



Playing With Sunshine

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Fake boyfriendpup-play all on a cruise just in time for PRIDE!

Our favorite pup, Jax, is christening a new yacht, and he's inviting all his friends to join him, including Todd aka Sunshine. But everyone is bringing their billionaire dates. This isn't a singles cruise, and Todd is still all alone.

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The whirl of the blender was so loud I didn't hear the front door open. So, when I turned it off and glanced up, I nearly jumped out of my skin, and I did scream like a screech owl. "Fuck!" Of course, Jax laughed at me, so I grabbed a lime off the counter and threw it at him. "Asshole."

"Sorry, not sorry." He laughed some more. So irritating. "What are we having?"

"Duh. Margaritas." I grabbed a straw from the glass holding them and popped off the lid of the blender. I stuck it in and covered the end with my finger to get a sample. It was good, but... "Needs a little more lime. Give that back." I held my hand out, and Jax dropped the fruit in my palm.

After slicing it up, I squeezed a healthy bit of juice into my concoction and ran the blender again for a quick mix. I tested again. "Perfect. Let's do this." I clapped my hands together, and Jax hooted loudly. Then, I unscrewed the container and poured it into the glasses, already prepared with salt, waiting on the counter. It all worked like a well-oiled machine because I'd done this a million times. It was kind of my thing, and I enjoyed sharing it with my friends. They meant the world to me, and I rarely had the chance to show them that. I could hardly ever give back to them all they'd given me over the years. They were actually more than friends to me—they were my brothers.

I handed Jax a glass and motioned toward the balcony. It was a gorgeous spring day, so we were going outside. My roommate, Levi, and I had finished our classes and officially graduated a few weeks ago. The ceremony was bland and small since it was winter term, but afterward, Jax and our other bro, Royce, took us out on one of Jax's boats. We partied our asses off. Of course, I hadn't manned the blender that night, but

it was worth it for once. I normally enjoyed the party more when I was playing mixology, but my friends weren't allowing me to hide behind the blender on my big night.

The only thing that could have been better was if I'd gotten laid. But there were like zero eligible bachelors around. Well, there was one bachelor, but I didn't consider him eligible for me. He was good friends with Levi's boyfriend, and he was sexy as fuck, but he was also an asshole. He avoided me during the party, and I guess I couldn't blame him. At Levi's birthday party back in January, we were getting to know each other, but as soon as my pup-kink came up, he turned into Mr. Ohfuckno. And for me, that's a deal breaker. A big one. So fuck him. When I walked away from him, I heard Levi bitching him out, so I hoped he felt small. Like mouse-small. Like titmouse small. Because that's what he was as far as I was concerned. I tiny, itty-bitty, asshole-titmouse.

Fuck him. Fuck that. I took a long drink of my margarita and leaned back on the patio chair. "Ah..."

"Yeah. This is good. You outdid yourself on this batch." He held up his drink. "Cheers!"

I clinked his with mine and took another sip. "Fuck! Brain freeze!"

And Jax laughed again, squinting up his mix-matched eyes and opening his pretty mouth. He was certainly a cutie, but I'd never been attracted to him in that way. He'd never been anything but a friend and brother. He had been my roommate once upon a time. That was before he met Mr. Moneybags, his weird, geeky billionaire boyfriend. I didn't hold it against him, and I loved how happy he was, but deep down, I could admit I was a little jealous. I still had no one. And what a fluke for him to find the perfect man. Rich. A born handler who loved puppy play. And even though he had an annoying geeky side, Ward was super sweet to Jax.

Once my brain thawed out, I sighed loudly.

“Hey, what’s up with you?”

“Ah, nothing...”

“Worried about finding a job? It’ll come. Relax.” He waved me off.

That was only half of my issues, though. “Yeah, I’m sure. I applied to a few internships as well as permanent entry-level roles.” At least talking about my job search would both keep me from thinking of my abysmal love life and from having to tell Jax how I felt about it.

“Offer is still open for some part-time work on the boats if you want.” Jax was sweet to offer, but part-time wouldn’t help much. I’d take it if I got desperate, but I wasn’t there yet. His company was still new, and the investment was huge. Buying yachts took a lot of capital, but what a cool business to run. He fell in love with the idea after spending time with Ward on his uncle’s vessel. I couldn’t blame him, but I would never have that kind of money. Jax rounded up the start-up capital with his trust fund, other investments, and Ward’s help. I didn’t have any of that.

Jax and Royce came from money and why they bothered with me was a mystery. I came from a lower middle-class family who tried hard but never had extra. Most of my education was paid for by loans. After my undergraduate degree, my parents were done with whatever help they could give. Going on to finish my master’s was something they couldn’t even comprehend. My mother was a waitress, and my father was a mechanic. Together, they raised three kids. My sister got married right out of high school and had zero interest in anything but popping out more babies. So, at least that was off their plate. My little brother was a basket case and most of the time, no one even knew where he was. But he wasn’t their problem anymore. He turned eighteen and took off. Me? I needed help. I had dreams. I wanted anything but the life

they had. Mom and Dad liked to blame my friends for that but to be honest, I started feeling that way in middle school. A lot of other kids had a lot of things I didn't. But I had love—always that. They supported me when I came out. And I had never doubted they would.

But it was a completely different world from the one Jax and Royce grew up in. And they would never totally understand.

The clouds grew darker as we chit-chatted and drank our margaritas. Jax gave me a few more job ideas while I debated asking for dating advice instead. But before I could actually open my mouth to ask where I could find me a pup-loving daddy, drops of rain hit my feet where I had them propped on the railing. "Shit, it's raining." My glasses steamed up a little as the humidity rose and the temperature dropped. I had to set my drink down and wipe them on my shirt.

"It's only sprinkling." Jax looked around. "We don't have to go in yet. I miss hanging out like this." We hadn't done this since he moved out nearly a year ago. "Fuck, Sunshine, we never have time to hang out anymore." It didn't surprise me at all that he used my pup-name.

"I know. But. That's life. Right?"

"I guess." He stuck out his bottom lip in an exaggerated pout.

"Idiot. You could invite me over to hang out at your pool now and then, you know?" Their house on Bayshore was killer, with an awesome patio and pool that I had not had nearly enough time at.

"Yeah. I should do that. Oh!" Jax's eyes lit up—one was a piercing green, the other half green and half brown. "I forgot to tell you. The purchase went through on the new yacht and the party is on for Pride!"

“Pride? We always do the parade.”

“Yeah, but wouldn’t it be more fun to celebrate out on the water? On a big yacht—a Super Yacht? Ohmygod, Todd. This thing is a beauty. Wait until you see it.” He went on and on about his big boat and exactly how big it was, and how many rooms it had, and how many party areas. The best part was that he was having it fitted for a pup playroom so we could pup-out while we were cruising. “And a big-ass bonus room for dining or recreation or whatever, and it’ll hold everyone. Every guest.” He was having the thing customized for exactly what he wanted. No doubt it would be the ultimate party vessel.

“Wow. Yeah. That sounds fun. Who are you inviting?” Before he could answer, the sky let loose. The little sprinkles turned into a barrage. But that was Florida in springtime. We should have expected afternoon showers. “Time for a refill, anyway. Let’s go in.” I could find out more about Jax’s Pride cruise later.

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Going to these stupid dinner parties was a chore I loathed, even when it was at my buddy Hudson's house. I coveted his house on the water for sure and his decorator. Maybe even his boyfriend a little, or rather that he had a boyfriend. Not that I was into daddy kink like they were at all. Hell, I wasn't into any kinks. What the hell was wrong with regular vanilla sex? Wasn't it enough that I was gay? It seemed like everyone had to have their own different thing—some kind of kinky label—in addition to their sexuality. Bears and daddies or pups! How exhausting. I was simply me—Larry Henderson, broker and partner in some ventures with Hudson. That was it. Wasn't it enough?

I walked in and greeted Hudson and his boyfriend, Levi. Then meandered into the living room. I shook hands with Jake Cornell, one of the investors for our renewable energy project, then Ward Predmore, who hadn't been on our radar as an investor but somehow had a connection through his boyfriend, Jaxson Hoadley, to Levi, and could potentially add some needed funding. Ward and Jaxson were certainly from the right circles.

"Oh, Hudson, come meet Drew and Justin," Levi called. He had certainly stepped up well to the role as host.

"Hello." I shook hands with Drew and Justin in turn, still not knowing who they were beyond names.

"Drew King," he gave his full name. "This is Justin Rockwell."

"Drew owns a law firm in Tampa, and Justin is his boyfriend. Aaand Royce's boyfriend, Quinn works with him," Levi added dramatically.

I had to force myself to refrain from rolling my eyes at his theatrics. “Great. So nice to meet you.” I barely recalled Royce beyond the fact that he was in that same friend group with Levi and Jax. All that had something to do with a roommate situation that happened before Levi moved in with Hudson.

As if called forth by the mention of his name, Royce wedged his way in beside Drew. “Royce Mabry. I’m sure you remember me.” He stuck his hand out, so I shook it. Mabry. That was a famous name around Tampa. I wasn’t sure how I’d forgotten that.

“Yes. Nice to see you again, Royce.”

His slightly pudgy boyfriend wrapped his arm around Royce’s shoulder as he announced himself as Quinn Setzer. So he must have been the lawyer who worked for Drew King. I had become skilled at remembering connections and names over the years, so I was unsure why I was having difficulty keeping it straight now.

“This is Larry Henderson, Hudson’s business associate,” Levi informed him with an arm flourish.

Everyone nodded and small talk ensued. I smiled and did my share of the nodding, feeling completely off. I was bored for sure, but it was more than that. I didn’t want to be there. It was important, and certainly, I was the first person to push Hudson into doing these social events. Hell, the party was my idea. But—

“Larry.” Levi was cute enough, but I found him slightly annoying. “You should totally go on Jax’s cruise.” He seemed too young for my friend, but to each his own.

“Cruise?” I asked, but mostly out of politeness.

“Yes, you know, he owns Hoadley Yacht Private Vacations. It’s a start-up but

gaining in popularity around here. And he's christening a new boat for Pride."

Hudson finally appeared and put an arm around Levi. "Hasn't it turned into a couples cruise?"

"I don't think so. I hadn't heard that." Levi rolled his eyes.

"No, no." Hudson shook his head. "Ward shared the guest list. It's couples."

"I don't know. Maybe that was the initial list. I mean, Todd is coming, of course. Jax?" He turned to find their friend and apparent cruise organizer-slash-owner.

"What? Todd?" Jax looked across the room, searching for him. I followed his gaze, and there he was. Todd. I hadn't realized how much I felt toward him until I saw him standing there again. "You know Todd Foster, right, Larry? He's my best friend, of course he'll be there."

But all I could concentrate on was one name. Todd Foster. Levi's ex-roommate and new best friend. And also one who had a kink. A pet play kink. What the hell was that about? And why did the guy get under my skin so terribly? I actually scratched at my arm, thinking about him.

"Oh, and no," Jaxon answered, adding to our conversation. "It isn't officially for couples. Larry, you can come for sure. It's still a few weeks off, and we're still finalizing the guest list."

"Sorry, babe." Ward kissed the side of Jaxon's head. "I didn't mean to cause confusion."

"Oh, no big deal. Nothing is final. But I admit, we do have a lot of couples coming." Jax shrugged.

I wanted to ask about Todd, but I didn't. I smiled politely. "I'll think about it. Send me the dates, Hudson, and I'll check my schedule."

"Sure, sure."

Then dinner was announced, and we filed into Hudson's dining room. The table had a medium wood tone that made the space warm and fit the ten of us perfectly. It still felt bright and open, next to a wall of windows on the back side and French doors to the patio on the other. Being open to the kitchen with the huge peninsula bar also helped lighten it up. His designer did a fantastic job with décor that complimented the space, so it felt comfortable and not too crowded even with this many people.

We ate. Talked. Of course, the subject of our energy company came up and Hudson was eloquent in describing our offering. I added what I needed about the finances. But at these things, it wasn't a hard close. I would follow up with the right people the next week. The process left me feeling jaded for the first time.

And why?

And why was Todd the only bright spot of the night when he had hardly even spoken to me? In fact, every time I tried to catch his eye, he turned away and started a conversation with someone else. And when I tried to bring him into any conversation, his comments were brief. It was as if he wanted nothing to do with me. And I couldn't blame him. But I hated it.

I had blown it at Levi's Birthday party. Todd brought up his kink, and I balked. I had actually shamed him, saying it was nothing but a childish and foolish game. But what the hell did I know about pet play? I had seen guys dress up like dogs for Pride, but the way Todd spoke about it implied they did it all the time. They got together and pretended to be dogs. I didn't understand the purpose of that. Hell, I didn't remember even playing pretend as a child. I didn't understand pup play any more than I

understood Hudson's daddy fetish. But I didn't judge him for it. I didn't give a shit what they did behind closed doors. I wasn't judging Todd, either. Not really. But when I tried to say as much, he lost it and yelled at me before storming out.

I guess the guy didn't give second chances.

Fuck it all. Maybe I would have to be resigned to being lonely for the rest of my life. Maybe I could forget about Todd. I scratched at my arm again and reached for my drink.

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After totally crushing Drew's boyfriend, Justin, in Mario Kart online, I turned off the game, tossed my glasses on the nightstand, and crawled into bed. It was late, and I'd spent most of the evening walking him through how to get set up. We'd talked about gaming at that lame party while most of the others were chatting about money and yachts and crap. Levi was busy playing host, so I fell in with Justin. It was cool to have a new friend. He was a little older than me but super cool and outgoing. That helped since I would otherwise have been sitting alone in a corner, playing on my phone. Actually, that's exactly what I was doing when he struck up the conversation, asking me what I was doing. That led to gaming and, ultimately, this late-night session.

I stared at the slightly blurry ceiling, trying to fall asleep without much luck. I grabbed my phone and flipped to messenger to see who was on. I didn't think anyone I wanted to talk with would be, but surprisingly, Levi was. Hell, if he was awake, he should be getting some sexy time with that man of his, not flitting around online. I tapped the messenger and typed out: Wanna talk? Call me.

My phone rang seconds later, and I answered. "Yo! Why are you up?"

"Ugh, man. I can't sleep. Dad—I mean, Hudson is out cold."

I laughed at his slip-up. He was normally pretty good about not calling his man daddy in public, but this was between us. "Dude, I know he's your daddy. Call him what you want."

"I know. It's just...it's private. You know?"

“Sure. I get it.”

“Why are you up?” he asked.

“I was gaming, but now I can’t sleep, either.” I took a beat before I confessed. “Actually, I’m thinking about that cruise coming up.”

“Are you worried because everyone is coupled up?”

I bit at my thumbnail. He wasn’t wrong. “Something like that. I mean. I guess. Why is he inviting so many couples?”

Levi laughed. “You’ve known him longer than I have. You tell me.” He wasn’t wrong about that either, but I was frustrated. “You can worry over it, or...” He sounded like he was planning something I might not like.

“Or what?”

“You can bring someone. A date.”

I had nothing to say to that.

“Todd? You still there?”

“Yeah...” I sighed. “I...I don’t have anyone.” Compared to them, I was not worthy. Even Levi had a handsome, wealthy man. I had nothing. I wasn’t being picky, either. I didn’t even need a wealthy man. I only needed self-sufficient and willing to get into pup-play.

“Then, how can we get Jax to invite more singles?”

I scoffed. “Jax is strong-willed. When he gets set on something, it’s hard to change his mind.”

“Well, there is a third option. Just come and enjoy the cruise and don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” I knew he was, and that was probably what everyone expected of me. I was Todd—Sunshine Pup—always bright and happy. But something in me didn’t want to keep trying to let it all roll off my back. It wasn’t rolling so easily anymore. It was sticking, and I was hurting over it.

“Hey, what were you playing anyway? On the game thing?” Levi tried to change the subject—bless him. He was a sweetheart and probably understood me better than Jax and Royce, whom I’d known and been super close with for years. But Levi grew up like I did. He had the same issues, concerns, and worries. Hell, he’d had severe money and parent issues when he came to live with me. I let the subject drop, and we talked a bit more about gaming before hanging up.

Afterward, I couldn’t help but think I could find someone to be an arrangement for the cruise and nothing more. Not a real date or boyfriend, but someone willing to go along with it so they could go on the cruise. Maybe someone closer to Jax and Royce in social status. I sure as hell didn’t want Jax and Royce to think I couldn’t get a boyfriend. But who would I get anyway?

I didn’t want my best friends to think I was less than them. Though, that was exactly how I felt. But that was bullshit. Why was I thinking that? I could land my own billionaire but...I didn’t know anyone...

Except maybe that Larry dude who was such a dick at Levi’s party. He was sexy but such an ass. At first, he wasn’t, though. He was nice. He was friends with Hudson, so I wanted to trust in that. He let me crawl in his lap, and it felt comforting with his

strong arms around me. And I wanted what Levi'd found.

And damn, was Larry sexy? Hell yeah. His shoulders were broad, but not too broad. He was tall, but not too tall. Dark hair and eyes. His hair was cut short and professional. He didn't try to style it fashionably like I did, but it made him look more mature. He was a little older than me, but damn. And his arms were warm around me, and he nuzzled against my neck, and my dick was getting really hard. Fuck!

I stuck my hand down my shorts and grabbed it, knowing that wouldn't help. But thoughts of Larry's brown eyes and kissable lips had me dry-humping into my fist. Frustrated, I threw the covers off and yanked my shorts down. I grabbed the lube off the nightstand and poured a drop in my hand. If I was doing this, I was doing it hard and fast.

Instead of climbing back on the mattress, I sat in the chair across from the bed. I had it set up like a reading area. It helped me focus on homework, and I kind of liked it for jacking off, too. I spread my legs and stroked my cock, fucking up into my hand and rubbing my crown. I imagined Larry standing in front of me, looking down at me and telling me what to do.

Then, I pictured him lowering to his knees and whispering dirty things into my ear as he grabbed my cock. I stroked faster then and exploded quickly. Fuck!

I'd never jerked off thinking about him before. And he was not going to be my fantasy.

I immediately regretted it.

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My home office was light, airy, and peaceful, and it overlooked the pool. From the ninth floor, I had one of the best views in the city—superb even. There were only two apartments on each of the twenty floors in the building, so I could see all the way to Davis Island on one side, the entirety of Tampa Bay from the middle, and practically to St. Petersburg from the back. It was a fantastic place to live and work, and from my built-in desk and bookshelves that surrounded the window, I could make all my calls, like the one I was on. It was easier to convince people like Jake Cornell to invest when I was comfortable. And I was, with my feet propped up on the desk, leaning back in my chair. I explained what our company was about again and what kind of returns we expected on his investment, and I listened to him talk on and on about his finances.

Calling investors was normally a thrill. There wasn't much I loved more than parting rich people with their money, except doing it for a good cause, and that was definitely this project. The renewable energy team of scientists that Hudson found had designed something that would be a much-needed help to the environment.

But I had to admit it was all losing some of its polish and pizzazz. The game. The hustle. Moving and shaking. Maybe I was getting too old for it? At least I'd taken Hudson's advice over the years and invested my money well. I could walk away if I wanted, but I never felt like I had enough. Never felt like I was actually good enough. No matter how much money I made.

After getting Jake's commitment, I ended the call. I still needed to follow up with Ward Predmore to see if I could get him on board. So I started to scroll through my contact numbers to figure out who I could get his number from when I noticed I had a voicemail. The call had come in when I was on with Jake, but I'd nearly forgotten it,

and I didn't recognize the number. I clicked on the button and played the message.

"Uh...so this is Todd Foster. Um...Levi's friend. I'm sure you know who I am. Shit. I'm messing this up. Look, I have a business proposal for you. Fuck!" He'd said the curse under his breath, but I could still clearly hear it. "You're probably not interested but call me back. If you want." The message ended. He was rather amusing.

And well, I had thought about Todd a lot since Hudson's party for his boyfriend. And even more since that crappy and completely boring dinner. He was a cutie, for sure. His hair was brown with some blond streaks on top where it flowed away from his forehead, and he seemed studious with his thick-framed glasses that didn't quite hide his hazel eyes. His lips were perfect for kissing and his body, long and lean, was perfect for holding. But I'd blown it big time with him.

So why was he calling now? He said something about a business proposition, but I had no clue what kind of proposition he would have that I'd be interested in. I hated to sound snobby, but I was involved with multi-billion-dollar deals, not any penny-ante stuff he could come up with. Hell, he was fresh out of college and so young. But...

Maybe I could get a second chance with him after all. I still didn't know about that pup-stuff or how I could navigate around that. I could explain that I didn't care about it. He could do it all he wanted, but I wasn't interested in being involved. That in no way meant I was judging. Hopefully, he could live with that. Or perhaps I was rushing things.

Fuck it.

I tapped the phone to call him back, and when he answered, he seemed so unsure, but it came across as endearing. "Uh...hello?" he actually asked like it was a question of whether he was answering the phone.

“Todd? This is Larry. Returning your call.”

“Yeah, about that. Sorry. Forget it.”

“No, no. Don’t hang up.”

“I-I wasn’t.”

“Good.” I put my feet on the floor. “I’m not sure what kind of proposition you have, but I’m interested in whatever you have to say.”

“Oh. Okay. Well...it’s kind of a long story and, uh, complicated.”

“In that case, let’s have dinner—on me. You can take plenty of time to explain.”

“Sure. When?” He didn’t sound all that sure, so I figured I would make it worth his while. Dinner and drinks somewhere nice where he didn’t normally get to go. We set up a time, and he texted me his address so I could pick him up. That was surprisingly easy to get out of him. But I wasn’t taking it for granted.

Out the window, the sun was setting somewhere behind me but still casting pink streaks across the sky and water to the east. It would have been nice to see the sunset directly over the water. But I still had a stunning view, and on the odd occasion when I could get my ass up early enough, the sunrises were incredible, especially from my favorite balcony—a clear, unobstructed view of the bay. But none of it was calming right now.

For the first time in as long as I could remember, I was excited about something. Truly excited and not merely acting like I was. I had the butterflies and everything to prove it. And I wasn’t even sure what the hell I was excited about. For all I knew, Todd could be interested in something purely platonic with no desire to take things

further with me at all.

And wouldn't that just suck?

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Waiting. Ugh! There was nothing worse.

I sat on my couch and bit at my thumbnail. I'd already showered and dressed in the best suit I owned. It was the one my parents had bought me for graduation. They probably saved up for months for it. It was off the rack, but it was nice. I stood and paced between the couch and the kitchen bar. My nerves kicked in, and suddenly, I felt like this was the worst idea I had ever had.

Then my phone buzzed. I grabbed it off of the coffee table. He was here. In the parking garage. Shit.

I should probably text him that I'd changed my mind while I could still back out. But then, what would that accomplish? I would have to go on that stupid cruise alone with my friends thinking I was a loser. I was not going to be a loser. Fuck!

I texted that I was coming, tucked my wallet in my pocket, and locked the door on my way out.

When I stepped off the elevator, a sleek, black BMW was parked in the visitor spot, and Larry was behind the wheel. He spotted me and stepped out of the car. "Todd. Hi. You look nice." He looked nicer. He walked around the front of the car and opened the passenger door. I'd learned from Jax and Royce what a bespoke suit looked like, and what he wore had to be exactly that, in dark gray with a shiny dark blue shirt and a tie that complimented both. And shiny shoes. So refined.

I bit my bottom lip and got in the car. I was in over my head. But Larry couldn't have done a better job auditioning for this role if he had known he was. But he didn't

know. Yet.

“Thanks for picking me up,” I said when he climbed back into the driver’s seat.

“No problem. I’m looking forward to hearing what you have to say.” He sounded genuine. He wasn’t mocking me at all, which helped ease the worry knotting my stomach.

