

ONCE UPON
A CRUISE



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Chapter 1

I still can't believe we're on a Disney cruise!" a tiny blond girl beside me squeals.

I close my eyes and repeat the Fairy Tale Cruises employee motto in my head: *Be helpful, friendly, and fun!* That means no correcting the passengers, even if this is the thirteenth person so far today who's been totally wrong. Instead, I force myself to smile and focus on offering passersby squirts of hand sanitizer as they head into the dining hall for dinner. We only left port a couple hours ago and already my face hurts from smiling. After a whole summer of this, my cheek muscles will be so strong, I'll probably be able to lift weights with them.

Then the blond girl gasps. “Look, there’s Cinderella!”

“Wow!” her dark-haired friend says. “But why is her dress the wrong color? And why isn’t she wearing glass slippers? Are you sure that’s even Cinderella?”

I can’t take it anymore. “Actually,” I butt in, “it’s Aschenputtel.”

The girls stare at me. They’re probably about six years old and dressed in sparkly pink from head to toe, like mini Barbies.

“What’s an *ash puddle*?” the blond girl asks, raising an eyebrow at me.

“That character over there isn’t Cinderella,” I explain in my most cheerful voice. “It’s Aschenputtel from the Grimm brothers’ fairy tale. It’s a lot like Cinderella’s story, but instead of a fairy godmother, there’s a tree that grants wishes.” Well, my literature professor dad would be proud of me, but judging by the skeptical looks on the girls’ faces, they are *not* impressed.

Technically, Disney doesn’t own the rights to Cinderella’s character, but Fairy Tale Cruises isn’t

taking any chances or they might get sued, which is why they're using characters that most people haven't heard of. At least that's the impression I got from slogging through the million-page-long manual my mom gave me after she took a last-minute job as the ship's cruise director.

"So she's not Cinderella?" the blond girl asks.

"She's . . . sort of like Cinderella's cousin," I say, but the mini Barbies aren't listening to me anymore.

"Look! It's Rapunzel!" the one with dark hair cries. She grabs her friend's hand, and they rush off toward a young woman dressed as Petrosinella, aka the Italian version of Rapunzel.

"I can't believe that weird girl didn't even know who Cinderella is," I hear the blonde say before they both disappear into the mob of passengers.

It's so hot and humid out that I'm pretty sure my eyeballs are sweating. I try to casually mop my cheek with my polyester sleeve before I go back to disinfecting people and chirping, "Remember, clean hands equal clean health!"

I should have known better than to correct the Barbie twins. They'll find out soon enough that none of the characters on the ship are from stories they know. But if one of the Spies heard me, I would have been in trouble.

"Ainsley!" I hear someone call.

I turn to find my new bunkmate, Katy, shuffling toward me. Her legs are bound together so tightly that she can barely move, but her sparkly mermaid costume is glowing in the sun, making her look like some kind of seaweed goddess. My fingers itch to grab the small camera I always keep tucked in my pocket and take her picture, but things like that are Not Allowed while we're on duty.

"Thank goodness I found you," she says. "I needed to see a friendly face."

"What happened?"

"Some little kid pinched me!" She lets out a high-pitched giggle.

"Ouch!" I say with a sympathetic cringe.

“I was just posing for pictures by the main staircase,” she chatters on, “talking to what I thought was a nice family, and suddenly—bam! Right on my behind!” Funny how she’s sixteen, more than three years older than I am, but she’s still embarrassed to say words like *butt*. “Oh, I forgot to tell you. A few of the other sea creatures might go hang out at the Oven tomorrow night.”

“The Oven?”

She rolls her eyes. “Terrible name, right? It’s supposed to be the ship’s teen lounge and nightclub. You want to come?”

“I can’t,” I automatically say. Then I remember that the whole point of taking this job was for me to not have to constantly watch over Mom anymore. “Wait, maybe I can come. What time?”

“Whenever they let us off our shifts,” Katy says. “I never thought being a mermaid would be so exhausting! You’re so lucky you’re in the show, Ainsley. Then you know exactly when you’re done for the night. Plus,

you get to actually *be* the character instead of just prancing around in a silly costume!”

Katy’s voice is loud and brassy, not exactly how you’d expect the Mermaid Princess (as she’s called here) to sound. I can see people shooting her confused looks as they walk by. Then again, maybe it’s because she’s dressed more like a fish with long hair than Ariel from the Disney movie.

Suddenly, I spot one of the Spies nearby, dressed in his crisp, white uniform. Uh-oh. He’s looking right at us. My stomach dips, and it’s not just from the movement of the ship.

Mom claims the “monitors” are only on the ship to make sure everything runs smoothly the first few days and that no one does anything that will get us sued, but I bet they scurry to the captain the minute we do something wrong.

“Um, we should probably talk about this later.” I try to give Katy a meaningful look, but she’s on a roll. She’s one of the sweetest people I’ve ever met, but she’s also a serious talker. Last night, our first night aboard

the ship, she kept me awake for hours, telling me all about her dog, Snoopy, who's back home with her parents in Tennessee.

"I did try out to be in the show," she goes on, "but they said the only spots left were—"

"Remember to remain in character at all times," the Spy hisses at us.

Katy jumps like she's just heard a snake. Clearly, she didn't notice him lurking until now. I glance at his name tag and shake my head. Of course his name is Curt. It matches his personality perfectly.

"Sorry," Katy whispers. Then her eyes widen and she chirps, "Sooooorry!" in her Mermaid Princess voice. She gives me a panicked look and starts waddling toward the pool.

"You're Ainsley Parker, right?" Curt asks, turning to me.

I swallow. Is he asking my name so he can report me? I can't get in trouble on the first day and risk making my mom look bad!

