

## New Beginnings

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Trevor hung up the phone and put his head in his hands. The fox's chest heaved with emotion. He didn't know how to feel. How were you *supposed* to feel when you found out that your girlfriend of two years had spent the last three weeks cheating on you?

They were broken up. That was the first step, but it didn't help the pain in his chest. His hands ran through his fur, mussing it and making him *look* as upset as he felt.

His phone buzzed. He ignored it; he couldn't *stand* the thought of his ex texting him with some excuse as to why what she did was okay. He thought of all the time they'd spent together, all the trips they'd taken, all the great memories they'd created together.

Was it all for nothing?

His phone buzzed again.

"What?!" he demanded, seizing it and looking at the screen.

It was nothing but a calendar notification: "Pack for cruise."

Trevor closed his eyes. *Crap*. He'd completely forgotten about the cruise. And now that Andrea wasn't going with him, he didn't even know what to do with the extra ticket! He pursed his lips—the cruise was tomorrow, so he had to do something fast. He thought about it a minute, then shrugged and dialed his phone.

"Hey, man. You got plans the next few days? You wanna go on a cruise? Um, we...broke up. Yeah, it's a long story. I—I don't wanna talk about it right now, okay? But are you in? Okay, sweet. Get packed, then. Come over here by 9:00, and I'll drive us."

Trevor hung up. *Well, at least that's taken care of*. He lay back and closed his eyes, falling into a troubled sleep with the lights on.

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His alarm went off the next morning at 8:45. He blinked blearily—the light was still on. He groaned and looked at his phone. The alarm said, "Go to cruise."

"Shit," he gasped, scrambling out of bed. He raced to his closet and began flinging clothes into a suitcase, stopped at his bathroom, grabbed a few toiletries, and then rushed to the door. He had to go pick up Andrea!

Andrea.

He groaned audibly as his stomach turned. He wasn't going to pick up Andrea.

Because they were broken up.

Because she cheated on him.

He sank onto his bed, his head in his hands again, and he would have remained there the rest of the day if it weren't for a heavy knock at the door minutes later. He dragged himself up to answer it.

"Hey, dude," his friend greeted him. "Whoa, you okay, man? You look...uh...a little worse for wear."

Trevor nodded glumly. "Sorry, Manny, just been a rough night," he said. "I woke up thinking I needed to go pick up Andrea, but..."

"Yeah, so what happened, man?" Manny asked, then in response to Trevor's bleak look, he put up his hands. "Whoa, easy, bud. It'll all be okay, all right? This cruise will be great for you! We'll get you laid and help you forget all about Andrea."

Trevor looked at him uncertainly. "You think so?" he asked. "I was thinking about not going."

The horse shook his head and patted him firmly on the shoulder. "Nope, you're going! Time to get your mind off all this. Come on, where's your suitcase?"

Trevor gestured to it, and the strapping bay hauled it up easily. "Come on," he said. "I'll drive."

Trevor reluctantly got up, locked the door, and followed his friend. He explained what had happened along the way, and they made it to the docks with plenty of time to spare—Trevor had to admit, it was nice not being crunched for time like they *always* were anytime he went anywhere with Andrea.

"This is gonna be just what you needed, man," Manny said as they got to their cabin. "Find yourself a nice, hot chick to bang and let her make you forget all about Andrea."

Trevor pursed his lips. "You think so?" he asked doubtfully. "I dunno. Maybe it's too soon."

Manny shook his head and put his hand on Trevor's shoulder, looking him in the eyes. "Trevor, you know I'd never steer you wrong. Trust me: you'll feel a *lot* better if you just get it outta your system. It sucks what she did, but you did the right thing. Now it's time to put it behind you and move on. At least give it a try, all right? Promise me you'll get out there and at least *talk* to someone?"

Trevor let out a groan but nodded begrudgingly.

"That's the spirit!" Manny said, clapping his shoulder and grinning.

"What about you?" Trevor asked. "What are you gonna do?"

"Me?" Manny asked, his grin getting even broader, "I'm gonna practice what I preach! Time to go find a smoking-hot babe to bang!" He hesitated. "You gonna be all right, man?" he asked.

Trevor nodded and gave a wry smile in response to Manny's hopeful look. "Go on, get outta here, you horny stud," he said, chuckling in spite of himself.

"Awesome! See ya, man! And don't forget: *talk* to people. Give 'em a chance to make you forget her."

With a wink and a wave, Manny disappeared, leaving Trevor alone in the cabin. He let out a heavy sigh. He'd had the whole trip planned for when he and Andrea came, but it was all couples stuff. He remembered thinking how sad it must be to be single on one of these things. Now he *was* one of those single guys. What did single people *do* on these things? Drink and screw? At 1:00 PM before the ship even set sail, it felt a little early to do either one of those, but he *had* promised to meet people, and he wasn't going to do that in his cabin. Besides, his luggage still smelled a bit like her perfume, and in the confined space, it was nauseating.

