



# All At Sea

Phil Lewis

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## **PART 1 - THE CAPTAIN'S TABLE**

### **Wednesday morning**

The flight was bumpy. For Janet it was terrifying.

The aircraft banked to the right and she kept her eyes tightly shut.

"There she is!" said Ray, with excitement in his voice. Janet forced her eyes open and risked a look down.

Five thousand feet below a ship rested on the calm sea. It was pale blue and looked very pretty. The plane banked once more, dropping height. Janet closed her eyes again. Ray persuaded her to look again. They were nearer now and she could see the ship's detail clearly.

"It's like a squashed pencil", she said.

Ray nodded. The front of the ship was conical, the very point of the pencil above the water line. The top of the boat was very flat. He could see the markings for the runway and two helicopter pads. The lower part of the ship bulged out at the water line, making it the widest part of the ship. Along its sides the various decks could be seen like lines gouged out of the pencil, running completely around the ship, even around the pointed end. Ray counted around 30 decks.

As the aircraft dropped further and made its final approach, they could see the rear of the boat was scooped out in layers, each layer having a large swimming pool, with space above to catch the sun.

The ERJ-140's two Rolls-Royce/Allison AE3007 A1/3 turbofan engines whispered ever more quietly as it aligned with the huge runway. The nose rose and the aircraft eased towards the floating deck. It needed only 4,330 feet to land, but the runway stretched another four hundred feet.

The wheels touched down with hardly a bump and Janet let out a sigh of relief. She let go of Ray's hand and he massaged some life back into it. The aircraft braked and pulled off to one side. As it approached the edge of the deck, Janet had a moment of panic until it slowed to a standstill. The landing crew moved out and chocked the wheels as the engines died.

Ray smiled at her and said unnecessarily, "We're here". He eased his huge body out of the seat and helped Janet to her feet. The rest of the forty-seater aircraft was empty and so they made their solitary way forward to the door. The crew were already waiting to wish them a happy holiday and smiled as the Quades walked down the short steps to the deck.

The wind caressed their faces as they were guided towards a large opening in the deck. The words 'Welcome to SeaCity' greeted them. A tall man dressed in an elegant suit smiled at them and waved them towards the stairs. They began to descend the rubberised steps into the depths of the huge ship. Once out of the stiff breeze, their host introduced himself.

"Good afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Quade. My name is Ronald Martin and I'm Senior Concierge for deck 23. Allow me to escort you to Mr Byron's suite. This way, please."

They were in a small holding room just below the Flight Deck. The walls appeared to be insulated, probably against sound, thought Ray, and freshly painted. Ronald pressed a button in the wall and elevator doors sighed open. They all stepped into the car and Ronald pressed the level 23 button. The lift was silent and the passengers felt almost no movement. Ray looked at the panel and saw the floors drop away. The Flight Deck was on level 30 and they dropped quickly to level 23. The doors sighed open.

The lift opened out on to a small veranda, which overlooked a large atrium inside the ship. It took Janet's breath away as she looked down past ten floors of balconies. In the centre of the atrium was a large tree, growing upwards and outwards towards her. It was beautiful.

"Is that real?" she asked Ronald.

He smiled and said, "I'm afraid not. There's no natural light in this atrium, because of the flight deck above." He pointed to the ceiling three floors above. "That's the hangar and maintenance deck, all three floors of them. Above that's the flight deck. This way, please." He moved along the walkway, leaving the Quades looking down at the activity a hundred feet below them. People were moving around, some using small, wheeled vehicles. Ray steered Janet to follow their guide.

They entered a long corridor, which had the illusion of curving from right to left. "We are, as you can see, nearing the point of the bow. The suites on our left are the internal accommodation. We've just walked along F section and we'll be heading for A Section, the ship being divided along into sections A to Z, and vertically Decks 1 to 30. Deck One being the Marina Deck, at sea level, to Deck 30 where you arrived. Each deck has elevator access to all parts of the ship, and to travel along the length of the ship there are walkways, travellators, trams and trains. Today, with your permission, we will walk as it's not too far?"

The corridor was well lit and the walls finished in a highly polished, light wood. The texture and grain shone at them as they walked, their footsteps heavily muffled by the deep pile dark blue carpet. They came to a break in the walls and to their left was another corridor at right angles to the one they were walking along. Ronald stopped and pointed.

"These are the cross-ship corridors that lead from one side of the ship to the other. Half way down there, you can see the main corridor running the length of the ship." They could see the walls of the corridor break at regular intervals and see the wider corridor over three hundred feet away. "Along the main corridor is the internal transport. Trains, trams and travellator. To our left Section E, to the right Section D. Please, this way." He moved on, the Quades obediently following.

After a while Ronald pointed ahead. "Here we are, this is Section A, Deck 23." The wall to the right was significantly curved inwards now and came to an abrupt end.

"How many apartments along this part of the corridor, then?" asked Ray.

"Just the one," Ronald smiled and pressed the doorbell. Ray could see the plaque on the door. It read 'BYRON'. The door opened and a maid smiled at Ronald. Their guide turned and waved the Quades into the apartment saying, "Mr. Byron's guests, Isabel." The Quades entered the premiere suite of James Byron.

James was a lot thinner than when Ray had last seen him. They embraced silently. They had been through a lot together and sometimes words just intruded. Ray looked into his friend, and previous employer's, eyes. The sparkle was there, the lust for life. Ray smiled and said quietly, "Good to see you again, James."

James Byron gave a broad smile and said, "About time. What is it now....two years?"

"Nearly. Let me introduce you to Janet."

Janet moved forward to shake James' hand and was surprised when he put his arms around her and gave her a fierce hug.

"I told him not to let you go. He can be so stubborn. I told him to go home, get you, and marry you. You look wonderful. Every bit how he described you. Beautiful."

"I'm flattered." She was clearly beginning to blush and James laughed out loud.

"Come on in. Welcome to my new home. Not so new now, I suppose. Nearly six months. Change from the Island, eh?"

To their front was a huge curved window, looking out over the pointed bow of the ship. The sun blazed in the sky, reflecting off the blue water. The horizon was slightly misted in the distance. The view was magnificent.

"A little different to the island. It's moving as well," Ray grinned.

"Well...after the...incident on the Island and then you leaving too, I decided enough was enough. I sold out my interest and invested in this. Big, eh?"

Ray nodded, "And the lovely Celia?"

"Out somewhere, with her cronies. She'll be back later. Let me get you a drink, have a chat and then I'll take you to your own suite. Tonight we have a special treat. We're dining at the Captain's table."

Daniel Rocco sat at ease on his floating real estate. The gentle swell within the marina soothed his anxious mind. He stretched out full length on a lounge and sunbathed in only his shorts. The sun was getting hot and that was just the way he liked it.

He glanced at his watch and chewed his lip. He couldn't wait until the following day, when he would be on his way. He sat up and looked seawards. Somewhere out there was his passage to freedom. He couldn't wait. He lay back down again, trying to relax. After ten minutes he gave up and stood in the wheelhouse.

