



Below Deck

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Category: LGBT+

Description: JJ Carrington was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He's used to flying in business class and spending all his holidays at the nicest resorts in the world. But lately he's tired of the same vacation over and over again, and the long days of drinking and looking for his next hookup are starting to blur together.

Cory Wynn has been working on a cruise ship for the past year. He'd never traveled before that, and now he's seen more Caribbean destinations than he even knew existed. He hoped to meet someone to fall in love with while at sea, but so far all he does is work.

JJ follows some of the passengers onto the cruise ship after partying with them all day. Security realizes he's not a passenger, and they waste no time taking him into custody and explaining to him he'll be dropped off at the next stop. JJ is used to getting his way in everything in life, but this time there's no one to bail him out. He may have finally met his match in the cruise worker who has to share his cabin with him and can't wait until the next stop to get him off the ship.

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Cory Wynn

“Hey, Cory, are you ready for a day on the island?” Johnny asked as I slipped out of my room and the two of us hurried down the hall.

“Yeah, I’m hoping I remember to use more sunscreen. When we were here last week, I got fried.” I showed him where my arm was still mottled, where my skin had blistered and peeled. Truth be told this had happened a few times since I’d started working for the NautiCaribbean cruise line.

“You’ll get used to it eventually,” he said and patted my back. Johnny was from somewhere south of the equator where the sun shone all the time. While I burned and peeled, he just got more tanned and beautiful. And he was beautiful. With dark brown hair cut close on the sides and left just long enough on top to let his curls show. He also had abs for days. My hair was dark blond and straight which I kept cut short on the sides and longer in the back. I was also not nearly as toned as he was. “Cory?”

“Oh sorry, just lost in thought.” He laughed at that, and we hurried up to the crew’s mess hall to eat before the ship docked. I’d been working here for a few months now, and so far, every day was exciting or at least different to how my life had been. Before starting work here, the farthest I’d traveled was the next county over, now I visited a different island every day or two. But we worked hard, and by the time my days off rolled around, I was more than ready to relax and have time away. “So, what’s on the agenda for today?” I asked as we got in line for the breakfast buffet.

“Well, as you know, this group has been all sorts of trouble. So, the captain wants to make sure that no one gets into anything while we’re on the private island. We’ve

added a few more guided activities in the hopes that if we break them into smaller groups, it will tamp down some of the craziness.”

“He does realize it’s a gay cruise and they’re all here to party?” I asked, making both of us laugh.

“Yes of course he knows, but every cruise is a gay cruise with NautiCaribbean. This group has been a little crazier than most.” The group he was talking about had ended up booking the whole ship. The cruise had been promoted by an online influencer as the party not to miss and apparently most of his millions of followers agreed. Well, thankfully not all of them. “This is the second day. Maybe yesterday was a fluke?”

He gave me the same look I had come to know as his I’m not dealing with this shit look, before filling his tray with food and two cups of coffee. “You know as well as I do, none of the cruises have started like yesterday. Try to keep them busy with activities and away from the alcohol.”

“Like that’s going to work.” One benefit of booking the whole ship gave them the ability to pay ahead for alcohol. Where normally everyone was charged per drink, with this cruise, alcohol was included. They’d proven in one day they were definitely here for the party.

“At least if they’re hitting it hard the first few days by the third or fourth day, they’ll be hungover and will slow down,” Alberto said as he slid his tray onto the table we’d just chosen.

“Were they tipping more since the alcohol was free?” I asked him, before taking a bite of eggs. Tips mattered. I was here to make as much money as I could and build up my savings account.

“Nope, just pounding the alcohol and asking for more.” Alberto was a few years older

than us and had worked at a few of the more famous bars in Florida. He'd applied to be head bartender on the ship around ten years ago and hadn't left. Well except for the two weeks off every eight weeks he worked. Most of us were on the same schedule and since this would be the fourth cruise we'd done together we were all very familiar with the routine. Usually, the first night aboard they all ate and drank but got up early the second day to either go on an excursion if we were at port, or they'd laze around on the pool deck soaking up the sun then later complain about sunburn. Which is what brought me to this line of thought to begin with.

"You can work at the island restaurant today, Cory. It's in the shade a little more than the beach bar. That should give you a break from the sun," Alexa said from another table. She was the person we went to with any scheduling conflicts or issues. She was twenty-five and had more management know-how than a lot of forty-year-olds. Her parents owned a popular restaurant in The Keys, where she'd worked from the time she was a teenager. Her specialty was scheduling, and she proved time and again how well she did her job.

"That would be great, thanks, Alexa. I should be okay by next week."

"Use your sunblock," she said, making everyone at the table laugh. Then nodded at me before going back to whatever she was talking about before she overheard our conversation. One look at my arms and I didn't need reminding.

"Since you're working at the restaurant, you'll want to get there a little earlier. They'll go over the menu and explain it all to you since you haven't worked there yet," Alberto explained before downing his coffee in one drink.

Johnny patted me on the back as he stood to put his tray away. "Let's get this show on the road," he said, clapping his hands together. Drinking down my own coffee—that I drank way more often now than I ever had—we left the mess hall and walked along to where we'd all get on a smaller boat called a tender, to be taken to

the island.

Our cruise line offered multiple cruise locations, but we were currently cruising the eastern Caribbean. It was close enough to Florida to make it a quick cruise to the Bahamas, and since there were a number of small islands, we were at a different port every day except for two days where we'd be slowly sailing to the next port. I'd tried a different route but didn't enjoy so many days at sea. So, for now I'd stick with this one. Plus, the friends I'd made also added to the fun.

We walked to the side of the ship they'd open to ferry the passengers in tenders to the island. We'd go first to make sure their experience was the best it could be, so we were lining up just as the sun was rising.

I'd grown up around Sacramento and had seen many beautiful sunrises and sunsets. But seeing it rise over the Caribbean wasn't a bad way to start the day. Not at all. I adjusted my backpack on my shoulders and joined everyone else in line. Since we'd be on the island all day, I made sure to bring a change of clothes along with my phone charger, and of course some sunscreen and bug spray. It only took about ten minutes before we were on the dock and Alexa was pointing everyone to where they'd be working for the day.

"Cory, you'll be working here," Alexa said to me as well as five other crew members. Some I'd seen before but hadn't worked with while one or two were complete strangers.

"How long have you been on board?" a guy about my age asked me. His hair was all buzzed and what he lacked in height he made up for in muscles. His tank top hid nothing, and I had a hard time not staring at his muscular chest—something he didn't seem to mind at all. But I did wonder how he managed to get that approved as a uniform.

“Well, I’ve been working for the cruise line for a few months now. This is my second week back.” With how scheduling worked on the ship, every week there seemed to be different people, which was both good and bad. You might work with a great crew for six or eight weeks, only to come back and most of them were no longer working for the cruise, or they’d changed their position on board and no longer worked in that department. It was always changing.

“Nice, this is my last week then I’ll be back after two weeks. The name is Quinn,” he said and held his hand out.

“I’m Cory. Nice to meet you. Have you worked at the restaurant here before?”

“Yes, every week so far. But don’t worry, it’s not bad, and it’s way less sun.” He pointed to where I was still peeling, making both of us laugh.

“Yeah, I was on beach activities last week and got a little too much sun.” We chatted a while longer before the manager from the restaurant walked over and assigned each of us the job we’d have the next few hours.

“Cory, you and Quinn will be bussing tables and making sure guests have everything they need once they’re served,” the manager, whose name I didn’t know, said and walked us around the restaurant, so we knew where everything was. I’d been assigned a few different jobs while working on the cruise but most of it had to do with food, so I was glad to see this was more of the same.

The restaurant, with its thatched roof and open sides, gave the feeling of being outside without the direct sun. We were each given a crisp white apron and an area to focus on. We’d just finished setting up the tables and chairs when the first guests arrived. It was still early but most guests would have breakfast on the ship before taking a boat to the island. We’d be serving a brunch menu until it was time for lunch then the guests would go back to the ship for dinner.

“Gentlemen, right this way,” the host said as he led a large group of men to the area I’d be working.

“Well, hello,” one of them said. He was very cute with white-blond hair, cut and styled perfectly with just a touch of pink in the front. I tried not to stare at his short shorts, but he made it hard to ignore him.

After helping them all find seats and giving each of them water, I left them to the waiter who was taking their order knowing I’d be returning to their table later. I reminded myself one more time how much I loved my job. Because I really did, and meeting lots of cute boys didn’t hurt it at all. I glanced back at the table just in time to see the cute boy looking in my direction, and wished it was okay for us to intermingle, but knowing it wasn’t. It was perfectly fine to imagine though, and I imagined a lot.

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JJ Carrington

Today I seriously questioned my choices. The summer was supposed to be fun with nothing scheduled and three months for me to do whatever the fuck I wanted. And apparently what I wanted was to join some friends on a small island in the Caribbean that the cruise lines frequented. I'd been trying to find my place in the family business since getting my college degree, but so far none of it held my attention. When I asked to take the summer off, my dad waved me off and I took that as a yes, when he probably was glad to get me out of his hair.

“What are we even doing here?” I asked Bobby, my partner in crime or at least mischief.

“It'll be great. We came here on a cruise when I was a kid and I thought it would be fun to stay nearby,” he explained as we walked to where a cruise ship was anchored offshore while passengers were loading into smaller boats to be brought to the beach.

“I mean don't get me wrong, it's beautiful. But there's nothing here except the cruise ship.” We'd been partying in Miami for the past week when a friend who had a yacht suggested we move the party here. We'd booked a room in a nearby hotel, but Bobby wanted to hang out with the cruise passengers for the day, and once he said it was a gay cruise I was more than happy to follow along.

“What do you mean there's nothing here?” Bobby asked and pointed out all the activities offered. There was actually a lot here. Floating structures bobbed in the ocean just offshore, and waterslides that emptied into one of the biggest swimming pools I'd ever seen. Plus, a restaurant and bar nearby.

“Okay so maybe this isn’t so bad.” Men and more men wandered over from the small boat to where we sat on the lounges we’d claimed. Some of them stopped to talk to us, while others ignored us as they walked either as couples or groups.

“Have you been on a cruise before?” Bobby asked, pulling me from my perusal of every man within my line of sight.

“Nope. My parents were never really into it. We went on a lot of vacations but not a cruise.”

“Too bad. There’s always something to do, and lots of clubs to choose from at night,” Bobby said and relaxed back against the lounge chair he had chosen. Both of us were tanned and judging by the looks we were getting we were looking good.

“Excuse me, are you part of the cruise?” a man a little older than me asked. He had on a crisp white button-up shirt and dress shorts. Definitely management.

“No, we’re staying at a small hotel on the other side of the island. We just bought a day pass to use the facilities,” Bobby lied.

The man narrowed his eyes and was about to say something when another staff member rushed over and whispered something to him. “I’ve got to go. Just don’t cause any trouble, okay?” he said and turned away without a second glance. “Can I see your wristbands?” he asked a loud group of men who had just taken the empty lounge chairs next to us.

“Hey, do you work here?” one of them asked the man, whose nametag said his name was Ryan.

“Yes, is there something I can help you with?” he asked and walked closer to where they were all still getting situated. I overheard the group asking about some

excursions they'd signed up for and where they were supposed to meet for the snorkeling.

Bobby slid his sunglasses down his nose and watched as he walked away. He turned to look at me with a big grin before waggling his eyebrows. "Looks like we're partying here." Just then a waiter walked up and took our order.

"Two beers and four shots of tequila," I said, making Bobby groan.

"Not again," he mumbled with a shake of his head. The other guys had stayed back at the hotel because we'd partied on the voyage here and none of them were up to partying again quite yet.

"Oh, it's on," I said and rubbed my hands together like a villain with a plan. Then the two of us settled back to people watch while we waited for our drinks. "When do you have to be back at work?"

"Monday. I took today off because I've been working nonstop for months, but we start a new project next week and I can't miss it. Looks like you're on your own next week." Bobby watched another group of guys fresh off the ship walk toward the other side of the swimming pool.

We were both single and liked it that way. I had no intention of settling down with one guy anytime soon, and Bobby was happy to find anyone he was attracted to for the night. He worked at his father's architectural firm as one of the lead project managers, and even though he loved to party, he loved his job even more. So, I knew when he said he was leaving he meant it.

"You're more than welcome to hang out here longer if you want. I can come back and get you next weekend," he said, while his attention was still on the group of guys who were discussing if they had time to get a drink before meeting the party boat that

was taking them snorkeling.

“Want to see if we can join them?” I asked when he still hadn’t stopped staring.

“Yeah, why not,” he said, before downing both shots and taking a drink of beer. “Might as well make the most of it while we’re here.” The two of us stood after I’d drank my shots and walked over to the group of about ten guys.

“Hey, do you have any idea where we sign up for the snorkeling tour?” Bobby asked and moved closer to the man who had caught his eye.

“I’m not sure, but that’s where we’re going.” He had a slight build that was very toned and firm. With dark hair and skin and a smile that was both innocent and hot as fuck. And when his eyes met Bobby’s neither of them looked away.

“Care if we tag along?” Bobby asked without even trying to pretend he wasn’t all over the cute guy in front of him.

“I don’t mind.” He smiled before one of his friends gave him a healthy shove out of the way and put his hand out.

“Hiiii, I’m Geno, and this is my friend Michael.” Bobby shook his hand and introduced himself, and immediately moved around Geno to stand closer to Michael.

“I’m JJ,” I said and held my hand out to Geno. “So where are you going snorkeling?” I asked.

“It’s a small reef not far away,” he said, and we followed as they slowly walked toward the bar.

“Hey, how about a round,” I said as I pulled out a stool and made sure Geno sat next

to me. “So, where are you from.” Geno was a little shorter than me and way more muscular. His barely-there tank top showed off his impressive chest and arms.

“I’m from New York, all of us are. This is our yearly cruise. How about you?” His voice was deep and when he spoke it was a direct line to my dick, and I was now more than happy to go snorkeling with them.

“Me? I’m from Sacramento,” I said, while watching his tongue as he licked his lips. Images of those lips on my dick had me starting to harden but then I remembered I was on a beach, in a swimsuit, with lots of other people nearby.

“Cool,” Geno said, just as the bartender walked over and took everyone’s order. “So did you really want to go spend the day with us?”

“Fuck yes,” I said and leaned in close to him. “Hopefully, we can find someplace private.”

“I think that can be arranged,” Geno said, and I knew for a fact we’d found the right group to hang out with.

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Cory

I glanced out toward where the ship was anchored and was more than ready to go back for the day. Normally I loved the time we spent at shore, but today had started out crazy as soon as Ryan had made sure each of us understood what we'd be doing.

The restaurant was divided into two areas. The open-air area was where guests from the ship and others staying at nearby hotels could order from the menu. On the other side was a buffet that was strictly for cruisers, and we'd need to check their wristbands for them to even enter that area.

I had been assigned the job of checking wristbands, and so far, I'd already caught five people trying to sneak in. Two tried to sneak in by way of the bathroom, and one had tried to just enter through the netted covering on the wall.

"Hey, everyone likes a buffet," Quinn said, stopping just long enough to say it before hurrying off to deliver an order he'd just picked up.

Alberto had told me I'd be bussing tables here, or possibly delivering drinks, but Alexa decided I needed to be the host for both sides and check wristbands at the door. It was all going good until the lunch rush then everything had gone to shit—well for me anyway, everyone else was having a great time.

This was officially one of those moments when I wished I was on the cruise not working on the cruise. "Hey, cutie, what time are you off?" one of the guys from a large group asked as I checked his wristband.

“Not until midnight, sorry,” I said, not sorry at all. I’d been propositioned so many times already I was done being vague about it. “And I work tomorrow,” I added, just to be sure.

“Aww well that’s no fun,” he said and pushed out his lip in what I had to admit was a cute pout. He was tanned and shirtless, wearing a white baseball cap backwards covering his headful of dark curly hair.

“Sorry, no time for fun.” I forced a smile as I said it, but it wasn’t a lie. When we weren’t working, we were sleeping or hiding away from the guests. Working on a cruise was very much a full-time job. But I loved it. Except today.

“Cory, time for your break,” Alexa said, barely sparing me a glance as she hurried past to check the buffet.

“Break time?” Quinn asked.

“Yes, let’s get out of here.” Both of us hurried off to the crew’s mess hall which was located a short walk from the restaurant. We’d be eating the same buffet foods the guests, but without the little details that made it look more special.

“How’s your day so far?” Quinn asked.

“Hectic,” Johnny said as he sat down with us.

“Is it just me or is everyone trying to do what they know they shouldn’t do?” Johnny and Quinn both looked at me like I had lobsters growing out of my ears and neither knew who should tell me. “What?”

“You’ve been cruising long enough to know. When you mix cruisers with guests or locals from land it’s never going to be an easy day,” Johnny said. He examined his

plate which was heaped with a little of everything before deciding to eat the chocolate mousse first.

“I know, maybe I just need time off.” I picked up my own chocolate mousse and shoved a spoonful in my mouth. “Oh, this is good.”

“Maybe your blood sugar is low,” Johnny said with a grin.

“Or maybe you need a quick hookup?” Quinn said and waggled his eyebrows.

This was what I loved. Even when the guests drove me crazy, and it was hot as hell, or when everything was going wrong. No matter what, the crew was always awesome. “Maybe,” I said, making them both laugh.

“You have a whole ship full of every type of man you can imagine. Live a little,” Johnny said.

I hadn’t signed up to meet anyone, but hooking up with someone I’d never see again was fun, and it was exciting to see who was on that week’s cruise that might be interested in the same thing. Originally, I had dreams of meeting mister right while on the cruise, but so far nothing even remotely like that had happened. “Sorry, guys, I’m not sure why I let it get to me today. Maybe you’re right and I do need to blow off some steam.”

“Or just blow someone off,” Quinn said.

“Or just have someone blow you,” Johnny said, making us laugh again.

“Maybe,” I finally said and promised myself I’d relax a bit more and not let the craziness get to me. It was a cruise, and things were going to happen that I couldn’t control, but I was on an island in the Caribbean surrounded by beautiful water, and

lots of gorgeous men who were more than ready to mingle.

“Tomorrow we’re at sea, so you know what that means,” Quinn said.

“Party tonight below deck.” A look passed between the three of us. A trace of excitement, and maybe a little fear for when morning came, but mostly anticipation of knowing we were going to be free do whatever the fuck we wanted for a few hours.

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JJ

Bobby had managed to get us on the party boat that was taking a large group out to snorkel. On the way out to a nearby reef the drinks were flowing. “Hey, can you help me with something?” Geno asked.

“Sure, what’s going on?” I asked as he stood from the table we’d been sitting at on the deck of the boat. He tipped his head to follow him, and I did.

“Just this,” he said, before turning and shoving me against the door we’d just walked through. “Let me suck you.”

“Like I could say no to that.” He wasted no time in kissing me. Both of us were pretty drunk so it was sloppy and hot all at once. He slipped my swimsuit down and I didn’t mind at all when he gripped my dick and gave it a good tug.

“I’ve been wanting a taste since I first saw you,” he said as I shoved his head a little closer to where I wanted him. He swallowed me down without any warning, making me gasp and groan at the same time.

“Oh god,” His hair was just long enough on top to grab a handful and guide him. Something he didn’t seem to mind. I noticed his own hand moving and was happy to see him taking his own needs in hand. He licked and swirled his tongue. Nibbled a little and spit a lot. I loved every second of it. His nose was buried in my groin as he swallowed me all the way down and kept my dick shoved down his throat. One tug on my balls and I came.

I was still catching my breath when he slid back up my body and kissed me, giving me a taste of my own release. “You’re amazing,” he said, before slipping out the door again.

