

Chapter 3 – The Ghost in the Machine

The next morning, the Wakefields began exploring the Oceanic Majesty.

The ship was less a vessel than a floating resort, each deck spilling into another world. Shops glittered in the atrium under chandeliers the size of wagon wheels, perfume counters pumping floral notes into the air while jewelry cases sparkled under spotlights. Becky lingered at the edge of a boutique, smiling at a sequined scarf she had no intention of buying. “Can you imagine teaching third graders in this?” she murmured, shaking her head, amused by the thought.

On the promenade, Emily tugged Dan into a salsa demonstration. She spun in sneakers, laughing, while Dan—steady, focused—did his best to match the rhythm. “You’re not half bad,” Emily teased, and he gave her a look that said you’re generous but I’ll take it.

Andrew, meanwhile, was outside, notebook in hand, counting the orange lifeboats lashed along the starboard rail.

“Twenty boats,” he muttered. “Capacity about one-fifty each... that’s three thousand total. Enough for the passengers, at least. Crew would end up in inflatables if it came to it.”

He jotted figures quickly, then underlined them twice. “Margin’s thin,” he added. “The Vikings crossed oceans with less, but they didn’t carry three thousand souls.”

Katelyn steered Leah’s stroller past the spa entrance, half-distracted by the deck plan glowing on her OceanBand. She wasn’t noting massage prices but exits, elevators, and security posts. Every detail filed itself into her practiced awareness.

Steve drifted apart, drawn to the engineering kiosks scattered through the ship. Touchscreens glowed with glossy diagrams of desalination units, waste reclamation, propulsion stats, and fuel economy. He leaned in, snapping quiet photos on his phone, as though cataloging an exam he’d later need to pass.

A passing crewmember, spotting his interest, chuckled. “Don’t worry, sir. The ballast system doesn’t mind a few thousand passengers moving around at once. These ships are smarter than they look.”

Steve smiled politely. “I’ll take your word for it.” But in his mind, the details were already clicking into place. Every system has its weak points. Every safeguard its limits.

At lunchtime they regrouped at the Lido Deck buffet on Deck 10, a cavernous space filled with the scent of roasted garlic, baked bread, and sizzling meats. Floor-to-ceiling windows framed the wide Pacific, sunlight glinting off the waves and flooding the room with brightness. The food seemed endless: prime rib carved in thick slices, pasta tossed to order, towers of fruit stacked in pyramids, a dessert bar crowded with pastries dusted in powdered sugar.

Emily filled her plate with small portions of everything—“just sampling,” she said—and coaxed Leah into eating mashed sweet potato while the rest settled in around a table near the glass.

The laughter and clatter of trays was suddenly pierced by raised voices. Two men squared off near the shrimp station.

“You cut the line!” one snapped, jabbing a finger at the other’s chest.

“Maybe if you didn’t hoard half the platter, we wouldn’t be standing here!” the second shot back.

The argument escalated fast, plates rattling as other passengers shuffled nervously out of the way. A pair of uniformed security officers hurried over, speaking in calm tones, separating the men with practiced ease. The incident ended without blows, but the tension lingered in the air like static.

Becky frowned at her plate. “It’s only day one. Imagine two weeks of this.”

Andrew tapped his pencil against his notebook, eyes narrowing. “Buffets always overstock at the start. Watch what happens after day four. Shrimp first, then steak. After that? Scarcity. It’s math, not manners.”

Emily shook her head. “It’s never just about the food. People snap when they feel uncertain—when they think something’s being taken from them.”

Steve said nothing. He’d been watching closely—the speed with which the argument flared, the way it quieted only under authority. Tension spikes when systems falter, he thought. Food today. Tomorrow, something bigger.

That evening, the family gathered in Steve and Becky’s suite. The sun bled red across the Pacific, staining the horizon in fire before sinking into deepening blue. The ship’s wake stretched behind them, white ribbons fading into infinity.

Emily leaned on the balcony rail, chin on her folded arms. “Hard to believe the world’s still out there—deadlines, bills, the news. Feels like we’ve slipped into another reality.”

Dan nodded. “Reminds me of deployment. Ship becomes the whole world, the ocean the horizon. Everything else just... vanishes.”

Andrew held Leah in his lap, making faces until she squealed with laughter. Katelyn sat close, one hand resting lightly on his arm, though her eyes kept tracking the horizon line as if it were an unknown adversary.

Steve stood apart, phone in hand. The storm icon he’d studied the night before was larger now, its spiral curling steadily closer to their projected course. He slid the device back into his pocket just as Becky approached with two mugs of coffee.

“You’re quiet again,” she said softly.

“Just... thinking about the systems that keep all this afloat.”

Becky nudged him playfully. “Thirty-five years of databases, and you still can’t stop analyzing.”

Steve smiled faintly but said nothing. His gaze stayed fixed on the darkening southern horizon, where clouds were gathering far beyond the reach of the ship's glow. The system looks perfect, he thought. But no system is perfect forever.