

A shirtless male surfer with a blue surfboard against a beach background. The man has dark hair and is looking directly at the camera. His skin is wet and glistening. The background shows a blue ocean and a cloudy sky. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

OUT IN THE SURF

OUT IN COLLEGE STORIES

LANE HAYES

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BLURB

The hockey player, the surfer, and a lesson neither can forget...

Luca-

I love the beach, and I'm a good athlete. Learning how to surf should be a breeze, right?

Wrong.

In a twist, hockey is nothing like surfing. That's okay—I just need a diversion to round out my new life in So Cal while I figure out what comes next. As long as I keep my head above water, this could be fun.

Bonus...my instructor is hot.

Cal-

Teaching newbies to surf is easy money. Usually. My newest student is a wild card who seems to think his jock status should make him a natural at everything he tries, and I can see why. Luca is...special. He's dynamic, energetic, and fun. It's hard not to like him. But I like him a little too much.

This could be trouble.

Out in the Surf is a low-angst MM romance, bisexual-awakening story. When the teacher becomes the student, it may be time to come out in the surf.

Out in the Surf was originally offered as a year-long “freebie” for the Prolific Works’ Your Book Book Boyfriend Giveaway. I’ve added a bonus chapter to give readers a little more Luca and Cal! Hope you enjoy. And yes...this book is available on audio too!

For Brett- my ocean boy

*Your fearless, passionate nature inspires us all. Always go for
adventure...and send it!*

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“**A**s you start to walk on the way, the way appears.” —
Rumi

LUCA

Eight a.m. was way too early for this nonsense. Whose idea was it to transfer to the West Coast and learn how to surf?

Oh, yeah...mine.

It might have been helpful if someone had mentioned that this endeavor required waking up at the crack of dawn and squeezing my booty into a borrowed skintight wetsuit. Those little details could have been game changers. Too late now.

Surf lessons were courtesy of my parents. I had to show up for lesson number one or figure out how to lie to my mom when she asked if the hobby I'd hoped might replace hockey was keeping me out of trouble in Lala Land.

The jury was still out on that. I'd been in Southern California for two months so far, having the time of my life with my new roommates and a few fellow transfer students I'd met at orientation. The partying had escalated lately, too.

I'd woken up with a hangover every day for a week straight...and a naked dude in my bed. I don't recommend either. The hangovers sucked, and waking up with crusty jizz on my stomach next to a snoring stranger who'd stolen the covers in the middle of the night wasn't so glamorous.

I'd had more awkward morning-after conversations with guys whose names I didn't know in the last sixty days than I'd had since, well...ever. It was time to get my act together and settle into a scholastically responsible routine. I could do this.

With classes starting at Long Beach State in a week, I didn't want to be the guy who slept through my alarm and was late every other day. I knew from experience that it was too damn easy to get stuck in bad habits. I'd given myself a long leash to have all the fun my heart desired this summer, but slipping into loser gear was not an option.

That was where surfing lessons came in.

I'd always wanted to learn how, but Ann Arbor wasn't exactly known for its surf scene. I'd grown up playing hockey like every other kid on my block—and loving it. But those days were over.

I had a new life on a new coast at a new school. So why not try a new sport too? One that I could do with a friend who would make sure I got my sorry ass of bed before noon.

“Help me out, Luca.” Zoe lifted her ponytail out of the way and turned.

I zipped her up and requested she return the favor as we waited for the owner to pull a couple of boards off the rack. Jay...or maybe his name was Ray—was small and wiry with a shock of white hair and skin so tan it looked partially leathered. He'd instructed us to put our belongings in a locker at the surf shop, change into wetsuits, and head outside to meet some guy named...

“Who's our instructor?” I asked.

The older man propped a medium-sized board against the stucco wall and tilted his scruffy chin. “Well, you two lucked out. Cal is gonna take care of you. And mind you, he's the best there is.”

I squinted at the figure walking toward us on the sand. I couldn't see much at that distance, but I could tell he was tall and fit with a swimmer's lean physique under his wetsuit. And his longish dark-blond hair curled around his ears enticingly.

There was something purposeful yet cocky in his stride. I didn't know jack about this guy, but I could tell he wore confidence like a second skin. And let's be real, confidence is sexy.

Zoe nudged my elbow. "Mmhmm. I'm suddenly very happy I let you talk me into this," she hummed in a low voice.

I chuckled as Zoe's smile lit her face. She was a petite Latina who did everything big. Her dark hair was super long, her brown eyes were huge, her lips were always painted red, and if she could have rocked her giant hoop earrings and a pair of stilettos on a surfboard, you bet your ass she'd have done it. The girl had a style all her own.

We'd met at orientation last spring when I'd first decided to transfer during my senior year of college. I didn't know anyone in California, but I wasn't worried about making friends. I wasn't exactly shy. And Zoe wasn't either. We'd bonded in the food court over an intense conversation about the proper condiments for corn dogs, both agreeing that spicy mustard was the way to go.

Okay, so she'd shamelessly flirted with me. When it got awkward, I'd gently let her know that although she seemed cool, I played for the other team. I'd braced myself for disgust or disappointment, and a round of "Are you sure?"...as if I might change my sexual orientation if the right girl came along.

That wasn't how it had gone down. After a surprised silence, she gave me a curious once-over, shrugged, and asked what I thought about adding hot sauce to ketchup. *Boom...* insta-buddies.

Zoe was a great girl and the kind of friend who was willing to sign up for last-minute surf lessons on a whim. Her motivation wasn't completely altruistic, though. This morning's excursion gave her an excuse to make a twenty-minute drive to Seal Beach to buy her latte at the coffee shop on Main Street where her crush *du jour* worked as a barista. Although she might have a new crush now, I mused, as our surf instructor approached.

And okay...*wow*. He was damn hot. Square jaw, full lips, high cheekbones, gorgeous hazel eyes, and a deep sexy voice.

“Hey, there. I’m Cal.”

He extended his hand in greeting to Zoe, who shook it and hooked her thumb toward me.

“I’m Zoe and this is my friend, Luca.”

I waved lamely and almost swallowed my tongue before finally blurting, “Hi.”

Zoe frowned, casting a WTF glance my way. I couldn’t blame her. I mentioned that I wasn’t shy, right? I was normally pretty gregarious and friendly. Not so much now.

I felt oddly self-conscious for no apparent reason. Sure, Cal was handsome, but I’d met plenty of good-looking guys—and slept with them too. That wasn’t an option here. Not only was Cal my instructor and someone I wasn’t destined to know after my three one-hour lessons were complete, he was probably straight.

Snap out of it, Luca.

Thankfully, Cal moved on quickly. He conferred with the owner, double-checking to ensure we’d signed all the waivers and were ready to roll.

“They’re all set,” the older man confirmed. “Have fun out there.”

Cal saluted him, then set his hands on his hips and turned to us with a broad grin. “Have either of you been on any kind of board? Paddleboard, surfboard, skim board?”

“I’ve never been erect in the ocean,” someone who sounded like me said.

“For fuck’s sake, Luca,” Zoe sputtered. “Sorry about him. He’s prone to weird outbursts when under-caffeinated. We’re newbies. Show us everything, *maestro*.”

Cal snorted. “All righty, then. Here’s the plan...we’re gonna head out to the sand. I’ll give you a brief intro and show

you how to balance before we hop in the water. Grab your boards and follow me.”

I passed Zoe her board and tucked mine under my arm.

“Thanks. Hey, are you okay?” Zoe whispered. “You’re kind of jumpy.”

I shrugged. “I guess I’m nervous.”

That was the honest truth, but I wasn’t sure why.

I trudged through the sand, thinking it might have been a combination of sleep deprivation, the early hour, and even hunger. I’d snap out of it once we were in the water.

Or not.

Have you ever had one of those days where nothing sticks? My hearing was just fine, but my ability to absorb new information was sadly lacking. I nodded attentively, as if I were hanging on Cal’s every word when he gave us a spiel about learning curves and ocean safety.

“...one of those activities where you can’t be afraid to fall. It’s gonna happen, especially when you’re new. It’s important to know how to read the elements and remember that you’re never really in charge. Mother Nature is. Winds, tides, and swells are always changing. It’s up to us to pay attention. Today is pretty mellow, but rip currents can form out of the blue.”

Zoe raised her hand like a kid in a classroom. “What’s a rip current again?”

“It’s a strong, narrow stream that pulls water from the shore out to sea. Emphasis on strong. You can’t swim against them. If you ever get caught in one, swim sideways—not toward the beach.” Cal clapped decisively and picked up the tether from his board. “You’re going to want to attach the leash to your back foot. If you’re right-handed, that’s generally going to be your right foot. Then lay flat on your stomach and start paddling.”

We practiced paddling and “popping up” in the sand for what felt like forever. I couldn’t decide if I was grateful for the

close-proximity extra eye candy or if being too near this guy was bad for me. I'd never felt so dopey around a man in my life. I didn't ask any of the questions I'd had planned. I just nodded and stared a lot. Thankfully Zoe was engaging enough that I doubted Cal noticed my fixation with his mouth or his ass.

"How do we know where to lay on the board? If you're too far to any one side, you're done-zo, right?" Zoe asked.

"True. A good reference is to have your toes touch the leash string." Cal waited while Zoe demonstrated. "Good. Find your sweet spot, Luca. Nice. Now, when you're in the water, remember to paddle with long, deep strokes."

Sweet spot? Long, deep strokes? *Fuck. Me.* This was torture.

"Got it," I choked.

Cal hopped to his feet. "Awesome. Let's give it a shot."

We spent twenty minutes or so transitioning from our stomachs to standing on the board in the water and let me assure you, it was comedy gold. I fell in over and over again. Theoretically, keeping my balance shouldn't have been so damn challenging for me. I spent most of my life zipping around on a pair of steel blades on ice, for fuck's sake. Why couldn't I do this?

"You're in your own head, Luca," Zoe cautioned from her perch on her board. "Concentrate. If I can do it, so can you."

I swiped at my eyes and heaved my chest on the narrow plank. I fixed my gaze on the horizon, but just as I was about to give it another go, Cal appeared at my side.

"Hey there. You're too tense, man."

"Yeah, I know. I'm not sure why," I lied.

"You're a land lubber," he teased. "Loosen those limbs a bit. Go on...shake your arms, maybe roll your head. That's it."

"I'll be fine."

“Of course, you will. I can tell you’re an athlete. What d’ya play?”

“Hockey.”

“Cool. Are you gonna play at Long Beach State?” Cal asked.

He sat astride his board casually, as if he’d pulled up a stool at the bar next to mine. Everything about his posture and carriage screamed competent and in control. I felt my blood pressure go down a few notches just being in his aura.

“Nah, I got banged up pretty hard, tore my Achilles last season, and got another concussion. Even though I’m mostly healed now, transfer rules are strict. It seemed like a good time to hang up my skates.”

I didn’t sound convincing in the slightest, which was strange because I was pretty good at bullshitting around the truth when it came to giving up the one thing I’d loved more than anything in the world. Whatever. Cal didn’t give a shit. He just wanted to make sure I didn’t drown on his watch.

“That sucks,” he replied sincerely.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “But as you can tell, I’m on my way to becoming a world-class surfer, so it’s all good.”

Cal’s hearty chuckle floated in the breeze. He gave Zoe a thumbs-up and gestured for her to steer in our direction. “You can do anything you put your mind to, Luca. Anything at all.”

“Including standing on this board?”

“Absolutely. It might take a few tries, but it’ll happen.” He smiled, but his tone was firm.

And because I was a complete horndog, my dick swelled in my wetsuit. Unbelievable. On the plus side, I was still on my stomach. If Zoe noticed that I was sportin’ wood for our straight instructor, I’d never hear the end of it.

“Hmph.”

“C’mon. I think you’re ready to give it a shot. Let’s paddle out past the breaker and find ourselves a wave.”

“Now? I can’t even kneel without face-planting,” I griped.

“Ride in on your stomach or on your knees if you want,” Cal advised. “You’ve got this.”

Like hell I did.

I cast a longing glance toward the shore with a sigh, but I wasn’t about to go down with a pathetic whimper. It was time to man up, stand up, and ride a fucking wave.

An old Rage Against the Machine song buzzed in my brain as I paddled like mad past the breaker to Cal and Zoe. I studied them as I navigated the current. Their differing stances told a story. Cal sat on his board as if he’d been born on it while Zoe wobbled precariously. She didn’t seem frazzled, though. She seemed revved up and ready to try something new. That was the inspirational push I needed.

Yes, I could do this.

I gingerly lifted my chest, shifting and scooting to the middle of my board, then sitting upright as I joined them.

“Glad you finally decided to show up,” Zoe joked.

I flipped her off, tipping to my right, steadying myself again. “So, what next?”

Cal pointed to a group of surfers nearby. “We’re heading that way. As you can tell, it’s too still here, but the sets are coming in nice and easy. We’re going to get into position close to where the waves are cresting. When I say ‘go,’ paddle on and give it everything you got. The key is to catch the wave before it breaks. Be quick and don’t turn around. Just like in real life, you’ll lose power if you look backward. If you miss your shot, be patient. You’ll get the next one. Got it?”

Zoe nodded enthusiastically. “Got it. Ready to party, right Luca?”

“Yeah,” I grunted, white-knuckling my board.

“Cool. I mentioned this earlier, but it’s super important, so I want to remind you to respect the right of way and stay in your own lane. You don’t want to take anyone else out.” He

waited for our acknowledgment, then tilted his chin. “All righty, troops. Follow me.”

Easier said than done.

I fell in immediately. My next two attempts involved swallowing a liter of the Pacific before I got myself situated. I had to paddle my ass off to catch up to Zoe and Cal. And somewhere in the battle to traverse twenty feet in less than five minutes, it occurred to me that it might help if I adjusted my thinking and pretended the ocean surface was an ice rink, and the wave I was about to catch was a puck I needed to bring to shore. Sounded perfectly doable when I put it that way.

But my arms felt like spaghetti noodles as I closed the distance, bypassing four other surfers to catch up to Zoe. Her eyes were glued to the shore, but she was primed and ready to take off on cue.

Cal darted his gaze in my direction and held his hand up, yelling a command that was probably “No,” but could have been “Go.” Long story short...I went, and it was a big mistake.

Look, I knew the chances of me gliding across the water and stepping onto the sand without incident were slim to none, but I was one cocky bastard. And my notion that this was hockey on melted ice was just plain...dumb. I didn't have the skill or experience to bluff my way through, but I stubbornly figured that the worst-case scenario involved wiping out.

Yeah, that happened, but it was a bit more dramatic. And a lot more embarrassing.

Of course, I fell the second I tried to stand up. That part wasn't a surprise. However, sitting on top of a wave, even a relatively small one, immediately buried me in white wash. I felt like a pair of gym shorts in the spin cycle of a washing machine. I popped to the surface just in time to get clipped by a fellow surfer. The tail end of his board smacked me in the forehead. I went under again and in the commotion, the tether around my ankle came loose.

So there I was...bopping in the ocean half a mile from shore without a board and no idea what to do next. Everything Cal said had gone in one ear and out the other. Why? Because he was too damn hot, and I was easily distracted by him. Yep, this was his fault. But there was no way I was going to show up looking like a drowned rat without that board.

I scanned the turbulent sea as I half floated, half doggie-paddled.

Nothing, nothing...*ah!*

I spotted my surfboard on a collision course for the pier. I sucked in a deep breath and swam like mad.

My head and my arms ached, but I powered on. It took me a precious minute or so to realize that the harder I swam, the farther the board drifted. And the farther I drifted out to sea.

“Swim sideways!” someone yelled in the distance.

I obeyed, but it was fucking exhausting, especially with a strong force pulling at me from below, urging me to give up and drift. It was tempting to let go. I was already too far from shore. And too far from the pier. Panic lodged in my throat as the waves got taller.

Fuck. Death by drowning was not how I wanted to go out. My lungs were on fire and my head—

“Luca!” Cal called over the roar of the ocean. “I’m right here. Grab my board.”

I couldn’t see Cal or his board. I lifted my hand, waving toward the sound of his voice. I opened my mouth to speak and swallowed a gallon of salt water. I choked it out, alarmed at the sharp sting in my chest. Everything fucking hurt now, but I coached myself to stay buoyant and ideally, not panic.

That was when a bullhorn blasted overhead. Or maybe that was Cal’s voice again.

“The board is to your right, and a boat is on the way. You’ve got this.”

I stretched my arm to my right and didn’t stop trying until I hit something solid.

“Got it,” I gasped.

“Good job. Come a little closer,” Cal coaxed firmly. “That’s it. Hold on to the board. The boat will be here in a sec.”

“Boat?” I repeated, resting my cheek on the cold, wet surface.

“Yeah, but don’t get too comfy. Stay with me, Luca. Open your eyes,” Cal commanded.

I fluttered my lashes, narrowing my gaze against the sun’s glare. Cal was close and solid and...safe. Despite the ringing in my ear and the constant swoosh of water in my face, I was able to tune out the excess noise and concentrate on him. I studied his mouth as if it might help me to hear him better.

He had a nice mouth. His lips were full and kind of pouty. And were sexy chins a thing? ’Cause his was hot. I wanted to run my tongue along his stubbled jaw, nibble his bottom lip. He was so...

“Hot,” I blurted.

“You’re hot?”

“No, you are. Very fucking hot.”

Cal grinned. “Gee, thanks. Are you drunk on ocean water, Luca?”

“Yes. Probably. Am I dead?”

“No, you’re fine.”

“Hmph. Barely. I did everything wrong, huh?”

“Let’s just say you have room for improvement,” he replied kindly.

“Look, I know this isn’t going to come as a shock, but I’m not doing this again. I gotta think of another hobby.”

Cal huffed in amusement. “I get why you’d feel that way, but the best way to conquer fear is to keep ticking away at it.”

“Right, but I don’t think I can handle getting drunk on seawater every day. My throat feels funny. And not for any

good, sexy reasons.”

“Sexy reasons?” He knit his brow.

“Blowjobs.” I made a lewd hand gesture...something I certainly wouldn't have done in casual conversation with a handsome stranger on a random Monday morning.

But these were extenuating circumstances. I'd almost become fish food, for fuck's sake. I was mentally and physically drained...and pretty damn sure the rules of social niceties no longer applied.

Cal chortled. See, we were on the same page.

“Blowjobs give sore throats? I've never heard that before.”

“Trust me, it's a thing. Or it can be...if you get into your work.” I shrugged nonchalantly and pointed at the boat approaching us.