He pulled out of the garage and headed west down Palm.

“Uh, where are we going, by the way?” He had said to dress up, but not where he was taking me, and now I was curious.

“You’ll see.” He turned to look at me and waggled his eyebrows.

“Hmm...I’m not very good with surprises. And you don’t have to go to all this trouble.”

“No trouble. We have reservations, so we’re going.”

“Going where?”

Larry’s laughter echoed through the car, and I smiled, finding it delightful.

“Todd...you are a breath of fresh air.”

“Whatever.” I rolled my eyes, but he didn’t see it since he was watching the road.

He grumbled a little at the traffic, but soon enough, we got on the interstate. I kept expecting him to get off at one exit or another, but apparently, we weren’t going downtown.

“So...how did you meet Levi?” he asked as the traffic slowed. Again.

“Royce. He worked with Levi’s sister and helped us work things out so he could move in with me. I needed a roomie.”

“Sure. I haven’t had a roommate in a long time. I roomed with Hudson in college for a while, though. I think that was the last time.” He finally hit his blinker and took the exit at Lois. I still didn’t have a guess as to where we were going. “But that was a long time ago. I’m a bit older than you, I guess.”

“I think so. I’m twenty-five. How about you?”

“Woo...I’m in my forties, and that’s all I’m saying.”

I chuckled at his reaction. “Come on, Larry, you know what they say?”

“Uh, no, no, I don’t. Who are they? And what exactly do they say, Todd?” He was mocking me but in a playful way that came off flirty. I would allow that. For now.

“Hm...everyone, and they say age is only a number, Larry.”

“Well. It’s a number, all right.”

“Whatever. You look great. I’m sure it doesn’t matter.” I wanted to say he looked sexy but that would be too much. I wasn’t flirting. Not going to flirt. This was business and nothing else. But the longer we drove, the more I had to remind myself he was an asshole.

We finally pulled into International Plaza, which was horrible for guessing where we were going, considering it had multiple nice restaurants. He pulled in near the Cheesecake Factory, so I figured that was it, but I was wrong. He pulled up to the

valet parking lot and got out. Great. He tipped the guy and gave up his keys before extending his arm to me. “Shall we?”

I scowled. “How far are we walking?” I pointed at the entrance to the Cheesecake Factory, but he shook his head and led me beyond the restaurant. An outdoor patio area separated the entrances between the Cheesecake Factory, where we were not going, and The Capital Grille, where Larry was leading me. Well, shit. “Capital Grille? Are you kidding me?” That place was described with no less than four dollar signs on the internet.

“I don’t kid. Come on. Like I said, we have reservations.” We walked to the entrance between two cement lions keeping guard on either side of the awning. It all looked like a very high-end hotel. Inside, he gave his name, and we were quickly seated.

I leaned toward him across the table. “You didn’t have to try this hard.”

He shrugged. “I figured we might as well enjoy it. Do you prefer wine or something stronger?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to order a frozen daiquiri, but this place was fancier than that. “Wine, please.”

“Let’s be adventurous and get what they suggest goes with the meal, shall we?” He smiled so sweetly that I found myself nodding along with him. Levi had told me he was a broker of some kind, making deals with Hudson. I could easily see why he was successful at selling. Larry was smooth.

When the server came, we ordered shrimp cocktail and, surprisingly, a riesling to go with it. When the server left, Larry asked. “So, what is this proposition all about?”

“Maybe we could have the wine first?” I asked, actually wishing for a shot of

something stronger. A lot stronger. But no. I needed to do this sober. I shook my head. “Seriously...” I took a deep breath. “You know about this cruise? Jax’s cruise?”

His brows furrowed. “Jax...You mean Jaxson Hoadley, right?”

“Yes...”

Larry nodded. “I recall something about a cruise. They mentioned it at the dinner.” He unfolded his napkin and put it in his lap, along with his hands. “Honestly, I didn’t think much about it since. Why?”

“Well, Jax and Royce are my best friends, and I’m expected to go.” I held my hand up as if that explained everything, but I knew damn well it didn’t. I would have to elaborate, but how did I do that without spilling my entire life?

The server showed up with two glasses and a bottle. He opened it and poured a bit for Larry to sip, and when Larry nodded, the server poured the other two and left the bottle on the table. Larry held his glass up. “To new propositions. Cheers.”

I tapped my glass against his and took a sip. It was sweet. “Nice. I don’t think we should drink the entire bottle.” He waved me off, so I sat my glass on the table. “Anyway...they have dates. I don’t.”

When I said nothing else, he asked, “Do you need a date?”

“Sort of...” I tilted my head back and forth. “More like a pretend date.”

“To go on the cruise?” His expression was blank, so I had no idea if he was following me or what he thought of it at all. I figured I was going to have to spell it out.

“Yes. I need someone to pretend to date me, go on the cruise, and then break up.”
There. I said it.

Larry leaned back in his chair and looked at me for a moment. “You want me? You want me to be that pretend date?”

I bit my lip. And nodded.

He exhaled loudly, but then the shrimp came. We ate and drank wine, and he ordered lobster bisque and Rib-eye, as well as a different wine for every part of the meal. And I stuffed myself. But we didn’t talk about it again until all the food and wine had been cleared and the server asked if we would like dessert.

“Coffee?” I asked. “With cream, please.”

Larry nodded and held up two fingers. The server took off to fetch the last of our meal, and when he was out of earshot, Larry leaned forward. “Okay. What’s in it for me?”

I pursed my lips together. “The rules are no sex and PDA kept to a minimum and in front of my friends or in public, or on the cruise only.”

“I repeat. What’s in it for me?”

I hadn’t thought of that. “It will be fun?” And my friends will think I’m cool. They’ll think I’m one of them. Of course, I didn’t say that. He didn’t need to know that much. “The cruise is free, not that you need a free cruise, but...”

“How many dates?”

“A few. Three or four before the cruise. On the cruise. At least part of the cruise. We

could stage the breakup on the boat.” Then, avoid each other.

“I supposed this is date one? W-Would the pup stuff be involved?”

“Well, only on the cruise, but you don’t have to be involved with it there either. You can watch. If you wanted.” I left it open, hopeful he would be interested to find out more. “Or not or whatever.”

“Let me think about it?”

“Sure.” I brought my hand to my mouth to bite my thumbnail but remembered where I was and who I was with and put it in my lap instead. That coffee couldn’t get there fast enough.

We finished dinner civilly, though I wanted to kick Larry under the table. Was he seriously thinking about it, or was he stringing me along before he said no? Was he disappointed that I took sex off the table? There was no way I was having sex with him. He was an asshole.

A sexy, rich asshole, but an asshole, nonetheless.

Larry paid the tab and walked me out. He tipped the valet while I got in the passenger seat. The drive home would be uncomfortable, and I had half a mind to grab an Uber instead. But then he was climbing into the driver’s seat and pulling away. I bit my lip.

Eventually, he broke the silence. “Your proposition is interesting, Todd. I’ll be honest, you completely surprised me, but...I promise I’ll think about it.”

“You sound sincere.”

“Ha. And you sound surprised.”

“Well...” I turned to look out the window and watch the streetlights go by. It had gotten dark while we ate.

“So, the elephant in the room it is...I’m sorry.”

“What?” I sat up straight and looked at him.

Larry sighed. “I was a jerk at the birthday party. I, well, I was surprised. You have a way of doing that to me. But I admit. I don’t know anything about the pet play, and I shouldn’t make judgements.”

“Okay...” I could work with that.

“And we don’t really know each other at all.”

“No, we don’t.”

“So, sincerely, I’ll think about all of this and let you know. I won’t take too long.”

What had he done with the asshole frog? I hadn’t even kissed him, and he was already acting like an unexpected prince.

Larry dropped me off at home, and I went upstairs and changed. I couldn’t get out of the suit fast enough. I groaned as I hung it up, knowing I had to have it cleaned soon. It needed to be ready if I actually landed an interview at some point.

Since it wasn’t terribly late, I grabbed a bottle of water and settled down in the living room to do some gaming. Maybe Justin was on again and up for another Mario Kart ass whopping.

Before the system powered up, my phone dinged with a text. It was Larry. He agreed.

He fucking agreed.

Then, before I even answered, he requested a second date. Well, okay! Maybe this would work out after all.

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Getting Todd to agree to go out with me on Saturday was a win, but it would be a long date. I'd spent the morning working and was taking a needed break in my favorite spot. It was like a cross between a balcony and a four seasons room with a set of super comfortable chairs, small table for drinks, and, more importantly, the most spectacular view in the place. The water stretched for miles, with the Tampa skyline rising to the left. I sat back and texted Todd some of the details. I'll pick up sandwiches from Bricks and pick you up at 1:30 pm.

He immediately texted back. 1:30? I thought dinner movie?

I chuckled. He had no idea who I was and how I did things, but he would learn. Yes. But it's in Safety Harbor, so I figured we could hit the park first. My phone immediately rang, and I answered it. "Hi, fake date."

"Uh...that seems like a super long date. You know, you can back out of this."

"What? No. I think we need this. If you want to pull this off, we need to get to know each other. People who date know each other, and we don't."

Todd huffed. "You have a point. If we're ready to strangle each other by the end of the night, we'll know this is a bad idea."

"Or...we'll get along fine and be able to do this thing." I waved my hand as if he could see me.

"Okay. But I'll pick up the sandwiches. Text me what you want."

What I wanted was to argue with him more, to get under his skin, and see who he was beneath that quiet exterior, but that wasn't going to get me anywhere. I sighed. "Fine."

"Fine."

"See ya Saturday, fake boyfriend."

"God. Larry, you gotta stop saying that. It'll become a habit, and the wrong people will hear you."

"Oh, all right. Saturday then, boyfriend?" I stressed the boyfriend playfully.

"Yes. Fine. Bye." He clicked off, but I heard him laughing as he did, and what a sweet, sweet sound. I couldn't wait to get more of that.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:04 am

I had no idea what that man was doing or thinking. Saturday would be interesting for sure, but first, I had to get through this interview. I flipped through the shirts in my closet, picking the light blue one that Jax said made the little bit of blue in my hazel eyes stand out. It couldn't hurt. I checked my watch as I put it on. I had twenty minutes, but everything else was ready for the video call. A quick button, then I grabbed my jacket and tie.

Royce's sister had told me about this position where she worked, but it had been Royce who actually got me the interview. He gave me a personal reference, and although I had a few great professional ones from my internships, his carried more weight at Deloitte. Apparently, Royce had been a superstar or something before he left. Maybe it was who you knew? Whatever. I'd take advantage of it if it gave me a good job.

I looked in the mirror one more time. My hairstyle was down-played but still swooped back on top and shorter on the sides. Fashionable, but not outrageous. I hoped it would work. A little ChapStick helped, though I would have liked to add some gloss, but I didn't think that would go over well. I slid my glasses back on, though I didn't need them for computer work and reading. They were for distance, but that mid-range was questionable. And they made me look smarter.

The laptop was set up on the kitchen bar where the light was better. I sat on the bar stool and pulled up the video chat app. The first screen showed you what you looked like. It was too low. I ran to my room and grabbed a few textbooks. After stacking two of them underneath my laptop, I had the right height. It looked good, so I clicked to join.

What gave me more flutters in my stomach? This interview or the thought of spending nearly the whole day with Larry? Ugh! The jury was out. But I stopped thinking about it as soon as the hiring manager came on camera. “Hi, Todd. Nice to meet you.” She smiled.

“Same. Hello. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today.” I’d studied enough to know what to say and had my resume and notes beside me. Though, as the call went on, I found I hardly needed them. By the time we started talking about my experience and what I could offer the company, I had totally relaxed. And once we hung up, I felt pretty confident about it.

I texted Royce and his sister a thank you note, then tweaked the one I’d already drafted to the hiring manager and sent it off. I had nothing to do after that but obsess over my upcoming date.

My phone dinged with a text, but when I checked it, there were three. One from Royce with a thumbs-up emoji, a nice one from his sister and...one from Larry with his sandwich order. Why did the mundane food request get my heart thumping?

This was getting ridiculous. No. I was not going to jack off to thoughts of him. Again.

I huffed and changed into a T-shirt before turning on my video console and starting up Baldur’s Gate 3. I needed to get into something that would totally distract me.

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I'd planned to take Todd to the Gigglewaters. It had a fun, relaxed atmosphere and after all day talking, we could enjoy a movie for a break from the chatter. It felt perfect. I hoped he liked the movie. Gigglewaters didn't play new things. Their films were older, classics.

I took a quick stroll through my closet. Dressing down would be fine for this day. I hoped Todd knew that, but then figured I'd text him. First, I pulled on an olive-colored golf shirt and cargo shorts. I wanted to show off my nice legs. After tucking my socked feet in my deck shoes, I checked myself out in one of the full-length mirrors that flanked the door that led from my closet to the ensuite bathroom. Turning left, then right, I liked what I saw and hoped Todd would too.

My hair looked good, and the olive shirt made my skin look less pale. I couldn't wait to see how nice Todd looked. I wanted him beside me. In my life. In my bed. I raised an eyebrow at my reflection and laughed. Todd had said no sex, but maybe things would change if we got along. There was no doubt we had chemistry. It zinged between us, and I wanted to fan the flames and get it rolling.

I found my phone and snapped a selfie from the mirror. The lighting was great for that. My closet was a dream. I'd never regretted paying the designer to come in and trick it out. I didn't spend money willy-nilly, but when something was worth it, I went all out. Like I planned to do for Todd. I couldn't help thinking he would be more than worth it. I sent him the picture and finished getting ready.

##

I picked Todd up on time and we ate our sandwiches on the way. The few times I'd

had food from the Bricks, it had been incredible, and this one was no exception. Chicken, bacon, apple, and fancy cheese. The perfect blend of flavors on a Hawaiian bun. Todd had some kind of veggie thing, and I savored the sounds he made as he ate it even more than my food.

He was adorable in a light blue short-sleeved button-up. He'd left it untucked over his khaki shorts. He turned and caught me watching him. He swallowed and wiped his mouth. "Eyes on the road, mister." He pointed at the windshield.

I chuckled. "Sorry. You're making it difficult with all that moaning and humming going on over there. Enjoying your sandwich?"

Before I even finished my question, he was scoffing. "You know this shit is the bomb. You practically inhaled yours. Ohmygawd."

I could imagine his eye roll. I could get used to seeing the gorgeous blue-green-brown of his eyes rolling around daily. "It was good, yeah."

We spent the rest of the drive talking about great places to eat and hang out, mostly in Ybor city. His apartment was right on the edge, so I imagined he spent most of his time there. "Where'd you go to school, then? University of Tampa?"

"Yeah. I loved UT. The campus is so cool. Even after what, six years? Yeah, love it."

"You recently graduated, right? With Levi?" I wanted to know everything about him.

"Yeah. Didn't you go to the ceremony? I thought he said you did, but I didn't see you there."

I changed lanes before answering. I didn't want to get into why I left early that day and didn't go to the follow-up party, even though I had been invited. I simply hadn't

wanted to feed that green-eyed monster that tended to pop up around Hudson and Levi. You couldn't look at them without seeing how in love they were. "Yeah. I had other obligations and had to cut out quickly when it was over." I shrugged as if it was nothing.

"Hmm...yeah. It's kind of weird having friends in common, but our paths don't cross much."

I laughed hard. It would have been a spit-take if I had been drinking.

"What?" he asked.

"The last time our paths crossed? Yeah, you wouldn't have anything to do with me. Every time I tried to even say hello, you snubbed me." I glanced over quickly, enough to catch him biting that bottom lip. "After that, avoiding you seemed safer."

"It wasn't that long ago, but seriously, can you blame me?"

"No, I guess not."

We went silent in the car, but fortunately, our destination was ahead. I pulled into the parking lot and circled until I found a spot I could live with. I didn't park my Beemer just anywhere. I shut off the engine and turned to him.

He smiled shyly and quickly looked away.

"Todd?"

"Hey, let's forget about the infamous birthday party event and that stupid dinner party. We can start over. How's that sound?" He looked up with only his eyes and sucked his bottom lip in his mouth again.

I stuck my finger under his chin to tilt his face up, wanting nothing more than to lean in and kiss those abused lips. “Agreed. And nothing to hide from. I’m not judging you at all. Okay?”

“Okay.” When he smiled this time, it was full-on. High-voltage. Maximum wattage. And it blew me away. My heart stopped beating. My lungs stopped moving. “Great. Now tell me why you parked so fucking far away?”

“Wha...”

When he laughed, the world started up again. I could breathe. But my heart was slamming around erratically in my chest. “Seriously...” he waved his hand at the parking lot.

“Seriously? Do you know what this car costs?”

He winked at me. “Come on. Let’s walk off those sandwiches. I can’t believe I ate the whole thing.”

We got out of the car and started to the park, but I checked him out as we went. His ass was tight and spectacular in those shorts, and I found myself hoping to all the stars above that this would work as more than fake boyfriends. Then he turned to me.

“Oh, shit. Todd.”

“What?”

“You got stuff, uh, food or something, on your shirt.” I looked down to make sure I hadn’t done the same.

“Fuck! This is my favorite shirt.” I thought he was going to cry or get upset, and my body acted before my brain.

I grabbed him and pulled him into a hug. “I’ll buy you another one before we go to the show.”

When Todd pushed me away, my heart broke a little. “I can buy my own shirts, Mr. Money Bags.”

“I know you can, but I feel like this was my fault. My date suggestion and all. So, I’ll make it right.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know, but I will. Now stop arguing. And come on,” I nearly grabbed his hand, but at the last second, I shoved him a little instead, then waved at the park entrance to the dock that stretched out over the water. We walked out over the faded gray planks, taking in the sight. “I love the water.”

He wrinkled his nose. “I don’t get out to the water much. Not much of a beach person, but this is nice.” A pelican flew by, and he tilted his head to watch it while I watched him.

“The decks go along the marsh, and there’s a marina.” I waved in the general direction. “I haven’t been out here in a while.”

“Why do you like the water so much?”

“Just look at it, Todd.” Gentle blue-green waves lapped against the pilings. “It feels like the world is subdued. Peaceful. Here. In this spot. Right now, in this moment.” The sun was bright overhead, and the few others around us spoke in hushed tones. It was warm, but not too warm. Spring was the best time of year to be outside in Florida.

Todd glanced around and inhaled deeply. “I see what you mean. Maybe I need more of this in my life.”

“I’m surprised you don’t have a stronger connection, being a Floridian.”

“Being, a what? Ah...no. I’m not a native. I’m from South Carolina. I came here to go to UT. I got a partial scholarship.”

“Are you staying then?”

“Yes. Probably. I mean.” He turned and started walking farther down the peer. “If I can get a job.”

“How’s that going?”

Todd stopped walking and turned his scowling face at me. “You know what? We’re talking a lot about me. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Are you from here? Where did you go to school? What exactly do you do?”

I didn’t want to talk about me, but I needed to give to get. “Yeah...” I started walking again at a casual pace. “From here, yes. I grew up with Hudson, kind of. At least we knew each other, but we didn’t get to be friends until college. University of Florida.”

“Go Gators!”

“Right.” I chuckled. “I’m not into sports.”

“What are you into?”

“Making money.” The words slipped out before I thought about them, but they were true. “Hudson grew up in the rich part of town. I did not. Which is why we weren’t exactly friends until college. But that’s also why I chose my profession.”

“Which is what, exactly?”

“I’m a broker.” I tucked my hands in my shorts pockets to keep them from reaching out to touch him. I didn’t want his alarm bells going off. He would have to make the first moves.

“What does that mean? I know you sell things, but what?”

“Land. Real Estate, commodities. I have several licenses. And it’s not that I sell. Sometimes, I’m the buyer or seller, but most of the time, I connect buyers and sellers and get a piece of the transaction. Usually.”

“Usually?”

“I’m not getting a commission on this deal I’m working on with Hudson. I’ve waived that and invested instead.”

“The energy thing?”

I nodded. “It’s going to be big.”

We reached the end of the dock and leaned against the railing to look out over the water. “Wow. Is this the bay?”

“Yes. Tampa Bay. Right here.” I waved my hand out as if presenting it to him. He had no idea how much I wanted to give him the entire bay. The entire world. Anything and everything.

“Wow.”

“Come on. Let’s go see some other things.” I led him back down the pier and around the park and surrounding area. We saw the marina and fountain and walked to the butterfly garden. The entire time, we chatted about everything and nothing. My love of nature and Florida. His love of video games and good food. The latter we had in common. He mentioned his siblings, who split pretty much as fast as they could when they came of age. We had surprisingly similar backgrounds, and I couldn’t wait to see what he made of himself. I told him about my older and younger brothers who did much the same as his but not why. We kept everything on the surface. Not probing deeper but slowly building the foundation for trust.

Eventually, it was getting close to the time to head to the venue, so we got in the car and drove the block or two over to the Galleria. It had a lot of kitschy stuff but nothing Todd could wear. So we made our way to Backwater Provisions instead, where we found a similar shirt, but it was white with a tiny yellow and white pattern of fishing flies on it. We were running out of time.

Todd laughed as he posed. “It’s not my normal thing, but I kind of like it.”

“I like it. You look like a tourist.”

He flipped me off.

“Come on.” I paid for the shirt, and he wore it out. It was about six o’clock, so we headed to Gigglewaters, only two minutes farther down the road.

Parking sucked, but it couldn’t be helped. Everything in front of the building was already taken. But I didn’t want to park on the street if I could help it, so I circled around and went into the lot on the other side of the building. Luckily, there were still a couple of spots. Otherwise, we would have had to park behind the fire station across

the street and walk. Parking was always a pain. I hated leaving my car where it might get dinged up, but if I wanted to drive a nice car, I had to deal with it. At least the spaces weren't too small and cramped.

We walked the block and went in. "This is kind of cool." Todd's head swiveled back and forth, trying to take everything in all at once. Gigglewaters was a restaurant, bar, and small movie house with a 1920s theme. Walking in the front door, there was a large bar and tables like any other restaurant, but the ceiling was tiled with tin and several large crystal chandeliers hung from it. The walls were painted black, and the glass of the doors looked antique. The wall opposite the bar had a baroque patterned wallpaper in persimmon and gold. I knew from prior experience that the walls in the screening room were painted that same rich persimmon color.

"Let's get a drink." The shelves behind the bar, though typically filled with alcohol, genuinely looked like they could have been from the twenties, and the drinks were all named according to the theme. "Considering where we are, I think we should order an Old Fashioned. Do you like bourbon?"

"Sure. That sounds fitting. I'll grab that table." He hurried to one of the few open spots and sat while I squeezed in at the bar and ordered. The place wasn't totally full, but there were plenty of patrons.

I joined Todd at the table with our drinks. "These are called The 1919. The orange peels are flamed, but you probably didn't see the bar tender light that up." We both shrugged as I sat down. He sipped it and nodded. If he wanted to see the fire-show at the bar, I would have taken him, but he didn't seem to care much about it.

"Want to order food?" I wasn't exactly hungry but irrationally needed to feed him.

"Maybe something lite?"

“We’re doing white truffle popcorn for the movie and maybe some bourbon pound cake?”

“Wow, that sounds good.” After a few minutes of reviewing the decadent menu, he put it down. “I know what I said about lite but I have to have a J.L.T.”

“Good choice.” Their version of the classic bacon sandwich was served with an out-of-this-world bourbon bacon jam. We ordered one we could split with truffle fries.

“The theme seems to be bourbon everything and truffles.”

“Sounds great to me.”

“Me too.” And there was that glorious laughter again, making me secretly vow to make him do that again and again.