He stepped out and walked down the hallway. It wasn't his first cruise, but it *had* was his first one by himself. He knew that cruises had singles events, but he figured those were probably later in the evening. His stomach growled.

*Well, that's something*, he thought.

He knew better than to head to the buffet—*everybody* went to the buffet, and while it might be an opportunity to meet people, it would probably end up more stressful being sardined in with a bunch of strangers than beneficial. Instead, he headed towards one of the smaller restaurants and ordered a sandwich. It was tasty and filling, but there weren't any singles to meet there.

He started wandering around the ship some more, just checking out what was available. The thought occurred to him that he could finally go to one of the piano bars; Andrea wasn't into that kind of music and made it clear she wasn't having a good time the *one* time he'd tried to take her to one. He shrugged. He didn't figure he'd meet someone wanting to bang at a piano bar, but he might at least meet someone who shared his musical interests. He made a note of the location and the time it opened.

"Oh, shoot," he said aloud. "I gotta cancel my dinner reservations!"

He turned on heel and quickly walked towards the main restaurant; not a big seafood fan, he had only agreed to go there because Andrea wanted to. Now that she wasn't here, well, he still wasn't a big seafood fan, and he'd much rather eat somewhere else.

No sooner did he finish canceling his reservation than an announcement over the PA summoned everybody to muster. Used to the drill, Trevor obediently walked to the muster station to await the instructions. He'd heard it all before, but it never hurt to be brushed-up, he reasoned. Besides, he'd heard you could get kicked off the boat if you didn't go.

The muster station was crowded, and Trevor instinctively found himself backing away from the crowd in search of a nice wall to put his back against. He felt himself bump into someone, cringed, and turned.

"Sorry," he said, reddening with embarrassment.

"No problem," a wolfess replied, smiling.

Trevor did a double-take before turning to face her.

"Wow," he said, "You have a great smile!"

Now it was the wolfess's turn to blush. "Oh, thanks," she said.

"I'm Trevor," the fox said, extending his hand. "Is this your first cruise?"

"I'm Chelsea," the wolfess replied, shaking his hand. "And no, I've been on a couple before."

"Oh, yeah? What brings you on this one?" Trevor asked.

"My little sister," Chelsea said ruefully, looking down and putting her hand affectionately around a smaller wolfess's shoulder. "It's her first cruise, and I promised to escort her for her birthday."

The younger wolfess, maybe 11 or 12, looked up at Trevor and smiled, waving a little. Trevor smiled and waved back, and the wolfess blushed and hid a bit behind Chelsea.

"Uh, oh," Chelsea chuckled. "Looks like Sonya's got a boyfriend."

Trevor turned red and laughed.

"Don't worry," Chelsea said. "She's like that with all the cute guys."

Trevor opened his mouth to speak, closed it, and then managed a stammered, "thank you."

"Attention, passengers: our crewmembers will now demonstrate the proper way to put on a life jacket," the PA buzzed.

Trevor and Chelsea turned to watch the demonstration, and Chelsea told Sonya to watch, too. The demonstration was short, and the PA dismissed them all almost as quickly as they'd arrived.

"Heh, I kinda wish they'd just let us do that in our cabins rather than making us all walk all over the ship," Chelsea said.

"Yeah," Trevor agreed, "Especially having to escort your sister with you! So, where are you from?" he asked as the bulk of the other passengers returned to their rooms or left for other, more interesting parts of the ship.

"We're from Scharpe City," Chelsea replied. "It's a little town—"

"About three hours from here in the middle of nowhere," Trevor chorused. Their faces both lit up. "Wow, *you're* from Scharpe City? Have you lived there long?"

"All my life," Chelsea replied. "What about you?"

"Yeah! Where did you go to school? I went to Litmos High."

Chelsea pouted. "Uh, oh; we can't be friends," she teased. "I went to Sandyville."

Trevor gasped in mock-horror and shook his head. "Yup, I guess you're right; we can't be friends. Such a shame. It's just my luck, though: of *course* the pretty girl I meet on a cruise three hours from town *would* be my high school rival, right?"

"Tell you what: you don't hold it against me, and I won't hold it against you," Chelsea said, grinning.

"Deal," Trevor said, and they shook on it.

"So, what about you? What brings you out here?" the wolfess asked.

"Trying to forget," Trevor admitted, giving a sheepish smile. "I just broke up yesterday."

"Oh, that's terrible!" Chelsea said. "Was it...on good terms, or...?"

Trevor pursed his lips. “Not exactly,” he said. “She, uh...well, I caught her cheating on me.”

Chelsea raised her eyebrows. “Wow, I’m sorry to hear that,” she said.

“Yeah,” Trevor said. “So, I’m just here to kinda clear my head, you know? We were supposed to come together, but I brought my best friend instead. He says I oughtta”—he lowered his voice, a bit embarrassed to say it—“Find someone to take my mind off my ex.” He chuckled sheepishly. “But he’s kinda like that, you know?”

Chelsea rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I know the type.” She shook her head. “I’d love to help, but—”

“But you’re already seeing someone,” Trevor said knowingly.

