

Chapter 18

Henry's escorts eased back on the throttle and the boat idled into an unknown port. He listened for any ambient noise that might clue him in to their location, but it was useless over the smooth growl of the outboards.

Passenger Seat Thug opened the door to the hold. "We're ready for you to come up. But first you'll need to put these headphones on over your hood. Hope you like metal."

Henry did as he was told, not bothering to mention, that no, he *didn't* like heavy metal, that he found it utterly lacking in musical artistry. Effectively deaf and blind, he let the man guide him up out of the hold. He tried filtering out a scent from the salt and damp of the ocean air—the aroma of seafood or steak emanating from a nearby restaurant perhaps—but his own sour breath overpowered any other smells possibly wafting past on the other side of the hood.

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His escort placed his hands on a metal railing leading up almost vertical, and he guided his foot onto a slip-resistant tread, so narrow it was really more of a rung. With nothing but touch to guide him upward, he felt a little precarious and hesitated.

The escort yanked one side of the ear-muff style FM headphones away from his ear a couple inches: “Climb, dumbass!” and then let it snap back against his head..

Henry climbed. Ten steps all told. Now at the top, on some kind of platform, he held on to a metal railing for balance as one of the escorts climbed up behind him. Then the man led him by the arm across a solid textured-fiberglass surface, through a door, and down a metal stairway. From the bottom of the stairs they led him across a few feet of plush carpeting; he’d expected more steel or fiberglass, since it was now clear they weren’t on a dock, but rather, a much larger boat. His expectations were fulfilled once they shuttled him through a door and into another room, this one without carpet to cushion its metal floor. There was an odor in this room. An odor strong enough to penetrate the hood. It reminded Henry of a cramped airplane bathroom...and some other scent, too, contributing to the first, but distinct from it. A familiar smell. A smell that shamed him.

Before he could identify it, the escort pulled the headphones from his head. “You can take off the hood now,” he said. Henry heard him close the door and lock it. No sound penetrated the door from the other side.

Then he heard Cindy.

“Henry? Is that you?”

She sounded scared. She smelled terrified.

“Wait. I need to get this hood off.”

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She didn't wait. She tore into him.

“What the hell is going on? What's happening to me, Henry? *Tell me! Tell me now!*”

The fury in her voice stunned him.

“Will you just calm down for a minute? I can't see anything.”

“That's because it's pitch-fucking-black! Now answer me: why I am here?”

Henry finally managed to pull the hood loose; total darkness, just like she said. He stretched his arms out for a wall or something else solid to hang on to. But Cindy didn't give him a chance to get his bearings, or even finish a complete thought for that matter.

“What's going on? And don't fucking tell me you don't know! They already told me this is about you. Don't fucking lie to me Henry! Tell me the truth!”

“Will you please keep your voice down? They're probably listening to every word we say.”

“I know they're listening, but I don't give a shit, because I want them to know I don't have anything to do with you. Tell them that! Tell them I have nothing to do with whatever you've done to them. Tell them Henry!”

“I will...I have already. But you need to calm down. I can't think with you so frantic. Please. Just calm down. Everything's going to be alright.”

She started to sob. “*P-p-promise?*”

Manic one second, despondent the next. Henry wondered if that bitch, Mercy Anne had bothered to refer Cindy to a psychiatrist to be evaluated for Bi-Polar Disorder.

“I promise Cindy. You're right: they're only interested in me. They need me to...to do some work for them. Once I start on the work, they'll have no reason to keep you here. Maybe I

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can even talk them into freeing you sooner? Why don't you tell me everything that happened since I left you in Mercy's office?"

"Well—a" she said, but he cut her off.

"Wait. Let me come closer."

He shuffled toward her. Stubbed his toe on something. Heard its contents swish around.

"Ouch. What is that?"

"The toilet."

"Ah."

He made his way around until his knee bumped Cindy's shoulder. She jerked away and let out a little gasp. Not of fear. More like repulsion. Immediately he wondered if their captors had touched her. That might explain the intensity of her aggression towards him.

He knelt down and sat on the floor beside her. Risked putting his arm around her waist. She shrunk back, then settled in against him, trembling.

"So tell me exactly what happened," he said. "*Quietly*," whispering this last word to imply she should do likewise.

He listened as she told him about her argument with Mercy, about the date she went out on with some juvenile delinquent in order to assuage Mercy's contempt for him, about how the men who'd ambushed her had already been inside her apartment—about how they'd watched her masturbate beforehand—and finally, about the ominous threat made by the voice from the intercom.

"Wait a minute. Why were you masturbating? Without me? What? Did that boy get you turned on? Did you kiss him?"

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Cindy jumped to her feet and kicked him right in the ass. Kicked him like an aggressive Chihuahua nipping at the tassels on your loafers. Not brutally hard, but not soft, either.

“Is that all you have to say to me, you fucking *pendejo*? ‘*Did he turn me on? Did he kiss me?*’ Are you fucking *loco*?”

Henry realized his mistake too late. She’d already begun cursing him in Spanish.

“You know what Henry? Maybe he did turn me on. Maybe I should have fucked him. Because I sure thought about it. Maybe *he* would actually *know how* to fuck!

“All this time together...all the times you licked my kitty—and you still won’t have sex with me? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Cindy, I explained this to you already. I am a servant of the Lord. I am not allowed to fornicate. Now can you *please* keep your voice down?”

He was worried the Brotherhood would learn of his oral indulgences.

“So you’re just like a catholic priest then? Giving head to a choir boy is OK so long as your prick never touches the inside of a vagina? Hypocrite.”

Actually, hypocrisy didn’t have anything to do with it. Henry believed all forms of sexual touching before marriage were sinful. But who is free of sin? Refusing to have sex with Cindy, of even allowing her contact with his genitals, was simply a matter of preference. To have someone touch his manhood made him feel uncomfortable. Squeamish. Impotent. Even when he masturbated, he did so through a barrier of some kind: a sock, or a pillow. He’d tried condoms but they weren’t substantial enough to mask the sensation of human skin. Not that he was about to share these idiosyncrasies with a romantic partner.

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“This is neither the time nor the place for this discussion. Please Cindy. Just calm down. I promise you, if you’ll just sit still, and be patient, I’ll get you out of this. They won’t hurt you.”

“You shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep, Henry.” The voice from the intercom didn’t exactly back him up.