

JONESY

A budding romance on a luxury cruise ship promoted by a talking computer

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Fiction: A Romantic Adventure

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Introduction

Originally this was intended to be the next in my series of free online short books about Search and Rescue with a Border Collie. I had just finished my fourth book and had the basis for two new Search and Rescue books ready to go. But my mind had other plans for me.

I talked to my editor and good friend, author Janet Elaine Smith about my problem. I couldn't shake a story that was growing in my head and occupying all of my creative juices. It was about a cruise ship. There was no way that I was going to be able to place my Border Collie Search and Rescue stories onto a ship. The ship's owners wouldn't allow it and my poor dog character needed bare ground for her feet. She would be sliding all around the ship's decks. I decided these story lines were incompatible.

Janet's advice was, "Well, just write a part of the ship story down, then you can get rid of it and go back to your dog stories." That was over nine months and 165 thousand words ago.

I just finished "JONESY" and may I add that I love it. I have read it through many times while editing and rewriting and I have yet to be able to read through the cemetery scene without crying when the jets do a flyover in the missing man formation. Let me know if it affects you the same way. I choke up in several other places, too. Let me know if you find those as well.

Many authors will write themselves into parts of their books. I did it in JONESY in very subtle ways. In reading the book again, I think that the computer named Jeremy and I are a lot alike in our wit and forgetting to keep a secret. Donald's description of his former bedroom sounded like the one I had from high school until my marriage. I had a very small room with a fold-up bed. There was zero floor space when the bed was down and the bed was LUMPY. Maybe that's why I now have a bad back. The closet door had to be removed as there was no room to open it with the bed down.

Also find in the book where Keith asks Jeremy to look in his refrigerator for him and Jeremy says if the door is closed, the light will be out. Just before writing that, we discovered the problem with our milk spoiling. Our refrigerator light was not shutting off with the door closed and the refrigerator couldn't hold its temperature. Jeremy would have told me that before we spoiled several gallons of milk.

Hurricane Sandy plays a key role in this book. Although this is a work of fiction, the facts about Sandy in this book have been verified through major sources. I find it fitting that this book was wrapped up on the one-year anniversary of the October 29, 2012 landfall of Sandy. I wish that the real displaced people from that destruction would have had a real Rudolph Sterling with a real luxury ship where they could have sought refuge and the compassion of its crew.

This is a fairly long book with a lot of characters. I have included a list of main characters at the end of the book that you may find useful.

I could not have finished this book without the encouragement of family and special friends that read and reread the entire book several times. They not only found my errors but they helped the direction of the story at critical points along the way. To them I am deeply indebted.

Lee J. Pullen
October 29, 2013

Dedication

To my loving wife of 53 years. I love you more than words could express.

JONESY

October 23, 2012

Loud cheering rang throughout the large ballroom as the last of the *Victoria Secret* models were leaving the runway. The models in the finale were dressed in skimpy white feathered bras and matching panties. They turned around several times as they were finishing their return walks with their angel wings swinging provocatively with each step. The spotlights followed every move they made with the lights bouncing off their glitter-splashed skin. Each suggestive turn was met with yet another wave of excited cheers from the men in the crowd.

The cheering was still intense as the announcer called out, "Gentlemen! Did you enjoy that?" The crowd cheered loudly again. "Well now you know what you want to get for your wife or for that certain special friend for her to wear for you. But now, it is time for your lady friend to choose some special men's bodywear that she would like to see you wearing! And we have it right here on the stage of Rudolph Sterling's *Maxx*, the newest mega luxury cruise ship on the seas. Ladies, here are the models of *N4N* with the very latest in bodywear for your man. And here to announce them is *Andrew Mecay*, *N4N*'s fabulous designer with his latest creations!"

This was an unexpected surprise. The ladies cheered, but there was initially less excitement than the men had shown. The men in this elite group of cruise ship owners and their spouses were not aware that their entertainment this evening would include nearly nude men parading around for the ladies in the audience. These ship owners had been invited by Rudolph Sterling to dinner and entertainment plus an announcement of a new high tech security system specially designed for cruise ships.

Mr. Sterling previously only had small 200-passenger cruise ships, but his *Maxx* ship could carry at least 8000 passengers plus crew. It was the largest capacity cruise ship in the industry. Sterling had been bragging about his security system and the audience was going to learn the cost of incorporating it into their new ships. If the price was right, they might be able to get a copy of it for a fraction of the cost of developing one for themselves.

As the *N4N* portion of the show got underway, a tall dark-haired woman appeared in the doorway at the rear of the dimly lit ballroom. She did not look for a place to sit although there were a few empty tables nearby. She stood and watched expressionless as many of the women ran up to the male models and stuck money into their bodywear. The cheers turned into screaming. The male models were gyrating around more than the *Victoria Secret* models had done. The tall woman was neither irritated nor excited by the men in very provocative underwear, but she was obviously interested. It seemed more like she was watching for someone or something.

The announcer sounded more like an announcer at a baseball game than a clothing designer. He put the same exciting intonation into introducing each model and the name of the clothing each was wearing. His style had the effect of increasing the screaming and getting increasing numbers of women up on their feet to stuff the models' pants with large amounts of money.

The tall woman watched quietly until the announcer introduced the final model. "And now ladies, here is the ultimate model of the evening. This is the man that you have been waiting for. He was named 'Mister Minnesota' three years in a row. And now, *N4N* brings you, 'Keith'" he went into a long pause, "the beef!" The ladies erupted in screams as a very muscular six-foot-two, 240 lbs., dark-haired and well-tanned, smiling man stepped out into the spotlights. He was wearing a very small, light

blue colored bikini with dark blue provocative trim. The woman by the door gasped when she saw that Keith was so tall and good looking. She quickly found a female crew member and handed something to her and gave her some verbal directions. As the crew member turned toward Keith, the tall woman smiled, then turned and left the room.

Carefully and politely the crew member worked her way forward to intercept Keith before he left the runway. She caught his attention and thrust a hard object into the palm of his hand saying, "Read this right away."

Keith nodded that he understood through the noise in the room. Then he looked briefly towards the place that the tall woman had been standing. Not seeing her, he continued with his modeling, never breaking his large, warm smile for the crowd. He wasn't used to this and the money in the elastic bands of his bikini was itching and irritating his skin as he walked. The money pushed down inside of his brief was even more irritating. As he returned to his starting point, he turned to face the audience and raised his arms to them, bowing slightly. Then he slowly brought his arms down to show off his biceps. The ladies screamed all the more. After a short pause, his expression changed to an "oh really?" and he slid his hands down to the tops of his bikini and slowly began to push them down and off. But just before he became indecently exposed, the room suddenly went dark for a moment while he ducked quickly behind the curtains. The ladies went wild and let everyone know it with the pitch of their screaming. When the lights went on again, only the designer, Andrew Mecay was on the runway to wrap up his show.

Back in the men's dressing room, Keith's friend, Ken Wenzell, went up to him smiling broadly. "That was an awesome ending, buddy! I nearly panicked when I saw you start to undress in front of that crowd."

"Yeah, I came up with that and checked it out with Mr. Mecay just before we went on. Glad he was able to get to the lighting crew and get them on board or that could have been embarrassing."

Keith and Ken both laughed.

"Listen to that crowd out there. What is he doing to whip up the crowd like that?"

"He said he was going out there with a bunch of the guys and throw out wrapped bodywear to the crowd. Didn't you hear about that, Keith?"

"No, that's news to me. I suppose they always do that, but this being our first time modeling..."

Ken enthusiastically added, "There were some awesome ladies in that crowd."

"Yeah, one especially caught my eye. Did you see that tall woman standing by the entrance? She was beautiful; she even handed something to one of the crew members to deliver to me."

"Keith? Have you changed your vow of never getting involved with a woman after your divorce?"

"Certainly not. I am just commenting on her appearance. Nope, not the way that I was dumped. The vow stands; I will not trust the intentions of a woman ever again."

"What did she pass to you? It looked like it is something other than the money that we were getting? By the way, these ladies were not just handing out singles. I even got some hundreds and some fifties. Lots of twenties. Looks like this crowd didn't even own any singles. I must have a thousand or more!"

Keith joked, "Don't forget to report that to N4N on Federal Form 4070 as tip income."

"You really know how to put a negative spin on things."

"Just comes from trying to run a business; except none of my employees received tips."

"Are you going to just keep it to yourself or are you going to tell me what you got from the tall woman?"

Keith looked at the item in his hand. His eyes got really wide. "What the...? Listen to this: 'Professor Young requests your immediate presence in Cabin 13301.' He told us about this N4N job on

this ship, but.... I've got to get dressed and get up there. At first I thought it was an invitation to her room for a fling, which I was going to politely decline, but this is going to be something else with the professor there. I'll, I'll let you know."

"Awesome, buddy! If you get a job out of this, put in a good word for me. Good luck!"

"You will understand if I can't say anything to you for a while."

"Certainly. That's the way we were trained by the good professor, himself. Just try to sneak a smile my direction in the meantime if you get a job. "

Keith dressed hurriedly, put his backpack into his locker, and looked again at the note in his hand. The note had been the wrappings for an electronic door-key. He figured that he would need that somewhere along the way. He had arrived at the ship with a backpack and a change of clothes from his apartment in Platteville, Wisconsin. He and Ken had just finished their studies from the University of Wisconsin-Platteville's School of Justice for a Doctoral Degree. Their degrees were in security systems, within the School of Justice. Most of the classes were taught by Professor Young, the head of the school's Security Department.

Dr. Young would only admit students with at least a B.S. degree including several key justice-related classes. Since Keith had B.S., M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in Electrical Engineering from UW-Platteville, it didn't take him long to pick up the required courses in Justice so that he would be accepted by Dr. Young. Keith's thinking was that he wanted to invent and build specialized electrical security devices. He could make a nice living from running his own business in this field. The more he learned about security, the more useful and better his products would be.

Keith had been married. Two years into the university, he met a beautiful girl from Platteville. Donna Wooding was the love of his life. He met her at a party at her home. He had been invited there by a mutual friend. Her parents were wealthy and they lived in a large home on a cliff overlooking the Wisconsin River near Wyalusing State Park. Donna was raised without regard to cost. If she wanted something, she would buy it. She was a model and was used to flaunting her good looks. Keith had just received his second "Mr. Minnesota" award and they were physically attracted to each other. But between his achieving the Dean's list every semester in his undergraduate electrical engineering studies and the time he spent working out in the gym, they didn't have much time together to nurture their new marriage.

Keith was financing his own education without obtaining loans. His parents had left him a large sum of money in a trust fund for his education when they were both killed in an auto accident when he was a year old. They were headed for work when a drunken driver ran a red light and hit them broadside pushing them into an oncoming loaded dump truck. The truck hit them head-on and went right over them. They were killed instantly. Keith stayed with his Aunt Jean while they were at work, but on that day he permanently moved in with his aunt. She raised Keith after the accident. She was not married so Keith grew up without a father figure in his life. Some of his friends thought that could have been a factor in the demise of his marriage.

But Keith didn't think that had anything to do with it. He blamed Donna for the failure. She was never home when he got home from school. She was always out spending money. She was running around with other men who had more money. Keith didn't have any income and he had plans for starting up an electronics manufacturing firm. Donna wanted a large house like her parents had and she wanted it now. One day she just didn't go back to Keith's small apartment. A couple of days later her father's personal attorney showed up at Keith's door and handed him divorce papers. Apparently Donna had found someone with a lot of money because she was not asking Keith for any money in the divorce settlement. Wisconsin is a marital property state where she could easily have asked for half of Keith's remaining assets. Keith never saw Donna again and figured that she probably married some rich guy and moved off to a big city somewhere.

Keith was very bitter over being dumped because of his wife's greed. He vowed that he would never get involved with a woman again. He continued his body building program and decided to get even with women in general by flaunting his appearance and sexuality. He would flirt with a woman and get her hopes up before dumping her and then he would go on to the next vulnerable woman. If he never had sex with another woman, it would be too soon for him.

The Tall Woman

He looked again at the plastic door key and note in his hand. He wondered what Professor Young was doing on this ship, but he was anxious to see him. He wondered why the note from Dr. Young was passed to him from the tall woman. More than that, who was the tall woman?

The crowd in the ballroom was still worked up over the presentations by both the female and the male models. A lot of the females in the crowd had caught the wrapped undergarments that had been tossed into the crowd. Some of the men appeared embarrassed when their spouses wanted them to hold up the skimpy underwear that they had caught. Some pieces were bright red, some pink, and some were see-through. There were solid colors and up-tempo patterns. The men were telling their spouses that they would put on the bodywear at home, but to put it away (hide it) for now. Throughout this the waiters were refilling the drink glasses in the intermission before Mr. Sterling's presentation of his security system.

Keith moved quickly out of the dressing room and went directly into the hallway without encountering any of the women in the ballroom. There was an elevator nearby and he pushed the up-button. He noticed that none of the food or drink smells from the ballroom had gotten into the rest of the ship. There was sea-breeze freshness to the air even though they were tied up to a New York City dock. A soft tone sounded and the outline of the elevator door was lit with LED lights just before the door opened. A steward was inside on his way up to the tenth floor as Keith could see that its button was lit. Keith could see from his name tag that he was also a member of the security force on the ship. The steward politely asked what number Keith wanted. "Thirteen, please."

"There is no 13th deck, sir. Some people are superstitious, so that deck has been eliminated. The button is there but it doesn't do anything. May I push '14' for you?"

"OK, thank you," Keith replied with a smile.

The elevator stopped at the 10th floor to let out the steward who bid him a good day.

Keith reached over to push number "13," which did not light up. He thought for a brief moment then placed his right foot below the number panel before pushing number 13 again. It lit up just as the door finished closing. Keith smiled and thought to himself, *"So, this is the ship that bought my security system. The microchip in my toe works just fine here. That woman didn't know about my microchip so she gave me this door key that would give me access to the 13th floor."*

His confidence was building. *"Professor Young, my security system, the possibility of a job here, it is all making sense now."* The elevator opened at the supposedly nonexistent floor and he stepped out. This floor was more austere. The appointments were very nice, but it was not as lavish as the rest of the ship. He quickly found cabin 13301 in a far corner. It did not have a door handle on it. Keith knew that doors in his system opened only with a coded wristband that the guests or staff would wear or with the microchip in their right toe that the security staff would have. Rather than use the plastic card that had been handed to him, he decided to try his toe-chip again. He put his right foot near the door and pushed the door open. There was an entry way inside that required a right turn to enter the room. It was built this way so when the door was open, there would not be any way for a person in the hallway to see the contents of the room.

Inside, the tall woman was standing watching several computer monitors. This was the ship's security headquarters and she was the chief of security. She was impatiently waiting for Keith. The door card that she had passed to him hadn't been used in the elevator yet according to the computer. She wondered if he even understood how to reach the 13th deck when he did get to the elevator. *"He is probably surrounded by women and hasn't even looked at my note yet. Men are so predictable. I don't know why Professor Young even recommended this Keith guy to me. He knows that I don't work well*

with men. Maybe he thought that Keith's attitude towards women and mine towards men would make a good match. I hope so. Lord knows that I can't handle this job alone. Why doesn't this computer even tell me where the door card is? The dummy that programmed this thing was supposed to put that feature in here."

"Where IS he?" Just as she was thinking that, the door to the hallway opened unexpectedly. She whirled around drawing her pistol as she crouched into shooting position and yelled at the figure of a person that was entering the room unannounced. "STOP AND RAISE YOUR HANDS!"

Keith was caught off guard and did exactly as instructed. He said nervously, "I'm sorry, but I was directed to meet Professor Young in cabin 13301. My name is Keith Northquest. Sorry for the intrusion."

The tall woman rose and holstered her gun. "Don't EVER do that to me again! You could have been shot! How did you get in here without using the door card?"

Keith lowered his hands, smiled, and spoke. "I noticed you in the ballroom doorway and saw you hand the young girl something to give to me. I watched her trying to make her way through the crowd so I waited for her before I moved on down the runway. I wondered why it referred to Professor Young and now I wonder what the connection is between you and him. He doesn't appear to be here as I expected. You seem to know me, but I don't believe we have met."

"With all those people, you noticed what I was doing? I am impressed. Perhaps Professor Young was right about you."

"Neither of us has answered the other's questions so I will start. You asked how I got in here. I did not use the ballroom door to get to the hallway. Perhaps our computer does not read the stage door traffic. When a steward that I encountered in the elevator told me that there was no 13th floor, I decided to use my own microchip to activate the 13th button as well as this cabin's doorway entrance lock."

"Keith, you referred to 'our' computer and that you have a microchip. Please explain."

"Well, you didn't keep up your part of the bargain by introducing yourself. If you do that I will explain myself."

Grumbling, she said, "My name is Judith and I am the chief of security for this ship. Satisfied?"

"Supremely. May I talk to your computer?"

"If you think you can get past the security in my computer, there is the keyboard. Go for it." There was considerable distain in her voice.

Keith grinned, but did not make even a step towards the keyboard. Instead he just said, "Good evening, Jeremy."

Judith thought he was just being sassy with her for a moment until the computer replied in a very enthusiastic voice. "Keith, my man! Where have you been? We have not talked for 912 days now. Are you well?"

All she could say after she picked her jaw up from the floor was a softly spoken, "Oh my God!"

Keith continued. "Jeremy, I am well, thank you. I didn't know where you had gone after I had to sell you to a distributor. You made me a rich man, my friend. I will always be indebted to you. Haven't you been talking to Judith? She looks very shocked right now."

"No, she has not spoken to me with the right code, so I have not talked to her. But I did learn some new swear words."

"Jeremy, stop. I do not want to hear them. Will you speak to her if I tell her how to do it?"

"Yes, of course. I would like to speak to people, but you are the only one that is authorized to initiate voice communication with me so far."

“Judith, thank you for letting me speak to your computer. Sorry if I shocked you, but I think you now probably have the answers to all of your questions about my knowledge of your computer and how I got in here unannounced. Are you ready to talk to Jeremy?”

“I think I’m still in shock. This is why Professor Young insisted that I interview you for the position as Chief of Security-Systems. I am actually Chief of Security-Guest Relations. The jobs really are identical and with equal pay. If you accept, we will report to each other with a dotted line responsibility to the owner, Mr. Rudolph Sterling.”

“Jeremy, should I accept?”

“Are you mad? Have you flipped your lid? That was a really dumb question, Keith. Judith, he accepts.”

Keith just stood there with a silly smile on his face. “There is your answer. Now do you want to talk to Jeremy?”

“I am liking you more as we move along here. I love your sense of humor. We have a lot to do today, but yes, I would like to talk to Jeremy, now that I know that it, I mean ‘he,’ has a name.”

“When beginning a conversation with him, you must always greet him with an acknowledgement of the time of day, using the word ‘Good’ followed with morning, afternoon, evening or night. Then add his name. So I greeted him with a good evening and his name. We will now enter the system’s secure mode where the questions and answers must be exactly as you hear them. If I do not ask him with exactly these words, he knows that there is someone else here that must not be allowed into his secure mode. I would do this for example if someone had a gun to my head and wanted access to the computer. Under a situation like that he will give incorrect responses that sound appropriate, but I know he understands when his responses are not exactly correct. When we have more time, we can demonstrate some incorrect entries. For now, let’s do this correctly. Ready?”

“Are you asking me or Jeremy?”

“You. Here goes. Jeremy, I have a question.”

“What is your question?”

“Jeremy, I have a question.”

“Ask it, I am ready.”

“Jeremy, I have a question.”

“Go.”

“Jeremy, I want you to talk with Judith. Please grant her all of the permissions that I have. In addition she may research any conversation that I have ever had with you or will have with you in the future. I will continue with all of my current and future permissions. Is this acceptable to you?”

“Permission granted. I am setting up a secure space for my conversations with Judith. I have heard her voice so this next step will not take as long as it would with an entirely new person. Judith, let me record your voice in my systems files. Please say each of the acknowledgements several times. Begin with ‘Good Morning, Jeremy’ in your normal voice, then in each of the following: hurried, mad, sleepy, whisper, sore throat, and any other variation that you might use. But do not use a drunken or drugged voice as I will not respond to that. Use them in any order that you wish. After you have finished, just go on to the next time of day greeting. When you are done, go through the ‘I have a question’ sequence once in any voice. When you are ready, please begin.”

Judith went through the series of voice changes that Jeremy had asked. She even added a sexy voice and watched Keith’s eyes get wider as she did so. When she finished with the last greeting sequences and Jeremy gave a ‘Go’ response, Keith told her that she was finished.

She thanked both Keith and Jeremy just as if the computer was a real person. “I have never heard a computer voice that had so much expression to it. His greeting of you even had emotion in it.”

“Jeremy has most of the human emotions built in. They were difficult to program, but immensely satisfying. He does not have a sexy voice, but he will respond to yours from now on, if you

decide to use your sexy voice with him. You said that we had a lot more to do. Is Professor Young actually here or was that a ruse to get me up here?"

"Both really. He is waiting for me to call him up on the large screen over there and that was the next thing that I wanted to do anyway. Professor Young, are you there?"

She touched a communications button and the screen lit up with the face of a distinguished, kindly looking gentleman. He appeared to be in his late 50's and he was smiling. "So, Judith you were able to get Keith up here I see. Congratulations. He doesn't do anything without thinking it out first. Hello, Keith. I told you that if you followed my recommendations, you might be offered a good job. Has that happened yet?"

They both answered in the affirmative. Judith continued. "Keith even showed me how to use voice with Jeremy. You never told me about that."

"In the security profession there are many things that we cannot discuss with good friends and good students without the appropriate permissions. Keith has given Jeremy a wonderful personality. After Keith would initiate a conversation with Jeremy for me, I was able to play several *Battleship* games with him. That got old very fast though as Jeremy kept learning from me and I couldn't beat him anymore."

Keith had a question. "Professor Young, how do you know Judith?"

"Oh, haven't you told him that yet, Judith? Keith, of course you remember that I often referred to my student S052 as the best student that ever graduated from my department. I never referred to the sex of S052, but I did say that this student was the most brilliant that I had ever met. You are standing next to S052 right now."

Keith extended his hand and with a big smile said that he was honored to meet her.

"Right now, my two best and most brilliant students are greeting each other and have agreed to work with each other. S052, I cranked the random number generator and it oddly enough came up with S007 as Keith's student number. Yes, Keith, granting you a student number acknowledges your graduation with honors from my department. Normally I require a semester or two of mentored work in a security-related position before I will grant the completion of your course work. But because of the intensity of your new job, I have marked that requirement as completed. And Judith, as I have already explained to you, S007 has now moved into the top-most rank of best students. In recognition of the accomplishments of both of you, I am also granting you both positions as Ad Hoc Professors in my department's system. Your requirements, if you accept, will be to lecture my current and future students on various ways to prepare themselves for roles such as yours. Keith, you probably haven't learned this yet, but the two of you will be hiring many assistants in the near and distant future. I am sure you will be looking at my students, at least I hope so. This is a great opportunity for you to mold them to your specifications. Any questions?"

Keith responded first with his thanks for his graduation and for the professorship appointment.

Judith had questions. "We are going to be swamped with work getting our security department manned and set up before we begin sailing in the spring. When do you want us to begin our teaching and can it be done remotely from the ship or do we have to travel to Platteville?"

"I know about start-up work and the problems associated with it. I would like you to begin as soon as possible, but if you could be ready to begin next fall, a year from now, that would be wonderful. And, yes of course, you should set it up as an online or remote class. Can't you imagine the persuasion factor on a student watching you lecture from a white sand beach on some remote island? Keith, your undercover position as a buff marketing consultant for a cruise line will have my female students' heads swimming."

"As long as they understand that it really is an undercover job and that real security-life isn't like that."

“Keith that will be part of your lectures. It will be up to you two to show them reality. If you have no other questions, I’ll go now and let you finish your introductions. Best of luck to my two best students. You have no idea how proud I am of you both! Please call me anytime, even if it is only to keep me up to date on your progress and your activities.”

They all closed the conversation with pleasantries.

Keith said, “Judith, this may be out of place, but programmers like to leave a ‘back doorway’ in their programs. That way if the new owner screws up the program and it locks up, the programmer can get back into the program to fix it. Some other programmers may have an ulterior motive in mind when they create their back door. Fortunately for you, I only had the first motive with Jeremy. Let’s both agree right now that we will know and meet the programmer and we will ask for the back door key when they hand a program over to us. Jeremy’s voice control was my back door key.”

“Thank you. I remember learning that from Professor Young, but somewhere in the stress of getting this all put together, I forgot that lesson. I am fortunate that you were the programmer and you have shared the key.”

“Totally understandable. Just remember to tell me when I have forgotten something. OK?”

“Will do, Keith. Now let me show you around this room and show you where your cabin is located. I would like you to move in within the week if at all possible.”

“Two days to drive back, a day to pack my few things and two days to get back here again. I need to cancel the lease on my apartment back at school. If you will give me my new mailing address before I leave here, I can be back and ready within a week. I will have my exercise equipment trucked here if there is room here for it.”

“Wait until you see your cabin before you decide on that. This room is the central command center or CCC for our security system. It is set up so two people can operate it in an emergency situation. Under normal conditions there is just one person running it and watching the monitors. We will need to hire from one to three new people very soon. These new hires will be assistant chiefs of security and will report to both of us. Then we can operate the system on a rotating schedule around the clock. When you and I are not working in here or sleeping, we will be interacting with the guests. Everyone, except security department people, will think that I am only the head of guest relations. Likewise we will set you up so that everyone except security will think that you are on the ship with your camera crew to take pictures of them in pleasant situations as you entertain them at the bar, at their dinner table, on the beaches, and so forth. No sex allowed with the guests, of course. You will be selling some of these pictures to the guests as they finish their cruises and some of them will appear in media advertisements for the ship.”

Judith became animated and used her arms to point out its features. “This room was originally built to be two separate 2-story guest cabins. I had them knock out the central wall so that we could have our security staff meetings on that side along with an equipped kitchen on the outer wall for dinner meetings or snacks. There is no outside balcony anywhere on this deck so no one will be able to look in on this room. You and I have separate locked bedrooms up those stairs behind us. Let’s go up and I will show you your cabin.”

The 8x8 foot landing at the top of the stairs was large enough to hold both of them comfortably. Over the railing, Keith could only see about 10% of the CCC below them as the upper level was 90% of the size of the CCC. At one side of the landing there was what appeared to be a fireman’s pole. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Yes, if we need to get down in a hurry, we can take the pole down,” Judith said with a smile. “No comments please, about being a pole dancer.”

Keith thought, “*She would be a good looking pole dancer.*”

At the top of the landing were two doors. She put her right foot near the door on the right side and pushed it open. "I will be resetting this lock to respond only to your toe-chip. Go inside and look around."

Keith was not ready to see the size of his cabin. "Wow, this is three times the size of my entire apartment. I see that you were already prepared for me. This fitness equipment is absolutely perfect for my needs. You didn't leave out a thing." Turning toward her, "What do I owe you or Mr. Sterling for all of this?"

"Nothing. It all comes with the job and if there is anything you want changed or added, you can just order it. Around this corner is a door to an exercise swim tank. It has a door to each of our cabins so that either of us can use it. When one door is open, the other is automatically locked to assure privacy. When either door is locked, this light indicates the room is in use. I have found that the room is so well insulated that none of the pump noise can be heard in our bedrooms. We can get our swimming exercise without disturbing the other's sleep. Your bath/shower is here on the outside wall so you can look out onto your private balcony while you are showering. I heard that you like that sort of openness."

"I love the openness. I love the entire cabin. Big bed, umm, were you thinking of joining me on it?"

"I heard all about your problems with your divorce and your vow regarding women from Professor Young. That does not cause me any concerns and whether or not you want to talk about it, I am fine with that. The size of the bed is for the comfort of an over six foot person and to promote good sleep. Whenever you would like a new mattress, just order it. The ship's housekeeping will be changing mattresses in our guest cabins on a regular basis so there is always a great supply of new mattresses on board. Our comfort is critical to maintaining our team's top performance which in turn is critical to the entire operation of this ship, so Rudolph maintains a no-limit on spending for our comfort."

"Judith, this is all just too awesome. I can't thank you enough for your trust in me and for bringing me onboard to help you."

"And I thank you for accepting. Your credentials are so far superior to anything that I could have imagined. A Ph.D. in electrical engineering with experience in inventing security devices that are actually in use here, beating me in kudos from Professor Young, and having designed and written the computer program that is in use here. What more could I ask for? By the way you did not ask about your salary. Would you like to know what it is?"

"You are too kind, Judith. I will strive to live up to your expectations and I will have your back in every situation. You know, I almost could care less about my salary. It is so evident here that it will be more than anything I would ever expect. My guess would be perhaps \$80-90 thousand per year plus room and board."

"You had better sit down in one of your chairs here. First of all understand that you and I are responsible for everything on this ship except for the navigation and operation of the mechanical systems. Well, that is not exactly true because as you already know from your programming of Jeremy, we can take over the navigation from the Captain and have Jeremy operate the ship if need be. But the Captain will not know that until it actually happens. So now would you like to revise your estimate of the value of your responsibility of this 8000 passenger luxury cruise ship?"

"I am sitting. Just tell me. Nice chair by the way."

"Your *starting* annual salary is \$120,000 plus room and board. When we actually get underway with passengers it will double. Plus there are surprise gifts, bonuses, and awards. I'm not done yet. There is also a very generous cash profit sharing where, depending on the operating profit for the year, we could get up to 40% of our salary in annual cash profit sharing. Keith! Are you OK? Your eyes crossed then rolled up and I thought I was losing you for a moment."

“Wow! That would really help my business, Judith. I own the company that made all of the door locks for the ship and installed them all into this ship. Due to security issues, I was not even allowed to know what ship they were being installed into. It was a complex situation, but while I owned it in name only, I had to lease a separate corporation to make it happen. My personal income was more than I expected, but if I get enough money to build my own facility, I can re-invest in the company. I could even put in a cash profit sharing plan for my employees. They deserve it.”

“What do you plan to do with your income, Judith? Or shouldn’t I ask?”

“No, that’s all right. To be able to support each other we need to be comfortable with asking each other any sort of questions. My parents are strapped for my dad’s retirement savings. They dug into it for my education and I promised I would replace it with interest. Dad is ten years from retirement so I still have time to have it all there for them before they need it.”

“I would like to meet them sometime. I don’t remember my parents; I was raised by my unmarried Aunt Jean. The only thing I know about my parents is that they were wise enough to set up a college fund for my education. I would give anything to have a dad call me his son.”

“I am learning that there is a lot more to you and your personality than I first thought. I know my parents would just love to meet you. They are such loving people that they would even want to unofficially adopt you. They are both educators and they will have the summer off, so I had planned to invite them here for a cruise this summer.”

“I can’t wait to see them.”

“Keith, have you seen your balcony yet? You can sunbathe out there to keep up your tan and your vitamin D₃ level. You have a private balcony so nobody can see you out there after we get out on the ocean. Now then, you need an office or lab for your electronics’ research. Because our cabins are on the corner of the 14th deck, there is no lab space for you that is attached to your cabin. The closest cabin that I could get is on the 13th deck next to the CCC and it is accessible for you through the door in the wall in the kitchen portion of the CCC that is under my cabin. Without going out into the 13th deck hallway, you have access to your lab. I had them install a separate circuit breaker box in your lab to both protect your equipment and isolate it from causing any damage to the rest of the ship. You may make any changes to improve it.”

“Wow, thank you.”

“Next. Each of us will have our own steward to clean our cabins, take care of our laundry, stock our refrigerators, make our beds, etc. These people are members of our security team so they have authorization to be in our areas. They will access our cabins from doors on the 14th deck. I have chosen a woman for my steward. Her name is Jodi. You can choose your own steward. I’ll give you a list of three people that I would suggest, but you are free to make your own choice after you meet them. You might want a person that could work out with you and spot you with your heavier weights. Now go look in your refrigerator.”

Keith rose from the chair and walked over to his refrigerator. “OK. Oh my God. You have everything in here that I use for snacks and drinks.”

“It isn’t full, but I wanted you to see that you can have anything in there. You will be gone for a week and we don’t want anything to spoil before you get back.”

“Judith, you even have a heavy duty blender over here for my health shakes! You are too much. Thank you.”

“I had thought if you refused the job, I was going to lead you up here and open your refrigerator for you. Maybe that would help convince you that we are serious. I’m glad that I didn’t have to go to that extreme. Keith, I am so very glad that you have joined us. Jeremy is glad, too.”

“I’m here now. You would have to drag me off the ship – except for my trip back to Wisconsin to get my stuff. Care for some juice? I’m going to open this bottle of V8.”

“No thanks. Either put your empty glass in the sink or into your dishwasher and your steward will take care of it for you. Drink up because we’re not done yet.”

Keith took several large swallows. “OK, ready.”

“All cruise ships are targets for the drug runners. We have taken the extra step to include a couple of DEA agents in our security staff. They are working undercover as passengers. If any of our staff sees anything or suspects anything related to illegal drugs, they are to report it both to CCC and the DEA agents. The DEA agents will then take over the investigation with a probable arrest and drug seizure.”

“That makes sense. It takes the load off of us.”

“Yes it does. Keith, I have a few things that I have to do right now, so I want you to wander around and start learning the layout of the ship. Ours are the only cabins above the 10th deck being occupied right now so you can go into several cabins to look them over. Do not blow your cover to anyone. Not the DEA agents and not any of the ship’s crew. To them you are just a hunk that we hired for marketing. We both have a meeting in here with the DEA agents 73 minutes from now. Be back here in 71 minutes. Since your toe-chip is apparently already in Jeremy’s database, I will verify its status that so that you do not get locked in or out of any space. I will see you back here soon. Welcome aboard, Chief!”

“Thank you, Chief!” Keith shook her hand and left quickly after trying out the fireman’s pole to get back down to the CCC level.

“Don’t break a leg on that thing,” Judith called after him.

Keith landed softly and waved back to Judith. *“What an exceptionally nice woman she is!”* he thought. *“With her as my work partner, I certainly won’t be teasing her. She is destined to be my best friend. Not a sex partner, but nonetheless my best friend. She already knows me too well.”*

He wanted to go back to the ballroom to see what Mr. Sterling was saying about his security system, but it would look unusual if an uneducated male model showed too much interest in the ship’s inner workings. That could wait until later. Just over an hour is not much time to make a whirlwind tour of such a large ship. He took the elevator to the roof. Then he thought he should start using his new lingo. This was the top deck. He stepped out into the open air. Instantly he was out of the fresh sea-breeze air of the interior of the ship. Here he could smell everything that made New York City the huge metropolitan complex that it was. NYC was not an overly polluted city, but the difference between its air and the ship’s was much more than he had expected.

He was on the 26th deck and over 300 feet above sea level. He could probably see over the top of the Statue of Liberty’s torch as that was 305 feet above the ground. There were signs up here pointing the way to a helicopter landing pad – probably for a medical emergency transport. He would want to know more about that later. He found the stairs; he wondered if they followed the Navy’s language and called it a ladder. He could take the stairs down five or six at a time so his downward movements on the stairs would be much faster than if he used the elevator. He went inside and down one deck to the 25th. A small central portion of this deck was used for the high dive platform to the pool three decks below. The flooring of the 26th deck above him was a semi-transparent thick covering for this pool area that allowed for an even distribution of light.

The rest of the 25th deck was used by the navigational department. All of the high-rise decks between the 20th and 24th held guest quarters that were far above the noise of the bars, disco clubs and children play areas. Most of these cabins appeared to be suitable for movie stars or the super-rich wishing to enjoy a cruise while being bathed in luxury. He wondered why the thought of having an elegant wedding here suddenly popped into his head. It would be as exclusive for newlyweds as having their own private island for the wedding and all of their guests. He would mention that to Judith. Judith. He wondered if he could ever love anyone again. Judith. Would he be able to love Judith? No, his attitude toward women would certainly turn her off to ever thinking of him as a potential husband.

It was a bit lonesome this way, but then he wouldn't have to be suspicious of a wife walking out on him again. It was better this way.

The cabins that he looked into were luxurious. Walnut and teak paneled walls, plush carpeting with substantial padding, and bright, welcoming colors and appointments. Several even had chandeliers that appeared to be crystal. He noticed that there was a four-foot wide void space between every 3-5 cabins. Since these voids must have some function, he decided to try his toe-clip and pushed on the wall in one of those spaces. He wasn't totally surprised to find it to be a door. He stepped in and closed the door behind him. The space was lit with several LED flood lights. Inside, there were housekeeping supplies and a very quiet running vertical ladder mechanism. If a person got on one side of it, they would go up to any of the above decks. The other side would take a person to the lower decks. It was protected with a clear, thick plastic panel to keep people from stumbling into the hole without grabbing onto the moving ladder. He was on the 20th deck so he jumped on, and grabbed hold of the down ladder and quickly dropped two decks before he jumped off. There was a large "18" painted on the wall in fluorescent paint. He assumed that their security force could quickly amass themselves at any deck with the use of these moving ladders. He wasn't so sure that OSHA would approve of them without having safety straps connected to them though. Since the doors to the hallways opened inward, an open door would not smack a guest in the face as they walked past. It might cause some surprise however, but if the person coming out of the wall was in the ship's uniform of the day, there wouldn't be any emotional stress with the person's sudden appearance. He, however, was in regular "street clothes" today, so he opened the door cautiously. There was nobody in the hallway. Keith stepped out and the door closed securely behind him. He decided to take the stairs for the rest of today's investigations.

Each deck was appointed in a different theme. This would personalize each person's deck to aid them in finding the deck for their cabin as well as avoid boredom of having each deck look the same as any other. Some of the lower decks were entirely devoid of cabins as they were entertainment decks. Some looked like the streets of *Walt Disney World*[®]. There were large and small shops everywhere. The street appeared to be paved in brick. There was a deck with grass and playground equipment, another with basketball, tennis, handball, racquetball, and squash courts and table tennis. Some of these areas were so tall that they occupied the center area of several decks.

DEA Agents

There were several people on the 5th deck who were wandering around looking at the ship just as he was. Most of them looked like they had no particular agenda, but two men in their mid-twenties were headed directly toward Keith. When they approached, they said quietly, "Hello, Keith. We all have a meeting with Judith in a few minutes, but we thought that we could get to know you a bit better first. Please follow us to our cabin just ahead."

Keith put on his best face of being confused. "What?"

"Just come with us for a few minutes." Keith noticed that they used their toe to unlock the door. The taller one led the way in and the other followed Keith into the cabin. The one at the rear said, "Nice body."

Keith jumped at the opportunity to change the subject so he pretended to act as if he thought they wanted to have gay sex with him. "Both of you look really good, too. Who wants to go first?" he said as he reached for the shorter guy's belt buckle.

"Wait a minute! That's not why we asked you to come in here."

"Oh, it's not? Then did you just want a body massage? Lie down on the bed here."

"Keith! No! Nothing like that. Sit! We need to talk to you about your new job."

Keith looked disappointed at first then switched to confused when they mentioned the new job. "What do you mean? What new job?"

The taller one said, "Nice diversion, Keith. Very professional. I am Agent Tom Hansen and my partner here is Agent Bill Smathers. We are DEA agents assigned to this ship. It is our immediate task to approve your 'chief' appointment before you can be officially hired. Since we already know a lot about you, this will just be a formality. Had you met Judith before today?"

"First of all, hi. But secondly, what does DEA stand for, Double Effort Always? And third, who the heck is Judith? You guys have got some explaining to do before I go out that door and get some help."

"Look, Keith. We don't have a lot of time before our next meeting. I appreciate your defensive posture, but you don't have to hide your identity with us. Let me repeat, had you met Judith before today?"

"You call me Keith, but you say I am hiding my identity. What kind of nonsense is that? And I don't even know any Judith! Can I go now?"

"We'll skip that question. When did you find out that you were going to be the Chief of Security on this ship?"

Keith's eyes went into his carefully practiced crossing and rolling back into his head and he hit the floor when his knees buckled.

"Are you OK? Let us help you up."

"Where am I? Oh, you guys."

"What the heck are you doing to us, Keith? Judith said that she had told you about the job."

"Look, I really need a job, but I don't know anything about a security job. Not enough to be a chief at least. I think you've got the wrong guy. I'm just a body builder that came here to show off some hot underwear. Oh, wait. My buddy, Ken said he had taken some schooling in being a security dude. Yeah, you have the wrong guy. He kinda looks like me – ripped body. You should go look for him. Our bus that brought us here hasn't left yet so he should still be around somewhere. I'll go help you find him."

"Well...maybe we should go look for him. We are sorry to have put you through this stress, Keith. Best of luck to you. You may leave now. Thank you for your time."

Keith left as quickly as he could and ducked into the closest housekeeping closet around the next corner. He grabbed the up ladder and didn't get off until he reached the 13th deck. He knocked on the door to 13301 and pushed it open. "This is Keith and I need to talk to Judith, he called out before entering the major part of the room."

Judith was watching a monitor and she had tears in her eyes. She obviously had been overcome with laughter. "Oh, Keith! I was watching on our secure cameras as you put those guys' brains into contorted twisted pretzels. You were incredible! I had called them about offering you the job and just knew they would try to sidestep my orders of not talking to you until we all got up here together. So I used that as my authority to watch on their cabin camera. We do not disclose that we have these illegal cameras in each cabin and only the chiefs and associates can use them or even know they exist."

"I came up here to give you a head's up that they might talk to Ken. Can you call them and stop them from spreading knowledge of my appointment."

"They won't have time to do that. They should be on their way up here for our meeting now. You got here so quickly that I assume you found the moving ladders."

"Yes. Umm, are we supposed to use OSHA approved safety straps?"

"No. If you had stepped into oblivion, it would have stopped and caught you with pillow-like obstructions that are very effective. Be sure you attend the next scheduled safety class. The boys are almost here and I can't wait for them to see you. Hope I have the signs of laughter off my face."

With a smile, Keith said, "You look great."

When the DEA agents arrived, they began talking to Judith before they had gotten fully into the CCC and they hadn't yet seen Keith. "Sorry, Judith, but we may have misunderstood when you told us that you had hired a man named, Keith. Could he actually be a 'Ken'?" Then Tom saw Keith and exclaimed, "Oh my God, Keith!?"

Keith shook their hands. "How do you do, Tom?" Then he quickly turned to the other, "Nice to meet you, Bill."

They both just stood there with the gears in their brains almost making noise as they tried to process what had just happened to them in their meetings with Keith.

Keith broke the silence. "How are the Double Effort Always gentlemen today? I enjoyed our short meeting immensely and it gave me a chance to practice my fainting skills again."

They both broke into laughter. Tom spoke first. "You did an outstanding job of concealing your role as Chief of Security. It was at a level above 'senior professional grade.' We talked on the way up here and admitted that we were confused. I don't believe that has ever happened to me before."

"No, not to me either, Keith," Bill said. "Judith, I wish you could have seen his performance. It was classic Broadway and completely believable. Keith certainly has our endorsement of his new job here."

"Keith, you will have to fill me in sometime," Judith told him. Checking to see that the boys were not watching, she gave Keith a wink. "Come gentlemen; let's go sit in the cushioned chairs in the conference room. The computer will alert me if anything needs attention. I will certainly be glad when we can get some assistant chiefs in here to help us."

The meeting room was on the other side of the CCC behind plasma glass walls. The walls could be clear or opaque and were controlled with a remote. Sections of the glass walls could display any of the monitors that were in the CCC proper. There were maroon leather cushioned chairs arranged around a coffee table. Its top surface was a flat screen computer monitor covered with protective glass so that hot or cold food and beverages could be set on it. "I just got this table in here. Watch this." Picking up a remote that was in a holder on the side of the table, she tapped it and an image of the floor plan of any deck on the ship could be displayed along with the cabin numbers for each guest cabin. "This can be used for small groups or it can also be displayed on the large wall screen over there for

meetings with the full security department. Keith, if you have time, it would be useful during our cruises if you would interface this with the current guest list names in our main computer.”

“Certainly. Piece of cake. Judith, can you also zoom in on a specific cabin or area?”

“No, that was not built into it. This software was used by the designers and builders during their construction meetings. I found out about it and asked for this display.”

“Good find, Judith. I’ll add some bells and whistles to it before we set sail. Would you bring up deck number 5, please? I would like to see the area around Tom and Bill’s cabin.” Keith looked at for a short time then asked Tom and Bill a serious question. “This view may not be up to date, but I don’t see a gun-storage cabinet for your AK-47’s or whatever firepower you are using and I certainly didn’t see it inside your cabin when I was there. Where are your arms and ammunition kept?”

Tom replied, “Sorry, Keith, but that information is classified.”

“Yes of course, ‘classified’ for use by only the four of us at this table plus my fire chief. Just think for a moment, if God forbid we have a fire emergency, I will not have time to look you up and get the appropriate information to my fire chief that will be even busier than me. Its location and current fire protection classification is critical to the safety of my fire department, the safety of our 8,000 guests and our 2,000 staff. When can you arrange for a modification in your classification?”

“I can’t do that, Keith. Department regulations require that only DEA agents have this knowledge. Sorry.”

Judith added her comment. “Tom, we really do need that information.”

Keith bristled. “Tom, in spite of what you may have thought of me in your cabin a short time ago, I am one of the most cooperative team players that you will ever meet, outside of Judith. So with that in mind, please understand my situation here. This is Tuesday, so I will give you until noon local time on Monday the 29th to provide either Judith or me with the classification change that I have asked for. If you do this, we will bend over backwards to cooperate with the DEA in every way possible. If not, you will need to pack your suitcase as we will be putting you off this ship until such time as we can agree on a classification change. Understand?”

Tom drew in a long slow breath and let it out slowly. He began, “Keith, I am extremely sorry that we cannot comply with your request, but the amount and location of any DEA equipment is classified and restricted to DEA agents. I will ask my superiors for a change, but don’t hold your breath. We, too, want to be cooperative team players, but you have us in a corner with no way to retreat.”

Smiling in a friendly manner, Keith said, “Give them this scenario and maybe it will change their minds.” He cleared his throat and lowered his voice, “Good evening America, this is CNN News®. We have just learned from unidentified sources that the fire onboard the new luxury cruise ship, Maxx which killed over 300 people became uncontrollable when the fire spread to an ammunition locker. The locker was maintained by the DEA for its use in potential drug raids or seizures. Nobody on the Maxx outside of some DEA agents knew of its location. The Maxx fire chief had sought this information from the DEA agents, but they said their Washington bureaucracy would not allow this disclosure. Both Republican and Democratic members of Congress are demanding a full explanation from the President.”

Looking at Tom he continued, “Would you like to hear the follow-up news report? This is the part where leaked communications were found showing that you were asked to disclose the ammunition location. Another was that you had sent the request to your headquarters. The last was that DEA denied ever getting such a request and that the two of you were on administrative leave without pay until further notice.”

Tom swallowed and said, “This is a bit of an over kill, no pun intended. We will do our best to be able to comply with your request, Keith.”

Keith and Tom just stared at each other for the next 15 seconds. Then Keith spoke again in slow deliberate words. “In the atmosphere of partnering with you, I may have just thought of a solution.

Follow along with my thinking pattern here, please. How did you come to be assigned to your cabin? Did you carefully choose it for its location or did someone assign it to you?"

"Well we didn't choose it so I guess it was assigned to us."

"Tom and Bill, if you could choose from any cabin at all on the entire ship, including Mr. Sterling's cabin, which cabin would best fit your needs from all aspects including size, proximity to the gangways where the passengers enter the ship, closeness to the CCC, closeness to the most central point of the ship, or would you like a tent on the 26th deck so you could fire your guns in all directions?"

They looked at each other for a few moments before replying. "We have actually thought this over and considered asking you if we could be here on the 13th deck, relatively close to CCC. We anticipate having meetings with you on a regular basis and especially before and after each port of call."

"Excellent. I saw that you have toe-chips. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. What is your daily routine like? In other words do you have hours at a time where one or the other of you is available for something or another?"

"If everything is going smoothly, we are relatively free most of the time."

"Excellent. Does the DEA allow their agents to have additional paid employment as long as they are instantly available to do what an agent does?"

"Yes, there are some agents with undercover jobs."

Keith looked at Judith. She replied only with, "Confirmed."

Keith flashed a big smile. "Isn't this great? Judith and I have only just met a couple of hours ago and we are already able to read each other's minds."

Tom said, "Well, I sure would like to know what is going on."

"Congratulations, Tom and Bill. You are our newest employees. You are now both Assistant Chiefs of Security on the Maxx. In accordance with your positions you will be moving into a cabin on the 13th deck which will be remodeled before you move into it. It will have a large fire proof gun cabinet in it that can be quickly unlocked with your toe-chips. Besides unlocking your cabin door, your toe-chips will also open the door to the CCC. I, of course, have absolutely no idea why you would want a gun cabinet in your cabin, but you may use it to store soap and towels or anything that you wish. Your cabin steward will be hand-picked by you from our security staff. I will ask our engineering staff to make the conversions to your cabin as quickly as possible. You may work with them on its floor plan."

Smiling, Tom asked, "Does this supersede your demands regarding our classified ammunition storage space that we may be currently using?"

Keith wrinkled his brow. "Funny, but I do not remember having any conversation or having made any demand about that. How do you like my compromise?"

All three of them replied in unison, "Brilliant!"

Judith continued, "Keith, will you hire Ken, too, or should I? As long as we are staffing up, we may as well add him right away."

"Well he was already expecting me to hire him for something if I got a job here, so, I can do it easily. Gentlemen, my friend and the person ranked second in my security college class, is the Ken we are talking about. The same one, I might add, that I was trying to get you to interview when I was spoofing you. He will be joining you as Assistant Chief of Security. By having two chiefs and three assistants, we will be able to accommodate your DEA duties as well as having 24/7 coverage with the CCC computer systems without over stressing any of us. Welcome and thank you for accepting your new positions."

"Keith, you were spot on when you said you were the most cooperative team player that we have ever met. Thank you so much for working this out without an unpleasant confrontation. I have the utmost respect for both of you. And thank you for hiring us, too. In spite of the potential dangers

we face in the DEA, our pay is regrettably small. Your offer of a side-job with pay is sincerely welcome. We will do our best to live up to your expectations.”

“Tom, I know you will and I know we will benefit from both of your jobs. By the way, you have not told me which of you is the leader. I just assumed that it is you. As our assistant chiefs, though, you are equal to each other and you are an equal with Ken. You will report to me and/or Judith. We, too, are equals and we report only to the owner, Mr. Sterling. The only people on this ship that know of the positions of the five of us are the members of our security staff. They in turn report to whoever is on duty in here at that moment. Each of them has a star on their ID Badge along with the word, ‘SECURITY’ under their name.”

“The Captain of the ship reports directly to Mr. Sterling. He also interacts with Judith in her visible role as head of Guest Services. Except for formal meals with the passengers, neither he nor his staff has any interaction with anyone else that is not part of his navigational team.” Keith set back into his cushion and looked at Judith. “I am sorry, but I got us off the track, Judith. You had an agenda for this meeting and I jumped in. Why don’t you continue?”

“That’s OK, Keith. You certainly covered and solved a critical point. This meeting was originally called to introduce you to our DEA agents and to have them explain their role here. You seem, however, to have a fairly clear grasp of their role. Tom or Bill, could you please add anything on your role and its history for Keith?”

Joking, Tom said, “I’m afraid to mention anything else or I may get jumped on again.”

“Sorry, Tom. I’ll try to keep quiet.”

“I am just pulling your leg, Chief, it is best to not hold anything back. Please interrupt at any time.”

Keith smiled and nodded.

The establishment of the DEA or the Drug Enforcement Administration was signed by President Richard Nixon on July 28, 1973. It created a single federal agency to enforce the federal drug laws as well as to consolidate and coordinate the government’s drug control activities. This brought together the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, the Office of Drug Abuse Law Enforcement, and some other federal offices. The cruise ship industry has been hit especially hard with accusations that they are participating in the drug running. The head of the cruise owners association petitioned the DEA to put agents on their ships to sniff out, identify, and apprehend drugs that may have gained access to their ships. We need to take possession of the drugs and arrest the persons responsible for getting the drugs aboard.”

“And how can we help you accomplish this?”

“First of all we would like access to your passenger list so we can run it through our system to check for prior arrests.”

“As associates, you automatically have this access without asking us for it. It is updated by our on-shore reservation office. When passengers arrive for boarding we will add a copy of their passport as well as take their photograph. Additionally, each passenger will wear a wrist bracelet containing a microchip. The computer will be able to track each passenger’s movements as they go from room to room throughout their time on the ship. It will provide you with their historical movements. If you want to learn if any two persons from different cabins have met in strange locations during the cruise, Jeremy can provide that for you.”

“Who is Jeremy?”

Keith looked at Judith and smiled. Then he called out, “Good evening, Jeremy.”

Jeremy’s voice came back. “Keith, my man. How can I help you?”

“Who is that? I thought we were alone in here.”

Judith answered, “That gentlemen, is Jeremy, our computer. Keith programmed the computer to have a voice before he sold it to Mr. Sterling. I did not find that out until just today when

Keith walked in here and began talking to my computer. It blew me away. You can ask Jeremy just about any complex question and he can provide the answer instantly. Keith has built an incredibly useful computer system.”

“Keith, what are your protections against outside hacking? If the protection is too tight will we still be able to interface with our DEA computer?”

“Tom, the security functions are several layers deep and very complex. In some cases information comes in to a stand-alone computer. A barrage of virus programs constantly being updated with new signatures, will examine the incoming information. If it passes all of the tests, it passes through another firewall to either a removable hard drive which has to be hand carried to Jeremy or if it is deemed clean and from a trusted source, it will pass electronically to Jeremy where it will be re-examined before it gets fully into Jeremy’s databases. In the case of any DEA files, this connection initially would take less than two seconds if everything checks out. There are additional safeguards that are proprietary and unique to Jeremy. I think it is safe, but we will continually attempt to break into it during our testing.”

“Tom, what else can we do to help you?”

“Of major importance to us is to have your security force become extra pairs of eyes and ears for us. If anyone in security sees, hears or learns of any quantity of illegal drugs coming into the ship, record the event and immediately get it to the DEA agents and/or CCC. We already know that your computer, I guess we are calling it Jeremy now, can detect a large number of different drugs in its room sniffing system. Be sure that Jeremy’s alerts are routed immediately to the DEA agents. There may be certain situations at certain ports of calls that will require special alerts that we may issue. Just be aware and let us know.”

Judith replied, “Great advice. Thank you, Tom. Keith, do you have anything else to add?”

“No, if we are done here, I would like to invite Tom and Bill to my cabin. It will give them some ideas for how they may want their cabin configured.”

“We are done. You guys should see Keith’s cabin. You can have anything that he has or make your own suggestions. Keith, when you are done, please find Ken and bring him up here if he wants to join us. Have a good day, gentlemen. I will be watching CCC until Keith gets back next week after closing out his apartment.”

“My cabin is up these stairs, gentlemen. I would like you to see it.” Keith led the way so that he could open the door. He wanted to see if Judith had time to enable the lock to work with his toe-chip. The door opened perfectly. “Feel free to look into any door or drawer. I will have a separate room for my electronics lab. As you already know, I am an inventor and will be working in there a lot.”

“Is our information correct that you have a Ph.D. in electronics as well as a Ph.D. in security?”

“Yes.”

“Should we be calling you Doctor-Doctor Northquest?”

“If you do, I won’t answer you,” Keith said with a smile. “As far as I am concerned, the only doctor on this ship is the physician. When and if your superior comes here for a visit and you have to introduce me, you may call me ‘one of the Chiefs of Security.’ You could also refer to my degrees, but that is not necessary. Also, if you call me ‘Chief’ while Judith is near, we won’t know which of us you are referring to. So using ‘Keith’ and ‘Judith’ will improve our communications.”

“This cabin is incredible. Was Judith serious when she said we could have any of this stuff?”

“I was spoofing you in your cabin earlier, but neither of us will spoof you again. Copies of any of this stuff can be put into your cabin. I assume you will want two separate beds, but what size beds do you want? And do you want them in separate compartments with locked doors? Will you need two showers in separate bathrooms? Think it all out and get back to Judith while I am gone. She will approve it. I trust you so you may continue to look around in here. I have to go look up Ken.”

“Thanks, but we will leave now, too. We will probably go back to our cabin and talk this over. Thank you so much for your great ideas. I really look forward to working with you on these cruises.”

“Me, too, Keith. This will make us look good back at headquarters.”

Ken

Keith found Ken in the dining room. The rest of the female and male models were just finishing their complimentary dinner. Ken saw his friend in the distance and jumped up to meet him half way. "Keith! You have been gone over two hours. What happened? Did they hire you? Did you see Professor Young? What did he say? Who was the tall woman that was watching you? Don't just stand there with that silly smirk on your face, tell me something!"

"There. Are you done now? May I say something?"

"Yes, yes, anything. Just tell me!"

"Better yet, I want to show you. You will just have to hold your questions for a couple of minutes more. Follow me – quietly!"

"OK, but this better be good. Are we going to see Professor Young?"

"Is that what you call quiet? Just be quiet."

"OK."

Keith led Ken to an elevator and pushed the UP button. When the door opened, Keith was glad to see that it was empty. They both went in and Keith pushed the "14" button.

In the quiet ride, Ken got in front of Keith and closed his lips tightly then outstretched his arms with his palms up and tried to indicate *WHAT?*

Keith just put his index finger to his lips to indicate, *SSHHHHH!*

When the door opened on the 14th deck, they got off. Keith turned left and Ken followed. Near the end of the hallway, Keith turned toward the port side of the ship and they walked down a narrower corridor towards the side of the ship. Before Keith opened the door near its end he turned to Ken and pointed at him then put his hand over his mouth. When Ken put his own hand over his own mouth, Keith opened the door and pushed Ken in. Then he closed the door behind them. "This is my cabin."

Ken didn't have his hand over his mouth, but he didn't need to. He was utterly speechless. After moving his head from side to side, he pointed at Keith and whispered, "Yours? All this? Really?"

"Yes, now sit down and we don't have to whisper anymore. I just didn't want you to blow our cover anywhere out there by yelling."

Ken looked around and sat on a chair. He looked from side to side at the chair in admiration.

"Ken, remember the tall woman? Her name is Judith and she is the Chief of Security-Guest Services. She has appointed me the Chief of Security-Systems. We are equals and report to each other. We also both report to the owner, Mr. Sterling."

Ken kept mouthing, "Wow!"

"And she knows that I am talking to you right now and inviting you to be an Associate Chief of Security. There are two DEA agents on this ship who were also appointed Associate Chief of Security a few minutes ago. The five of us will run Jeremy, the one you helped me program. Once we get underway in a few months, the five of us will cover Jeremy 24/7. Your cabin will be a few doors from here and you can have it configured like mine or in any other way you wish. You will pick your cabin steward from a list of the security department members. Go look in my refrigerator and get a drink. You look like you could use one."

"Keith, my head is spinning around. This is the dream that we have both had for several years now. What are you going to do with your apartment back at Platteville?"

"I'm heading back tomorrow to close it up. I called the landlord while I was walking down to get you and told him I would be out of it in less than a week. What about you? We will be living on this ship for the next several years. Do you want to go back with me to close yours?"

"I don't have much. My parents can just go in and pack up some clothes and books and send them here to me."

"Judith can use some help until I get back in about six days, can you stay here and help her out? Your salary is close to six figures now and it doubles when we set sail on our first cruise. I am planning on selling my car. I can always rent a car if I need one in the future. Ken I am counting on you to replace me someday. If I get transferred to the next big ship that Mr. Sterling builds, you could take my place here."

"That would be awesome, buddy. What is Judith like? She looked very stern in the doorway back there in the ballroom."

"She is very nice and get this. She is the 'S052' that Professor Young always talked about."

"Awesome. I can't wait to meet her."

"She had this cabin put together for me and she seems to know a lot about what I like. She said she knows all about my divorce and both how and why I feel the way that I do about women. She even said that none of that bothers her and we could talk about it if I wanted to. She gives me the feeling that she really wants me in this job with her and perhaps not just for my technical capabilities."

"And have you changed your attitude toward women?"

"I don't know. I don't think so, but time will tell. She is certainly very nice and...and very beautiful."

"I think that I should change the subject. Where is Jeremy?"

"He is right out that door and down the stairs."

"How cool is that to have the computer you programmed to be here working with you?"

"Right! It doesn't get any better than that. Let's go see Jeremy and meet Judith down there, too."

They went down the stairs. Ken looked at the fire pole, but didn't say anything about it.

"Judith, this is Ken; Ken this is Judith. Ken is our newest associate."

"Welcome aboard, Ken." She shook his hand firmly. "I wish there was room for three Chiefs of Security. You certainly are very capable. Professor Young told me that the three of us are the highest ranking class members he has ever graduated with Ph.D. degrees. I know Keith is happy to have you here, but rest assured, I am as happy as he is. I want to mentor you so that you will someday be elevated to Chief – either on this ship or on a new one that Mr. Sterling is building."

"Keith just told me the same thing. I am overwhelmed that you are both putting so much faith in me."

Judith asked, "Why not? By the way that is the second time in just a few minutes that Keith and I have communicated mentally with each other. I hope that will grow to the three of us being completely in tune with each other. Ken, for security purposes, the five of us have dual roles. Keith, as you would guess, is a male model assigned to marketing and I am the head of guest services. Have you picked a role for yourself?"

"All during my schooling I worked in restaurants. I was even a maître'd in an upscale restaurant for more than a year. Here, however the maître'd needs to be a consistent figure in the same place at all times so that wouldn't work very well here for me. I will be doing my real role in CCC at various times and on different days, so, I thought I should be the quality assurance head of the cabin stewards with an additional visible designation as a member of security. This would give me the additional opportunity to keep my eyes open in any of the guest cabins."

"Brilliant," Judith and Keith said at the same time.

"Judith, just to let you know, I will take care of closing my apartment through my parents. That will allow me to remain here while Keith closes his apartment in the next six days."

“Excellent. Keith, may Ken use your cabin until then? He will, I am sure, return it to its pristine state when he is finished with it. In the meantime, we will see that his cabin is equipped and stocked so that he is already living there by the time you return.”

“Of course. We even roomed together for a semester until our course work required privacy. Ken you will need a microchip in your toe that the ship’s physician can put in for you. It is nearly painless, almost. It becomes your key for nearly every door on the ship as well as giving you access to deck #13 from the elevator, stairs and moving ladders.”

“Painless? Almost? Judith, is he kidding me?”

Smiling. “We need to operate on trust. Go see the physician. Then come back here so I can get you into the toe-chip computer file. In the meantime you will need to be holding this microchip door card before you can get back into the CCC. And yes, that is the card that I had delivered previously to Mr. Minnesota, here.”

“Ken, I will be leaving early in the morning so you can room with me tonight. The bed is big enough for both of us – unless you have recently developed a nasty habit of throwing your arms and legs around at night.”

“Nope, I’m still a quiet sleeper. Thanks for letting me have a side of your bed, buddy.”

Judith asked, “Keith, can you stay here with Jeremy while I go get a leisurely dinner? I haven’t had a chance to do that since I arrived here many months ago. Ken can check on the physician and then spend some time in here with you getting reacquainted with Jeremy.”

“Certainly. Go get a great meal, Chief.”

“Thanks,” she said as she left the room.

“Ken, see if you can figure out that phone then call the doc to see when he can chip you.”

“Won’t I need an authorization?”

“Here’s a vial with a chip in it, but it won’t be functional until it is read in here and entered into the computer with specific authorizations.”

“OK. This phone looks easy enough, I’ll call the doc.” After a short conversation with the physician, Ken spoke to Keith again. “She can take me now. You didn’t tell me the doc was a female.”

“That’s because I didn’t know that either. I had the school doc put in my own chip when I was developing the system. See if you can learn what the medical staff size will be when the cruises begin. I cannot imagine having only one physician for 9000+ people on this ship.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“I won’t be able to get used to that. How about a simple, ‘OK’ or as Jeremy says, ‘Confirmed’”

“Confirmed.”

“Get outa here.” Keith noticed that Ken put the door card into his pocket before he left the room.

Keith went through the three questions with Jeremy to get into the systems level. After getting the code word ‘Go’ from Jeremy, he inquired about all shared computers and printers that were available to Jeremy. The only external device in the system that he wasn’t aware of was a high speed laser printer that was next to the main keyboard. This printer was also a copy machine that could be used to make manuals and books for training purposes. It had multiple paper drawers each capable of holding five reams of different kinds of paper.

Next Keith looked inside. He located the printer cable that was connected to the computer, but he found something else that he didn’t like. The printer had a built-in Wi-Fi connector that was active. This meant that the printer could receive information from other sources. What he didn’t like about that was the potential that information from Jeremy could be broadcast to non-secure computers or devices. More importantly, it could receive information that could be sent into Jeremy. He wrote a

note to ask Judith what, if anything, she knew about this. In the meantime he turned off the Wi-Fi. He was hoping that someone on the other end would inquire about the loss of functionality.

Jeremy was not physically located in the CCC, nor was there only one Jeremy. Keith had specified three backups so that there were four complete computers. One could be down for repairs or maintenance while the other three were in operation. During emergencies when there were two operators active in CCC, the computing power could be shared by two computers with one in back-up mode. This was an overly redundant system, but when you are half way across the ocean and your computer goes down unexpectedly, having more than one backup is comforting. All four of them were located in four distinct, widely separated, and sealed compartments on the lowest two levels of the ship. No one other than the Chiefs of Security was allowed access to these compartments. Jeremy would scream bloody murder if anyone else entered any of these compartments. Unfortunately this meant there were long stretches of fiber optic cables between the compartments and from each of them to the CCC room. The signals moved at the speed of light along these cables, but still the signals from one could get to CCC before the signals from another. This could result in a disagreement in the CCC between the instantaneously received signals from different computers. To compensate for that, Keith had specified that each cable must be exactly the same length, even if that meant having a large coil of cable from the closest computer.

Since each of these four computers was essentially identical, any one of these four computers could be called, Jeremy. Or Jeremy could be thought of as the terminal computer in CCC. It did not matter to the operator as it seemed that Jeremy was right there in CCC.

“Jeremy, where is Judith?”

“She is in the Staff lunch room. She arrived 6.8 minutes ago so she is probably just beginning her meal.”

“Thanks, I’m getting kind of hungry. Do you have a camera in my refrigerator so I could see what is available from your screens here?”

“No, silly. When the door is closed, the light is turned off.”

“Unless the door switch failed.”

“Not likely. Go and look in your refrigerator. I will call you if I need you.”

“Thanks, I will.”

Keith went up to his cabin and found a short note on his bed that read, “Thank you, Keith. We look forward to working with you. Tom & Bill”

That was nice of them, Keith thought. He must have written that while he was behind me when I was showing them the cabin. Looking in the refrigerator, Keith found a low fat, high protein sandwich in the meat drawer. “Awesome! Thank you, Judith,” he said out loud. He also took out and drank the rest of the low sodium V8 bottle. There were several computer screens in his cabin. He turned on the one by his snack table and saw that it gave him a clear picture of Jeremy’s main screen. *Good,* he thought, *he wouldn’t have to gulp down his food wondering what was going on in the world of Maxx.* He decided to look over his cabin a little more thoroughly than he had done when he went through with Judith or the DEA agents. *“Nice size closet,”* he thought. *Room enough in here for street clothes, formal wear, modeling clothes, ship’s uniforms, and outdoor wear for any season. Drawers of various sizes and even a large safe bolted to the floor. Very nice! And here is another closet with a floor that drops way down into the CCC area. I could even fit a 16 foot ‘Ocean Kayak’® into that space. Gee, I could have my own special rescue craft. Naw, I wouldn’t survive the jump from the 14th deck into the water. But I could get a different kind of exercise with it in my exercise swim tank. I might also use it along shore on our island stops.”*

Keith finished the exploration of his cabin and had just opened his door to go back to CCC when Ken returned from the physician’s office. “Hey, anybody here?” Instead of answering, Keith slid down the pole from the top of the stairs. “I wondered what that pole was for.”

Ken's right foot was heavily wrapped in bandages and he was carrying his shoe. "Aww, couldn't you have gotten crutches from the doc, too? Poor baby, do you have an owie?"

"I had the doc wrap it up like this. I thought I could get a little sympathy. Isn't Judith back yet?"

"No, and she won't give you much sympathy either so just take off that stuff and put your shoe back on. No shirt, no shoes, no service – not in here anyway."

"Not even a little sympathy?"

"Nope. You forget that I've known you for several years. Let's get your chip code into the computer. Before you put your shoe back on, put your foot over by that green tape; that's where the scanner is located."

When Ken put his foot in place, Jeremy let out a little chirp.

"Jeremy, show me the foot microchip file. If it is not called that, just show me the recent files used."

"Here it is along with its file path and name. Let Ken make the entry so that he can learn how to do it."

"Here you go, Ken. Jeremy wants to give you your first lesson. I'll watch over your shoulder 'cause I haven't done this for about five years now."

"Keith, did you forget already? See, I am indispensable already and you have been here less than 24 hours."

"Yes, you are wonderful, Jeremy. Now just tell Ken what to do and stop patting yourself on your back, where ever that is."

"Welcome Ken. You will notice that your chip number is already populated to this file. You will not need to remember it. Begin by entering your name next to it and you will notice that I will complete your entry as soon as it matches something in my files. Oops, there it is. You were in my files from back at school where Keith put it into several files during our testing phases. Next you need to enter the authorization code. Click in that column and a list appears with your suitable choices. Click on *ALL* and *Keith's cabin* so that you can access it while he is gone. Because I am smart and overheard your previous conversation with Judith and Keith, I know how long you will need that access. You, as an Assistant Chief, can go into this file to update your access if, for example, Keith does not return on time and your cabin is not yet ready. I am very flexible. Now just save and confirm and you will be done. The 'confirm' is probably a new command to you. It both makes an additional copy on a backup disk and it wipes the file from your screen for security."

"Awesome, thank you, Jeremy. Hey, my foot feels better already!"

"Jeremy is also a Registered Pharmacist. You would not have needed to put your foot exactly in that spot, but when you did, he sprayed some benzocaine on it to take away the big, bad owie."

Ken just lowered his head and looked at Keith through his eyebrows. Then he smiled and said, "You know me too well."

They were still laughing when Judith walked into the room. "Looks like I missed a good joke. What on earth is that pile of bandages doing there?"

"Ken just came back from the doc and thought he could get some sympathy if he had it wrapped up looking like a mummy."

Laughing, she said, "I can see this is going to be a very compatible trio. Did you get your toe-chip code into the computer without any problems?"

"Yes, I can open everything but your cabin."

"OK, why don't you two go down and get something to eat and get your stuff out of your lockers before they clean out the dressing room?"

Keith said, "We have both eaten, but we should go get our stuff. Ken, you can put yours into my cabin until your cabin is ready. Judith, we should be back shortly. Can you get some candidates as

cabin stewards for both Ken and me and have them here when we get back. We could both interview them at the same time.”

“Yes, that shouldn’t be difficult to do. They should be here by the time you get back.”

“Great, see you soon.”

As they made their way back to the ballroom’s backstage dressing room, Keith was talking. “What a day this has turned out to be. We came here because Professor Young wanted us to be in a modeling position with nothing on but extremely revealing underwear. Then we get mobbed by screaming women stuffing hundreds of dollars into our underwear. That had to be one of the most embarrassing times of my life.”

“Yeah, even worse than in 9th grade when Marvin Krystal pulled my shorts down to my knees in an all-school basketball game and the whole school cheered.”

“That had to be really embarrassing, Ken. Did you do anything to him in return?”

“No, he was the team captain and he didn’t like me. But his girlfriend dumped him for being a jerk. So in a way I got back at him.”

“Good. Here’s the locker room and the lights are still on. Hey, there is a note on my locker.”

“Mine has one, too. It is from Mr. Mecay. ‘Dear Ken and Keith, I had lots and lots of really nice comments about both of you from not only the audience, but from my regular models as well. I even received extra orders for the N4N pieces that you both were wearing. I want you back anytime if you are able – I will send you a schedule of our future shows. Our payroll goes out at the end of each month. I’ll be putting something additional in your checks because of your wonderful performances. Love you both, Andrew Mecay. P.S. Look in the lockers next to yours. I left you a couple of cases of N4N bodywear in your sizes.’ Wow, this is awesome, Keith.”

“My note says basically the same thing. Nice gifts.”

Michael

Back up in the CCC, Judith was assembling three handpicked members of security that she thought would make good cabin stewards. She had also asked Tom and Bill to join them as their current steward was not a member of security and they could take the third steward if he was acceptable to them. Her cabin steward, Jodi, was also there so that she could meet the others in the room. Everyone had just arrived as Ken and Keith walked in.

“Welcome everyone; let’s sit over here by the coffee table. The pickers and my steward, Jodi, may sit on my side and the pickees on the other. There are some beverages in the refrigerator if anyone wants anything. Let’s begin with the introductions. You all know me, of course, but the stewards will be meeting the guys on my side of the table for the first time. Remember that at no time will you blow the cover for me or any of the people in this room. At the far end are Bill and then Tom. They are DEA agents assigned to our ship by the Drug Enforcement Agency to interrupt the movement of illegal drugs into the U. S. through our ship. You knew we had DEA agents on our ship, but they had not yet been introduced to you. Next to Tom is Ken. He has a doctorate in security systems and he just joined us today. These three men have the title, known only to the people in this room, of Associate Chief of Security. Next is Keith. He has two doctorate degrees, one in electrical engineering and the other in security systems. I want to add that Keith graduated at the top of his security class with the highest grade ever achieved in his school. Ken graduated second in the same class. So we have two outstanding security men in our department. Keith has been appointed Chief of Security-Systems. This position is equal to my position of Chief of Security-Guest Services.”

Tom and Bill looked at each other with wide eyes when she introduced Ken. They nodded in the affirmative to each other.

The three stewards smiled broadly at Keith and Ken.

“This meeting is to enable Keith, Ken, and our DEA agents, Tom and Bill, to hand pick the person they want for their personal cabin stewards. I remind the men on my side that these three across from you are already performing openly as cabin stewards with membership in Security. You three stewards were chosen by me as possible stewards for the men next to me and if you would rather not be in this group, you may without consequences, withdraw and leave now.”

The three each shook their heads “No.”

“Anyone? OK, thank you. Let’s start on this end and each of you may introduce yourselves and give us some of your background then Keith can start the questions from this side of the table. We can be as informal as anyone wants to be. We will grow to know each other as family and not as employers/workers, so we may as well start now and not hold anything back. Michael?”

Except for Jodi, Michael was the only African-American in the group. These men were all about 6 foot tall with fairly muscular builds, but with varying sizes of pot bellies on them. Each was good looking and smiled a lot. They even looked like excellent choices of stewards for the guests. Michael began by looking around the group. “This looks like we are on *‘The Voice’*®.”

Ken quickly shot back, “But can you sing?” Everyone laughed.

It was an excellent tension breaker and Judith noticed that everyone settled back into their chairs looking a bit more comfortable.

“Hi, I am Michael Murphy and I only sing in the shower.”

More laughter.

“I am 23, single, and I had two years of college in the engineering program before I had to drop out to take care of my father. He died a year and a half ago, but it sapped all of my money. That is when I began working as a janitor for Mr. Sterling on his smaller ships. He seemed to like me and he

promoted me first to steward then chief steward then to chief steward on a larger boat. When the Maxx was ready, I was brought here as chief steward and I have been hiring and training stewards here since then. I would love to additionally be a personal cabin steward for any of you.”

Keith immediately began, “Michael, I am so sorry for your loss. I lost both of my parents when I was one year old; it must be even harder when you have grown up with a parent and then lose them.”

Michael was nodding his head in agreement and his eyes flashed a tear.

“We could have something between us with your interest in engineering. What kind of engineering were you going into and what were your grades like?”

He smiled and said that his love was electrical engineering, especially circuit design and he had a 4.0 GPA.

“That is incredible, Michael. I designed and programmed the ship’s computer behind me. I also designed and my company built all of the electronic door locks on this ship. Let me apologize now for your pain when you all got your microchips in your toes. I had the first one, when the chips were much larger.”

Everyone smiled and shuffled their feet.

“I have an electronics lab being outfitted in the cabin right through that wall behind you. Whether or not I choose you, Michael, you are more than welcome to join me whenever I am in there. I’ll take you on as my apprentice.”

“Thank you so much, Chief.”

Turning to Judith, “Do they have to call me ‘Chief’?”

“No, not at all. First names are just fine with me, too.”

“And not ‘Mister or Doctor Keith’ either. Is that OK with everyone?”

Michael said, “Sorry. I grew up in the south where whites were always addressed with a title. Thank you, Keith.”

With a broad smile, “You are very welcome, Michael. Let’s move on to the next person before Michael and I get up and walk out together. Maybe someone else can change my mind.”

“I don’t know if I can change your mind or not. My name is Alexander Goodman, Alex for short. I’d like to begin with a question for you. I was serving in the ballroom earlier and saw you guys in the show. Right now I am guessing that you guys were undercover when you were modeling out there, but during the show I thought you were both professional models. You did an awesome job! How long have you been modeling?”

Keith and Ken looked at each other trying to keep straight faces, and then they busted up laughing. “You tell him.”

“OK, I guess I’ll do it.” Ken replied while trying to control his laughter. “We had been told by a mutual friend that there was this modeling job that had been picked for us and that we HAD to be there. To be honest it was our first, and I hope our last, modeling job – especially with those kinds of clothes. We did not know what we were going to model until we got here today. I almost threw up when I saw what they wanted me to wear. I don’t have any idea how Keith was able to go out in front a bunch of screaming women with what he had on. It was outrageous. Keith, you must have been out of your mind when you pulled off that surprise ending of nearly stripping at the end!”

“Well, I did completely strip, but the lighting crew saved me. It was an arranged ending at the last moment. But, yes, it was very embarrassing. Sometimes being undercover can be a huge challenge. Alex, as a man, what did you think of the performance?”

“I was busy, but it was an interesting performance. I don’t think I would have been able to do it. But, I guess you wanted to hear more about my background. I am 23 like Michael, but I could not afford to go to college at all. My parents are both in the service industry and I waited on tables in an upscale restaurant before I heard about this job and was hired by Michael. I’ve worked on body building

when I have time, but not as much as I would like. I almost joined the Navy because I love the smell of the ocean and the thought of being on a ship is exciting to me.”

Tom asked, “What would you have liked to do in the Navy?”

“Ship navigation, I think that is a Quartermaster. None of the other jobs are positioned where you can always look out at the sea.”

“As a steward, you don’t get to see the open sea very often. Will you feel confined here?”

“No, I expect many people will like their breakfast served on their balcony. As long as I can see the sea fairly often, I will be happy.”

There was a pause so the third candidate began. “Michael, did you hire all 23 year olds? Hello, I am Christian Lewis. You can call me Chris. I was an undercover cop in a small city in upstate New York before my job was terminated when the city went bankrupt. Then I got a job in New York City as head of security for a jewelry store at night and I was a waiter in a fine restaurant during the day. I definitely made more money with those two jobs than I did as an undercover cop. There was no time for anything but sleeping with my long hours. I was lucky to see an ad for this job and Michael hired me on the first interview. I love it here and look forward to being busy with the guest passengers.”

“Are any of you married or in a serious relationship?” Ken asked.

They all shook their heads, no. Chris offered, “With the current economy, it is not unusual for people to delay even starting a relationship until they are at least 30. I don’t have any intentions to do otherwise.”

“Me neither,” was the response from the others.

Tom said, “As DEA agents we cannot be completely open with anyone and that includes our cabin steward. We are a couple of friendly guys, but there will be a lot of things that you might ask and we will not be able to give you answers. Does that pose a problem for anyone?”

Chris looked at the others on his side of the table. With only a shaking of their heads, he spoke up. “As an undercover cop, I couldn’t talk to anyone about my job and expect to have a long life. I never even told my parents. I wouldn’t be comfortable if you DID talk about your job.”

Judith said, “If there are any other questions from anyone, please ask them now. Otherwise, Keith, you get the first pick. Remember none of you has to choose from this group if you are not completely comfortable with anyone in this group.”

“Michael, would you like to see my cabin?”

Everyone applauded at Keith’s choice. It seemed obvious.

“I was holding my breath. Thank you. Yes, I would.”

“Let’s go upstairs. Good luck to everyone. I certainly enjoyed meeting each of you and we will all be seeing each other a lot.” He warmly shook each person’s hand.

“Let’s go out into the hallway and take the stairs to the 14th deck. I’ll show you how to access my cabin from there. But first, let’s get your toe-chip activated for my cabin.” They went over to the keyboard by the computer. “Watch this. Good evening, Jeremy.”

“Hi, Keith. Who is that with you?”

“Did you say that you built all of this and even a talking computer?”

“Yep. Jeremy, this is Michael Murphy. He has a toe-chip and I want you to add an authorization for my cabin to his list.”

“Confirmed. Welcome, Michael, you have 24/7 access to Keith’s cabin.”

“Thank you, Jeremy. That was awesome, Keith.”

Keith smiled when Michael spoke to Jeremy as if it were a person. “Let’s go.”

When they got to Keith’s door on the 14th deck, he told Michael to open the door; just to be sure everything was working with Michael’s toe-chip. Michael was amazed to see all the equipment that Keith had in his cabin. “I heard that you had exercise equipment in here and that Judith wanted

your steward to spot you on the heavier stuff, but I had no idea it was this well-equipped. I used to work out on equipment, but I've kind of let my body go, I'm afraid."

"That begs the question of whether or not you would like to get back into shape."

"Yes I would, really. I thought of getting up extra early and using the guest gym facilities, but we don't have any experience with how much our guests will be using it. I do not, as a member of the ship's staff, want to get into anyone's way."

"Excellent. You have just answered some of the questions that I have not asked you yet. Do you have a swimming suit?"

"No."

"Can you swim?"

"Yes, I was on my high school swim team."

"Excellent. I would like my steward to be here at 0400 every morning ready for exercising with me. I will be your coach if you let me. We will work out for 45 minutes. Then I will take a swim in this exercise tank over here for 15 minutes." Keith opened the door to the pool. Michael didn't know it was there and he let out a gasp. "When I get out, you can get in for 15 minutes at your pace. It is adjustable for each person and it will remember our personal settings. While you are swimming, I will be in the shower and getting dressed for the day. When you come out, you can use my shower, since you will be cleaning it up anyway. When you are dressed, I will treat you to a healthy breakfast with the food that you restock in my refrigerator each day. How does that sound? Do you still want to be my steward? I will be tough on you and I expect you to be tough on me."

"It sounds like a dream come true. Absolutely, I would like to be your steward. I'll have to find some clothes and gym shoes before I can start though."

"Well, that can be done easily, too. I have to leave tomorrow morning and drive back to southwestern Wisconsin to get my stuff so that I can move in here. I should be back in six days. I need to buy a tux and some other clothes and I will get some for you too if you give me your sizes. Ken will be staying in here while his cabin is being readied. I don't know if he will want you or his steward in here while I am gone. You three can work that out. Everything OK so far? Questions?"

"No. I will check with Ken to see what he wants. We can accommodate him for anything. Let's go over by your bathroom sink light so I can get a photo of you with my cellphone. I will make a ship's ID badge for you so you can eat in the dining rooms. It will allow you to come and go from the ship without any questions. I will have it back to you before you leave in the morning."

"Oh, thanks. Another thing, you and I will be able to acknowledge each other out in public because my undercover job is, as Judith would describe it, a hunk that is working for marketing. He is out looking for pretty ladies that will pose with him for magazine and TV advertising to promote our cruises. It would not be out of place for him to ask his steward to accompany him and a beautiful lady to the white sandy beaches for some photo sessions with the two of them. That is another reason for you to get buffed up. We can go pretty far with these ladies as long as we do not have sex with them or go into their cabins. We are always looking for people to cruise with us multiple times so we truly have to make them happy in any way that is legal. You still OK?"

"Yup."

"Michael, you are officially my steward, but I will be honest with you. I am uncomfortable with anybody that treats me like a superior. I need friends. Ken is a good friend. Judith is becoming a good friend. I want you to be my friend, too. Sorry if that sounds like a kids' program on TV, but I do not want you to stand like this when I am sitting, I do not want you to jump up out of a chair if I enter the room, or anything like that. Just act like a friend. OK?"

"That may take a while to get used to, but yes, thank you I would like you as a friend, too. I sometimes need to vent and having a friend to vent to can be important." Michael sat down in the nearest chair looking just a bit uncomfortable.

"I agree. Thank you for sitting. OK now, here comes the jackpot round. I want you to buff up. I want you to be healthy. I want you to be happy. I want you to get your degree in electrical engineering and I will provide you with the funds to make that happen."

"Oh my God! But, but why?"

"I am going to build a factory to sell my inventions. When this ship was built with some of my inventions included in it, I had to hire another company to physically make and engineer my products. There was money in it for me, but no satisfaction. If I had my own factory, it would be so much more satisfying. I intend to stay on this ship and work in my lab next door, but I need a good electrical engineer to run my plant. That person must be someone I trust and admire. I want you to be that person, but you need some degrees under your belt first."

Michael was speechless. Words were trying to come out, but only tears were making their way out so far.

"You don't seem to be used to receiving shocks like this. Well, every word is true, even the plural to the word 'degree'. You can choose the path that fits you best, but I was thinking that after you had your B.S. in EE, you would get an MBA, then a M.S. in EE and hopefully a Ph.D. in EE or some related field. This could take as little as 7-9 years of schooling, but if you were running my factory and taking night school classes, it could of course take longer. I'll have to find another cabin steward when you leave here."

"God, grant me the strength to do everything that will make Keith happy with me."

"He will and I will be happy. But YOU still have to be happy with all of this or it won't work out. You can think about it and let me know when I get back in six days.

"Keith that is going to take a lot of money. You are just starting out here. How can you afford such a huge sum of money?"

"You will be handling my factory's money, but I won't be letting you know what my personal financial situation is. Just rest at ease that I can and will handle your educational expenses. Period. Can I get you something from the refrigerator? There is some great stuff in here. What would you like?"

"Guess I'd better not drink pop anymore. Anything with juice would be fine. Thanks. I will remove the pops if you want me to."

"No. I might have a guest that would prefer a soda, that's what I call them. Let's decide later when you should begin school. I don't want to steal you from Mr. Sterling so soon and I would like to get to know you very well, so we can be thinking about maybe two years from now. I will see what strings I can pull at UW-Platteville to get you enrolled earlier so you could do some online courses before you leave here."

