

Chapter 1

The Call of the Sea (Stallion)

Donuts. So many donuts. Just not the delicious kind.

Gravity crushed my body against the passenger side door of a rental car. In the driver's seat, a Scandinavian cruise ship stewardess—experiencing a mental collapse of some sort—had her foot on the gas and the wheel white-knuckled all the way left. Neglected by her onboard lover, she was now spinning the car around and around the port, half-crying, half-belting out Tina Turner, while our tires tracked the dockside concrete.

Outside my window, I glimpsed an orange shipping container labeled “NYK” whizz past. A near miss. Next we drifted past an enormous yellow crane that resembled a prehistoric giraffe. Then a stack of red and green shipping containers, these belonging to Maersk.

She drunkenly belted out a Tina Turner classic, only vaguely in time with the music. *I had left a good job in the city*, I pondered.

Despite the crying, singing, and screaming—a portion of which was mine—I noticed that each of the stewardess's circles carried us a bit closer to the edge of the dock, and closer to the blue waters of the Persian Gulf.

Why did I agree to let her drive? I thought. *And why did I take this crazy gig in the first place?* Playing the piano in New York was a lot safer than whatever this was.

Containers. Open sky. More containers. A watery grave. Round and round and round we skidded. I reworked the evening in my mind to trace exactly how we got into this precarious situation.

Previous to almost drifting us into a watery grave, my friend had been trysting with a high-ranking officer on the cruise ship we both worked on, owing in large part to the cocktail of long hours, casual adultery, and endless, nearly free alcohol that ship employees are gifted (or cursed) with at sea. The temporary couple had made plans to stay in a traditional Bedouin campsite for the night upon docking in Dubai, but he had stood her up. She and I had been in ship's crew bar (aka The Happiest Place On Earth) when a note was sent via the ship's concierge regretfully informing this hapless young woman that her officer gentleman had made other plans, but that she should still enjoy the evening without him. It was a nuclear-grade punch in the stomach, the fallout of which I was now experiencing.

She had been noticeably upset after reading the note, so I took her outside for some fresh air¹. We both thought a ride around the port would be a good idea, and she already had a rental car. But the exact second she turned on the car she began crying uncontrollably. And then she stomped her Chuck Taylors down and began driving uncontrollably. I figuratively felt her pain, yes, but was uninterested in literally feeling it.

The rental car busted through a chain-link fence, which seemed to sober up my chauffeuse. She slammed on the brake and we skidded to a stop not twenty feet from the harbor. I took a steadying breath and folded my hands in my lap. I turned the volume down, and all was calm.

¹ Just kidding! It's Dubai! The air is not fresh.

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To get to the origin of my predicament, we have to go back farther, to New York City on October 31st. It all began while photographing a line of dancing zombies at the West Village Halloween parade. My phone rang.

“All-o? All-o, is this Jo-elle?” the voice asked, over the sound of the ruckus. His accent was French, but not, like, *normal* French. This was, in fact, a *Quebecois* accent, where they speak French as if the language has been chopped by a cleaver and then hastily re-assembled.

“Okay, all-o Jo-elle. My name is Tristan. And I have an exciting opportunity for you ... AT SEA!”²

I was in the middle of my last semester at what I semi-affectionately called Jazz Fantasy Camp—an exclusive graduate school program.³ “How would you like to play piano on the world’s most luxurious cruise ship?”

No thanks, said the rational part of my brain. Or at least the part of my brain that didn’t want to be stuck somewhere in the Caribbean playing Jimmy Buffet covers to drunk midwesterners while my career sailed off the edge of the flat earth.

“The pay is good,” he lied. “It’s a nice arrangement for someone trying to save money or pay off debt.”

That got my attention. Jazz Fantasy Camp had me in what amounted to a financial hostage situation, and I certainly wasn’t going to pay off my debts as a zombie photographer. I asked for more information.

“Could you tell me where the ship goes?”

“Sure. Let me see.” I heard the rustling of papers. “Eh, the contract starts in Los Angeles in January. You sail west to Hawaii, French Polynesia, New Zealand, Australia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, French Indochina—”

“Where?”

