

Icebreaker

2 Days to Perdition

'To the left...no...no,' the man waved one hand and balanced his phone in the other. 'My left. God, Baby, my hands are freezing, can't you just follow directions?'

'Whatever, Richard.' Baby shimmied to the left – *Richard's* left – and twisted to the side, hand on hip and chin up. 'Like this?' Fine droplets of mist dissipated around her face as she spoke.

'Yeah, yeah, like that,' he said. 'Just don't breathe this time.'

'Not nice.'

'For the picture, Bay.'

Baby heaved in a gulp of frigid air and held, waving her hand for him to continue as the moisture on her skin crystallised to a fine ethereal sheen in the waning light. He began shooting from the left, her best angle, and nodded when satisfied. Richard swiped through the series of photos and saw Baby's ever so slightly frizzed hair. Imperceptible to the average person, but no doubt she'd pass comment. He shoved the phone in his pocket. 'Done. Now let's get inside.'

Baby exhaled dramatically and rushed to the clothes draped over the steel rail. 'These photos will absolutely dominate,' she said, yanking on a pair of pink thermal bottoms. 'Can you imagine the exposure I'll get on Insta? I'd like to see Deb top it. Bet no one's had shots like this before.'

'Never in a bikini, I'd wager.'

Baby grabbed the phone peeking from Richard's pocket and scrolled. 'My hair, Richie,' she said, turning to face him. Pointing to her jacket zipper, she pouted.

‘You look amazing...luminous, Bay.’ He knew any doubt would lead to more frosty shoots. ‘It adds a certain *je ne sais quoi*, it’s...it’s...’ Richard fumbled with the zipper, before yanking it up to her chin. ‘It’s feral.’

Baby’s grin crept across her face as she inspected the photo again. ‘Yes, you’re right. Such a mood, isn’t it?’

* * *

‘Get what you’re after?’ drawled a man, sitting in a large vinyl chair at the front of the bridge. He rubbed the greying stubble on his chin between his thumb and forefinger, studying the two as they entered.

‘For now, Captain,’ Baby said, sitting herself opposite.

‘Don’t worry, you’ll get your money’s worth. Antarctica’s full of mysteries.’ He turned to Richard, setting his coffee mug with a clunk onto the table beside him. ‘You as underwhelmed as your missus, Dick?’

Richard shifted, failing to hide his discomfort. The captain was formidable, over six feet tall and with the build of a titan. No matter that he was on the other side of fifty, Richard knew he didn’t want to stoke what was already bubbling beneath every time Baby spoke.

‘No, of course not, Captain.’ Richard struggled to find words as Baby huffed. ‘It’s just the audience. They’re desensitised. We need new content, something fresh—’

‘Something shocking,’ Baby said. ‘My followers expect the best, Captain. I’m no wannabe. I’m an *Influencer*.’ She smiled at Richard and tugged her thick hair over her shoulder, loosely braiding it.

‘Um, yes, I suppose shocking is one way to put it,’ Richard said.

‘You’ll be shocked, no doubt about that.’ The captain stood up from his seat, grabbing a pair of binoculars from the pouch beside his chair. He walked closer to the large windows and looked into the distance. ‘Probably a couple days ‘til Perdition Bay. We’ll hit some ice soon, but she’ll carry us through, no problem. She’s ferried me through worse.’ He patted and gently stroked the walnut panel before him.

Richard and Baby looked at each other, disquieted by the intimate moment they were witnessing. A captain and his ship. Like a man and his lover.

‘Icebreaker,’ Richard said, slicing through the uneasiness enveloping them.

The captain turned, eyes meeting Richard’s.

‘The ship, I mean,’ Richard continued. ‘That’s her name, so I’d imagine that’s what she’s good at.’

Irritation in the captain’s eyes flickered for a moment, replaced almost immediately by a cool dispassionate gaze. ‘Sun’s down soon, get to your cabin. Ship’s a dangerous place in the dark.’ He turned back to the windows and without further acknowledgement, they were dismissed.

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‘*Ship’s a dangerous place in the dark,*’ Baby mimicked. ‘Is it just me or is he worse than when we set off?’

Richard knelt beside his wife on the small lower bunk of their cabin and rubbed her shoulders. ‘The captain’s American,’ he murmured while kissing her cheek and the crook of her neck. ‘Maybe that’s it.’

Baby swatted at him like a buzzing gnat. ‘Get off, Richard. I’m not being intimate in this disgusting place.’ She waved at the walls, dark crimson and oppressive.

‘The captain or one of his bloody stooges probably set up cameras. I can hardly bring myself to undress.’

