

Lena White Badger Therese



**Cruise du Kinque
Second Voyage – Part I**

The Second Voyage - Part 1

(Cruise du Kinque 2)

**Lena White and Badger
Therese**



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16	Lab	by Badger	<i>The Debt Proxy</i>
15	Confederacy	by Lena	<i>New Confederacy series</i>
14	Medieval	by Badger	<i>Guide to Slave Girl Husbandry</i>
13	Discipline	by Lena	<i>Black Bulls and Hotwives series</i>
12	Prison	by Badger	<i>2024</i>
11	Gangbang	by Lena	<i>Black Bulls Club series</i>
10	Adult Products Testing	by Badger	<i>Confessions, Adult Products</i>
9	Penthouse Room	by Lena	<i>The Whore Hotel series</i>
8	Domestic Sex Slave	by Badger	<i>Female, Recreational</i>
7	Buckhorn Club	by Lena	<i>Reluctant Cuckold series</i>
6	Breeding	by Badger	<i>The Debt Proxy 2: Mirabilis</i>
5	Visual Arts	by Lena	<i>First Time Hotwife series</i>
4	Milking	by Badger	<i>The Production Contract</i>
3	Bondage	by Lena	<i>Club-Sub series</i>
2		Operations	
1		Safeword	

*The Decks of Cruise du Kinque on the SS Loviatar
As Inspired by the Books of Lena White & Badger Therese*

The Second Voyage of the Sinflux Cruise du Kinque!

The reviews are finally in and they couldn't be better!

- “Amazing,” said a passenger who spent an unreal week on the Domestic Slavery Deck.
- “Incredible!” raved a fan of that interracial cuckolding paradise, The Buckhorn Club Deck.
- “That can't be legal!” gushed one ‘barbecued’ inmate on the Prison Deck.
- “I’ll go broke before I’m done,” babbled a male devotee of the Penthouse Club Deck.
- “I have to go back, when can I go back?” cried one hysterical enthusiast of the Milking Deck.

After the huge success of the Cruise du Kinque’s Maiden Voyage, the SS Sinflux Loviatar is setting sail for another fetish-filled week with new passengers, a bigger crew, and some exciting new kinks!

What’s in store for the next batch of merry perverts on the Bondage Deck, the Visual Arts Deck, the Gangbang Deck, and the Discipline Deck? Only Rodney Morrow and his diabolically wicked crew know for sure.

What’s happening on the Adult Products Testing Deck, the Breeding Deck, and the Female Sexuality Lab Deck? Read this book (and its sequels) to find out.

Deck	Lena Decks:	Series
3	Bondage (restraints, chastity belts)	<u>Club-sub series</u>
5	Visual Arts (Pornography)	<u>First Time Hotwife series</u>
7	Buckhorn Club (Interracial Cuckolding)	<u>Reluctant Cuckold series</u>
9	Penthouse Room (Prostitution)	<u>The Whore Hotel series</u>
11	Gangbang	<u>Black Bulls Club series</u>
13	Discipline (whips, paddles, shocks)	<u>Black Bulls and Hotwives series</u>
15	Confederacy (Slavery)	<u>New Confederacy series</u>
Deck	Badger Decks:	Novel or Series
4	Milking	<u>The Production Contract</u>
6	Breeding	<u>The Debt Proxy - Mirabilis</u>
8	Domestic slave (sex, chores)	<u>Female, Recreational series</u>
10	Adult Products Testing	<u>Adult Product Testing</u>
12	Prison (from 2024)	<u>2024</u>
14	Medieval Slavery	<u>Slave Girl Husbandry</u>
16	Female Sexuality Lab	<u>The Debt Proxy Series</u>

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1 - Sinflix Tonight (Production Meeting)



“Okay, last order of business,” Amanda Matthews said to the *Sinflix Tonight* production staff. It was her first time running the meeting since she was promoted to programming director for all of Sinflix Entertainment, Inc. She hadn’t had time to hire a replacement for her previous position as Executive Producer of the nightly news show on the streaming network. She looked at Zoe Grayson, who smiled and nodded.

“As you can see, Zoe has graciously accepted Mr. Morrow’s offer to return as the *Sinflix Tonight* host for our second voyage. Not only will she be hosting the show every night for the duration of the cruise, but she’ll also be escorting our featured guest for the week, if we can get her to come back. She’ll be our very first VIP Roving Ambassador, and she’ll showcase the cruise to our members from the perspective of an outsider.”

“Wasn’t she a passenger on the maiden voyage?” someone asked. “On the Milking Deck?”

Amanda frowned. “She was but this time she’ll see the rest of the ship through fresh eyes,” she explained. “With Zoe acting as her guide.”

“Wasn’t the PR guy supposed to do that?” the same person, Liam Breslin, interjected again. She decided that Liam had designs on Amanda’s old job, but that this was not the way to ingratiate himself. She would have to have a conversation with him.

“Kyle Bannister begged off the assignment,” Zoe said with a slight eye roll. “Too many conflicting responsibilities, it seems.” A subtle crosscurrent of murmuring coursed through

the small conference room on the Admin Deck of the SS *Sinflix Loviatar*.

Amanda cleared her throat to quiet the small group. “Be that as it may, we’ll be laser-focused on Zoe and her guest for the week. We’ve got her agenda finalized with each Deck Manager, although we will do what we can to accommodate any special requests. And if she declines to visit one or more of the decks, we’ll make every effort to work around the situation as it presents itself.” Amanda winced slightly at her foray into corporate-speak, something she hated when she was on the receiving end of such statements in prior meetings.

“When do we meet the VIP?” Breslin persisted.

“Our plan is to bring her aboard first thing next Sunday to get her settled,” Zoe said. “Assuming she agrees to all this, she’ll be staying in Mr. Morrow’s cabin for the duration.”

“Where’s *he* staying?” someone other than Breslin asked with a laugh.

“Mr. Morrow will be skipping the second voyage altogether,” Amanda said with a silent prayer that he follow through on his promise to stay away. She would have her hands full with the VIP.

“What’s her name?” Breslin asked. “The special guest?”

Amanda looked at her notes. “Her name is Meghan Attweiler. She’s a mom from Anaheim.”

“Isn’t she a member of the Orange County School Board?” Breslin went on. “I read somewhere that she’s a real holy roller.”

“I saw that, too,” another technician piped up. “Some megachurch or something.”

Amanda glanced at Zoe, who shrugged. “We’ll do what we can to make her comfortable,” Zoe said with a sniff.

“What if she doesn’t want to do it?” Breslin asked.

“We’ve got a few other names in mind, but she’s our first choice,” Amanda said. “We’ll be calling her Monday or Tuesday.”

“You don’t think we’ll run into trouble with her?” Breslin asked, clearly hoping that might be the case.

“Well,” Amanda pointed out, “she did spend a week naked, tagged on her ear and labia, and leashed anally at least a dozen times a day on the Milking Deck during our maiden cruise.” She didn’t mention the woman’s seemingly deranged notion that there had been babies on the ship that she was convinced were being used for outlandishly nefarious purposes. A fact she wished she’d shared with Rodney when he suggested that Meghan be invited back and feted as his special guest.

“Did she, uh, fully participate?” Zoe asked.

“She did,” Amanda said with a look. “Fully.” She glanced around the table. “Anyway, that’s it for now. We’ll convene just before general boarding.”

As the rest of the staff filed out of the small conference room, Amanda motioned for Zoe to stay behind. When they were alone, Zoe laughed bitterly.

“You’ve got your hands full with that guy,” she said.

“Breslin?” Amanda shrugged. “He’s harmless. Thinks the way to get ahead in this world is to be the biggest pain in the ass in the room.” She shook her head. “What a putz.”

“You really think this is going to work?” Zoe asked.

“The only possible way it does is with you here,” Amanda said as she touched Zoe’s arm. “I can’t tell you how happy I was to hear you decided to come back.”

Zoe laughed again, this time as if she meant it. “Rodney is pretty hard to say no to, especially when he’s writing big checks. But I don’t need to tell the Two Million Dollar Woman that, now do I?”

“And isn’t it funny the way he announces the offer publicly so if you turn it down you look about as idiotic as possible?”

“The man is a master of manipulation, no doubt,” Zoe added with a nod.

“Well, I’m just glad you came back.” Amanda checked her notes again. “Will you be fetching Mrs. Attweiler personally

or should we send the service to pick her up?”

“You don’t think she’ll bail on us, do you?”

Amanda deadpanned her host and VIP wrangler for the second cruise. “We can only hope.”

2 - Dylan and Jerri, Betrothed



"I'm sure you're wondering why I summoned you here tonight," Dylan Hightower said soberly, planting his elbow next to his beer and studying the blank faces of his three companions.

No one spoke.

"Any ideas?" he said, looking slightly disenchanted.

Heck Southward, Dylan's best friend from middle school on, shrugged.

Grey Fieldman, whom Dylan had met at an energy church a year before, looked lost.

Drake Palmer, Dylan's high-school-aged nephew, shook his head.

"Okay then," Dylan said, his smile not quite hiding his disappointment. "I am hoping each of you will do me the profound honor ..." Dylan raised his beer dramatically, "of joining my wedding party."

Silence followed, broken only by the rap of a cue ball hitting its mark on one of the nearby pool tables. They were at Quincy's, a local fried food bar where the beer was served in pitchers and the dinners came in plastic bins lined with paper.

"Cool," said Heck at last. "When's the party?"

"It's not just a party," Dylan said. "It's a whole thing. I'm getting married."

"Wow," said Heck. "Married? Like, to a girl?"

"Uh, yeah," said Dylan, picking up his beer again. "The whole nine yards. Church wedding. Bells. Flowers. You know."

"Energy church?" Grey asked.

“It’s under discussion, and if you want to put a list together, we’ll be glad to take a look.”

“Who are you marrying?” Drake asked, suddenly looking interested and peering out from under the brim of his black leather cowboy hat, which was part of the ensemble he’d been going with lately.

“You’ve met her,” Dylan said. “Jerri. You know, she was with me at Thanksgiving?”

“Oh yeah,” Drake said. “Does Aunt Ross know?”

“Yeah, I told her first,” Dylan said. “I needed her to get Uncle Monty on board.”

“Is he on board?” Drake asked.

“Dylan’s gettin’ married!” Heck announced, his social awareness arriving suddenly in the form of a verbal spasm. He tilted the half-full pitcher of Indian IPA into his glass and raised it. “Dylan Hightower’s gettin’ married!”

Heck surveyed the nearby tables. The only people who seemed to care were four Asian nail salon workers in matching pink, all drinking something green with umbrellas stuck in.

“Wooo!” Dylan added.

The salon girls stopped looking.

Grey was the first to offer his hand to Dylan, half-rising, bending to offer up a one-armed hug.

Drake was next, shaking his uncle’s hand formally.

Heck went last but most enthusiastically, forcing his friend into a bear hug and offering another “Wooo!” to the backs of peoples’ heads.

“So when’s the happy day?” Grey asked.

“May or June,” Dylan said. “We don’t want to wait around.”

“Four or five months,” said Gray. “That’s probably enough time for me to find an energy church with the space you need. Or there’s a very cool furries congregation I’m getting set up.

They're meeting in an old mansion with some good space, I can ask them."

"We're open," Dylan said, nodding gratefully. "So ... everyone in? This is my wedding court?"

"All the way," Heck said. "Can I nominate myself for best man?"

"It's yours, my friend," Dylan said, prompting an "Aw, man!" and another bear hug from Heck.

"Grey, you in?" Dylan asked.

"It'll be an honor," said Grey.

"Drake?"

"I reckon," said Drake, for whom words like "reckon" were also part of his current ensemble.

Dylan leaned back, smiled sincerely, his satisfaction growing apparently with the way things were proceeding.

"Now, let's talk about the bachelor party," he said, leaning forward and nodding at his fellows as though he had a secret to keep. "Everybody's free for a week, end of April, right?"

Grey, Drake and Heck pulled out their phones and studied them. "Finals are the week before, graduation two weeks after" Drake said. "I can do it."

"I'm in," said Grey.

"Wouldn't miss it, buddy," concluded Heck. "Whatcha got planned?"

Dylan leaned forward, eyeing his companions. "Can everyone keep a secret?"

They all nodded like they could.

"Cruise," Dylan whispered.

"Cruise?" Heck boomed. "Like on a ship or something?"

Dylan blanched, waved his hands.

"Shhhhh!" he hissed.

Heck looked puzzled.

“Not just any cruise,” Dylan said. “It’s a new one.”

“Which one?” Heck asked quietly, peering behind himself to make sure no one heard his question.

“The *Cruise du Kinque*,” Dylan said so quietly now all four heads were lowered almost to the table.

“*Cruise do Kinque?*” Heck echoed loudly. “What’s that—”

Another frantic hiss and waving of hands shut Heck up again.

“This is super secret,” Dylan said, quietly and pleadingly. “No one finds out. Jerri thinks we’re all going to Hilton Head.”

“Is that a different cruise?” Drake asked quietly.

“No, it’s a place on the other side of the country somewhere,” Dylan said. “Wilderness area I think. I’m not sure it even has cell phones. She’s saying she and her girls are doing some kinda meditation shit and she can’t call me, but that will probably last like two hours, so she needs to think we’re super far away so we can’t talk that week.”

“A weeklong cruise?” Grey said dubiously. “What’s the price?”

“You don’t want to know,” Dylan said, his expression gloating now.

“Well, I might like to,” countered Grey, “since I’ll be paying—”

“No, you won’t,” Dylan interrupted. “This is all courtesy of Uncle Monty.”

“Uncle who?” Grey said.

“Uncle Monty, my mom’s brother,” Dylan said. “He’s so rich it’s sick. She hit him up, I hit him up, together we shook loose some heavy cash money.”

“Okay,” Heck said, at this point observing discretion but looking as doubtful as Grey had a moment before. “So, four dudes on a high-class boat.”

“High-class sex boat,” Dylan corrected.

“Okay, sex boat,” Heck agreed. “So, I mean, I love ya’ll, but—”

“Errp,” Dylan said, holding up his hand again and silencing his best friend. “My man, how long have we known each other?”

“Since seventh grade,” Heck said.

“And in all that time, have you ever known me to do anything half-assed?”

“Well,” Heck said, staring at the ceiling. “Yeah, maybe. That one time at Pussy Top, you—”

“Okay, don’t answer that,” Dylan said. “But this time ... this time, gentlemen ... we’re doing it right.”

Dylan tapped on his phone, searched the bar again for interlopers, held up the screen, which bore a leering, topless devil girl in red panties and red horns.

“This is their website,” he said.

“So they got a lot of strippers on that ship?” Heck asked, starting to sound interested.

“Way more than that,” Dylan said. “Waaaaay more than that.”

Dylan pulled his seat closer to the table, glanced quickly at the salon workers to make sure they weren’t listening (they weren’t), refilled his beer.

“It’s pornography come to life,” he said. “Like, seriously kinky shit. You take your pick of what you want and then you just live it ... for seven days.”

“Says who?” Heck demanded, drawing a startled look from his friend. “Sorry, buddy,” Heck added quickly, “I don’t want to rain on your parade. I’m sure whatever we do will be awesome, due to company alone.”

Heck looked around the table, nodding. He barely knew Drake, didn’t know Grey at all. But maybe he was a quick judge of character.

“I’m just saying,” he continued, “that when it comes to things of a sexual nature ... what you think you’re buying is not what you end up actually getting.”

“Point taken,” Dylan said. “I haven’t put in any reservations yet. And space is going fast. But if I can book us some rooms—what’s the worst thing that could happen? A week on the ocean, at least some babes to look at, right?”

“That would not be a terrible thing,” said Drake.”

“So ...” Dylan said, “everyone on board?”

“For you man, anything,” said Heck.

“I’ll do it,” Grey said.

“I reckon,” said Drake.

As they’d been talking, Grey had been poking at his phone, and now he raised it for his friends’ inspection, revealing a little building with a pitched roof and steeple, glowing in an idyllic sunset.

“Here’s a possibility,” he said. “On the coast. New Century Energy Church. Seats 150. I did some work for them a couple of years ago.”

“That might be the one,” Dylan said, brow suddenly furrowing. “And if you can, get it locked in soon. Friend of mine says she wants to host at her place, and I need to tell her it’s already settled.”

The mood around the table darkened palpably.

“Lady Diana?” Drake asked with a scowl on both his face and in his voice.

“The very one,” Dylan said. “Southern charm and all.”

“She wants in on this thing?” Heck said.

“She was very insistent,” Dylan said.

“How’d she find out about it?” Grey inquired with affront.

“The woman puts out a lot feelers is all I know. She called me this morning, left a message saying her place was ours. She’s got close to two acres.”

A miasma of sorrows settled on the little party.

“I kind of have to do something with her,” Dylan said apologetically. “That’s one of the unspoken conditions of Uncle Monty’s money. He really respects her. But maybe a little party before the cruise. I’ll propose that. And it would be good if I can tell her we already found a place for the wedding. And best if it can be true.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Gray promised. “Any date late May or June?”

After a quick huddle and the consulting of phones, the last weekend in May and the middle two June weekends were agreed upon for the wedding, and the men clinked their glasses to cheer Dylan’s happy news.

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Jerri Magisteria stirred her lavender tea with one of those spoons useless for doing anything else, and smiled conspiratorially at her three companions.

“Thank you for joining me,” she said, gazing at each of the women seated at the little table. “I have an announc—”

The rest of Jerri’s words were swallowed up by a squeal from Jackie Divine, her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide and tearing up.

“Dylan proposed?” she nearly shouted.

Jerri nodded. Now her eyes were getting wet too.

Jackie stood. Jerri stood. The two hugged. Munro dePriest was next, hugging her co-worker with a sort of cooing sound, quickly followed by a hug and a soft squeal of delight from Jerri’s niece, Gallant Fender.

In all, the initial prenuptial celebration took some three minutes to conclude, after which they sat down and, still giggling and cooing, covered the minutiae of Dylan’s proposal (done at the beach, on one knee, presenting a ring with two small diamonds, which Jerri held out proudly), the date (late May or sometime in June), the venue (still up in the air, Dylan was looking), and the unavoidable involvement of Diana

Entwistle, the obnoxiously rich Southern woman who had wormed her way into all their dealings.

“Doesn’t she own a really nice place in Encina?” Munro asked without enthusiasm.

“Yes,” Jerri said sadly. “And Dylan said she’s already angling to host. And I sort of need to do something with her.”

“What does she want from us?” Gallant almost shouted, drawing the attention of five nearby men who, judging by their t-shirts and facial hair, were either unemployed stevedores or overpaid tech workers (probably tech workers, given they were all drinking complex, multi-colored concoctions from the \$10 end of the menu).

“You’ve had dealings with her?” Munro asked, first looking at Gallant with surprise, then glancing up briefly at the nearby men and quickly looking away, because they were all still staring.

“Yeah, once,” Gallant confirmed, grimacing and waving her hand in a way that made clear the nature of those dealings would not be discussed today. Or ever.

“Dylan told me he’d put a friend on the wedding location,” Jerri said. “*Not* Diana’s place.”

“He’s not having Heck look for a venue, right?” Jackie said.

“No, not Heck,” Jerri said, shaking her head and laughing. “Grey Feldman. He works with churches. And he’ll be one of Dylan’s groomsmen.”

“He’s cute,” said Gallant. “Isn’t he a minister?”

“No,” Jerri said. “He helps churches get off the ground.”

“I thought they were all dying off,” Jackie said.

“These are the new ones everyone’s going to,” Jerri said. “Energy churches mostly. Magnet churches. He just set up a furry church.”

“Furry church?” Munro echoed.

“Everyone shows up as a furry,” Jerri explained. “Including the minister and the altar girls.”

“Cool.”

Jerri nodded her agreement. “So, everyone’s good most weekends in May and June?”

“First Saturday of June is out,” Gallant said without consulting her phone. “I’m graduating that weekend. But all the others will work.”

“Me too,” said Jackie.

“I’m in,” said Munro.

Jerri turned to Jackie, paused dramatically.

“Will you be my maid of honor?”

“Oooh!” Jackie said, coming in for another hug.

“Munro, Gallant ... bridesmaids?”

“Yes!” Gallant said.

“Absolutely!” Munro promised.

Jerri turned to each female, took their hands in hers, sealing the deal.

“Now, just one more thing,” Jerri said.

“Bridal shower!” Gallant proposed.

“Well, that’s not up to me,” Jerri said. “But I—”

“Maybe we could do that at Diana’s place,” Jackie said. “So she doesn’t feel left out.”

A veil of sadness settled over the four women, a kind of existential resignation, because Diana Entwhistle seemed to be someone none of them wanted anything to do with, but someone all of them nevertheless had for some reason to placate.

“Okay,” Jerri said at last. “I’m not opposed to it, if she’s agreeable. I’ll let you pursue it with her.”

The darkness ended suddenly, Jerri leaning forward and smiling conspiratorially.

“So, bachelorette party,” she whispered.

“Oooh,” Munro said. “Frankencastle? I went to a great one there, it had—”

“Wait wait!” Jackie enthused. “A whole weekend. Napa Valley. Wine tour!”

“Or maybe a place up the coast?” said Gallant, not able to drink legally yet. “Bed and breakfast in Santa Barbara?”

“I’m way ahead of you,” Jerri said. “I’ve found our place. But it’s got to be super, super, double-triple secret.”

Everyone waited for Jerri to continue.

“How ‘bout we live a little?” she said. “The boys get to have their fun. Why don’t we—”

“I bet Dylan’s taking everyone to a strip club,” Jackie said.

“I don’t know,” said Jerri. “He’s talking about a week at something called Hilton Head. Like some kind of wilderness shit.”

“I’ve heard of it,” Munro said. “It’s a whole place. It probably has strip clubs.”

“So I want to do a week with all of you,” Jerri said. “A very special ... very naughty week.”

“Oooh,” Munro said, covering her mouth with her hands.

“A cruise,” Jerri said.

“Oooh,” Munro said, her tone decidedly less scandalous, and she dropped her hands to her lap. “I’ve heard about those poolside games ... some of them are totally risque.”

“Yeah,” nodded Jackie, looking distinctly underwhelmed. “This’ll be fun. And we could ... watch porn.”

Jerri smiled, shook her head, leaned in, looked around to make sure no one was listening. The tech workers were still glancing over now and then, but they were too far away to hear anything as long as Jerri whispered.

“It’s not a normal cruise,” she said. “It’s something insane I found, I was just searching and it popped up. And it’s basically

all sex, all decks.”

Jerri looked into three pairs of perplexed eyes.

“Look it up,” she said. “*Cruise du Kinque*. They’ve still got some spaces on the second voyage, April 28 to May 5. I put down a deposit for all four of us. I can get it refunded if I cancel by Monday, but I feel like this is it. I really, really want all three of you there.”

“So it’s like, on a boat?” Gallant said. “A cruise ship?”

“Yes, a big one. Something like 15 decks. They’re all different, and we might not all be on the same deck, but it would be ... well, just look it up.”

The three members of Jerri’s wedding court consulted their phones to check their calendars and visit the website, and eventually each of them was looking at the picture of a topless devil girl with red horns.

“Oh,” Jackie said, whose lilting voice sounded very much like feigned excitement. “Yeah, it’s based on books. Lena White. I think I’ve heard of her. And um, Badger, um, Therese. I guess I haven’t read them yet.”

“Oh, New Confederacy,” Gallant said. “That’s a movie. I’ve heard of that.”

“They made movies of all the books?” Munro asked, not waiting for an answer. “And ... I bet you can watch them. Like, in your room. Or big theaters they set up. That would be a trip.”

“No,” Jerri said, “it’s more than that. Keep looking. You *live* the books. And they’re all based on kinks. Like, punishment and porn stuff. Or you can be a sex slave. All week, and ...”

Jerri spread her arms, waved her hands, motioned her companions to lean in. “And ... we’re all going to get fucked.”

“Like, drunk?” Jackie said.

“No,” Jerri said. “The other kind of fucked.”

“You’re serious?” Munro said. “You think it’s that?”

“That’s what the website seems to be saying,” Jerri said.
“Go home, look it over tonight.”