“Oh yes, you call it Vietnam. Excuse me—then Singapore, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, India, Iran, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey...hold on,” (more shuffling), “Greece, Malta, Italy, Monaco, Spain, Portugal, France, and then finish in the United Kingdom in May.”

I hadn’t been off the island of Manhattan in months. “I’m interested,” I replied.

We scheduled an audition for the next day.

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² At this point, assume that everything Tristan (or the forthcoming onslaught of eccentric Quebecois) says should be read in an accent not far off from John Cleese’s French knight from *The Holy Grail*.

³ Sorry, did I say exclusive? I meant expensive.

The following morning, Tristan emailed me fifty pages of music and a link to a video chat that lasted an hour. I leafed through a few pages of the music, then cut up a grapefruit and asked Mr. Google “Where is Malta?” The music wasn’t too difficult for someone so close to obtaining a degree from Jazz Fantasy Camp!

When we connected on video, Tristan insisted on seeing my hands as I performed the music for him as apparently his agency had recently employed a trombone player who had never played a note in his life. A friend played the trombone audition over the phone, and the mischievous stowaway pawned an instrument before joining the ship. The musicians onboard were so impressed by his dedication to getting a free cruise that they let him remain in the orchestra and pretend to play. It wasn’t until he drunkenly rode his trombone across the stage like a pony during a show that Tristan was informed the new “trombonist” wasn’t really working out.

“Ok, Jo-elle, the gig is yours. In addition to your salary of \$2,500 a month, the company will cover your housing, food, transportation, visas, and medical needs. Welcome to Sea Stallion Cruises.”

I had never had a salaried position before! It felt good!

“You will get new music to perform every day. One short rehearsal in the afternoon, and two performances in the evening. Two, three hours a day, tops.⁴ There is no time to learn the music, so you have to sight read like crazy. Your job is to accompany *any* entertainer that the company brings on, no matter how unusual.”

Okay, that last bit was a little unsettling. But I was a salaried musician!

“Listen, Jo-elle. You will be onboard for the entirety of Sea Stallion’s World Cruise. The passengers are old, they are tired, and they are bored. It is your job to help make them happy. But they are not happy. Money does not buy you happiness, Jo-elle. You will see.”

* * *

My seafarer medical examination was, inexplicably, in Baltimore, which was actually okay, as a friend was studying at the Peabody Conservatory and I timed my trip to watch him perform in a production of Benjamin Britten’s *Peter Grimes*. I took the Fung Wah “Chinatown Bus”, which was a valid means of transportation at the time if your travel expectations were set low enough and you needed to get from one Chinatown to another Chinatown as quickly as inexpensively as possible.⁵

Dr. Patel put his hands behind his head and stared at me for an uncomfortable amount of time before asking, “So...you are going to work at sea. Tell me: do you get sea sick?”

I looked around the room. A number of framed medical degrees, all crooked. A window that looked out at a brick wall. Random pill bottles scattered around the desk.

⁴ This, my dear readers, was the understatement of millennium.

⁵ This particular Chinatown bus made a stop in Wilmington, Delaware. After getting back on the freeway, an elderly Chinese man ran up the aisle yelling: “Delaware! Delaware! Delaware!” and the bus pulled over and let him off. On the side of the I-95.

I vaguely shrugged. Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. Who could say what the open ocean might do to me?

"Good!" he said. "Anything else?"

"I have Tourette Syndrome. It's mild, but, you know, stress makes the tics worse."

Dr. Patel sat, thinking. "Well, a cruise ship sounds pretty stress-free to me. You'll be fine. The nurse will take care of the rest." He handed me a signed form that said "Approved" but with a note: "Tourette Syndrome—unfit to steer the ship." I couldn't imagine any situation where I would be asked to steer the ship, regardless of my neurodivergence. Also, for the record, my tics would have to be pretty wicked to crash a 50,000 ton ocean vessel.

That was it as far as the doc was concerned. He started to leave the room, except I opened my mouth and mentioned the ship was going to India, and did he have any advice. He stopped at the door, turned around, and answered.

"India? Hot and dirty. You will get sick. I will prescribe you something. Start taking it right away." He scribbled on a note pad, handed the paper to me, and exited.