Chelsea shook her head. “No, but I can’t exactly leave my sister unattended to go help some guy get over his ex, you know?”

Trevor chuckled. “Well, I wouldn’t want you to spend your cruise doing that anyway! Ugh, how lame would that be?”

“Oh, I dunno,” Chelsea said, giving him a mischievous grin. “Might depend on the guy and whether he *wants* to move on or not.” She shrugged. “If he wants to go live life, it could be fun to rediscover his freedom after being in a long relationship. But some people just want to cling to the past and never want to see the good in change.”

“Huh,” Trevor said, smiling. “You know, that’s good advice. I’ll keep that in mind!” He looked around and suddenly realized that the three of them were standing there alone. “Well, um, I don’t wanna keep you gals from your vacation, but, uh, maybe I’ll see you around?”

Chelsea nodded. “I’d like that. Nice meeting you, Trevor.”

“You, too, Chelsea.”

Trevor smiled as he turned and walked away. Of all the places he’d expected to meet someone, muster *certainly* didn’t rank high on his list! And the fact that she was attractive *and* lived in the same town...what were the odds? Maybe this cruise would turn out all right, after all. Still, if he was looking to get laid, someone stuck watching a 12-year-old probably wasn’t his best option.

He made his way to the miniature golf course about the time the cruise set sail. Having seen the sail-away party before and not really being all that keen to endure the throngs of people, he opted to keep putting. But aside from a couple of families there with their kids, there wasn’t really anybody to mingle with, and he quit after a few holes.

With the cruise now officially underway—he was surprised how far out to sea they already were: land was visible but certainly not within swimming or even kayaking distance—there was no going back now. But fortunately, evening had begun, and his odds of finding interested singles at one of the restaurant bars or clubs were quickly improving. His face lit up remembering the piano bar, and he quickly made his way there.

“Heh, maybe still a little early,” he conceded, finding the place empty aside from a couple of waiters; the pianist hadn’t even begun playing. “I wonder if Chelsea likes piano bars,” he mused. “I bet her sister doesn’t, though,” he added, rolling his eyes and grinning sheepishly. “Oh, well. Time to grab some grub.”

As he finished his meal, Trevor couldn’t help but wonder where all the singles were. For that matter, where was Manny? Trevor knew the horse was a horn-dog, but the notion that he’d found enough females to stay shackled up for the last five hours seemed pretty far-fetched. He shrugged. He’d see him around, he was sure. If nothing else, they’d see each other when they disembarked. He wasn’t sure he really wanted to listen to Manny’s conquests just now anyway.

As he walked past the theater, he saw a movie playing that he liked. He shrugged. He never promised that he was going to do *nothing* but talk to people, he reasoned. He stepped inside and sat at the back, laughing and enjoying himself for the first time since he’d broken up. Nothing like a good action-comedy to take his mind off his troubles. Andrea *hated* action-comedies. He had to admit, he was beginning to wonder what the attraction was. He’d spent so much time over the last several years doing what she wanted that he’d forgotten just how much he enjoyed doing what *he* wanted!

The movie let out, and he made another pass by the piano bar, but even at 7:00, it still didn't have many people in attendance. He decided he'd try another club that looked a lot fuller. Some people were doing karaoke on the stage—some of them surprisingly not too bad—so he ordered a drink and lingered to watch.

"Hey, man, you should get up there! Chicks love a guy who can sing!"

Manny's voice was unmistakable. Trevor turned to see his friend arm-in-arm with a tiger-gorilla cross, endowed rather generously in the bosom area—she had "Manny's type" written all over her.

"Trevor, this is Gretchen. Gretchen, this is my friend, Trevor. He sings *really* well!"

Trevor blushed. "Erm, well, I dunno if I'd say *that*..."

"Come on, Trevor! Confidence, man; chicks love confidence."

"Well, yeah, but there's a difference in confidence and tooting my own horn, you know?"

"I dunno about horns, but you've got a good set of pipes," Manny said. He gestured to the stage with his head. "Seriously, man, get up there! What's the worst that can happen? A bunch of complete strangers you'll never see again after a few days hear you miss a note? Helluva lot better than the last gal who just sang!" He grimaced. "I dunno what was wrong with what she was singing, but it was *bad*!"

"She was sharp," Trevor said. "And drunk...already."

"See, that's why you're not gonna do that," Manny said, winking. "We gotta go bang—again—this minx is insatiable! Aren't you, Gretchen?"

Gretchen grinned toothily. "Your friend is...very attentive," she said.

"You oughtta see what she can do with her mouth," Manny said as an aside. "She *really* heats things up!"

Trevor just shook his head. "Have fun, you two," he said, waving them off. Once they were out of earshot, he added, "Try to leave *some* fun for the rest of us..."

He turned his attention back to the stage, where a drunken coyote and an even more drunken chihuahua were trying to sing something in...Spanish, Tyler thought, though he wasn't sure. They mostly just sounded like they were yowling incoherently.