Richard stood and crossed his arms. ‘Well, I hope there’re no microphones then.’ He moved towards the cabin door. ‘You heard him, a day or two and you’ll have all the followers you could ever want.’

‘Likes and shares,’ she said, rolling her eyes, then inspecting her manicure. ‘That’s what matters.’

‘Okay, followers, likes *and* shares. Seems no one’s made it back to talk about this place except the captain, so you’ll have no compet –’

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ She looked up when the door creaked open.

‘The galley. I won’t be long. Want anything?’

‘A glass of Dom?’ Baby laughed, laying down and resting her head on the pillow. She was more tired than she realised. Maybe an early bedtime would help shake the dark shadows she’d felt following her that day. ‘I’ll probably be asleep when you return, so be quiet. And no funny business.’ She turned off the light, pulled the duvet to her chin and let herself drift into slumber as the door shut behind him.

* * *

Scratch, Scratch, Scratch.

‘Richard?’ Baby whispered. ‘Is that you?’ She rubbed her eyes, annoyed at being woken from her dream, and slapped for the switch without luck. ‘Damn it.’ Grabbing her phone from the side table, she pushed the wake button, but the resulting glow barely penetrated the darkness. ‘What are you doing over there?’

The scratching became louder and more frenzied. She sat up and held the phone towards the wall. ‘I swear, Richard, if you’re trying to –’

Her scream pierced the silence as the phone fell dead by her side.

1 Day to Perdition

Baby stabbed at the grey-green scrambled eggs smeared across the metal food tray and watched the second hand of the clock hanging above the galley door. *Tick. Tick. Tick.*

She could hear Richard speaking, droning away about something. *Tick. Tick. Tick.*

Her fork slammed against the metal again.

‘Lord, Baby, none of us got any sleep last night, not just you.’

She set the fork down beside the tray, straightening it so that it sat parallel.

Baby looked up, without a word, until her gaze met her husband’s.

‘I...I just meant...,’ Richard said, ‘your night terror...you were so loud that –’

‘A night terror? The captain was in our cabin dressed like he was at some cosplay convention. He was wearing a...a cloak.’

Richard looked away and took a steadying breath before turning back. He touched her hand, but she recoiled as though he were Hades himself.

‘Don’t touch me,’ Baby said, encircling her wrist with her other hand. ‘It hurts.’ Her fingers moved to her neck. ‘Here too. He was *choking* me.’

‘There’s nothing there, Baby. Not a bruise or scratch.’ Richard pushed himself up from the plastic chair. ‘The captain was with me in the galley when we heard you scream. Just stay focused. In a day or two you’ll be the Queen of Instagram and Debra will be weeping in her espresso martini.’

Baby perked up imagining her fiercest competition disappearing into oblivion. No more sponsorships, award ceremonies, advertisements...footballer husband. She looked up at Richard’s pale, slight physique and scrunched her nose.

Baby straightened her shoulders. *Get yourself together.* Night terror? That was plausible. Her sleeping pills had been lost while traveling from England. Exhaustion and stress were a heady mixture.

She looked up at Richard. ‘Queen of Instagram?’

‘Empress even.’ He began massaging her shoulders as Baby let her head loll forward.

‘Where’d you put my phone?’ she said between satisfied moans. ‘I couldn’t find it this morning.’

Richard stopped. To Baby, three things in life were sacred – her stylist, a reliable internet connection, and her phone. Unfortunately, the stylist had refused to come, but they *had* managed to charter a ship with reasonable Wi-Fi.

Her phone though? Richard had no idea.

‘It must still be in the room. Maybe it slid under the bunk,’ he paused, ‘in the, erm, commotion.’

Baby straightened; Manicured eyebrow peaked.

‘Your night terror, I mean.’

‘Possibly.’ She shoved the remains of her breakfast away, the tray screeching across the table. ‘Hey, you,’ she said, waving at a man entering from the galley. ‘Yes, *you*, Mr...Mr Cook-person. This’ – Baby said, pointing at the tray – ‘was disgusting. Let’s try harder tomorrow, yes? My reviews can make or break places, you know.’

The man smiled, a gaping black void where his teeth should be. Walking out the opposite door, he howled with laughter, his frail frame shaking with each obscene hoot.

Baby pulled the purple cashmere cardigan around her shoulders and hugged it close. ‘Where do they get these absolute crazies, Richard?’

‘Five-star chef’s on vacation,’ the captain said from behind them.

Baby and Richard turned, surprised at the stealth he had entered.

‘I think you’re mocking me,’ she said over her shoulder before looking at Richard. ‘Is he mocking me?’

