

CRUISE CONTROL

by Paul Watson

Vanessa Saunders sighs, staring out of her cabin porthole over the sparkling sea. She's bored, bored, bored, borrrrrred. Who'd have thought a luxury cruise would be so...dull? Apparently, there is only so much time you could spend topping up your tan, ogling the cuties in their short short and drinking unlimited margaritas. As a twenty-one year old fresh out of college, this is a world-view shattering conclusion.

She pulls a colourful wrap around her waist, slips into her strappy sandals, puts her sunglasses on her forehead. She checks she looks good in the mirror and walks out into the narrow corridors of the S.S. Melinda to find something, anything to do.

"Two dozen bars and none of them worth going to." Too noisy, too quiet, too boring, too sports. She keeps wandering. Past the shops, the theatres that are all dark, the games areas, the pools and finally turns down a small, almost hidden corridor. "Well, I guess I might as well see what's going on down here."

She walks down the short corridor, barely a diversion before there's a wooden door with a sign outside advertising a magic show. "Sure. Why not? I mean, what else am I going to do?"

The door pushes open easily. It's dark inside. Not pitch black, but very low lighting, probably to make it look bigger, but it feels small, intimate. She can't really see the rest of the audience, just make out muffled shapes around the stage. She finds a table for one, sitting down, waiting for something to happen. She didn't see a schedule, which is unusual. She sighs. More boredom. Probably be just card tricks or something else lame. A loud crashing and a yowl of pain come from behind the stage. Vanessa jumps in her seat.

A head pokes through the curtain, middle aged, hair starting to pull back, outrageously long moustache, "Not to be a cliché, but...is there a doctor in the house?" No one responds, "Right. Short delay, folks, be right back."

Vanessa looks at the stage. *"That was part of the act, right? No one's really been hurt. It's all just part of the..."* The curtains part and the same man comes out in tuxedo and cummerbund, holding a square box in front of him.

"Right. Bit of an issue with the show folks. My lovely assistant Eve has had...a bit of bother backstage and won't be able to perform so I'm afraid..."

"A bit of bother? Bit of bother?!" comes from inside the box, "That bloody thing fell on me! I've probably got a broken leg and you want to carry on the show!"

The magician smiles wanly and opens up the front of the box to reveal a disgruntled brunette's head scowling out. "As you can see, she's in no condition to take part in the show..."

"So cancel it and get me some help!"

"I can't do that. You know the contract. The show must go on or we don't get paid."

Vanessa relaxes. *"It's an act. It's all just an act."*

"If I don't get seen to I might bleed to death, you..."

He puts his hand over her mouth, muffling her cursing as an egg appears between her lips. "Don't be like that. I'm sure you'll be fine. But keep that potty mouth turned off. I don't think we have any children present, but you know how the management is."

Eve passes another egg and glares at him. He cracks both, two white doves springing out and flying around the room before perching on the box, cooing as he fixes the box onto a chrome stand.

"Oh, you are not going to use me as the table, are you? You are, aren't you? You bas..." her voice muffles again as she spits a card out, then another, cards streaming from her mouth. The magician catches them, spreading them in a fan until Eve reluctantly goes silent.

"So, as Eve says, without an assistant, I'm going to be unable to perform any of the grand illusions you may have expected and..."

"I'll do it!" Vanessa's quite surprised to find her arm raised and even more so that she shouted out. Now self-conscious under the hidden eyes of the audience she can feel turning to look at her.

The magician looks down at the box, then out into the crowd. He leans down. Whispered

conversation follows.

"Young lady, could you come up on stage, please?" Vanessa makes her way up to the stage, now assailed by nerves. "Now, you are?"

"Vanessa..."

"Well, Vanessa, thank you for volunteering. You may well have saved the show. Have you been a magician's assistant before?"

She shakes her head.

"Hmmm. That does make things trickier. Some of what I do could be dangerous to a novice like you. But I think I can make this work."

"Dangerous?"

"Nothing for you to worry about. Just let me get something from backstage and we'll be off." he walks through the curtains, leaving Vanessa on stage with a head.

"Hey." Vanessa looks down

"Are you alr..."

"I'm grand. Probably bleeding out back there. But that's not the issue right now. Ground rules: Don't let him bully you. Don't let him get too handsy, because he most certainly will. And, above all, don't let him..." the curtains part before she can finish.