"Well, even on my worst day, I've gotta sound better than *that*," Trevor thought to himself.

Downing his drink for a little liquid courage, he went and signed up to sing his favorite karaoke song. It took a lot of courage to sign up in the first place, but then came the worst part: waiting to be called. The anticipation always got to him. But two really bad singers and a not-so-bad singer later, he finally got called up. He took the microphone and gave a slight nod to the person running the karaoke machine.

Looking out at the crowd, he saw mostly drunks. He didn't realize how fast people got drunk on these cruises! "At least nobody'll remember it afterwards," he murmured to himself, smiling a bit.

The music started, and suddenly everything else disappeared except the lyrics on the screen and the music backing him up—his ex, the breakup, Manny's obvious advantage in getting with chicks, even the audience—all disappeared. He felt the music swell and heard his voice begin to sing with it. He made little adjustments as he went: changing the shape of his mouth here, the position of his tongue there.

Then came the chorus, and the sound of drunken voices startled him briefly back into reality for a moment as he realized the audience was singing with him. He grinned, heartened, and continued the song, joined periodically by the audience. It had been so long since he'd done karaoke that he'd forgotten how much fun the audience could be. When he finished, everybody applauded, and the person running the karaoke machine made him stop and take a bow. Of course, he blushed fiercely, but even though he hated to admit it, it was nice to have his talents appreciated.

"Hey, you," a voice said as he walked off the stage.

He turned and jumped. It was Chelsea.

"Ch-Chelsea!" Trevor stammered. "Hi!" He frowned. "What are you doing here? Where's your sister? I thought this place was 21 and up?"

Chelsea shook her head. "Nah, that's the piano room next door. This one's open to all ages. Sonya's right here."

Trevor looked down, and the wolf-cub smiled up at him. "You sing good," she said.

"Well, Sonya; he sings *well*," Chelsea corrected her. "What *are* the schools teaching them these days?" she asked, chuckling. "But she's right: you *do* sing really well!"

"Erm, well, thank you both," Trevor said, blushing and scratching the back of his neck. "It's been a long time." He frowned again. "But what brings you here? Come to sing?"

Chelsea shook her head. "Nah, I just wanted to find a place where I could get a drink and Sonya could eat. I dunno what it is with this cruise, but it's like you can get a drink *or* eat, but not both."

"Huh," Trevor said. "That *is* strange. Seems like a poor business decision. Still, I'm glad to see you again. I gotta admit, I've been thinking about you."

"Oh yeah?" Chelsea asked. "Well, I gotta admit, I've been thinking about you, too."

"Chelsea thinks you're cute," Sonya blurted, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, making both the adults blush.

"Erm, well, then, you know, since we keep running into each other, how about a date?" Trevor asked hopefully. "Don't worry, Sonya can come, too."

"Where did you have in mind?" Chelsea asked.

"How about the pizza place tomorrow for lunch?" Trevor suggested. "Kid-friendly, a little something for everybody..."

Chelsea cocked her head. "I think that would be just fine," she said. She glanced at her sister. "What do you think? Pizza for lunch tomorrow?"

Sonya's face lit up, and she nodded eagerly.

"All right, it's a date," Trevor said, grinning.

"We'll be there. 11:30?" Chelsea asked, and Trevor nodded. "Enjoy your night," Chelsea said. "We need to get to bed; it's been a long day."

Trevor nodded. "I'm sure. Sleep well, you two!"

He watched them go, admiring Chelsea's rump as she walked off. Then he shook his head and went to the bar for another round, sang a few more songs, and then headed to his room to turn in for the night.

"Oh, hey, man!" Manny said as Trevor opened the door.

Trevor turned on the lights couldn't help but chuckle as he saw Manny and Gretchen looking very worn-out.

"Have you worn yourselves completely out?" he asked. "Should I leave you two to it?"

"No, that's fine," Manny said. "We were just about to go get a night-cap."

He and Gretchen exchanged glances and laughed at some inside joke Trevor probably would never get.

"All right," he said. "I'll just be in the bathroom. You two let me know when you're decent, huh?"

"Oh, Gretchen's a nudist, and I just don't give a fuck," Manny said. "Seriously, dude, you're fine."

With that, he threw the covers off, and he and Gretchen began to get dressed.

"How about you, man? Why are you still single?" He gasped. "You haven't been moping around the ship all day, have you?"

Trevor shook his head. "Nah, I just finished singing karaoke."

"And you didn't get a hundred drunken girls after you? Did you sing the song, the one you always used to do?"

Trevor stared at him blankly and then chuckled. "Oh, that one. Yeah, that was the first one."

"Dude, then why don't you have a dozen girls next to you?"

Trevor blushed. "Erm, I got a little side-tracked after I sang it," he said.

"Oh?"

Manny paused with his shirt half-on and nothing covering his rather impressive package. Trevor gestured for him to continue getting dressed.

"Yeah. I met a cute girl today at muster, and we ran into each other again at the karaoke bar."

"So...where is she? Dude, you're killing me, man."