“And Dylan says this is okay?” Jackie whispered.

“Dylan doesn’t know,” Jerri said. “I told him we’re doing a girls’ week on Oahu. A meditation retreat. No cell phones. That’s our story.”

No one looked quite convinced as they put their phones away. But girlhood is powerful enough to overcome the doubts when one of its citizens seems to have arrived at a dubious plan. Especially if that girl is getting married.

“I’m in,” Jackie said.

“I’m going,” said Munro.

“I might be able to,” Gallant said. “How much is it?”

“Free,” Jerri said. “Daddy’s picking up the tab.”

“Uncle Robert is paying?” Gallant said.

“Does he know what he’s actually funding?” Jackie said.

“No idea,” Jerri said. “I just told him how much we needed, and he said yes, and first payment dropped this morning.”

“I didn’t know he was that easy,” Jackie said.

“Well, fortunately, he loves Dylan,” Jerri said. “And ... I sort of had to promise to get Diana involved. He thinks she’s great, and she told him how much she wants to help out with things. So, if you want, mention the shower idea, maybe right before the cruise. All of us there, guys too. And I’ll tell Daddy we’re doing that.”

3 - An Unexpected Phone Call



Meghan Attweiler sat hunched over a little chair at a little table, both painted to look like mushrooms, staring into the McDonald's ball pit, where her daughter Candy had lost herself, her shouts of delight the only confirmation she was still there, somewhere beneath the roiling plastic spheres.

Meghan was also lost, and she was screaming too, but silently, unheard other than by God:

I am a Christian

I love Jesus

Jesus loves me

Over and over she said it in her mind, making of it a mantra of sorts, although she wouldn't have called it that.

It was lunchtime on Tuesday, two days after she'd been freed from the *Cruise du Kinque's* Milking Deck, two days since the unceasingly sexualized giving of milk had ended, with all its distractions, its pains and pleasures, its restraints and regiments, replaced by a strange, existential silence: A god who was not speaking, a silence in which reflection was inevitable.

Our lives are a series of actions, she knew, but our actions are not what make us who we are. It's what we are thinking as we do things that matters most. If you are a soldier in combat who must kill, are you reveling in mindless slaughter, or are you praying that each death you cause is just in God's eyes? And if you have found yourself naked, locked in a stall with a very nice, enthusiastic girl 10 years your junior who is also kept naked, and who wants to make love to you every night because that's the way it was done in some strange book, and you do it with her, every night, why are you doing it? Unchecked lust? A selfish hunger for another girl's body? Or

an act of faith, something performed to fit in and ultimately to fulfill one's godly mission?

For Meghan, it had been the last choice. She was there to uncover evil, and she'd come close, she believed.

But then, what about the milking room? What had she done there? What had she thought there? If you're chained naked on your hands and knees, your breasts fitted with collection cups, and naked men—or boys, really, they were boys, some of them possibly still teenagers—are offering you their help, and you—

“Mommy!”

you tell them yes and they—

“Mommy!”

Meghan looked up. Candy had found a way to wedge herself into one of the corners of the ball pit, stockinged heels on the ledge, little fingers wrapped around the netting, head turned, waiting for her mother's attention.

“Watch!” Candy yelled, and she allowed herself to fall forward, like a plank, arms wide, dropping face-first into the balls, disappearing under them, into a sea of red and yellow, blue and green.

Candy screamed. Meghan grimaced.

There had been long talks with her husband, Keith. He'd tried to call her while she was at sea, had gotten worried when her phone never answered. He'd called the cruise line, and a nice lady said most passengers couldn't use their phones on the ship, because of how far out to sea it had gone and/or possibly because the ship was using a jamming technology which kept them safe, in the same way that not being allowed to use your phone on passenger jets keeps those craft safe.

What did you do? Keith asked as soon as Meghan had returned home. How was it?

Meghan lied. The words had just rolled out of her mouth, so readily she realized she'd been concocting them simultaneously with experiencing the truth on the ship, her mind in two places at once as the ship bobbed on the sea.

She'd told her husband it wasn't sexual at all, at least not to her. She'd been given a small room, and a roommate. The girl was pleasant but immature. Her name was Erin. They would pump a few times a day, drink tea and explore the ship and eat well, and she didn't know what happened to the milk (that part was true). It had been boring. She'd watched a lot of TV, just reruns and old movies. She suspected there was a more sexualized part of the Milking Deck, but she hadn't opted for that and knew nothing about it. She didn't understand the sexualization of breastmilk (mostly true), because how could you sexualize that? She'd left out a few details, and altered a few others. The part about seeing naked boys was left out. Also the part about sucking their penises. Oh, and the fact two of them got behind her and stuck their penises up her vagina. No reason to bring that up. It would just complicate the story. The nightly lovemaking with Gabby, the real name of the girl she'd been locked up, was also neglected in her retellings.

Meghan would have to lie again, tomorrow night, to the Healing a Troubled Land Committee at First Pentecostal Church of Anaheim. When Meghan, outraged by a story about the cruise she'd seen on the local news, had proposed going to uncover its evils, the committee had taken up a collection, quickly gathering the relatively cheap, \$800 booking fee for a lactating female on the Milking Deck. They'd given in faith, driven by a conviction that the *Cruise du Kinque* represented a new abomination, a new Satanic foray into the soul of America just as the End Times approached and the final harvest loomed. Meghan, in an act of desperate courage, had signed up for the cruise in order to experience it for a week so she could expose it and shut it down.

It was time for the debrief (Meghan couldn't think the word now without a grim new awareness of its second meaning), time for Meghan to reveal her findings, and for the committee to make a plan in fulfillment of their mission, to purify American society, fight Satan, and get the world ready for the Rapture and the Second Coming of Jesus.

Meghan would be lying again, telling the committee the same things she'd told Keith. She'd seen chained, naked girls in the waiting room, of course, and she could talk about that.

But one need look no further than the *Cruise du Kinque* website to verify the rest, with its decks dedicated to sexual slavery, fornication, adultery, porn, abuse. So what really, could she contribute to the effort?

And others were already protesting the cruise, she would note. At the port after she'd disembarked, she'd seen a big garish display, complete with two oversized plaster Jesuses, calling out the cruise and the evil it represented. She and her church weren't the only ones who'd noticed it. And really, what more could Meghan contribute even if she was the first, even if she did tell the truth?

Of course, the possibility remained that her milk had been drawn to feed infants being prepared for sacrifice. There were times when she was absolutely certain of it, other times not. She'd found no evidence of such a practice, but that didn't mean it wasn't happening somewhere, on that huge ship. The problem was, she'd spent the whole week locked up on one deck, kept in a stall, put on a leash to be taken to the milking room.

A leash. An anal leash. It almost felt good, once you learned to anticipate it. The staff was very gentle with them. They'd stick it in you, then lock it inside you, then walk you on it. Female staff. Male staff.

My God, did it really even happen?

Meghan shifted on the little mushroom bench. Her vulva was burning.

"Mom, watch!" Candy cried, and Meghan looked up and the girl fell into the balls and disappeared.

A part of Meghan Attweiler wanted to be done with it, to forget the *Cruise du Kinque* and never speak of it or think of it again.

Another part of Meghan wanted to go back. To look for the babies. To find the babies. And to do ... to see ... to feel all that again.

But whether or not she went again, Meghan had changed, in at least one important way. Pillow talk with Gabby, her

stallmate and lover, had opened her eyes to something new, to her right to have her pleasure considered in bed.

Again she lied, Sunday night, while reconsummating her union with Keith. She didn't demand he show her all the physical considerations at which Gabby was preternaturally talented. She didn't ask for a half an hour of oral stimulation, a long deep kiss, the emptying of both her breasts. That would have been honest, but it might have made Keith wonder where it was all coming from.

Instead, she pretended that she wanted just a little something more, a little touching ... elsewhere. It's something she'd thought about during all her downtime on the ship, she'd whispered to Keith during a pause in his thrusting. One thing led to another, as they sometimes do when two people surrender to the powers of the sexual quarters of the mind, and eventually Keith ended up in Meghan's anus, and it hurt and reminded her of the way she'd been leashed and of her reduction to, in many ways, an object on the ship, and it all spiraled together into a groaning, shaking orgasm, one of her strongest, certainly her strongest with Keith, and they kissed and talked and seemed to have opened a new door, if you will, into their relationship. They'd done it again Monday night. She told him other things she wanted. She liked being sucked. He liked her milk.

Were these not good things? Why hadn't they explored any of this before?

I am a Christian

I love Jesus

Jesus loves me

Would Keith notice the small hole in her labia where they'd affixed her ID tag? She didn't think so. It would heal soon enough, and in the meantime, they'd make love in the dark, as they always did. And if he found it, she'd tell another lie, something about how her gynecologist needed a tissue sample or something. Keith didn't know much about that kind of thing, didn't want to know. Although sometimes she wished he did.

One other small fear lingered over Meghan's mind. There'd been cameras, apparently, all over the ship, all over the Milking Deck. She'd been seen doing ... everything. And you could just call it up, if you had a subscription of some kind. But thousands of other passengers had also been seen, better looking than Meghan, she believed, with better bodies, doing more interesting things. She kept telling herself that. No one who knew her would subscribe, would they? Of course, she was a member of the Orange County, California, School Board. If one of her liberal enemies found it, it could be bad for her. And yes, she had liberal enemies. But she wasn't a lightning rod. She wasn't rabid. She wasn't outing trans kids on her social media pages, calling homosexual students devilspawn, demanding the whitewashing of books about the Civil War. She just didn't want Candy finding gay pornography in her kindergarten library, didn't want boys declaring themselves to be girls so they could slither through the girls' locker room.

(Maybe those things could happen, maybe they couldn't. Maybe everything that happened was caused by God or Satan, or maybe most of it was the result of human foibles, idiosyncrasies, random choices. The world had become a much grayer place for Meghan Attweiler in the last 10 days.)

Her phone rang. She reached into her purse to grab it, saw an unfamiliar number from one of the LA area codes.

"Hello?" she said.

"Meghan Attweiler? Hold for Amanda Matthews, please."

Meghan stared at her phone, heart suddenly thumping, mind racing. Amanda Matthews? Who was that? Someone with an assistant that made calls for her, she knew that much.

"Meghan?" said a woman's voice.

"Yes?"

"It's Amanda Matthews. We spoke briefly after the cruise, on the dock."

"Oh, okay, right. Hi."

“I know you had some questions about our maiden voyage.”

Meghan laughed nervously. “I guess ... oh God, what did I say? I’m not sure I was very coherent.”

It was coming back to Meghan now, a conversation she realized she was regretting, words coming from a dark, doubtful place.

Amanda paused. “Something about babies...” Amanda paused again, then added, “I know, it must have been a lot to process.”

“Oh, I guess I mentioned them ... I sort of thought ... but it’s okay, I didn’t ... I wasn’t ...”

“As you might have heard, we had a little negative publicity following the cruise. We’re very concerned with the public’s perception of what we’re doing...”

“What kind of negative publicity?” Meghan asked hopefully. She’d seen the two Jesuses at the port, the woman screaming about the sinful cruise, but maybe there was more? Maybe someone else was going to shut down the *Cruise du Kinque* without any help from Meghan and her church? At the moment, that’s what she wanted. To be done with all of it, the cruise just a secret, private memory, a place she would go to alone now and then. A place she would miss, though, because it—

“Oh, nothing we didn’t expect from the kinds of people who aren’t open to new and unique experiences, especially when they are of a sexual nature. But your comment about babies caught my attention and I mentioned it to my boss.” Amanda paused again. “We didn’t hear anything about underage, well, any children at all from the protesters.”

Amanda was being honest. Meghan could sense it. Scattered as she’d been the morning the ship had disgorged her, she sensed decency, honesty from the woman. If there were babies on that ship, people like Amanda wouldn’t be told. But that didn’t mean there weren’t babies there.

“I didn’t hear about it either,” Meghan said. “But It’s just ... well, it could be ...”

 Meghan paused, regrouped. Stop being a mom at McDonald’s she said silently to herself. You are a warrior. In the army of Jesus. And this phone call is the next battle. Step up, David, with your sling. Goliath is calling.

 “I think the evidence is pretty clear,” Meghan said, her tone going hard, direct. The voice of a prophet ... a prophetess.

 “What evidence?” Amanda asked.

 “Where did the milk go?” Meghan demanded, voice low and malevolent.

 Amanda paused again. “I’m actually not sure, but that’s a good question. I’ll look into it.” She decided to change the direction this call had taken. “You spent the entire week on the Milking Deck, isn’t that right?” She waited for a beat. “And you were confined at all times?”

 “Yes,” Meghan said with certainty. “You did a very good job of keeping us very secure. The stalls were like a prison.” Her voice faltered. “And we were ... they made us have these ... like, chains in our . . .yes, no escape.”

 “We tried to recreate the situations described in the books as faithfully as possible given the constraints we had to deal with. I’m sure you understand.”

 “Wait, I did get to one other place,” Meghan said for the sake of full accuracy. “Another deck, I think. For ... for coffee or something ...”

 Meghan could feel the color rising in her cheeks. For some reason, this memory in particular was embarrassing, the morning toward the end of the cruise when she was brought to a little coffee stand on another deck, bound to a frame so her nipples could be yanked by strangers who wanted to flavor their drinks with her milk. To be seen like that, to be used like that , , , she hoped Amanda wouldn’t ask her to elaborate.

 Amanda had a vague recollection of the coffee kiosks that had been placed on various decks throughout the ship, and she imagined Meghan, who didn’t strike her as their most typical

customer, chained to the scaffold on the end of the kiosk, naked and available to anyone with a few dollars for a cup of coffee. She winced at the thought, thankful she hadn't witnessed Meghan's obvious distress at being used in such a manner.

"But I didn't see anything other than those two places," Meghan said. "The Milking Deck and that other deck. So not much at all."

Focus, Meghan told herself. Be mindful. Let Jesus speak through you.

"I never read the books," Meghan continued, returning to accusation mode. "But I'm sure there were some babies in there."

Amanda's attention snapped back to the original purpose of the call. "Well, that's what we want to address, Meghan. My boss wants to bring you back for the second cruise, at our expense, of course, and allow you full run of the ship, to explore every deck without the restrictions you had to endure on the Milking Deck. We want you to be satisfied that no babies were involved with anything on the first cruise by giving you free rein on the second."

"You want me to do another cruise?"

"Yes. The one that sails this Sunday."

Meghan's face went blank, and she swallowed and was no longer seeing what was before her.

This was God, working in His infinitely omniscient way, making of Meghan Attweiler his vessel.

Amanda didn't know about the babies. Amanda's boss didn't either. A ship is a big place, like a city. No mayor of a city knows all the evil practiced there. How many of the ship's workers were kept blind to this abomination? But Meghan would find it. She'd just been handed the keys, on a silver platter, by the cruise itself. God had made of the cruise a house divided, good people working unwittingly against the bad. She would find the children. She would rescue the children.

This was a sign, God himself pointing the way. Back to the *Cruise du Kinque*.

“Okay,” Meghan said, struggling to keep her voice even. “I will ... I will do that. What should I ...?”

“We’ll send a car for you on Sunday morning, Meghan,” Amanda said. “Stay on the line so my assistant can get your address.”

Okay, another shift, from divine mission to practical. Focus. Focus.

“Is there a fee?” Meghan asked. She needed to have everything in place.

Amanda smiled. “We’ll take care of everything, Meghan. You won’t have to pay for a thing.” She couldn’t help but add, “And your accommodations will be much different, and better, than the last time.”

Accommodations were beside the point. Meghan wouldn’t be going to be comfortable. She would be going to ... destroy.

4 - The Virgin Mia



Mia Davis put down her phone. She had done what she didn't think she had the courage to do and now that it was booked she shuddered with the intensity of what was now true. She was going.

“Mia,” her mom called out from downstairs. “Dinner.”

“Be right there,” she called out, for once not telling her mother that she wasn't hungry because that was just a fact of life for Mia. She was never hungry. Tonight, she would make an effort to eat something. It wouldn't be enough to satisfy her mom because she never ate enough for that. But she'd make an effort.

Mia swiped the app closed where she'd booked passage on a cruise and clicked the button on her iPhone that turned the screen dark before she slipped it into the back pocket of her jeans and headed downstairs. Her mom and younger brother were undoubtedly putting the final touches on the table for dinner, her brother eager to eat because Miles was always eager to eat. The contrast between Mia and her twin brother was all the more annoying because he was a constant reminder of Mia's failings when it came to eating.

“What's for dinner?” she asked as she bounced down the stairs, a new spring in her step because she was still thrumming with excitement at the prospect of a week away from home.

“Pho 86,” her mother replied, adding, unnecessarily, “your favorite,” because Mia didn't have a favorite anything when it came to food, but that was an argument that had long ceased to matter to her mom. Mia smelled the soup before she arrived at the kitchen table and choked back the reflex to retch or gag. Miles was already squirting an insane quantity of radioactive-colored hot sauce into his styrofoam bowl, a condiment so

foreign to Mia that she had to look away. Why anyone would treat their taste buds with such disrespect was beyond her, despite her generalized fascination with pain.

“I got invited to go camping with Janelle’s family next week,” Mia lied as she took her seat at the small table in the breakfast nook. Takeout was never served in the formal dining room even though Martine Davis preferred to eat with real silverware and her mother’s good china when she cooked, which was less often than she liked, she always told her children even as she served takeout for the third time that week.

“Where are you going?” Martine asked and Mia answered with her practiced story, almost too quickly.

“Mount Shasta,” the nineteen-year-old said softly to her brother’s raspberries.

“Why so far away?” he said as he shoveled an ungodly amount of noodles and tripe into his gaping mouth. “What’s up with that?” Mia glared at him but he was too engrossed in feeding to notice.

“They have a friend who has a cabin,” Mia explained, mostly to her mother but praying that her brother would let the matter drop if she feigned not knowing the details.

“That’s a long drive,” her mother offered as she added the stack of foliage that went into making broth a meal of sorts, as Mia did the same. She didn’t mind pho as much as most takeout, mostly because she could make a production out of doctoring her serving while her mother and brother ate, and get away with sipping the broth mostly by the end of the meal.

“We leave Sunday morning and get back a week later,” Mia told them, hoping that would be the end of the discussion. “It’s way out in the boonies so I won’t be able to text you.” She caught a look from Miles that told her he was on to her. She shook her head slightly and he smiled as he dove back into his meal.

“Well, you can at least send me an email just to let me know you didn’t drive off the mountain before you get there,

right?” Mrs. Davis said with a concerned look at her daughter. That Mia weighed exactly half her brother’s body weight even though they were the same height made Martine’s concern understandable to Mia, if not tolerable.

“Sure,” Mia said as she fiddled with her noodles and sipped the broth. “I’ll do that.”

“Okay,” Miles said when they were alone in the kitchen, their mother upstairs watching TV in her bedroom. Cleanup from the meal was easy but Mia knew she had some explaining to do. “What’s really going on?”

“I’m going on a cruise,” she said without hesitating.

“Where?” her brother asked in a tone that hinted he hadn’t been peeking at her browser history for once.

“Nowhere,” she said simply. “It’s not a ‘where’ kind of cruise,” she said using air quotes.

“What other kinds are there?” Neither of them were familiar with the cruise industry. Their mother had been a single mom for most of their upbringing since their father died in a workplace accident when they were four. Money wasn’t tight thanks to a settlement that lasted the better part of a decade after paying off their modest mortgage, but expensive vacations like cruises were not part of their lives.

“It’s an experience,” Mia said, being intentionally cryptic. She knew her brother would tire of his questioning sooner than she would run out of clever ways of answering him without telling him much of anything, a knack she’d been cultivating for years with him. That he still hadn’t caught on didn’t surprise her nearly as much as it used to.

“Does this have anything to do with your rope shit?” he asked, cutting to the chase. Sometimes he still surprised her.

“Maybe,” she said, zigging hard while she pondered how much he might figure out if she admitted too much. “Don’t tell mom, okay?”

“Is it safe?” He looked sideways at her. She liked that he was protective even if it got in the way some of the time. Most of the time.

“It’s a big-assed cruise ship with thousands of people on it,” she said with enough attitude to push back hard. “How could it not be safe?”

“Come on, Mia. You know what I mean.”

She did. “It’s safe, Miles. Now, leave me alone.” To dream about what was in store for her in just a matter of days, she said under her breath. She had no desire to share her secrets with her brother, who wouldn’t understand and would probably blab to their mother. The woman had enough to worry about without hearing how her daughter felt about herself.

Mia felt sad, not for the first time and not for the last, either, that she had to hide her interests in these matters from her twin, the person she told everything to when they were younger. That the onset of puberty, not to mention the drastic differences in their maturation into adulthood—Miles a three-letter athlete in high school, Mia an anorexic-prone bookworm with sadomasochistic tendencies—had driven a wedge between them only made her situation worse. She had no one to share her most important secrets with after growing up with a person with whom she had shared everything, including their mother’s womb.

“How are you paying for it?” Miles persisted.

“I’ve got babysitting money,” she lied. “I’m serious, leave me alone.” She pushed him out of her bedroom door, closed it and locked it.

Mia needed to masturbate.

Badly.

5 - The Debriefing of a Freedom Mom



“The bad news,” Meghan Attweiler began, saying words she’d been rehearsing over and over in her mind since yesterday afternoon, “is that I didn’t see anything inappropriate.”

She was going to lie—Good lies. White lies. God’s lies—and say nothing true about her time on the *Cruise du Kinque’s* Milking Deck.

“We weren’t supposed to leave our deck,” she continued, addressing a rapt audience of almost 100 fellow members of First Pentecostal Church of Anaheim. It was Wednesday night, and a special meeting of the Healing a Troubled Land Committee had been called, to hear about Meghan’s experiences on the depraved cruise.

Committee turnout was double its normal population, all presumably there to learn of the debauchery practiced on the satanic ship, after which a plan would be put together and launched, a plan to expose the depravities of the enterprise and, with God’s help, shut it down.

“It was basically a mom’s retreat, at least for me and the women around me,” Meghan continued. “I think there was another side of the, um, the deck I was on, if you opted for that, but all I did all day was drink tea and watch TV.”

“Weren’t you on the Milking Deck?” one of the women asked.

“Right, yes,” Meghan said, blushing slightly. Even that detail felt uncomfortable to her now. “We did ... we did pump regularly. But no one would tell me what they did with our milk.”

“Was it done in a room?” a man asked. Meghan looked at him, someone she didn’t know. Had he read the book? Did he know about the large room where the women were brought naked, to be chained and cupped and milked en masse while nude males made the rounds, offering penises to mouths and vaginas for the purpose—or so the book would have it, allegedly—increasing milk production?

Meghan started hard back at him. Maybe she was, technically, an adulterer. Maybe she was even a lesbian in some sense of the word. But she wasn’t going to be intimidated by someone who read weird pornography.

“Yes,” she said. “We had little stations we could do it in, for privacy.”

Are you going to question me? she thought. Just try it. He held his peace and Meghan continued.

“We’re not the only ones doing this,” Meghan continued. “Did anyone see that lady with the two big Jesuses? She was at the port when we got off Sunday, doing a sermon about the cruise and how bad it was. And I think she got covered on TV. I saw two news cameras there.”

“Oh, yeah, I did see that,” said a young woman. “You were there?”

“I walked by her, but I didn’t want to talk to her,” Meghan said. “She seemed a little crazy. But anyway, my point is that we’re not the only ones trying to do this ... and it’s not as easy to be effective as you’d think.”

Meghan sensed an unsurprising disappointment from the people in the room. They were probably hoping she was going to come back from the cruise with a 10-point plan for bringing down the waterborn business this week, and all they had to do was help her get it done. That’s not, however, how anyone has ever fought Satan. It’s never that easy.

“But there’s good news,” she said. “That’s what I want to talk about tonight. We’ve been handed, well, I’m going to call it a miracle.”

Everyone waited.

“They called me yesterday, they want me back on the ship,” Meghan said. “They’re calling me a VIP.”

“How much will that cost?” a man asked, sounding skeptical. The committee had quickly raised the relatively low \$800 fee for Meghan to serve as a lactating female on the first cruise, but this sounded much more expensive.

