

1

Ben peeled back the double bed sheet. ‘Wake up, Mum! It’s morning. Let’s go swimming!’

Anya Crichton forced her eyelids to separate and saw her six year old standing over her, in rash vest and board shorts. From the sickly sweet smell, the globs smeared across his cheeks were sunscreen.

‘Come on, MUM!’

Part of her was impressed that he had thought of the sun protection, but the rest wished he could have slept longer – the bedside clock read 6.15 am. First hint of sunlight and he was wide awake, ready for the new day’s adventures.

She hauled herself up against the headboard and felt the vibration in the cabin. Despite a fitful night, she had escaped seasickness. For now. The last few days felt like a blur. Working in New York on an assault case involving the Jersey Bombers football team had been challenging but exhausting. The gift of a holiday on board the *Paradisio* with her son had been extravagant on the part of the Bombers’ owner. Only thing was, he had included her former husband in the ‘family’ holiday.

Ben had begged for the three of them to be together and, for his sake, Anya and her ex-husband had reluctantly agreed to put aside their differences. Besides, it made sense for Martin,

who had custody, to bring Ben from Australia to visit New York and see the Bombers play live. From there, the flights to Hawaii had been uneventful. Unfortunately at check-in, the two promised cabins had been unavailable, and they'd been allocated the same suite. At both their insistence, Martin was given a separate cabin on a lower deck.

Now Anya had Ben to herself for the first time in weeks.

'What about breakfast? Aren't you hungry? I bet they do fantastic pancakes.'

Hands on hips, Ben tilted his head. 'You never exercise or go in the water on a full stomach. We can eat *after*.' He moved his arms so his palms faced upward, emphasising the point. The gesture belonged to his grandfather.

Anya pressed the heel of her hand on her forehead. 'What was I thinking?' One lunge and Ben was squealing in her arms.

'How silly do you think I am?' she teased, exposing his belly with the threat of more tickles.

The scent of sunscreen filled the air. Suddenly the holiday felt real.

'You missed a tiny bit,' she joked, rubbing her hands all over Ben's face. He thought the action hilarious.

A knock on the door broke the moment.

'Dad!' He was off.

'I'll answer it. It could be anyone.' Anya scrambled to her feet.

Before she could stop him, Martin had entered and hauled their son into his arms.

Anyone would have thought the pair had been separated a lot longer than one night.

'Morning Annie.' He glanced at her oversized Tweety Bird T-shirt. 'Nice PJs. Didn't we give you that when Benny Boy was born?'

'It's still comfy.' It was all she could think to say. Truth was she wouldn't ever part with it because it reminded her of happier family times. Something in Martin's expression changed. He looked tired and drawn.

‘What happened? Party too hard after dinner?’ She regretted the tone as soon as the words came out.

He put Ben down. ‘I don’t have a hangover, if that’s what you’re suggesting. I was headed up for a jog, but if you’d like a lie-in? I can take —’

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to . . .’ She grabbed her swimsuit and overdress from the bottom drawer and headed for the bathroom. ‘I’ll just be a minute.’

By the time she reappeared, the curtains were drawn back, the balcony door was open and a brisk sea breeze drifted through the cabin. They had been sailing since leaving Honolulu the previous night and she had barely registered the movement. No nausea, no dizziness, no vomiting, unlike her earlier experiences with boats. Maybe the trip would be a new beginning; for her stomach at least, she thought.

‘This is luxurious,’ Martin announced, coming in from the balcony.

Anya felt guilty. ‘What’s yours like?’

‘There’s a picture of a porthole. From the sounds of it, I’m just above the crew’s karaoke bar. Most of the rooms on the corridor are filled with guys in matching bowling shirts who aren’t exactly considerate of anyone wanting sleep.’

That explained Martin’s appearance.

Anya felt even guiltier. ‘Maybe we should take turns here with Ben.’

He gave her a look that meant swapping cabins wasn’t an option.

‘If you were disturbed,’ she said, ‘chances are others were too. It might be worth saying something to the purser.’

‘Hey look, Dad, this is where I sleep.’ Ben had climbed the ladder and plonked himself on the bed that lowered from the ceiling, above the double-seater lounge. ‘It goes away in the daytime.’