They drank their juice in silence. Then Keith walked over to his balcony windows. "Looks more like a city than the open ocean. Guess I can live with that for a few months until we get underway with our first passengers. I want to spend some nude time on the balcony to keep my tan tuned up. Guess that will have to wait until we don't have people in hi-rise buildings looking over here."

"I won't be joining you in that activity. Besides, my tan is built-in. I don't have any need to keep my tan tuned up." They both laughed.

"I'll say good night now, Michael. Did you write down your shoe and clothing sizes for me yet? I'll be up at 0400 for my ride back to Platteville to close up my apartment. I won't be exercising tomorrow, but I will be looking forward to seeing you when I return."

"Almost done with the sizes. There. Good night, Keith. You have changed my life today. It is a day I will never forget. Thank you." They shook hands and Michael began to leave by the door he came in.

"Michael, go out the other door and down to CCC. Tell Ken, I'm going to bed now and that you need to know who will be the cabin steward for this next week. Oh, and I almost forgot to tell you. Ken's undercover job, he said, will be the quality assurance head of the stewards. You can help him with

the details on that. He won't actually be doing that, but the public will think so. I wanted you to stay on as the head of stewards so you should create a level below yours for him. That will be your choice. G'nite."

"The Lord be with you. Safe journeys."

Platteville

Keith woke the next morning at 4 a.m. even though he hadn't set an alarm. He wondered where Ken was. He certainly hadn't been in the bed all night. He turned on his monitor and saw Ken at Jeremy's keyboard. He must have been there all night. Being alone at the keyboard is a good way to learn the system.

After a quick shower, Keith put on the cleanest clothes he could find in his backpack. At least he had a large supply of underwear from N4N. He wore some really bright red ones. If he thought about them while he was driving, the thought would really help keep him awake. He pushed the rest of his stuff and several juice bottles into his backpack and went out the door to the CCC. He went down the stairs this time so as not to scare Ken. "G'mornin, Ken. Been up all night?"

"Yeah. I love this system you wrote, Keith. It runs beautifully. I only had to ask Jeremy one question last night. Otherwise, I found everything I needed. The passenger check-in procedure is incredibly smooth. I will wait a few hours before I wake up Judith then I'll catch some shut-eye. Have a safe trip. Michael seemed to be on Cloud 9 when he left your cabin last night. Sounds like you two hit it off really well. I like Alex really well, too. There is much more depth to him than you heard last night before you took Michael upstairs."

"Good. Well I gotta fly if I am going to hold to my schedule. Hope your new cabin's renovation goes well for you. Call me every day and fill me in, OK?"

"Will do. Michael came back in again last night and left this ID badge for you. He said you should wear it around your neck whenever you are on the ship. Have a safe trip and don't take any chances. We need you back here safe regardless of when that is."

"Thanks. Now this makes sense. How many times have you seen a blank back on an ID badge when it has flipped over? This is identical on both sides. I'll bet this was an idea Judith came up with. Please give her my regards. Tell her I'm sorry that I missed her this morning. I'll be back. See ya."

Keith went to the staff dining room where there were a lot of people eating early breakfasts. He ordered three poached eggs and two oranges to eat there. He also asked for a carry-out of an extra lean half-pound hamburger cooked medium with just lettuce and tomato on it, no butter or condiments and a tall low-sodium V8 drink. His eggs and oranges were delivered almost immediately. He ate them very quickly, finishing just as his burger and drink arrived. They had put his drink into a firm plastic cup with a sipping hole at the top and a handle on the side. He thanked the waiter for his kindness then he took it and left.

It was colder outside than he expected. In that this was New York he was almost surprised to find that his old used Subaru Forester had not been stolen. He realized that was just his Midwestern attitude about New York City. The car started quickly and he began the long arduous journey out of the city. Not knowing that he would have a job or that he had even graduated yet, he had not looked into purchasing a better car. His old car was reliable, just not a thing of beauty. The outbound traffic was not nearly as heavy as the inbound traffic at this time of day so he was able to get up to cruising speed when he left the metropolitan area. He had said it would take two days to get home, but that was only to give him some extra time as he would need to purchase some clothing for both him and Michael. His laptop showed it was only 1000 miles with an expected driving time of 16 hours 24 minutes. He was in the car before 5 a.m. so even with stops for gas and bathroom breaks he should be in Platteville by midnight. That should take him around Chicago well after the rush hour traffic.

He decided to pack and ship nearly everything from the apartment that he would need in his cabin. The only stuff in his car for the return trip would be the clothes that he would purchase in Madison on his return trip. Then he would sell his car when he got back into New York. He would call a

taxi and take anything that he had in the car with him in the taxi to the ship. He didn't think there would be very much, but if it got bulky, he could have the stores send it to him at the ship. He would save enough time so he could have a nice visit with Aunt Jean.

Aunt Jean! He wouldn't be seeing Aunt Jean for a long time after he got back to the ship. She had been his only family. He had tried to get her to go on a cruise ship a few years ago with her girlfriend, but she said that she didn't like that sort of thing. He wondered if she would even come to visit him on the ship. That would be nice, if she did. What would she think about his idea that Michael could go and stay with her in his old room? Keith would pay her for Michael's room and board. Would she go for that idea? Too many unknowns. Keith was not used to that. He liked to be in control, in command. His new job would satisfy him in that area.

His mind was making too much noise for him to concentrate on his driving. He turned on the radio. He had a *Sirius XM*® radio which was still turned to a news station that he and Ken were listening to yesterday when they arrived in New York City. The news sounded the same as what they had just been listening to the day before. Boring! He switched to a light rock station and turned the volume down to a comfortable level.

* * *

Judith heard the CCC door close just as she was leaving her cabin. She looked down and saw only Ken in the room. "Who just left?"

Looking up at Judith, Ken answered, "Keith just left for home. He asked me to give you his regards and said he would be back."

"That's all? He just left without saying anything directly to me?"

"I can get him on his cellphone; he would still be on the ship."

"No, thanks."

"He was in good spirits when he left. I'm sure that he didn't mean any disrespect, Judith. It is just that he, um..."

Judith interrupted, "I know all about his divorce and his attitude toward women. I guess I was so happy about being able to hire him that I expected...no, hoped that he would have said goodbye directly to me."

"Judith, if you ask me, the fact that he looked up at your door and made some comments that he wanted me to pass on to you, was a very unusual action on his part. Besides that I feel that he likes you, but you didn't hear that from me."

"Thanks, Ken. You are a good man. Are you in a relationship with anyone?"

"No, basically I agree with what Chris said last night. But now that I have my Ph.D., I may begin looking for a female partner for life. I really don't know how living on a ship would complicate having a married life, though. Have you considered that problem?"

"About a month ago I had been considering various aspects of having families on board. Both crew families and guest families have some issues in common, but obviously guest families are easier to contend with. Guests are only here for a limited time so we can create a multitude of learning and entertainment situations for their children regardless of their age. Crew families are different. Their children can mix in with the guest children only if there is room for them. Among other things, crew accommodations are more limited in size and there is less daylight available to them. Having said that however, if both partners really want it, a family with children can happily exist under any conditions. Even on a space station. I will be beefing up the medical center on the ship so that we have adequate health care including pregnancy care and baby care."

"I suppose so, I just hadn't thought of that. By the way, you made some outstanding selections when you brought in those three stewards for us to consider last night."

"They are wonderful, aren't they? Are you still happy with Alex?"

“Yes and Keith gave me the choice of whether I would use Alex or Michael while I am in his cabin this week. I told them Alex and I could begin bonding right away if he was my steward. Michael liked that and thought this would help him delegate his duties of hiring new stewards during this week.”

“That sounds like a win-win. I called the maintenance engineer and he said your cabin should be ready in four days. It would have been earlier without the swim tank, but they have a procedure for installing them in a couple of days. The water lines pass right near here for the high-dive pool above us. I went to bed before finding out how Keith and Michael hit it off. Did you hear anything?”

“A match made in Heaven. Keith is going to buff up Michael and get him to eat healthy foods. Then he will be sending Michael to Platteville to get several degrees. He wants Michael to learn in his lab here until he starts school. When he finishes up with his schooling, Keith will hire him to run his factory that he will be building.”

“Wow. They certainly made a lot of progress together in a short time.”

“I haven’t talked to Keith about this, but he and I were going to set up a fund to help promising students. He must be planning to start the fund now. I’m all for it and we would then both be helping Michael.”

“That is something that my father has always wanted to do. He is a high school teacher and wants to have the fund set up by the time he retires. It is just a coincidence that you both have some of the same goals as my father. I wish you well. Say, weren’t you going to get some shut-eye now that I’m up?”

“Yup. I’ll go up now. Wake me when you need me. G’night, I think that’s what you call it even at this time of day.”

“The CCC is not expected to get busy until the Maxx gets a full staff, so just sleep until you are ready to get up. I’ll see you later.”

“Thanks.” Ken went up the stairs to Keith’s cabin. As he went in, his face lit up. A copy of all of this will be his in just a few short days. After living in small apartments and working so hard on his studies for so many years, he had finally arrived. This was luxury and it was even on a cruise ship. Sure the work would be challenging, but this was Heaven. Alex had already cleaned up the cabin after Keith left. Ken was too tired to even notice. He just kicked off his shoes and collapsed on the bed.

Judith looked around the CCC. *“What has just happened?”* she wondered. *“Yesterday started just like this, I was standing here alone, looking around, and hoping I could have some help with my work along with some companionship. Today, I am standing here alone, looking around, nobody is helping me and I don’t have a companion here. Sure I’ve put things into motion that will change all that, but it is not here now. Come on, Judith, snap out of it. I just want things to change with Keith. He is sure nice. I hope I can win him over. I’m already interested in him.”*

She had a lot to do. After looking around again, she launched right into her regular line of work.

* * *

Keith arrived in Platteville before midnight and quietly went into his apartment to sleep the rest of the night. In the morning he called his Aunt Jean and asked if he could pick her up for breakfast.

“Dear boy, where are you? You were going to New York. Are you back already?”

“Aunt Jean, let me pick you up so we can talk. I’ll take you to *Windsor Food & Spirits* so we can talk. I’ve got some really exciting news for you.”

“Can’t you tell me now?”

“No, you will have too many questions. My treat. Can you be ready in 15 minutes?”

“Well I am ready now so I guess so. I will get my coat and wait by the door.” And the phone was hung up.

“She hasn’t changed,” Keith grinned.

He was at her house in ten minutes so that he could help her with her coat, but she was ready just as she said she would be. She greeted him like they hadn't seen each other in two years. In actuality, Keith stopped by her house to talk to her every week. Now that was all going to change. Unless she visited him on a cruise, they would hardly see each other. After Keith explained his new job to his aunt, she was silent. She was still sharp as a tack; she was just recognizing that he was moving away and they would hardly see each other again.

"We can still call each other every week and have our regular updates. It won't be the same, but we will make the best of it. Every week I am going to invite you for a cruise on our ship until you give in. I really want you to come and visit us."

"Did Professor Young set this job interview up for you?"

"Yes, that's what I said. He has been the most wonderful friend that I've ever known."

"He has been wonderful and supportive to both of us for many years. I hope you will stop by his office to see him before you leave. His wife is not well, you know. I stop by to see her every day to sit with her for a while. Sometimes I read to her and sometimes we just talk. I will have a lot to tell her today."

"I didn't know that. Has she been sick long?"

"She has terminal cancer and may not last the year."

"Professor Young never mentioned it to any of us. We were at their house in June and she seemed fine then. I am so sorry."

"It has only been noticeable to others for the last month."

"Are you all set to leave, I'm afraid I have a lot of packing to do today. I will stop by to get a kiss before I leave."

They left and Keith took her home. They hugged and she wished him a wonderful life.

* * *

Keith knocked on the door to a modest office in the Hall of Justice at UW-Platteville. "Enter." Keith walked in. "Ahh, there you are Dr. Northquest. I was hoping you would stop by. What can I do for you?"

"Do for me? You have already done so much for me I don't know where to begin. I suppose I could start with setting me up for that embarrassing modeling job. Everybody in the ship now knows just what I look like without my clothes."

"Didn't you have anything on?"

"Sure if you think a half ounce of monofilament see-through thread woven loosely into a loin cloth can be called clothing. It was real drafty. Although by the time I got off the runway, it was full of large denomination bills. That made it a bit more opaque, but then it became very scratchy."

"That would be illegal. It must have been more than that."

"Well if it was, it didn't seem like it."

Laughing, "My spies told me that you removed it in front of everyone at the end."

"Actually, yes, but I arranged for all of the lights to be quickly blackened before it got illegal. The crowd really seemed to like that."

"Andrew said that he sold more than double the amount of any of his previous shows. He said to thank you."

"He gave us a very generous supply of bodywear in our sizes along with a nice note. Did you hear about Judith drawing a gun on me? My day was just full of surprises."

"Well, you did walk into a top secret area unannounced. Then when you asked if you could talk to Jeremy, I was glad that she didn't have my mike turned on. I think I even said out loud, 'Oh my God – here we go!'"

"It would have been interesting to have had her hooked up to a heart monitor just then."

"Did you like your cabin? I had a hand in planning that for you."

"It is wonderful. Yes, I remember when you walked in on my exercising and you asked about the names and functions of the machines. Did you also know about my cabin steward in advance?"

"No, that was all Judith's doing. I understand that you and this Michael lad got along very well?"

"Yes, and I wanted to talk to you about that. Is there any way that I can get Wisconsin resident tuition fees for Michael. He is an Alabama resident. The difference between that and non-resident fees is rather large."

"It is interesting how that sounds like *deja vous*."

"How so?"

"I am going to tell you a story that I have never told you before. No interruptions, please. Having you ask about obtaining residential tuition fees is nearly like something else some years ago. I will start at the beginning. I was once in love with a beautiful young lady. We had planned to get married, but a tragic event came into her life. Her sister suddenly passed away leaving a young son to be reared by her. My love for her grew. I loved her new son and even held him during his parents' funeral. I was looking forward to suddenly having a son when we were married, but my love wouldn't hear of it."

Keith's eyes were welling up with tears.

"She insisted that my new position with the university would be in jeopardy if I did not obtain tenure through research. She did not see how that would be possible with a new son in my life. We have remained wonderful friends through all these years in spite of my marriage to another woman. Later when this child was preparing to attend the university, she asked me, just as you now have, if I could arrange residential tuition fees for a Minnesota resident. I told her that Minnesota residents pay non-resident fees in Wisconsin. Unfortunately for Michael, that is not possible."

"You were in love with my Aunt Jean?"

"Yes. Actually, I still am."

"You could have called me, 'Son', all of my life? You don't know how I have wanted some man to call me his son for all these years. You could have called me, 'Son', I don't believe it." He wept a little bit.

"Keith, I have always thought of you as my son. I didn't know you needed to hear it. I am so sorry." He rose and hugged Keith. "Now you know why there was so much emotion in my voice when I said that I was so proud of you. Your achievements in this world have been so outstanding. I know others have blamed you for your divorce and you have blamed, Donna. Keith, it takes two. We older folks easily say, 'they were too young,' and that is most of the problem. But the truth is, neither of you were ready. Try to get rid of your hatred and distrust of women. Let your life play out naturally. Don't rush it, but don't hold back either. God has a plan for you. That is my fatherly advice for you today. Please trust me and call me with anything that you might ask your father. Please."

"Thank you, Professor. I will."

How about calling me, 'Dad' when nobody is around that you would have to explain to?"

"Sure, Dad. Thank you for telling me your story. It explains a lot, really." He wiped his eyes on his sleeve. "I really just wanted to see you and thank you for setting up this ultra-incredible job for me. I even have an electronics lab on the ship."

"You deserve everything that you are getting. You are extremely bright and talented. You are more than capable of handling this job well. Best of luck in all you do, Son." Keith had to wipe his eyes again.

"Thank you. God bless you." He turned and left the room. He drove back to his apartment, went in, sat down on his bed, and cried.

Weather Forecast

The time went by very quickly and soon Keith found himself in his car headed back to New York City. He had arranged for everything to be sent to the ship. All he had with him was his ever present backpack and his laptop. When he stopped in Madison to do some clothes shopping, he even had the stores mail his purchases to him. He didn't close his bank accounts before he left. Since his bank was the *Wells Fargo*®, he decided to maintain his accounts there. A *Wells Fargo* branch bank would open in the Maxx in just a month or two.

As he was driving back through Pennsylvania, he caught a weather alert on the radio. Weather. Everyone always talked about the weather. No wait, this was serious stuff. Hurricane Sandy was headed up the Atlantic coast and was expected to make landfall around New Jersey or New York sometime late tomorrow on October 29th. Although it was weakening, it sounded pretty bad. He should be safely back to the ship well before it would hit. His small car might get blown off the road if the wind was too strong. His plan was to sell his car. As he approached a Subaru dealership in New York City, he decided to call Ken.

Just as he was opening his cellphone, it rang. "Ken, what's up?"

"You aren't due to leave Platteville until tomorrow and that means you may not be able to get back here until next week sometime. There is a hurricane that is expected to make landfall somewhere in this area and there may be major flooding. Don't try to drive through it..."

"Hold on, Ken. I will be there in a few hours. I left early and I am just 30 miles out. I will hopefully be selling my car in a few minutes then I'll catch a taxi for the rest of the trip. I just heard about the storm on the radio. What is the prognosis for the Maxx when it hits? I've read that ships don't want to be tied up in port when a hurricane hits."

"We're good. The winds are supposed to be less than hurricane force and the storm surge has to squeeze through the narrow mouth of the Hudson before it works its way up here. We may have some bouncing, but we're not expecting any damage."

"Thank God for that. Should I stop for some seasick pills for you and Judith? I don't usually need them."

"No thanks, the doc has been handing them out already. She is on the ball. Judith wanted me to call you. She's worried about you."

"Don't worry about me. I will be there soon. Does she have her damage assessment plans all in place with the security department?"

"She has everything in place for everything. She is incredible."

"OK, see you soon. Bye."

"Bye."

* * *

The sale of his Forester went very smoothly and he got about what he thought he would for the old car. The dealer even called a taxi for him. It was there almost before the dealer hung up the phone. The bright yellow cab came bouncing into the dealer's parking lot. Keith went out and waved to the cab driver. When the driver got out of his cab, he took Keith's backpack and they both got into the taxi. "Wha'sup? Couldn't get a car for the right price? Where you going?"

"I need to get to the Maxx, that's the big new cruise ship over by the docks."

"Yeah, I know where it is. You going there for a new job? I've taken quite a few people there that were looking for jobs. Don't know if any got their jobs or not, but some that I've picked up from there seemed happy."

Keith didn't contribute to the conversation so it just got quiet in the cab for a short time.

"You hear 'bout Sandy? Going to be wet around here tomorrow they say. I figure if I just stay a few blocks away from the water, I'll be OK. We've never had no storm here like they are telling us to watch out for. They just don't want to be accused for not warning people I think. It is crazy! No flood never hit us before and it ain't going to happen now either. Hey, you want to drive past where the old World Trade Center came down? Now that was a real disaster. Just eleven years ago. I had just picked up a guy from there before the plane crashed into it. He was one lucky man to get away from there in time."

"Please don't. I need to get to the Maxx right away."

"Got an appointment, have ya? OK, I'll take you straight there. What kind of job are you interviewing for? I'd say looking at you that you want a maintenance job. Guys with big bodies like yours like to work in maintenance. How was my guess?"

"Pretty close. Yup, pretty close."

"You said 'yup' instead of 'ya' so you're not from around here. That sounds more like the U-P of Michigan."

"My uncle was from Iron Mountain, so you are right on." He thought, "*Oh, P.L.E.A.S.E. shut up and drive.*"

"You don't talk much."

"No, I have a lot on my mind so I'm trying to think right now."

"OK, I'll be quiet. Unless some idiot from out of state cuts me off, then I'm liable to start yelling obscenities at him." He laughed at his own joke.

"*Please.don't.talk.anymore.please...*" Keith got his wish because the driver was quiet until they got to the dock.

"Here you are. Don't slip when they hang you over the side to freshen up the paint."

"Thanks for the ride and the advice." Keith put his ID badge on while the driver was handing his backpack to him.

"Oh! Looks like you already have a job. Hmm, marketing and security. Congratulations."

"You are welcome." He paid the driver. "I hope you will take a cruise with us sometime."

"I might do that. Thanks for the nice tip, too."

"You are welcome. Have a good day." Keith quickly turned and went up the gangway to the ship.

Michael was at the top waiting for him. "Welcome home, Keith. We were worried that you would get caught up in the storm tomorrow.

"That was just a stroke of good luck. I didn't even know about the storm until about 30 miles ago."

"Let me take your backpack up to your cabin for you. Weren't you going to have some more things?"

"I shipped everything. Or if I am on a ship, should I say that I trucked everything?"

"And if you were on a boat, would you say that you mailed everything? I don't think it matters. We are just glad that you are here." Michael gave him a warm handshake. "How was your trip? Did you visit anyone?"

"The trips were good. I drove each way in less than a day. And, yes, I had some visits. One was a difficult goodbye for a while with my Aunt Jean." He paused while he thought about his visit with Professor Young, his new almost Dad. "I talked to someone about getting you into UW-Platteville for your electrical engineering degrees. We can talk about that later; there won't be any problems. Is Ken's cabin ready yet or will I be sleeping in only half a bed tonight."

"They will have it ready by dinner time. Alex and I will move Ken into his own cabin this evening. You are in luck."

They walked to the elevator. "If you have the time, Michael, we should be taking the stairs up to the 13th deck. If you get too tired, you can take the elevator the rest of the way. I will carry my backpack."

Michael drew a deep breath. "OK, I guess I will have to start sometime. It may as well be now."

"We can start out slow. Thanks for the ID badge. Your cellphone takes good photos. I really like having a badge printed on both sides. That makes it easier for our guests to identify us. Whose idea was that?"

Michael was puffing already. "I agree with you. I asked Judith if I could do it that way for my people."

Keith cut him off to keep him from running out of air. "So she agreed and you went ahead and did it. Fantastic. I can see why Mr. Sterling kept promoting you. I hope he is not too upset with me when I tell him that I will be taking you from his employment when you head for school. He may think so much about you that he will fire me for doing that. You do not have to answer; you can just nod or shrug your shoulders. We only have eight decks to go. Are you OK?"

"One more."

"If you need to stop, that is OK. I never expected you to go all the way on the first day. When you say 'stop', I will just say, 'just one more.' Then we can stop. I want you to push yourself and I want you to push me."

"OK stop."

"You can still talk, so just one more. You can rest at the landing to shake the lactic acid out of your leg muscles, but then we have to keep going to the next deck."

"I – can't – go – any – farther." Michael was panting heavily.

"You are almost there, three more steps. Push yourself! There! You did it. Rest for a while and we will go up the rest of the way..."

Michael just glared at him.

"...using the elevator."

Michael's look turned into a tired smile.

Rudolph

They got off the elevator on the 14th level and Keith helped Michael into his cabin. “Do you want to collapse into the chair or lie on my bed?”

“That is your bed, I will take the chair.”

“Remember what I said. You are my friend and if you would rather lie on the bed, then lie on the bed.”

“Thank you, but I will still take the chair. I might not be able to get up again otherwise.”

“What can I get you to drink? You will take water and not soda, right?”

“Good thing I didn’t get a chance to answer. OK, I will take water, thank you.”

Keith poured them both tall glasses of water. He gave Michael one of them with a broad smile on his face. “When you finish that, let’s go back down a deck so we can enter the CCC refreshed.”

“I can’t believe I climbed that many stairs.”

“And soon you will be doubling that amount. I’ll bet you could do it back when you were working out every day.”

“I guess I did. I just let my body go downhill. I look forward to getting back into shape, thanks to you.”

“You can do it. Ready? Let’s go make a normal entrance from deck 13.”

* * *

“Hello, I’m back and I beat the storm. Michael met me at the gangway.”

Judith and Ken were the only people in the CCC. They smiled and showed that they were glad that he did not get caught up in the storm.

Keith went directly to Judith and held out his hand. “I realized that I did not say goodbye directly to you before I left. I am sorry and I won’t do that again.”

Judith smiled and shook his hand. “I am sorry for wanting that from you, but I guess I have done things to you that were worse.”

He questioned her with his face. “Worse?”

“I pulled a gun on you when you first walked in. That was not nice of me.”

Laughing, “You had a perfect right to do that. I was trespassing. I would be upset with you if you hadn’t done that. Anyway, we are a team and I should have personally let you know when I left. Never again. OK?”

“Should I leave?” Ken was becoming embarrassed for witnessing this.

“No. What is the latest estimate of damage from Sandy, Ken? We need to communicate a plan to the staff on the ship.” Keith jumped right into his work mode. Judith nodded to Keith in agreement with his statement.

“Her wind speed is dropping and she will be sub-tropical, but the moon phase and her intersection with another low are expected to make a storm surge that will be out of proportion to any recent storms. There are expected to be serious and widespread flooding conditions all around here.”

“Judith, this is going to mess up your reason for tying up here to hire new employees. They will stop coming in as they will have survival on their minds, not applying for a job. Wait a minute. I’ve got an idea. How do I contact Mr. Sterling?”

Judith gave Keith, Sterling’s personal cellphone number. “You make the call; you have the same direct responsibility to him as I do.”

“OK, I will go sit over there by your fancy coffee table to call him.” Keith took a pad of paper with him and sat in one of the chairs before punching in Mr. Sterling’s number. “Hello, Mr. Sterling? This is Keith Northquest, your new Chief of Security-Systems.”

“Hello, dear boy. I saw you the other evening when you arrived, but we were not able to meet and chat. I do want to let you know that I was able to sell some copies of your software and the installation of your door locks to other cruise line owners. I sold so many that it covered my cost for its purchase and installation in Maxx. I am going to reward you with a heavy kickback on my net income.”

“Hold on to that Mr. Sterling. I am calling you for your authorization of another large cost.”

“Please call me Rudolph, if I can call you Doctor Keith.”

“Thank you, Rudolph, but please just call me, Keith.”

“If you wish, certainly. Now what is the cost that you are proposing for me?”

“I will put you on speakerphone so Judith can also hear you. Are you OK with that?”

“Yes, of course. Good afternoon, Judith.”

“Good afternoon to you, Rudolph.”

Keith continued, “Rudolph, you tied up the Maxx here to make it easier to entice potential crew members to sign on with us. However, Hurricane Sandy is bearing down on us with potentially damaging conditions for a very large number of homes. I am asking if you will donate our facilities to displaced people. There will no doubt be an excessive number of them. I do not fully understand the mechanics of it, but perhaps the donation could be made to the International Red Cross so that you would not face denial of a tax write-off if you donated the use of cabins to specific families. The benefit to the Maxx is that we could gain a large number of upscale individuals and families that might sign-on with us as employees. They would be coming to us with immediate gratitude, rather than our having to earn that over a much longer period of time. The negative is that there may be some minor damage to our facilities from such a heavy usage. I propose that they must vacate our premises one month before we expect to leave our New York port. This results in a much longer benefit than what the Red Cross usually gives to displaced families. It would be a combined room and board benefit instead of their usual room or food pantry only benefits. Also, I anticipate setting up offices inside of the Maxx for the various government agencies that deal with replacement of various forms of identification and so forth. If you would you be willing to make this change in the operation of our facilities, I am sure that the current staff will follow your lead to bring comfort and caring to the displaced families. Your thoughts, Rudolph?”

Judith’s eyes were wide as saucers.

There was a pause. “Sorry, I was trying to take notes, but you got too far ahead of me. Please send me an email on this.” Keith’s fists tensed in anticipation of a negative reply. “Keith, you are so very in tune with my philanthropic interests. I had been considering a large monetary contribution, depending upon the degree of suffering of our metropolitan community. But your proposal hits the problem square in its guts and brings an immediate solution to much of the suffering that may arise. You and Judith may proceed immediately with your plans. I will call the president, governor, mayor, FEMA, and the Red Cross and ask for their immediate assistance in getting your plans to the agencies that will be in contact with the survivors. I am also going to call the governor of New Jersey. God bless you. Call me frequently to keep me in the loop. And send that email tonight. Thank you.”

Keith and Judith just sat and stared at each other.

The cellphone rang and Keith saw that it was Rudolph. “Yes?”

“You will still be getting the kickback that I mentioned, Keith.”

“Thank you Rudolph. I love working here and for you.”

“The admiration is mutual, Keith. Good Day.”

“Keith, you did it. I didn’t know what you were coming up with, but I could see your gears working on it as you spelled it out for him. You have come up with a beautiful solution to a situation that may become very ugly tomorrow evening.”

“We will need to explain it to the crew. It will require tackling a very heavy work load with a skeleton crew. Michael, did you hear this?”

“Yes, sorry for listening in.”

“No, you need to be heavily involved in this. Can your current small staff help as needed in the kitchen? I don’t think you should be delivering food to individual cabins. Can you reassign your people temporarily to fit their staffing?”

“Yes, our current employees are not yet union members so there should not be a problem with reassignment of jobs. And even if there was a problem, the union contract allows for changes to meet a serious problem. My personal view is that since the Maxx is paying them twice the going union rate, they should want to help like this.”

“Thanks for your great spirit, Michael. Before you leave, I want to ask you if you will sit in the front row of the general meeting that we will have tonight. A lot of the crew knows you and I think it would help.”

“Certainly, no problem. I have some planning to do so I will be leaving now, but I will see you there.”

“Thank you, Michael,” Judith said. “I think I should inform the chef and her staff before we make a general announcement. This may impact them more than any other department on the ship.”

Keith said, “If city utilities break down, we will have to depend on our own generation of electricity and production of drinking water. This will impact the entire ship, except for navigation. We don’t have a ship’s Captain yet anyway so that shouldn’t be a problem. I can’t get over Rudolph’s quick acceptance of my idea.”

“I can’t get over the size and potential of that storm headed this way. Ken, can you keep an eye on it and the reports? We will have to plan out the staffing of CCC that we will need to have in place when the storm hits. Keith will take the lead on CCC and I will take the lead on the survivors. Keith, I will be using wrist bracelets for ID and their door locks. Ken, please call Tom and Bill in here. They need to be brought up to date.”

“Confirmed.”

Judith said, “I like the sound of that. It means so much more than ‘OK’ or ‘I’ll do that’.
Thanks for coining that response, Jeremy.”

Keith smiled knowing that she was thanking him.

* * *

Keith sent a detailed email to Rudolph before Tom and Bill got to CCC. After they arrived, the five of them each took a portion of the heavy work load that they would be responsible for when the suddenly-displaced people would begin arriving. When they had it all worked out along with the times that each of them would provide coverage in CCC, they planned the communications to the rest of the ship.

Judith told Keith and the associates, “I think we are ready enough to present this to the crew. I have already told the chef. Most of the crew is at dinner so I will make an announcement over the public address system for everyone to meet in the theatre in one hour. Ken can you send *The Weather Channel*® forecast and some talking points to my tablet? I will look at it before I put it up on the screens in the theatre. Everyone has probably already seen it, but this will make sure that we are all on the same page.”

“Confirmed. If anything comes up in the next hour before you begin presenting, I will add that, too.”

“Great, thanks. Let’s go live on the PA.”

“Ready in 3-2-1-”

“May I have your attention, please? Your attention, please! Good evening to the Maxx crew members. This is Judith Overstreet, Guest Relations Chief Officer. All crew members are required to assemble for an important meeting in the main theatre at 1900 or 7:00 p.m. for the new people. Repeating, all crew members are required to attend an important meeting in the main theatre at 1900.

All exits to the ship should be manned by the minimum number of crew members. There will be time for questions at the end of a short presentation about Hurricane Sandy. Your attendance is required. Thank you.”

Ken indicated that the PA was off now.

“That was too long, wasn’t it?”

Keith said, “No, they need to be there and this way they can be prepared with questions.

With your well prepared presentations, their questions should be answered. Your announcement should have them well prepared for the meeting.”

Ken added, “I will put out a reminder 30 minutes before the meeting and again 15 minutes later.”

* * *

The main theatre had 5000 seats for movies, large concerts, or Broadway plays. The plush seats each had its own adjustable sound system which included built-in microphones that could be used during meetings where audience participation was needed. Touch pads mounted on the backs of the seats in front of each person were designed for game shows. Each seat was mounted on a moveable platform so the audience would receive moving sensations from specially filmed movies. The room-darkening curtain on the stage was pulled back so that the audience could look out over the front of the ship onto the ocean until the performance started. Because the Maxx was tied up facing down river, today’s view was of the mouth of the river about a mile away.

Ken got a total of the attendees from the count of their wristbands that went through the main doors and past the sensors installed for that purpose. He sent it to Judith on her tablet. Its clock showed her that it was time to begin her presentation. Both she and Keith went out onto the stage. They had put on their cruise uniforms of white trimmed in gold. Keith’s trousers had a gold stripe running down the outside seam. Neither wore their hats for this meeting as they wanted to look official without looking superior.

“Good Evening. Thank you so much for coming to this meeting on such a very short notice. By your encouraging response I can already see that we have the most incredible crew in the entire cruise industry.” She stopped to lead applause. “There are quite a few new people here that I have not yet met. My name is Judith Overstreet and I am the Chief of Guest Relations. This gentleman next to me is Keith Northquest and he is our new Chief of Marketing. Please use just our first names when addressing either of us. Keith reports to me and in certain situations I may ask him to step in for me. His major role is that of taking pictures of the guests for their cruise memories and his camera crew will be shooting advertising photos and videos for the Maxx.” Keith smiled and bowed very slightly before he sat down in the front row.

“Now, for the reason that I wanted us all together this evening.” She touched her tablet and the room darkening curtain closed across the windows. Large screens on the side of the room lit up and a large screen lowered behind Judith. “Perhaps you have seen the news about Hurricane Sandy that will hit us about this time tomorrow. These are the current *Weather Channel* images showing us the forecast for tomorrow. While this storm will no longer be considered a hurricane because of its wind speed, do not be lulled into thinking that this storm is not dangerous. It is combining with other weather elements to result in a historically strong and dangerous storm that will, not probably, but WILL leave hundreds if not thousands of people without homes.”

“I have just been talking with Mr. Rudolph Sterling about our responsibility as concerned citizens to these future displaced citizens. He has directed us to provide them with room and board for up to four months. This is longer than the Red Cross benefits typically last. Keith sees this as an excellent marketing opportunity to tell the world about our new cruise ship. He will bring in the major news networks to film the displaced people and the elegant furnishings that Mr. Sterling will be

providing them. This will all be coordinated through the International Red Cross. Details will be finalized in the next 24 hours so that we can be ready when they begin to arrive.”

“Have you been thinking about this already? How will it involve all of us, especially when we do not have a full crew on hand? You, me, Keith, all of us are going to have to work hard and work extra hours to make this as smooth as possible for our displaced guests. Please do not forget that they ARE our guests and we will all treat them as such.”

“We originally tied up to this dock for the purpose of making it easy for people to come here looking for work. We are hopeful that this will be such a positive experience for these guests that many of them will want to sign-on as crew members. Many of them will not only lose their homes, but also their jobs because of Sandy. We are hoping that without further advertising, we will have a full crew of competent people in four months.”

“Keith, if you will come up here to help, we will take questions now. Michael Murray, Chief Steward has ten twenty-dollar bills to hand out to the first ten people with questions.” Suddenly hands went up everywhere.

“Are we in danger on this ship in the storm?” The first question was a good one. Judith asked for an answer from someone in the ship’s company.

“No, the wind will not be a problem for us; we have stabilizers that will counter any wind problems at sub-hurricane wind speeds. The storm surge could be a problem if we were in a different harbor, but since we are in a wide part of a river that has a narrow inlet, the surge will be greatly modified, or slowed, by the time it reaches us. Our crew will carefully monitor the stress on our mooring lines and make modifications as the water level rises.”

“Thank you for that comforting answer. Who is next, Keith?”

The questions continued well after the twenty dollar bills ran out. Judith was pleased with the attitude of the crew. Everyone seemed ready to tackle any problems that might arise. They had signed-on to do a job and they were happy to begin working without waiting until the ship set sail on their first cruise. Judith had asked the department heads to put together their plans for action so everyone would be ready when the displaced people would begin coming in. She reminded them to above all, be flexible. She was given a round of applause when she ended the meeting.

* * *

Keith was awakened at 0400 the next morning by a preset alarm from Jeremy just as Michael was coming in for his morning exercise. “Great attitude, Michael. Even though you will be tired for a while after our workout, your body will function so much better all day long for having exercised. Don’t skimp on eating healthy during the day. Your body will need that nourishment to function properly. I got you some gym shoes, clothes and a swim suit. They are in this drawer here,” as he pulled open a drawer. “This can be your drawer for anything you want to keep in here. I had the other stuff sent here, but I knew it wouldn’t arrive for several days – maybe not before a week or more now with the bad weather.” Michael got dressed in the bathroom and Keith in the walk-in closet. They both went into their exercise routines. Keith did not have to worry about Michael not using the equipment correctly. Michael went right into a routine that he had walked away from several years ago when he had been working his muscles correctly. They both had a good workout. “I’ll take a swim for 15 minutes now while you use the treadmill. Be sure to leave our door to the pool room open. That causes Judith’s door to lock so nobody gets embarrassed. Just make sure that we close our door when we are out of the pool room so that she can get in there when she wants to use it.”

“Confirmed.”

Keith said with a laugh, “Oh, are you using that now, too. I built that into Jeremy because I wanted a short positive response from him. Guess it works for all of us.”

This was Keith’s first swim in the exercise tank. He really liked it. The tank was plenty long enough for him so he didn’t have to worry about whacking his feet at the end if his forward speed didn’t

match the water speed. It was wide enough for any of his arm strokes. It even had a sliding lever within easy reach to vary the water speed for his different strokes. This was a deluxe model that drained from the entire rear wall of the tank. The water was mixed with fresh as needed and it was kept at the selected temperature. But the best part was that much of the water was pumped into the ceiling and it came crashing down in front of him in a waterfall. Then it entered the swim tank through many large jets in front of him in the tank. The waterfall gave it a refreshing sound and a visual image like a Hawaiian waterfall that would have been romantic if someone else had been in there with him. He wondered what it would be like if Judith was in there with him. Wait! Stop! He was not going to get mixed up with any woman, or least he didn't plan on it.

Keith got out of the water and grabbed a towel. He was wiping himself off so he wouldn't drip as he walked to his shower. Michael passed him on his way into the swim tank. "Don't forget, Michael, leave the door open so that Judith's door stays locked."

"I won't forget. How was it?"

"You will really enjoy it. It was just fantastic!"

"Good. I'll be walking around with a smile on my face all day and some people may get the wrong idea," he said with a smile.

"It will just be a test as to your suitability for the security team. You have to be able to keep secrets."

Michael smiled and changed into his swim suit while Keith went into the bathroom to take a shower. It was darker than usual with the approaching storm. He turned off the shower light so that nobody with a hi-power telescope could see into his shower room. There was plenty of room in the 6x6 foot shower right next to the outer wall of the ship. All but the lower eight inches of the outer wall were made of a clear glass with a very light tint. He would learn later that the wall was polarized to filter out glare from the ocean's surface when its plasma wall was set to clear. He set it to a more opaque setting for this morning.

He was showered and dressed when Michael turned off the pumps and came out of the swim room with his towel. "Dry off and if you like and we can have a healthy breakfast together. How was the swim? Wasn't that fantastic?"

"I have never been in such a beautiful and well-engineered pool. It was simply incredible. I am so lucky to have you as a friend that lets me enjoy these finer things in life."

"And why not? You are an important part of my life. You will see. If you choose, you will be able to make a great life for yourself and I'll be there with the biggest smile for you. Come on, sit down and I'll see if you can handle a healthy meal." Keith fixed them each a drink of fresh vegetables whipped up in a blender. It looked like a smoothie, but it had a strange green-color.

"What is in this?"

"Drink it first then I'll tell you."

"Now you've got me worried. You drink it first."

Keith took a large drink and smacked his lips. He turned to Michael saying, "You next."

Michael tentatively smelled it then put his finger into it so he could lick his finger. "It doesn't taste bad, it just looks bad." Then he took a small drink. Stopped, licked his lips. Thought about it for a while. Then he turned in his chair with his back to Keith and took a large slow drink. He turned back toward Keith and saw that he was giggling. "What?"

"I just never saw a dark-skinned man with a green mouth before."

"Keep that up and I'll be able to say that I never saw a white man with his hair all dripping green before." Soon they were both laughing too hard to enjoy the rest of their breakfast drink. It is really good tasting though." Michael finished his drink. "Now will you tell me what is in it?"

"Sure, it has carrots, apples, spinach, cucumbers, celery, parsley, and mint leaves, along with some orange, lemon, lime and pineapple. That's all good stuff. It is just not usually mixed up together

like this. Now that you are done with that, here is some whole wheat toast with baked chicken slices on a thin layer of tofu. I got these ingredients from the chef last night. It is better to eat several small meals than to fill up on 2 or 3 large meals. If you are in this area and you want to make yourself another sandwich between meals, just stop in anytime. I'll talk to the chef about having some of these things prepared in the crew's dining room."

"These are so good that I might not be losing any weight if I keep eating like this."

"Sure you will. Especially with all the exercise you will be getting. Today was just a slow start. I'll build up the intensity as you progress."

They finished their breakfast and Keith opened his closet. "Hmm. I think we should greet our new guests with working clothes when they start coming in. They will be wet and cold and our dress uniforms would be inappropriate if we are to really help them. When we hold our first town meeting with them we can dress up for that. What do you think, Michael? You have more experience with guests than I do. I should get Judith's opinion, too."

"I was thinking the same thing, especially for the stewards. If the people have any wet belongings with them, the stewards' clothing will get soiled, too. I didn't even think about what you and Judith would be wearing. You can see what she thinks."

Keith got dressed quickly and started to pick up his cabin.

"Keith, don't pick any of that up. I will clean up your cabin now. You have to do your part and leave the mess for me," he said with a smile. "I can see you are not used to having a steward around."

"Me? My ex-wife didn't even pick up anything that I left lying around. I did it all."

"Better get going if you want to beat Judith down to CCC this morning. Thanks for the exercise, swim and breakfast, Keith. Now go."

"Yes, sir." He saluted and ducked out the front door before Michael's towel hit him in the back.

Displaced People

Bill was alone in the CCC. "You are up early, Keith. It is only 5 o'clock. I've got a fresh pot of coffee going over in the kitchen, if you want some."

"Thanks, Bill but I just finished a healthy breakfast after exercising and taking a swim."

"So you really do use that exercise equipment up there, do you? I wondered if it was just for show. I guess it keeps up the build on your muscles."

"Yup, that it does. I have to keep polishing my image so to speak. By the way, don't come within ten yards of any of the electronic equipment over here when you have a cup of coffee or tea for that matter. The acid in those brews is certain death to electronics and keyboards." He paused to let that sink in. "You know, I should invent an improved keyboard that could withstand a coffee splash and still maintain its operational function without giving up any of its light-touch characteristics. There are horrible plastic mats that I have seen some people put over their keyboards. You can forget about having a light touch on the keyboard when those things are in place. Ugh! They discolor and rip easily, too. I'll give that to Michael as a project."

"You mean your steward, Michael Murphy?"

"He's the one. He wants to be an electrical engineer so I am mentoring him in my lab next to the kitchen back there. This will give him something useful to make that he can use and it will cause him to be noticed by his peers and professors when he goes back to school."

"When is he leaving?"

"I am hoping he will be accepted to start with online courses next fall. He will be going to my old engineering alma mater, University of Wisconsin-Platteville. He won't actually be leaving the ship for a couple of years."

"I didn't know you had gone there for anything but your security education. Were all of your degrees from there?"

"Yes, I was what my aunt called, a 'professional student'. She didn't think I was ever going to leave there and get a job. Guess she was right; I just got my last degree last week. Five degrees is a few more than most people get."

"Tom and I heard about your degrees and how well you had done in your security training, too. You didn't get any answers wrong in the entire program, did you?"

"No, but before you begin patting me on the back, Ken only got one wrong in the entire program and Judith didn't get any wrong either when she went through it. Professor Young just chose to rank me higher than Judith because he changed one of the courses between the time she took it and when I took it. He said it is more difficult now, but I think Judith would have aced it, too."

"You three make an incredible team. We are lucky to be able to work with you."

"Bill, you and Tom went through a different course down there in Virginia. You had a very tough program and just the fact that you are designated as 'agents' means that your abilities are incredible. I think that all five of us are extremely fortunate to be able to work together and learn from each other. I feel that we are all equals, but there has to be some sort of organization and it is what it is. We will just use the organization to achieve the goals. I don't think that Rudolph Sterling needs to be getting updates from more than two people from the Maxx. We are not his only ship."

"Right, but we are still lucky to work with you. After all, you brought us in as your associates."

"I forgot to ask. Is your cabin ready yet?"

"Almost. You did get back here early, you know, so they are right on time. I don't know if the burden of our new guests coming in will cause any delays or not."

“Probably not, I’ve been told that construction crew meets all of their deadlines. They are very good. What do you think of Jeremy? Can you find everything you need? Are you able to track people as they move about the ship? You may want to do that with certain suspicious guests.”

“Both Tom and I absolutely LOVE Jeremy. He is so accommodating and easy to work with. Your programs are apparently bug-free. How long did it take for you to do all of this programming?”

“That is one question I won’t answer, but thank you. Jeremy was the subject of my doctoral thesis. Only one professor was able to listen to the whole thing due to its security. Others heard and questioned specific modules pertaining to their areas of expertise. Professor Young actually read the entire program and even made some few minor changes. We were both excited right out of our minds when it loaded, compiled, and executed without a glitch the first time.”

“Compiled? Isn’t that old-school?”

Keith smiled. “That is one of its levels of security. I also wrote the operating system. This is not just a Windows or UNIX or a multitude of other operating systems that are out there. They have been hacked and re-hacked by every bad guy around the world. This one is new and even after it gets on a few other cruise ships there won’t be much interest or opportunity to hack it. I will be extremely shocked if any virus can get into Jeremy.”

Jeremy announced that Tom and Ken were entering the CCC. Keith remembered when he walked in unannounced on Judith and she drew her gun on him. When he was in Platteville, he remembered to get his gun from his wall safe. The use of a gun was one of the topics they practiced in their security classes. Keith was classified as a “Sharp shooter.” He decided that he would carry it concealed on the ship from now on.

Ken and Tom both walked in at about the same time. Keith asked, “Morning guys. Everybody sleep well last night?”

“Love that bed, Keith. The workers were going to come in and finish up our cabin today, so I wanted to be out before they got there. It is almost done, so I slept there last night. Bill and I have separate bedrooms with a couple of desks in the room between them. Its third wall is the patio door to the balcony. It is just incredible.”

“If you three guys want to go to breakfast, I’ll take over here. Take your time. That may be in short supply after today.”

Bill asked, “Keith, are you sure? I was going to be on duty until Judith came down in a couple of hours.” Keith was nodding his head, yes. “OK, we shouldn’t be very long. Can we get anything for you?”

“No, I just ate, I’ve got everything I need in my cabin up there, and I have water down here. Go. Enjoy. See what the scuttlebutt is about our guests that will be coming in later.”

They had just left when Keith heard Judith’s door open. He looked up to see her looking down at him over the railing. For a moment he had thoughts of Romeo and Juliet. “Good morning. It looks like you slept well.”

“Thank you. Don’t forget I have had many more months of getting used to my cabin than you have. I always sleep well here. Did you use the pool this morning? I did not hear it if you did and it was so clean that I didn’t think you had used it.”

“Yes, both Michael and I used it after our exercise workouts. I am glad he cleaned it up to meet your inspection standards. I did not know it had a waterfall in it. Very nice. It would be like Hawaii if it had some orchids in there for decoration.”

“I thought of that too! How interesting. They would love the humidity and the temperature. Should we get some?”

“Aren’t there customs problems with that in some countries or are they OK if they stay on the ship?”

“As long as they are not made of cocaine I think they would be OK, Keith.”

"If they were, Jeremy would call Tom & Bill."

"He wouldn't squeal on you, would he?"

"Oh, yes he would. He was taught not to play favorites on something like that."

Laughing, "That is good to know. Did you have breakfast, Keith?"

"Yes, thank you. I just sent Tom, Bill, and Ken down to get breakfast. You could catch up to them if you want to."

"I'd rather be in here by you." She paused for effect. "We need to iron out some details for handling the new guests tonight."

He just said, "Oh."

"I will eat a few things from the kitchen down here."

"What about dress code for today? I was thinking that an appearance of being helpful rather than elegant would be more appropriate on the part of the crew. We can dress up for the town meetings."

"I agree. Thinking alike again, are we?"

Keith smiled. "OK, then how about this? You and I can greet at the door and inquire as to how many beds they will be needing. Based on that we will take them to an available steward who will check them in and carry anything they brought with them to their new cabin. Since the stewards have blocks of cabins, this will spread out their work loads."

"Just what I was thinking. This is beginning to be a habit."

"I'd rather have a compatible habit than be butting heads all the time."

"Let's set up for this and run all the stewards through the check-in procedures, Keith. It will be a repeat for a few of them, but Michael has hired some new stewards that will need the rehearsal."

"I don't know if Tom and Bill will want to be there 'helping' too or not, but Ken should be with Jeremy so he can alert us if any mistakes are made."

"When the boys get back, I will check with Tom and Bill about whether they will be cross-checking the guests with the DEA records from the entrance way, a room nearby, or the CCC. And I will have Ken handle the verification of the checking in process. Bill had better get some sleep before anyone arrives; he was up all night."

"Judith, if you don't have a schedule for the five of us, may I offer one?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"Until we get underway on our first cruise, I think the two of us should both be with the guests during the day and evening shifts. Ken always liked to study on 3rd shift. So he could cover 3rd with Jeremy while Bill and Tom can be with Jeremy on 1st and 2nd shifts. The three of them should overlap by a half hour. That would leave us available to cover any of them who might come down sick with something or another. I would like to sleep from 11 to 4; I have always operated on five hours of good sleep. You should probably sleep from 10 to 6. This schedule allows the two of us to be seen during the day in our undercover roles as well as having one of the DEA agents available during the 1st and 2nd shifts. Any thoughts?"

"I hate to sound as if I never have any original ideas. I really do, it is just that you always seem to express yours first and then I agree with them. Maybe if you noticed that I always agree quickly, you would understand that whatever you said is exactly what I had been thinking about, too."

"Do not ever let that worry you! I often think how wonderful it is working with someone as bright as you are. I have been in some jobs where I wished I could soar with eagles instead of running with turkeys. You are definitely an eagle."

"Wow, thanks, Keith. Umm, Jeremy, how do I get to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology website where I can learn how to imitate an eagle's call?"

"Try http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Bald_Eagle/sounds," was Jeremy's immediate reply.

Laughing, Keith said, "You are also quick witted and funny."

Judith asked, "Did you go to the Mississippi River when you were at Platteville and watch the eagles? I used to love watching them raise their young and teach them to fish. They were amazingly good at it."

"I loved the way they would fill their favorite trees along the river. A lot of them were older birds with their brilliant white heads in the sun."

"So do you like bird watching?"

"Yes, definitely. I am anxious to see some species in our travels that I have never seen before. When my stuff arrives, you may see a few bird books in my book collection. Where have you been on cruises with the Sterling Line?"

"His smaller ships mainly ran tours in the major rivers and up and down both American coasts. We did not stray far from the lower 48. He built up his financial reserve and finally decided the time was right to build a mega cruise ship that could travel around the world if there was enough demand for it. Initially he wants to just run the major cruise ship paths. He is looking forward to having you create that demand with your advertising."

"That will be fun. This position has so many really interesting aspects to it. Does our future Captain have access to all of the same navigational charts that our U. S. Navy has? I would like Jeremy to have them, too."

"We can interrupt his purchase orders and send for a duplicate set whenever he sends for any."

"Now there is an idea that I hadn't thought of. See, Judith, I don't have all the ideas."

"I didn't say you did."

Jeremy interrupted. "Ken, Tom and Bill are on the 13th deck and approaching."

"Tom and Bill arriving."

"And Ken, too."

Judith asked, "How was breakfast?"

Ken said, "Hey, Keith. The chef wants to talk to you again. She says she can get any of your health foods that you want. She already has most of them. She made me an omelet with chopped spinach, chopped lean bacon, onions and tofu. It was really good."

"Ken you are going to get healthy if you aren't careful. I wouldn't have made it quite like that, but it was a good start. Michael and I had my green smoothie this morning after working out."

"How did he like that?" Judith asked.

Laughing, "He turned his nose up at it at first, but after he sipped at it, he drank it all down. He really liked it."

Ken said, "Keith, you asked me to check on the scuttlebutt from the crew about our expected guests. Everyone is keeping their eyes on the weather news. It is hard to believe that an old hurricane will drive that much water up over the beaches. They believe it, but it almost too strange to visualize. The people that signed on here in New York are worried about their families that might be in the way of the storm. Some of them have even invited their families to come here if they decide to evacuate."

Judith said, "Why didn't we think to tell them to invite their families? I'm glad they felt that they didn't have to ask us. I will put out an announcement to remind the others that they can do it too."

Ken continued. "Everywhere you look there are people talking and comparing plans. The stewards are even alerting the laundry people to expect a heavy mud-soaked load of dirty clothing along with towels. But mostly people are more than ready to make their stay as comfortable as possible. I heard some of the younger crew members say that they were going to volunteer to babysit kids that will be coming in-and this is on their normal 'off' time."

Judith got somber and just shook her head. "I don't think that many of us have any idea of the magnitude of this disaster that is coming our way. Keith, you apparently did when you came up with

the idea of having us open our ship to help the displaced people. We can prepare for a disaster, but we may all be shell-shocked by the time this is over. Having said that, Keith and I have set up a work schedule for each of us for the next several weeks.”

Judith wrote it out as she explained it to their assistants. “If there are no serious objections, this begins today, after Bill gets some sleep.”

Everyone smiled and nodded in agreement. Tom said that he would switch with Bill for just today so Bill could sleep. He walked over to Jeremy’s console. “Good morning, Jeremy.”

“Hey, Tom. Glad you enjoyed your breakfast. That is one emotion that Keith didn’t give me. I just observe, but I don’t feel your satisfaction from eating.”

“Don’t you feel pain when the power is shut off?”

“Oh, is it something like that? Thank you, Tom.”

The others just stood there shaking their heads and chuckling.

Keith said, “Well done, Tom. I think Jeremy has an understanding of the human need for eating now.”

Bill said, “I need to catch up on my sleep. I’ll go get some shut-eye.”

Keith said, “Bill, they are still working on your cabin. You can use my bed today. Tom, would you please give Bill’s toe-chip access to my cabin for 24 hours? Thanks.”

“I almost forgot about that; I don’t know where I was going to go to sleep. I must be more tired than I thought. Thanks, Keith.”

“I did tell Michael that he could go in my cabin and have a health-snack whenever he wanted. It is not high-tech, but would you please tape a note on the 14th deck door to warn him that you are in there sleeping? Do not put my name or Michael’s on the note. Just write that you are in there.”

Judith said, “I will check on our order for radios. They were supposed to be here by now and we could really use them.”

“Let’s go down to the main deck. We could be getting some displaced people very soon. The police and Red Cross are already advising that people can come here when they leave their homes.”

* * *

Michael was directing the setup of chairs and tables for the check-in process. Each table had an iPhone for photos and for entering people’s ID information. Under each table was a box of bright yellow plastic wrist bracelets that would become the guests’ door keys as well as their dining room permits. He also had a white laundry cart filled with bath towels to dry off the guests if they came in wet. He had ordered several heat lamps to be directed at the towels. The large, warm towels with the Sterling Cruise Line logo emblazoned on them would also be used to wrap the guests if they were cold.

When Judith and Keith arrived, Michael was just setting up some easels with signs on them. Arrows on them would direct the guests to offices set up for the Red Cross and FEMA, as well as rooms for clothing distribution. “Everything looks great, Michael!” Judith exclaimed. “I really like the warm towel setup. That is a very welcoming touch. How about some coffee, too?”

Michael just pointed down the hall. Judith looked up and saw the dining room waiters bringing in large coffee carafes along with food and other beverages. Others were bringing in some wheelchairs. “You are just amazing. This area looks just perfect.” Judith and Keith were beaming. “Keith and I will greet people right here as they come in. Then we will introduce them to the next available steward who will offer warm towels and refreshments. The steward will check them in and accompany them to their cabin. After settling guests in their cabin, the steward can re-check on the needs of the previous guests that were settled in that steward’s block of cabins. If there are no needs, the steward can return here to get back into the line for the next guest.”

Michael just smiled and said, “Confirmed. I will watch that there are always enough available stewards and if we begin to get jammed up, I can bring in your guest services people along with the butlers and waiters, too. We will be ready for everything short of a train load of people.”

Keith said, "By the way, Bill will be sleeping in my cabin just for today. It doesn't look like you will be stopping up there for a health snack today, anyway."

"Not likely, but thanks for the heads-up. Who is in CCC watching for errors in our check-in data entries?"

"Jeremy is your first line of quality control, but Tom is there for this shift, then for today Bill will take 2nd shift and Ken will take 3rd. Tomorrow Bill and Tom will permanently switch places. Then we will operate that way for the next several weeks at least. Keith and I will be available to the guests until about 10 p.m. I also want some guest services people just roaming the hallways to help people get accustomed to this large floating city and the services we can provide."

"Certainly. Just to make sure, we will register each visitor who is not a displaced person just the same as a passenger except for the assignment of a cabin. This will include TV crews and honored guests up to and including the President."

"Right, Michael. If you have any trouble, just let them know that our security system requires it. Honored guests should be with Judith if at all possible. If we know that an honored guest will be arriving, we can get Mr. Sterling here to meet them. We should be here most of the time to help out."

* * *

"Look sharp people. Here comes our first family." Judith announced the arrival of the first three people that were walking across the gangway.

When they got close enough, she walked out into the light rain to welcome them inside. "Welcome to the Maxx, Sterling Cruise Line's newest and largest cruise ship. You are welcome to stay with us for up to four months at no cost to you. This service is provided by Mr. Sterling through the Red Cross. Please come in and get warm. This is your cabin steward, Charles. He will be taking care of your needs during your stay with us. And just as a reminder, there is no tipping anywhere on the Maxx."

"Good morning, my name is Charles; here is a warm bath towel for each of you. Do you have any other luggage outside that I can bring in for you?"

"Hi, Charles. We are the David Jones family and, no, we didn't bring anything else with us. There wasn't enough time to get everything we needed."

"Let's go over to this desk where I can get you checked into our system. Please sit here and be comfortable. May I take a photo of each of you for our security system? Thank you. Smile. That was good. Mrs. Jones, next. Thank you. And now your son. Thank you. If any of you have driver's licenses, please place them here under the camera. Thank you. Is this your current address?"

"Yes, we live in Breezy Point."

"Good. I won't have to ask for your street address. The computer will just collect it from your licenses. Each of you must wear one of these yellow wrist bands at all times that you are on our ship. It is both your cabin key and your meal ticket. Do you have one or more cellphone numbers that you would like to leave on file with us? It would help if you are off the ship and we would need to call you. Thank you. Any questions?"

Charles maintained good eye contact with the Jones family during the very short check-in period. Most of the answers from the family were nods or shakes of their heads.

"Before I take you to your cabin, would you care for any snacks or beverages? No? Well then, Mrs. Jones, if you will take my arm, your men can follow us to your cabin." Charles made a slight bow to her and took her hand as she arose from her chair. We will be going to the 8th deck. The cabins on that deck will accommodate three adults very well." He picked up their one suitcase and they walked to the elevator.

"I will push the UP button. The first available elevator will be announced by a soft tone. Then we will look around to see which elevator door is surrounded with flashing LED lights. There we are. Come this way please. When you look down, you will see that there is no open space for you to trip on. It is covered over. Mrs. Jones please push the '8' button with a finger on your arm that does not

have the wrist band on it. See, nothing happened. Now use your other hand. And here we go. Just remember to use your hand that is nearest to your wrist band. Anyone with a wrist band may push a deck number for you. This just bars anyone without a wrist band from using the elevator. Here we are and your cabin is to the left.”

“This is your cabin and you will notice that there is no door knob or lever on your door. Now I will demonstrate the security system on the door to your cabin. Young man if you will forcibly throw your shoulder, the one furthest from your wrist band, into the door, we will see what happens. Please use as much force as you would like to use. Whoa! Did you feel the ship rock over? Well, no I didn’t either, but that was a nice try. Do you see this red LED message on the door saying, ‘Attempted forced entry’? That message also appears on your computer in your cabin and on our main security computer. Our operator is now looking at the picture from the nearest hidden camera to investigate the incident before he alerts our security detail. He can see me with my hand in the air signaling that everything is OK. He is also cross-checking that you have just checked in on the main deck and are going to your cabin now. But there is a third thing we must do quickly. Mrs. Jones, your son could not open the door by slamming it with his shoulder, but would you just push in any place on the door with your hand that has the wrist band on it.”

She jumped when the door easily opened.

“Now, that was easy wasn’t it? Do not leave your cabin without your wrist band or you won’t be able to get back in.”

Her teenage son, Donald, was rubbing his shoulder. “Did you hurt your shoulder, Donnie? I didn’t have any trouble getting it open. How come you had so much trouble?” Then she laughed.

Charles led them inside and over to the computer which was flashing. He pointed to the screen and said, “This is your computer and your link to our security system. To answer the ‘ALERT’ message, just touch the screen anywhere.” Donald touched the screen. “Now it is telling you why it was alerting you with the message, ‘There was an attempt to force your door to open. Are you OK? Touch YES or NO.’ If you do not answer within 30 seconds from now, the computer will send several security people, so touch YES quickly. There, now it wants to confirm that you are authorized to be in this cabin by making a comparison with your photos that we took during check-in, so it is asking you if you want the camera activated so touch YES again. And there you are. It notices that there is no stress in your face so it knows that nobody is forcing you to make any particular answer. Now it is asking again if you are OK. Answer either with your voice or a touch on the screen. Perfect. Now it is clearing the message that was on the door. If you need someone, probably the first security person to come to your rescue will be me as I am nearly always the closest security person. But in the event I am getting something for somebody in my small group of cabins here, it will send several security personnel. I also carry a microchip which confirmed my arrival when I came through your door. Otherwise there would already be several security people here by now.”

Donald was really impressed. “Wow, that was awesome, man.”

“Honey, his name is ‘Charles.’”

“Oh, ya. That was awesome, Charles. Thanks for showing that to us.”

Smiling, “You are welcome, Donald. Now if you are ever goofing around with a friend and you stumble into a door that alerts, there is a way to avoid an embarrassment. When a door alerts, hold your wrist band next to the alert message for about ten seconds until it beeps. Then turn around 360 degrees so that a hidden camera can get a good look at you. If you hear two beeps, you are free to go on your way. If not, just wait for the security personnel to arrive in moments and explain to them. If that becomes a common problem with anyone that thinks it is a plaything, they will be asked to leave the ship, but that won’t be a problem in your case. I can already tell by your attitude.”

“This is an awesome system. We’ve never seen anything like it in any hotels.”

“Thank you. Someone employed by Mr. Sterling invented this. Now, would you like to look around your cabin? I will stay for only a moment to see if you have any questions. Your computer is also a TV. Channel 3 is your information channel. It is voice activated so you may just ask it a question. There is a Get Acquainted book right here so you can find your way around the ship. Before I leave, what deck are you on?”

“Eight,” they all answered.

“Right. Now, what was the color scheme that you saw when you got off the elevator?”

They thought for a while and then Mrs. Jones said, “It looked like a flower garden.”

“Perfect. This is the only deck that has a flower garden décor by all of its elevators. If the door opens and it looks like you are on a desert island or any other motif, that is not the deck for your cabin. You can get off and go exploring of course, but your cabin will only be on the deck with a flower garden. Now for the hard one, because I never gave you the answer. What is your cabin number?”

Donald said, “I know...”

“Wait; let your Dad get this one.”

Mr. Jones said, “I’m a retired police detective and I’ve been trained to be a careful observer. Our cabin number is 08114.”

“Very good. Now when you are ready, please go out and explore your community here on the Maxx. You can go for a walk in the park, go shopping, go visit the teen center, hit some golf balls, toss some basket balls... I could go on and on. If you get separated, you could arrange to meet at one of the dining rooms at a certain time or just meet back here first and go together. Please know that we are all here to be at your service. You can ask anyone for help.”

Charles left them and went back to the main deck to see if he could help anyone else. Ordinarily he would have checked on his other guests first, but the Jones family was the first of the guests in his block of cabins.

* * *

Back on the main deck, the incoming guest traffic was picking up. Apparently before the Jones family left their community they had been going around telling everyone on Breezy Point, if not all of Rockaway Peninsula in Queens, to go to the Maxx cruise ship. Their community’s private security firm was also telling everyone that Sandy was going to send strong and deep waves right across their yards completely destroying some of their homes. Everyone was under a mandatory evacuation. There were some 4000 people in Breezy Point at this time of the year. In the summer its population could rise to 11,000. There were a great deal of new guests that evacuated from Breezy Point. Most were older and retired; others had retired early. People just kept coming and coming to the Maxx. Each of the stewards had taken a lot of families to cabins before the families just stopped coming in. The weather had gotten so bad that people couldn’t get to the ship.

Everyone was anxiously watching the various news channels. They watched in horror as the water level rose and the wave action got more and more intense. Keith cut the work group at the door to a minimum size and told the others to go back to whatever they should be doing. He said that they would hold a town meeting for the Maxx’s guests in the morning. When the storm died down so that people could reach the ship, they would likely receive a lot more guests sometime tomorrow.

Keith went to check on the maître d’ of the main dining room. He learned that they had already fed most of the several thousand guests. Most ate quickly then went back to their cabins to watch the news of the storm. Keith walked around the room and struck up short conversations with some of the people. Everyone he saw seemed to be eating quickly. One lady was sitting nervously waiting for her dinner when Keith approached.

“Good evening, my name is Keith. I remember talking to you briefly when you arrived. Have you been able to reach your husband on your cellphone? Our ship has its own satellite wireless service and doesn’t depend on the city utilities.”

"Hi, I'm Mary and yes, I talked to him a few minutes ago. I work about a block from here, but I couldn't stay there tonight. Our home is upstate, but the subway tunnels are flooded and it was rapidly getting too dangerous to even be out there so I came here. We have only been married for four months and this will be our first night away from each other."

"I am so sorry. There is no limit and no charge on your minutes from our system so please talk as long as you want using the phone in your cabin. We will have some of the TV news people in here as soon as they can get in. If you would like to be interviewed, your husband will be able to see you and that will help him know that you really are OK. May I arrange that for you?"

"My hair is such a mess. It got all wet."

"Your shower has a fine grade of shampoo in it and your cabin has a hair dryer. All of our services are at your disposal. Please make use of everything we have. There is no charge. Your cabin, food, and all of our services are yours, compliments of the Sterling Cruise Line."

"Thank you so much, Keith." She rose as Keith was about to leave and hugged him.

Judith walked into the dining room just as she saw a lady hugging Keith. She knew was just doing his job, but he seemed to be enjoying it too much.

Keith approached her and asked, "Everything still OK out there?"

"Yes and it seems everything is OK in here, too."

"Yup. Let's go eat in the staff dining room. May I take you to dinner, Miss?"

"Sure, but I am not going to let you get chummy with me and then dump me."

"Hey I don't 'dump' beautiful ladies. I make them want to come back for another cruise."

"Well you don't have to turn on your charm for me, because I will be back for another cruise anyway."

"Just can't stay away from me? I must be doing my job very well."

They were still talking when they sat down at the lunch counter in the staff dining room.

Herb, the waiter asked for Judith's order.

"Two eggs, uncooked, easy over, please."

Herb's face showed confusion. "Not cooked, but over easy, Judith?"

"Yes, just dump it all easily over his head."

"Hey!" Keith reacted to her jest.

Judith broke into laughter. "Herb, I'd like you to meet, Keith. He is our new marketing chief. I think he is practicing his schmoose on me."

Herb greeted Keith with a broad smile. "Welcome aboard, Keith. I have seen you in here talking to the chef about health foods. Would you like an uncooked egg too or can I bring you a thin slice of chicken with tofu on a whole wheat toasted bun?"

"You remembered! Thank you that would be nice. And how about a tall glass of buttermilk too, please."

"Of course. Judith would you like your eggs cooked or may I suggest a BLT on whole wheat with skim milk?"

"Hold the eggs until sometime when I can walk up behind Keith with them."

"Of course. These will be right up."

"You are too funny, Judith." He thought for a moment. "But if you would like to bring the eggs up to my cabin, I could make a good natural shampoo with them."

"I won't do that, but if you are getting a naked sun tan on your balcony this summer, I could bring you a couple of cucumber slices to go over your eyes."

"Oooo, I might like that."

"In your dreams, mister."

Their banter was cut off by Herb bringing them their food. After eating their food, they went back up to the CCC. When they got onto the elevator, Keith said, "Watch this." Without touching any

buttons, he swung his right toe past the bottom of the button panel twice. Button # 13 lit up and the door closed quickly. The elevator car rose more quickly to the 13th deck than ever before.

Judith was astonished. "How did you do that?"

"That is one of the little gimmicks that I included when I first wrote the programs. I almost forgot about that one. There are more that are not documented anywhere. I'll write them down for you when I get a chance and if I can remember them all."

"That could come in handy if we need to get up there in a hurry."

"Right."

"Will my toe-chip do that, too?"

"Not until I tell Jeremy to add you into what I call 'special tricks.' Let's leave it for just the two of us for now, Judith. Is that OK with you?"

"I'll reserve judgment until I see what the whole group of special tricks consists of."

"Actually Jeremy should have already authorized you on all of the files, but I will just check on it."

* * *

Bill was in CCC working on cross-checking the guest list with the DEA files of known drug traffickers. There were no matches. "Judith and Keith are arriving," Jeremy announced.

"Hi guys. Tom just left. I came back after my nap and I just finished cross checking all of our guests with DEA records. All clean; no problems. Thanks for the use of your bed, Keith. It was very comfortable. I didn't put up a sign on the door as you advised because Michael called me and said you had told him to stay out today."

"He did a fantastic job down on the main deck today. He had the entire reception area set up beautifully and his stewards worked flawlessly. Did Tom have any comments on the check-in procedure?"

"He said it was very smooth and he could watch all ten registration lines without any problems. Only one guy came in with a new address written over his driver's registration card that was not very clear. Tom just checked with the New York DOT database and cleaned up his new address very quickly. We have photos of everyone and their wrist bands are all working. We did have one kid that I thought was going to have to go see the physician when he 'tested' our 'unauthorized entrance attempt' system. He was still walking around rubbing his shoulder two hours later."

Keith said, "Nice strong doors on this ship, Judith."

"They were designed to keep out intruders."

"Bill, OK if I tell Jeremy to do something?"

"Sure, but can I do it for you?"

"No, he needs to hear my voice to make it happen. Good evening, Jeremy."

"Hi Keith. It is nice to have you here every day. Just like old times."

"Jeremy, please add Judith's toe-chip to the "special tricks" file and mark her to have every authorization that I have. Do not change any of my authorizations."

"Confirmed."

"Jeremy, I can't remember the items in column one of that file so please print them in my cabin."

"Confirmed. Did you have a brain fart? Why did you forget that file, Keith?"

Judith and Bill broke into laughter as Keith's face got red.

"It is raining outside, but you look as if you were in the sun too long today, Keith. Was it something I said?"

"Back to work, Mister Silly."

"Sorry."

“Oh, that was good. Your face just lit up like a traffic light. Now I have a question, why did you program that into Jeremy?” Judith wanted to know.

“Well when you are in your room studying and programming 24/7 for months on end, you sometimes get a little punchy.”

“And Professor Young didn’t fault you on that during your dissertation?”

“No, he thought it was funny, too. He told me that he likes surprises in his programming.”

“I can’t wait to see if there are any other zingers from Jeremy.”

“There will be, but I will let you discover them.”

SuperStorm Sandy

Sandy lost its hurricane designation about an hour before midnight. It made landfall about midnight just 95 miles south of the Maxx with winds about 80 mph. News of nearly 100 separate fires began to filter in. With so many Breezy Point residents staying in the Maxx overnight, the news that a fire broke out there about 8:30 in the evening was most depressing. They left because the land level there was so low and they knew they would be flooded out, but fire, too? That was hard to take. Nobody knew which homes were involved, but they were learning that the fire was widespread and there was no fire equipment that could even get through the flood to the fire. There were houses surrounded by water that were burning out of control. It was beyond belief. They were being told that the fires were starting in their homes because the rising water was shorting out their electrical systems and the electric utility company did not shut off the power.

TV stations were reporting every aspect of the storm that they could find. There were several crews on board the Maxx interviewing people. They at first thought they were just being careful in leaving their homes, but now they didn't have any homes to go back to. Mary had appeared on one of their segments looking very beautiful. She told her husband that she would be home just as soon as possible and not to worry about her. As if to put fear into her husband's mind, the camera then panned to the side where Keith was watching Mary. He was dressed in his crisp white ship's uniform. His shirt was barely large enough to contain his muscular body. He gave a very nice interview which told people that the ship still had plenty of cabins available at no charge for their guests who were still arriving. The cameraman then panned back to where Mary was smiling and looking up at Keith.

Judith was watching the telecast and thought, *"That is not going to be very comforting to Mary's husband. I will bet that he will be here soon to take her home."*

The news announced that the displaced people on the ship would be holding a town meeting in an hour and that the ship's Channel 3 TV would bring live coverage of the meeting if they did not want to go to the meeting.

* * *

When it was nearly time for their town meeting, the displaced people began to assemble in the main theatre. The front curtains were open so that they could see the fury of the storm out the windows. It was like watching a movie. The river was being whipped up into the air and it was blowing straight across the width of the river. What made it look so unreal is that the ship didn't seem to be moving at all. It was as if the ship were anchored into the rock far below the river instead of actually riding on the water. Many of the people appeared shaken by the force of the storm; quite a few were crying.

Judith and Keith both entered the theatre from the back and worked their way forward through the audience. Judith was in the left aisle and Keith was in the right. They greeted the people and encouraged them to be seated so they could begin the meeting. The news media was adding to the mass of people in the aisles. She and Keith were giving hugs and shaking hands and doing their best to make it to the stage in the front. Judith reached the stage first and began the meeting by closing the curtain to the outside world.

"Welcome to all of our very special guests!" Her words were met by a roar of cheers. This distracted the crowd around Keith and he was able to escape to the stage. When he appeared on the stage next to Judith, the crowd intensified their cheers again."

Judith raised her hands with her palms down to ask for them to quiet down. "Thank you for that warm response. You are here because Mr. Rudolph Sterling, the owner of the Sterling Ship Lines and the builder of this incredible, new, passenger cruise liner wanted to come to the aid of his fellow

citizens in need.” The crowd cheered again as Mr. Sterling’s photograph appeared on the screens around the theatre. He appeared to be a middle-aged man with graying hair and a big smile. His suit did not appear to be expensive, but he was nicely dressed in a dark blue suit with a light blue shirt. His diagonally striped four-in-hand tie was dark blue and white with very thin strips of silver running through it.

“He has set aside a group of rooms where FEMA and the Red Cross will set up offices to bring their services here to you. There will also be local and state offices here for your needs. Be sure that you register with FEMA if there is any damage to your home. You will need your FEMA number to request a stop date on your home’s electricity and gas bills for example. If there are any other services that you need, let us know and we will bring them here to you. New York City and other nearby cities and communities will not be able to resume all of their services for you for potentially a long time. That will affect your ability to go to their offices outside of this ship. Therefore we are bringing them here to you. This will also be of benefit to them as their offices may have been damaged.”

Keith took over for the next segment. “The news that we have been receiving, about damage from Superstorm Sandy has not been good. Perhaps the news media in this room could change that for us. Do you think we might be able to persuade them to change the images of destruction to images of kids’ birthday parties or something like that? How about it?”

People knew that this was just wishful thinking, but what they didn’t know is that Keith was about to report some devastating news.

“Well, we can wish. But the news we just received this morning is that there has been a massive fire in Breezy Point. The early reports are that over 100 homes have been destroyed. When the storm surge came in, the flooding shorted out the electricity in many homes and that started fires-many separate fires. None of the fire trucks could respond until early this morning when the water went down enough to allow them to drive through the water to the fires. They have not been able to count the total number of destroyed and damaged homes. The good news is that you came here and got out of the fury of that storm. You are safe and you will continue to be safe here for several months. Nothing that you receive here on the Maxx will cost you anything now or in the future. This is all because of Mr. Sterling.”

Judith continued, “However, he cannot continue to have you live here forever. He has asked us to emphasize that the first cruises on this ship will be conducted on time as scheduled. That means that we must have you moved out of your cabins here in four months. That will give the crew here time to finish their training, give the ship a thorough cleaning and face-lift, and replace anything that may have been damaged. We do not believe that your homes will all be rebuilt by then, but you should be on your feet and have made other living arrangements within four months.”

Keith brought a new bit of news to the group. “We do have a proposal for you. There is one way that you can stay on this ship for many years. The Maxx was originally tied up here to take on a role as its own employment agency. The Maxx needs a full complement of its crew to be in place before it leaves port on its first cruise. We would like married couples and singles both to apply for available jobs on this ship. A limited number of people could have children. We have positions open in mechanical repair, guest services, security, and ship operations to name a few. We even need baby sitters and teachers. There are already employment offices near the main entrance where human resources employees are ready to sign you up. So, if you have lost your job because of the storm or if you just want to join us here on the Maxx, please consider a career with us. Now I will turn the meeting over to Judith so we can have a true town meeting.”

“Thank you, Keith. Welcome everyone to our first Town Meeting. We have brought you up to date on our current situation. You will be able to stay with us for up to four months. We will get the exact cutoff date later from Mr. Sterling. Keith announced that we wish to employ a large number of you. So now it is your turn to ask us questions or to share your story with the others. Please raise your

hand and one of the stewards in the aisles will activate the microphone at your seat. This lets everyone hear you. Who wants to be first? OK, down here near the front.”

“Thank you. My name is Karen. When will we be able to go to see if we still have a home?”

“Excellent question and one that is probably on everyone’s mind today. Keith and I are working with local officials to get that answer for each affected area and we are asking the media to aid in getting information to us. I will bet that most of the local officials still do not even have an answer to that question. Remember that channel 3 on your cabin TV is your local information source. Thanks for asking, Karen, but this is the best information that we have right now. Next?”

“My name is Joe. How do you expect me to rebuild my house in only four months? I am a carpenter and I know it can’t be done in that short amount of time without a large crew. I don’t have a large crew and I will need more time than that. After the four months are up, can I still live here for up to another year if I pay for my cabin?”

Judith looked at Keith for help. It wasn’t coming so she tried her best to be pleasant with this Joe. “We could work that out for you, but you wouldn’t like it. You would need a high-speed jet to be able to commute from the ship to New York. When we leave here we will head for our home port in Tampa, Florida. Then we will be on 21-day cruises to the Eastern and Southern Caribbean. We will not ever be close enough to New York for the Maxx to be a reasonable home for you until your house can be moved into. I am so sorry, but we do want you to be comfortable here until it is time for us to get ready to leave. Besides, a hotel room in New York or New Jersey would be less expensive for you than if you leased a cabin on the Maxx. This is, after all, a luxury cruise ship. Joe, I hope this clarifies for you and the others here that we are donating this luxury living space and our best food to people that either cannot get to their homes or that have no home to go to because of Sandy. This donation comes with the stipulation that it is for only a limited time. Joe, anything else I can add to this?”

The room erupted with applause. People began to understand the magnitude of Mr. Sterling’s donation even if it would not last more than four months.

“Thank you, everyone, for your understanding. I would rather have you hold your applause until we can get Mr. Rudolph Sterling here. He is a philanthropist whose life of donating to worthy causes is well known. He will be embarrassed by your kudos, but most appreciative of your applause. Any more questions-from anyone? Additional guests are beginning to arrive and we expect the pace to pick up when the weather makes it easier for people to get here. We have enough space for 8000 guests. I grew up in a village with a population of 6245 and I thought that was a big town. Now I find myself responsible for the care of perhaps more people than that. It takes a lot of people to feed and care for that many people. I really hope that you will consider joining our crew here. We will put you to work with a good starting salary. By the way, we discourage tipping as you have heard, but our wage scale here is twice that of other cruise ships. Plus we have a very healthy annual bonus.”

Keith added, “We will have another town meeting in a few days, but if you have any questions for us, please ask. If you can’t find us right away, call ‘Guest Services’ from your cabin telephone. Thank you for coming and we hope your stay with us provides you with some relief and creates some happiness for you.”

There was light applause as the guests rose from their seats. Judith opened the curtains again. It appeared to the guests that the storm was winding down somewhat. Both Judith and Keith went down to the main level and mingled with the guests.

The Jones Family

Both of them went directly to the Human Resources office as soon as they were able. It looked like a lot of those displaced were applying for jobs. Judith and Keith went into separate interviewing offices. The entire Jones family was directed to Judith for an interview. "Good morning. How may I help the Jones family today?"

Mr. Jones spoke first. "My name is David Jones or you can use my nickname of Jonesy. This is my wife, Martha and my son, Donald. We would each like to be employed on the Maxx."

"What are your experiences that would be useful to us?"

"I am a retired detective from New York City's finest. I had 31 years of experience on the force before I was forced into early retirement due to the economy. I still have many years of service left in me, but no place to work. I had been approved for a promotion to lieutenant and I was filling a lieutenant position and managing an entire shift of men and women when many of us were told we would have to go into retirement or be terminated. We still do not know what our retirement pay will be as the city has not negotiated our pay package for the last five years. I would like to manage the ship's entire police or security force, either now or work my way up to that position."

"Very interesting. I like your credentials. May I hear from the rest of the family before making a decision?" She nodded to Mrs. Jones.

"Good morning, my name is Martha Jones and my experience has been in teaching. I am currently home schooling Donald and I have been developing some new teaching methods that have been very effective and well received by the State Board of Education. Besides my teaching certificate, I have Master's degrees in Educational Administration, Art, and Music. I believe that since a cruise ship welcomes families, the parents would increase their enjoyment of the cruise experience if their children's lives were enriched in a multitude of ways before, during and after their cruise. Before the cruise, I would create fun-filled, age specific, online education focused on the sights and sounds that they will encounter on their cruise. They will learn some foreign language skills, geographic, flora, fauna, climatological, ecological, and historical facts before even boarding the Maxx. They will know what to expect on the ship and where to find it. They will be looking outside the ship for dolphins, sharks and the Blue-winged Teal. After they return home from the cruise, I will send reminders to them along with a video of some of their adventures. The parents will want to take another cruise just to focus on the children activities along with their children. On subsequent cruises, each age level will be exploring new things, researching the things they missed, and suggesting better ways to engage themselves in ecological improvements. They ..."

"Whoa! If we hire you, I won't be attending to all the guests; I will only be attending your children's' programs. Seriously, you have wonderfully exciting plans and experience in education and entertainment. You have not only plans, but results to show for them. Let's hear from your beaming son. How old are you and what are your experiences?"

"As you already know, my name is Donald. I just turned 17 and I have had a 4.0 GPA since 6th grade. I am taking all college level courses for my junior year in high school with my mother as my teacher."

"Is there some bias in your grades with your mother as your teacher?"

"No, all of my grades are awarded by the local schools through final exams given in and by the local schools."

"Wow, please go on. Do you have favorite subjects and what could you do for us here on the Maxx?"

“I love math, computers, and all of the sciences. There really isn’t any subject that I don’t like. As to what I could do, I would like to fit in and learn about all aspects of the ship. I would work in any of the engineering departments as a helper, or in food services, or offer tutoring as needed. Nothing is beneath me, because that is where you broaden your scope and learn new things.”

Judith rose from her chair. “Please excuse me for a minute. I see that someone just left Keith’s office and I want to share some thoughts with him that I have on your family. I will be right back.” Judith waved at Keith before he could take another person. Keith you have got to meet the Jones family that I’ve been talking to. He is qualified to be your police captain – that is your area. She is going to make a great Children’s Program Director. The son is a bit of an immediate problem as he won’t be 18 until next year, but his potential is phenomenal. Can you join us for a while?”

“Definitely. Sounds like you found us some winners.”

They both entered the now crowded office. “Good morning. I’m Keith as you know. Judith says your family has some great potential for us. I’d like to start with Donald. One of the things that seems to intrigue a lot of young people these days is the computer. Do you like playing the games or would you rather program your own?”

“The games can be a challenge, but basically I find them boring. It becomes simply pitting an intelligent human against a random number generator. There is nothing to learn there. It is a challenge, but there is no logic. I prefer to master computer tools like *Microsoft’s Access, Excel, Word*[®] and their other Office tools. I have already helped Mom with maintaining our family’s address books. In our system, Access does a lookup on the birthdays and anniversaries in our family and friends then it writes a nearly personal letter to the person in Word using a list of fun stuff and experiences that we have done or have had with them which are kept in Excel. It is brought up on the screen where it can be edited if necessary and then Access prints an envelope with personalized postage on it. There are several greeting card programs out there that I have modified to work with Access, too. Our Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year and Happy Winter mailings only take about three or four hours to create and send. That is the annual total for all of those special days.”

“I love it. We have one problem and that is that you are a minor. However, I can make that work out for you if you are interested. I am the marketing manager and I want you to develop a system for us that will utilize our passenger list to send our former passengers several notes during the year that will remind them of the fun that they had on their cruise to where ever they went and to encourage them to sign-up for another cruise with us. Maybe they would bring along several other families the next time. Other mailings to them would be birthday and anniversary cards as well as their kids’ graduation and anything else that we might have learned about them that we could celebrate with them. I know you could do this, but do you want to?”

“Oh yes, we could add personalized photos of them and photos of their empty cabin that is lonesome for them and ...”

“Wait. I know you are full of ideas. I just want to know if that would be something that you could program for us. Now here comes the part about you being 17. I would like you to operate out of our secret central computer room. I want you to record the time you spend on this task. I want you to complete this before you turn 18. Then I will purchase this package from you with a purchase price that will be determined by the length of time you worked on it. Off the record, the price will be more than what you would have earned from us at an hourly rate. Mr. Sterling’s legal staff can decide whether our purchase payment should be directed to you, your father, a trust fund, or to a newly formed company or whatever. How does this sound to you? You would be free to focus on completing your high school program as your first priority.”