“Nothing,” she said. “It’s free. They want me as ... well, they’re calling me an ambassador. They’re going to pick me up from home this time.”

The reaction was decidedly muted. No one was asking questions. They were just waiting for Meghan to say something to explain the spiritual value of another foray on this ship of sin.

None of which surprised Meghan. She knew about persuading large groups of people, and she was going to play this out at her pace.

“I’ll have the run of the ship,” she said. “They’re going to let me go all over it.”

“Why?” a man’s voice asked, the question followed by tension-breaking laughter.

It was the question Meghan was waiting for, prompting the answer she’d been concocting in her head since lunchtime yesterday.

“Two reasons,” she said, holding up two fingers. “One reason is business, and one reason only we can understand.”

Meghan waited for her words to settle in before she continued.

“The ship is going to use me for publicity,” she said. “That’s the business reason. They just want an average mom on board, to make it seem normal, to show me having fun.”

Meghan paused as snickers rippled through the room.

“Wholesome fun,” she added with a laugh, and then another lie: “Most of the decks are very normal, just regular people. Some might want to opt for something more adult-like, but it’s not required. There’s a lot of sin on that boat, and then

I'm sure there's something very evil going on, but a lot of it is innocent. Which is how Satan cloaks himself, we all know that."

Meghan raised her two fingers again.

"So the first reason is business," she said. "The second reason is that the ship is already at spiritual war with itself. It's already a house divided."

There were still no questions, but everyone was staring intently now.

"I don't think the people who invited me understand what's going on there," she said. "I told them—I told the woman who called me yesterday—that I think they're keeping babies on board. Her's names, uh, Amanda. She's high up there. I talked to her Sunday, too, right after the cruise, and she's the one who called me Tuesday. I told her both times, about my, my revelation. About the babies."

"Did she confess?" asked a woman, prompting scattered laughter. In fact, such questions were not always asked in jest. Sometimes, Jesus won hearts on the fly, their turning point impossible to predict, but never a surprise when viewed in reverent hindsight. And mysterious as the Lord's ways always were, they would surely get more inscrutable at the End of Days.

"She didn't," Meghan said, treating the question seriously. "But only because she didn't know. And I believe her. I think she's being honest. And that's what makes this so interesting. I think she chose me, or others around her chose me, because they *want* me to find it. They can't, but I can. They've been blinded, but I'll, I'll do my best, to see with God's eyes. They'll be giving me the run of the ship. That's what they told me. Access to all the decks."

"Could it be a trap?" someone asked.

Meghan nodded soberly, looked around the room. The highest service to God was always risky.

"It could be anything," Meghan said. "But I felt protected there. I felt loved there."

Meghan's voice caught in her throat. The earnest, innocent face of Gabby, her stallmate, flashed before her eyes. They were locked in together, leashed and milked together, punished together. They'd made love, fallen asleep in each other's arms, kissed every morning, every night. It was love. It was a kind of love. Was it God's love? Isn't all love of God?

"Sorry, sorry," Meghan said, coughing, laughing at herself and pressing the heel of her hand against each eye.

Were there any doubts before that moment, they all must have been dispelled by the Godly tears of a sister in faith.

"Thank you so much, Meghan," said Associate Pastor Silvio Martelle, "for your faith, and your courage."

Meghan nodded, breathed in, regained her composure.

"So it sounds like you've got everything in place," he said. "All you need from us this time is our blessing."

"Yes," Meghan agreed.

"So blessed," a woman quipped.

"I second that blessing," said an older man, voice shaking with devout passion. Some laughed, some nodded with their own reverent tears.

"Bless you, Meghan," said a young woman.

"Bless you."

"Bless you."

"Thank you, everyone, so much," Meghan said. "I don't even need a ride this time. They're picking me up Sunday morning. I might find the children before the ship leaves port."

Someone started the clap, and others picked it up, and now almost 100 people were clapping for Meghan Attweiler, and she responded admirably, with true humility, one hand on her heart, shaking her head, her eyes closed.

"Can I ask one thing, though?" she said after the applause had died down. "Keith Attweiler, my husband, he's the real trooper here. He's home with our four-year-old right now, and he's looking at another week with her, and he's on board with

all of this. He's been so incredibly supportive. So if anyone wants to drop off a love offering, or take him and Candy out to dinner, or have them over, you'd be doing us both a great service."

The nods and murmurs assured Meghan that Keith and Candy would not go wanting while she faced down Satan for the second time on the *Cruise du Kinque*.

6 - Porn for Fun



“Are you out of your mind?” Courtney Austen asked her husband, Ryan. “I’m not going to do that.”

“We’ve already done it, babe,” Ryan said with a shrug. “And you loved it.”

“*You* loved it, big fella,” Courtney corrected him. “I went along, that’s all.”

“Sure you did, Court. Keep telling yourself that.” The couple was out for brunch on a rainy Sunday as usual in downtown Seattle, but the restaurant was filled to overflowing, with several couples waiting for tables. Courtney wanted to linger as they always did when the weather was dismal, which was far too often in their adopted hometown. The rainy season was supposed to be over by this time of year, but global warming or maybe just bad luck was extending it past Courtney’s sell-by date for gray skies and soggy clothes. She missed Southern California, and Ryan was being manipulative in suggesting a cruise that departed from the Port of Los Angeles.

But this was no ordinary cruise.

“Why can’t we just sail down the Baja and sit by a pool sipping pina coladas like normal people?” she asked with a whine that even she couldn’t ignore. “Why do you have to turn it into something sleazy?”

“The website says it’s all done very tastefully if that’s what you’re into,” Ryan mansplained to Courtney’s ear.

“Which means what, exactly?” She didn’t want to hear about it but after ten years together, she knew that if she didn’t let Ryan have his say he’d keep after it like a dog with a bone. Better to get it over with than let the discussion drag on for days in fits and starts.

“I’m not exactly sure, but they’ve got a whole deck set aside for what’s called Visual Arts.” He smiled at her as if he was describing an overnight getaway, not a weeklong, inescapable fiasco.

“Are you forgetting that cruise we took in the Caribbean? That was a disaster and we couldn’t leave.”

“This one’s different, Court. They’ve got a helicopter right on board and if you want off, they’ll get you off.” He smirked. “No pun intended.”

“I don’t need jokes, Ryan. I need a vacation. Preferably one where the sun is virtually guaranteed to be visible all day every day for the duration.” She sipped her coffee. “Like in Maui.”

“I told you, babe,” he began but she waved him off.

“Just because we had a great time there once doesn’t mean we can’t go back, Ryan. It’s not like it’ll spoil things.”

“You know how I feel about that, Court. It’ll never be as good as we remember it, so why risk it?”

“We can always go to a different resort, or even a different island if you’re so stuck on keeping Kapalua Bay on a pedestal, honey.” She could hardly fault him for being sentimental about their honeymoon—his soft heart was one of the reasons she married him. What he lacked in physical prowess he more than made up for in emotional maturity and sensitivity, although he was being quite insensitive at this moment, she admitted, if only to herself.

“A cruise is way cheaper than a resort, babe. Especially a resort in Hawaii.” Though they both made good money, it wasn’t fuck-you money, as Ryan liked to call it when he daydreamed about quitting and moving to a cabin in the woods, something that held no appeal whatsoever for Courtney. Luckily, he didn’t bring it up *too* often.

“But the last time,” Courtney began only to have Ryan cut her off. Again.

“The last time we were on a boat that accommodated what, a few dozen people? This is a ship, Court. It holds thousands.”

The Caribbean tall ship experience looked exotic and romantic when they booked it, even if Courtney had voiced a bit of concern at the website's repeated use of the word 'rustic' in describing the accommodations. Calmer weather and a better captain might have saved the vacation, but that was asking more than Ryan could provide. They had sworn off cruises on the trip home and Courtney was content to stick with that plan.

But this was more than a cruise, she realized. Much more.

"What guarantee do they offer that anything we do will be ours and ours alone, Ryan? You know how easy it is for shit to get leaked to the internet and once it's out there, you can't undo it. I don't want to risk something like that."

"I had Bernard in Legal look at the disclosures," her husband said in his most confident tone. "He assured me that they've got it locked down."

She rolled her eyes. "What does a lawyer at a construction company know about the cruise industry? Or the porn industry, for that matter?"

"He's got contacts that he reached out to," Ryan said with his hands raised. "He said they've got it written in such a way that..." Her husband droned on long past the point at which Courtney could even pretend to be interested.

"And if he's wrong, will *Bernard* represent us at no charge?" she asked when she could get a word in edgewise.

"Better than that, he said his roommate from law school would love to take us on a contingency arrangement. He said the guy who owns the cruise line is a gazillionaire and the payday would be incredible if they were stupid enough to let something slip through the cracks, babe." He sidled up to his wife and wrapped his arms around her waist from behind while nuzzling her neck. "Come on, Court, you know you want to give it another try. This time with professionals."

She spun around and glared at him. "I am not interested in doing anything with..." She knew she was overreacting but the prospect of...

“What? No, Courtney,” Ryan almost shouted. “Not in *front* of the camera. That’ll just be you and me, babe. I’m talking about everything that goes on behind the scenes, like makeup and lighting, not to mention a real camera or two, not just an iPhone on a tripod. And that ancient Nano.” He laughed but it was forced. She could tell he was still trying to sell her on the idea. She didn’t like being sold on anything, not by Ryan.

But she had to smile at the recollection of his first hairbrained attempt at recording them *in flagrante delicto*. Without her prior knowledge, he’d hidden his ancient iPod Nano inside a wicker basket with the device’s camera aimed at their bed, and recorded them having sex. That there was no way to download the resulting video—the only way to view it was on the device’s postage stamp sized screen—was why she didn’t force him to delete it as soon as he showed her what he’d done. Over time, she’d come around to the idea of having sex on camera, but that had been with her phone only so she could maintain absolute control of the recording. Having a cruise ship involved was light years outside of her comfort zone and she was surprised he didn’t realize that.

“A whole week making porn?” she asked. Everything about the idea struck her as ludicrous.

“We can stop whenever we want to, Court. They’ve got all the usual entertainment onboard as well, from way too much food and alcohol to pools and slot machines. When you get tired of having sex with me on camera, we can always do other things.”

“It just feels too weird,” she said finally. “And what about all the other people on the boat? They’ll be making porn, too? Is that what we’ll talk about at dinner?”

Ryan shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe.” She watched his eyes as he looked off into the distance, that thousand-yard stare she saw when he was lost in his sordid fantasies.

“Is this a way to get me to do things you know I don’t want to do, Ryan?” He’d mentioned, more than once, how a friend of a friend had been to a swingers club a few years ago. The prospect of watching other people have sex held some appeal

for her, although she never admitted that to her husband. The idea of the two of them having sex in front of *other* people, however, was impossible to even contemplate. An objection that she had shared with him, emphatically.

“It’s not about that, Court,” he told her softly. “I know you’re not into the whole swinging scene and I’m fine with that. This has got nothing to do with having sex with other people. It’s about you and me making love and filming it, or taping or whatever the fuck they do. So we can watch ourselves, babe. No one else.” He nuzzled her neck again. “It’ll be fun.”

Yeah, right, she thought.

“But if it’s not, or if it gets old, we can just lay out by the pool and order drinks with little umbrellas.”

That sounded good as she stared at the gray skies of Seattle.

“Okay, Ryan. We’ll give it a try.”

7 - The Decks are Assigned



“Gentlemen,” Dylan Hightower said, using his most formal tone once the three members of his wedding court had gathered and been served drinks. “Thank you for joining me tonight. The plans have been made. We sail in three days, and now at last, I can reveal our destinies.”

“As in, boat destinies?” said Heck, sounding ambivalent.

“Boat destinies, yes,” Dylan said. “*Cruise du Kinque*. I hope everyone’s been researching it.”

Only Drake Palmer, Dylan’s high school senior cousin, admitted to a little investigation.

“Yup,” Drake said, sliding the brim of his leather cowboy hat up from his forehead. “New Confederacy. It was a movie. Based on a book. A good summary of the plot on Wikipedia.”

“Cool,” Dylan said, taking what he could get from his unenthusiastic court, returning to his earlier semblance of a judge rendering a verdict. “So, I’ve got everyone’s deck assignment. Are you ready?”

Everyone nodded like they were, so Dylan pulled a sheet of paper out of his back pocket, unfolded it and pored over the nearly undecipherable scribbles.

“Best man Heck Southward,” he intoned. “Breeding Deck. Beloved nephew and honored groomsman—”

“Wait, breeding?” Heck interrupted. “Whazzat?”

“Just what it sounds like, I guess,” Dylan said. “I haven’t done that much research on it.”

“Well now, breeding can mean a variety of things,” Heck pontificated. “On a farm, for example, you gotta—”

“You’ll just have to read the book,” Dylan interrupted back.

“Which one?” Heck asked. “You know I’m not that big on books.”

“I don’t know,” Dylan said. “Maybe look it up on the website.”

“Urrff,” Heck said, the sound he made when the conclusion of a conversation left him unfulfilled.

“My nephew Drake Palmer,” Dylan continued, “Lab Deck.”

“Lab Deck,” Drake echoed without conviction. “Any ... idea?”

“A little,” Dylan said. “They do tests on women there.”

“Ooh, that sounds like fun,” Heck said snarkily, obviously still disappointed with the ambiguity of his own assignment. “I bet they’ll all be on the rag and you get to take their blood pressure or something. And ask questions and shit. ‘On a scale of 1 to 10, ma’am, how much of a bitch are you right now with your raging time of the month problem?’ Okay, that’s another 10. Next question—”

“Grey Fieldman,” Dylan said, raising his voice to drown out the random musings of his best friend. “Man of faith ... man of many faiths ... and esteemed groomsman: Gangbang.”

“Gangbang,” Grey said stonily. “And might I—”

“All I know is it’s cheaper if you’re Black,” Dylan said. “Like, half off.”

“Aw hell no,” Heck protested, aiming the top of his beer at Grey. “I mean, my friend, I don’t want to sound racist, but c’mon, man, this ain’t ... there’s no way this ends well for you.”

“It’s all locked up,” Dylan said. “We sail in three days. You don’t have to go. But if you do, these are your decks.”

“Why are Black people half off?” Grey asked, his tone not just annoyed, or affronted, but despairing.

“Black *men* are half off,” Dylan said. “Black women are the same as white women. I checked.”

“That doesn’t help,” Grey said.

“What’s wrong with it?” Dylan asked.

“Damn, this is Klan stuff right here,” Heck asserted, his tone less despairing and more, it might be said, jubilant. “Half off. Like you’re worth half of a white person.”

“No,” Dylan said firmly. “They want Black men. That’s what that means. They’re cutting your fee. It’s like they’re paying you to come aboard. That’s how I take it.”

Gray paused in the face of Dylan’s simple logic, but Heck wasn’t done with the matter yet.

“It’s racism,” Heck said. “It’s gotta be. Somehow. Like, ancient slavery shit.”

“Grey, you’re going, right?” Dylan said, ignoring his friend. “I mean, how could it be racist? They’d get sued out of the water first trip, and nothing like that’s being said.”

“They’ve done a cruise?” Grey said.

“Yeah, one,” Dylan replied. “Last week. Docked Sunday. If they got racist, we’d know it by now.”

“I don’t know man,” Heck persisted. “I’m bettin’ on they go full racist, and then—”

“I’ll go,” Grey said, his voice even again. “I sometimes find that my encounters with racists provide enlightenment.”

“Or you could go batshit on them,” Heck said, and his eyes went wide and his seated body stiffened and he channeled a character from a martial arts movie. “Haaaiiiiiieeee!” he shouted, directing frantic karate chops at the imaginary head of someone he was holding in an imaginary headlock. “Yai yai yai! Take that, mo fo!”

Grey was still getting to know Heck, navigating the early phase of the relationship like he always did, by observing. There wasn’t a whole lot to work with here, unfortunately.

“Uncle Dylan?” Drake ventured, waiting for Dylan to turn his attention back to him. “So, do you think they need me to

have medical knowledge? For the lab deck? ‘Cuz I don’t know a dang thing about the medical field.”

“I think whatever you need to know they’ll teach you there,” Dylan said. “The website didn’t say anything about that when I signed up.”

Dylan surveyed the table, looking both a little disappointed and a little weary. Getting his three dearest companions to buy in to something he seemed to consider a fabulous gift wasn’t as easy as one might have expected.

“So what’s your deck gonna be?” asked Heck.

“Adult product testing,” Dylan replied.

“Aw fuck,” Heck said, laughing and grabbing his beer. “You took one for the team on that one.”

“What do you mean?” Dylan asked.

“Adult products,” Heck said. “Like diapers and shit, right?” Heck paused, savoring the idea. “You think you’re gonna have to wear them, or just take ‘em off the old folks and see what’s in ‘em?”

Heck held out an imaginary adult diaper, studying its contents with scientific diligence.

“Okay, Ethel, looks like you got a bad case of the—”

“It’s not that,” Dylan said. “It’s more like ...”

His voice trailed off. Why argue the point?

“So,” he continued. “We’re meeting at my place at 11 a.m. Sunday morning. Everyone can ride with me. We’ll get there about noon, and we’ll have until 2 to get on board, so don’t be late.”

No one cheered, but no one disagreed, which was probably as good as Dylan was going to get that evening.

“Last order of business,” Dylan said, weary voice dropping, slowing. “Bride and groom shower Saturday night, Diana Entwhiste’s place in Encino. Everyone gonna be there?”

“Yes,” said Grey, his previous despair returned.

“I reckon,” said Drake sadly. He might have agreed with the plan only because it gave him another chance to say “reckon.”

“Yeah, whatevs,” said Heck, suddenly somber. “What’s the latest we can show up?”

“Things start up at 8 that night,” Dylan said. “That’s what time her Royal Highness gets home. But she wants us there all day, setting up the party. Key’s under the mat. Drake, you got cupcakes, Grey, bring over some pre-cooked pizza anytime, Heck, find some pink ribbon and bows or whatnot and tape them near the front door. And I’ll be bringing mixers.”

“I ain’t spending all day at that bitch’s house taping shit to her door,” Heck announced.

“No, this is not an all day commitment, Lady Di’s delusions notwithstanding,” Dylan agreed. “Swing by, drop off your crap, tape up your crap, probably take 15 minutes max, return to the life you want to live, until 8 that night.”

Everyone nodded, and Dylan’s voice brightened noticeably.

“And just focus on getting through it and getting on the boat the next morning,” he said. “It’s gonna be amazing.”

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“Ladies,” Jerri Magisteria said dramatically over tea at Crowning Brew. “The planning is complete. Your decks have been assigned. We sail in three days.”

The females around the table waited, all bearing expressions of doubtful indulgence. The *Cruise du Kinque* was Jerri’s misguided idea, but she was the bride, and they’d go down with the ship by her side if need be—hopefully not literally.

“Jackie, my maid of honor,” Jerri said. “Adult Product Testing.”

Jackie smiled weakly.

“Munro, Gangbang.”

Munro raised her eyebrows but said nothing.

“Gallant, Lab.”

“Lab?” Gallant said.

“We won’t be on the same deck?” Jackie asked.

“What does gangbang mean?” Munro asked.

“Same thing it usually means, I bet,” Jackie said.

“I’m sure they’ll let me just observe,” Munro said with a nervous laugh.

“Maybe it’s just movies,” Gallant said. “But lab, now what does that—”

“It could be documentaries,” Jackie offered, squeezing Munro’s shoulder. “The history of orgies, sort of.”

“Could be,” Munro agreed doubtfully.

“Which deck are you on, Aunt Jerri?” Gallant asked.

“Breeding,” Jerri replied.

“What’s that?” Munro asked.

“I think it’s like a fertility clinic or something,” Jerri said.

“Aren’t there books about all the decks?” Gallant asked.

“Yeah, on the cruise website,” Jerri said. “I was thinking about buying some, but I haven’t yet.”

“Any idea what the lab’s about?” Gallant asked. “I don’t think I’ll be able to read about it before we leave. We only have three days.”

“They all sound really innocent,” Jackie said. “I mean, adult product testing lab. Did you pick the non-sex decks only?”

“I just signed us up for whatever was available,” Jerri said. “There was almost nothing left.”

“Will we see each other?” Gallant asked.

“I’m sure,” Munro said. “Let’s all try to meet somewhere first day. By the pool or something.”

“Agreed,” Jerri said. “So everyone gets to my place at 8 that morning, we’ll be at the port by 9 or so, get checked in and meet for lunch.”

“Oooh, this is gonna be fun,” Jackie said, sounding halfway sincere. “Cruise food is awesome.”

“Just one thing we have to do before we sail,” Jerri said, and the mood around the little table turned instantly dark.

“The shower?” Gallant said, using the same tone she would have employed if she’d said, “My anal probe?” or “My execution by firing squad?”

“The shower,” Jerri confirmed, shaking her head. “Starts at 8 on Saturday night. Diana doesn’t get home until then, but she wants us to get everything ready before she shows up.”

“Well, that’s pretty presumptuous,” Munro asserted.

“Let’s just be glad she’s not hosting the wedding,” Jerri said. “Or the bachelorette.”

The three members of Jerri’s court winced in unison.

“We’re doing pizza,” Jerri said. “Dylan’s guys have that covered, and cupcakes and mixers. So Jackie, can you bring salad?”

“Check.”

“Munro, liquor. Maybe rum and vodka.”

“Got it.”

“Gallant, you do decorations,” Jerri said. “Find pictures of me and Dylan, like 20 or so, new stuff, old stuff, print them out, tape them on the walls, it’ll be cute.”

“Can I just show up at 8 and do it?” Gallant said.

“No,” Jerri replied, “Diana said we should swing by earlier, and I think she’s sort of expecting we’ll spend all day there, and everything will be ready when she shows up. Key’s under the mat. I’ll be dropping off champagne at some point.”

8 - Love Taps



Ellen Toobert was impressed, which was almost unheard of. Jessica Franklin had been with Ellen for fifteen years and could count on one hand the number of times her wife had been overcome to the point of putting her at a loss for words. Language was the woman's stock in trade, so to speak, as the department chair at Nast College's School of Creative Writing.

"Where did you find this?" Ellen asked when she found her tongue again.

"A friend sent it to me," Jessica said with obvious obfuscatory intent. "And don't ask," she added.

"Why not?" Ellen bristled. "Why would anyone think to...?"

Jessica cut her off with a wave. "You don't know him, so don't bother..."

"Him?" Ellen almost shouted. "*Him?*"

"It's not like that, Ellen," she went on with a sigh and an eye roll. "It's nothing like that. I'm not even sure if he's a he, to be perfectly honest."

Her wife eyed her suspiciously. "How in the world...?" She stopped, suddenly understanding. "Oh. Was it one of those...?"

"Yes, and can we just leave it at that?" Jessica pleaded. "He or she or they don't know my real name or anything about me or us, so just let it go, okay?"

"Yes. Fine."

"So, you're interested?" Jessica asked, glad to move on to what really mattered.

“You knew I would be,” Ellen said quietly but intently. “You’d come, too?”

“Of course.” She waited a beat. “If you want me to.”

“It wouldn’t be the same if you weren’t there, Jess.”

“Not to participate, you understand,” Jessica added.

“No, of course not,” Ellen said. “Although the website says instruction is available if you bring a partner.”

Jessica sighed. “A *willing* partner, I believe is the exact terminology they use. And I’m not interested, end of story.”

“Fine.”

“Do you still want to go? And me to come with you?”

“Of course,” Ellen said, somewhat convincingly. “It might be a little boring for you, though.” She didn’t seem to be hinting at changing Jessica’s mind, so she brushed it off.

“I’ll find things to do,” Jessica said as much to herself as her wife. “I’ll load plenty of books on my Kindle before we leave the port.”

“They don’t have wifi onboard?”

“The brochure said that in an effort to separate life onboard from the everyday, they won’t offer wifi during the cruise.” Jessica shrugged. “For once we’ll have to entertain ourselves the old-fashioned way, with real books or even a conversation in real time.”

“Speak for yourself,” Ellen sniffed good-naturedly. “I’ll be tied up at least...” She looked at the website on her iPad again. “I’ll be tied up for at least part of the time,” she added with a gentle smirk.