Trevor gave a rueful smile and shook his head. "She's got her kid sister with her, and she understandably doesn't want to leave her alone to go get laid with some random stranger," he said.

"Then why are you spending your time with her?" Trevor asked. A look of concern came over his face.

"Dude, you know it's a bad idea to get into a rebound relationship, right? When I said to find someone to help you forget your ex, I didn't mean to go out and jump into a new relationship!"

"Why not?" Gretchen interjected. "Who knows when love will strike? Maybe they like each other. It would be a shame to waste the opportunity if it arises. Besides, the cruise only lasts a couple more days. It's self-limiting."

"Well..." Trevor said, cringing, eliciting an expectant look from the other two. "She lives in Scharpe City."

Manny blinked. "Wait, seriously? How the hell did you do that?"

Trevor shrugged helplessly. "I—I just bumped into her! Literally!"

Manny sighed. "Some guys get all the luck. Gretchen here's a foreigner. Somehow, I doubt we're going to see much of each other after the cruise is over."

"All the more reason to have as much fun as we can stand while it lasts!" Gretchen said, putting her arm around Manny's neck and kissing him on the nose.

"Yeah, on that note, we're outta here. Do what's right by you, but man, if it were me...I'd be looking for something with a little less...kid," Manny said.

Trevor pursed his lips as they left. Horn-dog or not, his best friend had a point: there were disadvantages to jumping right into a relationship after ending one. He wondered if he was so desperate that he had just leapt at the first girl he'd met. He wondered whether someone desperate would put up with the fact that she clearly had responsibilities—something he actually admired in her—or if his admiration was itself evidence of his being too hasty? Maybe some easy sex *would* help cure him of any feelings he might have for Chelsea. He fretted over it a bit, pacing the tiny cabin for a while before finally deciding he needed some air to help him think.

He stepped back out and made his way outside. The air was cool but not cold, refreshing. He sniffed the sea breeze and looked up at the stars, gasping in awe at how many there were and how bright they all looked. He could even see the Milky Way. Completely forgetting why he'd come out in the first place, he just stared, locating Orion, Cassiopeia, Ursa Major and Minor, and a few others. The calm and the soft rush of the ocean against the ship was intoxicatingly soothing.

The sound of music disrupted his stargazing, and he looked down at one of the other decks to see a night party in full swing. Manny's words came back to him, and he contemplated whether he ought to go see if he could find someone...easier...than Chelsea. He had to admit to mixed feelings about it, though: on one hand, someone easy might be nice, but on the other hand, it just seemed...he didn't know...kinda crass to be hooking up with someone when he had a date with her the following day. Still, it wasn't like they were *dating*-dating, right? He wouldn't be doing to her what Andrea had done to him, would he?

For a moment, his breath caught at the idea, but he quickly brushed it off. There was a huge difference between exploring the field with a few people before committing to one versus being committed and then deciding to cheat.

*Right?*

He had to admit, he had misgivings, but he dutifully went down to the party, ordered a drink, and watched people for a little bit. But though he tried to get interested in the people there, he couldn't help but feel like the whole thing was a waste of time.

"Hey, cutie," a voice said.

Trevor looked up, startled to see a drunken cougar looking at him.

"You...you wanna go?" she slurred

Trevor blinked. He had a hunch what she meant, but he figured better safe than sorry. "Go...where?" he asked.

"You *know*," the cougar said. "Go... To my room?"

Trevor's heart skipped a beat. He had *never* been asked out like that before. Manny would be high-fiving him right now, he knew. But...she was *drunk*! What if she didn't know what she was asking for? Then again, she was a grown female, and how *dare* he try to tell her whether she knew what she wanted or not? Ugh, the whole situation was...hopeless. He was the bad guy if he gave in for possibly taking advantage, but he was a bad guy if he declined because he wasn't respecting her feminine independence.

Yes, this was definitely a bad idea.

"N—no," he said. "I—I appreciate the offer, but I was just about go to."

The cougar watched him leave with her eyes differing amounts of closed. Trevor hoped she wouldn't remember him the next morning as he hurriedly walked back to his room.

Manny and Gretchen hadn't returned, so Trevor quickly got into bed and turned out the lights. *Oh, well*, he thought. *Tonight might have been a bad idea, but at least I have tomorrow to look forward to.* As his mind looked forward to it, he imagined Chelsea and couldn't help fixating on how attractive she had looked. Even though she was dressed casually and her clothes didn't exactly flatter her, she still had a really cute face, and what he could see of her form was definitely alluring! Suffice to say, Manny's sheets weren't the only ones christened that night.

Trevor slept late the next morning without an alarm clock to wake him up. There was no sign of Manny or Gretchen, so Trevor blinked and checked the time: it was already 10:30.

"Whoa!" he said, jumping out of bed and flying into the shower. He had to admit, the water felt great, but he didn't really have time right now to bask in it. He did, however, promise himself a spa date later. After bathing himself and trimming his whiskers, he got dressed and headed to the pizza place.

