her luggage. It’s heavy, like she’s packed everything she owns. Or possibly a bunch of rocks. I carry the luggage, dragging some of it, to the end of the line of people boarding the ship. “So, where are you from?” She’s from somewhere in the South for sure.

“Not relevant.”

Not relevant? Man. And I always thought Southern people were supposed to be friendly. I stand in silence and my mind wanders to Sara. Does Addison know about indoor swimming at the YMCA on Tuesdays? Did I put that on the list? I did, right? I think so. Maybe?

I reach inside my coat pocket. I’ll send a quick text about the class. I feel around for my phone. It’s not there. I try my other pocket. Nothing. Ridiculously, I pat all over my body, like my phone might possibly be hidden in my stomach or on a limb or something. It’s not.

I bend down and unzip my suitcase. I rifle through the contents like a madman. As I’m throwing my boxers on the ground, I visualize it, my phone, in the cup holder of Addison’s car.

Crap. C-R-A-P! I look at my watch. It's only been twenty minutes. She could get back here in time to give it to me before we take off.

I look up at Ellie, her gaze fixed on the guts of my small suitcase. "Hey. Any chance I could use your phone to call my daughter?"

"My phone?" Her eyes widen.

"Yeah. Sorry. But I left my phone in my daughter's car, and I really need it. My other daughter has cerebral palsy and -"

She jets out a hand and puts it on my arm. For a moment, I think she's about to say yes, of course, please. Things any normal person would say. Instead, she says, "Absolutely not."

Absolutely not? What? "I need to be in touch while I'm away. I really can't be without my phone."

She folds her arms across her chest. "That's not my problem." She wags a finger at me. "And don't think I don't know what this is."

"What what is?" I look at my watch. "Look, it's just one call. I need to reach my daughter before she gets too far away." We move a few steps in line. I pull, carry, and lug her bags along with us.

"No."

"No? Really?" I shake my head. "Okay. Whatever." I step out of line, grab my suitcase, and jog toward a smiling cruise worker. She's holding blue and white pom-poms and is wearing a button that says, "Go Seniors!"

As I approach, she shakes the pom-poms and yells "Yay!"

I'm momentarily frozen by the ludicrousness of the situation, like it's a dream or an out-of-body experience. Or maybe I'm dead and this is my personal version of hell.

“I’m Brandy!” the cruise worker yells in my direction. “Can I help you, handsome cruiser?”

Handsome cruiser? I’m seventy-two with gray hair and brown eyes and my six-foot physique feels like it shrinks on the daily. I’m not handsome. I’m more of a “not that bad” kind of guy.

I don’t acknowledge the condescending “handsome cruiser” remark and explain the situation. I make the call with Brandy’s phone (adorned with unicorn stickers!), and Addison assures me she’ll turn around immediately. I’m standing in the parking lot when she gets there, decision made.

“I can’t do this, honey,” I say as soon as she gets out of the car.

“Do what?” In a matter of seconds, understanding passes over her features. “The cruise? Dad no.”

I put my hands on her shoulders and look into her eyes. “It was a beautiful idea, and I appreciate it, but it’s just not for me. I can reimburse you.”

She steps away and holds out my phone. “It’s not about the money. It’s a thank you. For everything. Everything. All these years.” She looks to the ship and back at me. “Please. Please go and just have fun.”

I take the phone from her extended hand. “I – ”

The ship horn blasts.

Addison puts her hands in a prayer position. “Please. Please go, Dad. Please.” Her voice is pleading in a way I’ve rarely heard it. For some reason, my going on this cruise, me having “fun,” is extremely important to her, so much so that she’s almost in tears. And her feelings on this relatively small matter? Way more important than mine. I can suck it up.

“Okay, sweetheart. I’ll go.”

The horn blasts again. I give Addison a wave, walk briskly toward the ship, and ascend the ramp. Brandy is among the crew members as I board, all of whom have pom-poms. They make a pom-pom arch, which I have no choice but to walk under.

Good Lord.

I look around the general vicinity. Ellie is nowhere in sight.

At least I’ve got that.

***

I hope you enjoyed this sneak peek of “Why Not?” If you love romances that are funny, heartfelt, and full of second (and third) chances, Ellie and Mark are ready to welcome you aboard.

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