“Good to know.” He snorted, turning to wave. “I'm gonna jump on with you and ask them to swing by the pier. I can see your board from here.”

I was helped onto a boat and given a water bottle. I expected Cal to sit up front with the lifeguard, but he settled on the bench next to me instead.

I guzzled half the water bottle and heaved a sigh. “I'm really sorry. I swear I'm not usually this big of a dork.”

“Don't apologize. We'll make sure it's less exciting next time around.” He clapped my shoulder and winked.

Fuck, that was sexy.

Or was it? Maybe something was wrong with me, 'cause this was not a sexy scenario. This was embarrassing and traumatic. I couldn't believe he wasn't completely exasperated with me, but he seemed so unfazed. So patient, so chill, so... kind. And yes, so damn handsome.

“Thank you,” I said softly.

“You're welcome.” Cal smiled, then uncapped his water and took a swig.

I watched his Adam's apple bob in his throat and let my dirty imagination take over for a beat. Those lips wrapped around my cock or my lips on his or—

A rogue wave tossed the boat like a bath toy, sliding him against me. He started to scoot aside when it happened again. We were glued to each other and even through the protective layers of two wetsuits, I swore I could feel his body heat. It consumed me.

It was a sharp contrast to the cold ocean water. Somehow his nearness felt like a sign or a good excuse or a moment of insanity.

Don't ask me what I was thinking. One minute we were in an adrenaline-fused rescue; then the next we were swaying on a boat, inches apart. And something in me snapped. If this was life or death, I couldn't let the moment pass. This was a cosmic reminder to live each day like it was your last and if this was it...

I dropped my water bottle on the floor, grabbed his face in both hands, and crashed my mouth over his.

To be perfectly honest, it was more of a mashed-lips situation than a real kiss. It was rough, overeager, and completely lacking in finesse.

I wasn't exactly thinking clearly. Nope. I was caught up in an impetuous moment of crazy. However, my frenzied brain busily catalogued a few interesting tidbits I might have otherwise missed, ranging from his soft lips, to the brush of his scruffy chin against mine, to the feel of his cool skin on my fingertips.

Cal seemed too surprised to push me away or join in, but who could blame him? His problem pupil had turned out to be a raving lunatic and a kissing bandit too.

Talk about a rough Monday.

But here's the thing...he never pushed me away. His lips softened and molded to mine and for an instant or two, that lip mash became something more.

I regained some semblance of sanity as the lifeguard slowed the boat near the pier. I pushed away, wiping my mouth on the back of my hand, but Cal didn't move at all. He looked like a marble statue, frozen in a state of shock.

He blinked wildly as he slowly came around. "Uh..."

"Hey, Cal, I can't get any closer. You're gonna have to jump and grab the board," the lifeguard shouted from the front of the boat.

"Got it." Cal spared me a dazed sideways glance before diving over the side.

I watched him disappear, then gazed toward the beach, squinting against the sunlight sprinkling the ocean like glitter. A rogue bout of nausea hit me when the waves lurched under the small craft. *Fuck*. This was destined to be a long, uncomfortable ride.

The lifeguard adjusted his cap as he twisted to give me a thumbs-up. I returned the gesture and let out a low sigh of relief. At least no one else had witnessed my moment of madness. I hoped. The boat rolled again. And again.

Somewhere in the constant rise and fall, Cal retrieved my renegade surfboard and hopped on. He spoke to the lifeguard. A few random words traveled my way, but the rest was a series of hand gestures and laughter. Just when I thought he'd let me off the hook and ignore me till we reached the drop-off point, Cal flopped onto the bench beside me.

The boat rose, then fell, rose and fell.

"I, uh...sorry about...that," I stammered.

"Don't be. Hey, you—are you okay?"

I licked my dry lips, wishing I could hide behind a pair of sunglasses. "Not really. Why isn't the boat moving?"

"We'll be on our way in a sec." Cal's handsome features blurred as another wave tossed us sideways. Cal didn't seem to notice. He scratched his ear and cleared his throat. "Hey, um... about that, um...kiss. I—"

I lifted my hand like a stop sign, shook my head in the universal, “Hold that thought” motion before promptly barfing over the side of the boat.

Yep. I yacked, ralphed, vomited...in front of the guy I’d just kissed.

The same guy who’d saved my ass from floating out to sea. It really didn’t get much worse, did it?

I hardly remembered the boat ride. I was just grateful it was short and that Zoe was there to take over all adulting matters. She handled the board return, retrieved our belongings, and hovered nearby, chatting with Cal while I peeled off my wetsuit and redressed. He never mentioned the kiss—*thank God*—but he did tell her I had an upset stomach.

I must have looked like shit too, ’cause she bypassed the coffee shop on Main Street and drove straight to campus, entertaining me with mindless conversation until she dropped me off at my apartment complex.

“Take a shower and make yourself a piece of toast. You’ll feel better within the hour. We can talk about it later. Call me.”

“Zoe?”

She cocked her head and smiled gently. “Yeah?”

“Thank you for everything. You’re an awesome friend, but...I don’t want to talk about today. Ever.” I gathered my belongings and got out of her car, pausing with my hand on the roof to add, “And for the record, I’m never going surfing again.”

C al

The marine layer ghosted over the horizon and cloaked the coastline with a misty, ethereal glow. I loved mornings like this when the beach was quiet and the crisp air hinted that summer was in its final countdown. I would have preferred a decent swell, though. This two-to-three-foot nonsense was only good for training.

I rode the baby wave in and practically stepped off my board as if I were exiting an escalator. Nice and smooth. Then I shook water from my hair, picked up my backpack, and trudged through the sand toward the boardwalk. My mind was buzzing with a list of to-dos. Jay had scheduled me for three lessons. The first one was at eight, which left me just enough time to make breakfast.

And yeah, I'd checked the names of my newbie pupils. Luca Rossiter wasn't one of them.

I wasn't surprised, but I was disappointed...and I had no idea why.

Three weeks had passed since that very odd lesson. The writing was on the wall. Luca's first time surfing had been a complete disaster from the start.

It was easy to peg him for a typical jock who was used to being naturally good at anything he tried. He'd mentioned that surfing might be a nice hobby for him, so I'd bet he was a little bummed that his friend had taken to it quicker than he had. And that was before the rip current and the wipeout.

I got it. Facing an uphill learning curve was daunting.

Of course, I suspected that the real reason he probably didn't plan to use his two remaining prepaid lessons was...that kiss. It bugged me that I hadn't had a chance to tell him I hadn't minded it. At all. There was no reason to feel awkward, and there was no reason to waste money. In my opinion, it was better to try again with a different instructor than to give up.

I hadn't had a chance to tell him that at the end of his lesson. First of all, he'd completely shut down. I'd never seen anyone turn into a human turtle quite like that. He wouldn't make eye contact and other than an occasional grunt, he didn't speak.

Zoe had done enough talking for all of us, though. She was worried and she wanted the whole scoop, but she also wanted to tell us her version from the beach, which she did...while Luca moved like a man possessed. He'd stripped out of the wetsuit, toweled off, thanked me politely...no eye contact—then he was gone.

But he still had those unused lessons. And though it wasn't Jay's policy to send out reminders, I did it anyway. The problem was...I didn't have his number. Zoe's was all over the contact sheet. Not Luca's. I couldn't decide if it seemed stalkerish to try to reach him through his friend, so I did something even weirder and called the number on the initial purchase order.

Yep, I called his mom. Like I was tattling on him or something. She thanked me for the heads-up and promised to let him know.

However, once again, the real question was, why would I go through all that effort for a guy who wanted to be left alone? I had other things on my plate, for fuck's sake. Big things...a competition to prepare for, a few custom boards to finish and deliver. And since Jay had confirmed that he was serious about selling his business to me, I had to get my finances in order.

Naturally, my mind wandered to bolstering my savings account. I needed the commission from those boards and prize

money from the competition to hit my goal. If everything went according to plan, I'd have it within a couple of months. And maybe, just maybe, I'd be the proud owner of The Sand and Surf Shop after the holidays.

Happy visions of wearing a Santa hat while sanding boards and pausing to take orders for new ones next holiday season made me smile.

I'd rented the apartment above Jay's shop for years. Other than a short stint at college and the few months I'd shacked up with an ex-girlfriend in San Diego, I'd always lived in Seal Beach. My folks actually still lived on 10th Street in the same house where they'd raised my brother and me. Property values had skyrocketed around them, and most of their old neighbors had cashed out a while ago, but according to my parents, they weren't going anywhere.

Neither was I.

This was my hometown, my beach, my corner of civilization. I wanted to stay where my roots were and do something meaningful. Like own a surf shop. More specifically, I wanted to take over Jay's store.

Jay had gone from crafting surf gear to catering primarily to tourists. I understood that it was necessary to adjust the focus of the business to stay afloat, but in my opinion, he left a lot of money on the table. He had one foot out the door and his eye on retirement. He didn't care about developing a social media presence or taking a bigger role in sponsoring local surf events.

I did. Jay had agreed to sell it to me if I could close escrow at the beginning of the year. It was tight but very doable. With any luck, I could play Superman and save a neighborhood institution before some idiot trendsetter opened yet another bougie ice cream parlor selling twenty-dollar pints of rocky-fucking-road.

I was so into my internal ice cream rant that I didn't notice the lifeguard hailing me, waving both arms above his head, until I bumped into him.

Rex greeted me with a fist bump. “Whoa, someone is either sleepy or in need of a serious caffeine boost.”

“Or both. I need an early night,” I admitted, propping my board in the sand lengthwise and observing my friend.

Rex was six two like me and had roughly the same swimmer’s build. His wavy beach-blond hair was longer, though, and his curls usually spilled out the sides of his ubiquitous baseball cap. But his infectious smile was the first thing anyone noticed about him. Rex was the jolliest dude I’d ever met. Nothing got him down for long. People like that were good for the soul.

“Not tonight, amigo. We promised to go to Lance’s show in Long Beach. Do *not* try to bow out.”

“What time is his band going on?”

“Nine p.m.” Rex chuckled when I groaned aloud. “Take a nap, old man. There’s a big group of us going to dinner first. I’ll pick you up.”

“No, thanks. I’ll meet you there.” I rolled my eyes at his dubious huff. “I promise.”

“Hmph. You’ve been bailing on us a lot lately, dude. Too much work isn’t good for you,” Rex singsonged.

That was a mildly entertaining statement coming from a guy who lifeguarded part-time in the summer and spent the rest of his time working on some action-thriller script. Don’t get me wrong—I wished Rex nothing but success. But he came from a different world with a family fortune that was so old, he wasn’t quite sure where it came from.

Rex had grown up on a yacht and spent summers surfing North Shore in Oahu then moved to Long Beach for college and became a lifeguard. He’d requested to work Seal Beach so he could surf before his shifts, and that was how we’d gotten to know each other.

He studied film and television in college and recently decided he was going to write a screenplay and make millions. But since he came from millions, I had to wonder if his

perspective was a bit wonky when it came to modes of survival.

“Yeah, working all the time can be brutal, but there’s this crazy phenomenon where I don’t get paid unless I work,” I snarked.

“So unfair,” Rex grouched with an exaggerated sigh, hiking his thumb toward the ocean. “Gotta jam. I’m on the tower till noon, and—hey, I almost forgot. Did you know Andy Dugan is back?”

I furrowed my brow. “To visit or what?”

“To surf, dummy. He registered for the Pro Com in Huntington next month.”

“Fuck.”

“I know,” Rex commiserated. “He’s fresh off a big win in Hawaii too. That doesn’t mean you can’t beat him, but you need to shred some bigger sets. It’s been too mellow out here. We should go to Surfrider or The Wedge this weekend. We’ll plan something tonight. Do not forget. I’ll text you the info. Later, bro.”

I waved haphazardly, then picked up my board and balanced it on my head, lost in thought as I stared at the horizon.

Andy fucking Dugan.

Ugh. I’d chosen the Pro Com event because I knew I could win it. Most of the pros in the area didn’t bother with this one. It wasn’t as prestigious as the US or Pacific Open. The prize money was negligible in comparison to those bigger events, but it was perfect for me. I’d actually counted on it. But if Andy was in the competition, this was no longer a sure thing.

Fuck.

THE SALOON WAS a notch above being a true dive. It was dark and musty, but the high tables around the makeshift stage were

shiny and new. So was the pendant lighting overhead. No one here cared about the aesthetics. They came to listen to live music...and check out the eye candy.

I tucked myself into a corner of the bar and nursed a beer while I waited for Rex and the guys. My gaze wandered to the large group of college-aged friends on the far end of the bar, then to the guitarist plucking an old Bob Dylan song on his acoustic a few feet away. I wasn't a connoisseur, but I got the feeling his instrument was for show. Thankfully, he had decent pipes.

I bobbed my head to a sweet rendition of "Mr. Tambourine Man" when a pretty blonde with big tits and a low sultry voice sidled next to me and pointed at my glass.

"My friends and I are buying another round. What are you drinking?"

"Uh..." I held my beer up and smiled. "I'm good for now. Thanks for the offer."

"Sure thing. I'm Eden, by the way." She extended her manicured hand and stepped a little closer.

"Cal. Nice to meet you."

"Are you here alone?"

"I'm meeting friends. I'm always late and they're always giving me hell for it, so I made an effort to beat them here tonight. And I did." I raised my glass in a mock toast and took a sip.

"Well done. But there's no need for you to drink alone. I'm happy to join you or...am I coming on a little too strong?"

I chuckled. "A little strong, but that's okay."

Eden beamed. "Excellent."

We made small talk about the local music scene, the venue, and IPAs. It was pleasant enough, but it got harder to hear her when the guitarist wrapped up his act and the already crowded bar filled with thirsty patrons placing their drink orders before the next act took over. I leaned in to tell her fuck knows what just as someone whistled loudly and yelled her name.

“Someone’s looking for you.”

“They’re looking for their drinks,” she snickered, waving the bartender over. “Since you distracted me, it’s only fair that you help me deliver these to Zoe and Luca and—”

“Whoa. Zoe and Luca?”

I narrowed my eyes and scanned the semidark space, aware that my heart was beating overtime. That didn’t make much sense. Harmless flirting with a pretty girl hadn’t raised my pulse, but the idea that Luca was here made me sweat. I didn’t get it. I chalked it up to the fact that I’d been hoping to run into him and mentally resolve that last lesson.

Hey, the world worked in mysterious ways, and if Eden’s friend Luca was the same guy I’d been thinking about nonstop for weeks, this might be my chance to get some much-needed resolution.

“Yeah. We’re with a big group. Zoe and I are sorority sisters and...wait!” She pulled at my sleeve when I stepped away from the bar. “The drinks.”

“Oh. Right.”

I drained the last of my beer and followed Eden through the press of bodies, carrying three shot glasses. She bumped hips and parted the crowd like a pro before setting her burden on a high table near the window facing 4th Street, leaving me room to put mine down too. Then she opened her arms, introducing me with a dramatic flourish.

“Guys, this is Cal. Cal, this is everyone. Shots!”

Someone shoved a shot glass in my hand. I held it between my thumb and forefinger, scanning the friendly, happily buzzed faces and—

There he was.

And can I just say...Luca was a handsome dude. Dark hair, brown eyes, olive skin, and strong, angular features. The guy had a perfect nose, a razor-sharp jawline, and a slight cleft on his chin. He looked like an Italian movie star in his snug-fitted black tee and dark jeans. Somehow the monochrome ensemble

gave him a bad-boy vibe that had been lost in translation in his rented wetsuit. If he'd been out of his depth that morning, he certainly wasn't now. He exuded easy confidence with a major dose of sex appeal.

Okay, I wasn't sure why adjectives like handsome, sexy, or hunky kept popping up in my mind. They were accurate, but still...

I pushed my random admiring thoughts aside and realized almost immediately that I'd blown that impromptu kiss way out of proportion. Based on posture and the sheer force of "cool" Luca emanated, I really doubted he'd thought twice about it. In fact, his blank, even stare made me think he didn't recognize me at all.

Obviously, whatever had happened was a once-in-a-lifetime fluke. Embarrassment wasn't the reason he hadn't called for another lesson. Nope...he just wasn't interested in learning how to surf.

I slammed the shot, blanching at the feral taste of tequila before closing the distance between us.

"How's it goin', Luca?"

He tilted his chin and gave a wry half grin. "It's going well. Small world, eh?"

"Yeah, a friend of mine is in the next band and I—"

"Cal! OMG!" Zoe jumped forward and wrapped her arms around my waist like we were old buddies, swaying unsteadily as she turned to address her friends. "Guys, this is our surfer man. He teached me and Luca. But then he had to save Luca 'cause he almost drowned. It was like a *Baywatch* moment. Lifeguards showed up and everyzhing..."

Eden was at my side again, oohing and ahing over Zoe's drunken rambling while a half dozen of their friends listened in. I smiled wanly and plotted my escape, feeling like an idiot. I wasn't here to hang out with tipsy college students. It was time to find my people and put the kissing incident behind me. If Luca didn't care, I sure as fuck shouldn't either.

I gently untangled myself from Zoe and stepped aside. “It was good to see you. I should meet up with my friends before the band comes on. Thanks for the shot.”

A round of hugs and a passing wave in Luca’s direction later, I was free.

But the bar area was more crowded than ever. The best path to the stage was to maneuver the perimeter. It was jammed near the restrooms too. I glanced around for Rex and pulled my cell out to call him, inching close to the exit.

Just as I cleared the press of bodies, someone tugged on my shirt from behind. I figured it was Rex, but my smile faltered when I turned.

“Oh, it’s you.”

“Yeah. Do you have a second?” Luca asked, pointing at the doorway.

“Uh, I’m supposed to meet my—”

“I know. This will take less than two minutes.” He held my gaze for a moment, then squeezed through the exit.

And of course, I followed.

Luca moved to the corner and stood under a streetlamp with his arms crossed. His defensive stance contrasted with his sheepish expression. He wasn’t outwardly uncomfortable, but I could tell that he wanted to make this short and sweet.

Fine by me.

“I actually haven’t been to Long Beach all summer. I forgot how busy it is on the weekends,” I said, making light albeit lame conversation.

“Mmhmm. My mom told me you called.”

I winced. “I did. Sorry. That was...weird. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Luca chuckled. “It wasn’t weird. It was good customer service. She wants me to use those unclaimed lessons, so she can buy a few more from...how did she put it? ‘That nice

young man who went the extra mile.’ My mom thinks you’re a rock star.”