“How many sessions do you get?” Jessica had known about her wife’s predilection for being whipped or beaten while restrained for years but had never watched her indulge her kink.

“At least six, over seven days, but it doesn’t look like there’s a limit although I’m sure there must be. I just can’t find

it on the website. But they can't accommodate everyone all the time. It wouldn't make any sense to try."

"I thought you might meet others who like that sort of thing," Jessica said with a hopeful tone. "If you want to."

"I'm not sure that I do," Ellen said. "Why would I?"

"You could meet like-minded people that we might be able to see after the cruise is over?" Jessica offered.

Ellen sighed. "Honey, how many times do we have to have this discussion? I'm not going to go anywhere for this outside of a one-week cruise that has a clearly defined beginning and end. It's not worth the risk."

"Yeah, I get that, babe. And I'm not saying we should up and move to the big city or even another town just for, you know..." She gave her wife a crooked smile. "But we'll be spending a week with people like you and who knows what we'll learn in that kind of an environment? It's not like you'll be tied up all week, so to speak. We'll go to meals, sit by the pool, maybe even go dancing or whatever. It's not all kink all the time. It can't be. No one could take that kind of abuse. So, we'll meet people, make new friends, trade ideas. All kinds of possibilities come to mind."

Ellen stared at her for an uncomfortably long, silent time. Finally, she said softly, "You've put some thought into this, haven't you?"

"Of course I have, babe. It weighs on me, not being able to be what you want me to be." She wrapped her arms around Ellen's waist. "Maybe this could be something else," she said hopefully. "Something long-term."

"Fifteen years isn't long enough to qualify as long term?" Ellen said with a tight smile.

"You know what I mean, babe," she whispered as she nibbled her ear. "You know exactly what I mean."

"You can afford the time off from work?"

Jessica rolled her eyes. "If I don't take some of my PTO soon, I'll lose it."

“But Tom won’t hold it against you?”

“If he does, I’ll sue his sorry ass, but HR’s got my back in this regard. I can’t be penalized for taking time they give me.”

“Yeah, but you know as well as I do there are ways to make you pay that HR can’t help you with.”

“Fuck Tom and fuck the company, babe. If that’s the game they want to play, I’ll get an outside lawyer to take my case on contingency and we can retire to the South of France with all the money I’ll win.”

Ellen rested her forehead on Jessica’s. “You know that’s never going to happen, right?”

“You don’t know that, babe. I’m willing to risk it, though, especially for a week on the *Cruise du Kinque* with you.”

“Okay, you’ve convinced me.”

9 - A Midnight Boom



Corporal Rafael Hernandez, working the night shift for the Los Angeles Police Department, was making his usual circuit through the Encino neighborhood when the call came in.

“Delta 171?” queried the female dispatcher’s voice on his radio.

“Roger.”

“Got a report of an explosion, two calls in, might have happened on Mint Julep Lane.”

“Mint Julep Lane?” Hernandez repeated. “You got a number?”

“Map says it’s a short street, just one driveway, residential, a big lot, not much there other than maybe a house.”

Hernandez punched the street into his keyboard, waiting for the map to load.

“Okay, found it,” he said. “I should be there in like 7.”

This was not a corner of Encino Hernandez had spent any time in until now, the oddly-named little street tree-lined, the growth especially wild on the right. The only hint of civilization, in fact, was on that side of the road, a surprisingly elaborate mailbox, more a little house than a mailbox. He studied it as he drew closer, identified its design as a Southern plantation home.

A wide gravel road led between a break in a wooden fence that looked like something you’d see around a farm, or a horse pasture. Hernandez eased his cruiser onto the gravel, aiming his headlights into ... nothingness. Encino, like most of Los Angeles, had been settled long ago with wall-to-wall homes. Little yards, apartment buildings packed tight, barely enough room for power lines or any other infrastructure. But here

seemed to be something approaching wilderness, a gravel road surrounded by trees that curved left. It might lead to anything—a quarry, a small factory, a South American criminal headquarters, or what concerned Hernandez most—the home of an armed man, a wife, and irreconcilable differences.

“Hey, dispatch?” Hernandez said into his mic.

“Yeah?”

“Can you get me any intel on this place? Mint Julep Lane? In Encino? Who owns it? What’s here?”

“Yeah, give me a few.”

“And what did people hear? More like a shotgun, more like fireworks?”

“Neither,” she replied. “We just got a third call. Deep boom is what they said. Like commercial explosives.”

“Shit,” Hernandez said, inching his car forward. “You mind staying with me a sec?”

“I’m here.”

Hernandez followed the gravel drive, a solid wall of trees on either side. Anyone hiding in them would see him way before he saw them.

To his relief, the trees parted and he found himself before what looked like a standard small American home, although a bit whimsical, with vine-covered trellises, a gazebo, a wishing well, a restored tractor.

“Whatcha seeing?” dispatch asked.

“Nothing so far,” he said. “Just somebody’s house, all the lights are off, I’m thinking the noise came from somewhere else ... Wait, I see a light. Wait ... Oh damn. Oh shit.”

“What’s there?”

“All the windows are blown out,” he said, pulling his cruiser up to the front of the dwelling. “Internal explosion. Maybe gas. Curtains ... curtains are on fire. Wait, let me put that out.”

Hernandez put his car in park, leapt out, retrieved his fire extinguisher from the trunk and quickly subdued the flame.

“Okay, it’s out,” he said into his shoulder mic. “Slow burn, probably just some dust on it.” He put down the extinguisher, unholstered his flashlight, aimed it between the jagged edges of the window and peered into a room that once been someone’s parlor, a china cabinet dumped forward, an overturned couch against the wall, pictures blown to the floor, the ceiling cracked..

“Okay, I’m thinking gas leak, it blew up,” he said. “I don’t think there’s any active fire, must have put itself out. But if anyone was inside, they’re dead now.”

Hernandez leaned forward, aiming his flashlight into the room. “Hey, anyone here? Can you hear me? Hello?”

No answer. He stepped away, turned off his car.

“I’ll stay here,” he said. “Was anyone living here?”

“Not sure yet,” dispatch replied. “You see any cars on the property?”

“No, just a tractor,” Hernandez said. He aimed a flashlight at the front yard. “Looks like some cars have been through, maybe five or six, since the rain yesterday.”

Parts of Southern California had gotten a good dose of late May rain the previous morning, heavy enough that wherever cars made their way over lawns, the telltale tracks lingered.

“Okay, there’s some pink ribbon, bows taped around the front door, looks pretty new, like maybe a party recently,” Hernandez said. “Weird. They used duct tape to stick it on. Okay, let me go around.”

He circled the structure..

“Yeah, late model BMW, little sports car. License plate . . .M-N-T-J-L-P.”

“Running it,” dispatch said. “Okay, white female, age 34, that’s her address. Mint Julep Lane.”

“Her car’s here, so she mighta been home,” Hernandez said ruefully. “We’re gonna need an ambulance. For the body parts.”

“You didn’t see anyone? Any sign of anyone?”

“No,” Hernandez said, turning toward the windows at the back of the house, also blown out. He shone his flashlight in, backed away quickly..

“Okay, strong smell of gas here,” he said. “I’ll see if I can find the valve. That and water, and the house breaker.”

“Don’t go in there looking for any of it. Even if it doesn’t blow again, it might all come down.”

“I’m sure the valve’s in the front yard,” he said. “You said white female, 34?”

“Yeah, dispatch replied.

“Name?”

“Diana Entwhistle.”

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Crime doesn’t sleep, and neither does disaster. By 4 a.m. Sunday, April 28, the former home of Diana Entwhistle was crawling with first responders, the heroic people who make their way through flood zones and blazing forests and, when necessary, the unstable dwellings where gas has blown out all the windows, toppled all the furniture, and obliterated anyone unfortunate enough to have been inside.

Although her car was parked behind the Encino home on the unusually large lot, no body had yet been found. Of course, the half dozen first responders were proceeding slowly, methodically, first confirming the structural integrity of each section of the home before entering it. They’d come in through the front door, intact but loose on its hinges. They’d surveyed the living room, where all the framed paintings had been blasted to the floor but a few temporary images—“Dylan in First Grade,” read one; “Jerri & Dylan at Outer Bounds!” read a second—were still taped up. They checked the walls for soundness, found that the drywall had been removed in places

but the studs were still intact. They made their way into the kitchen, then the drawing room, the parlor, the first bedroom, all of it in shambles.

Further slowing their progress was the presence of scorpions, a half dozen scurrying away from the light or, mounted high on walls, moving their poisonous tails in a way not unlike someone gesturing with their finger: *move closer; move closer.*

They arachnids had probably been living in the basement, one of the firefighters surmised. The blast had shaken them loose, and they'd come upstairs to figure out what was what. Each was dispatched with an all-purpose varmint spray one of the cops had found in his trunk. Sad to have to kill them, but they didn't seem to be native. An invasive colony from South America, one of the EMTs theorized.

It took more than an hour for the first responders to make it down the hall and to the door of the second bedroom.

"Okay, we got a body," announced a female EMT named Rachel. "Call the coroner."

"You sure she's dead?" asked the first officer on the scene, Corporal Rafael Hernandez.

"See for yourself," Rachel said. Hernandez joined her at the door, and both shone their flashlights at a pair of blackened feet, at the end of a pair of blackened shins, the skin charred and roughened. So disfigured were the limbs that one could guess at the sex of the victim only by their diminutive size. These were the legs and feet of a woman, visible only below the knees because the rest of her had been crushed between the bed and nearly a dozen wooden ceiling beams.

All six first responders gathered at the door, human nature prioritizing dead bodies over other things one can look at, human nature requiring that they speculate on what had happened. There'd been a gas leak, that was obvious. The home had filled with the fumes while the temperature outside dropped, and when the furnace sparked on, the whole place had blown. Furnaces weren't supposed to do that anymore, but this was an old one. The tractor outside was old too, sort of a

theme here. The heat had been intense but brief, the explosion destroying the home and killing the woman while she slept before it consumed all the oxygen in the home and put itself out. She had probably died before the ceiling landed on her. She had felt no pain, everyone believed, body concussed by the pressure of the blast before she'd been broiled. Or flash-fried, someone proposed. Or quick-baked, which someone else said but no one else had ever heard of as a cooking style.

What did she look like under the pile? More than one of the emergency personnel offered their best guesses, based on experience. Head twisted grotesquely. Tongue hanging out. Eyes either closed or wide open with the brief, fleeting disappointment of having one's internal organs liquefied while being—and this was yet another term for it—barbecued.

Witnessing the final condition of the dead woman would take some time, however. Collecting the remains was going to be more a construction challenge than a coroner's project, everyone agreed. The home had been built over a basement, and the stability of the floor was in doubt. One of the firefighters stepped tentatively over the bedroom's threshold, stepped back immediately.

"Damn floor feels like a trampoline," he said. "It could give at any second."

Even as he spoke, the floor creaked and lurched, the corpse and the rubble piled upon it shuddering, a sudden hiss emanating from somewhere in the pile.

"Damn, what's that?" the EMT asked.

"Can't be gas, I already shut off the valve," Hernandez said.

"Maybe an aerosol can sprung a leak," someone else proposed.

"Smells weird," someone said. "Glad her windows got blown out or we'd be gagging."

The hissing stopped, the odor dissipated, and at that moment the floor gave out with a giant groan of wood, a shattering of glass, a snapping of wires, and the bed, the feet

and legs, and whatever human remains the legs were attached to, along with the ceiling beams atop it all, dropped into the basement.

“Aw hell,” said Rachel.

“Fuck,” agreed Hernandez.

# 10 - Brothers in Paradise



“Oh, *fuck yeah!*”

Jason McCormick was pumped.

After spending a week mostly as a cook on the maiden voyage of the *Cruise du Kinque*, he was going back for the second voyage, but with an upgrade. Now, the offer email on his phone clearly stated he'd be a 'service provider' on the Gangbang Deck.

“Cedrick, you gotta hear this,” he called out to his roommate in the living room in their condo in Van Nuys. Jason had been rooming with Cedrick Stone for almost six months, and with another half year to go on the lease, they were getting along well enough, if not perfectly. Money was a constant issue for the pair as neither was able to claim full-time employment until now. That Jason had been promoted—for what could a move from assistant sous-chef to gangbang provider be considered if not a promotion?—was a huge leap forward in solving their frequent insolvency issues.

“What's up?” Cedrick asked from the other room. He was playing a video game from the sounds of it, and not with his headphones on as the racket of fake gunfire ricocheted all over the small condo. Jason didn't mind the noise as he was an inveterate gamer himself.

“Pause it,” Jason said as he rushed out of his bedroom into the tiny living room. “You have to hear this.”

“I'm on level fifteen, dude. Can't it wait?” Cedrick growled without pausing the action or putting down the controller. Jason flirted with the idea of switching off the television but deferred to his better judgment as his roommate was a half foot taller and nearly a hundred pounds heavier than him. Although they had never even had a full-blown argument in

their six months as roommates, a physical altercation was—in Jason’s mind, at least—out of the question.

“You know that cruise I went on last week?” Jason asked over the automatic gunfire. He went on without waiting for an answer. “Well, they’re still hiring and they’ll pay you extra, sight unseen.”

“Why would they do that?” Cedrick asked, his eyes locked on the big screen TV on the wall across from their third-hand sofa.

“They pay up for black dudes,” Jason shouted excitedly.

“Why the fuck would they care what color I am? Besides, I can’t cook worth a shit, as you know.”

“Not looking for cooks, nimrod,” Jason almost yelled. “This is for a different deck entirely.” Jason had shared some of the details of his week at sea with his roommate but not all of them, including his time spent moonlighting as a john on the *Cruise du Kinque’s* prostitution deck. Some things were better left unsaid, he had decided, like paying for sex. But this news wasn’t like that. Now, he was going to be the one being paid. They both were if Cedrick would stop with the goddamn video game.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Cedrick asked in a calm voice as he paused his game, his attention fully engaged, finally.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, Rick. We get to fuck women on this other deck,” he whispered now that the room was suddenly quiet. “We’re part of the entertainment.”

After a long pause, “How can that be legal?” the bigger man asked as he stood up, towering over Jason almost menacingly. “Are you fucking with me?”

“No, I’m not. Look.” He handed his phone, which showed his letter of acceptance on the Gangbang Deck of the *Sinflix Loviatar’s* second cruise, scheduled to leave the Port of Los Angeles in two days. An addendum to the offer letter offered a not-inconsequential finder’s fee to any employee who referred another applicant who was ultimately hired. A quick check of

the ship's website indicated crew members were still in short supply and the premium for Black male applicants was still in effect. Jason showed the website to his roommate.

“Do I have to audition?” Cedrick asked as he stared at the phone. “Show someone my cock or something?”

“I didn't,” Jason said, semi-truthfully. He left out his unreported extracurricular involvement on the Penthouse Club Deck, which had undoubtedly accounted for something in his consideration for the new ‘service provider’ position. But he had no doubt that with one look at a photo of his bigger black roommate, the powers that be would jump at the chance to hire him.

“What does it pay?” Cedrick asked when he finally looked up from the phone.

“Does it matter?” Jason countered with a lascivious smile. “You get to fuck a bunch of different women all week.”

“Uggos, no doubt,” the Black man offered, seemingly intent on punching holes in the improbable situation. “Women who have to pay to get laid.”

Jason shook his head. “Wrong, Kemosabe. The women on the first cruise were almost all good-looking.” He wondered when he'd have to explain everything but he'd make Cedrick ask—he wasn't about to volunteer the information.

“What kind of a cruise offers sex to its passengers, anyway?”

“That's the whole point of this one, man,” Jason said as he looked for a way to avoid going into additional details. “They cater to crazy rich people who got money to burn but also have an itch to do kinky shit. Hence the name.” He smiled again, as if the proof was right there in the title on the website, which now featured a half-naked woman in a devil's costume for reasons unknown but which supported his unlikely story.

“I don't know, Jace. Sound fucking racist to me.”

“No, it ain't like that, Rick. It's just part of the show, like with the porn industry out in the Valley. You think the Black guys they hire to fuck white women are complaining that

they're hired *because* they're black?" His roommate side-eyed him hard but said nothing to rebut the shaky premise of his argument. Jason took it as a win.

"At least fill out the form and send it in before they close out taking applications, dude." He took his phone back. "And be sure to send in a selfie, too."

# 11 - Amanda, Zoe, and Meghan



“So what do I need to know about our VIP?” Zoe Grayson asked Amanda Matthews after she climbed into the limo. Zoe was tempted to ask if arriving at the woman’s house in a stretch limo was a little too on the nose but she decided that might be a bit much. Amanda was new at this, as they all were, and the last thing any of them needed was unhelpful sarcasm.

“I wish I knew,” Amanda said, which surprised Zoe. “She’s hard to pigeon hole from the little I learned about her.”

“What do you know?” Zoe pressed gently, tamping down her budding frustration.

“She spent the first cruise on the Milking Deck, as I said,” Amanda began. “She was actually producing, as I believe I mentioned in the meeting Monday. But it doesn’t really add up, when you think about it.” She shook her head. “She’s a mom, and a church-goer, which to me connotes someone who would not look kindly on any of our decks, let alone the Milking Deck. But I looked at some of the footage we have of her and she seemed pretty, uh...”

“Enthusiastic?” Zoe offered with a smirk. “I saw the montage that Charlie put together on her.” She shook her head as well. “I get what you’re saying about her.” She glanced at Amanda. “What did she say about babies again?”

“I didn’t really press her on the point,” Amanda said with a defensive tone that surprised Zoe. “Rodney had already made up his mind that Meghan would be our VIP so I didn’t want to get into it with her. I figured that talking her out of the idea that we had babies on board would be an exercise in futility so why not just wait and show her?” She glanced at Zoe and

smiled weakly, as if to apologize for passing the buck. A few more years in upper management would cure Amanda of that residual trace of humanity, Zoe thought.

Zoe decided to change the subject. “So, I guess it’s safe to assume she’ll need to visit the Milking Deck each day, right?”

“I suppose so,” Amanda said without emphasis. Not your problem, Zoe thought with a hint of bitterness. “Although if she prefers, I’m sure we can get her a pump and keep it in Rodney’s cabin.”

“I’ll see how she wants to take care of it,” Zoe said as she wrote a reminder in her reporter’s notebook. “Safe to assume we won’t be getting any more surprise appearances from Mr. Morrow?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, although I would agree it’s unlikely.” Amanda side-eyed Zoe. “He prides himself on being unpredictable, so there’s that.”

“But he wouldn’t kick her out of his stateroom, would he?”

Amanda frowned. “Doubtful, but I’ll come up with a contingency plan, just in case.”

“Where am I staying, by the way?” Zoe asked. “Anywhere but the Confederacy Deck will be fine,” she said with a laugh that wasn’t meant to be funny. She was convinced that Amanda had a full appreciation of the hell she went through during the maiden voyage and wouldn’t have to hammer the point home. She was, however, fully prepared to do so if necessary.

“There’s another stateroom right next to Rodney’s on the Admin Deck, just a tad smaller but very nice. I’ve got you in there.” She glanced at Zoe. “It’s nicer than mine so I won’t tolerate any complaints.” She smiled and Zoe wondered just what that smile meant.

“Where are you staying?” she asked, suddenly tense. In any other circumstances, she wouldn’t even contemplate a come-on from her boss’s boss, but if she’d learned anything during the first cruise it was that the *Cruise du Kinque* was unlike any other environment she could imagine. And some she couldn’t.

“I’m on the Safeword Deck. We didn’t get nearly as many passengers safewording out of their environments on the maiden voyage so we’re using more of those cabins for staff accommodations this week.”

“What if things change and more passengers opt out?”

“We’ll adjust and double up if need be.” Amanda sighed. “So much to learn, so little time to figure it out.”

“Tell me about it,” Zoe said. “Am I going to be joined at the hip with Mrs. VIP all week, or will I get time to work with my staff?”

“I’ll leave that up to you to read the situation, Zoe,” Amanda said with a hint of impatience that struck Zoe as unwarranted. “I can’t imagine that our lactating holy-roller is going to be all that hell-bent to explore every nook and cranny we have to offer once she gets a good look at what’s happening.”

“We’re here, ma’am,” the driver interrupted on the limo intercom as the vehicle pulled up to a non-descript tract house on a quiet cul-de-sac. Zoe looked for any sign of her charge, who she imagined might be waiting at the curb for them to arrive, but she was nowhere to be seen. Maybe Amanda was right, she decided, that after one visit to the Discipline Room on the New Confederacy Deck, their guest would spend the bulk of the week holed up in her deluxe cabin.

Meghan Attweiler had been glancing out her kitchen window ever since they’d gotten home from the early church service at 9:30. The cruise people said they’d be arriving at 11, but arrival time would depend, as it always did, on LA traffic. So by 10 that Sunday, while she was cleaning up dishes and trying to get the kitchen ready for another week with her gone, she was constantly peering outside.

She knew she was being borderline neurotic about it, her nerves on fire, her heart thumping every time she saw a car that might be them. She barely saw the sink, the silverware, her own hands, with her mind rushing from one thought to the next like a malfunctioning slide presentation, words and pictures flashing by too quickly for comprehension.

*ship babies satan sacrifice god nudity spiritual warfare sex  
faith orgasm*

Any minute now, strangers would pull up in a ... what? A bus? A car? A taxi? And bring her back to a world she wasn't ready for the first time, still wasn't ready for now, where she would do battle with the forces of evil.

And cum. That was part of the fight, she told herself. All of her body would be doing God's work.

At 10:45, out of church clothes and dressed for a drive to the port, a terrible new thought occurred to her for the first time. What if they arrived in an official *Cruise du Kinque* van? What if it was adorned with the cruise name, a list of the decks, the topless devil girl from the website? Candy would see it. The Attweilers' neighbors would see it. And Keith would have to deal with the fallout. He didn't need that. This was Meghan's fight, not Keith's. But then, he'd been by her side this whole time, making her struggle his own, looking after the house and Candy. And when she'd returned from the first cruise, he'd been waiting for her, his questions not too probing, his encouragement precious, and the new lovemaking they'd done deeply erotic to Meghan while it strengthened her. Yes, he'd sodomized her. And wasn't that preparation, in a way?

Keith was serving with all his body too.

Meghan leaned over the sink, nose almost touching the window, to take in all of the cul-de-sac. No one there. Maybe she should warn Keith about her premonition that a blaring manifestation of Satan might be pulling up to their Christian home any moment now.

He was in the living room with Candy, playing a racing video game with her, both of them working the controls frantically and laughing over the game's special effects. They'd gotten closer during Meghan's first cruise. The video game was a new thing.

And nursing ... that might be over now. Something had changed between mother and daughter since the cruise. Candy used to nurse four times a day, usually when she asked for it.

But the girl, already late to wean, was doing it perfunctorily now, if at all, not asking for, not seeming to care.

The fault could easily be Meghan's. She'd spent a week in a world where the giving of milk had been sexualized, where she'd been sexualized too. Who knows what subconscious signals she'd been giving the first time Candy nursed, last Sunday after the cruise?

This wasn't Candy's fight either.

Looking down at the water around the drain, the black shape in the street at first registered as something other than a stretch limo. And then she looked up and it was all she could see. It didn't say *Cruise du Kinque*, fortunately, but by its very presence it said luxury, pleasure, decadence.

The pounding in Meghan's heart moved up to her temples.

"Keith, I think they're here," she croaked.

Tunnel vision. All her awareness was now focused on the black limousine. Maybe it was lost. Maybe it would turn around and drive away. Maybe this whole thing, whatever it was, was a joke. Meghan hoped so. But she also didn't.

No. They were staying. A man got out. An actual limo driver. Black suit, black hat. He rounded the car and opened the door.

Zoe waited for Amanda to climb out after the driver opened the door near the curb. She slid across the seat and they stood together looking at the house, which still showed no activity.

"Shall we?" Amanda said, and she didn't wait for Zoe to answer before she walked up the cobbled path to the front door.

"Right behind you," Zoe answered, unnecessarily, as she followed behind her boss up the path. She stood behind her as Amanda rang the doorbell.