His captain's hat lay on the flat control board in front of him. He rested his arms on the small wheel and looked through the deep windscreen at the other moored craft. There were some craft bigger than his, but none worth as much. He smiled openly, then laughed out loud and slapped his hand on the leather dashboard. 'None worth as much!'

The one-hundred and fifty-foot, deep-sea cruiser gleamed in the Moroccan sunshine, awaiting the time when its four diesel engines would purr into life and the boat would thunder out into deeper waters. Daniel sat in the captain's chair and waited. He lit another cigarette and inhaled deeply. Time was passing slowly. He needed a distraction. He looked over to the marina strip and saw the busy lunchtime traffic of people eating, drinking and just ambling along The Way. He made up his mind.

He eased down into the lower deck and entered his bedroom. He slid back the door and selected white trousers and a dark red shirt. He slipped on a pair of white snakeskin loafers and checked himself in the mirror. His dark Latino good looks radiated charm, highlighted by the white and red of his clothing. He smiled widely, showing a set of even white teeth. He winked at himself and knew whoever she was, she'd be lucky this afternoon. He slid the wardrobe shut and went on deck. He locked the hatchway and set the alarms. He leaped on to the floating pon toons and whistled his way towards The Way and an afternoon of pleasant distraction.

An hour later he was seated very close to a petite dark haired girl who could not stop smiling at him. He knew she was going to be an easy target and took his time. He bought a few drinks and began to get to know her on a superficial level. That was all he'd need. There would be no lasting relationship. A few hours at most, maybe the night. He slipped his arm around her waist and felt no resistance. He took heart from this and ordered another round of strong drinks.

An hour later the couple began to feel very relaxed in each other's company and Daniel finally suggested they went on board his motor cruiser. The girl seemed impressed by this and was hanging on his arm as they strolled back towards the moorings. They did not notice they were being followed.

Within minutes of climbing onboard the 'La Vida Loca' they were in the huge round bed. The girl's laughter could be heard from the pon toon, where the stranger stood listening. Measuring his time carefully, the stranger stepped quietly on to the boat deck and moved to the hatchway. The laughter was getting louder now and the boat gently moving with the pair's antics. Judging that the couple wouldn't hear his arrival, Rod Lyman began his tour of the cabins, looking for anything he could easily pocket and sell, he made his way quickly through each room. He was disappointed in discovering that the boat did not have more passengers. There was nothing readily stealable. Perhaps the occupied bedroom might be more productive?

He'd watched Rocco from the moment he'd walked into the bar. The expensive jewellery, the ornate Rolex watch, the arrogance and swagger. Here was a man with money to burn and just the right sort of target for Rod. He'd followed him back to the yacht and now felt cheated. It had been a waste of time. Rod took a last look round and headed back for the Bridge. As he entered the central walkway the bedroom door flew open and the women staggered out, completely naked. She turned and waved at her new lover reclining on the bed and tottered up the steps to the main deck. Rod slid quietly back into the nearest cabin and eased the door shut. He would have to wait a little longer.

A few moments later she returned with a bottle of champagne and weaved her way towards the bedroom. She leaped on to the bed, causing Rocco to grunt in pain. She laughed and he scowled. There followed a mock fight and within moments they were locked in a sexual tussle again. Time for Rod to leave.

Rod heard a bump and felt the boat lurch. He moved to the porthole and saw a speedboat mooring alongside. Two men were in the boat, one was preparing to board the 'La Vida Loca'. He was trapped again. This was not his day. He would have to wait it out. He eased back into the cabin and looked for somewhere to hide. The wardrobe was the largest hiding place, but too obvious. No room under the bed. There was an en-suite bathroom, but that offered no cover. Hiding behind the shower curtain didn't seem practical. The wardrobe it was then.

It was several minutes later when he heard a change in the noises the two lovers were making. The girl shrieked and was silent. The man raised his voice, but then silence. Rod listened and could hear no more. There were sounds of footsteps and then further silence. Rod eased out of the wardrobe and opened the cabin door. The passageway was empty. Across the way the main bedroom was empty too. He felt the boat sway slightly. He hurried back into the other cabin and carefully peered around the edge of the porthole. The two men were back in the boat. He saw Lover Boy seated between them, clothed in only a dressing gown. There was no sign of the woman.

The boat revved up and accelerated away across to the open mouth of the marina. As it bounced away, Rod could see a flash of leg in the bottom of the boat. It must be the girl. He stood and listened for a minute before making his way to the deck. The boat was empty. Rod had a bad feeling about this. He looked around and saw nothing of portable value. He jumped below decks and made his way into the master bedroom.

The bed was rumpled and the unopened bottle of champagne lay on the floor. There was blood on the sheets. He stood and wondered what to do. He turned to go and noticed the man's trousers, crumpled on the floor. He felt the pockets and removed a wallet and some keys. He slid the wallet into his back pocket and threw the keys on to the bed. He looked around for more items. The wardrobe held a small zipped case. Inside was some jewellery, some rings and a few more watches. This packet he put in his side pocket. One last look around and he noticed a small dark door in the wardrobe. Bending down he

saw it was a safe. It was locked and remained firmly shut. He lifted up the keys from the bed and looked at the selection. One of them opened the safe.

Rod's heart was pounding and he removed all the contents from the safe. There were several packages of currency. US dollars, French Francs and UK Sterling. He guessed there was several hundred thousand pounds' worth. He looked around the wardrobe and found a man's small Gucci backpack. He loaded everything he could into the sack and then locked the safe again. He wiped his fingerprints off the keys and wardrobe handles. He stood and took a last look round. Time to go.

He casually stepped off the boat and walked towards The Way. He was expecting a shout of alarm at any second, but none came. He walked through the old town and up the hill behind. He had little of value in his lodgings and felt it an added danger to return there. He'd head for the airport and get out of the country. He waved down the local bus and got on. He sat on the back seat holding tightly to his bundle. At last something had gone right for him.

He sat at a bar in the Airport Terminal waiting the flight to Nice. He couldn't stop smiling. He relived his exploits and marvelled at his luck. He soon began to wonder what had happened to the two people on the boat. Had they been kidnapped? It certainly seemed like it. The guy was a jerk, anyway. Medallion Man. But the woman.....a cheap whore. It would be the man they were after not her. Whose was the blood? Probably the woman, she seemed unmoving, unconscious in the bottom of the boat. Rod thought through many scenarios and soon came to the conclusion - he wanted to know the whole story. There was a risk, of course. If he went back he could be discovered. But by whom? No one had seen him! Was there anything else on the boat worth taking? He had to know. He looked at the clock on the wall. Two hours before his flight. He just had time. He paid for his beer and went to the taxi rank.

The boat looked empty. Rod stood at a distance and waited for any sign of movement. He couldn't see the speed boat anywhere in the marina. Had he come back too early? Would Medallion Man ever come back? Rod moved on to the pon toon and casually walked to the end and back. As he passed the 'La Vida Loca' he noticed it looked exactly as he'd left it, four hours earlier. It certainly looked empty.