"Um, yeah," I say. "I was just—"

“Shouldn’t you be at the Once Upon a Time Theater right now?”

I grab today’s schedule from my back pocket. Sure enough, I was supposed to report for rehearsal five minutes ago.

“Oops, sorry about that,” I say, wondering how he knows my schedule better than I do. I mean, there are hundreds of crew members aboard this ship! “I guess time really flies when you’re dousing people with hand sanitizer!”

Curt doesn’t crack a smile. “Your replacement is on her way, so I’ll take over from here,” he says.

I gladly transfer my hand-spraying duties over to him and head to the theater on Deck 4. Tonight is the opening show, so we’re supposed to do a final run-through this afternoon to make sure everything looks right. Mom has been going on and on about how the Fairy Tale Extravaganza will set the tone for the rest of the weeklong cruise. Hopefully, that means it’ll go well. The last thing we want is for Fairy Tale Cruises’ maiden voyage to start off on a bad note.

I weave my way through the throngs of people and head down a corridor that's blocked off with red tape so passengers won't use it. This is the last part of the ship to be repainted. All the refurbishing was supposed to be finished before we left Fort Lauderdale, but I guess things got behind schedule. Still, the ship looks amazing now compared to how it was a few days ago when Mom and I first saw it. Before Fairy Tale Cruises bought this ship, it was used as a knitting cruise. Seriously. Not only were there rocking chairs installed all over the ship for people to sit in and knit, but the entire bow was painted to look like a wool hat, and the rest of the ship was covered in knitting-themed murals.

The biggest of the murals—showing famous knitters throughout history all connected with strands of yarn—is the one that's being painted over right now. As I pause to admire the way the sunlight hits the faces of the people in the knitting web, one of them catches my eye. He looks familiar, but I can't figure out why. I glance around to make sure no one is watching before

pulling my camera out of my pocket and snapping a picture. Then I hurry off to rehearsal before my mom starts to think I fell overboard or something.

When I get to the theater, the lights are all on and the stage is covered with people milling around. It takes me a minute to find my mom in the chaos. Finally, I spot her perfectly styled black bob at the far end of the stage. It's still kind of a shock to see her looking so put-together considering she was a wild-haired pajama dweller only a couple weeks ago, before she got this job offer. But that means Mom's "fresh start at sea" plan is actually working. Not only is she back to her old self, but I might even get to have a little fun this summer.

Mom's talking to the assistant cruise director, Aussie Andy, who's furiously scribbling down everything she says. Funny how before I was born, Mom used to be the one doing his job, and now here she is, in charge of the entertainment on the entire cruise. You'd never know it by the calm, collected look on her

face, but I can tell she's nervous. The way her nose keeps twitching ever-so-slightly is a dead giveaway.

"All right, everyone!" Mom calls, clapping her hands. No one seems to notice. "Gather round!" she tries again, louder this time. Still no luck. Her nose twitches a tiny bit more. She's clearly a little rusty at all this.

Finally, a guy in a prince costume lets out a loud whistle that nearly shatters my eardrums. "Listen up!" he bellows.

Mom gives him a grateful smile, though everyone else looks a little annoyed. "Now, " she says, "we have an hour to run through the opening show one more time, so let's make it count, okay? Remember that I'll start things off with a welcome speech before the dwarves dance out onto the stage." Her eyes lock with mine through the crowd. "Oh! And we have our special guest, Briar Rose, here with us today. Everyone, say hello to my daughter, Ainsley!"

Everyone turns to look at me, and I feel my cheeks

growing hot. “Hey,” I say, waving. “Um, I’m excited to nap onstage while you guys do all the work.”

A couple of people chuckle while a few others seem to be sizing me up. I probably look like a little kid to them since I’m still a few weeks away from my thirteenth birthday. Briar Rose, the German version of Sleeping Beauty, was supposed to be played by a girl from Canada (and she was also going to be Katy’s roommate), but she had to drop out at the last minute. Mom had just accepted the job as cruise director when it happened, and she thought having me take the girl’s spot was the perfect solution. Even though I have no business being near a stage, in exchange for taking the part, I also got to take the girl’s bunk instead of rooming with Mom. Considering my mom’s extreme snoring, the offer was too good to turn down. Besides, battling stage fright is still better than staying with Dad for the summer.

While the other cast members shuffle into the wings to their places, I head into the audience to wait for my mom to be done.

And that’s when I spot him.

He's wearing pointy shoes and green tights and elf ears, but he's still the cutest boy I've ever laid eyes on. He seems to be one of the dwarves, although I don't know which one. Bashful? Doc?

Wait, no. What am I saying? Those are Disney characters. I glance around, checking for Spies, paranoid that they might have heard my thoughts. Luckily, the coast is clear.

The dwarves line up behind Schneewittchen, which I guess is how you say Snow White in German. (Fairy Tale Cruises *really* isn't taking any chances with this whole getting sued thing.) Cute Dwarf stands sixth among the other dwarves, looking off into the wings as if he's contemplating something really deep. As my mom goes through her speech, he pulls a Moleskine notebook out of his pocket and jots something down.

Oh my gosh. Maybe he's a songwriter! There is nothing cuter than an artsy guy, and at my jock-filled junior high back home, there is a serious artist shortage. Finally, someone I might be able to talk to.

As if he can sense me staring at him, Cute Dwarf glances out at the audience and his eyes meet mine. I swear I feel the ground—or sea—move under me. And then he . . . well, he doesn't quite smile, but he gives me a soulful look, as if we share some kind of secret.

My entire body suddenly feels as if it's been plugged into an electrical socket. Cute Dwarf noticed me! He almost smiled at me!

Maybe this summer will be better than I thought.