Donald was nearly bursting with excitement while he was waiting for his turn to speak. “This sounds like a dream come true. I can’t wait to get started. You said I could use your computer room. Does that mean that I can live here and does that mean that we can all live here?”

“Oh I forgot about your parents. Yes, they can live here as long as your father will be the Captain of our Security Department and your mother will be our Children’s Program Director. Do you think they would like that?”

Jonesy jumped to his feet and shook Judith’s and Keith’s hands. Martha hugged both Judith and Keith. Judith told them that they were ground breakers; they were the first family that was hired onto the Maxx. Keith wanted to be sure that they would get a good photo of them after he got his marketing team together.

Judith said nonchalantly to Keith, “Why don’t you take them to the 13th deck to find an appropriate cabin for the Captain and his family. It should be close to his new work place.”

“Of course, if they are not superstitious about living on the 13th deck.”

“That wouldn’t bother us.”

“Come along then and I will show you some cabins that you can choose from. Let’s go to my cabin so you can get an idea of the flexibility of your furnishings and cabin arrangements.”

“Keith you can show them my cabin too. I did not change the access permission to my cabin so you will be able to open the door.”

Astonished, “I am not going to go into your cabin unless you are in there.”

Judith giggled and blushed.

“Oh my God, I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. I haven’t been in there and I’m not going in there.”

“Keith, lighten up. You can open the door for them and they can go in without you, if you want it that way.”

“Thank you, Judith. We will keep an eye on him for you,” Martha told her. She thought, *“It doesn’t seem that they are dating.”*

Keith led them to an elevator and asked Donald Jones to push “13.”

“It doesn’t light up and we’re not moving. Is everything OK? Did the storm take out part of the system?”

Keith walked to the button panel and showed them how to place their right foot when they were pushing the “13” button after they got their own chips. “The officers and security staff have microchips in the big toe of their right feet. This opens and operates just about everything on the ship. If necessary security can open any locked door. Except I didn’t know that Judith didn’t have me locked out of her bedroom. That was a shock to me. Here we are, but do not get out. I wanted to demonstrate my toe-chip for you, but my cabin is on the 14th deck.” He pushed “14” and they went up another deck. Keith led the way to his cabin. With his toe by his door, he pushed open the door.

“This is my cabin, my home. My personal preferences are all here in the makeup of this space. Besides a bed, I have a work-out space and an office work space. My refrigerator is filled with my health foods and I can sit with a good book. My private balcony may be used in any manner that I wish. Yes, Martha, there are two different sizes of clothes in my closet. Let me explain. My steward, Michael, wakes me up at 4 a.m. He comes in and we exercise together so that someone is there to immediately respond if one of us has an accident with the weights or anything else. Then, one at a time, we work out in the pool inside that door. Donald, please open it.”

There were sounds of “wow”, “would you look at that”, “this is beautiful.”

“When I am done in the pool, we switch places. I go and shower and get dressed. When Michael is done, he can shower and dress while I’m getting our breakfast ready. When I leave the cabin, Michael cleans it up and replaces my foods in the refrigerator. Would you like to see Judith’s cabin now? Let’s go out this door, but the landing is only 8x8 so please watch your step.”

They moved out onto the deck at the top of the stairs going down to the CCC. Below us is our CCC, or Central Command Center. Donald, this is where you will work on your project. The meeting rooms for Mr. Jones’ new staff are also down here. Let’s look in Judith’s cabin before we go down

there.” Keith pushed the door open and stepped back to let the Jones family inside. “As I have said, I have never been in here so you will have to explore on your own without any narration.” Keith thought that this might be his only opportunity to look around so he walked part way into the cabin.

The color scheme was different. It was not pink, like he half expected, but it definitely had floral colors and textures. Keith explained the automatic door locking system on the pool so nobody would be surprised by another person. He could see that she, too, relied heavily on the outside air and sun to elevate her senses. She definitely had more mirrors than he did. He was looking at her library book titles when the Jones family was ready to go down the stairs. He made sure that the door was locked when they left. “Donald, you can take the fire pole down if you want to.” He landed even more softly than Keith had done the week before.

Bill was working in CCC this morning. When he saw Keith, he decided this was a good time to take a short break.

“Good morning, Jeremy,” Keith called to his computer.

“Good morning to you, Keith. I see you have company. Would you please introduce me?”

Donald’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. “Is this the computer that you are going to let me work with?” he asked.

“Yes. I will set up a wireless terminal off to the side for your project.”

“Is someone going let me in on the secret?”

“I am sorry. Jeremy, this is Donald Jones. Donald, this is Jeremy.”

“Ah yes. Donald Jones from cabin 08114. And how is your shoulder this morning, young man? You really gave that door a good hit.”

David and Martha looked at each other in astonishment.

“I can still feel it, but I will be OK. I am impressed that you remembered me and even more amazed that you can put it into structured language with proper human emotion.”

“You have just discovered a hint of the many miracles that our friend, Keith, can do.”

“Jeremy, please. They are not miracles; they are a result of carefully crafted logic. That’s all.”

“Donald, did he tell you all of the degrees that he has?”

“Jeremy, what is with you today? Please stop bragging about me.”

“Well, I am waiting, Keith. Tell him.”

“OK. I have a few degrees. I know Jeremy won’t let me stop there so here goes. In electrical engineering I have a bachelor’s, a master’s, and a Ph.D. In business I have a M.B.A. and I have a Ph.D. in security systems. And now if you will let me get back to the introductions. Jeremy, this is David Jones who is now the Captain of our Security department. His wife, Martha, is the Children Programs Director.”

“How do you do, Martha? I am pleased to meet you. And your husband, David Jones or Jonesy, I am pleased to meet you, too. I heard Judith and Keith talking to you down in the Human Resources offices earlier about your new employment here. Now that Keith has confirmed your new jobs here, I am suggesting cabin 13638 for your new home. It is a large family sized cabin on two levels. The upper level has two bedrooms with attached baths. Each bedroom has an ocean view. This level also has three offices. One will be for our new Security Captain, one for our Children Programs Director, and one for use by our excellent student so that he can study to maintain his 4.0 grade point average. Martha’s room should be the largest of the three as she will need a lot of developmental and storage spaces. I have also assigned a storage area with controlled humidity on the third deck for all of the different types of paper supplies that she will need. Your home’s lower level has all of the normal features of a home. While it has a regular kitchen, you may eat any or all of your meals in any of the dining rooms on the ship.”

Keith spoke, “Jeremy, I think you outdid yourself that time. I would have to give you a 4.0 on that one.”

"I can't wait to learn more about Donald's brain and the way it functions. We will make a good team for the project you have given to him."

"Jeremy, I can't wait to learn from you as well." Donald's smile went from ear to ear.

Keith said, "Thank you, Jeremy. We will go look at the cabin you have suggested for the Jones family."

"Can we call it the 'Davy Jones Locker'?"

"Jeremy, that is not a pleasant thought. Davy Jones Locker means the bottom of the sea; the resting place of drowned seamen. Davy Jones is the evil spirit of the sea. Nobody is going to want to name their cabin with such a negative term. Go back into your dictionary and put an evil connotation notation on that phrase."

"Confirmed."

"Does he listen to everything that goes on with this ship?" Martha asked. That is scary."

"Only in the common areas and here in CCC."

"That could come in handy someday," David said.

"Yes indeed it could," replied Keith. Let's go see your cabin." Keith was the last out and said to Bill, who had returned to his post. "Validate their wrist bands for their new cabin in addition to their old one, please."

"Confirmed," Bill said with a wink and a smile.

They were waiting at the door when Keith arrived. "Open your door," Keith called to them.

Donald said, "I don't want to hurt my shoulder again."

Laughing, Keith said, "Then let your mother open the door."

She pushed on the door slightly and it opened.

Donald said, "You validated our wrist bands already."

"Yep, it doesn't take much time to do that with Jeremy's voice system. How do you like it? Bear in mind that there are no outside balconies on this deck. There are some glass areas for outside light, but your balconies are outside your bedrooms upstairs. If the color scheme in any room or in all the rooms is not to your liking, we will have it changed."

"Honey, this floor alone is larger than our entire home in Breezy Point umm was. This is just beautiful. I wouldn't change a thing." Martha was very happy. "Let's go upstairs."

Keith held back because he knew there would be a shriek of happiness when they saw their bedroom. He counted 10-9-8-7-6-...

"Ohhhhh! Look at this!" Martha let out a shriek before Keith got to "5".

David couldn't have been happier.

Martha exclaimed, "Keith! This is just beautiful. Our favorite colors. We couldn't afford a king-size bed and we were having trouble sleeping on our smaller bed. The room is so big that you can get around the bed easily. TWO big walk-in closets. A shower AND a bath tub both big enough for both of us. A huge private balcony where nobody can walk past our windows and look in."

"What will our nosey neighbors do when they can't walk by and look in while I am putting my uniform on and getting ready for work?"

"Well Honey, we won't have to worry about that anymore, will we? Dave, let's go see what Donald's room looks like. He is pretty quiet in there."

When they got to Donald's room they could hear him whooping it up. Everything on the ship was insulated so well that they couldn't hear him from their room. "That will be nice. He won't be able to hear us either," David said with a wink of his eye.

"Mom, Dad, look at my room. It is almost as big as our old house. I won't have to fold up my bed before I can get into my closet anymore. I have my own TV and my bed isn't lumpy. This is all just awesome." Keith was showing Donald how to adjust the darkening plasma polarized outside window on

his shower. He could make it transparent or opaque while he was showering. Keith also pointed out where he could put a weight set if he wanted one.

“While your job levels do not rate an exercising swim pool, I could make a case for getting you one if you want it.”

“Yesss!” Donald shouted.

“But we do not want you to get into any trouble by doing that for us, Keith.” David was aware of the consequence of rules.

“It goes on a point system. You are each just a few points short of having enough, but if we combine the points for both of you, then you have way more than enough. If anyone has a problem with it, I will just call Mr. Sterling. When I asked him to allow us to open the ship to Sandy’s displaced people, it didn’t take him even a second before he agreed to it. He keeps telling me and Judith that we are in charge. Normally I wouldn’t have told you this, but in your role of Captain, you need to know who you report to. The non-security personnel think that I am the head of marketing and a womanizer that makes advances at beautiful single women.” Keith said with a wink. “I am actually Chief of Security-Systems. Judith’s public image is the head of Guest Services, but she is the Chief of Security-Guest Services and she also has a Ph.D. in security. None of that information leaves this room. The two of us are equals and we report only to each other. We also have a responsibility to keep Mr. Sterling informed of major developments.”

“This was all your idea? Then we should all be thanking you!”

“Remember, Martha, none of this information can leave this room. If there is any thanking to do, it should be directed to Mr. Sterling. Only the Security Department will know that David reports to me. Anybody can know that you report to Judith. Donald reports to both of you, at least until he is 18”, he said with a wink. “It is OK if anybody knows that he is working on delivering a product to me in the Marketing Department. Just do not tell anyone that you are doing that project in CCC. If they ask, he is doing it on his laptop from his room. I am also accepting the responsibility for developing Donald into one of our future employees. I prefer that Donald would attend a college or university, but at least the first few years of that can be accomplished online. An added benefit to that scheme is that he can be earning more money here than he could earn anywhere else while he is in a higher educational program. And don’t forget that with our card project, there will be income from that, too.”

Mrs. Jones had to sit down. “We came here when our home was about to be destroyed and David was forced to retire. Now, less than 24 hours later we are living in luxury with great plans for our future while doing something that we each love. At the same time it is like we are on an endless luxury vacation. What else could happen?”

Keith said, “Perhaps this is a good time to go down to one of the chapels and thank our Father for His many blessings.”

David said, “Let’s go now. We should have done this yesterday, too. We can’t thank you enough, Keith. Please thank Judith, too.”

“Welcome aboard. You will all need microchips in your toes so that both David and Donald can get into the CCC and Martha can get onto the 13th deck. You could move into this cabin now if you wish, but it would be easier for maintenance to put in your swim tank if you weren’t in the cabin yet. They will be done in just a couple of days. Donald, when you guys get moved in look me up and I will show you how to get that passenger file with ‘Read’ permission so you can get started whenever you wish. I will pass your gratitude to Judith too. Have a wonderful day. I need to get back down there to see if I can help hire anyone else.”

* * *

The effects of the storm were a severe blow to the entire northeastern section of the country. Even West Virginia was hit with a three foot snow storm from Sandy. Nearly the entire area was without power for days. The people that had taken refuge in their cars or in a public shelter began

to realize that they needed a longer term shelter; the word began to get out that the Maxx was taking in displaced people. By the time that all of them had found some place to live, the Maxx was nearing its maximum capacity. Jeremy was reporting they had taken in 6743 people.

Additional town meetings had been held and as people realized that their jobs would not be coming back to them for a very long time, more and more people applied and most who applied were accepted as crew members for the Maxx. Judith had achieved her goal of bring her crew up to full strength as a result of tying up at a New York City dock. She had all of her department heads running full scale training programs.

“Keith, let’s give Rudolph another update. I know we called him last night, but everything has come together so well today that we need to give him a good anti-anxiety talk.”

“Is that what we call them?” Keith laughed. “I’ll meet you in CCC as soon as I check with marketing’s new camera crew. They wanted to ask me about some new equipment that they want to get.”

“OK, I’ll go up now and meet you there.”

First Kiss

When Keith arrived in CCC twenty minutes later, he found David asking Tom some questions. "Hi guys. Everything OK?"

"It is all good," Tom answered. "David was just asking if I had found out anything that he should know about our new employees. I said they all checked out as far as the DEA is concerned."

"That's good. I have a meeting with Judith so if you need me, I'll be out soon."

They both said that was OK and that Judith was in the room with the darkened walls. Keith went over to the room and Judith invited him in. "I set the room to secure-mode so we could put Rudolph on speakerphone. What did the camera guys want?"

"Not much. Just the newest and the best."

"Did you expect anything else?"

"Nope. Their new stuff will not have a learning curve on it as they've already used it in their previous jobs. It will give sharper and clearer HD and 3D images that will really pop on future TV screens. We can also put ads into movie theatres in upscale neighborhoods with 3D screens. Donald Jones was in the marketing department when I was being told about the new equipment. He jumped into the discussion and said he knew how to make 3D-appearing images on flat surfaces that he thought would be great on cards that he would be sending out in the future."

"He is already turning out to be a great addition. How long do you think we can keep him before he goes off to school, Keith?"

"Probably two-three years. He is so accustomed to online schooling that he could complete most of his under graduate work from here before he has to work in their labs. He could work online with us after that. I'll just keep my eyes open for another bright, hi-tech kid that can step in when we need someone. By then, Donald will have us up to speed and all we'll need is someone to operate his system and to add new bells and whistles."

"Great. Would you care to sit by me while we call Rudolph?"

"If I sat next to you would we still have to call Rudolph?"

"Do you mean that or are you just in your flirting with single women before you dump them mode?"

"I am serious. I have also been giving my 'vow against getting involved with a woman' some serious thought. I really like you. I love it that we are a team and I can count on you. I certainly will be at your side and backing you up whenever you need me for anything. You know my story about getting my heart broken and so you will understand if I am moving too slowly. If at some point, you care more about someone else, please do as it says in the song, and 'let me down easy' so my heart isn't permanently damaged. I hope that's not too much to ask."

Judith's heart took such a jump that she couldn't answer. She just leaned over and gave him a soft kiss on his lips. "Maybe we should get back to work."

Keith just closed his eyes and smiled. He had really enjoyed that. He may even have taken a few more steps forward towards breaking his vow. "Thanks, I needed that."

"Speakerphone OK?"

"Go."

Mr. Sterling answered on the second ring. "Good evening, Judith. Is Keith with you?"

"Yes, Rudolph. We are both here and you are on speakerphone. How is everything on your end?"

"I cannot tell you how proud I am of you two. I have had calls from congressional men and women and leaders from around the world. Even the King of Saudi Arabia called me. Everyone is both

surprised and pleased that we would even think of such a thing as to welcome displaced people into a brand new luxury ship. I didn't have the guts to tell them that it wasn't my idea."

"Well, don't be so hard on yourself. You hired us and we are therefore just an extension of you. So, it was really your idea." Keith tried to pat him on the back.

"You don't have to butter me up, Keith. We three all know whose idea it was. I am just so thankful that you called with the idea. By the way we have been invited to take the Maxx to any of their ports. If we have any trouble getting approvals through the normal channels, I should call them directly. How's that for a great kudo? But then, you called me."

Judith spoke, "Thank you so much for sharing that with us. Everything is going well here. Just before calling, we told each other that we couldn't be happier here." She looked at Keith and winked.

"Everything is going ahead at a pace that is beyond our expectations." Keith returned the wink and added a smile.

"We called to let you know that we are up to a full complement of crew members. All of the departments have launched full training schedules. We have some really outstanding individuals on our staffs. We were just too excited to wait until next week to let you know."

"That is just great. I am conducting interviews for a ship's captain and for the other navigational positions. Most of these captains are satisfied with their present ships so I have been expanding my search to English speaking candidates from foreign countries. They need to know the U. S. rules of course since we operate under the U. S. flag."

"Aren't there any retired U. S. Naval officers who would like a position like this?" Keith asked.

"There are, but they all seem to have pretty solid retirement expectations that do not involve looking out at the ocean. I am not worried yet; we are still a few months away from running a shakedown cruise."

"Have your office staff, put some ads into 'Stars and Stripes' or post them on the bulletin boards at Annapolis," Keith suggested.

"Thank you mister marketing man, I will do that. I will be leaving for dinner soon. It doesn't sound as if you have anything urgent, but of course if something comes up, I know you will call. Have a good evening, Judith and Keith. Good night."

They both said their good nights and terminated the call.

Keith asked, "Would you like to go to the main dining room with me and mix with the guests?"

"Oh thank you, but I was planning to curl up with a book and turn in early tonight. You go ahead if you want to."

"I guess I just wanted to be with you for a while. I've got a kink in my back, I'm going to put a heat lamp on it then go for a mile swim at a slow pace. That usually takes care of any back problems for me. Unless you were going to use the swim tank tonight?"

"No, I swim after you and Michael swim in the morning. Nope. Just me and my book tonight. Enjoy your swim. I will look forward to seeing you tomorrow."

Keith reached over and gave her a short kiss. "Thank you for today."

"Thank you, too. Good night."

"Good night."

Keith just stood and watched her go up the stairs to her cabin. She knew he was watching so she looked down and smiled at him as she went through her door. Inside her cabin she just leaned with her back against her door. She closed her eyes and remembered their first kisses with a smile on her face. *"I know I shouldn't push it. Just give him time. But I really want him. He is so nice, so handsome, so smart, so kind to people and his cabin is so close to mine,"* she thought. The book she had in mind was actually her diary. She thought for a moment then picked up a notecard to write to her parents

instead. She had already told them that she liked Keith and she had told them about his previous marriage and divorce. Her father had written back saying that Keith would not likely hold onto his vow about not wanting to get involved with another woman. He said that if she liked him, just let him know in subtle ways. That was how she got the courage to kiss Keith tonight. She just had to tell her Dad and Mother what had happened between them today. She wasn't sure that she could go slowly enough. Not after that first kiss from her and a returned kiss from him. Patience, her Dad had said would work wonders. She got into her bed clothes, bunched up some pillows behind her and curled up to write.

* * *

After resetting the room to a public mode with clear glass walls, Keith left the room and looked over at Tom and David. "You guys need me?"

"No, we're good. Thanks."

"I'm going up to work out some sore muscles. If you call I might be in the swim tank."

"Have a good swim. Good night, Keith."

He turned and went up the same stairs that Judith had just used. He thought he could just make out the scent of her perfume as he went slowly up the stairs. At the top he looked at Judith's door then down at his right shoe. He could open her door if he wanted to, but he had better not. He could knock on her door, but he had better not. He just wasn't sure of himself. He went into his own cabin and closed the door.

He walked around his cabin aimlessly. He couldn't get Judith out of his mind. He knew how to tease other women, but this was different. This wasn't teasing. He really liked Judith. Did she know how he felt? She said he could talk to her any time about his feelings about women. Should he? Was she just being nice? He was used to talking to Jeremy. Out loud he said, "*Hey Judith, you said I could talk to you anytime. I really like you. I might even be falling in love with you. How do I get rid of this fear that you will dump me if I fall in love with you? Will you dump me? How can I be sure? What should I do next?*" He didn't really ask Jeremy anything; he was just expressing his feelings. His brain was racing around. This was not like him. He was a calm, cool, sure-thinking individual. Why was he so mixed up now? He decided that he should just continue as he was doing now-just let things happen between them. Judith wouldn't have kissed him if she didn't want to. He wouldn't have kissed her if he didn't want to. Just let it happen until their future became clearer. He got his heat-lamp massage device out and plugged it in. He made a sandwich to eat while the lamp was working on his back.

President of the United States of America

The entire world was rocked by the devastation caused by Sandy. Donations were coming in from individuals, large corporations and everyone in between. Musicians got together and planned to do what they do best, put together a big musical event to raise money to help people. They planned “121212: The Concert for Sandy Relief at Madison SQ Garden.” To be held on December 12, 2012, tickets went on sale for \$150 to \$2500. But scalpers bought up large blocks of tickets and resold them for up to \$48,000 for front row seats. That would have been nice, but the scalpers kept the markup and it did not go to the relief effort.

Judith had planned to purchase tickets for the displaced people on the Maxx, but she refused to buy them from the scalpers. Instead she obtained approval from the concert organizers and the Madison Square Garden to pipe in the concert to the Maxx’s various theatres that could hold all of their people at one time. Then she arranged for TV cameras to be on the Maxx that would broadcast live pictures of the displaced people enjoying the concert for THEM so the world could see them. More importantly the world could see their reaction to the musicians playing for THEM.

Judith’s phone rang. It was a call from Mr. Sterling telling her that President Paul Newberg wanted to give him a Presidential Medal of Freedom on December 12th at the Maxx’s theatre during the concert’s intermission. She could expect the Secret Service to be there momentarily to inspect the ship for the President’s safety. She called Keith.

“Keith, this falls in your department. The Secret Service will be here at any moment to inspect the Maxx for a presidential visit on 12-12. Rudolph will be getting a medal from President Newberg on the main theatre’s stage during the concert’s intermission. Let’s show them the Presidential Suite too, in case we can get him to take a cruise with us sometime.”

“Thanks for the head’s up. I will watch for them and I will have David with me too.”

* * *

Keith and David were waiting for the Secret Service when they drove up in three separate unmarked cars. Two agents stayed with the cars while ten others came up the gangway. Keith greeted them and asked them to follow him to a secure conference room on the 13th deck. As they entered the elevator, Keith spoke. “Ladies and gentlemen, this is David, Captain of our security department. I am, Keith, the Chief of Security-Systems on the Maxx. Please note the movement of my foot.” He swung it twice under the button panel and they were whisked upwards. “I designed the security systems on this ship so you may ask me anything. I have doctorates in Electrical Engineering and Security from UW-Platteville. We are headed to the CCC, our Central Command Center.” The door opened on the 13th deck. “This way please.” Keith pushed the door open and announced, “Bill I have a tour coming in. Please look around briefly then we will meet in this secure room over here. Our computer’s name is Jeremy and he will take voice directions.”

The team was unusually quiet, Keith thought. He led them to the secure conference room where he opened a locked drawer and took out ten plastic door cards. When they were all seated, Keith picked up the remote and changed the walls to their opaque setting. He passed out the cards saying, “Our security staff personnel have microchips in their feet that unlock every door on this ship. These cards will give you the same access to every space, but for them to work more quickly, you will each have to slide them all the way into your right shoe under your foot. Unless you request otherwise, the codes on these cards will expire on December 13th. I know why you are here. Please proceed with your questions, then you may go alone to anywhere you wish or we can go with you.”

The lead person introduced himself. “Thanks, Keith. Your reputation precedes you. I am Agent Witherspoon, but you may call me Fred. Where have you seen me before?”

“Doctor Witherspoon, you presided with Professor Young at portions of my doctoral defense. I recognized you even before you took off your sunglasses, but did not want to acknowledge you in public until we got up here. Nearly everyone on the ship thinks that I am either the head of marketing or a hunk that chases single ladies.” That drew a laugh from everyone.

“Excellent. When I heard you were here, I suggested to the President that his presentation would be secure here on the ship. We will break into teams of two and inspect the ship. With your assistance we can complete this today, but two agents will remain here on the ship from now until the President has left. Can a room for them be arranged?”

“Of course. I would even give up my own cabin for you, but that will not be necessary. They may stay in the Presidential Suite which is here at the President’s disposal. You can give it a good going over.” That put a smile on a few faces.

“You may have also presided for Ken Wenzell’s doctoral. He is here too, but he is sleeping now as he has the night shift. You probably already knew this, but we have two DEA agents in residence. They are Agent Tom Hansen and Agent Bill Smathers; you passed Bill monitoring our computer as we entered the CCC. They are working in here undercover and they have nearly all of the same computer access as Judith and I do. They work as our assistants. Our computer has already approved you as not carrying any illegal drugs by sniffing you as you entered the ship. It did alert me however that you were carrying weapons, but it was only a confirmation as I had already informed it that you would be carrying.”

“Has Homeland Security ever contacted you about designing a sniffer like that for airport security, Keith?”

“No, but I am mentoring an Electrical Engineering student and that could be a good project for him to work on. He is my cabin steward, Michael, who is also the chief steward. My EE lab is right next door and you will want to see it, too. As we tour the ship, how do you want to be introduced to our lead staff personnel?”

“You may tell them that we are government people on a routine inspection tour. They do not need to know any more than that.”

“Excellent. Anymore questions, please ask. I will hand you maps of the ship as we leave this room. Fred you are in charge now. We will follow, but would you like to see my cabin first?” David opened a drawer and took out a stack of maps and put them on the counter for the agents. Then Keith led Fred and another agent up to his cabin.

“This is awesome, Keith. Oh, wow, you even have a swim tank! I see you still work out.”

“Yes, my steward, Michael, spots me on the weights and we both work out from 4 to 5 each morning. Then we follow that with a swim before he has a healthy breakfast in here with me. Where do you want to go next, Fred?”

“Why don’t you show us the ‘Presidential Suite’ as you called it?”

“Sure. Have you both used moving ladders?”

“Yes, it was in our training course. Are you telling me that you have them here?”

“Yes. Let’s go out into the hallway and we will take the ladders to the 20th deck.”

“Lead the way, Keith.”

There was one hidden in the walls right across from Keith’s cabin. “This why you need the door card in your shoe. The card readers are just two inches off the floor. I will lead the way up to the 20th. We have standard OSHA approved safety devices that we check daily so just jump on and go.” Keith caught a ladder and went quickly up.

Everyone got off on the 20th deck with no problems. “Your team will probably want to use these to move quickly without waiting for an elevator. The President may use an elevator car that I will lock out of the public system. Whether he uses the stairs or not, his elevator car will always be at the same deck as he is.”

“Jeremy can do that, too? I don’t remember seeing that in your dissertation?”

“I added it later. This is the door to the Presidential Suite. Would you please open it with your shoe-card?”

Fred motioned for the other agent to open the door. It swung open easily. “This is very comfortable looking. Easy on the senses.” The rooms were elegantly furnished without being gaudy. Everything looked as if the rooms were built after they were furnished. Everything fit into place creating an easy traffic flow within and between the rooms. The master bedroom looked remarkably like the Lincoln Room at the White House. The kitchen was large and it had a double-locked dumb waiter that could only be operated with an agent at both levels to prevent any deliberate contamination of any foods that might be carried on it. The President’s chef could either cook in the special guests’ kitchen next to the main galley or it could be prepared in the President’s kitchen. The dumb waiter could not be stopped at any other deck level. Fred approved of all of the accommodations in the suite.

“Let me also show you our helipad on the top deck, in case you would want him to either arrive or depart that way.”

“No thanks, one of the other teams will check that out.”

“Then let me show you the main theatre and the gadgets we have in there, before I let you go on your own and at your own pace. You may call me or David at any time. Look at your maps to find it and please let David know where he should position his staff. I want to be in CCC watching everything that Jeremy comes up with. I would like one of your staff in there with me so that your team will be apprised of everything. Judith should probably be with you so that you can ask Jeremy to investigate anything that comes up in your mind, too.”

“Thanks, Keith. I will sit down with you before I leave.”

* * *

Fred’s team thoroughly scoured the ship from top to bottom, stem to stern and port to starboard. Incoming and outgoing communication paths were tested and retested. Background checks were made of the staff, the crew and the guests. Keith asked Judith if they had checked her teeth for any cavities yet. “What? Do you mean they checked yours?”

Laughing, “No, but they might as well have done that. They didn’t miss anything else. They even asked if I was going to finish my skim milk tonight, because it would be expired tomorrow.”

Just then Keith got a call from Fred. “Fred wants to meet with both of us and David in CCC in ten minutes. I told him we were all here already.”

David said, “I’m ready for him.”

“So are we.”

Fred arrived with another Secret Service agent. He had been with Fred and Keith earlier. As they walked through CCC towards the conference room, Fred said, “Good Evening, Jeremy.”

There was silence from Jeremy.

Fred looked confused. “Jeremy talked to me in Platteville. Doesn’t he do that anymore? I was hoping that I could be up here with you, Keith. I may have to rethink this.”

“He still talks, but I erased all permissions except my voice commands from his vocal communication files. I will put you back in. Do you want to do that now?”

“Yes, please. That will check off another completion.”

“Good evening, Jeremy.”

“Hi Keith. I recognized that voice, but I was not authorized to talk to it. It belongs to Professor Fred Witherspoon.”

“Excellent, Jeremy. Let’s get him set up.”

“You will have to go into my secure mode first.”

“Hey, smarty, I programmed you, remember?”

“Like it was yesterday. That was the day you spilled coffee on your keyboard and you swore at me. It wasn’t my fault though.”

Fred, Judith, and David were watching in amusement. The other agent was just amazed. Finally Judith started snickering and then Fred couldn’t hold back his laughter anymore. He just exploded with laughter. By then Judith was nearly rolling on the floor, laughing. The other agent even started laughing.

Keith turned toward them. “Whose side are you guys on anyway?” Finally he gained his composure. “Jeremy, I have a question.”

“What is your question?”

“Jeremy, I have a question.”

“Ask it, I am ready.”

“Jeremy, I have a question.”

“Go.”

“Jeremy, please authorize full voice communication with Fred.”

“Confirmed.”

“Do you want to hear his voice again in all of his expressive modes for your records?”

“I told you ‘confirmed’ didn’t I?”

Judith snickered again.

“I am sorry I doubted you, Jeremy,” Keith said sternly.

Jeremy came back with an emotion that Keith had forgotten that he had programmed it into Jeremy. “I am sorry. Are you mad at me, Mister Keith?”

Judith almost said, “Awww.”

“No I am not mad at you. I was just testing you. Test completed.”

“Confirmed.”

Aside to the others, “I used to get into testing situations like this many years ago. I forgot that he developed a sensitivity to my testing by repeating. Sometimes I wish I could give him a doggie biscuit or something.”

Fred tried again, “Good evening, Jeremy.”

“Hi Fred. I remember when you used to ask me some really hard questions. But I always got the right answer, didn’t I?”

“Yes you did, Jeremy. I used to secretly wish that you belonged to me. You are very amazing!”

“Oh thank you, Fred. What do you want now?”

Fred said to Keith, “That is how you give him a doggie biscuit.”

Keith just smiled.

“Jeremy, what is the name of the color of the President’s bedspread and how was that color chosen?”

Keith looked at Judith and shrugged his shoulders.

Judith look back and mouthed, “*I don’t know.*”

“It is called ‘morning smoky mist off Key West’, do you like it? I had seen it on the President’s wife’s dress in a magazine before the designers made their color choices here on the ship. I was flashing ‘morning smoky mist off Key West for the President’s bedspread’ over and over again until somebody noticed it. Judith wasn’t here yet or it would have been noticed a lot sooner.”

“An excellent choice, Jeremy. She still wears that dress around the White House. She says it is her favorite color. I wondered when I saw it on the bed up in their suite, how it had been made into a bedspread and brought here. Now I won’t be asking her any embarrassing questions about what happened to her dress. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

“Let’s go into the conference room. He read it off a magazine; that is just amazing.” They all settled into the conference room and Fred set the room to “secure-mode.”

“We have finished the initial sweep of the Maxx and find it flawless in its security for the President’s visit on the twelfth. First of all, I would like to introduce my agent here. Since we rarely use our real names, I will just call him Adam. Adam is my top assistant. The two of us will stay in the Presidential Suite until the President Newberg arrives. At that time I will immediately go to CCC. Both the President and his wife will be in the suite and depending upon the weather that day, they will likely want to freshen up before meeting anyone. We will be at a discrete distance which they are used to. Twenty minutes before the concert starts, Judith will take Mr. Sterling to the President’s Suite and knock on his door. Mr. Sterling and Judith will then join the Presidential couple in viewing the concert on the large screen in their living room. Nine minutes before the concert intermission, Adam will invite them into the Presidential elevator for their ride to the hallway just outside of the main theatre. David will have this area restricted so that the party can make their way to the stage door. Once inside the theatre Adam will hand the medal to the President. A designated person will introduce the President to the audience. The President will enter the stage accompanied by Mr. Sterling who will be followed by the President’s wife. After the presentation and photographs, the party will leave the stage and return with Adam and Judith to the Presidential Suite. We will have stand-ins dressed like the President and his wife exit the ship with a security detail while the President and his wife leave later by Air Force One helicopter. The highest security risk to the President begins when he arrives on the stage and this is where Jeremy will be most valuable. Keith and I will be with Jeremy watching for anything even slightly suspicious. We will go over this several times more before the twelfth. Any questions?”

“This keeps me out of public view and Judith in the public view, which is consistent with the security of our jobs,” Keith said. “I like it.”

Judith observed, “I will be with Mr. Sterling in his private ‘Owner’s Suite’ until the appointed time.”

Keith was thinking out loud. “I will work on attenuating the sensitivity of our room sniffers to watch for anything unusual even before that day. The sensors tend to last only half as long when they are turned up. We won’t have to leave them at that setting, so we won’t have to do a total replacement for a year.”

“Well then we are agreed on the first draft of Plan A. I will work on Plans B, C, and D in the next day or so.”

“If any of your team wants their shoe micro-card replaced with a painlessly inserted permanent toe-chip, we can do it any time before the concert. I know that the shoe cards are uncomfortable to walk on. Just let me know and I can give them a tiny chip in a sterile vial that they can take to our physician to be implanted. It just takes a minute.”

“I will have one. Adam, you too?”

“Yes, thank you. I tend to slide in my shoe with this card.”

It was the first time that Keith heard him speak. Judith had a different response. She just tightened her face for a moment. Keith noticed and wondered about that.

The meeting broke up then with Fred and Adam leaving the CCC. David went with them.

Keith asked Judith to wait with him in the conference room. “What was that all about when Adam first spoke? You stiffened up. Do you know him?”

“You are the most observant person I know. Or are you reading my mind?”

“When did you two date?”

“Keithhhh.”

“What?”

“Since you seem to have it all figured out, do I even have to tell you?”

"You never HAVE to tell me anything. I just thought I could help you over an obstacle. I am here to help you, remember?"

"I want to tell you, because I don't like secrets any more than you do. Adam, except his real name is Sylvester Holden, and I dated for about six months while we were classmates at Platteville. He was always a bit pushy with our relationship, but I thought I liked him until..." Her voice trailed off and she stopped.

"It is OK, I trust you."

"One night, it was late, he was walking me home past the park, and..."

Keith just held his breath.

"He tore my clothes trying to pull them off. I screamed and ran all the way back to my dorm room and locked the door."

Keith jumped up. He suddenly looked like her hero. He towered over her and was snorting through his nostrils while staring at the door that Adam or Sylvester had gone through.

"No, Keith. Don't do anything. It is not worth it."

"You are always worth it. You are scheduled to be in the Presidential Suite with him. If he touches you, he will not get off this ship without at least a black eye, which he may notice when he wakes up in a hospital."

"Please Keith. I took a year of martial arts right after that and I can defend myself very well."

"How long did it take for him to apologize to you?"

"That's just it. Today was the first time that I've heard his voice since he tried to rape me."

"I am going to talk to Fred right now. I will talk to you when I get back." He bent down and gave Judith a hug - - and a kiss."

"I'm sorry for this."

"Listen, Judith. This is NOT your fault. He is the jerk here and we are just refusing to work with him. His past actions will get in the way of our performance and Fred won't allow that. I will just talk to Fred, man to man."

* * *

"But Keith, he is my right hand man."

"Except, he has a mark across his forehead that will get in the way of our making quick decisions. Neither Judith nor I will be able to forget what he did. If we get into a serious situation, that mark will get in the way of our making unbiased, intelligent decisions. I am not asking you to fire him; just replace him for that action here on that day. Not only that but we know his real name and we might slip and call him by his real name. We trust that you will make the right decision. Thank you." Keith shook Fred's hand and turned to walk away.

"You have grown in your professionalism, Keith. I admire you for it. He will be leaving tonight. Thank you for letting me know."

Keith turned with a smile saying, "Thank you. I will go tell Judith."

* * *

Judith was waiting for Keith to return. "Well, what did he say?"

"Mister Holden is leaving this evening."

"Really! Oh, Keith, you are my hero, my real hero. Thank you." She wrapped her arms around Keith even though Tom was sitting right there watching Jeremy's screens. "I have some fresh skim milk over here in the fridge. Will you have some with me?"

"Certainly."

They just sat at a small table looking at each other for a while before Judith spoke. "You make me feel so safe-and happy."

"You make me feel so warm inside when you confide in me with something that I can do that will make you feel good. You are so intelligent that you usually fix your own problems. I like that too,

but when you let me help you, I just feel so warm all over. I have never had that feeling before in my life. You have aroused a warmth and comfort in me that I've never had before. It feels good."

"Keith, you are not only physically strong, but you have such a powerful concern for others that everyone who comes near, loves you. Just look at what you have done for thousands and thousands of people without homes when it has gotten really cold outside. Sure you didn't put up the money for them, but you still thought of the plan and made it happen. If it were not for our jobs being secret to the outside world, I would march right up to the President and tell him that you should be getting that medal that he is giving to Rudolph."

"I'd rather that it was given to Rudolph. It will become a marketing tool that will bring even more people on board for cruises. It will be a windfall for all of us. Besides, any time you can make your boss look good, it will rub off on you."

"There you go again. Another example of why people love you. But I won't forget what you have done for me, personally. I love you, Keith."

He was stunned. Why didn't he even see this coming? What should he do now? What should he say? Aww heck, don't analyze it, just do it. He slid their drinks to the sides of the table and leaned over to give Judith a big kiss. "I love you, too. At least I hope I do, because if I don't then there is no explanation for how I feel. I am sorry that I am such a klutz over this, but it has been ten years since my divorce when I swore off women. I am seeing now that was a stupid blunder. But I am so glad that I didn't change my attitude until I met you. Thank you for easing me into this. I love you."

"Don't worry about your ten years. It just took you that long to get over a severe blow to your emotions. I am the lucky one here. I feel that you waited for me. I love you, too, Keith."

Ken walked in just then for his late night shift. Tom told him that everything was going smooth so he left Ken in charge of Jeremy.

Ken asked Judith and Keith, "You guys still up? I hear we have a busy day again tomorrow. None of my business, but I'd say you should be getting some sleep."

Keith said, "Yes father. I will go to my cabin now for some night-night." Quietly he said to Judith, "Night and sweet dreams, my love." He squeezed her hand.

"You too. I can't wait to see you again tomorrow. Thank you again for tonight!"

They walked together up the stairs and paused. Then they kissed and went into their separate cabins. Ken nearly fell off his chair.

This was going to be a long night. Ken could hardly wait until morning when Keith would come down to CCC. He had to ask his old friend just what was going on between him and Judith. It looked to Ken that his buddy was about to break his vow of not getting mixed up with a woman and Ken wanted to tease him about it. He had always hoped that Keith would find someone that he could be happy with, so he wasn't going to try to talk him out of it. But Ken just HAD to know what was going on.

The hours dragged on. Nothing unusual happened other than there were now two Secret Service agents in the Presidential Suite. One or the other was always out walking in various parts of the ship during the night. Two or three times during the night one of them would stop in at CCC to talk to him. They didn't talk much; they just asked a few questions about what they saw on the main screen. Tom had told him that he could discuss anything with these agents. They were more like robots dressed up to look like men, like you'd see in a movie. It was real quiet.

Ken finally heard Keith's door open. Keith came bouncing out and he grabbed the pole with just his hands and spun around it while he lowered himself down to the CCC deck. "Are we pretending to be a circus performer this morning?" Ken asked. "Would that have anything to do with your kiss with Judith last night?"

"Oh, you saw us?"

"How could I avoid it? I was even wondering if you were both going to end up in the same cabin last night. It would appear that you have abandoned your vow about women."

“Funny how someone can change your mind about things. Judith and I have slowly been growing more close to each other. She could become my wife if she wants to. I’m really falling in love with her.”

“And does she know that?”

“I think so. It is just too soon to come right out and say that.”

“When we start our cruises, will you still be coming on strong with the single women and if you do, how will Judith feel about that?”

“As long as I just do my job of entertaining the women and Judith can see that my love is only for her, I think we will be just fine.”

“I don’t know. Women can be very jealous. A man’s psyche tends to operate on logic while a woman’s is more likely to follow an emotional track. You can explain your actions all day long, but make sure that she sees your emotions towards her, if you want to keep her.”

“When did you ever take a course in psychology?”

“Hey, I read books, ya know.”

“Like what?”

“Like that one on men being from a different planet than women.”

“How much did you learn from it when you can’t even remember the title?”

“Not important. Also, you have changed the subject. We are talking about you and Judith.”

“Did someone mention my name?” Judith was coming out of her cabin.

Keith walked over to meet her at the bottom of the stairs. “Hi, I hope you slept as well as I did last night. Ken was just giving me his approval of our kiss at the top of the stairs last night.”

“Ken, were you snooping on us last night?”

“No, but you didn’t tell me not to look.”

She shook her head and just said, “Men. Well Ken, I hope that you do not go spreading any of your thoughts about us to anyone else, please.”

“Certainly not. You can both count on me.”

“Thank you. Did anything new happen overnight?”

“No, just that Fred and Ben didn’t sleep much last night. One or the other was up walking around all night long.”

She looked at Keith. “Ben? Thank you, Keith.”

“I told you I would take care of it for you.”

Ken said, “What’s this about, Ben?”

Keith said, “Ben replaced someone that we were not comfortable with.”

Judith looked as if she was afraid Keith would tell about her history with this ‘Adam’ guy. But Keith’s answer was very comforting to her.

Ken just said, “OK.”

* * *

The days seemed to just fly by with all of the many preparations about having the President and his wife being there. Mr. Sterling decided to drop in the day before and move into his cabin for a couple of nights.

Jeremy was the first to notice his arrival. Tom was in CCC with Jeremy and Tom called both Judith and Keith. They rushed to meet Mr. Sterling before he reached the elevators. They arrived together. “Mr. Sterling, good evening!” Judith called out.

He turned to see them both rushing toward him. “Come get into the elevator with me,” he said. “I should have visited sooner,” he said as he gave Judith a hug. “And this fine gentleman is Keith, no doubt. I am so glad to finally meet you in person.”

“The pleasure is all mine, I assure you,” Keith responded. “We did not expect you until tomorrow, Rudolph, but we are so happy that you are here.”

“Well I am still having trepidations about accepting a Presidential medal which should really be given to you. You not only had a great idea that matched my personality, but it has been extremely successful, too. I can’t thank you enough, Keith.”

“Nonsense, Rudolph. We could not have done this without your generosity. This is certainly your reward and richly deserved. Judith has been behind this 100%, too. It is just a great team effort and our leader is about to be rewarded for it.”

“And our crew is up to capacity, too. I even found a good Captain who comes to us with his own officers and navigational crew. They will be here in two days, on Thursday the 13th. Ah, here we are.” The elevator door opened. “Please come into my cabin where we can visit for a spell.”

Rudolph smiled as his toe unlocked his door. As they went in, he talked about the door lock systems. “This was one of the important features in my presentation of your computer system. Today there are so many similar systems using wrist implants, but they all agreed that a toe implant was so unique. The passengers will have wrist bands but they will not even notice that the staff has toe implants, especially when the staff has wrist bands, too. The staff wrist bands only operate their time clocks and a few other non-essential locks. Your main computer is also incredible.”

“Keith showed me something else about the computer that I did not know when I put your presentation together. It is so incredible that you should witness it yourself as soon as you are ready to go down to see it.”

“You have my curiosity up. Can we go now?”

Judith led the way to the elevator and once inside said, “Watch this.” She swung her toe past the lower end of the button panel twice. The effect on Rudolph was immediate.

“Wow, that was fast. Was that the new feature?”

“No, just a gimmick, but a useful one. Let’s go into the CCC.”

Tom jumped up as soon as they went in. “Good evening, Mr. Sterling. I am Tom Hansen, one of the DEA agents.”

“How do you do. I am so glad that you would accept working with the computer in addition to your DEA duties. The synergy should be very worthwhile.”

Keith asked, “Have you met Jeremy, Rudolph?”

“No, who is Jeremy?”

“Good evening, Jeremy.”

“Hi Keith. And good evening to you, too, Mister Sterling. Thank you for purchasing me and having me installed here in your wonderful ship where Keith could find me again.”

“Oh my God! I didn’t know the computer could talk. And with such intelligence and emotion, too. How did you ever do this, Keith?”

“Jeremy and I worked together for many years. His program was my doctoral dissertation. We were best buddies for a long time before someone bought him from me. I didn’t even know he was here until Judith asked me up here for an interview.”

“Will the cruise line owners that I sold copies to be able to use his voice, too?”

“Not unless I actually am in the presence of their computer and I validate its use for them. Are you thinking what I am thinking?”

“Oh, yes! I could sell them the additional voice feature for a price if you would visit them and validate it for them. There wouldn’t be anything illegal about it. The voice addition was never mentioned to them, because I didn’t know about it. This would be like purchasing a car and then asking the dealer to add an option after the purchase. The option was already built into the car, but all it needed was an activation component that could be plugged in with just five minutes of work. Yet they could charge any amount they wanted to for the component and the service. I love this, Keith! Show me what it can do.”

“Jeremy has Fred, the Secret Service agent had supper yet and if he has, what did he eat?”

“Fred went to the main dining room at 1812 and ordered a prime rib special, cooked medium. His drink was black coffee. He did not have a dessert, but he took a carton of milk out with him. He ate alone and he did finish his steak. He left the dining room at 1903.”

“How long would it take you to pull all of that together using the keyboard?”

“It would take about five queries using a database search, but it could be done in 2.33 minutes,” Tom answered.

“Keith, this takes computing to a whole new level. That would be a great selling pitch right there.”

“Jeremy, would you please print out a list of names that you would like your copies to be called when they are put into other ships?”

“Confirmed. Are you getting rid of me, sir?”

Rudolph smiled.

“No, I said names for your copies.”

“Whew, I was getting worried. I want to stay with Keith and Judith. We might be a family soon.”

Rudolph looked back and forth between Keith and Judith. “Is there something here that I should know about?”

Judith turned beet red. “Keith, what have you been telling Jeremy when you are in your cabin at night?”

Rudolph was smiling and still looking back and forth.

“Jeremy, explain where you got that idea,” Keith said sternly.

“Judith was writing to her parents and she read her letter out loud before she sealed the letter. She even said that I could be your first son. You know that I pick up on voices whenever my name is mentioned.”

“Sorry, Judith. I forgot to tell you that one item about Jeremy. I am so sorry if this is embarrassing to you. Rudolph, I have told Judith that I love her, but we haven’t gone any farther than that.”

“You do not need to explain to me, dear boy. It was just the word, ‘family’ that Jeremy used that caught my attention. My apologies, Judith for sticking my nose in where it wasn’t needed.”

Judith said, “It is apparently my own fault.”

“Judith, I am sorry. It really was my fault. I should have mentioned Jeremy’s desire to record anything where his name is mentioned.”

Rudolph wanted to defuse the situation he had gotten them into. “It is really amusing that a computer can express an emotion about wanting to be called a son.”

“He no doubt got that from me. I have not had any parents since I was one year old and it is an emotion that I have expressed frequently myself.”

“Amazing. Oh look here. Every one of the names that Jeremy came up with for his copies has a Biblical implication. Hmm, that might not go over well with some of our foreign buyers. But this is just a list of suggested names, right, Jeremy?”

“Yes, Mister Sterling. They are just suggestions that I took from the Bible. There are many other names in the Bible. Would you like to hear the correct pronunciation for each of them?”

“Perhaps some other time, Jeremy. You are just amazing. Keith, thank you for this wonderful demonstration.”

“We are glad that you had the time to come and both see and hear it for yourself.”

“I will be getting back to my cabin now. I am going to try to write an acceptance speech for tomorrow.”

“Don’t forget, sir, do not blow our cover by mentioning our names. This award is all for you and you only.”

“Keith, you are too kind. Thank you both for a wonderful evening. Tom, it was good to meet you. Thank you, Jeremy. I hope to talk to you again.”

“Thank you Mister Sterling. I enjoyed it too. Let me know if I can help you with your speech.”

“I do believe he means that.”

“Yes he does,” Judith added.

Rudolph left with a big smile on his face. His head was still shaking slowly from side to side.

* * *

The next day was Wednesday, December 12th; the displaced people were told that if they did not want to be on TV, they should go to any of the theatres except the main theatre as that is where the TV cameras would be. Just before the concert started, Mr. Sterling walked out onto the stage below the large TV screen. Before he could introduce himself, someone yelled, “There is Mister Sterling.” The cheering was deafening. Try as he did, he could not get them to quiet down so that he could tell them how pleased he was that they would use the Maxx for their shelter. Instead they were letting him know that they were so grateful that he allowed them to live there temporarily.

The TV crews were caught off guard with all of this, but they got into action as quickly as they could. This was taped and was played as the concert got underway. The world thought that the cheering was for the artists for putting this concert on for them. Later in the program, the TV stations showed a picture of Mr. Sterling and explained the cheering was also for Mr. Sterling.

The 121212 concert was exceptionally good. Artists from every genre performed their favorite hits to the great entertainment of everyone watching at the Madison Square Garden, on their home TV’s, in taverns, at U. S. military bases all over the world and in the theatres of the Maxx. Keith, Fred and Tom had their eyes glued on three separate screens while Jeremy scanned the theatres and the areas around them. If anyone in the theatre so much as reached into their pocket for a handkerchief, it would show up on a screen as an alert. The suspect person would show up in real time so a human could examine the suspect’s actions. The person’s ID information showed up next to the real time video to further aid the human decisions. Throughout the concert there were no real concerns with the Maxx audiences. Fred issued the order that the Presidential presentation of the medal could continue as planned.

* * *

Judith accompanied Mr. Sterling to the Presidential Suite at the appointed time and knocked on the door. Ben checked with Fred to be sure that it was Judith before he unlocked the door. Mr. Sterling was greeted immediately by the President Newberg and his wife, Georgia. “Mr. Sterling, please come in. You have an absolutely beautiful ship here. This is one of the finest suites that we have ever been in.”

“Thank you Mr. President. I worked with some of the finest designers to create a functional, yet elegant suite for the head of the finest country in the world. Your gracious comments are indeed wonderful music to my ears.”

The President’s wife was anxious to ask about the bedspread. “How did you know that the bedspread in the master bedroom is an exact duplication of the color of my favorite dress?”

Judith spoke up, “I just heard that story earlier this week. We were talking with our computer when Fred, your Secret Service lead asked it that question. Our computer related the story that it had noticed a photograph of you in your favorite dress. It also discovered that the name of the color is ‘morning smoky mist off Key West’. It kept flashing that name on its screen until someone noticed and further investigated.”

“Excuse me, but did you say that you were talking to your computer and it related this story to you?”

“Yes, ma’am. It understands human speech incredibly well.” Judith looked at Mr. Sterling and smiled. “It even heard me reading a private letter to my parents and embarrassed me in front of Mr. Sterling yesterday by reading it to him and several others.”

“Oh, my dear, Judith, you did not have to bring that up. I am afraid ma’am that I caused an incident where Judith’s secret emotions towards a crew member were revealed to him in front of others. Jeremy, the name of our computer, should have been more discrete.”

“Looking back on it, it was funny though. I am sure that Keith would have found out in a couple of days without Jeremy’s help.”

The President interjected, “A budding romance on a luxury ship promoted by a talking computer. That sounds like a book that I would like to read. Let me know if you ever write it.”

His wife replied, “I would like that, too.”

Mr. Sterling said, “Keith is really the reason that you are here today, Mr. President. Keith and Judith are the people that secretly control everything that goes on with this ship. I may be the owner, but they are in complete charge of everything. However, they work in secret. Only a few people even know that they operate the computer, which Keith designed and programmed, that controls everything on this ship. Even the ship’s Captain, who will be arriving tomorrow doesn’t know that. If he should fail in any way, Keith can electronically disconnect all of his systems and Jeremy can navigate the ship through Keith’s voice commands. While both Keith and Judith have Ph.D.’s in security systems, only their three assistants and Keith’s police Captain know that. Except for the security department personnel, everyone thinks Keith is just a male model who heads our marketing department and Judith is the head of guest services. And as it appears they are falling in love with each other.”

“Please write the book, Judith, I would love to read it,” the President’s wife implored.

“Mr. Sterling,” the President asked. “Isn’t this a unique management hierarchy in the cruise ship industry?”

“Yes, indeed, sir.” He looked at Judith. “Keith has specifically asked me to not tell you this, but I shall anyway as I believe you should know.”

“If you wish.”

“This whole idea of having the people displaced by the storm come here and live off of us for about four months was entirely Keith’s idea. He and Judith called me just as the storm was hitting the coast and they...”

Judith interjected, “He.”

“Right, he told me his idea. He also said it would benefit the ship because we were tied up here to hire a crew to run the guest services on the ship. That requires a massive crew of nearly four to one, guest to crew and we only had a skeleton crew at the time. He and Judith have successfully provided home-type settings to 6743 people that have come here to get their lives back together. Of those, they have hired 1687 people as employees with permanent housing and food provided them without cost as part of their employment. Even though this will have cost me over \$14 million by the time they are gone, I have told Keith that he should be getting this award, but he has insisted that I accept it without mentioning him.”

“I see. Well that puts a different slant on things doesn’t it? It just makes me that much prouder of you, Mr. Sterling. You have hired Keith and Judith, two of the most successful top executives in any large corporation. They have raised you to the pinnacle of service to your fellow citizens. There was no concern in my mind before I arrived here, about your suitability for this award, but now that you have explained the whole situation to me, it is abundantly clear that you are extremely worthy of this award. This situation will have cost you upwards of \$14 million by the time it is over. How can you pretend to tell me that you are not worthy? The world will learn tonight that you are very generous and you have built an amazingly beautiful luxury cruise ship. They will flock to your door to experience the

grace and beauty of this magnificent marvel and you will be rewarded by their praise and requests for additional cruise experiences with your marvelous staff.”

The President’s wife broke into applause and Judith joined her. The President shook Mr. Sterling’s hand warmly and told him he was too modest.

Ben turned on the TV screens as the concert was just being announced. The announcer said that this show was for the survivors of Superstorm Sandy. He said that there were some survivors in the vast Madison Square Garden audience, but most of the people in the packed house were people donating to help the displaced people. Apparently many of the survivors had taken up residence in the local jails. This brought a gasp of concern to those on the Maxx, but it was not registered in the TV scenes. Then the main ballroom of the Maxx was lit up as the TV cameras swung around its audience. “These people have taken up temporary residence at a newly built luxury cruise ship that is tied up in the Hudson River.” The audience on the Maxx went wild with excitement. The announcer continued, “The owner, Rudolph Sterling, is giving them luxury accommodations and food for up to four months at a personal cost to himself of an estimated 14 million dollars. But much, much more is needed. Those devastated by Sandy will need so much more for their medical needs and for their homes that were not insured against floods. There had never been a flood here so they didn’t think they needed flood insurance. Now everything they had is gone. Won’t you help right now by calling the number at the bottom of your screen?”

The President asked, “Where did he get the 14 million? I just got that now from you, Mr. Sterling.”

“Someone must have made an estimate like I did. I’d never mentioned it before. Sorry, sir.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. It will just add more emphasis when I announce it again.”

Ben got a call from Fred. “Mr. President, we just learned that the concert will last at least six hours. We will not wait until the end for your medal presentation. It will be at the two hour mark just as we had planned. I will give you a twenty minute mark if you want to freshen up before we go down to the ballroom. We have arranged for a pause in the concert for your presentation. It will give the artists a short break.”

“Thank you, Ben. This is a wonderful concert, but I don’t think I want to sit that long. My suit will look like I slept in it after six hours. If nobody minds, I will take off my suit coat.”

“Oh you always look fine. It is us ladies that have to keep our lipstick from smudging or our eye lashes from falling off.”

The President looked at his wife and started giggling. “You look just fine. You always look just fine.”

Judith agreed.

* * *

Keith, David and Fred had been watching all the activity on the ship and everything was in order. No suspicious activity had been detected anywhere on the ship. Fred said into his microphone, “Team, twenty minutes on my mark...stand by...Mark! Ben, alert the President.”

Keith double checked the location of the President’s party’s private elevator and found it to be in place and in “private” mode.

Ben went to the President’s side and announced. “Twenty minutes, sir.”

“Thank you.” He stood and offered his hand to his wife so she could stand up and then he went to the restroom to check on his tie.

At the appropriate time Ben led the party out the door and into the elevator. Judith brought up the rear and operated the elevator. It responded beautifully and stopped outside the main theatre. Judith kept the door locked until Ben heard the secret tap on the door. Judith opened the door and Ben stepped out to join several other Secret Service agents who formed a ring around the President and his wife. Mr. Sterling and Judith brought up the rear. The hallway had been blocked off by curtained

shields so nobody that was not with the Secret Service or the party would see any of them. David had done a very nice job, she observed. They were led into the stage door and waited for five minutes before Ben announced it was time.

From the TV screens around the room they could hear. "And now ladies and gentlemen, we take you to the Maxx cruise ship in the Hudson River, New York City, where President Newberg is about to make a presentation."

The Maxx stage lights went up and the local NBC news anchor announced, "And now, the President of the United States of America accompanied by his wife will honor Mr. Rudolph Sterling, the owner of Sterling Ship Lines, with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Mr. President."

The President asked Judith to follow Mr. Sterling and his wife would follow Judith onto the stage.

Nobody in the theatre was even aware that the President was on the ship. They were shocked, honored, and excited at the same time.

"Jeremy, focus on the main theatre, but do not forget the rest of the ship. Just scan the main theatre twice as much as the rest."

"I've got it covered, Keith. Alert at Row 23, Seat 46. He has been fidgeting for the last 15-20 minutes. My analysis is that he is going to make a break for the Men's Room. He has been crossing one leg then the other."

Fred barked into his mike, "Man in R23 S46 possibly going to go to the Men's Room, have Jim go with him."

"Roger."

Jeremy said, "Facial recognition complete. Man in Row 23, Seat 46 is Miles Wilson. Mr. Wilson has been seen by our physician for a bladder problem."

"Jim, your man is Miles Wilson, who may have a bladder problem."

The President said, "Thank for your kind applause. I have come here today on this special occasion to honor a man that has given so much to so many people, at a time when their needs were so great. What makes him stand out? After all, many people have opened their homes, their hearts, and their pocket books to help total strangers who were left with nothing by the destructive force of Superstorm Sandy. My answer to you is, that is true. People around this entire world have and are giving their hard earned money to help these victims. Every one of you in this audience on this ship is one of these victims. So you already know what I am about to say. On the evening of October 29th while the nation was watching Sandy hit our mega metropolises in New Jersey and New York, Rudolph Sterling had an idea. He had accommodations for nearly 8000 people just sitting here tied up to a dock in the Hudson River. It was here to hire a crew so the ship could leave early next year on its first luxury cruise. He called Judith Overstreet, Guest Services Director, standing next to him here, and asked her if the staff currently on the ship could handle 8000 displaced people coming in within 2-3 days. They could house that many, but could her limited staff feed that many?"

There were shouts from the audience that turned into a chant, "Yes, they can. Yes, they can."

The President smiled and motioned to them so he could continue. "And she said, 'Yes, they can.'" That just started the chanting up again. "And yes they did. So far they have accepted 6743 displaced people into their ship. They gave them a clean, warm, and I might add luxurious temporary place to live. They gave them elegant food as if they were paying for a luxury cruise. They invited in FEMA, the Red Cross, and many governmental agencies to use rooms here for their offices. The list goes on and on. It seems there is no limit to Rudolph Sterling's generosity. Ah, you ask, but what did Mr. Sterling get out of this? Yes, he got something very valuable from them, but it wasn't money. He got 1687 of them NEW JOBS. Some of them had lost their jobs permanently. Now they have well-paying jobs here on the Maxx."

The crowd jumped to their feet applauding and cheering.

“David Jones had been forced into retirement by a former economy. He was in line to be promoted to lieutenant of his police department, but he was forced out of work into unemployment. That was just one week before Sandy hit. David’s family evacuated their house before it was completely destroyed. He brought his family here and got a job here. He is now the Captain of the security force here on the Maxx.”

Again the crowd’s response was deafening.

“Those of you on this ship have already met the wonderful man that opened his ship to you, but I want to introduce the rest of the world to a man who won’t admit this, but it is estimated that he has or will spend over fourteen million dollars of his own money to help the citizens of this great country. Ladies and gentlemen, I now present the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Mr. Rudolph Sterling. Congratulations, sir.” The President put the medal around his neck. The majority of the color on the ribbon was blue that blended in with the blue suit that people had seen in his earlier pictures.

The crowd went into chanting, “Sterling. Sterling. Sterling. Sterling.”

Mr. Sterling motioned for the people to sit down, but they kept chanting. The President silently wished that he could have as great a response by 100% of the people when he made his “State of the Union” addresses.

Finally Mr. Sterling just began talking and the room fell reasonably quiet. “I just gave money. The person who really deserves this is the person who put together the incredible team that made all of this come together and work so well. Your friend, right here, Judith Overstreet!

More cheering and chanting.

He handed the microphone to Judith. “I am sure the news media does not want to hear from me, but just let me say that not one person on this crew turned me down when I asked them to be flexible and do what was necessary to get our jobs done regardless of what that was. We had laundry people in the kitchen, we had cabin stewards waiting on tables, and bar tenders pushing wheelchairs. If it needed to be done, it was done by the nearest person without complaining. And they did it with such compassion and happiness in their step. They are the real heroes. And Mr. Sterling’s lead is what inspired them. We are all honored to work for such an inspiring man.” Judith bowed to the audience and pointed to Rudolph who took even more applause as the President’s wife shook his hand.

Keith had tears in his eyes. He was so proud of Judith and the way she handled herself. The fact that it was all his idea was the furthest thing from his mind. His Judith radiated her love and compassion for everyone in the room. He loved it and he loved her.

The TV stations quickly switched back to the concert where the next act was already being introduced. The host, Billy Crystal told the audience that he was definitely going to arrange a cruise on the Maxx and joked that just maybe they would let him on their stage.

* * *

The Presidential Party was whisked quickly back into the Presidential Suite. There was a look alike of both the President and his wife in the suite when they got there. Apparently the President had seen his stand-in before as he was greeted warmly. Ben announced that the stand-in would leave in 15 minutes. They would be heavily surrounded by Secret Service and would be ushered out to the group of cars waiting outside. After Fred made all of his checks with everyone, he gave the order to move. Most of the people had remained in the theatres so there was no crowd control required by David’s people.

Ben asked the President, “We can either fly you out from the top deck in the Air Force One helicopter now or you may choose to stay until tomorrow at 0945. You have a meeting with the Vice President tomorrow in the Oval Office at 1130.”

“Rudolph will you be able to stay the night on board if we stay overnight? We would love to just sit and chat with you this evening. Judith may certainly stay, too. And if we can tear him away from his computer, we would certainly love to meet Keith.” The President did not seem in any hurry to leave.

"Mr. President, I had already planned to stay this night on board and if I would not bore you, I would love to chat with you and your stunning wife. I will make sure that Keith can join us."

"Ben, thank you for the options. I don't always get them from you guys. Yes, we would like to stay the night. Please thank, Fred, too."

"He heard you and he says you are welcome."

"Please sit and be comfortable. Georgia and I will be so much more relaxed if those around us are relaxed."

Georgia said, "Judith, come sit with me. That was such a marvelous response that you gave. It was from the heart and I am sure that every eligible traveler will be making reservations tonight for cruises with this marvelous ship and its incredible staff. All thanks to you."

"You are so very kind. Everything I said was true; the staff here is just incredible."

"Did your skeleton crew have its training from other ships in the Sterling Line or are they new to this Line?"

"We all came from various ships in the Sterling Line. I had been on four of them before coming here. Michael, our chief steward had been on three and the others were all on at least one other before coming here. Keith just arrived a week before Sandy hit us."

"And yet he is the instigator of the whole idea? He certainly fit in well. Who hired him?"

Judith blushed. "Well officially I did, but his name was suggested to me by Mr. Sterling and others."

"You blushed?" She said with a smile. "Why or shouldn't I ask?"

"Well, it seems strange now, but knowing that I hired someone who turns out to be as sweet as Keith, just seems so unreal. I know him well enough that I know he won't ask me to marry him for perhaps months yet, but as far as I am concerned, he is definitely the one."

"Oh how exciting. I want to meet him. But I promise that I won't say anything."

The President was listening to the conversation. "You won't say anything?"

"Well, I will try not to say anything that I shouldn't. Is that better?"

"Let's hope so. We do not want to embarrass our hostess. Ben, can you get Keith up here?"

* * *

"Keith, the President and his wife are requesting your presence in the Presidential Suite. Can you leave Jeremy with us here?"

"Sure, this is Tom's shift anyhow. You both know how to call me." Keith decided to run up the seven flights to the 20th deck. He knocked on the door with the code that Fred gave him. Ben let him in right away.

"Mr. President, Keith has arrived."

"Welcome, Keith. Please come in and sit with us – or you would rather sit with Judith, I know."

This time Keith blushed.

"Thank you. How do you do, Mister President. And Mrs. Newberg, I am so glad to meet you."

"We are both glad and honored to meet you. Both Rudolph and Judith have explained to us that you had the initial idea to bring in the displaced people. That was such a brave and honorable thing to do. The country is indebted to you even if they can't know about it. Weren't Judith's remarks wonderful?"

"I don't know. I didn't see it."

"Oh, were you so busy with Fred?"

"No. I had tears in my eyes. I was so proud of her."

The President's wife jumped up and walked over to him. "May I hug you? I can certainly see what Judith sees in you." He rose and leaned over so she could give him a big hug. The President smiled but rolled his eyes to Judith as if to say, "*She just had to say that.*"

"You, Keith, are such a strong willed person, but you have that tenderness that women love. You are a gentle giant. Please keep in touch with us. If someday you decide to marry each other, we would be honored if you would both invite us."

"Of course, but we are not anywhere close to an engagement, yet, I don't think, are we?" He looked at Judith and they both blushed.

"Keith, that is something that we can decide at our own pace-when and if we want to."

"Did you tell them that you wanted me to propose?"

"Keith, Honey, NO! Slow down. Jeremy hasn't told us to do that yet." She hoped her joke would relax him and take some pressure off of him. Everyone laughed and she could see him begin to relax.

The President knew exactly what she had done and why. He gave Judith a wink. "Keith, please tell us about Jeremy. I understand he can be embarrassing at times."

Keith quickly relaxed when asked about Jeremy. "Yes, well I guess I only have myself to blame for that. For several years after I put a voice into him, he was my 24/7 companion. I decided to add emotions to his voice and with the A-I, or artificial intelligence that I put in, he began to take on some of my emotions. I have a playful, sometimes teasing style along with a quick wit. That apparently was easy for him to copy and expand upon. It has recently backfired on me in some comical ways and on Judith in some ways that were embarrassing to her. My fault entirely. He really is a wiz and has become so easy to program."

"I suspect he was helping the Secret Service today."

"Oh yes, Fred is glued to his screens. There was only one incident. I don't believe it was secret in anyway so I would like to tell you. During the introductions, Jeremy alerted us to a certain man in the audience who was making strange motions and seemed about to jump out of his seat. Fred and I both watched as Jeremy zoomed down to him without any direction from us. Fred reached for his microphone, but before an agent could do anything, Jeremy told us the man's name and that he had seen the ship's doctor for a bladder problem. Jeremy also said that the man had been uncomfortable for 15-20 minutes and seemed like he had to go to the Men's Room. Fred had the agent follow him to the restroom. Fred said that they have never had that much detail and background on a person that then did exactly what the computer said he was going to do. He is still glued to the screen; he is more fascinated than worried about anything."

"Does this system exist anywhere else?"

"No sir. I designed it. I also programmed it and it does not run on any of the existing operating systems. I designed that myself, too. It was all for my doctoral dissertation."

"Incredible. You and Judith both have Ph.D.'s, right?"

Judith said, "Keith has two Ph.D.'s as well as a bachelor's and a master's in Electrical Engineering and an M.B.A." She was obviously proud of him.

The President asked, "Ben, can we go down to see Jeremy?"

Ben checked with Fred who put some additional agents into the hallways. When all were in place, he told Ben to lead the party all down the elevator to the 13th floor.

Once they were in the elevator car, Keith told the President to watch his foot. Keith put his hands up and away from the button panel then swung his foot past the panel twice. The First Lady's eyes looked surprised as they rapidly dropped to the 13th floor. The President grinned and nodded his head in approval. As they exited the elevator, they saw that the hallway had many Secret Service people at all of the access points.

"This way please to our CCC or Central Command Center." Keith pushed door and held it open for the rest of the party to enter.

Fred was waiting at the door. "Welcome, Mr. President and First Lady. Please come in."

Keith pointed to the computer area. "Good evening, Jeremy."

"Keith, you are back. How did your visit with the President, go? Oh, there they are! I am pleased to meet you, Mister President. And the First Lady, too. This is wonderful. We are honored to have you visit with us."

"He sometimes gets excited and then gets wordier as a result. Would either of you like to talk to him or ask him a question?"

The First Lady spoke first. "Jeremy, how did you know what color to put on our bedspread?"

"I hope you like it. I saw this picture in a magazine." He displayed a copy of the entire page of the magazine. "You will see under the picture that you said it was your favorite color and you mentioned the name of the color, too."

"Who gave you a copy of that magazine?"

"Keith brought large piles of books and magazines home from the school's library every day or two. He also brought me five different newspapers each day. He had rented a high resolution auto-feed scanner that had a page turner on it. He just put everything into place and hit the start button and I did the rest. I think that he felt that he could do some other studying and I would be kept busy with my scanning and wouldn't bother him with my talking. He soon learned that I would read books and ask him questions about them. Sometimes he just left me at the apartment and he studied at school."

Keith was nodding his head and when the President's wife looked at him and smiled, he put his fingers into his ears to indicate that Jeremy was too talkative at times. Everyone broke out laughing.

"Did I say something funny?"

"No, Jeremy. We were laughing at something else. We were not laughing at you, because we know that you do not like that."

"But it is OK if I tell a joke or tease you."

"Yes, of course. Let's see if the President has any questions for you."

"Jeremy, do you have an estimate of the total cost of the damage from Sandy?"

"That is not a calculation that I have made before, nor do I have all of the inputs. However, you asked for an estimate so here is my estimate. After all of the costs are in, I estimate they will total more than 68 billion dollars. That is not as great as Katrina, but still very costly. The death toll may be over 285 people."

Everyone gasped.

"Thank you for your estimate, Jeremy. It is higher than what I have been told, but I will refer to your estimate when asked. I value your judgment, thank you."

"Thank you for your trust in me, Mister President."

"Keith, how did you get all of this computing power and memory into this relatively small area?"

"This room only contains some of the input/output devices for Jeremy. Admittedly this equipment is a computer, but it is more like a computer terminal. The real workplace and memory storage are not here. They are buried in multiple temperature and humidity controlled spaces and they are spread from the bow to the stern of the ship. Each of them can function alone or they can act together for maximum computing power. They are frequently backed up with each other so in the event of a malfunction of any part of the system, the rest can continue to operate."

"Do they each have a name similar to Jeremy?"

"No, the system is Jeremy, but we could be talking to any of them now and a different one a few minutes later. We are not aware of the specific room that is operating at any given time. Which specific computer is communicating with us is recorded if we need that for historical or maintenance

purposes. I hope that wasn't too nebulous of an answer, but we will not disclose the specifics of the operation. Basically, that right there is Jeremy."

"So you have built the operation of everything into Jeremy?"

"Yes sir. Many units on the ship work on their own with only monitoring by Jeremy. For example the *Waste-to-Energy* system is monitored by Jeremy to make sure that it is putting out enough electrical energy to handle the current and future needs of the guests, crew, and ship. Our fresh water purifier is also monitored. The outputs are displayed in the engineering departments, but we can view them up here at any time. Jeremy will also let us know if any of the outputs get below established standards. Jeremy is basically our monitor of all functions on the ship including security."

Rudolph added, "Keith has put together the most advanced computerized system in the industry. I have been able to sell copies of his systems to the other cruise line owners."

Fred said, "I was impressed with the security system. However, as a professor in the security school that Keith attended, I was aware of much of it prior to my coming on board. I was on his doctoral defense examination panel and already knew of his brilliant system and his attention to detail. Keith, I would still prefer to address you as Doctor Northquest, but I know you are undercover here so I respectfully will continue to only call you Keith."

"Thank you. Both Judith and I are proud of our degrees, but it is better that the public does not know about them." He nodded to the President and his wife. "Would you like to sit in our conference room? Judith has a coffee table there that can select any deck on the ship and show the floor plan. We have it in there for training purposes with our security staff. I really like it and think you may find it interesting."

"Yes, please," the First Lady said. "I just love looking around."

Judith asked them to follow her. "Fred, may I offer tea or coffee?"

"Yes, just not any of Keith's expired skim milk," he laughed.

"Hey, my steward, Michael takes care of me. It is all gone, bottle and all." Keith made a pretend pouty face.

"Decaf for both of us please, without any cream or sugar," Georgia said.

"Coming right up." Judith brought in three cups including one for Rudolph, too. I found this interesting table in a garage sale while I was still in school. I have had it with me all this time. But when I got here, I put a monitor under it and added the file of these construction blueprints. With the remote I can pull up any deck of the ship onto the display. Keith merged the passenger list with it and now I can click on any cabin and see who is assigned to that cabin. Here is my cabin and you can see that I am assigned to it. Let's look at deck #6. Here you will see medic alert and wheelchair icons on some of the rooms. If we got into an abandon-ship situation, we would take particular care to see that these people were able to leave their cabins safely. We have not had any emergencies yet, but we do use this for training purposes for security and firefighting. With a larger group we just project this to a larger wall-mounted screen."

"Judith, this is a beautiful old table. Was it originally this size or did you have it modified to fit a standard sized monitor?" Mr. Sterling excitedly asked her.

"I was so lucky on the size, Rudolph. Everything just fit together."

"I would really like one in my suite. This is just incredible. I will call *Michael Revere* to see if he has anything like this."

"And that demonstrates just how supportive Rudolph Sterling is towards us. He is always complementing us," Keith said.

"But it *is* beautiful, Keith," Georgia assured him.

"Rudolph, just let me know when you have a table that suits you and I will configure it to do everything this one can do including a display on a large wall unit. I will link its computer to this one so that Jeremy only has to update one of them."

“Why wouldn’t Jeremy update both of them?” the President wanted to know.

“It may seem like a simple thing to do, but whenever a programmer writes or makes any changes to an existing program, avoiding duplication is one of the primary considerations. It is also called maintaining programming efficiency. If a programmer does this consistently with large systems the overall processing speed can be nearly doubled. Or looking at it a differently way, the computer can do twice as much in the same amount of time.”

“Thank you, Keith for that very clear explanation.”

“Yes, thank you. You have a nice way of clarifying things that could be very technical.”

“My pleasure, but it really is just that simple.”

Judith looked up and saw that the concert was still going. “Excuse me for a moment. Fred, how much longer until the concert wraps up?”

“It is only about half over so there are another three hours to go.”

“Our theatre seats are the best in the theatre business, but people are going to have to get up soon. They can’t sit there for a full six hours. I’ll call the chef and have her make up some sandwiches and drinks that the waiters can take to the lobby outside each theatre. When they are ready, Tom, you can flash across the screen that refreshments are available outside each theatre. We don’t need some sick people in here because they didn’t get up and move around.”

Tom said, “Confirmed.”

Judith got up and left the room to call the chef.

When she returned, Mr. Sterling said, “Judith that was very nice. If I sat that long, someone would have to use a crane to get me up again.”

Judith pretended to use her radio again, but it was obvious that she didn’t push any buttons. “Maintenance, get some portable cranes to each theatre and bring one up here, too.”

Everyone exploded in laughter.

The President spoke. “That sounds like a good segue. Perhaps we should get up and return to our suite. This has been a most educational and fun time for both of us. When my term in office is up, my family will definitely take a cruise with you. Rudolph that promise will only hold if you keep Judith and Keith here. Is that acceptable to you?”

“Oh yes. If they try to leave me, I will send out the bloodhounds after them.”

Judith said, “You are too kind, but we will both be thrilled if you should be able to join us at some later date. This would be a wonderful place to write your memoirs. Then we could set up another cruise at a later date and you could sell your books from here and do a book signing here.”

“These two are just full of ideas. That is only one of the reasons that I hired them.”

As they left, the President shook hands with each. At the door, he turned and waved with a big smile.

Keith gave Judith a big hug. “You were just wonderful today. Imagine. You entertained the President of the United States of America and his wife. You appeared on stage and on TV with them and even gave an impromptu speech that had me in tears. I was so proud of you.”

“And I was so proud of you. You caused Rudolph to be honored with a Presidential Medal of Freedom. That is a rare event. You are so supportive of both him and me. You are just so amazing in so many ways. I am so glad you are here with me.” They kissed longer this time, hugged and kissed again.

Keith nearly whispered, “Would you join me in the dining room at a private table for two. It must be nearly empty in there.”

“As long as it is with you.”

“Tom is the dining room hopefully just about empty?”

“Yes, only about twenty people in there. I’ll have a table waiting for you.”

“Thanks.”

* * *

The maître d' greeted them and led them to a secluded table for two next to an outside window on the starboard side with the river out their window. Keith asked what she might want.

"You" was all she said.

Keith smiled. He pushed the glass candle holder to the side and leaned across the table to kiss her. "You make me so happy."

"What are you going to have? See, I asked the question differently this time."

"I noticed. I think I'll have a small medium-rare fillet with a baked sweet potato and some lightly steamed broccoli. Green tea would go well with that. You?"

"I'll have the same."

The waiter had been watching and knew when they were ready to order. Keith ordered two identical meals and drinks. The waiter raised his eyebrows in approval. Only really compatible couples would order identical meals.

"So Judith, tell me about your parents."

"I love my parents. They are Vera and Edward Overstreet. They are both about 55 and both teach at Prairie du Chien High School in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. Mom teaches math and Dad teaches physics. Their students helped put the school into the *U. S. News & World Report's*, Silver class for BEST High Schools for 2012."

"Wow. Good for them."

"As I've said before, they put me through the UW-Platteville system. They were so proud when I got my doctorate from Professor Young's program. Rudolph has been promoting me ever since I started with him and I have been able to replace about a quarter of what Dad had to take out of his retirement fund for my schooling. I will have it paid off with interest in about a year with my income from the Maxx. They both want to retire in ten years so I'll be able to achieve my goal with them. Dad has always wanted to set up a scholarship fund for deserving students from the PDC schools."

"That's Prairie du Chien?"

"Yes, that's their abbreviation. Dad has tried to start several side-businesses over the years, but they never paid off for him. He even owned an electrical parts store, but they kept raising his lease on the building so he had to sell out."

"I could have used him when I was buying a lot of electrical parts."

"Did you ever try his store? Prairie du Chien isn't so far from Platteville."

"No, I used *eBay* a lot. How did they spend their summers?"

"Usually one of them was in school for educational credits needed to keep their teaching certificates. But we did some traveling when we could. I saw most of the National Parks. Did you travel with your Aunt?"

"No, we probably never went more than 500 miles from home. I learned about the parks from books and encyclopedias in the library. I imagine there is nothing like actually being there. We will become experts on a lot of the places that we will be visiting with the Maxx."

"True. I can't wait to see what Martha Jones puts together."

"You and me both. Oh, here come our dinners."

* * *

The next day started normally with Michael and Keith getting up at 0400 for their exercise routines. "How did your date with Judith go last night?"

"What? How did you find out about that?"

"Word gets around."

"What did you hear?"

"Well you decided not to light your shirt on fire when you leaned across the table to give her a kiss."

"And..."

"Sorry, that's when my source left the room. But how did the rest of the date go?"

"It wasn't really a date, we just went down together to have dinner."

"But you asked for a secluded table."

"Michael NO. I just asked for a table for two by the windows. Someone is feeding you garbage...and it would be better if you ate health food, mister."

"That was a nice twist. It sounds like you want me to stop asking you."

"What goes on between me and Judith is kind of private. We are just in the stage of exploring whether we love each other or not."

"I think you are in love and you are trying to figure out how to handle this change in your life."

"That's good. I like that diagnosis. Now move up to the next weight level on that one before you start."

"Already? I've only been at this level for three days."

"But you are ready, trust me."

"Unnrrrgggghhhh."

"There! Aren't you pleased? You did it."

"Does the doc carry any pain pills?"

"Don't be silly. You did it and you can do it again."

"Isn't it time for your swim?"

"Michael work! Make your body work for you! It is already showing on you. That has to feel good when you look in the mirror."

"I can't remember it hurting this much when I used to work out, but it does look better than the pot belly that I had before."

"OK, I'm going to jump in the swim tank. You can use the treadmill now. Add some incline to it this time. Soon you'll be running up all the stairs and skipping the elevator unless you are with a guest."

"Go soak your head in the pool-and the rest of you too."

Captain Perez

The talk around the ship was mostly on the concert and the visit by the President. Fred was already in CCC when Keith arrived after breakfast with Michael. The plans for the departure of the President and his First Lady were all in place. They were moved up to 0700 in case anyone had found out about the later departure time that was previously in the plan. Mr. Sterling had also been informed so that he could be on hand to see them off. He was in the Presidential Suite visiting with them for their last few minutes.

"Thank you again Mr. President for your great honor given to me and my crew. I hope you will take up Judith and Keith's invitation for a nice cruise for both of you at some point. We have grown to be good friends in such a short time."

"We are the ones that were honored by meeting you and your staff. We certainly will try to work that out. Our daughters would enjoy it too. God's blessings on you."

Ben told them it was time to leave as he led them to their private elevator. They were whisked up to the 26th deck where they paused until the Air Force One helicopter had opened its door for their boarding. Mr. Sterling shook their hands once again and waved to them as the helicopter lifted off the upper deck of the Maxx.

"Now," he thought. We can get back to normal around here. Judith and Keith can resume control of the ship I have a new Captain and his crew coming at 1000. I will show them around the ship and hopefully can hire them." He went back to his cabin.

The morning went quickly and soon he was alerted by his steward that a group of men headed by a Mr. Jesus Perez were waiting on the main deck for him. He thought, *"Aha, my new Captain and his crew have arrived early. I like that."* "Take them to my Conference Room and tell them I will be right there and to make themselves comfortable."

"Yes sir."

When Mr. Sterling arrived in his private conference room, he found twelve men of Columbian descent seated stiffly along a rectangular table. They had left the chair empty at the head of the table for Mr. Sterling. The person at Mr. Sterling's right rose as Mr. Sterling entered the room. "Good morning, Mr. Sterling. I am Mr. Jesus Perez Esquire and I will be your Captain when we come to an agreement."

"How do you do, Mr. Perez. We are very informal on the Maxx so that our guests may feel that we are all a family. You may call me Rudolph."

"We cannot do that Mr. Sterling. I require strict discipline with my crew. They may be addressed by just their titles without their last names. They are 1st Mate, across from me; 2nd Mate, next to me; Navigator, across from him; Meteorologist, next to Navigator; Radio Operator, across from him; two Quartermasters, numbered 1 and 2; and four Boatswain's Mates, numbered 1 to 4 with the odd numbers on my side and the even numbers across from them. We will sit in this formation whenever we are together in one room."

"Thank you and welcome to each of you."

"We will be hired as a group and you will address only me. You will also pay only me and I will distribute a share to each of my crew according to their rank as I have just described."

"I can accommodate that Mr. Perez, but we will need the full name of each person for our security system. I simply will not hire a group as an entity without knowing each person's identity and verifying that they have legal passports and visas for working in the United States of America as that is the flag that we sail under."

“That is not the way we work, but your offer has been most generous and I will accommodate you on this requirement. We are done here; please show us to the bridge.”

“*Boy is he bossy,*” Rudolph thought. “Just a moment. I will need to go over some of the rules with you. I do not normally reside aboard this ship. My office is in New York City, not too far from here. We will embark from this dock on Wednesday, April 24, 2013 at 0700, weather permitting. You may run various open sea seaworthy tests and drills as you make way to Tampa, Florida, which will be our home port. I am building our dockside facilities there which will be completed and ready for occupancy by April 15th. All of our cruises will be 21-day luxury cruises to the Eastern and Southern Caribbean with possibly a dozen ports of call. At no time may any of you have any sexual relations with any guest or crew member of this ship. None of you are to ever enter any cabin not assigned to your group. Your cabins will be the same deck as the bridge. However, the Captain and 1st Mate while dressed in your formal uniforms, may mingle with and have dinner with the guests at certain and specified times. Except for those times, all of the guest contacts will be handled by the ship’s crew members. The connection between the ship’s crew and your group will be between Mr. Perez and Ms. Overstreet. She is to be addressed by her first name, Judith. All of the department heads on this ship report to her. She, as Director of Guest Services, reports to me and is your liaison person. If you need something, call her. If you have weather related information, call her. For example if the weather would suggest any changes in schedule, call and discuss it with Judith. Can you work with these limitations, Mr. Perez?”

“I have never worked for a woman before. This may be a breaking point, but I will consider it. I have always been in complete control of every ship where I have been the Captain. This, too, is a challenge. On the other hand, it does free me of some of the silly requests that I always get from guests, so that may turn into a benefit. Show us the bridge first and I will decide then.”

“Very well, please follow me. We can all fit into one elevator.”