We sipped the bourbon in front of us while waiting for the food. Then Todd set his drink down and narrowed his eyes. “I hate to have to do this, but I must admit I’m having fun so far. This hasn’t been the torture I expected.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Glad to know you had such high standards.” He stuck his tongue out at me. “You’re too cute for your own good.”

Then he blushed and smiled, and a tiny dimple appeared on his cheek that I hadn’t noticed before. My heart dropped. Was it too early to be falling for him?

Maybe. But it was happening all the same, and even though I knew he would break me, I was all in.

The food was great. After we ate, we ordered snacks for the movie. “What are we seeing anyway?”

“Labyrinth. That’s why we had to come today. If we waited until next week, it would be Stand By Me.”

“Labyrinth? With David Bowie?” I nodded. “That is my favorite movie.”

“Good. I mean, either would be good with me, but Stand By Me seemed like too much of a downer.”

“Agreed. I love eighties movies. I didn’t realize that’s what they played here. I was expecting a Marvel movie or something.”

We got our popcorn and pound cake and another drink each, then moved through the French doors, painted black with etched glass, and into the screening room. The seats were paired with tables set between them, and there were only four rows of five sets, each with a few more seats in the back rows. All the seats had nice cushions, making them more comfortable. We picked a spot in the middle of the second row from the front and put our treats on the table.

“This is fantastic.” Todd had already dug into the popcorn.

“One of my favorites.” I dipped in for a handful too.

“I meant all of it. Yeah, the popcorn is great, but...” He waved his arm over his head.

“All of this is cool. I’ve never even heard of this place.”

“Ancient Chinese secret.”

“Huh?”

“Old joke. Never mind.”

He rolled those pretty eyes again but laughed at the same time. “Yeah. Grandpa. Keep your jokes to the twenty-first century, will you?”

I stuck my tongue out at him.

Then the movie started. Even though he confessed to having seen it a million times and owning it on DVD, his eyes were glued to the screen. But I only half-watched because watching him react to it was a lot more entertaining.

After Jareth turned into a barn owl and flew away, we got up and walked back out to the car. We were quiet for a little while as I drove us out of the little coastal town and back to the highway. I had enjoyed spending time with Todd and wanted more. I realized if that were to happen, I had to get to the bottom of this cruise thing. Going from fake dates to real dates had a lot to do with that. “So...the cruise?” I asked.

“Yeah. I think we can pull it off.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Oh?”

“What’s the deal with it? Why is this so important that you went to all this trouble to fake-date me?”

He huffed and turned to look out the window at first, but then he looked forward. “You know, they’re all dating rich dudes. Well, maybe not Royce, but like he’s rich.”

I had a feeling I understood this all too much. “Makes you feel left out?”

“Yeah. I mean. I’m not dating anyone. The last few times were disasters. So...I don’t know. When we all hang out with them and their boyfriends, it kind of feels like I’m

not really one of them. I don't want to go to this big deal thing and spend the whole time feeling less than. Or hiding in my cabin and not having fun."

"I get that, you know? You may not realize it, but we have more in common here than you think. In a room full of rich investors, I normally feel like the outsider. It's like the prince and the pauper or Cinderella or something. I didn't come from money. I made it." I left the so can you hanging out there, but he didn't take the bait.

He tapped on the center console, making me want to grab his hand again, but I didn't. He had to trust me first. "I didn't know that before. You know? I thought you and Hudson were like Ward. And Royce. And hell, even Jax. They're all like trust fund babies and shit."

"No. No trust fund here."

"Well..." He started but never finished the sentence. I didn't fill the silence between us, either. I didn't think I needed to. Eventually, he said, "We'll have to figure out some other dates. The cruise isn't far off."

"True. I'm sure we can think of something."

"Yeah..."

Then we talked about things to do in Tampa without settling on anything until I finally arrived at his apartment building. He turned to me in the car. "Thank you. This has been fun. And...thanks for doing all of it. I know you don't have to, and you aren't really getting anything out of it."

"I've gotten a lot more than I expected already."

"Sheesh. You're nice." He bit that lip again.

“Nope. Not even a little.” I had serious ulterior motives here. He had to know that. But I didn’t know for sure if he did or didn’t. Or if he’d ever trust me enough to give up the fake part of the boyfriend deal. He stuck his hand out, and instinctively, I shook it.

Then he was gone, leaving me sitting there staring at my hand and wishing for a whole hell of a lot more.

I went home.

As I got out of my car, I noticed he had left his stained shirt. I picked it up and brought it to my nose. It smelled of citrus and other fruits with a hit of warm and spicy behind it. It smelled like Todd. I needed to be in my room fast. I couldn’t contain myself anymore, and I was as horny as I had ever been.

The slow crawl of the elevator up to my floor was frustrating, but as soon as I was in my condo, I ripped my shirt off and raced to my bedroom with Todd’s shirt still clutched in my hand. I tossed it on the bed, then dropped my shorts and boxers, kicking out of my shoes.

I grabbed the lube and got on the mattress. I brought Todd’s shirt to my face again. I wished like hell it was him and not this poor facsimile. But I lubed my cock and jerked off with his scent in my nose and his image floating behind my eyes.

What I would do with him if he were willing. I’d lube his ass instead of my hand, opening him up nice and slow, teasing him, stroking his prostate. Licking his nipples. Making him hum and moan like he had in my car after eating the sandwich that had dripped on this shirt.

Oh, fuck...I squeezed my cock hard and fucked into my hand. I wanted him. Wanted to mark his neck and come inside him, marking him internally as well.

Then I came hard. Too hard. I was a fucking goner, but I didn't regret a damned thing.

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After the interview and the date, I needed a break from thinking. Everything had become too serious, so I was thrilled to have a morning mosh at the Tam-PAH later that week with our Tampa Pups and Handlers group. Jax and Royce had invested money to keep it open, and I benefited from that. Especially in times like this, when I needed to get into that puppy headspace and simply play with my pup-brothers.

I dropped my bag on the bench and pulled off my hoodie. The dress of the day was a tight tank top and snug bike shorts with a good jockstrap under for support. Safety first when dressing. The shorts were black, but the tank was bright yellow to match my persona. My pup-name was Sunshine, and I loved wearing yellow. I had collected a mask, harness, and leather collar over the years, all in bright yellow. I got my gear on, including gloves and socks with rubber bottoms to keep from skidding. I didn't wear my collar, though, because it had big buckles, which could hurt someone. Same reason I left my glasses at home and went with contacts. The collar was more for show, like when we went to the parades, and I hoped one day I would have a handler who could attach a lead and take me for a walk. Once geared up, I hit the mat.

Some of my friends were already there, like Egypt and Dallas. Of course, Gunner was sitting on his haunches on the back mat in his blue and black mask, watching over us. He was our Alpha, and along with his handler, Chris, ran the moshes. Even though Jax and Royce invested, our Alpha team was still in charge. Marshall came in behind me and started getting his gear on. Egypt had a handler, Ms. B, who was talking with Chris, and the pair were the only girls in our group. The other guys here were singles like me.

I waved to Marshall. He was cute in his black and white, spotted Dalmatian-style mask. We weren't that close, and sadly, there had never been sparks between us.

Then I was rolled over as Dallas tackled me. He had a Dallas Cowboy tank on and wore a Cowboys-blue mask. He loved football and was very outgoing. Although he was also single, like Marshall, there had never been any chemistry between us. Besides, I needed a handler, not another pup.

We wrestled around for a few minutes, and despite my best efforts, I ended up on the bottom, more often than not. Dallas was bigger than me after all. Finally, Marshall jumped in, and we ganged up on Dallas. I let loose and got into it, having fun, until I heard a familiar bark and looked up.

Jax, dressed in his gear, bounded toward the mats. His persona was Jay-Jay, and he was a hyper, bouncy thing. His build was tall and slim, but his lanky frame had started putting on more muscle since getting together with Ward, who walked over to the other handlers. Seeing the leash in his hands gave me a stab of jealousy. Would I ever find a handler? I doubted that would be Larry, though how crazy good would that be?

Then I ate the mat as Jax pounced, knocking me out of my fantasy. I pushed up and flipped him over. It was on!

A few minutes later, our Boone dog showed up. Royce's pup name was Boone, and he completed our trio. Quinn's boyfriend and handler was more of a daddy, but that wasn't out of the norm in the pup world.

We played hard for a bit until the handlers started giving out treats and water, essentially making us take a break. Chris shared his treats and water with the other singles, but Ward and Quinn did a great job including me. But it wasn't the same as having my own man. Feeling a bit morose over it, I laid down and put my head on my paws. It got me a little more attention as Ward and Chris pet my head and Quinn scratched my back. They laughed when I rolled over and kicked my legs in the air. Jay-Jay and Boone weren't having any of my antics, though. They both promptly

attacked me. Then all was forgotten as we wrestled again.

We played hard in our much-needed session until Chris called Gunner to him. That normally signaled either a change-up of some kind or the end of the session and given how long we'd been playing, I guessed it was the end. Chris tapped his watch, and all the pups, including me, made our way over to the benches to change. I was more reluctant than normal, though this was never my favorite part. I liked going into pup headspace a lot better than coming out of it. Feeling defiant, I plopped down in the center of the mats.

"Come on, Sunshine. You too." Chris motioned for me to get going.

I whined and laid down.

Chris grabbed a leash off the table where he had spare accessories laid out along with water bottles and snacks. "Oh, a little stubborn today, huh?" He walked out to the mat and snapped the leash to a small buckle on the back of my mask. "Come on, boy." He patted my head as I slowly got to my knees and followed him to the bench. He gave me a peanut butter-filled pretzel treat and patted my head. "I know you had fun, but it's time to clean up."

I climbed up to the bench and Chris helped me work my mask off. I took a long drink of water from the bottle he handed me.

"Feel better?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"Hydrate." He patted my shoulder before moving on to check on everyone else. We tended to sweat a lot when we played, so drinking water was important.

After pulling off my gloves and knee pads, I leaned back against the wall, still not wanting to leave.

“Hey, Sunshine.” Jax slid next to me, and Royce moved in beside him. Their handlers were farther down, packing up their bags. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

Jax nudged my shoulder. “Doesn’t seem like nothing. You normally smile fucking ear to ear at the end of a mosh. Not this sad face. What gives?”

“Tired.”

Royce leaned around him and made a buzzer sound. “Try again.”

“I had a few job interviews this week.” I shrugged like it was nothing. “It’s just. I miss ya’ll.” I was living alone for the first time since I started college. After Jax moved out, Royce temporarily moved in, even though he wasn’t there much. At least I knew he occupied the other room. When he finally moved on, Levi came. Now he was gone too.

“You lonely, pup?” Jax asked.

“Yeah. Maybe a little,” I admitted with a nod.

Jax crossed his arms. “That does it. We’re having a pool party. Either of you have anything else to do today?”

“Hell no! Let’s do it.” Royce threw a hand in the air.

“No.” I shook my head, and they stared at me like I was crazy, but I had something

up my sleeve.

“What do ya mean no? What do you have going on that you can’t come over for a few hours?” Jax practically pouted.

I laughed at him. “Nothing, but it’s not a pool party. If we’re doing this, we’re having a fucking daiquiri party!”

“Sweet!” Royce threw his hand up again.

“Hmm...” Jax puckered his lips. “We have booze and a blender but not the fixings.”

“I’ll bring the other goodies if you have the rum and the ice.”

Royce stood and danced around, rolling his arms together and chanting, “Daquiris, daquiris.” And shaking his butt in a one-man conga line.

Jax and I laughed, and I tossed my hand towel at him. This was going to be a great day.

We agreed to meet at Jax and Ward’s place on Bayshore in about an hour, and I had a few things to do before I went over. I needed to get home, change, stop by the store, pick up strawberries, and...see if I had any citrus in the house. If not, I could pick it up at the store. Plus, I needed a bottle of my secret ingredient—vanilla syrup! I could buy a commercial mix, but the homemade version tasted so much better and was more fun to make.

A huge part of me hoped Ward and Hudson wouldn’t be there, or at a minimum, they would stay inside. I didn’t want to be reminded so blatantly of what I didn’t have. No handler. No boyfriend. Fuck that. It was selfish, but I wanted to simply hang out with my best buds like we used to before they got all sexed up with their rich man hunks.

A little niggle in the back of my mind said maybe I could have that. With Larry. Or at least the rich boyfriend part. I knew he would go there if I let him. I felt whatever that zing of attraction was between us, and if I let it grow, it would. But being a pup was a part of me, and I didn't know if he could ever be a part of that. If that answer was no, letting things get serious between us wasn't fair.

But maybe we could be friends, so on the way home from pup play, I called him. We had been talking a lot since the long date.

"What's up, buttercup?" he answered.

"Hey, Larry. I'm on my way to get ready for a daiquiri party at Jax's pool."

"Oh, you inviting me?"

He never failed to make me laugh. "No..." We hadn't set another date, but we had been getting to know each other better on these calls, so I wasn't in a huge hurry to do that. "I, uh, wanted to see what you were up to. That's all."

"Is that all, really? I think I've discovered that you tend to have motivations of some sort for the things you do, even if I don't understand them."

"Eh...what's to understand?" I heard him chuckle, but he wasn't entirely wrong. "Okay, maybe there is another reason for this call. Since we are fake dating and all."

"Are we? Because I don't think we have another date set up. Is that why you're calling?"

I hated him pushing for that, but I would also ignore it. "No, not really, but since I'm hanging out with my friends, I was thinking if we were actually dating for real—"

“For real, for real?”

“Shut up. Stop teasing. My point is I need to tell them we’re dating. Right?” I pulled into my complex and found my spot.

“You don’t have to run that by me, Todd. This is your rodeo. But if you are going to tell them, I need to tell Hudson.”

“Eee-ah! I hadn’t thought about it that way, but you’re right.”

Larry grumbled something under his breath, but before I could ask him what, he said, “It makes sense, and Hudson is my best friend. If this were, in fact, a relationship between us, I would tell him.”

“Okay. We’re doing this, then.” I turned off my car as if that made it final.

“Sounds like it. How does that make you feel?”

“What? Are you a psychologist now?” I burst out laughing. I wasn’t going to get that deep with him if we weren’t having an actual relationship. And we most definitely were not.

The sun was boiling down on us, but between the frozen drinks I whipped up and the cool water in the pool, we were refreshed! We sat on the oversized steps at the shallow end with our legs stretched out in the water and sipped daiquiris.

“Ahh...this is it. Does it get better?” Royce asked. He had an oversized hat and big Audrey Hepburn-looking sunglasses on.

“For you, it doesn’t.” My comment was overly snarky, and the minute I said it, I wished I could take it back. Royce didn’t deserve that.

He turned to me, lowered his shades, and stared at me over the top of them. “Well, Miss Pissy Pants. What’s crawled up our little Sunshine’s butt?”

I huffed at that, but it was the perfect opening, so I needed to take it. “Eh...sorry. I, uh, have something to tell you guys.” Breaking the news about Larry would change the subject of why I thought Royce and Jax had it all while I was being left behind. Because I wasn’t ready to talk about that and didn’t think I ever would be. Not with them.

“What?” Royce asked.

“Yeah, what?” Jax echoed.

“I’m sort of seeing someone.”

Royce slid his shades back over his eyes but didn’t stop looking at me. “Someone?”

“Yeah. Someone as in Larry.”

Jax scrunched up his nose. “Larry?”

“Yeah, you know. Larry, Hudson’s friend. Levi’s Hudson.”

“The broker?” Royce asked.

“Yeah...” What was wrong with being a broker?

Jax laughed. “He’s cute. I like it.” He took a sip of his drink. “Does Levi know?”

“Not yet. You’re the first I told.”

“We should have invited him to the party.” Royce kicked his feet in the water. “He’s sort of in our circle now, right? I like him.”

I shrugged. I didn’t know if he was in our circle. It had been the three of us for a long time. Others came and went. Like Fredo. We thought he was a friend, but he’d turned out to be an asshole, and when a few bad actors trying to take Ward down offered him money to spy on us all, he took it. After that, we wouldn’t easily let someone else in, but Levi had his sister to vouch for him initially, and I’d gotten to know him while he lived with me. He was a good kid. He wasn’t a pup but had a newly discovered kink of his own, so he certainly didn’t judge us. Maybe it would be good for him to join us. But... “Not today. It’s been too long since the three of us hung out.” And I was exceedingly happy that their significant others had decided to go to Drew’s house. They were going to drag him and Justin back for dinner, but I wasn’t planning on sticking around for that. I could use Levi as my excuse. “I’m going over to see him after this, anyway.”

“Oh?” Jax asked. “Not staying for dinner?”

“Not this time. Hey, I need another drink. Ya’ll ready for more?”

“Fuck yeah,” Royce said, holding his nearly empty cup in the air. “I think I need some snacks too. Didn’t you say something about nachos, Jay?”

“Yeah, Let’s get drinks and go in for nachos and Sunshine can tell us more about Larry!” He sing-songed and I knew he wasn’t going to let me off the hook. Not that I minded talking about him. Larry had been nice. Surprisingly. But talking about him kind of made me feel like a liar, but we did actually go out. Twice. And maybe we needed at least one more date before the cruise, so we were dating. We simply didn’t expect it to lead to anything more.

I ran the blender and freshened up our drinks, then we grabbed the food and sat in the

side dining room overlooking the pool. Not only did it have the door to the pool and another large window, but a skylight overhead, all letting in that Florida gold, making the room airy and bright. Plus, the table was round and smaller than the formal dining room, so we could share the food easier.

We dug in and got a few good mouthfuls before the questions started. Jax must have been out of his mind with curiosity. He'd hardly swallowed before he asked, "Exactly how long has this little affair of yours been going on? Hmm..." He made it teasing and fun, but his mix-matched eyes were bright with curiosity.

I waved him off. "We've only been on two dates. Seriously..."

"Seriously?" Royce chimed in. "Does that mean you are serious, or you're not serious?"

"Too early." I gave him an eye roll. "Boone, please. You took your sweet time with Quinn."

"Yeah," he chuckled. "Made him earn it, unlike someone..." He glared over at Jax, who was stuffing his face.

"Wha?" Jax asked with a mouthful, cracking us all up. He'd been moved in with Ward in a matter of days once the whole Fredo thing had been sorted out.

Royce rolled his eyes. "I think what we really want to know is, are you bringing him on the cruise?"

I wanted to say so much more than I was going to. I had to play it cool. I purposefully shrugged. "If we're still together. Why wouldn't I?"

Jax slapped the table between us. "Of course you're bringing him. You'll be together.

There's no way he can't love you. You're adorable."

I started choking the second he said the L-word. How could I not?

Royce slid my glass closer to me. "Nobody's talking about love. Totally too early. But yeah, you're adorable, and you'll still be together."

They genuinely seemed happy for me. I knew they would be. I only wished it was something real they were happy about.

I ditched out of the party after Ward and Quinn arrived with Drew and Justin. No way was I sticking around, even after they told me to call Larry and invite him over. I wasn't ready for that. I begged off and headed across town to Levi's, hoping he'd be home.

The drive only took about twenty minutes, which was surprising for early evening when traffic usually sucked ass. I pulled into the somewhat circular driveway. It was done with pavers instead of asphalt. There weren't any other cars in the driveway. But Hudson regularly hired a driver, and their other cars were probably in the garage—a double-door, two-car garage. Everything about the entryway screamed money. The two-story behemoth of a house was a crisp white with a Spanish-tiled roof. The railings along the front walk leading to the door and the Juliette balcony above it were all wrought iron. The oversized dark-stained wood doors looked antique and were adorned with black hardware. Yep. Money, money, money. The first time I came here, it was all intimidating, and I could imagine how Levi must have felt the first time he stepped through those doors. Or maybe not. Hudson had gone straight into daddy mode on him and blown him away. I chuckled at that. My friend Levi turned out to be a born little. They were perfect for each other.

I knocked on the door.

And waited.

And waited.

Finally, Levi opened the door a crack, peeking out. “Oh, hi. I wasn’t expecting anyone.”

“Can I come in? I want to talk.”

Levi bit his bottom lip and looked up at me with wide eyes. And that’s when I clued in that he was in his little mindset. “Uh...” He wore overalls with a tight-fitting shirt underneath. It looked like it had Daddy’s Boy printed on the front. The toe of one Dr. Martens-covered foot twisted into the floor. “I’m uh...”

“You’re playing?”

He nodded. Lip still securely between his teeth.

I sighed. “I understand, but is there any way you can take a little break?”

“Lemme ask, ‘kay?”

“Okay.”

He closed the door. He really was a natural-born little. I was happy he was getting his needs filled. Even though I didn’t totally get it, I loved my pup-play. It was a part of me, and being a little was a part of him.

Before he returned, I’d started questioning how important this was that I interrupt his playtime. Would I have wanted my playtime interrupted? No. But if he had asked, I would have pulled off my pup mask for him in a heartbeat. So I was super happy

when he opened the door again. “Daddy says you can come in.” He opened the door. “Sorry, harder to get out of it than to go into it. Come on.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Come.” He gestured me inside, and I followed him through the living room into the kitchen. We sat on the bar stools at the large peninsula that separated the two rooms.

“Thanks, Levi. I know how important playtime is.”

He waved me off. “We play all the time. I mean it. Constantly.” He rolled his eyes playfully and laughed, but I didn’t want to get into his sex life. “So what’s up?”

“I have to tell you something.”

“Like you’re dating Larry?” He winked at me.

“Yeah. He told Hudson?”

Levi nodded. “Earlier today. I wondered how long it would take you to tell me, but I didn’t expect you to show up at the door.”

I shrugged. “It’s important. Right?”

“Yeah. Of course.” He tilted his head to the side and examined me.

“What?” I asked.

“Well...” Levi sighed. “Are you sure about dating him? You know, after what happened at my birthday party.”

We'd become closer friends even since then. Levi understood me better than Jax and Royce because we came from similar backgrounds. I was pretty sure he'd understand all of it. Jax and Royce, though? I didn't think they'd get it. They didn't know what it was like to be left out. They didn't know what it was like not to have everything you needed. Not even what you want—but truly needed. They had it all. I wasn't altogether sure how I'd gotten adopted by those two, anyway. I was glad I did. They'd helped me so much over the years. Not only monetarily but also in ways I didn't think they even realized. But if I told Levi, he would get it.

But I didn't.

"I'm sure. I like him. He apologized about all that." That was true. Everything but the fact that we weren't really dating. "Besides, we're not serious. You know?" Just dating until the cruise.

"Okay, but I'm going to say the same thing you said to me. I get it. I understand. And if you need to talk at all, I'm here. Always."

"Thanks."

"How does he feel about the pup-play now?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. He hasn't come to a mosh or anything, and I don't think we're ready for that. We're taking it slow."

"Okay. So all of that still stands. Get it?" He grabbed my hand and shook it firmly to prove his point.

"I get it." I stood and reached out to him for a hug I hadn't known until that moment I needed.

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The morning was productive, including garnering a couple of investments from Ward and Drew. Though smaller, every penny helped. I fixed myself a sandwich at the counter closest to the fridge. I had a lot of options in my kitchen, including two huge islands, and they were all in pure white, highly polished porcelain. The whole kitchen was white, which I wasn't over the top in love with but it was killer in terms of resale value. I poured a frosty mug of beer and took my drink and sandwich into the living room, which was also white as far as the walls and fireplace went, but my couch and chairs were a contrasting charcoal gray.

I sat and turned on the TV that hung over the fireplace. The room was too narrow to put it anywhere else. I ate while flipping through the channels. Nothing was on, so I switched over to stream an episode of *Altered Carbon*. I loved anything sci-fi, and that was one of my favorites. Particularly season one with Joel Kinnaman as Kovacs. He was a great actor, and I liked his looks.

Before I could hit play, my cell rang. I glanced at it on the coffee table and saw it was Hudson. We'd spoken about Todd the day before. It could be about that. Or about the project.

