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American Fantasy

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BOY TALK CRUISE SCHEDULE

2023



MIAMI TO BAHAMAS

THURSDAY TO MONDAY

QUIZ SHOW

FULL BAND CONCERT

COREY WEST SOLO SHOW

**NIGHTLY THEME PARTIES
ON THE LIDO DECK**

Have Fun, Talkers!!!!

DAY ONE

Thursday



SUNRISE / SUNSET:

7:10 a.m. / 6:38 p.m.

HIGH / LOW:

83°F / 72°F

TODAY'S HI-LITES:

Sail-Away Party, 4:30 p.m. – Lido 9 Aft

Quiz Show, 7 p.m. – 3, 4, 5 Aft

DECK PARTY:

Game Night, 10 p.m. – Lido 9 Aft

DAILY DEAL:

Ladies' Spa Experience – 11 Fwd

Thursday, 8:25 A.M.

Deck 9

The pool deck of the *American Fantasy* never smelled worse than it did first thing in the morning on turnaround days. Elsewhere on the ship, there was occasionally a faint sewage smell in bathrooms and staircases, but on debarkation mornings, the pool deck stank of spilled beer and regret, with those light whiffs of sewage and black ship exhaust floating on top like whipped cream on a sundae. Sarah watched as the ship's cleaning crew attacked the red, white, and blue confetti stuck to the ground, wheeling their buckets of soapy water inch by inch. Abandoned glassware and beer cans sat in sad clusters around the perimeter, overlooking the scene.

Sarah didn't usually do back-to-backs, but her recently ex-girlfriend had gotten custody of their cat, so there was nothing to hurry home for anyway. An empty one-bedroom apartment in Queens was less appealing than one with a pretty girl in it. Lexie would keep the plants alive no matter how long Sarah was away, she wasn't a monster; she'd just fallen in love with a twenty-three-year-old dog walker named Plum and they were going to be very, very happy together. Sarah was staying at sea for as long as possible. She felt like one of the men who sang sea shanties on TikTok, a millennial lost in the wrong century.

Turnaround day was impressive: The crew corralled two thousand people and their luggage off the ship, cleaned every room, restocked the vast stores of food and alcohol, refueled the whale-size fuel tanks, mended anything broken, and then opened the doors to let two thousand different people and their oversize suitcases aboard, all within the span of half a day. Sarah and her production team had to worry about their changeover too, but their charges were the entertainers, the talent. Getting a few hungover sixty-year-olds and their guitar techs back onto dry land and welcoming a new group aboard was easy. She didn't have to wheel anything heavy down a ramp; Sarah just had to make sure no one she was responsible for jumped. It was hard to fall off a cruise ship by accident.

During her tenure at JackRabbit Productions, Sarah had started with the easy cruises: Broadway, some wellness and vaguely cultish spiritual leaders (though not environmentally conscious spiritual leaders, a narrow field). By the time Sarah worked her first heavy-lift cruises (reggae, EDM, heavy metal, comedy, all the ones with the highest contraband rates), she was on track to be in charge. No one could do it forever. It was kind of like when Westley becomes the Dread Pirate Roberts in *The Princess Bride* – Sarah was aware that someday she would pass the metaphorical keys to the ship to someone else, as they had been passed to her. Maybe that was true for all jobs in one way or another.

It was just past eight in the morning, and her team was striking the things they no longer needed. There was still music blasting on the speakers, as if the ship could not stand a moment of silence – she could hear Lynyrd Skynyrd's 'Sweet Home Alabama' playing for probably

the seven hundredth time in the last four days. Sarah would be glad when the changeover was complete, and the soundtrack shifted to the top hits of the '80s and '90s. Sarah's walkie-talkie buzzed.

'Yeah?' she said, squinting into the light. 'Okay, send him up.'

Sarah's good assistant was going to a wedding in Cleveland and had already disembarked. For the next five days, she would have Tyler instead. He'd only been at JackRabbit for a few months and looked straight out of juvenile detention, with a giant koi fish tattoo on his neck, though Sarah knew that he wasn't out of juvenile detention at all and was, in fact, her boss's nephew and had recently dropped out of the part of NYU where you could major in basket-weaving if you wanted to. Sarah kept her eye on the door that led to the elevator banks, and a few minutes later, Tyler emerged, his wide jeans skimming the floor, where they would no doubt collect errant pieces of confetti. He nodded at her, and Sarah nodded back.

'Okay,' she said. 'Welcome, welcome. Did you read the packet?'

Tyler made a face that was clearly supposed to suggest that he had read the packet on Boy Talk but in fact made perfectly clear that he had not.

'Here are the basics,' Sarah said, already annoyed. 'These guys have sold millions of records. Millions. More records than artists today even *imagine* selling. Their fans love them, and we are here to support that love.'

'Do they even sing?' Tyler asked, scoffing, as if the most impressive thing he'd ever done wasn't taking his father's sports car for slow, supervised joyrides around a gated community.