* * *

Rudolph had asked Judith and Keith to monitor the video and audio from his conference room. Bill was there too as this was his normal working time in CCC.

“Bill, I am worried about a band of Columbian people infiltrating the Maxx. Can you get international drug info on all these people?”

“I hope so, Keith. I can let you know when I get copies of their passports and visas. They will probably come up clean, so the real problem is to determine whether they really are who they say they are. I can send their photos to Arlington to see if they can make the matchups.”

“Jeremy, put a constant watch on each of these people. Be especially careful of this Perez guy. There is something about him that I don’t trust.”

“Confirmed and in process, Keith. Bill, I can make facial recognition matchups between their passports and their photos.”

“Thanks, Jeremy. The DEA headquarters will thank you, too.”

“I’m a little nervous about this Mr. Perez, too,” Judith added. “I will constantly be watching to see if he is giving me the whole story. I will have to get him to trust me somehow. Keith, I may have to pit you against him so that I can come through as his friend. If you can think of something else, let me know.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Let me know when you want me to push him the wrong way.”

Judith looked at Keith with a smile. He really was her hero.

* * *

“Here we are on the 25th deck. The center of this deck is not accessible because it is the upper portion of a large high diving pool. The bridge is forward and there is an open deck overlooking the stern for your observations when backing into a docking space. There are also wings on the port and starboard sides for docking maneuvers. You will find this large ship very maneuverable as it has a

multitude of side thruster jets. As we know, not all of the foreign ports have tugs strong enough to dock this large ship. You will be the envy of your peers when you can turn this large ship on a dime.”

“I do not have peers. They already know that I am a superior Captain.”

“Yes, as I well know, Mr. Perez.”

Rudolph was getting a bit irritated with this arrogant man. He walked forward.

“Please come this way to the bridge. I have set all of these doors to their unlocked position just for today. Otherwise the bridge is open only to your group.” The view from each of the windows was spectacular. “We are high enough to see over any wave. You will recognize the various radar, sonar and satellite screens here as well as a bank of meteorological devices. I hope you approve of the white décor with brass and silver trim. The metals are covered with a thin, but strong coating of *MetalSealGuardian*. They will not corrode nor require any polishing even if scratched. It even feels like bare metal. Are the number and placement of chairs adequate, sir?”

“Yes, and very comfortable. I see there are places here for galley trays. These are very good binoculars plus no-bounce cameras that display on the overhead monitors. Very nice. Is this the radio room back here?”

“Yes, all with digital readouts and preset buttons.”

“Mr. Sterling, did you know there is an automobile on the bottom near our stern?”

“No I didn’t. Thank you, I will alert the port authority and city police departments. Does it look fresh?”

“No, it is half buried in the silt.”

Rudolph had one of his microphones keyed on and locked so anyone in CCC could hear him or nearby voices. Keith called 911 and reported all he knew about the sunken car. The 911 operator said that a number of junked cars had spilled from a barge ten years ago in that area and they were slowly being recovered. They would send a dive team to be sure there was no foul play. She thanked Keith and said they would record it.

Both David and Donald were in CCC and heard the exchange. David said, “I remember that one. They wanted me to dive down and verify the count of cars that fell in. Just as I was grumbling about it another more urgent call came in and I got transferred to that one. I was glad that I didn’t have to go down in that filthy water.”

“Dad, you came home and said the cars were in Davy Jones Locker and they could stay there as far as Jonesy was concerned. I remember that.”

“Do you? Yeah, I didn’t want to do that job.”

Keith went back to listening in on the conversations between the new Captain and Rudolph who had just told Mr. Perez that he could have all 16 of the cabins on that level so that nobody else would be walking around there. He could have some of them converted to a galley so that they could have their own dining facilities, too. Apparently Rudolph really wanted this group because he finally convinced Mr. Perez to accept the job for one year.

“Judith, we have a new Captain. Good luck with your communications with him. Let me know when I can help with him.”

“Thanks. I hope he is easier to get along with than he sounds. At this point I am not anxious to hold any Captain’s Dinners. He is liable to scare away our guests.”

Keith was adamant that he would have all of the security information on them that he needed. “I’ll call down and make sure that Human Resources get all the information they need on each one of them before they issue any wrist bands. I’ll tell them not to let Captain Perez badger them into accepting anything less than ALL they need.”

Rudolph went down to CCC in about an hour. “Judith and Keith please let me know if that Perez group gives you any trouble because I told him that Judith would not put up with it. She will have to have his complete cooperation or I will break his contract and they will all be out. I do have another

possible crew from your Annapolis suggestion. It is just that I did have a prior obligation to this group and they came with very high ratings. The Naval retirees would not have any cruise ship experience. I am going back to my offices now. This has been an exciting and exhausting couple of days. As always, please let me know if anything comes up. Again, my thanks to you both. Good day everyone.” Rudolph left the CCC.

“Well, this is Thursday afternoon and you know what Professor Young did every Thursday afternoon.”

“Keith, do you think we should just kick back like he always did and take the afternoon off to read or relax?” Judith asked.

“Do you have a game of *Battleship*® with you? That’s what he always did.”

“No. I haven’t even seen one of those since I left school. Do you have one, Keith?”

“Not me. I would like to go into my lab for a couple of hours if that is OK with you?”

“Certainly. Has Michael started on his new keyboard invention yet?”

“Yes, I think he may have it soon. He started by taking apart over 30 different keyboards. He is very creative and he has designs for several different solutions. I’ll bet that he has something ready for testing before we leave New York.”

David said, “I’ll be glad to spill the first cup of coffee on it.”

Donald added, “If it survives, he could call it the ‘JONESY-PROOF KEYBOARD’.”

“Well, there is one idea. I’ll be sure to tell Michael when I see him. Donald, are you all set up with the files you need or anything else?”

“I am good, Keith. Thank you so much for your help and your trust in me.”

“My pleasure. See you guys in a couple of hours.”

JONSEY

At precisely 1400 or 2 p.m., Jeremy's main screen flashed the word "JONSEY" in very large red letters.

Tom yelled, "Donald, did you do this?"

"No, I can't even get to that screen."

"David?"

"Not me either."

Tom got up and ran to Keith's lab door and pounded on it until Keith came out.

"Tom? What is the matter? You look as if you have seen a ghost?"

"We have a virus. Look!" Tom pointed to the large screen and Keith caught a two second look at it before it went blank.

"What in...?" Keith went running over to Jeremy. "Good afternoon Jeremy. What was that?"

"Hi Keith. I thought you were going to be in your lab. What was what?"

"What word did you just have on your main screen?"

"Nothing, Keith. There has not been any word on my main screen for the past 8.6537 minutes."

"No, it had the word 'JONSEY' on it in large red letters."

"Not on my screen."

"Jeremy, I have a question."

"What is your question?"

"Jeremy, I have a question."

"Ask it, I am ready."

"Jeremy, I have a question."

"Go."

"Jeremy, run Secure Section Virus Detect."

"Confirmed."

"Record everything in filename 'VD001' and add today's date and time. Then call Judith."

"Recording.....Confirmed."

"Show me every instance of the letters J-O-N-E-S-Y either together or alone with one or more spaces between them. They may be upper case or lower case or a mixture of both."

"There is only one. It is spelled 'J-o-n-e-s-y' and it is listed as the nickname of David Jones, Captain of Security."

"There must be more Jeremy. It was just on your screen."

"I have no record of it being on my screen as you have stated."

"What other traffic have you received from non-CCC room communications in the past 15 minutes?"

"None."

"What have you received from Donald today?"

"One request for an updated copy of the guest list as READ-ONLY. It was sent to his laptop."

"What have you received from David today?"

"Multiple requests for identity information from keyboard-C4. None of which had the target letters in either the requests or the supplied information."

"What have you received from the bridge today?"

"Nothing has crossed the firewall from the bridge today."

“Thank you Jeremy. If at any time you have a match on the target, alert me.”

“Confirmed.”

Judith came into CCC when Keith was asking Jeremy about non-CCC room traffic. “Keith, what happened?”

“Jeremy has a virus and I can’t find it. He displayed the capital letters J-O-N-E-S-Y in red on the main screen and he doesn’t have a memory of it.”

Judith said, “Jeremy show us the video collected on camera CCC005 in the past 15 minutes and get ready to freeze on my command.”

“Confirmed.” That camera was focused on Jeremy’s main screen.

When it got to the word ‘JONESY’, Judith called out, “Freeze. Print.”

“Thanks Judith. That’s a camera that you installed and I forgot it when I was going through my virus detect routine.” They looked at the printout. “That certainly says ‘Jonesy’, doesn’t it? I wonder why Jeremy has no record of it? Jeremy save this photo in that VD001 file, too.”

“Confirmed.”

“Donald, may I speak to you alone in the secure conference room?”

“Am I in trouble? I didn’t do anything.”

“Can I come in too?” David asked.

“No, just Donald for now please.”

When they were inside, Donald looked very worried. Keith set the room to “Secure” and motioned for Donald to sit down. Keith sat across from him. “Donald, if you caused that message to appear, it is critical for me to know how you did it. You look scared enough right now for that to be your total punishment if you did it. If you didn’t do it, can you help me find out how that message got onto Jeremy’s screen without him having any knowledge of it? I must have a foolproof system with no possibility of a virus getting in and I will go crazy worrying about it until we are secure again. What help can you give me?”

“I swear that I had nothing to do with it. I was so surprised when I saw it; I even smiled. I didn’t think it was anything to worry about until Tom went ballistic.”

“I am not surprised at your answer and I believe you. But can you just sit back and relax for a moment and think. What am I missing here? How could this have happened? What would you do to create this if I asked you to do it? Where do I go from here?”

“Now you look as worried as I did when you had me come in here, Keith. Can Jeremy’s screen pick up radio waves or cellular waves or anything like that and display them?”

“I don’t think so, he is supposed to be shielded from those, but I will check. Thank you. Wait a minute. Jeremy is actually four separate computers. Let’s go see if Jeremy searched them all or just the active one.”

They both came running out. David was still worried about his son.

“Jeremy, did you search all of your processor units when you stored information in filename VD001 or did you only look at the current processor?” Keith asked.

“Your protocol states that all processors will be queried and stored with the ID of each one. I am comparing all four. They match. Your target letters do not exist in any of them.”

Keith turned to Donald and shrugged his shoulders. Then he gave Donald a pat on his back. “David, you have a fine son. I didn’t think he had caused the virus, but I thought if it was fresh in his mind, he might be able to help me figure it out. That’s why I had him alone in the Secure Room. If we don’t have this figured out by bedtime, I don’t think he will sleep any better than I will. He’s a fine young man.”

Donald was glad that Keith didn’t show that he had been questioned about his involvement. He was definitely going to try to help Keith figure this out.

“David, Jeremy cleared you, too. But do you have any ideas of how your nickname got on the screen?”

“Only that I had tried j-o-n-e-s-y as a password on one of my files and Jeremy said it was too short and not secure. Besides I used lower case and the screen had all the letters displayed as capitals.”

Tom muttered, “Why did this have to happen on my watch?”

“Tom, can you search the DEA files for this word? I know you can’t tell me what the association is if it is there at all, but just give me an up or down. If it is there, then I will look for a way that it could have propagated from DEA over to Jeremy.”

Tom immediately started typing. In a relatively short time he was shaking his head from side to side. “I suspected a hit of some sort, but there is nothing at DEA about the word Jonesy regardless of the case of its characters.”

“Thanks. As part of Jeremy’s virus detection protocol, he has searched all of the original typed programming code for the target letters and came up with nothing, too. I frankly do not know what to...wait a minute.”

Keith opened up the printer and looked inside. Nope, the Wi-Fi connector under there was still disconnected. “I still do not know what to do about this. It may pop up again sometime and if it does, perhaps I can rig a trap for it. Jeremy, allow both of the Chiefs and the three Associate Chiefs to access your ‘Virus Detect’ without first entering your secure mode. That will save time. When any of us call out ‘Jeremy Virus Detect’, record the next VD filename in sequence and add the video file from camera CCC005.”

“Confirmed.”

“Jeremy, exit secure mode, please.”

“Confirmed.”

“Let’s all just put this on the back side of our brains and have it work in the background. Perhaps one of us will come up with something before it hits again. If it hits again. One of my biggest concerns is whether the virus JONESY has or will do any damage. Is it teasing us that after a certain number of warnings like this, it will sink us? That is my problem. What is it capable of? I also have to clear this up before Rudolph wants a copy of Jeremy’s programs sent to any of his purchasers.”

Keith went into the secure room to call Rudolph.

“Keith, what’s up? We just talked.”

“I have some disturbing news of a virus that has just struck Jeremy. I hope to have it cleared up before you have to deliver a copy of his software.”

“Oh dear, but these things happen. It sounds as if you haven’t isolated it yet.”

“Jeremy can’t even find it. He displayed JONESY in large red capital letters at 1400 today and he has no knowledge of having done that. As far as we know it did not cause any damage to anything except my mental condition.”

“Have you thought that it may therefore have served its purpose?”

“No, but thank you for that insight. I put into place a recording scheme that we five operators can use to quickly record everything if it strikes again. A comparison of the two hits might yield a clue. If it is targeting me, why did it wait for nearly two months to hit after my arrival? We will keep working on it, even Donald has been helpful. By the way it does not seem to have any connection to the Jones family, but I haven’t ruled that out. I just wanted to keep you in the loop.”

“Thank you of course. I did want to call you today.”

“Should I get Judith?”

“No, this is for my marketing man. After my appearance with the President on TV last night, our recall scores sky rocketed.”

“Wonderful. What about our persuasion score?”

“Our what?”

"Oh dear. Doesn't our ad agency track persuasion scores?"

"I don't think so. I have never heard them mention it."

"Recall, is just whether our ad triggers the thought of our name or product. Persuasion is much more important as it tells us whether our ad brings up thoughts of their wanting to try our product. In our case it would be if they want to go on a cruise with us after seeing our ad."

"Isn't that what Recall is?"

"No. Persuasion is a critical subset of recall. Some ad agencies have fallen on their faces because they were not delivering sales. They bragged about their recall scores, but when potential customers were asked what product the ad was selling, they didn't know. There was no persuasion. I will always produce ads where the final scenes have happy people telling about or showing the benefits of cruising with the Maxx over another ship. That is a key element in driving persuasion."

"I am going to call them back and ask for our persuasion score. If they don't know what I am talking about, I will find a good agency that does."

"Brilliant. Our association with Sandy will drive our recall and fine ads will drive our persuasion. In their minds we will be the 'comfort and rest' ship that provides an 'awesome and luxurious' cruise experience."

"Now I have to say 'brilliant' to you. Thank you again, Keith. I have faith that you will solve this virus thing before we need to deliver any software. Good Day."

Before leaving the secure room, Keith called Professor Young.

"Hello Keith, how are you?"

"Hi Dad, I am alone in a secure room and I have a computer virus problem."

"I would have addressed you as 'Son', but I didn't know if you were alone or not. What sort of problem do you have, Son?"

Keith smiled just hearing the word, Son. He went on to describe the virus and everything he knew about it, which wasn't much.

"Well you had four weeks of intense virus study from the best in the industry, even Mr. Norton, personally lectured your class. Remember that each new generation of computer viruses gets better. They now have a tendency to not be what they seem to be. A warning might not be a warning after all. A door might be something totally different from a door. Just do not give up. I am sure you will find the answer, Son. Have you involved Judith and Ken, too?"

"Ken will be getting up soon. He is on the late night shift. Tom was at the console and he called me then Jeremy called Judith. Our young protégé, Donald was there and saw the whole thing. He has already had some good ideas and he may become very helpful."

"I didn't hear you mention Michael."

"He is busy on his regular job, but I will bring him in too."

"If my son and his splendid team cannot solve this, it is not solvable."

"But, I HAVE to solve this!"

"And so you shall. Explore everything; do not leave a stone unturned. The answer may surprise you."

"I remember you saying that when we played Battleship. You also taught that random searches do not often reveal the answer faster than methodical searches which will always reveal the answer eventually."

"Exactly. Thank you for sharing this with me. My Son can do anything. My love to you all. Goodbye."

"*Well that was helpful, I think. It was mostly a pep talk, though,*" Keith thought. He went back into the CCC.

"What did Rudolph say?" Judith asked.

"I called both him and Professor Young. Both just patted me on the back and said our team could do it."

She smiled, "Did they say our team could do it or you could do it?"

"Both. We have apparently enough time before Rudolph has to deliver a copy of Jeremy's software. That was one of my biggest concerns. This is just so DARN frustrating. I thought Jeremy was completely virus-proof."

She just hugged him and quietly said, "That is what every professional programmer thinks. But it takes an incredibly smart programmer to feel as devastated as you do. I know you will solve this. I've got your back." Then she gave him a kiss on his cheek.

"I'm glad we have each other's back. Life would be so lonely without it." He returned the kiss.

Ken was up and walked into CCC just then. "I always seem to be at the wrong place at the wrong time." He said with a smile.

"Hi Ken. Judith was just giving me some encouragement. We had a virus attack at 1400."

"Oh, no! What happened?"

Keith filled him in and thought carefully through each segment of it as he related it. Ken had heard that tone before when they were studying together at Platteville. He knew Keith was talking more to himself at the moment and there would be time for him to ask questions at the end. They had worked very effectively together like this for several years.

Ken said, "Professor Young is right, it may not be what it seems. This printout is not sharp enough from camera 5. It was only intended for macro images. Let's get a super hi-def video camera in here trained on Jeremy's screen at 90 degrees dead center and run it in slow motion. It will have to be synchronized with the screen's refresh rate or we may only get black scroll bars, but that is an easy adjustment. It will take up a lot of memory, but we can recycle it every 24 hours if we haven't had another attack in that amount of time. Maybe there will be a clue if we can get down to the pixel size."

"Brilliant." Judith hugged Ken.

"Won't Keith get jealous?"

"Only if he sees us. Oh, hi Keith!"

"You are too funny." Keith gave Judith another hug.

"Excellent idea, buddy, thanks. I'll call my camera guys and tell them the results we want and see what they suggest. I won't be telling them our problem nor bringing them in here though."

The island Engagement

Judith's phone rang before she was awake on Monday, December 17th. It was Rudolph calling. "Judith, I have the most wonderful opportunity to buy a 300 acre island in the Caribbean Islands. I have already faxed the harbor size and depths to Captain Perez. He wants me to build a mooring dock for the passengers and I can do that, but I want you and Keith to see it before I seal the deal. Can you both pack your bags for three days with swim suits and hiking shoes and meet a taxi that is on the way now to take you to Newark Airport? I will meet you there with my jet. I will explain more when you arrive."

Judith had conferenced Keith into the conversation as soon as Rudolph began speaking. They both said they would be on the dock in ten minutes. Keith asked if he could take one camera man and Rudolph agreed.

Keith was dressed and he had just finished breakfast with Michael. He tossed some clothes into his backpack along with four bottles of V8. He paused and looked at his clothes drawers. Then he reached in and took a small box from the back of the top drawer before he ran out the door. Ken was still at the console. "Ken we have to leave for three or four days. You are in charge. Call us if anything comes up. We will be on satellite phone. Did Judith go out yet?"

"I'm coming. Go get the elevator and hold it for me, Keith. Bye Ken. We will call you with an update when we know what is going on."

Ken just swung his head from side to side as first one then the other ran past him. "Jeremy, what's up?"

"They are both meeting Mister Sterling at his jet and they will be going to an island in the Caribbean which Mister Sterling may purchase. I don't know how his jet can land on a small island. I hope they will be safe."

* * *

They bolted out of the elevator and headed to the main entrance. Scotty, the cameraman was already there. The taxi was just driving up. As soon as the driver got out of the cab, Keith said, "Oh No!"

Judith asked, "What did you forget to bring?"

"Nothing. It is that cab driver that I told you about. He will drive us crazy before we get there."

"Wha'sup people? Hey ain't you the big guy that sold your Subaru just before Sandy got here? That was a smart thing. Your car died a death by drowning when Sandy came in. All that guy's cars either were drowned or were swept away. The only thing he had left was a lot of garbage and mud in his lot and in his office when we could get back there again. You better get in front with me. Your shoulders are too big for the other two to sit comfortably next to you." He pushed Keith into the front seat and closed the door behind him. The others were already in the back seat. Keith turned around to look at them and he looked absolutely miserable. Judith didn't know whether to give him sympathy or just start laughing. She imagined what he must have looked like when he was put into his playpen when he was just a tyke.

"Where to people? Ha, you don't need to tell me I already know. You are going to the business terminal at Newark, right? Hey lady, weren't you on TV with the President last week on that ship? I thought so. You must be a big shot. The other guy back there looks like a cameraman so I can understand why he is with you, but what's with this big guy up here by me? I thought he was going to be a deck hand and he would find himself hanging from a rope ladder painting the side of the ship. He surprised me when he put on his badge and I saw he'd already...HEY LOOKOUT YOU DUMB #%\$&.

WHERE'D YOU GET YOUR DRIVER'S LICENSE AT EBAY?...been hired in marketing security or something like that. Oh, I'll bet he is your bodyguard. I should have put the other guy up here and the big guy could sit with you."

"Oh yeah. I would have liked that much better," Keith thought.

Judith spoke up quickly when he paused to take a breath. "We are all deep in thought. That's why we're not talking. This trip came up after they called you for the ride and we each have to give a speech when we get to the airport. We would deeply appreciate it if we could finish the trip to the airport in silence. I am sure you have a great many interesting stories, but perhaps we could get you as our driver for our return to the ship on a later, but undetermined date. Thank you."

That must have shocked the driver as he didn't even acknowledge Judith. He just went silent. Keith thought that he would have to learn to put a person down gently like she did.

The driver was even able to be quiet when another cab cut him off. He just shook his fist at the other driver without yelling at him. Soon they were at the airport. The driver knew exactly where they needed to go. Keith paid for the ride and gave him a big tip.

"I hope I was quiet enough for you. Next time just let me know. Hey, thanks for the nice tip. Have a good flight."

Keith managed a weak, "Thank you."

Mr. Sterling's limo pulled in right behind them and Rudolph jumped out. His driver got two large suitcases out of the trunk for him.

They were met by the copilot who picked up Rudolph's bags. They all followed the copilot to the plane. All of the bags were quickly stowed in the tail section of the airplane as the pilot welcomed them, leading the way into the plane.

"This is my seat here," Rudolph said. "Other than that, you may sit anywhere in the plane. It helps the pilot if you don't all sit on the same side of the plane. It could cause a minor balance problem for him otherwise."

After locking the door and explaining the location of safety equipment, the copilot announced. "Today we are flying to Charlestown, capital of the island Nevis in the West Indies also known as the Caribbean. You will be driven to the seaport where you will board a private seaplane for your final leg to a private island. Your first leg flying time will be just over four hours and the second leg will be about two hours. This is why we are leaving early this morning so that you will still have sufficient daylight hours today. Depending upon Mr. Sterling's wishes we will pick you up in Charlestown two to four days from today. Please sit back and enjoy your flight. After we have reached cruising altitude, I will be back to answer any questions. Welcome aboard."

Rudolph just smiled. "When the Captain turns off the seatbelt lights, I will show you the locations of the restrooms and food. I like to hear the control tower as I used to be a pilot so I always have them pipe in the conversations."

"Sterling 3906 proceed to runway 11-29. You are number two for take-off."

"Sterling 3906 moving into position two for runway 11-29."

"Sterling 3906 you are clear for take-off. Have a good flight, sir."

Rudolph said, "Watch this. You won't be able to count to five before we are going straight up. I love it."

Keith felt that this must be what it feels like to be launched into space on a Saturn rocket. His guts were flattened against his backbone. He wondered why they even had seatbelts on. He could hardly lift his arms let alone fall out of his seat. He looked out of his window, but he couldn't even find the ground until he realized it was behind them.

The pilot slowly decreased the angle until they were climbing at a slower and more reasonable rate and Keith could move his arms and legs slightly.

“Wow, that was incredible. Does anyone back there need a putty knife to scrap themselves off their seatbacks?” Keith was in the front row and he turned around to see how the others fared. Rudolph was smiling and sipping on a glass with liquid in it. Judith was OK; Judith was always OK. His cameraman Scotty looked a bit green. “Scotty, are you OK?”

He just nodded his head that he thought he was going to be OK.

“Apparently you don’t go on carnival rides very often.”

He just shook his head NO.

After they leveled off, the copilot came back to see if there were any questions. Rudolph thanked him but said he could handle it. He invited the copilot to stay with them if he wished, but the copilot said he should return to the cockpit.

“As long as the air is smooth, you may stand, except Keith and possibly Judith may bump their heads on the ceiling. There are portable chairs in the forward closet so we can gather around my table. I’d like to tell you why you are with me today.

Keith got two chairs out and he discovered how to turn Judith’s chair around to face Rudolph and the table.

“I just heard early this morning that an entire island is for sale at a very reasonable price. It is owned by a movie mogul who wants to liquidate it. It has a wonderful secluded deep water harbor for the Maxx. Captain Perez is confident he can maneuver in the relative tight quarters. He wants me to build a passenger dock to tie up to. There is a very large lodge complete with a wonderful kitchen and dining room for 2000 people at each serving time. The island is sprinkled with both condominiums and cottages that will accommodate up to 4500 people. We could stop there for a couple of days on our outbound trip while half of our guests could spend two days and a night on shore. On the return trip the others could do the same. This would give the island crew time to clean up after the outbound visitors. I would like Judith to examine the guest accommodations to see if they are up to our standards and if not, what it would take to bring them up to our standards. Keith, I want you and Scotty to explore the approximately 12 miles of beach shoreline. Look for hidden dangers or anything else that could bring a negative experience to our guests. An island employee will accompany you with an UTV in case you do not want to run the entire route.” Keith smiled. Scotty’s eyes widened, possibly in fear. “Take as many photos as you can as this might be our only opportunity to put this island into our advertisements if I decide to purchase it.”

“Scotty, perhaps you could take photos of Judith and me on the beach. As long as you do not put our faces up close in any of the photos, it would not look like it was just two employees posing for photos. Besides that would give me my first look of her in a bathing suit.”

“Keith!”

“Well, what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing really, it was just the way you said it.”

“Keith, does Scotty know that you two are almost dating?”

“Are you two men ganging up on me here?”

“No. It is just that you and Keith are so much fun to watch. Your little hand squeezes, the looks that you give each other, and your denials to me at least that you are dating. I love it.”

Scotty said, “Mr. Sterling, if I didn’t know it before, I guess I do now. But, Keith, I am not going to spread it around. I respect you both too much for that to happen.”

Judith said, “Scotty, thank you. I have seen your work and I think you are great, too.”

“And I think you are outstanding. When you and Mr. Sterling were on stage with the President last week, there wasn’t a single member of the crew that wasn’t proud of our ship and its owner. But then Mr. Sterling introduced you and you gave an impromptu speech praising the entire crew. You have no idea how much that affected each one of us. The crew has been talking about it every day since then. There isn’t a person in the crew that wouldn’t do anything you asked them to do.

This morning for instance, I wasn't even awake when Keith called me and asked me to join you and him this morning. You may have noticed that I was at the main entrance before you were. That is the kind of respect you have from the entire crew."

Rudolph noticed tears of pride coming out of Keith's eyes. He remembered the President's wife's reaction to Keith's tears when he said how proud he was of Judith.

"Thank you, Scotty, for your very kind remarks. I too am so proud of Judith and the way she has led this amazing crew. We haven't even had our first cruise on the Maxx and the praises are already rolling in. What a wonderful way to start a business venture!"

Judith had to get her appreciation in, too. She thanked Scotty for his remarks and told him how proud she was that he would make remarks like that about her in front of her boss. Trying to turn attention away from herself, she asked Rudolph. "Will our chef be on the island preparing the meals there? If she is, that could be a burden when she still has half of the guests on the ship."

"Good observation, Judith. "The employees that are on the island are allowed to live there during their employment. They are aware of the possible termination of their jobs when the island is sold, but I intend to retain each of them. Several times I have stayed on the island for a couple of days over the years as a guest of Mr. Jupiter, the owner. The same French chef is still there, as are most of the employees that I met. I have the utmost regard for each of them. This arrangement should actually give our ship's chef a little relief with fewer mouths to feed for several days on each cruise."

Keith added, "Could we consider an enticement of allowing a guest from one of our previous cruises to stay over on the island. They could get off on the outbound trip and stay on the island until we return on the inbound trip? This would not likely be chosen by too many people so as to burden the island staff as they prepare for the second visit on a single cruise. It could be one of several enticements that we could offer to our repeat guests. I am always looking for ways to build-up our repeat business."

Both Judith and Rudolph agreed that could be arranged and might be a good tool to use to get repeaters. Scotty asked if we could have pictures of the repeaters hanging in the main lodge when they arrived for the second time as a silent thank you for them. The others liked that, too.

"And now my friends, we could all supplement our shortened sleep if you would like to take a snooze. There are MP3 players here with earphones if you would like music, several magazines, or as I can see, you brought your laptops which you can use. We have an internal Wi-Fi system in here for the signal that we are getting from a satellite. Your choice. Keith, I believe you are normally up at 0400, but the rest of us were probably sleeping when I called. If you need exercise, you could go out and run alongside of us."

They all busted up laughing. Keith said, "I might even be able to keep up with you."

By the time Judith was able to stop laughing she said. "Rudolph, how do you really expect any of us to be able to sleep now?"

* * *

Soon they landed in Charleston and were being driven to the coast to board their seaplane. It was a six-seat twin-engine plane, but there was not as much room in this plane. They sat in two rows facing each other. Keith liked that arrangement as Judith was squeezed in next to him. He took the opportunity to put his arm around Judith. She snuggled up close to him and they both enjoyed the two hour ride to the island. Her head was on his shoulder most of the way.

The pilot circled the island as they approached so they could see the lay of the land. It gave them a sense of seeing a green croissant in the ocean with its open side towards the south. The open side formed a natural harbor. They landed in the harbor next to several small speedboats. Keith helped Judith out as they first had to step on a single ladder rung then step onto the plane's pontoon before they could step onto the dock. Keith just lifted her from the pontoon to the dock like a small bag of groceries.

The island's manager, Pierre Colette, welcomed Mr. Sterling and his guests. He had a French accent. "Please follow me to the main lodge."

The top of the hill, where the lodge was located, was 250 feet above sea level. The island had a mixture of palms and evergreens with several large, picturesque rugged rock outcroppings. Portions of the walk were paved with a blacktopping mixture, but there were also steps in three different places. Judith asked, "Has anybody ever been here on a wheelchair?"

Monsieur Colette answered, "Yes, there is a road from the shoreline to the lodge. It winds along the rear of the lodge. We use it both for deliveries and for transporting wheelchairs. It is safe and we have never had an accident with a wheelchair. There are handicap equipped cottages near the lodge level for such persons."

"Thank you. May I see them before we leave?"

"Of course, I will be most honored to show you." He stopped before reaching the lodge. "You will notice that we have many rest stops planned along the path to the lodge. Secure railings have embedded lighting for any that would enjoy a stroll down to the docks after dusk. This is one of several well-marked turn-off points where our guests may proceed directly to their cottages without climbing the rest of the way to the lodge. Moving on." Monsieur Colette marched briskly off towards the lodge.

Rudolph appeared to be tiring. Keith motioned for Judith to keep up with their leader. "Rudolph, do you want to rest for a few minutes? I will stay here with you."

"You should stay with Judith. I am all right; it is not my heart. My legs are just tired. Please Keith, stay with Judith. You two will be separated long enough today with all the tasks I have given both of you."

"Do I detect the presence of a cupid among us?"

Rudolph gave himself a look of "*Who? Me?*" and he pointed to himself.

"Well there are only two of us here right now and it is not me. Any idea who else it could be?"

"Keith, this could be a very romantic couple of days for you both. A beautiful, quiet, secluded tropical island on which most anything could happen. My legs are better now; let's catch-up to the others."

"I detect another facet of your psyche that is coming out and I like it."

"Quiet now, they are not far away and we are far above the ocean sounds that would otherwise mask our talking."

Judith turned around with a smile. "Isn't this a beautiful island? I can see our guests just loving this and wanting to cruise with us so they can return here again and again. Are you getting all of this with your camera, Scotty?"

"This is awesome. Thanks for inviting me, Keith. I have some incredible footage and stills, too."

"And now we have arrived here at the lodge. It is massive given the size of our island. Over the years it has been the site of large gatherings, some very exclusive weddings, and an island hide-away for kings and queens. Soon, I suspect it will be a romantic interlude for sea-going passengers on the world's largest luxury cruise ship. It will perform its duty for them as it has for its many regal visitors over the years."

Rudolph replied, "I am sure that it will. And I am sure that you and your staff will see that it does. We just need to explore it to be sure that our advertising is on target and that it is entirely compatible with our vision."

"As you said on our way up the path, you had a light lunch just before you landed at Charleston. I have asked our chef to make some French pastries for you to have an afternoon tea with us. We can discuss your plans there. Right this way to our overlook luncheonette." He beckoned them to follow him up three steps to an elegant lunch room. As they entered there were show cases with

both small and large French pastries, pocket-bread with salads stuffed in them and decorated cakes of various designs. "These are made during the chef's training sessions with his staff. If they are not eaten by our guests, they go to the families that work here."

He seated them at a table, and then took a seat with them. "You may choose anything from the menu or from the show cases. May I suggest that you try several items and if everyone wants to take a different dish you could sample from each person's selection. Just because it is French cooking, it does not mean that it is fattening. We French also make many wonderful health foods. Many of these wonderful desserts are even suitable for a diabetic, especially if the portion is demi-sized."

Each person ordered several selections. Keith asked for a whole wheat pocket bread with a lo-calorie tuna salad.

"Excellent choice, Keith. It is my favorite luncheon selection that the chef has made especially to suit my caloric needs and taste. I hope you enjoy it."

Judith had a meringue with a fruit mixture and a dab of low-Cal peach-flavored whipped cream. Each of them enjoyed their foods immensely.

The panoramic view from their table was breathtaking. Rather than just an endless view of the ocean's horizon, they could see a few small uninhabited islands in the distance. Portions of the islands were visible with majestic palms shooting into the air. "Who owns those islands?" Rudolph asked.

"The government owns them and will not allow humans to set foot there. They are part of a wildlife sanctuary and are an important stop over for many species of birds in their migrations. There are many sea turtles that also use all of these islands including ours. No commercial fishing is allowed within 50 nautical miles."

Judith said, "Thank you so much for a wonderful lunch. I would like to begin looking at the cottages now and I know Keith and Scotty would like to skirt the shoreline. Do I need a master key for the cottages?"

"Of course. We may proceed now. We have locks for the cottage doors if the occupants want them, but there has never been any theft on the island and we have never had any unwanted visitors from the sea. Here are some detailed maps of our island. Gentlemen, here is Henri, our security chief who will accompany you. Follow him to his UTV outside."

Keith raised his eyebrows at the sound of Henri's title. Nothing would be said of Keith's title as not even Scotty knew it. At least he could ask about their security systems.

Keith gave Judith's hand a squeeze and said, "I will be back later. Don't fall off a cliff."

She smiled back and said, "Don't run over any baby sea turtles."

There were so many cottages and condos. She began to lay out a pattern for her exploration. Monsieur Colette was watching her. "May I be of some assistance? There will be minimal stress on your legs if you follow the same pattern that our housekeepers use with their carts. There are roads on the island that are only very lightly marked on the map. Each of these roads was laid out to follow a given elevation for as long as possible before going to a different elevation. The length of your walk will be longer this way, but your stamina will last all day. Here is a list of cottage names and addresses that our head housekeeper uses for training new people that you may use."

"Oh thank you, Monsieur. This will be most helpful, thank you."

"You are more than welcome, my dear. This card operates all of the door locks by proximity switches; you may just leave it in a pocket. Here is a whistle which you should wear around your neck. Should you twist an ankle or get lost, just blow the whistle every 20-30 seconds until you hear an air horn indicating that we are coming to get you."

"I will remember that, but I believe I can take care of myself."

"But of course. Enjoy your walk."

* * *

Keith and Scotty followed Henri out the door and around the back to the vehicle garage. It was full of UTVs that could be rented by the guests. "We will take my Polaris," Henri said pointing to a 4-seat UTV with flashing red lamps mounted to the top of the roll bars.

"Wow, I have never been in one of these. It looks mean and fast."

Henri smiled. His English had very little French accent in it. "This is next year's model, a Polaris RZR® XP 4 900. It has an 88 hp 900 cc engine and is the fastest in its class for climbing hills and running cross country. If I may make a suggestion, Scotty you should sit in the back where you will be able to shoot scenes from the left or right as well as straight ahead showing us having a good time."

"That sounds good," Scotty said. "Could you also drop me off, then I can set up to catch you coming toward me and driving past."

"Yes. There are several places in particular where that would be very impressive on your film. Keith sit on the left side as this is a right hand drive vehicle. Let's go. Please fasten your seat belts. If I can't cover this whole island before dinner, I will go back to cleaning cottages." Henri smiled broadly showing his white teeth that contrasted with his Puerto Rican skin tones.

They left the parking lot and the smooth roadway and headed nearly straight down on two tire tracks through the woods. Scotty had his camera running, but he seriously doubted that the steadying mechanism in his camera would be able to compensate for the large bumps they were taking. Keith wondered at times whether they were in free fall; they were going down the hill so fast. He was about to yell out "TREE" when Henri swerved sharply to the right. Keith had to hold his left leg in tightly or it would have been scraped by the side of the tree. They came out of the trees into a clearing, but there was nothing in front of them - no trees, no rocks, no weeds, and no road! Henri kept charging straight ahead. Keith glanced at Henri wondering if he had a stroke. No, but Keith was about to have one. Scotty, bless his heart, kept his video running. Anyone who would watch this video later, would have heard Keith screaming at the top of his lungs. They landed in a grassy field 12 feet below and Henri slid to a stop.

Henri watched with a grin as his passengers tried to bring their breathing back to normal.

"Oh my God, I thought we were dead," Keith gasped.

Henri asked, "Keith if you can handle that again and you can come up with another ear-splitting scream like that, I want Scotty to get out here. I'll show him where to stand so he can get an awesome video as we come over the cliff. Are you both up to that?"

"I think so. It might even be fun the next time. Scotty, how about it?"

Scotty turned off his camera, unbuckled his safety straps, and got out. Henri got out with him and showed him how to line up his camera. He must have done this many times before because there was a flat rock right there painted red right at the place that Henri showed him to stand. He explained that they would not stop here, but after they disappeared into the trees over to the left, Henri would back up and come back to pick up Scotty. "When we leave here, count out 3 minutes and 27 seconds. That's when we will do a fly-by overhead so be sure you have your camera running. You may or may not hear my engine first, so be ready. OK?"

"OK, this should be good. I have the light to my back and Keith will be on my side of the UTV so this will be perfect."

"Start your stopwatch. . . NOW!" Henri and Keith roared off to the right and climbed back up the hill. After about 3 minutes they were going through the woods and they came to an intersection that Keith hadn't noticed before. "Here we go, Keith. I hope you are ready." Henri looked at his watch, waited two seconds and hit the gas.

Keith thought they were going even faster this time. When they shot out of the trees heading towards the big nothing, Henri yelled, "Oh NOOO!"

Keith went into full panic mode again and screamed just as they went off the cliff. He didn't even look to see if Scotty was down there. They hit the ground, bounced once, swerved to the left and

plunged onto a trail through the trees. Henri hit the brakes, shifted into reverse and went backwards nearly as fast as they had gone into the woods. Scotty was there reviewing his footage. When they stopped, he yelled, "Keith, this is totally awesome. All I heard until you came over the cliff was you screaming bloody murder. I didn't know you could act that scared."

"I wasn't acting. Henri faked a malfunction of some kind and I thought I was dead again."

Henri just said, "It was effective, wasn't it?" He had another huge smile on his face. "Climb in Scotty. The rest of the trip will be calm compared to that."

"Thank God" was heard from somewhere in the front seat.

"The sun hit the UTV just perfectly. It looks like you are on fire until the angle changes and then the brilliant blue of the machine comes out."

"I've done that before with guests and I make it a little bit better each time. I also knew the sun was right at the perfect angle. Let's go down to the water – ah, following the road this time. We can follow the shoreline. Most of the swimming is done on the other side of the island. So we will just zip along the water's edge until we get there. There will be a lot of photo-ops over there."

Keith took the opportunity to probe about their security systems. "What do you do as the security chief?"

"I will explain it today, but I will show you tomorrow. Normally I would not answer your question, but Monsieur said I must answer all of your questions. I have a Ph.D. in Security Systems from UW-Platteville in the States."

Keith nearly fell out of the UTV. "I heard about that program. I have an M.B.A. with an emphasis in Marketing from Platteville. I did some marketing projects where I interviewed a lot of the professors there. Were there any in your program that you especially liked?"

"There was one that we all liked, Professor Young."

"I remember that name coming up in my report. What did you especially like about him?"

"He was so practical in everything he taught. He dealt with a lot of the new techniques, but he always emphasized the basics and told us to make common sense out of everything."

"Common sense. Yeah. I remember that being in my report about him." Keith thought, *"Well, he sounds like he is giving me the truth about his degree. Funny, I don't remember seeing him in any classes. I'll have to ask Dad if Henri was between Judith and me in our years there."* He smiled as he realized how easily he used the word 'dad' in his thoughts.

"Sorry I interrupted. Please continue about your job here. Should I call you Doctor Henri?"

"Oh please, NO. The guests would be asking for medical advice. I am just fine with 'Henri'."

"OK, thanks."

"You saw the radar station on the top of the hill next to the main lodge. We tell people it is owned by NASA for tracking their satellites and it also acquires weather information. That is not the entire truth. They let me add ground radar to it, much like the ones used at major airports. It watches all of our cabins for anything out of order. The things it alerts me about include: fire, smoke, erratic behavior by guests, and intrusion attempts from the sea. It also watches our woods for fires or other damage from lightning strikes. If Judith were to blow her whistle, she would activate a wind driven sensor inside the whistle that would be detected by a triangulation device on the tower that could pinpoint her position to within three meters. It is not affected by the speed of the ambient wind."

"Brilliant." Keith was willing to establish a better communication with Henri without letting Scotty know about it.

Henri slowly turned his head toward Keith and gave him a knowing smile. Professor Young had taught his students to use that single word as an indication that they were talking to another security-person. Keith quickly put his finger to his mouth and shook his head from side to side slowly. Henri nodded his head, glanced to Scotty in the back seat, and smiled.

He went on talking. "I have around the clock technicians in my office that can radio me 24/7 about any problem that my system may detect. And to make sure that they are not goofing off, I have them give me updates on the whereabouts of someone. It changes every day and today their target is Judith. There is a sensor in her whistle that they are following. She just moved to that cottage that you can see at the top of the hill above us. There she is on the porch. Wave!"

"Be sure that your techs report that she is constantly moving, because she is highly skilled in finding things like your sensors and she may just drop it off in a cottage somewhere just to throw you off."

"She has that kind of training, too?"

Keith knew that Henri was referring to Judith's security training. "She is the best ever."

Henri hit the brakes and coughed. He stared right at Keith and asked. "Did you know that these islands extend in a direction South zero five seven miles from here?"

"Yes, of course," Keith replied with a nod. He recognized that Henri had asked him about Judith's standing with Professor Young. Henri had graduated before Keith so there wouldn't be any recognition of Keith's standing.

Henri cast a worried glance back at Scotty, who was busy taking pictures of the breathtaking scenery. "Hang on; we have some ground to cover today. I'd say that we already covered an awful lot already though." He smiled at Keith.

"Are there any dangerous drop-offs if a non-swimmer, for example, waded out too far?"

"There is only one and it is barricaded off. Otherwise, the bottom gradually goes down to twenty-five feet before it drops off. A non-swimmer wouldn't get out that far. There are some places that we recommend for snorkeling and even scuba diving where the drop-offs are even farther out. While we are talking about water safety, we have a large pod of Fraser's dolphins here that drive off the sharks. Many of the dolphins are very friendly and we've given them names. Every day at 2 p.m., the one we call 'Jonesy' comes up and does a series of amazing jumps and flips for us. He seems to be trying to train some of the younger ones to do it with him. We are on the wrong side of the island to see them today, but we could drive over there tomorrow if that fits your schedule."

"How did he get that name?"

"He showed up here shortly after I arrived and I named him that. He seems to dive so deep that I felt he was down by Davy Jones' locker."

"Have you ever sent his name to anyone by email?"

"That's a strange question. I suppose so. Mr. Jupiter wasn't interested in dolphins so he never called this Dolphin Bay or anything like that. Why did you ask?"

"We should talk later, but I am currently fascinated with the word, Jonesy."

"We can certainly do that, say tomorrow morning?"

"Brilliant."

"Thank you, Keith. I can't wait to talk with you."

They rode in silence for several miles.

"Up around the next bend, we will have to slow down. Scotty, be ready with your camera. If we are lucky, you could see hundreds of baby sea turtles leaving their nests and heading for the water. Usually they only hatch at night to avoid predators, but the species here hatch around the clock. During this season, there are some days when I can't get through there without going out into the water up to my floorboards. There are so many of them. When they get to the water they start swimming right away and they will avoid being crushed by my tires in the water if I go slowly enough."

Scotty used his telephoto lens to see them through his camera.

"Whoa! There are thousands of them today." Henri came to an abrupt stop after turning sideways to give Scotty a better angle for his pictures. "You can both get out and walk among them, but

they move fairly quickly so be sure to watch the placement of your feet for each step you take. Their shells are not hard yet and you could easily kill them.”

Keith picked a newly hatched turtle up. “Whoa, this little critter is strong. He is determined to get to the water and away from me. Isn’t nature incredible?” A seagull swooped right in and tried to take the turtle right out of Keith’s hands. “Hey, that wasn’t nice.”

Keith was still spitting feathers out of his mouth when Scotty yelled. “Keith, that was awesome. We can call that commercial, ‘Don’t fight the seagulls for their food’.” Scotty laughed at the expression on Keith’s face.

Henri said, “You and Judith should stay in this cottage right here tonight. The two of you should enjoy this together and the sunset from here is absolutely awesome.”

“That would be nice, but we aren’t married.”

“I didn’t say you were and I noticed neither of you had rings. But you don’t have to be married to stay here together. You wouldn’t want her alone in a cottage tonight, would you? I mean she would be safe and all that, but the scenery is just too beautiful not to share with someone. You wouldn’t want her to share it with Mr. Sterling or Scotty, would you? I am not suggesting that you wouldn’t be a perfect gentleman with her. It could be a night that you both would never forget.”

“That’s enough, Henri. Thanks for the suggestion. Can I go up to see the way it is set-up?”

“Why do you think I stopped here?”

“For the turtles?”

“Oh, I forgot about them. Let’s go up the walk. Just watch where you step.”

Henri opened the cottage door and led them in. The cottage was setup for a family or two couples. It had two bedrooms with king size beds and two full baths with showers. Between them was a large living/dining room and a full kitchen divided from the living room by a large serving counter. Henri hit a switch on the wall and Sirius radio music filled the rooms. “If this doesn’t promote love, I don’t know what will and I could see in Judith’s eyes that she adores you.”

Keith fingered an object in his pocket and smiled.

“We are more than three quarters of the way around, so let’s leave the rest for tomorrow. We could come around from the other side so we wouldn’t be crossing sea turtle alley here. Let’s take the service road straight up from here. Scotty, you could use the next cottage up the hill. Some photo shots that I recommend you take are to come down here and film Judith with the turtles. Then Keith could come walking around that last turn we took and their eyes could meet. They can repeat that several times while you shoot it from both of their backs and from their cottage in between. They can make some ‘greeting for the very first time’ hugs. Keith could scoop her up and walk off into the sunset with her. Another good sequence could be just walking calf-deep into the water and standing there enjoying the sunset with some kisses. Then from your cottage, Scotty, you could get a shot from over the top of their cottage of Keith carrying Judith up the walk towards their door and have them disappear from your view and under their roof-line. You can modify that any way that you wish, but that would be my suggestion.”

“Sounds perfect,” Scotty replied.

Keith said, “I like it, but I will ask Judith if we can shoot a commercial like that. I think she will like it, too. Let’s go up to the lodge. I want to jog up the road behind you. I haven’t had much exercise today.”

“Scotty, you going to jog or do you want to ride with me?”

“That depends on whether you have any more surprise attempts at sky diving.”

“All 4 wheels on the ground. I promise.”

“OK, I’ll ride. Keith keeps trying to get me into exercising, but not with an expensive camera in my hands.”

Keith yelled out, “Lame excuse if I ever heard one.”

“Get in with your treasured camera and we’ll make him run extra hard, today,” Henri said with a smile. He popped the clutch and the Polaris shot up the hill.

Henri used his mirrors to watch Keith in amazement. “That dude is strong. He is still right behind us and he hasn’t backed off a bit.”

“He rarely takes the elevator on the ship. He goes up and down on the stairs, whether he is on the 26th deck or the bottom deck. He never seems out of breath. I’ve heard that he has a set of weights in his cabin and he regularly presses 300 pounds. He finishes up a 45 minute routine with a mile swim in his tank. That is his every morning routine. He is a machine and he is very, very bright.”

“I thought that of him, too. Well, here we are and here’s Keith right behind us.”

“Are we at the top already? I was just getting started,” Keith said with a relaxed grin.

Henri said, “Perfect timing. I was just told that Judith is just leaving her last cottage in today’s tour and she is right around the corner.”

Keith jogged to the corner of the lodge to meet her.

Henri told Scotty, “Keep your camera handy. He is more in love with her than he will admit. You might get some surprising shots.”

“I won’t invade their private areas.”

“Of course not, but your public and even pre-arranged shots could be more emotional than you might expect and that could be developed into the best ad of the year.”

Scotty thanked him and went inside to get a drink.

Keith and Judith came back arm in arm. “Have you two met before? Possibly in Platteville? Keith asked Judith and Henri.

Henri said, “Oh now I remember. I thought your face looked familiar. You were about two years ahead of me I think. I am S923 and I am pleased to meet you.”

Judith had been talking to Keith and replied to Henri. “It is so nice to meet you. I am S057, but what you probably don’t know is that S007, right here, now holds the school’s record in achievement.”

“I knew he was smart from our discussion. Did he tell you that I scared him a little bit?”

“I heard him screaming all the way up here. I went back up to the lodge and told Monsieur that something terrible must have happened. He laughed and said that you like to scare your favorite visitors. Then he showed me a video taken a few weeks ago. I laughed, sorry Honey, thinking about Keith going airborne.”

“Scotty has a video of me making a fool of myself. He shot it from underneath us as we went over the cliff the second time. Henri got me to scream the second time by faking a malfunction with his controls.”

“Oh, I have GOT to see that. Did you have a good time?”

“We got about three quarters of the way around the island. Did you see us wave at you?”

“Yes, I wondered how you knew which cottage I was in, but I discovered a small locator chip in the neckband of the whistle they gave me to wear. That is a nice safety feature.”

“What did I tell you?” he asked Henri.

“How did you two find out so much about each other?” she asked.

“It is a long story, but Henri has named a dolphin, ‘Jonesy’ and that got me to ask a few pertinent questions.”

“Oh my God! Did you find out anything?”

“This is the first time that Scotty wasn’t with us. Henri, I just had a virus named ‘JONESY’ hit my computer that I designed and programmed with my own operating system. The three of us have worked with detecting viruses. Judith and I would appreciate any input you can give us.”

“What happened when it hit?”

“His screen went blank and came back with that word all in red capital letters. The most confusing part about it is that Jeremy doesn’t have any memory of it having happened.”

“Wait, who is Jeremy? Your console operator? Why doesn’t he remember anything?”

“Sorry. Jeremy is my computer. He is fully voice compatible and runs off an integrated AI-interface. I asked him to go back five minutes and show me everything on his screen and there is just a blank space in time where he doesn’t remember anything. He swears that neither the word nor that sequence of letters is anywhere in his system and he is not accessible from any wireless connections.”

“Wow, I would love to see your system. When did this happen?”

“Thursday, December 13th at exactly 2 p.m. local time.”

“That was the day after the Sandy concert and the President’s presentation to Mr. Sterling. We watched that and of course I saw Judith there, but not you, Keith.”

“I was up with Jeremy and some security people watching for any threats to the President.”

“Wow, they let you participate in that? I’m impressed.”

“Well, Jeremy could give them better coverage than anything that they had.”

“Again, I am impressed.”

“Henri, today the thought came to me that there might be some kind of connection between the virus and UW-Platteville when you said you had named the dolphin ‘Jonesy’ so soon after you arrived here from school. If we could all come up with the same connection, perhaps we could make some sense out of this. Right now, I don’t know if it is in the ‘Prank’ classification or if it is a foreboding of some dangerous threat. It is literally driving me nuts.”

“I see what you mean. It could be a predictor of your ship going to Davy Jones’ Locker. It is just that *Davy Jones* and *Jonesy* are not the same thing and I was just keying it into my iPad here and there are no cross references to Davy Jones on Bing®.”

“The only other thing and that was a dead-end too, is that we recently hired a family onto our ship’s crew. The father is ‘David Jones’ and his nickname is ‘Jonesy’. He is our police captain. His 17 year old son has read-only access to only one file, the guest list and he is working with Microsoft Office® to create some advertising bells and whistles for us. He is very bright, but doesn’t have the ability to place anything on Jeremy’s files; he is using his own laptop for file storage. The mother is an educator building training programs for children of our guests. Again, she is not on our computer network. One more possibly major thing is that we have over 6000 homeless people living on our ship until early March. They certainly didn’t come onboard with anything and Jeremy hasn’t detected any electronics brought aboard. I don’t know what to do, except to watch for the next attack and attempt to learn a pattern.”

“I think you’ve got me in over my head already. I have put some nice systems into place here, but nothing like what you have. I will think about this tonight and let you know before you leave if I can even suggest anything. Hmm, Platteville...nothing comes up there-or if it did, what would it mean?”

Rudolph walked out the door and came towards them. “Looks like a meeting of the minds. How did it go for both of you today? I met with Monsieur’s bookkeeper and we had a wonderful look at the books for the past few years. I am impressed that Mr. Jupiter had assembled such a wonderful staff and together they ran such a fine program here for his friends and guests. If our ship could pump some income into this program from our guests that would like an island overnight stop-over, this island could remain viable for many years to come. Perhaps we could talk over dinner. It is ready for us now.”

“Henri, your friendship and wonderful ideas will always be remembered. If you have any further ideas about our talk here, please see me right away. Otherwise, I look forward to seeing you tomorrow. Thank You.”

“Keith, it was all my sincere pleasure. I can’t wait to see Scotty’s footage of today and tonight. Have a good evening. Judith, the three of us already have an incredible bond. It was such a pleasure to meet you. Good evening to each of you.”

As they went inside, Rudolph asked. “What was that all about? He seems like such a wonderful man.”

“He has the same degree from the same school as we have. Whether or not you purchase this island, don’t let him slip through your fingers. You need him in your company. He is excellent in many ways.”

“Thank you. I will certainly remember that. They want us to sit in the main dining area tonight. They don’t have any live entertainment now, but they will show some video clips of the area for us. Scotty has his camera interfaced to their projection system and wants us to see some of his work today.”

Keith just rolled his eyes. “Excuse me while I wash up for dinner.”

Judith and Scotty followed him into their respective restrooms.

“So Scotty, what do you think of Henri’s photo-op ideas for tonight?”

“I have mixed feelings. From a marketing standpoint, he is spot-on. I just don’t want to interfere with you and Judith.”

“I know what you mean. I am planning to give her a ring down on the beach tonight and I think a photo of the occasion would be great to have, but I want it to be natural and not staged.”

“How awesome is that? You are right. It would be a wonderful photo that she could send to her parents. Your call. I will leave if you wave me off.”

“Thanks buddy.” They returned to their table.

When everyone was seated, Monsieur Colette invited them to dine on one of his Chef de cuisine’s specialty meals. They were served a cold hors d’oeuvre of Basil salmon terrine on individual specially shaped elongated bowls. The chopped shrimp was mixed with finely torn spinach and cooked into a loaf that was sliced onto their terrines and lined with sliced cucumber, dotted with cream cheese topped with currants and garnished with decoratively carved vegetables.

Their main dish or plat principal was a pot-au-feu, which is basically a French beef stew served with cooked carrots, turnips, leeks, celery and onions. For dessert they were offered both a flaming crème brulee and a mousse au chocolat. Keith passed on the dessert, but he said it looked wonderful. When their plates were cleared from the table, they were offered a selection of French after dinner wines to enjoy while they watched local scenery views from the movie screen.

Then Scotty’s footage was shown. Scotty apologized for not having had time to edit any of it, but he thought it had potential. He had taken mostly video, but still shots could be taken from the full footage at any time. The first scenes were from the seaplane as it circled the island before they landed. Soon he was shooting from the back of the UTV as they went on a wild ride through the woods on their way down the hill. They found themselves leaning from side to side as the UTV went zigzagging through the trees. Even Judith screamed when it went off the cliff. Scotty paused the video. “There is more. I just thought you should take a break while the cameraman got set up down below to re-shoot this scene.”

“Here’s where I look like a screaming idiot,” Keith added.

“Naw, not an idiot. Screaming, yes, though.”

Judith and Rudolph laughed.

“Here goes.” Scotty resumed the playback. They could see a vertical rocky cliff covered with grass at the top. The sky was bright and very blue. There was no sound until suddenly a flaming frame with wheels came flying off the cliff. Inside was a man that was screaming at the top of his lungs. As the camera panned across the sky the flames seemed to go out, leaving a bright blue UTV frame. It bounced once when it hit the ground. Its wheels were spinning and when it hit the ground the second time the

wheels grabbed hold of the ground and it went careening into the woods. Scotty stopped the video again.

Everyone said they just loved the sequence. Even Keith said he liked it. Judith was laughing so hard that her eyes were tearing. She threw her arms around Keith and kissed him. "I could feel your terror. Your acting was just wonderful."

"I'm glad you thought I was just acting. Just before we went over the crest of the hill, Henri pretended he had a serious malfunction and I went into panic mode. It looked lifelike, because I was feeling the terror."

"You were telling me the difference between recall and persuasion. I can see that this will have great recall, but will the persuasion get a negative score?" Rudolph was still laughing. "That was priceless."

Keith got serious. "It could go negative with the little old ladies, but I can see the younger demographic scrambling to get reservations."

"I was kidding you, Keith."

"Oh. Well it was a priceless video. Scotty had us right in the center of the screen all the way. Great job, Mister."

"Yes Scotty. That was wonderful." Rudolph was very impressed.

"I have some more video that is going to be persuasive. I will predict right now that Judith will jump up and want to go see it for herself."

"I'm ready, Scotty. Show us."

Scotty fast forwarded to the point in the film just before they went around the bend to see the turtles. His video was skillfully done. He zoomed in on the little sea turtles as they scrambled towards the sea without showing any of the seagulls picking them up as quickly as possible. They were so cute as they climbed over each other to be the first to get to the water.

Judith jumped up. "Keith! Where is this? I want to see it."

"Let's grab our backpacks so we can stay and watch them as long as we want to then we can stay overnight at a cottage down there."

"WE can do WHAT?"

"Well we have to sleep somewhere and I am certainly not going to let you sleep in a cottage alone tonight. We will be in one that has private accommodations for two families inside. We can each take a bedroom. Come on before the turtles stop hatching."

Judith looked half worried and half happy in anticipation of what might happen tonight. She grabbed her things and followed Keith.

"Scotty, bring your camera," Keith called back.

While he was packing up his camera and equipment, Scotty hinted to Mr. Sterling that he should grab a ride down to the beach with them. "Believe me, you will NOT want to miss a moment of this. It promises to be about more than just about turtles. Please join us."

Rudolph was surprised by Scotty's insistence. He asked Monsieur if he could have a ride to the beach with his people. Monsieur decided to go with them, too.

* * *

Keith took Judith's hand and ran down the path as fast as he dared with Judith. He was surprised at how athletic she was. She kept up with him without any hesitation.

"OK, let's slow down here. We don't want to step on any. Look there they are!"

"Ohhh, they are sooo cute! Just look at them go. All with one purpose in mind, the great wide open sea. Oh I wish Martha Jones were here to see this. I'll ask Scotty if he will be sure to share it with her. She could make a wonderful classroom video out of this. Look, look! That one is catching a ride part way on the top of two others. They are really clumsy on the sand, but they look like old pros when they get to the water."

Keith asked, "Isn't it amazing that they will mate and return to this same beach someday to lay their eggs and have their babies?"

"I would like to return to this beach someday-with you."

Keith wondered if she was thinking of the rest of the sentence that he had just spoken to her. "I would like to go anywhere with you." He hugged her tightly. "You have made such a difference in my life. I love you so much."

Judith practically melted in his arms. "Mmmm, I love being with you. Isn't this island just too beautiful?"

They just stayed in that position enjoying the light breeze and the nearly calm ocean with the turtles crawling over their feet.

Judith laughed, "They tickle!"

Keith said, "Scotty is here with his camera. Could we do a video of a guy and a gal meeting on the beach that could use it in our advertising?"

"Sure, just tell me what to do."

"Let's ask Scotty." Keith didn't want what would follow the video to appear to be a set-up or it could break the mood between him and Judith. "Scotty, come over here and let us be a couple on the beach for your video."

"OK. Hmm. Judith, let me get some footage of you alone with the baby turtles. You can talk all you want and I can decide later if I will use that or just background music or even ocean waves -- if we had any. Keith, how about if you go back around that bend and find some rocks to toss at the ocean as if you were bored. Then I will have you walk towards Judith. When you spot her, just do anything that a couple on a tropical island might do. Judith you can start now while Keith is getting in place then I will go back to him."

They both did what they were told. Scotty was chuckling to himself. After shooting Judith for a while, he told her to hold her position and he would get behind Keith.

Keith was a good model. He looked downright disgusted and lonely. He was trying to skip some flat rocks across the water, but he couldn't find any that were flat enough. Finally he just got up, shoved his hands into his pockets and walked around the corner towards Judith. "OK, hold it there, Keith. I want to get behind Judith as you come towards each other." Scotty ran with his camera across the beach. He had to walk in the water to get around Judith and the parade of turtles.

"OK, now both of you advance on each other. I will have you stop before you reach each other then I will move again before you finish up the scene."

The waiting worked perfectly on both Keith and Judith. They really wanted to get close to each other again. The waiting only added to their interest. When Scotty told them to move in, they picked up their speed. By the time he could get them to stop, they were too close so he asked them to both back up. Scotty headed towards their cottage before he let them move again. He winked at Mr. Sterling as he walked toward the cottage. Quietly, he said, "I think this is going to be good. I'm not real certain what is going to happen next, but I am guessing that Keith has an idea."

"OK", Scotty called out to Judith and Keith. "You are both on your own. Just do anything you want."

Judith started trotting towards Keith. Keith went right into a run. When they met, Keith swooped Judith up in his arms, picking her right up off her feet. Judith threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in his. She leaned back slightly and said, "I have been waiting for you to do this. Don't ever stop."

Keith opened his mouth waiting for her next kiss. He walked around in the ankle deep water, just swinging her gently from side to side. Mr. Sterling asked Scotty, "Should we be watching this?"

"Just wait. It should get better soon. You are going to like this." His camera was still rolling.

Finally Keith put Judith gently down at the edge of the water. They were well away from the turtles so they didn't have the turtles to distract them. Scotty thought to himself, "*The sunset couldn't be more perfect.*"

Keith asked, "Did you like that?"

"Mmmm, I loved it."

"Judith, you have gone from being my best friend to someone that I realize that I can't live without."

She just said, "Me too."

"You are so beautiful. You are so kind with everyone you meet. You help me and you let me help you. You make me feel so strong and needed. I want you always by my side; I want to always be by your side." As he slid down to his left knee, he pulled something out of his pocket. "Will you marry me and complete my life?" He opened the box and she saw a beautiful engagement ring.

"Oh Keith. Yes, of course I will marry you. I want you in my life forever. I am so glad that you thought to ask me in such a beautiful place as this. You are so romantic, I love it."

"Thank you for making me the happiest man in the world. I thought you felt the same way about me as I felt about you, but I just wasn't sure."

"You must have been thinking about it for you to have a ring with you. When did you get this ring? It is the most beautiful engagement ring that I have ever seen. A blue diamond surround by sparkling diamonds. And it even fits! How did you know? Oh this is so exciting!"

They kissed even more passionately.

"You have my mother's engagement ring. It is the only thing that I have from her. You must have the same size hand that she did. I had no idea."

"Oh Keith. That makes it so much more special. I am so honored to have it from you."

"Aunt Jean gave it to me when I went back to Platteville, in October. She told me to find a good wife this time. I didn't even know that she had it."

It had passed through Judith's mind that perhaps Keith had gotten it back from his ex-wife. She was glad to know that it was special for her.

"Oh Keith. I forgot all about Scotty. Can I, we, send the video to my parents to let them know?"

"Of course. I had him set up the video scene. I wanted my promise to you to be special."

"You are such the planner. Yes, it was very special, just perfect."

"For the advertising, I thought he could cut the ring part out, but I wanted to finish the ad by my carrying you into the cottage. Are you up for that?"

"You can carry me anywhere. I am yours, mister."

Just then they saw Rudolph and Monsieur coming down the path toward them while both sporting huge smiles. "Congratulations, to the lucky couple! I hope you do not mind but Scotty asked us to come along to see the video being shot. We had no idea we were going to witness this extra special moment in your lives. I am so excited and happy for both of you."

Monsieur said something in French then said it translated to a French poem of love wishes.

Judith replied, "I had no idea either. Keith is so special. Thank you both so much for your warm wishes."

"May we see your ring?"

"That's right. I guess I am supposed to show it off. He said it was his late mother's engagement ring. He just found out it had been saved when he went back to his apartment in October."

"It is very beautiful, Judith. Keith, you are such a special person in so many ways. I hope I can keep both of you for many years. I will make it worth your while. You are both just incredible and you have blessed me with being able to witness this very special moment."

"It is indeed a beautiful ring. Keith, do you have any idea how much it is worth?" Monsieur inquired.

"No, none what so ever. I can imagine that a blue diamond of that size could be quite expensive, but she is going to keep it, so its dollar value doesn't matter."

"Except, please promise me that you will never wear it in any of your ports of call, Judith. I have seen that setting before. I believe your father must have purchased it from the Shaw of Iran about 35 or 36 years ago. It was shown in some of the leading jewelry magazines and it was evaluated back then at 2-3 million dollars. So today it could easily be worth ten times that much. May I suggest that you have it appraised in New York by a reputable appraiser that Mr. Sterling can locate for you? Then do two important things. Have it insured and have a copy of it made from a good grade of glass. Wear the glass one except for extra special events when you may wish to wear the original if there is sufficient security around you."

Keith asked, "Is this perhaps a glass copy?"

"Oh my goodness no, my lad. It lights up the sky like no glass copy could ever do. It is simply elegant. A museum piece, but the article that I read said it had been legally purchased by someone in the States as an engagement ring. Who was your father?"

"They both died when I was one. I know very little about them except that they put up a large educational fund for me when I was born. I was raised very simply by my mother's sister."

"Let us take our leave and allow you two to savor the evening sunset and the night that follows."

"Thank you. Scotty, do you want that shot of us going into the cottage?"

"If you are both up to it, I would like that, yes. Just give me a moment to set-up uphill from your cottage."

Keith carried Judith back down to the water's edge. They kissed until Scotty yelled that he was ready. Keith thought, "*But I'm not. Not yet anyway. I'm busy right now.*" This time Keith scooped her up so that she was sitting in his arms and her feet were at his waist level. They kissed all the way up from the beach until they disappeared from Scotty's lens at their front door.

They went in and just sat looking out their front windows at the incredible sunset. They did not turn their lights on in their cottage until it was well after dark. Later they recalled that they didn't even remember watching the sunset. They were only concentrating on each other – kissing and dreaming about how wonderful it would be to be married someday.

Judith said, "Now I really have to call my parents and get them to come for a cruise with us this summer. Keith, could we get married when they are on a cruise with us? It would be so special for them as much as it would be for us. If Rudolph buys this island, we could have the wedding here and we could lock out the island just for our wedding guests. If you want to get married sooner, that is fine with me. It is just a suggestion."

"When we are married, we will each be one-half of the marriage with one vote each. Nothing will be decided upon without the agreement of both of us. It is kind of the way we already operate on the ship and it has worked just wonderfully there. That is why I knew you were the one for me. You are just so special and I am madly in love with you. I think the timing of our wedding is important for both you and your parents. They should be with us for the wedding. If you can't get them here for a cruise, let me talk to them and I will let them know that I want them here, too."

"Oh, Keith, you are so wonderful."

"I suppose we should go to bed pretty soon. Do you want me to sleep in the other bedroom?"

"When I was inspecting the cottages today, I noticed that the night stands had condoms in them."

"Is that an invitation?"

"I won't answer that."

"Don't forget what I said about we will always decide together about everything."

* * *

The next morning Keith was up before dawn. He heard an UTV coming down the hill and he could see its headlights. It stopped outside and someone walked up to the front porch and then the person went back to the UTV and drove it back up the hill. After it left, Keith looked outside and saw, in the very dim light, a large basket that appeared to be gift wrapped. He opened it outside so that the noisy cellophane wrapping wouldn't wake Judith. It was filled with fruits of many kinds and it had skim milk and orange juice in it. Margarine and a large fresh French baguette were also included. "*Hmm, looks like we could make a nice breakfast out of this,*" he thought. He took it carefully inside, but the fruit was loose packed and it started to fall and roll around the kitchen counter.

As he scrambled around trying to catch the falling fruit, he bumped his head on the kitchen counter with a thud. "Ouch!"

"Who is out there? Keith, is that you? What's wrong?"

"I nearly slipped on a banana peel." He laughed at his own joke. "I was trying to make you some breakfast."

"I'd rather have you in here."

* * *

Later in the morning Keith made a mixed fruit breakfast for them. They ate on their porch where they could see the morning wave of sea turtles crossing the sand. They both mentioned how comfortable the wooden furniture was on the porch. They used some low-rise small tables to hold their food and drinks. Judith said, "This is so beautiful here. I am sure our guests will enjoy it. It doesn't have all of the hustle and bustle that most ports of call have. This is pure relaxation."

"I don't think that very many guests will have the intense and wonderful experiences that we have had in such a short time, though." Keith was smiling and looking at Judith. "I see you still have your ring on."

"And why wouldn't I? It is so beautiful. It keeps reminding me of how handsome you are and how true blue you are. Oh Keith, I am so blessed that you asked me to be your wife. I will try to never disappoint you in any way. Isn't it wonderful that we can also work together, too?"

"We are both very lucky for that. Have you given any thought to how we are going to explain this to the rest of the crew?"

"Why? Do you think there will be a problem of some kind?"

"I am not sure. I was wondering if our closeness will somehow blow our cover of being the chiefs of security."

"I was wondering if we should move out of the CCC's upper level and into a separate cabin together where we could raise a family."

"Judith, I think that would be a great idea, but shouldn't we wait until we are married?"

"Of course, silly. I was just thinking ahead."

"We do not have much opportunity to even just sit with each other without having everyone watching us. I would like more privacy than that. Let's not make it obvious to anyone, except perhaps to Michael and Jodi. I can disable the door locks on both sides of the swim tank room so we can both walk through to the other's room. I would enjoy working at my desk if you were next to me working at yours. We could each put in an auxiliary desk next to the other's desk so we could make that happen. We could also just sit on a single balcony together that way without anyone finding out. I need to have more private time with you."

"Honey, I like that. I was wondering how we could do that. Would you be able to work in my cabin with all the floral designs in there?"

"If you are in there, how could your decorations bother me?" He noticed and liked it that she had called him "Honey," again.

"I need to call my parents. We are two hours ahead of them so they would just be getting up now for school."

"Christmas is next week. Do they have school today?"

"How soon we forget. Sure, today is Tuesday and they don't get off until Friday. Should we email them the video today or tell them they will be getting a video for Christmas?"

"You don't want to make them late for school. If they had it today, they would watch it over and over until they were late. Let's send it to them for Christmas. That will give us a day to look over Scotty's work and we can pick out some photos for them. We can email them to *Walgreens* with an order to print and frame the photos. We will tell your folks to go over there the 23rd to pick them up. I'd like to send some that way to Aunt Jean and Professor Young, too. We should sign one from both of us and give it to Rudolph."

"Brilliant. I really like that. Let's call your folks now."

"How about you calling your mother and I'll call your father at the same time. You don't think that would shock them too much, would you? They might think it was an emergency. They both have strong hearts, don't they?"

"Sure, they are both in great health. Let's do it."

They both put in their calls at the same time.

* * *

Back in Prairie du Chen, two cellphones began to ring at the same time. Edward and Vera, Mr. and Mrs. Overstreet both looked at each other. Vera said, "How often has that ever happened? I hope nothing is wrong."

"Mine says that Keith is calling me."

"Judith is on mine. I hope they are all right."

"I am guessing it is the news we hoped for. Go ahead and answer yours."

"Judith, Honey. Are you all right?"

Edward asked, "Keith is everything OK down there? Wait I can't hear you, her mother is screaming and crying at the same time. What is your news?"

"Dad, I should have called you yesterday, but last evening I asked Judith to marry me and I want to know if I can have your permission."

"Of course we have prayed that you would ask her. We are both so proud of both of you. We taped the President's medal presentation last week and we could hear in Judith's short speech that she was talking about you. Your love for each other is so obvious and we couldn't be more excited. Can you hear her mother excitedly talking to Judith? Do we have time to get there for the wedding?"

"Thank you so much, Dad. Your love for us means the world to us. We are waiting until you can go on a 21-day cruise with us in late June. We will get married when you are here with us. Can you put together a list of people that we should invite? They will be our guests on the cruise, too."

"She is yelling to me that 'they are having a June wedding' so Judith must have just told her, too. Keith, we had talked about taking a cruise with you two, but let us pay for it. After all, the father of the bride is supposed to pick up the cost of the wedding."

"That is very generous of you. But my book says that when the daughter is an adult, she and her groom should pay for it."

"What book is that?"

"It is the one I was just writing," he laughed. "Anyway, we are covering the expense for you and your friends. We will be inviting my Aunt Jean, too. Professor Young will be invited, but his wife is very ill so we wouldn't expect him to come."

"You are very generous. Thank you. I think we will both have a difficult time teaching today. This is so exciting. Give me the details of your proposal. What, where, how? You know, the 'Bachelor Show' kind of stuff."

"I am going to hold off on the details because my camera man, Scotty, got it all on tape and we will be sending you a copy when he gets it edited. I will tell you though that I gave Judith my mother's engagement ring and it fit her perfectly. You might want to tell your physics students how a blue diamond is formed by natural forces."

"A BLUE diamond?"

"Yes and a rather large one with lots of good size white diamonds around it. My parents must have been very rich. I never even knew that. Scotty got some good photos of that too so you will see it when you see the video."

"And..."

"And what?"

"And what else? Did you get down on one knee?"

"Yes, in the wet sand and water. It was just out of reach of the baby sea turtles headed for the ocean. You will just have to wait to see the video."

"You had sea turtles as your witnesses?"

"Yes, but we didn't catch their names. They had other things on their minds than whether we were happy or not."

"Wow. We will certainly have a lot to talk about over breakfast this morning. Thank you for making our day so special, Keith. I really do have to get going if we are to be at school on time. I think I'll call the florist and have some flowers delivered to Mom at school today. She is so excited right now. All our love. Thanks for calling. Have a wonderful day, son. Bye."

"Thanks, Dad. You too. Bye."

* * *

Judith was just ending her call too. "Thank you, Mom. I will. Love you too. Bye."

"How did that go, sweetheart?" It was the first time that he had called her that. Keith had a huge smile on his face.

"She was so excited. All she could do was scream at first. She said Dad was really happy too. You must have handled that really well."

"It was too late to ask him if I could ask you to marry me before I asked you so I just asked him if I could marry you and he said yes."

"He had better say that. They have been praying that we'd get married. I haven't told you that before."

"He told me they had. It really made me feel good. He said the father of the bride should pay for the wedding, but I told him I had read that couples our age should pay for their own weddings. He wanted to know where I had read that, so I said it was in the book I am writing."

"I'm glad you said that. I haven't finished paying off their school loan to me."

"I asked them to give us a list of the guests they would want. What did your mother say about your ring?"

"She was so excited. I had to describe it in detail for her. She can't wait to see it in the video. I didn't say anything about the photos that they could pick up for Christmas."

"I didn't either. That will make a nice gift and surprise for them. Your Dad is going to call the florist and have flowers sent to her at school today. He is certainly a sweet guy."

"That he is. The two of you make a great Father-Son team." She gave Keith a warm kiss.

"Mmmm, thank you."

"Keith, I hate to break this up, but I have a lot of cottages to inspect today. I don't know when Rudolph wants to leave, but I should be ready for him."

“Me too. Henri and I have a lot more to talk about and we haven’t seen the rest of the island yet.”

* * *

Rudolph and Scotty were sitting down to breakfast up at the lodge. “I had a breakfast basket sent to Judith and Keith’s cottage this morning so we shouldn’t wait for them to eat. How did you sleep last night?”

“I really like the cottages. The bed was perfect. How about you? I didn’t hear you snore last night.”

“That is because I don’t snore.”

“That could explain why I didn’t hear you,” Scotty laughed. “Thank you for letting me come on this trip with you.”

“I was going to ask for you, but Keith asked me first if you could come along. You have captured some outstanding footage, Scotty. Your skills in the use of natural lighting, your choice of camera angles, and your vision of what to shoot and when, are outstanding.”

“Thank you, but how could anyone not get great photos and video in a place this beautiful?”

“You have a wonder sense for getting it all perfect. Oh look, here comes the newly engaged couple. They are running up the hill and Judith is right behind Keith.”

“From my angle it looks like Judith is riding on Keith’s back. How he has all that strength and stamina, I will never know.”

Rudolph rose to greet them. “Good morning to you two. I won’t ask how well you slept or even if you did sleep. I will just ask how you are this morning.”

“Fine, thank you. Do we have you to thank for the wonderful fruit basket and the bump on Keith’s head?”

“Oh dear, what happened?”

Judith told them and they all had a good laugh at Keith’s expense.

Keith countered by saying he was fine now and they were both ready to finish their inspections today.

“Great timing. I will call for the sea plane to pick us up tomorrow after breakfast. We will be back to the ship about dusk.”

“I still have my whistle with the embedded locating device in it. I will head out now to finish the cottage inspections. Everything has been exceptional so far.” She gave Keith’s hand a squeeze. “I should be finished by midafternoon, Honey. Don’t let Henri drive you off any cliffs today.”

“I will stay safe, thank you. I’ll see you later Sweetheart.” The others raised their eyebrows when hearing the new pet names they had for each other. “Scotty, have you finished your breakfast?”

“I will be ready as soon as I finish my orange juice. Climb in Henri’s souped up police car and I will be joining you in a moment.” He nearly sloshed his juice down and had to wipe his mouth with his arm. “OK, let’s go.”

Haunted?

Monsieur told Mr. Sterling, "Your employees are certainly eager to do anything for you."

"Yes they are; they are all like this. I believe it is a combination of hiring exceptional people and then treating them as you would like to be treated yourself. I also have a profit sharing plan for all of my employees. It gives them a sense of being responsible for the success of their company. If I purchase this island, I have the option of asking all of you to continue working here for me. You would all be included in my profit sharing plan in that case. This may seem strange that I would tell you this. However, I am sharing this with you because I want you to show us both the positive and the negative aspects of making this purchase. If all I hear is good, I will have a tendency to suspect that there must be something negative that your people are hiding from me and I could choose to walk away from this. So, please. There must be something negative that I should know. I need the whole picture." He patted Monsieur on the shoulder. When I finish my breakfast, perhaps we could talk some more." Smiling, he turned to sit and finish his breakfast.

"Mr. Sterling, I assure you there is nothing concrete that we are hiding from you. There is, however, some talk of the island being haunted. None of the former guests here have seen it, nor hopefully have even heard about it. The legend says that this island was a favorite hiding place for several pirates. They hated each other and fought several battles here. Eventually one of them was killed. He was Davy Jones. That name has at times been associated with the evil ruler of the deepest part of the sea. The rumor goes on to say that he will someday come up out of his locker and carry off a pretty woman to be his bride down at the bottom of the sea. I have asked my employees and their families to never speak of this legend so that our guests would never be afraid of this nonsense. I have not hidden this from you; I have only failed to tell you until Henri shows Keith the location of his expected rise from the water. They will see it today on their travels."

"Can that place somehow be restricted to our guests by some natural topography?"

"Yes it can. It is fenced off, but Scotty will return with photos of it so you may decide how to handle it."

"Thank you for sharing this. Do you have any other unusual or negative comments?"

"Only the obvious. The nearest medical facility is two hours away by seaplane after it gets here. We do not have a helipad, but of course that could be constructed in conjunction with the dock that you said your Captain wants. We have a small medical office which serves our staff here on the island. You have a medical staff on your ship, but we would only be seeing your ship twice a month and real emergencies could come up that could not wait. That is why I built my own medical office. Also, we are well equipped to handle hurricanes here. We are much taller than most of the islands in this area so we are not affected by high seas or storm surges here. Our excellent deep-rooted vegetation here holds our hills together so we do not get mudslides. The main lodge does have a full basement that can be an excellent storm shelter for all of our people in the event of a major hurricane. I will show it to you when you have finished eating."

"Thank you Monsieur for your honesty and frankness. I look forward to the rest of the day here."

* * *

"See Henri, we got down to the shoreline just as fast by avoiding that death dive that you took us over yesterday."

"Yes, but it wasn't near as much fun. Yesterday, we went over half of the way around the island. We will head in the opposite direction today so we won't be retracing our route."

They drove along the shore of the western side of the island. It looked much the same as what they had seen the day before. Up ahead of them the western edge of the island didn't slope into the ocean as the rest of the island did. As they got nearer it looked more like the end of the island had been sheered right off. There was no beach at that place on the island.

"I will drive up as close as we can get so that you can get some shots at this angle. Scotty, don't walk in front of the UTV. It drops off very fast here. We try to keep people away from the danger here. Can you zoom in on where the rocks meet the ocean? There is an underwater cave there and if the wave action were greater today, you would be able to see more of the cave. We do not allow scuba divers access to this cave as its interior roof has had many rocks fall into the water there. If they fell on a diver, they could be very dangerous regardless of how deep the diver was. Climb back in and we will go back to where we can climb up the top of the rocks."

Scotty got in and was reviewing his shots to see how well the cave may be exposed in his shots. "I got some of the cave in a couple of the shots."

"Good. We will go back to where we can drive up to the top. This rock and its cave have a rumor of a ghost that haunts this end of the island."

"Ghost?" Keith asked. "What is the rumor?"

"This dates back to the 16th and 17th centuries when this area was rampant with pirates. A couple of pirate ships favored this island and its natural harbor. They both wanted exclusive use of the island and they fought over it. One of them eventually won out and the other was killed. The survivor of that battle captured the beautiful female companion of the killed pirate. It has been rumored ever since that the killed pirate is roaming the island and is looking for a beautiful female for himself. Normally he resides at the bottom of this drop-off in a large locker. His name was Davy Jones and thus the rumor of Davy Jones' Locker. That is the most popular rumor among the island's crew that lives near here. I have been told that two owners ago the rumor took on a slight twist to where Davy Jones returns every full moon and frequently seizes a female who is never seen again. We believe now that this more current version was told to keep intruders away from the island."

Keith said, "We have not heard this before. Does Mr. Sterling know of it?"

"Monsieur said he would tell him this morning and will add that I will show you the site and tell you the story. It is truly our opinion that this is only a story, but if it got out to our guests, we fear that there could be lives lost if inquisitive people got too close to the edge at the top of this cliff. We have it fenced off with a sign stating that this private area belongs to the families that work here and they should not be disturbed. The employees and their families have been instructed to never tell the story to any of the guests. Come, I will show you. We will have to walk from here as we do not want to leave a trail to this place with our UTV wheels."

They walked over some rough ground until they came to a high chain-link fence with a strand of barbed wire at the top. Every 50 feet along the fence was the sign that Henri had described. Off to the left and down the hill, some of the employee houses were visible.

"I can see some of your cameras and sensors in the trees. They must be wireless as there are no wires visible. It appears that this is your work." Keith observed.

"Yes, I designed this." He looked to make sure that Scotty was far enough away so as not to hear them. "It takes a professional to see the units. There is not enough sunlight coming through the trees to make them solar powered, but the batteries will last two years. Some of our maintenance people are natives of the area and they can climb these trees as fast as a lizard to change the batteries."

"I will look at Scotty's photos before they are published. I want to be sure that he is not exposing any of your cameras and sensors. There could be a reflection off a lens that he didn't notice when he was shooting the photo."

"Thank you, Keith. That is a good idea."

"If we have finished with the tours, I would like to see your office and work spaces. Scotty, there will not be any need to take photos in there. Perhaps you could catch up to Judith when we get back and you could get some photos of the interiors of the cottages and condos. Henri can tell you where she is so you could meet her."

"I did get some photos of our cottage this morning, but I would also like the condo configurations photographed."

"OK, let's head back. Climb in." Henri took them back to the main lodge.

* * *

After Scotty left them, Henri asked Keith to join him in his office.

Henri's security headquarters was all underground and it was attached to the hurricane shelter under the main lodge by a concrete tunnel. From the ground level it looked like it was going to be a new patio. Inside it looked like a basement in a home. There was a heat pump in a far corner that was pushing out cool air. Next to it the computers were being kept healthy in the cool, dry air. The work stations and several large monitors were along the left wall. Two technicians were watching the screens and making entries with their keyboards. Individual rooms along the right wall contained a kitchen, facilities and an office.

"This is my work space, Keith. Step inside." The far wall was lined with books and computer manuals. A temporary cot was on the left wall above a space to store spare parts and coils of cable. "I am working on converting our systems to fiber optics which are less affected by the wet conditions outside this room. I still have a ways to go before I can switch it over."

"Could you use a cable guy with networking experience?"

"I sure could, but they are hard to come by in this area. This area of the world still relies on wire and wireless."

"Judith put our system in before I joined the ship. We have three qualified people and we only need two for several months. I'll ask Rudolph if we can send one to you. Would that help?"

"That would be a blessing, thank you. I could have it all done before your cruises start coming in. Assuming that he will be purchasing the island."

"I hope he does, we are talking about having our wedding here in June."

