

Chapter One: Day One

LATITUDE

Your Daily At Sea Newspaper

WELCOME ABOARD! A MANDATORY LIFEBOAT DRILL WILL BE HELD at 4:30 p.m. Please find your muster station by viewing our safety film on your en-suite T.V. Also, please note that luggage delivery is a lengthy process. We thank

you for your patience and we invite you to join your Cruise Director, Derrick Doolittle, and the entire *Palace of the Dolphins* crew for our Willkommen Grand Esplanade Parade and Departure dinner. And don't miss our Lost at Sea (just kidding!) show featuring the entire cast plus important cruise information. SUGGESTED ATTIRE TONIGHT IS CASUAL. Ships Ahoy!!!

DERRICK DOOLITTLE, the former Dwayne Druel of Norman, Oklahoma, stood at the top of the entrance tunnel in his perfectly cut, startlingly white uniform with the over-size name plate, identifying himself to the emerging dazed, anxious, confused, overwhelmed, already inebriated, already exhausted, over-energized, barely walking, almost skipping, hardly moving, video-cam recording, animal cracker box assortment of new passengers, now flopping onto the deck reminding him of barrels of freshly caught fish, each flipping and thrashing and jerking about in various states of final confusion.

Lambs to the slaughter, Noahans to the Ark, termites to the mound, ants to the mother of all hills; these were the images gliding across the inside of his head, while the outside featured a wider than a rictus headed smile, exposing most of his cosmetic bonding and the cause of all those crow's feet that he now had Collie in the spa botox out of his head every couple of months.

Showtime. He smiled even more broadly, hoping the sweat already forming on his also botoxed brow wouldn't make those disgusting ridges in-between his hair transplants. Fifty-five hundred

old passengers departed at 9:00. Fifty-five hundred new passengers arriving at 2:00. And his job, all their jobs really, but especially the hands on-staff, was to make it all new again every seven days.

This was a milestone for him, one that would undoubtedly be pointed out by the captain himself, the new captain from Naples was it? Capt. Salmetti or, Sal-ami? Another in the long and seemingly endless supply of short, strutting Napoleonic little greaseballs who really saw the ship as their cock.

Well, he *was* the captain, but in a ship like this, the biggest, fanciest passenger cruiser afloat (for the moment), he was such a remote being, no one really knew what he actually did besides meet and greet, hold forth at the Captain's table, seduce members of the crew and the occasional passenger.

This was his 600th cruise and from the thoughts floating across his brain, maybe he was getting close to the checkout line. Dead fish and termites? How would he ever get it up for another week of shipboard Bingo and The Newlywed Game ("So—now after 40 years, I bet you just talk to keep the dog from getting bored!") and all those unbelievable questions.

He'd even thought of writing a book after he retired: *The Stupidest Cruise Questions Ever Asked, by Anonymous*. "Does the elevator go to the front of the boat?" "Does the crew live on board?" "Is the water in the pool so choppy because it's sea water?" "Why isn't there a bowling alley?" "Do you generate you own electricity?" "No, we're connected to San Juan by a very long cord."

It did make him sad, though. It was not how he had started, not how he had felt for the first twenty years. Why now, when he'd reached his pinnacle as the cruise director of the biggest ship in the world? How ironic.

Bigger was certainly not better. Bigger would be the end of civilization. The American Dream morphed into the ultimate horror movie. More, more, more. Money, people, things, a demon-driven (oh those Baptist roots) need to out-do.

He saw it as a symbol of the despair of the twenty-first century; nothing was enough. Has the world grown that tired? Have we over stimulated ourselves into a kind of joy deadened torpor, a TOP THIS need with everything in our lives? Now it takes a cruise "city" hurling 220,000 tons of ice skating rinks, rock-climbing walls, discos, casinos, theaters, spas, fitness centers, pools, basketball courts, man-made surfing waves, full scale shopping arcades, movie com-

plexes, activities for every imaginable (and unimaginable) interest and enough to eat, drink and keep one entertained to see the entire population of Kabul through a very long winter.

If the ships got much bigger and the at-sea condo developments everyone in the water-based travel biz was buzzing about were built, it might not be long before people could simply walk from ship to ship without ever dealing with what might be left of the ocean.