‘I’m just pointing out that you’re setting yourself up for disappointment,’ the captain said. ‘Cook does what he can.’

‘What he can?’ Baby said. ‘Well, that’s not much, obviously. I can’t wait until I’m off this heap.’

‘Soon enough,’ the captain said as he came around to face them. ‘We’ll reach Perdition Bay around noon tomorrow. There’ll be good light, weather permitting. We’ll approach up the coast.’

‘You’ve been pretty tight-lipped on what to expect, Captain,’ Richard said. ‘I’ve done my research, but couldn’t find anyone in the past fifty years, except you, who claims to have been.’

‘It’s not just a claim, son. I’ve been, and more than once.’ He walked back to the door, stopping to turn around. ‘You know, some say lost souls of the damned roam the shores there searching for someone to follow home.’ Baby snorted and the captain looked her dead in the eyes. ‘But don’t worry, no need for nightmares. No one will be following you.’

And the door swung closed behind him.

* * *

‘I’m heading to bed. You coming?’

‘Not just yet,’ Baby said, grabbing the iPad from her bag. ‘I’m staying in the salon to do some touch-ups.’

‘After last night?’ Richard walked to the door, his hand hovering on the handle.

Baby shrugged. ‘It was a night terror and clearly I’m not built for unmedicated sleep. Anyway, you heard Captain Spook, we’ll be at Perdition Bay tomorrow. I need to be ready.’

‘Captain Spook?’

‘He may not have attacked me, but he’s still creepy.’

Richard walked back to her, laughing. ‘Kiss?’

Baby pursed her lips. ‘I suppose,’ she said, turning her cheek at the last moment to receive Richard’s peck.

He straightened at the rebuff and returned to the door. ‘Well, don’t stay up too late.’ With one more silent look at his wife, he left.

She was thankful to be alone. For someone who craved attention, Baby had come to realise that there were few people she could tolerate longer than a short burst, including her husband.

The room was small and grotesquely decorated for a common area, with a mismatch of colours and patterns that had no business existing in a single space. A smell of damp wafted from a bucket in the corner overflowing onto the carpet. Not ideal. But there were no other tables large enough to spread her belongings while editing.

Richard had transferred yesterday’s shoot to the iPad, and despite his many shortcomings, Baby was glad he was at least organised. She clicked on the first photo. Too fat. In the second, she looked monstrous from the shadows clinging beneath her eyes.

‘Uggghhh,’ she groaned. *Photography course for Richard stat.*

Baby rolled her shoulders, releasing the tension that had been building since arriving. She was tired, hungry, and irritated that the captain had begun to worm his way into her thoughts again. And although she accepted that the night before had all been a dream, she couldn't help but feel uneasy in his presence.

She looked back to her work and scrolled through the photos. Selecting three images, Baby airbrushed here and shaved a few centimetres there until she was content that not even the most dedicated troll could find fault with her body.

Posting to Instagram with her standard stream of hashtags, *#YOLO* *#Livingmybestlife* *#nobodyputsBabyinthecorner*, she waited for the likes and comments. As the first few appeared on screen, she felt energised knowing that around the world people were looking at her, liking her, even wishing they could be her.

And so, for the first time on the trip, Baby felt content, save for the constant but mostly minor fluttering in her stomach she had attributed to seasickness. She pushed the nagging feeling aside and was deep into writing a blog entry when her direct messages pinged:

Is that you at Butlins? Maybe they have a golden oldies package you can promote. Deb xx

'Hag,' Baby said as she swiped to the next screen. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a small tin of diet gin and tonic, smuggled on board to alleviate the stress of her travels. Pouring the fizzy drink into a clear but scuffed plastic cup, she sighed as the bubbles danced up the side. Baby took a gulp and sat back, letting the warming flow of alcohol surge through her.

After three gins and more social networking, her eyes began to grow heavy. She placed her head on the table. A few minutes wouldn't hurt. Enough to recharge and finish the task. Just a few minutes...

It had been closer to an hour when Baby began to stir, murmuring as the spittle dripped from the side of her mouth, gathering into a pool on the table. 'No... not my fault.' Her body jerked. 'No.' Then she fell silent again, the demons in her thoughts retreating into the recesses of her mind.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

Unsettled but still asleep, Baby shifted.

Scratch, Scratch. The noise invaded her dreams first before it became distracting enough to rouse her. When she finally did raise her head, Baby looked around, disorientated. It was dark. Cold. So much so that she could see the warmth of her breath as she exhaled. She pulled on her coat, rubbing her arms in a vain attempt to thaw herself. Though Baby tried and failed to switch the lights on at the wall, once her eyes adjusted, it was still bright enough from moonlight to notice the deck door to her right was ajar.