"That's them," Meghan said, heading through the living room to the front door. Keith paused the game and Candy leapt up.

"Is it the captain?" she asked.

“No,” Meghan said dazedly. She went to the front door, pulled it open.

Zoe took in the sight of the woman she would be focused on for the week in a white sundress and wide blue belt, matching shoes and a thick ponytail tied with a white ribbon. She was not what Zoe expected although she knew that wasn't fair. What did she expect? A sex slave? A floozy?

“Hi Meghan,” Amanda said when the woman just stared at them. “Ready to go?”

“Hi,” Meghan said uncertainly. She'd been expecting Amanda, and believed Amanda was good. She had no idea who this other woman was, hadn't been warned about her, given her name. She looked worldly. More sophisticated than Amanda. The other woman was wearing a dark suit and stiletto heels—dressed for business on a Saturday morning—while Amanda looked like she was ready for school, in a pleated skirt and white blouse. Amanda didn't know about the babies, but if they were on board the ship, being prepared for sacrifice, this other woman did. She must. Maybe God had sent Amanda, but Satan made sure his agent was part of the deal.

“Yeah ...” Meghan said, her mind searching for words. “I guess ... Amanda, right?”

“Yes,” Amanda said quickly. “And this is Zoe Grayson, the host of *Sinflux Tonight*. She'll be escorting you this week on the cruise.”

“Oh,” Meghan said, startled by the news. This other woman, Zoe, would be in charge. This was another challenge.

Meghan felt pressure on her leg, looked down to see Candy there, squeezing between her thigh and the door frame.

She looked at the girl, looked back up at Zoe, two worlds colliding.

“Hi, Zoe.”

“It's so nice to meet you, Meghan,” Zoe said with a smile. She looked down at the toddler wrapped around the woman's leg. “And who is this little darling?”

*Oh, aren't you charming?*

"This is Candy. My ... she's four. My only girl. Only child."

Meghan turned to find Keith, realized he was hovering just behind her left shoulder.

"And this is, this is my husband, Keith. He's ..."

"Nice to meet you, Keith," Amanda said as she offered to shake his hand. "I'm Amanda and this is Zoe. We're with the cruise line."

Keith reached past his wife to take the women's hands.

"Nice to meet you," he said.

He was in his old green t-shirt, gray sweatpants, the opposite of sophistication, and he was staring hard at the women, especially Zoe. They were both attractive, but it wasn't that, necessarily. Did some part of Keith's mind know that these women were sexualizing his wife? Did he care? Did he approve?

Zoe found herself at a loss as she stared at Meghan's husband. She'd watched the tape of the woman on the Milking Deck deck, chained naked to a milking station as she fellated one of the boosters on the deck as her breasts were drained and a dildo filled her hole. Did he know what had happened? she wondered. Or did Meghan hide the true nature of what had happened to her? She glanced at Amanda and arched an eyebrow to forestall an awkward conversation if it was at all possible.

"What a lovely house you have," Amanda said as she looked past the threesome at the front door. Zoe rolled her eyes.

"Thanks," Meghan said. "Would you ... you'd be welcome to come in, for coffee. Would you like to?"

"That would be lovely," Amanda said as she walked into the house, leaving Zoe with no choice but to follow her inside.

"Are you the captain?" Candy asked, looking directly at Zoe.

“No, sweetie,” Zoe said with a laugh. “I’m not the captain.”

Meghan stepped around Keith to get to the kitchen. This had not been part of the plan, not something she’d prepared for at all.

*The Cruise du Kinque was in her house, talking to her husband, and her baby!*

“Do you like sugar?” she asked, reaching for the pot, glad she hadn’t had her usual second cup. “Cream?”

“Black, please,” Amanda said. Zoe asked for cream and sugar.

Meghan’s mind wandered briefly to her stint at the coffee shop, chained to a scaffold so passengers could pull on her nipples to flavor their drinks.

“Candy and I were playing Team Zoom,” Keith said, from the living room, apologetically gathering up the console and controllers. “Please, sit anywhere.”

“Sorry to take your wife away again so soon,” Amanda said without sounding at all like she meant it to Zoe’s ear. She almost felt the need to say something but her mind wandered back to the video montage of Meghan and her roommate in their cage, pleasuring each other until all hours. She kept her mouth shut.

“So, I had a question,” Keith said, looking warily at Candy. As if on cue, the girl skipped down the hall toward her bedroom. “There’s a lot of sex on that boat, isn’t there?”

## 12 - “There Will Be Sex”



Zoe Grayson glanced back and forth between Amanda Matthews and Meghan Attweiler. They were standing in Meghan’s kitchen when Keith Attweiler had asked a question that, from the look on Meghan’s face, hinted at a crucial detail about the woman Zoe would be chaperoning and interviewing for the upcoming week on the second voyage of the *Cruise du Kinque*.

Meghan had not shared with her husband much if anything about her activities on the maiden voyage. Zoe was certain of that.

“Well, yes,” Amanda said with a look of confusion and impatience. “It’s called the...”

“There are many activities offered on the ship,” Zoe cut in with a glance at her boss. “It’s not *all* about sex.”

“But there is a lot of sex, right?” Keith persisted.

“Yes,” Amanda said with less enthusiasm as she looked at Meghan, who struck Zoe as dazed, finally catching on as to the fraught nature of the question and her answer.

“Meghan will be in a strictly observational role this week,” Zoe added. “I’ll be escorting her around and reporting on her impressions of everything we have to offer.”

“I told Keith I think there was some of that going on,” Meghan said a little haltingly before she offered a nervous laugh. “I guess I missed it.”

“They had you confined pretty much the whole week on the Milking Deck, right?” Zoe asked.

“Yes,” Meghan said. “Tea and movies. And I expressed a few times a day.”

“Are you still lactating? Will we need to make daily stops for you?” Zoe asked, genuinely curious but also happy to redirect the conversation.

Meghan’s eyes clouded. “I don’t know. That phase might be over. I’ve been thinking about weaning Candy for almost a year, and when I got back from the cruise, I think ... I think we’re just sort of letting that go.”

“How old is she?” Amanda asked.

“Four.”

Zoe saw Amanda’s eyes widen but her boss didn’t say what was obviously on her mind. Zoe jumped on the slight lull in the conversation. “We should probably get going.”

“Let her see something sexy this time,” Keith joked, issuing his own version of an awkward laugh. “I think she’s old enough.”

Meghan looked sharply at her husband. Was he trying to help her with her mission to bring down the cruise? Or did he want Meghan to bring back ... new ideas for their bedroom?

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Zoe said with a nervous laugh. “There will be sex.”

Meghan looked at her husband a little searchingly. “I mean ... no telling what I might see this week.”

He nodded, his interest hard to read, and Meghan eased toward the rolling suitcase by the front door.

“It was nice to meet you, Keith,” Amanda said as she reached to shake his hand. Zoe did as well.

“Candy, come kiss your momma goodbye!” Meghan shouted. The girl raced back up the hall and hugged her mother’s leg, then turned to look at her dad. “We have to finish our game!”

The three women walked out the front door and toward the limo. “She’s adorable,” Zoe said to Meghan.

“She and Keith got a lot closer while I was gone last week. I guess that’s a good thing.”

“We really appreciate you giving us another week of your time, Meghan,” Zoe added.

“On the house,” Amanda said pointedly with a laugh.

Meghan opened her mouth as if to speak, shut it when the driver emerged and opened the door for them, took Meghan’s suitcase and placed it in the trunk, shut the door after they’d all been seated, Amanda and Zoe beside each other, Meghan perpendicular. She paused, waited, drew in her breath, and she heard the driver shut his door and start the engine. Soon they were out of their neighborhood, out onto Adams, nearing the highway entrance.

*Okay.*

“You understand my interest, correct?” she said, leaning forward, her eyes and her voice conveying a sudden edge.

“Your interest?” Zoe asked.

“Amanda and I talked about it,” Meghan said. “Last Sunday.”

“Something about babies,” Amanda said softly.

“There aren’t any babies, Meghan,” Zoe said flatly.

“Where does the milk go, then?” Meghan demanded. She glanced up, through the tinted window before her, saw they were pulling onto 101. If they dumped her off here, it would take her an hour to walk home.

“I checked,” Amanda said. “We give it to a charity that specializes in that sort of thing. We’re very careful about handling it, that’s why you were locked up the whole time you were on board. To protect the integrity of the milk, just like in the book.”

Zoe added, “Amanda said you signed up for the cruise without reading the book, Meghan.”

“I still haven’t read the book,” Meghan said.

“Any of them? There are dozens,” Zoe said.

“I read the Bible,” Meghan said. It wasn’t exactly true, but she was getting frustrated. Now Amanda was in on it too. “At

least that book is true,” she added.

“Would you like to?” Zoe persisted, ignoring Meghan’s slight. “We have all the books that inspired the decks available.”

“No,” Meghan said, and she knew her voice was betraying a rising, justified anger.

*Regroup, Meghan Attweiler. A soft answer. A soft answer ...*

“I mean, maybe,” she said. “But I’d like to see the rest of the ship. I’d like to see ... I need to see, for myself, where the milk goes. Can I do that?”

“I’m sure that can be arranged,” Amanda said as she pulled her phone from her purse. “Zoe, you’ll take care of that.”

Zoe nodded and realized that Amanda was about to check out of the conversation. She wondered if this would be a good time to ask Meghan if she was amenable to being interviewed on camera, given her reluctance to share details of her experience with her husband.

Meghan looked out the window. Was she making progress, or being fooled? Would they really let her investigate the guts of the milking operation? She was doubtful. Once she was on the ship, they could just take her clothes and lock her in a cage again and forget her for seven days.

“So what’s my actual, my agenda?” Meghan asked. “Besides looking at the Milking Deck?”

“I thought I’d show you where I spent the week on the maiden voyage,” Zoe answered. “It was quite a different experience than what you went through. And then I’d like to get your impressions on camera if that’s okay.”

Amanda shot a glance at Zoe but said nothing.

On camera. The word conjured up a lingering fear of Meghan’s. Apparently, deep within the thousands of hours of footage shot on the first cruise were scenes in which Meghan Attweiler starred—making love to her stallmate, sucking penises in the milking room, letting males—

“You would be fully clothed this time, of course,” Zoe added.

“You mean, for the whole cruise?” Meghan asked.

Zoe went on. “You’re a VIP this trip, Meghan. We will not be stripping and restraining you like we did on the Milking Deck.”

“Okay,” Meghan said. “But is there ... would I ... I don’t want to miss anything. So if ... if there’s a deck where I need to, you know, if it would be better ... my clothes.”

Zoe stared at Meghan for a long, silent beat, then glanced at Amanda, who was paying close attention again. Zoe cocked an eyebrow and Amanda nodded.

“We can do that,” Amanda said. “If you’d prefer to fully experience each deck the way our other guests will.”

“Yes, I think I’d need to do that,” Meghan said. “But not ... when you interview me, clothes for that. And, I’ll get to say anything I want, right?”

Amanda smiled at Meghan. “I think I understand, Meghan, and we’ll be happy to...”

“And if I’m speaking from the heart about something important to me ... about my faith ... you won’t just edit all that out?”

Zoe jumped in. “My show, where I’ll be interviewing you each night, is live, Meghan. We couldn’t edit anything you say even if we wanted to.”

Meghan smiled broadly, and she saw for the first time this morning the return of God’s perfect plan. Just one more little detail to cover.

“Okay, I want to do that,” she said. “And I want to see everything. The whole ship. And, just to cover everything, so I know what to expect. Does fully experience ... does fully experiencing it, it all ... on the other decks ... do you partner there? I mean, is that what happens? Is that what’s supposed to happen? As in, with a partner ... person?”

Amanda smiled, a smile that struck Zoe as positively predatory.

“Absolutely, Meghan,” Amanda said cheerfully.

“With men, then?”

“Of course,” she added.

“And, with girls? Women? With women?”

“Yes.”

## 13 - All Aboard



Mostly, Gallant Fender felt sorry for Aunt Jerri, at least at first. Jerri's dad—Gallant knew him as Uncle Randolph—was putting a small fortune into this wedding, most of it going to the bachelorette cruise.

And the bachelorette cruise was ... this. Someone's experiment, basically, trying to turn books into something fun.

Oh, but they were *kinky* books! *Dirty* books! *Adult* novels!

*Yay.*

It was going to be a waste of money, of course. And time, although with high school done, and college three months away, Gallant had time on her hands. So she could waste some of it indulging her aunt.

Lab Deck. Spending a week researching things. But she'd been told she looked cute in lab goggles. Maybe some boy would hit on her and not be a jerk about it. Maybe, if they clicked, they could find someplace to be kinky for real.

Aunt Jerri had no idea, of course, what kink was. You hit your 30th birthday and you think that those little romance stories in CosmoOnline are the ultimate in sex. Cabin on a mountain, fire in a fireplace, naked lovers on the floor ... in-out-in-out a couple of times, cum, done.

*Yay.*

No. There were things going on in Gallant's head that were way beyond this.

Everyone was trying to make the best of it, of course, as they headed to the Port of Los Angeles that Sunday morning.

But no one was talking about the decks Jerri had picked out for them. Jerri wasn't even talking about her deck, which was breeding of some kind. It was all about the wedding. The

honeymoon. The dress. And a general plan of getting together as often as possible, given everyone was going to be living on a different deck, and every deck had its own rules, apparently, and some of the rules might even place some restrictions on you. There was the Slave of the New Confederacy deck, after all. And a prison deck. Gallant had noticed those two during her brief foray to the *Cruise du Kinque* website. She could only imagine how cringe those decks would be.

“Okay, prisoners (or slaves), time to line up for an afternoon of games by the pool! And don’t forget, slave (or prisoner), bingo at 7:30 p.m. sharp!”

As they neared the port, it all felt more and more forced to Gallant, the three older women trying to seem excited, and failing. But something else was going on. Gallant could sense it. There was a strange edge to things, the laughter so sharp it could cut through steel, the attempted jokes so not funny they almost gave off a smell. The wrong words were being used, or the connections didn’t make sense. Gallant was a little off kilter herself, but she had her own reasons for that.

Maybe it was last night’s shower at Diana’s house. It was a different kind of awful from the drive to the port, but it was still awful. Diana seemed to think she was a Southern Belle, practicing at quaint charms and genteel expressions that had no place in Southern California and, Gallant suspected, were just as irrelevant in the American South where Diana was from. The mint juleps she made everyone drink, even the two 18-year-olds there who weren’t old enough yet, weren’t particularly good. Drake was funny about them, though. The other 18-year-old. The boy. He said “It’s mighty good,” but in sort of a tight voice like he didn’t mean it, and Gallant laughed. He was sort of cute, what she could see of him, tall and loose-limbed. He kept on his leather cowboy hat and his black, knee-length duster throughout the evening. He seemed to be trying a look. Cowboy, maybe. Western cowboy. Western hero, maybe. He said “reckon” a few times when it made sense, a few more when it didn’t. Gallant had tried to talk to him, but he seemed really nervous. He called her “Ma’am” and pushed his hat up off his forehead, then pulled it back down, like he knew he was supposed to do something with his

hat when he greeted a woman, but he wasn't sure what, and then he started adjusting his duster.

He'd figure it out. At least he wasn't going for rapper, or DJ, or Republican.

All the guys were cute, really. Dylan was Dylan, clean cut and a little short, with a trimmed goatee. He was right for Jerri, she beautiful, he kind of dashing. Heck (what kind of name was that, anyway?) was sort of country, few day's growth on his face, kind of a bubba but with zero Southern accent, and funny, and nice. He'd shaken Gallant's hand, asked a few questions about high school, given off no creep vibes. And then Grey, wow. Tall, refined, Black, helps people get their churches started, was talking about the latest book he'd read, something about Western civilization. But not trying to show off, was just talking about Diana's tractor and how it tied in with hunter-gatherer and Industrial Revolution or something. Jerri whispered to Gallant that Grey almost got a Ph.D. but something got wrecked about it, caused by Diana, but that's all she knew. Diana sucks. She kills everything she touches. Everyone knows that.

The worst part of the evening was when Diana started quizzing everyone on the bachelor/bachelorette plans. Dylan was bringing his guys to something called Hilton Head, which really excited Diana. She said she'd been, it was "peachy keen", she knew like 15 people there, she had all their phone numbers and was texting them to Dylan even though Dylan did not want to call any of her people, you could tell, and was saying things about just a guy's week, maybe going out in the swamp or fishing or something and wouldn't be socializing at all, or really wouldn't even be using their cellphones much, and the whole conversation seemed to make him super nervous. And then she laid into Jerri, and you could just see Jerri squirm trying to tell lame lies about this fake meditation retreat on Oahu, and Diana says what's the website what's the website and then Jerri had to tell even more lame lies about how they didn't have one, it was super exclusive and sort of secret, and then Diana sits on the floor and does a fucking demonstration of how she meditates, and she's all "Ohmmm ... ohmmm" with her eyes closed so it was literally eight of us

rolling our eyes at each other like oh my god will someone just please kill her and put us all out of our misery and her too?

Really, Gallant thought, being out at sea for a week was probably the best thing she could do. She needed to get away. Even if it was boring.

Poor Aunt Jerri, though. She'd know by this afternoon probably how bad this idea was, and she'd spend a whole week having to face the fact she'd screwed up.

"Gallant, you okay?" Jerri asked from the driver's seat.

"Yeah, I'm great," Gallant said flatly.

"Nervous about the cruise?" Munro asked from the other side of the back seat.

*Nervous about the cruise? Like, because sharks or something? Why the fuck would I be nervous about a fucking boring cruise?*

"Yeah, I sort of am," Gallant lied. "Just ... not knowing what to expect."

"I've heard things about the lab deck," Jackie said, turning back to stare at Gallant, almost accusingly.

*Really, Bitch. Like what? Test tubes? Ooooh!!!*

"Maybe you'll discover something and win a Nobel Prize," said Aunt Jerri.

Not funny. Not even partly funny.

But Jackie laughed. Munro laughed. You could tell it was totally fake, though.

Gallant was way more irritable than she should have been, for her own reasons. Things were worrying at her. Being on her own deck, far away from these people, was definitely a really good idea.

Jerri had to park too far from the terminal building, meaning a long walk over blinding pavement, and then the processing part was a pain in the ass: wait in line, show your driver's license and fill out forms and get your eye scanned and answer health questions and listen to irrelevant crap about

safewords and stand in another line and finally get in line to get on the ship and Jerri wanted everyone to bunch up again so they could all fake laugh and fake talk and fake being excited as they walked through this hot glassed-in bridgeway from the terminal to the ship and the first place you end up is this big waiting room and whoa three naked women are walking around with handcuffs on and now here's a naked dude and he's just out there greeting people and his fucking cock is just out there like up in the air hard as fuck and he just looked at us and smiled and oh shit oh shit oh shit ...

~ ~ ~

“Damn I’m hungry,” mourned Heck just as Dylan was pulling away from his apartment.

“You didn’t eat anything?” Dylan said.

“I was packing,” Heck said.

“What’d you pack?” Dylan asked.

“Speedos,” Heck replied. “Chicks love that shit.”

No they don’t, Drake thought, but he joined with Dylan and Grey in keeping his thoughts to himself.

Unfortunately, that seemed to encourage Heck.

“They’ll say they don’t look, you see,” Heck continued, slipping into a voice that Drake was starting to get familiar with, a sort of pontificating tone, but with an edge of self-effacement. “But watch their eyes, gentlemen. You show up in a speedo, and they look right at the package. Right at the engine room. Right at the nuclear power plant.”

For a solid five minutes, Heck’s soliloquy continued, a free association of sorts, mind pinballing among a few themes, chief among them speedos, with side trips to dubious theories of female sexuality, to their response to visual stimulation, and some ideas about the effect of ocean waves and sun on the mind and body.

Drake, sitting behind his uncle, tuned in and out. He had other things on his mind. Grey, in back with him, seemed completely absent, staring out the window, expression blank.

Uncle Dylan was mostly wordless, eyes on the road as he drove.

Did Heck always talk like this, nonstop, one word following another, almost like he just needed to make noise to ease some torment within? What was bothering him?

Drake, just done with high school, was the junior member here, which at the moment he appreciated. No one was expecting anything from him. He could sit quietly and muse to himself, or listen to a few words if they were interesting, and then drop out again.

Three questions had him mostly preoccupied: 1). Would there be girls on the cruise? 2). Would he be able to talk to them? 3). Was there a chance, no matter how remote, of more than talk?

Right now, he wasn't hopeful. He never did get a chance to pick up the book about the deck Uncle Dylan had put him on, something about research. Not that he was missing much, he was sure. Why would anyone write a novel about a lab? Was every other novel setting already spoken for?

Maybe it would be like high school lab, where you could get paired with anyone there, including Shanique Brown, and you'd just bathe in her company while you mixed stuff in test tubes and wrote down findings. But then, after the experiments on the ship, you could propose heading to the pool with your lab partner, which you couldn't do in school.

Maybe it was time to set aside *Western Drifter*. It had served its purpose. Leather hat, duster, boots, a kind of deserty way of talking, and an attitude to match, all brought together to create the ultimate personal: lonely, mysterious, deep. But high school was over, and Drake had become aware in the last few weeks that he could reinvent himself now, become anything else during his gap year.

The wedding shower last night, that had cemented the idea. Distracted as he'd been by other things, as averse as he was to the abominable presence of Diana Entwhistle, as distasteful as he'd found her mint juleps, he'd enjoyed some aspects of the evening. Jerri's niece had been there. Gallant, her name was.

She seemed to want to talk to him, but he found himself doubly speechless. First, cute girls were hard to talk to in all instances. But then, there was also the challenge of his latest affectation. How would a Western Drifter talk to a girl like Gallant? She didn't seem offended by his getup, nor did she seem particularly interested in it. Maybe it was time to move on. To something else. But what? Who should Drake try to be this time?

Between phases during his formative years, Drake's mind would sidle up to that persistent question: Who are you, really, Drake Palmer? He didn't know. He wasn't sure he wanted to know. But he knew he wasn't the boy Diana Entwhistle had caught masturbating that time, the boy she continued to subtly torment over it, even last night at the shower. The bitch.

She deserved whatever came her way.

He wasn't that boy, he reminded himself. At least, he himself didn't think he was that boy.

"Hey, Grey, what you packing?" Heck asked, turning in his seat to regard the future groomsman behind him.

"Pardon me?" Grey said.

"You know, what you got where it counts?" Heck said. "You more sapling, or sequoia?"

"I'm not sure what you're getting at," Grey parried.

"Aw, c'mon, you know what I mean," Heck said. "Your garden hose. Your smokeless chimney. Your, your, uh, piece de resistance."

"Are you referring to my penis, Heck?" Grey asked without humor.

"Yeah, man," Heck confirmed, nodding madly. "All that."

"And why are you asking *me*?" Grey queried, emphasizing the last word.

"Whoa, man," Dylan warned from the driver's seat. "Let's not get—"

“Aww, don’t be that way,” Heck said. “I’m asking you because you’re the only one to ask. I already know Dylan’s got a swinger, I seen it, and I can’t ask Drake because he’s still a teenager, and question like that would be bordering on child abuse.”

“He’s 18, so he’s an adult,” Grey said, turning to Drake and offering a half smile. “Your only limitation where he’s concerned is in how much bad taste you want to indulge.”

“Aww, shee-it,” Heck mourned. “This is bachelor party talk. You gotta roll with it. It might be the wildest anything gets for the next week.”

Heck seemed not to have heard his words before he’d said them.

“Hey, no offense, Dyl-o,” he continued quickly. “I’m excited as doo-doo about the cruise and all. But I’m seeing it as more a growth opportunity. As in, spiritual growth. I mean, it’s a winner, but you know,—”

“Hey, Jerri’s calling, I need to take this,” Dylan said, tapping his phone. “Hey, Babe, where are you?”

“Hey, Dylan!” Jerri said, voice as bubbly as ever, playing over the sound system in Dylan’s car. “We’re just in the waiting—we’re just waiting for our flights. How are you guys doing?”

“We’re, yeah, we’re great,” Dylan said a little uncertainly. “I got you on speaker phone.”