An idea began to form in his head and wouldn't go away. It was audacious and daring, but appealed to him. If he wanted to ride his luck, this was the way to do it. He first had to be absolutely sure the boat was unoccupied. He swung lightly on to the deck and made his way to the hatchway. He looked casually around and couldn't see anyone watching. He slid below decks and looked into the main bedroom. It was as he'd left it. He checked the whole of the lower deck and returned to the bridge.

He looked at Medallion Man's bunch of keys and found the one that fitted the master control panel. Holding his breath he turned the key. The panel lit up and a small panel displayed the engine's functions and the state of the auxiliary power unit. With a shaking hand he pressed the engine start button. The engine coughed into life and purred softly. Rod looked around. The area looked deserted. He slid the backpack to the deck and moved aft to release the mooring ropes. Back at the bridge, he slowly opened the throttles and eased away from the small pier. The open water beckoned him and he withheld the urge to roar away. He gently glided past the outer beacon and past the last of the warning cans. Slowly he opened up the throttle and headed for the open sea. He couldn't believe his luck.

Once clear of the land, he turned west and followed the coast. He found some charts in a drawer and tried to figure out where he was. It had been years since his father had taken him out on the fishing boat. He was in his teens and not really interested in fishing as a career. He wished now he'd listened and learned more of the seafaring ways. Still, he knew enough. He found a small village on the coast and eased back on the power. He'd wait until dark before mooring up.

The lights from the village enticed him. Rod sat on the deck drinking a fifteen-year old malt whisky. He knew the boat would be missed soon and a search started. He didn't have very long to make the most of

the situation. He couldn't sell it in that time. He didn't have the owner's registration and all.....He picked up the backpack and pulled out all the safe's contents. He spread them on the large table and carefully went through them.

The owner was a man called Daniel Rocco. He'd purchased the boat a year ago in Marseille for cash. All his personal documents were wrapped in a waterproof wallet. His passport, various visas and many other documents Rod put to one side for later. So....to sell the boat quickly he could offer the registration deeds and all he would have to do was prove he was the owner. He looked at the passport photograph. The age was about right. The skin slightly darker, but would that matter? Rod had a full beard and moustache now and very long hair. It covered a multitude of sins. Was it worth a try? Perhaps not in this little village. He would put into a larger port tomorrow and see what he could do. He would assemble a fast getaway pack in case he had to make a run for it. Tonight he'd be safe here.

He flipped through the other documents and a folder containing tickets caught his eye. The cover showed a huge luxury liner, cruising the ocean. Inside were tickets indicating cruise dates and cabin details. The date was for the following day. What was this? He read the details and became intrigued.

The cruise was scheduled for four months and included a berth for his own cruiser. A luxury outside cabin and all transports to and from the ship in port as required. All meals and drinks were inclusive. Now he felt tempted. A nice four-month holiday - for free. A chance to evade the pursuers, if any. It was perfect. Once again his luck was holding out. All that remained was, could he persuade them the down on luck Rod Lyman was the millionaire Daniel Rocco? He had the boat, which was a good start. He had the tickets and proof of payment, cash again he noticed. He had a passport and several international visas. He had credit cards from the wallet and he had lots of cash. He decided it was his best and safest option. He'd sleep on it.

He went to the main bedroom and removed all the bedding. In a cupboard in the bathroom he found clean sheets. He made up the bed and cleared away all other evidence the woman had been there. He bundled her clothing up and put it in a plastic sack. He added several ornaments as ballast. He would dispose of it at sea later. He familiarised himself with his new personal items and practised moving around the boat like he owned it. He lay on the bed and thought through his plan. It would be risky, but well worth it. How could they know he was NOT Rocco? He would explain away his looks as a recent illness, face-lift, anything. He lay for an hour and drifted into a deep sleep. The swell gently rocked the boat. On the mainland the lights went out one by one until darkness settled everywhere.

A hundred miles away the sea was ablaze with light as SeaCity prepared to visit the next port of call in its circumnavigation of the World. At a ponderous ten knots per hour, she inched her way across the ocean. There was hardly any bow wave from her flat-bottomed hull. Sea City was aptly named. She was a city at sea. She slid across the surface like a graceful giant. Her unstoppable mission was to transport people all over the world in the height of luxury. Nothing could halt, nor hinder, her progress. By dawn, she was in sight of Casablanca. To the west a small white plume of water was heading her way.

Rod looked in awe at the size of this ship. It hurt his neck to look up the curved side. He looked again at his arrival details and turned the craft towards the rear of the ship. He eased off the throttle as he cruised alongside the ship's flank. Above the waterline were rows of cabins, each with a veranda, which led on to the wide promenade deck. These stretched up almost as far as he could see. The pale blue paint looked almost new and blended with the aquamarine of the sea. He rounded the stern and was amazed at the size of the marina. He guided his boat through to Pier 17, passing the already moored boats. Some were even bigger than his. He found his berth and eased the craft on to the buffers. He leaped off and moored the craft. He went back on board and locked everything off. When he stepped off the boat he had a welcoming committee.

His heart stopped. There were three men in uniforms standing staring at him. He did not trust their smiles and he walked towards them with more confidence than he felt. The senior purser stepped forward and introduced himself as Michael Parsons. He introduced his staff, whose names Rod immediately forgot. Rod waited and hoped for the best.

The purser smiled again and said, "May I take your documents please and I'll register you on the ship's database. We'll then give you your security card that will access most areas of the ship. If you'd be so kind as to follow our Mr. Williams here. He'll show you to your suite. Mr. Rodgers will see that your luggage is taken to your room."

Rod shrugged his shoulders and said, "I don't have luggage. I assume you've some clothes shops on board?"

Parsons said, "Certainly, sir. Anything you require can be obtained onboard the SeaCity. I'll speak with you later. Enjoy your visit, Mr. Rocco." He waved a hand indicating he follow the staff member called Williams.

Rod hefted his backpack and walked slowly after the crewman. He looked back to ensure no one was boarding his boat. The pier was already empty. The sun was climbing in the sky burning his back as he walked the long pier towards the heart of the ship. Ahead were a series of doors, which opened automatically as Williams approached. Inside the air was cooler and Rod stopped in his tracks. The area they had entered was a huge vaulted ceiling. Around the walls were storey upon storey of cabins and walkways, each filled with shops and restaurants.

He followed slowly as Williams walked to the nearest elevator and pressed the door stud. Rod stepped in the glass lift and felt exhilarated as it rushed up to the 21st floor. He looked down the huge atrium until the walls closed in and the lift slid to a halt. He stepped into the corridor and was surprised to see a miniature train waiting. Williams waved him on board and Rod took a seat next to his guide. Other passengers were seated and a few casually boarded as he watched. The train moved off slowly.

Williams said, "We're going along the centre of the ship now, to section B. This is section Z. You need never get lost as long as you know where you wish to go. You are in Suite B1, Deck 21. It's on your registration materials you have in your hand. If you ever have any problems, there are courtesy phones all over the ship. Call and someone will be pleased to assist you."

