

An AB Discovery Book





BARRY OLIVER

Baby Cruise

By Barry Oliver

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"This is it, the aging elixir, or whatever they call it." Ridley Martin held her champagne glass toward the chandelier lights to inspect its bubbly contents. "Looks like champagne to me."

"It is champagne." Ridley's husband, Penn, addressed his wife dismissively while pretending to read a dinner menu. "The elixir is odorless and tasteless. They could have put it in a glass of water. I don't know why they bothered with champagne."

Ridley frowned at her husband with his sour attitude. She glanced wistfully at the other couples sharing their dinner table: George and Betty from Tennessee, Mike and Rick from Ohio. They appeared to be happy couples in love. Why couldn't that include Ridley and Penn from St. Louis, Missouri?

Because our marriage is a wreck, Ridley's frown deepened. This cruise is our last chance.

After four years of marriage while scrimping and saving every penny, Ridley and Penn Martin could finally afford the getaway honeymoon they should have taken the day after their wedding. Unfortunately, they had been broke college graduates at the time, aimlessly in love with each other, followed by an impulsive marriage. Not surprisingly, the past four years had been just as aimless. Their belated honeymoon cruise would likely be their last together if things didn't turn around.

Ridley had booked a cabin aboard the Pico Lines' cruise ship,

The Playground. It had been painful to part with the money accumulated over four years and equally painful to pressure Penn into going. "I could have used that money on a new BMX bike," Penn had grumbled. "Spending a week on a cruise as a child is hardly worth it."

"Of course, it's worth it!" Ridley had fumed. "We get to be children again. Can you believe it? On a Caribbean cruise to a private island, no less. What could be more fun?" She had thrown the Pico Lines brochure in Penn's face. "Maybe we'll become friends again. They say it's easier to make friends as children. Or if not, we can make friends with other kids on the ship."

That was the main attraction aboard a Pico Lines cruise. They literally transformed their passengers into children. Ridley was moments away from drinking the elixir that would perform the magic. For one precious week, they would experience a tropical cruise as a child between the ages of eight and ten years, or so the brochure described.

The first two nights would be spent aboard the ship, followed by three days on the Pico Lines private island named, not surprisingly, *Neverland Island*. During the two-day return cruise, the elixir's effects would wear off, and its passengers would return to their adult forms.

Tonight would be Ridley and Penn's only night on the ship as adults, and the champagne they were about to drink would be their last alcohol consumed. It would be alcohol-free fruit juices and kidfriendly meals after that.

Boarding The Playground had almost felt like returning to childhood without the elixir. Everything on the ship was cartoonishly small, ranging from their tiny bedroom cabins filled with child-size furniture to the narrow passages aboard the boat decorated with cartoon characters, all the way to this dinner table that felt more like a child's picnic table that could barely fit the

three adult couples seated at it.

"By this time tomorrow, this will all seem spacious," Betty from Tennessee spread her arms wide, almost knocking George from Tennessee off his child-sized chair.

"I can't wait to try out the ship's water park," Mike from Ohio beamed excitedly.

"I could have bought a new BMX," Penn from Missouri sulked.

I have a child for a husband; no elixir needed. Ridley kept her mouth shut.

At the appointed time, the chandelier lights in the dining room dimmed briefly. That was the signal for all passengers to drink the elixir-laced champagne. Ridley observed as George and Betty interlaced their arms, kissed, and then downed their drinks. Mike and Rick also kissed but then crossed their arms to drink each other's glass. Ridley thought it touchingly romantic.

Then there was Penn, oblivious to romance, his nose still buried in the diner menu. Ridley cleared her throat dramatically to get his attention.

Penn finally looked up. "Oh yeah, right," he said absently before reaching for his glass and downing it like a college kid doing a shot at a frat party. "I've tasted better," Penn commented before returning to study his menu.

Ridley stared at her own champaign glass distantly. In a crowded dining room surrounded by couples in love, she felt more alone and isolated than ever.