“Now that was amazing,” I mumbled and pulled my swimsuit back up.

Bobby had a drink ready for me when I wandered back out to where he was sitting with all the other guys from Geno’s group, Michael now on his lap snuggled in close with Bobby’s hand resting on his perfect ass.

“How much longer until we get to the snorkel place?” one of the guys I hadn’t met yet asked.

“Not much,” one of the others said. “It’s just offshore but within sight of the beach and the ship.”

We’d only been on the boat for around thirty minutes and most of that time included boarding time and pulling away from the dock. The crew made sure we had plenty to drink and kept coming around to check we all had a drink as soon as we needed it. They played a few drinking games and at one point pointed out where the life jackets were and what we should do if we were in the water and needed assistance. I ignored all that and focused on the variety of men that were aboard.

Geno had moved on to another prospect and after a look and a wink from him, I took it to mean he was a lot like me. Hit it and move on. I was about to walk around the boat and check out the scenery when the captain announced we’d arrived, and after dropping anchor we’d spend the next two hours snorkeling and doing other water activities before returning to the dock.

“Are you going to snorkel?” Bobby asked.

“Of course,” I said with a smirk. I mean why not. I could enjoy looking for my next good time in the water just as easily as I could on the boat.

“It’s beautiful here, isn’t it?” an older man said to me. He looked like he’d been on a few cruises or maybe he just spent his days out in the sun. His dark skin and toned body spoke to me, and his tiny speedo didn’t hurt either.

“I’ll say.” He was hot and I didn’t really care how old he was, on him it didn’t make one difference at all. “Are you with the cruise?”

“Oh yes, my husband and I make it a yearly tradition. A bit of fun at sea.” He smiled and his dimple caught my eye.

“Where’s your husband?”

“That’s him over there,” he said and pointed him out. He was possibly younger than me and just as handsome as his husband. He was also sandwiched between two large muscular men who were both grinding on him to the music from the PA system.

“He’s cute,” I said, and was met with another dimpled smile.

“And insatiable.” He squinted against the sun as he gave me an unapologetic onceover. “Want to hit the water?” he asked, taking me by surprise.

“Sure.” They opened the back of the boat for the swimming deck and we both chose a snorkel mask, flippers, and at the insistence of the deckhand, a lifejacket. Once we had them on, we jumped in. The water was clear enough we could see all the way to the white sand bottom and the small reef nearby. One of the deckhands had mentioned it was loaded with lots of colorful coral and fish, so we made our way over to it.

Most people were off the boat and in the water. Some were in big groups while others broke off into smaller groups. “Hey, I didn’t get your name,” I said, and glanced around for his husband.

“I guess you didn’t, did you.” He pulled me closer to him by the belt of the lifejacket and looked me straight in the eye before grabbing my hand and putting it on his very large and very hard dick.

“Is this okay?” I asked as I leaned in close for a kiss while shoving my hand inside his swimsuit.

He kissed me back and I noticed then he had a beard as it brushed against my chin. His eyes had drawn me in and distracted me, but his dick was definitely something that would keep my attention. I stroked him as we floated in the water, and the woozy feeling from the water moving reminded me how drunk I was. But then he gasped in my ear, and I got back to stroking him. “I wish you could fuck me,” I whispered. “I’d love to feel this big dick filling me up. So fucking hot.”

I pumped him slowly but gripped him hard before palming his head and squeezing his shaft again. Legs wrapped around me from behind and he leaned past me to kiss his husband who groaned next to my ear. Being sandwiched between two hot men was not a bad place to be and for a moment I forgot we were floating in the sea with a big group of people. But if they were okay with it so was I, and when his husband ground against my ass and one of them gripped my dick, everyone else were the last thing on my mind.

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Cory

After lunch the day had gone better, or maybe my mood was better. We only had about an hour before we'd go back to the ship. A few of the guests had already returned, the sun and water being too much for a full day. Which I totally understood. Being out in it was brutal, but after today I'd just wear sunscreen. Because working out by the pool was much better than working inside and dealing with the craziness of the restaurant.

"Cory, go ahead and start stacking those chairs," Alexa said as she walked around the restaurant and buffet making sure everything was taken care of as we started to prepare for closing. "When we get back on board, you're on the lido deck." Before I could respond, she walked away focused completely on the clipboard she carried.

"Don't worry, you'll get great tips and at least you'll get to bed before it's too late," Alberto said.

"I don't mind at all." Some crew members avoided the lido deck any way they could, but I hadn't worked it yet when it was busy with guests. I was on the crew that cleared out the tables and chairs every evening after whatever activity or entertainment it had been used for.

"I'm going to remind you of that later on." He walked over to the bar to do whatever task he'd been assigned, and I got busy clearing off the empty tables. They'd already been setup for any diners that wandered in, so I had to pack up the cutlery, clear off the tablecloths and anything else that was on the tables, before pushing them to the side of the restaurant, and then stacking the chairs against the wall. Since the

restaurant was completely open and the cruise didn't use this area daily, we had to pack anything we could in case bad weather came through.

The restaurant had nearly cleared out and I was just waiting for the last two tables to leave when a large group walked in. "Are we too late?" one of them asked and walked over to the tables and chairs I'd just stacked.

"You're not too late. Just give us a few minutes to set up some tables," Alexa said as she stepped in front of me and addressed the group of maybe fifteen people.

"We were on the snorkel tour and we're starving," one of them said.

"No problem, I'll let the kitchen know. Cory, you set up a few tables," she said, before hurrying past me to the kitchen.

Alberto looked at me from the bar and rolled his eyes as a few of them wandered over to him and ordered drinks. All of them were drunk, very drunk, and sunburned. From the looks of it, most of them were not done partying. I moved one table back in place and before I could put the tablecloth on it, four of them had dragged some chairs over and sat down.

"Sorry, I know you were cleaning up," one of them said, making the other three snicker.

"It's okay, the kitchen is still open." I turned to get another table as a few of the other guests were picking one up and taking it over where the first one was. "Hey, I got that," I said, but they ignored me. I walked over to the third table and two guys were standing there waiting. Neither offered to help or even acknowledged I was there. As soon as I pulled the table over, they walked over to it but waited for me to bring them chairs.

I got what was needed for all three tables and set them up as fast as I could. But apparently it wasn't fast enough. "Hey, can we order?" one of the two guys asked. He was wearing only a swimsuit and sunglasses, which I thought was odd. He didn't even have shoes on, but I didn't really care enough to dwell on it.

"Fuck I lost my wallet too," he said to the guy at the table with him.

"Don't worry, we'll call and report it as soon as we go back to the hotel," I overheard before going to get everyone a menu. I handed them out and hurried to get the tablecloths and cutlery on the other tables.

"This is so fucked," the shirtless guy said as I walked close enough to hear.

The next hour I was too busy making sure they all had what they needed and when the last of them left. I wasn't sad to see them leave at all. Johnny and Alberto were both hard at work doing everything I wasn't so we could get to the dock to catch the last tender boat of the day. When I'd finally stacked all the tables and chairs, Alexa walked over to me. "Great job, Cory, I know it was a lot to deal with at the last minute. But you handled it really well." She wrote something on her clipboard and walked over to check the bar.

I was double-checking I'd done everything when Johnny walked over to me. "Hey, let's get our things and get to the dock." We waited a minute more for Alberto and the three of us retrieved our belongings out of the employee lockers we'd left them in.

All the guests had made their way back to the ship and the only people here were either staying locally or staff. The three of us got on the small boat and waited for them to check they had everyone before pulling away.

"So on to the lido deck," Alberto said.

“I’m hoping I don’t hate it,” I said. “I can see it being pretty crazy there.”

“Yeah, but it’s also lots of fun. Tonight is the foam party. That’s always a great night,” Johnny said as I watched the beach disappear into the distance.

“I didn’t know that.” I’d helped clean up the mess left after foam parties, but I’d never actually experienced one, and after seeing the mess left behind, I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

“Don’t worry, we’re both working it too. It’ll be fun,” Alberto said, but the look in his eyes and the pat on the back he gave me made me think it wasn’t really going to be that fun.

The boat pulled up to the side of the ship and the crew helped us back on board. After having our identification cards checked, the three of us hurried to our rooms. “I need a shower. I’ll meet you on the deck,” I said, and once I was inside my room I took a deep breath and enjoyed the air conditioning. It was small, but I had it to myself, so I wasn’t complaining. Usually we doubled up, but this time I’d gotten lucky and didn’t have to share.

All the crew were housed on the lower levels of the ship, but even if we didn’t have a balcony or even a window, it had so far been great.

“Hopefully the foam party is fun,” I said to myself as I stripped out of my beach uniform and stepped into the shower. Again, it was small, but it did the job and washed off the salt and sweat of the day. When I checked the time, I knew I needed to get moving if I wanted to get something to eat before my shift. The crew mess was just a few doors down from my cabin, so after throwing on some comfortable clothes I hurried down the hall just as Johnny came around the corner from the other end.

“Fancy meeting you here,” he said and looped his arm with mine.

“I’m starving,” I said, and the two of us walked into the room where most of the crew were eating before going to their next shift.

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JJ

The day was a blur, there were parts I remembered but a lot I didn't. Including how I ended up on the cruise ship dancing between the hot guy and his younger husband. At some point he'd introduced himself as Greg, and his husband was Syd. I was currently sandwiched between the two of them and couldn't find it in me to mind one bit.

"Thanks for helping me out, Greg," I said, and he smiled at me before kissing me deeply.

"I told you not to worry about anything. We'll take care of you while you're here."

"You guys are the best, and I still don't understand how I'm here." Somehow it had been decided that I would join them on the cruise. I wasn't sure how that was going to work, but when we boarded it was so chaotic no one noticed I didn't have a card to scan. They were staying in a very large suite complete with a private balcony, king-sized bed, large bathroom, and a sitting room. Since I managed to lose everything but my swimsuit on the snorkel trip, they'd taken me to a shop on the ship and bought me clothes and shoes.

"Must have been a lucky mistake for us," Greg said and kissed his husband over my shoulder.

"Get ready to party!" the DJ yelled and turned up the volume to the shouts of everyone on the dancefloor. The deck was packed with people all moving to the music as the foam machines shot out even more foam. Sandwiched between two hot

men was not a bad place to be at all. But then one of the waiters caught my attention, and I squeezed out from between the two of them and danced my way over to where he was delivering a big drink order.

He'd just set the tray down on the table to pass out what must have been today's signature drink that was being served in a hurricane glass with the ship's logo on it. "Hey, cutie, I remember you," I said.

He ignored me as he made sure everyone who ordered a drink had one. Once the tray was empty, he tucked it under his arm and hurried back to the main bar with me hot on his tail. Because that ass was calling to me. Or maybe it was the drinks. And the sun. And the fact I hadn't eaten much today. Bobby and I had gone to the restaurant on the island today and we both ordered food, but I didn't remember eating mine. I definitely remembered seeing this waiter there.

"Can I get food?" I asked the first crewmember that walked close to me after I lost sight of the other guy in the crowd.

He eyed me up and down before pointing toward the bar. "They have appetizers at the bar," he said, before rushing off to someone else.

I glanced in the direction he'd pointed and slowly made my way to where a table was set up with various containers of appetizers and snacks. Taking a plate, I proceeded to load it up with all the finger food I could fit on my plate. A seat at the bar opened up so I took it, and after ordering a couple of shots and a beer, I sat and ate while relaxing back to people watch.

There was every type of man here that I could imagine, and more. Since it was a foam party most of them were wearing even skimpier clothes than they had while they were at the beach earlier. Some partiers had harnesses on while others had wristbands and necklaces that glowed and not much else besides their barely-there

swimsuits, thongs, or jocks. It was awesome!

After I finished the food on my plate, I went back and took more before ordering the signature drink that turned out to be hurricane with their own spin on it. One drink and I thought the spin might be extra alcohol because it was strong as fuck. My eyes started to close, and I struggled to keep them open while keeping myself upright on the stool.

“Everything right there, sir?” the bartender asked.

“Yes, sorry,” I said and shook my head hoping it was enough to rattle my brain back to consciousness. “Is that a British accent?”

“Australian, just here for this tour,” he said.

“Well, that’s nice,” I said just before faceplanting onto the plate of food I’d ignored once I started the drink.

“Sir.” A voice I didn’t recognize kept repeating while someone lifted my face out of the plate and wiped me off.

“He’s fucked up,” someone else said and laughed.

“Gesdmb seo for some,” I slurred and mumbled, but it didn’t make sense even to my ears.

“Call security so they can take him to his room,” the bartender said.

“No, I’m okay,” I finally managed to say. A bottle of water was on the bar right in front of me and without asking, I opened it and had a big drink.

The bartender looked past me and nodded. Not a good sign. “Excuse me, sir, can I see your guest card?”

Flinching at the voice behind me, I hoped they were talking to someone else. “Sir?” A tap on the shoulder told me they were definitely talking to me.

“Sorry. I’m fine,” I barely managed to say.

Before I could say another word, I was lifted up by hands under both arms and rushed away from the bar and into a door just behind it. “No more bullshit, who are you?” the bigger of the two security guards asked while folding his arms.

“JJ Carrington,” I said, and hoped they recognized the name while at the same time, prayed they didn’t.

“The rich kid that’s always in the news?” he asked.

“That’s the one,” I admitted.

“How did you get on board?” the first guy asked.

“Well, to be honest, I don’t remember.” It wasn’t a lie. The last clear memory I had was when the yacht had arrived here—at the island—earlier today.

“So, let me get this straight. You’re a stowaway.” The bigger guard didn’t try to hide his amusement and even though I didn’t know how serious that was, the look in his eyes told me I was about to find out.

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Cory

Of course, the guy who was one of the more obnoxious at the beach restaurant, had to find me on the ship. I had hoped he was staying at the hotel on the island, but it looked like I was wrong. They were all a mess. Sloppy drunk, loud and rude while we were trying to get cleaned up. Not that they cared one little bit. But he was with the same two guys he'd been dancing with at the restaurant, and I would have sworn they were all together. Not that I cared in the least, but I wondered why he wasn't with them now.

"I must be ready for some time off," I said to myself as I hurried back to the bar for one more round of drinks.

"Did you see what happened?" Johnny walked up to place an order at the same time.

"No, what happened?" I asked and glanced around at the dance floor that was still going strong.

"One of the guys from the restaurant that came in last minute snuck on board." He said it like he was telling me something super-secret and waited for me to respond.

"Can that really happen?" With all the security I never gave a second thought to someone sneaking on, and why would they want to? Once you were here, you weren't going anywhere other than the next stop.

"I guess so. What do you think they'll do with him?" Johnny's eyes widened either in anticipation or excitement. Either way he was really enjoying the fact someone was

going to be in some sort of trouble. "I'll let you know as soon as I find out," he said, before rushing away from the bar with a full tray of drinks.

"Did he really sneak on board?" I asked the bartender who was barely staying ahead of all the drink orders.

"Looks like. I noticed him earlier, but he hadn't tried to pay yet so I wasn't aware of anything out of the ordinary until he passed out into his plate. Seems like they should have caught it when he boarded. He might not be the only one that's dumped off at the next island." He smirked before passing me the last of my drinks. "By the way I'm Liam," he said.

"I'm Cory, I'm surprised I haven't worked with you yet."

"Oh, I noticed you." He winked and immediately moved to the next guest to get their order.

"Hm." When I first arrived to serve on the lido deck instead of cleaning afterward, I thought I'd made a huge mistake. But it was nice to work with different crew members and once I caught onto the routine it was going okay. The foam machines were cut off as they started preparing to close down. This wasn't the main party tonight, just the one that kept the party going from the beach.

They'd have a few hours before dinner was served and then each bar would have a different party based on that bar's theme, but there would be another whole ship party at midnight on this same deck. I had no clue what tonight's theme would be, but I was looking forward to seeing what everyone would wear.

Being a gay man working on a gay cruise was not a bad place to be. Today I'd done more with service than I had so far, but I liked it. Some people were assholes, but for the most part they were all happy to be on vacation and happy to see me when I

brought their order to them.

“Cory, last call,” the bartender said as I walked up with another order. Since they turned off the foam most of the partiers had slowly moved off to another part of the ship, and when the DJ announced the last dance, some stayed around for one more drink, but the area cleared out very fast.

After delivering the last tray of drinks I returned to the bar. The bartender, Liam, was now cleaning up as a few more of the tables and barstools had cleared out. “I’ll take that,” he said, and I handed him the tray of glasses I’d gathered on the way back from delivering my last order.

“You can go ahead and take your dinner break now if you want. I know it hasn’t been that long since you ate, but if you wait until later, you may not get to eat,” he said as he loaded more glasses into a tote for the cleaning crew to take to the kitchen. “Your manager will be in the crew mess in thirty to give you your next assignment.”

“Thanks, Liam, nice meeting you,” I said, before walking over to where Johnny was waiting.

“Are you eating now too? I asked.

“Yes, and this evening we’re both working the party at midnight. We’ll help with clearing tables after dinner service and come back here to set up,” Johnny said.

“Is there a theme tonight?” We walked down the railing until we got to the door that led downstairs to the crew quarters.

“Yep, Rio. Get ready, it’s going to be wild,” Johnny said and turned to grin at me.

We were about to walk into the mess hall when I noticed the guy from earlier at the

end of the hall. Two security guards were standing nearby as he spoke to someone that I knew was almost as high up as the captain. His eyes met mine and for a split-second I felt bad for him. His eyes were red-rimmed, and it was even more obvious what a mess he was.

I couldn't hear what was being said, but from the way his shoulders sagged, and the way his head dropped forward, it didn't look like a pleasant conversation.

"Cory, what are you waiting for?" Johnny said from behind me.

"Sorry, just wondering what's going on there," I said as I walked through the doorway.

"Doesn't look like anything good," he said with a glance in that direction. "Now tell me what you think of serving instead of clearing?"

"So far so good." We chatted with a few other crew members as we stood in line to get our food, and the guest who had annoyed me more than once was completely forgotten. Little did I know that before long he'd be a constant problem for me.

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JJ

Today had started out as one more adventure, but right now I was regretting every fucking minute of it. “So, since you stowed away on board, we’ll take you to the next stop and leave you. You’ll be responsible to pay for the time you’ve spent on board, and you’ll also be responsible for yourself once you’re off the ship,” the ship’s officer said to me, I wasn’t sure what exactly he was, only that he was in charge of what happened to me next.

“The guys I came on board with said it was okay for me to go with them.” It sounded just as weak to my ears as I’m sure it did to theirs.

“Look, I’m not really interested in what made you come to this decision to even try to sneak on board a cruise ship. But you will be removed as soon as possible. The next stop is the day after tomorrow. Until then you’ll be staying with one of the crew who doesn’t have a roommate. We very easily could just throw you in the brig, but upon speaking to your father we decided you were no danger to anyone.”

“Did you say you talked to my father?” I asked, and that shock almost sobered me up completely.

“Standard protocol, and you gave us his number. You two know what to do. Carry on,” he said, before walking away leaving me with the two security guards. I didn’t remember that part at all, but it sounded like me. As soon as I was in trouble, I’d try to get him to bail me out.

“Can I make a phone call?” This felt very much like I was being arrested, which I

guess in a way I was. But I'd lost my phone along with my wallet and had no way of buying a ticket home or even calling to ask for help without some assistance.

"Sure, you can use mine," one said after a look passed between the two of them, and I guess they came to a silent agreement that it was okay for me to use his phone. He handed it to me, and he stayed with me while the other man walked a few doors down. They still had not let me into the room they said I'd be staying in, and even though I was still pretty fucked up, there was no way I was pushing for privacy.