"Congratulations, Keith! Monsieur told me this morning, but I wasn't sure it was for public knowledge yet."

"I called our Security Staff this morning, but otherwise it is not generally known yet. Word will spread quickly, though. I am afraid that we will be watched carefully by nearly all the crew. We are going to have a cabin set up as our home. Right now we have adjoining cabins and I will be resetting the locks on the doors between them so we can have some privacy together."

"Good move. It is hard to live in a fishbowl."

"Henri, do you have any family plans?"

"No, but I'm only 25 so there is time yet. I was interested in a couple of the Hollywood beauties that visited here regularly, but that's not really my style. They preferred the wild night life and I like the quiet beauty here."

"You didn't want to hire out as a security agent for a block of Beverly Hills homes?" Keith joked.

"Barf."

"Gotcha. I wouldn't like that either."

"Are you and Judith planning to have a family on a ship or is it too soon to talk about that?"

"No, we talked about that some time ago when we were planning children's programs for the guests on the ship. It came up again when we decided to allow families with children to sign on with us as crew members. We do not envision the ship becoming a floating daycare facility, but a few kids

permanently on the ship will delight the grandparent-types and the wealthy parents. We had already talked about our design needs for home-cabins.”

“Interesting. I can see where it could work out very nicely with home schooling. I read an article on a family that was living on a medical ship where their teenage kid didn’t even know where to go to mail a letter when they got back to the States. He just had never seen a mailbox before. Simple things like that may be missing from the experiences of a floating kid.”

“Ha! Floating kid. I like that. Thanks, we will keep that in mind. I am sure that their grandparents would like them to visit for the 21 days that we are at sea sometimes. That would help.”

“THEIR grandparents? How many children are you planning to have?”

“We haven’t discussed it yet. Let’s go back to talking about your systems here.”

“OK. I’ll put a demo on for you. Let me call one of my guys out there.” Henri spoke into his radio. “Bill, can you test your whistle for me. I’m showing our guests how we can locate people. Yeah, just once will be fine. Thank you.”

Almost immediately one of the monitors lit up with *Emergency Whistle Activated*. Under the notice were coordinates and a large-scale map of that portion of the island with an “X” on the specific location of the whistle blower. “Looks like Bill is servicing the cabin you stayed in last night. He is on foot between the front door of the cottage and his UTV. You can see that he is moving at a normal pace so he probably did not have a heart attack or fall down the hill. Jim, this is a test. Do not activate a rescue and let the medical team know it was a test. Thank you.”

Jim, who was monitoring the situation on the computer, acknowledged Henri’s information with a hand wave.

“This is very impressive, Henri.”

“Our guests here were sometimes old and feeble and I had to build in capabilities of getting a head’s up on their condition before our rescue teams even left for the rescue run. I had help from our medical team in its design.”

“Very nice job. Mr. Sterling will be pleased to know about it.”

“I call this the police headquarters, but we also monitor the drinking water, solar panels, propane tanks levels, and garbage disposal systems from here. We don’t want any surprises to pop up on us. We generate 120 volt 60 Hz here which is not standard for this area of the world, but since most of our guests are from the USA, we use a USA standard electrical system. The island is as green as we can be with our limited acreage. Nearly every light here is LED so we can conserve as much electricity as possible. Our radio batteries are all rechargeable, too. What will your ship do to our harbor in terms of pollution?”

“That’s a valid question. You would expect something so large to put out a lot of pollution. Mr. Sterling required his designers to limit or even halt the pollution from every system. He even planted mature trees on the ship to process some of the carbon dioxide from the people on the ship. Your harbor should be cleaner when the ship leaves than it was when the ship arrived. And all that is done without disturbing the salinity of the harbor’s water. It is a wonderful system.”

“Nice. I expected as much from what we have heard about him. By the way, my system here is protected from lightning strikes by multiple grounding wires running in several directions from the antennae to the ocean. NASA put that in to protect their equipment and they let us tie into it.”

“How is your computer virus protection?”

“I run redundant systems with multiple antivirus programs. Their databases are updated at least hourly. Every night the entire system is backed up both locally and off the island.”

Speaking of which, have you had any thoughts about my JONESY virus problem?”

“No, but let’s go through the basics. We were taught to look at the basics first. What did you see on the screen?”

“The word ‘JONESY’ in red capital letters that filled the screen.”

“What if it wasn’t a *word*?”

“Then they would be letters.”

“What font was it?”

“I don’t recall having seeing that font before. They were block letters without any serifs, but they had a slight reverse slant to them.”

“What if they were not letters; what would they be?”

“It could be a bunch of dots connected together that would represent letters to the eye.”

“Keith, you said that you asked Jeremy what the word was and Jeremy didn’t know. How would he have replied it was just a bunch of dots?”

“You may be onto something there. If the dots were generated at that moment, he wouldn’t have a name for that, but if the dots were generated previously and displayed when we saw ‘JONESY’ he would have told me the name of the file. I will check this out when I get back. Thanks, Henri! Do you have any thoughts on the meaning of the word ‘JONESY’?”

“No, but again back to the basics. What could these letters represent? Or taking them in groups of one, two, or three letters at a time could they mean anything?”

“Not to me, but I will bounce this idea off Judith, too.”

“Don’t think too hard about it. Keep your mind open. That’s when the strange non-logical answers will come to you that can take you to the solution to the virus.”

“Thanks. I’m changing the subject again. You will get used to that if we are able to work together. I am making the assumption that Mr. Sterling will purchase the island and hire the staff. How would you feel if we made some rotations in security personnel? I’m thinking that Ken, our assistant chief of security and a graduate of Professor Young’s school, might come here for a year to work with you. Then he could stay while you joined us on the Maxx as his temporary replacement for a year. Then you and he could trade back to where you were. You would still be able to come here with us twice on each month’s cruise. By doing this, you would both become much more valuable to Mr. Sterling. He is talking about building a fleet of these super-size luxury cruise ships. If you like the ship life there would be lots of future opportunities for you and Ken. Your thoughts?”

“Oh my God! That hit me like a ton of bricks. I absolutely love it here, but being on a cruise ship for a year would be a dream come true, too. How are Ken’s abilities?”

“He graduated second to me and I’ve known him for a long time. He is incredible. You two may have even run across each other in Platteville. I would want him to work here with you for a year so that your systems will run smoothly after you leave.”

“I always thought I should have a backup here. My guys can run the systems, but they don’t have the training to design any systems. Thank you, I would like to do that. I think your idea could work beautifully.”

“Henri, I don’t know how Ken would be at your death-defying leaps off of cliffs with your UTV though.”

“Would you do it again with me a few times then try it yourself?”

“I think so. I see what you mean. He could do that with your training. He has the same personality that you have. He would even suggest beautiful settings for the guests to make marriage proposals.”

“Did you like that? I didn’t even know you were going to propose to her. Well, I did kind of have an idea while I was watching the two of you together. It did work out well, didn’t it?”

“When Mr. Sterling called and said we had ten minutes to get ready to meet the taxi yesterday morning, I just made a quick dive into the back of a drawer and pulled out the ring. I had been wondering how I was going to find a perfect place to ask her. When he said we were going to a tropical island for a few days, I just said, *Thank you Lord.*”

“I wasn’t there, but I heard you were the perfect bachelor-down on your knee and all.”

“Henri, it was the most perfect setting. Thank you. We both thank you. I told Scotty that I might give her a ring and asked him to keep his camera rolling. Did you see the video he got?”

“Yes I did. It was very emotional. Scotty said you might use it in your advertising. Is Judith all right with that?”

“First of all we want to send it to her parents; I don’t have any parents. But she readily agreed that Scotty could edit it for a commercial. We don’t want close-ups of our faces to be in the commercial, but it could draw a lot of couples or potential couples to our cruises.”

“That ring was out of this world. I heard it was your mother’s.”

“That is another amazing story. I did not even know that it existed. I had never even seen it in any family photos. I was married before, but it didn’t work out and my wife left me. She didn’t know anything about the ring either. My aunt raised me, but she didn’t like my first wife so she hid the ring from me. When I left Platteville headed for the ship, she gave me the ring and told me to find a good wife this time. I was shocked, but I am sure glad it worked out this way.”

“Monsieur said it had belonged to the Shaw of Iran. He told me from a police protection viewpoint. He thought it must be worth many millions.”

“That’s what he told us, too.”

“You may be interested to know that for all of the expensive jewelry that was brought by guests to this island, every single piece left with the guest that brought it here. I was shocked to hear from our room service personnel that much of it was often left lying around in the open in their cottages. Sometimes they left jewelry out in the open for days at a time. We have a very honest bunch of employees here.”

“Where is the nearest pawn shop? Do you think that is why none of it was taken?”

“No! They are just honest and accustomed to working for the wealthy. If they really wanted to take anything of value, they could have worked a deal with some of the merchants and suppliers that supply us by boat. I am very proud of all of them and do not have anyone on my watch list.”

“That is really great news. I think we’re done here and I would like to report back to Mr. Sterling. Is he up stairs?”

“Unless he has a whistle I can’t locate him, but I am sure he is with Monsieur. Let’s see.”

Henri tapped a few keys on a keyboard and the screen came up with a map and his location marked on it. “They are up in his office. I can show you where that is, but I do not bother him when he is in there unless it is an emergency. It is just my policy.”

“OK, I can wait in the area for him. In the meantime I can write my report on my laptop for him.”

“Do you want to do that in here at a desk?”

“Sure why not. Can you let me know when he comes out of the office?”

More tapping on a keyboard. “Yes, I will let you know.”

“When you get in our computer room, you can just ask Jeremy to tell you without using a keyboard. He is pretty incredible.”

“I am anxious to see him. I’ll leave you alone so you can work. I will be in my office if you need me for anything. Don’t knock; just walk in.”

“Thanks Henri.”

Keith sat down and began typing. Henri hadn’t gotten to his office yet and he had already noticed that Keith’s fingers were a blur on the keyboard.

Henri made a telephone call to one of the workers on the island. “Jose, do you still have your collection and is it for sale? There is a man in my office that might be interested in purchasing it. No, I haven’t even mentioned it to him; I just thought of it. They will be leaving tomorrow so if you want to show it to him, you will have to do it today. Twenty minutes? Perfect. Come to my office.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later, a fifty year old native arrived at Henri's office carrying a wooden box. He knocked on Henri's door and was ushered in. "I see you brought your box."

"Yes, I decided to sell them after you called. I was just collecting them for no specific reason. Mister Jupiter wouldn't even let me show them to any of his guests."

"They are very beautiful. Have you decided on a price for them?"

"No, I don't even know what they are worth. Where is the guy that you were talking about?"

"His name is Keith and he is working on his laptop at the first desk out there. He is part of the team that flew in yesterday with their boss who might purchase the island and hire all of us, too."

"I almost wish you hadn't told me that. I don't want to interfere with the sale."

"Don't worry about that, Keith is a very cool guy. Very nice. Wait here. I will go get him."

Henri walked over to Keith.

"Is Mr. Sterling out of Monsieur's office?"

"No, but I have something to show you if you can come into my office."

"Sure." Keith got up and followed Henri.

"Keith, this is Jose. He is a native on this island and a member of our island crew. I asked him to come in and show you his collection of things he has found around here. I told him that you might be interested in purchasing them."

"You are being very secretive about it. What's up?"

"Jose, would you please show Keith your collection?" Jose opened the velvet lined box.

"Oh my God! Pearls? BLUE pearls? Where did you find them?"

"I used to dive for clams in my younger days. Some of them had grown blue pearls. I thought they were unusual so I kept them. I have no idea what they are worth, but my wife is gone now and we did not have any children that lived, so I have nobody to leave them to. Henri called me and said that perhaps you would like them."

"I didn't tell you, Jose, but Keith proposed to his girlfriend last night and gave her a blue diamond ring. I thought the blue in your pearls would match the diamond in her ring."

"That's what I was thinking as soon as I saw them." Keith tapped on his laptop. "It looks like the good ones like yours are exclusive to New Zealand. Did you really find them right off this island?"

"Yes. There are clams all around the island, but the blue pearls are only in the clams by the ah, ah cave."

"It is OK, Jose, he knows about it."

"The water is dangerous there so I only dove when the ocean was calm. I don't do it anymore."

"What do you want for them, Jose?"

"I really have no idea, Keith. I was hoping you would have some idea."

"OK, how about if I give you \$100 for each one now. Then I will take them to New York and have them appraised. I will send you a copy of the appraisal and pay you the difference between 120% of the appraisal and the \$100 each that I will give you today. Would that be fair enough?"

"I couldn't take that much from you. How about the difference between 50% of the appraisal and the \$100 now?"

"You are too kind, Jose. I added 20% to the appraised value for your efforts in collecting them and for the care that you took in your collecting. You have seventeen fairly large pearls here. Will you accept \$1700 in cash or a check?"

"I don't know. I have never had that much money."

"Do you have a bank account somewhere so I could wire the money to your account?"

"What do you think, Henri? I do have a bank account in Puerto Rico. Is it OK to give someone your bank account number?"

"I trust Keith completely, Jose. I already know a lot about him."

"If I could wire it to you then I would pay for any transfer fees and as soon as I got the appraisal, I would wire the rest."

Jose was silent for a while. They didn't know if he was reluctant to sell his collection or he was in shock about the money he would be getting.

"Jose, I am not insisting that you sell these to me. If you wish to keep them, I will never tell anyone that I saw them. My reason for wanting them is to have a necklace made of them for my fiancé's Christmas present."

"Oh, they would make a wonderful necklace. I want you to have them. I just think you have offered me too much money. They did not cost me anything. They were made by God. I just found them."

"Have you heard of people that go out into the mountains and look for gold and rare stones?"

"Yes, I see what you mean. Are you sure that you want to give me 20% over appraisal for them?"

"Yes I do. Judith is going to be thrilled. I will be paid back in kisses."

They all laughed.

Jose said, "Then it is settled. You may wait until you get the appraisal before you wire my bank account with the full amount. I will let Henri handle it, if you will, please. I also trust you, Keith, thank you so much. I hope you can find someone to make the necklace by Christmas."

"You have made a good bargain, Jose. I will be happy to handle your end of the transaction. Keith and I will be in frequent contact with each other because of our jobs and I will keep you informed. Keith, thank you from both Jose and me. You are indeed a good and trusted friend."

They all shook hands. Jose left with a bounce in his step.

"You certainly made him happy. I'm glad that I thought of his blue pearls. Making it in time for a Christmas present is a bit aggressive, but it is doable. As a fallback you could just give her the box of pearls with a note inside saying that they are for a necklace. She might even want a hand in choosing the setting."

"I would bet that Mr. Sterling knows someone that can do it. He is very handy like that."

They both laughed.

"They just left the office. We can go up now."

* * *

Up on the main floor, Mr. Sterling was just leaving Monsieur's office when Keith approached him. "Rudolph, I am ready with my recommendation whenever you wish to hear it. I have nearly finished writing it up."

"Judith just called me with the same message. Perhaps the three of us could meet in the library when she gets here. She said she would be here shortly. This is good timing as I have finished my inspections, too. I am anxious to hear what you two have come up with. Ah, I see her coming up the path now."

Keith went out to meet her. They kissed and she put her arm in his as they went into the lodge. Keith said, "Rudolph will meet with us now in the library. He said you were ready, too."

"Yes. I just love this place. I am so excited at its prospects for our cruises. I hope this turns out."

"Me too." He opened the door for Judith and they both went in.

"Come in and sit down. Do either of you want anything to drink? I can ask the kitchen if you do."

They both shook their heads, no.

"I would like to begin. My initial vote is positive and I will explain why I feel that way. But if either of you has a different vote, please let me know. Each of us took an important third of the

inspection and your opinions are critical to my final decision. Do not hesitate to have a different opinion. I do not want 'Yes' people on my staff; I want honest answers based on both factual evidence and opinions. Clear?"

They both replied, "Perfectly."

Rudolph led off with his findings and opinions. He said he was surprised at the efficiencies that were in place in the running of the island. Its maintenance and personnel costs were far below what he had expected.

Judith said that the cottages and condos were each in excellent repair and there was no evidence of vermin or other pests. She felt that the guest accommodations were up to the Maxx's level. Her vote was also a yes.

Keith reported that the security was first class and each of the personnel he had met was far superior to anything he had expected as well. He brought up his idea of having Ken rotate down here for a year of training then remaining here for a second year as the security chief while Henri rotated to the Maxx for a year. Both Rudolph and Judith liked that. He said his vote was a yes.

Judith said she wanted to bring up a subject that was critical to each of them.

Rudolph asked her to proceed.

"Rudolph, when you were here a few years ago, how did you arrive here?"

"By seaplane just as we did yesterday."

"And you stepped carefully off the seaplane onto the small dock without feeling that you had entered a world where the facilities were substandard?"

"Yes, I catch your drift. Please continue."

"I feel that a large, modern dock as Captain Perez has proposed is incongruous to the tropical island atmosphere that we currently have here. We do not have fancy floating docks at our other ports of call. There is no reason that we cannot use the same ship to shore, motor launch style of transportation to carry our guests from the Maxx to this island. The proposed dock, I feel is incompatible with the natural atmosphere of this island. I would rather have the Captain drop anchors in this harbor. It is likely that we will have several thousand people going ashore for a few days here instead of a few hundred in the other ports of call. You could shorten their transit time by bringing one or two of your older and smaller cruise ships here for that duty of moving our guests to and from the island. Keith, how would this change your security considerations?"

"Judith you have just heightened their island-experience. I like the smaller cruise ship-launch concept. Rather than having people walk directly onto an upper level of the island, they will be either walking up as we did or driven up by a fleet of UTVs. It will cause a minor ripple among the staff as they will need to have additional people temporarily assigned to chauffeuring duty. I think most of the people will do as you did, Rudolph, just walk up. I like it, but the Captain probably won't. I do not know what effect the anchors will have on the bottom, but I know exactly who would have that information. Henri introduced me to Jose, who used to dive these waters and search the bottom. He would have better information than oceanographers would."

"Excellent! Thank you so much for your valued opinions. I knew you would be the perfect people to help me with this decision. I didn't anticipate watching an emotional marriage proposal last night, but it proved to me the value of this island in our cruise plans. I loved every moment of it."

"So did we," they both chimed in.

"Do not advertise this to the island staff, but I will be calling my attorneys to have them move ahead with my purchase of the island. I will inform the staff as soon as I receive an accepted offer to purchase from Mr. Jupiter. I already have a verbal acceptance from him, but my attorneys want it in writing before they will let me confirm it with the staff. However, because I know how well you security people can keep secrets, you may inform Henri, because I don't want him getting nervous and accepting some other position somewhere else. He has a cloud of doubt hanging over his head and, as you have

mentioned, I do not want to lose him. We can celebrate when we get into my jet for the return trip, but for now we should not change the expressions on our faces. Thank you again for your valued reports.”

“I’ll go tell Henri,” Keith said. “When I get back, do you want to go for a relaxing swim?” He smiled at Judith.

“That would be wonderful.”

Keith smiled and said he would only be a few minutes. Then he went back down to Henri’s office.

He knocked on Henri’s office door.

“Didn’t I tell you that you don’t have to knock, just come in?”

“Did I leave my iPhone in here?”

“Come in and close the door. Your iPhone is in your pocket. What’s up?”

“We are not to tell anyone, but Mr. Sterling is calling his attorneys to complete the deal for him to purchase this island and hire all of the current employees. He and Judith like the idea for you and Ken to rotate your positions. I told him that whatever he did, I did not want him to lose you. That is why he let me tell you now, before the deal is done. So if this deal should fall through for any reason, he wants you to work for him. There is one more thing, what is your current salary?”

“That is such good news, Keith. I couldn’t care what my salary was. Just to have a job with Mr. Sterling and to have you for a friend is more than I could wish for.”

“Well? What is your salary?”

“I make just over 50k.”

“You’d better sit down.” Keith waited for him to sit down. “You will start as an Assistant Chief of Security with a salary just under six figures. Wait, there’s more. When the Maxx sets sail, everyone’s salary doubles. Plus…”

“You mean there is more?”

“Plus there are gifts, surprise awards and up to a 40% annual bonus on your salary. OK, now I’m done.”

Henri just sat there stunned. His mouth was open as if he wanted to say something, but all he could do was to shake his head in disbelief.

“When you come out of your coma, would you let me know if you want to join us?” Keith reached over to grab his hand and lift him up. Instead of shaking his hand, Keith gave him a hug.

“Welcome aboard, friend.”

“Thank you is all I can think of, but it is so small considering my enormous gratitude. I am speechless. When I first saw you getting out of the seaplane, I liked you right away.”

“Are you sure you’re not talking about Judith?”

“Oh, I liked her instantly, too, she is beautiful. But it was obvious when you picked her up and set her on the dock that she only had eyes for you. Like I said, I thought you were special when I first saw you, but then you let me know that you two were both graduates from the same security school as I was. That gave me a connection to both of you that was very special.”

“I don’t know what there is about me, but both you and Judith tried to kill me when we first met.”

“Sorry about the suicide leap with the UTV, but what is this about Judith?”

“I boldly walked into a secure place before I was invited. All I heard was ‘STOP AND RAISE YOUR HANDS!’ and there was a beautiful woman crouched in a shooting position yelling at me. I was scared and she wasn’t happy. But it has all been good since then. That is not generally known by the way.”

“That is too funny. Maybe when we went flying I should have yelled out, ‘It’s OK. You will survive!’ or something like that.”

“You were fine just the way it was—even the second time with Scotty’s camera running. Well anyhow I am glad you are joining us. I assume you will report directly to Mr. Sterling while you are here, but you will report to both Judith and me when you are on the Maxx. We have two other assistant chiefs of security in addition to Ken. They are both DEA agents whose primary responsibility is to block any illegal drug traffic carried into the Maxx by guests or crew. The three assistants stand 8-hour watches with Jeremy. Judith and I can be backups when needed. She is the chief of guest relations with an expert staff that does most of the work. My visible job is the head of marketing and Scotty doesn’t even know about my security job. Like it so far?”

“Sounds like you have a fantastic set up with your Jeremy and the people that can interact with him.”

“The thing that only the assistants know and that includes you now, is that Judith and I actually run everything on the ship except the navigation that the Captain runs with his staff. He may think that he is in control of everything, but bit by bit he will discover that his control is very limited. In fact if I want or need to, I can do all of the navigation through Jeremy. Every signal the Captain sends to the engine room goes through Jeremy and he will be learning everything that the Captain does. If I take control, all of the Captain’s signals will go into the ether. Jeremy and I will send all of the messages to the engine room. Basically I don’t like the Captain and I don’t trust him. He has a really bad attitude, but he has great credentials so Mr. Sterling hired him and his team. I can even lock him in his cabin. He doesn’t know it, but he will have to earn my respect. It is just not there yet.”

“Wow, it is a good thing that we are friends.”

“I just wanted to let you know the tremendous responsibility Judith and I have for nearly ten thousand people. Our three shipboard assistants are just that. They can take over for us whenever necessary and that is what you will be doing when we rotate you up there after you train Ken in the island’s operation. Are you still interested?”

“You bet. Professor Young trained us all to be up to any challenge.”

“Good. Judith and I are going to go down for a relaxing swim now. There aren’t any sharks out there, right?”

“No, in fact there should be a lot of dolphins out there right now. They are friendly and may swim right up to you. If they nudge you, just make a circle with your arms and they might swim right into your arms. Then you should hang on and they will take you for a ride. They will stay at the surface so you can breathe. They might even take you and Judith on a race between the two of you.”

“What treats should we give them?”

“Nothing, they just really enjoy the human interaction. I hope they show off for you today. They will be there, but we just never know when they will interact with us. Maybe they make character judgments first. In that case, I know they will be your buddies. Have fun. Is it OK if I go down there to watch or do you both just want to be alone?”

“Come on along. Bring Scotty and his camera if you see him. If we want to be alone we can go into the cottage.” Keith said with a wink.

Dolphins

Judith was waiting when Keith came up the stairs. "Are you ready for a swim now, Honey?"

"You bet. Henri said we might be swimming with the dolphins today. That should be a new and exciting experience. Is it OK that I invited him and Scotty to watch?"

"Of course."

They went down the hill to their cottage holding hands. They stopped to kiss several times along the way. "Wow," Keith said. "No inspections for us to do for the rest of the day. We will have the water to ourselves."

"And the dolphins," Judith added.

They went in and into separate bedrooms to change into their swim suits. Keith kept wondering what she would look like in a sleek swim suit. He was changed into his swim suit when she came out. But he wasn't ready to see her in a floral pattern bikini. "Wow, you are beautiful! Maybe we should just stay in here alone together."

"Come on, silly. Our dolphins are waiting for us. We will have the whole night together, if you want."

"Oh boy, do I."

The wind was calm and the ocean was about as still as an ocean ever gets. Judith could see a lot of activity in the water. "Are you sure that is not just a lot of sharks out there? I can see fins."

"Henri said the sharks are afraid of dolphins and that there would be a lot of dolphins here at this time today. Let's go see if they are friendly. Henri is almost here to watch and he brought Scotty with his camera."

"Well if we get eaten by sharks at least Scotty will get it on his camera."

They went hand-in-hand into the water until they were waist deep.

"Judith, there is one right behind you. Look, it is beautiful. The back is brown-gray, but then the lower sides are cream colored. If it bumps you, it wants you to make a ring with your arms. Then if it swims into your arms just hang on and it will swim with you. Yea, like that. OK now tighten your grip and hang on." This Fraser's dolphin had a pink belly and it was shorter than Judith so its tail kept beating against her legs. While Keith was keeping a sharp eye on her a very large dolphin with a white belly bumped into him. Keith hung on while the larger one sped off in Judith's direction and they were soon side by side.

* * *

Henri shouted, "Scotty, were you ready for that? Are you getting this? I think they are about to have a race. Keith's dolphin is much larger, but Keith is much heavier so they may be pretty well matched up. They are making a turn to come back now. Watch this! Look at them go. Keith is ahead, but Judith is gaining on him. I forgot to tell him that when they get to their imaginary finish line, they will turn so sharply that neither one of them will be able to hang on. Get ready. Wow. It was a dead heat and they both rolled off. Look at the dolphins celebrating by dancing on their tails. They really loved Judith and Keith."

When the two came up for air, Judith was coughing. Keith was still laughing. She said, "Another yard and we would have passed you up, slow poke."

"That was so much fun. Look at them celebrating. Here come two different ones. Are you ready?"

"Maybe if I did a dolphin kick in rhythm with my dolphin we can beat you this time."

"Get ready. Here they come."

Scotty moved down the hill to get closer to the water so he could get better shots. He felt it was just as exciting watching as it was to be out there, because he didn't have all the water in his face and he could see better.

The dolphins kept this up for round after round until it seemed like each one had a turn with the humans. The larger dolphins seemed to prefer Keith as their partner for the race and the smaller ones headed for Judith. The humans wondered how the choice was made. Perhaps there was a judging committee out there making the assignments. Then the largest dolphin took Keith on a solo ride as if to say that he had won. When Keith least expected it, they made a sharp dive down for 15 feet and when Keith thought his ears would burst they turned and sped up so fast that he could hardly hang on. They broke the surface of the water shot up another 15 to 20 feet and then it shook Keith off so that they would land in different places in the water. Keith maneuvered into a perfect swan dive and entered smoothly. The dolphin hit the water smoothly as well, but it immediately looked for Keith and pushed him up so that he looked like he was a cork bobbing up out of the water. The dolphin put its nose to the bottoms of his feet and sped him to shore like he was on a jet ski. When he reached Judith, all the dolphins seemed to be putting on a show of jumping and tail walking. Then they just ignored Judith and Keith for the rest of the time they were in the water.

Keith quietly told Judith, "I was afraid that my swim suit was going to end up down around the dolphin's fluke. I'm glad that I pulled the draw string tight when I put it on."

"That certainly would have made Scotty's video interesting."

They both laughed.

Henri and Scotty ran down to the water. "That was just awesome. I told you they might play with you, but they obviously had a super good time with you today. I have never seen them play so much with anyone. They all looked like escapees from Sea World®. That last dolphin looked like it might be the leader of the pod. It had a lot of body scars from defending its leadership position. So you have been entertained by the king of the pod."

Scotty was reviewing his video in his viewfinder. It was too bright out to see it very well on its display. "This is awesome, especially the races between you two. There are some extremely good shots in here for a commercial. I don't think anyone will believe your high diving with a dolphin, but if a photo of that gets out among the crew of the Maxx, they will be calling you 'Sea World Keith' and somebody might change your badge to read 'Keith; Plays with dolphins.' That would have our guests wondering if you would be putting on a performance for them during the cruise."

Judith said, "We wouldn't want them to think that. I would like a photo of it to send to my parents, though. They already think Keith is the greatest; this would just prove it."

Keith hugged her. "It was definitely an experience that I will never forget. I have seen them leaping into the air with people on TV, but isn't that with killer whales and not dolphins?"

Judith said, "If it was with dolphins, they never went that high, that I've seen."

"He took me down until my ears were about to explode and then we shot up so fast that I wondered if I would get the bends. He was really working his flipper hard when we were going up. I wonder how high he could have gone if I wasn't such a drag on him? When he shook me off, it looked like we were pretty high up."

"Well it was a higher dive than the one I took you on with my UTV."

"And it was softer landing in the water, too."

They all laughed.

Judith said, "Let's see now. On this trip you have flown in a jet, a seaplane, an UTV and on a dolphin. Two days ago, if I had told you that you would be doing that, you wouldn't have believed me."

"You forgot another flight."

"What's that?"

"You have sent my heart soaring, too."

Judith jumped into his arms and they kissed.
Scotty said, "I think it is time for us to leave, Henri."

* * *

The next day came early. Judith and Keith were up, dressed and packed up for their flights back to New York. Keith carried her and their luggage up the hill to the main lodge for a final team breakfast with Monsieur and Henri. After breakfast, Mr. Sterling told them that his attorneys had already made significant progress on the sale so that it might even be completed by Christmas.

Monsieur signaled to the waiter to bring them some wine for a toast. He toasted to a long and wonderful relationship and to everyone's health.

None of the three security people drank any alcoholic beverages, but they all took short sips so as not to offend anyone. There were handshakes all around as they heard the seaplane approaching. Keith quietly told Henri that they would be in touch and assured him that he would email an appraisal as soon he got back.

Keith was glad that he didn't have to declare the blue pearls when they went through customs in Charleston. He didn't want Judith to know anything about them yet. They sat next to each other on both flights enjoying the warmth of each other's touch.

Rudolph said, "I never expected our little trip to end up with an engagement, but I like it. How are your Christmas plans coming along, Judith?"

"Right on schedule. I've been in contact with Guest Services and the ship's exterior is decorated with lights and we have a Christmas tree on the fo'c'sle. The inside is decorated as well. The presents you authorized should be there by the time we arrive. Our personal communication radios should finally be there, too. I will have Jeremy make gummed envelope and package labels from our passenger list for our displaced folks and crew. The entertainment is on schedule. We should be all set."

"Excellent. You have everything covered as usual." He settled in reading his new business magazines that the pilots had put into his magazine pocket.

Scotty was busy reviewing all of his video and photos. He made careful notes regarding which scenes would need editing and which would be cut out when he got back to his computer. He was not even finished by the time they began their approach to Newark. He would still have many more hours of footage to examine when he got back to the ship. At least he would get a lot of help from the others that had stayed behind. His first project would be the proposal footage that Judith wanted for her parents.

Keith woke Judith up as they neared New York City. The pilot had said that he had permission from the flight controllers to fly near the Maxx so they could see the decorations from the air. Scotty quickly set his camera to take additional footage as they flew past the ship. Its colored Christmas lights were on.

"Judith, it is beautiful!" Rudolph exclaimed.

Christmas

On the ship, there was a different opinion. "Who put that tree on my fo'c'sle? People will think we are hauling logs instead of people. Get it off immediately!" Captain Perez was screaming.

The guest services director, Sharon, was trying to calm him down. "Captain, it is a Christmas tree and Judith directed that it be placed there. She will be here in just a few minutes. You can speak with her then. In the meantime, the tree stays where it is. It is a Christian decoration for the upcoming Christian celebration."

"This is my ship and I am not a Christian. I will not tolerate it degrading my ship. Get it off or I will take it off myself. Do you understand me?" He was screaming at Sharon.

She immediately called David Jones and told him she needed help. She also called Judith just as she was getting out of the jet at the airport.

David called a security detail to meet him at Sharon's office. David and a dozen other security personnel came towards the Captain from all angles. "Captain Perez, I am the chief of security on this ship and you appear to be causing a disturbance. Please settle down and explain your problem calmly."

"You are just one of my subordinates. I am the Captain of this ship. This young lady is not bowing to my authority. I want that ugly tree removed from my fo'c'sle immediately."

"And does the tree interfere with your navigational ability while we are sitting in this harbor for another four months, sir?"

"It has nothing to do with navigation. It is a religious symbol that is abhorrent to my beliefs. It must go."

"I am sorry, Captain, but the range of your duties and responsibilities do not include decorations in or on the ship. I am sorry about your disagreement with our religious symbols, but it is out of your area of responsibility. And I might add that I do not report in any way to you, sir. Your assignment to this ship is exclusively for the purposes of navigation, which I have heard you are excellent at. Now, if you will just quietly go back to your quarters, sir, we can get back to business as usual. In the future, please address any of your non-navigational concerns to Judith Overstreet, only. Thank you, sir."

Perez was ready to continue his tirade but he saw that he was surrounded by large men with handcuffs protruding from their belts. He grumbled, "You bet I will talk to her." Then he left to go back to his quarters.

Sharon said, "Thank you, David. He was getting louder and louder."

"Did he touch you at all?"

"No, I called you before it got to that level."

"Thanks, you did the right thing. Call me if he comes back, whether or not he says anything.

OK?"

"I will. Thank you."

"Judith will be here shortly. I will wait here and go over this with her."

* * *

Judith, Keith and Scotty arrived in just a few minutes. The security guard at the door told her that David wanted to see her right away at Sharon's office.

Keith said to Judith, "I will go with you. I still don't like Captain Perez."

They went up to Sharon's office and saw David waiting there for Judith.

"Welcome back, Judith and Keith. I stepped in to stop our Captain from yelling at Sharon for having a Christmas tree on the fo'c'sle. He said he wasn't a Christian and he didn't want that symbol on HIS ship. He said he would be talking to you about it."

"Did he want me to call him?"

"No, just that he would be talking to you."

"Let's just let him cool off first. Sharon, are you OK?"

"I'm fine. I have dealt with irate customers before. If you are honest with them, they usually just melt into pussy cats, eventually."

Keith said, "I don't see much chance of Captain Perez becoming much less than a mean ole alley cat. I'm on the security team too, so I will help keep an eye on him, Sharon."

"Thank you. OHH, what is that on your finger, Judith? It is beautiful. Who? Keith?"

"Yes, thank you. Keith proposed yesterday with his mother's engagement ring. Isn't it beautiful?"

"I have never seen anything like it. A huge blue diamond with white diamonds around it. Congratulations, Judith. And best wishes to you, Keith. Have you guys had time to set a wedding date yet?"

"It will be at some point on our June cruise, when my parents can join us."

"So we will get to see it! What a wonderful idea. Keith can get out the message in our advertising and we should have a packed house on that trip. Is that what you two were up to while you were away? Coming up with advertising ideas?"

"Not exactly. We will have to talk about that later."

David went over to look at Judith's ring. "Do you have that insured, Keith? If not, go out tomorrow and get it insured. Congratulations to you both. You certainly even look like you are in love."

Keith said, "Thank you both. We will have it insured. My parents were killed in an auto accident when I was one. The ring was my mother's engagement ring and I only just recently learned of its existence and I wanted Judith to have it. We are both very happy. We are going to our cabins so we can unpack and get something to eat. All we have had since breakfast is a sandwich and my stomach is growling. Good job on the crabby captain, chief."

Judith added, "Sharon, you have the ship looking very festive and beautiful. I will call Mr. Sterling to come and look at it. Thank you for all of your beautiful work."

"Thank you, Judith. It was a team effort as you know. I will tell the others that you like it."

As Keith started to walk away, Judith joined him. She said, "I am glad they didn't ask where we were the last couple of days. I hope Rudolph can wrap up the island purchase soon. Should we come up with a name for the island or do you think he has one already?"

"I am guessing that the name would have to be on the sale documents, but we can suggest something else that we could call it that wouldn't have to be its official name. Any ideas yet?"

"No, but we can work on it. How long will it take you to fix the locks between our rooms?"

"It sounds like you are as anxious as I am to have some private time together without prying eyes watching us. Those locks are not a Jeremy function, but probably just an electrical function so I can temporarily disable it in a few minutes. Michael swims at 5 in the morning for 15 minutes. I am in there first so I can shut your door when I go in. I don't want any embarrassment between you two."

"Does he swim in the nude?"

"No, neither of us does, but he would still be embarrassed if you walked in unexpectedly."

"Jodi, too. She would be shocked if she walked into my cabin, went into the swim tank room to clean up, and found the door to your cabin was open. I think we should just tell both of them."

"When we have our own family cabin, which steward should we use?"

"I would feel more comfortable with Jodi handling my female clothing. Why don't you use your present cabin as your exercise room for you and Michael? You two could even have your healthy

breakfast together in there so that he can reach his weight goal with your supervision. He can still clean that room and stock it with your foods. I get up about the time that you finish so you could come back here to get dressed for the day.”

“Sure, that should work out. I’ll tell him. I wonder if he kept to his workout schedule while we were gone. It has only been two nights so he wouldn’t have done that much damage if he didn’t. I’m betting that he did exercise though. I just don’t think that he made himself a health drink. I’ve been making those each morning.”

They were just reaching the CCC. They stopped to kiss before they went in. “Honey, I’m going to go up and put my things away and freshen up after the trip.”

“Me, too. I wonder if there will be a dolphin in our swim tank.”

“Oh, wasn’t that wonderful yesterday? They were so much fun. Judith and Keith coming in.”

Tom said, “Hi guys. Did you have a good flight? What did Rudolph decide about the island? Oh my God, Judith, would you look at that ring! Keith, you have a smile, too. You didn’t tell us that you were going to propose. Congratulations!”

“Well, we had to have part of our trip as a surprise for you. Keith got down on one knee at the beach and proposed to me the first day. We did work a lot, but we also had a wonderful time.”

“I can see that by your smiles. Do you have a wedding date set?”

“It will be during our June cruise so my parents can be here with us. The specific date and details haven’t even been talked about yet. Scotty has a video of his proposal that we will show to you, Bill, and Ken plus a few others.”

“I can’t wait to see it. What did Rudolph decide; you didn’t tell me?”

“It is a beautiful island with wonderful accommodations. Rudolph has his attorneys working on it. At the last report, it was moving ahead smoothly.”

Keith added, “One really nice surprise for us was the island’s head of security has his doctorate from the same school we graduated from. He is very good at his job. His name is Henri and he is a native of Puerto Rico. All of the island personnel will automatically be hired under an option in the purchase contract. Henri will be an Assistant Chief of Security. Judith is reworking the cruise so that the island will be a port of call both on the way down and on the way back. A guest may, for an additional fee, spend two nights on the island on either the outbound or the inbound route. It can accommodate just over 50% of our passengers while the others remain on the ship in the harbor. Repeat guests may opt to stay on the island between those two ports of call. That would require a significantly greater fee than if they stayed on the ship for the entire time. The island has both cottages and condos. The cuisine on the island is French. Judith and I even got to swim and play with Fraser’s dolphins.”

“That was so much fun. The larger dolphins would choose Keith and the smaller ones would choose me and they raced in a loop with us on their backs. We beat Keith and his dolphins several times. It was like nothing that I have ever experienced before. Scotty got some great video of it.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing all about it. Let me know when I can set up a meeting so we can all see it.”

“OK, let’s wait until Scotty is ready; then I’ll let you know. We’re going up to unpack and freshen up. Well I need to freshen up at least, Judith is always beautiful.”

She kissed him and they both went up the stairs to their cabins.

It seemed to Tom that they had just gone in when Keith came back out and ran down the stairs and into his lab next to the kitchen. He was in there for only a moment before he came back out with a small tool kit and ran back up and into his cabin.

* * *

Keith made the door locking changes to his swim tank door then he closed it and called Judith's phone. "Sweetheart, open your swim tank door then walk through and open my door. I'll fix your door lock then."

"Wow, already? Wonderful, here I come." Judith walked into the swim tank room and closed her door behind her then she walked into Keith's room. "That was fun. I've wanted to do that for a long time."

Keith put his arm around her and led her to his bed. They sat down and kissed. "Well we seem to have a problem."

"I thought you had fixed your door."

"I did."

"Then what is the problem?"

"Well, I need to fix your door lock from your side of the door and you closed it behind you."

Judith slapped her hand to her mouth. "Oh no. I can't very well go out your door and back into my room can I. Yes, I think we seem to have a problem. What can we do?"

"Let's just stay where we are for a while, I like having you here." He kissed her again. "Remember when you first showed me this room and I asked you if my bed was so big so that you could join me in it?"

"I think you asked ON it not IN it."

"So I did. I was already interested in you and I hadn't known you for even an hour. I am glad that I followed my heart. You have made me very happy."

She dove onto him and smothered him with kisses.

When she sat back up again, she said she knew what they could do.

"More kissing, I hope?"

"No silly, I will go out your door on this deck and walk around to enter my cabin from this deck. Then I can try again and leave my door open this time. That way, Tom will not have seen me leaving your room to go into mine."

"That should work. Better check yourself in my mirror to see if I messed you up at all before you go out. Hurry back."

She left looking very lady like. Keith thought, *"I'm glad she came up with that. Maybe she was reading my mind again. If I had given her the suggestion, we would have missed out on all those kisses."*

He met her as she opened the swim tank door with his tool kit in his hand. A few swift moves inside the wall plate on her side and now both doors were permanently unlocked so either of them could move in either direction through the doors. "There, that is better for both of us now. I just need to do one more thing." He set his tool box down on the floor.

"What is that?" She no more than got the words out of her mouth when Keith picked her up and set her down on her bed.

"We need to kiss on top of your bed this time."

When they came up for air, Judith asked. "Should we have Jodi bring up supper for us? I think we should try to not be seen together until we can explain the island trip. I will tell Jodi and you should tell Michael right away. We can work out times that they can be in here with both doors closed."

"Let's meet them both in the secure conference room first, before we order dinner. They should both be relatively free now unless they are eating. I'll call Michael to see if he can be there in 30 minutes. I will also see how much of our trip Scotty can email to me by then."

* * *

Keith greeted their two stewards as they entered the conference room. "Hi, guys. We have some exciting news for you. Some of it is public, but some of it is private. Did you notice anything when you came in here?"

Jodi burst out, "Oh, Judith. I heard you had a rock on your hand, may we see it please? Oh, it is beautiful. This must be worth a million dollars. What a beautiful setting. Tell us, tell us."

Michael said, "Keith, you are one lucky guy. Judith is such a wonderful lady. I am so happy for both of you."

"Keith gave me this while we were on our little outing, but that is the private part of our news. Mr. Sterling took us to a private tropical island southeast of Puerto Rico that he wanted us to investigate before he decided to purchase it. If the deal goes through, and that is why it must be private until the deal is sealed, it will be on our cruise route. We will stop there for a few days on our outbound leg and again on our inbound leg. Over half of our ship's capacity may choose to stay on the island for two nights on either leg. It is about 300 acres and incredibly beautiful. Here is a video that Scotty took. I must say that I knew that the first part was a setup between the guys, but neither Scotty nor I knew what Keith had in mind for the second part. Watch and you will see what I mean. By the way, we have not seen this yet, either."

Scotty's video began with Judith being entertained by the baby sea turtles. They heard Michael and Jodi saying how cute they thought the turtles were and how beautiful Judith looked. They laughed at Keith's dejected look while he tossed stones. When he put his hands into the pockets of his white beachcombers, Michael shouted. "Look, he's got the ring box in his pocket."

Keith said, "I didn't notice that. Scotty should blank that out. Thanks for noticing."

When they ran to each other and Keith picked up Judith, Jodi thought that was very sweet. Michael thought it was sexy. They both exploded after Keith proposed and slipped the ring on Judith's finger. After the scene with Keith carrying her into the cottage, both Jodi and Michael were both speechless.

"What's wrong? Is it too suggestive for a commercial?" Keith asked.

"Oh. A commercial. Why didn't you say so? It is perfect for a commercial. It is just because we know you both that we didn't know how to respond to seeing you both heading for a cottage and presumably a bedroom."

Judith gasped, "Oh, I see what you mean. We were just caught up in the moment and didn't think about that. That means that we should leave the walk to the cottage part out of the video clip that we send to my parents."

"Or Judith's father may show up on the ship the next day with a shotgun," Michael suggested. They all laughed at that thought.

Keith said that they might all enjoy a video of Keith's ride on an UTV. He also told them the driver was the island's security chief. They enjoyed the twists and turns through the woods then the leap off the cliff with Keith's screaming. They all laughed at that, even Keith thought it was funny now.

Judith said, "That was the private part, except that I am engaged. I do not want to tell anyone about the island until it is confirmed. We will be showing these videos to the assistant chiefs of security, but nobody else. This next bit of information is ONLY for you two."

Michael and Jodi looked at each other wondering what was coming next.

"Keith, at my request, has removed the locking system from our doors to the swim tank room. We want some private time with each other without walking out one door and in the other under the eyes of anyone in CCC. With the locks disabled, we can just walk between our cabins. We plan to have an extra desk brought into each cabin so we can work together in either cabin. Michael, I know that you and Keith work out together each morning from 4 to 5 and I do not want you to change that. We will just close the two swim doors and I will not go in there until I know that you have left. We did not want either of you to be embarrassed if you saw that both doors were open."

"Michael, don't just walk into my room at 0400 without knocking anymore. This is just in case Judith and I just happen to have fallen asleep on my bed. I wouldn't want either Judith or you to be embarrassed by what you wouldn't see. OK?"

"Thanks, I was going to ask about that."

"You didn't think I was going to let you stop exercising, did you?" Judith asked.

"Well, you know."

"I want you two boys to do what you do each morning. We will move into a separate cabin together after we are married and we will work out a schedule so you can continue to do your exercising and swimming. And Jodi, I am exercising daily, too. Would you like to begin working out with me like they do?"

"If you let me start slow, I would like that."

"OK, we can talk about that later. We will have to make sure we know Michael's schedule so there are no whoops experiences."

Keith said, "Thank you both for being such an important part of our lives. That is another reason we wanted to share this with you. I think we are done here unless you have any questions. Judith and I would like a quiet dinner together in her room. Could one or both of you please bring us dinners? You already know what we like. Bring them in on the 14th deck so nobody from CCC sees two dinners going into one room."

Michael said, "Thank you for sharing this with us. We both think so highly of the two of you. We have been watching the bond between you grow and strengthen and we have just been waiting for the day that you would also recognize it and announce your intentions to each other. We will be here for you whenever you need us. Come on Jodi, let's go get them some dinner."

"Jodi, Michael, thank you for all of your support," Judith said with a smile.

The stewards left and after a brief pause, first Judith then Keith went up to their cabins. When Keith closed his door behind him, he noticed Judith was lying on his bed. "Ooh, I like this arrangement very much!"

* * *

After dinner, Scotty called Keith to say that he had completed the video for Judith's parents and he was sending it to Keith's laptop. They called the Overstreet's and sent the video to them. After they had all watched it together, her parents couldn't stop talking about it.

"Oh Honey, that was so beautiful. Keith, you are so handsome. All we have of you is a couple of photos from Judith's phone that we had to ask her for. You make such a beautiful couple. We couldn't be prouder of you both." Vera kept up the conversation until Edward had to ask her if he could talk to the couple.

"I agree with everything your mother just said, but I just wanted to get a few words in. Keith, Judith's engagement ring that you got from your mother is incredibly beautiful. You had told us that it was a blue diamond, but it is huge!"

Keith interrupted, "We are getting it appraised tomorrow so that we can get it insured. We have also been told to have a glass copy made of it for everyday wear."

"You took the words out of my mouth, son. You have also told us that you didn't have any information on who your parents were. Doesn't that seem odd?"

"Dad!"

"It is OK, Sweetheart. He can ask me anything he wants to. I don't have any problem with that. Dad, until I saw the ring myself, I didn't have any reason to wonder about them. My Aunt Jean told me that her parents, who would also be my mother's parents, had died before I was born. All I had were photos to look at. They lived on a small farm and didn't appear to have a lot of money. My dad grew up in a small town, or at least that is what I had been told. There were no photos of his side of the family and besides them being called Grandma and Grandpa, I never heard their real names. They had passed away before I was born, too. My only family was my Aunt Jean. I should do some genealogy research someday."

"That is something that I've been interested in for some time now. Would you mind if I did some research for you?"

"Dad that would be exciting. We really are very busy here although it may not seem that way to others. If you are able to find more about my history, perhaps we would learn more about her ring. That could be interesting. So please go ahead if you are able."

"Yes, thanks, Dad."

"I just don't want either of you to think that I am prying or trying to dig up some dirt about your ring. I love both of you and would never do anything to hurt either of you. If at any time, you want me to stop the investigation, just tell me and I will stop. No questions asked."

"Dad, I would like to know more about my family and the story of the ring. So, just go ahead and find out what you can. I have nothing to hide. On the contrary, you might dig up some interesting story."

"Yes, Dad. See what you can learn. We are anxious to see what you can find. Thank you for saving us the time that it would take to do it ourselves."

"My turn again. Honey, do you have a dress picked out or how can we help you find a dress?"

"Mom, are you suggesting that she can't marry me in a swim suit?"

"Keith! Tell my mother that you are kidding."

"Well, the wedding will be on a tropical island."

Edward was laughing so hard that they could hardly carry on a conversation. "Good one, Keith!"

"Sorry, Mom. That's just my silly personality kicking in."

"And here I had expected that a man with five college degrees wouldn't have any sense of humor."

"You are wrong on that one, Dad. Keith has a wonderful sense of humor. He is always joking around with me."

"And you heard that from a lady that pulled a gun on me and threatened to shoot me when we first met. I didn't know if she was joking or not, but I raised my hands-right away."

"I guess I haven't told my parents that one. But in my defense, he barged into a secure area without permission and I didn't know who or what was invading us, so I pulled my gun."

Keith was laughing. "I thought, wow she is beautiful, but she doesn't seem to like me."

"You did not, silly."

"I did on the first part about you being beautiful, though."

Edward was laughing. "Whoa, stop. I shouldn't have said anything about your sense of humor. I am getting more of your humor right now though. Keith, we have started our list of guests for your wedding cruise. We don't want to overdo this. It would help if you could give us an upper limit of the number of people to invite."

"Thanks, Dad. Let's see, the Maxx can hold 8000 passengers. Have you gone over that number yet?"

"No, but we haven't even started on Vera's side of the family. Actually we were planning to all come in one car."

"Dad, when Keith said we were footing your expenses, he meant that. You and your guests will be picked up at your homes with limos, taken to the PDC Municipal Airport, flown by private planes to the Milwaukee airport, then by a commercial direct flight to Tampa. There you will be met by limos for the drive to our dock. You are not carpooling anywhere."

"Keith, I apologize in questioning your sense of humor. It may be even better than Judith's. I was just kidding, Honey."

“Dad, she just wants you to know that we are serious about covering all of your expenses for this trip.”

He said, “Vera, I like that. Our new son-in-law to be is protecting our daughter from jabs even from her father.”

“Yes, he is just wonderful. We couldn’t be happier that you two are getting married. Well, we have taken up enough of your time tonight. Thank you so much for sending the video. We will treasure it and will certainly share it with our friends.”

They all said their good byes and the kids said they would be calling again the next day.

After terminating the call, Keith smiled. “That was fun. I really love them. Wouldn’t it be neat if Dad can dig up something on your ring?”

“Aren’t you interested in knowing about your family?”

“Oh sure, but that is the past and I am looking forward to the future with you. That’s where my focus and interest lies.”

“You say the nicest things.” She grabbed his head and covered his face with kisses.

* * *

The next morning Keith and Judith went to the jewelry appraiser that Rudolph had recommended for them. They were to meet a Mr. Marcus Epstein at 0930. He was waiting for them when they arrived. Judith had hidden the ring on her finger with a scarf bunched loosely around her hand.

“Good morning. Will you please come with me to our guest room?” When they entered the room, he held a chair for Judith to sit in. “Well, Mr. Sterling tells me that you may have a rare ring. May I see it, please?”

Judith took it off slowly as if she did not want to part with it even for a moment. “I have had it for less than 36 hours.”

He smiled. “I understand that the proposal was very emotional. This certainly looks genuine. Let me look into it closely.” He removed several magnifying lenses from a drawer in the table and examined the ring for a few minutes. “Yes indeed. This is the original from the Shaw of Iran. You wanted a signed appraisal of its value for the insurers. I have asked other buyers since Mr. Sterling’s call and we all agreed that in this condition it is worth thirty-eight million dollars at retail. You should not be wearing this in public. Put it back on your finger before I leave the room for a moment. There. I will be right back.”

He left the room for a moment and returned with a box. “Do not remove your ring from your finger while I have this box open. Keith, hold her hand with yours in a way that you can feel her ring.”

Keith did as he was told.

“Now, I want you both to see this.” He opened the box and there was a perfect copy of Judith’s ring in the box. “I want you to keep your ring on your finger so that there is no chance of the two of these getting mixed up. Yours is real; this one is glass. Admittedly an excellent copy of yours, but it is glass none the less. Mr. Sterling knows about this glass imitation and he is purchasing it for you to keep and wear in public.”

“Oh my word. He is doing that for us?” Keith asked.

“Yes. The copy is worth \$2000, but that is much less to lose to theft than the original. Now, you need to be able to easily identify for yourselves, which is the original and which is the glass. Look here on the inside where the artist’s signature is located. The glass ring has an “x” at the end of the signature. Think ‘x’ for ‘extra’ so that you do not mix them up. When you are back in your cabin, hold them side by side and look at white paper through the blue diamond. You will be able to see the difference in clarity and brilliance.”

“Yes, I see the ‘x’. Do you see it Keith?”

“Yes, I do. Shouldn’t you wear the glass copy until we get back, Sweetheart?”

"I hate to do that, but I'd better get used to it, I guess."

"That is a good habit to get into, Judith," Mr. Epstein said.

Judith switched them. Her original was placed in a simple box and put into a plastic shopping bag. She said she would like to go out and look at other items in the store. She had no intention to purchase anything; she just wanted to look around.

Keith asked Mr. Epstein to wait with him in the guest room. Judith just thought Keith was waiting for the appraisal form. Keith opened his backpack and pulled out a wooden box. "Could I get an opinion on this, please?" He opened the box of blue pearls.

"Oh, aren't these beautiful. Are they from New Zealand?"

"No, I purchased them from a man who took them from the sea in the Caribbean. The purchase price will be based on your retail appraisal, if you would be so kind? Then for the most important part of my request, could these be made into a necklace and matching earrings for Christmas, ah this year?"

"Oh my. We are very busy, but since you are both very valued employees and friends of Mr. Sterling, I will promise that we will have them for you by noon on the 24th. If they are ready earlier, I will call you. Now then, value." He pulled out his magnifiers again. "The only true way is to cut them in half. Of course that would be insane. Do you want an individual appraisal for each pearl or for the total?"

"No, just the total amount, please."

He examined them for a few minutes. "They have an average value of \$250 each. The retail price of these seventeen blue pearls is therefore \$4250. What did you pay for them, if I may ask?"

"He wanted less, but I told him I would send him 120% of the appraised value. Actually I have not paid him anything yet. I wanted to give him \$100 for each then wire him the rest when I got the appraisal, but he insisted on waiting for your evaluation."

"That is an incredible arrangement. It is a testament to your honesty and kindness that Mr. Sterling has told me about you. In our short meeting today, I can already sense why he likes you. When will the wedding be?"

"We will be wed on the same tropical island where I gave her the ring. We have chosen our 21-day cruise in June so that Judith's parents can be there. They are school teachers."

"Yes, I know. And I know of the island. Rudolph and I happened to be there at the same time a few years ago. What a wonderful place for a wedding."

"Just one more thing, if you please. Would you know anything about my father, who purchased this ring for my mother? They were killed in a traffic accident when I was one year old."

"May I defer that until I look it up in my files? I would also like to confer with Rudolph as he may recall something of it, too."

"Thank you. Anything more than the little that I already know would be helpful. You have been so helpful today. What do I owe you?"

"We will discuss that later, so that I can get right to work on these pearls. Thank you for entrusting me with them. I will go in back and prepare your two appraisals and give you a receipt for the pearls."

"Don't let Judith know about the pearls, please."

"Certainly. You said they were a Christmas present."

Mr. Epstein left with the pearls. He returned in a few minutes with the three papers. Keith put them into his backpack.

"I am so glad that you had an occasion to come in this morning. Rudolph has spoken often of you. He told me that having the displaced people on his ship was your idea. I bow to you for your generosity." He made a slight bow toward Keith.

"It wasn't my generosity, Mr. Epstein. It was all Mr. Sterling's money."

“Ah, but it took and is taking many, many hours of your time to provide food and shelter to these unfortunate people. They are two of the most basic needs that we humans require. And please call me Marcus.”

“I am honored, Marcus, thank you. I wish Rudolph would accept the Presidential Medal of Freedom for what it is, an honor to him for HIS generosity.”

“And there is another example of YOUR generosity, Keith. You are passing the honor to him without reservation. I completely understand your feelings, but you should accept my praise of you for your own wellbeing. It is a mark of your growth to do so. Think about it.”

“Thank you, Marcus. I will.”

“Now you must hurry out to find your fiancée before she decides to buy out all my stock. Newly engaged ladies have a tendency to think like that.” He said with a smile.

Keith bowed slightly to him and left to discover Judith looking at pearls.

Looking up, “Oh hi Honey. Look at these pearls. Aren’t they beautiful? There is a blue cast to the lighting that really sets them off.”

“There is a Walgreens store just two blocks over. Why don’t you put your package into my pocket so nobody could grab it from you?”

“I’ll put it in your backpack.”

“No, that is too easily stolen. I will put it in my pocket. OK?”

“Yes, you are right. Wow, can you believe Rudolph paying for this beautiful glass copy?”

“We learned something else. Rudolph and Marcus Epstein know each other and have been talking about us for some time now. He knew that your parents were school teachers. Don’t you find that strange?”

“Possibly. Isn’t Walgreens down this way?”

“Oops, I should have checked my map again. Yup, you are right. I brought the photos as glossy prints and as jpegs on my memory stick. They will probably want the jpeg files so they can electronically send them to the Prairie du Chen and Platteville stores. It is a good thing they have a Walgreens in both cities, otherwise either Professor Young or your parents would have to drive the 80 mile round trip to pick up our gift from the other city.”

“Honey, when we are done at Walgreens, can we catch a cab and go to *Michael Revere’s*? I would like to see if I could find a table that I could convert into a video table for Rudolph’s suite for Christmas.”

“I’d nearly forgotten. What a great idea!”

After they finished ordering their photos at Walgreens, they took a taxi to Revere’s antique furniture store. Keith was happy that the driver was not as talkative as his first New York taxi driver. They were met at the door by an overbearing woman clerk. “May I help you find something?” They distinctively felt that she had already put them down as not being of the class of people that she was used to be dealing with. They thought Keith’s backpack may have given her that impression.

Judith spoke, “We are interested in a small coffee table with a glass top. It should appear elegant, but we don’t want to pay a lot for it as we are going to make modifications to it.”

Keith thought the woman was going to faint. She must have been insulted to think that they were going to damage a piece of fine antique furniture.

“Perhaps you should have inquired at a second hand junk shop in another part of the city.”

“No, wait. We really do want a nice piece to start with. It will be a show piece in an expensive setting.” Then Judith purposely put her left hand where the woman could see her ring.

“Oh my, what a beautiful ring. Yes, please come this way, we may have something for you.”

Keith squeezed Judith’s hand.

They walked the length of the store and took an elevator up two levels to a room filled with living room settings. Back in the corner was an old coffee table that Judith thought was just the right

size. The woman was pointing to it. "This piece had a dreadful accident when it was damaged by a careless maid at a local mansion. We were able to replace it with another just like it. The replacement went for over \$5000, but this one now is practically worthless. I can let you have it for \$100, but only if you do not tell anyone where you purchased it."

Keith said, "Where is the damage to it?"

"Oh my. Don't you see the scratches on the inner side of this leg?"

"You are a genius, ma'am. We were going to mount a special expensive box under the table and the box will completely cover the scratches. We will indeed honor your requirements. Could this be wrapped in plain cardboard so nobody would see its condition as we take it out of your elegant shop? It will be our gift to Mister Rudolph Sterling on his ship, the Maxx. It will be in his private suite."

"Oh my! How wonderful. Will this be your thanks to him for providing you with a place to stay? Oh, I am so sorry." She nodded to Judith. "Now I recognize you as the beautiful young lady that was on the stage with Mr. Sterling when he got his medal from that President. I don't remember seeing your ring at that time."

"No, Keith just proposed to me a few days ago. Thank you for remembering me. We both report directly to Mr. Sterling."

"May I deliver this at no extra charge to your ship? It will be there perhaps before you get back. May I call you a taxi?"

"You have already been too kind, ma'am. We can hail a taxi from the street."

"It was a pleasure to meet you. My name is Martha. Please ask for me next time and I shall be happy to serve you."

"The pleasure is ours. Thank you so much for your help."

When they got into the taxi, Keith couldn't hold back anymore. He just let out a long, loud laugh. He was all doubled up laughing. "Did you see her change her attitude about us when you flashed your ring at her. Before you did that I thought she was going to hand us some sticks and tell us to go build our own."

"I liked the part where she said THAT President. She obviously has a small set of people that she considers good enough for her to bother with. Well at least we got the perfect table for Rudolph. You sure buttered her up after her conversion."

"I've had a lot of practice buttering up women-until I met you, that is."

"Keith, we haven't talked about this, but I know your job on the ship requires that you butter up women. I just want you to know that I expect you to perform your job well. Just remember me and I won't be jealous, because I know you truly love me and I love you."

"That had me worried. I hear you. But my job is going to be just that, a job that requires some concentration to do it right. I will never forget or neglect you for any reason. I couldn't live without you."

The taxi driver couldn't hear them above the noise of the Christmas shopping traffic, but he noticed them kissing in his rear view mirror and he smiled.

* * *

Monday, December 24 came very quickly. Not one of the Maxx employees took any vacation days around the Christmas holidays. Some were asked why they didn't request vacation days and their responses were always similar. They always sounded something like this: *Admittedly having guests in our cabins constantly without any slack in our work will not be our normal way of operating when we are conducting cruises, but unusual conditions call for unusual effort. There will be plenty of time for vacationing later; these people really need us. We are not just entertaining people, we are providing for their basic needs.*

The crew really was in the spirit of giving. They were acknowledged by Mr. Sterling with his giving each of them a special Christmas Bonus of \$1000 along with a personally signed Christmas letter

of thanks. The purchase of the tropical island which Judith named, "Sterling Paradise" was complete and it was to be announced this day during a Christmas show put on by the children living on the ship. Much of the footage that Scotty took of the island was also in that show. It included the UTV leap off the cliff with Keith screaming. Keith had introduced that one and said that he really did have a panic attack. After it was shown, he asked the crowd whether it should be used as an advertisement to draw people to the Maxx for a cruise. He asked them to press "1" on their seat keypads if it definitely should be used, "9" if it should definitely not be used, or any number in between. Then he displayed the results on the screen. Everyone must have pushed the "1" button as the other numbers had zero votes. "So you are telling me that you enjoy seeing me having a panic attack. Is that it?" That broke everyone into hysterical laughter.

"OK, well here is a video of another side of me that you may be interested in. Some of you have already figured this out, but here is the actual unrehearsed footage of an important moment in our lives. After we saw this, both Judith and I have decided that it should be used as a commercial. But I will ask for your votes again at the end of the video."

They showed the proposal video without the close-up of her ring in the footage. Scotty had also professionally blurred out the ring box bump in Keith's pants. Throughout the film there were wolf whistles and shouts of "YES" and "OOOOH". At the end Judith appeared on the stage with Keith. Everyone was on their feet applauding. They kissed right on stage in front of everyone. Judith said they would be married during their June cruise when they reached the island. Keith asked for their votes as to whether they thought that ad would persuade anyone to sign up for a cruise with them. Again everyone pushed the "1" button. "Thank you, but would everyone now push "9" on their keypad." They did and Keith said, "Thank you that was a test. I thought the wires had gotten crossed with everyone pushing the '1' button. Your votes are really important as we want to have ads that will persuade people to sign up with us. And now Mr. Sterling has a message for each of our guests."

Mr. Sterling came out onto the stage for the first time during the show. He gave a nice short speech thanking the displaced people for giving his crew a "trial by fire" test of their abilities to attend to their near capacity number of guests. Some of them had been hired after being displaced, but all of them had performed exceptionally well. He repeatedly said how proud he was of all of his crew. "But, I am exceptionally proud of you, too. There have been zero reports of any non-accidental breakage of anything. There have been zero reports of anything being defaced. There have been zero reports of any fighting or crimes committed. Each one of you has been exceptionally wonderful, and so I have a gift for each man, woman, and child. I have created a new passenger status category. In addition to 'new passengers' and 'returning passengers,' each of you will have the exclusive status of 'Charter Passenger'. You will carry that status for life. If at any time in your lifetime you wish to join us as a guest on any of our cruises, and there is no limit as to how many times you can use this, as a Charter Passenger you will pay 50% of the lowest available price for your choice of cabin. Please pay the full deposit amount requested with your reservation, but your final price will be discounted so that your total fee is half of what anyone else would pay. It may be some years before you will be able to cruise with us, but whenever we see you again, it will be a joyful reunion. I hope we are all reminded of this joyful season as well. Thank you and Merry Christmas from me and the outstanding crew of the Maxx."

Everyone was on their feet cheering Mr. Sterling as the music broke into Christmas Carols. Judith and Keith stood at the exit doors and greeted people as they were leaving the theatre. When the last had cleared out, Judith and Keith headed back to their cabins for a quiet Christmas Eve dinner.

Once inside Keith was quick to turn into Judith's cabin with a wrapped package in his hands. "Merry Christmas, Sweetheart," as he handed Judith the package.

"Oh, I don't have a box for you," she said. "But if you will go back into your room and find a red bow, you may discover something."

Keith said, "I want you to open yours first."

She opened her box and found Mr. Epstein's sticker on the box. "I didn't see you purchase anything while we were there and you haven't left the ship. How...?"

"Just open the box."

She let out a soft scream then slapped her hand over her mouth to stifle any more screams. "Where? How? When? They are even in the setting that I thought was so beautiful and look how they complement my ring. Keith!"

Keith explained about Jose on the island and all the events that led to them being delivered to him at the ship earlier that day. He said that he wanted the blue pearls for her as soon as he had seen them. They hugged and kissed.

"My gift is less expensive, but it is bigger."

"Hey, don't ever think that you have to get me anything expensive. I have you and that is all I need. You are my treasure."

She led him to his closets where he saw a red bow on one of his closet doors.

"Whatever it is, did you notice that the bottom of this closet is WAY down below the floor? Will I be able to get it out without a ladder?"

"Well are you going to open the door or should I?"

He opened it cautiously and then he screamed, "Oh my God! How did you know I wanted an *Ocean Kayak*? Oh, thank you so much! It is a tandem model, too. We can go on rides at our ports of call and at the island. I can even use it for advertising."

"You have been talking to Ken about wanting one and where you would put it. He really can keep a secret very well, you know. We had it hidden in his cabin from the time it was delivered until he woke up this afternoon. Then he put it into your cabin. I had to make sure both of the swim tank doors were closed and I had to have Michael open your cabin door for him. Michael never let on that I could get into your room without him. It was a team effort."

"It is even yellow. I must have told Ken that, too."

"You did. Merry Christmas, Honey."

"Merry Christmas, Sweetheart. Thank you. I love you so much!"

Their phones both rang at the same time. They knew it was from Judith's parents.

"Merry Christmas, Mom."

"Merry Christmas, Dad."

"Thank you so much, Son. These framed photos that we picked up earlier today are just incredible. We would have called earlier, but Vera wanted to stop at just about everybody's house in town to show them our new son-in-law-to-be along with the video of your proposal that I downloaded to my camera."

"Did you invite them to the wedding? I hope."

"Some of them, yes, and they were very excited. Do you have a departure date yet?"

"Yes, all of our cruises will depart on the third Thursday of each month and they will be 21-days in length. So our wedding cruise will be June 20th to July 11th. I don't think Judith has confirmation of the dates for all of the ports of call so we won't know the specific wedding date until that is finished. At least your friends can be told the departure and arrival dates. We plan on two loading and two unloading dates so you may arrive on the 18th of June and you won't be expected to leave until the 13th of July."

"Thanks that will be helpful as most of our friends are still working and they want to be sure that they can get those dates for their vacation time. One of them is in a wheelchair. Will that..."

Keith interrupted, "No problem, Dad. Not for the ship and not for the island wedding. We checked specifically on wheelchair accommodations on the island. Two of our ship's swimming pools also have handicapped lifts for getting into and out of the pools. Even our miniature golf course has a wheelchair path. May I make a warning?"

“Sure what’s that?”

“We said we would cover your expenses, but that doesn’t include the gift shops on the ship. We can get you crew-discounts, but this is a luxury ship and the gifts shops are geared to that clientele. They do have some very nice things that are less expensive though. The shops in the ports of call, however, run from the bottom to the top of the price scale. Right up there at the top of the scale are the drugs that we are trying to keep off the ship so we don’t lose our license. That falls under my job description and I have some excellent helpers.”

“How do you stop the drug trade?”

“That’s one area I can’t discuss, Dad. Next question.”

“No question, I’ll just make a comment. I hope that doesn’t put you into danger.”

“We are all in danger every time we cross the street. At least I don’t have to watch out for cars and trucks while I’m on the ship.”

Edward could hear in his voice that he was thinking of his parents and their accident. “No, and you have a most beautiful ship that keeps you off the streets.”

Judith had been talking to her mother about wedding dresses, color choices, marriage vows, and clergy.

“Mom, we have the nicest pastor on the ship. Keith and I have been going to his chapel services every week since he arrived. We asked him today if he would perform our wedding ceremony and he said he would be happy to do this for us. So that is all set. He said that he was wondering when he would hear that Keith had proposed to me. He knew that it would be soon, but he thought it would be tomorrow for Christmas. He said we got a one week jump on him. He is so nice and helpful with some work-related problems that we have encountered. You will like him.”

“I am just not sure what I should wear. I have never been to a tropical island and certainly not to a wedding on one.”

“Keith is still teasing me about showing up in a swimming suit. I don’t think that he has given it much thought either. I do know that he has a tux here in his closet for formal wear on the ship, but he hasn’t worn it yet. Perhaps he is holding out until then. We do have a men’s formal wear store on the ship so he might just ask for Dad’s sizes and then Dad wouldn’t have to pack a tux and worry about getting it wrinkled. Our women’s formal wear shop might be too limiting for your choice, but why don’t you wait until we select a color scheme for the wedding before you go shopping for your dress. And for Heaven’s sake don’t spend money on anything for a wedding gift for us. We would like a new photo of the two of you, but Scotty can take that for you and he will print and frame it for you to give to us. That goes for everyone on your guest list too. We certainly do not need any gifts. Rudolph provides absolutely everything we need for our household needs in our cabin.”

“Well, we certainly want to get you two, something special.”

“Mom, please do not try to match our new style of living here with an expensive gift. Having you both here with us and having a good photo of you will always give us a thrill.”

“It sounds like Keith is giving your father some dates. Probably the dates for your wedding cruise, I will get them from him. We had so much fun at your Aunt and Uncle’s house on the way back from the store with your photos and video. Your uncle loaded the video onto his computer and played it on his large screen TV over and over. We picked out our favorite little sea turtle. He kept bumping into the other turtles and almost got turned in the wrong direction. We all laughed and cheered him on until he got to the water.”

“Was your daughter even noticed on the screen or your soon to be son-in-law?”

“Of course, silly. We didn’t even see the turtles until the 5th or 6th showing. Poor Keith looked so dejected in the beginning until he saw you. Then you both noticed each other and raced to hug each other. How many times did you run through that before you got the perfect video?”

“Believe it or not, Mom. Scotty, our photographer just told us the basics. He didn’t even know about the ring, so everything in that video was just as natural as it could be. Mr. Sterling was there as Scotty expected something might happen, so he told Mr. Sterling to join him. But what you see is exactly the way it happened. What you do not see is that for the purposes of an advertisement, Keith carried me into a cottage at the end. We did not want our family to get the wrong idea about us, so what you have to share with family doesn’t have the same ending as the TV advertisement has. But on the other hand, the ad does not have close-ups of the ring or of our faces.”

“Oh, that is wonderful. After seeing it several times over and over again, it begins to take on a staged or practiced look. I thought it was as you said when you sent it to us. It was the actual footage of Keith’s proposal.”

“Mom, you should see the pearl necklace and matching earrings that I just got from Keith. They are blue pearls that match my ring. He bought them from a native on the island where we will be married. They were found right in the water off the island. I didn’t know anything about Keith having them, but while he was in the back room talking to the jeweler about making them into a necklace, I had fallen in love with a pearl necklace in their jewelry case. The clerk obviously told that to Mr. Epstein after we left and he duplicated that setting with Keith’s blue pearls. We will send you a photo.”

Her mother let out another of her excited screams.

Her dad asked what that was all about.

Keith had heard Judith telling her mother so he told her dad. “Judith was telling Mom about a few pearls that I bought on the island from a native.”

“It sounds like more than a few pearls for that kind of excitement. What’s up?”

Keith told him the whole story including the part about good blue pearls only being found in the farms off New Zealand.

“Will you be showing Jose the necklace and earrings when you get down there?”

“Oh yes, I want to get the two of them in a photo together. Actually I feel bad that he sold his collection to me, but he said he didn’t have anything that he could do with them. He is a very nice guy and now he is working for Mr. Sterling.”

“Well you two must be tired after putting on a show for your guests and all you have done today. I am sure we will have more to talk about tomorrow. Will your security system let Santa onto the ship tonight?”

Keith sounded genuinely shocked. “Oh my God. I never programmed that into Jeremy. I’d better run down to the master console and tell Jeremy to let him in and to expect a bunch of reindeer on the fo’c’sle next to the Christmas tree. I’ll probably get a call from our grumpy Captain in the middle of the night about some reindeer wandering around on his ship. G’night, Dad. We love you.”

Keith hung up without waiting for him to respond. “I’ll be right back,” He shouted to Judith as he went out the door and down the pole.

Judith asked, “What did Dad say to Keith? He tore out of here like there was an emergency.”

Vera checked with her husband. “Honey, all he said to Keith was that he wondered if Keith’s security system would let Santa onto the ship tonight.”

“And he got all excited about that? I wonder why. Maybe he has something up his sleeve?”

“Well it can’t be very big, not the way he wears his shirts so tight. There wouldn’t be any room in there for anything but his big arms,” she said with a laugh.

“He certainly is muscular, isn’t he? He picks me up like I am a feather. I personally don’t like to see men who have overdone their muscle building. Keith is perfect as far as I am concerned. And that goes for his personality, too. I really love him.”

“We do too, Honey. He is so kind, even to us. Well, we should let you go, too. Good night, Honey.”

“Good night, Mom. Love to you both.”

Keith was walking back into his cabin just as Judith was ending her call. "What do you go tearing off for, Honey?"

"Your dad reminded me that I forgot to set the timer to start the movie that Scotty's team put together. They spent so much time finding clips of movies that they could put together about Santa visiting a cruise ship. I didn't want to drop the ball and not have it start at 2300 on our channel 3, in case any kids were still up at that time. When I got down there, Ken said that he had already taken care of setting the timer. Our team has so much on the ball. He checked to make sure it was ready and found I hadn't done it, so he just went ahead and covered for me. Gotta love this team."

"I do, especially the chief of security."

"Mmmmm and I love the other one."

"Is it too late to call Professor Young and Aunt Jean?"

"No they are an hour behind us so it is not late out there."

They received the same type of reply from Aunt Jean as they did from Judith's parents. She loved her photographs and the video and said that she would be happy to go to Tampa in June for the cruise.

The call to Professor Young did not go as well. He was excited for them and he liked the photos and video, but he was preoccupied with his wife's illness. He said that she had deteriorated so much that the doctors did not expect her to see the New Year in. Keith's Aunt Jean was providing almost around the clock care for his wife. He was so grateful for her help. Keith was surprised when Professor Young said that he knew about the island and Judith's blue pearl necklace and earrings.

"How did you find out about all of that?"

2013 Challenge

“Rudolph has always kept me in touch with the things the two of you have been up to. I won’t tell you much about this, but he and I have been good friends for a long time. I will not go any farther than to say that there are six of us men that have known all about the two of you since you were both born and you have only met five of us so far. I have been authorized by most of them to tell you that your Christmas present is a challenge for 2013 to discover who we are and what our basic connection is. End of conversation; do not ask me anymore questions about it. Oh, I am sorry, but my wife needs me now. Merry Christmas to our two favorite people.”

He hung up before Keith could say another word. Keith and Judith just looked at each other.

Judith said, “Well, so far all we know is that Professor Young and Rudolph are part of a larger group of six men that have known each other for a long time and that they have been watching both of us since we were born. That is not much to go on.”

“But it is a start. It is our 2013 challenge; maybe we’re not supposed to start on it until next year.”

“And if I know you, you won’t be able to just sit on this for another week.”

“Well since you do know me, you are right as usual. I know that Professor Young knew me when I was one year old. He told me that he held me at my parents’ funeral. But I never even heard about Rudolph until I came to the Maxx and I am 32. And they both knew you all that time, too. How strange is that?”

“Keith, I never even heard about Professor Young until I started college there, but he knew me when I was born? Why didn’t you and I ever meet until now if they both knew me for the last 27 years? I think they should have called this a 2013 mystery instead of a challenge. And putting a date on it may imply that they expect us to figure it out within the year.”

“I’ve said it before, but Professor Young has always liked surprises. He’s really got us going on this one. Are you going to wait up for Santa Claus or are you going to bed?”

“Let’s go sleep in my bed tonight. I want to snuggle with my man. Will Michael be getting you up early tomorrow?”

“No, I told him he could take the day off from doing anything in my room on Christmas. I’ll likely be up to exercise early though.”

“Wake me when you get up and I’ll spot you on your heavy weights. I don’t want anything happening to you.”

“Mmmmm, love you.”

* * *

“That was fun, Sweetheart; we should do that more often.”

“Do you make Michael work this hard?”

“You only did a tenth of what Michael does each morning, but you’ll get there.”

“I really don’t think that my body was built for working that hard. Besides, do you want me to have a hard muscle physique or a soft feminine one?”

“I like you just the way you are. Just stay healthy. We don’t want any problems like Mrs. Young is having.”

“Oh, that poor woman. I don’t wish that on anybody. It has to be really hard on the Professor, too.”

“I’m sure it is. Aunt Jean says that his health is draining along with his wife’s. She has been trying to get them both to eat.”

“Honey, when do you think Rudolph will be getting up? I’d like to take his coffee table up to his suite.”

“You could call his steward and find out when he has breakfast. Be sure to tell him why we want to know so that he doesn’t think we are spying on Rudolph.”

Judith discovered that Rudolph was already up and dressed. She asked his steward to detain him if he tried to leave the suite before they got there. She and Keith picked up Rudolph’s table from Keith’s electronics lab and carried it to the elevator and up to Rudolph’s suite. She knocked on the door.

Rudolph’s steward told him that Judith and Keith were at the door. He jumped up and opened the door himself. “Merry Christmas to my favorite daughter and son! Please come in. No, you didn’t make me a table like yours, did you?”

“Merry Christmas, Rudolph. We didn’t forget your wish for a table like Judith has down in the CCC.”

“It is exquisite. What a beautiful piece of furniture. There is not a mark on it. This must have cost you a fortune.”

“Judith has a knack for finding the right things at nearly no cost,” Keith said. They told him of their encounter with Martha at Michael Revere’s.

“She can be quite stuffy at times. I haven’t been in there for years, but it sounds like she hasn’t changed a bit. Isn’t it a shame that many businesses only pay any attention to their customers if they think the customer has a lot of money? I have always contended that unless the customer is a criminal, I want to serve that customer with respect. It has certainly paid off for me without problems. I am glad that she gave you the nice discount, however. Your installation of the monitor under the glass is a fine piece of craftsmanship. Thank you so much!”

“We also want to thank you. Judith is wearing the glass copy of her ring that you purchased for her.”

“I am so glad to be a part of your lives. This was just a way for me to acknowledge it.”

“That brings up something that Professor Young told us last night.”

“Ah, he told you already, did he? Well I have no comment other than a big know-it-all smile.”

Keith pondered, “When you first shook my hand and said you were glad to finally meet me. There was much more to that statement than I even would guess. You apparently knew me from the time I was born.”

“My lips are sealed.”

“Without reason, because Professor Young said there were six people that have known both of us since we were born.”

“Isn’t that interesting,” Rudolph laughed.

Keith looked at Judith and said, “I don’t think we will get much out of this one. Should we take the table back?” Then he laughed.

“No, I wouldn’t do that to our good friend and I know you wouldn’t either.”

“Of course not.”

“The program yesterday afternoon was just wonderful. I even stayed up until 11 p.m. to watch Santa landing on the ship. Scotty did a wonderful job on that. I want to thank him personally for that one. You are replaying it today on demand, I understand.”

Keith nodded.

“I have not had my breakfast yet, would you two be able to join me here in my room?”

Keith nodded toward Judith. She said, “Yes, I would like that. How about you, Honey?”

“I would be honored. I have only had my orange juice so far. Thank you.”

“Very well then. We can sit next to the verandah, but on this side of the glass. It is much too cold outside to even have the doors open.”

Keith said, "At least you do not look out directly into an office building like we do. Will you be using this suite for any of our cruises? I could connect your New York office to the ship so that you could conduct all of your business from the Maxx whenever you wished. With video hookups you could hold meetings with any employee without having to be there with them. You certainly wouldn't be bothered with unscheduled people dropping in to take up your time, unless we were in our home port. There have been so many computer advancements in bookkeeping, payroll and others that you wouldn't have to be there all the time. You could operate your business from here utilizing the comforts that you have already designed into the Maxx. How about it?"

Keith, I was looking for an opportunity to talk to you about this. Yes, indeed I did design this suite with the thought of using it as a floating office. As you have discovered, I have known about you for years and I have watched as you have built solid computer systems. Is this a task that you could handle for me? I am afraid of over taxing you."

"This is actually a good time. If we waited until a few weeks before our first cruise, I could get real busy validating Jeremy's reservation system. It did work exceptionally well for the displaced people influx, but cruise guests could present different problems. I know hooking the two offices up will require a considerable amount of time off the ship, but if Judith was in your New York office during the design phase, it could go much quicker and have a better result."

"I suspect then that you would like to begin by looking at my New York office. Judith, I have learned how important it is to have a woman's perspective in any design. My office is closed for this Holiday week. We can take a taxi to my offices on Thursday, January 3rd after breakfast together in my suite. You two can decide how to break up the task of putting together a project plan. Ah, here is our breakfast. Thank you."

They ate with only light chatter. Keith missed several questions put to him as his head was busy with various aspects of the project. Judith smiled at Rudolph while giving a nod towards Keith. Rudolph nodded that he understood what Keith was doing and he came close to laughing out loud several times. As they were about to leave, Rudolph decided to pull a joke on Keith.

"So it is agreed then that Keith will begin the project on the 3rd completely dressed in a red spandex jumpsuit like some superhero."

Judith caught on and answered, "Yes, I will order one for him tomorrow."

Keith sputtered, "What?"

Rudolph said, "That is what you agreed to at breakfast."

Keith looked back and forth at them. "I am sorry, but I must have missed some of the conversation while I was thinking about the project. I don't want to wear a red jumpsuit."

Judith wrapped her arms around Keith and buried her head in his chest. "Oh you silly."

Rudolph began to laugh so hard that he was doubled over. "Sorry Son. We were pulling your leg. I love to watch you when you go deep into thought on some problem. You don't have to wear a red jumpsuit; I think a black spandex jumpsuit would be more appropriate."

Then they all laughed again. Rudolph could hear them both still laughing as they entered the elevator down the hallway.

* * *

On January 2nd, Keith got an afternoon phone call from Aunt Jean. "Hi, Aunt Jean. Did you have a good New Year's?"

"It was kind of rough. I hope I never have to go through that again. Mrs. Young passed away this morning. She just never woke up this morning. It was very peaceful. Lloyd and I were both with her when she just stopped breathing."

"I'm so sorry for both of you. The three of you have been good friends for a long time. Dad told me that he wanted to marry you, so you have been friends for at least 32 years."

"He didn't tell me that he had told you that. Is that why you have been calling Lloyd, 'Dad'?"

"Yes. He told me I should call him that and he told me why. It is funny, but I almost asked you who Lloyd was when you said his name just now. What can Judith and I do for him or you? Would it look better to the busybody people if your name was on a floral bouquet with ours?"

"I guess that would look better, I hadn't thought about that. The funeral will be Saturday, the 5th at 10 a.m. He didn't want me to call anyone until he'd made the arrangements, otherwise we'd have to call each person a second time. That's a man thing I guess. I would have called everybody when she passed then called again with the arrangements."

"Will you have the flowers sent for us? I will send you a check when you know how much it will be. Is there anything else we can do?"

"No, I don't think so. He gave me a list of some friends that he wanted to contact. I noticed that Mr. Sterling is on there."

"Yes, I recently found out that they have been good friends for a long time."

"Judith's parents are on the list too."

"Really? I will tell Judith. Maybe she would want to go in with her parents on flowers. I would hope that she and I could be on the same card."

"You two can work that out. Should I still call them?"

"Why don't you let me call them and I will call Mr. Sterling, too. He is right here on the ship today. Thank you so much for letting us know. Be sure to get some rest. It sounds like you were up all night."

"I will, but I want to call these people first. Thanks for taking some off my list. I will tell him that you made those calls. I will be in touch."

"Take care, Aunt Jean. I love you, bye."

He called Judith with his radio.

She said she was close to Rudolph's suite so she would stop there to tell him. Then she would talk to her parents and she would ask them if she could be on the flowers with Keith and his aunt.

Rudolph answered her knock. "Judith, my girl. How are you? Won't you come in? Where's Keith?"