The train stopped off at several points as the various passengers pressed the bell. Finally Williams eased himself off the train and Rod followed. They were standing in a long central corridor and Rod peered into the distance they had travelled.

"How long is this?" He waved at the far end.

Williams said, "The SeaCity, sir, is eighteen hundred feet long. That's over a mile. It's over eight hundred feet wide and over three hundred feet high."

"Bloody big!"

"The biggest thing ever to sail the seas, sir. This way, please."

Williams turned down a corridor at right angles to the main and this had a further turn to the left. Williams stopped and indicated with his hands. "This longitudinal corridor, running parallel with the Main corridor, splits this section into two. This gives two suites, B1 and B2. Section B1, Deck 21. This is yours, on the left." He walked along the shorter corridor and stopped by a large door. Rod immediately noticed the small and discreet camera above the door. He knew someone could be watching him from somewhere on the ship.

Williams took a plastic card key from his pocket and swiped it through the lock mechanism. "You can add a security entrance code if you wish, sir. All the details are explained inside." He pushed open the door and waved Rod inside.

Rod stood open mouthed at the luxury before him. The first room was beautifully decorated and furnished. An elegant, almost regency style, he thought. To his left the whole wall was a window, curving from left to right. Outside he could see the small veranda and then the wider promenade. The room was 'L' shaped and as he moved to the turn, on his right were the rest of his rooms. Williams gave him a quick tour.

There were two bedrooms, both with en suite bathrooms. One bathroom had a large Jacuzzi, the other a small sauna. The bedrooms were a mass of flouncing curtain material, which billowed in the breeze from the open window. Few hotels could provide this level of comfort, thought Rod. The main lounge area was graced with two three-seater couches and four armchairs. There was a small bar alongside the far wall. Williams moved to one wall and slid back a panel. A TV screen glowed into life and a welcome message displayed on the screen. With a few deft touches on the buttons on the wall, a menu appeared.

"This will guide you through every aspect of the ship, sir. Just call up whatever you need to know and it will provide the answers. If, in the unlikely event you cannot get an answer you require, please pick up the courtesy phone, the white one there."

Williams stood, holding out the plastic card key. Rod slowly took it, confused. He started to look in his pockets for a tip.

"Not necessary, sir. If, however, at the end of your visit you feel the need to express your gratitude for excellent service, please feel free to discuss it with the Concierge. Have a pleasant stay with us, Mr. Rocco. Goodbye for now." He left smoothly and silently.

Rod sat on the sofa and looked out to sea. This was certainly another great piece of luck. This was going to be terrific. He then had a sobering thought. He hadn't really passed security yet. What if they found him out? He moved quickly to the telephone and picked it up. A pleasant female voice answered.

"Yes, Mr. Rocco. How may I help?"

"Well, er....I spoke to your...I think it was a Purser...somebody....Parsons?...."

"Yes, Mr. Rocco, Michael Parsons."

"Well...he was getting me a....security key? I just wondered how long that will take?"

"It's probably on its way, right now. It'll be with you in a moment. Anything else, sir?"

"No. I don't think so. Thank you. Very much."

"You're very welcome." The line went dead.

So far so good. Rod never counted his chickens, so he awaited the knock at the door and was ready to play it by ear what to do next. He held on to his backpack and moved to the bar. He poured a large scotch and settled down to wait. It seemed only minutes later there was a faint tone. Rod moved to the door and looked through the small security spyhole. It was Parsons and he was alone. Rod placed the backpack near the door, ready for an emergency exit. He opened the door, trying to control his nerves. Parsons entered smiling. He held out a credit card sized yellow key.

"This is your security to all access levels from four and below. That means apart from the staff, maintenance, ship management and security areas of the ship, you can swipe the security doors and enter. Any doubts give me a call, or check your screen there."

"Thank you." Rod carefully took the key.

“Now. I need you to complete the security check for us, please. May I take a seat?”

Rod’s heart was pounding. He waved Parsons to a chair and sat himself nearer the door. He looked at the backpack a few feet away and measured the distance. How far could he get? He would have to put Parsons out of commission first. He didn’t like violence, but it was a matter of survival. What weapon did he have? He slowly looked around as Parsons opened a leather, A4 document case. Rod could see nothing to use as a weapon. The lamps looked a little too heavy, even to lift. The only weapon he had was his mind. Quickness of thought. It would have to do.

Parsons settled his case on his lap and said, “Just a formality. As you were probably told when you first approached SeaCity, we do have to be sure who is on board. We can’t take any risk with the reputation of the company. All our passengers are important to us and we like to think they’re as safe and secure as we can make them. Now, you filled in several forms and I would just like to ensure everything is all right. Now.....”

For the next five minutes Rod was on the verge of getting up and running for the door. Several security checks had been put in place at the time of the booking. Responses were required to key questions, such as Rocco’s mother’s maiden name. Rod had always been blessed with a good memory and it came to his assistance in the most positive way. The evening before he had read everything about Rocco and his life that he could. Every document and paper was carefully absorbed. After five minutes Parsons passed across the case and asked Rod to sign the agreement. Rod was thankful he’d practised the signature and with a flourish he signed the form. He passed it back and waited.

Parsons snapped the document case shut and stood up. “Sorry for taking your time. But we can’t be too careful.”

“No, indeed. Thank you. I feel really secure now.”

“Yes you are. Everyone on board is now under the protection of the American flag. The ship is registered in New York and you have the protection of the U.S.A. to fall back on.”

“Great! About my boat....”

“A lovely craft, Mr. Rocco.”

“Is that safe moored where it is?”

“Certainly. We’ll attach extra alarms, linked to our central security office, if you wish. No boat leaves the marina without the owner’s permission, or without our knowing. It’s perfectly safe, I can assure you.”

“That’s good to know. Thank you.”

“Well if that’s all for now....?”

“Yes. Thanks.”

“Call me if you need anything with regard to your boat, or the marina. Anything else, just summon your Concierge. That blue button by the TV there. Good day. Enjoy your visit.” He was gone.

Rod let out a huge sigh of relief and sat down on the sofa and laughed out loud.

There was a safe in the master bedroom and Rod placed everything he owned in it. He had little faith in safes, after the way he had obtained everything he owned, but he felt he had no choice. He couldn’t carry it all around with him all the time. The credit cards would be safe to use for a while, assuming Rocco had regularly paid them off. There was a larger risk they’d be reported stolen and cancelled. Rod decided he couldn’t take that risk. All his food and drink was already catered for, all he needed was some spending money and for that he’d use cash. But first he needed a wardrobe. The old jacket he was

wearing had seen better days. If he was to carry the character of Rocco further, he needed to look the part.

The TV screen gave him a list of every clothes shop on the ship. He narrowed the search down to ten shops and picked one. He called them on the phone and gave them his sizes and requirements. They would be along within an hour to fit him in his own suite. In the meantime, he ordered lunch to be brought to him. He sipped another Scotch and looked out to sea. Luck was still with him. He returned to the screen and brought up the menu. He found what he was looking for and within seconds he had the picture from the camera outside of his door. Now he could see who was calling on him. Great!