What an awful thought, he thought watching the cattle-slightly-prodded look of the streams of new arrivals, many of whom were asking where the ship was, having no sense that the beast on which they were standing could possibly move, let alone whiz them across the Caribbean for seven unforgettable days of sensory and gastronomic overload.

He stretched his smile, glad no one had asked him, *yet*. But the truth was Americans *loved* big. They staggered forth, full of once-in-a-lifetime expectations, thrilled by the new. Blow those whistles, ring those bells. Where would it end?

On they poured, types and archetypes. He gazed out at the mass of humans moving his way, looking for anyone interesting. The rare few, he could spot by day two, and so could most of his crewmates. Amazing how fast they could sort—a kind of psychological triage they all did to save their energy.

He took the manifest out of his pocket and scanned the group lists. The groups, of course, were their bread and butter, and they also came with their own tour guides who, if they were not total jerks, made his job far easier. They soothed the entry process. He let his smile slip. One hundred black Baptist church women from Mobile; 75 Downs Syndrome singles from Buffalo; a Holistic Healers tour from Sedona; 230 honeymooners; 20 weddings-at-sea and their bridal parties; the usual array of family reunions and 50th anniversaries. He could *make up* a manifest and stack it against a real one.

The dipsos who use the cruise to drink without standing out and the four-hundred-pounders who use the cruise to eat without standing out and the compulsive gamblers who use the cruise to bet without standing out; the swingers who use the cruise to swap without standing out; the bickerers who use the cruise to fight without standing out and the other side of the quarter; the plastic surgery couples and the aging beauties who use the cruise *to Stand Out*; the exhibitionists who use the cruise to flaunt their lavish jewelry or designer duds; the spinster schoolteachers and

overweight manicurists who have saved for this since high school; the doubled-up “Cof-bin” dwellers, cheerfully crammed into the cheapest cabins with blasting ACs and mirrors designed to deflect the fact that they *have no windows*.

The elderly who cruise compulsively to stop time; the Love-to-Dancers who cruise to re-create their Fred and Ginger fantasies “Nightly in the Sky Lounge”; the spoiled rich kids who want to play and “slum” away from Momsey and Popsey’s private yachts. And the most annoying of all, the “Isn’t-This-the-Most-Fantasticers” who spend the entire trip behind their snap-and-clicks or video cams, recording everything and seeing nothing, the whole trip being an elaborate photo shoot for the Less Fortunate back home, who will endure hours of railing shots and drink trays being carried, rope-pulling contests, and Mom on the first rung of the Rock Wall, looking excited, terrified and bloated from the midnight buffet. *Oh boy, Derrick, get a grip. You have fifty more to go before you can retire.*

Where are we going anyway? He re-checked his notes. Depart San Juan; then St. Thomas; St. John’s, Antigua; Bridgetown, Barbados; Castries, St. Lucia; Philipsburg, St. Maarten; at sea and back here.

He hadn’t divided up the fun and sun duties for his staff. Not that 99% of the passengers would know the difference. They could probably take the boat in a big circle, docking at various parts of the same island.

How different is surfside volleyball or a steel drum picnic on the beach or a kayak ride down a mangrove estuary from island to island? Who would know or care? More and more of the passengers never even got off the ship. Why risk getting mugged or sick or sunburned or lost or hawked by endless and aggressive locals proffering cheesy baskets and bras made out of coconut husks, when onboard they had more than enough to keep them entertained.

He re-stretched his smile, straining his cheeks. People were starting to make eye contact, and his last moments of reverie were about to end. Risk-free, now there’s a hooter. Little did they know. Well, they knew a lot more now, since the stomach flu nightmare that had various cruise crews scrubbing down entire fleets as they were operating suites at the Mayo Clinic. So ridiculous. As if they could really stop anything from spreading or anyone from falling off one of these floating city states.

Food poisoning? The only thing that surprised him was that hundreds of people weren’t puking their guts out all the time. They

provisioned 90,000 pounds of pork alone every week. They went through a half ton of bananas and ice cream every day. How could anyone think it was all really safe? Just last week the captain of one of their sister ships came in too fast, made a very quick, hard turn and almost flipped 160,000 tons like a buttermilk pancake.