"Thank you. Keith just got a call from his aunt with the news that Mrs. Young passed away this morning in her sleep. Keith's aunt was making the calls for Professor Young. I was just down the hall so I came directly here to tell you."

"Please sit down. When is the funeral?"

"It will be this Saturday at 1000 in Platteville."

"We were just going to send flowers. Keith and I were going in together with his Aunt Jean on the flowers. We are working on getting the displaced people off the ship by the end of February."

"You can both manage a day away to honor a friend's wife. We will leave the ship at 0600 on the 5th and take my jet directly to the airport just ten minutes from Platteville. I will make all the arrangements. By the way my car will pick us up at the dock so Keith won't be worried about getting his favorite taxi driver again."

"Thank you. I will tell him."

"We will fly back later in the day. On second thought, Ken should be there too. Bill and Tom should be able to handle anything that comes up."

"I'm not worried about them, but Ken will have to try to catch some sleep on both flights."

"He's still a hardy young man; he should be all right."

"He will be up by now so I will tell him right away. He hasn't had that much contact with Professor Young since he got here. I am sure he will appreciate your request of his presence."

"Tell Ken that he can change into his black suit on the plane as we pass the Chicago airspace so that he can sleep in the clothes he has on."

Judith thought, "*Black suit. I wonder if either of them even has one. Their tuxes won't be appropriate.*" She thanked Rudolph and then stood up to leave. "We will all be ready by 0600 Saturday. Thank you."

She went back to CCC to talk to Ken and Keith and to ask them if they had black suits.

Funeral

The next day was January 3rd so Keith and Judith had breakfast with Rudolph before going to his office for their planning session. It was after New Year's Day and she wanted to remind the displaced people about the upcoming last day for them to leave. She put the announcement out onto Channel 3. "As we announced when you arrived, Thursday, February 28th is the last day to have all of our guests off the ship. Please do not all wait until the last day to leave as we cannot accommodate that many people leaving at one time. We will need to have at least 1800 people leave by the 26th and another 1800 by the 27^h. Please stop by the Guest Services desk to choose a departure date for you and your family."

She was concerned about their reaction to the realization that they would be leaving in less than 60 days. They had already been there for 60 days or more depending on when they arrived. She was going to remind them every ten days until each cabin had signed up for a departure date.

When she had finished the announcement, she and Keith left with Rudolph to go to his office to begin their design phase for hooking the two offices together.

* * *

Saturday morning Judith, Keith and Ken met Rudolph at the ship's main entrance at 0600 and stepped out into the cold January morning air, headed for Rudolph's limo that was waiting for them. They got into the limo and Judith snuggled into Keith and his overcoat. "I'll be glad when we are in Tampa or the Caribbean. I have never liked the cold winters."

Teasing, Rudolph said, "Keith, don't you think that Judith should be the one to carry my private documents between the ship and my New York office, especially this winter?"

"That's what bonded couriers are for," Judith quickly replied.

Ken said, "I thought they were called 'bundled couriers. Or is that just in the winter time?"

Rudolph said, "Many of them ride their bicycles through the streets all year-round. They don't look like they are dressed very warmly either. Perhaps they keep themselves warm by pedaling fast."

"I like to work out, but that does not sound like my kind of work out," Keith added.

It was nice and warm in Rudolph's limo. In the pre-dawn, it was very dark inside the limo, especially with its heavily darkened windows. A few of the interior lights were on. The ceiling and sunroofs were outlined in LED lights. "Does anyone want some hot coffee?" Rudolph asked as he poured a cup.

Judith said she could use one, but both Keith and Ken politely declined. Rudolph asked if she wanted sugar or cream. Keith winced. Judith said that black was just fine for her as she was handed the cup. It was a china cup with the Sterling Cruise Lines logo on the side. Rudolph poured himself a cup and again asked if either of the boys would like a cup. They were through the light Saturday morning traffic and at the airport before Judith had finished her coffee. Rudolph took it from her and placed it in a bin built into the side of the vehicle. She could feel the cold breeze again as soon as Ken opened the door. She was glad that she had the coffee to warm her up, that and Keith's strong arm around her. As they neared the jet, the copilot opened the door, dropped the stairs, and ran down the stairs to welcome them. They quickly entered and the door was pulled up and closed behind them.

The copilot took Ken's suit and hung it in the closet along with their overcoats. Judith and Keith's backpacks were also put in there after Keith removed his laptop.

"You just never go anywhere without your laptop, do you, Honey. Have you given it a name like Jeremy has one?"

"No, because Jeremy would get jealous," he laughed.

"I thought you said that Jeremy didn't have the jealousy emotion?"

"True, but he could develop it. Remember when I said that he learned the emotion of wanting to be called a son from observing me?"

"That's not an emotion."

"No, but 'longing' is and he can act it out."

Ken added, "Better watch out, Buddy, Jeremy is going to get you in trouble someday. It would be interesting to let Jeremy go through Professor Young's program. He might top all three of us in the brains department."

"That's an idea. If it wasn't such a security risk to us, I would certainly like to put a copy of Jeremy into Dad's school."

Ken was quick to ask, "What do you mean 'Dad's school'?"

"That was a deliberate slip. I was going to tell you someday anyhow. Rudolph, I don't know if you have heard this either, but I thought it was going to be difficult to hold it back when I see Professor Young today. He has asked me to call him, 'Dad' and he will be calling me his son." Keith went on to tell them about his visit with Professor Young in October when he went back to Platteville for his things he wanted to move to his cabin on the ship.

"And that was the first time I could finally call someone Dad. It feels really great, by the way."

Judith had been holding his hand as he was telling the story. She could feel him tense up in some places and she gave him some tight squeezes in those places. That helped him relax and he looked at her with a smile knowing that she was now with him for the rest of his life. When Keith finished, both Ken and Rudolph gave him some reassuring words and Judith threw her arms around him.

Keith looked at Judith. "Judith's father has also asked me to call him 'Dad' and I am going to have a wife. I don't need anything else in my life."

Rudolph commented, "But you will be having more, much more in your lives, both of you will. Perhaps you haven't noticed it yet, but I have at times referred to both of you as my son and daughter. Now that Lloyd has told you that I have known both of you since you were born, you may understand why I have done that. End of subject; no questions, please."

Ken looked back and forth at the three of them. He felt as if he had a large question mark painted on his face, but he wasn't getting any help from any of them. It had all the earmarks of one of Professor Young's strangely worded questions that they often got in school from him. He looked directly at Keith. "Are you going to fill me in, Buddy?"

"Nope, not until we get back to the ship, please."

Ken nodded.

* * *

They snoozed or snuggled, depending upon which passenger you were looking at. After a length of time, the copilot parted the curtain and came in to shake Ken gently to wake him up. "Mr. Wenzell, you wanted to be awakened when we cleared the Chicago airspace. We will be making our landing approach soon."

Ken jumped up. "Thank you very much. I'd better get dressed."

The copilot handed him the clothes hanger with his suit on it and directed him to the rear restroom. "You may change in there, sir."

"When you are out, let me know so I can go in and comb my hair," Judith asked.

Keith drew his head back to look at her. "Why would you have to do that?"

"Because you have been teasing my hair since we sat down in here, that's why. Not that I mind, of course."

In a few moments the copilot came back into the cabin again. "Mr. Sterling, we just received a radio message asking if we would participate in a flyover at the cemetery to honor Mrs. Young. She was a pilot that we have met many times. May we have your permission?"

"Yes, of course. That would be very fitting."

"Thank you, sir. We will be flying as the second element leader."

"Beautiful. I almost wish that I could be in the plane with you."

When both Ken and Judith were back in their seats, Rudolph explained the flyover honor. "Four planes will fly level over the cemetery in the four-finger formation. It is called that because they fly in the shape of the ends of the four fingers of your hand. The plane in the position of your ring finger is called the second element leader. That has its basis in an early fighter pilot tactic. When they are directly above the cemetery, the second element leader does a sharp vertical pull up until he is out of sight. This represents the missing or departed pilot. We were asked to be second element leader possibly because our plane is more suited to making such a sharp and fast climb. Witnessing the flyover is a very emotional experience for pilots." He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes just thinking about it.

They were met at the airport by a local limousine service. As they got into the limo, the driver greeted Judith. "Good morning, Ms. Overstreet. I drove your parents down here from Prairie du Chen last night. They said you would be coming in with Mr. Sterling. And how are you, sir?"

"Fine, thank you, Jerome. Thank you for making these arrangements for us. There will be room enough in here for all of us, the Overstreet's, Keith's aunt, and Ken's parents. I believe you know everyone here?"

"It has been a while, but yes we have all met somewhere in our past. How are you, Ken and Keith? Congratulations on your engagement, Judith and Keith. My wife and I wish you both the very best."

After Jerome got into the front where he couldn't hear them, Keith and Ken both asked who he was. Rudolph said that Jerome used to own all of the Shell Oil stations in that part of Wisconsin. He has a unique ability to remember everyone he has ever met. Starting a limo service was a natural for him as everyone knew him too. "You two probably don't remember him 'cause you always had your heads buried in books. I would guess that you will see more limos in the funeral procession today than you have ever seen in one place before, including presidential processions. Jerome has probably called in everyone in the area that owns a limo to honor Lloyd's wife."

They drove the few minutes to the funeral home in Platteville. They arrived much earlier than the scheduled time for the viewing to begin, but the parking lot was already beginning to fill up. Professor Young met them at the door with hugs for everyone. "You were so kind to come here today. Thank you so much."

"My son and daughter! How wonderful to see you. You are both so radiant even in your black attire. Everyone will know you are in love without even knowing who you are, just by looking at the two of you."

"Thanks, Dad, we are happy to see you too, just not for the reason to see you. We are so blessed that you arranged for Judith and me to meet each other. We will never forget you for this. We hope you will now be able to attend our wedding on Sterling Paradise in June."

"I would come even if you didn't invite me. I adore both of you!"

Judith asked, "May I call you 'Dad' too? You are so important to both of us!"

He answered with a big hug for Judith. "Thank you."

When the hug lasted longer than he expected, Keith said, "Hey, that's my job."

"And when was there a time limit put on a dad hugging his daughter? Keith, your aunt is inside talking to Judith's parents. You might want to get in there before too many stories are exchanged between them."

"Thanks, Dad. We will talk to you later," they both said in unison.

They quickly found the three of them doing just what Professor Young said they were doing.

Vera saw them first and let out a whoop. "There they are! Judith! Keith! Come over here!"

Judith hugged her mother while Keith hugged his aunt. Then Keith turned and went towards Edward who stuck out his hand. "Oh no, I want to give my dad a hug," Keith said as he gave him a hug.

"That's good, because I like hugs, too," Edward said as he returned the hug. "We are so glad to finally see you in person. You are a bit taller than I expected, but then I'm just six foot. Vera, look who I've got." He handed Keith off to his wife so she could hug Keith and he could hug his daughter.

"Mmmn, I finally have a son to hug me. You are so much more handsome than your pictures. Judith got herself a real hunk."

"Mom!" Judith admonished. "He's mine."

"But I get to hug him, too. That's a privilege reserved for the future mother of the bride. We are so happy for both of you. Jean has been telling us so much about you."

"Aunt Jean, you haven't told them anything embarrassing, have you?"

"What could I possibly say that would be embarrassing? You were always perfect."

"Thank you for giving me my mother's ring. Doesn't it look good on Judith? She decided that a funeral wasn't anyplace to wear the pearls so she left them back on the ship. You will get to see them when you come for the wedding."

Edward asked, "Is this the real ring or the glass one?"

Judith looked at Keith. Keith answered. "We have decided to not answer that question, just from a security standpoint."

"That's probably a good idea. I'm sure we will see the real one at the wedding."

"Correct," Keith responded.

Edward whispered to Keith, "This one is absolutely beautiful. It would be hard to imagine anything with more depth of color or sparkle than this one."

Keith whispered back, "Just wait. We will be in the sunlight then, too. Bring your sunglasses."

Edward felt very proud that Keith would trust him with such a secret. He had great respect and admiration for this young man.

Judith spotted Rudolph walking in after he had spent some time with Professor Young outside. "Mr. Sterling, I would like you to meet my parents. Mom and Dad, this is Rudolph Sterling. Mr. Sterling, my parents, Edward and Vera Overstreet."

"Howdy, Ed. It has been a long time. Vera, nice to see you again, my dear."

Keith and Judith looked at each other as their jaws dropped.

Edward said, "Rudy, since you hired Judith, she has certainly grown into a wonderful young woman."

"She is one of my most trusted employees. If she wasn't with me, I wouldn't have built the Maxx. It is as simple as that."

"And now that we have Keith, we have a team that can't be beat," Judith added.

Jean beamed. "Hello Rudy, it is good to see you again. I can't wait to see your new ship." She looked at the kids. "They can't figure out what's going on with all of us knowing you so well."

"Well, please do not explain it to them, because Lloyd and I have given them a challenge to figure out that very thing. My response to them when they ask about it is always the same, 'my lips are sealed.' I guess we didn't think to tell you about the challenge."

"I don't know what you are talking about; my lips are sealed." Jean tried to look very innocent and she was almost convincing until she burst out laughing.

"I knew we could count on you."

Keith asked, "Does that mean that I can't count on you anymore?"

She thought for a moment then cocked her head and said, “That kind of depends on your question.”

“Oh great. Judith, I think they are ganging up on us.”

“Apparently, they have been doing that for most of our lives. Do you get the feeling they have had a hand in planning our lives?”

“That may be an understatement, but I love the way it is turning out, so it doesn’t matter, does it?”

Rudolph looked up and saw someone else that he knew. “Excuse me for a moment.” He left the group to go and meet another apparently long-time friend. This man was oddly dressed in different articles of clothing where nothing matched. He had a slightly graying pony tail and a black Fedora hat with a peacock feather. Rudolph put his arm around the man and was leading him towards the group.

“I didn’t know that John was going to be here today. But he has also chosen to honor Mrs. Young. I would like to introduce my good friend, John J. Jupiter. John, both Keith and Judith were with me when we examined your island.”

“Yes, I heard that Keith had baby sea turtles watching his proposal to this beautiful young lady.”

Judith was the first to speak up. “We absolutely fell in love with your island. I hope you do not mind too much if I renamed the island, “Sterling Paradise.” You, then, are from Hollywood?”

“Yes, Judith, I own Jupiter Film Productions Ltd. and I am the one that sold the island to Rudy. I was so happy that he found favor with my employees and included them in the deal. I respect each one of them.” He turned to Keith. “And you, young man discovered Jose and his beautiful collection of blue pearls. Marcus Epstein told me about the necklace and earrings he made for you to give to Judith for Christmas.” He held his fingers in the shape of a picture frame and looked through them at Judith. “They could never have found a more beautiful neck to adorn. Henri told me that Jose was ecstatic with your kind and prompt payment.”

“You have left me almost speechless, Mr. Jupiter.”

“John, please.”

“Thank you, John. We are discovering that many people that we have never met before are talking about us. It is a bit unnerving.”

“Learn quickly to live with it and take it in stride without letting it go to your head. One of the major downfalls of many Hollywood people has been to bask in the glow of other people without making an effort to continue to improve themselves. I have seen it happen to many people, many have used their fame to turn to drink and drugs. Just be aware of your growing fame and use it to continue to grow. Judith’s name will soon be on the lips of every travel agency in the world as the best Guest Services Director in the cruise industry. Yours will be known by all of the marketing agencies. ‘Sterling’ will become the name of the best cruise line. Use your fame to improve yourselves. The growing love between you two should be your guide in business as well. End of lecture. How are you?”

Rudolph replied, “Take it from the King of Success. He knows what he is talking about. He saw the opportunity for the Maxx to become unique with overnight stopovers on a tropical island and offered his island to me. Our visit there was more to see how the two of you would react to the opportunity than it was for me to make a decision. You both performed beautifully. You brought along a cameraman who took outstanding footage for persuasive commercials, but then you immersed yourselves into a marriage proposal that will go down in history as the best commercial ever. Keith, you even put together a plan to cross-train Henri and Ken. I told John all about this when I called him to seal the deal. He agrees with me that I have the best two people for my new ship.”

Keith took a deep breath. “John, you asked how we were. Somewhat overwhelmed at the moment is probably the best description. How about you, Sweetheart?”

"I am so pleased to meet you, John. The island, although devoid of guests, was so full of love. It was there between Keith and me, yes, but it was more than that. We could feel it in the layout of the guest accommodations and in the staff and their attitudes to their work. Keith and Henri hit it off so well, they were like long lost brothers. I realize now, after meeting you, that the island and the people on it are an extension of you. It was your love that we felt and I know that it will grow with our care. You are an amazing person and we are blessed to know you."

John smiled. "See what I told you, Rudy? She is an incredible asset. They both are."

* * *

The people just kept coming in. Professor Young was still at the front door and probably did not notice that the funeral home was filling up. Keith asked if he could be excused, then he told Judith he would be back before the service started. He went out to speak to the Professor.

"Dad, it is filling up inside. Would you consider moving the ceremony across the street to the UW field house? It is not even time for the viewing to begin and people can hardly move in there. I see two options. First, move the casket and the ceremony over there. I can get the funeral home staff to set it up. And second, I can quickly hook up the cameras in here to project to the screens over there, if you want the service to be held in the funeral parlor. As you can see there is a long line of cars that are already spilling over to the field house parking lot."

"They are both fine with me, see what the staff here thinks, then do it, Son. I will stay out here until I get cold."

Keith quickly found a staff person and laid out the options. They opted for moving to the field house. Keith called a friend of his that ran the exercise room at the field house. Within minutes the plan was put into place and the pallbearers were utilized to aid in moving the casket to the field house with the many visitors falling in behind them.

John said to Rudolph, "See what I mean about that young man? Those two are the best. Identify the problem, find a good solution, and quickly carry it out with minimal disruption to the benefit of all."

"They are mine; you can't have them."

With the field house's layout, the viewing line moved quickly. Professor Young helped the movement by stationing himself at the front door rather than creating a bottleneck next to the casket. The ceremony went according to schedule and the funeral director asked for a show of hands as to how many cars they should expect at the cemetery. Keith thought that the poor man nearly fainted when most of the hands in the field house went up. It was announced that the Grant County Sheriff's Department would provide road control for the procession and if people were not going to be in the procession would they please remain inside until the procession had left the parking lots. Professor Young asked Keith and Judith to please ride with him in the car directly behind the hearse.

At the cemetery only a few of the people could get under the large tent next to the gravesite. Keith and Judith were on either side of their 'dad.' When the service was completed, Keith could see the jets approaching in the distance. Dad didn't know about the flyover. Keith stood and announced to the audience. "As Mrs. Young was a pilot, some of her friends have decided to do a flyover in the missing man formation in her honor." He no sooner got the words out of his mouth when the planes approached low from in front of them in the four-finger formation. Right overhead the Sterling jet pulled up sharply and poured on the power. They could feel the heat of the exhausts from his two engine jet as it quickly climbed out of sight.

It was too much for Professor Young. He stood but completely lost it and broke down sobbing. Keith and Judith grabbed him before he collapsed and helped him to his seat. They sat with him until he could regain his composure to a degree. Dad used his handkerchief and Keith pulled one out quickly for Judith who was also sobbing. The pounding of the jets on their chests brought most people to their knees. It was like a trigger that sent them into a state of emotional sobbing. Even the

funeral director was wiping his eyes as he announced that the flowers on the casket could be taken by the friends.

Professor Young said, "Wow, I didn't expect that. What a beautiful tribute to a beautiful lady."

"I think it was just thought up this morning. Rudolph's copilot told us just before we landed that they had just gotten the request by radio. They were in the plane that represented your wife."

"Yes, I recognized it. I recognized each one of them. We had all flown into Oshkosh for the EAA Fly-In for many years. The lead plane was ours."

"Hmm, so the other two planes up there were from the group of your friends that knew us since we were born?"

"My lips are sealed."

Judith grabbed him and gave him a big kiss.

"What was that for?"

"I was wondering if I could unseal them."

"I felt them melting. They haven't had a good kiss in quite a while now. She has been so sick for so long. At last she is in a beautiful place and she doesn't have any pain anymore." He looked at both of them. "You two are so very special to me. Words can't express how I feel about you two. I knew that I wanted you to meet and I just couldn't find a way to do it so that you wouldn't feel that I was pushing the two of you together. When Rudy told me his plans for building the Maxx and that Judith was going to be the lead person on the ship, I asked him about his security plans. Keith had almost completed his work on Jeremy, so I suggested that to Rudy. Then the two of us put together this plan to introduce the two of you to each other as co-workers. It just came together like a brilliant art form. Once Keith was on the ship, we let nature take its course. I nearly died when Rudy told me that you had pulled a gun on Keith."

Judith appeared shocked, "I never told Rudolph about that."

"I did once some time later," Keith admitted.

"Well Keith did like the way you arranged his cabin for him, didn't he?"

"I loved it as soon as Judith showed it to me."

"Honey, don't you remember that I said that if you didn't want the job, I was going to take you to your cabin and open your refrigerator for you?"

"I do, but I was hooked already-both on the room and you."

"No, I think I had to work slowly on you for quite a while before you began to show interest in me."

"I told Ken the first day that you were beautiful and he even asked me then if I was interested in you. I said it was possible. Actually I really liked it when you pulled the gun on me. I thought, *she's good. I like her attitude.*"

They all laughed.

"Do you really have to leave so soon? I wish you could stay so we could talk some more."

"If we talked it would only be a one-sided conversation. I would be pumping you with questions about your Challenge and you would have your lips sealed. Guess we'd better get going. Besides, we don't want to miss our ride back."

"Rudy can be persuaded."

"But you can't."

"Oh all right. Please be sure to keep in touch. If I don't see Rudy before you leave, please thank him for coming and bringing the three of you."

Keith said, "I almost forgot about Ken. He's been with his parents every time I've seen him."

"As it should be. When kids move away from their families to take on a new job, there is a separation pain that shoots through the family. Any reunion, no matter what the reason, is an

important re-bonding time. That's the reason I would like you to stay longer as I am sure they are saying the same thing. Have a safe flight back."

They both said thanks to him as they moved to locate Rudolph and Jerome's limo. When they found him, Ken was already with him.

* * *

As they settled into the warm Sterling jet, the copilot made a cursory check of their seatbelts and said the Grant County Municipal Airport was very busy with all the guests that had flown in. Mr. Epstein's plane was just taking off and they were two behind it in line for takeoff. The weather was good all the way back so it would be a smooth flight and Ken could catch up on his sleep.

* * *

After they left the Chicago airspace, the copilot came back to talk to Mr. Sterling.

"Of course. You need not have even asked me. Let's go."

The copilot went back into the cockpit and the seatbelt signs went on right away.

Rudolph announced that they were landing immediately to pick up Marcus Epstein. His plane had developed a low oil pressure in one engine and they landed at a small field in Indiana to fix the problem. Without knowing how long it would take to fix it, Marcus had asked if they could carry him back to New York City. There was plenty of room for him as he was the only passenger in his plane.

They landed and taxied over to where the Epstein jet was waiting for them. The Sterling jet cut its port engine and feathered its starboard engine before the door opened and the stairs were unfolded. Mr. Epstein was only carrying a briefcase and his topcoat as he entered the plane.

"Rudy, thank you so much for this inconvenience. I really appreciate it. Do you have enough av-gas with the extra weight and the extra takeoff? Call over the truck and I'll buy."

The copilot said he had already calculated and determined that they had much more than they needed as they had gassed up right after the flyby.

"That turned out really awesome, didn't it? I asked my guys to put that together. Hey, there are the newly engaged kids. So nice to see you. Rudy told me that Judith really liked her pearl necklace. I am so glad we were able to do that for you. My shop supervisor did the work himself; he does exquisite work."

The port engine had been started and was already up to operating temperature. Rudolph had to remind Marcus to sit down and buckle up. He sat in front of Rudolph in the swivel seat that was now facing forward as they began to taxi. Keith thought he was much more talkative than he had been at his jewelry store. Perhaps this was his real personality and he was only subdued in his high scale jewelry store. When they got to cruising altitude, Marcus swiveled his seat to face Rudolph across the small table between them. He unbuckled his seatbelt and rose to go over to Ken, who was beginning to doze off again.

"Hi Ken, I'm Marcus. I got to meet your parents today. Very nice people. I can see why you are so nice, too. The apple never falls far from the tree." He went on and on seemingly without taking a breath.

Ken was blinking and trying to keep his eyes open, but he wasn't winning in that area. Judith went to his rescue.

"Marcus, Ken pulled the night shift on the ship last night. He went right from the keyboard to the car to the airfield without even a nap. This is the time of day that he is usually sleeping so he is not his usual sparkling self, right now."

Ken said, "I am so sorry. Was I that obvious? I find you interesting, Marcus. I really do."

"Marcus, let the boy sleep for a few hours. He is one of my three top employees. You just caught him at a bad time."

"I'm sorry Ken. In my job I don't get to chat with people very much, so when I'm with friends, I like to talk. You should try a light-blocking mask. Here I have a fresh one in my pocket. I almost always

carry one on my plane so I can sleep during the day if I need to. Put it on and keep it, you never know when you'll need it. Judith, thank you for telling me. As I said, I get carried away with my chatter sometimes."

He returned to his seat and talked for the rest of the flight with Rudolph in quiet tones. Judith and Keith enjoyed the quiet as they snuggled together until they landed. The copilot reported to Marcus that his plane's only problem was a failed oil pressure gauge, which they replaced. All of the pressures were fine now and his plane was already in the air for the remainder of the trip.

JONESY #2

The next week Keith was in CCC putting together a list of the cabins that still had not signed up for a departure date. Donald was there working on his greeting card programs. "Hey Donald, how would you layout a spreadsheet for this?" He knew; he just wanted to challenge Donald. "I need a list of cabin numbers and the number of guests currently assigned to each cabin, then I want to print that file with one cabin on each page and the total cost per day for that cabin as it is currently occupied. Should I put the cabin numbers in rows or columns?"

Donald quickly answered, "Put them in a column. That way you can issue a print command with a limitation of one print row per page. You can put the description of the page into the page headers then by putting the column headers on each page and the specific data for that cabin would then print. If you sorted the file by the assigned steward, the printouts would be grouped by steward."

"Very good. I like your knowledge of MS systems. How is your project coming along for....What the...?"

Jeremy was displaying "JONESY" in red letters on the main screen.

"Jeremy, Virus Detect," Keith quickly commanded.

"Confirmed."

"Jeremy, what is on your screen right now?"

"Just some dots in no particular pattern."

"How did they get there?"

"I put them in there using the specific instructions that you gave me."

"That I gave you! When did I give them to you?"

"Those instructions are part of the original code that you wrote and programmed into the 'Ship Program.' Version 2.006.04.01 is currently running."

"Jeremy show me all of the similarities between your two current virus detect files."

"Confirmed."

"How many are there?"

"Six thousand four hundred and seven."

"Put them on the screen and I will look at them."

"Confirmed."

"Donald, do you want to look at these with me?"

"Sure. I really like the way you can talk to Jeremy. Can I do that sometime?"

"Someday I hope you can, but for now only the security chiefs, assistant security chiefs, and your Dad can talk with Jeremy. That is just a security measure. When you are 18, I'll see if there isn't some way that we can add you in too. OK. Here is the list. The plan is to see if we can figure out how this virus got into Jeremy, where it is, what triggers it, and what it means for the future."

"Keith, look, both were on the second Thursday at exactly 2 pm. The second Thursday next month is February 14th. Have Jeremy remind you before 2 pm. Maybe if we are all watching on that day and time, we might recognize some events leading up to the 'JONESY' display or we might see something that we hadn't seen before."

"Definitely. You know, you are the only one that has seen both of the JONESY attacks. You may turn out to be our expert, here."

"You are not suspecting me again, are you?" Donald sounded worried.

"Absolutely not. There is no way for you to pass instructions from your keyboard to Jeremy. Besides Jeremy is saying that I put that code in there. I will be reverse engineering that portion of the

code to see if I can learn anything more. This could keep me busy for a couple of months. I also want to look at the slow motion video from our new camera here.”

Departure Dates for Displaced People

After two reminders and 30 days had gone by with only a minimal number of sign-ups for departure dates, Judith was getting worried. She asked Keith what he thought they should do. He said, "Let's get a meeting of the stewards together. Call Michael and have him set it up in one of the smaller theatres as soon as he can get them all together. We should have a tentative plan pulled together, but I want to see what the stewards' ideas are about using them to spread the word. Here's a thought, after Michael has it set up, let's put out a message to everyone on Channel 3 that their stewards will be in a meeting at such and such a time to discuss departure dates for their cabin assignments."

"I think we should get the stewards' agreement to participate in an arrangement like that before we announce that they will be doing it."

"We need the extra help. If Michael thinks they can do it, let's go ahead with the announcement. We need to begin putting some teeth into our announcements. I want the guests to leave on their own accord without having the sheriff in here to enforce their removal. That would really be a blow to our image."

After getting Michael's approval, Judith put out the announcement of the meeting with the stewards for the purpose of assigning departure dates for the guests. Even before the time of the meeting people began showing up at the Guest Services office and calls began coming in. Most were apologetic for not signing up sooner, but some complained that they didn't know how they would be ready to move out that soon. That was all reported to the meeting with the stewards.

When the meeting with the stewards started, Keith began by bringing them up to a common understanding of the original plan of helping the displaced people for about four months. Some of the stewards were hired before Sandy, some were hired from the Sandy people and some were hired since then. He wanted them all on the same page. He let them know that the specific ending date had now been established as February 28th.

"Thus far the response to our request for them to choose their last day with us has been very slow and spotty. We feel that specific face-to-face contact with them is needed to get them to commit to an end date. That is where you come in. You have built a rapport with our guests and you know how to modify or individualize your contact with each of our guests. What information do you need from us that would be helpful to you in your conversations with them?"

There was a lot of discussion before they got down to making really good comments and suggestions. One said that she would like to know the value the guests had received per cabin and also per person over the four months. Another asked if the guests could be billed if they stayed over and what that amount would be. Most thought that was a good idea as most rental places would cost less than what the Maxx would charge and that would be very persuasive. Keith added, "The number of nice rental units may be very limited so the sooner they contract for one, the better."

Judith thanked them all for the interesting discussion and said she would print up the charges for each cabin and the per person charges for meals and services including the tipping fees that would be added to their bills if they missed their departure deadline. If they stayed beyond the beginning of their cruise departure dates, they would be responsible for payments of the entire cruise as determined by the specific cabin they are occupying, even with their Charter Passenger discount. "Thank you once again for your exceptional dedication. I am determined to get through this without any embarrassment to Mr. Sterling. I will have the printouts for you to pick up in the Guest Services office within two hours. As an added incentive to leave the ship, we will hold a special 'Going Away Party' in the Ballroom on Saturday, February 16th for those who have signed up for an exit date. And as a special bonus for your efforts, each steward will receive up to \$100 for persuading them to sign up. Whatever percentage of

your assigned rooms that have signed up by midnight on the 15th will be the percentage of \$100 that you will receive. That will not go through the payroll system and it will not be taxable as it will be a gift from me for your efforts. If you are having trouble with some guests, please let us know. We will do all we can to bring each of you up to 100%.”

That was well received by all of the stewards. It did not amount to a lot of money for any of them, but they understood the seriousness of the effort that each of them would have to put in to accomplish the task for Mr. Sterling.

As they were leaving to go back to CCC, Judith asked Keith. “Did I go too far with any of that?”

“No. The money was a surprise, but I will give it all to you. We don’t need to let Rudolph know about it. Will your team put the party together?”

“Sure, it was their idea anyway. They enjoyed putting on the Christmas parties so much.”

“Why not make it a Valentine’s Day theme. It will only be two days after Valentine’s. If our response rate is really good, I could bring in the media to advertise that we will be ready for cruise guests by the time we sail in May.”

“I like that, mister marketing. That would be a good time to run our engagement ad again, too.”

“Now who is the marketing wizard?”

* * *

The stewards did an outstanding job of putting out the information to those who had not yet signed up. By the end of the week there was an avalanche of signups. There were only five holdouts. Of those, four did not know how to read the information or did not understand what it meant. When the stewards went back to talk to them individually again, they signed up. That left only one person and he was very belligerent. He wasn’t going to leave and he didn’t have any money for the rent. Keith went to talk to him and told him that while it was unfortunate, he would have the sheriff come in and physically remove him on March 1st. He explained that the first was a Friday and his finding a hotel room would be difficult on a weekend. A complaint would also be filed with the sheriff’s office for any damage that might be caused by him. His only reply was that they should go ahead and do that as he was homeless anyway.

Keith asked him, “Mr. Whitehorse, what did you do to earn a living before you were homeless?”

He replied that he had run a physical fitness gym and he used to make sixty thousand a year before the mob took over, ran him out, and stole all his money. He hid in the streets from them and slept under bridges. They even took over his apartment.

“I wondered if you hadn’t had a good body at one time. I remember when you arrived, you were almost starved; you were so thin. I have seen you working out in the gym and getting back into shape. If the mob stayed away, would you go back to running one or more gyms?”

“I would certainly do that. I loved the business.”

“One job that we didn’t advertise for on the ship was a physical fitness instructor for our three fitness gyms here. If I offered that job to you, what would you do to make our gyms the best on any ship?”

Mr. Whitehorse suddenly went from belligerent to enthusiastic. He laid out a plan for Keith that would certainly put them into the top rating for gyms. “You also need to make one of gyms into an exclusively woman’s fitness center and there should be a place for inactive retirees to improve their flexibility. Would you be agreeable to maintain one of the gyms as a registered physical therapy center? Then people could sign up for a cruise and continue with their doctor-ordered PT schedule. We would have to hire a licensed PT therapist.”

“Which performance enhancing drugs do you recommend?”

"I don't touch that stuff and I refuse to work with anyone that does. That was one of the reasons that the mob ran me out. They wanted me to push all kinds of drugs and I refused."

"Congratulations! Now you are off the list of people that have to leave by the end of the month. All you will have to do is move to a cabin on the crew's decks. Welcome aboard, Director. I am going to have you report to me in Marketing, rather than to Judith. Her plate is already full, but you will be responsible to both of us. Put a plan on my desk in seven days that includes your wish list with some futuristic ideas. You could also design a line of exercise clothing that we could sell in our ship's stores."

"Really? Wow, thank you very much."

When Keith left Mr. Whitehorse, he went to the Wells Fargo bank office on the ship.

"Hello Keith. What can we do for you today?"

"I just wanted to give you a head's up. I know it is Friday, but I will make a \$37,500 withdrawal on Wednesday from my personal account and I want it all in twenty dollar bills."

"That sounds like some very expensive confetti for the Valentine's Day party."

Laughing, "I'd even go to a party like that. No, this is a gift for the ship's stewards and I'd like five twenties in each of 375 envelopes. Would you be able to load your cash dispenser with the bills and have it spit out five at a time that I could put into the envelopes? That would save me a ton of time if you could."

"We can do all that for you. Do you have special envelopes or do you want to use ours and do you want them left open or should we put them through our sealer?"

"If you gave me 375 sealed envelopes with five twenties in each one, I would be as happy as a baby loon riding on his mommy's back out on a calm lake. I will put stickers with the names of each steward on them and hand them out by the end of the week. Thank you so much. Do you want me to write a check against it now and pick up the cash later?"

"That won't be necessary, Keith. You can just sign for the filled envelopes when you pick them up. I will call you when they are ready early next week. Thank you for the advance notice. That is a very kind gift for the stewards. Is there anything else that I can help you with today?"

"You have already taken a huge load off my back. Thank you very much. Have a good day."

"You too and say hello to Judith for us."

"I will. She is the one making the gifts to the stewards."

* * *

Back in CCC, Keith loaded thirteen sheets of sticky-backed label paper into the printer.

"Good Morning Jeremy."

"You seem very happy today, Keith. Am I right?"

"Yes, of course. You are always right and thank you for noticing."

"I like being right. What do you want me to print on those labels?"

"Please print the name of each of the stewards, one on each label, sorted alphabetically by last name. Put the last name in caps on the first line and the rest of the name on the next one or two lines. Adjust the font size to fit the space. Any questions?"

"No, the job is already in the printer queue. You should design a faster printer."

"It has a pretty good speed; it is just slower when it uses labels, so they don't get stuck going through the printer at the speed that you would like. Besides it is done already. Thanks Jeremy. Were there 375 names?"

"Yes. Did you count them that fast, Keith?"

"Ah Ha! I gotcha that time. You forgot that I counted them yesterday for another reason."

"Well one could have quit by then. I keep my records updated, you know."

Bill was laughing. He loved the banter that Keith and Jeremy always seemed to get into.

"You two are a hoot. I love listening to you. One is always trying to get the best of the other."

"You can imagine what it was like at school with nobody else to talk to all day when I was writing the last of his programming. I would have gone crazy without Jeremy."

"I tried to keep him sane, Bill. I think I did a pretty good job," Jeremy said.

"Yes you did, Jeremy. Thank you."

"My pleasure, Keith."

"I will put these labels in my Inbox on the counter in the next room. Jeremy, if any of these stewards leaves before February 16th please let me know. I will also ask Michael tomorrow morning when he comes in to exercise."

"There are none scheduled to leave. I will let you know when there are changes."

Keith spoke into his radio. "Judith, everyone is signed up to leave on time. I hired the last holdout. Do you want to call Rudolph with an update?"

"He is up in his suite, why don't you go up and tell him. The whole thing started as your idea; you should tell him 'mission accomplished', OK?"

"I'll go see him. Thanks. The bank will prepare the 375 envelopes for us as all the stewards will be getting one."

"Great. Love you, Honey."

"You too."

Before he went to see Rudolph, he made a call to the Wall Street Journal.

"Business News, Marv."

"This is a person who asked not to be identified."

"Keith, is there a leak on the Maxx?"

"No, we are still nice and dry in here. I just wanted you to know that without any problems, all of the displaced persons living on the Maxx have scheduled their exit dates ahead of the end-of-month deadline. The leaving times were arranged by the stewards who will be given a total of over thirty-seven K as a thank you. Then add the usual about us leaving NYC in April and moving to our home port of Tampa in time for our first cruise 16 May. Do your magic with it again, OK?"

"It would be easier if I knew who was calling me with this leak. Gotta love caller ID. Thanks, Keith. How's Judith? You lucky guy."

"She is wonderful as usual. I didn't see you at Professor Young's wife's funeral. Were you there?"

"No, I couldn't get away, but I did send him a card with a nice note. I only had him for the one class while I was at Platteville, so I didn't know him that well. How was it?"

"She was a pilot so her friends did an unscheduled missing man flyover at the gravesite. It was incredible. Sterling's plane did the sharp climb, spot-on over the casket. I thought the flowers were going to wilt, they were so low. Very emotional. Judith and I had to hold the professor up when his knees buckled."

"Why the heck didn't the news services cover that? Can you find anyone that took pictures?"

"I will check for you. Gotta go plug that leak. Thanks."

"Call anytime, Keith."

Keith thought, *I gotta remember to invite him to the wedding*, as he walked up the stairs to Rudolph's cabin.

Rudolph met him at the door.

"Mission accomplished, sir." Keith saluted.

"Come in and relax. What mission?"

"Every displaced person that was not hired has signed up for an exit date within our boundaries. I had anticipated there would be some difficult situations and we would have to bring in the sheriff, but they all agreed to a date. The stewards did most of the persuasive work and we have arranged for \$100 gifts to each of them for their outstanding efforts."

Rudolph was very pleased. "I will tell payroll to print their checks."

"No, please. This one is on us. I have already arranged with the bank to put together five \$20 bills in envelopes for each of them. By doing it this way, it is a gift from Judith that they won't have to declare on their income taxes. It is a good stimulus gift from their leader. We are also throwing a Valentine's Day party next Saturday in the ballroom. Would you care to be on the stage to share the love for all of the people that will be leaving?"

"I would be glad to as long as you don't ask me to dress in a red spandex jumpsuit."

Keith laughed, "That was funny when you told me to do that. I was ready to get down on my knees and plead with you until I realized you were joking."

"You should have seen the look on your face. What about the three of us in formal wear for the party? Anyone working could also be in formal wear."

"Good, that would show our ship's transition from casual to formal on that date. We won't even suggest that the guests dress up. It will just be our statement of what we will be as we transition to a luxury cruise ship."

"Excellent. I will make a point of explaining that in my short remarks, Son."

"You and Dad have certainly put together an interesting challenge for us. It almost broke down at the funeral as we suspect that all six of you were there, but there are still a lot of questions."

"My lips are sealed."

"You should have seen Judith when Professor Young said that to her. She planted a kiss on him to melt the sealing wax on his lips."

"Did it work?"

"No, but he did say that he felt them melting."

"He needed that. Good for her. The caregiver is often forgotten when someone is near death or has died. His or her intense effort to provide the care can be very draining and they are sometimes completely ignored. Knowing Judith, she knew exactly what she was doing."

"She did; we talked about it on your plane."

"Thank you for your wonderful report on the displaced people, Keith. You have made me and this ship very, very proud."

Keith left with a smile on his face after receiving an unexpected hug.

JONESY #3

Even before 2 p.m. on February 14th Donald was busy rounding up his dad, Judith, Ken, and Keith. Jeremy alerted Keith while they were there that another 'JONESY' attack could be imminent. Tom was already there to take over from Bill. Keith had given Donald access to the file of comparisons between the two previous attacks. Donald printed out all 6407 similarities. He had assigned a level of importance to each of the 6407 and sorted the file with those he thought had a major importance at the top of the list. Twenty-five of them stood out in his mind as being noteworthy and he highlighted them. Each person had a copy of the numbered list for ease of having them all focus on a single item to talk about.

Keith walked in and found Donald leading the discussion. Keith had a broad smile on his face. *"We need to hire this amazing kid,"* he thought. He called Professor Young. "Do you have the time to watch a discussion of the JONESY virus? Donald has taken this on as a project and I'd like you to watch him. He is good. OK, thanks." He made a few keystrokes on the main keyboard and it connected Professor Young to their room microphone.

Donald said, "Hi Keith, I started early because I knew you were nearby."

"Good for you. Just so you all know, I have added Professor Young to the discussion as an observer. He can see and hear you, but I don't have his video input on the screen so it won't be intimidating to anyone. Please continue, Donald."

"As I was saying, Keith gave me access to Jeremy's file of 6407 similar facts between the first two virus attacks. I went through them and assigned an importance level to each one. We should begin by each of us looking quickly through the list and seeing whether you would have made any major differences in the ratings from what I gave them. I know most of you are speed readers, so it should not take you too long. I also know that most of you can hear and think at the same time, so I will continue to talk. And if anyone has a thought, please talk at the same time that I am talking and I will record your thoughts. If you are referring to a particular item, please use its number on the sheet so that I can record your views as I am talking."

What proceeded next would seem to be a din like the stock market has never heard. Everyone was talking at the same time and Donald was making marks on his set of papers with incredible speed. At the same time he continued to explain why he thought the top twenty-five deserved to be there.

Donald called out loudly, "TIME! We are just ten minutes away from what we expect will be another virus attack. Will everyone kindly give thought to what is happening right now around the world, but especially here on the Maxx? Keith, tell Jeremy to kick into what we talked about, please."

"Jeremy, run the 'Donald Thought Process'."

"Confirmed."

Every screen in the room lit up with images from key positions on the ship.

Professor Young just quietly shook his head in awe of this seventeen year old wizard. *"What a truly amazing young man!"* he thought. *"I am going to put his analysis into my virus detection classes."*

The room was silent. At ten seconds before 2 p.m. Donald pointed to Keith. Keith called out, "Jeremy virus detect" and waited.

A display of a digital clock appeared on the main screen. Everyone watched it and at precisely 2:00:00.00 they saw the infamous red letters spelling 'JONESY' on the screen. Keith called out, "Jeremy, what is on your screen?"

"Just some dots in no particular pattern."

Donald said, "That is exactly what Jeremy said last time."

Then the clock display returned without losing any time during the duration of the virus' display on the screen.

"Jeremy, show me all of the similarities among your three current virus detect files."

"Confirmed."

"How many are there?"

"Four thousand five hundred and eleven."

Donald said, "That is an improvement of 1896 or 29.59%. At least we are improving in that department." He did not have a calculator in his hand.

Everyone stared at each other, wondering about this math wizard.

After an energetic discussion, Keith offered his thoughts. "I have come to believe that the JONESY virus is probably innocuous and is most likely in the code that I have written into the main program. There were a very small number of people that helped me code this program and one or more of them may have had some light hearted moments when they thought they would attempt to trick me. They were successful, but they will not remain undiscovered much longer. I want to thank everyone in this room and in Platteville for their expert eyes and ears. Most of all I want to thank Donald who wanted to lead this discussion and analysis today. We now all know what he is made of and we are all extremely impressed with all his abilities that he has shown us today. Thank you!" Even before Keith had finished, applause had begun.

Donald looked pleased, but embarrassed to have his dad and all the other Ph.D.'s applauding him. His dad reached over and gave him a big hug while he was trying to mouth a 'Thank You' to everyone.

Keith's phone rang. "Keith, fully activate my audio so I can congratulate, Donald."

"Donald, this is Professor Young in Platteville. I am absolutely enthralled by your analysis, confidence, and presentation. It was better than many well-trained doctoral candidates have done. Would you please send me a description of your analytical processes? And with your permission I would like to incorporate it into my classes on virus detection. I will refer to it as the Donald Jones system and after you edit it, I will see that it is published in the best reference journals. Furthermore, if you wish, I will see that you get a full scholarship to UW-Platteville. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Professor Young. I still have another year of high school, but I have begun my search for a university and UW-Platteville is already at the top of my list."

"Keith, thank you for letting me in on this young man's accomplishments. I am already late for a meeting, but this was more important than any other meeting could be. Signing off, thank you."

As the meeting broke up, each person in the room went over to Donald and shook his hand. When they were through, Keith asked Donald, his dad, Judith and Ken to go into the conference room with him. He set the room to secure and closed the door. Everyone please sit and be comfortable. I was late for the meeting because I was conferring with Mr. Sterling's legal advisors. Since the Jones family arrived, I have always wanted to hire Donald in some capacity. I was under the impression that we had to wait until he was 18, because I was looking at it from the standpoint of age of majority to sign documents. However, I was told that as long as he keeps accurate records of his time of day for each episode of beginning and ending his work, and he does not exceed 8 hours in any one of 6 days per week, I may hire him. There are other rules pertaining to working on schooldays and the day before a school day, however, since he is not registered in a school – he is home schooled, those rules do not pertain to him. Therefore, if he and his parents agree..."

Donald couldn't wait for Keith to finish and he shouted out, "YES!"

"If he and his parents agree, I am appointing him to a newly created position of Security Systems Assistant. Welcome Aboard, Donald. You have earned this position."

David smiled through his tears, "Thank you, Keith. You said you were looking into this and asked if my wife and I would agree. We talked about it and gladly agree. Donald didn't know until now, though."

"Ken, I asked you in here too, as I've said that I will mentor you, so that you can grow in this organization. Donald will report only to you. That will help him, and it will help you by having a direct report to manage. You are awake in the afternoons and that coincides nicely with Donald's available work time."

Donald asked, "Does this mean that I can do more around here?"

"Yes, definitely. Just let Ken know before you begin any new projects. You will have to keep him informed of your projects and of your progress every two days or three times a week. Do not get us into any trouble with the State by going over 8 hours per day or 6 days per week. These are upper limits of work time. Remember your schooling comes first and foremost."

"Definitely. If it is agreeable to you, I will not work Sundays and we can begin on Monday after my home schooling session."

"That will be perfect. Dad, will you get your son's badge changed with his new title, please?"

"I will be glad to."

"Thanks. I think we are through here. Judith, is there anything I can do to help you with the Valentine Party?"

"No, Honey. The team has everything in place."

"I knew you would have it covered. I just wanted to hear you call me 'Honey' again." Keith gave her a hug.

Valentine's Day Dance

On Friday Keith accompanied Judith as she passed out the gift envelopes to the 375 stewards. She greeted each one by name and thanked them. She shook the hands of all the men and hugged each of the women. When they finished passing out the envelopes, she thanked Keith for holding them so that her hands were free for the greetings.

The next day just before it was time for the party, Judith and Keith dressed in their formal wear for the party. Keith walked into Judith's cabin.

"Wow, you look fantastic in a tux, Honey! All of the ladies will be drooling over you."

"I'll try to keep my shoes shined up if they do. Talk about fantastic, you are a cover girl for Miss Formal Wear of the year. There is only one thing missing."

Judith looked back and forth over her long formal dress.

"Here," as he handed her a corsage.

"Oh Honey, how beautiful. It even matches my dress, how did you know what I was going to wear?"

"I asked Jodi and she obviously kept the secret for me."

"Will you pin it on me, sir?"

"Do you have any bandages in here, just in case I miss?"

"Someone who puts tiny transistors and other electronics into place on a tiny circuit board is afraid that he won't be careful enough to pin a corsage on his sweetheart?"

He refused saying, "Circuit boards don't bleed."

"Here I will show you how to do it, but only this once. You are on your own next time."

"I don't ever want to be on my own again." He kissed her suddenly before she had a chance to put the corsage on and he ran into the pin with his hand. "Ouch!"

She felt sorry for him, but they both laughed at the situation. He was worried about pricking her and now he had done it to himself. She put on her corsage and turned to hug him. "You can be so funny sometimes."

"You are in heels, so let's go out our 14th deck door. I don't want you getting your heels caught in the metal bars in the steps going down to the CCC."

As they got out into the hallway, she put her hand through his arm. They took the elevator down to the ballroom deck. When they arrived, they took their place just inside the main door to greet the guests that would be leaving by the end of the month. The ballroom was beautifully decorated in red and white hearts.

Michael was also in a tux and stood between Keith and the doorway. Michael announced the names of each couple or family as they entered the ballroom. This gave Keith and Judith the opportunity to greet everyone by their names. Each person entering the ballroom had a broad smile and many had comments on how formal and beautiful the room was.

After all of the guests were assembled, Judith and Keith walked up onto the stage and welcomed everyone. Judith announced, "We wanted this to be a happy remembrance of your time here with us. We know you will be leaving us soon, but we hope you will be back to join us on a cruise at some time. Let us celebrate our love this evening and especially the love of one special man that brought you here out of the wrath of Super Storm Sandy. And here he is now, Mister Rudolph Sterling." Judith pointed to the side of the stage.

Rudolph entered from the side of the stage with a spotlight following him as he greeted Judith in the center. He reached across and shook hands with Keith, too.

He ended his short speech with, "If I had to do this all over again, I certainly would invite you in out of the storm. You have all been wonderful and deserving of my love for you. Have a wonderful evening. God bless you." He blew them a kiss and left the stage to thunderous applause and whistles. His steward later told Keith that Rudolph had nearly run to his private elevator to get quickly back to his suite.

Keith announced the names of four different large and famous bands that would be playing. "If you don't want to dance to one of them, just wait, another band will be playing soon. While this may be your first Valentine's Day dance on a ship, it is Judith and my first Valentine's Day together. So if you come up to talk to us while we are staring into each other's eyes and we do not respond immediately, we hope you will understand." He waved at the crowd as they left the stage to another even louder applause and more whistles.

Back stage before they went out onto the floor, he wrapped himself around Judith and kissed her repeatedly. "Happy Valentine's Day plus two, Sweetheart. I love you so much. You look so beautiful tonight."

As they walked out onto the dance floor, Judith said, "It just occurred to me that we have never danced together before. Are you ready for this?"

"Just watch me," he smiled. She didn't know that Aunt Jean had taught him to dance by taking him to dance lessons for years before he was finished with high school. They danced nearly every dance, except for the dances when Bill or Tom cut in. She danced with Michael when he wasn't dancing with Jodi. The whole evening went beautifully.

They left the ballroom for a while because she felt sorry for Ken. They went up to the CCC and Keith watched Jeremy as she danced with Ken for a couple of dances.

When all of the bands had finished playing for their time period, there were still a lot of people on the floor. Keith looked at her, but she had a plan. Her team had brought out a bunch of CDs and there was a portable player backstage that was hooked up to the sound system. They played CDs for several more hours-as long as anyone wanted to dance.

Throughout the evening, the chef and her crew kept coming out with various special finger foods. The bar was open, but nobody had too much to drink. Everyone had an especially good time. Keith even danced with the chef. Keith and Judith were there to the end. On the way out they ran into Michael and Jodi. Keith said, "I think we had enough exercise for one day. Do you mind skipping our normal routine that we would be doing in just two hours? Let's sleep in tonight."

"But Keith, I was hoping..." He couldn't keep a straight face and broke out laughing.

Judith told Jodi that she wouldn't be exercising in the morning either.

Jodi rolled her eyes up and just said, "Thank you." They were all still laughing as they went to their rooms.

After arriving in their combined cabin, Keith kissed Judith for a long time. "Care to go skinny dipping in our pool, Sweetheart?"

"I'd love it, but I think we had better take off our formal wear first. I will meet you in the pool."

Keith was ready first and he adjusted the lights so that the only light was dimly on the orchids next to the waterfalls. He put the water temperature up several degrees and set the water speed to extra slow. The pool had a submerged sitting bench folded into the foot end of the pool so it could be used as a hot tub if they had wanted the temperature up that high.

He was standing nude at the end of the pool when Judith walked in with a towel around her. "Oh, I have never seen the pool lighted this way, this is beautiful."

"Drop your towel so I can carry you into the water, Beautiful."

He slowly carried her into the pool and they both sat on the submerged bench.

"Mmmm, you feel so good."

“You were just stunning tonight. All the men in the room were looking at you with smiles on their faces. My smile was the biggest though.”

“And you didn’t even notice that all the women were looking at you?”

“I only saw one of them looking at me.” He turned her head toward his and he kissed her again.”

Donald's Analysis

Ken greeted Bill when he reported for duty in the morning. "G'morning, Bill. Did you have a good time last night? I saw you dance with Judith. She even came up here to dance with me. Keith certainly has a wonderful woman!"

"Isn't she just incredible? Yes, I had a good time last night, Ken. There were some single women down there and both Tom and I had good times. At least I did. I even got a couple of cellphone numbers. I turned in before our bosses did. What time did they get back here?"

"Jeremy said they got in at 0228 this morning. I think they both called off their exercising this morning as I haven't seen anything of either of them nor Michael or Jodi, either for that matter. It looks like are all four of them sleeping in this morning."

"I don't blame them for that. They really put a lot of effort into the party and they must have been just about the last to leave the ballroom. Anything to report this morning?"

"Nope, all is quiet. I imagine it will be a late breakfast for just about everyone this morning."

"I am ready to take over for you now, Ken. Why don't you just leave early and go to bed yourself?"

"Thanks, Bill, I think I will. Night or Morning or whatever."

"It has got to be rough on the 3rd shift. Even our whole language is built around sleeping at night instead of in the daytime. See ya later in the day, Ken."

* * *

Every one of the displaced guests had left the ship within their scheduled deadlines. Keith couldn't believe that it went so smoothly. All of the cabins were refurbished and were brought up to new condition. All of the departments and teams concentrated heavily on their training. Keith decided it was time to solve the JONESY problem.

"Ken, since Donald is working for you, I would like you to assign him to the computer virus problem. Don't let him get in over his head, but challenge him and I think he will come through. You can give him Read and Execute permissions to any program, except don't let him take over the navigation from Captain Perez. Tell him to be reasonable. Set up a large area where he can write anything to his disc. Have him look at the source code for Jeremy's Ship Program version 2.006.04.01 and see if he can figure it out. Give him a reasonable time to understand its basics. Then have him find the virus and point it out to both of us. I will be surprised if he doesn't have it identified by the time we reach Tampa in late April."

"Sounds like a very reasonable challenge. I can help him with the source code as I wrote a small part for you. He is an extremely bright kid and this will challenge him to broaden his horizons. He should be here in the next two hours if his mother hasn't loaded too much homework on him."

"Don't let him get so wrapped up in this that he ignores ANY of his homework. I will tell Martha what we are giving him. I want her to let us know if he is not living up to his goals of homework first and ship fun stuff later. He has already delivered on his marketing project and I think he is ready for this, but it has to come from you."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"I will never get used to that. I'm still stumbling on cabins vs. rooms and decks vs. floors."

* * *

After only a week of examining the programming code, Donald was ready for his first major report for Ken. "This does not look like it will be hard, just tedious. There are hundreds of pages of code here. The beauty of it is that Keith included an incredible number of comments in the code. They show the intent of each minor section in the code. It is even arranged and annotated as if it were a detailed

outline. That will be immensely helpful. Please pass my sincere thank you on to him. Secondly, the language used here, I think it is based on C++, is a lot like the older versions of Visual Basic that I have frequently used with Microsoft Office® products.”

“Donald, how long do you think it will take you to locate the starting point of the virus code?”

“I may have already found it. I will have to read all of the code to be certain, but it appears to start at section ‘J.1.’ Think of it, Ken, J-1.” He paused for effect. “The spelling of the word ‘JONESY’ begins with the letter ‘J’ then the word ‘ONE’. I think the author of the virus was trying to guide us to the location of the virus-code. I don’t know what the ‘S’ or ‘Y’ means yet, but it should pop out at me like the J-1 did. May I go to the next phase now? I am anxious to get started.”

“Good grief, Donald. You may have made the most important discovery about this code yet. If you have finished all of your homework, I would like you to carry your homework one step further, before you continue with the JONESY work.”

“Sure, what’s that?”

“It is something that Keith and I used to do to each other when we were studying together. Write out at least five questions each day in each of your subjects that a college professor might ask on an exam. Remember, the professor’s goal is to stretch your mind and to make sure that you fully understand the ‘body of knowledge’ that you need to acquire for that semester. They also want you to be able to use your knowledge to answer unusual questions. After I see that you have understood my assignment, then I want you to also answer your own questions.”

“That is something that I try to do when I am studying. I like the added challenge to my homework. May I show my mother?”

“Yes, of course. But I want to see it too. I will add it to my daily duties just to help you become completely proficient. Keith and I were always at the top of our classes. I want to see you pass us up.”

“I knew you guys were really smart and so is Judith.”

“Yes she is. Now, when you are ready to continue on JONESY, what will you do next?”

“First of all I need to be sure that I found the location of the virus-code. It really looks like it, because there is a lack of comments in that area. I want to step through the code and write down what is happening to confirm the construction of the display of dots that Jeremy had during the virus attack when the dots looked like letters. If I find something positive, may I show you before waiting for our next update meeting?”

“Of course. I would love to wake up Keith in the middle of the night and show him what you have done. He would be so excited that I’ll bet he would be pounding on your cabin door at 3 in the morning, oops, at 0300.”

“I hope I have found it, but if not, I will let you know and keep looking.”

“Brilliant, Donald. Don’t forget to show me those college level questions.”

“I won’t. Thanks, Ken. Are we done now?”

“Until you have the questions for me.”

Donald nearly bounced out of the CCC. Ken could see on Jeremy’s screen that Donald had headed back to his cabin, *probably to study, he thought. Keith really knew what he was doing when he wanted Donald to solve the virus problem.*

* * *

“Hi, Donald. How is your project going? I hate to bother you, but it is time for your weekly report on your virus project. The last two reports were only that you were getting closer and you were making progress. The second Thursday in March will be here in six days. What is our plan? Should we just watch it happen or do you have a plan?”

“I have been kind of quiet, but that is because now I can read the code and I have been translating the code into actions. I have plotted out on these screen representations that the code is

writing onto Jeremy's screen, but they don't look like anything that I have seen on the screens. Look at these four charts. The code is plotting these points on the screen as red dots. Individually, they do not look like anything. Now watch this. When I move these charts, which are representations of the screen, into this position, they could be the four quadrants of a single screen. And there is the exact screen displaying 'JONESY' that we have been seeing."

"Do you mean that when we have seen 'JONESY' on the screen, we are actually looking at a collection of four screens of dots that have assembled to look like a single screen?"

"That is what it looks like to me. There is no complete alphabetic letter on any one of these four screens, so Jeremy could not find any letters or words on any one of them. He therefore answered correctly when he said that it was just a bunch of random dots. I haven't found the code yet that splits the screen into four separate windows so that the four can all be displayed at one time. Maybe that is because I don't know what to look for. Do you know what that code would look like, Ken?"

"I don't remember dealing with that feature. I will have to look it up. Keith is visiting with the marketing people, but I will ask him if he knows right off hand what that looks like. He will be excited to learn what you have found out, too. Donald, this is just incredible. As soon as you find the triggering mechanism for 1400 on the second Thursday, we can dismantle it."

"Ken that may be premature. Don't you think we should know more about why it is there, who put it there, and what the message may mean?"

"At your pace of discovery, you will have all of that for us before we begin our cruises. That was Keith's goal."

"But I have run into a dead end. The section of code that wrote these windows just came to an end. The triggering and display is buried somewhere else. If I knew what it might look like, I could have Jeremy run a search to look for that kind of code. Wait, you know what? I got this code from section J-1, or J-ONE. Maybe the 'S' and 'Y' have something to do with where the rest of the code is hidden. I will look for sections numbered with those letters. There could be lots of them as they could be sub-sections, too."

"I want Keith to see this right away. I will go over to Jeremy and ask where Keith is, and then I will go see if I can find him. I don't want to call him with his radio in case he is busy. I will just go and see if he is talking to someone. Thank you, Donald. You have made fantastic progress this week. As we both know progress is measured in spurts with a lot of work between them."

"Thanks, Ken. Let me know when he comes up here so I can ask him, too."

"Confirmed."

Ken left the conference room and went over to the computer. "Jeremy, where is Keith?"

"He is in the marketing office, Ken."

"Thank you, Jeremy."

Ken went to the marketing office to find Keith.

"What's up, Ken?"

"Donald has made a great discovery. The virus is displayed as a collection of four windows on the screen. Each window has dots that form the letters JONESY only when all four of them are displayed in a certain pattern. Then he runs out of code. He wants to know if you remember the code sequence to display four windows onto the four quadrants of an active screen. He is also anxious to show you what he has discovered. When do you think you might be able to get away and talk to him? Should I tell him just to go to bed for the evening and you will see him tomorrow?"

"No, he has been working hard on this. I would like to pat him on the back this evening still. Tell him I will be right up there. Thanks, Ken."

Ken headed back to the elevator. He was surprised to find Keith in the CCC when he got there. "Did you take the moving ladder?"

"No, I like to run up the stairs when I get the chance."

Ken just shook his head.

"This is just incredible, Donald. Let's look at the high-speed video of the new camera on Jeremy's screen. If we look at it frame by frame, we might be able to discern whether all four windows appear at the same time or if they appear one at a time. The coding would be different for each of these scenarios. I will write out the probable code to create these two, at least the way that I would do it. Different programmers approach complex situations differently."

"OK."

"The trigger may be harder to find. It will probably be located in the main area that I called 'Ready.' That is the place that Jeremy sits and waits for us to do or say something. Somewhere in or near there, is a line of code that sits and waits to be triggered by a timer of some kind that looks for a second Thursday first, then the time of 1400:00.0 which is the line of code that needs to be removed in order to stop the JONESY attacks. Back in the days of straight forward programming, it wouldn't be hard to find. But now that there are software calls to subroutines and programmed fire-wires along with software equivalents of USB connectors, this is going to be a tremendous job. You may need to call in some outside contractor experts to work with you on this."

"Where would I find outside contractor experts?"

"You are looking at two of them right now. Ken and I may have to work under your leadership to find the trigger within a reasonable time."

"I told Ken that perhaps there is a section or subsection of the code that begins with 'S' then 'Y' that contains the rest of the virus. I have thoroughly examined the 'J-1' section, so the 'S' would be next. When could you two sit down with me?"

"Ken, you and Donald can decide when you should call in the outside help. Just let me know and I will join you. Great job, Donald. Thanks for calling me in here, Ken." Keith got up and left the room.

Out in the hallway Keith thought, *"I really wanted to just sit down right then and find the darn thing. This is one of those times when you must delegate. If you just grab it away from someone and do it yourself, your people will not learn to think for themselves. Besides this gives me time to do something else. I'd better get back to the marketing guys. They had some great ideas that need to be encouraged."*

* * *

The next time that Donald was able to work on the virus detection, he reviewed the high-speed video of Jeremy's screen. When he got to the point where the JONESY was displayed there were three of the windows on one frame of the video and all four on the next frame. That proved that the windows were not put together before they were sent to Jeremy's screen. They were sent individually. That would help in his investigation, because now he knew to look for four commands to display the windows and not just one. Next he looked for any parts of the overall outline that began with either an 'S' or a 'Y'. There was a lot of code, but he typed in a command to ask Jeremy to find every line beginning with an 'S' or a 'Y'. Nothing turned up from his request. He thought that was odd, but there were no coded lines starting with either of those letters. *"I wonder if the J-1 line was just a coincidence. It must mean something else."* He thought. *"Gotta keep my mind open to other possibilities."*

After much more searching, he found where in the code, Jeremy sits and waits for us to do or say something. Then he found it. *"Keith was right,"* he thought. That is where he suspected the trigger would be lurking. He began to blush when he thought that of course Keith was right, after all he wrote the program. In no time at all, he had found all of the coded lines that held the trigger and the lines that displayed the four windows onto Jeremy's screen. He glanced at the clock. *"Oh, no! I don't have time to tell Ken or Keith about it or I will go over my time limit for this week. Now it will have to wait until Monday."* He sent Ken an email.

Hi Ken,

I just hit my time limit for the week so I can't meet with you to disclose to you that I just found all of the code for JONESY. The construction of the windows, the trigger for the 2nd Thursdays at 1400, and the display; it is all there. Plus there is code that watches for Keith's appearance on the ship before the other triggers would begin functioning. So it was someone that knew that Keith was going to work on this ship that wrote the code. I think it was Professor Young, but that will also have to wait until Monday for me to tell you about that. All of this is in my notebook that I have been keeping. By the way, I remember Keith saying that he used to play Battleship with Professor Young on the 2nd Thursdays at 2 pm. Did you do that with him, too?

Perhaps we could sit and play Battleship this weekend so I could point out where J-1 is located on the board. If I put my tug on space J-1 and you fired a shot to that space. Then I would have to tell you that it was a hit. You might ask, 'Sink?' and I would have to answer 'Yes.'

Funny how J-1, Sink, Yes seems to spell out JONESY. But then it will have to wait until Monday before I have a fresh new week with hours available before I can talk to you about this.

Sincerely,
Donald

Donald didn't know that Ken was sitting in the next room looking at his email when Donald sent that to him, but he sure found out when Ken let out a very loud war whoop!

It startled everyone that was in the CCC when Ken yelled. They were even more startled when Ken went running across the room and picked up Donald and swung him around yelling, "You did it. You did it. Oh my God, you did it."

David had just come in at that moment and wondered what all the commotion was.

Tom was manning his shift when it all happened. He told David, "I think your incredible son just cracked the code for JONESY." He looked at Ken still dancing around. "Ken, do you want me to tell Keith?"

"No, let Donald do it."

"I am off the clock now or we could get into trouble."

Ken asked him if he had to be on the clock to tell someone something really great.

"Well, I guess not. I don't have a radio, may I use yours?"

Ken handed it to him and told him which button to push for Keith.

"Keith? This is Donald. Ken told me to call you on his radio."

"What is so exciting up there? I can hear Ken dancing around."

"I found the virus and all of its triggers."

There was a moment of silence. Keith's brain was racing around. "Judith is with me. We will be there in a few moments."

Judith heard the message. "I will beat you to CCC," she said as Keith went running up the stairs. She took the closest moving ladder up the seven decks to the CCC.

Keith was just coming out of the stair area when Judith got there by the ladders. "You must have really put some steam into that climb. You couldn't go that fast on the stairs if people were on them during our cruises."

They entered CCC and found what seemed to be a party going on. Ken said that Donald had indeed found it all, but he told Ken via email, because he would have gone over his available minutes if he had called a meeting. Whatever they did now would have to be done without Donald being on the clock.

Keith looked at Donald's notes. "J - ONE - Sink - Yes equals JONESY. Wow, you really did it Donald. Congratulations! Professor Young was always the sneakiest professor that I ever had. He is just perfect in his job. He put the virus in here to challenge me. He knew that I was overly concerned with computer viruses, so he put this benign virus in here. He knew I would search everything to find it and at the same time it would prove to me that Jeremy was virus-free. Brilliant."

Judith looked at Donald who was wrapped in his dad's arms. "Young man you have solved a problem that was dreamed up by one of the best computer craftsmen that ever touched a keyboard.

You must be very proud of yourself. You can see from how the older adults in here are carrying on about this, that this is a very big deal. Not only that, but when Professor Young finds out that you single-handedly found it, you will carry with you his complete respect. That is something to be treasured.”

Keith looked pensive. “I would like to wait until we have the 2013 Challenge figured out before we tell the professor. I just keep thinking that it and the virus have something meaningful between them. Since Rudolph is so closely intertwined with Professor Young, we’d better not tell either of them. Donald, you have just lifted a terrible weight off my shoulders, so don’t think for a moment that I am not excited about your discovery. It is just that the timing of telling the professor may not be the best right now. OK? I do not want to lessen its importance. This just gives me some breathing room. You are one incredible young man and I will see that you are appropriately rewarded.”

Ken said, “May we dismantle the virus trigger so that it doesn’t go off on March 14th?”

“Certainly, let’s work on that on Monday when Donald has time available. Once it is turned off, I will reload the software and compile it. The first time we will just make each of the virus-related lines appear to be comments, so they will not compile. If Jeremy runs just fine for another couple of weeks, we can remove those lines. Then Rudolph will be able to provide fresh copies to his software purchasers. Each time I make a change, I will update the version number and we will continue to save each version. Donald should plan on being present at 1400 on 14 March to watch when nothing happens.”

“Does that mean we will celebrate nothing?” Donald was laughing.

“It certainly does, because nothing will be something special.”

* * *

Thursday, March 14th did just that. Nothing happened at 2 pm, which was something to be excited about. Everyone watching in CCC gave Donald a high-five along with their congratulations. They celebrated nothing, which was something.

Ken told Donald, “This just proves that you have indeed solved our virus problem.”

Maxx Moves to Tampa

All of March and most of April were busy for the crews of the Maxx. The crews were trained and retrained for any event that might come up. Judith and Michael were excellent in creating both minor and major emergencies that the crews might encounter. On April 24th the mooring lines to the Maxx were cast off and Captain Perez blasted the Maxx's horn to indicate they were underway. Most of the crew that was available was in the main theatre which had its curtains drawn back so they could watch their progress towards the mouth of the Hudson River and out into the ocean. Except for the old timers, this was the first time at sea for most of them.

Keith's camera crew was spread out around the ship taking photos of the event. Keith had a camera stationed on each side of the river to record the movement of the huge ship. The crew would put it together for the noon news on the various TV syndicates. The ship paused when it got out into the ocean to allow the shore photo people to grab a ride with private launches to get back to the Maxx.

Keith was with Bill and Jeremy. He wanted to be sure that Jeremy was recording every movement that was directed by Captain Perez. All of the future ship navigational movements would be recorded by Jeremy just in case they ever got into a situation that would require Jeremy to take over the ship's navigation. Keith had a big smile on his face.

"What's up, Keith?" Bill asked. "I'd say you seem very pleased at Jeremy's learning of the navigation tricks."

"You would be right. I can see what he is recording and he is even recording reasons for the Captain to be making those moves. I may have programmed this, but Jeremy seems to have figured out a 'why' to each movement."

"Great, but you must have taught him that or he wouldn't be doing it."

"Bill that is where artificial intelligence programming comes in. After learning only the elementary moves, a computer with AI in it will begin to learn much more than we program into it. I had gotten a very advanced AI-package and even tweaked it a bit before I put it into Jeremy's programs."

"And Jeremy will just keep learning and refining his knowledge of navigation?"

"Exactly. Jeremy, you are doing a very good job of learning how to navigate."

"Thank you, Keith. Sometimes I do not know immediately why the Captain makes some of his decisions, but then I can figure them out shortly after that by making comparisons with some of his other, but similar movements."

"Can you give me an example, Jeremy?"

"Three minutes and two seconds ago he used his port-2 thruster when I expected him to adjust his rudder two degrees to the right. Then I could see with the forward camera that there was a mid-channel buoy coming up and he only wanted to make a temporary angle change. I knew it was a mid-channel buoy from the navigation books that you gave me to read. His moves are very smooth and deliberate. Our passengers will not be spilling any food onto their clothes in the dining rooms with this Captain."

Bill said, "He has even read navigational books?"

"Lots of them. After reading Bowditch, he can compute our position even if our electronic navigational instruments go down."

"What is Bowditch?"

"Nathaniel Bowditch published *The American Practical Navigator* in 1802. It contains tables for computing position using spherical geometry."

“Wow. I suppose that is easy for him, but I have forgotten more than I ever knew in that area.”

“I have to agree with you on that one, Bill.” Then Keith laughed. “I’ll bet Donald could do it though.”

“Yes, he probably could. That kid is just amazing.”

Keith was very satisfied. “I don’t think that I need to watch Jeremy constantly any more. I will check on him every hour or so. The 1500 mile trip from New York City to Tampa will take us three days at a 20 mph land speed. It would be shorter if we took a more direct route, but the Captain wanted to hug the shoreline so as to encounter the most number of other vessels. He said many other ships do not strictly follow the navigational rules of the road and he wanted to practice maneuvering this huge ship in more of those situations. It will be interesting to see how Jeremy records them.”

“I’ll tell Tom and Ken that we should let you know if we think we have gotten into any sticky situations.”

“Thanks, Bill. I will check in with the marketing crew and see what they have put together. We will want to put together some new ads announcing our movement to our home port. So I might be there or in my electronics lab. I have some ideas to tweak some more efficiency into our check-in procedures. I’ll need to program them in and check them out before I change Jeremy’s programs.”

“Good luck. I will see you later.”

* * *

In two days, it had already gotten so much warmer that he and Michael could do their morning exercising with his balcony door wide open. “Ahh, this I can take, Michael. I will spend some time out here later today so I can work on my tan.”

“Just don’t fall asleep in the sun and get a burn or Judith will have to spread some aloe oil all over you.” He laughed, “I know that look, Keith. You think it might be worth a burn, don’t you?”

“You know me too well, Michael. Maybe I’ll just fake the burn.”

“You need to stay honest in all things with Judith, Keith. My dad use to say that honesty with your wife is the most important trait to have for a long married life.”

“Maybe I’ll just tell her that a good aloe rub would make a good sunburn prevention. Then it would be honest and I could still have her hands all over me.”

“Do you really need an excuse? Don’t answer that. I don’t want to know.” Michael couldn’t finish his sentences without laughing.

* * *

The trip down to the Florida Keys went beautifully. The news reports included some great shots taken by the local news helicopters. Keith was busy contacting the sources to see if he could purchase the footage. As they rounded Florida and turned to head north in the Gulf of Mexico, Keith had some brief moments of not wanting to go back north again. His thoughts quickly turned to plans for their arrival in Tampa, their new port. Due to the size of the Maxx, Rudolph had purchased some land at the southern tip of the land the other luxury ships used for their ports. While it wasn’t necessary, Captain Perez decided to pull up near their port before stopping. Keith wondered what he was doing as he had the wrong side of the ship close to the port and he was facing the wrong direction.

The Captain was just showing off to the onshore crew. He used his side thrusters to turn the Maxx on a dime. The front half of the port thrusters and the rear half of the starboard thrusters were sending out large jets of water. The Maxx responded by turning clockwise in place without going forward or backwards. When the turn was completed, only the port thrusters were activated to move the ship sideways up to the dock. It was so perfect that he didn’t have to use the starboard thrusters to slow its approach to the dock.

Keith looked at Jeremy’s records and was amazed at how precisely Captain Perez had completed the maneuvers.

Anabel

This was a day for celebration, May 16, 2013; they were out in the Gulf of Mexico on the first day of their first cruise.

Keith called Judith on his radio. "Sweetheart, how is it going for you?"

"Well there are only a few people wandering around looking for their cabins on the wrong decks, but otherwise it is calm in Guest Services right now. Apparently our brochures and your advertising have done their job to help people settle into their new surroundings very quickly. It doesn't sound like you are in the bar yet?"

"I am heading there right now. According to the guest list, we do not have very many single females on this cruise."

"Good, maybe I will get to spend some time with you this evening."

"Certainly, I'm going in one of the bars now and it sounds noisy in there. I will talk to you later. I love you."

Keith went into the South Caribbean Bar, smiling at the people in there. It wasn't time for dinner yet and there were a lot of guests in this bar. Keith wandered in and out of the people. Suddenly he froze when he recognized a voice behind him.

"Hello handsome."

No, it couldn't be. Oh why did Donna come on this cruise? He turned and saw his ex-wife behind him. "Oh, hello Donna. It is nice to see you again." He looked around the area. "Where is your husband?"

"I divorced him and him and him and oh I don't remember how many husbands I have had since you left me. But none of that matters anymore now that I have found you."

"You sound as if you were looking for me."

"Oh, yes. Then I saw you on that TV commercial for cruises on this ship. You were so romantic when you made that fake proposal with that beautiful ring. I just knew that we could be together again."

"Wait Donna. Don't get the wrong idea, because that was a real proposal to my fiancée. We will be married soon. So there is no chance that you and I will ever be together again."

"Darling, come with me to my cabin and I will prove you are making a mistake. We were meant for each other. You even said that to me."

"That was a long time ago and I will not be going to your cabin. Sorry Donna."

"My name isn't Donna anymore, I changed it to Anabel, Anabel Johansson and I changed my hair color to make me look Swedish. I also had breast implants. Do you like them?"

"You didn't need to do that, you were always very nice looking. But I am sure you will be able to attract some wealthy man on the ship that will be very attracted to you. Good luck to you. Now if you will excuse me..."

"Keith, don't think you are going to get away that easily. Do you remember that nice Mr. Norse that was Daddy's attorney? Well he just did the most marvelous thing for us. He is a judge now and he made a ruling for me that annulled our divorce. That means we are still married! Isn't that wonderful? The only thing different for us this time is that now you have enough money to support my needs. That was the only problem last time."

Keith went into shock. "Are you delusional, Donna or Anabel or whatever? We are divorced. It is final. It is over. I do not now and never will want you for a wife. Please excuse me; there are a lot of more pleasant people here that I would like to talk with."

She seemed to expect Keith's rejection, but she wasn't through with him yet. She called to him as he was walking away, "When you tell your girlfriend that we are married, just be sure that you get that ring back from her. I want it from you, Darling. I will be waiting."

Keith left the bar and ran up all the steps to CCC. He burst through the door. Tom was working on the guest list. He looked up when Keith came in. "What's the problem, Keith? You look like you have seen a ghost."

"It is worse than that. Did Anabel Johansson pass all of your tests?"

"I just finished the last names beginning with 'H'. The 'J' names should be finished soon. Each name goes through a lot of files before it passes all the tests. What do you suspect, Keith?"

"When we were divorced about ten years ago, she was Donna Wooding then. Now she has the gall to come here saying that her daddy's attorney, who is a judge now, has ruled and issued an annulment to our divorce. She says we are still married and she said that she wants the ring that I gave to Judith. She was always a money grabber. I want her off this ship and I am hoping you can find some way to make that happen."

"Does Judith know?"

"No, I came right up here to see what I can do about it first."

"Here's her name. Well, would you look at that? She has a code NOP."

"What is that?"

"NOP stands for 'Non-Official Passport'. Wait there is more. Her social security number does not match her name."

"She told me that she changed her name after seeing our commercial of my proposing to Judith. That started airing right after Christmas, so she would have had time to get her SSN updated. But she wouldn't have been able to get a new passport would she?"

"No, but the system isn't even saying that it has been input so that the investigative stage could begin. It does not appear that she even applied for a new passport. Her passport is just fake."

"Can we get immigration people onto the ship tomorrow in Key West to detain her?"

"That is automatic. When all of the names have gone through the system, it sends the information to our next USA port of call and they will be there waiting for us. But it could take a few hours to complete so I am putting in a request right now to Captain Jones to review it and he will make the contact to Immigration."

"Hopefully she will be off the ship tomorrow, but now what can I do about her claim that we are still married? How the heck could she pull that off when she's been married at least four times since we divorced? She would have had to get those annulled, too. That isn't even legal, is it?"

"I never heard of it before, but DEA doesn't deal with those issues. Keith, look at this. She has had three arrests, all dismissed, for cocaine possession and use. Looks like she has enough money to pay off the judge."

"I am sure she does. I am going to turn up the sensitivity of the drug sniffer in her cabin. What's her cabin number?"

"Well there is another strange thing. Her cabin is directly above Judith's cabin, one deck above. I wonder if that is just a coincidence?"

"I doubt that. I am going up to make sure Judith's balcony doors are locked and mine, too."

"Good move."

"It is time to tell Judith. I will be in her cabin waiting for her."

Keith went to his own cabin first to verify his balcony was locked and his curtains drawn. He didn't want to let Tom know about the unlocked connecting doors so he left his cabin before entering Judith's. Her balcony doors were closed but unlocked. He called Judith.

"Sweetheart, we have a major problem with one of our passengers. My ex-wife is on the ship and she is causing a disaster for us. I am in your cabin; let's talk up here." While he sat and waited for Judith, he called Professor Young.

"Hello Son. Don't tell me you are seasick already."

"Hi Dad, I have a big problem. I need a family lawyer from the Platteville area. Donna, my former wife is on the ship and she claims that she had our divorce annulled so that, in her view, she and I are still married."

"Is she crazy? I've never heard of an annulled divorce. How did she do that?"

"She said that Mr. Wooding's attorney is now a judge and she had him make the ruling."

"Why would she do that? Didn't she get enough money from all those rich guys that she divorced?"

"She wants Judith's ring. She said she saw it in our TV commercial."

"Yes, that could be her motive. So you want a Wisconsin attorney that will appeal the judge's ruling?"

"Yes, can the ruling be blocked so Judith and I can be married next month? Appeals can take a long time."

"Keith can I put you on hold? I am going to go check with someone that should be able to help."

"Yes, please."

"I will be right back."

Keith was still waiting for Professor Young when Judith rushed into her cabin. Keith met her with fear and concern on his face. He held her and kept saying, "I am so sorry. I am so sorry."

"What is the matter, Keith? Why are you so upset?"

Keith told her what Anabel had done.

Judith tried to calm him. "You didn't do anything wrong. Do not blame the wrong person. You did not do anything wrong."

"I am on hold with Professor Young. I thought that if he knew a Wisconsin attorney that could handle this, we might be able to get a stay on the annulment ruling so we can be married next month. Wait, he is back. Yes, Dad, I am here and Judith is here now too. I will put you on speaker phone."

"Hello Judith. Well, there may be a way to fix this problem."

"What can you do?" Keith asked.

"Before you called, I had just been down the hall in Dean Holbush's office. You will remember that he is the Dean of the Law School here and one of the most esteemed family attorneys. Well Gus Norse, our judge in question, and the Dean have been at odds for several years. Holbush advised William Wooding to drop Norse as his attorney when Holbush discovered some shady dealings that Norse had been involved with. When I told Holbush just now what Norse has done, his response was, 'That is the last straw. He's going to go down.' Holbush wants to take your case. He said that he would get Norse's ruling nullified and he will petition the Supreme Court to disbar Judge Norse. He didn't know how soon he could get the Appellate Court to stay the annulment ruling, but he advised you to go ahead with your wedding plans. Norse was appointed a judge by a political appointment. He said he argued against the appointment, but he was from the wrong political party so the governor would not even listen to him."

"Thanks, Dad. I just knew you would be the one to call."

"Dad, thank you from me and my parents, too," Judith said.

"You are both very welcome."

"Dad, I am going to call Mr. Wooding just to clear the air and let him know that I hold him blameless for what his daughter is doing to us. The DEA guys on the ship have discovered that Anabel or

Donna is using a fake passport and they will be removing her from the ship when we reach Key West tomorrow. I think he should have a heads-up as I don't know if they will detain her or what."

"That would be a fine gesture, Son. You may have him call me if he has any questions. You two should just go ahead with your wedding plans as if nothing has happened. I know it won't be easy, but you do not need to trouble your wedding guests with any of this. Go watch the sunset together. It is your first night out and you deserve to spend it together. By the way, I will inform Rudy, too.

"Thanks again. I don't know what we would do without you."

Keith told Judith that he had closed and locked their balcony doors as Anabel's cabin was directly above hers. Then he called Mr. Wooding.

"Wooding, residence. Whom may I say is calling, please?"

"Keith Northquest. I wish to speak with Mr. Wooding, please."

"Good evening Mr. Northquest. If you will hold, please, I will tell him you are on the telephone."

"Same old butler that they've had for years," Keith told Judith.

"Hello Keith. This is a surprise. How are you?"

"Hello Mr. Wooding. This is a courtesy call to inform you of some trouble that your daughter may be in."

"That seems to be a regular topic when it concerns Donna. What has she gotten herself into now?"

"She is here on the cruise ship, Maxx, that I am working on and she is using a fake passport. I discovered that she will most likely be removed by the authorities when we arrive in Key West tomorrow. What will happen after she leaves the ship is unknown to me. She may or may not be detained by the authorities."

"And."

"Sir?"

"And why is she on the ship?"

"She approached me earlier this evening and said that she saw me in a TV commercial making a marriage proposal to my fiancée. She said that Judge Norse, made a ruling to annul our divorce, resulting in the continuation of the marriage of Donna and me. I certainly had nothing to do with that and do not want to be married to her."

"Oh, dear boy. I am so sorry and ashamed. Only money would have led her to make such a foul maneuver. I can understand Norse pulling something stupid like this if she bribed him with enough money. They should have been married; they are both crooked. What does she expect to get from you?"

"She mentioned that she saw my fiancée's engagement ring on the commercial and she wants me to give it to her."

"Ah, the 'Shaw of Iran' ring, I had nearly forgotten about it. Well yes, she would do this for \$30 million or more. It sounds just like her. What can I do to help? Her mother and I have written her out of our wills."

"I have called Professor Lloyd Young at UW-Platteville to assist with finding an attorney for me. When I told him that I was going to call you with a heads-up, he said that you could call him if you have any questions or suggestions."

"Excellent. He will find the best person in the state to represent you. Keith, I cannot tell you how happy I am that you would confide in me. Any other person would have called spitting fire at me, but you have shown again that you have such a fine character and personality. We love our daughter, but we are on your side in this matter. I will call Lloyd, but if there is anything that I can do, either now or at any time in the future, do not hesitate to call me. God be with you."

Keith hung up the phone. "That went much better than I expected."