“Hey, Jer-Jer,” Heck said, using one of his names for the girl she’d made clear she wasn’t a fan of. “What’s the town news?”

“Hi, Heck,” Jerri said without enthusiasm. “Who else is there? Drake? Grey?”

“All present and accounted for,” Dylan said.

“Hi, Jerri,” Drake said.

“Hello, Jerri,” said Grey.

“Hey, guys! So where are you now?”

“Almost to the, uh, yeah, the airport,” Dylan said. “I mean, on the way to the airport. Like, have a ways to go. Probably won’t get there until you’re long gone.”

“I’m sure,” Jerri agreed. “We’re taking off ... pretty soon I guess. So I was calling to say bye, and I love you.”

“Awww, she loves you,” Heck enthused.

“Love you too,” Dylan said. “And I guess ... well, we’ll just have to catch up in a week. Because I know you said ... the cell phones.”

“Yeah, no cell phones allowed at the retreat,” Jerri said. “Like, totally banned.”

“Yeah, I think that’s how it is, at, at Hilton Head,” Dylan said. “I guess there are some places you can talk there, like Diana was saying. But I think where we’re staying will be out of range or something.”

“Same here,” Jerri said.

“So if you call, I might not pick up.”

“I know, same for me,” Jerri agreed. “And I doubt we’ll even be able to text.”

“Yeah,” Dylan agreed. “Us too.”

After a slightly too long silence, Jerri’s voice filled the car.

“Well, you men have an awesome time. And I can’t wait to see you. And Dylan, I love you so much!”

“You’re my number one, Sweetheart!” Dylan replied. “Love ya totes!”

“Bye!”

“Buh bye!”

Only after the line clicked off did Drake regret the departure of Jerri’s voice.

The bitch—he did not think the term lightly, or disrespectfully where she was concerned—had it going on. Her sweet, lilting voice was just one of the attributes that could harden him up; she looked good in anything: sundresses, the

navy skirt and blazer she wore for work, and then, that red bikini at the family picnic. Ass just riding high behind, like she wanted it grabbed, and tits just ... oh god, her top was straining to hold them in. And her mound. You could almost, almost, if you stared when she wasn't looking at you, you could see her parts. Maybe even her hair, if she didn't shave it. You know it had to be black, as black as that sweet, thick hair on her head, draped over her shoulders, a little curl in it.

Oh god.

*Oh god.*

*Hey, Jerri, mind if I call you bitch every time I shove it up you?*

*Maybe. How many times is that going to be?*

*Somewhere between 500 and 1,000 times, I reckon.*

*Well, I guess if you need to ... sure.*

*Okay, thanks ... Bitch. Bitch. Bitch. Bitch. Bi-*

“Earth to Drake.”

“Huh?” Drake said, looking up, startled.

“We’re here,” Dylan said.

“C’mon dude,” Heck said, grunting as he exited the front passenger seat. “Those girls on their periods ain’t gonna test themselves.”

Drake adjusted his untucked shirt to cover his erection, but he couldn't do anything to fix his other problems, including his unyielding arousal, his general, sexualized angst, and his desire to fuck his uncle's fiancée, who at this very moment was headed to an island retreat to achieve enlightenment, leaving Drake to wallow in the muck of his primitive lusts.

Things got no better as he endured the overly intensive pre-boarding screening, the presenting of the ID, the eye scan, the medical questions, the lines.

But at last he and the rest of the wedding party were allowed onto the glass bridge that led to the ship, the *SS Sinflix*

*Loviatar*, which would serve as Drake's prison for the next week.

First stop, some kind of waiting room, where they had food and... wait, that girl ... those girls ... are they naked? Tan body suits? Or actually, physically, humanly ... naked?

Nipples. A breast. And then a nipple at the end of the breast. She was on the other side of the room, talking to someone there. Now Drake could see all of her.

*Oh, damn oh damn. That ... Yeah, that's her thick black muff. Turn just a little more. Ow ... fuck that hurts.*

Standing was getting very uncomfortable, so Drake sat. Sitting hurt worse, but Drake kept sitting. He didn't want to stand and show something and embarrass himself in front of Dylan. Or provoke some off-color and very public remark from Heck.

Okay, no chance of that. Heck's attention was entirely elsewhere. He was standing, mesmerized, looking at the naked, black-haired girl.

She seemed to sense someone looking. Her eyes searched the room, first settling on Heck, then on Drake.

She smiled. She nodded at the couple she'd been speaking to, as though taking her leave, and she raised her hand to shake theirs, but not all the way, and then she started shuffling over.

Shuffling. Because she was chained. Cuffs around her wrists. A chain from her handcuffs down to her feet, which were also chained.

Her breasts bounced as she walked. So did her hair. The hair on her head, that is. Her lower hair didn't bounce. It didn't need to. It simply ... was.

Everyone was watching her pass, taking her in as she navigated people in chairs, people in little knots.

She didn't stop until she was face to face with Heck.

"Hi," she said. "What deck are you on?"

"Breeding," Heck said.

“Oh, that’s a shame,” she said, still smiling. “Next time you sail, please sign up for the lab.”

“The lab?” Heck said. “You mean, where they’re doing some kinda research?”

“The very one,” she said, lowering her gaze to the still-seated Drake.

“Where will you be staying?” she asked.

“I don’t know, exactly,” Drake confessed, because he had no idea what his room number would be, what hall he’d be on, if he’d have a window, where—

“You’ll be in the lab, boy,” Heck reminded him, slapping Drake hard enough on the back that he lurched forward.

“Yeah, right,” he said, straightening, taking in all of the female before him once again. “Lab. Lab Deck.”

“That’s where I’m usually kept,” she said. “I hope we’ll get a chance to work together.” She extended her hand as far as her chains would allow. “I’m Priscilla.”

Drake took her hand in his, rising reflexively, wincing as his clothes forced his penis into an unpleasant new contortion.

“This will be easier when your clothes are off,” Priscilla said. “How big is your penis?”

Drake opened his mouth to speak, shut it when Heck blurted, “Aww, damn.”

“Any size is good,” Priscilla said. “I was just curious.” She turned back to Heck. “What’s your sperm count?”

“I don’t rightly know,” he admitted. “If beer drives it up, though, I guarantee you it’s a solid number.”

“The future moms are going to be fighting over you,” Priscilla said with an earnest nod.

“Future moms?” Heck echoed.

“About 15 percent of our female Breeding Deck guests are there to conceive,” Priscilla explained.

“Wait,” Heck said, and now he needed to sit down for some reason. “You sayin’ ... you tellin’ me ...”

“Nothing to worry about,” Priscilla said, shrugging her shoulders and raising her hands until her chains rattled. “Everyone signed a waiver. No one’s going to ask for child support.”

Priscilla searched the room, smiled at Drake again.

“Sorry, I need to greet some new people,” she said, “but I’ll see you in the lab.”

She offered that same chained handshake, first to Heck, then to Drake, and shambled off.

Heck watched her go, then seemed to collect himself, rubbed his face with his hands, looked up to see that Dylan and Grey were hovering.

And Heck, without a word, stood and embraced the groom.

# 14 - Mia Finds a Friend



Mia Davis walked down the corridor, watching carefully as the room numbers climbed inexorably toward her number. She was almost vibrating with nervous excitement, not just at being away from home alone for the first time in her new life as an official adult but at the prospect of having adult roommates who were here for the same reasons she was. After a lifetime of sharing every aspect of her existence with her twin brother, she was used to being able to talk to another person about everything. That she couldn't talk to Miles about the things that mattered most to her was a burden she'd borne for years and this cruise would be her first opportunity to talk to someone, anyone, about sex.

Not that she'd ever had sex.

With anyone.

She just wanted to talk about it.

The numbers on the doors finally reached hers and she stood at the door without reaching for the handle for a long, silent pause before she screwed up her courage and used her keycard to unlock it. This was her first experience with electronic locks, something she knew about but had never experienced firsthand, like so many things she was looking forward to on this trip. That the lock responded as expected, if unexpectedly to Mia, was a small godsend, she realized, as she couldn't contain her nerves about everything that she'd built this trip into over the two weeks she'd been planning it. She pushed the door open and walked into the room. Cabin. They said she was in a cabin at the registration place.

A woman was standing at the window.

"Hi," the woman said when she turned to look at Mia. "I guess we're roomies." She smiled warmly and walked towards Mia with her hand outstretched. Mia forced herself to shake

the woman's hand because that's what was expected of her and she didn't mean to disappoint even though she did so much of the time but not this time. "I'm Bellinda, but my friends call me Belle," the woman said as they shook hands. "And you are...?"

Mia realized too late that she should have told the woman her name but the damage was done. "Mia Davis," she whispered as she tried to smile but it was hard since she'd just met the woman and didn't know her at all.

"You're so young," Belle said with a laugh and a wave. "I guess you have to be eighteen but you hardly look it."

Mia tried to understand what the woman was saying without saying it, something she never really understood and now it was imperative that she figure it out as soon as possible. What did she expect Mia to say, she wondered. "I'm nineteen," she settled on, finally.

"Seriously? I wouldn't have been surprised if you told me that you're planning your *quinceañera*," the woman who said her name was Belle said with another laugh, something she seemed to like to do, Mia decided and that there was nothing wrong with that she just wasn't used to it, not at all. "Are you as excited about this as I am?" she went on, confusing Mia again but not too much. She was just making conversation, wasn't she? Isn't that what questions like that meant?

"Yes, ma'am," Mia whispered but the woman almost turned on her.

"Oh, let's not do that, okay?" she said in a harsh tone but with a quick laugh that did nothing to soften the blow of her harshness but she didn't apologize so what did that mean? "I'm not old enough to be called ma'am even if I am old enough to be your mother, okay?"

"Okay," Mia said with a nod she didn't feel right about. "Sorry."

"Honey, it's okay," Belle said with a touch that almost made Mia recoil but she forced herself to take it. There would be more touching here, she'd told herself a billion times, and

she needed to be ready for it because that was the whole point of the trip and she wasn't going to waste all the money she'd spent on the trip and...

"Are you okay, Mia?" Belle asked suddenly. She supposed it was suddenly but maybe she'd drifted off because she did that sometimes and especially when she was stressed and didn't she have a perfect right to be stressed when she was meeting someone for the first time in a strange place and not just strange to her but strange in general? "Mia?"

"I'm okay," she whispered. "I'm on the spectrum," she added because she'd heard her mother say it a million times and it always seemed to work so why not try it herself and the woman was nodding like she understood and that was a good thing, right?

"Really," the woman called Belle said but it didn't sound to Mia like a question. "Are you okay to be here by yourself?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Mia said although she didn't feel like she meant it. "I'll be fine once I get comfortable."

"Comfortable?" Belle asked. "What do you mean?"

"I don't deal with new stuff real well," Mia went on. "But it'll just take me a short time to get used to everything." She looked at Belle. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact, I am." She walked to the low dresser where she'd left her bag. "Let's go get something to eat and talk about how we can make you more comfortable, Mia."

"Thanks, Belle." She followed her new friend out the door.

"Did you read the book?" Belle asked as they walked down the corridor.

"What book?" Mia asked.

Belle smiled. "The book this deck is based on." She patted the girl's arm. "It's fine, I'll tell you about it over lunch." They walked in silence until they arrived at one of the main dining rooms on the deck, which operated like a sit down restaurant.

Belle took over and asked for a table for two. They were seated almost immediately.

“So, the books that this place is based on...” Belle began but Mia interrupted her.

“Books? As in, more than one?”

“Well, yes. They’re are three in the series but only two of them are recreated here, from what the website said. Did you look at the website, Mia?”

“A little, but as soon as I saw the part about the chastity belt and bondage sessions, I didn’t need to see much more than that.”

Belle laughed and Mia relaxed even more. She liked Belle’s laugh more and more each time she heard it. “Me too, but I don’t have the foggiest clue why. It just spoke to me, you know?”

“Oh, yes,” Mia said quickly. “I love the idea of being locked up, uh, you know...” She looked down and was even more embarrassed that she was looking at her own lap, which was ironic, wasn’t it?

“So, you’re just interested in a plain, old-fashioned chastity belt, Mia?” Belle asked as she perused the menu. “The food here looks delicious,” she added almost to herself.

“What other kind is there?” Mia asked without looking at the menu. She wasn’t hungry—she was never hungry—but she knew most people loved to eat. Belle looked like no exception. She would order whatever Belle ordered and pick at it long enough to make it seem as if she’d eaten something, just to be polite.

“See, that’s the thing that really intrigued me,” Belle said softly as she leaned over the table and looked around. “They offer a special version of something they borrowed from one of the other decks and a whole different book by a whole different author, the other one.”

“The other what?” Mia asked but Belle didn’t seem to hear her.

“This other type of belt has what’s called a ‘frustrator’ that’s controlled by the auction in the chastity room that they talk about in the book. I don’t really get the way it works but it sounds incredible.”

“I’ve never had sex,” Mia announced unexpectedly, even to her. “Will that be a problem, do you think?”

Belle stared at Mia, smiling but with a faraway look in her eyes. “No, honey. I don’t think it will be a problem,” she said softly. “But maybe you should start out with a normal belt, then, hmm?” The server appeared to take their order and Belle asked for a chicken salad sandwich with tea, so Mia ordered the same. “You’re not here to have sex, are you?” Belle asked after the server departed.

“Oh, no,” Mia said softly but urgently. “That’s what I liked about the belts. That it makes it impossible to have sex. And they said you can order one and take it with you, right?”

“I think I did read something about that, but I’m not sure.” Belle looked around as if she was looking for someone else to talk to, a look Mia was all too familiar with. She must be saying the wrong things again.

“You’ve had sex, right?” she asked Belle, who smiled and turned her head.

“I’ve got children, Mia. A boy and a girl, both younger than you, of course, but...” Belle looked around again, then asked, “You’re not sexually active, then?” She seemed uncomfortable to Mia but that was nothing unusual. She should probably stop blurting things out, she decided.

But another question popped into Mia’s head. “Why do you want to be frustrated?”

“Oh, I don’t, not really,” Belle said with a shy smile. “But not being in control? I really don’t understand it but it speaks to me, you know?” She leaned back as the server arrived with their orders. When she left, Belle continued. “I haven’t decided if I want to try the bondage room.” She took a bite of the sandwich and smiled as she chewed. “What about you?” she asked after she swallowed.

Mia nibbled around the edges of her sandwich without actually eating any of it. "I've been self-tying since I was in junior high. This will be my first chance to have someone else tie me up, so I'm really looking forward to it." She sipped her tea.

"Self-bondage? Is that a thing?"

"There are a lot of videos out there," Mia said with a nod. "They walk you through it pretty well."

"Well, let me know how it goes for you. I might give it a try." She took another bite. "That's one of the things I like about this cruise, Mia. You get to think about other possibilities, not just here but on other decks, as well."

"Other decks?" Mia asked. "That's allowed?"

"I asked at registration," Belle said with a knowing smile.

Mia shuddered. She hadn't realized the other decks would be open to her. She hadn't even looked at what was happening on the other decks. Once she knew what was available on the Bondage Deck, she had decided to sign up.

She looked at Belle. "I'm really not interested in losing my virginity," she said softly.

Belle looked startled. "I wasn't suggesting anything of the sort. I totally agree, by the way. You shouldn't take such a big step in a place like this. That's something a girl should be very careful about, who she gives her flower to." Belle almost blushed but Mia had no idea why. "I know I must sound impossibly old-fashioned but that's the way I feel about it. Too many girls these days are too cavalier about who they sleep with for the first time. It's not right, in my opinion."

"I agree," Mia said, although she felt even more strongly about it. She wasn't interested in having sex with anyone, ever. She just wasn't interested.

"Well, there are other things to do besides having sex with a strange man," Belle said with a look that confused Mia.

"I think getting a chastity belt and getting tied up will be enough for me," Mia said, surprising herself with her

assertiveness. She must be getting comfortable with Belle, she decided.

“Then that’s what we’ll do. But you should understand about the Chastity Room if you’ve never read the books.” She waited as if she wanted Mia to ask her to go on, so she did.

“It’s probably easier to just go,” Belle said as she finished her tea. “But you’ve hardly eaten anything.”

“I wasn’t hungry,” Mia said honestly. “I’d rather go and get fitted.”

Belle stood up. “Then let’s do that.”

# 15 - Suspicions



It was almost 10 Sunday morning before the necessary equipment had been procured, rolled into place, and set to work excavating the burned, crushed and liquefied remains of Diana Entwhistle.

Corporal Rafael Hernandez was still there, looking down somberly at a reverse construction zone, the roof dismantled, the walls torn away, nothing left of this half of the home except a debris-filled basement. And a pair of blackened feet, still visible, sticking out from the wreckage.

Hernandez could have clocked out three hours ago when his shift ended, but he'd radioed his captain that he'd be staying, would work it to the bitter end, would call for an ambulance and notify the coroner once the remains could be got to, would write the statement to be added to the coroner's final report. It wasn't morbidity that made him linger at the scene. He truly did not want to see the horrors that lay between the ruined bed and the heavy ceiling beams: the broken ribs, the shattered limbs, the deformed face frozen in that last moment of fear and pain before the end arrived.

No, Hernandez was here out of a sense of reverence. He'd been first on the scene. He'd seen her feet. He'd built from the blackened limbs the whole, tragic woman, petite and alone and now, dead. Were she looking down from some ethereal plane, she'd have wanted him to stay. It was the least he could do for her.

People loved her, and they would in time pay their respects. She'd hosted a party last night, probably a wedding shower, judging from the cute bride and groom pictures taped to the walls, the pink ribbon duct taped around the door (duct tape? okay, whatever). The people whose love she'd help celebrate would miss her, would mourn, would weep at her funeral. But

only Hernandez was here to officially note her passing, and he would do it with the utmost respect.

Ten heavy beams had dropped onto the woman, all—strangely—dislodged by the original calamity, the gas explosion. The walls had survived the blast, albeit with the shredding of drywall in some places. The roof was still intact. But all the beams had come down. Hernandez tucked the discrepancy away and watched as a claw dropped, bit into a beam, pulled it upward, laid it with a puff of dust onto the grass, swung around and grabbed the next one.

Hernandez, who did not consider himself particularly spiritual, took off his hat and held it over his heart as the ruined form of Diana Entwistle slowly came into view. Most of her had been lying beneath a large quilt, and was still covered by it, only her feet and lower legs exposed.

The quilt—also strangely—did not seem to be burned, but one should not attempt to second guess the behavior of fire, Hernandez reminded himself. Even the experts would get puzzled by the way heat and flame traveled here and there, touched this and left that alone. Maybe the force of the blast had lifted up the quilt before the flames had toasted her exposed limbs, blackening them before the fire ebbed without sparking the quilt.

Another beam, this one above the woman's hips, was raised, discarded. Hernandez, hat still over his heart, could make out her belly now, under the quilt, not particularly misshapen. Another beam. Now her breasts, and now her shoulders. The quilt had been drawn up to her neck, and he could see her neck, the white of her flesh there, not burned.

The claw reached for the last beam, across her face, and Hernandez drew in his breath and waited somberly, knowing that what he was about to see would haunt him forever.

It was worse than he'd expected.

Her face, like her feet, had been horribly blackened, the flesh burned to a grisly, charcoal-like texture.

Hernandez grimaced.

At least her face wasn't crushed, and her eyes were closed, he thought. Something about open eyes after death made things worse, at least for him.

No, her eyes were opened.

*Oh, Santa María, Madre de Dios.*

Okay, it's just nerves. The beam was lifted, a still-firing nerve in the face triggered the lids to rise. Can that even happen?

The eyes were moving. They were searching. They were looking. They had found him. They were looking at Rafael Hernandez.

*Oh Dios, ayúdame!*

The mouth opened. As if to speak. And then it spoke.

"My good sir," it said, weakly, but the words were audible. "I do hope you've come to rescue me. I am feeling rather faint."

Hernandez dropped to his knees at the edge of the pit that had been Diana Entwhistle's basement.

"Are you alive?" he asked, knowing the question was stupid the moment he'd asked it. But still, look at her face. How could she even talk? The flesh must have been burned down to the bone.

"I rather believe so," she said, sliding one hand out from under the quilt. "But I seem to have hit a rough patch. I think perhaps a doctor would be in order."

"Doesn't your face hurt?" asked a voice above Hernandez's. The operator of the claw had exited the cab to regard the scene.

"It's the only thing that doesn't hurt," she said, rubbing her forehead. "Mary Anna Lee's mud mask does wonders for the complexion."

"Is there some of that on your feet too?" Hernandez asked hopefully.

“Yes,” she said with a weak chuckle. “But might I ask you to keep that beauty secret to yourself? And might you call me an ambulance?”

Hernandez, blinked, tapped his shoulder mic, barked urgently into it, calling for immediate medical help.

The woman issued a shriek. Yes, the death shriek, Hernandez thought, pausing in his instructions. Sometimes this is how people die, bodies giving out at last after a thorough battering, the horror and trauma winning over the mind with one last cry of despair.

No, she wasn't dying yet.

“Get that awful thing away from me!” she cried, pointing, and Hernandez followed her finger to another of those South American scorpions, tail wagging as it climbed up what was left of the basement wall, some five feet away from her. Hernandez reached down into the pit, found a rolled up poster, swung and crushed the arachnid on the second hit.

“Thank you,” Diana said. “If one of those things gets their stingers into me, I'll be gone in two minutes. Or so my doctor says.”

“Have you had a problem with them?” Hernandez asked.

“Not at all, I've never seen one before in my life,” she replied. “Here, or anywhere else.”

Hernandez finished giving instructions to ambulance dispatch, looked down at the woman again, and his training kicked in.

“The ambulance is on its way,” he said. “Can you tell me where you're injured?”

The woman grimaced, rocked her feet and wiggled her toes, touched her hands to her face, grabbed a corner of her sheet and wiped off what she could of the mud mask, revealing a healthy cream complexion underneath.

“I would call it more a general malaise,” she said. “My head hurts. It hurts to draw in air. My muscles are a bit

strained. And I'm sorrowful about being in the basement of my former home."

"Do you remember the accident?" Hernandez asked.

"What accident?"

"The best we can tell, you had a gas leak, and it blew."

"I don't remember that," she said. "I don't remember anything from the moment I lay down until I opened my eyes and saw you. Get a few mint juleps in me and I sleep like a baby."

"Is there a chance you're concussed?" Hernandez said. "Any sore ribs? We had to lift 10 ceiling beams off you."

"So that's what that was," Diana said. "No, they're decorative. Inconvenient to be under when they're falling, but they're not solid wood."

Hernandez raised his head, heard the first hint of a siren.

"Ambulance is probably a few miles away, Ma'am," he said. "May I ask you a few more questions?"

"Of course."

"It looks like you hosted a party recently?"

"I did, last night," she said. "A wedding shower, for two dear friends, just before they embark on their respective journeys."

"Who's getting married?" Hernandez asked, pulling out his notebook.

"Jerri Magisteria and Dylan Hightower," she said, spelling the names. "They were here, with all of the wedding party. And we had the loveliest time."

"And they're traveling today?"

"The men are flying to Hilton Head, South Carolina," she said. "For male adventures. The ladies are going to Oahu, for a meditative retreat."

Diana winced again, closed her eyes, made fists.

“Are you still with me?” Hernandez asked, scribbling in his notebook.

“I’m just resting,” she said. “I’m fine.”

For a time, Hernandez hovered, poised 10 feet from the woman and watching her face intently, the rising and falling of her chest, until the ambulance arrived with a wail. He stood, waved it over, stayed and watched as two EMT’s dropped into the pit, slid Diana’s body carefully from her bed to a stretcher (she’d gone to sleep in a pink flannel gown, fortunately), hoisted her up to ground level on cables, loaded into the ambulance and, after a final wave to Hernandez, headed off for the hospital.

Diana was gone, the heavy equipment had been carted off on its trailer, and Hernandez was alone. Yet still he lingered. Something didn’t feel right. He peered into the basement with its mass of debris, leaned over so he could peer at the section of wall where he’d killed the last scorpion. And then he saw it. A metal box, the size of a shoebox, wedged in between the fallen dresser and the basement’s scratched plaster wall.

