

## **Seventeen**

“Gonna head to the bar. You guys want anything?”

Rick raised himself up and out of one of the four poolside hot tubs on the cruise ship deck, waiting for a response from the three still soaking. His wife Shelly, and their new friends and ‘cruise buddies’, Chris and Vanessa.

Chris took a beat, and countered with a cheery, “Aw hell. I’ll come with, mate.”

Tasked with drink orders from the girls, the pair headed for the nearby bar. The couples had met standing in line waiting to board the luxury liner, the wives first striking up a conversation, and the men quickly following suit. They were all in the same age range or so, early 60’s, and found a lot in common but enough differences to make it interesting.

Rick and Shelly were solid Midwesterners; Naperville, Illinois, with a commute most weekdays for Rick to Chicago. Chris and ‘Nessa were Brits, hailing from its smallest town, Fordwich, about 2 hours from London in Canterbury and home to less than 400 souls. Chris had retired from a successful woodworking business. They promised to look each other up on the ship, and had done just that, spending most of the seven day cruise together, laughing, commiserating and in general making fast friends.

Today was Friday, the fifth day of their voyage. The weather had been absolutely spot on perfect, each day graced with beautiful blue skies, light breezes and temps in the low 80s with little or no humidity. High season March climate for sure in the Caribbean, as good as it gets. Their ship, the *Vista*, was on the sea today, due to port in Cozumel in the morning, and then sail to New Orleans for the cruise’s end Sunday.

Just as they made the bar, Rick motioned to Chris to follow him around a corner on the deck, away from the music and noise of the crowd surrounding the pool. He’d been considering something for a couple of days now, and decided this was the right time. The two men were out of sight for the moment, swim trunks still dripping wet from the hot tub, and Chris was wondering what Rick had on his mind. Rick began.

“Chris, I want to tell you something, actually, *show* you something quite...unique. As a matter of fact, I’m sure you’ve never heard or seen anything like it. But I have to know..”

Rick searched his friend’s eyes with his own earnestly, shared a wry smile and then went on.

“ I *have* to know that you’ll be calm. Be cool about it, and not freak out on me, ok?”

Chris chuckled, then replied in his middle England lilt.

“Well it’s a little hard without knowing exactly what we’re talking about, but I’m generally not the freaking out kind, right? Right!”

Rick took a breath and said, ‘Ok, ok. Definitely one of the things I like about you. Chris, I’m going to ask you to close your eyes, just for a moment, and not open them until I tell you. Will you do that?’

Chris smiled quizzically, but nodded his assent. Rick then closed his, and reached across to his friend, placing his right hand on his shoulder. He said one word.

“Seventeen.”

Rick waited one moment, and then told Chris, “Ok, open your eyes.”

Chris did, and was definitely confused to see a teenager in front of him instead of his newly made friend. The teenager spoke.

“Chris, look in the mirror to your right.”

He was trying to process a LOT right now. The young man speaking to him looked and sounded like a younger version of Rick, and as Chris turned toward the glass and saw his own reflection, he truly understood Rick’s admonition to remain calm.

Obviously it had been a very long time since he was young. Christ, he would turn 64 this September. But he knew what he looked like as a young man, hell he’d lived it. And the reflection looking back at him was just that.

It was stunning. Breathtaking, in the real sense of that word. He gathered himself, and managed, 'How-'

"I was early 40's, and always traveling for my firm", the teenage Rick responded. "This happened in South America."

"Lima, Peru. And a very cool guide on a hiking part of that trip. The Mountain Of Seven Colors, Yuracochas. Ernesto & I just hit it off, man. Like you and me, Chris."

Rick thought back, and did his best to explain the unexplainable.

"Ernesto was around our age now, 60 or so. But fit, dude. I had a nice middle age paunch, too many late dinners, drinks & no exercise. I was struggling on the hike, no lie. But he was the shit, man. So full of knowledge about the mountains, and everything else around us. We really hit it off. I talked to *him* more than any of the other people on the hike. The second night, he got me off to the side like I did you today, told me to be cool, and put his hand on my shoulder. Seventeen. And bang!"