This cruise was a mistake. We shouldn't have come. I should have let him buy that damn bike.

Tears welled in Ridley's eyes, but she was too proud to cry. Ridley turned her eyes away from her drink to glare at Penn. He

continued to read his dinner menu with suspicious interest. Ridley leaned toward him to get a better look.

"A BMX brochure?" Ridley shouted. "You're reading about those damn bikes?"

Penn looked up from his menu with an expression of innocent guilt. He had, in fact, slid a BMX sales brochure between the dinner menu pages as a disguise. "What? They don't allow leisure reading aboard the ship?"

"We're supposed to be celebrating!" Ridley pointed to the couples at their table. "This is supposed to be romantic!"

Penn looked around the table. His gaze was returned by averted eyes and uncomfortable fidgeting. "How is being turned into a child, romantic?" He shook his head and returned to his 'menu'. "It's kind of the opposite. More like being demoted."

The other couples at the table, painfully aware of the developing argument, abruptly excused themselves.

"I hear the view from the observation deck is spectacular," Betty said nervously as she dragged George away.

"Let's check out that water park," Mike said as he nearly stumbled over his chair.

"Yes. Let's." Rick replied, lending an arm to steady his husband.

Ridley and Penn watched silently as their tablemates *skedaddled* from the table, leaving them alone to their argument. Penn pointed accusingly. "Look. You frightened our new friends away."

Ridley shot an icy, silent stare at her husband.

Penn set his menu down (being sure to keep the BMX brochure) and then stood from the table. "They say the elixir doesn't kick in until after midnight. I'm returning to our cabin to

wait for it to happen." He turned his eyes toward Ridley's untouched champagne glass. "Aren't you going to drink yours?"

"I haven't decided," Ridley replied with the same ice in her voice.

Penn rolled his eyes as if bored. "Well, fair warning. I used to wet the bed as a child."

Ridley spoke through clenched teeth. "We have separate beds."

"Okay. Whatever." Penn turned and walked away.

Now alone in a crowded room, Ridley turned her eyes toward her drink. A steady stream of bubbles drifted from the base of the glass to the surface, disguising the invisible liquid that would transform Ridley into a pre-teen girl by the morning.

That is if Ridley drank it.

Maybe I won't. Ridley grinned wickedly. Perhaps I'll remain an adult and torment my child husband for the remainder of the cruise. She contemplated dressing him in ridiculous outfits to embarrass him. I might even dress him like a girl. And I'll definitely put him in a diaper if he wets the bed. Little Penn can walk around the ship in dresses and diapers. Won't he be miserable?

Then another thought came to Ridley, a memory, rather. Ridley remembered that she had been popular in school as a child. She had been (and still was) very social and made friends easily. Ridley gazed around the dining hall, still crowded with passengers eating dinner.

When I was a kid, I would make friends with everyone in this room. I would become the most popular kid on this ship.

Ridley reached for her champagne glass. "They say the best revenge is to live a good life." She downed the drink, also like a college kid doing a shot. "Penn, you're about to share a bedroom

with the most popular kid on The Playground."

Ridley remembered how popular kids were uniquely capable of emotionally torturing those less popular. "We'll see how he likes that. No need for dresses. No need for diapers. I'm going to make Penn wish he could be as popular as me."

Ridley stood from her table now with a sense of determination and purpose. She was in a room full of people—her natural element.

"Time to mingle." Ridley made her way to the nearest table filled with happy, cheerful couples. "Time to make myself popular."



Ridley awoke the next morning to the sound of Penn jumping on his mattress. She rolled out of bed feeling strangely dizzy and off balance—a sensation she attributed to the ship's motion (they were at sea, after all). She thought it odd that her nightshirt slid off her shoulders as soon as she stood. But then again, Ridley liked sleeping in oversized, loose clothing, so it could be explained. Her eyes didn't work right, either. She rubbed them once, then twice, then opened them wide to get a look at her annoying husband.

Ridley's jaw dropped. Penn was nowhere to be seen. Instead, a nine-year-old boy had taken his place and was repeatedly jumping on what used to be Penn's twin mattress.