Ignoring his personal safety—and Los Angeles Police Department protocols on exploring hazardous building sites—he lowered himself into the ruined space, crab walked over broken furniture and the split timbers of the collapsed first floor, stopping only at the edge of a cracked board that might or might not hold his weight, and he eyed the box warily.

He didn’t dare touch it, but he didn’t need to. He could see the trap door at the end of the container, pulled open by a spring. He could make out the teeth of the timing mechanism which, at some point in the middle of the night, had released the door and set the exotic scorpions free.

Hernandez pulled out his cell phone, tapped a number on speed dial, raised his phone to his ear.

“Marriage Crimes Division, Rebeka Charger,” said a youngish woman on the other end of the line.

“Hi, Ms. Charger, this is Corporal Hernandez. Rafael Hernandez. I don’t think we’ve worked together.”

“Yeah, I work weekends,” she said. “Started a month ago.”

“Okay,” Hernandez said. “I’m in Encino, and I think I’ve got something you’ll want to check out.”

“Bride or groom?” she said.

“What?”

“Which one is dead? Or both?”

“Oh, neither,” Hernandez said.

“Best man?” Rebeka asked. “Maid of honor?”

“Neither,” Hernandez replied. “The lady that hosted the wedding shower.”

Rebeka blew out her breath in the way people do when their time is being wasted.

“Okay, how’d she die?” she asked dully. “Hanging, crossbow, ornamental pond drowning, falling statuary, dropped from a tower, wild ani—”

“No no, none of those things,” Hernandez interrupted. “Look, I—”

“I haven’t finished the checklist,” Rebeka barked. “Wild animal attack—mammal, wild animal attack—non-mammal, exploding snuff box, pump house malfunction, arsenic cookies, axe from a medieval suit of armor—”

“She’s not dead,” Hernandez said, prompting another long, frustrated exhale.

“Then we really don’t have a crime here, do we?” she said.

“I think we might,” Hernandez said, doing a poor job of hiding the reciprocal contempt in his voice. “I found a box.”

“You found a box,” Rebeka echoed.

“The lid was on a timer,” he said. “I’m looking at it now. The lid’s been popped. I think it was full of scorpions.”

“Are there any scorpions in it now?”

“I can’t tell, I can’t see in it. It’s turned away from me and I can’t get any closer to it and I don’t want to touch it anyway

and mess up the fingerprints. But the victim is deathly allergic to them. She almost fainted when she saw one.”

“Wait,” Rebeka said. “There’s no dead body, the victim isn’t even in the wedding party, and she’s conscious?”

“Yeah, but she’s hurt pretty bad,” Hernandez said. “She has, uh, uh, she called it malaise I think.”

Rebeka exhaled again, this one the longest yet.

“Okay, Mr. Herman, I—”

“Hernandez. Corporal Hernandez.”

“Okay, fine. Corporal Hernandez. So I’m going to assume you meant well, and you’re not trying to gather material for a book, or get a promotion to our department ...”

Hernandez listened in silence, but he was seething.

“But what you actually have is what’s called a household accident. And it’s not something anyone at any police department looks into, much less a marriage crimes division. So thank you for your—”

“It doesn’t add up, okay?” Hernandez nearly shouted. “Her whole fucking—sorry, pardon my language—but her whole fucking house blew up, okay? And I’ve been working this clusterfuckateria since midnight and the place is crawling with scorpions, her fucking floor caved in, her whole fucking body was covered with ceiling timbers, and my gut says some kinda shit’s happenin’, and I’m just saying you—”

“Sergeant Hernandez,” Rebeka interrupted icily. “Let’s just ...” Rebeka paused in mid-sentence. The Los Angeles Police Department’s Marriage Crimes Division did not suffer fools. And the number of fools darkening the division’s doors and warming up its phone lines was, in word, legion. Every time a best man stubbed a toe, a maid of honor got a hangnail, someone was calling to report another attempted wedding murder. The division’s harried professionals had developed a myriad of ways to dismiss complainants efficiently, most of the methods not intended to prevent hurt feelings; in fact, many of them were designed to maximize humiliation, both to

forestall more false alarms and for the pleasure of the overworked staff.

But officer Hernandez was at least a law enforcement professional. And why burn a bridge? Maybe one day he'd have a real case.

"Okay," Rebeka said, regrouping. "Can you give me a few facts? Just the basics. I'll look into it when I have time."

"Fair enough," Hernandez said, his tone softening considerably, and he drew out his notebook.

"Groom is Dylan Hightower, bride is Jerri Magisteria," he said, spelling the names. "Bride headed out today for Oahu with her bridesmaids, some kind of zen thing I think. Groom went to Hilton Head, South Carolina, for man stuff."

"Man stuff?"

"That's how Miss Entwhistle put it. I got the sense of, I don't know, hunting alligators or something."

"Do you have the names of the rest of the party?"

"I don't, sorry."

"They were all flying out today?" Rebeka continued. "LA Airport?"

"That's my understanding."

"Okay," Rebeka said, breathing in. "If I open a case on it, you'll be notified through our internal channels. You're Hernandez?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Corporal Rafael Hernandez. And ... thanks."

"No problem."

Rebeka Charger hung up her phone, set it down, rose from her cubicle and headed to the common room to make another mug of tea.

She'd thought that Sundays would be the ideal shift for marriage crimes, and, novice that she was, she'd accepted her schedule eagerly. But she'd been mistaken. Most marriage murders happened Saturdays, before or during the wedding or,

just as often, during the reception. Bodies weren't even found sometimes before Sunday or Monday, and the first suspicions of foul play didn't arise until well into the week, meaning the calls usually didn't start coming in until Tuesday or Wednesday. And Sundays weren't the best day to work the half dozen cases she'd been given, either. Businesses were closed; suspects were off to the beach, or the mountains; caterers, bartenders, musicians, florists, DJ's—the eyes and ears of a wedding crimes case—were recovering Sunday, not taking calls. So Rebeka was not quite as busy as she'd been suggesting to Hernandez.

Okay, go ahead and indulge the man.

First, find the wedding website for Dylan and Jerri, this part she could do in her sleep. Okay, here we are. Cute couple. Great names. Registered at Target and Fineman's. And here's the rest of the party. Gallant, Drake, Grey, Munro, Jackie, Heck. No Johns or Janes here. The names suggested the potential for something sinister, definitely.

So the girls flew to Oahu, the boys to Hilton Head, all presumably out of Los Angeles Airport. Check the passenger manifest, get their cell phone numbers, find out when they landed, call them, see what happens.

Hmm, nothing. No one by any of those names flew out of LAX today. Or San Diego. Palm Springs. Santa Barbara. Maybe the girls took a boat to Hawaii. Waterborne passenger manifests weren't online; you had to call for those. Rebeka picked up her phone.

“LA Port,” said a man's voice

“Rebeka Charger, LAPD, looking for some passengers.”

“Okay.”

“Jerri Magisteria,” Rebeka said, spelling out the name.  
“Any boats going to Hawaii today? She might be on one.”

“No boats leave for Hawaii until Wednesday,” he said.  
“Jerri Magisteria. Okay, found her.”

“She's on a boat? Leaving today?”

“Yeah, cruise ship.”

“Which one?”

“*SS Sinflix Loviatar.*”

“Who owns it?”

“Sinflix.”

“Where’s it stopping?”

“Nowhere,” he replied. “Itinerary is just sail out to international waters and then come back. Out a week, back next Sunday.”

“Gambling?” Rebeka said.

“Probably. They all have casinos.”

“Right. Okay, another name. Dylan Hightower.”

“Just a sec. Okay, found him. *Loviatar.*”

“Heck Southward?”

“Yeah, *Loviatar.*”

“Gallant Fender?”

“Yup, the same.”

“Okay,” Rebeka said. “Hey, thanks.”

“Sure.”

Rebeka hung up, turned to her laptop, and for the next hour her fingers flew over the keyboard while her eyes oscillated and her pulse quickened.

Finally, she leaned back, stretched, sipped cold tea, picked up her phone and tapped.

“Dawson, Detectives,” the man answered.

“Hey, this is Rebeka Charger, Wedding Crimes,” she said. “I think we’ve got an attempted murder on Mint Julep Lane in Encino. Gas leak, possibly arachnids on timed release.”

“Arachnids?”

“Scorpions,” Rebeka said.

“Okay, we’re on it,” Dawson assured. “Suspects still there?”

“No, they’re all on a ship,” Rebeka said. “Left today. Tell me what you find out as soon as you have anything. I’ll be meeting with the victim in the hospital, then choppering out to the ship tomorrow. Call, text or email, I can get all three out there. And the more you can give me, the quicker I can get a confession.”

# 16 - Intro to Porn



Courtney Austen glanced up at the ship she and her husband would be trapped on for the next week, from the parking lot at the pier. She was more than impressed.

“It’s certainly not going to be as claustrophobic as our last cruise,” she said softly as they walked toward the entrance.

“Feeling better about it now?” Ryan asked, rhetorically she assumed, so she felt no need to answer him. Then she decided this would be the perfect time to reiterate her concerns for the trip.

“I’m enjoying the fact that the sun is shining,” she said pointedly. “I am not looking forward to spending a lot of time indoors, though.” A week on a ship that catered to amateur pornographers and budding pornstars was sounding less and less appealing. “How did I let you talk me into this?”

“We don’t have to do anything that makes you uncomfortable, babe,” he said for the umpteenth time. Which made her head ache.

“The whole notion makes me uncomfortable, Ryan,” she said with an exasperated sigh. “Are you listening to me?”

Her husband of five years sighed even more dramatically. He could be such a shit, she said to herself. “Look,” he said, “I did some reading about how they run the program. It’s all laid out for us in an introductory meeting later this afternoon, and if you don’t like what they have to say, we can just go up to the pool and get baked.” He gave her a look and she had to giggle. “I’ve got plenty of weed, babe.”

They walked in silence toward the entrance as Courtney looked around at the other guests who were headed in the same direction. She was surprised at the number and diversity of the people who had paid significant sums of money to

indulge in various kinks for a week at sea, something she still harbored severe reservations about. She had only glanced at the other kinks the ship catered to, not because she was a prude—far from it—but because she didn't want to know for reasons that never became clear to her. She had decided that the less information she had about her fellow travelers, the better, although that notion seemed incredibly short-sighted to her now that she was confronted with reality. Would she be forced to break bread with a table full of perverts? All she could conjure were overweight men wearing gold chains and their shirts unbuttoned to their disgustingly hairy chests.

Thankfully, she saw none of that in the crowd as they lined up to check in. What she did see surprised her. A lot.

Young people, mostly women, almost girls, really. They must be 18 she decided and they mostly looked like twenty-somethings but young ones, like the types she knew at work, who were adults chronologically but not in any other sense of the word. A lot of them, too. Where were the young men, she wondered. Wasn't this a sex cruise? Wouldn't that be a huge draw for the 'bro's before ho's' cohort? Didn't she see several decks that would appeal to young men, hopped up on testosterone and internet porn? There were a few but they were vastly outnumbered by the girls, in twos and threes, even bigger groups who looked like they were here for an after prom party, but that couldn't be the case.

And then there were a fair number of couples like herself and Ryan, although so many of them seemed awfully attractive. Women who looked like they just climbed down from the runway in New York or Paris, men who were Instagram ready. Was she hopelessly out of touch with the modern alternative sex scene, especially here in LA, where botox was practically its own food group and unplumped lips and unenhanced breasts looked more unnatural than not?

"I feel a little underdressed," Courtney whispered to her husband. "Or am I being paranoid?"

He looked at her. "You look great to me, babe," he said almost mechanically, always with a ready compliment even if it was routine to the point of being irrelevant. Courtney was

wearing an old blouse and worn shorts with flip flops, in stark contrast to the designer shoes and clingy dresses she saw everywhere in the crowd. She'd packed extremely lightly, thinking that even if the porn thing was over and done with as quickly as she hoped it would be, pool wear would be fine for the rest of their voyage. She was quickly reassessing.

As the line snaked its way into the hull of the ship and she got a look at the registration area, she was surprised again, more so by orders of magnitude, by the goings on just past the tables where passengers were scanned and checked in. She nudged Ryan but he was already focused on the scene himself.

"I know, right?" he whispered as they gawked at a woman who was...something. Naked but not completely, chained but not oppressively, and smiling as she greeted passengers, posed for photos, and signed autographs. She was accompanied by a Black man in what looked like a uniform, mostly because he carried a baton that looked official and ominous, who watched over the woman but was somehow detached from what was happening with her...fans?

"Are we in the right place?" Courtney asked in a furious whisper.

"Yeah, we're fine," Ryan said without taking his eyes off the nearly-naked woman. "She's one of the performers on another deck," he explained unhelpfully. But the line was moving quickly and they stepped to the next table that opened up to check them in, Courtney too distracted to pay close attention as the woman droned on about their STD tests, consent form, and something about safewords. Eventually, their luggage was carted away and they received key cards to their cabin on the seventh floor of the vessel. They followed a crowd and walked past the woman in chains toward the elevators.

"How weird is this going to be?" Courtney whispered in the crowded elevator.

"If we venture off our deck it's going to get really weird," Ryan said in a tone that Courtney found dismaying. "I looked

at the website after we booked and there's some really strange shit going on, no doubt about it."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Courtney hissed but there was no point, she realized. This was exactly what Ryan wanted and mentioning any of the extra goings on to her would have risked her trying to get their tickets refunded.

"Come on, babe," Ryan said as he watched the numbers above the doors climb toward their deck. Most of the people in the elevator with them were apparently going to other, higher decks and they had to almost elbow their way through the small crowd. "If we hurry, we can make the first orientation," he said with a glance at his phone.

"We can't relax?" Courtney asked, dismayed again. "Or get something to eat?"

"We'll get food after the meeting, which starts in like five minutes."

"Why do they have to orient us about having sex while being recorded?" Courtney asked pointedly. This vacation was quickly devolving into something other than what Ryan had told her to expect, not that she was surprised. Her husband was a good man, she often told herself, he just had a flexible relationship with the truth when it served his purpose. Like most men, especially when the possibility of sex was involved.

"They offer a bunch of different options they want to tell us about, Court. That's all," he said in a tone that made it clear that wasn't all, not by a long shot. The voice in the back of Courtney's head told her she should end this and right now, just grab her bag and leave, but she didn't. Her curiosity was getting the better of her so she agreed to go get orientated.

The room they were directed to was surprisingly large, like the rest of the ship. Fourteen decks, each one a thousand feet long, a little world unto itself, not at all what she'd expected. The meeting room, which she assessed with a practiced eye given her job as an event coordinator, would hold about a hundred people and was filling up fast. Ryan secured two of the last available seats where they could sit together as Courtney looked around at the people who were here to make

their own porn. So many of them, she marveled. What are they all doing here?

And why are they so damn attractive?

“Ladies, and gentlemen,” the woman on the slightly elevated stage at the front intoned into the type of almost-invisible mic used for TED talks. “We’ll get started in one minute so please find seats.” The woman, dressed in a suit and looking overly professional for a cruise line employee, was joined onstage by two people whose blinding charisma and otherworldly attractiveness almost washed out the speaker. Courtney glanced at Ryan but he only had eyes for the couple, no doubt the female half of the couple, who were smiling at each other and laughing gently at some private joke.

“Welcome, everyone,” the woman in the suit began, “to the Visual Arts Deck of the *Cruise du Kinque*. I don’t know who came up with that dreadful name but we’re stuck with it so...” The woman smiled too broadly at her lame attempt at humor, but only polite laughter emanated from the crowd. She glanced at the couple who were now watching her.

“My name is Isabelle Foster and I’m the Program Director for this deck. I’ve got quite a bit of information to get through in a short period of time so please bear with me.” She paused and smiled as she turned to look at the couple standing next to her.

“But first, we’re quite fortunate to have with us for the week two very special guests,” the woman went on. “Damian Marshall, the star of the new Sinflix hit *Slave of the New Confederacy*, needs no introduction but if you’ll bear with me I’ll give him one just the same. In addition to his breakout role in that recent blockbuster, Damian has appeared in over one hundred studio-produced movies over the years, and now he’s a top ten creator on OnlyFans. We’re incredibly lucky to have him.”

The handsome Black man in a powder blue polo shirt and dark slacks smiled and waved to the crowd to scattered applause that died down quickly.

“Kylie Mills, our other guest, is less well-known but a rising star in her own right as she makes a name for herself on the OnlyFans platform as one of Damian’s live-in costars on their top ten channel. Kylie, Damian, thank you both so much for joining us this week.”

The woman, Kylie, was the kind that Courtney could seriously hate, no problem. Tall and svelte but with a great rack, she had long brown hair that she clearly didn’t deserve. Her eyes were deep blue and her cheekbones beyond perfect, but the woman’s lips were just, quite frankly, stunning. Full but not fake or even plumped, they made a mockery of Courtney’s thin mouth, one of her most debilitating features. She hated Angelina Jolie and never saw any of her movies for the same reason and now she hated this Kylie woman even if she was, apparently, merely a porn star of some sort.

The dubiously semi-famous couple smiled and waved before they exited the stage and the woman in the suit cleared her throat to signal she would start the serious phase of the meeting. Courtney glanced at Ryan as her stomach rumbled and wondered how much longer this would take.

“Men are pigs,” the woman in the suit said in a serious tone that prompted a wave of unexpected laughter to ripple through the crowd. “No offense to those of you here today who happen to be men, but you know I’m right. And before you even think about protesting that men in general may be disgusting degenerates but not you, how many of you would be willing to come up on stage and share the browser history on your phone with us?”

A murmur washed over the crowd, accompanied by titters of feminine laughter.

“Yeah, I thought so.” The woman walked from one end of the small stage to the other. “But it’s these same men who dominate the porn industry from one end of the production pipeline to the other, as consumers, creators, financiers, and arbiters of what gets made, how it gets distributed, and whose needs are met. Which is pretty damn depressing, am I right ladies?”

The crowd agreed enthusiastically.

“Now, I know that many of you here this week are not interested in the porn industry per se. You’re here to make a few videos for your private collection using our state of the art studio facilities and production team, and that’s fine. That’s what we’re here for, to help you in those endeavors. But I would be remiss if I didn’t inform you of our new service, offered by our parent company and sponsor, Sinflix Enterprises, a service that will offer a wider array of productions that cater to the forgotten audience in porn, women.”

A smattering of applause broke out and built quickly into an enthusiasm that Courtney found at once a little off-putting and vaguely contagious. She was only an occasional consumer of commercial porn, much more likely to view her own videos created with her husband’s help and her personal iPhone. The idea of watching other women like herself was intriguing, she admitted, but the notion of putting her content out there for others to consume was abhorrent. No fucking way that was going to happen, she told herself.

“In order to help you understand what we’re offering this week,” the woman continued. “We’re holding an open house this afternoon. All twenty of our specialized studios will be open for your inspection and inquiries. Our in-house service providers will all be available to answer your questions, including Damian Marshall and Kylie Mills, whom you met earlier. So go get settled in your cabins, grab lunch in one of our wonderful restaurants, and then come down to meet the team and see what we’re doing to bring the porn industry, at long last, into the twenty-first century. Thank you all and I’ll see you in a few hours on the deck.”

# 17 - Gallant in the Lab



At some point after she'd been stretched out along a pole, wrists bound at one end, ankles cuffed to the other, her pole lengthened with a crank until she'd been stretched to an unpleasant state of tautness while she groaned in discomfort, after which she'd been set on a shelf with two other gasping girls while other girls screamed in pain in the middle of the room, Gallant Fender realized she should have read the book.

Gallant and her two companions had been arranged in alternating directions, meaning that a toe was regularly brushing against the back of Gallant's head while she stared at the soles of a pair of bound, bare feet. Every time someone screamed, the feet moved.

Okay, this wasn't boring. Aunt Jerri had accomplished that much. But it wasn't sexy either. Nor was it non-sexy. What was happening here transcended any form of sexuality Gallant was familiar with. Yes, there'd been the nude men and the nude women in the waiting room. Sexy, obviously. Damn. And yes, some of them were chained or cuffed or leashed in bizarre ways, and that was sort of sexy too. But from there, Gallant's experience had devolved, quickly, to something more akin to post-apocalyptic hellscape.

They'd given her a little slip of paper with a number on it during check in, and she'd been balancing a mushroom omelet on her knee and was almost done with it when the number flashed on the screen at the top of the wall, and she'd stood up, got big cooing hugs from Jerri, Jackie, Munro, and off she'd gone, escorted to the very top deck, which they were calling the Female Sexuality Lab.

Okay, that was different from just "Lab," which was what Jerri kept calling it.

They took her to a gyno exam room, and that's how it started out, like a gyno visit. Not even remotely sexy. She undressed completely, as instructed, put her clothes and her suitcase to the side and got up on a chair and a man and woman shoved this thing up her pussy and started talking about how great it was. Like, measuring her or something. And they seemed excited. Not like, sexually excited, but business excited. Like, wow, what a vagina! We can do businessy things with this one!

*Yay.*

And then a nurse chains her, like some of the women in the waiting room had been chained. Hands and feet. Chain running from handcuffs to footcuffs. She's walked down a hall, maybe getting a little aroused, because now she was the one being looked at by clothed people, even though they barely looked at her, like it was all in a day's work for them to see things like this. Were they actors? Like, boat cast members?

And then it got even weirder. She was walked through another hall to the back of an actual bus, parked in a space that was made to look like an underground parking garage and was actually pretty convincing, and she was put on there with other girls, each one stuck in their own little cubbyhole thing. Or cage, maybe, but it was really small, and her chains were hooked to the floor and the door was locked, a barred door so you could see the other girls and even talk to them, and they made this big deal about how you could pee in a trough at the back of your space, and some people were doing that and people were talking to each other like this was the greatest thing, and they were saying it sucked but it was still great.

Then the bus turned on, and this was pretty convincing too, like they were going somewhere, and Gallant asked the girl next to her, or really she was more like a woman, probably in her 30s, what was going on and the woman said this was all part of getting them to the lab, where the research would be very sexual in nature. Lots of vaginal stuff. Very strict. Okay, this was starting to seem like legitimate kink. Not for everyone. Gallant wasn't sure it was for her, because most of it

she'd never thought about. But okay, Aunt Jerri, maybe you knew what you were doing. Or you didn't, and this was way beyond what you were expecting, or anything you would intentionally subject your teenaged niece to.

In the book, Gallant was told, the girls had to spend the night on the bus, but this ride was over in no more than like 30 minutes, and then they all got marched out onto a loading dock. The dock wasn't there when they got on, so that's another plus for the cruise, that degree of realism, and the dock sort of looked like it was open to the air, with a chain link fence and trees painted on the walls beyond the dock, and they all had to stand on numbers, and then get put on poles, and get stretched unpleasantly, and get carried into this room where some girls got put on shelves and some were being tortured in the middle of the room.

When Gallant's time came, she willed herself not to be afraid. Pain wasn't that scary for her, really and, c'mon, this was a cruise. She wished she'd asked more questions, though. Or read the book.

They put her on a table. There were like, five people here, workers who had to do this job. Two men, just looking at her. They could see everything. Her tits, which were a nice healthy size, C, so stare all you want, boys, and her pussy, which she'd shaved preemptively in case wearing her scantiest bikini bottom turned out to be a good idea. It was weird, though, that she didn't care that two men she didn't know were drinking in her goods.

They pressed something against her lower back. Okay, it hurt. "Ow," she said. Not scream worthy, but kinda stung. It was hot or something. Then her shoulder, left side. "Ow!" They flipped her over, so now the pole was underneath her and she was squinting against the bright ceiling lights, and they did it again, to her hip. "Damn, ow!" Whatever they were doing, it was really starting to hurt. Then right above her right breast. "AHHHHH!" she screamed. "Dammit, stop!"