Not this again. The scratching became louder – behind her, beside her, below her. When it stopped and restarted again, her gaze turned to where the noise now travelled in on an icy draft from the door. Baby walked closer and peered through the window beside the entrance. Movement. A bright blue object drifted closer, fifteen feet, ten feet, in a mass with no clear shape.

And then it disappeared as abruptly as it had emerged.

Baby stumbled back and flicked the wall switch up, down and up again. *Sod it.* As she turned to leave, chalking it up to her lack of sleep and the captain's ghost stories,

her heartbeat accelerated. The shape had reappeared, but no longer was it blurred and unrecognisable. It was corporeal. A woman, dressed in fine blue silk pyjamas gliding past the window, eyes unwavering from her path.

‘Perry?’ Baby said, her voice breaking as she pulled open the door. The wave of frigid air hit her with a force so powerful that she took a moment to steady herself.

‘Perry? How?’

But the woman acknowledged nothing.

Baby followed the retreating figure until it disappeared at the natural bend of the boat, but as she reached the spot herself, the deck was empty. No Perry. Not a sound, save for the ship’s hull slicing through water and the swooshing of blood racing in her ears.

She looked down at her shaking hands, bluish red from the unrelenting cold. Baby ran back to the salon door, to the warmth, and shook the handle. It did not move. She tried again.

‘Damn it.’ Baby peered in through the window, made nearly opaque by the reflection of the moon. She could make out the glow of her tablet on the table, and a shape. A person. She banged on the glass. ‘Hey, let me in. This isn’t funny. I’m locked out.’ She cupped her hand around her eyes and pressed her face against the window again.

The captain. Sitting, watching.

Baby banged harder. ‘Let me in,’ she said, but he just stared. Tightening the coat around herself and racking her hypothermic brain for other entrances, she slammed her fist numb against the pane.

And still he watched.

Baby yanked on the handle, bitingly cold against her bare fingers. ‘Let me in you sack of –’ but before she could finish, she was sprawled, hands and knees, on the floor of the salon. As Baby stood up, alert and on edge, the ceiling fixtures flickered twice before the fluorescent bulbs remained lit.

But the captain and her iPad were gone.

Baby rushed to the table and gathered the rest of her belongings with a swipe of her arm into the bag. The internal door slammed hard behind her as she ran to the sleeping quarters.

Either she was going insane, or this boat was trying to kill her.

Perdition

The captain’s voice rang out over the loudspeaker. ‘Perdition Bay coming up soon, portside.’

His voice sent a jolt through her spine, like a bolt of Zeus’ lightning dispatched solely for her. ‘That freak has my phone and iPad,’ Baby said as they stood at the bow. ‘Whatever.’ She waved her hand in the air dismissively. ‘Let’s get this over with and get back to civilisation. The police can deal with him.’ Baby turned to Richard with a cheery but false lilt. ‘I think it’ll be a boat graveyard...with treasure. What about you?’

Richard gaped. He was baffled by her reversal and wondered how even she, a woman of many, many faces, could flip so fully from a frantic mess the night before to the cool, collected woman before him.

‘Shouldn’t we talk about Perry?’ he said. ‘You were all over the place last night. I was worried.’

‘No, *Richard*. We shouldn’t talk about Perry.’ She pushed him aside and started pacing. ‘God, Richard...I can’t even.’

He pulled her arm gently. ‘Wait, wait. I’m sorry. Pretend I didn’t say anything...please? You’re right.’

She shook her head. ‘I know I’m right. You’re just so morbid. It’s gross.’ Baby pulled out her compact and frowned when she saw her reflection. ‘And now I’m gross. You shouldn’t get me worked up.’

Richard, desperate to disentangle himself from the sharp end of Baby’s growing irritation, changed the subject to something he knew she’d find more amenable. ‘You know, I think it probably is treasure. Booby-trapped maybe. Could explain why no one comes back.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ she said, swatting at him. ‘Anyway, we have plenty of money.’ She snapped the compact shut after adding another layer of fine powder over the dark circles beneath her eyes. ‘I’ll take fame, thanks.’

‘That’s what I promised you.’

‘Yes, you did. And speaking of that...I need you to do something.’ When she saw the worry cross his face, she continued. ‘Now hear me out. You know that crane there?’

‘I see the crane, yes.’

‘I think you should climb it for a bird’s eye view. A picture of me with Perdition Bay in the background.’

‘You want me to climb a crane? Maybe the bridge would be better –’

‘You said you’d do anything.’