"Hey, Trevor!" a voice called.

Trevor turned around to see Chelsea and Sonya waving from a table.

Trevor frowned. "Have you two been here long?" he asked.

Chelsea shook her head. "No, we just got here."

"Looks like we're *all* a little early," Trevor chuckled. "Hungry?"

"Starving!" Sonya said.

"And by that, she means she'll eat two slices of pizza and be stuffed," Chelsea teased, eliciting a petulant pout from her sister that made Trevor laugh.

"Well, I, for one, could definitely eat," Trevor said. "Meat-lovers' all the way!"

"Meat is murder," Chelsea said flatly. Trevor gasped and stared.



"And I *love* murdering meat!" the wolfess grinned.

Trevor breathed a sigh of relief. "Don't *scare* me like that!" he said. "That would have been *awful*!"

"Gotcha!" Chelsea laughed. "Did you have a good night?"

Trevor nodded hesitantly. "Yeah, the stars were really nice, but...the night-life, not so much."

Chelsea chuckled. "Aww."

"You know, you really ought to let Sonya stay up just to see them—the stars, that is," Trevor said. "You'll never see anything like it back home."

"Ooh! Can I? Please?" Sonya asked, tugging on Chelsea's sleeve. The elder wolfess gave Trevor a dirty look tinged with mirth.

"Well..." she said, eliciting hopeful looks from both her sister and Trevor. "I suppose. If you're good." She glanced at Trevor.

"I promise to be on my best behavior," he teased.

"You better be, Mister!" Chelsea laughed.

The waiter came over, and they placed their orders—meat-lovers' for Trevor and Chelsea, with *extra* murder—er, meat—and cheese for Sonya.

"So, what kind of music do you like?" Trevor asked. "You mentioned the piano bar—any interest in that?"

Chelsea held up a paw while she chewed and swallowed her pizza. "Yeah," she said, "But they don't have a kid-friendly piano bar on the cruise."

"Too bad," Trevor said. "There's one in town, though. Ever been to the Satin Oboe?"

Chelsea's mouth dropped.

"It's *not* what it sounds like," Trevor laughed. "Granted, the name could *definitely* be better! It's just a piano bar. I don't think I've ever actually even heard an oboe in there!"

Chelsea shook her head. "No, never heard of it. Is it any good?"

Trevor nodded. "It used to be; I haven't been in years—my ex...didn't really care for that kind of music."

"She's missing out," Chelsea said.

"I *know*, right?" Trevor said. "It's just...wholesome, you know?"

"Are you guys gonna kiss already?" Sonya quipped, interrupting.

The adults' mouths dropped, and they stared at her.

"This is the part in like *every* Disney movie where the boy and the girl kiss," Sonya said expectantly. "I can practically hear the music doing that big build-up thing now." She put her fingers together to make a camera viewfinder. "And the camera zooms in on you two as you two lean in. Aww! You two would be cute!"

The adults exchanged glances and blushed fiercely.

"All right, that's enough out of you," Chelsea said at last, finally breaking the silence, "Unless you don't wanna stay up and see the stars tonight."

"Ooh, that would be so *romantic*!" Sonya said, batting her eyes at Trevor.

"Goodness, Sonya! What happened to the bashful girl hiding behind me yesterday?" Chelsea asked.

"What? You *know* I always know how movies end!" Sonya protested.

"It's true; she seems to have a knack for figuring them out," Chelsea admitted.

"And I know how this movie is gonna end," Sonya said smugly.

"Well, how about you keep it to yourself and don't spoil the ending for me, then, huh?" Chelsea suggested. "It's not fun for the rest of us when you spoil it."

Sonya shrugged. "Suit yourself," she sing-songed.

Trevor and Chelsea exchanged glances.

"Precocious," Trevor chuckled.

"Uh, huh. Handful!"

"I'm sure."

They stared at each other for a few lingering seconds before Trevor cleared his throat and looked away. "So, uh, I guess, maybe we could meet this evening to see the stars together?" he asked.

"The planets are aligning!" Sonya interjected, putting her fingertips together and giving an impish grin.

"Sonya!" Chelsea protested.

"No, she's right," Trevor said. "Jupiter, Mars, and Venus will all be lined up tomorrow. You could almost see it last night."

A look from Chelsea made him grin. "Lucky coincidence, then, huh?"

They finished their pizza and arranged to meet that night at 10:00 on one of the upper decks, away from all the lights, and then they parted ways, Trevor to go enjoy the massage and spa he'd promised himself, and Chelsea and Sonya to go play on the waterslide.

The massage was perfect, and the spa day was every bit as relaxing as Trevor had hoped. By the time it was time for dinner, he felt so relaxed that he just kind of floated to the restaurant. He didn't have a reservation, but they had space for him, and he eagerly set into his steak with gusto. He always liked to do a special meal on the only day where the ship wasn't embarking or debarking, and without Andrea insisting on seafood, tonight was *steak* night. It was cooked to perfection, juicy, tender, and almost soft enough to cut with a fork.