I struggled to remember Bobby's number since I had it saved on my phone and hadn't had to think about it in years. I considered calling home but there was no way I was asking my parents for help again when it was completely my fuck up. "Bobby, I'm in a little bit of trouble."

"JJ? Whose phone are you using? No, never mind, it doesn't matter. I can't speak right now, we're headed back to Florida, and I have a lot to do before work tomorrow," he said as soon as he picked up.

"They're holding me on the ship for sneaking on. I don't have any cash, or my phone, and they're putting me off on the next stop. I'm sorry to call but I didn't know who else to call, and I barely remembered your number let alone someone else's."

He was silent so long I thought he'd hung up.

"I'm sorry that happened, but I tried to get you to go back to the hotel and you refused. You were so into those two guys that's all you could see. I think this is it for me, JJ."

"What do you mean?"

"You're going to have to figure it out yourself. You're almost thirty, it's time to grow

up.” He hung up and this time I did look to see if he really had before handing it back to the security guard.

“Is there anyone else you want to call?”

“No, thank you,” I said, and leaned against the door we’d stopped in front of.

“One minute, I’m going to go alert the crewmember that he’ll be sharing his quarters,” the other security guard said, before walking down the hall.

He returned a few minutes later and I couldn’t believe my eyes. The same guy I’d just flirted with who was also the guy from the beach restaurant earlier. I was pretty sure he hated me. “Uh, I—”

“Crewmember Wynn has agreed to allow you to use the extra bed in his room. There’s a lost and found by the laundry that he’ll show you later. You can find some clothes to wear until we arrive at the next port, which will be the day after tomorrow,” the security guard said, while the guy who was getting stuck sharing his room with me crossed his arms and dared me to say something.

“Can I pay for a room?” I asked and hoped if I did call my parents, they’d help me one more time.

“The ship is fully booked. This is the only room we have open. Except for the brig.” He had yet to uncross his arms and even though I was still drunk, there was no mistaking that he meant every word.

I was afraid to even look at the poor guy who had been unlucky enough to get a room of his own, and when I finally did get the courage up, or maybe I really was still that drunk, he looked away and shook his head.

“This way,” he said and opened his door. “You can take that bed. I’ll take you to the commissary so you can get a toothbrush, I’m not loaning you mine.”

I held my hands up in surrender. “I wasn’t going to ask.” The other security guard who I’d forgotten about, snickered before wiping his mouth.

“Are you okay, Cory?” the other guy asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. I’ll get him set up then I need to get to work.”

“Just a reminder, Jackson Carrington, you are under house arrest, and you are not allowed to leave this room without being accompanied either by security or Cory. And he’s only got permission to take you to get food and necessities. Is that clear?” the first security guard asked.

“Yes, sir.” I wasn’t about to test either of them. The fact they brought me down here in the first place told me how serious it all was. And fucking Bobby! Actually, fucking me. Bobby had a life and was doing great; he was right, it was time for me to grow up. “I’d like to volunteer to help in any way I can to pay for staying here.”

Both of them looked at each other before one walked away while speaking on his handheld radio. Cory was looking anywhere but at me until finally walking over to his bed and sitting down. Then I remembered, he’d been working all day while I’d been drinking and partying. His day still wasn’t over, he’d said he worked later. I tried to think of a time I’d worked that hard and couldn’t come up with even one day. I groaned in shame and tried to cover it with a cough, but the look Cory gave me told me it hadn’t worked. Not even close.

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Cory

“Cory, your manager is going to be calling you,” Max on security said, and the look he gave me told me I wasn’t going to like what Alexa was going to say. The two of them left and for once the silence in the room roared while the two of us tried to ignore each other. It had been so nice having my own room and in just a short time I’d gotten used to falling asleep by the slap of the waves against the side of the ship instead of a roommate snoring or watching television.

“Sorry,” he finally whispered.

I was so annoyed I couldn’t even answer. How did I end up with this loser in my room. “It’s fine. Let’s go get something to eat. I have to eat now, or I won’t have time until my shift ends later.” I waited at the door while he tried to get his shit together enough to walk out with me. He looked mortified and I wasn’t sure if it was actual shame at his behavior, or the predicament he was now in. “What?”

“Should I go with you? I mean I can stay here.”

“If you want to eat, you’ll go with me. They put food out three times a day but if you don’t eat it while it’s out then you’re on your own. You can’t eat from the guests’ cafés or restaurants. It doesn’t work that way, you’re not a guest.” It sounded harsh even to my ears, but this guy wasn’t a friend, he wasn’t even an acquaintance. He was a stupid drunk who’d snuck onto the ship.

He didn’t say a word, just nodded and followed me to the mess hall. Johnny was still where I’d left him and so was my plate. After showing the guy where to get his food I

walked back to my chair and took a seat. Johnny looked at me with brows raised. “What?” I shoved the sandwich I’d chosen into my mouth and was glad for a few seconds to process what was happening.

“Is it okay if I sit here?” the guy asked. Fuck.

“Did you really sneak on board?” Johnny immediately asked him.

“Yeah, I guess I did,” he said as he picked up the sandwich he’d chosen and took a massive bite. “Oh my god, what is this?”

“Looks like ham and cheese,” Johnny said, while I ignored them both and focused on my food.

“This has to be the best sandwich I’ve ever had,” he said and took another big bite.

“When was the last time you ate?” I asked, knowing he hadn’t touched the food he’d ordered at the beach.

“I ate a little at the bar before I passed out, but before that I’m not sure. It’s been a long day.” He stared off like he was trying to remember but it was a complete mystery to him, while I took the time to take a closer look at him. He was cute, there was no denying that. I wondered how he’d managed to keep his sunglasses when he’d lost everything else, but nothing would make me ask.

“So, what’s your name?” Johnny asked, even though I knew for a fact he knew exactly who he was.

“J—Jackson Carrington,” he said and held out his hand. “And you are?”

“Johnny Herdez.” They shook hands, which annoyed me, and I wasn’t sure why other

than Jackson or JJ or whatever the fuck his name was, had stepped all over my last nerve several times today.

“I thought your name was JJ?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“I’m thinking it’s time to stop acting like a kid and start acting like an adult.” He didn’t say anything else, just started eating everything on his plate like it had been days not a few minutes since his last meal.

“Where are you from?” Johnny asked.

“California, how about you?” he asked, and waited while Johnny explained where he was from.

“I’ve never been there. I’ve been to a lot of Mexico and some of South America, but not Rio,” Jackson, or JJ, or whatever, said.

“Cory is from Sacramento,” Johnny said.

“Yeah? What part, that’s where I’m from too,” Jackson said.

“My family lives near Folsom,” I said, and didn’t bother to ask for more details of where he was from, but of course he still told me anyway.

“Really? My family has a house near the college,” he said, and I knew he was trying to be friendly, but I just didn’t have it in me to care.

“Where the rich people live, right?” I said and immediately felt bad. This wasn’t me, and even though he’d annoyed me I really had no reason to be so cold. “Sorry, it’s been a long day.”

“It’s okay, I know I was the last person you expected to have to share a room with.” He put what was left of his sandwich on his plate and didn’t talk for the rest of the meal as Johnny and I discussed what we’d be doing at work later.

“I have to go to work, I’ll take you back to the room and you can get some sleep,” I said, but he was still staring at his plate like he hadn’t heard me. “Jackson.” I looked at Johnny who was trying to ignore the whole interaction when Jackson jerked to attention.

“Sorry, what?”

“I have to go to work,” I repeated. “I’ll take you to the room so you can get some sleep.” I stood and waited for him to do the same. I reached to take his plate, but he shook his head.

“It’s okay, I can get it,” Jackson said, and I could see something had shifted in his attitude.

“Johnny, I’ll meet you on the deck,” I said, before walking Jackson to my room. “I work until late, so please don’t leave the room. I know you might think it isn’t a big deal, but they made me responsible for you, and I won’t risk my job for you.”

I opened the door and stepped aside so he could enter. “I’m just going to go to sleep,” he said and sat on the extra bed.

“I’ll take you to the lost and found in the morning and see what clothes they have.”

I didn’t even make it out the door before he collapsed on the bed and fell asleep. This day had turned into the worst ever and I was more than happy to see it done.

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Cory

I'd ended up working first dinner service as a busboy and after it was done, I joined Johnny on the lido deck to serve drinks for tonight's party. There were so many parties this week, way more than we normally had. But everyone was so happy, and they'd all brought costumes and all sorts of themed clothing, so a festive feeling was in the air.

"Tonight's theme is Rio," Alexa had said before handing us our shirts that were more festive than the daytime uniforms. "Think of a carnival atmosphere."

"Like I know what that is," I said and slipped on the colorful shirt that showed off way more of my chest than my regular uniform.

"I do," Johnny said and busted out a little dance with a lot of hip motion and a little swag.

"Hey, now you'll have to teach me," I said. But he knew better. I had no rhythm at all and had proven it many times.

After the foam party, this party was a lot tamer. It started at midnight and would last for ninety minutes. There was a live band playing with a light show and dancers. It was crazy on the dancefloor and not much better navigating the crowd to take orders and deliver drinks. But we did it, and when the last song finished and the lights flashed out, I was ready to be done. "Are we still having a party after we're done?" I asked Johnny.

“Hell yes. I’m ready to blow off some steam. Plus, we don’t start until late shift tomorrow.”

“That’s right. I forgot about us being at sea.” Those of us who had more to do with the excursion yesterday would not be scheduled until later in the afternoon to give us a chance to rest for the evening’s activities. Plus, since there had been two parties tonight, we were all more than ready to recover from all the craziness.

“So, you and the bartender Liam?” Johnny asked and waggled his eyebrows.

“What? I don’t know what you’re talking about?” I lied.

“Oh, you know exactly what I’m talking about. Don’t think I didn’t see the way he looked at you, and you looked at him, and birds started singing in the distance.” He clutched the hand he wasn’t carrying an empty drink tray with to his chest and let out a deep sigh with a big grin. “It could be love.”

“What?” I screeched, and instantly regretted it when a group of men turned to look at me. “What?” I asked again with less screeching this time.

“Hey he’s cute,” Johnny said.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure I want to start something with a crewmember.” When I’d first started working here, I hadn’t thought much of hooking up with a fellow employee, but before that happened, I’d witnessed how bad it could go and how disruptive it could be for everyone else. There was a couple who had been seeing each other for a few weeks, and when one of them was off ship for his time off everything changed, and it was ugly when they returned.

“Stop overthinking it, just have fun when you’re not working,” Johnny said. “Come on, let’s gather up some glasses and get ready to go below.”

For the next thirty minutes we gathered up glasses, and I found it hard to ignore all the party remains I normally cleared away, but tonight that wasn't my job. I walked over with the last tray of glasses just as Liam was wiping down the bar. "Hey, are you going to the crew party?" I asked, surprising myself, and by the look on his face, him too.

"Yeah, are you?" he asked.

"Oh, for sure, it sounds fun." I tried really hard to act cool, which I knew was a hopeless task, but Liam grinned at me like it didn't matter at all, he was just happy to know I'd be there.

"Is that the last of the glasses?" he asked, breaking me out of my stupor.

"Oh, yes." I passed the tray to him, and stayed while he unloaded it, until I realized I was standing there stupidly watching him unload a few glasses. "Okay, guess I'll see you in a little while." He tipped his chin at me and smiled. I turned to rush away and nearly ran right into the tray of glasses Johnny was returning.

"Whoa. That was close," he said, before sliding around me to set the tray on the bar. "See you later, Liam." He gripped my arm as he led me to the hallway that would lead to the crew quarters. "So, you and Liam?"

"I don't know, I mean he's cute. I'm trying to take your advice and have fun while I'm not working." He grinned at me before squeezing my shoulder.

"You just might make it as a cruiser after all. All work and no play is no way to live, my friend."

We both laughed at that and as we got closer to my door I slowed down. "I'm going to go shower and change before the party."

“Me too, I’ll meet you there in about an hour,” Johnny said and walked past my door without another word. He was so uncomplicated, and so easygoing. I once again wished I could match his energy. Nothing ever bothered him and no matter how hard the job was, he always did it with a smile and to the best of his ability.

“Plus, those abs,” I mumbled to myself as I opened my door. The room was dark, so I turned on the light, having forgotten all about my new guest. He jerked awake and looked around the room in shock. “You’re okay, you’re on the NautiCaribbean ship. Remember?” I tried to be nice, I mean he really hadn’t done more to me than be annoying and invade my privacy, but for some reason he really got under my skin.

He squinted his eyes and shielded them with his hand against the light. “Cory?” he croaked out, and I was shocked he even remembered my name.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m just going to shower.” After I gathered up what I’d need, I turned off the light and stepped into the bathroom. After slumping against the door for a moment, I turned on the shower and stripped down before climbing in. The shower was tiny, but that didn’t matter right now. All I cared about was taking a shower and getting to the party.

The hot water felt great, and I realized how tired I was as my eyes slid shut, and I hadn’t had one drink yet. My mind wandered, and surprisingly it went to the guy in the other room. He was hot. He was definitely hot. But he was also a hot mess, and I wasn’t sure those lips, or those abs were worth all the drama. But he was definitely hot. Itoweled off and was about to reach for my clothes when I realized I hadn’t brought them with me. “Fuck.” I’d brought my shaving kit but hadn’t brought anything to wear.

Wrapping the towel around me I walked back into the room and was both relieved and shocked that the light was on, and Jackson was sitting on the edge of his bed with his head in his hands. I was about to ask if he was sick when he looked up, and when

his eyes met mine, I knew I was fucked—or maybe he was.

JJ

While Cory was in the shower I sat up and thought I was going to either throw up or pass out again. My head was splitting with pain and my stomach wasn't in any better shape. I had no clue where I was when he'd first woken me up. But for some strange reason I knew who he was. I guess drinking several days in a row would fuck with your memory, but I wasn't sure why my memory of him earlier was burned into my brain.

He hated the idea that I was here, and even though he was trying to be nice about it, he wasn't happy. I slid over to the side of the bed and was having a serious conversation with my stomach about how now wasn't the time to throw up, when he walked out of the bathroom. Every time I'd seen him, he'd had his uniform on and while he looked hot in it, seeing him in only a towel was so much better.

He was thin but he was toned, and his shoulders were very muscular and broad. Before I knew it, I was on my knees at his feet staring up at him as his breath sped up. "What are you doing?" he asked. His voice was gravely and rough, and I hoped it was from desire not exhaustion.

"I noticed you as soon as we got there today. I don't know what it is about you, but you're too hard for me to resist." I slowly reached a hand up to cover his groin while keeping my eyes locked on his.

"I think you have a hard time resisting anyone," Cory said, but his eyes were focused on my hand that now pressed against him as he hardened.

“Is this okay?” I asked, because if he wasn’t into it, I would be ready to go back to my bed and never bother him again. His lips twitched but his eyes never left my hand, and when I started to pull away, he pressed his hand down on mine. He was getting even harder.

“It’s okay,” he finally said and met my eyes.

I tugged his towel down and buried my face in his groin. “You smell so good,” I groaned and tried to make it all last. I wanted to breathe in every part of him and experience his taste on my tongue. “I want to taste you so bad.” I didn’t add that I was terrified if I went down on him, I’d gag. I forced myself not to focus on my stomach but instead focus on him.

Gripping him, I slowly started to pump with one hand while I rolled his balls with my other. My mouth watered with the need to taste him, but I knew for sure it wasn’t a good idea. Not this time. His hand rested on my shoulder as his hips started to move, and the sounds that came from him turned me on more than any experience I could remember. He wasn’t afraid to get what he wanted, and when I slowed down, he’d guide my hand in the rhythm he wanted.

I was so lost in the sensation of his hand on my shoulder as he held me just where he wanted me, that when he came it was against my face and I was sorry that it hadn’t been down my throat. But I still didn’t trust myself, and puking on him was not something I was going to let happen. For a moment neither of us moved, and I listened as his breath slowed down, then he squeezed my shoulder before taking a step back and picking up his towel.

“I need to go meet Johnny in a few minutes. Why don’t you take a shower, you can help yourself to some of my clothes until tomorrow,” he said, and wiped at my cheek before gathering up some clothes and turning to walk back into the bathroom.

Emotions bubbled up in me that I didn't recognize, and I hesitated to move while I stared at this guy who had somehow completely turned my world upside down without even trying. He hurried back out of the bathroom before stopping where I still knelt. "Hey, are you okay?" he asked. "Go take a shower."

I nodded, stood, and walked around him into the tiny room, shutting the door behind me. Without even thinking I turned on the water and splashed it on my face before catching my reflection in the mirror. I looked like shit. Red-rimmed eyes, hair looking like shit, teeth unbrushed, and just generally looking like I'd been drinking for days, like I had been.

"I'll be back late," he called through the bathroom door then I heard the outer door open and close.

My eyes met my reflection, and I felt a pull to him like nothing I'd ever experienced. "What the fuck is happening?" I mumbled to myself, and tried to make myself believe it was just alcohol and lack of sleep, but I knew deep down it was something else. Something I'd hoped for long ago when I was still a teenager, but as I got older it became less important than finding someone to hook up with for the night.

I leaned against the sink to get a closer look and it hit me, I was still hard. What the fuck? Not once had I ever not taken my own pleasure as I'd given it. Getting off with someone was literally my number one goal. That thrill of the chase and the ultimate reward was what kept me constantly looking for more. More men, more sex, and more unattached fun. I'd never let myself think of any of them past the time we were together.

"And here you are," I said to my stupid reflection. Shaking my head, I stripped down and got in the shower. Happy to finally be washing this day away, but at the same time not wanting to lose the scent of him on my skin.

My mind wandered while I stood under the hot water, and I thought how Bobby would be laughing his ass off at me right now. The king of hit 'em and leave 'em had somehow caught a feeling for the one guy who hated me more than I hated myself.

Cory

What the fuck had just happened. I leaned against the outer door for a moment and tried to put some order to the storm of thoughts running through my head. The look in his eyes. When he'd knelt at my feet, I had no clue what he was doing, and it took me completely by surprise that he wanted to take care of me.

"I didn't even offer to take care of him," I mumbled.

"Hey, Cory, are you going to the party?" another crew member asked me as he stepped out of his room down the hall.

"Hey, Carlos, yeah, are you?" I was so fucking happy for the change of subject I probably came off as way more excited about the party than I actually was. We chatted as we walked down the hall and then downstairs to where the crew party was being held. It was a large room that had been decorated with a tropical theme, but since we were in the Caribbean, every party had a tropical theme for the crew.

"About time you got here," Johnny said. "How's your roommate?" He handed me a beer and the two of us walked over to a couple of chairs and sat down.

"Weird." I took a big drink and tried to get the image of him on his knees out of my mind.

"What do you mean? Did he do something?" Johnny's voice was full of concern, and he settled his hand on my arm offering support as he waited for more details.

“Oh, he did something,” I again found myself mumbling.

“What? What happened?”

“I went back to the room to take a shower before the party, and I forgot he was even there, so I turned the light on, and it woke him up. He was looking rough. And by rough, I mean like he probably hasn’t gone a day without a drink in a while. I was worried he was going to throw up, but then I decided it was his problem not mine, so I went to take a shower.”

“Is that it? You woke him up?” Johnny asked.

“Not exactly.” I took a deep breath and proceeded to give him every detail while he listened with that calm expression he always had no matter what the situation. Right now, I was so happy for that calm that I could have kissed him. But telling him what had happened helped.

“Really? That doesn’t sound like something he’d do. He seems like the kind to take what he wants and move on without a second thought. I mean not that I know the guy,” Johnny said.