"Only he said, 'Diecisiete.' And then he told me what I'm about to tell you. Enjoy it, man. Odds are it will only be this once. It only lasts for 24 hours or so. It's inexact. Like most wonderful things. And don't worry about your wife. Even though a day passes for us, when you and I are ourselves again, we'll walk back to that hot tub with the drinks and only minutes will have passed."

Chris' mind reeled, trying to absorb it all as Rick went on.

"You'll be tired when you're yourself again, likely for a couple of days. Maybe a headache. It's SO worth it, though. I was extremely rare, buddy. The ability to use it again, like Ernesto did with me, I got that as well. But I can't just do it at anytime. I have to have a real bond with that person, have to feel that kinship. Doesn't happen often. Only works with other guys. And it takes more of a toll as I get older. So it's been a few years since I've enjoyed this too!"

The American smiled at his now young English friend, and finished his explanation.

“Buddy, go have some fun. Do whatever you feel like. Treasure it! You’ll know when it’s about to end, and the old Chris is coming back. Things will begin to look out of focus, and you’ll feel like you don’t belong wherever you’re at. When that happens, find a little corner all to yourself. And then we’ll be right back here, and head to the bar. Most of all...I hope you don’t mind that I’ve shared this with you. Our connection to each other these past few days is the only reason I *could*.”

Chris took a breath, gave his newly young friend a hug & thanked him, and then set off to enjoy a day or so of returning to his teenage years. The most obvious thing at first was physical. The way his body *felt*. So taut and lean, like a coiled spring. Zero fat. It seemed as if he had enough energy stored up for days. And his mind was different as well. Focus like a laser, no clutter or haze. And the big question, what to do with the enormous gift that the next 24 hours or so would be.

The first thing was clothes. His 64 year old body’s swimsuit was so loose he had to hold it up with one hand. Luckily, he’d noticed that the ship’s laundry was on the same deck as he and ‘Nessa’s suite. Keeping a careful watch, it only took rifling through 3 or 4 bags until he came up with something suitable. Tee shirt & jean shorts would do, and feet didn’t change size so his old slip on sneakers still did the trick. The clothes were dirty but all things considered, at this point he couldn’t care less.

Food wouldn’t be a problem, there was a 24 hour buffet on board the ship. And good thing, because he was ravenous. Chris proceeded to eat a meal like he’d just been rescued from a tropical island. Anything, everything he wanted. Lunch, breakfast, dinner, bloody hell, all the meals at once. The young man was seated alone, and soon started to notice young girls checking him out. Wow. He literally couldn’t remember the last time that had happened.

Finally he was full. And freshly amazed at his teenage gastric capacity. It was true, teenage boys could eat you out of house and home. What next? He decided on sunshine and the ship’s topside pool. Quickly making the deck, he got a couple of towels from the attendant, grabbed a pool mattress and was soon happily floating on it’s smooth blue surface. Hearing a joyous shout, he lifted his head in time to see his cruise buddy Rick execute a cannonball off the diving board. Splashed by some of the resultant spray, he folded his arms behind his head, relaxed and closed his eyes. The Gulf of Mexico sun felt incredible, and he fairly glowed inside,

buoyed by the water and the most wonderful, unexpected surprise of his entire life.

Chris also quickly found things he couldn't do. Drink, for one. No ID, and he was obviously underage. A place to sleep that night was also problematic, he didn't have a suite to return to, or a cruise ID for that matter. Fortunately the crew left a few folding deck chairs at both ends of the ship's deck, and he could stretch out on one of those without too much notice. The pool towels worked nicely as surrogate blankets, and even though the tropical night was cool with a stiff breeze, young blood runs hot, right?