I pointed at my chest and shrugged nonchalantly. “Well, I’ve been told I look a bit like Mick Jagger.”

“You look nothing like Mick Jagger,” he deadpanned, continuing with a sigh. “You’re hotter. Not to mention super patient and cool and...I fucked up. On top of being the worst surf student ever, I kissed you, ran, and ignored my mom’s request to call you back. To be honest, if I’d happened to see you in there before Eden brought her A game and talked you into joining us, I would have continued ignoring you.”

“Why?”

“ ’Cause I kissed you,” he whisper-hissed. “I guess I can blame it on a near-fatal adrenaline rush, but—”

“You weren’t going to die,” I intercepted.

“I know,” Luca huffed, raking his fingers through his hair. “I know. Adrenaline was definitely a factor, but it’s a poor excuse. I apologize. I’m sorry for the kiss and I’m sorry for being a dick.”

“Forgiven.” I held out my hand, smirking when he stared at it suspiciously.

“Thanks.”

He pressed his palm against mine, shook my hand, and released it. No big deal, right?

Wrong.

My fingers tingled and my heart rate soared to the stratosphere. I played it cool, though. I hooked my thumbs in my belt loops, casually glanced up at the street sign before asking, “So...when do you want to schedule your next lesson?”

Luca barked a laugh. “I’m not doing that again. That was single-handedly the most traumatic thing that’s happened to me since I moved to Cali. A clear sign I should stay closer to shore and away from surfboards.”

“No, no, no. You’ve got that wrong,” I cajoled. “It’s like I tried to tell you...you’ve got to get back on that horse. Or surfboard. Don’t let fear win.”

“I’m not afraid of surfing. It’s more a matter of returning to the scene of the crime.”

“What crime?”

“The kissing crime!” He threw his hands in the air and paced a few feet away.

I pursed my lips to keep my smile in check when he came to a stop in front of me. “Are you going to do it again?”

Luca shrugged. “I didn’t intend to do it the first time around. But what if I accidentally stick my tongue down your throat? Don’t look at me like that. It could happen.”

“I’m willing to take a chance.” I chuckled. “How about Monday?”

He screwed his features into wide-eyed disbelief. “Really?”

“Really.”

“I can’t. School started last week and I can’t be late...yet.”

“Wise choice.” I stepped away from the crosswalk to lean against the building’s façade. “Okay, if you have any open mornings, we’ll make it work. Otherwise, I’ll make time for you on the weekend. Early.”

Luca furrowed his brow. “If I hypothetically agreed, what is ‘early’ to you?”

“Seven a.m.”

“Fuck that.” He snorted with a laugh. “I need my beauty sleep.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to assure him that he didn’t, but that was a strange sentiment coming from another guy. Wasn’t it?

“Early bird gets the worm and all that,” I singsonged.

“Hmph. I’ll think about it...someday.”

“Sounds fair. Gimme your phone number.” I handed over my cell and let him add his contact info. “I’m free tomorrow morning...just sayin’.”

I was teasing. I was more interested in coaxing an incredulous reaction than anything. And Luca didn’t disappoint. He put his hands on his hips and shook his head in mock consternation.

“You’re nuts. Certifiable. I wouldn’t want to hang out with hungover me if I were you.”

“I’ve seen you barf. Does it get worse?”

He opened his mouth and closed it. “Wow, I really was a mess that day.”

“You weren’t *that* bad,” I chided playfully.

“Liar,” Luca scoffed. “All right. Call me or text me. We’ll have a redo and next time, I promise not to kiss you.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you did,” I replied, unthinking.

We both froze.

I wasn’t sure who was more surprised. My jaw unhinged while he cocked his head and really looked at me for the first time that night, his eyes roaming my face as if searching for clues.

“So kissing might be okay,” he hummed, narrowing his eyes.

I felt his gaze like a physical touch. It had never occurred to me to wonder how another man saw me, but I had to admit, the flash of naked desire in his expression did something for me.

This was a new one. Luca was gay, or maybe bi. Either way, he was plainly interested in me...and I didn’t hate it. In fact, my jeans hugged my crotch a little too tightly, which meant my body appreciated his interest and maybe shared it. And that was pretty...gay.

Was I okay with that?

Yeah...I was.

Fun fact about me. I'd suspected I wasn't one hundred percent straight since high school, but I figured that occasionally checking out another guy's physique just put me in a mildly curious category. To be clear, my definition of "mildly curious" was more of a nod of acceptance than a tangible admission of bi-ness.

I was completely in favor of following your heart and doing whatever and whoever felt right. Dudes with dudes, cool. Girls with girls, also cool.

I didn't think *I'd* actually ever want to touch a man, though.

Until now.

'Cause right this very second, I wanted to touch Luca.

And I wanted to kiss him.

"I'd be cool with it," I said in a huskier than normal voice.

Luca chuckled softly.

"Then do it," he taunted.

"Now? You want me to..." I gestured between us.

"If you want...yes."

Yeah, I wanted to.

I didn't question the sudden surge of desire. I just went with it. I set my hand on his shoulder and palmed his neck, drawing him close.

My heart hammered in my chest when my nose brushed his. A wicked thrill raced along my spine at the feel of his breath on my lips, his eyes locked on mine. No doubt he wondered what had gotten into me or how many shots I'd had.

But he didn't know me, so he had no way of knowing how fucking intense and exciting it felt to be this close to him.

And I hadn't even kissed him yet.

I swallowed hard, then gently pressed my lips to his. Luca didn't move. He didn't try to deepen the connection, nor did he pull away. I knew immediately that he was giving me a

chance to change my mind before this subtle exploration turned into something more.

While I appreciated the gesture, I wasn't going anywhere now.

I tilted my chin slightly and licked his lips. Luca growled. He stayed perfectly still, though I could feel tension rolling over him in a needy wave. It should have been enough to set off internal alarm bells and remind me that Luca was a powerful, masculine dude. He was strong, fit, and undeniably male.

Luca was my height, but he outweighed me by at least twenty pounds of sheer muscle. The contrast of his obvious strength with this soft touch was heady stuff. Asking for more might be like unleashing a genie from a bottle. It could be more than I could handle.

There was only one way to find out.

I pushed my tongue between his lips and slid it alongside his. Fuck, this was good. Intense and immediately consuming—the way bad ideas sometimes were. But this was a good idea and I didn't want to miss a single detail—like the friction of his scruff, the intoxicating smell of his cologne, and the oddly compelling taste of beer and cinnamon.

I dove deeper still, twisting and sucking until my experiment felt more like a true exploration. Damn, I liked this. A lot. I nipped his lower lip and licked it better, savoring him like a fine wine.

Luca groaned...a low, needy sound that seemed to come from his toes. That was my only warning before he grasped my face between his hands and backed me against the shadowy side of the building.

He cradled my chin with one hand and braced himself on the wall with the other, effectively shielding me from the street and caging me at the same time. The rough stucco dug into my shoulder, but I didn't move a muscle. He surrounded me, taking up every inch of space and breathing room. He didn't care if anyone noticed us and honestly, neither did I.

“Now what?” I rasped.

Luca didn't answer. He just smiled—a lopsided, roguish upturn of the lips that should have pissed me off or at least made me want to take over. But he set his thumb on my bottom lip, rubbing it before licking it, and driving his tongue inside.

He immediately turned up the heat and challenged me to keep up. He was rough and demanding one moment, tender and almost sweet the next. And I was right there with him, responding with a hunger I'd never felt for anyone...ever.

I didn't want to come up for air, but eventually the need for oxygen broke what had to be the hottest kiss of my life. I studied his chiseled features in the shadows and did a quick mental analysis.

Was I still okay with this? Yes.

Did I feel different? Not really...or maybe a little?

Whatever. If I felt different, it wasn't a negative. I felt like I'd met my match. Not in a romantic sense. For fuck's sake, I barely knew the guy.

No, this was more about discovering I had an innate appreciation for an even exchange of power. Apparently something in me responded to rough kisses and dominant manhandling...as my raging boner could attest.

My cock pulsed behind my zipper. The urge to adjust myself was strong, but I didn't want to draw attention to my condition. And no, I wasn't going to peek at Luca's crotch. No way. I had to play this cool.

I straightened from the wall when he stepped aside, eyeing me warily. No doubt he expected me to freak out. That wasn't going to happen, but when an awkward silence stretched between us, I willed him to break it, 'cause I sure as fuck didn't know what to say.

“What time do you want to meet tomorrow?” Luca asked in a gravelly tone.

“Seven.”

“No fucking way.”

My lips twitched in amusement. “Eight.”

“Eight thirty,” he countered.

I pulled my keys from my pocket. “Fine. Meet me at the surf shop.”

“You’re not going back to the bar?”

“Not in the mood. See ya.”

“Wait.” Luca moved under the streetlamp. The hazy illumination had a halo effect that made him look like a superhero making an unexpected appearance in the nick of time.

“What is it?”

“Are we cool? You’re not gonna freak out or plan my surfing demise, are you? By the way, don’t even think about pawning me off on another instructor. If you’re not suited up and ready for action, I’m not playing.” He furrowed his brow and made a face. “That sounded very sexual, but—”

I barked a laugh. “I’m fine, Luca. I’m not freaked out at all. Don’t worry, I’ll be there.”

He nodded and took a step backward.

Traffic whizzed by, neon lights from the diner across the street cast a garish orange glow that somehow fit the manic pulse of the night. A party of friends spilled onto the sidewalk, hooting uproariously. A couple wove between us, holding hands as they grinned at each other. I was aware of everything and everyone around us but oblivious at the same time.

I didn’t understand this connection, yet I had no desire to fight it. I wasn’t nervous or suspicious. I welcomed the distraction from worrying about money and competitions. My focus tended to turn into an unhealthy single-mindedness when I was close to achieving a goal. I was famous for ditching parties or leaving a bar early to work on a newly commissioned board. The sooner I finished, the sooner I got paid, right?

Tonight, my body was on fire, but my mind was oddly serene. The way I saw it, whatever was going to happen, would happen. And I was ready to go along for the ride.

Luca

Have I mentioned that I hated waking up early? Yet not only did I arrive on time the following morning, I had ten minutes to spare. That, my friends, was a testament to my curiosity.

I had no idea what the fuck had happened last night. One minute, I was enjoying a drink with some friends and the next, I'd backed the sexy surfer against the wall and stuck my tongue down his throat. The same guy I'd kissed...and yes, puked in front of a couple of weeks ago. It was a startling turn of events for sure.

And somehow, it had led me to the one stretch of beach I'd sworn to avoid for the rest of my life.

For a fucking surf lesson.

Of course, I wasn't really here for the lesson. I was here for answers. Or maybe I just needed reassurance that I hadn't dreamed the whole episode.

I found a prime parking spot on Ocean Street and fed quarters into the meter while gazing out at the pristine sand and the sparkling Pacific in the distance. A few joggers and power walkers dotted the boardwalk, but that was it. I was surprised there weren't more people out and about, enjoying what promised to be a beautiful September day with mild temps and plenty of sunshine.

I lifted my face to the sky as I waited at the light, then refocused to study the aptly named The Sand and Surf Shop across the street. The blue-stucco exterior had a kitschy retro vibe with old-school signage hanging from a post above the entrance. And a life-sized cutout of a cartoon dude astride a red-and-yellow striped surfboard circa-1950 greeted customers at the door. It was touristy but cool at the same time.

A bell chimed when I pushed the door open a minute later, and a pretty blonde with wild curly hair glanced up. She hung a wetsuit on a peg on the wall before greeting me with a winning smile.

“Good morning. Can I help you?”

I pulled my sunglasses off and nodded. “Yeah, I have a lesson with Cal.”

She frowned. “Cal? Are you sure? I don’t think he’s working today, but—”

“Hey, there.” Cal popped his head around a corner and waved. “He’s with me, Sarah. Gimme a minute. I’ll be right there. Or...you can come upstairs.”

“Um...okay.” When he disappeared, I narrowed my gaze and addressed the girl, who looked to be about my age. “Where am I going exactly?”

She gestured toward a narrow doorway beside the reception desk. “The stairs are through there. I’m Sarah, by the way.”

“I’m Luca.”

Her smile widened. “I know. You’re in my macro econ class. I try to sit on the side of the room and slouch in my chair as much as possible. If the professor calls on me to ask any tough questions, I’m doomed. In fact, I’m not sure how I’m going to handle the semester.”

“You’ll do fine. What’s your major?” I asked conversationally.

“Econ. See? I told you I’m doomed.”

I chuckled. “I’m a business major. So far, I’m following along okay, but I reserve the right to join you on the side if necessary.”

“Deal. Nice to meet you, Luca.”

“You too.”

I waved and headed into the adjacent area, noting the racks of surfboards and miscellaneous beachy equipment on my way to the staircase. Swim trunks, snorkel gear, towels, paddle ball sets...apparently, this shop rented or sold a little bit of everything.

I paused on the landing and knocked on the open door before peeking inside.

Then nearly swallowing my tongue at the sight of Cal wiggling his ass into his wetsuit.

Fuck, he was hot. Toned, tanned, and fit.

Cal stood in the middle of the small living room, bathed in sunlight streaming through the picture window next to a leather sofa. Shadows highlighted the contoured grooves of his muscled back and broad shoulders. He could have been posing for a painting or a marble statue depicting the modern-day ideal of a god. Except for the wiggling part.

And that ass was all kinds of distracting. So was his smile.

He turned abruptly and set his hands on his hips. “Hey. You made it.”

“Yeah.” I checked out his apartment to keep from staring at him. I was in serious danger of popping wood...not so easy to hide in a pair of board shorts. “This is nice.”

Lame adjective, but it worked. The living area was a glorified box with a sofa and flat-screen on one side and a kitchenette on the other. The ceilings were low, the carpet was a nondescript oatmeal color, and the basic white walls were decorated with framed retro surfing posters. It was like any basic bachelor pad for sure...until you looked out the window at the beach and the endless stretch of blue beyond.

“Incredible, huh?” Cal commented, coming to stand beside me.

“Fucking amazing.” I didn’t bother hiding my awe. The view was absolutely stunning: the pier, the sand, and the sea. In a way, this sliver of coastline encapsulated my inspiration to move west. It was so inviting and promising. Like a fresh start. “I can’t believe you wake up to this.”

“I don’t. My room overlooks the alley.” He snorted. “But if you think this is cool, wait till you see the deck. It’ll blow you away. Want some coffee?”

“Um, sure. Thanks.”

I followed him to the kitchen area, thanking him when he handed over a cup. He poured himself one, then inclined his head. “This way.”

He led me through his bedroom—a small, darkened room with an unmade king-sized bed, lined with surfboards—to a closet...that turned out to be a narrow stairwell. We climbed a short set of stairs to another door. Cal unbolted the lock, flung it open, and stepped onto a large rooftop deck.

And...wow!

I scanned the horizon as salt air and a mild ocean breeze washed over me. Any nerves and tension I’d been holding on to faded in an instant. This was heaven.

“How did you luck into this place? It’s....insane.” I hummed reverently.

Cal cradled his coffee in both hands and took a sip. “I’ve practically lived at this store my whole life. My grandparents were friends with Jay’s parents...and my folks are friends with Jay and his wife. I went to school with Jay’s kids too. I actually dated his daughter, Hannah, for a while.”

“High school sweetheart?”

“No, the couple part happened in college. And it ended a while ago.”

“Rough breakup?”

I wasn't sure why I pressed. Maybe I needed to be reminded that this guy was mostly straight and two rogue kisses weren't going to change that.

"Yeah, that was...a rough one." Cal shrugged as if pushing away a memory. "Anyway, I've always worked here. After school, weekends, summer jobs...Jay's parents lived in the room upstairs when they first bought the building, but when they died, it became an extra storage room. Big-ass spiders took over the kitchen and I'm pretty sure there was a family of mice there for a while too."

"Gross."

"It got kinda nasty. One day, Jay asked me to grab a box up here, and the wheels started turning. I told him I'd clean it up and reorganize the storage room downstairs so he didn't lose any space...if he rented it to me. He liked the idea. Better yet, he liked having someone on hand at the shop—especially for when he retires, which supposedly is happening in January."

"Oh. Will you still run the store for him?"

"I could, but I'm hoping to do it for *me*. I want to buy the business," Cal replied matter-of-factly.

"Wow. Really? That sounds so...grown up."

He snickered. "Allegedly, I'm an adult, so—"

"Ew."

"Ew?"

"Yeah, don't admit you're an adult. In my experience, that's exactly when everyone starts looking to you for answers. Trust me, it's a trap. Stay young, my friend," I advised sagely, taking another sip.

This time, Cal guffawed. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-three. And you're...let me guess—forty?"

"Fuck off," he chided without heat. "I'm twenty-nine."

"Close enough." I held a hand up in surrender and grinned when he scowled at me. "I'm kidding. Owning a place like

this...wow. How'd you save that kind of dough? Rob a bank? Win the lottery?"

He shook his head, his lips curled in amusement. "I've saved like a miser since high school and a couple of years ago, I invested my money. So far, so good."

"I'm very impressed."

"Don't be too impressed. It's not official yet. Just a dream. But in the meantime, I get to live here, so I really can't complain."

"It's a good dream," I agreed softly.

"What's yours?"

"Surviving another day on a surfboard. If I can do that without embarrassing myself again, even better."

Cal smiled reassuringly. "That won't be a problem. You ready to do this?"

I raised my coffee in a mock toast and sighed theatrically. "Ready as ever."

"Let's get you a wetsuit and a board. You can leave your wallet and keys in my apartment if you want. That way you don't have to fuss with a locker and paperwork."

"Sounds good."

"C'mon." He patted my shoulder as he eased by me.

I followed him to his apartment and set my coffee mug on the counter next to his. He said something about grabbing the sunscreen in his bedroom and meeting me downstairs.

And somewhere in this ho-hum cordial dance, I realized my window of opportunity was closing. A morning spent second-guessing my every move sounded like hell. It was better to get any awkward discussions out of the way once and for all. If he wasn't going to address the elephant in the room, I would.

"Wait." I grabbed Cal's wrist before he walked away. "Are we going to talk about last night, or are we going to pretend it didn't happen? Either way is cool by me. Just curious. Okay,

that's a lie. I'd prefer to get this conversation over with. This is already weird enough as it is."

Cal didn't shake me off or break eye contact. His gaze was focused and steady, without a trace of agitation or discomfort. I got the feeling he was choosing his words carefully and maybe trying to find a nice way to tell me not to get any ideas. After all, a kiss was just a kiss. And a drunken kiss in the dark wasn't worth mentioning.

