

“Lieutenant Morales, Lieutenant Morales, please wake up, sir. Hurry. We need your help right away. Lieutenant Morales, please sir”.

I rolled over in bed and pulled the alarm clock closer to my face so that I could read it better. The clock's dial glowed 5:00 in a sickening green color. Was that a.m. or p.m.? I really had no idea. It seemed like I had a hard time remembering things lately. In fact, I wasn't even too sure how I had ended up back in my own cabin. Or at least I thought it was my own cabin.

“Lieutenant Morales, please answer me if you are in there. We need your help right away. We think there may have been a murder on board the ship.” The voice sounded to me like a roar, even through the thick cabin door.

After a few seconds, I got my bearings and was finally able to recognize the voice as belonging to one of the new security guards I had recently hired to replace two guards who had been fired for drug smuggling shortly before I was hired as head of security on board the Mardi Gras.

“Roman, Roman, something or other,” I mumbled as I rolled over onto my back, as I finally remembered the name of the man whose voice I heard outside my stateroom door. “What the hell does he want at this time of the morning,” I wondered. “Goddamn him, just when I was starting to fall asleep after being awake all night.”

The pounding on my door continued but all I wanted was to be left alone. I had a throbbing, migraine headache, and I felt like I might throw up. I did recall that the Captain’s welcoming party the night before had gone on for a lot longer than usual and I had drunk way too much tequila. I did not particularly like tequila, but there was a certain young woman at the party, who I was drinking with and she loved tequila. Lots of it. I could barely keep up with her as we downed tequila sunrises together at dinner and later at the bar in the ship’s lounge. Truth be told, I hadn’t had a drink in over a year since I left LA. Little wonder I felt so lousy now.

“What was her name? I’m not sure that she even told me.” I thought that she was Asian-- --Chinese, or Vietnamese or maybe, Korean, but I wasn’t even sure about that. But I was certain that she was quite beautiful. She wore her long black hair down to her waist and her eyelashes seemed almost as long. She had on a black, silk, split leg dress that was slit to her hip and showed off her surprisingly long brown legs. I thought she looked incredibly sexy. “I must look her up this morning.”

“Get me some coffee. Black, no sugar,” I yelled as I started to climb out of the narrow single bed. “I’ll be right out.” I climbed slowly out of bed and stood up and immediately I realized that the ship was not moving. Usually, when the ship is moving, I feel a little unsteady when I first get out of bed or stand up from a chair. When I was being interviewed for the job as head of security aboard the Mardi Gras, I had told the interviewer that I had lived my whole life in California and had never been on a ship before. He assured me, “Don’t worry; you’ll get your sea legs in no time.” He was wrong. It had been six months and I still seemed to feel woozy half the time.

Once out of bed, I walked over to the far side of the cabin and looked out the small porthole. The ship was enveloped in a thick, black fog. I couldn’t tell where the water ended and the sky began, it was so thick. We must be stopped in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico. I hoped it was only the fog and not some mechanical problem that had caused the ship to be dead in the water.

There had been a rash of mechanical problems recently on all of the Mariner cruise ships. A few months before I came on board, there had been a suspicious fire in the engine room of the Mardi Gras, which had required the evacuation of the ship. Passengers aboard all four of the Mariner ships also had gotten violently ill from the norovirus. The cruise line’s public relations department had issued press releases claiming that all of these intestinal problems were caused by the passengers themselves. But, because of these problems, the cruise line had become fodder for the late night, television talk show hosts almost every night. Bookings were definitely down as a result and Mariner had recently filed for bankruptcy.

I had been chief of security on the Mardi Gras for almost six months. I had found life aboard the Mardi Gras to be quite pleasant. Since I had come on board, I and my deputy, and our

crew of eight security guards had investigated several robberies and assaults on board the ship. Most of these were of a petty nature. I made sure that security aboard the ship was quite tight because it is well known that some passengers on cruise ships are affluent and travel with a considerable amount of cash and jewelry. For that reason, a variety of petty criminals and a few well-trained thieves stalk the cruise ships to prey on those passengers. But murder? I quickly dismissed the thought that there had been a murder on board my ship. Not that I wasn't familiar with murder. I had seen plenty of murders while working homicide out of the Ramparts Division west of downtown Los Angeles, where there were frequent homicides in that most-densely populated part of the city.