‘Like a secret bed!’ Martin pulled the sheet over Ben’s face. ‘I think I will complain. Two weeks of what happened last night will do me in. We could stop by the main deck on the way up to the pool.’

Complete with room keys, sunscreen, hats and sunglasses, they headed to the birdcage lifts. At that time in the morning, Guest Services was quiet. Martin was greeted by a smiling purser with a Jamaican accent. Ben sat on a lounge chair nearby with his favourite book – *The A-Z of Animals*.

‘Last night,’ Martin began, ‘the noise on the corridor was louder than the crew singing karaoke below.’

‘Sir, the crew are entitled to their downtime and, unfortunately, there is little I can do about that. Some passengers who sleep lightly find earplugs helpful. They may be purchased in the shop on deck four.’

The response took both Anya and Martin by surprise.

‘Look,’ Martin attempted. ‘I’m into fun as much as the next guy, but last night deck one was out of control. A group of men were drinking outside the cabins and mucking around with fire-extinguishers.’ His voice lowered, ‘Some were naked and when I asked if they could keep it down, they became aggressive. To be honest, as a group, they’re fairly intimidating. I get cutting loose, but not with families all around. There was even a nude couple in the corridor at one stage having sex.’ He jabbed his finger into the desk. ‘It’s completely unacceptable. I don’t want my son or anyone else’s kids to have to see or hear that.’

Anya was surprised how annoyed Martin was. There was a time when he would have been the loud one in the corridor. He had been known to pull pranks at university, but they were harmless. Nothing like what he just described.

‘Well, sir, we take safety on board very seriously and interfering with fire equipment is a breach of our regulations.’

Anya glanced at Martin. ‘But nudity and intercourse in public areas isn’t?’

The purser gave her a sympathetic look. ‘Ma’am, it was our first night at sea. We find that people let off steam and have fun on vacation. It’s why they sail with us. They usually settle down after a couple of nights.’

He handed across a couple of drink vouchers. ‘We apologise

for the inconvenience.’ His smile revealed fluorescent white teeth.

‘Is that it?’ Martin was incredulous.

‘I am only permitted to give you two vouchers.’

Martin breathed and his nostrils flared. ‘What happens tonight?’

The Jamaican man tapped into a computer. ‘I’ll have a security guard patrol that deck. You have a great day now.’

At least that was something. Anya touched Martin’s arm. Maybe the purser was right. It made sense that the first and last nights of a cruise would be the rowdiest. No one could keep up that pace for fourteen days.

‘They’ll be asleep by now. We could go play loud music outside their rooms.’ Anya smiled, remembering the accommodation hall at university. A friend had once rewired the speaker system to play ‘Too Many Times’ early the next morning after a ball. The number of angry sore heads proved it had been effective.

‘Maybe if you get seasick you could knock on one of their doors?’ Martin said. ‘You should have heard them carry on about a girl vomiting inside one of their rooms.’

Anya gestured for Ben and the trio caught the lift to the pool deck. Before Anya’s towel hit the lounge chair, Ben had slid into the pool. Martin took the opportunity to go for a run on the deck above.

The sun had risen but had no heat in it. A fresh breeze caught Anya’s hair as she pulled it back into a tie. Wisps at the side escaped and gusted about her face. Ben was already splashing in the pool and she imagined the holiday ahead – nothing to do but lounge around and enjoy time with Ben. She had forgotten what it was like being outside. Her body seemed to crave every hint of energy the sun bestowed.

At this hour, only a handful of people were up and about. A cleaning crew swept the wooden decks and collected rubbish from the bins. Towels were already stacked in readiness for the day ahead.

‘You coming in, Mum?’

Anya shed her sandals and lifted her dress over her head.

It had been a while since she had been in a swimsuit but, thankfully, her size and shape hadn’t changed, just succumbed to some gravitational pull.

She sat on the side of the pool and dipped her feet in. The cool water was refreshing. If she wasn’t fully awake, she soon would be. Ben dived under the surface and bobbed up like a dolphin. He had to be part-amphibian, she thought. For the moment they had the pool and quiet to themselves.

Anya closed her eyes to savour it. She missed Ben more than anyone knew and understood his desperate need to have both parents together sometimes. Just like she had wanted when her own parents divorced.

