



Love on
Deck

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A TEN RIGS TEXAS TALE

LOVE ON DECK
Product Sample

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PROLOGUE

Marva Maple exits the cab and takes in the large white ship beyond the squat concrete terminal building. The briny air tickles her nose and she tugs her jacket a little closer against the breeze. Like a hummingbird in flight, her heart thrums in her chest. She's closer to sixty than to fifty, and she's never been on a cruise. Her Howard, God rest his soul, got seasick in a swimming pool, so they'd never taken a cruise.

"Look at that," says Wanda, shading her eyes against the glare of the afternoon sun off the ship. Her smile is wide and happy. Whose wouldn't be after having gotten a week's reprieve from the winter doldrums and second semester blues at Ten Rigs High. Being a high school principal isn't for the faint of heart.

By some amazing twist of fate, Wanda had won the tickets from the large item raffle at the Ten Rigs Christmas Festival last December. Normally the prizes in the raffle weren't as large or as expensive as this, but here they were. Senior citizen sisters on a Valentine's Day expedition around the Western Caribbean. Marva wasn't questioning the fates. She does wrap her arms around Wanda, though, and hug her close. "Thanks for inviting me, Wonderful Wanda."

“There’s no one else I’d rather go with, Marvelous Marva,” she replies, and they both giggle like the teenage girls they’d been a lifetime ago.

Wanda had broken up with her last gentleman friend shortly after the school year started, citing his derogatory remarks about the marching band as the reason. Wanda takes marching band as seriously as the band director, but Marva thinks their parting had more to do with his tipping than the man’s lack of appreciation for fight songs and John Philip Sousa. Wanda hadn’t lamented the loss, so Marva hadn’t worried.

Wanda tilts her head and rests it against Marva’s. “We’re going to have a great time, sister mine. Now come on, let’s get aboard.”

The cab driver plunks the last of their luggage on the curb and zooms off around a shiny black SUV.

Ten minutes later, they’re loaded down with tote bags and carry-on cases and rolling suitcases.

Except.

A small trunk remains at the curb. It’s not large or heavy and it has wheels, but neither of them has a spare hand.

“Well, shoot.” Marva looks at Wanda. “We’re going to have to rethink this.”

“Oh, hey, ladies.” A striking, athletic-looking young man strides over. He’s got a garment bag slung over one shoulder, a valise in one hand, and a sports bag in the other. “Let me help?” He sets the large sports bag atop the

trunk and grabs the trunk's handle. His smile is bright and charming. "How's that?"

"That's so kind. How can we thank you...?" Marva says, glancing at Wanda, whose mouth has gone slack.

"Connor. And no thanks are necessary. I'm happy to help."

"Well, I'm Marva, and this is my sister, Wanda."

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Marva, Ms. Wanda." He cants his head in greeting seeing as how none of them have any hands free. He turns to the approaching couple, also laden with bags and cases. "This is my sister, Casey, and her fiancé, Will." Connor's still smiling, but it appears less easy now. Hm.

"How do you do?" says Marva to the young couple, who smile and nod in return.

"We're celebrating Casey and Will's impending marriage," says Connor. "They met two years ago on this very cruise."

"The girl of my dreams," says Will, lifting Casey's hand to his lips.

"Oh, that's so sweet and romantic. Congratulations," says Wanda. She wrinkles her nose after a moment and asks, "No offense, but doesn't that make Connor a bit of a third wheel?"

Will chuckles. "It might. However, my best man is joining us as well."

Casey glances at her brother, an expression of hope on her face. "Maybe if Connor didn't live, eat, and breathe baseball, he'd find the girl of his dreams too."

"I knew it," Wanda murmurs barely loud enough for Marva to have even heard her. Marva would ask what she knew, but Connor is saying...

“I’m twenty-nine years old, Casey. Even if I had time, I wouldn’t be interested in *girls*.”

It’s said innocently enough and his intent is obvious, but there’s a note of wistfulness in his voice. Marva has a sneaking suspicion that the implication is the actual truth, and his sister has no idea.

“Don’t worry about it, Connor,” says Marva. “The right person will come along when you least expect it.”

He shoots her a look and a raised eyebrow, then nods.

CHAPTER ONE

The thump of the music can be heard and felt from outside the entrance of one of the ship's many bars. Andrew pulls open the door and lets the noise and color wash over him. Sweeps of sunset red, grass green, indigo blue, and deep orange from a round club light keep the dark at bay. The music has a decent bass, and Andrew's pulse picks up the beat and thrums in time. The stress of the last few months eases a little. He's on a well-deserved vacation, even if he's alone on a Valentine's cruise.

The bar takes up the whole of one wall, bottles of all shapes, sizes, and colors lining glass shelves. A granite bar separates the three bartenders from the crowd. There are slightly more men than women, and Andrew's pretty sure he's in the right place. From what he's read, most cruises these days have a bar that leans primarily gay.

A seat opens at the bar and, once he ensures its occupant won't be returning, he slides into it. A drink is set in front of him within a few minutes, and the smooth glide of Johnnie Walker Black is everything he wanted.

The dance floor isn't terribly crowded yet. He fully expects it to be in the next

couple of hours. The bodies bounce and sway in time to the rhythm. There are any number of them he wouldn't mind taking back to his cabin. Against the far wall stands a tall man in a dark-colored tailored suit. Hair slicked back. Hint of whiskers shadowing his chiseled jaw. Not only are women crazy about a sharp-dressed man, but Andrew is too. Linen pants and a tropical-print shirt belie his own penchant for expensive tailoring. He's on a Caribbean cruise, and it's been way too long since he's worn much other than his suits, hence the cruise wear.

