

Connie Rook leaned with outward nonchalance on the railing of an 80-foot 2-deck party boat, a plastic champagne flute cupped in her hands. Alternately she looked at the sky blazing with reddish-purple streaks of light, and the sunset's reflection in the rippling and dark waters of the river.

An hour ago she had met Val at a small port building, relieved she had finished her work in time and been able to make the trip. Val had told her she would have a "fantastic" time, then led her through a short maze of the other buildings on the docks and up onto the gangway for the boat, *Les Triumphante*.

Connie made her way into the throng of women already aboard. Tossed a few greetings, she had been pleased after looking around at the other women, to realize she had chosen the proper level of attire, business informal. She wore a peach v-neck sweater, her throat accentuated with a single silver chain, and long white slacks with closed toe white sandals.

There was a buffet set up on the lower deck. One half of the large area was a dance floor. On the other half guests circled around a drink bar. She found herself awkwardly moving from conversation to conversation, frequently listening in, but finding little of interest to chime in, or feeling her own thoughts might be unwelcome.

*Maybe I should've stuck with Val*, Connie thought. But the other woman, though at first introducing Connie around, had quickly hooked up for the weekend. Connie could see her enjoying attention from a curvy Latina. The looks Connie had received were clearly of the 'you should move on' variety. Val had only offered a distracted 'have a good time' as Connie moved to the small bar, and requested the special she had heard the woman in front of her order, a drink full of swirling color the bartender had called a "Rainbow Sunrise." She nodded her thanks, paid her money, and escaped to the top deck.

The top deck was open and breezy, and populated mostly by couples. The pairs of women walked leisurely around the deck engrossed

in quiet, intimate conversations. She had made eye contact with a few, but no one moved to talk to her.

*Maybe I'm just not cut out for this*, Connie thought sullenly. Dating wasn't a problem usually. It was the unattached searching between that she could do without. She tended, she realized, to stumble over her prospects. Brad, Michael, Harry, Josh and, she admitted, definitely Kate. She inhaled, the mind-blowing first-time experience with the woman seldom far from her thoughts. The whole reason she had come to this all-woman cruise, to figure out what happened next.

*Did she even know the games?* Solemnly she downed the remains of her drink and studied the refracting moonlight through the curved surface.

"Hello."

Connie turned her head to see a woman with brown curly hair in a ponytail. She wore a half-smile under light brown eyes. Her outfit was a braided blue wool turtleneck and dark blue, perhaps even black, slim-fit jeans and cross-trainer athletic shoes. Connie had seen almost no jeans among the attendees and wondered at the woman's choice. Then she noticed the woman looked a bit younger than most of the other cruisers, probably not yet thirty years old.

Returning her gaze to the woman's face, Connie was surprised to see the woman's smile had widened. "Hello," Connie finally replied.

"Do you do that to everyone?" the woman asked.

"What?"

"Frisk them with your eyes." The woman held open her arms, palms facing toward Connie. "No weapons." She then hooked her thumbs onto the edges of her jean pockets.

She seemed to be waiting for a response, but Connie suddenly was at a loss, disarmed by the suggestion she was unapproachable. "I... um, I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was... doing that," she finished lamely.

The woman's smile returned slowly and Connie found herself watching the mobile and expressive face with interest. *What would she say next?*

"You've got something of a 'deer in headlights' look about you a lot of the time." Connie's eyes widened. She looked afraid? "I've seen you at the Midway club," the other woman explained. "Val invited you on the cruise, right?"

Connie nodded.

"Slept with her yet?"

Connie blinked, again disarmed, and shook her head. "We've talked. I'm not her type."

"She yours?"

"My type? No, I..." Connie closed her eyes briefly and as she opened them again, admitted, "I don't know that I have a type." She decided to turn the tables, a bit defensive in her discomfort. "You?"

Her companion leaned backward against the railing bracing against the surface with her forearms, hands now crossed over her stomach. "Women who like to have fun." Brown eyes lifted, and an eyebrow rose further to accentuate the coming question. "Do you?"

"Within reason I guess," Connie replied. "What do you like to do?"

"I play softball on the Rainbow league, and I scull for Harvard's squad."

Connie smiled. "I graduated Harvard Law."

"Do any sports?"

"A little running." Connie tried to turn the conversation. "What are you studying at Harvard?"

"Pretty dry stuff," the other woman skirted.

"I'm curious." Connie was surprised to note she truly was curious. She turned toward the other woman, leaning on the railing now with one elbow, and that lowered her tall posture just enough to bring her to the same eye level as her companion.

Answering with a very dry tone, as if to say, 'I'm going to regret this', the woman did answer. "I'm a fourth year student in biomedical engineering."

Connie, however, was no intellectual slouch, and did at least know one hot topic to which that field of study could apply. "Are you in stem cell research?"

"No. Gene therapy." Her insight paid off when her companion smiled. "Particularly disease therapy. I'm impressed. Most people's eyes glaze over."

Connie decided that warranted granting the woman her name. "My name's Connie."

"I'm Elizabeth. What do you do?"

Now it was Connie's turn to expect a poor reaction. "Promise me

no pity looks?"

"Hey, would I do that?"

Connie then answered the question. "I'm a high school teacher."

"With a law degree?"

She sighed. There was that surprise again. "I was in corporate law practice for a while. I like teaching more."

"Yeah, but comparatively speaking, the pay's pretty much crap."

Connie nodded. "Yeah, and your point? You're not likely studying all those medical concepts strictly for the money either."

Elizabeth blinked. "Bleeding heart here," she admitted. "I'm actually looking forward to clinicals. Most of my classmates want to stay in the lab."

"Which disease are you most focused on?"

"Cancer."

Connie looked off at the water, suddenly surprised by how her memory and emotions wrestled with the singular word.

"Hey?" Elizabeth's hand brushed Connie's wrist.

"Sorry. I haven't... thought about that in a long time."

Apparently Elizabeth was familiar with the reaction. Insightfully she asked, "Relative?"

Connie exhaled. "My grandmother. Breast cancer."

"It's hereditary, you know. Do you get regular exams?" Connie looked surprised. Elizabeth was contrite. "Hey, sorry, doctor in me blurting out there. I'll poke her back to silence."

Connie let her smile come back. "I need a refill," she said finally. "Come down with me to get another drink?"

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By midnight, the *Les Triumphante* floated in the relatively open waters of Massachusetts Bay. Connie only realized the time though when the sound of bells drifted across the quiet waters from one of the many land points shrouded in haze. She and Elizabeth had retrieved second, third and fourth drinks together. The younger woman encouraged Connie to try a Fuzzy Navel, and a drink she now couldn't recall the name, which tasted distinctly of butterscotch.

Connie saw couples ducking into a doorway along the wall where