The peace was suddenly shattered.

‘ANNIE!’ Martin leant over the rail from the next level up. ‘Emergency! Need you up here now! Ben, you stay there.’

Martin disappeared. He had been an intensive care nurse and his tone was enough to alarm her. Whatever it was, he didn’t want Ben to see. ‘Dad and I need you to sit on the lounge. Don’t move anywhere, you’re like a statue,’ she said, pulling Ben out of the pool. ‘If you go back in the water, there’ll be no more swimming this trip. This is incredibly important, OK?’

Two elderly women in tracksuits saw the commotion and offered to sit with the boy.

Ben nodded and shivered. Anya wrapped a towel around his shoulders and another over the goose bumps covering his legs. ‘I’ll be right up there,’ she said, pointing to the balcony and throwing her dress on. Ben gave another understanding nod.

‘Call out if you need me.’ She thanked the women then rushed up the stairs, past a middle-aged man on his way down.

About ten feet along on the left, Martin was crouched at the open doors of a waist-high towel cabinet.

‘There’s no pulse. Help me lift her out.’

Anya couldn’t immediately see a face but bare feet protruded from the door.

She took the legs and Martin carried the limp top half of the young woman. Long, wet black hair obscured the face. They gently lowered her onto the hard deck and Martin commenced mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Anya began cardiac massage and the pair worked in synchronicity.

A passenger had attracted the attention of a cleaner who dropped his high pressure hose and ran over.

‘This is a medical emergency; we need you to call for help.’

The panic on the cleaner’s face showed he understood.

A minute later, an officer arrived with a first-aid kit. He took out a one-way breathing mask and introduced himself as William. Martin stepped away and used the back of his hand to wipe what looked like a small amount of vomit from his mouth.

‘Please, not again,’ William muttered, kneeling down beside the patient. He began blowing into the tube on top of the mask.

‘Does anyone know what happened?’ he managed in between breaths.

Anya continued the compressions, desperate for the patient to breathe. She paused to feel for a carotid pulse.

No pulse.

‘Come on,’ she urged, locking her hands together and pressing on the chest with short sharp bursts. After each breath, William listened for any spontaneous sounds from the mouth.

‘Med team’s on the way.’ Breath. ‘Should be here any second.’ Breath.

Anya was unsure who William was reassuring.

A woman in a crisp white officer’s uniform squatted to their side, and unzipped a large backpack. A security man asked a small group of observers to step back.

‘I’m Karen, senior nurse on board,’ she puffed. ‘What have we got?’

Martin spoke. ‘Young woman. Feet were sticking out of that cupboard. When I found her, she wasn’t breathing and had no pulse. We commenced CPR . . .’ he checked his watch, ‘four, no, five minutes ago.’

The nurse dropped to her knees and snapped on blue gloves.

Anya continued compressions, sweat beading on her forehead.

‘She vomited and may have aspirated.’ Martin wiped his mouth again, this time on the crook of one elbow.

‘Reeks of alcohol. Do you have any medical training?’ The backpack contained a small oxygen tank, which the nurse connected to a mask and bag. Working from the top of the girl’s head, she extended the neck and placed a Guedel’s airway over the tongue. With the mask in place, she held one little finger under the chin and the others on top. A few bursts of oxygen were delivered before she reached for the carotid with her other hand. Anya paused.

‘My ex-wife’s a doctor and I’m a trained ICU nurse.’

‘In that case, can you grab me a sixteen-gauge cannula? And you may want to put on gloves and take over this end.’

Martin positioned his hands over the mask and continued to squeeze air into the girl’s lungs.

With Anya on the right of the patient, the nurse moved to the left and extended the arm. ‘Veins aren’t good, but we’ll give it a go.’ She pulled the plastic sheath off the cannula with her teeth and pierced the skin. ‘I’m in,’ she announced. ‘William, can you peel off some tape from the roll.’

The officer quickly obliged and the access vein was deftly secured.

‘Do you have adrenalin, I mean epinephrine?’ Anya had never understood why America used different terms from Britain and Australia for the same medication.

‘And an automated defibrillator.’ She held a mini-jet for Martin to see.

‘One to ten thousand epinephrine.’ Martin confirmed the dose.

While Martin and Anya continued their physical resuscitation, Karen injected the young woman’s only hope of survival.