They stopped and she was unceremoniously hoisted off the table and brought to another room, where she and her fellow victims were set upright, the bases of their poles stuck into

holes in the floor. She wouldn't be hanging there long, though. Workers were pulling her fellow sufferers off the poles a few minutes after they were brought in, freeing their wrists and ankles from the ends of the poles, putting them back in their prison chains so they could be escorted out. Gallant, once she'd gotten her bearings, took a quick inventory of her condition, confirmed that the places where they'd burned her were black now, with some kind of ink in the shape of a rectangle. It wasn't permanent, she assumed, but it still stung. Maybe there was some acid in the ink? Okay, the black mark over her breast, the one closest to her eyes, was a bar code. Thicker bars, thinner bars, like on something you buy at the store. Why? She'd been turned into a product. The realization dawned on her. She wasn't here to study. She was here to be studied.

*Damn.*

Gallant's mind raced with the possibilities. Study what? Her body? Her mind? Was that what all that fuss over her pussy was about at the start?

She was let off the pole, chained and walked out of the room by an older woman.

"You've made it through the hardest part," the woman said, guiding Gallant down a long, narrow hall with doors that said "Female Cageroom X" on one side, "Lab X" on the other, with the Xs all numbers that got higher. "Congratulations."

"Yeah," Gallant agreed flatly, although she was a little relieved that her torments were apparently over. "Where are we going?"

"Dr. Bank wants to see you," the woman said, guiding her down another hall, stopping at a door that said, "Douglas Bank."

The woman pushed open the door and motioned Gallant to enter, and the girl found herself in the small office of a man with a mustache and goatee, youngish and cute but looking a little like a cartoon devil. This was a gyno doctor, Gallant quickly concluded, his walls covered with closeups of pussies, diagrams of all a girl's reproductive stuff, a picture of a naked

girl with all her parts listed, from feet to head but with most of the labels pointing to her middle. On the man's desk was a painted plastic model of just a girl's crotch, thighs cut off at the middles and spread so you could see her pussy in all its glory. Lips, pussy hole, butthole, clitoris. Even her hair was painted on, black. So he was a doctor or a major perv. Or both.

"Hello, Gallant," he said, rising and stepping around his desk to offer his hand.

Gallant heard the door shut behind her, realized she was alone with this man.

"Hi," she said, raising her chained hand.

"Please take a seat," he said, gesturing, and she sat and he returned to his seat and leaned forward, elbows on his desk.

"Your vagina is exceptional," he said.

"Okaaaay," Gallant said, drawing out the word and nodding.

"But we need to do a further assessment," Dr. Bank said. "We'll need to use a penis."

Gallant drew in her breath.

"A guy's penis?" she asked.

"Yes, one of our males," he replied.

"Wow," Gallant said.

"I hope our procedures aren't too much of a surprise to you?"

"Oh, yeah," Gallant said. "They are, kind of."

Dr. Bank's demeanor changed subtly. Less menacing, maybe. Less certain. "You're familiar with our safeword protocol?"

"Oh yeah, right," Gallant said. "Yellow, I think. Black."

"That's right. Yellow, red, black."

Gallant had to dredge the memory back up from the top of her mental trashcan, because that's where she'd put it this morning when she decided it was something she didn't need to

know. Yellow meant make it stop. Just temporarily. Red was I'm done, I need to go to a normal deck. Black was let me off the ship.

Now it made sense. An escape hatch. A roller coaster with an off switch. A parachute. What Aunt Jerri had bought Gallant was so extreme it needed to come with a one-word way out.

“I can say those words anytime, right?” Gallant asked.

“Anytime.”

“Okay, let's keep going,” she said, breathing out with a surprising wave of relief.

Dr. Bank's disposition shifted again, subtly. “We'll be bringing you into the lab for your first assessment by penis a little later today,” he said, tapping a button on his desk. “In the meantime, you'll get some time to get adjusted to your cage.”

“Cage?”

“It's where we keep females in between lab sessions,” he explained. “Twenty cages per room.”

“Okay,” Gallant said, running through the safeword colors again, like a spell she had to memorize if she didn't want to die. “Wow.”

# 18 - Whipped



“This is a lot nicer than I expected,” Ellen Toobert said to her wife. “I don’t know why but I thought the whole thing would be a little cheesy.”

Jessica Franklin snorted. “Do you really think I’d book anything but the best they have to offer?” She sidled up to Ellen. “Nothing but the top of the line for us, babe.”

“So they offer lesser accommodations than this?” She waved her hand at the expansive cabin, with floor to ceiling windows and a king sized bed, a small love seat and what Jessica could only think of as a fainting couch. She’d seen one in a furniture store when she was a young girl and her mother explained that in olden times, women needed a place to faint. She wondered as she got older if her mother had been joking inappropriately with her, something she only realized was happening after the fact when she grew into adulthood. But her mother had died when Jessica was in middle school and couldn’t answer her questions.

“No, actually, they don’t,” Jessica said with a wince. “You always have to spoil my fun, don’t you?”

“Sorry, darling,” Ellen said earnestly. “I love that you did this for me, I really do.”

“De nada,” the younger woman said with a wave of her hand. “I still can’t believe a place like this exists. Did you see the woman in the lobby who was hooked up to a milking station? I read about some of the other decks and it’s really beyond belief what all they offer here.” Jessica was almost certain her wife had purposefully avoided looking at any of the other kinks that the *Cruise du Kinque* catered to, her single-minded focus on her own kink was her only interest.

“I must have missed that,” Ellen said off-handedly, telling Jessica that she likely did see the woman but chose to ignore

her. She decided to change the subject.

“What time do you meet with your domme?” Jessica asked. “Do we have time to check out the restaurant ahead of your appointment?”

“I’d really rather not,” the older woman said. “It’s a group meeting this afternoon and I’m dying to know how many subs she’ll be working with. The website was most unhelpful on that score.”

“Well, how many dommes did you have to choose from?” Jessica asked as she slipped into problem-solving mode. “We can probably come up with a good rough estimate based on the number of people who are booked on this deck.”

“No, it’s fine,” Ellen said. “I don’t want you to go to any trouble.” She pulled out her phone. “It starts at one and I’m sure I don’t want to be late.”

Jessica sighed. “Math is hardly any trouble, babe. There’s a calculator app on my phone and I don’t need wifi for that. The meeting isn’t for an hour so we can grab a bite if you’re hungry.”

“I’m really not hungry, Jess,” she said with what for her was a sharp tone. “But you go if you are.”

“Babe, I’m not going anywhere without you today, okay?” She wrapped her arm around her diminutive wife’s waist. Jessica stood six foot tall in her stocking feet and even though she always wore flats she was six inches taller than Ellen. Although she’d long gotten past the suspicion that Ellen had been interested in her because of their size disparity when they met, in the context of a kinky cruise and a deluxe cabin on the Discipline Deck, her insecurities burrowed out of their long-dormant hiding place in her subconscious.

“So you’ll come to the first meeting with me?” Ellen asked hopefully. Jessica winced at the corner she’d painted herself into. She wasn’t into pain the way Ellen was and just talking about it would make her queasy. The videos Ellen watched, her only avenue for indulging her unusual proclivities given Jessica’s unwillingness to hurt her, were bad enough. To hear a

woman in the flesh talk about all the ways she would be tormenting her wife over the course of the week was beyond the pale, or so she'd assumed until this moment. But the look on Ellen's face, so full of hope, so yearning, was too much for Jessica to ignore.

"I'll come to this one meeting, babe, but that's it. I don't want to go to your one-on-one sesh, okay?"

"No, that's fine," Ellen said with a bright smile. "I understand."

A thought popped into Jessica's head. "Wanna fool around?" she whispered, hopefully, somewhat jokingly, but not entirely.

Ellen gave her a sorrowful smile. "I'm too keyed up, darling," she whispered. "Raincheck?"

"Of course."

Jessica spent the time until their scheduled meeting unpacking, which didn't take long, and exploring the CCTV channels offered in lieu of basic cable on the big screen TV in their cabin. She didn't understand most of what was offered—Buckhorn Club? Adult Product Testing?—although some of the decks and their attendant kinks were perfectly obvious. Bondage. Milking. Breeding. And, of course, Discipline, the deck where they were staying.

While her wife spent almost all of the time in their surprisingly large bathroom, Jessica read the details on the screen of the various options available on the Discipline Deck. She scanned the descriptions of the various dommes and their specialties, but having left it up to Ellen to make the selection during the booking process, she didn't know or need to know what all was involved. Which had been the dominant theme throughout their long relationship, for better or worse.

When she'd met Ellen a decade and a half ago, her future partner disclosed her interest in pain, a surprise that Jessica had to deal with or move, on she realized almost immediately. Moving on from the woman who had captivated her on their first few dates and intrigued her even more as their

relationship deepened was, Jessica decided rather quickly, not an option for her. She left it up to Ellen to decide if her need for whatever it was that drove her to seek out women—never men—who would torture her would supercede their budding relationship. That Ellen had decided in Jessica’s favor over her own needs astounded the younger woman, although Ellen confided years later that she had come closer than Jessica realized at the time to going the other way. That knowledge, and the freighted baggage that came with it, had weighed on Jessica’s mind for years.

“Ready to go?” Jessica said as she knocked on the bathroom door. Ellen emerged from the locked confines of the room transformed—shoes, dress, hair, makeup, even perfume—no effort was spared to impress. Who she was trying to impress was not explained, Jessica noted with a hint of dismay but only to herself. This week was for Ellen and she would bend over backwards to make it special for her. “You look incredible,” she gushed as her wife, who was not prone to such displays, twirled for her with a big smile lighting up her face.

“I’m so nervous, I had to do something with all that pent-up energy, so...” She looked down and if Jessica didn’t know better, she would have sworn her wife blushed.

“Well, it was certainly worth the effort,” Jessica said as she offered her arm. “But now I feel drabby.”

“Nonsense,” Ellen said as she patted her hand. “Thanks again for coming.”

“You really need to stop thanking me, babe.” They walked into the crowded corridor and marveled again at the sheer size of the floating...what was this place, exactly, Jessica wondered again. A city? A nightmare? Hell on the high seas?

“This won’t take long,” Ellen reassured her for the third, maybe fourth time.

“Babe, relax. I’m fine.” They walked arm in arm past rows of doors on both sides of the corridor to the bank of elevators that seemed to act as a dividing line between the residential section of the deck and the business section, as Jessica had decided to think of it. She was grateful there was plenty of

space between the two as the soundproofing of the rooms where Discipline with a capital D was meted out would be crucial to her getting through the week.

“Here we are,” Ellen said even though the large sign announcing they were about to enter Meeting Room A made such a pronouncement superfluous. Jessica patted her wife’s hand as it gripped her forearm more tightly than usual. “It’s been a long time since I went to a meeting like this...” she whispered as Jessica pulled the door open.

Inside was a smaller room than Jessica expected for such a meeting, although she had no frame of reference for how these things worked. Two dozen chairs or so faced a lectern where a woman stood poring over a list on a clipboard. She flipped through the pages without looking up as the room quietly buzzed with nervous energy. An old fashioned wall clock confirmed that Ellen and Jessica had arrived precisely on time.

“Thank you all for coming today,” the woman said when she looked up as the second hand swept past the twelve on the dial. “We’ll get started as soon as everyone is seated.”

Ellen and Jessica were the only women standing, which they immediately remedied.

“My name is Marcy Newell. I know you were all expecting to meet Lucille Patterson today but unfortunately, she was unable to make the trip due to a family emergency, so I’ll be filling in for her. I’m the Entertainment Director for the *Cruise du Kinque* but I’m also an experienced Domme, having spent the last five years at the Penthouse Hotel in New York City running the Discipline floor for Rodney Morrow. Believe me when I tell you, you’re in good hands.”

Jessica looked at Ellen, whose face had lost some of its color, and patted her arm. Jessica knew full well how much time and effort her wife had put into selecting a domme from the women listed on the cruise’s website only to find out all of that had been for naught. Ellen had explained how crucial the match between domme and sub was in defining a relationship, even a short one on a weeklong cruise. She knew her wife was

disappointed, but the woman at the lectern seemed to be a qualified last-minute substitute.

“It’ll be fine, babe,” Jessica whispered. “Give her a chance.”

“First things first,” Marcy began. “We learned a few things on our first cruise from the feedback we solicited that I want to go over with you this afternoon.” She looked at her clipboard before she scanned the crowd again. “We’re using a newly designed flogger that was developed on one of the other decks for all whipping requests. There are a couple of reasons for this. One, the flogger is electrified, which means the pain inflicted is a result of electric currents that are imparted upon contact with skin. Two, the strands of the flogger are quite light, made of plastic in fact, and do almost no damage. As a result, your recovery time is almost non-existent. Obviously, that allows for more sessions in a shorter period of time if that’s of interest to you. And it also allows for much more pain being inflicted due to the design of the flogger. We’ll get into the specific details in our individual sessions.

“Also new, we’re using a much stronger capsaicin cream to simulate burning without doing any real damage to your skin. As with the flogger, this allows us to provide more sessions in a shorter time frame, something you all can appreciate is crucial in this kind of venue.”

Marcy looked down at her clipboard again and flipped the pages.

“Finally, how many ‘significant others’ do we have in the room today? Please raise your hands.”

Jessica raised her hand and looked around. She was surprised to see that almost half of the women in the room did likewise.

“And how many of you are interested in participating this week?” Jessica lowered her hand but she was the only one to do so, also surprising her.

Marcy continued. “That’s something else we were surprised to learn during our maiden voyage, that so many of

you were here to learn and be coached. We made adjustments accordingly so feel free to ask if you have any questions or concerns.”

Ellen turned to Jessica and cocked an eyebrow.

Jessica nodded, reluctantly. “I’ll try,” she added in a whisper. “But I can’t promise anything.”

Ellen smiled and touched Jessica’s arm.

“Thank you.”

# 19 - Gangbangers



Jason McCormack and Cedrick Stone sat with a dozen or so other Male Service Providers, their new job titles, in a nondescript waiting room on the Gangbang Deck of the SS *Sinflix Loviatar*. The other men—and they were all men—looked mostly at their phones as they waited for...what? Nothing had been made clear in the short meeting they'd been subjected to an hour ago other than their room assignments and the distribution of rulebooks. Jason had already leafed through his, at first with enthusiasm, but which had waned quickly. The rules, even in a place like the gangbang deck of a sex cruise, were still rules and proved boring as fuck.

“What’s the holdup?” Jason whispered to his roommate on dry land, and now on the ship. They had been assigned to the same quarters on the deck where they dropped their bags before being led to the introductory meeting, after which they'd been sent to Selection Room 1175. Their quarters were at the far end of the deck, a long walk but that's what you get when you sail on a ship of this size and magnitude. Jason had regaled Cedrick with facts and figures about the vessel and its tonnage, capacity, and dimensions but with little impact until they were on board and able to witness the scope of their new home for the weeklong cruise.

“How horny are you, dude?” Cedrick whispered with an eye on the MSP as they were referred to in the meeting to Jason's left.

“I haven't rubbed one out in days,” Jason confided quietly. “They said to save it up as we'll need it and they pay bonuses for...” He couldn't quite finish his thought.

“Seriously?” Cedrick whispered. “No shit?”

“Look, you need to read the contract, dufus. All that shit is spelled out pretty clearly, not like this thing.” He held up the

looseleaf rules binder they carried but had stopped reading.

“Look, I’ll figure it out as we go,” Cedrick said with more confidence than Jason was feeling. One look at the crowd of MSPs in the larger meeting told Jason everything he needed to know about what the expectations were from the cruise line and the passengers. He should have figured it out from the promise of extra pay for black men, a benefit he’d used to sell his roommate on applying for a position and garnered Jason a signing bonus of his own. But until he walked into the meeting and realized that he was in the minority as a white man on the Gangbang Deck, the ramifications of the racial preferences of the women who signed up for a weeklong cruise to be serviced by at least two and often more providers hadn’t sunk in. Now that they had, Jason’s performance anxiety reared its ugly head.

That Cedrick was seemingly brimming with confidence, sexual or otherwise, was no surprise to Jason. He’d lived with his Black roommate for six months but had rarely double-dated with him, having glimpsed the occasional look at his appendage in their apartment. Not that the opportunity had presented itself but Jason went out of his way to decline invitations to go out with Cedrick until the invitations stopped coming. They settled into a slightly uneasy relationship that precluded socializing with women outside the apartment so as not to invite unwelcome comparisons.

“It seems unlikely to me that the women who signed up for this deck will be ready to go on the first day,” Jason said. “I mean, don’t they need a few hours to get settled in and all?”

“Who knows?” Cedrick asked rhetorically. “If they’re as ugly as I expect, they’ll be all fired up and raring to go, you ask me.” He cocked an eyebrow at his roommate.

“The women we saw during check-in were pretty fucking hot,” Jason offered.

“Yeah, but we were in the employee section,” Cedrick countered. “The hiring department no doubt went out of their way to come up with reasons not to make offers to butterfaces.”

Just then, for the first time in the hour they'd been sitting in the modified waiting room, the door opened and a lone woman walked in.

"No butterface there," Jason whispered to Cedrick as all the men in the room stood up from their chairs, something they'd been instructed to do when a guest came through that particular door.

The woman was Black, light-skinned, the color of coffee and cream. She was in a red dress with matching red pumps, wearing a necklace with a heart.

Jason was surprised, intimidated and excited all at once. He had never been with a Black woman in his life and for some reason, he hadn't expected to be with one under these circumstances. He looked over at Cedrick and grinned.

Cedrick looked shocked.

One of the attendants, a white woman in a uniform of sorts who seemed to be in nominal charge but not really, walked over to the girl and whispered. The girl answered quietly and the woman turned to address the men around the perimeter of the room standing in front of their chairs.

"Gentlemen, this is Munro," she announced in an official-sounding voice. Then she turned back to the girl, who was staring wide-eyed at the men. "Munro, feel free to ask anyone any questions that come to mind. And let me know if I can help you in any way."

"Uh, hi," Munro De Priest stammered, gaze moving from one man's face to the next. "Okay. So, yeah."

She turned to the woman beside her.

"How many do I get?" she asked, struggling and failing to be inaudible to the rest of the room.

"As many as you want," the woman said to gentle laughter from the men.

"All," she said, voice breaking.

The room went silent.

Munro looked at the floor, expression difficult to read. But it wasn't shame. It almost looked like anger. Or the demeanor of someone just before she kills herself.

The white woman forced a laugh. "Well, we should probably leave a few for our other guests," she said as she flipped through her clipboard.

Munro smiled, laughed self-deprecatingly, fanned her blushing face with both her hands. "I know, I know ... there's just some things I'm ... I'm working through some shit. So why don't you pick? Whatever my max is. That's what I want."

The white woman eyed her with some skepticism. "Why don't we start you off with a threesome just to get your feet wet?" She turned toward Jason and Cedrick. Jason was almost beside himself. "How about these two, for the sake of diversity?"

Munro raised her hands to her mouth, laughing into her fingers, eyes sweeping the bodies of her two nominated partners. Her demeanor seemed to have shifted as the reality of what was about to happen sunk in.

"I'm ... oh my god ... of course." She laughed again and turned toward the men, expression changing again, subtly, to something more like *game on*.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Munro. Munro De Pr ... Munro."

"Gentleman," the white woman, still nameless, said to the men. "Your names, please."

"Jason McCormick." Jason reached out to shake the woman's hand.

"Nice to meet you, Jason."

"Cedrick Stone."

"Hi, Cedrick."

Munro turned to the white woman.

"Okay," she said. "Where do we do this?"

The woman looked at her clipboard. “We have public rooms across the hall, or you can take them back to your cabin.”

“Public rooms?”

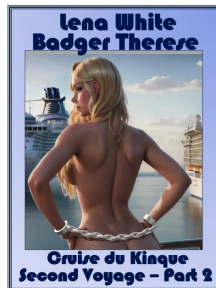
“Most of the ship is wired for video. If you choose a public room, we’ll put it on the CCTV feed in real time and you’ll be recorded so you can review it later at your convenience.”

Munro’s eyes grew wide, and she pressed her hands to her mouth and breathed through her fingers, nearly hyperventilating.

“Yeah,” she said. “One of those. Public.”

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[\*The Second Voyage \(Part 2\) \(Cruise du Kinque 2\)\*](#)



The new guests find their decks, cabins, and kinks as the SS *Sinflix Loviatar* leaves the Port of Los Angeles for the *Cruise du Kinque's* second voyage.

Jerri Magisteria and Dylan Hightower have unwittingly booked simultaneous pre-wedding celebrations for their friends on the Female Sexuality Lab Deck, the Gangbang Deck, and others.

Mia Davis shares a cabin on the Bondage Deck to explore her fascination with ropes, chains, and chastity belts.

Meghan Attweiler has returned at Rodney Morrow's invitation as his VIP guest with Zoe Grayson to guide her as she explores all the kinks the *Cruise du Kinque* offers.

And many, many more...

Click [here](#) to leave a **review** of:

[\*The Second Voyage \(Part 1\) \(Cruise du Kinque 2\)\*](#)



Please leave a **review!** Or even just a **rating!**

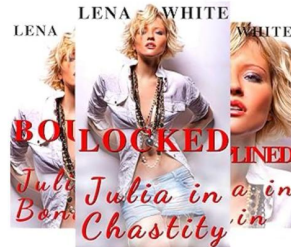
*(They really, really help us out!)*

*Thank you so much!*

# Cruise du Kinque

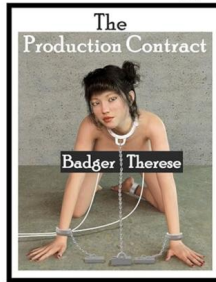
## Decks and Their Inspirations:

### Deck 3 - Bondage Deck



### [Club-sub series](#)

### Deck 4 - Milking Deck



### [The Production Contract](#)

## Deck 5 - Visual Arts Deck



## [First Time Hotwife series](#)

## Deck 6 - Breeding Deck



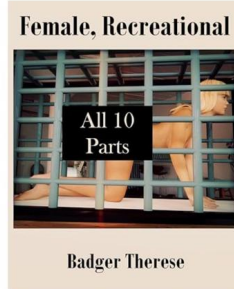
## [The Debt Proxy - Mirabilis](#)

**Deck 7 - Buckhorn Club Deck**



[Reluctant Cuckold series](#)

**Deck 8 - Domestic Slave Deck**



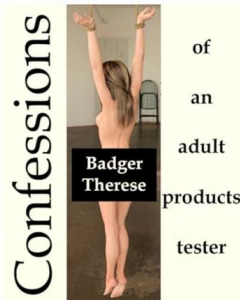
[Female, Recreational](#)

**Deck 9 - Penthouse Room Deck**



[The Whore Hotel series](#)

**Deck 10 - Adult Products Tester Deck**



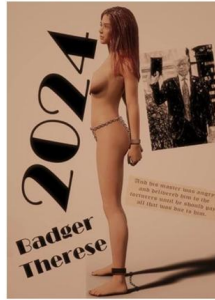
[Adult Product Testing](#)

**Deck 11 - Gangbang Deck**



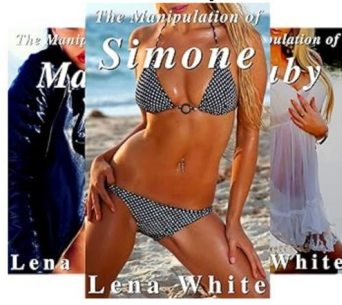
[Black Bulls Club series](#)

**Deck 12 - Prison Deck**



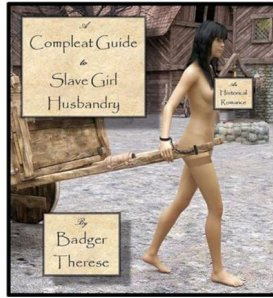
[2024](#)

**Deck 13 - Discipline Deck**



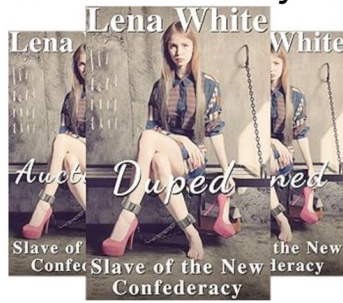
[Black Bulls and Hotwives series](#)

**Deck 14 - Medieval Slavery Deck**



[Slave Girl Husbandry](#)

**Deck 15 - Confederacy Deck**



[New Confederacy series](#)

**Deck 16 - Female Anatomy Lab Deck**



[The Debt Proxy Series](#)