“That’s what I thought too, and I did notice him at the beach and the restaurant, he was all over a couple that he seemed to be hooking up with. Then I saw him dancing with them earlier, he was all over them too. But I haven’t seen them since then, and he hasn’t mentioned them.”

“So, they were most likely a hookup. Is that how he got on board?”

“I’m not sure. But I think he’s never been held accountable for anything ever in his life. The part of town he said he’s from is all mansions and mini mansions. It’s not an area most people go to unless they live there or work there. It’s very exclusive and

very expensive. I don't even think he has a job. I think his life is one party after another." Saying it out loud made it sound even more sad than it probably was. I liked partying, but not daily and not full time. "How much of a life is that?" I asked.

"Not much. Maybe getting caught will do him some good," Johnny said. His eyes were focused on something else as he took a sip of his own beer. "I've had friends on board that were in a similar situation. Only they were working and partying. But you can't keep that up for very long before the cracks start to show."

"The way he looked at me . . . I don't know, it was just strange."

"What do you mean?" Johnny asked.

"It was like I was something special to him. That's the only way I can describe it. Like I meant something to him." It sounded strange even to me, but the more I pictured his face, the more the look in his eyes haunted me.

"Maybe you're one of the only people who hasn't caved to his every whim," Johnny said. "Some people know they need help, but they can't do it alone, and until someone else makes them aware of it they don't see it as a problem. Maybe you made him open his eyes."

"I doubt that. I barely spoke to him other than to let him know how much he bothered me. He was so drunk and acted like he thought everyone should do whatever he wanted them to do. I was tired, it was hot, and I didn't want to deal with a drunk frat boy," I rambled.

"Is he a frat boy? I thought he was older than that? Or is he an old frat boy? He can't still be in school, can he? Is he going to be a doctor or lawyer?" Johnny rambled right back.

“What? I don’t think he’s in college. I really don’t think he does anything other than party.” I tried to remember if he’d mentioned anything about a job or—well anything. But all I remembered was him flirting a little and me shooting him down. I’d dealt with enough drunks while working here and wasn’t about to get too close to someone who lived their life party to party. “He’ll be gone day after tomorrow anyway.”

“What’s he going to do all day tomorrow?” Johnny asked.

“I’m not sure. He can’t leave the cabin unless he’s with me, and I don’t really want him following me around all day. I’m sure they won’t want him working or doing anything to do with passengers. He has no wallet, and no way of paying for anything.”

“Maybe you can help him take care of that stuff,” Johnny said with an edge of worry to his words, making me feel a little guilty for treating JJ the way I had.

“Maybe. He looked awful earlier, but I told him to shower so maybe that will help.”

“Cory, even I know that guy’s not going to feel better after a shower. He passed out face down in his plate at the bar earlier.”

My eyes widened and my head dropped in shock. I knew he was drunk but I hadn’t seen that happen. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, I didn’t see it but that’s what Liam told security.” Johnny was friends with pretty much everyone on board so when something happened, he usually knew more about it than anyone else, and this was no exception.

“I knew he was at the bar, but I avoided him and when I went back, he was being led off.”

“It doesn’t look good for him. The only reason they didn’t throw him in the brig was the captain knows his father. But I guess when he called, JJ’s dad said he wasn’t going to save him this time. Sounds like he’s run out of options with his friends and family.”

And I officially felt even worse than I already had for using him like I had earlier, not that I had instigated it, but because I didn’t stop him.

JJ

I sat on the edge of the bed in silence for a while before the sound of water breaking against the ship lulled me into a more relaxed state than I had been. There were so many thoughts running through my mind, and at the front of the line was the fact I'd pushed myself at Cory. I mean he could have said no, but I knew I wouldn't have turned down a hand job and I didn't expect him to.

Sometime during the night, I fell asleep. The shower had made me feel better, and wearing some shorts and a shirt that smelled like Cory gave me a sense of comfort I hadn't felt in years. I had never liked sleeping on a boat or any ship, but the sound of the water, and maybe the fact I couldn't remember the last time I slept, lulled me into a deep sleep.

"JJ?" A familiar voice called my name, and I knew that voice, but I was afraid to wake up and have it be a dream. Then someone shook my shoulder, and I felt a weight on the bed next to me. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I shouldn't have used you the way I did earlier."

For a moment I didn't move and neither did he. The press of his hip against me felt way better than it should have, but again he made me feel things I never had.

"Why are you sorry?" I asked and rolled over to face him. He was hidden in the shadows, and I couldn't make out his expression, so I waited until he was ready to speak again.

"I shouldn't have let you do what we did earlier. I really feel guilty. That's just not

me.” I didn’t need to see his face to hear the sincerity in his voice. I knew I wouldn’t be able to remember a time when someone had offered me pleasure and I’d felt guilty. But he wasn’t me, and it was obvious this was weighing on him.

“You have nothing to feel guilty for. It was all me.” I slid my hand across the bed until it was close enough to feel the heat from his, and when he covered my hand with his, my eyes slid shut in contentment and the warmth I could feel through his hand.

“I’ll let you sleep, you have to be tired.” He squeezed my hand and started to rise, but I held onto him.

“Don’t go. I don’t want to be alone anymore.” I whispered words I had never admitted in my life even to myself. Sure, I could keep lying to myself like I had for years, but I was tired of that, and right now I didn’t have the energy.

For a moment he didn’t move, and I held my breath while he decided what he’d do. Slowly, he lay down next to me and I rested my head on his chest. His arm came around my back and he gently rubbed his hand up and down. I started to drift to sleep, once again to the sound of the water and now with his barely-there touch on my back. “Thank you,” I whispered, and I would have sworn I felt his lips press against the top of my head as I fell asleep.

Through the night I woke a few times, and each time Cory was there holding me. When I rolled to my side a while later, he curled up behind me and pulled me close.

Sometime later and most likely before dawn he ground against me in his sleep. He was hard, and I forced myself not to reach back and pull him closer. But he was asleep, and the next time we did anything I wanted it to be his choice, and for him to lead. I needed to know he wanted me and wasn’t just following his dick like I usually did.

He nuzzled into my neck before taking a deep breath and relaxing against me again. “Good morning,” he said, and that same rough voice from before made my dick take notice.

His arm was slung over my side, and without a thought I wove my fingers with his. “This is nice,” I said.

“Lying in bed?” he asked and shifted to lean up on his elbow. I could hear the smile in his voice and couldn’t stop myself from smiling back.

“Yeah and holding hands. I can’t remember the last time I held hands with someone.”

“You didn’t hold hand with daddy earlier?” he said, but his voice was teasing not accusing.

“No. Our hands were otherwise engaged,” I said and rolled over to face him. “I’m really sorry about how I treated you yesterday. I swear I wasn’t always an asshole, and I’m not sure when that became my go-to personality. But I think yesterday showed me I need to change some things.” It was strange how speaking to him was so easy, when saying those words to people I called my friends would have been impossible.

“I really didn’t like you, but not for being a rude drunk,” Cory said and brushed his hand against my cheek.

“I knew it. I could see it in your eyes how much I annoyed you, and I am a rude drunk, so you were totally entitled to those feelings.” I was rambling and speaking like I knew all about feelings when in reality, I didn’t know shit.

“I didn’t like you because I couldn’t stop looking for you or thinking about you. I hated knowing you were on the snorkel tour with all those guys and knowing you

were going to be hooking up with someone else. Then I was annoyed with myself for even noticing you.”

His words were raw and honest, and something I had never experienced with anyone. No one in my past just said how they felt, unless it was telling me to fuck them harder or them telling me to suck them off. Every interaction in my world was around hooking up. But not Cory. His world was about emotions, and feelings, and all those scary things I’d avoided for years. Now I was being hit in the face with all of it, and the brown eyes staring at me in the dim light of a cabin room that had no window, were making me want to connect to those feelings if it made him happy. Because right now, for probably the first time in my life, I cared more about his feelings, than my own comfort.

“Do you work today?” I asked, suddenly remembering this wasn’t a pleasure cruise for either of us.

“Yes, but not until this afternoon. I’ll be bussing after late lunch and then serving drinks during tonight’s party. It’s a day at sea, so the guests will all be on board, but usually they tend to stay around the pool all day before going for a spa treatment or maybe wandering the shops,” Cory said.

“Do I need to stay inside? I know I’m in trouble, but could I work or do something?” Wait a minute! Did the world just start to spin backwards? Because when had I ever volunteered to work? And not just any kind of work, manual labor. His smile made it worth it. He grinned and ran his fingers through the hair above my ear.

“I’ll ask. We always need help.” Then he surprised me when he leaned in and kissed me. Without any pretext, or expectation. Cory kissed me, and once again my world tilted.

Cory

Rummaging in my closet, I made a mental note that it was more than time to do laundry. I rarely brought more than a week's worth of clothes with me when I worked, and now with the two of us wearing them, I knew it wouldn't be enough. Those thoughts stopped me.

"What the fuck am I doing?" I said to myself, but I already knew the answer. There was something about JJ that I both loved and hated in equal amounts. But after last night the love part was passing the hate part, and that scared the shit out of me. The sound of the shower reminded me it was all real, and he was still here. It also reminded me that he'd be leaving tomorrow when he was unceremoniously dumped off at St. Thomas.

"Did you say something?" JJ asked when he stepped out of the bathroom wearing only a towel. I turned back to my closet and thankfully found a pair of briefs, shorts, and a shirt.

"No, just grumbling to myself about doing laundry."

"I can do that if you want. I don't mind at all," he said as he took the clothes from me and walked over to his bed to start getting dressed.

"Are you sure? I mean I don't expect you to do my laundry," I said, and I meant it. When I found out he'd be staying here I didn't like it, but one night later I didn't mind at all. So far, he wasn't a bad roommate, and if it continued this way I was more than happy for him to stay.

“I’m sure. Also, I need to speak to whoever is in charge. I want to pay what I owe,” JJ said, surprising me.

“Really? I mean I would love you to help with the laundry because I don’t know when I’ll have time. But you want to pay?” He’d said it before, but he was drunk, and I found drunk JJ said whatever got him what he wanted. Nothing he said was to be believed.

“Yes, and I need to see if they’d let me stay on board past tomorrow,” he said, and that surprised me.

“I thought you’d be ready to get out of here and go home.” I turned to face him and ignored the fact he hadn’t pulled his shirt on yet and his toned chest was once again on display.

“No. I’d rather say here.”

“JJ, don’t you have a job or something to get back to?” I hadn’t meant to pry into his personal life so deeply, but we were in a strange situation of being forced to stay together and really, at this point, I wasn’t going to start holding back.

“Jackson, my name is Jackson. JJ is the name my friends started calling me when we were out partying. I hate it, and I don’t want you to think of me that way. Please. Call me Jackson.” His eyes told me it was more than just calling him his given name and not his nickname, but I was happy to call him whatever he wanted me to. I wasn’t his friend, so where they didn’t seem to respect him as more than a person to party with, I’d use the name he asked me to.

“Jackson, it suits you.”

“Thanks, I’ve had it forever,” he said and smiled. The change in his mood was instant

and his smile lit up his eyes, making him look even hotter than he already was.

“Let’s go see what there is to eat,” I said and hoped that was okay with security. I mean he’d eaten with us last night and this was no different. We walked down the hall and as soon as we entered the mess hall Johnny waved to me from where he sat at what had become our usual table. I handed Jackson a plate and the two of us chatted about how good everything looked but we were probably just hungry from yesterday. “How do you feel?”

“Oh, I feel much better today. I was pretty sure I was going to die last night though. Nothing like having a hangover the same day you’re drinking. I could live without ever feeling that shitty ever again.” He chose some scrambled eggs and fruit to eat, and I knew even though he said he felt better, he still didn’t feel great.

“I’m not a fan of a hangover, and when I started working here, I partied every night they had a crew party, but the work is hard, and it’s horrible trying to work with a hangover. It’s not like I can just say I’m not going in to work. I live where I work,” I said, making him laugh.

“We all learn that lesson,” one of the other crewmembers said, making me laugh again.

“It’s hard enough dealing with drunk guests. But dealing with drunk guests when you’re trying not to puke or pass out is a whole new level of hell.” I led us over to where Johnny sat taking the last bites of his breakfast.

“I’m surprised you two are awake already. I didn’t expect to see you until right before your shift.” His eyes bounced between us, and I knew without saying anything that he knew things had changed between us.

“I slept so good last night. I mean I was pretty drunk and being in the sun all day

didn't help. But I loved hearing the water breaking against the ship. It's mesmerizing," Jackson said, before taking a tentative bite of eggs.

I looked at Johnny and almost started laughing but I knew exactly what he was reacting to. JJ was trashed yesterday and any interactions we'd had with him were mostly him acting like an entitled asshole. Now apparently JJ was gone, and Jackson was here instead. I liked Jackson. I liked Jackson a lot. That thought did make me laugh, and when Jackson met my eyes, he smiled before taking another tentative bite.

"Yeah, you kinda get used to it after a while and don't notice it," Johnny finally said with a shrug.

"How long have you worked for the cruise line?" Jackson asked and pointed his fork at Johnny.

"Around five years now. I started only working during the summer months and going home to work the other half of the year, but I missed cruising. So as long as it stays fun, I'll continue to do it full time," Johnny said and turned again to look at me with wide eyes.

"How about you, Cory," he asked, but his eyes never left mine. The connection we had crackled and I had to look away to answer his question.

"I've been cruising a few months now. I'd never traveled much before that first cruise, so it was all a new experience for me. But I love it, and I see myself working in the cruise industry for a few more years. Maybe not as long as this guy, but there's nothing else I want to do right now."

"I can see the appeal. Even though you're working you're still on vacation in a way. I mean I know you're busting your ass and some people are total assholes." He stopped for a moment and stared again at me making me laugh. "I know I was one of those

assholes, and if I treated you badly, I apologize.”

“No, man, I didn’t have the pleasure, but I do appreciate the gesture,” Johnny said, before lifting his juice in a toast. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Jackson said and took another tentative bite.

Jackson

My stomach didn't completely object to food, but I was hesitant to eat too much and end up sick later. I meant what I'd told Cory. I wanted to help if I could, and I wanted to speak to whoever it was that would make the decision if I could stay here or if I needed to go. "I was telling Cory earlier, I want to pay my way and see if I can stay on board until the end of the cruise at least."

"Who should he speak to?" Cory asked.

"Ask Max. If he doesn't know the answer, he can tell you who to speak to," Johnny said.

"Have I met him before?" I asked and racked my brain for anyone I'd come across named Max since yesterday.

"He's one of the guys that put you in custody," Johnny said, like he was telling me he preferred vanilla ice cream more than chocolate.

"Oh god. The big one or the one with giant biceps?" I asked, making the two of them laugh.

"The big one," Cory said and grinned at me. I wasn't sure if it was in amusement or support, but I couldn't stop myself from grinning right back at him. "Wouldn't they be doing their rounds?"

Johnny looked at the time on his phone before answering. "Yes. If I had to guess

they're in the hot tub area. Some guests snuck in there last night and left a huge mess. Complete with a few toys and various pieces of clothing. You might want to give it a few, he may not be in the best mood."

I thought about it for a moment, but my mind was made up. I'd been ducking responsibility for years, and that shit ended now. "I don't want to wait," I said. And Cory and Johnny were locked in a stare down. I wasn't sure if they were deciding who would take me, or if both of them would avoid the conflict but finally Cory turned to look at me.

"Let me get dressed for my shift and I'll take you there," he said, before standing and hurrying out the door.

My eyes were on him until he was gone and when I turned back Johnny was staring at me again, but not in a friendly way this time. His fork was clenched in his fist as he narrowed his eyes at me, and I braced for his words. "Listen up, motherfucker. You hurt Cory and I will hurt you. He's a good guy and he doesn't deserve to be treated like shit or used. You got me?" he snarled.

I leaned in toward him and said in a low voice so only he could hear. "If I hurt him, I want you to kick my ass like you've never kicked an ass before. He's important to me, and I would never do anything to hurt him on purpose." He grinned then before both of us laughed, and it felt so fucking good.

"I mean it, idiota," Johnny said. Apparently, his native tongue was more forceful than calling me an asshole in English. Either way, message received.

"I have a lot of feelings for him," I said, being completely honest. "I'm not sure why, I mean we don't even know each other, but he makes me want to be a better person."

"When he was first working on the cruise he was like a deer in headlights. Always

very afraid of screwing up or doing something that made more work for another crewmember. But he's come a long way and he's proven to be a hard worker. There isn't a crewmember here that wouldn't vouch for him. So please, treat him right." Johnny's voice was sincere this time, and I thought there had to be something between the two of them besides friendship. He rolled his eyes then seeming to sense what I was thinking. "We've only ever been friends."

"I won't. I'm honestly amazed he's still willing to give me the time of day. I don't remember everything from yesterday, but I do remember the look on his face when he saw me here. He was shocked, but he was also disgusted, and I don't ever want to make him feel that way again."

"If Cory is willing to give you a chance, then I am too, but don't fuck up. Because you won't get another."

"Thanks, Johnny, you're a good friend." I thought of how Bobby had basically deserted me on the island and when I called for help, he was more than willing to let me figure it all out for myself. He was my closest friend, and really there were no others. There were many people I partied with, but none of them were friends I could call on if I was in a jam. Now I knew Bobby was also on that list.

"Try to be respectful when you're talking to Max. He's big on respect, and if you come at him all high and mighty—well you won't get far," Johnny said.

"Thanks, I'll remember that."

"Did he say you could go up on deck?" he asked.

"No, his boss said I was to stay in Cory's cabin or with him at all times. I just want to make it right if I can."

“What kind of work do you do?”

“Nothing. I worked at my dad’s business for a while, but I didn’t take it seriously and he got tired of having to waste his time trying to motivate me. I have a degree in Physical Education, though. I always thought it would be fun to either teach PE or coach a youth league.”

“So, you like working with kids?”

“Yeah, I guess I do. I mean I’ve always been good with them.”

“I might just have an idea where you can help on board.” He gave me a look that said he was going to enjoy this way more than I was going to like it, but right now I’d take any job I could to stay.

“Okay, I have about thirty minutes before I need to start my shift. Let’s go see if we can find Max,” Cory said as he walked over dressed in his uniform.

“He has a degree in Physical Education and he likes kids,” Johnny said, like it was some kind of special code.

“No way, really?” Cory said, but I was still in the dark of what they were talking about.

“We lost someone in the kids’ area, and they really need help,” Cory explained.

“There’s a kids” area?” I asked.

“Yes. We always provide childcare to guests. It’s an area of the ship that’s removed from the bars and deck, so they get a totally different experience than their parents do. Is that really something you’d want to do?” Cory asked and cringed a little. “I

can't think of a job I'd rather not do."

"I'd rather do that than work around drunk people all day." I smirked at him and hoped he knew I was talking about myself.

"Not all drunk people are bad," Cory said, and Johnny rolled his eyes and sat back in his chair.

"That's my cue, I'm out of here. I'll see you later in the dining room." He stood without another glance and the two of us watched until he walked out of the mess hall.

"He's from a huge family. The kids' area would be his last choice," Cory said, making me laugh again.

"Let's go before I change my mind," I lied. I loved the idea, and hoped the position was still open and they'd let me work there.

Cory

I led Jackson out onto the deck that for now was deserted and would be until the party later this afternoon. Beyond it the pool deck was loud and crazy. We could hear the music from here, and I knew what to expect when we could see it. Lots of people barely dressed baking in the sun or splashing in the water. All of them with the same agenda, either be seen by someone, or see them. It was a classic game of cat and mouse played out every day right here. Well almost every day.

“He’s right over there.” I pointed to the closed off hot tub area. Max stood there with his arms folded like he normally did, but it was hard to tell if he was annoyed or just paying attention. He always had a look on his face that was hard as hell to read.