‘You OK?’ The nurse glanced at Anya who nodded and continued compressions, pausing only for Karen to cut off the

young woman's blouse, revealing a flimsy bra. She slid it to waist level.

Anya looked up. A small group had formed and were watching, some even taking photos. 'Can we get anyone who isn't helping back,' she said loudly. 'Can you use towels to make a screen?'

This young woman deserved respect and privacy.

The nurse shouted orders to security and a wall of towels went up around them. She used a spare from nearby to wipe the chest.

'No piercings, no underwire. We're good to go.' Karen placed one gel pad on the right side, the other below the heart on the left. The machine charged and Anya knelt back and held her breath. The adrenalin had the chance to circulate. All eyes focused on the tiny screen.

'It's VF. Everyone clear.'

Anya felt relief. At least it was a rhythm that might be shocked back into a heartbeat.

The young body bucked with the electrical charge. Martin felt for a pulse and his shoulders tightened. 'No output.'

The monitor showed a flat line.

Anya resumed cardiac massage, with aching arms and cramping fingers. The physical effort was exhausting. But she was not giving up. 'What if she's diabetic and hypoglycaemic?'

'Could be, if she's been here all night.' Without hesitation, the nurse inserted a large pre-packaged syringe into the vein. 'Fifty mls of fifty percent dextrose going in.'

A tall olive-skinned man in white uniform arrived. He was unshaven, hair tousled.

'What happened?' His voice was gruff, and his accent eastern European.

The nurse filled him in.

'Give Narcan.' He remained standing, arms folded as if in judgement.

The antidote reversed any effects of narcotics, in case the patient had overdosed on codeine, heroin or morphine.

It would not cause harm and could just save her life. The effect would be immediate. For the first time, Anya hoped illicit drugs were responsible.

The needle entered the cannula and the Narcan was injected. Nothing.

'Mum!' Anya heard Ben call for her and turned. He had slipped behind the towel screen and was crying, clutching one of the towels. 'I got scared. You didn't come back.'

Martin continued to squeeze oxygen into the lungs via the bag. 'Hey buddy, this lady's pretending to be asleep. Just like when we practise lifesaving on the beach.'

But it wasn't the scene that disturbed Ben; it was their absence. Anya looked for someone to help. The women in tracksuits were nowhere in sight.

William was quickly at Ben's side. He turned him around and knelt down to his eye level. 'There's someone I know who would just love to play with you.'

He called over a female crew member who poked her head over the towels. She had a broad smile and introduced herself to Ben with an English accent.

After a word and a trip to the railing, William returned. Anya was relieved but the muscle fatigue and hand cramping were taking hold.

'One of our best kids' club counsellors is with your son. If you like, I can take over.'

By now, short of breath and strength waning, there was no argument. She slid to the side; hoping blood had circulated to the girl's brain with each press on her narrow chest.

Around a dozen staff stood guard and talked into phones, while peering over the towels. So much for privacy and dignity.

The ship's doctor knelt down and listened to the lungs. 'Air and fluid is in both sides. There is much congestion.'

Karen closed then opened her eyes. 'About to give more epinephrine, and then a diuretic.' Again, she presented the labels to Martin for verification while he kept up the rhythm of squeezing and relaxing the bag.

Within a minute, William was perspiring with his effort.

‘We should open her chest,’ the doctor announced.

Karen remained calm but assertive. ‘We’re not equipped for open heart surgery in the middle of the ocean. We can handle minor surgery but not that.’

Martin checked for a pulse then glanced up at Anya. The monitor still showed a flat line. Someone had to make a decision.

Karen noticed the exchange. ‘How long?’

‘Twenty-three minutes.’ Martin had slipped back into his former role.

‘What is the exact time?’ The doctor demanded. He was about to stop the resuscitation and record time of death. Anya did not want to give up. The girl was young. She deserved every chance. So did her family. Especially on a cruise ship. Death was the last thing anyone expected on a family holiday.

‘How about Flumazenil?’ She blurted. It reversed the effect of benzodiazepines, like valium and rohypnol, a date-rape drug.

‘It’s a good idea,’ Karen said. ‘We might just get lucky. If not, we can honestly tell the family we tried everything we could.’