Except neither of us had been drunk last night. I remembered everything, I mused, staring at his mouth.

Cal rubbed his scruffy jaw thoughtfully. "We can talk now."

"Okay, cool. You start."

He chuckled and pointed at his chest. "Why me?"

" 'Cause you kissed me. And you're supposed to be straight. So, either that kiss was meant to satisfy a bi-curious moment, or maybe you were evening out the score so I wouldn't feel weird about taking another surf lesson. Or you were punishing me for—"

"Punishing you?" Cal intercepted.

"Yeah, for being an idiot."

"Wow. That's kind of a stretch," he huffed. "You're overthinking this, big-time."

"I excel at overthinking. If overthinking were an Olympic sport, I'd hold the world record in every category possible." I paced to the window and back, pushing my fingers through my hair. "What am I gonna have for breakfast? I dunno, let me overthink this. Why did the Uber driver give me a funny look last night? I probably had something in my teeth. But I should overthink it, just in case."

Cal busted up laughing. "You're kind of funny."

"I am. I'm fucking hysterical. Usually by accident. I'm the guy who waltzes into a club giving high fives and trips the second I get on the dance floor—or hits on a guy whose

boyfriend suddenly appears and turns out to be a former professional linebacker. Or the guy who—”

He held up his hand, his eyes creased with ready humor. “I get it. You’re a train wreck.”

I gave a self-deprecating sigh. “That part started when I moved to SoCal, though. I used to be much smoother.”

“So, this is California’s fault?”

“Hell, yes. But I love it here, so I’m gonna have to figure out how to cope with being unintentionally entertaining until I find my groove again.”

Cal smiled. “You’re used to being number one, huh?”

“Something like that. Let’s just say, I’m used to knowing what I’m doing. And I don’t really know why I’m here.”

He studied me for a moment, then stepped closer. “You already told me why you’re here. You wanted to know if I meant to kiss you and if so...why.”

“Oh, yeah...I am very curious about that.” I inclined my head and waggled my fingers meaningfully. “Lay it on me. I need to process this and ideally, stop crushing on you.”

“You have a crush on me?” he asked incredulously, pointing at his toned chest.

“Of course, I do. You’re hot. No, you’re not just hot... you’re sexy. The kind of sexy that doesn’t try too hard or—”

Cal grabbed my arm and crashed his mouth over mine.

He’d caught me off guard for the second time in less than twenty-four hours, but I was a quick study. I inched back slightly, softening the contact as I licked his lips. Cal got the message. He pushed his tongue inside and picked up where we left off last night.

Sidenote, I loved kissing. And not to brag, but I was very good at it. It didn’t matter if he was trying to prove something to himself or just shut me up. I was sharper than I’d been last night and determined to make this kiss count.

I set my hands on Cal's hips, where the rubbery wetsuit met skin and tilted my chin. Fuck, he tasted good...like coffee and strawberries. And he was better at kissing a man than he'd probably counted on. He wasn't hesitant or skittish. He seemed to gain confidence with every nip, stroke, and languid glide of his tongue. Before I knew it, he took over completely.

Cal wrapped his fingers around my nape, pulling me closer still. I stumbled into him and acted on instinct, grinding shamelessly.

Oh, wow.

Between my thin board shorts and his skin-tight wetsuit, there was no hiding how hard we both were. My cock ached. I couldn't resist dragging my pole alongside his one more time. He groaned aloud, which I took as a good sign, but I paused for a beat to give him a chance to push me away.

He didn't.

He growled as if in frustration, then gripped my ass, holding me still while he bucked insistently. And he never stopped kissing me. Molten-hot kisses that mirrored the feverish sway of our hips. We were racing toward dangerous territory. As desperate as I was for friction, I didn't want him to regret this. Or regret me.

I broke for air and stepped aside.

Cal blinked, sweeping his tongue across his bottom lip in an unintentionally sexy maneuver that made me want to tackle him to the sofa and wiggle that wetsuit off his ass.

"Wow, that was..."

When he didn't continue, I prodded. "Weird or good?"

"Very good. You're the first guy I've ever...you know."

"Kissed?"

"That was more than a kiss," he huffed, gesturing at his prominent bulge. "I liked it."

"Me too." I wracked my brain for a seamless transition back to reality, but then he gripped himself through his

wetsuit, proudly showing off the outline of his impressive erection. I swallowed around the desert in my mouth. “Holy fuck. What are you doing?”

Cal gripped his sack with one hand and rubbed the palm of his other hand against his length. “I have no idea what I’m doing, but I want to do more. Show me.”

Whoa.

Was this real? I didn’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t this.

“Show you?” I choked. “What do you...what do you mean?”

“What comes next? We’re both hard. We want the same thing, don’t we?”

“Good question. What do *you* want?”

Cal gave a pained half laugh and squeezed his dick. “I need some release here, Luca. Can you help me out?”

I raised my brows, nodding slowly. “Yeah, I could do that. But I’d have to touch you.”

“Do it.”

Cal tucked his thumbs under the fabric at his hips and peeled it over his ass, freeing his cock so it bobbed in the air between us.

Okay, then.

I stepped closer, my hand hovering over his shaft. He met my gaze and held it...as if he were daring me, wondering if I’d follow through.

Challenge accepted. I closed my fingers and stroked him from base to tip. His sexy, low moan spurred me on. I recaptured his mouth, sucking his tongue while I jacked him. Cal moved his hips to match my rhythm. I tightened my hold, then rested my free hand on his ass and squeezed. He grunted in response and tugged at my hair.

“You like that, huh?”

“Oh, yeah. I could come from this. I’m already close,” he whispered.

I didn’t think twice. I dropped to my knees, yanked his wetsuit farther down his long legs, and took him in my mouth.

Here’s the thing about blowjobs...I loved giving and receiving. I’d honed my craft over the years, and I liked to think I was pretty good at them. I knew better than to go in hot. Making a guy come right away wasn’t the goal. I knew every trick to draw out pleasure. Squeeze his dick, move on to his balls, tease his slit... No kidding. I could write a “how to” advice column.

All that knowledge didn’t do me any good right now. I was too strung out and too eager to strategize my game. I didn’t want to think; I just wanted to do.

So, I twirled my tongue around his wide mushroom head a few times, swallowed him whole...and immediately gagged. In my defense, Cal was a big man. His cock was thick and long. I backed off and tried again, alternately tracing the prominent vein along his shaft with the tip of my tongue before sucking him to the root. I played with his balls while I worked him over, fondling them as I bobbed my head and gave myself over to sensation.

I didn’t mind being on my knees. I didn’t mind having my hair pulled or my mouth used. In fact, I loved it. But I loved it more when my cock was in on the action. I untied my drawstring and pushed the thin fabric over my ass, sighing as I stroked myself. I was maybe two pulls in when I felt his balls tighten.

I released him with a pop and sat on my heels.

“Do you want to come?” I asked in a smoky voice, giving Cal a lopsided smile when he licked his lips and nodded. I tapped his cock to my bottom lip and stared up at him. “Do it. I’m ready for you.”

That was all the encouragement he needed.

Cum spurted over my lips a moment later. I licked them clean, then opened my mouth and sucked. My fist flew over

my cock as I swallowed every last bit. The taste of him was enough to push me close to the edge. I was right there...right

Cal dropped to his knees in front of me. He flattened his palms over my chest and wrapped one hand around my neck. He slipped his tongue between my lips and that was the end of me. Jizz shot over my fist and probably on the rug or his wetsuit. I didn't look. I was too busy making out with the sexy surfer and trying my best not to keel over with the force of my orgasm.

He pulled back gently, licking his swollen lips as he studied me. I'd been with a couple of curious or closeted bi dudes, so I knew this could play out a number of different ways. He might suddenly remember he was busy today, or he might get angry and suggest I'd tricked him or—

“You're overthinking again, huh?”

I released a long stream of air. “Yeah, I am. But I'm not going to apologize for what we just did.”

“God, I hope not. That might have been the best blowjob I've had in months.”

I furrowed my brow. “*Might* have been?”

Cal grinned. “Excuse me, I misspoke. That was *the* best BJ ever. No question.”

“Good answer.” I fell onto my ass and mustered a wobbly smile. “This is usually where things get weird. Do you want me to leave?”

“No. I want you to stay right here.” He hopped to his feet and hooked his thumb toward his bedroom. “I'm gonna get us a towel.”

When he returned, we cleaned up and redressed in silence. It took everything I had not to ask direct, pointed questions about his state of mind. I only sort of succeeded.

“Do we surf now?”

“Yeah.” Cal nodded as he grabbed a couple of water bottles from the fridge, handing me one. “But we should

probably get this out of the way.”

Ah, here we go.

I uncapped the water and took a swig. “Okay...”

“Quit looking at me like you think I’m a time bomb ready to blow at any second. I wanted that, and I liked it. A lot.”

“Question...did I turn you gay?” I deadpanned.

He snorted in amusement. “Do you have that kind of power?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. If I do, it’s new and not necessarily the superpower I was hoping for. I’d rather have an invisible cloak or the ability to time travel. But hey, this was good. The thing is...I know my motivation. I’m queer, I’m attracted to you, and I’m going through a quasi-self-destructive phase where my brain has gone into daredevil mode. Try a dangerous sport, kiss a straight guy, blow a straight guy...you know, the usual. What’s yours?”

Cal chuckled. “Do I need motivation?”

“Well...yeah. Every action is motivated by thought or impulse. Did you ever think about...this?” I gestured between us.

“Definitely.” He pursed his lips at my dumbfounded expression. “I’m serious. I’ve always wondered what it would be like. And I’ve found quite a few dudes attractive in the past. But I was either in a relationship or not brave enough to make a move. You made the move for me, and I haven’t stopped thinking about you since that first *terrible* surf lesson.”

“You weren’t thinking ‘Gee, I never want to see that maniac again’?”

“Nope. The opposite. I almost didn’t go to the bar last night. I have a few boards to finish downstairs and I’m working against the clock to get them done so I can take on a few more commissions. But my friends hounded me to go, so I did. And I’m glad.”

“You didn’t stay.”

“No, I wasn’t that brave,” he huffed. “I didn’t think I could be in the same space with you and not...touch you. But I didn’t want to be able to blame alcohol. I wanted you to come to me. I guess I needed to know you were still interested. I didn’t think we’d end up with our dicks out so soon, but...I’m not complaining, ’cause I hoped we would eventually. Call me curious, call me a late bi bloomer, call me horny. All of those labels probably apply.”

I raked my teeth over my bottom lip thoughtfully. His hungry stare didn’t escape my attention. His eyes were glued to my mouth. I’d bet big bucks he was remembering my lips around his cock.

He wasn’t kidding. He wanted me. He wanted to explore this attraction, and I wanted to let him. But of course, I was me. I needed plain-speak and clarification. It would be far too easy to make a fool of myself, and I’d done enough of that already.

“Are you gonna want to do this again?”

Cal’s devilish grin spoke for him, but he inclined his head and replied, “Fuck, yes.”

“Cool. You know, it’s good to give a sport a second chance. I think I’m gonna like surfing.”

He barked a laugh, then left his water bottle on the counter, ruffling my hair on his way to the door. “I’m going to make sure you do.”

My brows rose to my hairline and stayed there as I followed him down the narrow stairway to the store.

This surfing thing had turned out to be my best idea since...ever.

But was it really that simple?

Don’t get me wrong, My standards were exceedingly low at the moment. I’d gone through a string of one-night stands for months on end with men I hadn’t exchanged more than a few words with, and I couldn’t remember any of their names. I wasn’t proud of that. It was just a fact.

Cal wasn't like those other guys. He seemed to be a "still waters run deep" type. But I didn't know him...at all. I was going on horndog instincts and wild attraction. I had two surf lessons in reserve, and if they both ended with me on my knees with Cal's dick in my mouth, I wouldn't complain.

C al

One month later, the instructor had become a pupil.

Hey, I'd gone into this with zero expectations. I hadn't been looking for a lover—male or female, and I certainly never thought I'd be in the market for a mutually beneficial “arrangement” with an extremely hot dude.

Life was good.

I wasn't sure it was a fair trade, but it wasn't like we had a contract. We just did what felt right.

I gave Luca surf lessons and he sucked my cock. Often. I sucked his too, but...more about that later.

Let's talk surfing first.

I never set out to be a surf instructor. I wanted to be a surf hero...thank you very much. The only way to achieve that goal was to be a standout. The guy who nailed important competitions worldwide.

Sadly, that hadn't panned out. So I turned my focus to building a name by making custom boards. With any luck, my long-term plan might make me a different kind of surf hero. The kind who sponsored new talent and provided gear to the pros. In the meantime, I worked for Jay doing whatever he needed at the shop and stealing away to craft new orders in my free time.

Instructing newbies was just part of the gig, but I had to admit, there was something innately satisfying about teaching a newbie how to surf.

Luca went from barely balancing on his stomach on a board to riding his first wave within a week. Granted, he stood for less than ten seconds and wiped out pretty hard in the beginning, but he kept trying. He got knocked down and hopped back on time after time.

Within two weeks, he'd learned to pay attention to the wind and gauge the height of the sets, which helped him find his footing more easily. By week three, he'd mastered his crouch-to-standing maneuver. He grew steadier at each outing, and that steadiness gave him confidence.

Within a month, he could surf.

He might not be ready for big waves, but he'd get there.

Luca's progression was fun to watch. Honestly, he was the best kind of pupil—enthusiastic, smart, and naturally athletic. He'd laughingly told me his strategy to chase waves like he chased after a puck. Two different animals, but he had the right idea. The field of play was the ocean rather than the ice rink, but knowing how to read opportunity and finesse dangerous situations into a win was an invaluable skill set for all sports.

That struggle with uncertainty he suffered on day one didn't happen again. He wouldn't let it. He was determined to become a good surfer, and I had no doubt he would be. Luca didn't do anything in small measures. He was extremely goal-oriented. If he set his mind to something, he worked hard to make it a reality.

I could see the fire in his brown eyes, his squared shoulders, and the firm line of his mouth. The same mouth that had sucked my dick in the shower earlier this morning.

Oops. Boner alert.

I used my board as a shield and clandestinely adjusted myself as I watched him in action, leaning into the barrel of a

wave. His feet were set, his position was perfect, now he just had to maintain his balance all the way in.

“Your new student is doing pretty well out there,” Rex commented, shaking water from his hair as he joined me on the shoreline with his surfboard tucked under his arm.

I nodded but made sure I had my expression under control before I glanced sideways.

“Yeah, he is.”

Fact...it was getting harder to hide the stupid smile on my face lately. It popped up out of nowhere all the damn time and took on a life of its own without my permission. If anyone knew why, they'd probably understand completely. But Luca and I kept this thing between us on the DL.

Look, I wasn't ashamed. I just didn't know how to explain...us. I wasn't even sure how to talk about it, and I knew Luca felt the same way. Let's face it, surf-instructor-slash-student-with-benefits sounded sleazy. And we were so much more than fuck buddies with a seedy arrangement.

We'd become friends.

We'd started over with a fresh slate the morning he blew me, or the day we referred to as BJ Sunday. After a mishap-free lesson, we'd agreed to meet the following Tuesday morning for another. An early surf lesson followed by a hand job in the shower turned out to be the beginning of a new trend. Over the past month, we'd met three days a week on average—usually on mornings we were both free till nine or ten.

We'd surf, peel off our wetsuits, and head to my apartment via the side entrance, avoiding the shop and anyone working there. And when we reached my place, we'd strip out of our trunks and come together in a naked frenzy, sucking face and writhing against each other like a couple of sex-starved maniacs.

Electricity sparked and hummed between us, then tipped into an inferno. I couldn't get close enough fast enough. I thought I'd been here before with previous lovers. The joy of

discovery was part of the fun of connecting with someone new. This was different somehow. More intense, more carnal...and sometimes, a little savage.

A major part of the thrill was that this was literally virgin territory for me. I'd never touched a man, and I now had free rein to explore a sexy ex-hockey player in the privacy of my own apartment. I took advantage of every opportunity and got bolder each time. That first week, I let him lead. I got off on the role reversal. Luca was the teacher in the bedroom and he led by unfettered, unbridled example.

To be fair, he was cautious with me in the beginning. He asked if I was okay a lot. He moved slowly, giving me space to change my mind. He did most of the work...or tutoring. He wanted me to get used to the idea of being touched by a man. He didn't take, he gave. He sucked me, stroked me, kissed me till I couldn't see straight, and held me when I trembled in the aftermath. It was kind of...beautiful.

But I always wanted more, and I got bolder each time.

Every first opened a whole new world to me. The first time I wrapped my fingers around his cock and stroked him to orgasm. The first time I licked my way down his gorgeous body, kissing the scars on his hip and the wicked gash on his calf. The first time I pressed my dick against his and jerked us together, sucking our combined cum from my fingers. The first time I traced his crack and brushed a finger across his hole, wondering if he'd let me fuck him.

Actually, I knew he would. He was that kind of lover. Pleasure was the name of the game, and it wasn't in his nature to hold back. I fucking loved that.

Luca's lusty, "go for it" attitude was inspirational. Hell, it inspired me to drop to my knees and suck his cock. I wasn't great at it. I was a little sloppy and I gagged easily, but Luca didn't seem to mind. Then again, he was exuberant about everything. And it seeped into every facet of his life.

Luca was adventurous and charming. He made friends easily, dazzling people with his quick wit, boundless energy, and *joie de vivre*. I knew a few guys like that and honestly,

they annoyed the fuck out of me. But Luca was a force of nature. His joy was contagious, his frustration palpable. I couldn't help rooting for him. His happiness made me happy. Every day, the physical connection grew and a real friendship formed.

Within a month, we'd gone from tentative lovers to a couple of guys who wanted to be together whenever possible.

"...the twelve-foot sets are epic. If we leave at five a.m., we'll miss traffic and be one of the first ones in the water at sunrise. We have to go tomorrow, though. Are you up for it?" Rex asked conversationally.

I tore my gaze from Luca and replayed Rex's question in my head. "What? Where?"

"Dude," he huffed irritably, smacking me upside the head. "Newport, the Wedge, tomorrow. What's the matter with you? We've talked about this. Get over last weekend's loss and get ready for the next competition."

Ugh. Side note...I came in third at Pro Com. Second place would have been respectable behind Andy Dugan, but third was...lame. There was no prize money and no glory. I wasn't surprised I didn't do well. I hadn't been prepared.