I returned to the outer office and handed a nurse my prescription. "Lariam, huh?" she asked, "Where are you going, the jungle?"⁶

I answered with another shrug.

"Oh, and you don't have a seaman's discharge book by any chance, do you?" asked the nurse. "We need to get you a seaman's discharge book if you don't have one yet."

In a cosmic sense, I couldn't know for *sure* that I didn't have a seaman's discharge book. But still, I was like *pretty* sure I didn't. 99.999 percent sure or something like that. But I *did* know with absolute certainty that I wanted the nautical community to immediately stop using the phrase "seaman's discharge".

The nice nurse informed me it was a seafaring passport of sorts, issued by the great and powerful seafaring nation of The Bahamas. The book has a page for each vessel a person had worked on, which sounded kind of neat, except that to collect the various stamps I'd actually have to work on multiple ships, and I was pretty sure that this particular seaman would be discharged only once.

* * *

Three months later I was on onboard a plane from LGA to LAX, and my mind was filled with questions about my life on Sea Stallion.⁷ The music stuff would be fine, probably. But I knew nothing about crew life. All I had were Tristan's vague assurances that things would, you know, like, probably be okay. Three hours a day, tops, right? I could handle that. I ranked my main questions on a piece of paper:

⁶ Lariam is used to prevent malaria. If you happen to get malaria, you take more Lariam. The drug comes with the extra fun side effect of vivid, psychotic nightmares. Stay tuned for more on that.

⁷ Dear reader, please note that it is never "The Sea Stallion," only "Sea Stallion."

- 10) What if my cabin has no window? *Small chance of that...where is it gonna be, underwater?*
- 9) Are pirates still a thing? *Nah, this ship is probably way too big for that to be a risk.*
- 8) What kind of music are we going to be playing? *Listen, these people are loaded, I'm sure they have good taste.*
- 7) I'm not really at risk of getting malaria, am I? *It'll be fine, I've been popping the pills.*
- 6) Do we get days off? *Surely, we get days off. Maybe weekends? People with salaries usually get weekends off.*
- 5) These are all safe countries to visit, right? *A big company wouldn't just drop us off in a dangerous port city with no caution or advanced notice whatsoever. That would be irresponsible. And crazy!*
- 4) Should I start dating again? *It's been a while, but a cruise ship seems like a good place to find a nice, stable relationship.*
- 3) I wonder what the entertainers will be like. *Odds are that they are all consummate professionals.*
- 2) Is this really a 6-star floating hotel, as advertised?. *Come to think of it - who's giving out the stars, anyway?*
- 1) Will the captain be my friend? *I bet he will! I'm fun!*

* * *

Since a cancelled flight for a soon-to-be cruise ship employee could mean waving goodbye from land as your place of employment buggers off into the sunset, all joining crew are flown to their port of departure a day early. Crew get a shared hotel room and two meal vouchers on the company's dime—which is the nicest some of the crew have ever been treated, I'm sure. Since Sea Stallion was sailing out of the port of San Pedro (Long Beach), we were put up on the Queen Mary—a ship turned hotel full of dark hallways and rife with murder vibes.

There was a nostalgic back-from-summer-vacation vibe in the air at our hotel. Friends were re-united and new connections were made before the hierarchy of ship life took over.

My double room had a few cockroaches in the bathroom and a trombone tucked into the covers of the other bed—an ominous sign, if Tristan's story could be believed. At the hotel's restaurant, I sat across from a young Swedish woman named Stina. I learned she was about to start her first contract as a stewardess. She was pretty, very tan, and had penciled-in eyebrows. And she was apprehensive about her future.

"I hear it's very hard work and the guests can be mean," she told me between tears, as she mistakenly took a bite of a pickled jalapeño—an uncommon flavor back home in the frozen north.

We spoke about Sweden and New York and pondered how different our lives were going to be, starting tomorrow. "I know it'll be an adventure," I told her with confidence.

She agreed, with fake-tanned Swedish confidence.⁸

When I got back to my room after dinner, the trombone was still lying in the second bed, unattended. That night I dreamt a wave of cockroaches swelled high above my head and washed me out to sea.

⁸ Little did I know that these were the only calm and sober moments that I would ever spend with Stina.