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Sarah took a deep breath and ticked off the members of the band on her fingers. 'It's Shawn and Keith Fiore; they're brothers. Shawn's the de facto leader, I'd say, you'll see what I mean. Intense. Keith is the nicest one. Corey West, who you'll probably recognize from TV, et cetera. Scotty Sanchez and Terrence Campbell. Scotty is the life of the party, a sweetheart; Terrence is kind of a weirdo. There are pictures of them in your packet and on your clipboard. You should know what they look like.' She paused. 'With me so far?'

Tyler nodded, his eyes glassy. There was no hope that this boy was going to retain any useful information. Sarah saw the next few days stretching ahead of her, carrying the entire ship on her back like Atlas. Boy bands had never been her thing either, and she had just turned thirty, which made her ancient compared to Tyler but a decade younger than the low end of Boy Talk's fan base, not counting the twentysomethings who were there with their mothers. Suddenly, someone in their *twenties* sounded so young. Tyler looked like an actual baby, even with the neck tattoo. Lexie's new girlfriend was only seven years younger than she was, but still, it felt vaguely scandalous for anyone Sarah knew to have a girlfriend who had been born in the year 2000. It sounded both impossible and illegal. Thank god the cruise would be filled with middle-aged women – Sarah didn't think she could take a ship full of Plums right now, women with no memory of taking a quiz that wasn't on BuzzFeed, for whom 9/11 was a historical fact rather than something they actually remembered.

'It's very straightforward. Bobby – he's their manager – and Shawn and their team communicate well, and everyone else shows up and is super professional. This is our fifth

time working together. They're all cruise pros now.' As was she. Sarah knew what they liked, what they needed. The Serenity Suites were already stocked with enough Diet Coke, Dr Pepper, and Red Bull for a herd of elephants. Sarah wasn't sure some of the guys consumed anything else the entire four days. She was good at her job, and the job did not include judgment. Sarah became Cruise Sarah (efficient, problem-solving, cheerful) for at least fifteen hours a day. It would be even easier now that Lexie wouldn't be sending photos of Mr Whiskers every night before bed, his giant gray body stretched across Sarah's pillow. Mr Whiskers was Plum's problem now. Sarah hoped he bit Plum's toes every morning with his tiny little razor blade teeth.

'Okay,' Tyler said. He scratched his fish tattoo. 'Cool.' His mouth stayed slightly open, like he too was a giant koi, trying to breathe on land.

'The guests will mostly be Talkers – that's what they call themselves. Not all the guests will self-identify that way, but most of them will. They're not all moms, but they have mom vibes – drunk, horny moms on vacation.' At the word *horny*, Tyler's eyebrows flickered with surprise, like he'd just heard his elementary school teacher say a naughty word. Great. Now she was babysitting on top of all her other jobs.

Middle-aged women were the ideal cruisers because even when they got drunk, they didn't start fights, and they rarely complained. There would be some heterosexual husbands and some gay men, maybe a hundred total out of the two thousand cruisers. The women were diverse in many ways – race, political views, ability, income bracket – but they were almost all women. More lesbians than Sarah had initially anticipated, which was nice and made sense once she'd

thought about it. These were the guys who had launched a million sexual awakenings, and even if they had awakened something other than heterosexuality, they had still been present, like distant guardian angels of puberty. Beautiful teenage boys often looked like middle-aged lesbians anyway.

'Didn't Corey, like . . .' Tyler said. 'Get into trouble?' He gestured with his hand, sort of like he was pretending to jerk off. He had a stack of jangly bracelets, big chunky silver things that were going to make noise and annoy her all weekend, she could just tell.

'It doesn't matter,' Sarah said. 'Not to us. Anyone could get wasted and crash their car and make out with a nineteen-year-old.' She gave Tyler a look. 'You hear me? It doesn't matter to us.' Her phone buzzed. 'Hey, Bobby,' Sarah said, chewing on a thumbnail. 'Everybody ready? You coming all at once? I can set up whatever you need. The Serenity Suites are ready to go.' It wasn't unlike trying to take five cats to the veterinarian, with lots of yowling and maybe a little blood drawn. She didn't envy Bobby his morning's task.

'Sure, yeah, we're ready for ya,' Sarah said. She looked at Tyler, who was staring out at the water. He'd probably never been on a ship before. They still had to cling the elevators with photos, put down the rubber-mat photo floors on Deck 3, hang the vinyl banners from Deck 6 to Deck 4, finish the stage on the lido deck, move the Quiz Show props backstage at the theater. There was so much to do.

'I'm coming down to the gangway now,' Sarah said. It was game time. The kid would follow her, and if he didn't, they were still at the dock, and she could send him back onto dry land and do everything herself.

Thursday, 9 A.M.

American Fantasy Cruise Terminal

Keith and Shawn Fiore stood in an otherwise empty stretch of metal hallways that led from the terminal to the gangway that in turn led onto the *American Fantasy*. A professional from the cruise line in a tight royal blue nylon uniform – *Tonya, Ohio* – held them at bay until Sarah from JackRabbit appeared on the other side, ready to welcome them aboard. Through the plexiglass windows, they could see forklifts hoist pallets of suitcases into the ship's underbelly.