Of course, I answered. "Hey, man."

"Hey, what's up? How ya been?"

"Uh, fine? Why?"

"Well, I want to take my boy out on the boat this weekend, and he thought you and Todd might want to join us. It'll be fun."

“Um...Okay.” His invitation was totally unexpected, and I had no idea what Todd would think about it. But it would be a great opportunity to get my hands on him. In front of our friends, we would be expected to show some PDA. I might even get a kiss. The challenge of that was exciting. “I have to ask Todd.”

“Of course.”

“But I mean, probably. Can’t see why he wouldn’t want to go. Unless he has other plans, but I don’t know of any.” In fact, I couldn’t even get him to commit to another date, but maybe this would do it.

“Okay. Ask him and let me know.”

“Sure, it sounds great.”

When we got off the call, I immediately hit Todd’s number. After a minute, he answered. “Hey, Larry, what’s going on?”

“We have an invitation to go out with Hudson and Levi on the boat.”

“Boat? What boat?”

“He has a couple, but I bet it’s the Maria. She’s a Jefferson 46.”

“A what? The who?”

I leaned back and put my feet up on the coffee table. “It’s called Maria’s Sea-Dream, but we generally call it Maria. I’ve been out on it with him a few times. He has a bigger boat. It’s an almost fifty-foot sailboat, but he needs a crew for that one. He can take Maria out on his own.”

For a minute, there was silence, and I thought I'd lost him. Then he sighed.

"Todd? You alright?"

"Yeah. I guess it would be a good trial run. I mean, if we're going to pull this off, we should find out if we can do it in front of our friends. Maybe it will be a little easier with only Levi and Hudson to start."

It was my turn to be quiet. Because really, was dating me all that hard?

"Shit, Larry. I didn't mean that how it sounded."

"How did it sound to you? I mean, I think I've been very respectful. We get along. Why would this be hard at all? Because, you know, we can talk about the elephant in the room." There were plenty of reasons this would work for me. Reasons that probably meant I was a bit crazy. But I had agreed to all of this fake dating bullshit, but Todd hadn't agreed to anything more than that. My serious attraction to Todd wasn't his problem. But I felt it. I felt the zing between us, and I knew he did too.

"Elephant? I don't think we have an elephant. I mean, yeah, you've been nice. I like you enough. That's not what I meant by hard. I meant keeping the fact that it isn't real a secret."

I wanted to tell him it could be real. All he had to do was say the word and stop pretending. But I didn't. Maybe it was because I wanted to see him in a bathing suit with wind-swept hair. He was gorgeous but always prim and proper. I wanted him buttoned down. Pupils blown and those pouty lips made red from kissing.

"Todd. Whatever you want to do. I'm not arguing. If you don't want to do it, that's fine. If you'd like to go, that's fine. I think it'll be fun. The boat is super cool. There's nothing like being out on the water."

“Yeah. I know. I’ve been out on several of Jax’s yachts. He has a super small one meant for like couples, you know, romantic and all, but Jax took me and Royce out for the afternoon once on it. It was nice. I’d never done anything like that before.”

It sounded like the three really were best friends, so I didn’t understand why he was lying to them. “Why—” I stopped myself from asking.

“Why what?”

“Nothing. What do you want to do?”

“Let’s go.” He didn’t sound excited. More like resigned. I hated that. I wanted him to be eager to do things with me. But it had taken a lot to get him to do even this, and the whole fake dating thing was his idea. Maybe I was reading him all wrong. Maybe the thought of touching me made him sick. “And just so you know. There will be PDA. Be prepared to hold my hand. Put your arm around me. You know. They’re going to do that, so we will too. Are you okay with that?”

“Are you?”

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Or maybe he didn’t think touching me would make him sick.

“I think it’s fine. All of it. I’ll let you know when I’m picking you up, but it’ll probably be early Saturday.”

Todd agreed, then we got off the phone. We had been talking a lot, but maybe this conversation about dating and PDA was too much for him. He didn’t seem like he wanted to deal with his feelings around this, and I didn’t understand why, but I was going to give him all the time and space he needed.

He was worth waiting for. He was sweet and kind, and even though he was quiet and hesitant, he was actually ferocious underneath. Kind of like He-Man's Cringer who turns into Battle Cat.

And my little cat was sexy as hell. He had a long, lean body that I desperately wanted to see naked. I wanted him to slowly strip down, discarding his clothes on the floor as he walked closer to me. He'd stop mere inches in front of me as the last bit fell, leaving him naked. His skin would be pale and slightly pink. I'd reach out and grab his thigh, pulling him closer. Then, I would stretch my arm around him and grab that curvy ass. He would crawl over me and straddle my legs.

I stuck my hand inside my sweatpants and grabbed my dick. It was hard and ready. If Todd were here, I'd love to press our cocks together. I would wrap my fingers around both of them and jack us off together. He would moan and wiggle. I stroked my cock as I imagined it. Those long legs of his working as he moved. He'd end up fucking into my fist, his dick rubbing against mine until he came, shooting out all over me.

I came hard with a grunt.

Afterward, I popped into the powder room and washed up. Then I went back to my sandwich. I picked it up, and it was completely soggy. Still, I had no regrets.

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We started the day earlier than I would have liked. Larry picked me up and we drove out to Hudson's house in Westshore before the sun even came up. Apparently, the boat was small enough that he had it docked beside his house. But when we got there, it still seemed pretty sizeable to me. Not as big as Jax's smallest, though.

Levi and I crawled up on the little bench couch and stretched out on either side as the other two got us going. The coffee I had on the way over wasn't touching my sleepiness.

Levi tapped me with his foot. "It's too early, right? I'm going to sleep."

"Nap is good."

I dozed off but woke to a slight rocking and sat up, looking around. The scene outside the window had changed from dark with nothing to see to bright sunlight sparkling on dark blue water, and the sky was a lighter blue stretching up and up. With a groan and a yawn, I watched a seagull fly by, cawing loudly.

Hudson poked his head in the double doors. "Hey, sleepy heads. You know there's a bed down there." He pointed to the little set of stairs beside the ones he stood on top of. The ones I hadn't noticed before.

Levi sat up and leaned into me. "We're awake now."

Hudson came down into the little room and sat beside Levi, and Larry followed him. "We're anchored for a bit. I thought we could get something to eat. Then y'all can sit on the deck while we tool around after. Sound good?"

Larry stood there, obviously debating whether to sit in the single chair or beside me. I couldn't help feeling like it was my fault he didn't know what to do. I'd given him a strict no-touching rule, and he'd respected it. But we couldn't do that now. The rule was off the table. I patted the spot beside me and jerked my head toward it. He looked like a whipped puppy with its tail between its legs, but he moved and sat. I leaned into him, wanting to comfort both of us. This situation felt more difficult than it should have.

Larry had been nothing but sweet and kind since we started this. Larry the jerk had apparently been replaced by boyfriend material Larry. And it was confusing the hell out of me.

But damn if I didn't like him for real.

Levi yawned, "Yeah, I'm hungry."

Hudson broke out pre-made breakfast sandwiches, and we squeezed around the little booth-style table, my leg pressing up against Larry's on one side and Levi and Hudson on the other.

Levi tugged on Hudson's denim shirt sleeve. "Cut my sammich, Daddy?"

"You can eat it like that, baby," he answered.

"Pwease?" Levi looked up at him with wide eyes and a pouty mouth, lip poking out.

"Okay, hold on." Hudson got up, rummaged around in a drawer, then brought back a knife and cut Levi's sandwich in half. "Is that good?"

"Yes, thank you, daddy." Levi picked up half a sandwich and took a bite while kicking his feet against the banquette.

I'd never seen him go into little head space before. I'd thought it was a private thing, but I figured he must trust us. I glanced over at Larry to see how he reacted to their play. And I nearly burst out laughing. He froze with his sandwich halfway to his mouth. His sparkling green eyes were wide, and both eyebrows were raised. Mouth open.

Hudson growled. "Don't you dare." And I think he kicked Larry under the table.

Larry shoved the sandwich in his mouth.

I wanted to break this up, and since I had a great idea, I swallowed my bite, took a sip of coffee, and spoke up. "Levi, I was thinking. I should bring my gear over to your house one day, and you could play with a puppy."

He dropped his sandwich and clapped his hands. "Yah!"

Hudson snorted. "Don't talk with your mouth full, baby boy."

Levi swallowed and sipped from the chocolate milk carton Hudson had pulled out and opened for him. "Yes, Daddy, but I wanna play with a puppy!" He was as excited as any little kid, and it made me chuckle.

"Okay, baby." Hudson leaned in and kissed Levi on the side of the head. "Now, eat your breakfast."

"Yes, Daddy." His voice was soft and sweet and totally different than his normal speaking voice.

Larry stared at him and then glanced over at me, but when he caught me looking back, he took another bite of the sandwich. He might have been a little stunned and unsure of how to react, but he remained respectful. I had to give him credit for that.

All of these kinks were brand new to him.

Something in the back of my head teased me, thinking maybe Larry could get used to it. But maybe he couldn't. I wasn't going to get my hopes up.

After breakfast, we went out and sat in the beanbag-style chairs on the bow. The sun was warming everything up nicely and the water was beautiful. Salt permeated the air, and we couldn't have asked for a better day for a boat trip. Hudson started the engines up again and drove the boat slowly along. We were out a long way from shore but were still in the bay and could see the Tampa skyline in the distance.

Larry stood near the railing, looking out over the water. "Todd! Todd! Come here. Look at this."

I scooted down and joined him at the deck. "What?"

"Look over there." He pointed out to the water, and I tried to follow where he was looking.

Then, two silver-slick bodies bobbed up and then back under the water. "Oh! Oh my! Were those dolphins?"

"Yes."

They jumped up again, and I grabbed Larry without even thinking.

Levi joined us on my other side, and Larry slid an arm around my shoulder. I hadn't let go of his shirt, but the warmth of his arm felt perfect. Felt right. Like home. And I knew this had been a big mistake. I was falling for him, and Larry would never accept me. I wasn't good enough for him. I would never be good enough.

But the wind was blowing through my hair. Levi was laughing. And Larry felt damn good next to me.

Larry took me home and got out of the car to walk me to the elevator. “I had a great time today. Thank you, Todd.”

“Nothing to thank me for. I had fun.” I was salt-sticky and a little wind-burned, but I felt great.

Larry stepped close to me, and I could still smell the seawater on him, but beneath that was something warmer, like vanilla, and a little woodsy. “Still...”

“Yeah...uh, want to come up?” The invitation practically fell out of my mouth, but I didn’t want the day to end. “We could play video games or something.”

Larry smirked and opened his mouth to answer, but he said nothing. He leaned in closer like he was going to kiss me. He closed his eyes and moved his head like he was smelling me. So close my glasses started fogging up. Then he stepped back. “Uh, no. Not this time. I need to go. Work starts early tomorrow.”

“Sure.” I stood there, watching him get back in his car. He waved and drove off.

I stayed in that spot another minute, feeling all kinds of conflicting emotions. Rejected. Let down. Relieved. Fuck!

I went upstairs and got ready to take a shower, dropping my clothes in the hamper and turning the water on. I needed to wash the day off of me. Then my phone dinged, and I made the mistake of checking it before I got in.

Larry texted: Don’t misunderstand. I am attracted to you. But I don’t want to break your rules or step over the line.

Well, that didn't help anything.

I tossed my phone on the bed and got in the shower. The water was warm, and my cock was rock hard. Fuck!

Everything about him got under my skin. I grabbed the soap, trying to ignore it, but that lasted a whole two seconds. I grabbed my dick with soapy fingers and stroked. When I closed my eyes, I wanted to think of someone else, but I didn't. I saw Larry. I saw the way he had leaned into me with his eyes closed and looking all sexy, making me want to kiss him. And I saw him on the boat earlier in the day, pulling his shirt over his head and smiling at me like he knew how his naked chest made my heart thump. His nipples were a pretty blush against his creamy skin, and he had a little hair between his chest that traveled down to his belly button, then lower until the trail disappeared into his swim trunks. I wanted to lick it, and finger his belly button, and flick his—

My cum shot out hard all over the tiles. At least relief hadn't taken long, but I regretted it. And regretted going on that damn boat with him. And worst of all, I regretted making this stupid deal with him.

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The cruise was coming up on us fast. But I wanted another date before that happened. I wanted at least one more night with him. Because it would be over after that, and I didn't want it to end. Ever. But I didn't know how to convince him.

I almost blew it, trying to kiss him. I needed to prove I respected him above everything else. He wasn't going to give me a third chance at that. At that stupid birthday party, I gave him strike one by blurting out the first thing that came to mind. I wasn't doing that again for sure, but what else could I do?

I was such a loser. I was going to mess up everything, and I was sick to death of walking around my lonely apartment worrying about it. And yet, here I was, one more time. I couldn't sleep the night before. I couldn't choke down my breakfast. I kept thinking about the day before on the boat. It was glorious. I was allowed to hold his hand, so I did a few times. I even put my arm around him when we saw the dolphins, and I was convinced he belonged there beside me.

Damn, that little mother fucker was going to break my heart—I was falling too hard, too fast.

Fucking it up was inevitable. Why did I try? This was exactly like the time I dated Blake. I tried too hard, and he saw right through me. He laughed in my face when I asked him to move in with me. He knew I was a failure right through to my core. He was the last one. Since then, I only had two dates and maybe some sex, anonymous, faceless, and meaningless. Eh, once or twice. Serious wasn't in my cards. After Blake, I was the one who ran. But now, I wanted to stop running, but would Todd?

Not when I failed at everything important. Failed to keep my family together. My

brothers got the fuck away from me as soon as they could. My parents divorced. I hadn't even told them I was gay, afraid to be labeled. Afraid of the unknown, afraid of everything. Afraid of Todd's kinks. Afraid of mine.

I was never going to stop feeling like this if I didn't stop acting like this.

Grabbing my phone off my desk, I headed into the living room and pulled up his number, sucking it up and tapping it as I slid back on my favorite spot on the couch.

Todd answered, "Hey. What's up?"

"Hi, cutie. I had fun yesterday."

"Yeah. I liked it."

"Good. So...I was thinking..."

"Yeah?"

"Let's go out. Tonight. Something simple, just you and me. Or you could come over, and we can have a quiet dinner in. What do you say?"

Silence. I lost him. Why?

"It sounds nice, Larry," he finally said. "But... I have an interview tomorrow, and I need to get ready for the cruise, you know? You still picking me up for that?"

"Yeah, uh... Yeah, sure. Of course."

"Okay. See you then."

I sat there staring at my phone. This was never going to work. My careless words ruined everything before I ever had a chance.

I looked around my pricey condo. I owned it outright—no mortgage. I owned my car. I had millions. I made multi-million dollar deals all the time. And I didn't truly enjoy any of it. How could I? My dad was right. I was a loser. He told me that a million times, and despite trying so-so-so hard to prove him wrong, I was still sitting here in the middle of this wealth alone. Always alone.

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Oh my gawd—this boat! No, this yacht . Jax had purchased a true cruise ship. It wasn't as big as one of those Celebrity cruise ships or anything, but damn. It outsized everything else in his little fleet. By a lot. Jax had explained that it was actually over eight thousand five hundred feet of super yacht that he'd had customized to fit what he wanted. In reality, it was a mini-cruise ship. All the fun of a cruise in a much more personal size. It had fifteen guest rooms, all booked up for this inaugural voyage. Plus, rooms for a crew of up to twenty-six people, though I thought I remembered he said some rooms had bunks rather than private accommodations. Most cabins, including the crew's rooms, were on the first level. But there were four special suites on the second deck. They were bigger and had balconies, and Jax had reserved them for the pup-brothers and Ward's best friend, Drew. That meant Levi and Hudson were on the first deck, but they didn't seem to mind. I was happy we had a bigger room, so I wouldn't have to be pressed up next to Larry the whole time. That would be torture. All that closeness that I couldn't allow myself to have.

We spent time wandering the three outdoor lounge areas before launch time. The front deck on the bow used to be a helicopter pad, but Jax had it converted into an excellent lounge space with a bar. I was going to give a lesson on how to make frozen drinks there the next day. That was going to be fun. Jax thought it was a brilliant idea, but of course, he was the one to think it up.

Larry held my hand as we walked out to the pool area. My poor heart wanted it to mean something, but despite Larry's admission of attraction, I knew better. Sure, he was attracted. I felt that. But that wasn't enough, was it? Nope.

A few couples I didn't know were already in bathing suits in and around the pool. Most guests were from our circle, but some were Ward's friends. And it seemed like

all of them were paired off. I was more than grateful to Larry for doing this with me. Walking around this ship alone would have been the biggest suck-fest ever. At least I had that.

Larry slid his hand into mine and gave it a gentle tug. “Alright?”

“Yeah. We should check out our cabin, right?”

“Sure.”

The cabin was lovely. Bigger than I expected, but it still only had one bed. There was room for a desk and an actual closet to hang clothes or slip them in a dresser and stash your luggage. The balcony was revitalizing since we could open the glass and let fresh air in, so it didn’t feel like we were sardines cramped in a can. However, it was still only big enough for a couple of chairs and a little round table. The art in the room was tasteful, but the lights under the bed were tacky to me. I guess it was supposed to look sleek, but I didn’t get that. The attached bathroom was a relief. A small shower only big enough for one, but room to brush your teeth and check yourself out in the mirror, and drawers to put your styling shit in, and I had a bunch of that.

Larry star-fished in the center of the bed. “This isn’t bad at all.”

“No. It’s not, but...” I raised an eyebrow at him—a move I learned from Jax’s snarky ass.

“Yeah. We’re adults, Todd. We can manage sleeping in the same bed.”

“You say that, but every romance known has shit happening in there when you least expect it.” I made a stirring gesture aimed at the bed.

Larry shook his head with a chuckle. “Romance isn’t real life. Maybe that’s part of your trouble. Your standards could be impossibly high.”

“Right.” I snorted. I only wanted someone who cared about me and enjoyed my puppy play. Why was that too much?

“I wouldn’t know, though. You don’t talk about things like that.” He shrugged.

“Like what?”

“Like deep. Like feelings and hopes and dreams.”

“Neither do you.” I grabbed my suitcase and opened it on the floor to unpack, not that I had a lot. “All I know about you is what you do for a living. That you have money. And your family is scattered outside of Florida.”

“That’s fair, but all I know about you is that you’re from out of state, where your parents still live in what? Where? I don’t even know that.” He slid to the floor and leaned against the bed, watching me. “And you graduated with your MBA recently, so you’re looking for the perfect job. And you like puppy play, which you do regularly with Jax and Royce. But it seems like even though they’ve been your best friends since your undergrad years, Levi has now taken that spot.”

“No. Not taken. Just added.” I dragged jeans to the side to cover the skimpy underwear I couldn’t resist bringing but now hated for him to see.

“Well, I guess I know a little bit more than you. I’m willing to open up if you are though.”

“Hey, I’m not the one complaining.”

Larry looked crushed. It wasn't like I told him to get lost. But, yeah, getting to know him deeper would be too hard. When he left. And I knew he would. Everyone left. He dragged a finger across my hand. "It doesn't have to be this way. I wish you wouldn't shut me out."

"Well..." I huffed. "You're right and you're wrong. I know one more thing about you, Larry, and it's that you don't like my pup-play. And that is a deal breaker. So, let's just get through this cruise."

"That's not fair either. I don't understand it. I don't know about it."

"In all this time, you haven't tried to understand it. Have you even looked it up online? You know, research?"

"Actually, I have. I get what it's about, intellectually. But I don't understand why you do it. Why do you like it, Todd?"

I didn't want to do this. His green eyes sparkled with curiosity or interest or delight. I didn't know, but they sucked me in, making me want to crawl in his lap and lick under his chin. I whimpered before I could catch myself, and that spark in his eyes changed—his pupils dilated. What the hell? Maybe he had kinks he didn't even know about? But...I couldn't do that to myself. He wanted me, my body, sure. But none of this was evidence that he could get into pup-play and be my handler. Nope.

I slammed my suitcase shut before it was emptied and slid it into the closet. "No." I grabbed my swim trunks from the pile I'd made, tossed them on the bed, and dumped the rest of the clothes in the closest drawer. Then, I made a beeline for the bathroom, trunks in hand. A hand that trembled as I yanked my clothes off to change. I was so shaken that I forgot to remove my glasses before pulling off my shirt and knocked them to the floor.

And why did my deceitful heart thump harder in my chest? I took a deep breath and finished changing, ready to head to the pool and splash away these stupid thoughts of what Larry could be to me. He was nothing. Had to be nothing.

Before I made it halfway across the room, the PA system kicked in, and Jax's friendly voice boomed through the room. "Welcome, guests!" Was he shouting? A scratchy noise came through the speakers, then Jax again. "Sorry. I'm so excited you're all here to join us on our inaugural voyage of The Sea Star. We're about to depart. We'll head out of Tampa Bay, into the Gulf, and south to Key West. We'll stop overnight at Mallory Square port. You can enjoy Old Town and have some fun, but be back by noon the next day because we'll head off again, and on the way home, we'll have our own Pride Parade!" We all knew this, but I guess it was a good reminder. "We'll march our sexy asses around the pool deck, up to the bow and back again! Plus, I have some surprises in store for you! But to get this all started...it's pool party time! That's right, folks. Pool party right now and drinks are unlimited all night long! So again, welcome, and let's party!"

I would bet cheers were going up poolside, but we couldn't hear them from our cabin. After a minute, another voice came across. "A quick reminder. Please party responsibly. If you do need assistance at any time, our crew will be stationed throughout the pool deck. Please ask for help. That's what they're there for." That voice sounded suspiciously like Ward. "Oh, and party on! And thank you for cruising Hoadley Yacht Private Vacations." I couldn't help laughing at that awkward addition. Yep, it was Ward.

"Can I join you at the pool?" Larry asked as I grabbed the door handle.

A part of me thought he should, even if it was only to keep up appearances, but I needed space. Fuck! "Maybe a compromise? Give me like twenty minutes?"

"Why is that a compromise?"

I didn't bother turning around. I didn't trust myself not to stay if I did. "Because I say it is."

"Fine."

I pushed the door open and left without another word. I needed air. And a fucking drink.

The sun practically blinded me when I stepped out on the deck. I'd forgotten to swap my glasses for sunglasses. Now, I needed a serious drink, so I headed to the bar. We all knew I loved my frozen drinks, but that wasn't what I wanted. "Oh, I want that. Cucumber sunrise." It was a featured drink made with vodka, watermelon, and, as the name said, cucumber. "That's gotta be refreshing. Can you make it with double the vodka?"

"Sure." The young, dark-haired bartender winked at me as he started mixing the drink. All Jax's staff looked cute with their short black shorts and white button-up shirts, which had the ship's name, The Sea Star, embroidered on the front. He really spent his money well.

Sipping my drink—strong drink—I made my way to one of the deck chairs and stretched out. I wished I could call Larry and ask him to bring my shades, but I left my phone on the dresser. And I was not going back. So I closed my eyes to the glare and took a deep breath.

"Todd!" Royce's voice had my eyes popping back open. I waved as he joined me with Quinn and another couple I didn't know. "Hey. This is Lee and Danny."

"Nice to meet you."

"Danny works with me at Drew's firm," Quinn explained with a shy smile. He didn't

Speak up a lot. His shyness rivaled mine, and he was super sweet to Royce, and that's all I cared about.

"Oh. Hi." I shook hands with the one I thought was Danny who was closer to me. He had a smaller build and a friendlier smile.

Royce leaned closer. "Where's Larry? Don't tell me he didn't come."