"I return. Miss me?"

"Of course." Eve replies with a smile that almost reaches her eyes. "Counting down the seconds. Just like in bed"

The magician pushes a wide horizontal stock on wheels out, the wooden stock just above waist height, but the singular hole much too small for that.

"Now, Vanessa, if you'll just kneel down..." she raises an eyebrow. Eve sniggers. "Not like that. Honestly, such dirty minds. We're on stage and professional."

Vanessa gets to her knees. The magician opens the stock and rolls it up against her, pulling her long blonde hair free before he swings the other half into position around her neck. She can feel the smoothly polished wood pressing quite tightly around her. She certainly can't escape, but she tries anyway because that's what assistants do, isn't it? Prove how tightly they're locked in so the audience can't see how they can escape their fate. She's just a bit nervous that *she* can't see how she can escape her fate, either.

The magician places a small square box box around her face, quite tight and confining. She breathes a little faster, wondering if this really was such a good idea. But it's a bit late to back out now. The magician turns the box ninety degrees to the left, moving her head with it. He turns the box the other way and then back to the front. Vanessa gulps, figuring out what's likely to happen next and sure enough the magician turns the box a full 180 degrees. Which is clearly impossible. Which is why she obviously can't be looking backwards at the stage to see Eve wink at her. Her head is turned back to the front. Her face pale, breaths shallow as she tries to understand what just happened. I mean, it's not hard to understand what happened, but how is proving elusive. It proves more elusive as her head is turned around again. And around and around and around, getting her dizzy with the impossible movement.

The rotation stops. She hears the magician's hands grip tightly on the the sides of the box by her ears and then lift. This time she can't avoid letting out a squeal as her view swings wildly higher. Her hands wave wildly, feeling along the wooden stock but finding no trace of her head where it should be. The magician holds her head in one hand, lifting the box containing Eve with the other hand. For a moment, he holds them up together, contrasting side by side, which is lost on Vanessa as she stares wildly out at the dark theatre with wide eyes. He replaces her head on the stand where Eve was and moves to place Eve's head on the stocks.

"Wait, wait, what are you doing?"

"Well, I could hardly allow a novice to take part in my act. Some of those spectacles are really quite dangerous." he sets Eve down, twisting the box a couple of times. Vanessa's body goes numb beneath the neck.

"What just happened? I can't feel my body!"

"Of course not. Eve needs it to complete the show. I do thank you for volunteering it."

"But...." he unlocks the stocks and Eve steps out, her skin mismatched with Vanessa's tan. She looks down.

"Well, I can see why you wanted this one."

"But..."

Eve looks over her shoulder. "Yes, that's pretty nice, too."

"But..."

The magician takes the wrap from Eve's body and stuffs it into Vanessa's mouth. "No more interrupting. You'll have the best seat in the house."

And she does. In a way. She gets to watch her body float into the air, shivers as it's run through with swords, tries to scream into her gag as a huge buzzsaw spins up and carves through her waist, and all the other tortures and tricks that the magician and Eve put it through.

But at the end of the show, they bring out the stocks again and the magician quickly runs through the same routine as the show started with, twisting the box containing Eve's head off and swapping it back with Vanessa's. As soon as she's freed, Vanessa stands on shaky legs, feeling over her body for the various holes and cuts that the act should have left there but finding none.

"Well, Vanessa, I do hope you enjoyed your time as my assistant. And, to show my gratitude for saving the day..." he pulls out a small paper stub. "...an invitation to my show."

"Uhhh, thanks. Happy to help, I guess." she reaches for the ticket, not noticing Eve shaking her head in the box. She takes it. The stage lights go out and everything turns black in the theatre.

"...are baffled by the disappearance from the cruise ship the S.S. Melinda of student Vanessa Saunders. Saunders, twenty-one, was last seen on the ship's security monitors walking along a corridor on the edge of the activities area. Authorities are interviewing another woman, identified as Eve Stanovich, about her connection to this disappearance. Stanovich herself mysteriously vanished three years ago aboard the Melinda and authorities hope she can shed some light on what happened to Vanessa and where she has been. Rumours of a faded ticket stub being Eve's only possession bar her clothing have not been verified at this time..."