The screen chimed quietly and he pressed a button to see what it wanted. A message was flashing and he looked for the appropriate button and pressed it. Rod smiled as he read the invitation and composed a short note of acceptance. Now he needed a dinner jacket as well.

### **Wednesday afternoon**

Bartholomew Briggs sat back in his most comfortable chair and stared at the wall. He was stumped. If he had a window, or porthole, he would have stared at the sea. Being in an internal staff cabin, he didn't have these luxuries. In fact, he had few luxuries, especially compared to the paying punters on the decks above him. He was pleased to have a cabin to himself. He had to fight for that, refusing to sign the contract until it was a written guarantee that he didn't have to share. He was not about to embark on a two-year contract to travel the world and have to share a cabin with a stranger. Or worse, one of his own staff!

He pondered further on the problem.

He was two months into the tour of duty and begrudgingly admitted he was enjoying himself. Things had gone well - so far. Two complete shows under their belt and the next, well on the way. The rehearsals were encouraging and it should be a 'happy' show. He tapped his teeth slowly with the pen. Much Ado About Nothing. An aptly named piece for the countless hours on board, where there was little to do. He corrected that last thought. Nothing HE wanted to do. He was definitely getting lazy. The ship's staff had an excellent choice of recreational facilities to enjoy, but he wanted few of them. He read most of the time. Old plays, new plays, crappy plays. At least his staff were happy. At least, he thought so. He tried not to spend too much time with them. They were there purely to convert his ideas into practicality.

He was still puzzling over his latest problem. He stood and paced the room. The thought just would not come. He couldn't remember it. Damn it, an actor losing his memory, is no longer an actor. This can't happen to him. Not now. Not ever! He was only sixty-five! Most of the renowned actors went on into their eighties, getting better with age for the most part. He stopped the thought train right there. Being Resident Theatre Manager aboard a cruise liner was not the height of his career, nor, could he reasonably expect anything better in the future. Ah, well. What was it? The thought still eluded him.

He sat and looked again at the clue. "Fifteen across. 'Come dawn'. Five letters. It was on the tip of his tongue. He stood again and realised he was getting agitated. He threw the newspaper on the chair and moved into the tiny kitchenette. He turned on the kettle and prepared a mug of tea for himself. He stood, waiting the kettle to boil, staring at his old favourite mug. He looked more closely. That's it!

"Crack!" He returned to the paper and started on the few remaining empty squares.

The phone purred and disturbed him from his sleep. He awoke and fought to realise what time it was. Even the day would be a help. They all seemed to be same, so the accurate time would do. He never

wore a watch so he looked at the clock on the wall. Then he put on his glasses and looked again. Three-thirty. Was that morning or afternoon. No porthole to let him know.

He picked up the phone and in his best enunciated voice said, "Bartholomew Briggs, here."

He listened carefully and a slow smile spread across his face. "Anything in particular? Shakespeare, naturally, but any choice of your.....I will. Something....grand for the occasion. Thank you. At seven then. Good day to you." He hung up the phone and stood in front of his full-length mirror.

"A command performance, Barty. About bloody time!"

### **Wednesday evening**

The Captain's formal dining room was located behind the bridge on Deck 9 and occupied Sections H and I. It was massive, by cruise ship standards, measuring one-hundred and fifty by three-hundred feet. The long side had an ocean view and a private Promenade deck. The walls were oak panelled and contained portraits of famous historic seafaring heroes. Central on the longer wall was a huge old ship's clock. Made from an old brass porthole, it was a present from some ancient captain, once affiliated to the current ship's owners.

The lighting was concealed and seemed to radiate from the ceiling, which was also oak panelled, yet intricately carved. The central table was oak and had a polish with such depth that the whole room was clearly reflected from within its surface. It was adjustable, but for this particular evening there were only twenty guests, so the table was reduced to scale. Each place setting was immaculate, with highly polished heavy silver cutlery. The side plates were dazzlingly white, with a discreet pale blue edge shaped like a wave. The silhouette of the SeaCity was softly portrayed in the centre. The cut-glass goblets reflected the light like a mirror ball. The napkins were of damask and pale blue in colour, intricately wrapped within a silver ring. The nameplates were pale blue card, with gold lettering announcing the guest's name.

At 19:00 hours the staff were waiting and had been fully briefed. Each place setting was allocated and culinary preferences accounted for. Each guest had been asked to suggest their own menu choice. Many had left it to the international chef to decide. The food served in this room was quite remarkable, with the additional luxury of having the variety and quality of cuisine that normally can only be found in the larger cities of the world. This ship was a city and consequently almost anything could be provided. The kitchens, sited directly behind the dining room, were ready and waiting, the chef putting final touches to his masterpieces. The stage was set as the captain entered.

David Morgan did not look like the Captain of the largest ship afloat. He was relatively short, beginning to look slightly over-weight. Aged fifty-six, he had receding hair, which was already grey, and excessive wrinkles on his hands and face. He also had an almost permanent cough. He had never been embarrassed by his lack of height. David had always claimed it was an advantage when below decks, especially on war ships, during his career as a naval officer. He stood erect and exuded authority, which often masked his acute sense of humour.

He made a swift inspection of the table, confident in the staff's ability to get it right first time. He nodded his approval and checked his watch again. He stood by the wide double doors and braced himself for a duty evening. Another set of boring rich people, asking the same predictable, stupid questions. Well....it came with the territory. He would put on a brave face, try to see the funny side and hope the evening didn't wear on too long. He had no other duty that evening so he could enjoy a few drinks, not too many though. It didn't look good if the captain in charge of nearly one hundred thousand lives was drunk. He squared his shoulders and nodded to the Head Waiter, who opened the door with a flourish.

The clock on the wall read eight-thirty. David Morgan was already bored. There was a pause between the first and second course and all the plates had been cleared away. He was seated between a very elderly lady who had to have every sentence repeated. This limited the range and subject of their conversation. On the other side was a younger lady who clearly thought the Captain was a prize to notch on her bedpost. Her flirting was anything but subtle. Her name was Madeleine Fletcher and she was travelling on her own. David had seen the effect single people can have on crew and passengers alike and he was instantly cautious. He would inform the crew to keep a careful eye on Miss Fletcher. But worst of all, David was already drinking too much.

The Captain tapped his glass with a silver fork and the room quietened. "Ladies and gentlemen. Honoured Guests. In the spirit of the evening, may I suggest all we gentlemen stand, and move four places to our left. This will allow all the ladies to get the full benefit of our gracious company. Thank you." He stood and the guests followed.

There was a general shuffling of positions. The men moved around the table and introduced themselves to the new set of ladies on either side of them. The level of conversation rose momentarily, until it settled to a steady hum. Morgan looked to either side of him and nodded to the lady on his right. She was no stranger to him. As he said hello, he knew that he could be brief for the moment and turn his attention to the new arrival on his left.