There were rapes and assaults of crewmembers and guests; a coffin-equipped morgue hidden discreetly beneath the clinic to deal with the average of three or so anticipated deaths on every trip; the racism beneath the pecking order (Italians or Caucasians at the top, Filipinos usually on the bottom). Everyone finding someone beneath them to push around, so Darwinian it all was.

Plus, the legal and illegal dumping of sewage which was growing out of control with the ever-expanding numbers of new ships. The solid waste produced by each passenger each day was, what had he read? 7.5 pounds? BIGGER must be better! 60,000 gallons of raw sewage alone every day just from their ship? And the exhaust equaled about what 13,000 cars spewed out. Ah, the sea air!

Derrick caught his reflection in one of the stainless steel panels and sucked in his stomach. When had he turned into this middle-aged person with the thick gut and the soft chin? Horrifying. No hint of the former college fencer or John Wayne look-alike. All that remained was his height; at least he was still tall. Tall and employed. One of the lucky ones.

But he was so tired. This was new; tired had not been one of his things. Low energy types did not become Cruise Directors. Cruise Directors were like permanent Game Show hosts, like that movie with that really annoying guy with too many teeth, whose entire life was being filmed and he was the only one not in on it. That's what his job was like. Only he *was* in on it!

Terror was being tired. Tired meant resting. Resting meant being alone. Terror was closing that cabin door at night. *Gotta get down to the infirmary and get some B-12 shots.* Besides, he had three more cruises before he could take a break. Break from what? To do what? To go where? Where do floaters go when they hit land? His *life* was like a continual vacation, so what exactly would be the point in taking "time off?" Don't want to think about that. Do not need to think about that. Think about what lies ahead. Think about the Esplanade reception. Think about the champagne party and the Captain's table seating for tonight. Think about cutting down on the mashed potatoes and hitting the gym, that would be

helpful. Don't think about the sublet in Key West with no pictures on the wall.

"We've been on board for two hours, and we do not have our luggage, buddy. Do you know who I am?"

Derrick turned, glad to be out of range. A muscley little man with a dark, hawky face and a nervous, equally hawky wife, was pushing his thumb into a cabin steward's chest. The cords on his birdy neck were strained. Ah, his first "Do-you-know-who-I-amer" of the new manifest.

Yes, Derrick did. *"I do know, sir. You, sir, are nobody. If you, sir, were somebody, you wouldn't be caught in a coma on the same pier with the Palace of the Dolphins, sir. If you were anybody, you'd be on your own yacht with your luggage being laid out by your personal valet, or chartering one of the Big Boys for more per week than you, sir, probably make in a very good year. And you would certainly know, sir, that except in rare exceptions—like the suites on B-Deck—if serious money cruises commercial, they go small. Ah, small. Smaller is all the rich have left these days to protect them from the likes of you, dear sir. Small cruise ship. Big bucks. Privacy costs, sir. Keep those guys in the khaki shorts and baseball caps AWAY from me!! Is how they see you, sir."*

Whoa. Was this him? This was more than tired. What was happening to him? He *loved* people! He was easygoing and accepting and accommodating. That was his job, to charm and disarm. Anger at the passengers was not his thing. *Difficult people are my specialty.* In four languages!!

Breathing, heavy breathing, hot heavy breathing moving closer. The Downs Syndrome group encircled him, pushing against him, warm and soft and smushy. They patted him and touched him, leaving moist prints on his uniform. Mucous dripped onto his arm. He put his hand up, fending, a fending gesture as if he had been overrun by a herd of friendly beasts, playful but menacing.

"Are you the captain?" They fondled him, invading, too close, too close. He wanted to run. He had been taken by surprise. "Captain! Captain!" They patted him; he could smell sweat and saliva. They were gleeful as if Christ had been lowered down among them. Joyful, innocent with excitement. "Captain Cruise!! You're Captain Cruise!! Very nice!! Very handsome! Will you take a picture!! Take a picture with us!!!"

He fought the urge to push them off. "No, no. I'm not the Captain.

