# Skinny Dip
## Carl Hiaasen

### Chapter 1

At the stroke of eleven on a cool April night, a woman named Joey Perrone went overboard from a luxury deck of the cruise liner M.V. Sun Duchess. Plunging toward the dark Atlantic, Joey was too dumb- founded to panic.

I married an asshole, she thought, kniÞng headÞrst into the waves.

The impact tore off her silk skirt, blouse, panties, wristwatch and sandals, but Joey remained conscious and alert. Of course she did. She had been co-captain of her college swim team, a biographical nugget that her husband obviously had forgotten.

Bobbing in its Þzzy wake, Joey watched the gaily lit Sun Duchess continue steaming away at twenty nautical miles per hour. Evidently only one of the other 2,049 passengers was aware of what had happened, and he wasn't telling anybody.

Bastard, Joey thought.

She noticed that her bra was down around her waist, and she wriggled free of it. To the west, under a canopy of soft amber light, the coast of Florida was visible. Joey began to swim.

The water of the Gulf Stream was slightly warmer than the air, but a brisk northeasterly wind had kicked up a messy and uncomfortable chop. Joey paced herself. To keep her mind off sharks, she replayed the noteworthy events of the week-long cruise, which had begun almost as unpromisingly as it had ended.

The Sun Duchess had departed Port Everglades three hours late because a raccoon had turned up berserk in the pastry kitchen. One of the chefs had wrestled the frothing critter into a sixty-gallon tin of guava custard before it had shredded the man's jowls and humped snarling to the depths of the ship. A capture team from Broward Animal Control had arrived, along with health inspectors and paramedics. Evacuated passengers were appeased with rum drinks and canapŽs.

Later, while reboarding, Joey had passed the Animal Control ofÞcers trudging empty-handed down the gangplank.

"I bet they couldn't catch it," she'd whispered to her husband. Despite the inconvenience caused by the raccoon, she'd found herself rooting for the addled little varmint.

"Rabies," her husband had said knowingly. "Damn thing lays a claw on me, I'll own this frigging cruise line."


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"Oh, please, Chaz."

"From then on, you can call me Onassis. Think I'm kidding?"

The Sun Duchess was 855 feet long and weighed a shade more than seventy thousand tons. Joey had learned this from a brochure she'd found in their stateroom. The itinerary included Puerto Rico, Nassau and a private Bahamian island that the cruise lines had purchased (rumor had it) from the widow of a dismembered heroin trafÞcker. The last port of call before the ship returned to Fort Lauderdale was to be Key West.

Chaz had selected the cruise himself, claiming it was a present for their wedding anniversary. The Þrst evening he'd spent on the fantail, slicing golf balls into the ocean. Initially Joey had been annoyed that the Sun Duchess would offer a driving range, much less a fake rock- climbing wall and squash courts. She and Chaz could have stayed in Boca and done all that.

No less preposterous was the ship's tanning parlor, which received heavy trafÞc whenever the skies turned overcast. The cruise company wanted every passenger to return home with either a bronze glow or a crimson burn, proof of their seven days in the tropics.

As it turned out, Joey wound up scaling the rock wall and taking full advantage of the other amenities, even the two-lane bowling alley. The alternative was to eat and drink herself sick, gluttony being the principal recreation aboard cruise liners. The Sun Duchess was renowned for its twenty-four-hour surf-and-turf buffets, and that's how Joey's husband had spent the hours between ports.

Pig, she thought, submerging to shed a clot of seaweed that had wrapped around her neck like a sodden Yule garland.

Each day's sunrise had brought a glistening new harbor, yet the towns and straw markets were drearily similar, as if designed and operated by a franchise. Joey had earnestly tried to be charmed by the native wares, though many appeared to have been crafted in Singapore or South Korea. And what would one do with a helmet conch clumsily retouched with nail polish? Or a coconut husk bearing a hand-painted likeness of Prince Harry?

So grinding was the role of tourist that Joey had found herself looking forward to visiting the ship's "unspoiled private island," as it had been touted in the brochure. Yet that, too, proved dispiriting. The cruise line had mendaciously renamed the place Rapture Key while making only a minimal effort at restoration. Roosters, goats and feral hogs were the predominant fauna, having outlasted the smuggler who had been raising them for banquet fare. The island's sugar-dough ßats were pocked with hulks of sunken drug planes, and the only shells to be found along the tree-shorn beach were of the .45-caliber variety.

"I'm gonna rent a Jet Ski," Chaz had cheerily decreed.


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"I'll try to Þnd some shade," Joey had said, "and Þnish my book."

The distance between them remained wide and unexplored. By the time the Sun Duchess had reached Key West, Joey and Chaz were spending only about one waking hour a day together, an interval usually devoted to either sex or an argument. It was pretty much the same schedule they kept at home.

So much for the romantic latitudes, Joey had thought, wishing she felt sadder than she did.

When her husband had scampered off to "check out the action" at Mallory Square, she brießy considered seducing one of the cabin attendants, a Þne Peruvian brute named Tico. Ultimately Joey had lost the urge, dismissing the crestfallen young fellow with a peck on the chin and a Þfty-dollar tip. She didn't feel strongly enough about Chaz to cheat on him even out of spite, although she suspected he'd cheated on her often (and quite possibly during the cruise).

Upon returning to the Sun Duchess, Chaz had been as chatty as a cockatoo on PCP.

"See all those clouds? It's about to rain," he'd proclaimed with a peculiar note of elation.

"I guess that means no golf tonight," Joey had said.

"Hey, I counted twenty-six T-shirt shops on Duval Street. No wonder Hemingway blew his brains out."

"That wasn't here," Joey had informed him. "That was in Idaho."

"How about some chow? I could eat a whale."

At dinner Chaz had kept reÞlling Joey's wineglass, over her protests. Now she understood why.

She felt it, too, that dehydrated alcohol fatigue. She'd been kicking hard up the crests of the waves and then breast-stroking down the troughs, but now she was losing both her rhythm and stamina. This wasn't the heated Olympic pool at UCLA; it was the goddamn Atlantic Ocean. Joey scrunched her eyelids to dull the saltwater burn.

I had a feeling he didn't love me anymore, she thought, but this is ridiculous.


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Chaz Perrone listened for a splash but heard nothing except the deep lulling rumble of the ship's engines. Head cocked slightly, he stood at the rail as solitary and motionless as a heron.

He hadn't planned to toss her here. He had hoped to do it earlier in the voyage, somewhere between Nassau and San Juan, with the expectation that the currents would carry her body into Cuban waters, safely out of U.S. jurisdiction.

If the bull sharks didn't Þnd her Þrst.

Unfortunately, the weather had been splendid during that early leg of the cruise, and every night the outside decks were crowded with moony-eyed couples. Chaz's scheme required seclusion and he'd nearly abandoned hope, when the rain arrived, three hours after leaving Key West. It was only a drizzle, but Chaz knew it would drive the tourists indoors, stampeding for the lobster salad and electronic poker machines.


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