Now it was early October, and I was thirty grand shy of my goal. I took on a ton of new commissions and private lessons, hoping to shore up the money I needed for a down payment. And at Rex's insistence, I signed up for the Holiday Classic. Talk about a long shot.

"It's two months away, Rex."

"That's nothing. Big competition, baby. They'll blow you out of the water if you're not prepared." Rex cast an annoyed glance toward Luca, fist-bumping a couple of surfers at the shoreline. "You're spending a lot of time with that guy. He's cool. I like him. But it's time you could be spending conquering big waves. You've gotta be ready, man."

"Ready for what?" Luca strode forward, balancing his board on his head. His wide grin held just the right amount of mischief. And that body...

I hid my crotch behind my board and smiled. I tried to keep it from spreading too fast—easier said than done. If Rex had an ounce of intuition, he'd know there was more going on between us than casual lessons. Geez, he probably thought Luca paid me to be here. He had no clue I did this for free. No regrets.

“The Holiday Classic. Gotta get this old dude out in the big surf,” Rex replied, patting my shoulder, then narrowing his gaze at me. “I’m picking your ass up at five tomorrow.”

I flipped him off and grunted. “Text me later. I’ll let you know if I can do it.”

“I’ll hold my breath,” Rex snarked. “We’ll talk more at The Brewery tonight. See ya there.”

He paused to give Luca a fist bump before heading toward his car.

I sighed as I turned to Luca. “He’s gonna be pissed when I don’t show up. C’mon. We need to buy coffee. I ran out and haven’t had a chance to go to the store.”

Luca was uncharacteristically quiet as we walked to the shop to leave our boards and change out of our wetsuits. My mind was buzzing with the day’s itinerary—two private lessons, work, and three custom boards to start—but I should have clued in that something was on his mind. Luca was loquacious. He could talk anyone’s ear off about a medley of subjects. Everything was interesting to him, from the number of bars on the main drag in town to the number of seagulls looting the bins behind a popular Chinese takeout spot.

I waited for his silly segue about birds loving moo shu pork as much as he did, but he didn’t say a word until he thanked me for the coffee and led me to a bench facing the ocean.

Low clouds kissed the pier and extended to the waves breaking at the shoreline. I loved this time of year. The air was crisp and clear and better still, tourists were long gone and—

“You should see more of your friends. I feel like I’m taking up too much of your time,” Luca commented, sipping

his coffee, his eyes fixed straight ahead.

I frowned, twisting sideways to rest my knee on the bench between us. “I feel the opposite. I wish I could spend more time with you.”

The knot in my stomach unraveled when he grinned. “Me too.”

I propped my elbow on the back of the bench and combed my fingers through the hair at his nape. We were in public in daylight, and I didn’t give a fuck who saw. I had to touch him. Luca widened his eyes at the contact but didn’t push me away. Maybe he sensed I was trying on a new hat. I needed to know what it felt like to be...out. Even if it was in the smallest way.

“I love my friends, but I don’t love partying. I’ve done my share and someone else’s too. If I go to that bar tonight, I’ll spend the whole time thinking about the boards I need to sand or the guy I wish was sucking my dick.”

Luca snickered. “I’ve created a monster.”

“Maybe so,” I conceded with a careless shrug.

“What if I sanded the boards for you so you could have a beer with your friends? And when you got home, I’d be waiting for you naked on all fours with my ass in the air, ready to suck your dick or...whatever else you felt like doing.”

“Whatever I...” I swallowed slowly to avoid choking on my coffee.

“Yes. Whatever.” He flashed a Cheshire cat grin.

“Just to clarify...what are we saying here? Are we talking about...” I sat up taller and glanced over my shoulder at the pedestrians speed-walking nearby, then stage-whispered, “Anal sex?”

Luca threw his head back and guffawed. “We could be. But we don’t have to do anything at all. I’m serious about helping you too.”

“That’s nice of you, but...why?”

“ ’Cause I like you, and I want you to do well. I don't like the idea that I'm taking from you and not giving anything in return.”

“We both know that's not true,” I snorted. “I appreciate the offer, but I'd have to teach you how to sand and buff.”

“I'm an expert sander and buffer,” Luca huffed. “And I'm good at reading situations. All those morning BJ's have taken you from your training. I don't want to be the reason you miss an opportunity. And I'm not talking about winning a competition. You're not in it for the glory. You need the money.”

“True, but—”

He held his hand up before I could argue. “Then let me help. You know I'm a fast learner. You can teach me to do some basics.”

“Sure, but you must be busy too.”

Luca inhaled deeply and stared out to sea. “Not busy enough. I'm taking one class that counts toward my major. The rest are electives...Photography, History of the Beatles, and Chess 101. It's a blast. If I'd known how awesome SoCal was, I would've fucked up my Achilles my freshman year so I could hang out at the beach and party with the cool kids sooner.”

“You hate it here,” I deadpanned.

“Nah, I like it just fine. I've met some good people. But I miss hockey. A lot. I miss things about it that surprise me too...like waking up early for practice, running drills, and geez...having teammates. I even miss the annoying ones.” He twisted on the bench to face me. “There was this D-man, Mark Jennowski, on my team. The guy was a prick. He was obnoxious, full of himself, and so sure he was always right, even after he was proved wrong. Get this...he had a theory that hair and nails grow after death.”

I chuckled. “Really?”

“Yep. He'd waltz into the locker room every other day spouting some false claim. Everyone would groan and try to

be the first to debunk his theories. We'd have these mad Google forums where we'd take turns listing facts."

"Like what?"

"Uh...let me think." He tapped his temple and squinted. "Baby flamingos are born gray, not pink. Elephants suck on their trunks for comfort, like human babies suck on their thumbs. Ooh! Get this one. All clownfish are born male."

"No way."

"Way," he countered with a laugh. "Do not ask me in-depth questions about clownfish. I know they're orange, but that's it. I ceased to care after I schooled Jennowski's ass."

I grinned, then sipped my coffee. "Do you stay in contact with your old teammates?"

"A little, but they're busy with school and practice." Luca's voice lowered and the note of misery in his voice was hard to miss when he continued, "Our season started this week."

I put my arm around his shoulders, pulling him close in an awkward side hug.

"I'm sorry. That sucks."

Luca sighed. "Hmm. You know, if I hadn't met you, I think I'd be really homesick."

"Yeah?" I smiled, inordinately pleased with the compliment.

"You've kept me centered. I wake up early and learn something new almost every day. And I'm a huge fan of the bonus sexy time."

"Me too."

"I don't want to freak you out, but this is a little more than just sex for me. We're legit friends, right?"

"Right," I confirmed.

"As your legit friend, I want you to know I've been paying attention, Cal. You're confident, disciplined, and patient as

fuck. You're also stretched too thin. If I can help you, let me. Please."

I wasn't sure how to respond at first. I was used to doing things that mattered to me on my own. I didn't think twice about it. Surfing taught me how to rely on myself and trust my instincts. It was something I could do with friends, but ultimately, surfing was an individual sport. And I liked being alone.

It was a good thing too because other than Luca, I didn't hang out with anyone. I bumped into people and temporarily shared their atmosphere. Jay, Sarah, Rex, my parents... If I remembered correctly, my ex's number one complaint about me was that I did "alone" too well.

Luca didn't. He needed more on his plate and I needed less.

I didn't want to mess with a good thing, though.

"Making surfboards is a business for me. I'm kind of a perfectionist when it comes to my work."

Luca's lips twisted in a wry grin. "I'm not suggesting you have me do anything that requires mad skills. But you've given me free lessons for weeks now. Why not let me pay you back somehow? And let me warn you, if you make one crack about paying for your services with BJs and hand jobs, I'm gonna be mad."

I barked a laugh. "You mean I got your dick for free?"

"You haven't really had my dick yet, baby," he drawled.

I set my half-empty cup on the bench and bugged my eyes out. "We're definitely talking about anal now, huh? Are you... I mean, do you like to be—how would this work?"

"My dick in your ass or yours in mine." He lifted his brows as he raised his cup in a toast.

I shushed him, waiting until a man walking a Great Dane passed by to reply. "Yeah, I got that part. Do you have a preference?"

His eyes twinkled merrily. "Not really. You?"

“Well, since I’ve never done...that...before, I’m probably going to want to be on top,” I whispered. “I mean...if we ever wanted to do that.”

“Oh, I’ll definitely want to do that,” he assured me enthusiastically. “But you’ll have to be more specific, ’cause you can be on top and still be the one with a cock in your ass. Highly recommend that position, actually. One of my faves.”

I sighed ruefully. “I cannot believe I’m having this conversation over coffee. Or at all.”

Luca snorted. “You never talked about sex with your previous partners?”

“No, we just did it.”

“Ah, well...that’s too bad. If you ask me, communication is important.”

“Sure, but why waste time talking when you can be doing?” I quipped.

“Because if you don’t know what your partner is into, you might fuck up.” He sipped his coffee and stretched his long legs in front of him. “And not in a fun way.”

“Huh. I thought the bonus of hooking up with a dude was not talking about feelings and sex and uncomfortable emotional baggage.”

I kept my tone light, but Luca’s sharp sideways glance indicated I hadn’t quite succeeded.

“Feelings and baggage. Yikes. I was thinking more along the lines of how many fingers you like in your ass, but feelings are good too.” He waited a beat and added, “How do you feel about three fingers?”

“You’re hysterical. And I need to get to work.” I stood, tossing my to-go cup into the recycle bin.

Luca chuckled as he fell into step beside me. “Fine. We’ll save the sexy stuff for later. What time should I come by tonight?”

“You really want to help?”

“I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t. Let’s try it. If I’m in the way, fire me. I won’t be offended.”

My mouth twitched in amusement. Luca was very hard to resist. “Okay. I’m closing tonight at six. Knock on the side door if you come any later. I have a workshop set up behind the storage area. I won’t hear you unless you bang loudly.”

“How about if I text you?”

“That works too.”

Luca grinned. “Cool. Think of all the dirty laundry you want to share and sexy questions you want to ask. I’ll be ready.”

“I won’t be. I’ll be working.”

“All work and no play is *no bueno*,” Luca singsonged. “Speaking of playing...how much time till your next lesson?”

“Fifteen minutes. That’s not enough time for what you’re thinking.”

“Ooh! A challenge. Give me ten minutes. If I can get you off in less, I top first.”

I busted up laughing. “You’re a little crazy.”

“I know. You in?”

Hell, yes. Of course I was in. I’d come to realize that Luca’s so-called challenges were almost always mutually beneficial. And I was no idiot.

Or maybe I was.

’Cause it wasn’t like me to allow someone to help me in the workshop. Crafting a board was an art. Sure, some parts of the process didn’t require experience, but any small nick or scratch would take valuable time to fix. I didn’t have time. And while I loved sex and I loved the idea of being inside Luca, I wasn’t a starry-eyed teenager. Nor did I trust easily. But I trusted him.

And I was curious about him.

Luca played the role of carefree college senior on a final bender well, but he was in pain. He'd lost something important, and his struggle to fill the void compromised his vision. On some level, I could relate.

I wasn't sure if that explained why I wasn't even remotely alarmed at the idea of taking this physical thing between us one step further.

Nope. I just wanted him. Maybe it was as simple as that.

Luca

Long Beach State's campus was very different from the U of M's. There were no grand old trees or ivy-covered brick buildings dating back to the turn of the previous century. The town wasn't dedicated to the college the way it was in Ann Arbor. It didn't shut down for football games, and every other store didn't sell university gear. But it was cool in its own way.

The campus was easy to navigate, the students and faculty were friendly, and I'd much rather own a shirt with a surfboard on it than a cartoon shark anyway. And get this, the gymnasium was a big-ass blue pyramid building.

I stared at it in wonder, nodding absently as Zoe updated me with her latest boy drama. Either she assumed that being gay gave me sensitive insight into the male mind, or she mistakenly thought I was interested in her revolving list of crushes.

"...if he doesn't call me by tonight, it's over," she grumbled, fidgeting with one of her hoop earrings. "Or should I give him till tomorrow?"

I rolled my eyes and came to a stop at the entrance to the Walter Pyramid. "This is a cool building."

"You weren't listening!"

"No, I wasn't." I lowered my sunglasses and pointed meaningfully. "What do they play here besides basketball?"

“Volleyball,” Zoe huffed. “And you’re a jerk.”

“Maybe, but I can’t listen to you tell me you’re waiting for some schmuck barista to call you. Games are stupid. If you want to talk, call him. If he doesn’t pick up or he acts like a douche, you have your answer. Don’t wait on a guy, Zoe. You’re better than that.”

“Uh...” She closed her red-stained lips and gaped. “Wow. Thank you. You’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“You were thinking he deserves rent-free room in your head. He doesn’t. Or maybe he does. Call him and find out. But leave me out of it,” I griped, tilting my chin toward the building. “Where do they play hockey around here?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything about hockey.”

“Ugh. You know if anyone said that in my hometown, everyone would look at them like this.” I shot an exaggerated incredulous glance her way and bit back a smile when she laughed aloud.

“Well, it could just be me. I know a little bit about football and baseball. And thanks to our surf lesson, I kind of know how to surf. How’s your new hobby coming along? Mikey says you go every day. So much for never getting on a board again,” Zoe snorted, pulling a stick of gum from the designer bag over her shoulder. “Want one?”

“No, thanks.”

Hmph. Mikey was one of my roommates. I’d lucked out with my living situation. Mikey and Oscar were good guys, albeit a bit chatty. I didn’t try to hide my surfing exploits, but I hadn’t thought they’d paid much attention. I was usually home from the beach before either of them woke up.

“So...how’s Cal, the hunky surfer dude?”

“What makes you think I’m seeing Cal?” I countered, peeking at my watch. My next class started in fifteen minutes. I’d made it five weeks into the school year without being late once, and I wanted to keep it that way.

Zoe gasped. “Please tell me you aren’t going surfing alone. You almost died, Luca.”

“Don’t exaggerate. It was just a bad day.”

“A very bad one. I’m glad you kept at it, though. Kind of like me with barista boy. Although I think you’ve been more successful. Do you love it?” she asked conversationally.

“I like it.”

“Just not as much as hockey, eh?”

I inhaled deeply and shook my head. “No.”

“Then you should play hockey,” Zoe replied matter-of-factly. “And before you tell me you can’t, talk to Colby Fischer.”

“Who?”

“The guy standing under the tree by the econ building. The younger one,” she clarified.

I glanced over at the good-looking burly dude talking to a muscular middle-aged man. “Who is he?”

“That’s the head coach, and Colby is one of the assistants. He played for Long Beach until he graduated.”

“I thought you didn’t follow hockey.”

“I don’t. But Colby’s boyfriend is a star baseball player who just signed with the Dodgers farm team.”

“No shit?” I studied the men more closely. Colby was an openly gay hockey coach? Interesting.

“Colby’s hot, but his boyfriend, Sky is...*gah*, mega dreamy. That’s beside the point. Go talk to him.” Zoe shoved my chest. “Maybe he needs help. If you want to get on the ice again, he might be a good contact. It couldn’t hurt anyway. *Mwah*. I’m off. Later, Luca.”

I waved after her, but my feet were already moving. I was a big fan of taking chances. And only a little pissed at myself for not thinking about this sooner.

I reached the two men just as the older one squeezed Colby's shoulder and walked away.

"Excuse me. You're Colby Fischer, right?"

"Yeah. Can I help you?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I can help you," I replied with a confidence I didn't quite feel. "I'm Luca Rossiter. I played for U of M till an injury sidelined me last season. This is a long shot, but I was wondering if you need any assistants. On a volunteer basis. Hockey's in my blood, man. I've played my whole life and I know the sport inside and out. I can get you references, and I'm available to interview at any time. Can I give you my number?"

Colby lowered his Ray-Bans and fixed me with a WTF look and chuckled. "Geez, why do I feel like I just got hit by a truck?"

"More like a Lamborghini," I countered.

"Ha. Luca the Lamborghini. That has a ring to it." He slid his sunglasses along the bridge of his nose and cocked his head. "So you want to volunteer?"

"I do." I launched into a mini version of the series of mishaps leading to my departure from my team and relocation in SoCal.

He rubbed his stubbled jaw thoughtfully. "Come by the rink tomorrow any time before noon. We can talk then, Lamborghini."

Colby gave me a high five, chuckling as he headed toward the parking lot.

Me? I raced to class, my mind churning at a breakneck pace. I was a firm believer that all things happened for a reason. I didn't need a job until I graduated, but I needed a purpose. I needed hockey.

Maybe this was a long shot, but I had nothing to lose.

“NICE AND SMOOTH, Luca. That’s it.”

“Got it. You know this would go faster if you let me use the electric sander,” I huffed, flexing my fingers and rolling out my wrists.

“I don’t want you to go faster. Take it slow. There’s a chance you might accidentally over-sand when you use electric tools. If that happens, I’m screwed,” Cal grouched, adjusting his goggles.

He bent over the blank piece of foam clamped to a sawhorse and picked up a hand planer to shape the curve of a new board. He’d given me a brief tutorial, but the process was much more involved than I’d realized. I’d really never thought twice about how a surfboard was made. It was one of those things that seemed best to leave to the experts. And in a twist, Cal was an expert.

He’d transformed the original garage of the building into a surfboard workshop. It was lined on two sides with boards in various states of progress and a huge section dedicated to supplies, paints, and tools with names I forgot the moment he uttered them. The space was kind of a mess, but it was a controlled mess. Like an art studio.

And Cal was an artist at work. Which, I think, made me an apprentice. A very lowly one. I’d been tasked with using fine-grit sandpaper to smooth out any bumps or lumps on the underside of a newly crafted board. It looked finished if you asked me, but according to the boss, it wasn’t shiny enough. Yet.

I flexed my wrists before returning to my chore. We’d been at this for a while now, and trust me, this was harder than it had seemed.

“Did you make all these boards?”

Cal hummed. “Yep. The older ones on the far end are rentals in need of some buffing and the others are commissions.”

“Wow. I can’t believe you’re letting me work on newly commissioned artwork.”

“I’m not. That one belongs to the shop.”

“Oh.”

“The ones I’m selling have to be perfect and...you’re not ready for prime time.”

“Ouch.”

Cal snickered. “Don’t be insulted. You *are* helping me by doing a chore I’ve been putting off for a while.”