I'm the Cruise Director! I'm going to make sure you have fun every day!"

He felt panicky searching for their guides. Waving above his head. Trapped.

"Now, now, let's move on. Come, come!" Rescue. A better person than himself. A kind, unafraid, person. A person who would choose such a job transporting mongoloids (Was that politically correct? Could you say that?) and be responsible for 75 childlike people with special needs and no sense of boundaries or danger?

Who then was he? Behind all the bonhomie? Not a brave or nice man at all. He was stained. Stained with snot and sweat of others, not his own, which was repelling enough. He stunk. Thousands of trips and nothing like this had ever happened to him before.

Everyone was on board now. He could feel the tension of departure moving across the reception area. Deck hands were whizzing by. He had to get to the Cruise Desk. No time to change. He reeked. *Jesus*. He turned and caught sight of himself in the reflecting panels and saw something in his face he had never seen before. Doubt.

And so the ship moved on, out of San Juan Harbor and into the open sea. The sun lowering slowly, shooting streaks of orange and lavender across the spring sky, the warm wind blowing the cumulus clouds, pushing against their sharpened edges, relaxing their outlines.

Off she went, provisioned for any event, enough for a small army, one that served and was served, but fighting only for space at the pool or a place up front for the Ice show.

She was serene in the setting sun. Opaque and revealing nothing but power and purpose. A mask, an illusion, a lie, if you will. Inside, the ship was anything but serene. A churning, giant cauldron of clanging parts; steam and fire and hissing pipes.

Techno-turmoil and banging gizmos. A vast mass of noise and energy from the machine and its managers and an even vaster combustion from the compression of its emotional human cargo. A juggernaut or a joy ride or both, many times a minute.

Of course the truth was that no matter how thorough and thought out the voyage, how well trained and prepared the crew, how well behaved and enthusiastic the guests, two things could never be anticipated. Mother nature and human nature. Acts of man and God, which would alter the course of some of those aboard and change their journeys, forever.



THE ELEVATOR OPENED and Vera and Solly Russolini, of Great Neck, Long Island, cautiously moved forward as if approaching the side of the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, the Eiffel Tower or any other exhilarating but potentially life-threatening experience.

“Solly, I am frozen. I am frozen with fear. Do not let go of me. Do not even think about letting go of me.”

“I don’t have to think about it, since you are holding on to me. Your nails have cut through three layers of cashmere and are entering flesh, now. I’d need a saw to get you off.”

“Don’t joke. This is so not funny, Solly. What was I thinking? What could I have been thinking? Showing off, I was showing off for my sister. ‘We’re goin’ on a cruise on the world’s biggest ship.’ God is getting even, big time.”

“Vera, if God continues to focus on paying you back for every little thing you do, what will happen to the rest of the planet? You are not his only concern.”

“Don’t move so fast. The floor is so shiny. I can’t see where I’m going. Shiny floor, and everything else is dim. Like I’m going blind. What’s this deck? Why are there Cowboy things everywhere?”

“I’m checking the map. We’re on the Promenade deck in the Cowgirl Lounge. Everything has a theme. This is the Western Bar. See, the bar stools are saddles. It’s cute.”

“It was cute at Camp Coyote when I was nine. I didn’t stand on line at the Manolo Blahnik sale for three hours and the Versace pantsuit sample sale for an entire Saturday to sit on a saddle. Keep moving.”

“You just told me not to move so fast.”

“I changed my mind. I didn’t know we were going to be in Frontierland.”

“The ship hasn’t left yet. We can still get off.”

“See? See? That’s what you do! That’s what the counselor said! You’re playing me, Solly! You know I’m not leaving. Do you not know that? If we end up sitting in the goddamn cabin for the entire week, I am not getting off this thing and leaving my money here!

“I packed for this, did I not pack for this? Two hundred sheets of tissue paper, I used. I saved for this! Who am I? Do you even know? Who I am, Solly? Am I a someone who would face her relatives

and say, ‘We got off the cruise of a lifetime before the friggin’ boat left?’ Am I that woman? I will do this. I have drugs to take. I will be fine. Just don’t let go of me and keep moving. What’s this, this looks better?”