"Mrs. Byron. Good to see you again. I trust you are well?"

Celia Byron nodded her head slightly. Her elegant stature held a gracefulness that was particularly enchanting in a woman of her advancing years.

"David. Another Captain's dinner! How exciting. Do call me Celia. After a few more of these dinners we'll have nicknames for each other."

David smiled and said, "Celia. Please excuse me, I have to talk to this most enchanting guest to my left." Celia raised an eyebrow and grinned. David turned and smiled at the woman on his left.

She was very dark haired and tall. She looked quite serious until she smiled, when her whole countenance lit up.

"Janet Quade. How do you do, captain. Pleased to meet you."

David shook her hand briefly and felt strength there. "I understand you arrived just today?"

"Yes. We're guest of James and Celia Byron." She leaned forward and smiled at Celia. "My husband, Ray, is over there. The big guy."

"Welcome to SeaCity. How did you meet the Byrons?"

"My husband met them on Palm Island. Have you heard of it?"

"Oh..yes. I've heard all about it. Ah...so your husband was the security chief there?"

"Yes. For his sins."

"I must say hello to him. I understand he did some remarkable things. Terrible situation. Unthinkable."

"I don't actually know any of the details, perhaps you can fill me in a little. All I know is that for a secure island they were invaded and a few people were injured. Some died?"

David looked briefly across to James Byron before saying, "I think the story should come from James. He was in the thick of it, as it were."

Janet was silent for a moment. Then she said, "Ray won't talk about it. Was it really bad?"

David shrugged. "I don't know. I wasn't there. But I believe it was more a case of what COULD'VE happened. Anyway, tonight you're here to enjoy yourself. So what do you do for a living?"

"At this moment - nothing. I used to work in a steel mill, as an accountant. Then...Ray asked me to marry him and we did. He got a very generous golden handshake from the Island job and so he decided we could both retire. He says that, but he's getting bored already."

"How long have you been married?"

"Just over a month. We haven't had time to have a honeymoon yet. I suppose this is it. On board your ship. I suppose I know what you do, but what's it like being a Captain of a ship like this?"

"Same as any other. Only bigger." They both laughed. "Technically I'm 'Captain', but there are three other 'Captains' to help. We take it in turns to shout at the crew and make important decisions like turn two degrees to starboard to avoid hitting the island of Australia."

The six waitresses entered and began to serve the next course. The food was beautifully presented and smelled delicious. The guests were eager to taste the latest offering and so conversation quietened for a while. The sun set slowly outside of the long cabin window, its splendour not lost on the diners. The evening wore on and it was time to swap chairs again. The gentlemen moved round four more chairs and a whole new conversation began afresh.

Janet Quade found herself talking to a charming young man who seemed particularly interested in her. She was momentarily flattered and kept an eye on Ray to see if he was looking. Ray was always looking. Every few minutes his eyes swept the table, seeing how people were reacting. Reading body language. He knew his wife was not going to be swept off her feet by that particular young man. There was something about him.....it took a while but Ray finally decided what it was. The man was out of place. He was not particularly cultured, but was mimicking what others were doing around the table. What was his name again.....Rocco. That was it, something Rocco. Ray returned to his own conversation and kept a casual eye on the wannabe Casanova.

Rod Lyman was beginning to enjoy himself. He was determined to make the most of his good luck, whilst it held. When it broke, he would have to run for cover. But until then..... He was beginning to get an idea that might help his situation. He needed to blend in with the crowd a little more. He decided he would strike up a few relationships, be seen regularly with people, as if they'd known him a long time. Be one of the wealthy set. Another area that was bothering him was his escape plan. He didn't have one. As he spoke to the increasingly animated women, he thought of a concept and began to warm to the idea.

He needed the security personnel's permission to take out his own boat, in as much as no one could take out the boat without Lyman being contacted. So he needed a dummy run. He had to find out how much delay there would be from the time of notification to his sailing away from the ship. He needed an excuse to sail the boat. The woman next to him was going to provide that excuse.

At a predetermined time during the evening, Bartholomew Briggs made his excuses and left the table. He went into a small anteroom to prepare himself for his oration. He had a small repertoire of off-the-cuff recitations that he could do at the drop of a hat. But this was the Captain's Dinner and he felt he had to earn his corn. These diners were, after all, for discerning people. Perhaps some had even seen him on the stage. He had a reputation to live up to. He had to be excellent tonight.

He did his breathing exercises and was thankful he had drunk only water that evening. He could make up for it after his performance. For Barty Briggs, the performance came first. He waited patiently for his cue. In the dining room David Morgan once again tapped his glass for attention.

“Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please. I thought as a little...diversion this evening, you'd be pleased to have a solo performance by one of England's foremost actors. Mr. Bartholomew Briggs...ah, I see many of you know of him. Barty Briggs will perform a monologue of his choice. As some of you may know, Barty, or BB, is most famous for his one man Shakespeare revue, “Two Bs, or Not Two Bs.” He's our resident Theatre Manager on board and will be producing many excellent shows for your pleasure, during our round the world voyage. Perhaps a round of applause will encourage our famous thespian out, so he can entertain you all.”

There was a round of scattered applause and the door opened for Barty to make his entrance. He affected the humblest of entrances, totally unworthy of their adoration, but as a heroic trouper, he would overcome his embarrassment and perform to his best.

Barty gave the performance of his life, he reflected afterwards. He covered three of Shakespeare's better known soliloquies and one obscure one, that happened to be one of his favourites. He was so engrossed in his performance of Lear, that it was some time before he realised he was being signalled to end his performance. The across the throat gesture meant it was time to finish. So he finished in a blaze of glory. He had the standing ovation he felt he deserved, then moved to the table to join his public for dessert.

David was looking at the clock more and more. He felt light-headed so he stopped drinking the wine and passed on the port and brandies. It was past eleven and he felt that the guests could excuse him for the evening. He stood up and the conversations died away.

“Ladies and gentlemen. I have to thank you all for a most glorious evening. But I'm afraid I must take my leave of you now. There are a few things I have to do. Thank you once again, and enjoy your stay with us on SeaCity.”

He gave a short bow and was rewarded with a smattering of applause. He left quickly and returned to his own cabin. There he had a large brandy and was thankful his duty evening was over for another week or two.

The dinner party continued until nearly one o'clock when the last stragglers returned to their cabins to sleep off the night's excesses. They could lie in their beds until they felt ready to rise. The sun would be up before them. Most of the other passengers would already be halfway through their day. The crew and staff would be working their shifts, or taking the opportunity to relax and enjoy the onboard facilities that gave them the most pleasure. Many people worked in the more everyday professions as the day progressed. People were born, some people died. It was just another day on board the SeaCity. The ship sailed on towards its next destination of Tangiers, mostly unaware of the world turning around it.