“Happy to be of service. But I’ll be happier when the pizza arrives. I’m fucking starving. I ordered too much of everything. Pepperoni, sausage, mushroom, green peppers, onions. There’s probably more. Oh, and salads. I was going to order drinks or dessert, but you have beer and the dessert menu was lame and—why are you smiling?”

He flashed a grin that made butterflies dance in my stomach. “No reason in particular. You’re just very talkative tonight—like a kid on a sugar high. Is it me or pizza that’s got you excited?”

“Both. Hold that thought. I hear the delivery person.”

“Let me give you some money,” he offered, lifting his goggles.

“Too late. I already took care of it. You can get the next one.”

Cal smiled. “Thanks. Meet me upstairs. I don’t want food around the new boards. I’ll clean up and join you in a sec.”

I balanced the salad containers and paper goods on the large pizza box, then carried it upstairs to Cal’s place.

We sat across from each other on the sofa with our plates piled high and tucked into the pizza, occasionally commenting on the brilliance of sausage and the importance of crust to sauce ratio in between bites.

Cal polished off his second piece and flopped against the leather cushion, resting his hands behind his head. He looked cool and content. The way he did on a surfboard...which was way more relaxed than he was on land.

Don't get me wrong, Cal wasn't uptight at all. He was friendly...but guarded. I got the impression he didn't let many people on the inside, and I liked the idea that I'd weaseled my way past his first line of defense.

He invited me into his sphere and spoke freely about his work and his plans for the future. Occasionally, he seemed surprised at his own candor, but the look in his eyes told me he was glad I was here.

That made two of us.

"Something interesting happened today," I blurted around a mouthful of pizza.

"Oh? Tell me about your day, dear," Cal teased with a crooked smile.

I rolled my eyes, then told him about Zoe's suggestion and my brief conversation with Colby. "I'm going to meet with him tomorrow. Nothing may come of it, but I'm ridiculously pumped to be going to an ice rink."

He widened his gaze. "Did you really just waltz up to a coach and ask for a job?"

"Nah, the coach got away. I asked his assistant. At least, I think Colby's his assistant. I'm not sure."

"You've got big balls, Luca." He barked a laugh when I cupped said balls. "I didn't know you wanted to coach."

"To be perfectly honest, I don't know what I want. And I'd be volunteering. Not coaching." I set my plate on the coffee table, hiking my knee on the sofa as I shifted to face him. "I technically graduate in January. This last semester is a gift to me from the universe. A few extra months to get over a career-ending injury and sort out what comes next."

"A torn Achilles isn't usually career-ending at your age. Why can't you play again?"

"I was good, but I wasn't AHL good. I was a leading scorer and one of the best forwards on my team. But there are better, more consistent forwards. And yeah...just saying that out loud hurts. I think I'm a cautionary tale in what happens to

guys who believe their own press. I assumed with a little extra hustle and grit, I could make miracles happen. I didn't count on being sidelined with multiple concussions, and I sure as fuck didn't count on tearing my Achilles in the middle of what was supposed to be my final season."

"That sucks."

I nodded in agreement. "Yeah, but that wasn't the worst part."

Cal massaged my calf sweetly. "What was?"

"I got dropped by the agent who'd supposedly been about to score a contract for me with the AHL. My parents thought he was full of shit. I didn't know what to think. It's like getting run over by a car, and thinking at least you remembered to write the license plate down...just as a Mack truck comes from the opposite direction to finish the job."

Cal smiled wanly. "Gory."

"That's how it felt. I couldn't catch a break. Injury after injury, watching games from the sideline while these dreams I'd had forever"—I snapped my fingers—"evaporated."

"I'm sorry, babe."

My pulse revved at the casual term of endearment. I liked it better than dear. I thought about mentioning it, but let it go, and continued my tale of woe.

"Me too. I didn't graduate with my class, I didn't get recruited, I didn't...matter anymore. But my coach insisted that I come to the games. That gave me hope. Until I found out that having the out gay dude on the bench was somehow a PR boost. How ironic is that? The one thing I assumed I'd have to hide was the only reason they wanted me in the end."

"So you were out in college?" he asked, frowning his brow.

"Yes and no. A couple of teammates knew, but no one talked about it. Until I got injured and became an overnight on-campus queer celebrity. I'm not sure how it happened. It was...weird. Jarring, ya know? On one hand, I wasn't trying to

keep a big-ass secret, but I thought I'd be the one to do the coming out."

Cal went still. "You mean you were sitting on the bench with a cast on at a game when they started flying Pride flags in your honor?"

"Yep. They weren't chanting my name or anything, but yeah...that was for me. I wasn't sure what to think about it. My friends and family have known I'm gay for years. This wasn't a coming-out moment for me. It felt more like I'd been used by the program. They couldn't use my hockey prowess anymore, but they could use the press. A diversity shoutout made them look like stars for supporting a queer athlete as he retired from the game. Fuckers," I huffed. "After that, I couldn't wait to get out. My parents suggested that a change of scenery would do me good."

"Long Beach?"

"Exactly. I moved here in June and spent the majority of my summer screwing my brains out while high, drunk, or both. I thought I was having fun, but I was self-medicating... trying to forget what I'd lost." I sucked in a deep breath and rested my hand over his. "Then I tried surfing, and almost met my demise."

Cal snorted. "Thankfully, your instructor knows what he's doing."

"That dude is hot as fuck too. Don't tell him, but...I've actually learned a few things."

He nudged my knee. "Like what?"

"Waves and wind don't adjust to my timeline."

"True," he agreed.

"I've also learned that I can't rush the process or will myself to be more than I am." I released a beleaguered sigh. "Surfing might be the most humbling sport I've ever tried."

"Yeah, but that's 'cause you went from being an expert to being a novice. It's brave to try something new."

“Brave? I think of it more like going into therapy with nature.” I snorted dismissively. “Nah, that sounds dramatic—”

“No, it doesn’t. Surfing is good for the soul,” he said with a smile.

“I used to feel that way about being on the ice too, but I’m kind of mad at hockey.”

“Why?”

“I felt like I got cheated, like the game owed me something and didn’t deliver.” I tapped my temple meaningfully. “I’m just beginning to clue in that I was never owed anything. Now it’s up to me to figure out what happens next. Maybe I can find something in hockey. I can volunteer with a youth team or hell, do office work for an organization. I’m open to ideas. It’s just helpful to think that I don’t have to walk away entirely. I might be irked, but I still love the game. I don’t want to give it up.”

“Have you thought about joining a club team? Scouts might not notice you, but you could still do something you love. I’m sure there’s something like that around here.”

“I’ll ask Colby.”

“Good.” Cal tilted his chin and gave me a lopsided half smile. “You’re pretty fucking special, Luca. I know you’ll be amazing at anything you try, baby.”

Sweet affirmation *and* a “baby”? My answering grin was so wide it hurt my cheeks.

“You called me baby...twice.”

He furrowed his brow. “I did?”

“Mmhmm. Dude. You must like me or something,” I singsonged.

Cal chuckled. “You’re okay.”

“Not good enough. Let me hear it... ‘Luca, baby, I think you’re so awesome.’” I fluttered my eyelashes, hoping to annoy him into a wrestling match.

I figured he'd flipped me off and change the subject in a hurry, but he leaned in and bit my bottom lip.

"Luca, baby, I think you're so..."

"Awesome," I suggested.

"Annoying."

I pounced. I almost warned him to look out. I had a tendency to get playfully physical and tackle hugs were my go-to. But warning him was no fun.

So I went for it, knocking Cal onto his ass and pinning his arms above his head. I blew a raspberry in the crevice of his neck and shoulder, then licked the shell of his ear. He grunted as he pulled his hands free and bucked his hips in a valiant effort to push me away.

"It's not gonna work. I'm stronger than you," I taunted.

"The hell you are."

I was. And he knew it. Cal was lean and wiry and quick. If he had more space to maneuver, he might have been able to slip out from under me. At the moment, he was trapped. After a small struggle, he went limp and wrapped his legs around me, capturing my face as he fused his mouth to mine.

Mmm. Interesting counterattack. Effective too.

I melted into the kiss, angling my head and parting my lips when he pushed inside.

Well played.

I was so consumed with the sweet but ravenous tangle of tongues that I didn't think twice about sinking against him, rubbing my growing hard-on alongside his. But when he opened his thighs wider still and arched upward, I had to break the kiss to catch my breath.

Cal noted my weakened defenses and made his move.

He lifted his right leg and rolled to the left, using momentum to topple us both off the sofa. We slid in a heap beside the coffee table with our positions reversed. Cal

chuckled gleefully as he straddled my torso and declared himself the winner.

I palmed his shaft through his ubiquitous board shorts. The thin layer of fabric left nothing to the imagination. I ran my thumb over the head of his dick and gave him a cocky grin.

“What exactly did you win?” I pushed the coffee table aside and rolled on top of him.

Cal squeezed his eyes shut for a brief second. His Adam’s apple slid theatrically as he met my gaze. “You need to move.”

“How? Like this?” I swayed from side to side.

Cal growled in frustration. Totally understandable. Our alignment was off by a few inches. And unlike him, I wore jeans. I was hard and getting harder by the moment, but my package was trapped. I ached all over. And though I wanted nothing more than to jump up and get naked, knowing he was in the same predicament did something for me.

He threaded the leather strap from my belt through a loop, then unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans.

“Let’s try something else. Stand up, get naked,” he commanded abruptly.

I obeyed. I hooked my thumbs under the elastic of my boxer briefs, glancing toward the window at the sound of traffic below. “Your shades are open. Someone might see. I’m not shy, but—where are you going?”

Cal jumped up, pulling his T-shirt over his head. He tugged at the Velcro on his shorts and let them fall just as he reached his bedroom door. Then he struck a pose with one hand on his hip and the other on his dick.

“What are you waiting for?”

I had no idea.

I practically stumbled over my own two feet, stripping along the way. I kicked off my flip-flops, threw my tee haphazardly, and pushed my jeans lower, hopping on one foot like an injured kangaroo. Cal chuckled at my antics as he

stroked himself lazily. I had to look like an idiot, but I didn't give a fuck.

Need and desire sparked an inferno of lust. I pulled my jeans off and barreled into him, slamming my mouth over his as I flattened him against the door. We made out in a passionate fury, sucking and nipping at lips and skin. I bit his shoulder as I raked my nails along his sides and clutched his ass, humping in a manic quest for friction. Cal tipped his chin back, humming when I licked the column of his throat.

“Fuck, you're hot,” I grunted, slipping my fingers between the tight press of our bodies to wrap my hand around both of our cocks. I smeared our combined precum to use as lube then stroked us...sweet and slow. “I want this. Are you gonna give it to me?”

He stuck his tongue down my throat and tilted his hips in response, panting when he pulled away for air. “Bed.”

Cal peeled himself from the door and walked me backward, sucking my lips as we shuffled toward his unmade bed, unwilling to be separated for even a few seconds. We'd been here before. The past month or so had been all about nonstop BJs and hand-job exchanges. Any initial reticence Cal might have felt about being naked with a dude was long gone. Sure, he'd been careful and cautious in the beginning, but not anymore.

He pushed me onto the mattress and climbed on top of me, covering my body as he ravished me with hungry, carnal kisses. He had to know I was more than happy to be under him. But in case he needed assurance, I wrapped him in an octopus hold—my arms draped over his neck, my legs over his ass. We groaned aloud at the first delicious slide of friction.

Cal thrust and grunted, upping the tempo with abandon. I tilted my hips, hoping to feel his cock slide against my crease.

And there it was.

“Oh, fuck. That's good,” I moaned.

“So good,” he agreed, capturing my mouth in a searing kiss.

Just when I thought I was in danger of coming, Cal's dick nudged my hole.

We froze with our foreheads touching. I felt his breath on my lips as a drop of sweat fell from his brow onto mine.

"I think you should fuck me," I rasped.

"Yes." His nostrils flared. "Don't move."

Cal climbed off me. I immediately missed the weight of him, but the sound of a drawer opening and a condom wrapper tearing sent a thrill along my spine. Don't ask me why. I should have been nervous as fuck. I hadn't been on the receiving end in a while.

But I wanted this.

And I loved knowing he felt the same way.

He rolled the condom on and reached for the lube, pouring some on his palm before handing the bottle to me. I massaged my hole with slick fingers then slipped a single digit inside, wincing at the stretch.

"This might take a minute."

Cal scooted between my thighs. "Can I do something? Do you want me to...you know."

"Finger me?" I offered. "Sure, but add more lube and go slow."

He did as instructed, easing his middle finger inside me. "You're hot...and tight. Fuck, I'm not gonna last."

"Geez, and I'm wondering if you're gonna fit. You're fucking huge."

Cal snickered. "Thanks. Now, be serious. This is my first time, and I want to get it right."

That got me.

I sat up, bracing my weight on my elbow as I leaned in to kiss him. "You can't get it wrong. It's not possible. I want you too fucking much. You know that, right?"

He smiled, bit my lip, and kissed it better, pushing his finger deeper inside me. He took his time, alternately tweaking my nipples with his free hand or pausing to jack himself. He was a natural...patient and just the right amount of gentle. And he was slowly making me crazy.

I begged for a second digit...then a third, moaning when he brushed my prostate.

“Please tell me you’re ready now,” he whispered in a low, gravelly tone.

I nodded, lifting my legs in silent invitation. Cal set his left hand on my knee, tapped his sheathed cock at my entrance, and inched his way inside.

We gasped in unison and kept our eyes locked till he bottomed out. It took a few beats for me to adjust to his girth...and not gonna lie, it hurt.

“Don’t move. I need a second,” I panted.

“What can I do?”

“Nothing. Just...kiss me.”

He distracted me from the pain with deep kisses that made my toes curl. And before I knew it, pleasure took over, spreading like wildfire through my veins.

“Fuck, that’s good. Gimme more.”

“Like this?” Cal rocked his hips, slow and steady.

“Yeah, that’s it, baby. Oh, fuck.” I gripped my cock, jacking myself as he picked up the tempo.

The bed springs squeaked in time with the headboard thumping against the wall. It got progressively louder. Just loud enough to drown out our grunted sighs and the slap of skin on skin. Ah, the sweet sound of sex...it was a symphony all its own, and I fucking loved it.

However, I tried to moderate my enthusiasm to a degree. I mean, this was nowhere near my first rodeo. I’d been with more guys than was polite to admit. Cal hadn’t.

I was his introduction to gay everything, and I was a terrible role model. I wasn't known for being sensitive, and I didn't do well with feelings. But I wanted to do better for him. I wanted to make sure I gave more than I took.

So I met him halfway, reading his body and the subtle change in his expression for clues—his strained expression, the vein throbbing at his temple. I could tell he was close, but I was too.

Just when I thought I should warn him, he slowed the pace and rolled us over so I was on top.

“Ride me,” he growled.

Oh, fuck.

Yeah, I could do that.

I splayed one hand on his chest and rode him hard, digging my heels against his thighs as I jerked myself to a happy place where want and need collided. I felt my orgasm approach like a runaway freight train.

“I'm gonna come,” I warned.

He beat me to it.

“Fuck,” Cal roared, grabbing my thighs for purchase as he bucked his hips wildly and fell apart.

One more pull on my cock and I was right there with him. Cum spurted over my fist and across his abs. I gasped for air, playfully smearing the mess I'd made.

We laughed for no reason and all the reasons...this felt good.

And so real.

Sometime later, we redressed, put on sweatshirts, and went to the upstairs deck to watch the stars and listen to the waves. We were quiet for a short while, but it wasn't awkward at all. It was sweet. It felt nice to be with someone and not feel the need to fill the silence.

And when we did speak, it felt like talking to an old friend. It was as if our respective armor cracked, allowing us to share

freely.

Don't get crazy. We didn't deep-dive into childhood trauma or analyze our life choices. We talked about fun stuff, like...movies and TV shows we loved as kids.

I was hungry for details tonight. I didn't just want to know the name of his favorite movie or TV show, I wanted to know why he liked it, how old he'd been when he saw it, and who he'd watched it with. And I hoarded every piece of information he shared like a detective solving a mystery.

Our six-year age difference wasn't much in the scheme of things. However, according to Cal, I'd missed out on some awesome video games and Nickelodeon shows. I teased him about his throwbacks to the dark ages and he pretended to be offended. But he also couldn't stop touching me. His hand on my arm, my hip, my waist, my hair.

And I couldn't get enough. I leaned into his touch and hung on his every word, feeling more centered and at peace than I had in a year.

I rested my hip on the railing and wrapped my arms over my chest for warmth when the wind kicked up. I didn't want to ruin the moment, but I had to know something.

"Tonight was good." I paused for a beat and squinted. "You liked it. Right?"

Cal turned to me, his features half-shadowed in the moonlight. He cupped my chin and rubbed his thumb along my jawline. It was a lover's touch. Not a fuck-buddy or a friend thing. It was the simplest, sweetest, smallest gesture, but it was filled with easy affection. He didn't have to say a word, but he did.

"I loved it. Thank you."

I snorted. "Don't thank me. As you could tell, it was definitely my pleasure."

Cal smiled, slipping his arm around my waist and pulling me against his side. "Mine too, but that wasn't what I meant. Thank you for...being you. Tonight was perfect. It *is* perfect."

“Yeah, it is.”

“Do you want to stay?”

I did a double take. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask if that was really okay or wise. Someone might notice, and he'd have some explaining to do. But Cal was a smart dude. He didn't need to be reminded that I was a guy. So I swallowed my “Are you sure?” speech and bit his chin playfully.

“What's for breakfast?”

“Oatmeal.”

“Hmm. With brown sugar?”

“Of course. I have berries too.”

I nudged my nose against his. “Strawberries?”

“And blueberries.”

“I'm in.”

Cal grinned. “Good. You have to help me change the sheets first.”

“Deal.”

I winked, then turned to the sea to hide my smile when it threatened to give me away.

Damn, I had it bad.

Sure, I'd had a crush on this man from the moment we'd met, but the reality of Cal was so much sweeter than the idealized surfer sage hero I'd imagined. He didn't profess to know all the answers. He couldn't solve my problems or erase old scars, but being with him calmed me.

And in all my messy, clueless-wonder ways, I wanted to think I had something to offer him too. I had no idea what that might be. For now, I was content and happy. Knowing he felt the same was enough.

More than enough.

C al

“Grr. Would you care to discuss the joys of neoprene with the middle-aged know-it-all out front?”

I glanced up from a box of new apparel when Sarah swept into the back room and made a beeline to the rack of rental wetsuits.