The young man slept in short fits and starts. One, he didn't seem to need much rest, and two, his head was spinning about tomorrow, and the relatively short time he still had to enjoy his newfound youth. The ship would dock in Cozumel, and he definitely wanted to leave the ship and enjoy the city. But this was a problem. When you disembarked during the cruise, you had to present a cruise ID. That ID would be scanned, and a picture would come up on the attendant's screen. That meant he would have to find a young man that looked similar, although not identical. Chris could wear a hat or a hoodie that would help obscure him a bit. But finding that teenager, and lifting his ID? Well, if he wanted to enjoy Cozumel...

As it turned out, the perfect opportunity presented itself. The Brit enjoyed a hearty breakfast, finding out in the process he didn't need coffee anymore at this age. After the PA announcement that the ship had docked, he roamed the top deck, keeping his eyes open. A group of teenagers were talking and gathering their things, obviously excited about going ashore. They were gathered around a boy lying on one of the outstretched deck chairs, and obviously feeling under the weather. Rick could make out the fact that this boy would remain on ship while they went, and so he simply moved a few chairs away and waited. The friends left, and soon the young man was asleep. Not a dead ringer certainly, but with a cap close enough. It was almost too easy, the sleeping teenager's ID was on a lanyard by his chair. Rick glided by, gently sweeping up the ID as he did. Cozumel, here we come.

No problem getting off the ship, and the day was truly spectacular. The bluest sky he could ever recall, perfect temperature, and for Christ's sake he was seventeen. SEVENTEEN. Every thing was different. The way he felt, the way people reacted to him. And *he* was different. The way he saw

the bustling port city....not through the jaded eyes of a senior citizen, but optimistically, its every corner looking like something new and exciting. Truly mind blowing. He had all the wisdom that experience had taught him through the years, but freshly coupled with boundless energy and the hope that only youth knows. Potent mix. Probably good this was temporary, he mused.

Rounding a corner that led back to the port and the ship, he spotted the young teenage Rick about a half a block ahead. Ha. Obviously, Rick had the same idea about porting here in Cozumel and was successful as well. He hadn't spent any time with Rick since this marvelous thing had happened to him, and thinking thanks and a little hang time were in order, he quickened his pace to catch his friend. Just then, the young Rick grabbed a piece of fruit from one of the produce marts on the street and kept walking. And a Mexican policeman carrying an AR and looking much more like a soldier happened to notice.

Chris could helplessly see it all unfolding in front of him. The policeman's order to halt, Rick starting to run, other policeman noticing and joining the chase...and then his friend falling to the street. Chris ran too, he definitely hadn't heard a shot, it was just a piece of fruit for God's sake. As he caught up, he could see the policemen huddled around his friend lying on the street. And he could see Rick clutching his chest. Looking positively blue, mouth agape but no sound coming out. God he felt so sick to his stomach. The policemen called for medical help, and literally as he watched, his friend died.

To say that Chris was stunned would be an understatement. Sick, dazed, utterly at odds, totally unsure of what to do next. He found a small, quiet park just at the port's edge, and sat and thought. It would soon be nightfall in Cozumel. It was now well past 24 hours since Rick had shared seventeen with him. The stolen ID might well work to get him back on the ship, but being aboard was certainly not a solution. The ship would dock in New Orleans tomorrow, and he had no passport, or any ID for that matter. And the biggest uncertainty of all. What effect would Rick's death have on Chris' present state? His age, and how long it would last?

A dark blue night gently fell around the young man as he considered. He felt a sharp pang as he thought about his wife 'Nessa, and what this would mean for her. He had not chosen this, Rick had gifted him with it. That made things just the slightest bit easier to bear. Would he and Rick simply disappear in the life that they all shared? Would the return to his old

life happen soon, and would it be him returning without Rick now? Or with Rick being gone, was he stuck in this dimension of life for good, or whatever the hell it actually was?

One thing was for sure, he had to keep putting one foot in front of the other, especially for now. Chris took stock. He was an underage, British illegal in Mexico, with no ID whatsoever. He had no money, and was already achingly hungry. But, he had youth on his side, and 60 plus years experience and knowhow of the way the world worked, and how to get along. I'm betting on myself, he thought with resolve. The young man began the walk out of the park, and into his future.