“I’m reading. It’s hard to see, the lights got pink all of a sudden. Oh, sure, Pink like Flamingos. This is the Pink Flamingo lounge. See, everything looks like birds, it’s a motif. Every 30 feet, it’s an entire different décor. Like that little fruitie-tootie who decorated your brother’s house. Every room with a theme. Only on a grand scale. So first, cowgirls, now flamingos.”

“Don’t stop. I want something like old movies. Shipboard romance. Something nice and normal.”

“Okay. Okay. Alright, we’re going to go up that staircase and, I see something called, the Sinatra Room. See? See? The glass is half full? Alright, Vera?”

“OHMIGAWD. Look at that staircase! What is that, crystal? The steps are rare crystal or something. Can you walk on that? What if it’s just for show? It must be ten stories high! My Manolos will slice right through there and we’ll end up lying in a pool of blood. You go first, check it out.”

“I’ll be glad to, but you have to let go of my friggin’ arm. The circulation is going. I’m getting tingles up and down.”

“I can’t. I told you, I’m frozen with fear.”

“Okay, we’ll go together. They wouldn’t put something like that here for show. Wait, look, there! Two kids are running up. See. See? Just kids and they’re not scared.”

“Yeah, they’re not scared because they’re just kids—fearless and clueless. What do they know. Our kids are still fearless and clueless and they’re in college!”

“Okay, Vera. You gotta let go, so you can hold on to the rail. Just hold on and I’m right behind you. If you fall, I’ll break your fall. Now go. Take a deep breath, like they taught you in the class, and just go one step at a time. On the count of three. One, two . . . Three!”

“Ohmigawd. I’m doing it. Solly. I can tell them I walked up crystal stairs on my way to the Sinatra lounge. I’m going to have a Manhattan. I’m doing it. I’m going up.”

“That’s my girl. Doing fine, just don’t look down. Oh, Christ! . . . I looked down! I’m getting a little clammy. Vera, I think I’m going to faint. Gotta sit for a minute.”

“Here, take a sip of my water. It’s okay, Solly, I’m right here. Just

sit until you get through it. Just a panic attack. It's the height thing. You'll be fine."

"Okay, I'm better. I think I can move again. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay. Let's try again. Slowly. We're doing it. Think of Frank. Solly. Think of Frank."



DAMES AT SEA, by the Sea, one of them is me, have a cup of tea, then you're gonna pee, My Country 'tis of thee, longing to be free, That's how it's gotta be, Swinging from a tree, swimming cross the sea – can't say sea twice – swimming to Galilee; ski, pee, tree, me, key, If I could only see, The worst song yet to be.

Rory Riley Saltz lowered herself into the Jacuzzi in the De Milo spa and closed her eyes. The songwriter's curse, ritualistic rhyming. *Drain that mind, babe. Drain all the lousy lyrics right out of there.* Something was not working. The writing on command something. She was blanking; couldn't get it going in the same way. Menopausey? Was that it? Just couldn't seem to work with people hovering, only at home on her terms. Some sort of infantile regression? When *I'm* fucking ready, pal! Whatever it was . . . oh, maybe it was just THE SHIP deal. *How about keeping it simple, Ror? Too much stuff to filter. It always takes you a day or so. You always choke the first rehearsal. Flora knows it. The director knows it. Just settle down.*

She sunk deeper, trying a visualization exercise. She was floating in some pure, clear, bubbling mountain hot pot. Somewhere in Iceland, pure mineral water bubbling up out of the ground from deep, deep down in the center of the earth where the world began, from the dormant craters and steaming, boiling crevasses, building up, up, waiting for the right moment to explode out of all those blowholes and steamy, salty pools, bam! Blowing their antediluvian lids off of the fucking planet. Pow.

Billions of years of discreet gurgling with only an occasional gigantic volcanic eruption now and again to keep the whole thing kosher, but steaming underneath, forgetting nothing, biding their time until the right opportunity to let all that passion and disgust and anguish and need not-to-try-and-behave-the-way-the-world-on-top-expected-them-to; while the world soaked and dunked and oohhhhhed and ahhhhhed at their relaxing, soothing, calming effects.

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