

PROLOGUE

The seagoing phase of his career began suddenly, unexpectedly, the moment she came on to him. Her first words, in stark contrast to his dark mood and the depressing moan of a foghorn somewhere off in the distance, sparked his senses into full alert.

“This isn’t your first cruise, is it?” Her smile was seductive, inviting. She was tall, tanned, hard-edged attractive, and she bested him by a good five or six inches. Her height ignited his highly flammable suspicions, always alert for affront. Tall women avoided him, ignored him, dismissed him, and he hated that. There were many things he hated.

“Actually, it is. I won this cruise in a raffle.” Despite his disgust for having allowed himself to be seduced into an ocean voyage, he decided to smile in response — to signal he would be receptive. He had no trouble guessing what she was — and he chose to play. He assumed she had no idea what he was — but it was too late. She was already in the game. Pros were easy — they never suspected.

“I thought so,” she said. “You’re standing here at the bow, looking out to sea. Newbies always do. Experienced cruisers look back towards the shore. Don’t ask me why, they just do.”

He smiled inwardly, knowing she would have said “*I didn’t think so,*” if he had said “*no.*” He found her mind game entertaining, a classic application of the ‘vanishing negative’ — an old psychic’s trick. He briefly wondered where she learned the tactic but dismissed it as one more device she would have developed and cultivated in a long career on her back. She cocked a knee and slouched slightly, lowering her eye level more towards his, and that amused him. Her body language drenched him in flattery, and he admired her artifice. Her eyes were pale grey, and vacuous, which he took to suggest protracted use of mind-altering substances. He would refuse if she offered him any — his opiate came in different form.

“My name’s Sandy. What’s yours?”

“Michelangelo”

“Ooh, like the artist.” He suspected that she considered herself an intellectual although he was sure that her knowledge of Renaissance artists took up little space in her cerebral cortex. “Are you an artist?” she cooed.

“Of a sort.” He congratulated himself on his wit and contemplated this new canvas for his artistry, weighing the challenges as he focused on the woman’s spectacular bosom, a view that competed admirably with the spectacular view of the Olympic Range lying dead ahead as the cruise ship slid through the choppy waters out into Puget Sound. He shifted perspective and his mood brightened as he began to consider the intriguing prospect she presented, and he promptly donned a disarming personality — one that would sound no alarms. A familiar beginning to a familiar process — but with a difference. This was a closed environment with a finite number of suspects, presenting a challenging opportunity for a new venue — with added points for difficulty.

“Do you cruise much?” he asked. He doubted she would catch the double entendre; but if she did, it would move things along.

“Three or four a year,” she answered with a seductive pelvic twist that let him know that she did. “I love the water and I adore the interesting people I meet on board. So many single guys out for an adventure, and I love to give them some memories to take home with them. How about you, Mike? Interested in making some memories to start out the twenty-first century?”

“Why not? Your cabin or mine? I might be interested in company for the whole trip if the price is right.”

“Oh, Mike,” she purred with an impossible attempt at being coy. He dismissed her as too old and too edgy to be kittenish, but some part of him understood that some part of her still lived back in those days when she had been cute.

“C’mon back to my cabin and we’ll talk about the boring stuff later, after you’ve sampled the goods.”

She squeezed his arm and led him away from the railing. A familiar arousal accompanied his anticipation of the moment as he allowed himself to be guided back to her cabin, sunset and the Olympic Mountains behind them, and he was fully committed by the time they reached her cabin door. She slid her key card from the rear pocket of her too-tight mini-skirt and scanned the card through the reader slot until the lock flashed green.

He was full of expectation — at first. But then he saw her room and angry envy flared. He had been promised a luxury cabin as part of his prize, but her accommodations were nicer than his. Larger, more well-appointed, with a balcony out to the sea. His anticipatory pleasure turned rancid and his lust curdled to hate, and he smiled at her as she stretched out on her larger-than-his bed, her skirt inched up enough to deny the presence of undergarments, and her top slid down enough to affirm augmentation.

“What do you say, Mike? Ready for your best time ever?”

He dropped his pants, but the arousal was gone. She gave him a smile of mock pity, slid off the bed, sank to her knees in front of him and ran her tongue around her lips. She looked up at him. “Come on, little feller, let me help you get it up.”

That was not the right thing to have said. As she grasped his buttocks and pulled him towards her mouth, he palmed the ballpoint pen picked up from her bedside table and drove it through her ear into her brain.

His erection returned with her last spasm, and he took her then, carefully using the condom he pried out of her clenched fingers. And once he finished pumping his hatred and draining his lust into her, he dragged her out to the balcony, levered her dead weight over the railing, and dropped her cooling body into the frigid waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca — followed by the condom, weighted down with a knife and fork from the room service tray. The image of her shocked surprise would be his souvenir, and he knew that for a long time afterwards he would be able to revel in the recollection and masturbate to the memory. “*Number sixty-seven,*” he thought. “*One step closer.*”

He cleaned himself, carefully scrubbing off her corruption — pocketing the wash cloth — and wiping off any places in her cabin he may have touched. Once that was done he carefully and meticulously planned his cover. First, he mussed her room. Then, twice each day for the

remainder of the cruise he would again rumple her bed and strew clothes all over the furniture in her room so no unsuspecting housekeeper or room steward would doubt the room was indeed occupied — and in frequent use. Carefully avoiding being seen, he would have meals delivered and eaten. Her supply of condoms — with a wide selection of size, color and protuberances — would be employed in the deception by a few opened wrappers left lying around. Her stash of marijuana would be burned a little at a time for aroma, and just before they docked, he would clear her cabin of all her belongings and walk off the ship with her things in his suitcase.

Those things, save perhaps one item to be retained as a memento, would eventually find their way into a Goodwill drop box after having been stripped of all labels, and days later, when her friends noticed no one had seen her in a while, all would assume she had gone missing after disembarking. After all, she would not have left anything behind on the cruise ship.

And then, confident that he had not overlooked anything and with a grand sense of accomplishment, he returned to his own cabin and showered, admiring the enhancement provided by one of Sandy's little blue Viagra pills as the soap and warm water transformed his fist into the mouth of the prostitute in Chicago who had been Number fifty-two on his burgeoning scorecard.

Afterwards he changed to a polo shirt, chinos, Topsiders and a NY Yankees baseball cap, and rode the elevator up two decks to dinner, all the time daydreaming the confirmation of his genius that would follow a series of cruise ship triumphs.

"Yes," he told himself, *"I shall do this again."*