“Instead of unpacking all this winter crap? But I’m having a blast,” I snarked.

Sarah twitched her nose in distaste. “I bet. Did we get anything fun?”

“If you think hoodies with dolphins and waves are fun, then yes.”

She wandered to the boxes and picked up a pink tie-dyed sweatshirt. “Ooh! I like this one. Great color.”

I shrugged. “I guess. Don’t you need to handle the neoprene weirdo?”

“I’m going, I’m going. Jay’s out there now.”

I frowned. “Really? He took the week off. What’s he doing here?”

“He just popped by to show his daughter the surfboard display. They’re on the way to lunch and...”

I tuned Sarah out and slowly stood, brushing my hands on my shorts. I bet I looked perfectly normal, but in reality...my

head was buzzing.

His daughter?

Fuck.

I hadn't seen Hannah in over a year. Conversations with an ex were always fun, I mused sarcastically. Of course, I immediately chided myself. Hannah was cool.

In fact, my family thought Hannah was the one who got away. I couldn't decide if I agreed or regretted that we'd ever gotten together sometimes. But I hadn't seriously thought about her in a while, so I wasn't sure how I felt now.

We hadn't ended on bad terms by any means; we had an unspoken agreement to keep our distance. It was just easier that way. We were both big fans of avoiding awkward scrutiny and in a town this size, where our relationship had been a focus of interest, I couldn't blame anyone who might have been curious about what the hell had gone wrong.

Maybe we'd subconsciously figured that if they never saw us together, they'd forget about us. Which meant I never went to her parents' house and she never came to the shop.

So why was she here now?

Awkward.

Of course, it didn't have to be awkward. We were adults, for fuck's sake. And Jay probably assumed we'd buried the past a long time ago, so it was up to me to walk out there and say hello. Like a fucking adult.

I sucked in a deep breath, aware of Sarah's lively chatter behind me as I headed for the shop.

"Well, there he is!" Jay boomed. "I was just showing off your new designs to a fellow artist. I think you two remember each other."

Hannah's lips quirked at the corner. She tucked a stray strand of blonde hair behind her ear and stepped forward. "Hey, Calvin. It's been a while. How are you?"

"Good. You?"

“I’m doing well.”

“Glad to hear it.” I cleared my throat and lamely added, “I’m...you look great.”

She did. Then again, she’d always been pretty. Very pretty. And equally cool.

Hannah was a statuesque blonde with big blue eyes who’d traded her spot on the surf circuit for a career in graphic design a few years ago. Which roughly coincided with our demise. It confused the hell out of me that we hadn’t worked. I still didn’t get it. We’d made sacrifices to support each other the way we’d witnessed our own parents do and yet...that wasn’t enough. We were good friends, and the sex had been great. Not earth-shattering, the way it was with Luca, but still...nice. That hadn’t mattered. Something had been missing, and we both knew it.

The breakup part had been so fucking painful.

But that was a long time ago.

I braced myself for a wave of melancholy that didn’t come. In fact, I didn’t feel anything at all...except a little antsy to get back to my chore so I could get to work on the board I’d been prepping to coat with resin.

“Thank you.” Hannah smiled. “I hear you’re still competing.”

“Not as often. I signed up for the Holiday Classic, though.”

“Good luck. That can be tough competition,” she commented.

“Nothing this guy can’t handle.” Jay scoffed, patting my back. “I’m gonna grab one of the new sweatshirts that just came in. Did you see them?”

I squinted thoughtfully. “The pink whales?”

“Dolphins,” Hannah corrected.

Jay beamed. “Yep. Hannah-banana designed those. Nice, aren’t they?”

I nodded automatically, but Jay was already gone.

Hannah crossed her arms and grumbled good-naturedly. “I can’t get him to stop calling me that.”

“Hannah-banana?”

“Yep. That’s the one.”

“That’s the beauty of a one-syllable name. No one can mess with it too much.”

Hannah arched her brow mischievously. “Cal the snail or send Cal to jail or Cal-man, the mailman.”

I snickered. “Those are so bad they don’t even sting.”

“They did when we were ten.”

“True. You were kind of a bully back in the day,” I teased.

She smacked my arm playfully. “I was not! I was an angel. Ask my dad.”

“Right. He’s very impartial.” I hooked my thumb toward the storage area. “So...you’re making whale stuff now.”

“Ha. Ha. Dolphins. And yes...I started a surf line. With my boyfriend. ” She wrinkled her forehead and continued in a rush, “Did I just make things weird?”

I shook my head vehemently. “Of course not. I’m glad you’re seeing someone. He better be a good guy.”

She chuckled at the note of warning in my voice. “He is. Um...and you know him. I didn’t just come by because of my apparel line. I didn’t want you to find out from someone else that I’m seeing Andy.”

“Andy?”

“Dugan.”

Andy-fucking-Dugan. *Wow.*

I wasn’t sure what to say. So I settled on, “Okay. Good. I mean...if you’re happy.”

“I am. What about you?”

“Me?” I pointed at my chest.

“Yeah, you.” The hint of caution faded, giving way to a carefree smile that reminded me of the girl I grew up with... well before we’d tried on titles like “boyfriend” or “girlfriend.”

“Are *you* seeing anyone?”

“I am,” I replied automatically, surprising both of us.

Hannah cocked her head curiously. “Anyone I know?”

“Nope.”

She waited for me to give details, huffing with faux impatience then smiling sweetly. “Be happy, Cal.”

“You too. Um...I should probably get back to work.” I glanced briefly toward Sarah who was finishing up with the wetsuit rental. “Have a nice lunch and—”

“Wait.” Hannah grabbed my elbow and quickly let go. “I’m getting the feeling that my dad didn’t mention my surf wear line to you.”

“No, but it’s cool. Good luck on—”

“Cal, I’m going to sell it here. I mean, Dad is one of my vendors. If you’re still planning on buying the business, my contract is part of the deal. He was going to talk to you about it, but...” She bit her bottom lip. “That didn’t happen yet, did it?”

I frowned. “No.”

Jay reappeared with a handful of new apparel, spreading them on the counter next to the register. “Check out this collection. We have dolphins, turtles, sea urchins, lobsters...”

“That’s a crab, Dad,” Hannah intercepted, holding the crab tee in front of her before folding it neatly. “And, um...weren’t you going to mention this to Cal?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course. You don’t mind selling Hannah’s crab collection here, do you?” Jay adjusted his baseball cap then flattened his hand on the counter. “There’s not too much. I’m sure we can squeeze it in.”

“The line is much bigger than a couple of T-shirts. We have bathing suits, board shorts, hats...”

Hannah’s smile dipped when she met my gaze. She knew there was no need to continue her list. I could recite it myself, and it would basically be everything we’d talked about years ago but never got around to doing. And now she was doing it all with Andy.

“Okay,” I whispered.

Jay was seemingly oblivious to the melancholy undercurrent in the air. He gave a careless shrug and headed for the door. “We’ll work out the details later. Cal still has a race to win and some boards to finish up before we’re ready to draw up any paperwork. When we’re in the home stretch, we’ll get to the nitty-gritty. Want anything to eat?”

“Better yet, join us!” Hannah offered cheerily, slinging a colorful bag over her shoulder.

“Uh...no, thanks. I had an early lunch,” I lied, fixing a smile on my face that felt surprisingly genuine. “It was good to see you, Hannah.”

“Thanks. You too.”

I stared after them for a moment, my brain whirling in a few directions at once. I wanted to believe that we’d both moved on. I honestly wished Hannah well and meant it. However, I wasn’t so sure about working together. I wasn’t sure why, but it felt like a trap.

LUCA DIDN’T AGREE.

“Dude, you’re a drama queen,” he snorted, perusing his menu. “What are you having? I feel like a steak.”

“You don’t look like one,” I quipped, waiting for his eye roll before glaring across the table. “And by the way...how am *I* a drama queen?”

“You think everything is a trap. Like the world is conspiring against you somehow. Do you like mashed potatoes?”

“Love them,” I replied, trying not to gape at the price tag on the filet.

“Cool. I’ll share my mashed potatoes if you share your fries.” Luca pushed his menu to the edge of the table and reached for his ice water, winking at me over the rim of his glass.

And just like that, I chubbed up. *Go figure.*

After a month of what felt like a nonstop sexathon, I would have thought my body and brain would need a break. But I didn’t want any kind of break. I wanted to be with Luca as often as possible. I didn’t get it and I didn’t overthink it. I just knew that my attraction to him grew stronger every day.

Luca had an innate exuberance for everything he tried. Surfing, volunteering at the rink, taking oddball elective classes... He could balance on a board in the ocean, help wrangle sweaty hockey equipment with a smile on his face, and thanks to his Intro to the Beatles class, Luca could recite more trivia about the Beatles than anyone needed to know. And I had to admit his ceramic-making skills were impressive too.

I smiled whenever I used the coffee mug he made me. It was ridiculously huge and lined with colorful surfboards. But the best part was that he’d signed the bottom with the tiniest heart, like a love letter.

Whatever. The point was...Luca was gifted.

And surprisingly Zen. I’d always considered myself to be pretty chill, but I had nothing on Luca.

He didn’t sweat the little things. Ever. Sure, he had a hot temper and a tendency to go for the most dangerous option when he felt cornered. But that fiery spirit was what drew me to him in the first place. Luca lit up every room he walked into with his mischievous grin and devil-may-care attitude.

I liked the way he responded to me. When he was angry or frustrated, I was usually the one who calmed him. When he was sad, I was the one who reassured him everything would be okay. I'd thought our age difference had something to do with our complementary natures, but I realized now that it worked both ways.

He calmed me, reassured me, made me stop and think too. And he was always rooting for me. Always. In a relatively short time, he'd become a close friend, a confidante, a lover. He might be impetuous and occasionally reckless, but he was wise beyond his years.

Not gonna lie, as the weeks slipped by, I was beginning to seriously worry about what I'd do when he graduated and moved on.

And no, he hadn't said he was going anywhere, but he'd been excited enough about an assistant coach opportunity in Northern California to insist on a celebratory dinner. Then again, Luca could find a reason to celebrate practically anything—an A on a test deserved ice cream; hitting all green lights on the drive home deserved an extra ten minutes of *Call of Duty*. I supposed it only made sense that a possible job offer warranted a steak dinner at a bougie restaurant on 2nd Street. His treat.

I had a million questions for him, ranging from interview details to how a college student could afford a forty-dollar filet, but he kept steering the conversation to me. He claimed my aura was off, and he couldn't relax until he knew what was on my mind. I probably should have been pissed that he thought I overreacted to Hannah's surprise visit today, but maybe...he was right.

And did I mention he was hot? *Fuck me*. If he flicked his tongue over his bottom lip one more time, I might have to undo my zipper.

My gaze traveled from his mouth to his eyes, lingering for a moment as we shared a smile about nothing at all.

I cleared my throat and sat up a little taller in the leather booth. "Did I say I was ordering fries?"

“No, but you didn’t have to. You always order fries.”

“I do?”

“Yup.” Luca flashed a radiant grin my way before greeting the waiter in his customary friendly fashion. When we’d placed our orders, he leaned forward, propping his elbows on the table. “So...Hannah. I have to admit, I’ve been low-key jealous about her for months.”

“Really?” I frowned and quickly assured him. “Don’t be. Seriously, Luca. We broke up a long time ago. There’s no reason to think twice about it.”

“Hmm. Tell me about her,” he prodded.

I pulled a piece of bread from the basket between us, then proceeded to make a production of buttering it before setting it on my plate without taking a bite.

“We just didn’t want the same things anymore. It sucked, though. I’ve had other girlfriends and been through a few breakups—they’re never fun. It was harder with Hannah than anyone else.”

“Why?”

“I think I wanted it too much.” I shrugged and finally bit into my overly-buttered bread. “We both did.”

“You loved her,” Luca said softly.

“I did. But not enough. I mean...I loved my friend. Maybe I still do to a degree. She’s someone who’s always been part of my life. It’s complicated.”

“You mentioned that you grew up together.”

“Yeah. I’m two years older, so we weren’t in the same classes, but we went to the same schools and because our families were friends, our worlds always blended. Hannah was like a little sister to me. Until...she went to college. She came home from a winter break after her junior year and I swear it was like I was meeting her for the first time. Everything she said and did seemed kinda magical. I was...smitten.” I smiled at the memory.

Luca scowled playfully. “Okay, now I *am* jealous.”

I slid my calf over his under the table. “Don’t be. Infatuation doesn’t last. Or it didn’t in our case. I think we were too...convenient in a way.”

“How so?”

“Well...in my head, I made us into something we weren’t. I decided we were good together ’cause on paper, we should have been. My family loves her, my friends assumed we’d get married. And it was just too perfect to fall for the girl whose family business sponsored my surfing career. She talked about building her own apparel business and I’d design boards, we’d take over the family biz, expand it nationwide and...*boom!*” I brushed my hands together. “Happily ever after.”

“Oh.”

“Turns out ‘happily ever afters’ are hard work. If they exist at all. I did everything I thought I was supposed to do. Fuck, I even moved to San Diego to live with her.” I huffed, then stared out the window, unseeing for a moment. “That was a mistake. Or maybe it was the push we needed to address a few glaring issues. I love San Diego, but I hated living there. I made up excuses to come home all the damn time until one day she finally suggested it might be better if I stayed here.”

“Ouch. That must have hurt.”

“Yes and no. I was relieved to be out of the relationship, but very bummed that I’d lost my friend. I still feel that way. I think she did too. We’ve done a good job of staying away from each other...till today.” I spotted our waiter heading over with our dinners, and quickly added, “I’m not sure what to think about a pre-existing contract written into the purchase agreement. On one hand, it’s standard procedure, but it feels... too convenient again.”

Luca waited till our server left to reply. He picked up his fork and twirled it in his mashed potatoes thoughtfully.

“What are you afraid of exactly? Do you think Jay’s going to rescind his deal if you don’t honor his daughter’s contract?”

“No.”

“Do you think you’d have a hard time working with her?” he prodded.

“No.”

He cut into his filet and speared a piece of meat before asking, “Then what’s the problem?”

“She also mentioned she’s dating Andy Dugan.”

“Who the fuck is that?”

I snickered at his comedic delivery. “He’s a well-respected surfer, and he’s ranked way higher than me.”

“Oh. A rival. So it’s a double whammy. Your girl sails in with your arch nemesis and brings a bunch of whale gear for you to sell in a store you don’t own yet. And I’m assuming you have to beat this Andy dude in the holiday wingding if you’re going to make your goal.”

I snorted. “She’s not my girl. And it was dolphin gear. As for Andy...I don’t care that they’re together. But it feels like a lot of bad mojo coming at me at once.”

“And you’re afraid of past failure—the ex, the rival—tainting your new start.”

That was...true.

“Maybe so.”

“Totally so,” he corrected around a mouthful of food. “I get it. Our stories are different, but I know how you feel. I was so desperate not to let my past fuck up my future that I left home and moved across the country. I didn’t want anyone I used to know to feel sorry for me. I felt sorry enough for myself. I thought a geographic change would solve my problems. News flash...it’s been a nice temporary reprieve, but I still have to work on me. Is hockey who I am? Do I need a job in my sport to prove I’m still worthy? Or should I shuck it and do something new?”

“You have options.”

“Everyone does, Cal. You do too. You’re not stuck. If owning that shop is your passion, you’ll either make it work

with the ex or you'll put your foot down and call your own shots. Maybe you suggest adding an addendum to the contract. That would be reasonable since she's a newer client," he continued matter-of-factly.

"How do you know all that?"

"My parents are lawyers. One of my grandmothers is a high-powered litigator. Law is in my blood." Luca plucked a french fry from my plate and smiled.

I narrowed my gaze. "Oh. Have you considered going to law school?"

"I have. I thought I'd never say this, but I'm open to anything and everything at this point. Colby was telling me there might be an opening for a Pee-Wee coach soon. I don't think the pay is great." He shrugged nonchalantly and speared another bite. "It sounds more like a part-time gig."

Luca had made it his mission to get to know Colby and the men's hockey coach at Long Beach. They didn't have a job for him, but he was more invested in building relationships that might lead to other opportunities after graduation. He volunteered to help out when he could and according to him, just being on the ice again was all he needed. I wasn't so sure about that.

I'd seen the gleam in Luca's eye after his first visit to the rink. He couldn't sit still and he couldn't stop talking about the drills, the players, the energy. His descriptions were almost poetic. The tight feel of his skates after months of wearing flip-flops, the wobbly feel of trudging over the rubber mats on blades, and the feel of the stick in his hand.

His voice had lowered reverently when he recalled his first time gliding onto the ice after so many months away. He'd started and stopped, then shook his head and sighed, claiming he couldn't do the moment justice. Not realizing he already had.

The thing was...I knew exactly what he meant. Except it was the ocean for me. I'd been surfing since I was a kid—probably before I learned how to ride a bike. I had a deep

connection with surfing. Call it my hobby, my sport, my professional endeavor, or my blind ambition in the face of passing time. Labels didn't matter. Surfing was ingrained in my very being. The way hockey was for Luca.

We belonged to different worlds.

Maybe that was why talking about the future rattled me when it used to be so clear. I thought I'd had life figured out. Now, I wasn't so sure. Seeing Hannah today made me realize there might be a danger in getting what I wanted.

Right now, I wanted to cling to this moment.

Luca had managed to turn my world upside down in a matter of months. I didn't want to be anywhere else or with anyone else. I wanted to study him in the candlelight, admiring his handsome features as I shamelessly pressed my calf against his. I needed to touch him. I needed to be close. I needed to hear his voice and drink in the sunshine that poured out of him in waves. Like it was my right to.

Sure, I still had my goals, but my focus was...blurry. Or maybe it had just shifted. 'Cause all I could see now was him.

Luca kicked my shin playfully. "Okay, okay, I'll quit talking about hockey. Stay with me, Cal."

"I'm here and I've been listening. You have a Zoom interview with the Sharks for a job you think you aren't qualified for and something about an econ test on Monday."

He stole another french fry. "Impressive."

"What makes you think you aren't qualified? You aren't interviewing for a coaching gig for the NHL, are you?"

"No, it's a lowly finance position at headquarters." Luca rolled his eyes, but not before I caught the note of interest.

"You want it."

He inhaled, then released his breath slowly. "I don't know. In the plus column, I'd be working for the NHL. In the negative...as an accounting drone. And I'm not sure how I'd feel about moving to San Jose, but there's no harm in interviewing."