It's also been way too long since he's gotten laid. Perhaps he'll catch the sharp-dressed man's eye and gauge his level of interest. But said eye is glued to something or someone out of Andrew's line of sight. The crowd parts, and Andrew's gaze is drawn to the lithe figure moving sinuously with the music.

He's instantly mesmerized. The figure is dancing—not alone exactly, but not really with anyone else either. He's caught up in the melody, swaying and moving with the grace and control of a professional dancer. Dark hair frames a young angular face. A dark tee shirt and snug jeans emphasize the spare frame. There's muscle to be sure, but not a single ounce of fat is apparent, and Andrew wouldn't be surprised if he danced for a living. Several tats embellish the bare flesh of both arms, although it's too dark to make out what they might be. Andrew can't help but wonder where and what other ink might be hiding beneath his clothes. Because a guy like that...yeah, there are

more tats.

Andrew's mouth goes dry at the grace and the beauty that emanates from this guy as he moves. There's a joy and a truth that speaks to Andrew, as well as to everyone else if the slight hush of the crowd is anything to go by. This is a man who's embraced his homosexuality and made his peace with it. It's incredibly attractive. And Andrew wants it, if only for a night.

The music swells and then ebbs, and the dancer stills. The hush holds for a moment longer before a round of applause breaks the charged silence and the dancer opens his eyes and looks around in surprise. His smile is wide and shy and confident as only a young person's can be, and frustration stabs at Andrew. The guy may be old enough to drink, but at the ripe old age of thirty-one, Andrew draws the line at sleeping with anyone younger than twenty-five. He glances back at the suit and sees him walking toward the young man. Despite his decision, he's a little disappointed. But the night is young and he's not in a rush, nor is he that desperate to get laid.

Andrew downs the remains of his scotch and signals the bartender for another. It warms him, and the edges of his sobriety are getting just the slightest bit soft. He loses sight of both the suit and the dancer as a wave of newcomers enter the bar. There are plenty of people to watch now. It's the first night of the cruise, and the downtime will do him good. Is doing him good already. The last five months had been filled with endless meetings and late nights as he and one of the firm's largest clients hashed out contract verbiage and negotiation points for the buyout of

an elevator parts manufacturing company. That was in addition to minor contract negotiations for other clients and his regular review of documents for the half-dozen attorneys of the firm. Aside from a few long weekends and family holidays, this is his first vacation in well over two years.

“Hi.”

Andrew blinks and focuses on the tall curvy woman who takes the seat next to his. He accepts her outstretched hand into his own, smiling. She’s barking up the wrong tree, but he’s on vacation and he’s a friendly guy.

“Drew.”

“Penelope.”

“Nice to meet you, Penelope. Is this your first cruise?”

Dimples frame her red-coated lips as she smiles again. A more natural, less forced smile than before. Her brown eyes sparkle with her enthusiasm.

“Oh, yes, it is. I’ve never been to Mexico either.” Her admiring gaze slides up and down his body. Her interest is appreciated, but for naught.

“So you plan to go on the excursions then?” Andrew asks. The five-day Western Caribbean cruise they’re on will stop in Progreso and Cozumel. Whether or not he leaves the ship remains to be seen. A couple of lazy days in the sunshine with fruity drinks and several playlists on his smart phone sounds like a mighty fine plan. Despite it being mid-February, the weather should be warm enough for sun bathing. He’s not sure about swimming, but he can decide when the time comes.

Penelope sits back, showing her cleavage to its best advantage. It's nice cleavage as far as he can tell, but it's doing nothing for him. Her sensual musky scent is nice too. He can certainly appreciate a well-blended, well-chosen perfume.

"Well, now, that depends on what's available on shore," she says, "and if there's anything more interesting going on here on the ship."

He supposes he ought to out himself. It's not that he cares, but he doesn't want it to come off too abrupt.

"Listen, Penelo—"

"Hey, there you are," says a voice in a sultry tone that sends a shiver right down Andrew's spine.

Andrew and Penelope both turn to see the young man from the dance floor. Eyeliner highlights his eyes. It's bold and daring, and thank God Penelope is staring too because Andrew almost falls off his stool. The subtle scent of expensive cologne and clean sweat swirls between them, and Andrew *doesn't* inhale sharply. Those eyes caress his face and a hand slides up his arm and across his shoulder. Long fingers trace the collar of his shirt and brush the fine hairs at the base of his neck, making them stand on end. Sparks dance along his skin like water on a hot skillet. Blood rushes to his groin.

The quiet click of Penelope's teeth brings Andrew back into coherence. He's not quite sure what's going on, but it seems he's being rescued from Penelope. The sharp-dressed man must have struck out and somehow this exotic creature noticed him. He leans his head against the man's arm and gazes into his eyes. He's not

quintessentially good-looking, nor Andrew's usual type. His features are sharp and angular, but there's an intensity about him that makes up for it. This up close and personal, Andrew recognizes that he's definitely a man, though, and not an overgrown twink. And Holy Nutcracker Suite, Batman, the evening just took a turn for the better. He's nothing if not quick on the uptake and joins the charade. "Was that dance for me?"

Andrew hears a faint "excuse me" and knows that Penelope has gotten the message loud and clear. He should say something, but his mind has gone blank, and there's no way he's breaking eye contact.

"Connor," says Connor.

His fingers caress Andrew's neck again, raising chills. "Drew," he offers. His blood thickens and slows, turning to molten lava in his veins.

"You want to get out of here, Drew?"