"Oh my god, the elixir worked!" Ridley covered her mouth the instant she spoke those words. The voice she heard was not her own. Rather, it came from a little girl about the same age as the boy jumping on the mattress. Ridley discovered why her night shirt had fallen away. "The elixir worked on me, too," she gasped.

Ridley quickly examined her newfound child's body. She had the flat, boy-like chest of a pre-adolescent girl with slender hips that had yet to widen. Her fingers were relatively short. Her fingernail polish had been replaced by a child's stubby, unpainted nails. Her skin was as smooth as a proverbial "baby's butt." Ridley's girl parts between her legs were equally smooth.

Ridley covered herself with embarrassment. "Wow, I haven't seen that in a long time." She then looked back at the child Penn who was still jumping on his mattress. "Penn, we're both children. It happened overnight like they said it would."

"I know," Penn replied with a pre-adolescent boy's highpitched, mellow voice. "This feels amazing. You should try jumping. I'm light as a feather."

Ridley shook her head. "You're naked as a plucked chicken."

Penn's clothing had slid off his slender body the same as Ridley's. Penn laughed as he attempted to bounce up to the ceiling. "I know. But who cares? We're married. You've seen it all before."

Ridley had to giggle in response. "I haven't seen you like that," she pointed.

Penn stopped jumping and looked over his pre-teen body. "Yeah, I guess I do look like a child." He then looked across the room at Ridley. Now it was Penn's jaw that dropped. Until now he hadn't really noticed that his wife was missing. In her place stood a nine-year-old girl as naked as him.

Penn blushed and averted his eyes. *I shouldn't be looking at that*. It somehow felt wrong to stare at a naked child, even if she *was* his wife. "Uh, maybe we should put on some clothes," he said, jumping lightly to the floor.

Ridley nodded. "I think you're right." She turned toward the dresser on her side of the cabin.

Pico Lines had instructed its passengers to pack lightly for the week-long cruise and to bring only one or two "adult" outfits. Ridley's adult clothing remained packed in her carry-on luggage.

Opening her dresser drawer, Ridley discovered the reason. Her dresser was filled with an assortment of children's clothing. Since Pico Lines couldn't predict the exact age or size their guests would become, their rooms were stocked with clothing to fit typical children between the ages of eight and ten years.

Ridley reached for a pair of little girl underwear displaying a cartoon princess print. "I can't believe this is for me." Ridley hadn't worn anything like that since... well... since she had been a child.

A stack of nighttime pull-up diapers was located next to her little girl's underwear. Apparently, bedwetting was a common enough problem for their guests that Pico Lines provided the pull-ups just in case. Ridley remembered Penn's comment last night about being a bedwetter as a child. She then remembered him being an insensitive jerk at the dinner table and her desire to get even with him. That wicked grin from last night stole across her face.

Ridley glanced across the room toward Penn, who was looking at the same pull-ups in his dresser. "Looks like they know about the bedwetting boy's problem," she taunted.

Penn tried to sound nonchalant. "I was just joking about the bedwetting. I don't really need these."

But Penn hadn't been joking.

Penn remembered he had been a hopeless bedwetter until nearly his teens. He stared at the pull-ups with trepidation. He tried to swallow against a dry throat.

Will I have to wear these tonight? Ridley will never let me live it down if I do.

Penn looked down at his hairless, shrunken boy parts along with the rest of his equally hairless, muscle-free pre-teen body.

"Remind me, how long are we stuck like this?"

Ridley answered Penn while joyfully stepping into her princess underpants and searching for the cutest little girl outfit she could find. "Only for a week, and then it's back to our mundane adult lives." She laughed as she picked out a princess mini-skirt. "This is going to be so much fun. Better enjoy it while we can."

Penn groaned as he picked out the least child-like underwear he could find.