Trevor had to admit, he was really enjoying the cruise as a single guy. No, he wasn't banging everything in sight, but still, having the independence to do what *he* wanted to do was awfully nice.

And now that he'd indulged in a little hedonism for one, he was looking forward to meeting up with Chelsea and Sonya to indulge in some stargazing for three.

He got up to the deck a little early and ordered drinks: hot cider for himself and Chelsea and hot chocolate for Sonya. Then he stood at the stairwell, waiting. The sky was perfectly clear, and sure enough, you could see the three bright dots where the planets had aligned. He smiled to himself just as he heard footsteps. He turned.

"Hey, you two!" he said. "The sky's perfect!"

"Hey, Trev—oh, wow!" Chelsea gasped, bringing her paws to her mouth.

"Whoa," Sonya said, just as awed as the adults by the sea of glistening stars above them. "There are so many!"

"Your order, sir."

"Ah, great! Here you go, gals," Trevor said.

"I'm not supposed to take presents from strangers," Sonya said with mock-suspicion.

"I think in *this* case, you can make an exception," Chelsea said, glancing at Trevor. "What is it?"

"Cider for us, hot chocolate for her," Trevor replied.

"She won't sleep all night," Chelsea chuckled, shaking her head. "Chocolate goes straight to her head."

"Just one night?" Trevor asked.

"You better be careful, or you're gonna be her favorite stranger ever," Chelsea teased, "But all right."

Sonya squealed with delight and eagerly took the hot chocolate.

"Careful; it's hot," Trevor warned.

They stood, clutching their drinks against the evening chill and looked once more at the starry night.

"Look, the big dipper!" Sonya said, pointing.

"Right!" Trevor said, pointing. "And there's the little dipper."

"Orion," Chelsea said, pointing to another constellation.

Trevor nodded slowly. "It's my favorite," he said.

"Really?" Chelsea asked. "Mine, too."

They looked at each other, smiling faintly, and Trevor wrapped his arm around Chelsea's shoulder.

"Umm!" Sonya said hopefully.

"Shut up," Chelsea laughed, bopping her playfully on the nose.

A meteor streaked across the sky, eliciting an "ooh" from all three of them.

"Make a wish," Chelsea said.

"I did," Sonya said, grinning.

"Did you?" Chelsea asked Trevor.

"Of course!" he replied, smiling.

"This was very sweet of you," Chelsea said, wrapping her arms around him. "Everything: the view, the drinks...it's just really thoughtful. Most guys would have seen that I had a kid with me and turned and ran."

Trevor shrugged. "I had a kid brother I took care of for a while, too, so I get it," he said. "He didn't really appreciate the stars the way Sonya does, though," he chuckled, glancing back at Chelsea.

Her eyes twinkled in the starlight as she smiled, looking up at him contentedly. Their breath caught; the tension in the air was palpable. At last, Trevor leaned forward, and their lips met. They both sucked in excited breaths, and Trevor did his best to conceal the stiffening between his legs.

"Aww!" gushed Sonya, who had been watching them eagerly. "Get a room, you two!"

Chelsea laughed in spite of herself and teasingly pushed Sonya away by the forehead.

"I would," she murmured so that Trevor could hear but Sonya couldn't. Her voice was a little husky.

Trevor chuckled. "We *do* live in the same town," he hinted.

"Maybe a date without the peanut gallery?" Chelsea suggested.

"Day after tomorrow, so we have time to recover after the trip?"

"Definitely. Satin Oboe?"

"You read my mind."

As the three shifted to loungers to get more comfortable, a meteor shower started overhead, filling the sky with streaks of light.

It had been, as best as Trevor could tell, a perfect day.

It was after midnight when they finally parted ways, exchanging phone numbers so they could stay in touch. Chelsea carried a sleeping Sonya back to her room, and Trevor bade them both goodnight before retiring to his own. There was no sign of Manny; Trevor figured he was probably out carousing with

Gretchen. He was glad for the privacy; the feelings he'd had when he and Chelsea had kissed hadn't abated even a little bit, and he christened his sheets again to thoughts of her before dozing off.

The next day was, as expected, a hectic one. The ship's horn blew as it made its way into port. There was breakfast to eat, bags to pack and have handy, debarkation, and then the drive home. After a quick breakfast, Trevor and Manny stood and waited for their zone number to be called. Debarkation was uneventful, but Manny seemed uncharacteristically down.

"What's wrong, man?" Trevor asked. "You're supposed to be happy after a cruise; I sure am!"

Manny gave a wry smile. "It was a great trip, man," he said. "It's just, that Gretchen—she was something special, you know?"

"Well, did you tell her that?" Trevor asked.

Manny nodded. "Yeah. We're gonna stay in touch online and stuff, but, ya know...the sex isn't the same that way."

Trevor chuckled and rolled his eyes.

"What about you, man? Did you ever get laid?"

Trevor shook his head. "No, but I had a great time anyway, you know? And I have a date tomorrow."

"With Chelsea?"