‘A crane,’ he repeated, pointing to the white and red steel reaching to the sky from the bow. ‘That one, hanging out over the sea in the Antarctic.’

‘God, I knew you were lying. Why can’t you be like your brother? He would do anything for me, he –’

‘I’ll climb.’ Richard tucked his phone, their only remaining device, into his pocket and pushed himself onto the railing below the main body of the crane.

‘Get up a bit higher,’ Baby said. ‘Yeah, just like that.’

‘It’s slippery. Maybe the captain has some sort of harness I could –’

‘For the love of god, stop whining. Just a few pictures and you’re done.’

As Perdition Bay came into view beyond an outcropping of ice and rock, Baby fell silent. No ships. No treasures. Just a blinding, unnatural light pulsating from a small cave.

‘I don’t understand. What’s this?’ Baby said, irritation flooding through her.

‘Where’re the boats? The treasure?’

‘Ok, here, wait. Maybe I can get a better look.’ Richard hauled himself up a few more inches when the sea around them started to churn as though a kraken had broken free of its shackles. His left foot slipped first, and when he couldn’t manage a firm hold again with the crane, his hand gave way beneath the weight of him. The phone in his pocket slipped out, crashing to the deck near a small drainage hole that opened to the sea below. With each undulating wave, Richard screamed, and the phone slid closer and closer to side.

‘Help.’ Richard panicked, fixed to the crane only by the fabric of his coat. He reached for Baby.

She raced forward, hands out to meet his flailing arms. ‘I’ll pull you in. Hold on.’ Baby turned when she couldn’t reach him and noticed the captain watching from the bridge. ‘Help us,’ she yelled as Richard slipped further away from the rail. ‘Help us, please.’

Baby looked down to the phone and then up to Richard again.

‘Grab my arms, Baby.’

Richard swung, grappling at the air as Baby lurched forward. He grasped wildly, his final attempt to reach her before the last threads of his designer jacket gave way. But before their hands met, she was falling – no, dropping to her knees, sliding across the deck, clutching for the phone as it slid over the side. ‘No,’ she screamed in unison with Richard as he fell into the inky sea below. Baby pulled herself up by the rail and frantically searched over the side.

‘Richard,’ she called, but he was gone.

The captain materialised beside her, clapping, slow and deafening as the sea went perfectly still. ‘Magnificent.’

Baby sank to the deck, sobbing. ‘Why didn’t you help us?’

‘Were you deserving?’ The captain’s drawl transformed into a cold, monotonous tone.

As the eerie calm of the sea and stillness of the winds sank in, Baby looked up to the man standing above her. His skin was smooth as marble and his eyes were two black chasms.

‘Who...what are you?’

‘I’m the captain. Or Charon. Or the ferryman. I have many names.’

‘I...I don’t understand.’

‘You allowed your husband to fall to his death for a phone, and yet you still do not understand?’

‘Was...was this a test?’

The captain laughed. ‘No, no, there was no changing your path. Your fate has been set for some time.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Baby said. ‘I’m a good person.’

‘Are you?’

‘What are you talking about?’ Her shock deepened and she fell back to the ground, rocking. ‘What’s going on?’

‘An organ required; an organ denied. You made your choice and sealed your fate.’

‘This is crazy. This is about the kidney?’

‘You refused your sister the kidney she needed to live. Why?’ When Baby stayed silent, except for a whimper, he roared, ‘Tell me.’

‘The scar,’ Baby said. ‘I didn’t want the scar. But...but, I was going to, I just needed some time, but then she died...she died.’

The captain bellowed, monstrous and deep.

‘What are you going to do to me?’

‘I’m delivering you.’

Baby sobbed. ‘Please, let me live. Please.’

‘I’ll grant your wish,’ he said, but when Baby’s face shone with hope, he shook his head. ‘No, no. Not that wish.’ The captain looked down to his hand where Baby’s phone appeared from nothing. ‘I’ll grant your true wish and greatest desire.’

Baby scrambled backwards as the captain began to shift, growing taller, thinner. His hands transformed into claws and she screamed until her voice was raspy and gruff. He pointed gnarled bones that had once been fingers and drew them lightly down Baby's cheek. The shadows that had been consuming her for days darkened and her skin became hollowed and grey, pulled taut at her cheeks.

The captain snapped a photo just as Baby's jaw went slack and a final gasp escaped her lips. He pressed Post, and when the hundreds, then thousands of likes and comments began to appear, he tossed the phone into her lap.

Icebreaker glided over the now glass-like sea, through the motionless air towards the dazzling light of the cave. His delivery would be made soon, and the ferryman knew with no shortage of deserving, another journey was only a matter of time.