Jackson started to walk in that direction, but I caught him by the arm and pulled him back. “You stay here, and I’ll go talk to him.” He nodded and I hurried over to where Max stood. “Hey, sorry to bother you, Max. I just had some questions about Jackson.”

“Hey, Cory, sure. What can I do for you?” he asked, without looking away from where they were working on the hot tub.

“What happened here?” I asked.

“Oh, a thong got shoved down into the drain and the filtration system sucked it in, so now we’re having a hard time getting it out of there.”

“You’re having a hard time?” Jesse, one of the maintenance guys, said to Max as he

stood in the hot tub with his arm shoved into the filter.

Max shrugged but didn't take his eyes off Jesse's arm. "Did you need something?" he asked.

"Yes, Jackson wants to pay for the time he's here. How can he do that? Or who can he talk to?" That got Max's attention and he turned to meet my eyes.

"He's supposed to be under house arrest until we can drop him off tomorrow. You know this," Max said with that look that said he meant business.

"I know. But he wants a chance at making up for a stupid choice. Max, have you ever done something stupid that you deeply regretted?" His eyes met mine and I knew he understood exactly what I meant.

"He'll have to go to the Hotel Director, he's the one who can tell you what he'd need to pay and where to pay it."

"What if he wants to work until the end of the cruise?"

"Oh, kid, you've got jokes," he said, and I could hear a little of his Brooklyn accent that he tried to hide for reasons I had no clue about.

I shrugged and folded my arms back at him. "Why not? We can always use help. He's good with kids. What if he helps in the kids' area?"

"That's a definite no. He was drunk off his ass yesterday and you want me to trust him with watching kids? Not to mention he'd need a background check to do it and as you know that shit takes time."

"How about in the kitchen?" I asked.

He hesitated a moment before looking past me to Jackson, who looked between Max and I like we'd caught him doing something even though he'd only been standing there patiently waiting. "What?" Jackson asked.

"Cory was just telling me how you want to work on the ship until the end of the cruise. Is that right?" Max asked.

"Yes, sir. I want to make up for all the trouble I've caused. First, I want to pay, and second, I want to work the rest of the trip. If that's okay," Jackson said, and some weird part of me was filled with so much pride for him. I knew from what little he'd told me this was not how he normally dealt with circumstances that were not in his control. But he really did seem to want to change that.

"Cory had mentioned that you're good with kids, but we can't just allow someone to work with kids when we haven't done a background check and checked out a few references. No offense but we take security very seriously on board."

"I understand. Is there something else that's open? I'm willing to try just about anything."

A sly grin slowly formed on Max's lips before he wiped his mouth and the smirk away. "There is, but you may not like it."

"I'll try anything," Jackson said.

"You may regret those words."

"I got it!" Jesse yelled and pulled a bright pink thong out of the panel he'd been digging around in and spun it on his finger. A few guests seated nearby cheered and clapped for him while he stood in the middle of the hot tub grinning.

“They need a dishwasher in the kitchen, are you up for the challenge?” Max asked.

“I’ll give it my best shot.”

“After you talk to the Hotel Director, have Cory take you to the kitchen. You’ll want to talk to the Executive Chef. If you’re not sure who that is just ask, they’re a tight crew and they’ll help you figure out who to speak to. Tell them I said it was okay for you to work until we get to Miami, so they know to plan for you to be there through to the end of the cruise,” Max said.

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate it,” Jackson said and held his hand out to Max, who shook it before turning back to the hot tub.

“Let me take you to the Hotel Director’s office,” I said to Jackson who was still staring at the hot tub.

“Does that happen often?” he asked as we stepped inside the ship.

“More often than you want to know. It could have been so much worse than a thong.” I shivered at the memory of all the strange things that had been pulled out of that hot tub in the time I’d been here and reminded myself never—ever, to use it.

I led him down a hall that was away from the guest area of the ship where the offices were located until at the end of the hall, I saw the door we were looking for. I tentatively knocked lightly and took a deep breath when a voice from inside said to come in. Roger Dayton sat at his desk staring at his computer screen. He’d taken off his uniform jacket but still wore his white button-up shirt, and with his deep black hair cut so close on the side and faded up to his thick hair on top, he was quite the picture.

“Good morning, sir, I’m Cory Wynn. I work in the dining room on clean up. I believe

Max in security told you about a stowaway?”

“Yes, what’s going on with that? And why are you here telling me about it instead of my head of security?”

“Sorry to interrupt, but I’m the stowaway,” Jackson said as he stepped closer to the desk. “I want to fix what I’ve done.”

Mr. Dayton seemed shocked for a split-second before spinning his chair to face us. “Have a seat, let’s talk. Cory, doesn’t your shift start soon?” he asked, and I was so shocked he’d know that, that I could only nod. “Go ahead, I wouldn’t want you to be late. I’ll make sure Mister Carrington is taken care of. Thank you.”

“Thank you, sir.” I glanced at Jackson expecting him to look worried, but he was a picture of calm. “I’ll see you later, Jackson,” I said, before walking out of the room.

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Jackson

I didn't know the Hotel Director, but he was like every other executive I'd met over the years at my dad's hotel. There was actually something comfortable in dealing with him, since I knew what to expect and more importantly, I knew how to play the game.

"Good morning, sir, I would like to pay off the debt that I've incurred since I've been here."

"What debt do you have?" he asked as he steepled his fingers while resting his elbows on his desk.

"Well as I know your head of security told you, I snuck on board yesterday. I owe for the room and the food I've eaten. I lost my wallet and my phone, but I can wire you the money directly from my bank account."

He tapped on his computer before meeting my eyes again. Then suddenly he looked up. "You're staying in a crewmember's cabin?"

"Yes, there were no other rooms available, and Cory had a room to himself."

"What's your game here, Jackson Carrington?" he asked and waited for me to speak.

"There's no game. I'm an idiot. Yesterday I got really drunk and followed some passengers on board. I don't really know why I did it, but I want to make it right. Please, I'd really like to pay my way."

“We still don’t have another room. Where will you stay if I allow you to continue on the cruise?”

“I’d like to stay in Cory’s cabin if I could. I’d also like to work. Max mentioned they need a dishwasher in the kitchen, and I do have experience with that.”

“Really? I’m surprised by that,” he said and continued to stare at me.

“My father owns one of the larger private hotels in the Sacramento area. He wanted myself and my siblings to learn all aspects of running a hotel when we were younger. Since it has an expensive steakhouse located on top of it there were dishes that needed to be washed, and for a summer when I was in high school, I was the dishwasher on the weekends.”

“I respect the fact you’re offering to work, but I’m not sure I can trust you to do that. What if you decide to get drunk the night before and you don’t show up for your shift?”

“I’m not going to do that. I feel horrible for all the trouble I’ve caused, and I would really like the chance to prove that I’m not the loser I know you think I am.” I wasn’t beyond begging, but I hoped it didn’t get to that. This chance meant a lot to me, and I knew that was directly tied to Cory, but I truly wanted to show him I was willing to make an effort.

“If I let you work, you wouldn’t need to pay for the cabin or the food. That’s included for all employees. But if you are late, or you do not do the job we expect you to do, you’ll be sitting in that cabin the rest of the voyage. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir, and thank you.” I stood and offered my hand. He shook it and spent the next thirty minutes filling out the paperwork for me to become a temporary employee.

“I’ll still need a copy of your passport, and your social security card.”

“I can have my parents get that to you today.” I hoped they were willing to help and then I realized I couldn’t remember the last time I’d spoken with either of them.

“Come on then, I’ll lead you to the galley and Chef can show you what you’ll be doing.” He stood and walked briskly down one hall and then another before we entered the biggest kitchen I’d ever been in.

“Whoa, this is huge,” I mumbled, and a sous chef that was nearby prepping vegetables snickered at me.

“That it is,” Roger said, before introducing me to the chef that would be showing me the dishwasher and explaining their routines.

“As you know there is food constantly being sent from the kitchen, so there are always dishes to be done. Orlando, who usually works this shift, had to leave when his wife went into labor, so we’ve been short the whole cruise,” he explained after introducing himself as Javier. There were stacks of trays all loaded with plates of every size and hundreds of drink glasses. “Have you used an industrial dishwasher before?”

“Yes, but not this exact one,” I said and paid attention as he ran a tray of dishes through and showed me every step along the way.

“Here’s an apron, now show me what you’ve got,” he said and crossed his arms as he watched me put a tray in and organize the other trays to get them ready to go. When the first one was done, I pulled it out and stacked it next to the one he’d done.

“Where do they go when they’re clean?” I asked, and he grinned at me. I hoped that was a good sign and he wasn’t thinking I was a complete dumbass.

“Follow me,” he said, and spent the next twenty-minutes leading me around the kitchen to the different areas I’d be restocking. The kitchen was a buzz of activity, and as soon as the dishes I’d put in were clean, another kitchen worker took the tray and rushed it over to restock the plates. “You’ll want to wear gloves, everything is superheated when it comes out, so don’t take the chance on burning yourself.”

“Got it, anything else?” I stood in front of the dishwashing station and made sure I knew where everything was and how it all worked while he was standing there. But in a strange way it all felt very familiar, and I remembered how I actually didn’t mind doing this job. I could slip in my earbuds and listen to whatever I wanted as long as I kept them stocked with clean dishes.

He patted me on the back as I rinsed the tray before sliding it into the dishwasher. “Good luck, we’re about to hit the lunch rush. You’re going to need it,” he said and walked back to where he’d been earlier.

I got into a rhythm, and I was making a big dent on the dishes that had been stacked when I first got here, but then slowly those stacks that I’d nearly finished, started to grow. I glanced at Javier who grinned at me as he rushed around the kitchen doing whatever job he was working on. The noise level went up and along with the sounds of busy conversations, the clang and clash of metal rang out through the kitchen as the lunch rush officially hit.

Putting my head down, I forced myself to focus and do the job that needed to be done. I wasn’t sure yet if I could keep up with the amount of dishes going through, but I was going to give it my best shot.

Cory

Today was just as busy as yesterday had been but possibly even more chaotic with every passenger on board and ready to eat at the same time. I was more than happy that I was bussing today, and not taking orders or dealing with passengers beyond clearing their tables. But because everyone was eating on board today, as soon as one table was cleared, we were resetting it for the next guest.

The cart we used to put the totes with dirty dishes on was full, so I hurried to take it back to the kitchen. Everyone was running around trying to keep up on orders and to prepare for dinner which would also be busy. I rushed over to the dishwashing station and started unloading the cart, not paying attention to much more than getting rid of the massive amount of dirty dishes I'd collected.

"Sorry about this, today is really busy," I said to the dishwasher that was busy pushing a full tray into the machine.

"No problem," Jackson said as he turned around with a big smile and started stacking the trays next to the sink so he could rinse them off.

"Oh my god what are you doing here?" I asked and found myself grinning back at him.

He shrugged his shoulder like there was nothing unusual about his little rich-boy-self working as a dishwasher. "Just earning my keep. I've worked as a dishwasher before and the regular guy that has this shift couldn't make it on this cruise." He worked the whole time he talked, and I would have sworn he'd done this job for more than just

the hour or so I knew he had.

“You look like you know what you’re doing,” I said, and he met my eyes again with a grin.

“I’ve done this before at the hotel. It’s been a while, but I’m doing okay so far.”

I looked at the overloaded tray I’d brought and the trays that were already stacked there, and was glad it was him and not me. “Okay well I’ll be back with another load in a while.”

“I’ll have the cart cleared for you the next time you come back,” he said and pulled out a tray of clean dishes that he pushed to the side to cool before picking up the tray that had been there and hurrying off toward the kitchen to put them away.

It was hard to look away from him and such a strange juxtaposition to the drunk partier I’d met just the day before. But I liked this version of Jackson, and I hoped he’d stick around longer than one shift. Another busser hurried in to bring another cart of dishes and seeing him got me moving.

The restaurant was still just as busy, but thankfully the line to get a table was not as long, so I could see a chance to catch up for a short time until dinner. We only had an hour from the time the dining room closed after lunch to when it opened for early dinner service to clear all tables and reset them from the casual lunch setting to the more formal dinner service, and we needed every minute we could get to make it happen.

“Cory, just a reminder, tonight’s dinner is semi-formal,” the maître d said as he hurried from table to table checking on guests to make sure they got everything they needed.

“Are you working the dinner shift too?” Johnny asked as he paused on his way to deliver a drink order.

“Sounds like it. How about you?”

“Yes, I’m on drinks for dinner, and then I’ll be helping at tonight’s party.”

“What’s the theme?” Because they all had a theme, and I had given up trying to keep up on them and just made sure I knew that day.

“Eighties. It should be fun,” he said and glanced around at the remaining guests. “I better go so we can get everyone taken care of and move onto dinner.”

“See you later,” I said and went back to setting up the table I’d just cleared. Since no other guests would be using it, I replaced the tablecloth and set it for dinner. That one hour before dinner service started would also be when I’d need to take my lunch break.

The next hour I hurried around bussing tables, taking the cart back to Jackson before returning to the restaurant to fill it again. Finally, I could tell we were making a difference and the clean, set tables finally outnumbered those that guests were still seated at. I was about to take another cart of dishes back to the kitchen when one of the waiters told me to go ahead and take my lunch break.

I rushed to the crew mess hall and was shocked to see Jackson and Johnny already seated at a table. Wasting no time, I grabbed a tray and filled it with a variety of foods before hurrying to take a seat with them. “How’s it going?” I asked Jackson.

“Better than I thought it would. I can’t believe how many dishes the ship uses in an hour, let alone a whole meal service.” He took a bite of pizza and met my eyes. God the look in his eyes. I thought he was hot with his aviators when I could barely see his

eyes, but the way he was looking at me now was a whole new level.

My eyes shot to Johnny who I knew for a fact knew what I was thinking, or at least was close, and took a bite of my own food before saying anything. “It really is crazy. But they serve food all day in all the different restaurants and cafés, so it adds up. The kitchen you’re working in only serves the main dining room and room service, there are two smaller kitchens that are located in the other cafés,” I rambled, making Johnny giggle.

“When I first came to work here, I worked in the kitchen for a while doing prep. After that, serving drinks is nothing,” Johnny said.

“Yeah, I’ve done dishes at a restaurant before, but it’s nothing like this,” Jackson said, and I was amazed that he seemed proud of the work he’d done. Maybe he really did just need a chance to prove himself, and maybe he’d never been given that opportunity in the past.

“They have to be thrilled with you in the kitchen. Since Orlando wasn’t able to make the cruise, they’ve all been trying to keep up, but it wasn’t working,” Johnny said.

“Well, I’m hoping I can get caught up on all the dishes by the end of dinner service. I’m glad it was only one day they were without a dishwasher,” Jackson said. It was strange to hear them talking about work on the ship the same way Johnny and I normally did, but I loved it, and if the look on Jackson’s face said anything, he was happy about it too.

Jackson

As the three of us ate I slowly realized this was what I loved about working that summer as a dishwasher. The easy camaraderie with the kitchen staff, and how there was a slight us against them vibe concerning difficult guests, but that we were all more than willing to set right. It was the same here.

“Dinner is semi-formal, so not quite as many plates for the service. You might just be able to catch up,” Cory said.

I rubbed my hands together making him laugh. “Challenge accepted. There were so many dishes when I got there. I don’t know how they thought the kitchen staff could handle it, they’re busy as hell.”

“Are you working during the party?” Cory asked.

“I don’t know. I was so excited just to be put to work I didn’t ask for any details.”

“It’s an eighties theme,” Johnny said.

“That sounds fun. I mean not that I would even want to go. I’m finally feeling better, so I don’t plan on drinking for a long time.” I wanted Cory to know I was serious about not drinking and saying it out loud made it feel more real to me. He grinned at me, and I couldn’t look away. I didn’t consider myself to be an alcoholic, but I definitely had a problem with it, and this was the perfect chance for me to change that.

“So,” Johnny said and cleared his throat. “Are you guys going to the crew party tonight?”

Cory’s eyes widened slightly before he once again looked at me and waited for me to answer. “Not me. I meant what I said.”

“I could probably use a little more sleep,” he said.

“You guys sound like the adult section. But I guess I could skip tonight too.”

“Hey, a good night’s rest never hurt anyone,” Cory said.

We all ate and chatted about how work was going, and once again I was hit with that feeling of belonging somewhere and actually enjoying doing something worth doing and not just lazing around drinking.

“I’m going to get back to work. I’ll see you guys around,” Johnny said as he stood from the table and left Cory and me alone.

“So, how’s it really going?” he asked and leaned in close.

I settled my hand over the top of his and leaned in closer to him. “It’s going really well. I was worried that the Hotel Director wasn’t going to let me work or pay my bills. But I think they were so desperate for a dishwasher they took a chance. I’m not going to let them down.”

“Good thing you had experience. I wasn’t kidding when I said I’m glad I’m not working in the kitchen. It’s so fast-paced and I have no kitchen experience, so no thanks,” Cory said.

“I forgot how much I actually enjoyed doing it. I can’t wait to get some earbuds so I

can listen to music while I work.” And a phone because I couldn’t listen to music without a phone. But I hadn’t missed it since I’d lost it.

“You can borrow mine if you want, and my phone. I don’t mind, and I can’t wear them on the floor.”

“Thank you, but I’m going to wait until I can get my own. It’s more than time for me to pay my own way.”

“Whatever you want. If you get bored, go ahead and use them.”

“I can’t imagine getting bored, and I’m glad you didn’t want to go to the crew party. I can’t wait to lie next to you tonight and just relax.” I hadn’t meant to say that even if it was true. But the complete truth was I thought of Cory holding me in his arms at night way more than I even wanted to admit to myself.

“That sounds nice,” he whispered.

Sometimes when Cory looked at me, I knew exactly what he was thinking. When he was mad or upset it was written all over his face, but there were times he looked at me and I thought I saw something more than just a guy who was helping someone out. The way he brushed my hair back over my ear when we were lying there, and his gentleness called to me in so many ways.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked me.

“Me? Oh, nothing. Just hoping I can get all caught up on dishes when I go back to work.” I bit my lip and hoped he believed me. I wasn’t ready to get into a deep conversation about emotions and I think he realized that.

“I hope so too, and I can’t wait to hold you all night again. Maybe we can see how

the eighties party is going after we're done with work," Cory said, not making a big deal of telling me he'd be holding me all night.

"You're amazing," I said, and that made him blush. He was beautiful, and I was lucky to have met someone like him. "Let's get back to work so we can get it all done."

We walked out of the dining room together and past the pool area. The lounge chairs were lined up right next to each other the length of the swimming pool and under a cover that gave some protection from the sun. There were lots of thongs and other swimsuits that somehow seemed even smaller than a thong. It was fun to look though, and both of us got an eyeful until we walked into the kitchen area.

"I'm in awe that some of those swimsuits are able to stay in place," I said, making Cory laugh.

"I know! There's a topless deck on top of the ship closer to the smokestack, but since this cruise is mostly men, they open it up for nude bathing too."

"That doesn't seem like a good idea. Isn't it a lot easier to get sunburned on a cruise ship? I swear I've heard that somewhere."

"I don't know if it's easier, but when the ship is moving it's definitely breezier, and if it's sunny people don't realize how much sun they're getting. Just be glad you don't work at the clinic that's on board. They'll be dealing with sunburn in places you never thought you could get burned," Cory said, making both of us laugh—and cringe.

"Think I can pass on that too," I said as we arrived outside the kitchen. "Guess I'll see you later?"