Maybe I won't need the pull-ups. Penn could only hope that his adult mind would maintain control over his bladder at night. He hunted for a BMX-themed shirt but couldn't find one. He had to settle for a T-shirt displaying a cartoon train on its front. "What is there to enjoy?" Penn mumbled.

Thoroughly satisfied with her own cute outfit, Ridley skipped happily to their cabin door. "Let's get started. I want to see what everyone looks like now that we're all children."

Judging by Penn's sudden change in mood, Ridley suspected he was bluffing about the pull-ups. She certainly *would* tease him mercilessly if he wet his pants.

"Let the torture begin," Ridley said under her breath as she opened the door and proceeded to skip down the hallway toward the main entertainment deck above.

Penn followed behind morosely.

Ridley and Penn took the stairs rather than the elevator since they were only two floors below the main B deck. They stepped out into the ship's enormous, semi-open play deck containing an indoor playground and a water park that spilled onto the outside terrace under the brilliant tropical sun. The air was humid and fragrant. Sounds of playing children were everywhere.

The sight was truly breathtaking. Penn momentarily forgot his sour mood as he stepped forward wide-eyed. "This place is

incredible," he gushed. "I don't remember seeing it yesterday when we boarded."

Ridley extended her arms and spun in a circle while breathing in the warm, tropical air. "Your nose was buried in that damn BMX brochure. That's why." She gazed around the crowds of playing children, wondering if she would recognize anyone she had mingled with the night before. She wouldn't have to wait long.

"Hey, Ridley, is that you?" A voice came from nearby.

Ridley turned to look at the little girl who had called her name. "Liane, is that you?" she answered. "Oh my god, it *is* you, Liane. Look at that cute outfit you are wearing."

The eight-year-old girl—Liane—pointed to her light purple shirt. "I know. Can you believe it? And your outfit is just adorable, too."

"Hey, Ridley!" Another child called. "I almost didn't recognize you."

Ridley turned to the nine-year-old boy who had called. "Thomas! I can't believe it. I almost didn't recognize you either." Ridley embraced her little friends, Liane and Thomas while jumping excitedly.

Penn's initial delight at seeing the ship's playground faded. He was baffled that everyone seemed to know Ridley while he was a complete stranger. "How do you know all these people already? We just got here."

Ridley answered the friendly hail from yet another child before turning impatiently toward Penn. "While Mister Pee-pee Pants was sulking in his room last night, I was out meeting people. I know everyone on the ship now." It was a bit of an exaggeration. Ridley had met barely a dozen people the previous night. But Penn wouldn't know that.

Ridley grinned wickedly. This is how popular kids get even.

Penn's confidence was shaken further. His shoulders deflated as he took a step away. "Oh, I get it," was all he could muster.

At that moment, Ridley noticed two things about the child version of her husband. First, was that he was surprisingly cute. Once dark and straight, his hair was now sandy brown, with a slight curl at the ends. His eyes were softer, and his right cheek had an endearing dimple. Of course, Ridley had seen pictures of Penn as a child before, but those pictures didn't do justice to the living, breathing boy standing before her.

The second thing she noticed was his fragile appearance. Gone were the bulky muscles given to him by adolescence and years of working out in the gym. Penn's arms and legs were now slender and smooth, almost birdlike. His T-shirt hung loosely over bony shoulders and a flat chest. The nine-year-old Penn Martin looked like a soft breeze could knock him over.

All of a sudden, the prospect of emotionally torturing this cute and fragile boy didn't feel so good to Ridley. Hurting a little boy's feelings wouldn't be fun at all. Ridley wanted to take him by the hand instead. She wanted to introduce him to all the young friends she had made. She had an inexplicable desire to play with Penn—nothing sexual—but rather to play as a child on this amazing cruise ship appropriately named The Playground.

So, take Penn by the hand she did.

"Hold my hand, Penn. I'll introduce you to everyone I know. After all, you are my best friend."

The effect on Penn's mood was instant. The boy's shoulders straightened. His eyes lit up. His bright smile dimpled the right side of his soft cheek. "I would like that," he beamed. "Thank you, Ridley."

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