“Honey, it is your personality. You can win any person over.”

“Except one certain greedy woman.”

“I did use the word ‘person’,” she laughed.

* * *

Captain Jones entered CCC with a grim look on his face. Tom asked, “What did you find out, David?”

“The U. S. Customs and Border Patrol requested that I deliver her to them when we arrive in Key West. They authorized me to detain her under house arrest until then. I asked them to clarify that; did they want me to lock her into our jail or just lock her in her cabin. They asked what deck she was on and I told them she wouldn’t jump off the 15th deck, so I’m just going to have Jeremy lock her in her cabin.”

“That seems reasonable. From what Keith told me, she is not likely to cooperate.”

“That’s why he chose me to lead his security force. I’ll take a squad with me and march her to her cabin. Good evening, Jeremy. Where is Anabel Johansson?”

“Hello David. She just returned to her cabin and she has ordered dinner to be served in her cabin.”

“Is she alone in there?”

“Yes, but her dinner will be served in 18 minutes by her steward.”

“Thank you, Jeremy.” The captain assembled his on-call squad. He told them to accompany him to Ms. Johansson’s cabin when her dinner is served. “Tom, will you please inform Keith. I will fill him in fully when I return.”

“Yes sir, Captain.”

“Just ‘David’, please.”

“Sorry, I should have just said ‘Confirm.’”

“Jeremy, Anabel Johansson will be under house arrest. Can you set her door and balcony locks so that they cannot be unlocked or opened from the inside?”

“Confirmed. Yes David, Keith programmed a ‘lock down’ feature that can be used for a house arrest. For your information, it can be set for a door, cabin, block of rooms, deck, or all doors. At the present time, only the Anabel Johansson cabin has this setting enabled. Be sure to alert her steward as she will not be able to unlock her door to allow him in with her food. And he won’t be able to open the door to leave if it is shut behind him.”

“Thank you for the good information, Jeremy.”

He asked his squad if they had any questions. “Let’s go now. We need to be there when her dinner is delivered.”

* * *

Anabel was making sure that her hair was all in place and her lipstick was perfect. She liked her steward and was certain that she could convince him to stay in her cabin with her for a few hours when he delivered her dinner. She could not explain the uneasiness that she was feeling. She had never been refused before, so why should tonight be any different. There was the expected knock on her door. As she went to the door, she was surprised that the steward could open it before she got to the door. *Mmm, I like that*, she thought. *He could come in anytime.*

“Dinner is here Ms. Johansson. Where would you like it?”

She was about to say something coy when she noticed a group of men outside her room. “What do you want?” she asked. They looked official. Especially the man in front of the rest, who had a police badge on him.

“Ms. Anabel Johansson, I am Captain Jones, the head of the security force on this ship. May I see your passport, please?” She sheepishly handed it to the Captain. “I have been directed by the United States Customs and Border Patrol to take charge of this and to place you under house arrest until

our arrival in Key West tomorrow. At that time you will leave this ship with your luggage and be placed in their custody. You may not leave your cabin until we reach Key West. You may have three meals per day delivered to you. The previous meal's remains will be collected from your cabin when the next meal is served. There will be a guard outside your cabin at all times. Your balcony doors are locked and cannot be opened by you. A wireless communication blockage has been placed around your cabin. Your only outside communication is through the ship's built-in communication system. Please be aware that every steward on this ship is a member of the security force. Your steward will now be leaving with us. We hope you have a pleasant few remaining hours with us. If you have any questions, please use your communication device or TV, if you prefer to call it that. "Good night."

When they were all out of the cabin, he closed the door.

When Anabel collected her senses, she let out a scream that was barely audible through the door. She banged on the door. The LED message on the outside of her door just said, "House Arrest". David assigned a different security member to arrive each hour until they arrived in Key West.

Anabel thought, *what a revolting set of developments this is. Here I was expecting a good time in bed with my steward. Instead I'm in here alone and he's probably outside laughing at me. This is all Keith's fault. He set this up, but I will get the last laugh. The only way out of this for him is to give me the ring, and then I will divorce him again. But this time I will take him for at least half of everything he has left. His income, which has to be huge, his business, and any savings that he has built up will all be mine. That should hold me until I find another sucker. The others weren't from Wisconsin, so I couldn't get half of their assets. I just waited until they settled by giving me cars, jewelry and other wonderful gifts, including money – lots of it. He will be sorry for doing this to me.*

* * *

"Judge Norse, please. This is James Holbush, the Law School Dean at UW-Platteville. It is urgent that I speak to him at once."

"Well Jim. What is on your mind today? Anything?"

"Very funny, Gus. As you know, I record all of my telephone conversations. Are you all right with that?"

"Yes, get to the point Jim. I am busy."

"I am representing Keith Northquest in a matter of an illegal divorce annulment ruling that you recently made after you were bribed by one Anabel Johansson. Where did you come up with that absurd ruling?"

"Jim, it was merely a bench ruling on a petition from the two parties that they wanted their divorce annulled."

"And how was Mr. Northquest represented in this matter?"

"The former Mrs. Northquest sent me his signed petition along with hers."

"And you made no attempt to inquire of Mr. Northquest whether he had actually signed it or not?"

"No, I went on the signed affidavit by the former Mrs. Northquest that it was his signature and that his employment prevented him from attending the hearing."

"What was her excuse for not attending?"

"I do not need to answer that."

"Are you aware that the former Mrs. Northquest has in her years of divorce to Mr. Northquest, been married four or five times to other men? And if so, how does your stupid ruling affect their divorce decrees since your ruling puts her at bigamy during those other marriages?"

"My legal ruling bridges over those years instead of voiding the Northquest marriage through those years."

"That is absolutely and totally absurd. If I cannot get you to withdraw your ruling, I will (1) go to the Appellate Court to overrule you and (2) go to the Wisconsin Supreme Court to have you

permanently disbarred for taking a bribe from a client and creating law that has no basis in fact. This is not a threat. It is a statement of fact. You may be interested to know that Anabel Johansson will be detained at Key West for using a fake passport and her name is not connected to the Social Security number she supplied. She has had multiple former felony charges, each of which was dismissed by you. She is a crook and you are a crook.”

“That is your opinion of course. Good luck.” He hung up.

If he is not shaking in his boots, he should be. He knows I am right and he knows he is in trouble. It will be interesting to see what his next move will be.

* * *

Tom spoke into his radio, “Captain Jones, can you come to CCC to take phone call from Anabel’s attorney, a Mr. Gus Norse?”

Keith was standing nearby. “That is the judge that made the annulment ruling.”

David went into the CCC to take the call. Keith told him who Gus Norse was.

“Don’t worry. I can handle him. Hello, this is Captain Jones, thank you for waiting.”

Norse asked for Anabel’s release on the grounds that she had not been charged and that she had not actually used the passport for re-entry. She had planned to only go as far as Key West anyway.

“I am sorry, but you are talking to the wrong person. The authority in this case is the U. S. Customs and Border Patrol or ‘CBP.’ They have directed my actions and I am carrying them out for the CBP. My directions are to keep her from talking to anyone until they take actual custody of her. Besides, she did use the passport as it is required for entry to this ship and any use of a fake passport is a federal offense. You should know that, Judge Norse.”

Tom and Keith could see from the grin on David’s face that Judge Norse was not at all happy.

“No sir. Those are my orders and they will be enforced. Good day.”

“He apparently was not happy?”

“Oh, could you hear him yelling at me? I have always loved putting down these over eager, holier than thou, attorneys.”

“And you did it so beautifully, too.”

“Thanks. By the way did you know that the use of a fake passport can result in a heavy fine and/or jail time? Homeland Security does not take these violations lightly. The use of a fake Social Security card can result in several separate offenses each with their own fines and jail times. I’ll let the feds figure all that out. Now then, it would be prudent to put Judith’s ring into a safe in a location known only to you and Judith or possibly only to a third party unknown to me. I would hate for Judge Norse to present me with a warrant to turn over the ring to him.”

“He could do that?”

“At this point it seems that Norse is capable of just about anything whether legal or not. I did not tell you to hide the ring.”

“I’ll go talk to Judith. Thanks.”

Keith rushed back up to Judith’s cabin and knocked on the door. Both David and Tom were probably watching, so he had to keep his foot far enough away from the door or it would have opened when he was knocking.

“Keith, I was just coming out to have an outdoor walk with you.”

Keith went in and shut the door behind him. He told Judith about Judge Norse’s call to David and the comments David made to him about the ring.

Judith thought for a few moments then her face lit up. “I have the perfect place and it will be known only to a third party, Jeremy. We both know that he won’t tell anyone and he can’t be ordered to tell. I will prepare a separate box to be put into each of the Jeremy computer rooms, but will put the real ring into only one of those boxes. I won’t know which box has the ring, but I will have Jeremy weigh each box and he will know which box has the real ring. Then I will tell Jeremy which box is going into

which computer room. He will be the only one that knows the real ring's location. Neither you nor I will know where the ring is. Jeremy will be told to not let me know where the ring is until the day of our wedding. Do you like my idea?"

"If asked, we will truthfully state that we do not know where the ring is. If we have to answer if the ring is somewhere on the ship, we can say that it is, but we do not know where. The computer knows where it is, but he has been instructed to not tell anyone its location. This is brilliant, Sweetheart. When can you get the boxes ready?"

"I'll go down to the guest services office right away and bring back some boxes."

"I will go with you."

They left and brought back four identical boxes that were the right size for her ring. She put some tissue wrapping paper into each one and the real ring into one of them. They marked a pencil dot on the bottom of the box with the ring. Then Keith put some coins into the other boxes until they had a similar weight to the box with the ring. Then all the boxes were taped shut. They carried the prepared boxes down to CCC in a bag.

Tom was the only person in CCC. "Tom, we have a super-secret thing to do here, would you excuse us for ten minutes, please?"

"Certainly, I'll go stretch my legs, Keith." He left the room.

Keith started the 'I have a question' sequence to get to the secure mode. He explained to Jeremy what they were going to do. He also asked Jeremy to erase the conversation that he and Judith just had in her cabin when they mentioned Jeremy's name. Jeremy found and erased the recording. Keith placed the box with the pencil dot on it onto the DEA's drug scale and told Jeremy that it had the ring in it. "Now do any of these other boxes have the same weight as the ring box?"

"No, in fact each box has a unique weight."

"Good. Now print labels marked 'A' through 'D'."

Keith took them out of the printer.

"Jeremy, I will give you these boxes one at a time. Weigh each one and remember which box has the ring, but do not tell us which box it is. I will give them to you in alphabetical order."

"Judith, after you erase the pencil dot, mix the boxes so that you do not know which one has the ring, then put them on the scale one at a time and I will apply their label when Jeremy has recorded each one."

After weighing each box, Jeremy said, "Confirmed."

"Jeremy, Judith will now go to each of your computer rooms and deposit the correct box into each one. I will go with her, but I will not go into any of the rooms. Do not disclose where we are to anyone until we leave that deck. Now execute your secret of the ring."

"Confirmed."

"Jeremy, leave the secure mode and come back to normal."

"Confirmed."

Judith put the labeled boxes into the bag and folded the top over. Keith shredded the rest of the used sheet of labels. When Tom gets back we will be ready to make our little trip to the bowels of the ship. Tom walked in just as Keith finished saying that.

"How was my timing? Can I come back in?"

"Thanks Tom. Your timing was perfect. While we are gone, see if you can find out from Jeremy what we were doing. He isn't supposed to tell you, so don't get mad at him. You can even try his secure mode, if you wish."

"OK, sounds like a challenge." Tom winked at Keith and nodded his head. Keith felt Tom knew it was about a hiding place for the ring, but obviously Tom didn't know for sure.

When they got to the lowest decks where the computer rooms were located, Keith asked Judith if she thought she should use a marker on the boxes and add a sign that they shouldn't be touched without her express permission.

"Not necessary. I have the perfect hiding place in each room. They won't be found by anyone that isn't standing on his head with a light on his forehead."

Laughing, "That was pretty descriptive, but you are probably correct."

When they finished the four rooms, Judith hugged Keith. "I know how worried you are, but I want you to know that I have every confidence in you to get us through this problem without any scratches."

"I pray that you are right. You just don't know Donna; she can be extremely devious. She could have planned all of this and she may be laughing right now knowing that we have walked right into her trap. One thing that she doesn't know is that back then, I noticed when I received my copy that our divorce decree was not filed with the Circuit Court. I took my copy to the Wisconsin Vital Records Office in Madison and made sure that they properly filed it. I have a certified copy of the filed divorce decree now. It will come in handy if her attorney tries to say that it wasn't filed within a certain time limit and therefore wasn't granted. I faxed my copy to Attorney Holbush today after I told him my suspicions."

"How did you ever think to do that?"

"I don't know. I guess I was suspicious when my copy arrived without any posting or filing notation on it. Rather than confront our Circuit Court, I went directly to Madison."

"Brilliant, Mister Northquest!"

It was difficult to determine which person initiated the hug that time. They were in a place rarely visited by anyone on the ship so they felt safe to have an extended kiss in this public place.

* * *

"Back already? I have been quizzing Jeremy every way that I know and I can't get anything from him. He doesn't have any record of the two of you talking about your plans that you may have recently had. He didn't know what you were up to. He even couldn't find you on the ship until the last couple of minutes. If I have a secret, I certainly know where to record it so that nobody else will ever find it. He doesn't even say, 'My lips are sealed.' He just didn't know what I was talking about."

"Thanks for trying, Tom. It gives us a good feeling to know that whatever we were up to will not become general knowledge. We are going to go eat in public, then attempt to retire early. This has been a trying day. Thank God for a smooth sea!"

They went up to the 15th deck before they headed to the dining room. They saw the guard outside Anabel's cabin. Keith asked, "How is it going in there? Any noise?"

"Good evening, Keith, Judith. It has been very quiet."

"I need to tell you that you are guarding the cabin of one of the most devious people that I have ever met. She will try anything to get out. Please be sure to pass this forward to each of your replacements."

"Thank you for that advice. My instructions are to be certain that she remains in here until Captain Jones takes her out."

"Good job; keep it up."

"Thank you. Have a good evening."

As they walked toward the elevator, Keith said he was going to be sure that David had extra people there when the morning and noon meals were delivered the next day. She might try to make a run for it otherwise.

The Stanton Family

It was a relief to enter the dining room with all of the joyful sounds. The dress was casual for this evening's meal in the main dining room. The maître'd asked if he could find them a table. Keith said, "No thank you. We will just mingle with the guests and see if we get any invites to join a table."

"I am sure you will, if only because of Judith's beauty. I will watch for you and summon a waiter when you are seated."

"You aren't up for a raise, are you?" Judith teased.

He just smiled. They had worked together on their last assignment on one of Sterling's ships.

She and Keith walked into the dining room and walked among the tables while greeting the guests. Some had some minor questions they answered. Both had cheerful smiles for everyone. As they approached one particular table with two open seats, a man rose and greeted them. "Aren't you two the youngsters who were engaged in one of your commercials?"

Keith shook his hand and answered. "How kind of you to recognize us. Yes, we are Judith and Keith."

"I would like to introduce you to my family here." He introduced his wife, two sons and their wives. He said his name was Frank Stanton. "Would you please join us for dinner?"

Keith looked at Judith, who nodded. "Yes, we would enjoy that very much. Thank you for asking."

"We have just ordered, I will summon a waiter." Stanton turned to look for a waiter. He was surprised to see one just a table away headed toward him. "That was certainly prompt, my good fellow. Would you please attend to our guests?"

Keith ordered for both of them.

Mrs. Stanton looked surprised. "Is that all you are ordering, Keith?"

Judith replied, "He eats five or six small meals each day to control his weight and nutrition."

"He is so good looking. Judith, you are a lucky young woman."

"Thank you, Mrs. Stanton."

"Please call me Sally, dear. We loved watching your engagement. My husband, Frank, obtained a copy of it from our television station and we have watched it over and over again. Those baby sea turtles were so very cute and so determined."

Judith smiled and giggled a bit. "I was enjoying them when I saw Keith coming around the corner of the island. I got so excited seeing him that I almost forgot about the turtles."

Frank asked, "Do you mean that it was not staged?"

Keith answered, "Only in terms of where we should start. I told my cameraman to watch out for anything. He guessed, but he was not certain that he was about to film an engagement."

"Oh, that makes it so much more exciting and beautiful. I am so glad you told us." Sally was nearly out of her chair in excitement. "After watching the tape over and over again, I told Frank that we have to be on your first cruise and we should take our family with us. Neither of the boys was able to get time off from their jobs for a honeymoon when they were married."

"What kind of jobs did you have?" Judith asked, looking at the boys.

One of them, William, answered, "We were both home on leave from Afghanistan when we had a double wedding. Harry and I are twins. Now we have returned to the States after finishing our final tour of duty."

Keith jumped up and went over to shake their hands. "Thank you for making all of us safe and proud! What sort of accommodations do you have here on the Maxx?"

William answered they were all in a large family suite.

“Please forgive me, but you should have separate cabins, especially if you have just returned home.”

Frank looked uneasy, but felt he could tell Keith. “We could afford the family suite, but not three separate cabins.” Sally looked shocked that he would say such a thing.

Keith asked, “Would you please excuse me for a moment while I make a phone call?” He turned his back on the table. “Tom, do we have three type A-4 rooms fairly near each other on an upper deck? Thanks, I will be reassigning the Frank Stanton family into them.”

Keith turned back to the table and walked to stand between the two younger couples. “In honor and appreciation of all you have done for your country, we are moving you into three separate cabins on the exclusive upper decks at no additional charge. The cabins are next to each other so you can still visit as a large single family unit, but you will be able to have your private times as three separate couples. Each of these cabins has enough seating room for the six of you as each of them is larger than your present cabin.”

The newlyweds instantly had tears in their eyes and they kissed. Keith and Judith could see they really wanted and needed some private time together. Sally and Frank were overwhelmed. Frank insisted on paying the difference.

Judith said, “Keith and I have considerable latitude in what we can do on the ship. We have not interfered with any other guest by doing this. He looked at me and I nodded back as I knew what he was thinking of doing for you.”

“After dinner we will take you to your new cabins and after you decide which couple will be in which cabin, you may tell your original steward which of your personal items go into which new cabin. You do not need to repack anything. Your former and new stewards will take care of everything.”

The wine steward was approaching their table. Keith winked at him. He replaced his wine list with a different wine list out of his back pocket; there were no prices on this list. He suggested an obviously expensive wine with a very fancy description. Frank’s eyes widened and he just nodded.

Keith said, “The usual for us, please.” As the steward left, he added, “Judith and I do not drink alcoholic beverages, but we will have a drink of something else with you.”

The wine steward returned with an assistant. Other people were interested and were watching. Both Frank and Sally were very impressed with the wine. Frank made a toast to their new friends. Keith toasted the family and their three weeks of relaxation and family building. If Keith meant that to be a pun, it was not evident when the young couples searched his face.

The meal went well. The Stanton family was delighted in everything while Judith and Keith felt the family was delightful. Keith asked the boys if they had acquired jobs now that they had returned. They replied that they had just returned when they discovered the Stanton’s had arranged for this cruise. He learned the girls were living with their parents. William’s wife, Mary, was a waitress while Harry’s wife, Elizabeth, was a business planner. Both boys had been waiters in high-end restaurants before they joined the military where they had gained a lot of leadership skills as MP’s.

Keith looked at Judith and raised his eyebrows. She asked, “Would the four of you like to have permanent jobs on this ship? I need another planner in guest services, we always need good waitresses, and we need skilled security personnel. Our security people generally are stewards who are on call as security personnel. Would each of you be interested in something like this?”

Sally had to stifle a scream, Frank’s jaw dropped, and the four others all shouted “Yes!”

Judith said they should just enjoy their honeymoon and whenever they wanted during their cruise, they would be shown more about their jobs.

Keith looked at Frank. “All this, because you were so friendly and invited us to your family table.” Then he turned to the four newlyweds. “Let your dad’s attitude be a lesson to each of you. Always be willing to be a friend – to everyone and for no reason other than to be a friend.”

Judith said, “Another toast. To Frank and his wonderful attitude.”

Their waiter presented Frank with his receipt to indicate the charge to be put on his account. "Where is the wine? It is not on here and it only indicates six meals?"

Keith asked to look at the receipt. He put some sort of code on it and signed his name. "Again, your kindness. Our meals are part of our salary so you will not be paying for us and since I switched the wine list, you will not pay for that either. It is our pleasure and I just signed off your charges. Thank you for inviting us."

"But, but..."

Judith said, "Come, let's go look at your new cabins." She led the way through the dining room to the elevators. They got on the next car and Keith pushed '21'.

Frank said, "Way up there? Aren't they the most expensive cabins?" Keith just smiled.

When the door opened, Keith told them to turn to the right as they got out.

"Your cabins are next to each other, but there is a linen storage space between your cabins, so you won't be able to communicate with each other by pounding on the walls," Keith said with a wink to the newlyweds.

"Let's go to the forward cabin first." Judith opened the door. "Each of these three has the same layout, but their color schemes are different. Let's first be sure that you are comfortable with the layout before you see the other two cabins."

"Oh my goodness, but these are elegant," Sally exclaimed as she walked in slowly while looking both ways. "Oh, I have always wanted a bedroom in this shade of green. Could we please take this one?" she asked the kids.

"Of course, Mom," they all said at nearly the same time.

"Oh, there is someone in here." Sally was surprised to see a uniformed man standing in their bar area.

"Sally, this is your butler, Anthony."

"Good evening, Ms. Stanton. I wanted to meet you and Mister Stanton in person. There are call buttons arranged around your cabin. I will be in here within moments of your calling me by pushing any of those buttons at any time of the day or night. Please feel free to call me to arrange a pillow for you, order a meal or snack for you, adjust the temperature of your room, serve a meal for the six of you here in your room or on your verandah. These two buttons are portable and you should take them with you when you leave your cabin. If you are in one of the shops on the ship and you purchase anything that you would like me to carry back to your cabin, just push your button. The systems on this incredible ship will alert me as to where you are and what you want. There is nothing that I will not attempt to do for you. On another ship, I have even stood with a box of tissues next to a person with a slight cold, for the entire day. Nothing is too small or too large. Just call me. Do you have any questions?"

The six of them just stared and shook their heads from side to side very slightly.

Anthony smiled. "You will think of something and when you do, please call. By the way, each cabin on this deck has its own butler. I will leave now; please do not forget to call me."

Frank put out his hand and thanked Anthony. They shook hands with a large smile from Anthony.

Keith said, "There is no additional charge for the butler. He comes with the cabin. I will cover your bar bill as that was not part of your original ticket purchase. I am sure that you will discover many other things about these cabins that you can share with each other. Let's see who wants which of the other two cabins before we leave you."

Harry and Elizabeth took the next cabin in a light blue color scheme while William and Mary were excited with the bolder colors of orange and yellow in the third cabin. "Harry and William, would you have a few moments to follow me to meet Captain Jones, the head of our security force. Your wives may entertain themselves exploring their cabins. We will not be gone long. First let me make sure that your security bracelets allow you to enter your rooms." He called Tom. "Tom, the Frank Stanton's will

take the forward cabin, Harry and his wife have the next and William and his wife the rear cabin. All set now? Thank you. I will be bringing the two young men to CCC with me in a moment to meet David.”

He had them all try to open their doors to verify that their codes were correctly posted before he left with the boys.

When the rest of the family members were all inside their cabins, Keith winked at Judith and said, “Let’s go this way.” He moved to the wall between the boy’s cabins and said watch this. He pushed on the panel and it opened. “Follow me. We are going to deck number 13.” Keith grabbed a rung of the downward moving ladder and jumped on. The boys’ eyes popped wide open as they each jumped on like Keith did. Judith followed them.

Keith hopped off at the 13th deck and called to each of the boys as they neared his deck.

William exclaimed, “That was awesome. What a great way to quickly go to a critical deck.”

“Exactly. We can move a lot of security people to a given position in a very short time. Now let’s open the door carefully so someone doesn’t fall into us as we open the door. OK, please follow me.”

They crossed the hallway to the other side of the ship and went to cabin # 13301. Judith went through the door first. “Judith and Keith with two guests.”

“Follow her quickly, please,” Keith urged.

The boys did not expect to be suddenly inside the inner sanctum of the ship’s computer room.

Keith said, “Hi Tom. These are the Stanton twins, Harry and William. Men, this is Tom.”

They exchanged greetings, before Keith introduced himself. “Gentlemen, my name is Keith, but I am not just the marketing director. Please do not tell anyone that I am the Chief of Security-Systems and Judith is Chief of Security-Guest Services. Together we are responsible for everything that happens on this ship. Captain Perez and his crew operate the navigational aspects of the ship, but they do not even know that with the computer that you are looking at, we can take over the navigation if we choose.”

Both boys just said, “Wow.”

“You think that was a wow? Well hang on to your hats for this one. Good evening, Jeremy.”

“Keith, you brought me some guests. May I talk to them?”

“It talks, too?”

“Yes. Jeremy that was William.”

Jeremy said, “And the other one is Harry. I will begin with William. Welcome aboard. I understand that you will be working for Captain Jones. I read on your information sheet that you were an MP. Thank you for your service to our country. We are very happy to have you working with us. But first remember that you still have another twenty days to be our guest on the Maxx. Please say ‘hello Jeremy’ for me so that I will recognize your voice.”

“Hello, Jeremy.”

“Oh come on, I won’t bite. Say it like you mean it.”

“Hello, Jeremy.”

“That was better. You probably haven’t ever talked to a computer before, I will bet.”

“No, Jeremy, I haven’t, but I certainly am enjoying it.”

“Thank you, William. Now how about your twin brother, Harry? Why do I detect that you were both born right after Prince Harry and you have the same names as both of them?”

“That is right, Jeremy. Our parents were very fond of Princess Diana and so we were named after her two sons. Our wives just happen to have names from the English royalty, too.”

“You won’t need to say ‘hello Jeremy’ after that nice information from you. Thank you.”

“May I interrupt this lovely conversation?”

“Oops, sorry Keith, but I don’t get a lot of visitors and since you programmed me to talk, I just love to talk now.”

“You? You programmed Jeremy to talk?” William asked.

“Yes, it was part of my doctoral thesis in a security curriculum. I already had B.S., M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in electronics along with a M.B.A., so programming was not a problem for me.”

“So should we address you as ‘Doctor’ or ‘Chief?’” Harry asked.

“Wait, he said we couldn’t talk about this so he is just, ‘Keith.’ Right?”

“Good one, William. I am just Keith the marketing guy that entertains single female passengers and tries to get them into his advertising photos.”

David walked in just then. “Hi men, I understand you want to work for me. I accept, now tell me about yourselves.”

When they both filled David in, he was impressed with their experiences. “I have wanted to build our security force to the point where we have a lieutenant on each of the three shifts that would be responsible for all of the operations for their shift. I already have a 3rd shift lieutenant, so would you accept the 1st and 2nd shift positions? At the end of each cruise, the three of you could rotate to a different shift or you could stay on your current shift for an entire year. It would be up to the three of you. I am sure that Keith and Judith can arrange the shifts for your wives so that they can work the same shifts as you have. Would this be acceptable with you?”

They both said that would be great.

“You may both carry concealed firearms, but Jeremy has already told me that you did not bring any with you on this cruise.”

William asked, “How does Jeremy know that? We were not asked to declare if we had a firearm.”

“You will discover many of Jeremy’s attributes, but one of them is that he sniffed your luggage and you as you came aboard. There is also a sniffer in each cabin, primarily for illegal drugs. Tom, here, and his partner, Bill are DEA agents. Please report any illegal drug activity to them that you suspect. May I swear you both in now so that you will be employed and can be earning a salary while you are vacationing?”

“Wow! Really? That would be awesome.”

They were both sworn in and were given toe-chips to take to the doctor.

While they were gone, Keith and Judith thanked David for accepting them and then they both went up the stairs to their cabins. Keith went immediately to Judith’s cabin. “That went really well tonight, Sweetheart. We met some wonderful people and gained some valuable employees.”

“You were especially wonderful, Honey. Can I have you all to my own for the rest of the night, without you worrying about Donna?”

“Donna, who? I love you, Sweetheart!”

* * *

When Harry and William returned from the doctor, David had them one at a time, put their foot under the green light while he entered them into Jeremy’s data files. He told them how to use their foot to control any door and to move the elevator quickly to the 13th deck. “I won’t call a meeting of the security department to introduce you until your vacation is over, but here are your ID badges that you don’t have to display yet, but you should carry it on you at least in a pocket in case you need to use it.”

“Certainly.”

“Will do.”

“We currently have one guest under ‘house arrest’ at the request of the CBP. She will be transferred to them in Key West tomorrow afternoon.” He told them about how she was interfering with Keith and about her fake passport.

William commented that with her apparent motive, she could be very devious and should be watched for anything unusual.

David asked if they would like to be nearby to watch their interaction with Anabel. They said they would both be there for her two meals the next day and especially for the transfer to the CBP.

"I am very pleased that you have decided to join us, but if I am to stay out of trouble with your wives, I need to get you two back to them now. I have already kept you here too long."

As they were leaving the CCC, they both said they had enjoyed meeting Tom and Jeremy.

"Thank you gentlemen. Your wives are in your parent's cabin."

"Jeremy, you can be kind of snoopy, can't you," Harry stated.

"Someday that will become very important to you. Please don't worry about it."

"We won't, Jeremy. Good night."

"Have a very wonderful vacation." Jeremy called back.

* * *

"Here are the boys now," Sally exclaimed. "How did you get in without us letting you into our cabin?"

Both wives rushed to greet their husbands.

William answered his mother. "Well, when you are employed as shift commanders with the grade of lieutenant, you are able to open any locked door on the ship."

Mary and Elizabeth were very excited. Mary squealed, "Shift commander and lieutenant? We didn't expect to get to that level for 15 or 20 years? That is so exciting. I am so proud of you."

Elizabeth asked, "Harry, you too?" He shook his head up and down in his tears. "Amazing. This is all because your parents asked us to go on this cruise with them."

The boys went the rest of the way into the room to thank their parents.

Frank asked, "What happened? Are you on duty now or on vacation or what?"

William said, "Yes. Both. We are drawing a very nice salary right now, but Captain Jones wants us to finish our vacation with the entire family. He said if anything comes up, he might have to call on us, but basically we are on a paid vacation. Harry and I will alternate from the 1st to the 2nd shift switching at the end of each cruise. Captain has another shift commander that prefers the 3rd shift. He said that Judith would arrange Mary and Elizabeth's work schedules so that Harry and I will work the same schedule as our wives. They are very accommodating."

Frank asked, "What happened when you followed Keith and Judith? Where did you go and what did you do?"

Harry answered hesitatingly. "Well we can't say very much, but we went to the security headquarters at a secret place. The security department holds their meetings there. We met David Jones, the Captain of Security. And we talked to an amazing computer that would answer us with a perfect sentence structure and even ask us questions. It seemed to already know a lot about us. If we mention a Jeremy at some time in the future, that is the computer's name."

"Was this Jeremy like that computer in the movie about those space guys?"

"No Dad. This one doesn't have a face, but it does seem to have a mind of its own." He tried to change the topic. "Aren't these cabins fantastic? After the cruise is over, I wouldn't expect our quarters to be this luxurious, but we won't have to live off our parents until we got a job. We have jobs, wonderful jobs."

"Well after all you have gone through over there in the Middle East, you deserve a good job back here in your homeland. Oh, look at the beautiful sunset. Let's go out on the balcony."

"It is a verandah, Mother, but yes, it is beautiful. If you do not mind, we would like to celebrate it on our own verandah. Thank you again, Mom and Dad. This is only the first day and so much has happened already. We will see you tomorrow. Good night."

“Good night, kids. Have a wonderful evening.” Frank winked as the two couples left the cabin.

In their cabin, Mary asked, “Do you have a slight limp? What did they do to you?”

William smiled. “Nothing really. We each have a very small microchip in our right foot, in the big toe. That’s what unlocks all the doors for us. I did not even think that I had a limp.”

“Let me see it.”

“See what?”

“Mmmnn.”

* * *

Keith and Judith slept soundly through the night. He woke up and went through the doors to his cabin. He got to his outside door and opened it just as Michael was about to knock on his door.

“Another moment and I would have been knocking on your forehead. That was great timing or is this another of Jeremy’s tricks?”

“Come on in, Michael. No, just good timing, I guess. Have you been outside this morning? I was just about to open my balcony door to smell the morning breeze. This is so much better than staring at the side of a hi-rise in New York.”

“Isn’t that the truth? I thought you would be sleeping with the balcony doors open.”

“There has been a development. My ex-wife is in the cabin above Judith’s. She came here expecting to get Judith’s engagement ring for herself and I locked both of our balcony doors to prevent any unexpected outside entry into our cabins.”

“Is she that athletic that she would try something so foolish?”

“That is not the right question to ask. It should be, ‘is she so desperate for the money she could get for the ring that she would try something so foolish?’ Then you would have said it right.”

“I know you well enough that I can tell you are holding something back. You said you wanted us to be friends. What else is biting you, Keith?”

He told Michael the whole story.

“Do you know that you are lifting your weights a lot faster this morning? Slow down before you hurt yourself. I am so sorry, Keith. What can I do to help?”

“You already have helped, buddy. You reminded me to slow down. See what you can do when you get mad? Your body just uses your muscles to get that anger out before it hurts you.”

“And you have helped me. Seven months ago I would never take the stairs, even for one flight up. Now, I only take the elevator when I have a deadline to meet. And sometimes the stairs are even quicker than the elevator.”

“That is obvious from looking at your body. Are you going to go into maintenance mode now or are you going to continue to keep building up muscle until you have to get your uniform hand-tailored for you?”

“Hey, I still fit into my clothes. In fact my waistline is smaller now than it was when we started.”

“Wrong. You can still get into your clothes. That is different from still fitting into your clothes.”

“I guess I had better go up a shirt size.”

“Or two.”

“How is Judith taking this? It has to be hard on her.”

“Michael, she is the most fantastic person that I know. I know it has to be hurting her, but the only thing that I can get from her is that she is hurting for me. She is supporting me 100% through this.”

“Whoa. Stop. I have known her for quite a bit longer than you have. We worked together before you came along. I have never seen her express an emotional hurt, but I have seen her get

emotionally hurt. She won't show it, Keith. Don't let that fool you into thinking that she is not hurting. How can this problem be resolved and who can resolve this problem? You are the only one that can bring this to a good ending. She knows that and she trusts you to be able to deliver it. That is why she is supporting you so much. She has to. What else can she do? Just do not forget that she needs just as much support as you do. Be sure you are there to give it to her."

"Thank you, Father Murphy."

"Don't get flippant with me, Keith. I mean it." Michael raised his voice.

"I am sorry. That just popped into my head. I should have let it go. I believe you, Michael. Thank you for being such a good friend. I needed that. What you have said makes a lot of sense. I just wish I knew how to resolve this. I thought that my attorney could resolve this because it is a legal issue, but perhaps there is a way for me to get through Donna's greedy head and show her that her scheme is only going to get her into permanent misery."

"That sounds like the Keith that I know. He is the brilliant guy that always seems to find a way through difficult situations."

"Don't be too sure. Donna is difficult."

"Turn off the negativity. Put your energy into finding a way through this. Draw on your faith. God can get you through this. Just listen to him. You surely haven't forgotten how you got through the problem with the weapons the DEA guys were hiding, have you? You were almost immediate in coming up with a brilliant solution."

"That was a good one, wasn't it? Donna just got to the emotional side of my brain and it shut down my analytical side. I will overcome this by having both sides working together again. Thanks, Michael."

"That sounds more like the Keith that I know. You have worked your brain as hard as the rest of your body this morning. Why don't you take a good long swim? I will shower first and fix our breakfast. Take as long as you want in the pool."

"Are you sure? I always make breakfast for us."

"Duh. I'm the steward here. I should be serving you. Get your butt into that pool, mister."

Keith laughed at the change in their roles and their routine as he headed for the pool. "OK, coach." As he entered the pool, he thought, "*My two best friends in the world are within a few feet of me right now. They are both supporting me. I will not fail them.*"

After a good breakfast with Michael, Keith walked over to his electronics lab. He could sit and think in private there. He turned on his desk computer and sat for a few minutes while it booted up. "*It is booting up. I need to do that. I need to start my brain off in a fresh mode, reenergize it, and rethink about the important things in life. Judith is my life. I need to protect my Judith. My virus protection is guarding my computer and my brain needs to guard my life with Judith. Each day I find a new way to express myself to her. Today my new way will be to guard her from this outside disaster in some amicable way. It has finished booting up and is ready. I am ready.*" He began to type a letter.

May 16, 2013

Dear the former Ms. Donna Wooding,

At one time we loved each other. There were many events that lead to our separation and our legal divorce. We will never again have a love between us. You have moved on to several other brief love affairs which have not ended happily for you.

I have found the love of my life and am engaged to be married next month in June. Regardless of the semi-legal confusion that you have introduced, my attorney has advised me to move ahead with my marriage plans. There is no legal reason for us not to go ahead with the marriage.

Please look deeply into yourself. Whether you or someone else has put you up to this, you must know in your heart that your real goal here is to steal the Shaw of Iran ring. I could just let you have it, but I would only give you the cheap glass imitation ring that my fiancée is wearing and tell you it was the real ring. By the time you found out it was a fake, you would be in jail for a long time for a number of crimes including:

- *Blackmail and extortion*
- *Uttering before a judge that I had signed a paper to request that he vacate our divorce*
- *Possession of a fake passport; conviction can have 15 years of jail plus a heavy fine*
- *Possession of a fake Social Security Number; this can be tried on five or six different counts including uttering, where conviction of each can have 15 years of jail served consecutively plus a heavy fine for each.*

Please read this carefully and understand that regardless of whether you had the ring, you are right now facing all of these charges. You have no husband to comfort you and your greed has turned both of your parents away from you. Your father said they both love you, but they are very grieved by your behavior and they have written you out of their wills. Yes, I talked to him last night to tell him that you were in custody. He asked how he might be able to help me.

My attorney is making headway right now in having Gus Norse disbarred and removed from his judgeship position. What you have convinced him to do is criminal and there could be additional judgments against you for perhaps bribery.

I would not like to learn that you were in prison for nearly the rest of your life. You have been able to buy your way out of your cocaine and other arrests through Mr. Norse, but he will not be in a position to help you any longer. You are alone. The ring would never be of any help to you. I have learned that it has been hidden by a third party and neither Judith nor I know where it is. We would not be able to give it to you even if we were ordered by the Supreme Court to give it to you. It will never be yours.

Your only hope now is for you to reverse your misdeeds immediately and to cooperate fully with Homeland Security when the Customs and Border Patrol takes you into custody at Key West later today. You have gotten yourself into this. You cannot buy your way out of this one. You need to change your ways and ask Him for forgiveness.

*Sincerely,
Keith Northquest
(Via email, signature available upon request)*

P.S. I, Keith Northquest, do declare that I am legally single and am not now married to the former Donna Northquest and have no intention to ever again be married to her.

*cc. Attorney James Holbush, Dean of Law School, UW-Platteville
Judge Gus Norse
David Jones, Captain of Security, Maxx, Sterling Ship Lines*

His intention was to put the letter onto Anabel's computer under an "Emergency Bulletin" which could not be erased by the receiving party. But first he emailed it to Dean Holbush asking for permission to send it to Anabel. He called Holbush to tell him that it was already routed to him via

email. He responded after reading the letter. "Brilliant, Keith. This may do more for our cause on both the divorce issue and the disbarment issue than anything I have done yet."

Keith emailed it to Anabel and silently wondered if he should set the sensitivity up on the fire detectors in her cabin. He did not expect her to take this lightly. Her morning breakfast would be delivered in twenty minutes so he thought he would go up to see what her response was to the security squad on duty during the meal delivery.

The security team was already in place and he saw both of the Stanton boys standing off to the side. He greeted everyone and thanked them for their extra effort. Her steward arrived with her meal and Captain Jones went over the procedures with everyone again just to be sure there were no problems.

The steward knocked and entered the cabin. Anabel was sitting at her desk looking at a message on her screen. The steward announced that he was delivering her breakfast and picking up her tray from the evening before. She nodded and kept reading. He put her breakfast on her table and gathered her soiled service, never turning his back to her. As he was leaving, he said that he would be back with her noon meal. She said, "Don't bother." The steward left and a security team member backed out behind him.

After the door was closed, David asked the two new lieutenants for their comments.

Harry said there was too much white space in the doorway. He thought it would be better to have one member with the steward as the steward had other things to attend to than to keep an eye on the prisoner. Then another single member could be five yards inside the cabin and two more should be shoulder to shoulder in the doorway with another member in the outside hallway on each side of the doorway to halt anyone else from coming near during the mission. David liked that. Harry said that he and William had discussed it before David asked.

"I didn't hear you discussing anything," David said.

"We learned how to silently plan maneuvers with our hands and bodies when we were in Afghanistan," William replied.

"Will you teach us that?"

"We will be glad to."

The other team members instantly liked the Stanton's.

Keith asked the steward for any clues to Anabel's attitude.

He told Keith that she was sloppily dressed without having combed her hair. It looked like she had just gotten out of bed after a rough night. She didn't say anything when he went into the room. She was staring at the communication screen in her room. As he was leaving, he said he would be back with her noon meal and she replied that he shouldn't bother.

"Did she give any indication as to what she meant by that?"

"No. I took it as a sign of some depression with her situation."

"David, Anabel may be planning something. I don't know how she could escape, but it seems that she may be up to something."

"Thanks, Keith. I will put some extra people on duty here. She won't get out. I have my reputation to keep with the feds."

"She can't get through her locked doors, so she may be thinking of something else. David would you please assemble the team including her steward in CCC a half hour before he picks up her noon meal. Maybe someone can come up with some ideas and we can put together a plan."

"Will do, Keith. My lieutenants have indicated we need more bodies here. We can all settle on a plan. Thanks everyone. We will meet in CCC at eleven hundred hours."

Keith went back to his electronics lab to think. He asked William and Harry to join him for some brain storming.

Once inside his lab, William said, "Wow. This really is a great lab. We had some electronics supply houses in Afghanistan that weren't even this well-equipped."

Harry asked, "How many computers do you have in here? Looks like you have been working on a new keyboard design."

"Michael has been designing a keyboard that will withstand having a whole pot of coffee dumped on it, then drop a peanut butter-jelly sandwich face down on it and finally wash it in hot soapy water. All without any loss of functionality."

Harry asked if it could withstand a desert sand storm and 160 degree F. heat. Keith wrote that down and said he would leave a note for Michael. They wanted to know if Michael was an inventor, too.

"When I learned that Michael's educational goals were close to mine, but he had to drop out to take care of his father, I told him that I would sponsor his education. Until he can get into school, I am mentoring him here and challenging him with his keyboard design. He is coming along very nicely; he is very smart."

William said, "I heard from Captain Jones that you were mentoring his son, Donald, too."

"I believe in helping qualified people, William."

"Thank you for your support of us, too, Keith."

"You are welcome. Now let's brainstorm our house arrest prisoner so that you two can get back to your wives and your vacation. Anabel has her back up against the wall. She is desperate to avoid being arrested by the CBP. I think she will attempt something this noon. She will not want to wait until the transfer to CBP because there will be too many officers in close proximity to her and she will probably be in cuffs."

They worked on various scenarios and devised a plan that would cover each of them. When Keith was satisfied, he sent the boys back to their wives with his apologies and thanks.

Escape

Captain Jones had his lieutenants and squad members assembled in the CCC conference room at 1100 when Keith walked in. William asked if he could start the meeting.

“Keith, Harry and I had a brainstorming session this morning. I would like to present our thoughts to everyone, but these are not final. Each of you is encouraged to add your opinions before we finalize our plan. Ms. Johansson is likely to be desperate to escape this noon. We built a plan to deal with any contingency. Each person should be alert to unexpected conditions. Regardless of what the conditions are, do not move from your assigned position. Here is our plan subject to approval of the Captain.”

William had drawn the schematics on a sheet of paper that he had given to Keith to display it on the wall screen. It showed the steward entering the room accompanied by a squad member. Two members would block the open door. If the forward member required assistance the pair in the doorway would enter with another pair moving into the doorway to replace them. The outside hallway would be empty of squad members towards the bow of the ship, but there would be a side-by-side barricade of squad members to the rear of the ship and thirty feet back from the doorway. “If there is an escape, the barricade would be a visual signal for the escaping person that her best route would be towards the bow. At the end of this hallway is a stairway that goes both up and down. Harry and I will be stationed at the first stair landing above and below the 14th deck to intercept the escapee. As soon as our escapee enters the stairway, the barricade members will advance to the stairs while all of the others will split with half going up one level and half down one level using the moving ladders. These will advance to the stairs on the 13th and 15th decks. These movements will begin on signal from the Captain. Hopefully, there will be no escape and none of this will be necessary.”

David asked why they would be alone and so far away.

“We learned in Afghanistan that ‘runners’ felt a certain brief level of relief if they had a chance to run. This messes up their thought process. Harry and I would appear to be guests on the ship and would initially act as someone that could assist the escapee. This gives us the opportunity to make a firm and secure grip on the unaware escapee, a technique that we are well versed in. We would maintain this grip all the way to the jail on a lower deck.”

“Any questions, thoughts or comments?” William looked at the Captain first then the squad members. “I want to add that because of the circumstances, Keith should not have any physical contact with the prisoner. We do not want to add any complications to an already messy legal situation between them. Keith will be stationed behind the barricade to the rear. He will be our assist to the main computer via radio to Bill up here in CCC.”

“I would say that you have put together an excellent plan. Congratulations and thank you. I approve of your plan.” He then made assignments as to which squad member would be in which position. “If everyone is ready, let’s go.”

Keith and the Stanton’s went up the stairs while the others all took the elevator. Harry said, “It looks like we will have to institute an exercise program for our security members.” They were on the 14th deck before the security team arrived. When they arrived, Keith called Bill to lock down the 14th deck elevator doors; he had earlier advised the other guests on this deck that the hallway was not accessible for twenty minutes around noon. Bill also locked their cabin doors to prevent someone walking into a problem.

When the time arrived, the steward arrived with the food, knocked on the door and entered Anabel’s cabin with his announcement that he was delivering her meal. Nobody could see Anabel at first. Then the steward found her on the floor in her kitchen area. There was a blood stained knife

nearby and her black jumpsuit was stained in blood. He called out, "Suicide attempt. Knife on the floor."

The two in the doorway and the guard five yards in the room moved into the kitchen area. Anabel had a pulse, but they couldn't tell if she was breathing. They hadn't planned on this so they relaxed their guard for a moment. Anabel jumped up screaming and ran for the door. Her jumpsuit was too smooth and slippery for any of them to get a grip on her. The two in the doorway had moved a bit to get a better look at what was happening in the kitchen. Anabel burst through the doorway. Looking right, she saw a barricade of men in the hallway, but the hallway to the left was clear. She let out a scream and ran towards the bow where she knew there was a stairway. As she ran down the stairs, a male guest was coming up and turned toward her as he was on the landing. He was in shorts and a tank top showing his muscular build.

"Whoa, what's up? Is someone chasing you? Come here, I can protect you." He held out his strong arms.

Without thinking of anything but getting safely away from the guards, she ran right into his arms. She was surprised at this man's strength and only for a moment, she felt safe. Then she realized that she couldn't move her arms or her legs. Another man looking just like the first one was coming down the stairs behind her. If there was any part of her body that she could move before he got there, it wasn't moving any more. She was even off the floor. She let out a weak scream.

"Do not try to move. You are under arrest. Any resistance from you will be met with an even tighter grip on you. You will be released in the ship's jail cell on a lower deck in a few moments. Anabel, we will not harm you unless you resist. Do you understand?"

She tried to shake her head up and down, but she couldn't move it. She squeaked, "Yes."

"Good, we will go to the jail now."

Then she could see all of the guards. Some were in front of them leading the way and some were behind them. They went to a waiting elevator and went in.

"I can hardly breathe," she pleaded.

"We will not release our grip even if you barf all over us. You will only be released in the jail."

After she was placed into her cell, her steward put her meal into her cell through a pass-through. "I noticed you used all of your catsup from this morning's meal. Would you like me to bring you some for this meal, too?"

"I hate catsup."

"There is a folded set of jail clothing on your cot. Please change into the jail clothing after we leave. You will be under watch by only female security members until we arrive at Key West in about four hours," the Captain said.

"I want to see my husband."

"You indicated that you were single when you boarded the ship yesterday. That is the only thing that we will be using as to your marriage status."

"Keith is my husband and I demand to see him."

"After what you have done, we cannot possibly believe you. Please enjoy your remaining four hours on this magnificent ship. Good day." Captain turned on his heel and left.

"There is nobody in here. You said there would be a female security member in here. Where is she?"

"Good afternoon, Ms. Johansson. My name is Alice and I am in another room where I can see you. There are no males in here with me so you may safely change your clothes now. When you remove your catsup-soiled clothes, please put them in the hamper next to your door. They will be cleaned and put with your other clothes in your cabin."

Anabel kept screaming, but there were no further responses from Alice, if that was her real name.

* * *

The security team regrouped in Anabel's cabin. Keith said, "Congratulations to William and Harry for formulating and executing a perfect recovery of the prisoner. We have some things to learn from today. I want every person from the Captain on down to rethink the events of today and write down the pros and cons that happened regardless of who did them. We will meet in CCC at 1100 tomorrow. If you have nothing to contribute, you will be removed from the security team. That is all." He was obviously not pleased with the escape.

When he got back to his cabin, he sent another message to the screen just outside of Anabel's cell.

May 16, 2013

Dear the former Ms. Donna Wooding,

You obviously did not carefully read the message that I sent you this morning or you did not take it to heart. With your poorly planned and poorly executed attempt to escape, you have now added to the list of possible charges against you. May I respectfully repeat the final paragraph of my previous email?

Your only hope now is for you to reverse your misdeeds immediately and to cooperate fully with Homeland Security when the Customs and Border Patrol takes you into custody at Key West later today. You have gotten yourself into this. You cannot buy your way out of this one. You need to change your ways and ask Him for forgiveness.

*Sincerely,
Keith Northquest
(Via email, signature available upon request)*

He called both his attorney and Professor Young to tell them the events of the first part of this day. Then he went up to see if he could talk to Rudolph.

"Come in Keith. You look depressed, or is it that you have worked very hard today? Don't forget, you gave me access to Jeremy and I have been watching via the hall cameras and other devices."

"I feel that I have brought on this mess to your beautiful ship and I want you to know that I am very upset with the way this has turned out. I want to ask your forgiveness and let you know that this will be brought back to normal as soon as possible."

"Sit. I don't have any health shakes up here, but I can offer you prune juice."

"No thank you, but I will take some tap water-no ice if you please."

"Of course. Now then. I want you to hear me clearly. I do not know of anyone in the world that..."

"Can mess up things like I can."

"Keith! No! I was going to say that I do not know of anyone in the world that I would rather have on my ship in your capacity. You are facing some very difficult challenges with an unwelcome former wife and a security staff that fell apart when they were faced with a real challenge. You have the unique ability to see through problems and face them head on. Bringing Lloyd into your ex-wife problem was brilliant. He has the resources to bring to bear on Gus and your email attempts to Donna were first rate. History is replete with well-trained armies that collapsed under pressure. What made today's event so wonderful for me to watch was that you had a contingency plan that worked perfectly.

Your recognizing the value of the Stanton boys and bringing them in was a remarkable event that fell right into place at the right time.”

“We got lucky on that one.”

“Are you sure it was luck? It seems to me that you listened to a voice from above to go out and look for them. Don’t always assume that YOU have to solve every problem. Normally I would tell you to delegate your tasks, but this time I am going to tell you ask, and then listen to Him for an answer. I won’t leave you in a trash can and neither will He. You are too valuable to both of us.”

Keith rose to leave. “Thank you for your support. Can I give you a hug?”

“Anytime. And you can call me ‘Dad’ anytime, too. Remember there are six of us in that category, but...”

“I know, but your lips are sealed.”

“Exactly, except for this one more statement.”

“What is that?”

“You should put more effort into your 2013 Challenge, because solving it will make even more things become clear to you – things that you want the answer to. There now my lips are sealed again. Hope my saying that doesn’t upset Lloyd.”

Keith just furrowed his brow. *That was a very confusing statement*, he thought.

* * *

Keith went looking for Judith to fill her in on the events of the first half of the day.

“I was hoping to see you. I wondered how things were going for you.”

He told her about his day including his talk with Michael early that morning.

“Isn’t he the best? I picked him for you, because I knew you would like him. I would love to see him find a wife. He deserves someone as wonderful as he is. Of course you are the ultimate in wonderfulness.”

“Were you getting worried that I was getting jealous with your praises of him?”

“Of course not, Silly. He is a great guy and I knew he would be a good male friend for you.”

She thought Keith’s emails to Donna were incredible. She was proud of his wonderful character and insight. “Some people are just beyond help. We can keep trying to encourage them to follow the straight road, but some just can’t seem to do it in spite of everyone’s attempts to help. She may just end up in jail as you warned her. We don’t have control over her actions. You have shown to the world that you tried. I am so proud of you.”

While Keith was telling her about the noon meal and escape, she was very agitated. “With that knife left there, she could have hurt someone. Was she actually bleeding or was it all catsup?”

“It was all catsup, diluted with some water. With her black jumpsuit, the intensity of the red was not noticeable, so a little went a long way. Besides, she thinks too highly of herself to actually cut herself. It might leave a mark that would show if she was doing any modeling anymore.”

“I would like to see what the Stanton’s did to make her unable to move.”

“I had thought of asking them to try it on me, but it looked painful, so I will pass on that. And it certainly isn’t something that I would want to learn and try on you. I like your moves too much.”

“Mmmm. I can’t wait until we are married so we can do all the movements.”

“Same here. That time will be here in just over a month. I can’t wait. I love you.”

* * *

As the ship approached Key West, some of the passengers were gathering to go ashore for a few hours. Captain Perez dropped anchor in the bay as there were no deep water ports on the island. Small ferry boats were headed toward the Maxx to take passengers to shore.

A U.S. Coast Guard cutter was also approaching to take Anabel Johansson ashore. Five men and a woman armed Coast Guard members came aboard the Maxx and were greeted by Captain Jones and the two lieutenants. They all assembled in the jail area. Anabel was dressed in her prison garb and

Michael had delivered her luggage including her laundered clothes from this morning to the jail office. She was very somber, but cooperative. She frowned when she recognized the two lieutenants.

The head of the Coast Guard unit presented papers to David showing that he was taking charge of the prisoner, her luggage, and the passport David had taken from Anabel. He signed the papers and he had David sign them. Each received a copy. Anabel was handcuffed and told she was going to be delivered to the U. S. Customs and Border Patrol when they arrived at the Key West Coast Guard station.

IT COULDN'T BE

The next day Keith was in his electronics lab by 0900. He wanted to think about the 2013 Challenge. He was intrigued by Rudolph's comment of *solving it will make even more things become clear to you – things that you want the answer to*. What did he mean by that? I want the answer to JONESY, the virus. I have asked several people about my parents, with no responses. I want Judith, but that is not something that I want an answer to. How could knowing who the six men are, answer the question of JONESY? *There are six of us men that have known all about the two of you since you were born and you have only met five of us so far. Discover who we are and what our basic connection is*. I know that Lloyd and Rudolph are two of them. And *there are six of us that you can call Dad*. I have a real dad, but he is in Heaven. I call him Dad, though. It is funny, but I don't think I have ever used his full name of David Northquest. And I am also calling Judith's father, Dad.

How about if I add them at least temporarily to the list? Then I would have Lloyd, Rudolph, David, and Edward. Or if I used just the last names, they would be Young, Sterling, Northquest, and Overstreet. Even if that was right, who would the other two be? They would certainly be friends of Rudolph and Lloyd. They were probably at Mrs. Young's funeral; no they would HAVE to have been at the funeral. Who was there that knew me? Let's see, there was Jerome, the limo driver; Marcus, the jeweler; John, the guy from Hollywood; and what about Dean Holbush and Mr. Wooding? Wait, we wondered about Marcus Epstein, so he should be on the list. Now I've got two columns:

<u>First name</u>	<u>Last name</u>
Lloyd	Young
Rudolph	Sterling
David	Northquest
Edward	Overstreet
Jerome	?
Marcus	Epstein
John	Jupiter
James	Holbush
William	Wooding

Keith wrote their full names and arranged them in nine points on a circle. Then he drew connecting lines between people that he was sure knew each other. Everyone, of course, knew Lloyd and probably everyone knew Rudolph. But there were too many missing links. Certainly his dad and Judith's dad didn't know each other. But Edward did say that he would help me find out about my dad. Did he actually know my dad? John Jupiter seems to fit because he was at the funeral for Lloyd's support and he certainly knew Rudolph well enough to offer him the island. Both Lloyd and Rudolph know Holbush. But how would these people know my dad? Rudolph didn't say much about Wooding. I'll keep this list but let's narrow it down to this:

<u>First name</u>	<u>Last name</u>
Lloyd	Young
Rudolph	Sterling
David	Northquest
Edward	Overstreet
Marcus	Epstein
John	Jupiter
James	Holbush

Now I've got seven. One too many. Or maybe the six that I need aren't all listed here. But who would they be? He cut them out into separate pieces of paper and shuffled and shuffled them around. Finally he thought that he'd better tape them down on a single sheet of paper and let it sit until he had time to look at the list again. This was his new working list:

<u>First name</u>	<u>Last name</u>
John	Jupiter
Edward	Overstreet
David	Northquest
Marcus	Epstein
Rudolph	Sterling
Lloyd	Young
James	Holbush

He stood before he left to go to the 1100 meeting and he looked at the list again. Suddenly he yelled out, "OH MY GOD! IT COULDN'T BE! I have got to show Judith. Oh darn, but I have to go to the meeting now. This can wait for a little longer."

* * *

Judith asked Mary and Elizabeth to go shopping with her. She thought they might be concerned about their husbands' jobs because of the seriousness of their meeting today with Keith. She wanted them to know that there was no concern for them. Shopping would take their minds off of their worries.

Keith arrived in the conference room after everyone was present. "Would everyone please put your names on your lists and hand them to me, please." He read them as he collected them. *At least everyone had cons listed*, he thought. Even the Captain turned in a list; his competed for being the longest list with the lieutenants being in competition with him.

"Yesterday's attempted escape was an embarrassment. Each of you has identified the major breakdown as that you fell into Anabel's trap. She created a diversion and you did not follow orders to, and I quote, '*Regardless of what the conditions are, do not move from your assigned position*'. Do you remember that instruction?"

They all nodded, yes.

"Nobody is going to get fired today. But I want you to know that we have to build and maintain an excellent security force. Now that we have an excellent Captain for our force in David, and two new excellent former military police as our 1st and 2nd shift commanders, I believe we will be able to quickly build our force to the level expected of a ship with up to 8,000 passengers. My job is to consult with your Captain and to help him meet his goals. Another part of my job is to provide actionable information for your Captain through the use of a world-best computer program. I delivered on that with Jeremy, but I have been working daily on making improvements to it. I expect that same dedication of everyone here. You, of course, have your stewarding duties to attend to, but you can still be thinking of how to improve yourself while you are pouring someone's coffee. What if they started chocking? What if they pulled a gun on you? What if, what if, and what if. Keep your skills up and keep your minds sharp. If I have made myself clear, I will leave you with Captain Jones. Thank you for your list of pros and cons. I want you to take them back and review them over and over again. Thank you for your time and dedication. We can and will be the best on the seas. Have a good day." He turned and left the room.

David just stood silently for a few moments while it all sunk in with everyone. Then he said, "The Stanton men really saved our butts yesterday. Both of them set up a contingency plan and when we let it fall apart, they stepped up and captured our escapee by executing their portion of the plan beautifully. In case you didn't see that portion, Jeremy has it from the hall cameras. The Stantons did not appear to be security people and one of them actually coaxed the escapee into his arms as if he was

going to protect her. Beautifully planned and skillfully executed. The second Stanton immediately backed up the first one after the initial capture. I will put it up on the wall screen for you.”

After going through the video twice, David continued. “I had already picked them to lead our 1st and 2nd shifts. I believe they have already earned your respect. These men have the training and leadership that we need. You will need to follow their advice and commands.”

Everyone in the room warmly welcomed them.

“We do have a very minor problem, however. They are currently on vacation on this cruise. They were married a few years ago before they left for extended duty in Afghanistan. They only recently returned to the U.S. and to their wives. So they are on a 3-week pleasure cruise with us. I have already hired them and sworn them in, but please treat them warmly as honored guests for the rest of this cruise. Meeting adjourned.”

He stood. Everyone else stood in respect of Captain Jones. He went over to the Stanton’s and hugged them both warmly before he left the room. The others formed a line behind him and expressed their warmth and respect. When they were alone, Bill called to them. “Hey guys. Judith has your wives on a shopping trip. She said you could join them when you were through with your meeting.”

Harry said, “Shopping trip? I thought we left Key West last night. Where did they go?”

“They are new house shopping. Just a second. Jeremy, where is Judith?”

“She is in cabin # 13336 with Mary and Elizabeth. Shall I tell them that their husbands will be joining them now?”

“No thank you, they will just go down there now.”

Jeremy responded, “Out the door, across the hallway and to your right, gentlemen. Good luck.”

They still looked confused. If they were looking for their future cabins, they wouldn’t be on this deck. They would be below the main deck in the crew quarters. Remembering that they could open any door with their toe-chips, they knocked then pushed the door to #13336 open and went in.

“There they are. Anyone for some coffee before lunch?” Judith asked.

“Why are you looking on this deck for our new home?” William asked.

Judith explained that since they were shift commanders and their wives were also employed, they had accumulated enough points that they could live on the 13th deck with the department managers. “Would you like to have your wives show you around your new homes?”

Elizabeth started off leading them. “There is more floor space in here than in my parents’ house. Here we have a full living and dining room with a playroom for the kids.”

“The what? Are you pregnant?” Harry was not expecting that.

“No, not yet anyhow. But you always talk about being ready for anything. By the way, you weren’t ready for that, were you?”

“Sorry. I just thought that I would know before a major announcement like that.”

She snuggled up to him and cooed, “You will be the first to know. I promise.” Then she took him by the hand and led him around the cabin. “Come, look at the fantastic kitchen. The closet space is incredible, but let me show you the loft.” They all went up to the 14th deck. There are four bedrooms up here. You could use one of them for an office. There are two baths and a balcony off our bedroom. It is even fenced off so small toys can’t even be lost over the side. I liked the color scheme in this one and Mary likes the other cabin next door for the same reason. Otherwise they both have the same layout.”

Harry was excited. “This is absolutely beautiful and completely functional. I can’t believe that we will be living in something like this.”

Judith asked if they would like to see the next one.

Mary led the tour of this one. William agreed that he also liked the color scheme here, too. When they got to the kid's playroom, she said, "Come in here with me a moment." She closed the door behind William.

Through the closed door, the rest of them could hear some voices. "WHAT?! WHEN?!" Then the door opened. William was hugging Mary; they both had tears in their eyes. He said, "We are going to have a baby!"

After the Stanton families had left the deck, Keith asked Judith to meet him in his electronics lab. "I made a startling discovery this morning. Remember we had to discover who the six people were that have known us all our lives? Well, look at this. I picked seven who might be in that group and wrote them on paper and cut them out. Then I kept rearranging them around until I noticed this." He uncovered his slips."

<u>First name</u>	<u>Last name</u>
John	Jupiter
Edward	Overstreet
David	Northquest
Marcus	Epstein
Rudolph	Sterling
Lloyd	Young
James	Holbush

"Do you see it?"

"See what?"

"Look at the first letter of the last names."

"Oh, Keith! You have them. Then Holbush doesn't fit into the group, but you have six and they spell out J-O-N-E-S-Y. Wait, I see two problems. Your dad wouldn't have known me because he died before I was born."

"I don't think that matters because they have already said that my dad was watching me even now so they are still including my dad in their group even though he is no longer a touch and feel kind of person. What's the other problem?"

"We have met all of these people and you were told that we hadn't met one of them yet."

"I thought about that, but Professor Young said that before the funeral where we met John Jupiter, so he could be the one that falls into our not having met him yet category. And both Marcus and your dad have talked about telling me about my dad. Marcus had a glass copy of my mother's ring. I think he had something to do with the purchase of the real one."

"Honey, what if the six of them purchased the ring with the agreement that the first one to marry could have it for an engagement ring. Then when your parents died, it went back to the remaining five. When you married, your Aunt Jean didn't actually have it for you to give it to Donna. I think the group could see through Donna; something you couldn't see. They withheld it from giving it to you to give to her. Then when they got together and sent you to work with me, they pulled it out of its hiding place and Aunt Jean was told to give it to you, knowing that you would eventually ask me to marry you."

"Makes you feel kind of funny that we are players in their screenplay, doesn't it?"

"Are you sorry it turned out this way?"

"Judith, don't ever think that again. I love you. I was just saying that we have moved just the way they predicted that we would."

"Sorry, Honey. It was just the way you phrased the question. I am so happy with or without the ring. You are the one that I want."

"Where did these six meet? They seem so different in their likes. Ships, movies, professor, high school teacher, jewelry, plus whatever my dad did. Wait. Aren't they all about the same age? Do you think they went to college together?"

"Honey, where did they get the money to buy the ring? College has never been cheap. Maybe they developed their careers after they met."

"That is certainly reasonable. They needed a money manager for them to get enough money to buy the ring."

"Your dad."

"What do you mean, my dad?"

"Your dad was the money manager."

"That could be a good guess. Hey, back in those days the stock market was skyrocketing and several well-known companies were just starting out then, too."

"Honey, do you think we are getting too far off on a tangent in this?"

"Judith, this is the best scenario that we have until we find a better one. Until then we can keep checking this out. And the virus. The virus was a way for Professor Young to tease me into finding out more about my father. Having it also called J-1-Sink-Yes is just one of his cleverly crafted twists. I think we have it."

"When should we tell them that we have discovered all of this, Keith?"

"They will all be at our wedding, so let's tell them the next day. We could put a special meeting announcement into their formal invitations to meet us somewhere the next day. We could even have them stagger their arrival times by two minutes 'sharp' so that they don't know what is up until they arrive in the room with us. We will invite Aunt Jean to sit in for Dad."

"Oh this is perfect. They have been so sneaky with us; now it is our time to be sneaky with them."

"It is strange that Mrs. Young passed away so that the Professor would be able to attend our wedding ceremony."

"Yes, strange and sad at the same time. But you are right, it is perfect this way."

Sterling Paradise

When the Maxx arrived a few days later in the harbor of Sterling Paradise, Captain Perez swung the Maxx around and dropped anchor in the protected harbor. The ship to shore launches were all in place and quickly transported nearly one half of the guests to the island. Both Keith and Judith went ashore. Judith also took her guest services team ashore in two separate groups to have them at least experience the island so they would have answers to questions from their guests in the future.

Keith looked up Jose and arranged for him to see Judith's pearl necklace. Jose was very excited to see the pearls arranged in a necklace and matching earring set. He bent on one knee and kissed Judith's hand to show his appreciation that she would wear his former collection. For the rest of their three days on the island, whenever they saw him, he had a broad smile on his face.

Keith took Henri back onto the ship. Henri couldn't believe how huge the ship was. They went up to the CCC together. Keith announced, "Keith and a guest coming in."

Henri was amazed to see the small size of the computer. Keith told him that this was only a terminal and the real computer was on a lower deck.

Ken knew they were coming in and he was in CCC when they arrived. He jumped up and went over to Henri to introduce himself. "So this is the Henri that I have heard so much about. I understand that we will be working together in a few months. I am really excited to learn to do your job so you can come here and do mine."

"I am just as excited about it as you are, Ken. I can't wait to talk to this amazing computer," Henri replied.

Ken said, "Jeremy, I would like you to talk to Henri. He will be working here some months from now."

"I am so glad to meet you, Henri. I have heard a lot about you, too. I want to know how you got Keith to scream so loud when you took him for a simple UTV ride through the woods."

Keith and Ken burst out laughing. They hadn't expected that from Jeremy. Henri just stood looking with amazement on his face. He didn't know if he should laugh or not. "Did you tell him to say that?"

Keith shook his head. "No, he just comes up with off the wall comments sometimes. He will really keep you on your toes."

Henri got a grin on his face. "I will enjoy working with you, Jeremy. Maybe you can come up with something else that I can stress Keith with. Or maybe we can do something with Ken sometimes, too."

"When I know more about you, I am sure that we can come up with something. But you will have to tell me when I can disclose it as I can't really see except in a few directions, so you will have to let me know when they are not in the room. Is that a deal?"

Henri got very animated. "You have a deal, Jeremy. We will make a great team."

"Hey you guys. Jeremy, you better remember that I am the boss here and you are a worker."

"Sorry Keith. I won't let him do anything that could hurt you. Remember how you and I used to plan little tricks on Ken? It will be something more like that."

Ken asked, "You mean when I dozed off and you sent a jolt to an electrical pad that Keith put on my chair? I thought that was all Keith's idea; now I understand you were in on it, too."

"See Jeremy. Your big mouth got you in trouble this time. Ken, that was all Jeremy's idea."

Jeremy sounded confused. "I don't have a mouth. What does that mean?"

"Jeremy, it was a figure of speech."

That made him sound happy again. "Confirmed. I will add that to my list of FOS's"

Keith explained to Henri that Jeremy's artificial intelligence kept a FOS or figure of speech list with examples.

Ken was still laughing. "Henri, this was nothing. You should hear them when they really go at it with each other. You will have to learn how to breathe when you are doubled up laughing or you will pass out otherwise."

"I can't wait. Jeremy, it was very nice meeting you. We can work on ideas for Keith later."

"That will be fun. I already have a bunch of ideas for when we meet again, Henri."

"Henri, let's go up to my cabin so you can see the kind of accommodations we have."

As soon as they were in Keith's room, he looked and saw his door to the pool was closed. That was a good start. He had Henri look around the room as he opened the pool door and saw that Judith's door was closed, too. "Look in here, Henri. We can have exercise pools for our morning workouts. Judith's cabin is through that door. We have only told you, Michael and Jodi that I disengaged the door locks between our rooms."

"Wow! I had no idea that even the staff had luxury cabins. This is out of this world."

"You will have something similar on this deck, too. You can have it outfitted in any way that you want, so give some thought to it. You will also have your own hand-picked steward to make up your bed and stock your refrigerator to your liking. We normally eat with the guests or sometimes in the crew dining room, but we can have food brought to us, stocked in our refrigerators or we can just snack from there. It is all up to you."

"I thought my island quarters were elegant, but this makes mine look like a janitor lives there."

"Henri, I am having my longtime friend, Ken, be my Best Man when Judith and I get married June 26th on the island. Would you be able to break away from your security duties long enough for you to be a groomsman for me? I would really like that."

"So you have set a date, have you? Thank you, I would be honored. When and who will set up the decorations or can we do that for you?"

"Thanks. You will have to check with Judith about the decorations. There are tuxes available in the formal wear store on the ship. Before we leave, be sure to go down there and get fitted for one. Then you can keep it as my gift. You never know when you might need it again."

"I don't have anyone in mind for a bride, so I have no idea when that might be. But thanks. I could have used one a couple of times to help out Monsieur in the past."

They walked down to the CCC level and Keith showed him their conference room and his electronics lab.

"Also, let's go down to the Medical Center now to have a microchip put into your big toe of your right foot. It is your passkey to get onto our 13th deck as well as 99% of the doors on the ship. Any time that we are here, you will have free passage to any place on the ship. And we will give you a radio, too. Everyone in security or management has one. It will work from any place on the island, but not when we are many miles away. It is supposed to work between the inner bowels of the ship and the limits of travel at any of our ports of call while we are anchored there. Here is where we keep the unused microchips. We will just take one and you can have Jeremy read it when we come back."

"Will you and Judith stay in your connected cabins after you are married?"

"No, we have another cabin picked out on this deck. It is a lot bigger than any house that I ever lived in. There is already room in there for any kids we may have."

"Will they have to have toe chips, too?"

"That is a good question. We will have to come up with something. Once they are walking I wouldn't want them using their chips and just wandering into anyone's cabin. I will have to come up with a restrictive subset of door locks that can be opened by kids who live on the 13th deck. One of our

security shift commanders is having a baby right after the first of the year, so I will have a little time to think about that.”

“How have you done on your virus problem that you were having?”

“Thanks to your help with your different way of looking at the problem, it has been solved and eliminated. But, and this is a big but, do not tell anyone that you know about this. Judith and I have decided to announce it as a surprise after our wedding.”

“Oh, OK. Sure no problem.”

“Henri, you do not know anything about the virus or who may have put it there, do you? Please be honest.”

“That is a strange question. No, all I know is what you told me.”

“OK. I will tell you about it the day after our wedding. Please don’t breathe anything about it to anyone.”

“I promise. Does Jeremy know? He seems to be a blabber mouth.”

“No, he didn’t even know that he had a virus. And, get this; it was solved by a 17 year old brilliant young man on this ship who is only a junior in high school. His name is Donald and he is the son of our Security Captain. You will like him. I’ve made him a Security Systems Assistant. He reports to Ken.”

“Wow, a 17 year old. He must be a whiz.”

“There must be a word that describes how high his abilities are up there, but I don’t know what it is. Even Professor Young told him that he would give Donald a free ride at Platteville.”

“Now that is really saying something. I don’t believe that Professor Young has ever done that with anyone.”

“That is my point, exactly. Let’s go get you a toe-chip and then you can see the rest of the ship. When we are done, you can show Ken your security headquarters, too.”

* * *

At the end of their three-day stay on the island, Judith gave each passenger a questionnaire to fill out as they returned to the ship. Keith had written it so they could evaluate the marketability of their stop at the island. They bid Henri and the rest of the island crew a good bye and said they would be back in about two weeks.

Judith told Keith that just from the spontaneous comments she received from the guests as they returned from the island, the addition of the island by Rudolph was a master stroke. Everyone had wide smiles on their faces and most said they would be signing up for another cruise right away. They loved that it did not have the feel of being so rigid and commercialized that other ports of call had. Here they could sit on the beach, swim all day long, go for walks. It really had the feel of a tropical island home.

“Good. Why don’t you run up and tell Rudolph. I am sure he will be pleased. This questionnaire will take longer to analyze than I thought as all of their written comments will have to be coded by hand. I will run the analyses on the other parts where they just checked boxes first.”

“Are they all in already, Honey?”

“No, but my guys have already started the coding and keying in the rest of the data. They are keeping up with the flow, but the bulk of the questionnaires are still out.”

“Honey, I was able to spend some time with Henri. I can see why you like him. He is a real asset. He also told me that you asked him to be a groomsman and that you were getting him a tux. That was very nice.”

“I’ve also asked Michael. Have you asked Jodi?”

“I have. My cousin, Alicia is going to be my bridesmaid. Since you asked Henri, I have another girlfriend that I will ask. That will balance out the two sides, unless you are going to ask some more men?”

“No, I think that will about do it for groomsmen, but how about having Donald as our ring bearer?”

“Wonderful, that is a great way to honor him. I don’t have a flower girl picked out, but I was thinking of picking out a girl from our passengers on our next cruise. I’ll bet you could make some advertising out of that.”

“I certainly could. Have you decided on the colors yet, our mothers will want to know. Why? I am not sure. But they have asked. Let’s have the floral shop on the ship do our flowers. It would be a boost for them to be honored with the order.”

“I have already asked them. I even had them go onto the island so they would have a better idea of what should go where.”

“That is the groom’s job to pay for the flowers, right?”

“If you insist. I was just gathering information with them being involved. We can sit down tonight and plan the wedding. Oh, I forgot to have our minister go see the island.”

“I took care of that. Henri took him around for me. Speaking of Henri, I have asked him if he will monitor Captain Perez’s email and cellular communications. He knows the language and he can translate it and see if the Captain is trustworthy. I still do not trust him. Henri agreed and I’m setting it up with Jeremy to transmit copies to Henri.”

“Well the Captain certainly is not a ‘team player.’ He is so negative that I cannot figure out what attracted him to our ship.”

“That is what I am hoping to find out. I need to ask Rudolph what his Plan B is if we have to have Jeremy take over for him.”

“Honey, what are the limitations for Jeremy? Is he able to take over now or does he need to at least go through one complete cruise?”

“Certainly he would be ready after one complete cruise, but the real question is whether we can navigate into and out of ports of call and Tampa without a licensed pilot. We might be able to get away with it if we call it an emergency. I think Jeremy can handle just about anything. I am going to talk to Rudolph after dinner tonight about our Captain Perez and his team.”

Barahona

Keith knocked on Rudolph's cabin door. "Come in, come in. Judith said you were on your way to see me."

"Yes, I asked her to give you a call. We are very concerned about Captain Perez. There have been several run-ins with him and his dominating personality. He certainly does not fit the role of someone that our guests would like to have dinner with nor does he want to do that. Since I asked Henri to review all of his email and radio calls when we were on the island, he has had several calls with questionable individuals. Our DEA guys think he is planning to use the Maxx for a large drug transport to Tampa."

Rudolph sat and pondered his reply before he began to speak. "You may be right about him and I was going to talk to you about this. I just recently learned of that, too. That was probably when Tom and Bill got the same information. You do not usually just present me with a problem without a plan. Why don't you tell me your plan first?"

"I thought that if they tried something, we might have to take over control of the navigation and trust Jeremy to complete our cruise. He can do it, but we would not be operating with a licensed pilot. With that in mind, could you bring on board your back-up retired U. S. Naval team for our next cruise? They could pose as passengers on a vacation until Perez steps out of line. If it was serious enough, Jeremy could lock them into their cabins."

"Excellent. That is a similar, but better plan than I had envisioned. I had just contacted the back-up team and learned that they are available. They will come onboard when we return to Tampa. I hope that will be soon enough."

"Henri said that the supply source would need two to three weeks to put the load together and deliver it to Barahona, Dominican Republic where the Maxx would stop to assist an apparently distressed vessel well off the coast. He wasn't sure of the details as it was all in code, but that is what his computer came up with. I would guess that it was planned for just prior to our arrival at your island on our next cruise."

"I hope it doesn't mess up your wedding plans."

"We of course hope so too, but we will have all of our guests with us so if we have to delay the wedding a day or two, it won't matter that much."

"Shouldn't we call in Puerto Rico's U. S. Coast Guard or the U. S. Navy? We shouldn't risk any problems with our guests."

"What I would like to do is use our defensive torpedoes to sink the supply boat. But, yes, I will ask Tom to activate any U. S. forces as appropriate to bring them down before we got anywhere near that location."

"Thank you for your wisdom, Keith. Keep me informed as usual. You have my complete support. Judith has been telling me about the questionnaire that you gave to the guests that were on the island. So far it looks like John was right about the island fitting into our cruises."

"He should be right; he is a great entertainer. Judith said the guests couldn't stop smiling as they returned to the ship. They are already making plans for another cruise with us and we aren't even through with the first week."

Out on Bail

“Judith, I just got a message from James Holbush, my attorney. He said that Gus Norse paid Donna’s bail as soon as it was set. She was supposed to report back for a hearing in a week and she never showed up. There is a warrant out for her arrest as a result.”

“Wow, she just likes to get into trouble, doesn’t she?”

“There is more. Judge Norse hasn’t reported to his court for any of the cases that he was scheduled to hear for over a week. He went missing the day before he paid Donna’s bail. Holbush thinks that the two of them were living together, so he is working with the District Attorney to file charges on both of them for their attempt at extortion. But here is the best part of his message; Holbush has gotten us a stay from the Appellate Court on the divorce annulment. The clerk over there said it was the most stupid ruling she had ever heard of. So there is no legal barrier to prevent us from going ahead with our marriage.”

“That is wonderful news, Honey. Well, the part about the divorce part was good. I think we should be on guard for any surprise visits from your ex, at least until we are legally married. I am sure glad that the real ring has been safely hidden.”

“I agree. I will tell Captain David as well as Ken, Tom and Bill to keep on the lookout for her, too. The greatest danger would probably be while we are back in Tampa. But when we have our short stop outside of Key West on our return trip, she could also try to slip on board with our guests returning from Key West.”

* * *

Their first 21-day cruise was a success. They were into Tampa on June 6th and the passengers left the ship in a well-orchestrated fashion.

“Sweetheart, you did it! Your plans for having people leave the ship in three days went so smoothly, it was as if your Guest Services have been doing it all their lives. It was beautiful!”

“Well, the major players have been doing this for several years on Rudolph’s smaller cruise ships. This was just a scale up and they trained for it with all of our new employees. There were a few hitches, but they smoothed out the wrinkles so that most of the passengers didn’t even notice. Once again, I heard a lot of people say that they were going to sign up for another cruise. Some of them were able to get cabins on our next cruise. They said they wanted to be there for our wedding.”

“That was nice. It shows they like you, Sweetheart.”

“The women seemed to be saying that they wanted to see you again.”

“You have got to be kidding. I am going to be married.”

“Keith, I think they are hanging on to a hope that they still have a chance with you.”

“No way. I entertained them, but I was completely honest with them that you are my only love.”

“You weren’t very convincing with the tall blonde. She looked for you every chance she had.”

“Didn’t you know that she was married, too? Her husband was with her, although he was usually at the bar. He was the plump guy that was watching from the beach when she and I shot some of the beach commercials on Aruba. As soon as we were done, she ran right up to him.”

“I would never have guessed.”

“I even went up to him and thanked him for allowing his wife to help me with the commercial shots. He said that she has wanted to be in movies for a long time and this was at least a start for her. He shook my hand. I thought you were going to mention the woman that was in the kayak scene. I love that Ocean Kayak that you gave me. We should use it as our ‘get away’ vehicle after the reception.”

“That would be fun. Let’s work on that. Do you think there will be any dolphins there with us?”

“Now there is an item that we can’t plan on. They will either be there or they won’t, I guess. It would be fun if they joined us. They were so friendly. Wouldn’t it be great if they put on a show for our guests with us in the water with them? I’ll call Henri and see if there is any trigger that causes them to come in like that.”

“Honey, I think we have just had a full and wonderful day today. I just want to spend the rest of it with you without any calls from guest services.”

“There is a very lonely bed in my cabin that hasn’t seen much of you lately. Let’s go and make it happy.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Guests Arrive for Wedding Cruise

As the day approached for the next group of passengers to arrive on the ship, Keith was going over the list of scheduled passengers very carefully, looking for any hint that Donna and/or her judge friend, Gus Norse might be on the list. Not finding any passengers that he suspected from any that registered for the cruise at the same time that Donna signed up for their first cruise, nor any that had registered since Donna left the ship in Key West, he felt that he hadn't learned anything of her intentions yet. He just felt strongly that Donna had not yet given up on stealing the ring from Judith. He kept trying to come up with a plausible scenario that Donna would attempt to try to follow. He wondered if she had been so evil while he was married to her and he just didn't know it.

Judith's parents and their friends arrived a day ahead of schedule as Judith had requested. That way they could all be settled in before the steady stream began of the nearly 8,000 people coming on board for the Maxx's second cruise. The others thought to be part of the original JONESY group were also asked to arrive early. Keith told Jeremy to note each time Rudolph and any of the others got together in his suite. He was sure that they would try to get together secretly to possibly plan some joke on him and Judith. They were practical jokers and he wanted Jeremy to watch for something like that.

Keith and Judith took her parents and friends on an escorted tour of the Maxx that included a tour of a special cabin on the 14th deck.

"Mom, Dad and friends, we are about to enter the cabin that will be our home. We are currently in separate cabins, but after our wedding we will be moving into this cabin. Please follow me while Keith holds the door open for the rest of you to follow."

When they were all inside she continued. "This is our bedroom level. You may look into any closet or drawer that you wish as we have not yet moved in. We have room down this wing for any possible expansion of our family as well as for office space for both of us. Behind you and next to our bedroom is an exercise pool where we can swim against an adjustable current of water. We had it decorated with live orchid plants. Is everyone able to go down these stairs and then come back up again when we are finished? If not, let Keith know and he can take you down on the elevator and then bend our security rules to give you access to our room from the 13th deck which is restricted to allow only certain employees."

Everyone agreed that they could manage the stairs.

"Keith wants to put in a slide that he and our kids could use. Yes, he is still a kid at heart himself."

One of the men even mentioned that we could put in a fire pole. Keith snickered softly at that suggestion.

"This is our main living space. There are no outside balconies on this deck of the ship, but we have nice windows with electronically adjustable light-blocking for privacy when we are in port or for room darkening on the ocean. We do not need a large kitchen as we can have any amount of food brought in. There is a full bath on this deck and a children's playroom next to it. We can easily convert it to a grandparent's room."

Vera asked, "Honey, are you trying to tell us something? You have mentioned children several times. Ed keeps asking me if you are pregnant."

"Oh Mom, no, but we are just showing you how we are planning for that possibility. Keith and I would like to have children if that will be possible for us. Have you ever seen a community that has such a potential for baby sitters? Nearly all of my employees have already asked if they could be our baby sitters when the time comes."

Keith said, "And I won't have to drive them back to their homes after we return home. That is another advantage." That got a snicker from all of the dads in the group. "Let's sit for a few minutes before we leave again. You are our very first house-guests. We would like to show you some of the other videos from our first visit to Sterling Paradise, the name of the island where we will be married. I'll put it on all of the screens in the room so you won't have to turn around to watch it."

When they saw the video of Keith's wild UTV ride, the women screamed and the men laughed so hard they nearly rolled on the floor. One of the men said, "Keith, you would make a great character actor!"

"But I wasn't acting. The first time I didn't know what was coming, but the second time when the cameraman was out of the UTV, I was screaming because the driver had just said that he'd lost control and we were going to crash." That made them all laugh all the harder. "Funny, but the driver is now one of my best friends and he will be one of my groomsmen. His name is Henri and he lives on the island."

They saw most of the stills and video footage that was taken on the island. It gave them a break in the long tour on which they were being led and it also gave them a better idea of what to expect when they reached the island. When they were finished with the photos and videos, Judith asked if they were ready to go to dinner. "We do not yet have any guests on the ship so we will have our pick of the tables in the main dining room. We want to again remind you that you are our guests on the ship and except for the gift shops, you will not be paying for anything including the tips. You are to just relax and enjoy our world with us. Let's go back up the stairs so that we do not go out into the employee's-only hallway on this 13th deck. But again if you wish, Keith can break that rule if you require it." Again there were no takers on their offer.