“Yep. We should both be done around the same time. Hopefully it’s not swamped. But I know they’re all going to be eating early so they have time to go back to their rooms and get ready for the party later. Then they’ll go to one of the bars and wait for the music to start. I’ll stop by here when I’m done and see if you’re still here.”

“Okay, bye, Cory,” I said and like the unapologetic fool I was, I watched him walk down the hall on the way to the dining room.

Cory

I forced myself not to look back as I hurried to the dining room and settled into the dinner routine. Guests were arriving, and as usual for a seated dinner, most were dressed in suits or tuxes. The host seated everyone, and I spent the first thirty minutes pouring water until the first guests had finished their salads and I could start collecting dirty dishes. I had never been so anxious to collect a dirty dish in my whole life.

When I finally had enough on a cart to not look obvious, I hurried back to the kitchen. I stood for a moment and watched Jackson work. He never slowed down as he first grabbed a tray of dishes, rinsed them off, and slid them into the dishwasher. Once it started, he walked around to pick up a tray of clean dishes to take back to the kitchen. He noticed me when he walked back a few moments later.

“Hey, do you have some dishes for me?” he asked.

“Yes, they’re just starting to finish the first course.” I pushed the cart over and I took the one that was empty. “There shouldn’t be as much tonight, but never say never,” I said.

“I just loaded the last batch of the dishes that had put us behind, so it should go a little smoother now.” He dried his hand on a towel before settling his hands on his hips. He was so happy. It was easy to see, and if his parents thought giving him a life of partying without any responsibilities was what he wanted, they’d be wrong.

“That’s great! You really look happy working here,” I said and tried not to wince. I

hadn't meant to say that out loud, but it was so obvious.

"I am. Hey, I gotta get back to work. I'll see you with your next delivery." He immediately opened the dishwasher and pulled out another tray of clean dishes before shoving a dirty tray in. Then I realized I was watching him wash dishes and I knew for a fact there was more between us than me helping a guy.

"See you later," I said and hurried back out to the dining room. It was now full and even though it was semi-formal almost everyone was dressed very formally. Getting to see handsome men was definitely a bonus, and seeing a boatful of gay couples gave me hope that someday I could find my other half. "Or maybe I already have," I mumbled.

"What's that?" a guest asked me as I leaned in to take his plate. I'd been so lost in thought I wasn't thinking.

"Oh nothing, just talking to myself."

"Well, it's only a problem if you answer," he said and smiled while everyone else at the table chuckled. I picked up as many plates as I could carry and turned to walk away when the same guy stopped me. "What's your name?"

"I'm Cory," I said and hoped he wasn't asking so he could complain to one of my bosses about me.

"Nice to meet you, Cory, I'm Neal," he said and held out his hand to shake, but my hands were full, so I just sort of shrugged.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. I wanted to ask if you would be at the party later?" He was cute with dark

blond hair and blue eyes, but something told me to be wary. Everyone at his table was dressed to the nines and all of them seemed to be in on some joke that only they got. There was just an air of arrogance that hung over them that I couldn't explain.

“Sorry, no. I'll be off work by then and I plan to relax for the rest of the night.” It wasn't a lie, and he didn't need as much information as I'd given him, but still he paused like he thought if he waited long enough, I'd do what he wanted. Well, he was about to get a lesson in how little I cared about who he was.

“Is there anything else?” I asked, and when he only smiled at me, I turned and put the dirty dishes on the cart before going back and collecting more.

This cruise was different than most because one person had reserved the whole ship and everyone on board was here at the invitation of a social media influencer. I had yet to see him, but there were private dining rooms I had never been to that were most likely where he and his main party were.

I glanced around the room and to me it looked like the same crowd as any other cruise. There were all ages but there were definitely more men on this trip, but that wasn't a bad thing. Noticing a table nearby with more plates, I hurried over to take them and noticed that Neal guy was watching me. I ignored him, and their table until finally I had no other choice but to go back to it. I picked up one plate and the only other one left was conveniently right in front of Neal.

“You don't like me much, do you?” he asked.

“What? I don't even know you. So, I have no opinion of you at all,” I said and tried to smile, but this was getting weird. Without waiting for him to say something else, I took the dishes I'd collected over to the cart and pushed it back to the kitchen without a backwards glance.

Jackson was still working as hard as he had been when I was here last time, but he looked up and smiled like he hadn't seen me all day. "Hey, how's it going out there?"

"It's going. The first seating is just being served their main course so not much longer until we'll be clearing the first seating and preparing for the second."

"Are you okay? You seem off," he said and gave me a critical once over.

"I'm fine, just ready for this day to be done." I didn't feel this way often. I really did enjoy this job, but so much had happened the last two days, and the more I thought about spending a quiet night with Jackson the more I wanted it.

He walked over to me and pulled me in for a hug. He squeezed me tight and shook me around until I couldn't help but laugh. "What's that for?"

"You just looked like you needed it. Don't worry, this shift will be over before you know it," he said, and I wondered when it had happened that the guy I found so disgusting on the beach had turned into such a sweetheart.

"Thank you. I guess I did." I walked back out, smile in place and full of anticipation for work to be done, and resolved to avoid that guy's table by any means possible.

Jackson

Work was buzzing along. I was getting everything done, and the constant rush was addictive. The harder I worked the harder I wanted to work. Cory was in and out of the kitchen all night, and that wasn't a bad thing either. I still wasn't sure what was going on between us, but I decided I'd let him lead, and I was going to stick with that idea.

Finally, after the last plate was washed, the sous chef that had originally put me to work walked over to where I was wiping everything down. "You did a great job today. I know it wasn't easy, but you were on it and we noticed. Any chance that you want to continue working for us after we get back to Miami? We can always use a hard worker."

"I'll keep that in mind, thank you. Did you want me back at the same time tomorrow?"

"Yes of course. We want you as many times as you want to work." He laughed and walked away leaving me feeling pretty proud of myself. It might have only been dishes, but there was a mountain of them, and I'd handled it. I took off my apron and hung it on the hook next to the dishwasher then made my way down the hall that led to the deck.

It was dark now, and the deck was alive with activity. The eighties party hadn't started yet but there were a lot of people already dressed in their neon and club styles. The bars were open, and they were all partying. A week ago, I would have walked right over to the bar and had a drink or five, but not tonight. I was tired, but it was a

good tired, and none of the hot men I walked by could tempt me enough to get me to stay here. I waved to Johnny who was carrying a tray of drinks, and I remembered Cory mentioning he had to serve drinks, but I wasn't sure if it was during the eighties party or just before it started.

The way to the crew quarters was more familiar to me now, and as I walked past the crew mess hall I checked to see if Cory was there yet but didn't see him, so I rushed down the hall to his door. I tried to open it but it was locked, and I thought I should maybe ask for a key just as he flung the door open.

"I'm so happy you're here," he said, and pulled me into the room by the front of my shirt. "Do you know I've been thinking about you all day?" He nuzzled into my neck and whispered close to my ear.

My arms came up around him and squeezed him tight. "I'm happy to be here. I've been thinking about you too. Every time the door opened, I looked up to see if it was you," I admitted because what was the point in holding back. He pulled back enough to meet my eyes before slowly leaning in and pressing his lips to mine.

It was an innocent kiss, but it was Cory, and nothing with him was average or not important. He kissed me again, and this time he opened his mouth enough to touch my lips with his tongue. I opened my mouth, and we stood there kissing. I'd never been a big fan of kissing. I didn't mind it, but I didn't love it either. Kissing Cory was different to any kiss I'd had before. He groaned low in his throat and pressed his hardness against me while pressing his hand against my back. "I want you," he whispered.

I pulled back enough to meet his eyes. The desire was easy to see, but to emphasize his words, he ground against me before sliding his hand down between us and squeezing my dick. "I want you," he repeated.

I could only nod as he guided us to his bed, and in the back of my mind I thought this was the first time I'd been on his bed. He pulled me down on top of him, but I rolled us, so he was on top, and he instantly ground down on me. He was hard and made me harder. "Are you sure?" I finally managed to ask.

He met my eyes and gave me a serious look. "You don't know me well enough to know I don't screw around with things like that. But know I would never tell you I want you if I didn't." He smiled then before helping me pull my shirt off. The sunburn I'd gotten from the beach was slightly tender but not enough to be uncomfortable and everything felt so good I didn't want to mention it.

"I want you to fuck me." I said what I'd wanted from the first time I'd seen him. He might have been a waiter, but he definitely had that energy that told me he was the one in charge. Just thinking about it made me want him more. He kissed me again and we fell into a frenzy of lips and hands, kissing and groping. Touching all the parts of him I'd noticed but had forced myself not to focus on, now those parts were under my fingertips as I tried to soak up every sensation.

I tugged at the back of his shirt until he sat up enough for me to pull his shirt off, and when he pressed his shirtless body against mine the fire of lust ignited into an inferno, and we still had our pants on. He stood and unbuttoned my shorts before pulling them down with the briefs he'd loaned me.

"I forgot to take you to the lost and found," he said out of the blue.

"I don't mind wearing your clothes," I said and pulled him down for a kiss. He stood and pulled his own pants off. I'd seen him naked, but this was different. This was so very different. There was a small shelf next to the bed and he opened a shaving bag and took out lube and a strip of condoms. "Are we going to need that many?" I asked.

"Possibly," he said with zero guilt or humor.

There had been a moment I thought of Cory as shy and quiet, but when he lifted my leg over his shoulder and worked his lubed fingers into me, he was far from shy about it. He did whatever he wanted, and I was more than happy to let him take what he wanted. Once he set a rhythm with his fingers in my ass he started to pump my dick. It was sensation overload, and I couldn't decide if I wanted him to fuck me harder with his fingers or pump my dick faster with his other hand.

Just when I was on the edge of shooting, he pulled his fingers out and pressed into me. He pushed all the way in, and then kissed me before I had time to recover from the fact his dick was in me. "I've wanted you since I saw you yesterday," he whispered before kissing me again.

"You hated me yesterday," I managed to say.

"I still wanted you."

His hips started to move, and he never slowed down as he held my leg over his shoulder and pounded into me. I needed to come, but he brushed my hand away when I reached for my straining hard dick. I started to moan as my senses were assaulted by pleasure. Sounds of desperation, and passion, and waves and waves of sensation. I thought for a moment if I didn't come soon, I would lose my fucking mind, and just when I was about to beg him to let me touch my dick, I came.

"Oh god," I said and didn't recognize my own voice. Cory reached down and pumped me at the same time I felt him release in the condom. It seemed to last too long, but not long enough all at the same time. But finally, when I had calmed my breathing enough to meet his eyes, the look he gave me said more than all the words we'd spoken and the emotions neither of us were ready to admit or address. I could love him. The thought echoed so loud in my ears I was afraid he'd heard. He brushed the hair back from the side of my face and leaned in to kiss me softly as his spent dick slipped out of me.

“Let’s take a shower.” He stood and held out his hand while pulling off the condom with the other, and right then I knew my fucking heart was never going to let this guy go. And I was totally fine with that.

Cory

I hadn't meant for us to fuck, but he was on my mind all day. Seeing him work and really put in an effort had shown me he was serious about making a change, and even though I'd seen him at his worst, everything felt so right with him. When we were lying in the bed together, I wanted him more than I'd ever wanted anyone. I thought of how annoyed I was with him on the beach and huffed out a laugh while turning on the water in the shower.

"What?" he asked and hugged me from behind.

"When I saw you on the beach, I would never have guessed I'd be having the best sex of my life with you just a couple of days later." I turned and kissed away his smile.

"The best sex of your life?"

"Yeah. I'm not going to try to deny it," I said and stepped into the shower. It was tiny so we wouldn't be in there long, but we'd be a little cleaner than we were now.

A short time later we were lying in bed facing each other when he smiled at me.

"What?"

"It was the best sex of my life too," he whispered.

"How did this even happen? I'm so confused because I legitimately did not like you, now I can't imagine you not being here," I said and cupped his cheek. "How can that be?"

“Fate? I’m not sure. I’ve never wanted to be with anyone for more than one night. And I really do mean no one. But you did some kind of magic or something and made me fall—” His eyes widened as he clamped his mouth shut and I knew what he was going to say without him saying it. I fought against saying those words myself. But it wasn’t time yet.

“It might have been magic,” I said and pulled him close. “Whatever it is I don’t want it to end.”

“Me either. Even if I have to do dishes,” he said before shaking with laughter. “The things I do for you.”

That made me laugh and the two of us rolled around the bed just enjoying being together without there being a ship full of people around us. “We still have nearly a week, let’s just enjoy it and see how we feel when the cruise is done,” I said, and hoped that gave us enough time to see if it was just lust or—

“I like that idea, but I can tell you right now I won’t change my mind.” He looked so determined, or maybe he just liked to be challenged.

“Well, I won’t change my mind either.” Just then his stomach growled. “I forgot we were going to go back out and eat.”

“Do they still have food out?” he asked. I knew he had to be starved, he wasn’t used to working all day like he had. Checking my phone for the time I thought we might get lucky.

“Let’s go see.” We both threw some of my clothes on and hurried down the hall barefoot. Crew showed up to eat in all stages of dress so no one would think twice about us not having shoes on. We walked in and there were still a few people eating. The hot food trays had been taken away but the food that was left was wrapped in

foil. “Looks like burgers,” I said, and the two of us took two each and some bags of chips.

“Can we eat in your room?” Jackson asked.

“I don’t see why not.” We did another onceover of the food, and both grabbed some cookies before walking back across the hall.

He flopped on his bed and patted it next to him. “Let’s eat here so we can sleep in your bed. It’ll be like a picnic.”

“Like I could say no to that.” We sat next to each other eating our burgers, fighting over chips, and sharing bites of cookies. It was romantic in a very nonromantic way and felt so good to finally not have all the bullshit between us. Being with him now, I didn’t recognize the guy from the beach, and I hoped I never had to deal with that part of him.

“So, tell me what you did today.” That seemed to surprise him, and he set the remains of his food down and reached for my hand.

“It was good. I think they were all expecting me to give up because they hadn’t been keeping up on the dishes but I wasn’t going to give up, and knowing they expected me to fail pushed me even more.”

“You’re competitive,” I said and grinned.

“With some things, not so much with others. I like to finish something that no one else thinks can be done. Dishes are easy, they didn’t require any thought, just a lot of elbow grease.”

“Why aren’t you working at your family’s hotel?” I asked and hoped that wasn’t a

sore subject.

“I thought that’s what I wanted to do, but it’s my dad’s thing, not mine. When I worked in the kitchen I didn’t mind it. He mainly leaves the restaurant to the restaurant staff, but the hotel is a whole other thing. He has his hands in every part of the business. I understand why he does, but it made working for him very stifling. Sometimes he cares a lot more about his hotel than he does about anyone who works there or his family.” His eyes darkened as he stared off for a moment before looking back at me and smiling. “He’s definitely been happier since I’ve been out of the state.”

“Jackson. I had no idea. I guess we just think money is what we need to be happy, but it doesn’t sound like that’s always the case.” I wasn’t sure what else to say, I really felt bad about his family situation. Or what he perceived it to be anyway.

“It’s not as sad as it seems. My brother and sister both work for the hotel and they’re happy.”

“It’s not for everyone though. I never understood a parent who would push their kid to do the same job but then be critical of how he does that job. It’s obvious to me you’re a hard worker.”

“I don’t mind working, but I prefer physical work to mental, and it’s not that I can’t handle the mental work. It’s that I get more satisfaction from a day of hard physical work,” he said with a shrug.

“I get that. I’d rather be busy running around all over than sitting behind a desk. Which is why I never went to college. When I graduated high school, that was enough school for me.”

“I have a master’s degree in business,” Jackson said with a grin.

“Ohhhh look at the big brain on you,” I said and ruffled his hair. “I thought you said you have a degree in Physical Education?”

“I do. I stayed in school hoping to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. Eh, I’d still rather wash dishes.” He laughed then, but this laugh was different. It was light and happy and sounded like a burden had been lifted with his words and he was somehow happier. And looking into his eyes I could see it. He was happy, and I was now worried how fast the remainder of the cruise would go by and he’d leave while I was on to the next cruise.

Jackson

Waking up in Cory's arms had become one of my favorite things in only a couple of days. I didn't need alcohol or anything else to fall asleep, all I needed were his arms to hold me, and mind-blowing sex didn't hurt either. "I know you're awake," he said from behind me.

"I don't think I've slept so good in years. Must be all that fresh air," I lied.

"Must be," Cory said and kissed my shoulder.

"The fact you fucked me into oblivion before feeding me had nothing to do with it," I said, making him laugh.

"What time do you work today?"

"They told me the same time as yesterday, what about you?" I pulled him over, so we were facing each other.

"Same for me too. Charlotte Amalie is a nice port. The ship can pull in right at the dock so guests will be back and forth until we leave. Most of them will come back to the ship to eat so we're still on the same schedule."

"Is there a party tonight?"

"Yes, I think the theme is Roman Empire, so that should be fun. I bet they make the staff wear some sort of costume too," Cory said with a grin.

“Are you working at the party?” I was still trying to figure out how the ship’s schedule worked. Especially on days we were in port compared to days at sea. This was the first time I’d be going into port, and since I was supposed to be leaving the ship today, I was a little on edge.

“I don’t think so, but I might be on cleanup afterwards. It depends if they’re short or not.”

“Does everyone work the same schedule every day?”

“Some do, some don’t. The maintenance crew have their own schedule that isn’t based on passenger schedules, but our schedules are based around them. There’s an early crew for breakfast and early morning activities, but they don’t work the late-night parties.” Cory stood then, with his hands on his hips. “Let’s go get some breakfast. Johnny will be shocked to see us this early.”

“He works later too, right?” I asked and stretched before standing.

“Yes, he usually does, but he’s an early riser so even if he goes to bed late, he’s always up early. Plus, he’s always on drinks or bartending, so they put him where it’s busiest. The party will be busy after dinner, but it’s only ninety-minutes and he doesn’t have to worry about clean-up. Sometimes he just stays behind to help.”

Cory’s phone pinged with a text message, and he grinned before going to the door. He walked back holding a cellophane wrapped package. “They sent you some uniforms.” He tossed them on the bed and the two of us got dressed for the day.

“Great, although I really haven’t minded wearing your clothes.”

“I know I’ve said this before but let’s go to the lost and found before work. I’m sure there’s clothes there you can use. Not that I mind you wearing mine, but unless we

want to do laundry every few days we'll need more."

"I really don't mind doing laundry," I said, willing to help out wherever I could. "You'll just have to show me where it is."

"Maybe we can do it tomorrow morning. I mean we have the same schedule so far, I doubt it'll change much," Cory said. We stepped out of the cabin and walked to the crew mess hall. It was packed now compared to how dead it was here last night. There was also a chef making waffles which sounded really fucking good to me.

"Hey, Rana, why are they making you cook downstairs this morning?" Cory asked him and both of us waited for them to cook.

"I was there early, and they asked if I would mind. It's a nice change," he said with a smile. Almost all the employees I'd met so far seemed happy with their jobs. It was definitely hard work, but they all took everything in stride and made the most of the weeks they were on shift. "I saw you were in the kitchen yesterday. Are you washing dishes again today?"

"Yes. I finally got caught up, I don't want to let it get behind again," I said, and it was nice to be included in a conversation that didn't involve getting another drink or who looked like an easy hookup.

"The boss said you did a great job. They were really freaking out when Orlando's wife went into labor."

"I'm glad it worked out."

As he passed us each a waffle onto the plates, we were holding, he asked, "Are you going to continue with the cruise line?"

“I’m not sure. I love it, but I’ve only been here a few days.”

“I took a vacation with NautiCaribbean and decided I wanted to work for them. That was five years ago,” he said and waited for my reaction. “I haven’t regretted that decision at all.”