"Oh, no. He'll be along in a minute or two. I just really needed a drink." I held the glass up as if that proved we were still together and I simply couldn't wait, but I didn't think I was fooling Royce. He gave me a sideways glare. I took a sip to keep from opening my stupid mouth.

But after a few minutes of small talk that I wasn't really paying attention to later, Larry showed up. And damn, he looked good in nothing but dark blue trunks. A part of me wanted to throw a towel around him so no one else could look, but that was ridiculous. "Here, babe. You forgot your sunglasses." He handed me the case.

"Thanks." I opened it and switched eyewear. And my heart melted a little at his thoughtfulness.

"Need a refill? What are you drinking?" He reached for my nearly empty glass, and I couldn't argue.

"Cucumberer-something. Maybe don't ask for double vodka." I let him walk off with my glass and a smile. I had to admit I liked him being attentive.

"That was sweet." Royce nudged me.

"Yeah, that's Larry."

Quinn put his arm around Royce's waist. "I hate to say it, but I didn't think y'all made a good couple, but maybe I was wrong. He's ah...nice. You need someone nice."

"Ahh...thanks." I waved at him. Yep, feeling that first drink a little.

Royce laughed and asked Quinn to get him one of what I was drinking.

Before the guys got back, music started playing. Royce hooted and grabbed my hand, pulling me out of the chair. "Come on. Come on, Danny. Let's dance."

It was a cruise, so we stepped away from the chairs and danced between them and the pool and no one cared. I didn't know the song, but it had a good beat, not that I was very rhythmic. I probably looked like a scarecrow kicking around, but it was fun, and I did not care one damn bit.

By the time Larry returned and put a fresh drink in my hand, I was feeling better and vowed to drink this next one slower. I took a sip and could tell it was weaker, too. That was fine. It would be a long night.

We danced more, and Larry danced with me. Quinn and Danny's partner, who I couldn't remember his name, sat across from each other on the chairs, drinking short drinks that looked like whiskey but had fruit in the glass, so it was probably Old Fashioneds or something like them, and chatted. That was boring, so I ignored them. Watching Larry move was a lot more entertaining. And boy, could he move. He flexed those hips, giving me an idea of what being in bed with him might be like.

That had my cock half-hard too fast, so I handed him my drink. "I'm hot. I'm getting in." I turned and jumped in the pool. It didn't take Royce and Danny long to jump in after me.

We splashed each other for a bit, and then Levi showed up with Hudson in tow.

“Levi, come on!” I called him. He pulled his t-shirt off, threw it at Hudson, and sprinted for the pool. He cannonballed us and came up shaking his hair around, so I grabbed him and dunked him under the water. After a little more wrestling, I noticed Larry had joined Quinn and Hudson with Danny’s partner by the lounges. Well, fuck him and his boring ass anyway. This was way more fun. They were probably talking about work. Who wanted to do that at a fucking Pride cruise pool party?

A few guys used the slide, splashing everyone near them. It was a decent-sized slide, though not like a water park slide. It was definitely smaller than that, but it was still fun and big enough that it probably wouldn’t have fit, except that Jax had removed half the deck above the pool. Not only did he have the slide installed, but the pool was twice its original size. His customizations were expensive and well worth it.

Royce splashed me. “Turned out nice, huh?” As Jax’s business partner, he’d helped with some of the plans, but he was more involved with advertising, and this cruise hadn’t needed one bit of that. “I have a camera crew on board. Just two guys, but they’ll take pictures for the brochures.”

“That’s smart.”

He smiled like a cheeky loon. “I know!”

Not only did I splash him, but Levi joined in. Then we were tackling Royce while Danny laughed at our antics.

Royce came up sputtering. “You better stop, or I won’t tell you about the surprises we have for the cruise.”

“Surprises?” Danny asked. “I love surprises.” His voice went soft like Levi’s did

sometimes when he was playing little, which got Levi's attention quickly. He stared.
"What?"

"Are...are you?" Levi tried to ask.

I blurted it out, though. "Are you a little?"

Danny blushed and nodded. He was cute.

I shoved Levi. "See...y'all should talk."

Levi smiled, looking pretty damned happy with himself. "Me too."

"Cool," Danny squealed.

Sometime after the sun had set, I sat back in one of the deck chairs and closed my eyes. We had been swimming and dancing and acting silly. It reminded me that my friends were my friends because of me and not who I was dating, but Larry was there the entire time. He went to the bar and brought me drinks. He danced with me. He even got in the pool with me, and we wrestled around. It had been entirely too much fun, and my heart was shaking. So was my body.

"Hey, there." Larry sat next to me in the same chair and put his hand on my thigh. It was so warm. "You're freezing. Let's go back to the cabin." I started to shake my head in protest, but he had an answer for me. "We'll take a break, get warmed up, and if you're feeling better after that, we can come back."

I wanted to huff and complain, but he was right. "Fine."

After telling Royce, Levi, and his new friend Danny where we were going, I followed Larry, holding his hand as we went up the stairs and down the hall to the cabin.

Larry turned on the water in the shower to warm it up while I grabbed an oversized t-shirt and boxers to put on when I got out. “Do you want some hot tea or something?” he asked.

“No. Thanks.” I touched his shoulder. “I mean that. Thanks.”

He nodded and left me alone in the bathroom. A huge part of me wanted him to stay, but it would be breaking my own rules.

The room started fogging up, so I dropped my glasses on the counter and jumped in to warm up. It felt nice, and I sighed with relief. I washed my hair and body, removing the pool’s chlorine. After rinsing, I stayed a little longer, solely to be under the hot water.

When I turned the water off and started drying off, Larry knocked on the door. “We should get something for dinner. Want me to order up? What would you like?”

“Something light. Maybe salad with grilled chicken or shrimp. Oh, yeah, make it shrimp.”

“No problem.”

I pulled on my shirt and boxers and walked into the main room as he finished the call for the food.

We talked about the day as we waited for the food. After it came, we chatted about the events coming up for the rest of the cruise, including my stint teaching whoever wanted to learn how to make blender drinks.

Then I was tired with a full stomach and didn’t want to go back to the party. “Maybe I need a short nap.”

“Sure, we can do that.” He’d been very agreeable and caring all day, and I wondered if that’s how he would really be if we were together. Would that be his mode of operation all the time, or would it get old fast? It didn’t matter because we weren’t going to happen.

“You can go back. You don’t have to stay here and babysit me.”

Larry pulled the blankets down on the bed. “Crawl in. And, by the way, has it not occurred to you that maybe—just maybe—I like babysitting you?”

He wouldn’t say that if I were in pup-mode, but I bit my lip on that and got in bed. Larry moved to cover me and rested his hand on my shoulder. “You sure you’re okay?”

I had already closed my eyes, but I hummed my ascent.

“Want me to lay with you for a bit?”

I must have been half asleep because I nodded, and Larry crawled in beside me.

At first, we lay without touching but soon, we were cuddling, and I was okay with that. Friends could cuddle. Then I drifted off. Completely exhausted and that was my excuse.

When I woke up, my hard dick was pressed against Larry’s ass. Fuck!

What the hell was I going to do about that? At first, I didn’t move—didn’t even breathe.

Then Larry squirmed and I squeezed my eyes tight, trying and failing to deny the pleasure against my cock. He flipped over, and I could see him looking at me in the

dim glow from the stupid light around the bottom of the bed. And his hard cocked was pressed against mine. I bit my bottom lip, still not knowing what to do, but he knew.

He reached between us and growled. "Take these boxers off," he whispered as if afraid to break this weird spell around us, and damned if it didn't work. Or I still felt the alcohol. I was still asleep. I had a million excuses, but I simply didn't care anymore. I pushed my snug boxers down with my hand, low enough to shuck them completely off with my feet.

And then he touched me.

His hand was hot on my cock, and he pressed it against his. I bucked my hips and moaned.

"Yes..." He breathed against the top of my head, then squeezed his hand tighter.

We fucked against each other, frothing while that hot hand worked us over. It felt like we were in a secret place, cocooned against the rest of the world. His moans joined mine until he thrust fast and hard and came all over me. Of course, that was all I needed to push me over the edge along with him, and I cursed as I came too.

Not long after, I was dozing again, and Larry chuckled softly before getting up. He came back, cleaned us up, and snuggled in, pulling me against his chest as if that was naturally where I belonged. Maybe it was. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the feel of his arms around me, my face against his hard chest and the warmth of his body. That was all that was left in the universe.

Until the next morning.

I woke up to the sun beaming in through the open curtains that could have been

covering the balcony doors but weren't. Larry was still snoozing beside me, our legs tangled under a sheet.

It didn't mean anything. None of it did. Right?

And...maybe that was the lie because I had no regrets.

None.

Perhaps this could be something after all.

But I didn't have time to think about it because if I didn't get moving, I'd be late for our first pup mosh of the cruise. I sat up fast, making Larry mumble, groan, and reach for the sheets. He pulled them back over him, but not before I caught a clear view of his sexy and very bare ass.

Nope. Still no regrets.

I leaned closer and whispered in his ear. "I have stuff to do. We have a pup mosh. Want to come watch? You don't have to."

"No. No, a what?" He sat up, and his ashy brown hair stuck up in every direction. "Pup what?"

"Mosh. Where we play together. It's kind of important to me."

"Right. Got it. I'm in. Let's go."

"Sure, but maybe you should grab a shower and wake up first. I'll grab us some coffee. What do you want in yours?"

He smiled brightly. “Cream. Lots of cream.”

I chuckled. “Are you making a joke, Mr. Henderson?”

“Yes. And no. Maybe a little sugar too?” He looked at me hopefully, and I wasn’t sure exactly what kind of sugar he was asking me for. But I wouldn’t make more of this until after the mosh. That was going to be the make-or-break moment.

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Oh god—he was so sexy and fun! That yellow pup mask was adorable, and his body was long and lean. And I wanted to jump in and play with them as he wrestled his friends.

What have I done?

I wanted more. I wanted to see more, learn more. Earlier that morning, I was thinking we finally crossed over into the realm of making something of our relationship, but he got up to go do his pup-play. I didn't even know what the hell a mosh was. But I grabbed a shower, and he got coffee, and I followed him to this large room on the bottom deck to watch and learn. I was so curious, and it was so important to him.

The open room had mats on the floor and a table at the far end with bottles of water and snacks. Ward and Quinn stood beside it, watching Jax and Royce crawl around. They were dressed similarly to Todd in puppy masks of different colors. When Todd joined them, a wrestling match ensued.

I watched as I crossed the room to stand by the other observers.

Oh shit! I liked it. I liked this version of Todd. Adorable was an understatement. Why had I belittled him when we first met? This was nothing like I thought, even after what I found online. I still didn't understand Todd's reasons completely, but I could easily see it was fun.

He had great companions. These guys were obviously lifelong friends. Todd had even called them brothers. I saw it when we'd gotten together before, and more so yesterday at the pool, but never greater than now.

But there was something else to this. It was...

Sexy.

I couldn't find a better word. And I still didn't understand it. Why did they do it? Why did I like it? Why did Ward and Quinn like this? I turned to them, and Ward gave me a knowing smile. But it was Quinn who spoke up. "I knew I was a daddy before we got together. This fit with that well."

"Daddy?" Had he meant like Hudson and Levi? That was another dynamic I didn't understand, but at least with that relationship, I didn't have to understand. "But Royce is a pup, not a little."

"I know." Quinn grabbed a bottle of water off the table. "But there are enough similarities that it works. My bottom line is taking care of him." He held the water up, then whistled. "Boone! Come on. Let's get some water, boy."

Royce's head popped up from the center of a dog pile, and he made a woof sound. He then extricated himself from the others and padded over quickly. He wore a blue and black mask and a thick leather collar with his name, Boone, embossed into it. Quinn helped him get some water while petting his head, neck, and back the entire time. Afterward, Boone rolled over on his back with his arms and legs up like a pup, and Quinn got on the floor beside him and rubbed his tummy. I could see that easily leading to other things—sexual things. I had to admit it was hot.

"Ward? Is it like that for you?" I asked.

Again, he flashed that knowing smile. "No. I mean, yes, I like taking care of my Jay-Jay, but I'm no daddy or anything close. I'm considered a handler when we're in a group like this."

“And when you’re not?”

That smile morphed into a smirk. “Then we’re just us. And we do whatever we want.”

“D-Do you...”

“Go ahead, Larry. Ask what you want.” His expression softened. I had a feeling he was the best person to ask anything to do with this pup stuff.

I took a deep breath. “Do you have sex? I mean, while he’s in the pup stuff?”

“It’s called gear, and yes. We have.”

“Isn’t that—”

“Sexy as hell? Why yes, Larry, it is.”

That wasn’t what I was going to say, but since he threw it out there, my mind shifted. I nodded. “It is sexy. I admit that.”

Jax and Todd bounded over to us, and Ward immediately petted his pup and got him some water, so I grabbed a bottle and awkwardly did the same for Todd—Sunshine. And that was the perfect name for him when he was a pup. He was like a little hyperactive bundle of joy that didn’t stop moving and petting him was irresistible.

Once playtime was over, I helped Todd with his gear and held his hand on the way back to the cabin so he could shower. He had that class to give later and wanted to be fresh, and I couldn’t blame him. We didn’t say much until he got out of the shower and came out with a towel wrapped around that slender waist. My gaze tracked right down his chest, hitting the line it made across his hips.

“Eyes up here, Mr. Henderson.” Todd snapped his fingers, but he was smiling. “Seriously, thanks for today. You didn’t have to even be there, and you jumped right in.”

“I was surprised. And to be honest, I still don’t understand it all, but I’m hoping you can help with that.”

“Yeah, maybe...” He looked incredibly sexy, even with his wet hair drooping down in front of his face and no glasses blocking those eyes that looked browner now in the soft cabin light. Looking up at me from behind that damp curtain, he gave me a shy smile, and for the first time, I felt hopeful. Even since the night before. Yeah, we got off, but that didn’t have to mean anything to him. But it did mean something to me.

And maybe it could mean something to him, too. “So, we can talk about it later. But we could also maybe fool around. A little before you have to go?” I ran my finger along the edge of the towel, taking a chance.

“Really? Because last night—”

“Can mean whatever you want it to. I told you before, Todd, I’m attracted to you. But more than that, I like you. I even like the pup stuff.”

“You don’t even understand the pup stuff.” He shoved my shoulders, and I stepped back.

“That doesn’t mean I don’t like it. Doesn’t mean I’m not open to it.”

“What if we played now?” he barked at me.

I couldn’t stop the surprise from showing, but it did nothing to diminish the hardness of my cock. I raised my hands.

“That’s what I thought. You are acting like you’re cool to get in my pants again. No. Not happening. You really are the ass I thought you were.”

“What? No. Damn, Todd.” I grabbed my cock, both to show him how interested I was, pup or no pup and because it was aching for him.

He started grabbing clothes and mumbling to himself. And worse, ignoring me.

“Todd. You’re not listening to me.”

“Oh, I’m listening. I hear what you’re saying, and I see what your body language is. I’m not an idiot, you know.” He let out a string of curse words and grabbed his phone.

“This is stupid. Todd, stop.” I wanted to get him to calm down and listen to me, but he was on a tear.

His face was red when he turned to face me. “You did not just call me stupid. My gawd, you fucking fucker ass wipe head hole. Shit. I’m so fucking pissed.”

“I did not. Todd. Stop. Please.”

Out the door he went—towel around his waist, clothes and phone in his arms.

I followed, thinking that I was the one who was an idiot. “Todd. Wait.”

“Don’t fucking follow me.”

“No. Here.” I opened the door to the cabin and bowed down with one hand, showing him the open door. Then, I turned in the opposite direction and walked away. I left him standing there half-naked with his wet hair, not to mention that horrible frown on

his face. But he wasn't listening to me, and I couldn't have him walking around like that. I had no idea where he thought he was going, but he didn't need to go anywhere.

I went down the stairs to walk the deck. I had no destination in mind except away so I could give him the space he so obviously needed. But I didn't understand what had happened. I thought I was doing everything right, but maybe I underestimated his sensitivity to the pup stuff.

I looked up when I heard music and voices to watch where I was going and was surprised to find I was by the pool. I walked up to the bar and ordered a whiskey, but I wanted to be alone. So, I had him put it in one of the plastic to go cups and took it with me.

I walked across the deck to the side railing of the ship. The water spread out away from the yacht like a vast ocean, but we were still in the Gulf of Mexico. I wouldn't know the difference except that the ship wasn't leaving the Gulf on this trip. Ocean, gulf, bay, whatever. It was water. And it was lonely.

No, that wasn't what I wanted at all. What I wanted was Todd.

In every way possible and in any way I could get him.

I sipped my drink but didn't want that either. Since I didn't know what else to do, I headed back to the cabin. He wasn't there, then I remembered he had been getting ready to go do his class. I was torn between going or staying here and taking a nap, but the former won out.

Leaving the shitty drink on the dresser, I headed out to find the bow deck where he was supposed to do the class. When I got there, it was in full swing. About a dozen guys, including a few uniformed crew members and probably a few who weren't in uniform, hung around the bar, including a couple of women. I had heard a few

women were on board but hadn't seen any until that moment.

Levi was standing beside one lady with his arm around her, and when she laughed at whatever he said and turned so I could see more of her face. She must be his sister. She favored him, or vice versa since she was older. Todd said she worked at the company Royce had been at and had helped him get an interview there, though nothing had come of it as far as I knew. But it had been nice of her.

Todd turned on a blender, drowning out all the conversation with the whir. Then poured the red mix into a few small glasses and passed them around. "Samples, people. And don't drink too fast. You'll get a brain freeze. Trust me." Everyone laughed at his self-depreciation. And why not? He was so cute.

I dared to get a little closer. The drink samples were passed around as he rinsed the blender. A few people asked him questions, and he answered as he pulled ingredients together, including a bottle of Camarena Tequila, Silver, and another of Grand Marnier.

"This is the secret," he said, holding up another bottle I didn't recognize. "Probably of all these drinks in one way or another. It's basically simple syrup. You can actually make your own, but it's a helluva lot easier to buy it." He shook the bottle and squeezed it into the blender. "Then add the Grand Marnier first." He tossed in two shots, put the lid on, and gave it a quick blitz. Then he shook the tequila for effect before dropping in a few shots. Maybe four. "Twice the tequila." After another whir, he squeezed half a lime in and added ice until the concoction was at the top of the blender. "Okay, this takes a while at this point because you want it thoroughly mixed and that ice crushed up as much as possible to get a good texture. Use crushed ice whenever you can, makes it easier. Ready?"

The small crowd cheered, and he turned the blender on.

His smile was beautiful. He was totally in his element. Sometimes, he seemed very shy. At others, he was a fierce tiger. He'd managed to get his hair styled up and back away from his face, and it made me want to go over and pull his glasses off so I could see it even better. But I didn't think he'd appreciate that. In fact, I didn't think he would want me here at all.

I backed up slowly and left the deck. I wanted to watch the rest of the class, watch him, but I felt like a stalker. I headed, once again, back to the cabin. I didn't know if I would see him after the class. There was other stuff going on. And I could go do something. Or not.

My phone buzzed, and I looked at it, hoping it was from Todd, but I should have known better. And it wasn't. It was Hudson: What up bro? Where you at?

Halfway to the back lounge deck. It was on the same level as our cabin and one floor up from the pool, and though fewer people congregated there, it was still noisy from the pool.

Come to the dining room.

I'd wondered where he was while I was watching Levi's class. I gave him a thumbs-up emoji and headed one more level up to where the massive dining room was. It took up the majority of that deck, with a small open lounge area at the back. When I arrived, Hudson was with Drew and his partner, Justin. Todd had mentioned that they were into BDSM, but I didn't really know them.

The three were sipping Old Fashioned classic drinks, so when the server looked over at me, I pointed at them and then held my index finger in the air. He nodded and headed toward the bar. Satisfied, I turned to my companions. "What's going on?"

"Waiting for Levi. He's down there doing Todd's class. Hey, why aren't you there?"

Hudson scowled at me.

“I was. Just left. They’re having a good time. I’d rather have this.” I nodded at the drinks, and Drew held his up before taking a sip.

“Honestly, me too.” Hudson picked his glass up. “This has been fun so far though.”

The server arrived with my drink, so I held it up. “To cruises.”

The other couple held their drinks up and everyone sipped.

Hudson glared at me again. “What’s wrong? I’ve known you long enough and well enough to know when something is up. So spill...”

I huffed. “Fight with Todd before his class. That’s the real reason I’m not there. He doesn’t want me there.” I was pouting and looking for sympathy and couldn’t help myself. “I don’t understand him sometimes.”

Justin snorted. “Sorry. But you haven’t been together long enough, that’s all. But Todd’s a cool dude. I’m sure you’ll work it out.”

“I don’t know,” I answered with a shrug. Todd wanted to do a fake breakup to end this farce anyway. I guess the breakup part sure didn’t feel as fake as the relationship had. “I’m trying, but he refuses to see that.”

“What do you mean?” Drew asked.

I didn’t know how much they knew about the pup stuff, but Drew was Ward’s best friend, and it felt like this group lived in each other’s pockets, so I didn’t think I was breaking confidence. Especially since they were all doing pup-play earlier and had invited anyone who wanted to come. “It’s the uh, pup stuff.”

“You didn’t put your foot in your mouth again, did you?” Hudson asked, leaning in a little.

“No. The opposite. That’s why I don’t understand.” I held up my hands.

Hudson shook his head. “One extreme to the other. I bet he didn’t believe you.”

“Yeah, I think it was something like that.” I downed my drink and waved to the server for another. “What?” I asked when Justin shook his head.

“You messed up with him and his kink once. Now you’re trying to be accepting. Do I have that right?” I nodded. “It’s going to take time for him to trust you.”

“I get that. I do. But if I’m trying, he should at least listen.” I appreciated the advice, but I wasn’t looking for that. Was I?

Justin shook his head again. “No. You screwed up. It’s your job to listen to him.” I opened my mouth to contradict him, but before I could get a word out, he kept going. “Even if it doesn’t seem fair. If you like him or love him or whatever. You want him? A relationship is built on trust. So, you have to listen and give the whole two hundred percent, expecting nothing from him. For a little while. Especially if he’s sensitive about a kink. He’ll come around when he sees with his eyes what you’re doing. It’s not about hearing what you’re saying.”

“Actions are louder than words—that type of thing?”

Justin shrugged one shoulder, and Drew put his arm around him, pulling him close. I wondered what their story was. Justin sure sounded like he was speaking from experience.

“Okay. I’ll keep trying.” I wasn’t one to give up easily, despite the fact that it felt like

I had already been giving two hundred percent from the start of this farce.

After a few more drinks, I headed back to the cabin. It was still empty, and I hadn't heard from Todd. I didn't feel like looking for him or doing anything else. Nearly everyone else on this tub was paired off, making it awkward to walk around without him.

I took a shower. Put on a pair of sweatpants and crawled into bed with my phone. I flipped through some financial pages but couldn't concentrate on anything I was reading. Eventually, I nodded off but woke up quickly when the door opened and the lights flipped on.

Todd stumbled in. He wobbled over to the small desk and put his phone down with a hiccup.

"Todd? You alright?"

A second later, he turned to me with a glare. "No. Not fucking really." He hiccupped again. "I'm going to go sleep on deck."

"What? Like on a deck chair?"

"Yes. They have loungers." He spread his hand out as if showing me the lounge chair that wasn't there.

"Whatever—don't be ridiculous. We're two adults and we can sleep here with nothing happening."

"You said that lass times." He pointed a finger at me, but even that was wobbly.

"Last time you weren't drunk."

“Well, ‘em not drunks now,” he slurred.

I got up and crossed the room. “Come on, tiger. Let me get you in bed. I’ll sleep on top of the covers. Okay?”