## **PART 2 - IF YOU BUILD IT**

### **Thursday evening**

The evening was beginning to get busy. Their quiet table for four had turned into a quiet island for four, surrounded by bedlam. The restaurant was on the Marina Deck and attracted the younger crowd. James Byron had suggested it, as it was the last deck on their tour and all four were getting hungry. It had looked empty and showed an interesting seafood menu. They were finishing their coffee and he waved for the waiter to bring the bill. They left the restaurant and moved to the Marina Promenade.

“Fancy a walk?” James asked with a smile. “Once round the block?” The Quades nodded in agreement.

Celia linked arms with James and added, “He didn't tell you it's over three miles. Halfway round he'll want a taxi.”

The sea air was balmy and the light breeze made it very pleasant. They could see lights on the coast of Africa and the clear sky showed no moon. It was idyllic. They strolled in silence before James said, "So what do you think of the runabout?"

Ray gave a rare smile, "Out of this world. It's just the .....size of it!"

"We get a lot of 'big, eh!' here. So you like it?"

"A logistic nightmare, I would've thought," Ray said thoughtfully.

"It is. But do you like it?"

"Of course he likes it. We both do," interrupted Janet. "It's a beautiful concept and wonderfully put together. Do I detect your hand in this?"

James shook his head and laughed. "Not a bit of it. I've only bought into the business. I didn't have a hand in its design, or the management of it."

"For once!" added Celia.

"Without being rude...you said bought into the business. Exactly what have you bought?" Janet linked her arm with Ray's.

James shrugged, "Just a partnership share. The SeaCity is a registered business. A newly formed corporation owns it. Twenty shareholders, each contributing to the various stages of the construction and ongoing maintenance of the ship. I've bought in near the end, so my capital is helping to run the ship until we begin to make a profit."

Celia leaned across and chipped in, "A lot of money. Nearly all we have, actually," she added a meaningful look at James.

"No, dear, you exaggerate. Enough about money. All I am is a shareholder and that gives me a few privileges. The apartment for instance. Nice, isn't it?"

Janet said, "It's beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. You must be delighted with everything."

Celia let go of James' arm and moved to Janet. She gently moved her away from Ray and dropped back, allowing the men to walk ahead. She linked arms with Janet and said, "Let me tell you all about it."

Janet recalled later the extreme detail Celia had gone into about the furnishing and design of the apartment. That was her part of the deal. James allowed her to have free reign over what the living accommodation looked like. She had loved the challenge. She'd brought on board her own designer and the two of them had flown to Italy to get the exact furnishings they required. It had taken nearly two months, but it was now completed.

"How's the Guest Suite?" Celia raised an eyebrow.

"Breathtaking. Not as large or grand as your place, but really beautiful. I can't thank you both enough. It's such a wonderful wedding present."

"Oh....I don't think James has given his wedding present yet. It's a little break for you. Stay as long as you like. The Guest Suite comes with his shareholder deal. We've no plans for anyone else to join us for some time yet. Enjoy." Janet squeezed Celia's arm in gratitude. They were beginning to like each other's company.

Ahead of them, the men were moving slightly quicker and were approaching the halfway point of the ship. Above them the sides rose like a wall, leaning away at the top. The graceful curve of the craft helped to disguise the slices along its flank, where the promenade decks were exposed to the elements. Built into every deck were discreet lifeboat sections, which would slide out during an emergency

evacuation. The normally unsightly lifeboats on most liners were hidden on the SeaCity, maintaining its smooth and graceful lines.

The occasional sound of music caught their ears as they passed by hundreds and eventually thousands of cabins. Apart from this intermittent noise, the night was calm and peaceful. The boat moved at a steady nine knots and the movement was almost imperceptible.

The day had been particularly busy for the Byrons. They took great delight in showing off their ship to their guests. They had started on the Flight Deck and progressed down through the other twenty-nine decks until they reached sea level. Several of the decks were out of bounds for security reasons, with only selected staff, or crew, having access. Janet had stared in awe at the size of the aircraft maintenance hangar underneath the runway. It had a depth of three decks and held half a dozen aircraft and two helicopters. The elevator system at the stern end was huge, a giant car lift to winch the flying machines to flight deck level. They had watched for an hour in absolute fascination at the bustling scene. During that time two light aircraft had taken off and one helicopter had landed.

Ray was particularly impressed by the Entertainment Deck. Byron managed to get them behind the stage of the full sized, working theatre. The production company boasted fifty people, most of whom performed, as well as operating the various technical aspects, such as lighting and sound. The Cinema was a multi-complex with three screens. The movies were flown in as soon as they were released, allowing the passengers to see the up to date films at the same time as the countries that released them. One evening a week was dedicated to the Classics, one evening for the younger element of the passenger list and the rest were a miscellany of top rated and some not so top rated movies.

The business aspects of the ship were very complex and Janet managed to drag out the details from James for nearly two hours. They were briefly alone and walking on the promenade deck, getting some air. James wanted some time alone with Janet. He found her fascinating and such a contrast to his friend Ray. Janet had a gleam in her eye as she took hold of Byron's arm, pulling him to a stop. "Tell me exactly how this works then."

"What?"

"How the commercial business side of this ship works."

"Well.....I don't know where to start...."

Do you have a business interest onboard?"

"Yes."

"Let's start there." She linked her arms through his and continued to walk along the mile long promenade deck.

"Well.....I've interests in several businesses actually. The main one is an import and export company. We have several units on deck seven. The real benefits of this type of business on board this ship is mostly on the tax side."

Janet pulled him closer. "I know a little about that. Explain some more. Please?"

"Buying products in one country and then selling them in another is one of the largest business disciplines on board. After all...there are no local taxes to worry about. No income tax, no sales tax, no business tax and no import duties. Not on board this ship."

"Do these tax breaks apply only to import and export businesses?"

“Nope. It applies to everything on board. We can circumnavigate the globe. See all the wondrous countries of the world and still be in touch with every aspect of our business while doing so. What a place to work, eh?”

“So what other businesses are there here?”

“You name it. It is a veritable Global Trade Centre. To start with, you have the ship itself. With up to 60,000 residents, 16,000 staff and around 20,000 visitors. You have around 100,000 people on board at any one time. They all need to eat, drink, be entertained. There are around 400 businesses on board at the moment. There are many franchises still available. This could become the world’s largest duty-free retail shopping mall. All items are without tax. Staff don’t pay tax, they’re housed, fed and watered, so they don’t need to earn so much income, and the savings are passed on to the customer. You can buy expensive products on this boat cheaper than most places in the world. There’s a steady stream of people coming here for a weekend’s shopping trip, stay in an on board hotel and go home again.”

The light breeze was picking up and Janet moved closer to Byron for warmth. He removed his light jumper and placed it around her shoulders.

“Thanks. Sub tropical and I still get cold.”

“We’ll go inside at the next hatchway, just a few yards ahead. They turned into the interior of the ship and stood looking down into the huge central atrium.

The well inside the ship called the Atrium was vast. It took up several decks that could have hosted many more cabins. The sacrifice for profit appeared a noble one. Janet looked across to the other side and marvelled at the expanse normally associate with a sports stadium, was inside a ship.