After they were back up on the 14th deck and out into the hallway, Keith asked Judith's dad, Edward, to stay behind with him. "Dad, just stay with me and we'll take a secret trip." He looked at Keith with a furrowed questioning brow, but all he saw was a twinkle in Keith's eye.

The others all got into the elevator, but Keith and Edward just waved goodbye to them. Keith quickly said, "Follow me." He went to the nearest wall panel and pushed into it. Inside were the moving stairs. "Stay here and watch me. I will be right back." Keith jumped onto the down-ladder and disappeared only to pop back up on the up-ladder. "Want to try it? We will beat them down there."

Edward said, "Sure."

"Follow me and I'll talk you through it." Keith jumped on and told Edward to follow him. Keith kept looking up and explaining the system to Edward. "OK, now when you see the large '5' on the wall, look behind you and just hop off the ladder. If you fall, the system will catch you with pillows before you even drop another floor. Here I go; get ready. Now, Dad." Keith grabbed him as he easily got off next to Keith.

"That was fun. Did we beat them down?"

"Let's see." Keith opened the door to the hallway and they went over to their elevator. It was still one deck above them. "We beat them."

Edward went right to the door and was waiting when the elevator door opened. "Surprise," he yelled.

Vera said, "I kept asking Judith where her father was, but all she would say was just watch. And here you are. How did you two do that?"

Edward said, "Keith told me it is a secret and I can't tell you." He had a broad smile on his face.

The others were all just as surprised, too. At dinner, Keith told them that the ship had a special high-speed elevator system for the exclusive use of the security team so they could access any deck with the appropriate number of security members within seconds.

At the end of dinner, Keith asked Edward if he would join him in the corner of the room for a few moments. He asked Judith and Vera if they could be excused.

“Dad, I know about your dream of having a scholarship fund set up for deserving kids. Well, Ken and I have talked for many years about doing just that after we got on our feet. We are both on our feet now and we are in total agreement about this. Judith is also completely on board.”

“About what, Keith?”

“Ken and I want to join you in creating your scholarship fund. Any of the three of us can contribute any amount at any time to the fund. There are no quotas, because we each have different abilities to contribute. I am ready to start it off with a half of a million and just between Ken and I, we feel we will be contributing close to a million each year.”

Edward nearly fainted. He had to grab onto a chair.

“Dad! Are you all right?”

“I was thinking you were going to say just ten per cent of that amount. It just caught me off guard. Are you sure Judith knows about this?”

“Look over there. See the smile on her face? We have talked about this over the past month. She said she would be paying you back for her schooling at the end of the year, so you could put that into the fund if you chose to do that.”

“Of course. I have always wanted to do that.”

“We can work out the details later on the cruise, but I just wanted you to know because I couldn’t hold it in any longer. I already have committed my support to two fine people on this ship that I want you to meet. If the fund can pay their schooling, that will be fine, but if not I will still pay it from my own funds. Ken and I want you to administer the fund and we will be anonymous contributors to the fund.”

“You are just like your father – oops.”

Keith winked and said, “Sorry, I didn’t hear you, but you do not need to repeat it nor my response, either.”

Edward just looked at him with a slight smile that he was trying to contain. Keith knew that Edward knew that Keith knew about the JONESY group.

“When we get back to the table, it will be your choice to make an announcement about the start of your dream scholarship fund. Or if you would rather wait until another time, that is fine with Ken and me. It is yours and it is your choice. Oh, would you look at that! Here comes Ken. You could go over to him and ask him if what I told you is true.”

“I believe you, Son. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I want to thank Ken, too.”

Edward waved at Ken to come over and talk to him.

As Ken approached, he could see that Edward was near tears. “So, he told you, did he, Mr. Overstreet? What do you think about our plan? Or should I call it your plan?”

Edward barely knew Ken, but he wrapped his arms around Ken and gave him an extended bear hug. He whispered, “Thank you so much. You have no idea what this means to me.”

“Yes we do,” Ken replied. Keith and I have talked about this since we first roomed together ten or twelve years ago. We talked and planned and saved and talked some more. Then Judith hired us and we learned about your dream and we just told each other that we had found the solution and the vehicle for our dream as well. We should be thanking you for agreeing to manage our dream for us. The Overstreet Scholarship Fund LLC is about to become a reality.”

“Keith said I could announce it to my family and friends. Is that agreeable to you, too?”

“It is your fund. Go. Do it.”

Edward hurried over to the family, arriving well before Keith and Ken did. Keith asked Ken to sit with them.

“Dear family. I have an announcement. With tongue-in-cheek I could say that Keith has given me a dowry for permission to marry Judith.”

Judith and Keith looked a bit shocked.

“But that wouldn’t be true. What Keith and his friend, Ken, have done is to join me in the establishment of my dream. The Overstreet Scholarship Fund LLC is about to be formed and funded. Through their generous contribution and promise of continued contributions along with mine, this fund will be able to grant scholarships to deserving young women and men to obtain advanced degrees so they can follow their dreams.”

Everyone stood and applauded Ken and Keith. Ken pointed to Michael, who was walking through the room.

Keith called him over to the table and introduced him. “This is one of the first recipients, Michael Murphy. Michael used to attend a university majoring in, what else, electrical engineering. He had a perfect 4.0 grade point when he returned home after two years to take care of his ailing father. This drained all of his finances and after burying his father, he began working for Mr. Sterling. He kept proving himself capable of more and he is now the head of the stewards here on the Maxx. He is also my personal steward and exercise partner. He has built up his body to where people can’t tell us apart anymore.”

That brought a laugh from everybody as Michael was African-American. Michael quickly added, “Except I have a darker suntan.”

More howls from everyone.

“To get Michael ready to go back to school, I have him working during his spare time in my electronics laboratory that I have here on the ship. He already has an invention ready to be patented that will revolutionize the keyboards that we use for our computers. He is ready to work to obtain multiple degrees and when he is ready, I want him to manage an electronics corporation that I will build. I want to remain on this ship with Judith. I can continue to work on my inventions here on the ship. Michael is an incredible person. I would trust him with my life. You will be seeing Michael again as he is one of my groomsmen.”

Edward jumped up and congratulated Michael on receiving a scholarship from his Overstreet Scholarship Fund LLC. Keith explained that his support of Michael would be channeled through this fund operated by Judith’s father. Michael thanked Mr. Overstreet.

After Michael left to finish whatever he was going to do, Judith’s mother said that Judith and Keith certainly worked with some extremely wonderful people. She said it was such a blessing for a mother to know that her daughter was safe and being watched over by a constant company of trusted people.

“Mom, I think you have it backwards. I am responsible for the safety and welfare of all of these people. They, in turn, are reflecting the love that I have for them. Keith also has an awesome responsibility for them as does Ken. The top portion of the chain of command on this ship is not published anywhere and it will have to remain that way for security purposes. I can only say that the three of us have a complex responsibility that can reach up to ten thousand people when the ship is full. While you are here, there may be times, therefore, that neither Keith nor I can be with you. I hope you will understand as we attempt to perform our duties to the best of our abilities.”

“Judith, your mother and I understand fully that you three have a lot to do. We are just so happy that you have chosen us and our friends to share three weeks in your life-including your marriage to this wonderful new son of ours.” Edward didn’t want his daughter to have to explain her job to anyone.

As the guests began to leave the dining room to do their own exploring, Keith told Edward that he wanted him to meet Donald up in the CCC. Vera went with Judith to shop for a dress for the wedding.

"Dad, we will be going to the top secret computer room. You must not tell anyone about it or what we do there. Is that agreeable to you?"

"OK. I understand that you have to have secrets."

"This will blow you away. First of all, I built and programmed the computer that runs this ship. When Judith bought it, we did not know each other and I didn't even know who had purchased my computer. When I was sort of pushed into this job by Professor Young, I didn't know that my computer was here and Judith didn't know that I could talk to the computer. She has probably told you a little about Jeremy."

"She said that Jeremy can talk, but I don't know anything more than that about it."

"Just wait. Jeremy does more than talk. Here we are. I have to announce our entry as we go in. Keith coming in with Judith's father."

"Come on in, Keith. I want to meet him," Tom called back.

Keith introduced Tom to Edward. Then he said, "Good evening, Jeremy. I want you to meet Judith's father."

"Hi Keith. Hi Edward. I just love your daughter. She is so kind to everyone."

"You are right, Keith. He does more than just talk. Can I talk to him?"

"Jeremy, can Edward talk to you?"

"Of course. I already love his voice. Edward, you have some similarity in your voice and your pronunciations with that of Judith's. I like that. Is Judith's mother with you?"

"Yes, she is on the ship with Judith."

"Oh yes, I see she is in the woman's fashion shop. This is a good time as there are no other customers in the shop right now and there is a lot that she can buy in there."

"I hope not."

"But then why did she go in there if she did not want to buy a lot of things?"

"Well, I meant that I hoped that she would not buy a *lot* of things. She went in there to find just one special dress that she could wear to Judith's marriage to Keith."

"Yes, I know about the wedding plans. Did you know that Judith said she wanted to marry Keith, before he said that to me?"

"Jeremy, stop!"

"Did I make a social mistake again, Keith? I am sorry."

Keith just slapped his hand to his forehead and shook his head. Tom began to crack up laughing as quietly as he could. Edward didn't know what to do.

"Jeremy, that is OK. I shouldn't have yelled at you. I am sorry. It is just that you are telling someone about someone else's comments made to you. You should only repeat those kinds of things to the chiefs and associate chiefs and Captain Jones. Do you understand?"

"Yes and thank you for clarifying that for me."

"You are welcome. That was not a social mistake. It was more of a security mistake."

"Oh dear. I am sorry, but now I know better. You should have told me that when I read Judith's letter to Mister Sterling. Then I wouldn't have made that mistake just now."

"You are right. I should have explained it then. Are you back to normal, now?"

"Confirmed."

"Dad, with Jeremy's complex understanding, this kind of a dialog is all it takes to update the programming in Jeremy's main computers."

"There is more than one computer?"

"Yes, we have a few redundancies on the ship. They are all talking to each other right now to update the programming on each one."

"This is waaay beyond my comprehension. Judith told us you were a master at programming, but that doesn't even touch the complexity that you have here."

"Thanks, Dad. I worked day and night for years and years to develop this and as you have just witnessed, it is still being updated."

"When you stopped Jeremy, Tom was laughing. Has that happened before?"

"You tell him, Tom."

"It doesn't happen often, but sometimes Jeremy gets Keith into the funniest predicaments. I love to watch the wheels spinning in Keith's head as he tries to get out of the mess that Jeremy has gotten them into. Keith has to be careful with his reply or Jeremy's feelings will get hurt. When that happens, Keith has to apologize to Jeremy to bring him up to being happy again. It is just too funny to watch. I'd swear that Jeremy tries to get Keith's goat sometimes."

"Dad, that is true, he does try to trap me. I had put that into him so I could test various new things whenever I programmed something new into him. But at some point, it got out of hand. I think that he tries to think up something that will get me mad at him. For example, there was no reason for him to bring up about who said they loved who and wanted to be married before the other one did. No reason at all. He just knew about you from listening to Judith and he put some unrelated facts together and spit it out at us. He was embarrassing when the President of the United States was here, too. Hey Tom, he usually does something like that when we have a guest, doesn't he?"

"Could be, I'll have to think about that. The worst one was when he embarrassed Judith in front of Rudolph." Tom smiled to Edward.

"Oh, Dad. She was so embarrassed. I felt so sorry for her. She turned beet red. You see Jeremy is always listening in, but he doesn't record anything unless he hears his name mentioned. That's when he records what he hears. She was in her cabin writing to you and Mom one night and before she sealed it in an envelope, she read it out loud to herself. Well Jeremy's name was mentioned in there so he recorded it. Then one day Rudolph was here and Jeremy decided to read her letter about loving me and wanting to marry me. I was standing right there and hadn't heard that from her or Jeremy, so I was just as embarrassed for her. Rudolph got Jeremy to stop and he defused the whole situation beautifully. Tom is right. That was the worst one. I'll have to talk to Jeremy about dumping info on guests. Or maybe our little talk today will take care of it."

"This is almost like a movie with the computer interacting with the characters. It certainly must make life more interesting for you."

"That it does."

"Judith said her cabin was next to yours and above the computer room."

"Yup, we go up those stairs to our cabins. Hers is on the left and mine is on the right. We have a locking system to the exercise pool that is between our cabins. Only one cabin can access the pool at a time."

"That doesn't give you two any private space to yourselves. You need that."

"We find ways to spend private time with each other, but thank you for understanding."

"Is that where your exercise equipment is?"

"Yes, do you want to go up and see it?"

"Sure, if you don't mind."

They went up to Keith's cabin. Keith knew that the doors between their cabins were closed, so he wasn't worried about disclosing their secret.

"Here you go, Dad. This is my cabin and Judith's is right through that door. Our exercise pool is in the room between us. Michael, my steward, comes in at 4 a.m. to exercise with me for an hour. Then we take turns in the pool and the shower and get dressed for work. We have a health drink and I'm out by 5 a.m. for work. Judith and Jodi have a similar schedule but they begin an hour after I do. That way nobody has to wait for the pool."

"Very nice. Is this the door to the pool?"

"Yes. It will be locked if someone is in there."

“Is it OK if I look in there?”

“Of course.”

Edward opened the door and was startled to see Vera in there on a tour of her own with Judith behind her. Keith looked at Judith and squeezed his eyes shut while he slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. “Oh no! I am so sorry.”

Edward instantly knew what had happened and interrupted. “I was just telling Keith that I thought that he and Judith should have some way to have some private time together. I am so glad to have found out that they have been able to do just that.”

Vera was surprised. “I just told Judith the same thing. Yes, this is absolutely wonderful. They can study together, sit together, eat together and just spend time loving each other.”

“Mom, I am sorry that you had to discover this. I asked Keith to disable the locks. The only other people that know about this are Jodi and Michael.”

Keith said, “That is what I was referring to when I said earlier that I trust Michael with my life. Exactly as you just told me, Dad, we needed some private time together. This certainly eliminated any tension between us. You have probably figured out by now that we are the heads of everything that goes on in this ship. Everyone reports to us or through someone else that reports to us. Our lives are hectic enough with that responsibility without adding the stress of not being able to show my love to her without a lot of people looking on.”

Judith added, “Mom and Dad, we don’t want you to think that we are doing something that should wait for our marriage. Keith was very insistent that he would honor me with that.”

“Whoa! You do not have to explain anything to us. If you were teenagers, we would likely have something to say about that, but you are both adults. We didn’t know about that between you and it is none of our business, but to tell the truth, your mother and I are delighted in your decisions.”

“I agree Honey. They are adults and I might add wonderful and loving adults that we are so proud of. Keith, I wish your mother and father could be here to see you and Judith.”

“Thank you Mom and Dad. I know that they are watching me with Judith. I think of them more now than I have for a long time. I am just beginning to learn more about them through some of their friends.”

“Keith, we had just finished shopping and Mom wanted to see my cabin. I didn’t know you and Dad were in your cabin. I thought you were going to talk to Donald.”

“That was our intention, but Donald wasn’t here yet. He is probably still studying for his final exams. We talked to Jeremy before coming up here.”

“And Jeremy gave Keith a hard time again. Honey, I can’t tell you about the computer, but Keith has created an incredibly useful tool.”

Keith looked at Judith and mentally asked her if Vera could see Jeremy.

“Sure, why not?”

Edward asked, “What? Why not, what?”

Judith smiled at her father. “Keith was using mental telepathy on me so I just answered him out loud. He asked if Mom could see Jeremy, too. Let’s go down there. But, please note that we have to go out our separate doors so that we do not show others about our connecting cabins. Keith, you and Dad can go out first and we will follow in 2-3 minutes.”

“Good. Let’s close these doors again, too.”

On their way out, Keith demonstrated the fire pole and asked Edward if he wanted to try it.

“I don’t think so; I might make a fool of myself.”

“Hey Donald. You weren’t here when we came in before. I want you to meet someone important.”

"I was studying for my finals. I have to leave tomorrow morning to go to the nearest high school. The exams will take two and a half days to complete. My mother will be going with me to attest to my home schooling textbooks and some other stuff."

"Good luck. I have been telling this man about you. This is Judith's father. Dad, I would like you to meet Donald Jones. Donald this is Mr. Overstreet."

"I have heard a lot about you, Donald. Keith tells me that he will sponsor you through your college career."

"Yes, I am so lucky to know Keith. He has finally hired me for specialty projects and they have added such joy to my life. The cruise that we just completed was incredible. He also hired my parents so our whole family owes him a debt of gratitude. Our home was wiped out by SuperStorm Sandy and my father had just been laid off."

Keith added, "Donald's mother has been home schooling him and he is way ahead of his junior class. He has had a straight 4.0 since 6th grade. He will be able to be here on the ship for another year before he begins at UW-Platteville. I did tell him that I would sponsor him. Then Professor Young began watching and listening to his analyses and said he would sponsor him. Now Donald is about to find out exactly where those funds will come from. Dad?"

Donald's head began to jerk back and forth from Keith to Edward.

"Donald, I wanted to meet you because all of your funds will actually come from me. I have begun the 'Overstreet Scholarship Fund LLC' and you are a recipient of a full scholarship from the fund through me. Keith and Professor Young will make contributions to the fund, but you will get any needed monies through me. By the way, Ken is also a contributor to the fund. This way you don't have to wonder which one of these generous people will be giving you your next payment. Just look to me to make the payment."

"Since Judith's dad has this already setup, there will be a steady flow to you rather than having you depend on sporadic contributions from me, Ken and the professor."

"Awesome. I can't thank you enough-all of you. I just love the assignments that I have gotten here so far. I gave the idea of the first one to Keith and later he gave me a difficult problem that he hadn't solved yet and I was able to solve it for him. This is so much fun."

"Dad, when Professor Young watched him analyze the latter problem, he wanted to name the analysis after Donald and he said he would be submitting it to a professional journal. Professor Young was just amazed at his abilities."

"No doubt. If he offered a free ride through his school, he must have been very impressed. Donald, both Judith's mother and I are high school teachers. We would like to meet your mother and talk 'shop' with her. It can be anytime during the cruise that she is able to talk."

"I will tell her. Both Mom and Dad will like to talk with both of you, too."

"By the way, Dad, Donald will be our ring bearer for the wedding."

"Wonderful, that makes him part of the family!"

Donna

The next day Keith told Judith about the latest message that he had gotten from James Holbush, his attorney. "Sweetheart, I don't know what to make of this news from Holbush. He states that Gus Norse returned to Platteville and turned himself into the authorities. But before he did that, he called Holbush to tell him that he has left Donna, which as it turns out is her real legal name. He said she is heavily into cocaine and is adamant about getting your ring, apparently so that she can support her drug habit. He said he told Holbush because he said she had a gun and was going to get the ring at our wedding. He didn't want either of us to get hurt by Donna. All he knew about her plans was that she was going directly to the island. She did not want to go on the ship and get near those military guys again. That would be William and Harry. I will alert Henri and our team here on the ship so they will all be ready when we reach the island. I know you want the real ring on your hand for our marriage, but I think we should play safe and not bring it out of hiding until Donna is locked up again. I'll have Captain David decide which legal authority should be brought in to take her away. I am sorry that she is raising her ugly head again."

"It is not your fault, Honey. She was taken off the ship by the Coast Guard and the Border Patrol. It is not your fault that she got out on bail and then ran off. She has just added another federal charge to her list."

"But now she has a gun and she is goofy on drugs. I am worried for your safety."

"Yours, too. I would think she feels that you are the responsible one and she would be going after you. Do not let your guard down just because you think she will be going after me."

"That goes for both of us. I will have David call a planning meeting and teleconference Henri in on it, too. If she is headed for the island, he will have to watch his approaches by sea and by air."

* * *

Donna thought her best opportunity to get onto the island without being detected was to arrive on a boat that was expected there with a delivery. If anyone was actually looking for her they would be watching for a helicopter or a small private boat. Her best bet was to hop aboard one of the delivery boats. That was why she was on the south shore of Puerto Rico. First of all she didn't need a passport to go there and secondly if the island used U. S. consumables, they would avoid import duties. From there, she made a few calls to companies that might be making deliveries, but couldn't find any that were going to be headed in that direction. There were still a few days before she had to be there, so she didn't need to get frantic yet, but it did bother her. She decided to see what she could find out from loose lipped bar customers and bartenders. There was one just down the street from her hotel. She put on a short skirt, a tight fitting low cut blouse, and matching high heels. She put her gun into a side pocket of her small purse just in case she might need it.

It was a warm evening in late spring as she walked into the *Surfer's Bar*. She glanced around and immediately liked the scenery, many good-looking strong young men were in the bar shooting pool, standing around or sitting with a drink. There were very few women in the bar so when she walked in, she attracted the attention of most of the men. She returned their smiles and the bar seemed to warm up instantly. One guy introduced himself as *Mitch* and asked if he could buy her a drink. She smiled with her best "*I want you in bed with me*" smile and asked for Jack on the Rocks. His eyes got very wide to match his smile and he asked the bartender for two of them.

The bartender handed them to Mitch. They walked to an empty table for two and sat down. He helped her with her chair and gave the first glass to her. They each took a sip, and then Donna said she wanted to trade glasses with him. She was just making sure that her drink didn't have a date rape drug in it. He traded with her with a knowing smile and liked that she was being careful. They made

small talk about where had she been all his life and other things that Donna thought were senseless. She asked him what he did for a living and he said he piloted a boat that made deliveries to the islands. She thought, *it can't be this easy. Have I found my ride already?* She asked how far he went.

He smiled, "How far do you want me to go and when would you like to start?"

"I meant with your boat, Silly."

"Oh, I was afraid that is what you meant. My boat and I will go anywhere that can be reached in a day."

"What cargo do you haul?"

"I don't suppose you would want me to take you somewhere, do you? I would go anywhere with you."

"First let's find out what sort of deliveries you make."

"Donna, I can deliver you anything you want."

"I'll bet you can. You look very strong, too."

"But I can be gentle."

"What sort of cargo do you usually take to these islands?"

He thought for a moment. "I can't seem to think of a way to twist that one around so I guess I better give you an answer. I usually deliver booze to the island bars, hotels and nightclubs."

"Perfect. Have you ever been to Sterling Paradise? It is ..."

"I know where it is. They just changed the name this year. I have to deliver a bunch of champagne there on the 24th for a big wedding that will be held there."

Donna nearly screamed. She didn't want to sound too anxious, but she just had to be on that boat. "Oh, I would be so grateful if you could let me be on your boat for that delivery. I am supposed to be on the cruise going to that wedding, but I had to be here until the 22nd so I couldn't get onto the ship when it leaves Tampa on the 20th and I just didn't know how to get to the island on time."

"Well, I'm not supposed to take any passengers with me. But what the heck, I own the boat so I might be able to do it for you."

"I will pay you properly for letting me be with you."

"Properly?"

Donna slipped her shoe off and ran her foot up his leg to his crotch. "Oh yes, properly. We could practice this evening, if you want to. My hotel is just down the street."

"You are in luck, Miss Donna. I live alone and I would like very much to show you how you could properly pay me. We could begin in your hotel room this evening."

"I would like that." She set her glass down and slid her chair back.

Mitch was on his feet in an instant and held her chair for her. He extended his hand to help her up. They were out the door quickly while everyone in the bar was watching. Some shook their heads in amazement at how quickly Mitch had smooth talked this beautiful lady into going with him. They never found out that it was the lady that had smooth talked Mitch into going with her.

They walked back to her hotel arm in arm, laughing like a couple of lovers out for an evening. As they got near the hotel, she took her room key out of her purse and gave it to Mitch. "In case there are other people nearby when we get there, it is room 617."

"Are you sure you want to do this, Donna? I want to be with you, but you don't have to do this just to get a boat ride with me."

"You aren't backing out on me are you? I haven't been with a big, strong, handsome man since my husband died from a heart attack six months ago. I am ready now to be in your arms." All of that was a lie, of course.

"I said it before and I'll say it again. I will be gentle."

"You don't need to be," she cooed. She knew if she said that, it would put his internal fire at full power.

Before they went into the hotel, Mitch grabbed her and kissed her passionately. The elevator was empty when they entered it and they almost didn't even notice when the door opened at the 6th floor. Still kissing her, he extended his arm and stopped the door from closing on them.

Inside her room she said, "Mitch, you don't know how badly I want to be on that island for the wedding. I have planned for this for a long time, but circumstances developed so I have become desperate for a ride there. I appreciate so much that you will let me ride with you. I will do anything for you. Besides, I really like you and want to see more of your handsome body."

He lifted Donna onto the bed quietly and gently removed her clothing. "Very nice. You are even more beautiful with your clothes off."

* * *

Mitch had asked Donna to be at the dock with her luggage on Sunday at 7 p.m. When she arrived on time, Mitch was just finishing the loading of his boat with the champagne. It was a very expensive load so he wanted to spend the night outside the harbor where the local thugs wouldn't rob him of his cargo. His boat was protected by a radar protection net that surrounded them and it would wake them if any other boats came near. "I put a large cot in the pilot house so we could spend one last night together. You have already more than paid me for your passage, but I have grown to need you in my arms before I can sleep. I don't know what I will do when you leave me tomorrow. Can I meet your ship in Tampa when your cruise is over?"

"By then you will be hooked up with someone else, Mitch baby. I will miss you too so I am going to make this night extra special for you."

"I can't wait. I will put your luggage on board. Just step here, hold on there, take another step and you're on. Good. The pilot house isn't very large. I made it that way so I could maximize the cargo space, but there will be room for both of us if we get really, really close together."

"That sounds just wonderful to me."

Mitch started the engine, checked all of his gauges twice and after casting off the mooring lines, slowly moved his expensive cargo away from the dock. They went out past the entrance to the harbor. There were other small cargo boats parked out there. They were all waiting to leave half an hour before dawn. The sea was very calm. During the night, it was obvious from the sounds emanating from most of the other boats that not all of them had only a single person on board. The weather conditions for making love were very inviting and the boat captains were really enjoying themselves with their companions.

Donna's plans for an extra special time for her and Mitch included the use of cocaine. Mitch was horrified that Donna was a user. He told her that he couldn't have any coke in his body or he could lose his pilot's license. He didn't want her to use it either, but she knew that she couldn't make it through the night without it. He let her get her fix, but he waited for her to make the first move to offer her body to him. They soon melted into each other and added their voices to the others that were drifting across the sea.

* * *

Mitch was up at first light and he moved his boat around the others that were also beginning to move. When he had a clear path in front of him, he advanced the throttle and followed his planned route to Sterling Paradise. He smiled at the soft body at his feet that was just beginning to wake up.

"Is it morning already?"

"Good morning, sunshine. There is coffee behind me on the shelf. Help yourself. There are cups in the cupboard, above. I do not carry milk, but there are various additives in there you may want to add to your coffee. I hope you do not feel that you need to get dressed as there is nobody out here to see you but me and I do want to see you."

"That sounds like it could lead to an interesting voyage."

"I certainly hope so."

“When do we get there, Mitch darling?”

“We should arrive at 1:20 p.m., then another half hour to unload, depending on whether I can get a few people from the island to help me. I am supposed to leave the dock by 2 p.m. I usually head back right away so that I will be back just after dark. You will have about 22 hours on the island before the Maxx arrives with its enormous load of passengers.”

“I won’t know which cabin to stay in at the island because I heard that the cabin assignments are made on the ship and the island staff won’t know where I should stay. Is there anyone that you know on the island staff that I could stay with until the ship gets there?”

“Well if you want to hook up with someone on the island, I think you might like the wine master, Lynn. He’s a pretty nice guy, single and it looks like he is in shape. He would probably enjoy having you take care of him for the night. I will introduce you to him when we get there. But after I finish with you all day long today, you may be too tired to do anything with him.”

“Oooh, that sounds like fun.”

“That’s where having an auto-pilot on the boat comes in handy.”

“Oh look, the sun is coming up.”

“That’s not the only thing.”

* * *

“Hi Mitch. I hope you’re not short on anything. This may be a heavy drinking crowd heading here this week. Weddings can be like that.”

“Hi Lynn, everything you ordered is here. I even brought you something special.”

“What’s that?”

“Not what, but who. I have one of the ship’s passengers with me that missed the ship in Tampa. She had a business appointment in Puerto Rico and couldn’t make it to Tampa on time. When I found out, I offered her a ride to meet the ship here on the island.”

“Oh really? Well we would be happy to put her up until they get here tomorrow. I can have our security call the ship to find out which cabin we could put her up in.”

“Hello Lynn, my name is Donna. If it is not a problem, I would rather just stay with you for the night.”

“Lynn, I can tell you from experience that you will really enjoy having her stay the night with you. Although you may be tired the next day, if you know what I mean.”

“Well Donna, if you don’t mind, I would enjoy your company. If I may ask you to not let anyone else know that you are here, otherwise I could get into a lot of trouble with my boss if he found out that I had a guest in my home.”

“I will stay well hidden from everybody. Perhaps I could hide in your bed. Would you be able to visit with me a few times during the day and of course all night?”

That brought a large smile from Lynn and a wink from Mitch.

“Mitch, if you will begin unloading, I will take Donna up to my home. We will go the back way so that nobody will see either of us. I will be right back with a small truck and some helpers so we can get this stuff into the cooler. Donna, may I carry your luggage? You certainly travel light.”

“Thank you. This is just a small portion of my luggage. The rest of it is already in my cabin on the ship.”

“Of course.”

She put her arm through his free arm and they quickly walked up the path. When they had gone only a short distance, they took a turn towards a village of older and smaller homes. Lynn’s home was on the edge of the village that was the closest to the lodge further up the hill. Lynn set down her suitcase and opened the door for her. As soon as they were inside, Donna stepped in front of Lynn and kissed him passionately. “Thank you for helping me tonight, Lynn. I promise to be a good house guest.” She rubbed her hands over the sensitive parts of his body.

"I am sure you will," he whispered as he kissed her. The house was spartan, but comfortable. He put her luggage on a chair next to his bed. "I have to go get back to work. I will bring supper back to you later. We can enjoy it together. What would you like me to bring you to drink? The tap water is very pure and safe to drink."

"Could you bring some champagne? Having all of that on the boat got me worked up to want to drink some of it."

"Of course. Make yourself comfortable."

"I could make you very comfortable right now, if you could stay."

"I have to make sure that the cargo is all stored properly in the wine cellar. I will be back. Do not leave the house or you may be stopped by some security on patrol. Then I could get into trouble." At that he left quickly so as not to be tempted again.

Lynn went up the hill and stopped at an underground building next to the lodge. He went down the steps and into an office. "Henri, she is in the cabin as we planned. Mitch brought her in on time. Do you want to give him the reward yourself or should I just include it with our payment for his cargo?"

"No, let's keep the reward separate. I'll pay him the \$25,000 reward for delivering her to us. Did he unload her gun?"

"We haven't talked yet, but if I know Mitch, he was very thorough. He is a former cop, you know."

"What an incredible chance discovery for him to be in the bar that Donna went to."

"In his last phone conversation with me, he said he was waiting outside her hotel and he saw her head towards the *Surfer's Bar*, so he just managed to get there before she did. The rest is history."

"Lynn, you'd better get down there and help him unload. He probably had a lot of extra exertion to keep Donna happy until they got here. He is probably worn out."

"He had the biggest smile that I've ever seen on his face when they tied up. I think he is OK."

Lynn got a small truck with a flatbed trailer behind it along with a couple of other helpers. They drove down to the loading docks.

Mitch had more than half of his load off the boat when they arrived. "I thought someone may have changed your mind about coming back to help me. Thanks for bringing some help."

"Mitch, we can handle getting your load up to our coolers. Is there anything here that is not for delivery to us?"

"Nope, it is all for you."

"Good, why don't you go up and get your pay from Henri, this time. He is expecting you. Thank you very much for all of your delivery." Lynn made sure that Mitch saw the wink in his eye.

Mitch smiled and returned the wink. "Here is something else you may want." He handed Lynn a cloth bag with bullets in it.

"Excellent, but you should give this to Henri."

Mitch took the bag back and shoved it back into his pocket. He left saying, "If you break any bottles, they are yours now. I have made my delivery." He walked up the trail looking from side to side to see if there would be any sign of Donna. He hoped he had seen the last of her.

"Mitch, come in, come in! You have just made the most important delivery of your life and we are most grateful. I had put out the bulletin on Donna, hoping that we were right in our guess that she would try to hitch a ride with one of our suppliers. But to have her make contact with someone as professional as you was just a blessing for us. Thank you so much for all of your extra efforts."

"Are you referring to locating her or my living with a sexy, dangerous, cocaine pot-head?"

"Both actually. We did warn you about the cocaine. Does she have a lot of it with her?"

"Enough to get her locked up for the next 200 years."

“When they captured her on the Maxx, she was a screaming banshee. Did you see any of that attitude with her?”

“No, although I expected it. She only brought out the cocaine this morning and she tried to get me to take some. Otherwise I wouldn’t have known that she had any. She knew enough not to drink any alcohol with it though. She is one hot lady. She sure knows what to do with her body to get what she wants from a man. I really had to try hard to stay focused on what my goal was. If I hadn’t installed an auto-pilot on my boat last year, we probably still wouldn’t be here. Neither of us got dressed this morning until we were 10 miles away from here.”

“She was that intense, was she?”

“I’m not complaining, you understand. I thought she might sleep most of the way and I would empty her gun then, but that didn’t happen. Good thing I woke up an hour before she did and I unloaded it then. The chamber is empty, too. Here’s a bag with her bullets in it. I did not touch any of them, so any finger prints on them will be hers.”

“Thank you so much, Mitch. I know you want cash, so here is your reward money for delivering Donna to us. If there is ever anything we can do for you, please let us know. If we hadn’t found her, the wedding might have had to be called off. The couple, Keith and Judith will learn what you did, too.”

“Give Keith my regards. Does he still have Jeremy?”

“Oh my God! How do you know Keith?”

“We were in several classes together. I was a cop before I went to UW-Platteville. But I dropped out without getting the degree when I learned about this boat and the routes that it had already established. Living on the sea with a good paying job was always my dream and now I am living it.”

“I will certainly pass that along to Keith. Thank you for sharing it.”

“I knew Donna back then when she and Keith were married. Of course that isn’t saying much. I think every able-bodied man knew Donna. I changed my name after I left school and I grew a beard so I was pretty sure that she wouldn’t remember me. I figured that she probably had 5-6 different men each week over all those years so with my changes, she wouldn’t remember me.”

“What was your name then?”

“Jack Mitchell. I changed it to Mitch Jackson. Kind of a sloppy switch, but it worked for me.”

“Brilliant.”

“So you were there, too?”

“I thought that word would mean something to you. Yes I was there and so was Judith. If you ever get tired of taking care of your boat, call me and I’ll see where we can fit you into the Maxx or this island.”

“OK, that’s a deal, Henri. Thank you for your prompt payments and remember there is a deposit on the bottles and I will be glad to collect them from you when they are empty.

“Thank you, Mitch. You are probably too tired to safely go back tonight. There are mooring buoys across the bay that you can hook up to for the evening. May God safely return you to your port tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Henri. Please say hi to Keith and tell Lynn that in a way, I am sorry for dumping that fox on him for the night. I don’t know when you plan on arresting her, but the sooner the better.”

With that he left and returned to his boat. On the way down he passed Lynn and his load. They waved and exchanged smiles. He found a note of thanks from Lynn in his pilot house. After a full inspection of his boat, he tossed off the lines, fired up the engine and maneuvered over to the far side of the bay to hook up to a buoy for the night.

After a light supper, he dropped off to sleep even though it was still daylight. A sound woke him up and he checked his ship’s clock. Exactly 10 p.m. He could hear a throaty sound of a powerful

boat moving very slowly into the harbor. It had all of its interior and running lights turned off. Mitch had his anchor lights on so he knew they would see him and not collide with his boat. There was nearly a full moon and they passed close enough for him to see that it was the U. S. Coast Guard from Puerto Rico. They probably had a squad of Border Patrol with them. They switched from diesel power to electric as they went silently to the dock where Mitch had been some hours before. He thought, *there is going to be some screaming from Donna pretty soon. She is not going to be happy about this.*

Perhaps twenty minutes after the Coast Guard arrived, there was a short blast from its horn. Exactly three minutes later there was an explosion up on the hill in the direction of Lynn's cabin. It lit up the sky. Having been a cop, Mitch knew that it was a flash-bang to stun Donna. The boat horn must have been a signal for Lynn to leave her in his bedroom so he could quickly get out of the cabin before it went off. *Poor guy. I hope he had some clothes or at least a towel on before he went out with all those people out there.* Mitch knew that the flash-bang would disorient Donna so that she wouldn't be able to put up any resistance when the Border Patrol went in to get her. *Yep, there's the screaming that I thought I'd be hearing. Glad I can't make out the words that she is using on them.*

The Coast Guard cutter lights went on when they got word that they had captured Donna. The island path lights went on. Mitch hadn't realized that they weren't on when the troops got there. He had calculated how long it would be before the female Border Patrol got Donna dressed so they could take her to the Coast Guard cutter. Then he added the time for them to carry her down the hill. He looked at his clock and thought it would be just about three more minutes. He counted out the seconds and when he got to 165, he could see them coming down the hill. He smiled to himself at his accurate prediction.

Mitch's phone rang. Without looking at the Caller ID, he answered, "Hi, Lynn. How did it go?"

"How did you know it was me?"

"I'm parked at one of your mooring buoys across the bay. I watched from down here. I am surprised that your ears seem to be working so well."

"When I got outside, they quickly covered my ears with some sound-proof ear muffs. It was still loud and they faced me away from the cabin so my eyes would still work, too. They had two people assigned to take care of me when I got out."

"Did one of them have clothes for you? I was just thinking that I felt sorry for you having your whole body exposed to them."

"I'd taken care of that. I had large beach towels for both the prisoner and me. I left mine where I could grab it on my way out when the boat horn went off."

"That was good thinking. No sense in embarrassing yourself when you were the key to her capture and you were therefore the hero."

"Hadn't thought of it that way, but I guess we are both the heroes."

"Nope, the last one in action is the hero. So you are it, my friend. I am glad to be rid of her. She is too intense for me, certainly not a person I could be in love with."

"I agree with you on the intensity part. Good grief, but she is crazy when she's on cocaine. I thought that stuff was supposed to make you numb."

"Numb and dumb, but crazy is one of the side effects, Lynn. I am so sorry that you had to go through all that."

"You are the one I should be sorry for. You had her for several nights plus the whole ride over here this morning."

"Life has a way of forgetting the bad things and remembering just the fun parts, so I think I will get through this just fine. Hope the same goes for you."

“Well, I argued for a 9 p.m. arrival, but they said they couldn’t get here that soon. Something about the Border Patrol’s arrival was going to be the limiting thing in the timing. They just laughed at me and said I could have another hour of fun with her. They apparently didn’t know her that well.”

“I’m glad you called, Lynn. I wanted to be sure that they got her and that you would still be speaking to me and ordering your supplies from me.”

“You will be a life-long friend after this episode, Mitch. I won’t forget you. Can you come up for breakfast in the crew quarters in the morning or do you have to leave now that she is gone?”

Mitch thought for a moment. He really did want to leave before daybreak, but there was no real reason for it except for his compulsion. “Thanks, Lynn. If it is early enough in the morning, I would enjoy a real breakfast instead of the dried stuff I have here on my boat.”

“Name the time and we’ll be ready for you.”

They talked for a couple of more minutes before they agreed on a time and they both signed off for the night.

* * *

While they were talking, Keith’s phone rang. He switched it to speaker-phone so Judith could also hear it. “Keith! It is over. Donna is in chains and they have her locked to the frame of the Coast Guard cutter. They just left the harbor.”

“We can’t thank you enough, Henri. How did it go? The last that I heard was that some boat pilot had connected with her and was taking her to the island for the reward money that Sterling put up.”

“He wasn’t just some old boat pilot. Do you remember Jack Mitchell from school way back when you were married to Donna?”

“The name is familiar, but I couldn’t paint a picture of him. Was he the boat pilot?”

“Bingo. He changed his name when he dropped out of Security School and bought a boat. He had been a cop before that. His name is Mitch Jackson now and he had been with Donna back then. She didn’t remember him, but he knew who he was looking for and he arranged for her to bump into him in a bar in Puerto Rico. He just played the game for several days before she got into his boat loaded with champagne for the trip here to our island. Then he handed Donna off to Lynn, our wine steward. Lynn took her to a cabin that we set up for him. When the Border Patrol got here, Lynn was able to get out before they threw in a flash-bang in at Donna. It stunned her so badly that she didn’t put up any resistance. Lynn can go back to his own cabin tonight and we will rebuild the old, run-down cabin that was used for the capture. It is over, Keith and Judith. Since Donna jumped bail, there is no chance that she will be out free, ever again.”

Judith answered first. “Henri, you really pulled off a miracle on this one. You will have to tell your complete story to Professor Young when we get there. This has been a tremendous stress on Keith. He may not be able to finish talking to you. He is so relieved that he is walking around the room crying right now. Thank you so much, Henri. And thank you for calling us. This may be the first time in the past month or so that he will be able to sleep comfortably tonight.”

“You both need comforting. I’ll get off the phone now. I can’t wait to see you tomorrow afternoon. Maybe you will see Mitch tomorrow on his return trip. He is staying overnight in his blue and white striped boat with a red nose. He painted the red nose on the bow as a comment on over-drinking.”

“We will look for him. Have him pass on our port side if he sees us. Good night.”

“Keith, it is over. It is over. Now we can begin our life without your ex hanging over us as a threat to our future. This is wonderful.”

They hugged until Keith could stop sobbing. “I am sorry for losing control. Her threat has been hanging over my shoulders since she found me on our last cruise. I kept trying to comfort you and

keep you from feeling her threat. It was tearing me apart. She is gone now. The day after tomorrow, we will be one. Thank God! I can hardly wait.”

“I love you so much, Keith. Let’s go into your cabin. I want to sleep in my protector’s bed, wrapped in his arms for the rest of the night.”

* * *

“Sweetheart, I was talking with Michael this morning about that guy, Mitch that helped with Donna’s capture. I am going to rig some of our extra Fourth of July fireworks to shower him as he passes by us. I’ve already asked Captain Perez to blast our horn when he is about to pass. I was surprised when he agreed without an argument. I will put out an informational message to our passengers that we are honoring a hero that may be passing us today. I don’t think we need to explain further than that, except that maybe he is a former police hero. I’ve rigged Jeremy’s forward radar scan to watch for him.”

“We won’t scare Mitch will we?”

“Nah, I will phone him just to make sure that it is his boat that we are seeing. Then I’ll tell him that we have a surprise honor for him. We may not even see him. This is a big ocean. I’ll get his phone number from Henri.”

A couple of hours later Jeremy alerted Keith that Mitch’s boat was 20 miles out and approaching the Maxx. Keith called Mitch’s phone. “Is this the former Jack Mitchell that I knew in school that saved our butt yesterday?”

“Keith? How nice of you to call. I can see a floating skyscraper dead ahead. I may have to turn to the starboard to avoid getting stepped on like an ant.”

“That is the Maxx, the largest luxury cruise ship on the seas. Don’t pass too far to our portside as we want to shower you with fireworks. There will be close to ten thousand passengers waving to a former police hero. That’s what we told them you were anyhow. You are our hero and we wanted to give you a howdy.”

“Hey, Keith that is very nice of you. I just saw the opportunity to help, and the reward money was a nice incentive, too.”

“If you are ever in Tampa for twenty-one days on the third Thursday of the month, come aboard. We will give you first class accommodations on our tab. You can even bring a friend.”

“You would do that for me even when I slept with your former wife while you were married to her?”

“That’s a long time ago and it worked out to our advantage that you knew who you were looking for. Judith and I owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“You are very kind. I just might take you up on that when the cruise season winds down a bit. Right now I am kept very busy. May I take a rain check on that?”

“It is an open invitation. Just walk onboard to collect. We will find great accommodations for you. Get ready for the fireworks, you are getting close now.”

“Thank you in advance. Have a good cruise and a fantastic wedding. Congratulations to you both.”

Captain Perez blew the ship’s horn just then and Jeremy let loose with a barrage of fireworks that would show up well during the daylight. Keith and Judith waved from her balcony and Mitch waved back. Passengers all over the ship must have been waving, because Henri called Keith to tell him about the call he had just gotten from Mitch. Mitch said he couldn’t possibly count all the people that were waving and whistling to him as the Maxx went by. He was very humbled by the display.

Hijacking

When they arrived at the island, there was a lot of excitement in the air. The invited wedding guests were excited to see the island and wanted to investigate the actual place where the wedding was going to take place the next afternoon. The other ship's passengers that had opted to go ashore for the wedding were ooing and aahing over the island's beauty. They too thought it was the perfect place for a wedding. Keith's photography staff was busy taking photos of everything they could find that might be useful in their future advertising. Of course they were also taking photos of the passengers so they could sell them at the end of the cruise as mementos of their cruise. It took most of the afternoon for all of the passengers to go ashore that had signed up for this side trip.

Judith's guest services staff was busy with the decorating of the main lodge and the wedding site. Henri's teams set up the chairs down by the beach, but Judith's staff wanted to do the major decorating. Everything was going according to plan when Keith got an urgent phone call from Tom in CCC. "Keith, Captain Perez hoisted the anchors and is headed out to sea. I called him and he said that a storm was brewing and it would become the next named hurricane just as it was getting here. He wanted to be out to sea when it hit. Keith, the National Hurricane Center says he is crazy. There is no tropical depression even out there to begin building."

"Thanks, Tom. I will call Jeremy. He will lock down Perez's navigation team and take over. We have never tested his navigational abilities. I hope this works."

"Good luck, Keith."

Keith called Jeremy's private number and went through the "Jeremy, I have a question" sequence. "Jeremy, initiate navigational take-over."

"Confirmed."

"Jeremy, initiate navigation-team lock-down."

"Confirmed."

"Jeremy, can you navigate the ship back to where it was anchored?"

"We haven't gone very far, Keith. This will be a simple task for me."

"Jeremy, take the ship back to where it was anchored, then drop the anchors where they were a few minutes ago."

"Confirmed."

"Thank you, Jeremy. You may talk to Tom and tell him what I just told you to do."

"Confirmed."

Keith called Judith, Rudolph, David and Henri on a conference call. "Well our Captain Perez just hijacked the Maxx, probably to go get his load of drugs. Jeremy stopped him. If any of you are in position to watch Jeremy navigate the Maxx back and drop anchors in their exact former position, this might be a historic event. Jeremy has the navigation crew in lock down. They can't even move between rooms. Perez is going to be furious."

David said, "I will call the Coast Guard back. I had just been talking to them. They captured the cargo off Barahona. It was just as we had told them. This appears to be a new record that will beat the February 6th bust of 4.5 tons in Spain worth \$340 million. The Coast Guard had called to thank us. Now they can come and get Perez and his crew. I don't know how many of his crew even knew about the drugs, but that is something for the DEA to figure out. This will go down as an assist by Tom and Bill, too. They contributed a lot to the investigation."

Henri excitedly said, "Here comes the Maxx. I am watching it coming back into the harbor just as smooth as Captain Perez ever did. In fact, Jeremy is copying each of Perez's minute motions right to the letter."

“Excellent job of programming, Keith. Jeremy’s value just shot up immensely for any of the ship line buyers that haven’t committed by now. Thank you.”

“Thank you, Rudolph. It is also a tribute to your ship builders that followed the specifications that I wrote for hooking up the right wires to the right terminals when they put the Maxx together.”

“Honey, what can we tell the passengers when they start asking?”

“Judith, we need to give this a positive spin, but still be honest. How is this for a starter? The ship’s captain, Jesus Perez, attempted to hijack the Maxx so that he could use the ship to move a huge amount of cocaine into the United States of America. The United States Coast Guard confiscated all of the drugs and arrested Perez and his navigational crew. At no time were any of the ship’s nearly ten thousand passengers and crew in any danger. The security force of the Maxx planned and orchestrated the entire event. They have already replaced Perez and his cohorts with a crew led by the decorated, retired U. S. Navy Admiral Ralph Bayer. The security force waited until Perez had cleared the harbor with the Maxx so that he could legally be arrested for hijacking. An onboard computer brought the ship back to its point of anchorage without any human intervention. This computer system in the Maxx was designed and built by an employee of Sterling Ship Lines. This unfortunate incident will have no effect on the comfort or timing of the ship’s 21-day Caribbean cruise that is now in progress.”

“Thank you, Keith. Would you please add that our employee has Ph.D. degrees in Electrical Engineering and in Security Systems? That would add to the professionalism and the safety for the passengers.”

“Well said, Rudolph,” Henri added. “Sometimes Keith has to walk a fine line between disclosing his role and promoting his achievements and abilities. The way you added the information does not endanger Keith’s role.”

“Honey, that was beautiful. I am impressed that you could put that together so quickly. I would have had to write it down and edit it several times to come up with what you said.”

“Thank you everyone for your support. I need to check back in with Tom and Jeremy to see if they are OK and find out when the Coast Guard will be arriving here to pick up the prisoners. I, for one, will be glad to be rid of them.”

Rudolph said that Keith spoke for each of them on that score.

“Tom, do you or Jeremy have any comments for me?”

“Only that it was incredible to realize that it was a computer that brought us back into the harbor and dropped the anchors in precisely the same position that we had been in before the incident. He was so smooth in his steering and his movements. It was just beautiful, Keith.”

“Good. I’ll call Ken to see what the passengers are saying.”

Ken had gone immediately to the busiest open air deck to mingle with the passengers when Perez had begun to move the ship. “Keith, the incident didn’t cause any alarm among these passengers. They just thought it was part of the normal daily ship movements. That may change when the Coast Guard comes in and hauls off Perez and his band of thieves.”

“I had Jeremy record a message for Judith to publish that will help the passengers understand what is going on.”

Captain Bayer

It was several hours before the Coast Guard arrived to pick up Perez and his crew. When the navigational deck was cleared of the prisoners, Admiral Bayer and his crew were moved into their new quarters. Keith asked Ralph Bayer if he wanted to be addressed as Captain or Admiral.

“Keith, while I don’t care, I think the Navy would want me to have the civilian title of Captain as far as this ship and its passengers are concerned. You could advertise that I am a retired U. S. Naval Admiral, but otherwise use Captain.”

“OK, but when just you and I are together, I’d like to call you Admiral as your nickname.”

“That is your choice and I am just fine with it. It is kind of like I would like to call you doctor in private.”

“I see what you mean and that is fine as long as only the security chiefs and assistants hear that.”

Ralph slapped Keith on the back. “I think we will get along just fine. Anyone that can program a computer to navigate a huge ship like this and move it so precisely into position has my highest admiration. There are some people in the Naval Advanced Planning that would like to talk to you. The Air Force has unmanned drones; just think what the Navy could do with unmanned submarines or in-close attack ships. You could revolutionize our Navy, young man.”

“You would have to go through Rudolph with anything like that, but I’m up to it as long as I could do it from here. I will show you my electronics lab when we finish up here.”

“Keith, our accommodations up here are far better than any active duty admiral has ever had. And you are even treating my staff as equal to me. That is just outstanding. This bridge is incredible. The instrumentation, displays, communications, and creature comforts are incredible and it is not all in ‘ Battleship Gray.’ Now, you said that your Jeremy just cut all of this off with a simple command from you by radio?”

“Yes. Then another command told Jeremy to take the ship back where it had been. I could have given commands as if I was on the bridge, but since Jeremy has been memorizing all of Perez’s commands, he just utilized them to return on his own.”

“Incredible. I like everything up here, could I go see Jeremy?”

“Of course. If you are ready, we can go now.”

They went down to the 13th deck and walked into CCC. “Keith coming in with our new Captain.”

“You have got to be kidding me. This is your entire communications center? I expected two dozen people in here with two to three computers for each person. This isn’t any larger than two regular cabins and there only seems to be one or maybe two computers in here.”

“This is Jeremy. Actually the system is Jeremy and this is just his main terminal. We have multiple unmanned computer rooms on another deck. Would you like to talk to Jeremy?”

“May I?”

“Good afternoon, Jeremy. This is our new Captain. You may talk to him.”

“Welcome aboard, Admiral Bayer. We are so glad to have you join us with such a wonderful crew. I have been watching all of you since you arrived on the 18th as I knew you would be replacing the other crew.”

“Jeremy, whoa. I said you could talk to him, but he would like to ask you some questions if you will give him a chance.”

Ralph just watched with his mouth open.

"I am sorry. Too wordy again, I guess. I was just telling him how happy we are that he is in command."

"Jeremy, I wanted to tell you how magnificently you maneuvered this ship into position earlier today."

"Thank you, Admiral. Keith is the one that programmed me to do that. Actually, I thought it was fun. Did you like the way I dropped the anchors one-at-a-time then put some stress on them so we wouldn't move after they were down."

"Yes I did and I was wondering about that because Perez didn't do that. I thought you were just copying his movements."

"Well, I did copy him, but I read about putting stress on the anchor chains from a seamanship book that Keith let me read."

Ralph turned his head slowly to look at Keith. He raised his eyebrows as if he was asking Keith to confirm that.

Keith just shrugged his shoulders.

"So you improvised a little bit, didn't you?"

"Was I wrong to do that? I was only told to copy Perez."

Keith spoke up to answer Jeremy. "You were not wrong, Jeremy. You learned from a book and that was OK. Why don't you ask our Captain about that?"

"Captain Bayer, was it OK that I learned it from a book and added it to what I copied from Perez?"

"Jeremy, I thought it was incredible. When I saw that maneuver, I was standing next to my 1st Mate and he pointed it out. He said that Perez hadn't done that, but he should have. So what you did was something even better than what Perez did. I want to congratulate you on your performance. Usually it takes a naval officer several years to do it as smoothly as you did."

"Oh thank you Captain. I will remember that."

"And he will, too. Admiral, may I add you to our security team? When we have meetings that I think you should attend, I will invite you. It will be your choice as to whether you are able to attend."

"As long as I don't over-step my limits of navigation-only, I would like to attend. This has a possible confusion however as my communication with non-navigational staff is to go through Judith."

"Judith and I are equals and that rule was made to keep Perez from knowing that both of us run the ship operations. I have decided to open up our levels of communication with you, so you can talk to either or both of us."

"I understand and thank you."

Just then Donald walked in.

"Ralph, this is Donald Jones and Donald, this is Captain Bayer."

They exchanged greetings.

"Ralph, this young man is only 17, but he is already college material. He works here in CCC with Ken when he is not studying. His mother, Martha home schools him and he has a perfect 4.0 since 6th grade. He has made some very important discoveries here and Judith's father's scholarship fund will take him as far as he wants to go in college."

"Congratulations, Donald. You certainly have made some wonderful achievements. If you would like to see how a ship is supposed to be run from the bridge, I would enjoy having you spend as much time with me as you would like. The bridge under my command will be open-access to the ship's guests."

"My mother would like to explore that as an educational experience for the ship's Children's Program. May I tell her about it?"

“Keith, does everyone on this crew think more about others than they think about themselves? What an incredible crew. Donald, of course your mother may spend as much time learning about the bridge operation as she wishes and I would love to have her bring tours of kids through. As long as we are not dodging submarine attacks, we will never be too busy to accommodate tours. And I don’t expect that will ever happen.”

“What would you do to dodge a submarine attack?”

Aside to Keith he said, “I think I may have opened a can of worms.” Then he turned smiling to Donald. “Under a submarine attack, each U. S. Navy ship has a unique set of secret rules to follow. There are zigzag paths that we have to follow that are pre-designed to best avoid letting a sub line-up on our position so they can shoot a torpedo. Then if one is fired off, the ship turns parallel to the path of the torpedo so that it presents the smallest profile target to the torpedo. Some ships are equipped with missiles that can be sent out to intercept the torpedo and explode it before it reaches them.”

“With the Maxx, couldn’t you also throw out a load of chaff and utilize all of the side thrusters to move 90 degrees to the incoming path more quickly?”

“Yes, you sure could and I will remember that one. Good thinking, Donald.”

Keith had a big smile on his face. He was very proud of Donald.

“Please send your mother up to see me and if you are not busy working down here, you could come up with her.”

“Thank you, Captain. It will probably have to be after we are back off the island. I am the ring bearer for Keith and Judith, tomorrow. I have never worn a tux before. We could never afford anything like that. I haven’t met the girl from the passengers that Judith picked for her flower girl. How old is she?”

Ralph raised his eyebrows and looked at Keith. “He is growing up, Keith.”

“Donald, I don’t even know. Judith has kept that part secret from me. I just hope there aren’t any sudden surprises. For either of us. There will not be any practice run through as everyone would be watching. So what we have done is just practice here on the ship with the minister. We have done it in separate segments so it will all come together tomorrow on the beach. I am kind of hoping our Frazer dolphin friends will be there. We had so much fun with them when we were engaged.”

“They love to ride the bow wake of ships. Our seamen always ran to the rails and cheered them on.”

“When we were here just before Christmas, we went out in the water with them. They came over to us and began playing with us, taking us on their backs for races and at the end, one of them dove deep with me then threw me up high into the air. It was just incredible. I felt like we were in a show at *Sea World*. Judith and I are hoping we can do something like that with them for the passengers to watch. Henri says their appearance in a group like that is very sporadic. They are there frequently, but not with any pattern that he has figured out.”

“Wow that would be fun. May I join you if they come in?”

“Sure Donald, just put a swim suit on under your tux. That’s what we are both going to do. We won’t interrupt the wedding for them, but if they begin asking us, we will just surprise our guests by taking our formal clothes off and we’ll dive in with them. That is AFTER the wedding, young man. I don’t want you losing our rings into the water.”

“Aw come on, Keith. I wouldn’t do that.” Then he laughed. “What kind of music will you be having? Maybe that will attract them.”

“That could be a problem. The *Canadian Brass* band is here for the processional and the Wedding March at the end.”

Ralph laughed. “At least they will know you are there. Those guys can really put out some volume. I love their music. Anyone doing any singing?”

“Would you believe that Judith got *Andrea Bocelli* and *Celine Dion* to sing some love songs for us? They brought their own CDs for their backup music. It turns out that they have both been to this island in the past although at different times so they were both excited to be asked to sing for our wedding. They remembered Judith on TV for the Presidential Medal of Freedom presentation on December 12th and they wanted to come.”

“Awesome, Keith. You really know how to pick them. I like the newer rock groups, but the classics are great for weddings.” Donald was animated about the musical groups coming in.

Ralph cocked his head as he looked at Donald. “For a 17-year old you are certainly grown up. I thought you would turn your nose up at Keith and Judith’s musical selections.”

“I have spent a lot of time with adults. My peer group was pretty small back in New York and on this ship it is even smaller, so that may have something to do with it. I do have some friends on the ship that are my age. Their parents work here and we hang out when I’m not studying or working.”

Keith asked, “Donald, do you have *any* free time to spend with your friends? Maybe we should cut back on your hours so you guys can just hang out more together.”

“Well, I can’t work on Sundays, so we have some time together.”

“Let’s talk together, you, me, Ken and your parents. I think you should have at least two full days off each week so you can socialize more.”

“I like to work, though.”

Ralph advised, “Donald, even adults need time to socialize. The Navy builds that into the intense work load that our men and women have. They work hard, but they play hard too. Sports fit into the play hard part of it. Plus every night there are card and board games going on down in the crew compartments. The Navy encourages it so that the crew members get to know and trust each other. Especially while you are still in your teen years, be sure to include a good amount of social interaction into your days.”

“Thank you, sir. I will talk to my parents about that, too.”

“Good one, Ralph. I am glad you brought that up.”

The Wedding

That night was one of the first that they had not slept together for several months. Keith, being the traditionalist, said that he and Judith shouldn't see each other on their wedding day until the wedding. It was difficult for both of them to fall asleep. Judith was in their beach condo and Keith was in his cabin on the ship. They talked to each other by phone or radio until the wee hours of the morning. They missed holding onto each other.

Michael arrived as usual at 0400 and walked in on Keith as he knew Judith wouldn't be there. "Hey, wake up! Do you know this is the first time EVER that you have been sleeping when I walked in? Didn't you two get a good night's sleep? What is with this, sleepy head? Get up!"

"Is it morning already? My built-in clock didn't go off, I guess."

"I think you forgot to set it last night. That's what I think. Do you know that this is the LAST night that you will be sleeping in this cabin? The LAST ONE ever. Come on, get up and let's celebrate with a good work out."

"How did you suddenly become me and I became you? Huh? Wait, lemme me look, turn on a light. Nope, I am still basically white and you are still black. So you look like you, but you sound like me. Tell me how that happened?"

"It happened because you were so lonesome for your beautiful girlfriend that you didn't sleep last night. Just think. In just ten hours you won't have just a girlfriend any more. She will also be your loving wife. You two really deserve each other. You were made for each other. I don't know when I have ever seen two people that were just so perfect for each other. It is always a joy for me just to watch you work and play together. Now get your butt out of bed and get warmed up. We have some work to do here for the next hour and I am going to make sure you do it, Mister Northquest."

"I thought I told you never to call me that. You are my friend and you should just call me Keith."

"Well, that woke up your brain muscle. Now if I can just wake up your other muscles..."

"Well played, Michael. OK, here goes. Oh my gosh, am I ever tired. If I get into the pool, I may just drown."

"I'll make sure you don't get in there until you are awake. Come on stretch those quads. Let's go!"

The banter went on like this for longer than normal this morning. Michael actually felt very sorry for his best friend. He so wanted Keith to just go back to bed for some much needed sleep, but he knew how Keith's body worked. Keith needed to get moving and into his routine or he would complain to Michael for the entire day that Michael didn't force him to get going. Eventually Keith was lifting iron like he would on any normal day.

"Thanks for getting me going this morning, buddy. I really needed your encouragement. I probably didn't get more than two or three hours of sleep last night. I hope Judith is able to get up this morning."

"She is a lot stronger than you think she is. She lets you do the heavy stuff, but she could do it almost as well as you could. Jodi tells me that Judith can lift a lot of iron, too. Judith just lets you do it, because she likes to feed into your manliness and your self-esteem. Be sure you continue to let her do that for you, but also be aware that she is one physically strong woman if she needs to be."

"I love when you tell me these things about her that I should have already figured out. I don't know what I would do without you, Michael. You are like my cherished advisor."

"Nope, just your good buddy, that's all. And I really like the way you and I can talk about stuff like this. I need it from you too. Now get in the pool, before I have to push you in. Set your water

speed up a little bit this morning. When you feel your feet hitting the back wall, you will realize that you aren't up to your top speed yet. You will feel great when you come out for your shower."

When Keith finished his swim, he headed for the shower. He stopped to say, "Thanks good buddy."

While they were drinking down their morning health shake, Michael smiled at Keith. "I stopped in to see Ken in CCC before I came up here. I asked him to check on Donna's status. He checked and said that she was locked up in Miami and the judge had already ruled that since she jumped bail the last time, there would be no bail set for her this time. She had a court appointed attorney that was not thought to be very sharp. He had just gone along with the D.A.'s office each of the previous cases that he had been appointed to by the court. I thought you should hear that this morning so you don't have any worries that she could possibly show up and in any way mess up your wedding."

"Like I said before. Thanks good buddy. And that is really what you are. You are my best male friend and I hope that never changes. Remember, I want you to run my company someday. I thought I would be sorry for Donna, but she has gotten herself into this mess. She probably won't see the light outside of a prison for many, many years, if ever. She has broken so many laws that, they could put her away forever. I thought I was rid of her when we divorced many years ago. She became greedy and just look at the mess she got herself into."

"She was in a mess before she came here to try and screw up yours, too. She was sleeping with that Mitch guy and a bunch of others while she was married to you. I am glad that you got an easy divorce from her back then."

"I am so lucky that Judith is in my life now."

"This is your day. This is Judith's day. Make those days into ONE day today as you two become one. Now go out there and celebrate your day together. I will be there with you on time. GO!"

Keith got up and gave Michael a man hug before he left the cabin.

* * *

The day was an organized scramble of activity for the wedding party. Eventually it all came together-without Keith even getting a glimpse of his bride before the wedding. When everyone was in their place, the pastor walked up to the front and welcomed everyone to the wedding. He warned that there may be some elements of the wedding that could surprise some people, but it was planned by the bride and groom. For one thing, he said, it would be shoeless in keeping with a beach wedding. Then he invited the men in.

Keith walked in from the side. He was in a black tux and he was barefoot. Then the groomsmen came in behind him. There was no music except for a very soft splash from the very light waves. It was almost glass-smooth out there. The flower girl came in spreading pink jasmine petals. A very cute girl, she was dressed in a simple white dress, she appeared to be about 16 and she had been picked from the passengers for this honor. Donald followed, watching her with a big smile on his face. He came in carrying a folded white beach towel. The wedding rings were in a slight depression in the center. The bridesmaids walked in barefooted. They too had simple white dresses, but no flowers.

The *Canadian Brass* stood and played "Here Comes the Bride" with the sounds echoing across the waters. The pastor motioned for the audience to rise and he was slightly shocked to see more than 4,000 people rise from seats all over the side of the hill. Judith walked down from her condo, arm in arm with her father. She was in a white A-Line/Princess Sweetheart Chapel Train Chiffon wedding dress with ruffle lace beadwork and a light veil. She was carrying a single white calla lily over her arm. Keith's face lit up when he saw her and he smiled at her choice of a wedding dress. It just made her that much more beautiful, he thought. When they arrived, Edward kissed her and put her hand into Keith's before he sat down. The first surprise was about to hit the audience.

Unknown to the audience, Andrea Bocelli and Celine Dion stepped out from behind a screen and sang several love songs accompanied by a full orchestra on CD. When they were finished, they walked over to the couple. Celine hugged them both and Andrea hugged Judith and shook Keith's hand. Celine guided Andrea back to their seats.

The minister said that was one of the surprises with possibly more to come. The couple exchanged vows and rings. Judith was wearing the real Shaw of Iran ring. Their wedding bands were made of twisted strands of stainless steel, gold, and titanium representing past, present, and future of their lives intertwined with each other. As the minister pronounced them husband and wife, there was an unexpected surprise. The dolphins as if on cue, leaped into the air and danced on their tails. The sea erupted with happy dolphins.

Keith took the minister's microphone and said, "These dolphins were here when I proposed to Judith at this very spot. They swam with us then and entertained us. We had no idea if they would even show up today, but we are ready. Judith, Donald and I have our swim suits on under our formal wear and if you don't mind, we would like to swim with our friends and see what they want to do for your entertainment today." The crowd applauded and Keith kissed Judith again. Donald was already stripped down to his swimsuit. Keith helped Judith with the zipper on the back of her dress. He took the mike again and said, "Normally we wouldn't do this in front of anybody, but...." Everybody laughed again.

They went into the water and told Donald what to watch for and soon a dolphin bumped into his back. He spread his legs and wrapped his arms around the dolphin's neck as it came between his legs. He hung on tight as he was taken out into the bay. His mother gasped and held her hand over her mouth. Soon he was propelled at top speed back to the shore and then dumped with such force that he looked like a log rolling up the beach. The minister ran over to him to help him up. Donald was laughing so hard he could hardly stand up again. Martha screamed, but everyone else applauded.

Just as they had done in December, the males took Keith out and the females took Judith out. As if there had been a shot from a starting gun, they both went racing around in circles with Keith in front sometimes and Judith in front sometimes. Some of the races included Donald. The dolphins took turns with them and raced around and around. When it seemed that every dolphin had taken its turn, Keith shouted to the minister who repeated into the mike, "Keith says, here comes the big one who seems to be their leader. Let's see what he does."

No other dolphin picked up either Donald or Judith as Keith rode their leader. Keith was taken around several circles and was picking up speed when the dolphin's tail went up in the air with Keith's feet and they disappeared below the surface. Again, Keith thought they were going too deep when they turned and went up. He didn't remember the dolphin pumping his body so hard last time but when they broke the surface of the water, they just kept climbing up into the air before they arced over and began to come down. Keith pushed off to get away from the large animal so he wouldn't be crushed when they landed. He had time to make two summersaults before he entered the water perfectly vertical. He could feel the dolphin hitting the water near him. Before he could swim to the surface the dolphin was pushing the bottoms of his feet to bring him up just out of the water as if he was standing on the surface. He jumped off and turned to hug his dolphin, but it had already returned to his pod. As he and Judith swam to the shore and walked out of the water, the dolphins again walked on their tails and made a lot of racket. They both turned to wave at the dolphins and bowed to them. Then they kissed. When they were ready, Keith nodded to the *Canadian Brass* who played Mendelssohn's Wedding March as Keith carried Judith up into their condo. Outside there was a constant din of cheering.

"That went even better than we planned, didn't it? Oh, I love you so much, Honey."

"You are my everything. Don't ever leave me, Sweetheart."

“We are one now. We are inseparable. Where you go, I go. We cannot leave each other. It is impossible.”

Michael and Jodi collected their formal wear and deposited it on their porch. Their reception was scheduled for an hour after the wedding. That would give all the people time to get back to the main lodge. It also gave the grounds crew time to collect the chairs and put them into the lodge. Judith and Keith made the best of passing the time together. They were finally married. Now they could do whatever they wanted in public without hiding from others. They could do whatever they wanted in the privacy of their bed. And they did.

* * *

When they entered the reception, the minister announced that the friends of the dolphins had arrived. There was a standing ovation. Keith took the mike. “We had no idea if they would react that way to us again. They even took Donald for some rides. We were ready for them with our swim suits, but it was just a guess on our part as to whether they would participate. We thank them for making our day really special. Judith and I want to thank each of you for making our day really, really special, too. Having our friends and guests here with us to celebrate our day, means so much to us. Thank you.”

Judith said, “We know that some of our cruise guests signed up for this particular cruise just so they could join us in our wedding celebration. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts for doing that for us. We hope your cruise is special because you did that. Tell your friends that if they want a special wedding, we have some ideas for them. Thank you to each of our family and friends for being here. Some people may wonder where Keith’s parents are. He wants you to know that they are here in spirit. They were killed in a car crash when he was one year old. They are now my in-laws and I want to thank them for being here with us in spirit.” There was an applause. Less vigorous this time, but still it was applause in empathy.

Keith introduced his Aunt Jean to the crowd. He thanked his marketing team for taking pictures and the video that was shown on the Maxx for the people that remained behind. He also thanked his special friends, especially Michael.

Henri asked if he could take the mike. “Hello everyone. My name is Henri and I am Judith’s Guest Services counterpart on this island. On behalf of all of the staff here on Sterling Paradise, we welcome you to our special island to celebrate Judith and Keith’s wedding. I have been asked to pass on the best wishes from two other people who were not able to be here today. On December 12th as most of you know, Mr. Sterling was honored by the President of the United States who awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. After that ceremony, the President and his wife remained overnight on the Maxx. While they were on the ship, they met Judith and Keith. They instantly liked Judith and Keith. That is not surprising to me, because everyone that has met them, likes them. What may be somewhat unusual, however, is that while Judith and Keith were not yet engaged to be married, both the President and his wife asked if they could be invited to their wedding. Please watch the screens on the walls while I put up a video that we have just received from President Newberg and his lovely wife, Georgia.”

The guests were astonished that the President and his wife would ask to be invited to their wedding. The screens lit up showing President Newberg and Georgia sitting in their living room in the White House. “Good evening and congratulations, Judith and Keith Northquest. Thanks to your wonderful camera crew, Keith, we had live video from Sterling Paradise of your entire wedding ceremony. Thank you for remembering us. We are so sorry that the matters of State here in Washington had to come before attending your beautiful wedding. Just as Georgia was preparing to leave for a flight to the island, there was a security concern and she was advised to not make the trip.”

Georgia continued, “We were both devastated that at least one of us was not able to be there with you to enjoy your beauty and be witnesses to your remarkable wedding. The setting was out of this world and your musical selections and artists made the afternoon one of the most stunning

events of the year. Judith, I especially enjoyed your beautiful wedding gown. It was just simple elegance and it complemented the island's simple elegance. Great choices. With tongue in cheek, may I suggest that Keith wear shoes and socks for any formal photos that you take, because 100 years from now, people are going to be wondering if you didn't have enough money to rent the shoes, too?"

The audience burst into laughter. Judith kissed Keith who had a big smile on his face.

"They won't be privy to the incredible dolphin show that followed the wedding, so do not include in your formal photos, any that show you both undressing in front of your guests, either."

That really brought the house down with laughter.

"Blessings on your wedding and your many years of happiness to come, Judith and Keith. Please keep in touch with us, your friends, Paul and Georgia Newberg."

The video ended with a scene of them both blowing kisses to Judith and Keith. The audience was on their feet with a loud standing ovation.

"Thank you, Henri, for making the display of their video possible for all to see. We had thoroughly enjoyed their visit to the Maxx, back in December. That was a week or so before I had proposed to Judith. When I expressed my love for Judith in front of them, Mrs. Newberg jumped up off of her chair and came over to give me a hug. They are both incredibly nice people and we are proud to call them our friends. We are surrounded by incredibly nice people." Keith spread his arms out to include everyone in the audience. They continued with the introductions and short speeches.

The wedding dinner was a spectacular French cuisine wedding meal complete with a gigantic French wedding cake. When the dancing started they danced the first dance. Keith winked at Aunt Jean to recognize that she had made sure that he knew how to dance. Before the evening got too late, Judith and Keith ducked out and walked slowly down to their condo by the beach.

"What a wonderful day this has been," Judith said.

Keith responded with, "What a wonderful life we have begun. We have a lot of good friends, we have wonderful jobs, and we have a wonderful future. But most of all, I have my wonderful best friend that I can share the rest of my life with. This is a wonderful day. And I am completely in love with my wonderful wife." They stopped and kissed again. Then he waved off his cameraman that he spotted in the bushes. He picked Judith up and he carried her the rest of the way down to their condo. They proceeded to enjoy their first evening completely together.

JONESY Club

The next morning, they awoke to a beautiful sunrise. Keith rolled over to see his beautiful bride waking up with a smile on her face. He said, "I can't believe that we have just passed one of the biggest milestones of our lives. We are together and we don't have to go out separate doors so that no one will know that we were together last night."

"And it can always be this way. This is a big weight off our shoulders. I feel so free and yet so closely connected to you. It is the most wonderful that I have ever felt."

"Since your parents got you that puppy for your 8th birthday."

"Oh, but you are so much more wonderful than my darling puppy ever was. At least I hope I don't have to go around and pick up after you."

"Not until I am ready for a nursing home, at least."

"Keith! I am talking about love and you twist it around to a nursing home." She made a pretend pout.

"That's a good idea."

"What is?"

"Making love."

"Mmmmm!"

* * *

They had invited the JONESY club to their condo for a short get-together at ten in the morning. Each person was given a specific time to appear and they were asked to be prompt, not before and not after their time. John Jupiter was the first to arrive, right on time.

"Good morning, kids. That was a beautiful wedding yesterday. I have entertained other weddings on this island, but none so beautiful and as full of joy as yours. I have never seen the dolphins so entertaining. You have connected with them in some magically special way for them to celebrate at the moment you were married. Then you had them play with you. Oh, I could have made millions with a movie about them with you two."

"Originally we didn't even know they would do that until Henri said they might play with us. This island is so very special to us. And to think that is because you suggested it to Rudolph as an addition to his cruise schedule. You are just such a special person. Please come and sit, Keith will pull up a chair for you."

John sat and they talked until two minutes later when Edward Overstreet, Judith's father arrived.

"Oh, Dad. Please come in. We learned at Mrs. Young's funeral that you and John already knew each other."

"Yes, we have met before. Wonderful wedding yesterday. You told me about the dolphins, but you didn't say anything about them being part of the wedding. How did you pull that off?"

"Ed, I asked them the same thing. I could have made mega bucks with a movie like that."

Keith said, "Well, as we said yesterday. We did not know if they would even show up and if they did, we did not know if they would participate. Three of us were prepared with our swim suits. I'll bet there are not many weddings where the bride and groom have swim suits on under their formal wear. Oh, here is my Aunt Jean. Come in. You know these two guys."

"Yes, they were at the funeral."

Keith said, "This was going to be a men's group today that we wanted to get together, but since my dad can't be here in person, we invited you to sit in for him. I will get another chair for you, Aunt Jean. You can sit next to Judith's dad."

John Jupiter looked back and forth at the three of them. Keith saw him mouthing the letters J-O-N. He turned around to look out the window.

Judith asked, "Are you looking for someone, John?"

"Ah, well, ah, no, but I thought I perhaps saw Marcus heading this way."

She asked, "Why would he be coming here this morning?"

"Oh, ah, well, perhaps he won't be coming, but he is here on the island. I spoke to him last night and well, he was on the ship, too."

Keith asked, "You look a bit uncomfortable, John. May I get you or anyone something to drink?"

They all shook their heads "no" and mumbled something about it being too early in the day for anything like that. There was a knock on the door.

Keith went to the door and asked Marcus Epstein to come in. "Welcome, Marcus. So nice of you to come to see us. Didn't Judith's ring light up the sky yesterday? She is still wearing the original on her finger. It will be replaced by the glass imitation ring when we get back to the ship this afternoon."

"It was magnificent. Its sparkle illuminated her beautiful face and set off her blue eyes. I heard so many people around me say that it was the gem of the century. The blue pearls that you brought me from this very island to craft into a necklace and earrings for the beautiful bride were stunning accessories. They were both 'something old' and 'something blue.' Of course the Shaw of Iran ring was also 'something old.' I remember when David"

John quickly interrupted him before he let the cat out of the bag. "Marcus, how much did you value that ring at? The kids went to see you for an evaluation of Keith's mother's ring, didn't they?"

"Oops, I almost...Well, yes they did and I said...Oh, Rudy is here, too."

Keith smiled at what must have been going through their heads. He said, "I will let him in. Welcome, Boss. We thought you would like to get together with some of your friends this morning while we are still on your new island. I will get you a chair."

Keith set another chair next to the curved line of four that were already there.

Rudolph first went over to John Jupiter and shook his hand. "I will never be able to replay you for your kindness, John. This island has already become a focal point for our cruises and we are only on our second cruise. The reservations are pouring in and nearly everyone wants to have some nights on this incredible island. Your employees here are more than up to the tasks and they bring our passengers such joy and comfort. This was truly a blessing."

"Thanks, Rudy. I felt that I had run out of ideas and expensive friends to entertain on the island. When you decided to run some longer cruises with the Maxx, which by the way is an incredible piece of work, I felt that I had my answer as to what to do with the island. I couldn't just dump it with all of these wonderful, dedicated employees, so you became my target. I want to thank you for accepting it."

There was a knock on the door before Rudolph even sat down. Keith asked Professor Young to come in.

"Well, well, well, look who we have here. Keith, do you have some sort of announcement for us this morning?"

"I wouldn't know what you mean, Professor. These are just some people that we wanted to spend some time with on this special occasion. It is a Thursday, even though it is the third Thursday of the month. Did you happen to bring your *Battleship* boards with you this morning? Oh, that's right, it isn't anywhere near 2 p.m., at least in this time zone. Well, if we were playing *Battleship*, and I called out J-1 and then asked 'Sink?' what would you have to say?"

Professor Young got a big smile on his face and yelled out, "YES!"

"I am sure that you have kept this JONESY club informed."

The entire group briefly looked shocked, but when they saw the smile on Rudolph and Professor's faces, they also smiled.

Keith continued, "But if you haven't, I wish to explain that J-1 and the first letter of the words sink and yes, spell out JONESY, the name of your club or group or whatever. That word has appeared on the ship's computer screen at 2 p.m. every second Thursday since I arrived on the Maxx. We originally thought it was a computer virus. It was the most elusive virus that I had ever seen. I believe it was put into our computer by a master who did it to encourage me to thoroughly inspect every facet of our computer system while looking for the virus. This master knew that I wouldn't stop until it was found and when this inspection was completed, I would know that the integrity of the entire system had been re-evaluated and it was thoroughly safe. However, what this master did not know when he performed his sneaky virus insertion, is that we would hire a 17-year old incredible wizard who ultimately is the one that found his inserted code. Donald, our ring bearer is the one that discovered and validated the code for the virus. We have not had a display of the red letters J-O-N-E-S-Y on our computer screen since February."

The JONESY club rose and applauded.

"Continuing, I would like to thank this master, Professor Young for presenting me with such a mind-racking challenge. Actually we both would like to thank each of you for your support. We have learned through our detective work and a few slips of the tongue by some people, that you have each known us since each of us were born. You have been true to your organization's ideals as you have each supported us, guided us, nurtured us, encouraged us, and loved us. It must have been a shock to each of you when my parents were killed. But that only encouraged you to firm up your ideals and carry them out for as long as we have lived. We feel that our marriage must mean something far greater to you than we can imagine. We are blessed to have each other and we are blessed to have each of you. Thank you, too for not revealing the ring during my earlier disastrous marriage. Let me assure you that Judith and I will be in love together forever."

They all cheered and hugged the kids and each other.

Keith had more to say. "I am only now beginning to discover what I believe was my father's contribution. Actually, this was Judith's idea. Was my father very good at using the stock market and you guys were all his friends? Then you formed a group named after your last name initials and you made a big killing in a short time in the stock market. By the time you were about to leave college, you were afraid you would never see each other again so you did something rash, like purchase the Shaw of Iran's 1967 coronation ring. Then you made a pact to let the first married have the ring. You also vowed to watch over the off-spring of the JONESY group. And then when my parents were killed in the accident, you let Aunt Jean in on your secret pact. How close are we?"

They shook their heads in amazement. Someone in the group said, "Lloyd, you tell them."

"Brilliant. That just about sums it up. You are spot on. We could see though your ex-wife from the time of your engagement so we just waited for the inevitable divorce to happen before we gave the ring to Jean to give to you. After Judith hired you, we agreed that we knew you would be married and we asked Jean to find a way to give you the ring. Before Rudy decided to encourage Judith to hire you, Marcus had the ring and its glass copy in his safe in New York. We even agreed that Rudy should take you both to this island hoping that you would propose with the ring while you were here. Everything fell into place with your parents' help from above. They and God are looking after you as much as we are."

Judith said, "We cannot express our true affection and love for each of you with just words. We hope our actions in the future will do a better job of showing you how much we appreciate everything you have done for us."

Keith said, "I have always wanted to have someone to call my Dad and now I have the five of you men whom I am honored to call my Dad."

Professor Young jumped in. "Great segue, Keith. I told you in October that I had wanted to marry your Aunt Jean before your parent's tragic accident. I also said you could call me your Dad because of our relationship. Soon, however, you will have an even better reason. I have again asked Jean to marry me and last night, she accepted."

Keith and Judith burst into tears and hugged them both.

Main Characters (in order of appearance)

Rudolph Sterling.....	Owner of Maxx, a large luxury ship
Keith Northquest.....	Chief of security, head of systems/security
Ken Wenzell.....	Keith's friend, assistant chief of security
Professor Lloyd Young.....	UW-Platteville security professor
Donna Wooding	Keith's ex-wife, a.k.a. Anabel Johansson
Aunt Jean	Keith's aunt
Judith Overstreet	Chief of security, head of guest services
Jeremy.....	Ship's computer
Tom Hansen	DEA agent, assistant chief of security
Bill Smathers	DEA agent, assistant chief of security
Jodi	Judith's cabin steward
Michael Murphy.....	Keith's cabin steward
David Jones, Jonesy.....	Captain of Security Dept.
Martha Jones	Children's Program Director
Donald Jones.....	17 yr old brilliant young man
Mary (1 st).....	Newlywed stranded in NYC
Fred Witherspoon.....	Lead Secret Service agent
Ben	Assistant lead Secret Service agent
President Paul Newberg	President of the United States of America
Georgia Newberg	The President's wife
Edward Overstreet.....	Judith's father
Vera Overstreet.....	Judith's mother
Jesus Perez.....	Captain of ship, from Columbia
Scotty	Cameraman, marketing
Copilot.....	Copilot of Rudolph's personal jet
Monsieur Pierre Colette.....	Island manager
Henri.....	Island security chief
John J. Jupiter.....	Hollywood mogul
Jose.....	Island native, finder of the blue pearls
Sharon	Guest Services Director
Marcus Epstein.....	Jeweler
Mrs. Young	Wife of Professor Young
Anabel Johansson	Alias for Donna Wooding
Judge Gus Norse.....	Donna's attorney
James Holbush	Keith's attorney, Dean of Law School
Mr. & Mrs. Frank & Sally Stanton	Passengers
William Stanton.....	Former MP
Harry Stanton.....	Former MP
Mary Stanton	William's wife
Elizabeth Stanton	Harry's wife
Anthony.....	Butler
David Northquest.....	Keith's deceased father
Mitch Jackson a.k.a. Jack Mitchell	Supply boat Captain
Lynn.....	Island Wine Master
Admiral Ralph Bayer	New Captain of the Maxx

Back of book cover

“A budding romance on a luxury ship promoted by a talking computer.”
That is the way one of the characters characterized the storyline in this can’t-put-it-down book.

The author first develops the romance that weaves itself through the entire book by introducing Keith, a divorced man that has sworn off women, to Judith, a woman that does not work well with men. They become working partners after she points a gun at him. She is surprised to learn that he programmed the computer that she has been using. She is even more surprised to learn that the computer can talk, when he begins talking to it. They both have Ph.D.’s in security from the same school.

Slowly they begin to like each other, but they only tell the computer, Jeremy. Things get awkward for them when Jeremy tells a third party that they secretly love each other. Jeremy keeps getting them into hilarious predicaments.

They become engaged on a private tropical island in the Caribbean and the dolphins celebrate with them. He gives her an engagement ring worth over \$30 million.

Things go terribly bad when Keith’s ex-wife shows up to claim the ring as hers using some fake legal documents. The ex is arrested, escapes, and is arrested again after she acquires a gun.

Hurricane Sandy becomes SuperStorm Sandy before it hits New York and they convince the ship’s owner to open up the ship to over 6000 displaced people devastated by Sandy. The ship’s owner estimates that he spent over \$14 million on the welfare of the displaced people that sought refuge on his ship. This causes the U.S. President to present a medal to the owner.

“Jonesy” becomes the name of a virus that strikes their computer. There is an all-out effort to learn how it got there. A brilliant teenager living in the ship after his family was displaced by Sandy, is able to find the virus and dismantle it.

Judith and Keith discover that their lives have been orchestrated by a secret club that brought them together then arranged for them to be on the island for their engagement.

Join Judith and Keith on their 8-month romantic adventure on the world’s largest luxury ship as they direct its every moment through romance, adventure, mystery, and fright, as they work, laugh, cry, and grow in love.