“Okay...” he said on a long exhale and closed his eyes. He leaned into me. His shirt was big and soft, so I didn’t bother with that, but I slid his glasses off and pulled his khaki shorts down, leaving him in tight boxers. I’d seen him go to bed like that the night before, so I shuffled him over and pulled up the covers.

“Are you going to puke or anything?” I asked as he climbed into bed. I pulled the covers up to his waist.

“No. I’m only a little tipsy.”

Sure he was. I went into the bathroom, grabbed the waste basket, and put it beside the bed. “Here. Just in case.”

“Tanks.”

I grabbed a bottle of water from the mini-fridge and a Tylenol from my toiletry bag. “Take this and drink at least half that bottle.”

He did as I asked then put the rest of the bottle on the side table. “Sat okay, boss?”

“Yes. Thank you, but you’ll appreciate it later.”

“Sure...” He closed his eyes again.

I turned off the lights and got on top of the covers on the other side of the bed. It was going to be a long night. How the hell was I supposed to sleep? Not that it mattered.

If I were going to take Justin's two-hundred percent advice, it would be my problem to deal with.

I closed my eyes and tried to get comfortable.

For a long time, there was no sound on the other side, and I drifted off again.

Until cold hands slid inside my waistband. I grabbed them. "You're going to regret that later, babe."

"No, I'm not."

"You are. You're not thinking clearly."

"I'm thinking clearly enough. I was buzzed earlier, but it's worn off. I'm not a lightweight, you know."

"I'm not saying you are."

"Come on, this is what you want, right?" He tugged his hands away and grabbed my pants.

"No. It's not."

"What the fuck, Larry?"

"I want a relationship. I want you to be in it for more than a fake date and fooling around. Are you?"

"I don't know yet. Isn't that good enough for now?"

It wasn't but I couldn't tell him no, when he was so persistent and no longer slurring his words. "You sure you're not still drunk?"

"Want to give me a sobriety test?"

"No." What did I want?

Then he had my pants down, low on my hips, and his fingers skated across the top of my dick. He pulled in close to me and then...

He passed out.

So much for not being drunk. I moved him to his side, and when he didn't wake up, I yanked my sweats up and spooned him.

I had no regrets. For now, that was enough.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:04 am

Maybe this could work. Maybe I was being stupid. Maybe he understands or at least is trying to. I thought he was fetishizing me—was that even a word? And what? I want someone who likes the pup-play, and then I don't want someone who finds it sexy? Isn't that what he was saying? He sure was hard enough, even after I barked. I could see that. Hypocrite much?

No, I was scared. And I had a right to be. I'd been burned so many times, and when I first told Larry about my kink, he criticized me and called me childish. But. He wasn't calling me childish now.

And I'm so fucking horny with this hard on, and he's right here and...

I pressed against his body, and he didn't move. He was so warm, and I wanted to stay there, but my dick was demanding more, so I slid down his body. He still wore those sexy sweatpants that made me a little crazy and wanting him the night before. I hadn't been drunk enough not to remember that. Fuck!

Pulling his waistband down, I peeked at his treasure trail that pointed me lower still. This would be easier if he didn't have these pants on, but I was more than determined. I pulled them and yanked until his morning wood sprang up for me. Since it was practically waving at me, I took a swipe of the head with my tongue. Pre-cum immediately leaked out, and I licked that up. Salty and tangy with a slight citrus flavor, it reminded me of seawater and margaritas. I leaned up, repositioning so I could get my mouth on him and take his head in. Then I went down and sucked as I slowly came up.

Larry moaned like the dead awakening. I cracked up at my silly thoughts.

“W-What are you doing?” His sleepy voice was low and rough and sexy as hell, making my cock hard as a rock.

“I don’t know, but I’m sober, and I want you.” That was as much of the truth as I had at that moment.

His hands landed in my hair as I went down on him again. He moaned again, softer this time, and then cursed under his breath. His fingers played with my hair, never pushing or directing, only encouraging. Still, I wouldn’t have minded a shove or two.

I growled a little as I moved down and licked his balls.

“You’re going to kill me with that.”

“Ha-ha, that’s my evil plan. Death by oral.”

He laughed, then moaned. “Damn. I’m so fucking close already.” And I believed him since his cock was like an iron rod.

Then I said something that I thought was caused by my brain being melted or something. “W-Will you? Will you fuck me?”

“Todd? Are you sure?”

“Yeah...Fuck! I know I’ve been hard to deal with, but I want to give this thing a try. It’s just I’m scared and—”

“Let’s talk about that later.” He flipped me over on my back and crowded over me, staring down at my face. He touched my bottom lip. “Let’s do it. We can work out the rest later. Tell me you have lube.”

I rolled my eyes. “I have lube, duh.”

“Get. It.” I hadn’t heard him so commanding and forceful before, and it did something strange inside me. Not only did it make my cock pulse, but my heart leaped too. Then Larry moved off of me, and I jumped up. I rummaged through my bathroom stuff, finding both the lube and a condom. When I went back to the bed, I practically threw both at him.

He’d pulled off his sweatpants and knelt there on the bed, completely naked and glorious. Fuck!

“Get those off.” He motioned toward me, obviously meaning my boxers and T-shirt. I whipped them off as quickly as I could and practically tripped. I caught myself on the edge of the bed before I could hit the floor, and he reached over, grabbing me under the arms and pulling me up on the mattress. “Come here.” He wrapped me in his arms and ran his nose behind my ear, where I was sure he could only smell day-old sweat and chlorine.

“That’s probably not all that sexy. I need a shower.”

“After.”

I didn’t answer. Simply let him manhandle me around until I was face down and butt up. He rubbed the palms of his hands over my back and ass, down my thighs. He leaned in and licked my balls, teasing them, then squeezed a butt cheek. “You’re probably the sexiest man I’ve ever seen. You do know that, right?”

“Me? Huh. Doubt it.” I was scrawny at best.

“Long, lean, sexy in every move you make and every word you say, and you’ve been driving me nuts for over a month now. Maybe longer.”

“N-Nah...” But I couldn’t say anymore when he quickly snicked open the lube and dripped a trail down my crack, following it with his finger. He slid that digit inside me, and I wanted to come right then and there. I hadn’t been breached in a while, and I hadn’t even realized how much I missed it until right that second. “Fuck! We could have been doing this all along.”

“This?” He wiggled that finger around, added more lube, and slid a second finger beside it. “Yes, we could have.”

I growled and hissed, bucking back against his hand when he brushed my prostate. “Fuck! You ass...”

“Want me to stop?”

“Hell no. Don’t you fucking dare.”

“You have a potty mouth, you know that?” he chuckled, but he didn’t stop finger fucking me and stretching me out.

“Fuck yeah.” There was a push-pull-burn-release rhythm going that I moved with until I couldn’t take it anymore, and I groaned and begged under my breath.

Larry leaned close and whispered, “You ready?”

“Yes.” I was more than ready, but I didn’t want the sensations to stop. At the same time, I knew the next part would be better. It had to be. I’d seen the man move his hips on the dance floor, and I knew he could fuck the hell out of me. And more importantly, I wanted it. “Fuck me! Fuck me now!”

“With pleasure.”

He moved around, and I heard him fooling around with the condom wrapper, then he flipped me over on the bed again. “I want to see your face. I love your expressions.”

I lifted an eyebrow, making him chuckle. “Like this?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

I spread my legs and rolled my eyes. “Whatever. Come on.”

He lifted one of my feet over his shoulder as he moved closer. The move lifted my ass off the bed and gave him a better angle to find the hole. And in a moment, he did. The head of his dick was pressed against it. “Take a breath.”

I sucked in air.

And he pushed that sexy, thick cock right in. It actually wasn't too fat, but it was long. I'd measured it up when I was blowing him, and honestly, it seemed to fit me perfectly.

When he had pressed in all the way so his groin brushed against my butt cheeks, he paused. “Ready?”

“One second,” I practically gasped the words. It felt like I'd taken his whole arm rather than his dick.

“Breathe, baby. In slow. Out slow.”

His voice was commanding, demanding. I listened and breathed, and he walked me through it. I hoped things would work out. He'd be an amazing handler if he applied himself like that, but I sure as hell wasn't going to tell him that while he was poised to fuck me.

When my heart stopped racing, and my lungs felt like they could handle the job on their own, I gave him my best smile and said one word, “Go.”

And go, he did.

He pulled out slowly, about halfway, and shoved in again quickly. Then he moved in steady strokes that weren’t too fast or too slow, but as he did, he shifted around, shifted me around, shifted his hips erotically. And then he hit that spot. His dick rubbed against it with each push and pull, making weird noises come out of my mouth.

“Yeah... that’s it, huh?” He crowed as he fucked me harder and harder by measures.

And I relished every fucking second.

Until I started chasing my orgasm in earnest, then I was moving my hips counter to his strokes, looking for more pressure, more speed, more something. “Come on...”

Then he grabbed my cock, his hand still sticky and slick with lube, and jacked me.

“Yes!” I yelled out. That was what was missing. He annihilated my ass and squeezed my cock simultaneously, and in seconds I was coming all over the damn place, shooting off like a rocket.

Then, he grabbed both my ankles and spread my legs farther apart. “Oh, fuck, yeah...”

I opened my eyes to see him staring down at me. Green and mossy and passionate, loving eyes, staring back at me—taking all of me in. He bit his lower lip, then closed those pretty green eyes and came with a jerk and a gasp.

“Good?” I asked tentatively.

“The fucking best.”

After we cleaned up, we lay in bed together and cuddled up, which surprised me. It shouldn't have, I'd been in bed with him and knew he didn't mind a little snuggle. But this seemed bigger with our legs tangled and my head on his chest with his warm arm around me. I wanted to live there forever. And it felt like he was willing to let me.

Just as I was starting to doze off, Larry squeezed me tighter and kissed the top of my head. “This is nice. I've never wanted to hold on to someone like this before, but you're opening my eyes to a lot of things, little pup.”

My heart swelled with the endearment that I didn't think I'd ever hear from someone outside of my pup-play circle. But that didn't make him my handler, and I needed to remember that. “Good. It's good to be open to new things, and I like this too.”

“I like everything about you.”

“I like almost everything about you.”

“Hey, now!” He tightened his arms around me again. “Seriously, Todd. I am keeping an open mind, so tell me more about why you do the pup thing.”

I thought about what to say for a minute. “Well...” I shifted to get more comfortable, but I was only stalling. The best thing to do was jump in. “First, it's more than a thing I do. It's who I am. Sunshine is a part of me. Does that make sense?”

“No. Maybe a little bit. Explain.”

“I’m not sure I know how to explain that, but not going to moshes and playing with my pup-brothers is not an option. It’s as important to me as...as getting up and taking a shower. Getting dressed for the day. Eating breakfast. It’s something I have to do, but I love doing it, so it’s not a hardship. Maybe it’s like jacking off.”

Larry burst out laughing, and I quickly joined him. “That’s something.”

“You get what I’m saying? Something you have to do, but you also enjoy it.”

“But do you have to jack off?”

I groaned. “Okay, maybe not the best example.”

“Sure, I think I understand, but it still doesn’t explain why.”

“Why, huh...that’s maybe harder to work out.” I grabbed the sheet and pulled it up over us. Not because I was cold but because I wanted a symbolic shield. And the sheet was super soft.

“Hey.” Larry flipped to his side and pulled the sheet back. “Don’t do that. I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. I’m trying to connect with you on your level. Don’t shut me out.”

“I’m...scared. You know? I’ve never opened up so much.” I tucked my face against his chest.

“Sure. But neither have I. And being vulnerable is always scary.”

“What are you being vulnerable about?”

Larry gently pushed me back and stared into my eyes. His were sparkling green and

maybe a tad moist, but I wasn't calling him out on it. Maybe mine were too. "This. You. I've never understood kinks. I've never let myself admit that it can be fun and sexy. I never got that having kinks is...normal. Hell, it took a lot, and Hudson, to get me to truly understand that it was okay to be gay. It was a lot of deprogramming the brain." He tapped his forehead. "Normal and right meant a man and a woman, missionary style." He chuckled, "I don't even know why, but that's what was ingrained in my head."

"Why?"

"I'm on the spot for why now, huh? Okay. Well, my alcoholic father drilled it into my head from a very young age. If I wasn't exactly what he thought of as a man, then I was a failure. I am a failure."

"Oh shit. You are anything but a failure. Honestly, you're pretty fucking fantastic." I rolled over, putting my body half on top of his, enjoying his warm skin. "One of the most successful men I know. I aspire to be that successful. Ha! I don't even have a job."

"You will though. And then you'll be great at it."

"Yeah, well, you don't really know that, and fuck! It had better be fast or I'm going to be homeless."

"Uh, hell no, you won't. You have plenty of people who love you and would take you in, including me, but starting with Jax and Royce. What is it you call them? Pup-bros?"

"Pup-brothers. Yeah. I know, but I don't want to rely on anyone else. I mean, I've loved their support, and we got into the pup play together, and we're just that—brothers. But I'm in a different place now."

“Sure, everyone grows.”

I rolled over to my back and stared at the ceiling, thinking about how much I had grown over the last seven years. A lot, but still, at my core, there was uncertainty and a sense that I’d missed out on something early in life. “I don’t know...my childhood wasn’t bad. My parents are as supportive as they can be, but I’m different.”

“Different than Jax and Royce?”

“Maybe than anybody.” I cleared my throat, sucking my tears back, and sat up. “You want to know why? Why the pup play?” Larry nodded. “Fine.” I got out of bed and walked naked across the floor. Why not? All of this made me feel more vulnerable than I had ever been. “At first, it was because they were doing it. I went along for the ride but soon realized it fulfilled something deep inside me. It allowed me to be, well, to be the complete opposite of how I normally am.” I bit my lip as I thought about it, then dragged my fingers through my hair, pushing it back. “When I’m Sunshine, I’m happy and energetic, carefree. I don’t have to think about school or my family or life. I can just be.” I held my arms out, begging him to understand.

“Oh.” Larry’s eyes lit up, opening wide as he shuffled to the edge of the bed. “I...I understand that. I mean. I don’t do anything like that, but at the end of the day, I’m home alone. I can just be. I don’t think about work, the deals, my friends, or my stupid demanding family.”

“I guess that’s similar, but I think it goes deeper for me. It’s acceptance and play, and having that is something I’ve never had before and probably never will again.”

Larry nodded and held his arms out to me. “Come here.” I readily moved over and crawled on his lap, wrapping up in him. He kissed the side of my head. “Here’s the deal. I might not totally understand that, but I don’t have to. All I have to do is be open and kind. All I have to do is try. And honestly, this is new to me, but I admit I

like it.”

“Okay.” I leaned back and took in his rugged, handsome face. Since he hadn’t shaved, the scruff along his jaw outlined the strength he held there. I ran my fingers over his cheeks. Then he pulled me closer, rubbing his nose against mine and silently offering me his lips. And I took them. Kissing, then sucking his lower lip into my mouth.

Larry moaned and opened for me, begging me for more with the tip of his tongue. I was all in. I attacked his tongue with mine, taking in his flavor, and it was heady stuff. My cock woke up and took notice, and apparently his did too. I felt it hardening beneath me, so I flipped over, straddling him, and he fell back on the mattress. His hands roamed my sides and back, then lower, gripping my ass, which made me moan along with him.

Without words, we wiggled around, repositioning and getting under the soft sheets. We touched and explored each other. Arms, shoulders, chests. He sucked on my nipple, making it nub up. I nibbled on his side, making him squirm and laugh.

Larry fingered my balls, gently massaging and coaxing me to spread my legs. Then he took his time, licking and sucking my cock, like it was the last bit of sustenance he was ever going to receive. Licks, nibbles, sucks, all of it until I bucked my hips, wanting to ask for more but not wanting to break the quiet loving we’d started. I didn’t need to say it, though. He knew. And he found the lube and a condom on the floor beside the bed, where they’d ended up before. It didn’t take much to work me open, and then he was suited up and pushing in.

This wasn’t purely sex. No. Larry made love to me, slow and sure. Steady and promising. And underneath those soft-soft sheets. It was nearly heaven. Then I chuckled, thinking how cheesy-romantic I was getting.

“What?”

I leaned up and kissed him. “Nothing. Later.” I rubbed my hands along his sides, encouraging him to move again. And he did. A little more soft-sweet, then he shifted, flinging off the sheet completely and pulling my legs up. And he fucked me like he meant it.

It couldn’t be more perfect.

Until the stars exploded behind my eyes and I came hard with one hand jacking my cock and the other gripping his side. It only took a few pumps until he was there with me, jerking and coming into the condom and making me wish we’d gone bare. But there was time enough for that later. It was still in my someday category. Not for now.

We lay there and cuddled and dozed for a while, but eventually, my stomach growled. We got up, showered, brushed our teeth, and ordered sandwiches. We ate out on the balcony when our meal arrived, and like everything else on Jax’s cruises, the food was fantastic. For sandwiches, they were elevated and tasty.

“What are we going to do now?” Larry asked as we cleaned up lunch.

“I don’t know. There’s some surprise on the schedule for tomorrow, but nothing today.”

“Good. More snuggling in bed where I get to have you all to myself.”

I laughed and stood to grab the tray and put it outside, but Larry had other plans. He grabbed me and pulled me into his lap. “This is nice,” I said softly as I cuddled in.

“Mmm...it’s a great spot for you to be in when I kiss you.”

“Oh, you’re going to kiss me?”

“Of course.” He winked and pulled me to him, keeping that promise, kissing me softly and then hard, the passion building.

The intercom system crackled, and Jax came across. “Attention, my wonderful guests! This is an important announcement from your sponsor, Hoadley Yacht Private Vacations.”

“He’s so goofy. I just love him.”

Larry nodded, and Jax continued his speech. “There are not a lot of rules or expectations on this cruise, but I have one thing to ask of you. Please. Everyone is expected to be in the main dining hall at seven pm sharp tonight. Everyone. No exceptions, please. This is an every-guest aboard dinner. Oh, and please wear all the fancy clothes! This is special. Thank you.”

I pursed my lips, staring at Larry, wondering what Jax was planning.

Then Jax piped up for one more thing because, of course, he had to. “And thank you all so much for traveling Hoadley Yacht Private Vacations. Please be sure to rate your experience, post to social media, and tell aaaall your friends.”

“Now that’s more what I expected from him.” I rolled my eyes.

We dressed for dinner. We’d been asked to bring at least one nice suit. Mine was okay, but Larry looked fucking spectacular. I grabbed my glasses off the side table and slipped them on. “Woah. That’s what? Bespoke?”

“Yes. Good eye.”

“Yeah, well, I spent the last seven years hanging out with Royce. He’s a clothes whore. I mean, Jax has nice stuff too, but Royce? Man!”

“You look exceedingly nice yourself. And with those glasses, very Clark Kent.” He waggled his eyebrows at me, so I rolled mine, but I didn’t think he was totally wrong. It’s why I bought the thicker black frames in the first place.

“Shall we?” I asked, holding up my elbow for him to wrap his arm around, which he did.

“Yes. Let’s.”

We goofed off, being silly, as we made our way up to the dining room on the upper deck. The place was decked out like a prom. The front entrance had a large backdrop of glittery stars framed by black and silver balloons next to it, and a line of couples were getting selfies before they went inside. “Oh hell, yeah, we have to do that, Larry.”

“Sure. Let’s get in line.”

We made our way over, saying hello to most of the people we knew. Though I didn’t know them well, I did know who they were. Levi’s sister Brianna was there with her hubby and another couple that had come with them. She stepped out of line to hug me and say hello. “You look fabulous, Brianna.” She wore a deep purple cocktail dress with a princess cut that showed off her best features.

“Thanks, sweetie. You both look great.”

We ended up behind Drew and Justin, so I immediately struck up a conversation about gaming with Justin. Drew shook his head. “You’re a bad influence on him, Todd.”

“Shut up.” Justin bumped into Drew with a bright, flirty smile. They both wore nice suits, but Justin’s was a particularly fetching shimmery black. The colorful tattoos on the back of his hands stood out against the jacket and white shirt cuffs.

Eventually, it was our turn, and we did a few different poses. The professional photographer Royce had hired was manning the booth. He not only took our pictures with his camera, but he also used both of our phones to take pictures for us. The one he took with his equipment had our cheeks pressed close together, and I knew I had to get it from Jax later. It would be so cute.

Inside, the room looked like more prom store décor with balloons and streamers. The tables were fancy, with white and silver tablecloths and centerpieces. It was amazing. Everything my high school prom was not. Especially since this time, I had a sexy date on my arm.

I turned to him and smiled as we made our way around the room, searching for our names on the tables. Jax and his team did a great job positioning everyone. He sat Royce and Quinn at the table with us, Ward and him. Pup-brothers to the end. But the table right next to us was Levi, Hudson, Levi’s sister and brother-in-law, and their friends. On the other side of our table, Drew and Justin sat with a few other guys, including Lee and Danny, whom we met on the first day.

Our tables were positioned front and center of the room along a small stage that looked ready for the crowning of prom-king and queen. However, I didn’t think that was actually going to happen, but who the hell knew with Jax in charge. He was known to steal the show with his cute blond hair, mix-matched eyes, and sweet smile that looked like he knew something you didn’t.

He strutted in with Ward at his heels, both looking stunning in white tuxes with deep blue bow ties and cummerbunds. Hell, they actually looked more like they were getting married than going to the prom. Ward pulled Jax’s seat out for him. “Thank

you, gorgeous.” He winked at Ward, who blushed and sat beside him. “Hi, guys. Where’s Boone?” Jax asked, using Royce’s pup-name and looking down at his watch.

“Don’t know. Maybe in line for the selfies.” I thumbed over my shoulder toward the entrance, and the timing was perfect. Royce and Quinn walked through the doors like they owned the place. Of course, Royce was dressed to the nines in a bespoke suit with pants and a jacket in a light blue and a white shirt that seemed to have a slight silver sheen, and he wore it open at the collar instead of having a tie. He had a silver and soft pink pocket square popping out that nearly perfectly matched Quinn’s shirt. His suit was dove-gray over it, and surprise—his pocket square matched the silvery white of Royce’s suit. Yep. Stunning.

“Fuck! Why do they always look so good?” I asked no one.

But Jax answered with a chuckle. “It’s his mother’s influence, I assure you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever, dude.”

Royce and Quinn sat beside us, and we all talked quietly until drinks and entrees were served.

At some point, Larry patted Jax’s shoulder. “This is nice, Jax. Y’all did an amazing job with this.”

“It was fun.” Jax winked and flashed that knowing smile.

But Royce smirked. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

I glared at my friend. “What do you know that I don’t?”

“It’s a surprise,” Royce answered, and Quinn groaned.

Jax smacked Royce's shoulder. "Be nice. Oh shit! Time. Time. Ward." He shoved Ward a little, and he swallowed his drink.

"Okay. I got this." He stood and waved to someone, nodded, and sat back down. "Here we go."

An older man dressed in Jax's company uniform walked out to the little stage and turned the PA system on. "Test. Test. One two." The crowd got quiet. "Good evening, gentlemen and ladies." He smiled at the one table that had women, Levi's sister and her friend. "Thank you once again for cruising Hoadley Yacht Private Vacations."

"Enough with the marketing," I whispered under my breath, and Jax actually cackled.

The employee continued. "Now. Introducing our captain for this voyage, Captain Mark Freely, to bring us a few words."

He held his hand out to the right while the captain walked up the stage and everyone clapped, especially Jax and Royce, who over-did it a little. Captain Freely nodded to them and bowed to the crowd. "Thank you. Thank you for the warm welcome. Now." He paused for effect or to let the crowd quiet down. Everyone in the same room felt like a full boat with all the guests and crew. "I shall be announcing tonight's Prom King and King."