"Yeah, *just* her."

"I hope it's worth it, man," Manny said, shaking his head. "You always were kinda weird that way. I mean, damn, dude, you're some weird kind of fox! Aren't you guys supposed to screw everything that moves?"

Trevor chuckled. "Yeah, I guess. It's just...different for me, you know?"

"I hear ya, man. Well, I hope it goes well."

The three-hour trip back was uneventful, but both were glad to be home once they got there. Trevor thanked Manny for driving and then unpacked his stuff, ran some laundry, and crashed for a few hours.

He was awakened by a text on his phone. It was Chelsea saying she made it home safely. Trevor replied that he had, too, and that he'd enjoyed meeting her and Sonya and that he was looking forward to their date.

"What if we did it tonight instead?" Chelsea responded.

Trevor's heart skipped a beat. "You're not tired?" he asked.

"I am, but the anticipation is killing me. I don't think I could sleep if I tried."

Trevor chuckled and texted back, "Well, I'm game if you are. Satin Oboe is open right now; want to meet there in 15 minutes?"

"Sure!"

Trevor reeled in surprise. Andrea would have taken at *least* 45 minutes to get ready. He had expected Chelsea to come back suggesting an hour or so. He realized *he* was going to have to hurry to make the 15-minute mark! He hurriedly showered, got dressed, and then drove to the bar. Fortunately, it was only a 5-minute drive.

Trevor walked in and gasped. Chelsea was wearing an evening dress that was *really* flattering to her figure.

"Wow," he said. "Those stars last night have nothing on you!"

Chelsea blushed. "I clean up nicely when I'm not toting my sister around," she said.

"I'm gonna tell her you said that," Trevor laughed.

"She figured out where I was going," Chelsea said ruefully. "So, she pretty much teased me non-stop ever since I got home."

"She's a cute kid," Trevor said. "And good-spirited."

"Yeah, but kind of a cock-block."

Trevor's jaw dropped, and he stared at Chelsea.

"What, did you think I was only interested in how good you were with kids?" Chelsea laughed. "Girls have needs, too, you know. She's my sister, not my daughter! It's not like I *need* a good father to my cubs. It *is* endearing that you're so sweet to her, though. Makes me think you're actually a decent guy."

Trevor chuckled. "I try." He hesitated. "So, uh, if there are needs to take care of, I take it we're not gonna spend a lot of time here, then, huh?"

"We can save here as a great date for tomorrow," Chelsea said, stepping up close and wrapping her arms around him. "You know, after a bit of the...erm...tension has been cut?"

Trevor swallowed. "Um, yeah, I—I could go for that," he said.

"Your place?"

Trevor nodded. They didn't even take the time to get a table; they just walked right back out. Trevor gave Chelsea his address, and she followed him home.

They got inside, and after a brief comment about it being a nice place, they quickly made their way to the bedroom, where clothes came off, and they each got a look at each other. Trevor's heart pounded. Some furs only looked good when they wore the right clothes, but Chelsea looked even better without them! Besides all that, he could see how swollen her vulva were with desire. His own prick leaked and throbbed painfully at the sight of her.

"Heh, Sonya thinks she knows how it ends, but that's the Disney version," Chelsea chuckled as they stepped close to each other.

"No reason to spoil *that* magic, yet," Trevor replied, cringing a little.

His hands caressed her face as they kissed passionately, their lips thrilling each other. They backed up to the bed and lay down together, their hands exploring each other's bodies after days of being pent-up.

"You smell good," Trevor breathed.

"So do you," Chelsea replied.

Their breathing got raspier. Trevor's fingers moved down Chelsea's body, and their groins moved together almost instinctively. Chelsea's legs parted for Trevor's member, and her lips parted for his. They kissed passionately as he pressed inside, the tip of his swollen prick burning against her swollen vulva. Both shuddered and gasped in pleasure, savoring the moment after such a long wait. Then he pressed inside and felt his knot growing. He pulled back and looked at her cautiously.

"In or out?" he breathed.

Chelsea didn't have to say anything; instead, her hand reached around to squeeze his buttock and pull him tightly against her. He pressed inside, and his knot locked them together. They shivered as their orgasms began, their kisses alternating between desperate passion and gentle tenderness as their sexes took turns stimulating each other. A throb invited a squeeze, which invited another throb. For many minutes, even an hour, their bodies locked them tightly together, prolonging their nearly painful ecstasy. But they would not have parted sooner if they could; the intimacy was far better than either could remember having ever felt before. Even before their sexes stopped quivering, they embraced each other and just lay quietly, enjoying the closeness and the prolonged afterglow.

As Trevor lay there with Chelsea resting on his chest, he couldn't help thinking that it was all worth it: the breakup, missing out on the sex on the cruise... Even if this relationship didn't last longer than right now, it was all worth it to feel *this* close, this utterly content. But he was certain this wasn't the end. They already had another date planned, and he was sure that today was just the beginning.

## New Beginnings

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And for the first time, he didn't think about was his ex.