Fancy chandleries hung from the roof, huge and glistening. Below, on the deck, trees and bushes flourished, making it look like a small park. She could smell fruit trees and blossoms, from way up in her perch.

“So apart from the obvious business opportunities, what else is there?” Janet said, pulling her attention from the ants walking below.

Byron leaned on the gleaming chrome rail and said, “Most things, really. We’ve people who have small, medium and some large, manufacturing units here. Making anything from small hand crafts to light engineering machinery. We have, as I’ve mentioned, a whole plethora of service industries. Tourism, boat tours, gymnasia, restaurants....the list goes on. We also have schools, private medical facilities with specialist doctors, therapists, psychologists, hypnotherapists, masseurs....again the list is endless. On the entertainment side.....well, we have a theatre, cinemas, children’s entertainers, video stores.....and on and on.”

Janet was smiling wistfully. “A long way from my little job in a factory in rainy England.”

“Sooooo...come on board. Persuade Ray to stay. You said he was looking for something to do. Pick one of those businesses” he waved his hand expansively towards the teeming people below, moving around the stalls and shops, “and jump in. 100,000 potential customers on your doorstep. What have you got to lose?”

“What little money we have, I’m afraid.”

“I’ll sponsor you. It’d be my pleasure. Pick yourself a nice little business and we’ll sort it out.”

“That’s most generous and kind of you, James. But I’m not sure Ray would take any more money from you. You’ve been exceptionally.....”

He held her hands gently and his face grew serious as he looked into her eyes. "I can NEVER repay Ray for what he did on Palm Island. Money is nothing here. It's the happiness of both of you that's more important to me."

She found herself blushing and eased her hands away from his. "I'll certainly mention it to him. Though.....I'm not sure what other business he would be interested in. Other than something connected with security."

Byron's face broke into a smile and he nodded. "Sure. Anyway, the offer's there. Now.....you wanted to see the Commercial Deck. Here's the lift. Let's go to Deck Seven, shall we?"

The Business suites looked like any modern office in the world. Tasteful panelling, light streaming in from the large windows along the ship's sides. Glass was everywhere, giving an airiness to the whole deck. Byron escorted Janet to one of his business interests and showed her around the small unit.

"Can I be rude and ask how much this all cost?"

"Byron smiled and said, "Not rude at all. A genuine business question. Well.....we have an ocean view unit here, as you can see, which is about 5 metres by 30. Prime location, not very large, but big enough for the office based business that we need. This costs us just under ten million US dollars."

Janet was taken aback. "That sounds like a lot of up front business venture capital to lay out?"

"Not really. If you wanted a site this size back home you would have to rent. Consequently over the years it would add up. For our ten million dollars we get this for as long as the ship stays in business. We can sell it on if we wish, at a profit, of course," he smiled.

"And.....are there any other charges?"

"Maintenance. That's about fifteen hundred a month. That is quite high, but when you take into account that the actual RUNNING of the business is very much more economical than on dry land. Salaries are much lower, no taxes. Even the materials, if you need them, are cheaper on board. It all adds up. Most companies can turn a tidy profit here."

She looked around at the pleasant environment and the clean new equipment and office furniture. It would be great to work here, she thought. After a day's work you could go for a swim, sunbathe on the decks, take advantage of hundreds of restaurants and entertainment facilities. Visit exotic places around the year. Who wouldn't want to work here! She turned to Byron, "What exactly is this business?"

Byron showed her through to the small kitchen and poured some iced water. "We're effectively an employment agency. We have a database of every employee on the ship and can offer services to any potential employer on the ship. Either temporary, or permanent. From cooks, computer specialists, secretaries, shop assistants ...everything and anything. It's very easy. We have a definitive number of potential employees all in one place, and another definable number of potential employers - all also in the same place. We just have to put them together. We also recruit from countries all around the world. We can fill ANY vacancy on board."

Janet sipped at the water and looked out into the office once again. She saw about twenty people sitting at desks, or standing conversing with each other. The atmosphere seemed quite relaxed. The soft purr of the occasional telephone interrupted the low hum of conversation and movement. It all looked so serene.

She turned to Byron, "Hypothetically....if I was to apply for a job on board....say in this office, for example, what would I need to do?"

Byron's smile held for a moment longer than normal and his eyes had a twinkle that Janet couldn't fail to see. He straightened his jaw line and tried to be serious.

“First, and I suppose foremost, you’d have to be security cleared. Everyone on this ship, and I mean everyone, has been vetted to one level of clearance, or another. To spend any time on board you’ll have to be vetted to clearance level four. This’ll mean researching your background, any prison sentences, financial problems....the usual. If you pass that you’ll have your first interview with the company you wish to join. Then, if accepted by them, a second interview with the ship’s HR department. Here you will be told the do’s and don’ts of onboard life. If you accept all that and you’re offered the job, you’re in.”

“The benefits are obvious.”

“They are, but on top of what you can see you’d get....the applicant will also receive special discounts on most stores, restaurants and specialist shops, ongoing medical care and education if required. Obviously housing, uniform and meals are all provided. Access to staff swimming pools, restaurants and leisure facilities. You can have your own ship’s credit cards from our onboard bank. Just to mention a few.”

Janet stood and thought it all through. Byron let her have a moment’s silence before saying, “Of course there’s nothing to stop anyone running a business from their own onboard accommodation. Someone could convert one room into an office and use the rest of the ship’s business facilities to support a small business. We’ve meeting rooms to rent. Conference centres. Bang up to date computer systems and technical support. With all this backup, anyone could do business here.”

“What sort of business would you suggest was worth looking at?”

“Anything really. Like....I don’t know...let’s say an accounting service. Something along the line you used to do for a large company. Something you’re familiar with. One could do for oneself, as it were! This is not just a cruise ship, but a unique place to live, retire, holiday, or visit. But especially to work.”

The quiet hum of the ship receded into the background of Janet’s thoughts. An idea was forming and it wouldn’t go away.

Several tiring hours later found them all together taking the air. After half an hour of walking, the men slowed down to let the women catch up.

“Anyone cool?” asked James. There were shakes of heads, so the walk progressed.

“I know Ray wants to poke his nose into the security aspect of the ship. Could you arrange that?” Janet asked with a smile.

James nodded and added, “It’s all arranged. Ray’s been hinting for the last few hours and I’ve already contacted our Chief of Security. He’ll satisfy Ray’s inquisitiveness. How about you? You’ve been here less than twenty-four hours and I do believe you’ve almost seen the whole ship!”

“Enough for a while, certainly. I just want to relax and soak up the sun. I feel I need it at the moment.”

“That can be arranged. We’ll leave you two alone for a few days to get totally rested. Then, if you’re up to it, we’ll show you the fun spots of the ship. Have a party. Something, anyway. Whatever you like.”

“Thanks. That’d be lovely.”

The evening was slowly cooling down and the lights on the shoreline, four miles away, sparkled romantically. Thousands of people strolled the decks, or swam in the pools. People relaxed, worked or were moving from one place to another. Many were asleep, awaiting their shift to start. The city was alive.

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