Everyone cheered and laughed. Jax hooted and shook his fist in the air. What a lunatic.

But then the captain motioned up and down with his hands for everyone to quiet down, and when they did, he continued, "Just kidding." After another round of raucous laughter, including mine, he began again. "Seriously. I'm honored to be working for Jax and his amazing company. The staff and crew have been wonderful,

haven't they? Let's give them a round of applause."

"That's nice." Larry smiled and bumped into my shoulder. I nodded my agreement, but I was ready for them to get on with it.

"This is a Pride cruise, and I know we will all be celebrating, but maybe we'll have even more to celebrate. I'm doubly honored to introduce our owner, Jaxson Hoadley, and his partner, Ward Predmore." He held out a hand toward our table and Jax and Ward stood. Everyone clapped and cheered again as they took the stage.

When they got to there, Jax hugged Captain Freely and took the mic from him. "Hey, y'all!" He waved with his other hand, and Ward rolled his eyes. Then he grabbed Jax's hand and shook it a little to bring his attention where it was supposed to be on whatever they were going to say. "Okay. He wants me to get on with it, and I'm sure you do too. As soon as we finish this, they'll bring out dinner, and I promise you that the Chef did an amazing job on this one. You'll love it."

Ward took the microphone from him, and Jax mouthed hey but Ward kissed him, and everyone hooted and cat-called. Then Ward spoke into the mic. "We wanted to take this moment to announce something very special in our lives to our closest friends. Besides being the inaugural voyage and a Pride celebration, we had an ulterior motive for bringing you all together."

"This is so good." Royce rubbed his hands together like a kid about to get a piece of cake or something.

Ward handed the mic back to Jax and bowed to him. Jax gave him a wink, then turned to face us, took a deep breath, and practically yelled into the mic, "We're getting married!"

This time, the audience erupted in applause, screaming, hooting, cat-calls, all of it.

But me? I cried.

Not an ugly cry. But tears spilled over for sure, and Larry put his arm around me and squeezed. They had met a year ago at a Pride parade, and with all the changes in their lives since then, this cruise was full circle for them. And I was so happy for my friends, but with Larry by my side, holding me, I thought maybe this could be us. Eventually. Maybe.

My someday could be closer than I thought.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:04 am

The next morning, we woke up to more announcements from Jax. Apparently, we were stopping for the day to play in the water. They were rolling out some kind of water slide and adventure park items off the side of the boat.

While I wasn't excited about any of that, Todd seemed to be. He bounced out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel and looking sexy as hell with wet hair and no glasses. "It's going to be fun. Even if we don't do it, we can watch our friends do it. But I have to do the slide for sure. Right?"

"You're going to rope me into going along, aren't you?"

"Don't raise your eyebrow at me, mister." He pointed and tossed his towel at me, leaving him standing there naked and me wanting to get my hands on his highly appealing body. But he turned, shaking his tight ass, and pulled swim trunks out of his drawer and put them on. When he turned back around, he shot me a sly look as if he knew exactly what he was doing to me—teasing. "Oh, are you pouting now? Come on. Take a quick shower and let's get breakfast while the team sets up the fun."

"I admit I'm curious about this other adventure stuff, but we could have our own adventure right here. Alone. You and me. What do ya say?" I patted the mattress beside me.

"Huh. Plenty of time for that later, Mr. All-Sexed-Up-Now. Let's go."

Reluctantly, I gave in because, truthfully, I'd probably do anything he asked at this point, including walking him around on a leash while he wore that cute yellow puppy mask. In fact, that sounded quite appealing. But we were being roped into water fun,

so a quick shower later, we were off to breakfast.

After the huge buffet, we headed to the top deck outside the dining room, where people were already gathering. Off the side of the boat was a huge water slide, similar in construction to Levi's bouncy house at his birthday party, but I was guessing it wasn't exactly the same, hung over the side. The thing was at least three stories tall, given the size of the yacht, but people climbed up a ladder excitedly, ready to slide down into the water of the Gulf below. Even though that giant thing was expected from Jax's description, it was still impressive, but the rest of the setup was not. To one side, a crane held a climbing wall, like a rock wall. The wall was inflatable, but a significantly sturdier material than the slide. There were already a few people climbing. Then, out farther away from the yacht, but within a short swim of the landing zone for the slide, was an inflatable jungle gym on top of a platform in the primary shades of red, blue, and yellow.

It was an adult playground at sea. I held my hand to my eyes and looked out beyond the play area the team had set up and saw nothing but water glistening in the sun. And beside me, Todd was bouncing on the balls of his feet with ten times the energy I had. "You going down that slide?"

"Yes!" He clapped his hands together.

It looked safe enough. Jax had even included two lifeguards positioned around the landing zone, outlined in floating buffers that people could easily climb on. Still, there was no way I was letting him go down with no one at the other end waiting to make sure he was okay. "I'm going first."

"What? Yeah. Let's do it." Todd grabbed my arm and practically jumped in my arms. He kissed my jaw and chin as if he were throwing kisses at me and letting them land wherever they happened to end up. His excitement and joy had my heart spinning in my chest. Or maybe that was my lungs because suddenly I couldn't breathe.

Before I could think past these new feelings, I was shoved forward, and down the slide I went. My heart leapt clear out of my throat on the way down, and I was pretty sure I screamed in a way that would normally embarrass me, but I couldn't think about that either. In the next moment, I was underwater. I pushed back to the surface and quickly moved out of the way for the next slider, which I expected to be Todd.

I held one of the float-boarders with one arm while I watched Todd fly down the slide with his hands in the air. He landed feet first and only took a second to pop back up. I reached out to him and called, "Todd."

He swam to me, and I pulled him in. He was a strong swimmer, proving my worries unfounded, but I couldn't help caring. "You okay? How was that?"

"So much fun." He slushed water out of his face.

"What did you do with your glasses?"

"Jax has lockers up there." He pointed up to the top of the slide. "I figured I better tuck them away. Didn't want to risk losing them here."

"Smart." I kissed him on the top of the head.

"Ready to go again?"

"If you don't want to check out the rest of this stuff."

"Nope. More sliding."

We swam out of the landing zone to the platform with three ladders for people to get out, then we headed back in to climb the stairs to the top deck again. This side of the boat had stairs with marine materials that kept people from sliding and falling with

wet feet. Otherwise, the stairwell was cement painted a soft blue, and chrome handrails lined the walls. Safety first. I approved.

I swear we climbed those stairs five or six times that day. And each time was followed by a wild slide into the Gulf. By the time Todd was finished playing, I was exhausted. We swam out to the jungle gym thing and hung out a while with Quinn and Royce who weren't as excited to slide. Levi and his friend Danny, on the other hand, tried everything and slid twice as many times as Todd and I. Hudson sat on the platform, chuckling at his antics as he played. Eventually, he called Levi over, and we all decided to call it a day.

Stomachs were grumbling and pups and boys alike were tired. We all got sandwiches from the lunch buffet that was set up while we played, then headed to our respective cabins for some afternoon naps.

When we got in bed, Todd's personality took a decidedly noticeable shift. He crawled over the bed and gave me puppy-huffs and licks. He turned around in circles three or four times before cuddling up next to me. I pet his head. "You okay, boy?"

Todd's response was a half-whine, half-bark, and he pushed his nose into my hand. I knew he was testing the waters with me, and I certainly wasn't going to disappoint him.

I rubbed his face and ran my fingers through his hair until he settled in and closed his eyes. "Good boy," I told him. And his lips stretched out in an ear-to-ear smile.

The day had been a lot of fun. I would never have done anything like this without him. He was changing me but in the best way. My chest felt warm, and I wanted nothing but a million more days like this. Perhaps minus the giant water slide, but together with Todd, doing whatever he wanted.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:04 am

This cruise was giving me so much more than I'd expected. And none of that had anything to do with the super fun we had on the giant water slide. It had more to do with the acceptance from Larry and the words "good boy" that came out of his mouth. When the cruise was over, maybe we could have a real relationship. Maybe this fake dating could be actual dating. I had been reluctant to get my hopes up, but my walls were crumbling by the snuggle. And we were getting plenty of those in.

Late that afternoon, the team pulled in all the inflatables and stowed them so we could get underway around dinner time. And while the fancy dinner where Jax and Ward announced their engagement had been fun, I was looking forward to something more casual. I wasn't disappointed. We had hamburgers, hot dogs, and special fries, which were fixed how you wanted them, with a bunch of crazy toppings to choose from, but I was a simple guy and went with the standard, melted cheddar cheese, chili and onions. Larry did some kind of weird truffle and parmesan thing. He let me taste it, and while it wasn't bad, it could never beat the classics.

My friends joined us, and we had craft beer with our food and plenty of laughing and congratulating Jax and Ward. For the first time since they'd started pairing off with their rich boyfriends—now fiancé—I felt comfortable with them again. The warm camaraderie we shared was back. To be honest, on their part, it never left. It had only been me and my insecurities mucking up the works, so sitting with Larry, I no longer felt left out with them. I was warm and happy like this was how it was supposed to be, effortless.

Finally, for that thirty-some-odd-minute dinner, I felt like I could be good enough for them. Good enough for Larry. It was everything.

Later, the tables were pushed back to allow room for dancing. If you could call it that. Anyone looking in on us would call it weird gyrating and hand movements set to music. But it was fun and carefree.

At some point, Jax grabbed my shoulders and pulled me to the side. “Hey,” he said, leaning in to speak above the music. “Your blender drinks class was a hit!”

“Yeah? How do you know?”

Jax put his arm around my shoulders. “A lot of people were commenting on it. So...”

“So what?”

“Would you want to do it again?”

“Sure. It was fun. When?”

Jax bit his upper lip and looked at me sheepishly. “Well, tomorrow?”

I laughed. As if I would say no. “Of course. Just text me when and where and I’ll be there.”

“Thanks. I think people that didn’t go to the first one will want to get in on it too this time.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Hell, they might go to taste the drinks. But they’ll stay because of you. Hands down, you’re the best part.”

That warm feeling in my chest grew. It was nice to do something fun, something that

I was good at, for my friend who had done so much for me over the years. I missed having him as a roommate. Those days were gone, but I looked back fondly at them. I put my arm around his waist and hugged him. “No, the best part is being here and doing fun things with you guys. Thank you for having me.”

“Any time, buddy.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:04 am

The next day, we had a nice ordered-in breakfast, and then Todd got ready and went to do his drink class. I went with him this time, and he was fabulous. He flirted with the crowd and whipped up the best drinks. This time, I tasted everything. I had to admit, he was pretty damn good at this, and it had my brain churning. The most important part about it was the smile on his face. It lit his eyes and shimmied down his entire body. This—showing off his blender drinks—made him genuinely happy. As much as the pup-play did. I could see how much he loved it, and I had several ideas I wanted to share with him on how to make that a bigger part of his life. But we didn't have time to discuss that because there was another play date with pups before we arrived in Key West.

We went back to the cabin so he could change and grab his gear, and he allowed me to hold his hand the entire way, even when no one else was around. This felt more and more like a relationship and less like fake boyfriends. We had started out rocky, but it was rapidly moving to something more. I was excited about that and terrified. I still had a lot of questions about the pup-stuff and kinks in general. It still felt risqué and a bit forbidden, especially with my dad's voice in the back of my head whispering things about how much of a loser I was and other things about being a failure and how queers like me never amounted to anything.

I'd come a long way from that. Hudson had helped me probably more than he even knew. I had a lot more in common with Todd and Levi than Hudson and Jax and all those others. I grew up in a family who was barely making it and a dad who drank away whatever extra we ever had. I put myself through college with no help from them. And Hudson's friendship gave me the moral boost I needed to keep going.

He helped me find things I was good at and lean into those skills. He helped me

invest my money and set me up for life. But none of that stuff was me. I credited my education to Hudson, his efforts keeping me on track and motivating me, and many other things, including luck. And now, faced with Todd and something meaningful in my life, I was terrified I was going to fuck it up. And that was what had my dad's voice whispering his doubts at me. I didn't want to listen to it, but it proved difficult sometimes.

But not when we both tried to squeeze into the little shower at the same time. Not when we were laughing together. Not when we fell into bed and kissed each other passionately. Not when he looked into my eyes, and his promised forever.

This thing could be the most meaningful relationship in my life. And for once, I was not going to screw this up.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:04 am

Next to teaching people about my blender drinks and sex with Larry, pup-play was my favorite thing in the world. Maybe more than the drinks. And especially when Larry helped me get my gear on. I kept it simple with my favorite yellow mask, matching MMA gloves and knee pads, tight tank top and biker shorts. When I was ready, I bounced out to the mat where Royce was already rolling around in his pup persona, Boone.

I jumped on him, and we rolled around together. He snuffed at my neck and back and let out a little bark. Then Jax, in his pup gear as Jay-Jay, pounced on us. We quickly had a three-way wrestling match going.

Egypt and her handler couldn't make the trip, but Marshall and Dallas were there. Marshall had his black and white spotted Dalmatian gear on, while Dallas was in Cowboy blue as usual. Dallas barked and sat up in the begging position. Neither of them had handlers, but Ward seemed to take on the role of Alpha-handler quickly. Our actual Alpha pair from Tam-PAH wasn't on the cruise with us, either, but I suspected Ward had been training as backup. Jay-Jay was not suited to be alpha, though. He was way too hyper and more like a puppy. Boone was my pick for our next alpha, but Quinn wasn't great as a handler. He was a super daddy for Royce, but for a pack, not so much. Perhaps this combination of Boone and Ward, though unconventional, would work for us.

Ward handed out treats to Dallas, Marshall, and Jay-Jay while Royce went to Quinn for water and pets. I sat there staring at Larry, wondering what he would do. Would he be as into it as he seemed to be the last time?

"Sunshine. Come on, boy," Larry called to me and snapped his fingers. I crawled

over, though slowly, questioning. “Here. I have some treats for you, boy.” He stretched out his hand, palm up, offering a pretzel bite. I snuffled it, and he helped me get it in my mouth. “Good boy.”

Ahh...there it was again. Those words turned my insides upside down and backward. Larry was getting involved. Trying to be a handler for me. I couldn’t have asked for anything more. I rolled over on my back and let him rub my tummy for a few minutes. Then he helped me get a drink from a water bottle before we all dashed back out to the mat with Boone in the lead.

We chased Boone around until Ward tossed out some toys, distracting us. It was so much fun playing with the other pups. But it also wore me out, and eventually, I crawled back over to Larry. He sat on a folding chair off to the side. I put my head in his lap, and he played with my sweaty hair that stuck out the back of the mask.

Larry helped me get my gear off and handed me a bottle of water. While I drank, he stared at me, holding my mask.

“What?” I asked.

“Isn’t this all a little degrading? I mean, you’re not into that, right? I’ve heard about, like, uh...humiliation play? I don’t think—”

What the fuck was he talking about? I had no clue. Degrading? Humiliation? He had the wrong idea, and I was so fucking tired. I didn’t want to have this conversation. “Fuck! Larry, I thought this could work, but you’re not accepting. You’re not into this. You said you liked it to get in my pants. Right? That’s all? And now you’re wondering how far you’re going to have to take it to keep fucking me? That it?”

“I don’t understand.” He held his hands up, one of them still holding my mask.

“This is a part of me.” I snatched my mask back. “That’s all you have to understand. Get it? No, I don’t think you do.” I tucked it under my arm and started walking, not giving him a chance to explain himself.

“Waid, Todd. Let’s go back to the cabin and talk.”

“And have more sex, you mean. Well, that wasn’t supposed to be on the table, was it? What exactly do you want from me?” I wasn’t thinking clearly. I was angry. Tired and frustrated. And I felt used.

“This is the same old argument, Todd. I want to get to know you, want to see if this can work, but you have to let go of your insecurities and take a leap of faith.”

“So do you.”

“I’m trying.”

“Not hard enough.” I walked in the opposite direction of the stairs, not sure where exactly I was going, and Larry kept pace right behind me, but I wanted to be alone.

“Todd. Todd, you’re not being fair here.” He grabbed my arm, but I jerked away.

“Forget it. Leave me alone.”

When I stormed off again, he didn’t follow. This whole fucking thing was a disaster. I had been fooling myself. It would be better if we ended it now. I circled around back to the stairs and headed up to the room. I needed to change and figure out where I could sleep for the night. Because it sure as fuck was not going to be with Larry.

I quickly changed into comfortable shorts and an oversized T-shirt. Then I took my contacts out and grabbed my glasses before heading out again. Luckily, Larry didn’t

come after me. I didn't know how long I could hold out if he kept pushing because, despite everything, I wanted him.

I found Jax and told him we'd been in a fight. He hugged me and tried to assure me we would work it out. But I didn't think that was the case. I should have explained that we weren't in a relationship to begin with, but that would have been admitting to the lie. I lied to my friends. And why?

I sighed. "I'm tired. Too tired to think about this." I rubbed my eyes beneath my glasses.

"I've got you. I only have one single room down by the crew. Do you want to go get your stuff?"

"No. Not now. Tonight, I want to sleep. I'll go get it tomorrow."

"What about dinner?"

"I'm going to order something. Okay?"

Jax hugged me again. "Of course it's okay."

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I walked around the deck, getting fresh air and trying to calm down. This was it. I didn't even understand what I'd said to set him off. He had said I should ask questions. I didn't think I was pushing or asking him for anything more than information. I huffed to myself. I needed to go back to the cabin and try to talk to Todd again. I had to prove myself to him. I knew that. Only I wasn't sure how I was going to do it.

But Todd wasn't in the cabin. He'd been there. His glasses were gone, but was he coming back?

I didn't know anything, but I got cleaned up and headed to the dining room for dinner. Maybe he would be there, and we could sort this out. But he wasn't.

"Anyone seen Todd?" I asked, approaching the table with most of his friends.

Royce and Jax glared at me, while Ward and Quinn looked sympathetic. They knew I'd fucked up. Royce shook his head, and Jax said, "No."

"Where is he?"

"I said we didn't know." Jax smirked at me. He was an energetic cutie most of the time, but when he was angry, his looks could slice a man.

I held up my hands and walked away, looking around for Hudson and Levi. I found them, but neither knew where he was or had seen him.

Fuck Todd, anyway. Why was I jumping through all of his hoops? This thing had

been one-sided from the beginning. He knew I wanted more with him, and he took advantage of that. He used me.

I went down to what I'd started thinking of as the party deck and walked around the pool and to the bar. I ordered a whiskey straight up. I didn't want any of the fancy drinks. No, I was after something to numb me quickly, and the whiskey did exactly that. I sat there and drank. And drank. Until I lost count of the refills. My thoughts spiraled out of control and made no sense.

Hudson was next to me, but I wasn't sure if he was even real. He'd been in my life for so long and was always the one I went to for advice, help, and whatever I needed. So I'd probably conjured him up in my whiskey-drunk brain.

Then he put his arm around my shoulders. "Think you've had enough, buddy."

"Nah...We're juss getting started."

"Nope. You're cut off. Come on." He said something to the bartender, but I couldn't make out what.

"Where's Levi? You worry 'bout your boy. Not me," I protested. I didn't need him. I'd relied on him too often.

I was walking. Hudson was there. I could smell his rich cologne. Familiar and comforting. "I've got you." He always had my back, even when I didn't know I needed it. Best friends were—

The ship spun around. "Didn't know boats could do this."

Hudson chuckled, and I was pretty sure he was laughing at me, but it wasn't mean. Hudson had never been a mean sort. No, he was caring. Loving. All the traits of a

good daddy for his boy, and all the things I could never be. Especially not for fake boyfriends.

I was in a bed. “Bring me onesmore drink!”

But the lights went out. I was alone in the cabin.

I rolled over onto Todd’s pillow, which smelled like him—fresh and clean.

Then tears fell. Slowly, at first, but I couldn’t stop them. That was the thing I’d forgotten when I started drinking—alcohol only numbed for so long. Then it intensified everything. And it brought you down. Alcohol was a depressant and the worst way to attempt the whole not being sad thing. Ultimately, it didn’t work. It made everything worse.

And I was terribly sad. Alone and doomed to that forever.

Exactly like my father always said, I was a failure. Sure, I could make millions. Sure, I could sell anything to anyone. But it was all bullshit. The most important things in life were out of my reach. Love. Family. That’s what I failed at. I was a bad person.

And the saddest part was that I would do anything to fix this. Anything. And Todd had no idea. This fetish stuff was so outside of my comfort zone. My father always told me that if I was ever going to have a life, I’d have to get a wife. And he was crude about it. Promising me that any woman worth having a family with would expect missionary style and nothing else. Anything else was perverted, disgusting, and would leave me alone in the world. I’d end up in a gutter. And here I was, admitting I was gay, admitting I wanted another man, and even willing to go down whatever perverted, fetish road he wanted.

Because I was lonely, but it was more than that. I missed Todd. It was as simple as

that. I already felt his absence from my life, and I wanted him back.

But why? What did I see in Todd in the first place?

Sure, his looks. He was adorable. Those thick glasses hinting at the Superman under his Clark Kent exterior. And he did have the strong jaw, but his lips were soft. His eyes were deep and ever-changing depending on the light and what he wore, and I could practically see him thinking when he stared at me. He was one of the smartest guys I knew. He was only getting started in life, but I could tell he would find success at whatever he wanted to do. And I knew. I could read people. I could see easily by their body language, what they said, and how they said it, if they would buy or not, and I gauged their responses and reactions in order to manipulate them down the road I wanted them to go. But not Todd. He had a mind of his own, and he was stubborn. And I even loved that about him.

Yeah. I loved everything about him.

Except for the fact that he wasn't here beside me.

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Sleeping alone in this tiny room sucked. It was a single bed and a small dresser. It didn't even have an attached bathroom. Or Larry.

I could have been next to him. Holding him. But he only wanted me for sex. He's a jerk. Fuck!

There was a tapping at the door, and I got up and opened it with a spark of hope that it would be Larry, but it was Levi. "Hey. Come in. We might both fit in here." I opened my arm to invite him in.

He looked around the tiny space. "Uh...I don't want to get into this or in the middle of whatever..."

"But?"

He exhaled loudly. "I do think you need to know that Hudson found Larry drunk as a skunk at the pool bar. And I mean drunk!" He made a weird facial expression.

"So? Not my problem." I wanted to say we broke up or that we were never actually together to begin with. Instead, I pursed my lips together tightly and crossed my arms over my chest.

Levi shoved me a little. "Don't give me your angry pose. Sit down."

I flopped back on the bed and spread my arms. Levi sat next to me on the edge. "I don't know what you expect."

“Listen. That’s all.”

“Fine.” I sat up, and Levi bumped his shoulder into mine.

“Okay. Larry was drunk. Very drunk and babbling on and on about how he missed you. He said things that were left to interpretation, but the gist was that he wanted you any way he could get you. He wanted his pup back, even if he never had you for real. What’s that mean?”

I bit my bottom lip. Nope. I did not want to talk about it. Not with Levi. Not with anyone. I wanted to wallow in my loneliness and self-inflicted isolation. Because maybe I’d blown everything out of proportion. Maybe because it was more about me being afraid to take that step than anything Larry said or did.

And I’d made both of us fucking miserable.

“Was he a jerk? What did he say?” Levi asked. I knew he was being a friend, but I didn’t think I owed him this. “Okay. I’m saying it. If you’re not sharing, I’m just going to tell you what I fucking think.”

My eyes went wide. Levi wasn’t normally that forceful and cursing too? “Okay, then. What?”

“You are not giving him enough credit. I mean, I don’t know Larry well, but Hudson thinks the world of him. And from what I’ve seen on this trip. Larry is being very accepting. He was totally accepting of me and my unconventional relationship with Hudson. And maybe he needs more time and more civilized talking about the pup-play. There is a world of difference between intolerance and ignorance. Educate him. He’s willing.”