“Wow, that says a lot. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to work anyplace I’ve stayed on vacation.” When I was a kid we traveled a lot, always to the nicest places, but it felt so stifling. I wasn’t allowed to go to the pool and play because someone might judge my family by how crazy I got at the pool. Sometimes they put me in the kids’ club at a hotel while they went out on excursions or did activities I wasn’t interested in. Being the youngest sucked.

“Maybe you didn’t stay at the right place,” he said with a big smile.

“You could be right about that,” I said, and the three of us laughed. “I guess I’ll see you later in the kitchen.”

“I’ll be there, I’m on sauces today so I’ll be at the other end of the kitchen, but I’ll be thinking of you when I need clean dishes.”

“See you later,” I said, and after Cory and I added eggs, bacon, and fruit to our plates we walked over to where Johnny was already seated. “Hey, you were right, he is here.”

“What?” Johnny said looking up.

“I told him you’re an early riser no matter how late you work.” Cory sat next to me, and a look passed between us. A look I knew Johnny noticed. When he bowed his head and snickered, I knew for sure. “He’s onto us,” Cory leaned in and said just loud enough for Johnny to hear.

“Oh, I’ve been waiting for it to happen since day one. No one hates someone that much without either falling in love or kicking their ass. And I haven’t seen any ass kicking.” Johnny took a sip of his coffee while looking at each of us.

“Well you’re not wrong,” I finally said, making Cory laugh.

Cory

Tonight's party theme was the Roman Empire, and on past cruises this was my favorite night. Everyone dressed in various stages of dress from long flowing gowns to something similar to a loincloth, it was wonderful and somehow a little magical. I enjoyed the hot bodies on display while draped to reveal just enough to tease, but then I remembered I had my own hot body to go back to this evening.

"What's got you smiling?" the host asked as I passed by where he was tidying up the entrance to the dining room.

"Just thinking about Rome," I said, and we both laughed. Most of the crew were single or just liked to be social. So, the party nights were always a hit with both the guests and the crew. Even when we complained it was mostly that we wanted to be a part of the fun. Mostly.

"Cory, right?" The same guy from last night walked toward me. He was dressed in linen shorts and a button-up shirt making him look like a rich tourist, not someone out for a casual day on a Caribbean island. He was probably around the same age as Jackson, but he seemed so much older.

"Yes, sir." I braced for what he'd say next. Most of the guests were still on the island, and since lunch service hadn't started yet we were the only ones here.

"I want you to join me for lunch today," he said. It wasn't a request. It was a demand, something I didn't deal with lightly.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. I want you to join me for lunch. Make sure you order something special to be brought to my room. We’ll be dining there so we can have some privacy. There are a few things I want to discuss that are best kept to the privacy of my room.” The way he spoke definitely wasn’t a request. He actually thought he could demand I spend time with him, and I had no choice but to comply. He was about to learn how little control he had over me.

“Sorry, but I work today, just like I do every day. We don’t have any backup staff, so there’s no way I can take time off to have lunch with you.” I looked him straight in the eyes while I spoke, so he’d see I meant what I was saying, but he smirked before turning away.

“Do you know who I am?” he said as he turned around and walked back toward me.

“He may not, but I do,” Jackson said as he walked into the dining room dressed in his kitchen uniform.

“JJ Carrington? What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Working, not that it’s any of your business. Cory works today, he was very patient with you and explained he cannot leave his job to spend time with you. Now, what part did you not understand?” Jackson asked and stepped next to me.

“He should appreciate that someone like me noticed him. What the fuck, JJ, you’re usually the one to hit it and forget it,” he said, and I knew he wasn’t wrong.

“You’re right, but I’m trying not to be the asshole I’ve been in the past. Plus, if someone isn’t interested, they’re not interested.” Jackson didn’t look away, and I could hear in his voice he meant every word. Which surprised Neal, so he stepped up

his bullshit.

“Maybe your captain would like to hear how you refused a guest request,” Neal said, and looked at me. Then he stared at Jackson, obviously trying to intimidate him.

“Maybe he’d like to hear how one of the passengers was harassing a member of his crew. I don’t think your followers would like to read online what a douche you really are, and I think I heard your daddy wasn’t going to be bailing you out anymore.” Jackson stepped forward and stared him down. He knew this guy. I wasn’t sure how but there was too much tension between the two of them for this to be a random thing. “I have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Cory’s important, but you and all the bullshit that goes along with you mean nothing to me, and your little staring game does nothing other than waste my time,” Jackson said.

“Gentlemen, is there a problem?” Max, the security guard who had put Jackson under house arrest, walked over and stood between them.

“This guy was harassing Cory,” Jackson said. “This is his usual bullshit and Cory doesn’t need it or deserve it.”

“Cory?” Max said.

“He was trying to force me to spend time with him in his room, but I explained to him I wasn’t interested and that I’m here to work. This is my job, but he didn’t want to listen and tried to force me,” Cory said, and ignored Neal.

“That’s not true. You have no proof that’s what happened.”

“Actually, he does, I heard the whole conversation from here,” the host said as he stepped over from where he’d stayed at the entry. “He was trying to intimidate Cory to get his way, even when Cory said no.”

“Sir, you’ll need to come with me,” Max said and pulled out his radio. “Advise the captain I have a guest that I’ll be bringing to the bridge to speak to him.”

“Over,” a voice crackled through the radio.

Neal’s eyes widened when he realized no one was playing, and it didn’t matter what his name was here. Here he’d be held responsible.

“This way please,” Max said and walked behind him as another security guard walked next to him.

“Are you okay?” Jackson asked.

“Yeah, he didn’t touch me or anything, he was just pushy,” I explained, but I wasn’t sure what could have happened. “He knew you.”

“Yes, unfortunately we grew up together. His family is in the same business as my family, so we were at the same events a few times a year. He’s always been an entitled asshole.” Jackson’s hands clenched as he tried to tone down his temper.

“It’s okay. They don’t take that shit lightly here. He won’t be allowed to return unless he can control himself and be respectful. I bussed his table last night and I knew he was trouble. Go ahead to your shift. I don’t want you to be late,” I said to Jackson. He leaned in and kissed me, and I melted into his arms. That guy really had rattled my nerves, and I was thankful for the comfort Jackson offered. He gave me a squeeze before pulling back.

“If you have any trouble, call Max. I know for a fact he can handle it,” Jackson said, before kissing my cheek and hurrying to the kitchen.

“So, you and the convict, eh?” the host asked with a grin.

“Yeah, I guess so.” No more trying to deny it when we were apart. Jackson had something I liked, and I wanted more of it. Guests filtered in until the dining room was nearly full for lunch, and I was happy to finally get to take a load of dishes back to the kitchen. Jackson was hard at work each time I pushed a cart through the door, and it made the day go really fast.

By the time dinner service ended I was excited to have some time with Jackson before the Rome party started. When I walked out of the dining room, he was there wearing a big smile and looking like he’d been working hard all afternoon. “Ready?” he asked.

“Oh yeah,” I said, and the two of us hurried past the pool and straight to our cabin.

Jackson

As soon as the door was closed Cory kissed me and reached between us to unbutton my pants. He gripped me and I hardened in his hand as he stroked me. “I want to fuck you,” he whispered.

“Then fuck me.” His eyes met mine and they were filled with the same fire as last night. And just like last night he took control.

He took my hand and led me to the bed before pushing me forward and pulling my pants down to my ankles. His hands kneaded my ass which actually felt really good. I’d been standing a lot lately and this wasn’t a bad way to relax. “Oh, babe, your fingers are magic,” I groaned.

“Yeah?” he said and glided his fingers up my back under my shirt to my shoulders. He pulled my shirt up enough to start massaging my shoulders and for a short while I forgot how hard my dick was. But then he reached between my legs and squeezed it where it was pressed against the bed. “I can’t seem to get enough of touching you.”

“You can touch me all you want. I love it,” I said and smiled into the bend of my arm.

He reached across the bed and took out a condom and the lube while I waited in anticipation. After smoothing the lube on my hole, he smeared some on his condom before slowly pressing into me. “Is this okay?” he asked, his voice tense as he tried not to press in too hard or too fast. I lifted my hips as he slowly worked his way in.

“Yes, it’s more than okay.” As soon as the words were past my lips, he pressed all the

way into me. There was something about the way my pants made it hard for me to move, and how I was face down under him. My god I think I liked him being in charge way more than I wanted to admit. He lifted my hips a little higher and started to thrust.

“You’re all I’ve thought of since this morning. I wanted to fuck you all day. What is it about you that makes me want you so bad,” he murmured between grunts and groans.

“I don’t know but I hope that doesn’t change. I want you too,” I admitted and ground back on his dick.

He gripped my hips so hard I knew there would be marks as he pounded into me chasing his release, but when he reached under me and gripped me so my dick was being stimulated while he thrust, I knew I couldn’t last long.

He came just at the moment I felt myself tip over that edge, and the two of us rode out our orgasms together. He collapsed on the bed next to me panting hard while I lay there unmoving. “I think you broke me, again,” he said, making us both laugh.

I leaned across to kiss him and we didn’t stop until both of us were breathless and hungry. “If we want to eat before dinner service we need to do it now,” he said, always the voice of reason.

I stripped down and took a quick shower while he cleaned up at the sink, and in fifteen minutes we were ready to go eat. Johnny was walking into the mess hall the same time we were and once again he looked between us and gave us both the same knowing smile he had earlier.

“Are you having a good break?” he asked.

“The best ever,” Cory said, before walking over to see what they were feeding us.

Johnny’s eyes met mine and the two of us laughed. “Come on, lover boy, let’s eat before he takes it all.”

The easy friendship Cory had with most people here was something I was so attracted to. They were good people, and all looked out for each other and were the hardest working people I’d ever seen. Each and every one of them were ready to make the guest experience the best it could be, and it didn’t matter if the guest was aware of that.

“What’s that look for,” Cory said when we sat down to eat.

“What look?” I asked but I knew exactly what he meant, and if I had to guess he knew too. I was happy. Probably for one of the first times in years, and it didn’t take alcohol or more than one guy. It only took him.

“Hey, I heard about that guest harassing you, Cory, what was that about?” Johnny asked.

Cory took a bite of the salad he’d chosen for dinner before he spoke. “He was at one of my tables last night, and I got a weird vibe from him. He didn’t do anything, but he acted like he could do whatever or say whatever he wanted, and no one would care. Then I ran into him on the way to work and he basically demanded I go to his room with him.”

“No shit,” Johnny said.

“Lucky for me the host heard it and called security. Max arrived just in time to hear some of it and the host filled him in on everything else. He took him to speak to the captain but I’m not sure what happened after that.”

“They’re making him leave the ship at the next stop,” I said.

“Saint Kitts?” Cory asked.

“Yes, I guess a crewmember heard the captain telling security that he was to be removed. Kinda nice not being the trouble starter,” I said, making them both laugh.

“You caused trouble being drunk and a little stupid. If he tried that on someone who didn’t know they could say no, it could have been really bad,” Cory said, and I was reminded how I felt when I realized what was happening.

“When I walked up on you, I couldn’t believe he was talking to you the way he was. But then when I saw who it was, it all made sense. That guy is one of the most entitled assholes I’ve ever met.” I took a deep breath and forced myself to remember that Max had taken care of it, but I couldn’t help but imagine what could have happened.

“Don’t worry, we take care of our own here,” Johnny said.

“I’m so sorry you guys had to deal with me. Seeing him act that way actually made me feel guilty.” I hadn’t meant to say it, but it was true.

“Don’t worry, we know you’re a good guy,” Cory said, and I couldn’t think of anything else he could say that would erase some of the guilt I still felt since that first day.

“I’m trying,” I murmured. His eyes met mine and he covered my hand with his.

“I know,” he said before kissing my cheek.

Cory

After we'd eaten Jackson went back to the kitchen and I returned to the dining room, but this dinner was different. Because the party theme was Ancient Rome, the dinner would be served buffet style. Not the buffet you'd find in a casino, but what you'd imagine in a Roman palace. The crew had moved an enormous fountain into the center of one massive table and three smaller tables branched off it.

The kitchen crew was hard at work setting it all up. I noticed a few other bussers helping, so after asking I was tasked with bringing totes of ice out that they'd use as the base for the food. One other area was going to be all hot foods, and another would be meats. The bakery had made lots of specialty desserts and breads including an oversized bread cornucopia that made a beautiful display.

Even though it was less work for me, it was just as many dishes, and Jackson was hard at work every time I got a refill of ice, so I didn't get a chance to check in. As soon as we opened the buffet, guests flooded in, and the dining room was filled. Most were dressed in their finest interpretation of Roman partygoers, which was perfect with the massive buffet.

"Attention, everyone, the emperor has arrived," one of the dining room hosts announced. It wasn't only the guests that were dressed. For this night they had actors who would mingle with the guests to make it feel even more unique.

Eight men dressed as gladiators, complete with helmets and chest-plates, walked into the dining area, behind them was an actor with the leafy crown of the emperor. He was surrounded by men of all shapes and sizes that danced around him dressed in

sheer togas wearing crowns of flowers.

“Wow, this is incredible,” one of the guests said, and it was. The next two hours were a constant battle to keep the food stocked and to clear off tables so guests who hadn’t eaten yet had a place to sit.

I happened to catch a glimpse of the married couple who had helped Jackson get on board. The older guy had a toga draped around his waist while his husband had the smaller version. “They are handsome,” I mumbled to myself as I continued to gather dirty dishes while making sure there were still enough clean ones.

“Are you nearly done?” Jackson asked me when I wheeled the last of the dirty dishes into the kitchen.

“This is the last of the dirty dishes,” I said and pushed them over where I now knew he wanted them.

“I should be done within an hour,” he said, and immediately got busy on the dishes.

I stood and watched him for a moment because watching him was becoming one of my favorite things. He glanced up at me with a wink and I left with a smile.

“The party should be fun tonight,” Johnny said.

“Are you done?” I asked.

“Yeah, they were serving wine tonight to go with the theme, so I think everyone was saving themselves for the party later,” he said.

“I’m done after dinner, so I think we’ll go watch the party if you want to join us.”

“You really like this guy,” Johnny said.

“I hate to admit it, but I do. He’s so different than I thought he was at first, and—well he’s fun. I really do like spending time with him.”

“Well, that’s saying something. I know how happy you were to have your own cabin this tour.”

“I don’t mind sharing with him. In fact, I wouldn’t mind if we shared every tour.”

“It doesn’t hurt that he has no belongings to leave all over the place,” Johnny said. The two of us stopped just before we walked out of the dining area, and a laugh burst out of me.

“You know me too well,” I said just as Jackson walked up.

“Hey.” He leaned in and kissed me, making me smile. I definitely didn’t mind this. “I hurried so we could watch the party,” he said.

“We were just talking about that. Come on, we know just the spot.” Johnny and I both liked to watch people rather than be in the middle of the craziness. We had enough of that when we were working, but it was fun to watch the party from a distance. The upper deck where they allowed nude bathing was always empty this time of night, and it had the perfect view of the deck below where they held the dances. The three of us pulled deck chairs over and watched as the crowd started to gather.

The stage was set up and the band started playing. It might have been a Roman theme, but the band was playing club music complete with a light show. “These have to be the best seats on the ship,” I said, but when I turned, Jackson’s attention was on me, not the dance floor. He grinned and I took his hand.

“Oh my god, you two really are too cute together,” Johnny said, making us all laugh.

“Do you feel cute?” Jackson asked me.

“I think you’re cuter,” I said. While Johnny faked a gag.

“I said cute, not disgusting,” he said.

After about an hour he’d had enough and decided it was time for bed. Jackson and I stayed and when the music no longer held our attention, we stared up at the stars and pointed out constellations to each other. “Thank you,” I said after we’d decided to try to share a lounge.

“For what?” he said.

“For not being the total asshole I thought you were.” I tried to keep a straight face but couldn’t and when I started laughing, he tickled me. “Okay okay, you are a total asshole.”

“Well, now I’m just hurt,” he said, but he didn’t look hurt. His eyes were bright with humor and his smile . . . his smile lit up his face.

“You look happy,” I said, and cupped his jaw.

“You make me happy. You and everything here.”

“Really?” I murmured.

“Really.” He kissed me then, and I fought to remember every detail from the brush of his lips to the look in his eyes when they met mine. But mostly I wanted to remember the way he made my breath speed up and how fast my heart beat in anticipation of his

touch. Mostly I wanted to remember the exact moment that I fell in love with him.

Jackson

We stayed on the deck until the guests started to clear out, and the day started to weigh heavy on me. I did love the work, but it was fast-paced and intense at times, and by the end of today I was definitely feeling it.

“Ready to go?” Cory asked.

“I’m ready to sleep, but I’m not ready to leave here. This has been really nice. I never would have thought I’d like sitting above the party looking at the stars with a hot guy rather than being in the middle of the party drunk.”

“How’s that working for you?” he asked.

“I do not miss the hangover the next day, and the hot guy is definitely a must.”

“Oh really? Just any hot guy?”

I squeezed his hand that I held between the two chairs we now sat in. “I think there’s only one hot guy for me.”

“Well, he’s a lucky guy,” Cory said with a grin.

“Nah, he’s the best. I’m the lucky one.” I pulled his hand to my lips and kissed it and the heat started to build between us like it did every time we touched.

“Let’s go back to the cabin,” he said, his voice husky with want.

I stood and pulled him up into my arms. “I’ve been waiting for you to say that.” We kissed then, under the stars above the chatter of a party I realized I no longer needed to be happy. My happiness was in my arms. If I was willing to show him, I could be his happiness too, and I was more than ready for that.

We walked along the deck where guests were now lounging around, either in groups or one or two here and there. Some would wander off to one of the bars and keep the party going, while others would return to their rooms to be ready for tomorrow. The ship had sailed from St. Thomas, and we were on our way to St. Kitts where we’d spend the day tomorrow.

“Saint Thomas is a beautiful port,” Cory said as the lights of the island faded into the distance.

“Next time we go, we should see if we can have time off to explore.” I’d been there before, but I was a child and we drove to a distant beach for the day with the family. I wanted to see what life was like there, not where the tourists went.

“I’d like that. I don’t usually go to port because I really do love being on the ship when it’s not as crowded,” Cory said.

“There is something to that,” I said.

“We’ll be at Saint Kitts soon,” Cory said. We were nearly to our cabin, and it was all I could do to not drag him there. He paused with his hand on the knob before entering when we finally made it there. It felt like it took forever when it was only a few moments. “Jackson—.”

I squeezed his shoulders and kissed his cheek since he still faced the door. “I need you too,” I whispered.

As soon as we were in the room, we were in each other's arms, but this time the frantic need wasn't there. It was replaced instead with gentle kisses and a slow building heat that was more addictive to me than any drug or alcohol. The feelings he made me feel were new and exciting and made me want more.

We made our way to bed and after stripping down, settled under the blankets facing each other. Slow kisses and wandering hands had me more turned on than I would have ever imagined. We'd fucked, but this night was different, tonight we took our time, and when he lay on top of me and slid into me, I could see it in his eyes that he felt it too. We were making love.

I'd fucked and been fucked many times through the years. So much so it had become routine. Find someone who was willing and after figuring out who would do what, get it done. Until now I hadn't realized how mechanical it had become. There was no connection, and nothing deeper than getting off. As I ran my hands down Cory's back, just the feel of his skin excited me.

He settled my leg on his hip and made slow sweet love to me while kissing me until my lips were puffy but left me wanting more. "What are you doing to me, Cory," I finally managed to whisper.