Tonya smiled a familiar smile – lips closed, eyes wide – one that said *I know you*, even though she didn't, not really. The brothers were used to this look, as well as its cousin, *Do I know you?* It was what Dr Robert, his therapist, described as 'the business of being Keith Fiore', and it was what they had spent a decent percentage of their time talking about over the years. Usually, the answer was meditation or breathing, something just to get Keith out of his head and back into his body, but for the next few days, there would be no escape. Keith looked at his brother, and Shawn looked at his phone, texting quickly with his thumb. Tonya clutched her walkie-talkie close to her ear and paced with purpose to the end of the gangway and back.

‘Just one minute,’ she said, and the walkie-talkie crackled back as if in agreement.

The Fiore brothers looked most alike when they were wearing their Ray-Bans and baseball hats, which is also when they looked the most like other white men. Not quite six feet, with brown hair and brown eyes. Keith’s cheeks were soft, the way Shawn’s would have been if he hadn’t bought himself a facelift for his fifty-fifth birthday. There was a tiny dot of dried blood on Keith’s neck where he had nicked himself shaving, and he fingered the spot gently.

‘It’s gonna be good, brother,’ Shawn said, and clapped Keith on the shoulder. ‘I’ve got a great feeling about this one.’

‘Yeah? Yeah.’ Keith nodded. ‘Talked to Scotty this morning. Always good to have some Scotty time.’ Keith did love Scotty, but he could have seen Scotty somewhere on the mainland. Keith had not wanted to come. He had not wanted to come at all. It had taken all year to psych himself up for it again, and he felt the panic in his stomach begin to bubble. ‘You gonna come up to Jersey for a few days when we’re done? Be nice to have you home.’

‘If I can, man. But seriously, this is gonna be the best one yet. We’re up two hundred passengers over last time.’ Shawn wiggled his butt. It was like he could see Keith’s worry and was trying to deflate it with his ass. Keith nodded – he was used to this kind of brush-off, but that didn’t make it easier to hear. It was hard to get Shawn to do anything that didn’t directly correspond with an agenda.

Keith didn’t know how you could make a full ship fuller, but Shawn had figured out a way. He always did. There was the world outside Boy Talk and the world inside Boy Talk,

and sometimes the worlds seemed like they had hardly anything in common. Were most people thinking about Boy Talk on any given day in the last thirty years? Of course not. But the people who *did* think about Boy Talk thought of them as often as they thought of their own family members. Keith couldn't really explain – it sounded like a hallucination – how much the Talkers did for them, the way they bought tickets and posted videos and edited photos and made T-shirts and tagged them on social media and how they continued to show up, year after year, like nothing had ever changed. Like he hadn't changed. This year, so many people had tried to book tickets that the entire website had shuddered and died, and Shawn had immediately taken to Instagram Live, where he spent two full hours talking to fans via the comments as they waited to book their cabins.

There had been a hiatus. That's what they called it, the decade and a half in between Corey breaking up the band and them getting back together. It had meant that Keith was present for most of Madison's childhood, a lot of good that had done. Shawn got divorced and then remarried. He owned six Papa Fiore's pizzerias, each of them filled with Boy Talk memorabilia. Scotty put most of his money into nightclubs and came out of the closet. Terrence grew a ponytail and got hired by the Travel Channel to host a show about aliens. Keith had stayed as frugal as his wife and daughter would let him; he turned off lights in empty rooms. He'd made a solo record that even the Talkers had only pretended to like. Keith found it was hard to get Shawn on the phone because he was so busy, but that had always been true. There were certain things that time just didn't fix, like wanting your brother to ask you how

you were doing. Keith had gone to AA meetings and to therapy, where he'd spent the last few years learning how to accept his life as it was rather than whatever it might have been, that the band was both good and bad and so was everything else. He'd gotten off the internet, where he had, in the old days, occasionally looked at the photos that fans sent him, which from time to time were of parts of their bodies without clothes on. He'd invested in childhood friends' business ventures that sometimes stayed afloat. He sometimes stayed afloat.

Then there was Corey – Corey West had taken off from whatever tenuous platform they had all been standing on and rocketed upward, out of boy band jail and into the Respectable Famous Person category, which in turn made the ground beneath the rest of them crack, sending them tumbling toward the Earth. Indie movies, superhero movies, a cop show, albums that grown-ups listened to without shame. He'd swaggered in and out of trouble the way only a person with charisma to burn could. A flattering mug shot was as good as being on the cover of *People* magazine. It somehow made the rest of them seem less famous, the more famous Corey got. No one thought he would ever come back because they represented the squar-est part of him, but who remembered gravity on the way up? Corey had come back needing Boy Talk's sheen of goodness; he'd needed the Talkers' forgiveness before he could earn anyone else's. Shawn had loved that so much – saving Corey, beautiful little Corey, his favorite punching bag turned party foil. And now that Corey was back, Keith couldn't be the one to ruin it for everyone else.

They'd gotten back together in 2009. Scotty and Terrence hadn't needed convincing. They both had mortgages