“Do you really think? I like him. A lot. Maybe too much. And I’m scared of that.” I

turned and butted my forehead against his shoulder.

“Could you love him?”

“I don’t fucking know. It-It’s too early. Maybe.” But my heart pounded extra hard thinking about what it could be like if we loved each other. It was more than the security he offered. But hell, I hadn’t worried about money since the start of my junior year. The guys always had my back, and I would be fine no matter what. But I would be lonely. Fuck! I was lonely. And the only time it eased was when I was with him, and I sure as hell didn’t mean the sexy time. It was more than wanting to fit in with my friends because they accepted me before when I didn’t have anyone. They loved me any way I showed up. That had been another fucking lie I told myself. To protect my heart.

“I don’t know what’s going on in your head, Todd, but I can see something is. There is a lot you’re not saying. But...I’m here for you. We all are, and I know you’ve been closer to Jax and Royce over the years, but I’m here too.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m trying to work shit out and...I haven’t been honest about anything. With myself or with y’all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Larry and I...” Was I going to tell him? I huffed. “Don’t say anything to Jax and Royce. Please?”

Levi nodded. “Okay.”

“We’re not a couple. We never were. We aren’t dating.”

“I don’t understand.” I didn’t like the way his eyebrows bunched up.

“Don’t get mad.”

Levi held up his hands. “I’m not. I’m trying to understand. That’s all.”

“Okay. So, like, we made that up so I wouldn’t be alone on this stupid fucking cruise. Everyone was paired off. Even you—”

“Hey! That’s not fair.”

I spoke over him, “No, no. I get that. I’m not mad. Maybe I was a little jealous, but I asked Larry to do this so I wouldn’t feel left out and jealous.”

“I still don’t understand. You went on dates. You’re sleeping together...aren’t you?”

I cringed. “We went on dates to get to know each other better so we could pull this off, and we didn’t sleep together, well, until we did.” I rubbed my face. “This is so complicated.”

“Okay. Maybe it started out as pretend, but it’s a hell of a lot more than that now. It’s obvious. The way you look at each other. You fooled everyone, Todd, including yourselves.”

“But it wasn’t. None of it. And we’d planned to fake breakup before the end of the cruise. So, this is that.” I waved my hand around as if that would make everything make sense, but it didn’t. “I guess.”

“You’re full of shit, you know?” Levi shook his head. “He cares about you. About this.” He made a swirly motion in the air around me. “And you’re breaking his heart. And I think you’re breaking your own. So go on pretending if you want. Oh, don’t worry, I won’t say anything, but I think...I, uh...”

“Oh, don’t stop now.”

“You. You are the jerk now. The asshole. And I don’t like any of this.”

“I don’t either,” I said very quietly. So why was I still wanting to go through with this breakup plan? Why was I still thinking about Larry?

“It doesn’t have to be like this, Todd.” Levi left then. Left me sitting there, contemplating all of it.

What the fuck did I see in Larry anyway?

He was a pompous asshole. Wasn’t he? But he’d been nothing but nice to me. Adventurous and willing to go along with whatever I wanted. Maybe I hadn’t liked how he seemed smitten with me—and maybe I did. Maybe I took advantage of that. The truth was harder than that. I liked the way he looked at me and the way he made me feel. He was successful, and truthfully, he didn’t flaunt it. He dressed nicely and had a fancy car, but he didn’t act stuck up and was willing to share anything he had with all his friends. He’d grown up like me. Like Levi. He worked hard for everything he had and encouraged me to do the same.

And he stuck by Hudson, even when he didn’t understand his friend. He said it didn’t matter. He wanted Hudson to be happy. Wanted me to be happy.

Fuck! Todd was right. I was the jerk.

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“Come on, dude. This is the best way to get over it. Get back in the swing of things,” Hudson explained his reasoning while picking out clothes I didn’t want to wear.

I wanted off this fucking boat and back to my normal life in my condo. Alone. Where I belonged. I briefly considered chartering a plane from Key West to get me home quickly without being tortured on the second half of the voyage. “I mean it, Hud. I don’t want to do this.”

“It’s only a few people. Small. And some of the guys there are single.”

“What about Jax and them? His friends?”

“Not going to be there. Honestly, there are going to be off-duty staff there, mingling. And shit.” He tossed me a golf shirt and my gray slacks that clung to my ass. “And don’t do the buttons on that shirt.”

I huffed but did as he asked. Then fixed my hair. A little. Hudson made a swirling motion to get me to turn around, so I held my arms out and twirled. “Good enough? I hope so.” I wasn’t doing anything else.

“Sure. Come on.” Hudson practically shoved me out the door and down to the lower decks. Apparently, they’d pulled up the mats from the pup-play area and brought some music in. There were people around, staff who I didn’t know, but through the small crowd, I saw him. He was standing at the far end, talking with Levi and Jax.

I turned to Hudson, “You lied.”

He held up his hands. “Maybe I was mistaken. They weren’t supposed to be here. So suck it up already.”

And the whole time he was talking, he directed me across that room and right to Todd.

I blew out my breath. “Hey. Sorry. Hudson tricked me. I didn’t want to come.”

Todd laughed. “Well, same. Levi dragged me here, kicking and screaming.”

“I can go. It’s fine.” I turned around and noticed a lot less people in the room. “Where is everyone going?”

“Shit.” Todd pointed to the door where Levi and Hudson slipped out, followed by Jax and the last of the crew. He jogged over to the door and pulled. “Fuckers.”

I actually loved all his little F-bombs. How had I ever lived without them? “What? What’s going on?”

“We’re locked in.” He pounded on the door. “Jax, mother-fucker!” I chuckled. “What?” He turned, flashing those blazing eyes at me.

“They got us.”

Todd laughed then. Hands on hips and looking around. He pointed at the snack table set up with booze and other fixings. And a blender. “I’ll just make us some drinks. How’s that? It’s still a party.”

He was hiding. Behind the party, behind the drinks. The blender started up, drowning out everything but his smug smile.

I understood what our friends were doing, and I didn't know if it was going to work, but from the second I saw Todd's flippy-fixed-up hair and his sparkling bright eyes behind those thick frames, I wanted him. His tan slacks hung low on his hips and his peach-colored button-down shirt was open, exposing his bare chest. I never wanted him more. And in this short time since we met, I'd gotten to know him and his sweet, sweet heart. Yeah, I wanted him. Who wouldn't?

The blender stopped, and Todd poured the concoction into two glasses. He held one up for me. I didn't want it, but I crossed the open space and took it from him. "Thanks." I sipped it. Strawberry-fresh and boozy. "This is good."

"Mm...thanks."

We stared at each other. "Todd, look—"

"Don't. I mean. Don't because I screwed up. I know you didn't mean anything by what you said. I-I...fuck! It's hard for me to admit when I'm wrong."

"Really?" I asked with all the sarcasm I could possibly put into one word.

"Fuck you!" But there was no heat in his words. He took another sip of his drink and then put it down. "Larry, I didn't mean for any of this to happen. And this has been all our own fake-date bullshit, but somewhere along the line, it stopped being fake. I like you. I-I fucked this all up, but maybe can we start over because I want to try this for real...if you do?"

"Wow, did you say all that with one breath?"

"You're being a jerk?"

I smiled shyly. "I know. But honestly, you had me from Blender Drink."

“Are you trying to pull a Jerry McGuire moment here?”

“Maybe. Is it working?”

Todd laughed hard. “Okay. Yeah. I’ve been harsh, like this entire time, but I do like you. For you, who you are. I like how you look at me and how you smile, and how self-sufficient you are, but also, you going through with all this fake-boyfriend shit for me only proves you’d go out of your way for a friend in need. I’ve seen how sweet and vulnerable you can be. Maybe this can work. I’m serious. Please.”

“Maybe. If we can stop being idiots and try. Because how I feel about you has never been fake, Todd.”

“Yeah, me too. But it took me a while to admit that to myself. Come on. Let’s do it.”

I put my drink on the table and spread my arms wide. Todd jumped into them. And I held him. His warm body against mine felt like home.

“You know?” he asked.

“What?”

“This is the pup-room, and there are thick mats right over there.” He pointed to the corner where the mats had been stacked up. “We could, you know, pull one or two of them out.”

“I like how you think, pup.” I kissed the side of his head before putting him down.

We pulled the mats out and climbed up on them. Todd grabbed my shirt’s hem and pulled it over my head. I took his glasses off his face and stared into his brown eyes.

Todd blinked for a second, then smiled. “Here. Put them in my pocket.” He took his shirt off, and I slid the glasses safely into the front pocket and set our shirts to the side.

We lay side by side, chest to chest, and kissed softly. I couldn’t resist getting my fingers into his perfectly coiffed hair. He pressed closer to me. “Larry...”

“Yeah...”

“I’ve been lying to everyone, especially us.”

“What do you mean? The fake-boyfriend stuff?”

“Yes, you’re right. There has never been anything fake here, and I...I’m going to just come out with it, okay?”

“Of course, anything, baby.”

He held my face, cupping my cheeks. He looked into my eyes, left to right and back. Then he said, “I love you.”

There were never three words that sounded better. My heart soared, and I knew the truth of it.

“I love you, too. I think I always have.”

“Shut up.” And he shut me up with his kiss. His lips pressed to mine, and his tongue teased me. When I opened, he dove in, and I let him lead because I wanted to go wherever he went. “Too many clothes,” he said into my mouth.

“Yeah,” my word was practically nothing but a breath.

Then we scrambled to unbuckle belts and buttons. Flies dropped and so did our pants. We held each other for a minute, but then my hands explored his body. I rubbed down his sides, over his ass. His hands explored me back, and soon we were rubbing our cocks together. “I don’t have lube,” Todd confessed.

“Me either. You know what that means?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Blowjobs?”

“Hell, yeah. Turn around.” I needed him in my mouth. He turned, and I lifted him over me into the classic sixty-nine position. He sucked me deep into his mouth, making me moan, but I was ready to give back what I got. While he sucked on me, I licked and sucked on him. Running my tongue around his crown and over the flat of my tongue, then sucking him to the back of my throat. I only gagged once. Or twice. It didn’t matter. He felt good, and I wanted him badly. More than anything.

“I can’t come like this. I’m too busy thinking about you.”

“No problem.” I flipped him over to his back and moved out of his reach. Then continued blowing him. This time, I was fully concentrating on him, and every slurp and moan echoed through the room until he came down my throat. I swallowed it all, happy to keep that part of him within me.

Todd sighed and dug his fingers into my scalp. “I’m returning that favor. In a minute.”

“Okay. There’s plenty of time. Rest.” I slowly kissed my way back up his body until I was staring down into his face again. “Hi there.”

His smile would knock angels out of the sky. “Hi.”

“You know? We’re going to owe Hudson and Levi big time.”

“Yeah. And Jax. He was behind this too. Hell, he’s the one who locked us in. Oh...”
He bit at that lower lip. It was his thinking mode.

“What?”

“I told Levi the truth. That this was all, you know, fake.”

“Okay. Well. That was your secret to tell. I’m pretty sure they saw through it.”

“Yeah...”

We laughed together. Then Todd blew me, making me come so hard, I think I actually saw the inside of my skull. Then we drank a little more and danced around the floor naked.

After a while, I saw Todd was getting tired, so we fished out some towels that were stashed and covered up, stretching out on the mat. And I held my pup until we fell asleep.

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The next day, we got up slowly and dressed, and Larry pounded on the door until Jax finally opened it. When he did, I was staring into his scowly face. “What?”

“You lied.” Jax poked my chest. “To me. To everyone. Fake dating. Bullshit. I call bullshit. What is your deal, Todd?”

“Maybe, I—fuck! I’m sorry, Jax. I couldn’t face this trip without someone.”

“Why? You wouldn’t be the only single guy. I told you that.” He held his hands out.

“No, but all of y’all are paired up. And that’s what mattered. You, Royce, and even Levi. I-I couldn’t.”

Jax turned to Larry. “You’re not off the hook either, dude.”

“Leave him alone, Jax. This was me. All me.”

“He didn’t have to go along with it.”

Larry huffed. “Do you not know him? Hi, Jax, meet Todd. Headstrong, stubborn—”

“Hey,” I growled, giving him my best angry glare.

“And the cutest pup in the whole world,” he finished with a sly smile.

“Forgiven.” I cuddled up to his side, but Jax wasn’t finished.

“No. Not forgiven. I think I need more of an explanation than that. And Royce and Levi need apologies, too.”

I couldn't hold back a sigh. I should have known it would end like this. “I don't know what to tell you that you would understand. What matters is that we're not pretending anymore. We are actually dating. And that's thanks to Levi and you. So...thanks.”

“That's not all that matters.” Jax crossed his arms over his chest. “We're your friends—your best friends. We are here for you no matter what. You could have told us you felt uncomfortable. We're never going to judge you. Don't you know that yet?” He started getting choked up.

“You're right. I know you are. I'm sorry.”

“Fine.” Jax pulled me into a hug. “Don't do this shit again. Don't lie to us. We love you.” He squeezed me hard, and I felt the truth of that statement.

“Okay, enough of that,” Royce said as he walked up and pulled me out of Jax's arms and into his. “What he said. All of it, asshole.”

I saw Levi over his shoulder. He was standing in the hallway and smirking. I mouthed thank you, and his smile grew into the real thing.

These were my best friends, and I never should have doubted them.

The sun was shining brightly when we dropped anchor in Key West. I held Larry's hand, ready to voyage out into the town. Jax's voice boomed over the public address system. “We're here... Happy Key West! Go forth, explore, and have fun. But remember, Hoadley Yacht Private Vacations launches at noon tomorrow. When we're back out in the Gulf, we're having our own Pride Parade. You don't want to miss it, so don't be late!”

The system squelched, and Ward came on. “Thank you for cruising with Hoadly Yacht Private Vacations!”

There was laughter from everyone as the gangplank, or whatever the fuck it was called, was lowered and we all descended into Key West. We spent the day walking along the main drag, but our first stop was for Cuban coffee! We went in and out of the shoppes, buying souvenirs. Larry even found one place with some amazing artwork and bought a painting, having it shipped back to his home in Tampa. Then, we found the Southernmost Point Buoy and took pictures to prove we were there. A few were serious, but then we goofed off with silly poses. I texted Levi and told him to meet us there, and we waited for them to catch up, then took more pictures.

After that, we rode a trolley to find a place to grab lunch. I was starving. And also having the best time of my life. We ended up at a beachside café. While we ate, we watched a bunch of hunky shirtless men playing volleyball on the court by the restaurant. We all shared peel-and-eat shrimp, and then we ordered different meals and shared so we could taste everything, and it was all fabulous.

Larry put his arm around me, and it felt right. Nothing fake about it.

“This has been fucking fantastic.” I leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Thanks, Larry.”

“You’re more than welcome, pup.”

I sure as hell didn’t regret anything that had happened on this cruise. It all brought us to this, and if this was what it would be like to be with Larry, I would take it.

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I'd been to watch the St. Petersburg Pride Parade a few times, but I'd never marched in the parade. Not that this was that, but it was something. Jax and Ward had all the guests start in the dining room. Probably because it was the only space big enough for everyone to congregate. I didn't care much about any of it. I simply wanted to hold Todd's hand and be near him.

Jax and Royce and their significant others went around the room handing out paper leis, saying, "Everyone gets laid." They thought they were funny—jury was out on that. They didn't allow the beads you would normally see at a parade because they were bad for the environment, and no one wanted them accidentally going in the water. The leis were a great alternative, and the guys tried to make it fun. Unofficially, there was a competition to see how many leis someone could con or flirt away from others. Before we started, Todd already had four or five and felt pretty smug about it. Levi and his new friend Danny had more, though. They were doing their little thing, and it was working. I wasn't giving mine up to any of them, though.

Then the music started blasting, and Jax, Ward, Royce, and Quinn started the line, leading us out of the dining area, down the outside of the deck, to the stairs near the bow, and down. We marched—but it was more like dancing, wiggling, jumping, and bouncing—around the bow and down to the deck below. Then we went all around the pool. Some folks were pushed in the water, others stopped to dance and hang out, but most of us kept going around the yacht. Eventually, we ended up at the pool again, and several guests were already sliding down the slide. It was a ton of fun.

Todd picked up a couple more leis, making me scowl at him. "Where are you getting these?"

He smiled shyly. “Guys are just giving them to me.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Huh. Watch.” He turned to a guy next to us and smiled. “Hi.”

“Here.” The guy dropped several leis over Todd’s head.

“Thanks!” Then he turned to me and shrugged. The guy he got the leis from slid behind the bar and came out with two more. He winked at me and gave them out to two other guys.

“He works for Jax, doesn’t he?” I asked, thinking he looked familiar.

“Uh, yeah. He’s on staff.” Todd laughed at me, then threw his arms around my neck. “Happy Pride, baby!”

I couldn’t help but chuckle and kiss his forehead. “Happy Pride to you.”

Then the pup-pack showed up with Levi, Hudson, Danny, and his partner, Lee, in tow. They all demanded dancing and drinking. Who was I not to join in and ruin the fun?

If this was what our life would be like, I would embrace it, because I had never been happier.

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Six months later

The sun blasted into the room, waking me up at too early an hour. I rolled over and buried my face into Larry's side. I did love his apartment and this soft, cushy bed. And this was going to be a great Saturday morning. But maybe some coffee first.

We were in such a great place in our relationship. I no longer feared being in an actual-real-adult relationship with him. I loved him so much, and it was more than obvious that he felt the same.

I rubbed my hand down his chest, flicking a nipple and lingering in his belly button. I scratched along his treasure trail and lower. Lower. His morning wood was strong and ready for me, and I couldn't resist sliding down that sexy body. I flicked my tongue over his crown, the way I knew he loved, and he moaned his pleasure. I sucked that thick cock into my mouth.

"Todd..."

"Mmm..." I didn't stop to respond past that. Why would I?

"Fuck..."

I worked him over, knowing exactly what to do to drive him crazy. I kneaded his balls and fingered his taint and...

Boom! Breakfast of champions!

He came hard and fast.

Then he growled as if he were the pup. “Get up here.”

I willingly crawled up to him, and we snuggled a bit, but then he started playing with my ass. As much as I now knew what made him crazy, he also knew what made me go nuts. And running his finger down my crack was a great start.

He flipped me over and nibbled my neck. “I want to fuck you so hard, pup.”

I whined in response, and Larry pulled away to grab the lube.

We weren’t using condoms anymore, having been tested twice, not that either of us had many previous partners, and we felt secure with being monogamous. And I couldn’t wait to feel his hard cock inside me again with nothing between us but the lube, which he squeezed over my balls and taint. “You’re so messy.”

“You love it.”

I did. I squirmed around as he started working me over. “Hold still, pup.”

I yipped at him, and he held me down. Who knew I’d love that? But I seemed to love everything Larry did, and since I let go of my fears and defeatist attitude, everything was sunshine.

Eventually, he stopped playing and pushed that big head through my ring. He must have bounced back fast because he was rock hard and pushing in and out in no time. I thrust along with him until he leaned back and spread my legs with an ankle in each hand. Then he pounded me furiously to his own rhythm.

It didn’t take long before I reached down and grabbed my cock. I slipped down to my balls and wiped up some of the spare lube to stroke myself with.

“Do it. Come for me, pup,” Larry growled out and watched as I jacked my dick.

Damn, I loved that too, and in another second, I was coming. Spraying all over both of us with stars bursting and blurring my vision. “Fuck!”

Then Larry jerked and grunted, and I felt his release, hot and heavy in my ass, filling me up. It was beyond anything I thought I would ever have or thought I would love so much.

I sighed as he pulled out. He kissed my forehead and moved to get up, but I didn’t want him to go yet. “Wait. We both have to shower in a minute. So stay.”

“Okay.” He snuggled back down beside me, and we wrapped up together, grabbing each other and tangling our legs together. “Nice way to wake up.”

“Yeah...” I couldn’t argue with him on that one. In fact, I didn’t argue with him much anymore.

We lay together until the alarm went off, and even then, I groaned, not wanting to get up. Then he reminded me it was puppy mosh day! That had me getting up and in the shower with Larry hot on my heels.

We ate breakfast sandwiches on the way to Tam-PAH headquarters and drank a little coffee. But I was about to spend the next few hours rolling around with my pup-brothers, so I didn’t overdo it.

And that’s exactly how the day went. Larry helped me get my gear on. And I dove into the play with everything I had. Jax and Royce were still my brothers, despite my deception on that cruise. They were frustrated with me for lying and keeping things from them about how I felt. But they didn’t hold it against me. They were as understanding and forgiving as they could be, but they also said how much of a dumbass I was. After all, I almost threw Larry away because of it. Thankfully, Levi

helped me pull my head out of my ass, and we were all good now. Especially me and Larry.

The day was fun, wrestling with Royce and Jax and chasing each other around. I even played tug of war with a rope toy against Royce. Of course, human-pups used their hands for that, and Royce won. Then we fought over the rope until Jax literally dog-piled us.

Then Larry made sure I got my treats and water. He called me good boy. I could see the love in his eyes when he said it, making it even better.

After the play date, we picked up lunch and went home.

Larry was trying so hard on all of the pup-play, and I didn't want to do any of it without him anymore. I'd found my handler, despite myself. Since we returned from that crazy cruise, Larry supported me in other ways as well. He helped me with my job search, and I had some great interviews. And ended up accepting a job at the firm Royce used to work at and where Royce's sister, Brianna, still worked. After the cruise, I had two follow up interviews with them, and the offer was incredible. And through all that turmoil, Larry had been fantastic.

Even better, Larry was working with me on creating my own business, which I worked as a side gig. Yep, BlenderParty.com was born. I made instructional videos on how to make my drinks and posted them online where people could view them—for a small subscription fee. Plus, I did live webcasts and private parties, which paid better. I never thought making daiquiris and margaritas could be a business, but Larry saw something I hadn't. And it wasn't the drinks. I wasn't making a ton of money on it yet, but Larry helped me create a business plan to grow it into something more. And I was going to enjoy it, money or not.

Also, I could now afford my apartment on my own without a roommate, which was great because since Levi moved out, I hadn't interviewed any new roommates. I

didn't want to, either.

I looked out the window as we drove along Bayshore, almost home, and enjoyed the sparkling sunshine on the water. It made me love my pup-name even more. Since we'd been together, everything felt like sunshine. Like it was finally and truly me. "Larry?"

"Yes, dear?"

I smiled hard at the endearment. It sounded like something you would call someone in a long-term relationship, like when the couple had been together for twenty years, not six months. All the same, it warmed my heart and proved my point. "I love you."

I watched the smile stretch across Larry's face. "That's fantastic."

I scowled. He could still be a sarcastic ass. "You think?"

"Yeah, you want to know why?"

I had no idea where he was going, but I kind of liked his playful side. "I think you should enlighten me, dear." Was he fucking with me here?

"Because I love you, too. So much." He reached over and grabbed my thigh. "So much, in fact, that I have a very important question to ask you."

What the hell was he talking about? "What's that?"

"Will you move in with me? I know you can do it on your own, and we can arrange this however you want. But I love you and don't want one more morning waking up without you."

I contained my squeal. It was like he read my mind. "Well, dear. That's a damn good

thing because I feel the same way.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He parked the car in his spot and turned to me. “Is that a yes?”

I couldn’t stop smiling. “Yes.” I crawled over onto his lap and kissed him. It wasn’t chaste, either. It was tongues and roaming hands and passion like I’d never known.

“We better get upstairs,” Larry suggested, breathing hard.

“Yeah.”

“Come on, Sunshine. Let’s go make love.” I had never heard anything better.

And I didn’t regret one damn thing.

~End