"I'm making love to you," he said. "I think I could fall in love with you, Jackson." His hips slowed down as he held me closer and looked me right in the eyes. He meant every word, but he was nervous, and I understood why. Fucking was one thing, but love was a whole different thing. But for Cory I was willing to throw my heart out there and see what happened.

"I've never been in love before," I whispered. "But I think I could fall in love with you too," His lips crashed into mine, and we held each other tight as we ground against each other. When I fell asleep in his arms for the third night in a row, I asked the universe to please not take the happiness away from me that I'd found in this

sweet man. He'd become so much to me in three short days, and if we didn't have more than this cruise, I swore to myself to make the most of it. But my heart screamed that it would never be enough, and my fucking brain needed to get it together and make sure the two of us had a future.

"Fucking brain," I mumbled, and Cory squeezed me tight from behind. How would I ever sleep again without those arms holding me? And why would I want to try? Another fire ignited in me then. Not of passion but determination. A determination to make sure we had a future, and to make sure we were both as happy as we were tonight in a year. And after that another year, and another and another. I hoped he was my forever, and I'd spend as much time as it took showing him how serious I was and how much he meant to me.

Cory

St. Kitts had flown by. Most of the guests went to shore and enjoyed the natural beauty of the island or they snorkeled in the crystal blue waters. Jackson and I worked hard, and at night we loved hard. Because after St. Thomas it wasn't just fucking, and I was there for it.

"What's the party theme tonight?" Jackson asked while we met to eat before dinner service.

"Glow party," Johnny said.

"What's that?" he asked.

"We put blacklights all over the deck so everything glows. The waiters all have glowing necklaces or bowties on and, of course, the guests come up with all sorts of glowing things," I said.

"Sounds fun. So, do they have the same parties on every cruise?" Jackson asked and took a sip of his coffee. He was beginning to really appreciate all the benefits of caffeine. Johnny and I practically had coffee in our veins, but we needed it with how busy every day was on board.

"No, these are specifically chosen for Pride Cruise. This week is planned just to celebrate Pride. Otherwise, we have a rotating schedule that changes every third week but also can change with holidays that fall during that week," I said, and he paused with wide eyes to listen.

“There is so much more to keep track of than I realized. I kinda like the idea of hiding in the kitchen more and more,” he said, making us laugh.

“You’re still not tired of it?” Johnny asked.

“Not yet. I’m still working on a routine so I’m able to keep up and not let it fall behind. That was brutal the first day.”

“The kitchen falls apart when the dishwasher is down. No one wants to be responsible, but then they freak out when there are no clean dishes.” I’d been there when Orlando had problems with the machine and it was a huge issue, so I knew he wasn’t exaggerating. It was just so odd when I thought of Jackson as JJ Carrington. Rich boy and asshole who did whatever he wanted whenever he wanted, without any consideration of time or money. Now here he was discussing dirty dishes in the crew mess hall, and it made him happy.

“So, what are your plans after the cruise ends?” Johnny asked Jackson.

“I’m going to speak to the Hotel Director about a permanent position.”

He’d mentioned it several times, but until just this second, I didn’t really think he was serious. He had a whole other life he could be living. Why would he choose to wash dishes? I thought of how many times he’d said he enjoyed the work and the routine and decided I’d trust him.

“Really?” I asked and tried not to sound as happy as I was.

“Really. I’m not ready for this to be over. I hope you don’t mind. I really should have asked you first.” I kissed him, because he made me so happy, and if we could work together and still be happy to see each other at the end of the day that was a huge win.

“I’ve been worried you’d be ready to get off the ship. I know you’ve been happy here, but you also didn’t have a choice in being here. Are you sure you’re ready to make a career of it?”

“Yeah. I think I am,” he said, and Johnny looked between the two of us before shaking his head.

“You two really are disgustingly cute.”

“We try,” Jackson said.

“Oh, I saw the couple that snuck you on,” I said. He looked confused for a moment before the memory hit him.

“I forgot about them. Did they say anything?” He cringed and I was glad to see he was worried about their reaction. Not that I wanted him to spend any time with them. He’d spent more than enough on the snorkel trip, and I did not need any details, but he wasn’t trying to deny it happened.

“No, I’m not sure they recognized me, and I didn’t approach them. I’m surprised you haven’t seen them. They’ve been at all the parties.” It did surprise me he hadn’t seen them, but while he’d been on board Jackson had been busy, and he’d been very focused on work and staying out of trouble. So even though we’d watched the Rome party from a distance, we usually went back to the room at the end of the day. He never once seemed to be looking for any guests and the only one he’d recognized was the asshole that had indeed been dropped off at St. Kitts.

“No, I haven’t. But to be completely honest, by the time I hooked up with them I was trashed. When we went out snorkeling, I hated that they insisted we wear a lifejacket, but I’m thankful for it now.” His eyes narrowed as he was deep in thought then his brows shot up. “Oh god, I think I hooked up with the two of them while we were

floating around out there.” He shook his head before covering his eyes with his hands.

Johnny snickered and tried to cover it with a cough while I didn’t try to hold back my laugh. “Sometimes amnesia isn’t a bad thing. Although they are nice to look at.” His mouth dropped open and he looked at me with shock and a little bit of embarrassment.

“I can’t believe you just said that,” he said and looked even more mortified.

“Babe, it’s the past. We’ve all done things we’d rather forget. Consider yourself lucky you can’t remember it all,” I said and patted his hand.

He smiled then and gave me the most adorably embarrassed look. “I have not missed being drunk. It’s nice to remember what happened, and not wake up feeling like shit. I could get used to this,” Jackson said and finally smiled.

“You’re doing great. Just keep doing what you’re doing and I’m sure you’ll be able to get a position on the next tour,” Johnny said.

“When does this tour end?” he asked.

“We have four more cruises after this one, right, Cory?” Johnny said.

“Yes, this is our first one back from having two weeks off.”

“Is it the same course next week?” he asked.

“Yes, we’ll be doing this same route for two more months, then they’ll change it up.”

“Do you go back to Sacramento on your time off?” Jackson asked, and I wondered

why he was asking so many questions about it, but I didn't think much of it.

"Most of the time. But sometimes I go on a vacation somewhere and see something new. Same with Johnny, he's always hiking all over the place," I said.

"I like that idea," Jackson said.

"Which one?" Johnny asked.

"Going where you want to go when you're not working but then pivoting and going back to reality for a while."

"Overall, it's a pretty good gig," I said, and I meant it. I loved my job and I hoped he meant what he'd said, and he'd try to get a permanent job here.

Jackson

I had no clue how the schedule worked on the cruise, and when Johnny and Cory had told me how they're on for a few weeks and off for a few, my first thought was to go speak to the captain about staying. I wasn't sure if that would make a difference or not.

I was lost in thought when we were walking back to the dining room for dinner service. Tonight was buffet style, but more casual than the last one with lots of ice sculptures that glowed from internal lighting. They'd added blacklights to this area so it would glow the same as the dance floor later. After saying goodbye to Cory and Johnny I walked right to the Hotel Director's office. If he couldn't help me, I'd see what the captain could do. But I wanted to go through the proper channels.

"Come in," Roger Dayton said as soon as I knocked. "Mr. Carrington, I didn't expect to see you back here. Is there a problem?" he asked as he swiveled his chair to face me.

"No problem, sir. But I'd like to stay on the cruise and continue working in the kitchen. As a permanent employee I mean, and I'd like to be on the same schedule as Cory Wynn." For a moment he just stared at me like this wasn't a surprise to him, and he'd anticipated my request.

"You realize you'd be starting at the bottom. Your pay would be in the bottom tier."

"I know, but I don't care. I love the work and I don't want to lose Cory. I think he might be the best person I've ever met." I knew I sounded pitiful and raw, but I felt

pitiful and raw. “The last few years I’ve let life pass me by while I partied and wasted time. I’d really like a reset and I think that’s possible here.”

Twenty minutes later I was walking out of his office as the official dishwasher for the main kitchen. I couldn’t wait to see Cory and tell him, but first I had a pile of dishes that were calling my name. Slipping on the rubber gloves and apron I got busy and barely noticed when Cory walked in pushing a dish cart a while later.

“Hey, you look busy,” he said and started stacking the trays on the counter by the sink.

“Yep, and guess what?” I said unable to wait any longer.

“What? Is everything okay?” he asked.

“It couldn’t be better. You’re looking at the official dishwasher not the temp one.” I grinned as I jammed my thumb into my chest.

“No way, really?” He walked over closer to me, and I knew he wanted to kiss me as bad as I wanted to kiss him.

“Really. I talked to Roger Dayton on the way to my shift and asked for the position. He said they were hoping I wanted it because I’ve put it back into shape. So, what do you think? Are you ready for a permanent roommate?”

“Can we do that?” Cory asked.

“He said it was fine as long as you agree. He’d rather we bunk together than make two other employees miserable going back and forth between rooms. If it becomes a problem at work, then he’ll take action, but I would never want you to risk your job. So, I promise, if things go bad between us, I’ll leave.” I would never want him to give

up anything for me. His job was important, and I meant what I said, if it came down to it, I'd leave.

He rushed at me and took my face in his hands before kissing me hard. "Yes. I can't wait to spend our next time off together. Oh, we need to start planning it, did you want to go somewhere? Or go back home?"

"Do you mind if we go home? I want to introduce you to my family." I'd be turning twenty-nine soon and I had never brought anyone home to meet my parents. Not only because they were intense and a lot to handle, but also because I'd never met anyone important enough to. But I wanted everyone to know about Cory and know without a doubt I loved him.

"Do you think that's a good idea? I don't want to cause any problems with your family," he said.

"The only problems with my family are what I've caused. They'll be thrilled to meet you, and even happier you're a local. They were worried I'd meet someone from Florida and end up moving out there, but it's not for me."

"We'll be there when we're working," he reminded me.

"Yeah, but only to get on the ship then we're out of there."

"I'll meet your family if you meet mine. Fair is fair, right?" Cory said, and I tried to remember any details about his family but came up blank.

"Of course. I can't wait to meet them."

He kissed my cheek before mumbling, "You might regret those words."

“What? Why?” I asked, but he smiled and chuckled as he pulled the cart out of the kitchen backwards, watching me the whole way.

“Hey, Chef says you’re going to join us permanently,” Javier, the sous chef who’d helped me the first day, said.

“Yes, I am. I’m happy here, and I’m not ready to leave. Plus, I just got everything in order, and I don’t you guys making a mess again.”

“You’re staying?” one of the chefs who had never said a word to me yelled from the cooktop.

“Yes, I’m staying.”

“Thank god!” he yelled back and went back to cooking without another word.

There were a few more words of smack talk that echoed across the kitchen, but Javier slapped me on the back and laughed.

“Welcome home, kid. Now you’re stuck with us.”

I remembered years ago hearing how important it was to find your people. I never understood what they meant. Not until today, and not until Cory.

Cory

Tonight was the last night of the cruise, but it wasn't the end of our story. It was just the beginning. Tomorrow we'll be on a plane to Sacramento where we planned to stay for a week before driving up to Seattle. I'd never been before, and the two of us wanted to see more of the country when we weren't cruising around the Caribbean.

"I'm going to miss watching you two make eyes at each other," Johnny said while we were eating before dinner service.

"Join us on our road trip," Jackson said, before taking a big bite of the burgers we were having.

"No way, this is like your honeymoon trip. I see enough without being in a car with the two of you for a week. Plus, I have plans. I'm going to visit my family too. It's been a while, but Rio is calling."

"That's great, Johnny. Have fun," I said. Johnny went home often, but he missed his family and his homeland, so I wasn't surprised when those were his plans.

"So you guys are meeting the families?" he asked and looked at both of us.

"Yep, I can't wait for my family to meet Jackson," I said, and Johnny burst out laughing.

"What?" Jackson asked.

“Has he told you about his family?” Johnny asked while staring directly at Jackson.

“Not really, why, are they in the witness protection program?” Jackson asked.

“You didn’t tell him?” Johnny asked me before laughing again. “He has a huge family. He has something like ten siblings and there’s aunties, and uncles, and cousins, and second cousins. And they all like each other so they always have big dinners and invite everyone. Like at least a few times a week.”

“That’s it?” Jackson said.

“They’re a little overwhelming,” I said, and wished I’d just told him.

“I don’t mind that.” He stood as we all got ready to go to our shifts.

“Just wait,” Johnny said and laughed again.

The three of us walked outside to the pool area and were about to cross into the dining room when I saw the couple that had brought Jackson on board. “You guys go ahead,” I said. Johnny walked off with a wave, but Jackson stayed.

“What’s going on?” he asked as I took his hand and pulled him over to the bar outside the dining room.

“Excuse me,” I said and tapped the older man on the shoulder. “I know you don’t know me, but I wanted to thank you for bringing Jackson on board from Berry Island. If you hadn’t, I would have never realized what a great person he is, and I wouldn’t have met the love of my life.”

Both of them were dressed in impeccably fitted white tuxedos. The older man’s was a more traditional style while the younger guy’s had a flare of pink on his tie and the

lapel that matched the pink in his hair. They stared at me for a moment before they looked at Jackson, who waved.

“Hi, guys,” Jackson said.

“You’re the guy we snorkeled with,” the younger guy said and smiled while giving Jackson the once over. “You’re hot.”

Jackson’s eyes widened and he stepped closer to me. “Syd, please,” his husband said. “I’m Greg, and you are?”

“Sorry, I’m Cory Wynn. I just wanted to thank you.”

“Well, Cory, you’re welcome,” Greg said with a grin and a wink. “Now if you don’t mind, I have a husband I need to romance tonight.” Syd smiled and snuggled into Greg’s side. “Oh and thank you too, JJ. It was very—memorable.” They both walked over to the end of the bar and ordered drinks while Jackson and I hurried to our shifts.

I paused at the entry before kissing him. “See you soon,” I said, making him smile.

“See you soon.”

I watched as he walked away and forced myself to go to work. Tomorrow we’d leave the ship, and I hoped our feelings for each other off the ship were the same as they were on board. But right now, I couldn’t imagine loving anyone as much as I knew I loved the guy that I’d hated more than anything until we were forced together below deck.

My phone buzzed with a text, and I checked it before starting work, it was from Mom on the family chat. I can’t wait to meet Jackson

I was about to reply how excited we were too when five more messages came through from a cousin and four of my siblings. They were all giving me crap while also telling me how much they missed me, and I missed them just as much. But Johnny was right. They were a lot, and I really hoped Jackson loved me as much as I thought he did when he met them all.

“Sorry, Cory, we got behind on dishes, do you mind taking that cart back to the kitchen?” one of the bussers from the last shift asked me on their way out of the room.

“Nope, I got it,” I said, and pushed it along the hallway to the kitchen where the man I loved was busy at work even though he’d just arrived. As soon as I entered the room, he turned to look with a grin.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he said and kissed me on the cheek. “I’ve missed you.”

Jackson

This month it would be one year since Cory, and I had met. So much had changed, and some things hadn't. "Did you get your bags?" I asked as we waited at the luggage carousel at Miami Airport.

"Yes, sorry, one of them took forever. We can still make the shuttle bus," he said, and we hurried outside the terminal to the now familiar area where the bus would pick us up to take us to the ship. We stood in a line with a big group of people for a short time before the bus arrived and after the driver stowed our luggage underneath the bus, we walked inside and chose our seats.

This had become so routine now that we both knew exactly what to do and when to do it.

"Can you believe it's been a year?" I asked Cory once I was settled in my seat.

"No, I can't. But we have been a little busy." He smiled and kissed my hand. "I'm excited to get back on board, plus this year for Pride Cruise they're going to the Western Caribbean, so it'll be a different route than last year."

"Are you ready to start the new job?" I asked him. "I'm so proud of you, babe." Cory had been promoted to waiter and not just the entry level, he was now a lead waiter and while he had more responsibilities, he was also really good at his job and fell into it easily.

"I can't wait, but I will miss seeing you every time I need to bring a tray of dishes

into the kitchen.”

“You’ll see me.” I’d been promoted too. Since I’d worked in the restaurant at my parents’ hotel I had more than dishwashing experience, and when Orlando returned to the dishwashing station, they put me in as a sous chef. “Just don’t yell at me if your orders are wrong.” Just by chance on the last cruise, I’d been forced to the staging position when the person who normally did it was taken out with food poisoning. Or so they said, but I suspected a hangover was more likely.

“I would never,” Cory said, but we both knew that wasn’t true. He was very easy going, but he also wasn’t willing to be walked all over. A lesson that a few other waiters had learned since he’d been promoted.

“Sure,” I said, making him laugh.

“I wanted to talk to you about something,” he said, still grinning. “My family was talking about going on a cruise together for Christmas. What do you think?”

“How many of them?” When he took me to meet his family, I soon found out Johnny wasn’t joking. They were a huge family, and all of them lived close enough to visit all the time. His parents’ house had an expansive backyard that was the family meeting place and every week they had a big dinner that everyone was invited to. I loved it and I loved them, and luckily for me, they seemed to love me too. Well, some of them did.

“All of them, I think it would be around forty total. Don’t worry, Zane can’t go, he gets seasick and said he’d just be miserable.”

“Oh, thank god. I mean I don’t want to talk bad about your brother, but—”

Cory held his hand up and widened his eyes. “I get it. He’s always been hard to be around.”

“There’s always one,” I said. I hadn’t had a drink since the day Cory and I met. It just wasn’t worth it to me anymore, and I figured I’d already drank enough to last me the rest of my life. Surprisingly I had not missed it one bit.

“So, Mom and Dad wanted to invite your family too.” Cory waited for my reaction, and if he had asked me that same question a year ago, I would have said hell no. But I was a different person then, and we were a different family.

When I returned home with Cory, I insisted they all meet him, it was one of the first times my parents and siblings had been together in months. While they were there, I admitted how my drinking had gotten out of control and thanked them for helping me when I was detained on the cruise. I also explained to them how much Cory meant to me, and how I wanted to keep working on for NautiCaribbean.

“You’re willing to give up a career in the hotel business to work on a cruise ship?” my father had asked while I held Cory’s hand.

“Yes, sir. I know you wanted me to one day work there, but it’s not for me. I want to work for the cruise line and see how it goes.” They were not happy, and for the next hour tried to talk me out of it, but my mind was made up.

In the end it was my dad who relented. “The captain is an old friend of mine, and he told me you were a hard worker who would go places. I remember when I was younger and everyone said I needed to go to college to start a business, but I worked in the industry instead and that didn’t turn out so bad,” he said.

“When they detained me, the security guard told me that you knew the captain.” I squeezed Cory’s leg and was thankful once again for meeting him.

“I skipped college too,” Cory said. “I knew I wanted to work in the cruise industry, so I applied and got lucky.” My mother and father looked at him and both smiled. Cory was working his charm on them, but even if they didn’t like him, it didn’t matter.

I was pulled back to the present when I realized he was still waiting for my reply. “Let me ask them,” I said and sent a text. That was something else that had changed. I used to go months without speaking to my family but now we regularly kept in touch, and I appreciated it more than I ever had. A text came through almost immediately. “Mom said they’re in, she’ll need to ask if anyone else can go.”

“Great, I’ll let Mom and Dad know,” Cory said and for a while the two of us were busy answering messages as we drove to the port. We pulled up and everyone stood to get off the bus. Some of the travelers were crew but most were passengers, and once we had our luggage, we walked past the passenger entrance to the crew entrance.

Standing there were Greg and Syd back for another year, and I was sure that if they were lucky enough to have Cory be their waiter while they were here, he’d make sure they had the night of their lives without floating around in the ocean drunk and half naked.

“Come on, babe, we can go on board,” Cory said as he hurried along to the crew area.

“Great, I can’t wait.” And I couldn’t.

THE END