Whoa.

Moving?

He just got here.

“Definitely,” I agreed. “So...San Jose. That’s not *too* far.”

“Five hours by car or a forty-five minute flight. No big deal.”

“Right.”

“Would you miss me?”

“No,” I deadpanned.

Luca chuckled. “Liar.”

Thankfully, he changed the subject before I could admit that the idea of him leaving felt like a punch in the gut. I told myself to stay in the moment. Stay focused.

He was talking about hockey again. And about a blow to the head he’d taken into the boards his freshman year. I took the opening, even though it was sophomoric and lame.

“Speaking of blow jobs...I believe you mentioned something about sucking my dick tonight.”

“I don’t think I said that.” He barked a laugh, scanning the nearby tables before whispering. “You know, that sounds kinda gay.”

I held his gaze intently and smiled. “If being kinda gay means I get to be with you, I’m all for it.”

Luca widened his eyes. “Geez, that’s almost romantic.”

I chuckled on cue. Romance wasn’t our thing. If anything, we went out of our way not to be romantic. Sure, we flirted with the concept here and there, like the heart he drew on that mug and the intimate rub of his ankle on my calf—but we were friends first. That friend card made it possible to hang out whenever and wherever we wanted. Even a fancy dinner where we were surrounded by couples on dates or business associates could be explained away. It would also make it

possible to say good-bye when the time came...with no recriminations or expectations.

But my laughter faded and my decidedly unromantic reply fell away. I didn't feel like playing a part. I needed to be real and transparent. I needed him to know me completely. If only for now.

I dropped my napkin and captured his wrist, sending a knife clanging against a plate. It was loud enough that a patron or two turned to the commotion. If they looked our way, they'd know we were lovers. And I really didn't give a fuck.

"I'm serious, Luca. I want you. That's all I want."

His answering grin threatened to split his face in half. Any lingering angst vanished to the point I couldn't remember what I'd been anxious about. There was no drama with Hannah. She was the past.

Luca was the only one I could see now. The only one I wanted.

"You have me, you lucky bastard."

My smile grew and morphed into laughter. The sweet sound soothed away the dull ache of rehashing melancholy shit that couldn't be undone. "Lucky, eh?"

"Oh, yeah. And you're about to get a hell of a lot luckier."

Luca

We didn't speak on the way to Cal's place. Or maybe we did and I blocked it out. I was buzzing everywhere...inside and out. My hands trembled and my pulse raced. I felt like a live wire that had just been tripped.

Call it anticipatory-sex jitters. We both knew we'd be naked within fifteen seconds of closing his door, so that might be accurate. But this was more than scratching our usual itch. This felt significant. This was more than want or need or a journey of discovery. I could feel it in my bones.

And my dick. Yeah, don't worry...I didn't waste time getting in touch with my feelings. I was far too busy meeting the sexual onslaught coming my way.

Cal was all over me, backing me against the wall of his apartment, squeezing my ass, then my dick. He tongue-fucked me until we were both gasping for air. He bit my bottom lip before inching away, his nostrils flaring as he stroked me from base to tip. Without a word, he slid to his knees and swallowed me whole.

For a man who was new at the art of cock-sucking, Cal was damn good at it. He didn't try any crazy maneuvers. His technique was base and carnal. He licked and sucked greedily...as if I might be his last meal. He was messy in his enthusiasm, and that turned me on more than I ever would have thought possible. It was another sign that I wasn't alone in this. Cal wanted me as much as I wanted him.

And I wanted him bad.

I tugged his hair and yanked him to his feet, fastening my mouth over his and devouring him. We made out as we stumbled to his room, falling sideways onto his bed. We were like human pretzels with tangled limbs and tongues. We writhed hungrily, using precum as natural lube as we humped and grinded.

I was close to blowing my load. *Ugh*. I did not want to be the first to come. I pushed his chest and rolled sideways to grab the lube and a condom from his nightstand drawer. Cal snatched the condom away and tore it open. I wrapped my fingers around his girth like I was his personal fluffer on a porn set...which in a way, I was.

But instead of rolling the latex on himself, he rolled it down my shaft, his gaze locked on mine.

“I want you inside me,” Cal rasped. “Please.”

Holy shit.

I kissed his nose and rested my forehead to his. “You sure?”

“Very sure.”

It took some time to prepare him. I used every trick in the book. I loved bottoming for Cal, but I preferred to top, and doing this for him felt extra special somehow. I wanted to be sure he'd never regret it. Never regret me.

I moved slowly, but with purpose, stretching him open thoroughly with a single digit before adding another. I kissed and stroked him all the while. I wanted him so ready he begged for it.

And when he finally did, I eased between his thighs and pushed my way inside my lover.

We both moaned into the sweet connection, staring into each other's eyes. I didn't move until I trusted myself to go slow. It wasn't easy. I kissed him while I rocked back and forth, humming my approval when he wrapped his legs around

me, digging his heels in, grunting for more...faster, harder. I delivered.

I snapped my hips and tweaked his nipples while he jacked himself. And because I was me, I couldn't shut up. I praised his sweet, tight hole, his gorgeous dick, his pretty mouth. He blushed at the nasty onslaught, and I fucking loved it.

I loved him.

Whoa!

What the fuck?

The crazy part wasn't the sentiment itself, but the certainty of it. I loved him. He grounded me, made me feel whole and powerful. He made me...feel.

And I loved him.

The words were right there on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed them. I wasn't ready to say it aloud, even though I knew it was true. I was too raw, too vulnerable in the moment, and...too fucking scared.

But I could show him how I felt.

I slowed the tempo and pressed my lips to his in a featherlight touch. When he lifted his hips, I thrust to meet him, urging him to follow me in a gentle give and take. A sublime dance that was all ours.

"You have no idea how amazing it feels to be inside you," I whispered reverently.

"Mmm."

"I fuckin' love this sweet hole."

"I—oh, fuck. I'm gonna come."

"Do it. Come for me, baby."

I moved faster, pistoning my hips and growling when cum shot over his fist and onto his stomach.

That was it for me. I bucked wildly and let my orgasm pull me under.

I braced myself for a big “feelings” conversation afterward. Not that either of us was into that shit. We weren’t. But tonight was...special. It wasn’t sex. It was so much more. I sensed it and I knew Cal did too.

Neither of us said a word.

We shampooed and washed each other, dried off, then redressed and crashed on the sofa with our legs tangled, playing video games until we were exhausted.

When we woke the next morning, everything felt different.

THIS NEW “US” became our norm as the holidays approached. Cal and I were something more than we’d set out to be. More than friends and more than lovers. We acknowledged it with touch and tone of voice. We stood closer than necessary, smiled too long, stared at each other...just because.

And we spent a lot of time together.

We surfed almost every morning, sometimes venturing to farther beaches. Then we’d go our separate ways for work and school, then meet up again later to sand surfboards, make dinner, or occasionally hang out with friends at a local bar. If anyone wondered why we were always together, they didn’t ask. And we didn’t tell.

I didn’t think he cared if anyone knew about us, though. We were too busy to worry about perception. Cal had been heads-down preparing for the holiday competition and working on the boards he needed to deliver before the new year. He didn’t share exact numbers, but I had a feeling he was closing in on the sum he needed for the surf shop. With any luck, by the end of January, he’d be a proud business owner.

And me?

I had finals, a few job interviews, and a plane ticket to travel home to see my family over winter break. I was on the short list for a promising opportunity with a venture capital firm in LA. My parents would freaking love it if I ended up

working for a “real” company like that one. It paid well for an entry-level position....However, it sounded like a real yawner.

Honestly, I wanted to find something local and put the job search behind me. I spent way too much time worrying about it. I couldn't even enjoy hanging out at the rink, 'cause my mind was doing laps faster than I could skate.

Like now.

I grabbed a stack of cones and dropped them on the blue line on the ice, nodding a greeting to Colby as he skated in a circle around me.

“I hear congratulations are in order, man,” Colby enthused, smacking me on the back.

I glanced over at my sort-of boss and raised my brows. Technically, I didn't report to anyone. I volunteered a couple of times a week during team practices and occasionally for the youth squad.

What had started out as a desperate means of connecting to my biggest passion had morphed into a savvy way to make contacts. I'd heard that it was a matter of who you knew, not what you knew, that launched careers, but I'd still considered my effort to ingratiate myself to Coach Beltram and Colby as more of a lark than anything. I didn't think anything was likely to come of the Sharks interview, and I didn't really care. I enjoyed hanging out here. It was the best form of therapy... and cheaper by far than a session with my shrink.

“Congratulations? For what?”

Colby widened his eyes comically. “Oh, oops. Spoke too soon.”

“About?”

He skidded to a stop at my side, shredding the ice like a pro. “I can't tell you now. This kind of news needs beer. What are you doing after this?”

“Meeting my—” I caught myself before I finished the sentence. “Friend. Why?”

“Tell her...or him to meet us at The Brewery. I’ll be done here in fifteen minutes. I just have to lock up.” Colby’s hair fell into his eyes as he pumped his fists in the air, skating backward to the gate. “Check your email, Luca. I bet it’s there.”

I left the cones where they were and followed Colby, pulling my cell from my pocket when I reached the rails. I had a missed call from a Michael Bergman and a slew of unread emails. I opted to listen to the voice message rather than tackle email.

“Hi, Luca. We’re excited to invite you to join our team. The Sharks are pleased to offer you a position...”

I froze with my phone glued to my ear.

Whoa.

This was good. No, it was great. I’d have to listen to the details again later, but...*wow*. I hadn’t expected this.

My parents would be happy, my friends would be stoked. Geez, my buddies on my old team would be jealous, and Cal...

I dialed his number and left a quick message before stepping onto the rubber mat.

TWO BEERS and a plate of nachos later, I slapped a final round of high fives with Colby and the other assistant coaches he’d insisted join us at The Brewery. Oh, yeah...and his boyfriend, Sky.

Zoe was right. Sky might have been the most classically handsome man on the planet. Tall, dark blond, blue eyes, and muscular with the chiseled features of a model. He and Colby were a hot couple. And I’d never hung out with a gay couple in any capacity related to hockey. It had been cool to be in their orbit for a while, but I couldn’t wait to talk to Cal.

I strode purposefully to the side entrance and let myself in with the key Cal had given me, smiling at the wall of sound coming from the garage area. Cal usually got so involved in his work that he didn't notice when the satellite station chose some funky shit he'd never listen to if he were paying attention.

I waved a greeting, shamelessly eye-fucking him as I adjusted the volume on the music. He looked hotter than hell in ripped Levi's and an ancient Mammoth Lakes sweatshirt liberally stained with paint and resin.

"Hey, where've you been?" he asked, setting a putty knife down before greeting me with a sloppy kiss.

"The Brewery. I texted you." I hiked my thumb at his phone sitting next to the Bluetooth speaker.

Cal winced. "Sorry. I've been cruising on this thing and trying to get in the right headspace for the competition tomorrow. What was your message?"

"Colby and the guys wanted to buy me a beer," I hedged.

"Oh?"

"Yeah." I stared at the wavy design on a surfboard for a beat, then met his gaze. "I got that job with the Sharks."

"What? No way! That's awesome. Congratulations, baby."

"Thanks, but I don't know if I'm going to take it."

Cal's sunny smile dipped as he creased his brow in confusion. "Why not?"

"Not sure I want it. I didn't tell Colby that, though. The guy was more excited than me."

"But...why wouldn't you want it?"

I rubbed my scruffy jaw thoughtfully. "A few reasons. It would be cool to work for the NHL, but it's an office job. In San Jose. I could do the same thing in LA for more money. And...I'd still be able to live here."

Understanding dawned across his face.

“Luca, you can’t stay here for me. You can’t give up opportunities like that,” he replied softly. “Not for me.”

I was too taken aback to reply at first. I hadn’t meant to put him on the spot or even insinuate that I’d give up anything, but now that the words were out, I’d own them. Even if it meant getting my heart trampled on in the process.

“I can’t?”

Cal turned the music off, then closed the distance between us, sliding his hands from my shoulders to my elbows. “Luca, you have to do what’s right for you.”

“Who says I’m not?” I shook him off and walked to the opposite side of the board. “What if being in LA is what I want? What if I wanted to work nearby and...maybe go to law school later? What if I told you I’m perfectly happy being here? Right here. With you.”

“Me,” he repeated. “I’m...I’m not...I shouldn’t be your reason, Luca.”

That stung.

It was on the tip of my tongue to backtrack, but you know what? Fuck that.

“You’re my *only* reason. You should know that.”

“Luca...”

“It’s true,” I assured him. “I can practically hear you thinking out loud. You’re thinking I’m too young to know what I want. You’re thinking I’ll get tired of you or that I’ll demand shit you can’t deliver. Or maybe you’re thinking that just when you might fall for me, I’ll leave you and you’ll get hurt...again. Am I close?”

Cal squinted, his expression wary. “I thought we were talking about a job.”

“We were, but this is about us now. Me and you. And... I’m too Italian to keep this in anymore. Look, I don’t care if you need or want to stay in the closet. You do you. But you need to know that I don’t hang out with you because I love surfing so damn much. I’m not here for titillating

conversation, I'm not even here for the sex. I'm here for you, Cal. You."

"I know. And I love that, but—"

"I love you," I blurted.

Okay...apparently, I'd shocked both of us speechless. I swallowed hard while my lover gaped at me incredulously.

"You..."

"Yeah, I do. And before you try to tell me that I don't know what I'm talking about—don't. I know how I feel, and I know I mean it." I put my hands on his cheeks and sealed my mouth over his, then retraced my steps to the door.

"Luca..."

"Yeah?"

He looked confused and way out of his element, in spite of the fact he was a block away from the beach and literally surrounded by the things he loved most.

"I don't know if...I can do this. You have to live your life and—"

"And I will. If you just want to be friends, that will have to be okay."

"That's not what I want," he huffed, following me to the door. "Wait. Where are you going?"

"Home. I'll see you tomorrow at the competition. You're gonna be awesome." I released a ragged breath and tried to smile. "I'm sorry. My timing sucks. Just...go do good things. I'll be there...cheering you on."

My knees felt weak and my stomach turned unpleasantly as I made my way to my car.

Friends. *Fuck me.*

I'd been so careful with him. I hadn't wanted to scare him. I hadn't wanted to overwhelm him. But I couldn't keep pretending.

Whatever happened now was up to him.

CAL

Fog stubbornly hugged the horizon in the distance, casting a hazy glow over the Pacific. The conditions were perfect. The offshore wind was steady and holding with regular sets averaging around three or four feet. Not the kind of waves to ride big barrels or anything dramatic. The key today was to ride it with confidence.

So far, I'd nailed it.

I couldn't get too excited, though. This was the first leg of a three-day competition. I might be riding high now, but I knew how fast everything could fall apart. The ocean was in charge here. I had no say. I had to rely on training, experience, and daredevil instincts. The judges watched for degree of difficulty, innovative and varied maneuvers, speed, power, and flow. Timid surfing was not an option.

Andy Dugan was ahead of me in points. Not a surprise. He was good.

But I was good too. I had a tendency to be cautious in my everyday life, never in the water. I wasn't an idiot, but I was fearless. This was my happy place, my zone. I cleared my mind and let my body take over. It was the only way to focus. If I let my brain in, it wouldn't be Andy I worried about. It would be Luca.

He loved me.

Me.

Wow.

He said he knew I was afraid and of course, he'd guessed every damn reason I had for not letting anyone in. I couldn't blame Hannah or any previous girlfriend. I couldn't claim that I was nervous to come out. I wasn't nervous at all. I was just my own worst enemy.

My world was small and insular. It was hard to trust that a former hockey player with the world at his feet would give up anything at all to be with me. The crazy thing was...I knew he

meant every word. I didn't doubt him. I should never have insinuated that Luca was too young to know what he wanted. My man was a quick study and a bold warrior. He might not have all the answers, but he followed his instincts...and somehow, they led him to me.

I could second-guess his wisdom all day long, but I wasn't a complete idiot. He didn't pick up his phone last night, and I didn't see him when I arrived at the beach this morning. But I knew he was here now. I just had to be a freaking rock star for one more heat and—

A bullhorn blasted from the nearby boat full of judges. I had no idea what was said, but it spurred me into action. I paddled like mad for the oncoming swell, jumped on my board, crouching low until I felt the wave pull me in. I leaned into the crest and glided like I was walking on water...which I kind of was. Wave caught, check.

My internal cruise control took over again, guiding me over a peak with a fancy maneuver or two I knew would score extra points. But I wasn't thinking about points. I was thinking that every passing second Luca didn't know how I felt was a moment wasted.

And I'd wasted a lot of time already.

I veered right, letting the wind take over as I steered toward the beach. I heard my name yelled in a WTF tone that was totally justifiable. I was basically pulling the equivalent of dropping the ball and running off a court or a field.

Fuck the competition, fuck the money. The guy I loved was sitting with his buddies, watching his "friend" compete. Screw that.

I rode a long set in, jumped in and pulled the leash, dragging my board onto the wet sand as I scanned the beach. It was packed. Balloon arches cordoned off a large section for the event, but most of the spectators were on the pier.

"Cal, good run out there, man. But aren't you supposed to check in before the next heat?" Rex offered his hand for a high five.

“Yeah.” I smacked his palm automatically as I continued my search. “Have you seen Luca?”

Rex cocked his head curiously, then pointed south. “He’s that-away. Why? Are you okay?”

“No, I have something I need to do.” I released the strap, shaking excess water from my hair before striding away.

“But you’re in the middle of a compet—wait. Where are you going?”

I didn’t look back. I scoured the crowds, calling for Luca at the top of my lungs. The masses parted like the Red Sea, clearing room for the lunatic yelling his head off.

“Luca!”

Luca pushed through a throng of college-aged girls in tiny bikinis. “Hey! I’m right here. What the fuck are you doing?”

I spotted Zoe, Eden, and his roommates. But I only had eyes for him. He wore a pair of navy board shorts low on his hips like every other guy on the beach. Yet somehow, he stood out. The way he always did.

I stopped in my tracks and stared at him, feeling suddenly overwhelmed. Everyone was staring, wondering what the hell I was doing. Including Luca. I didn’t know what to say, so I pulled him against my chest and crashed my mouth over his.

The crowd erupted in a chorus of catcalls and wolf whistles. I tuned them out, curling my hand around his nape, and resting my forehead on his.

“Stay. Or I’ll go with you. It doesn’t matter. I just...I love you.”

“Oh, yeah?”

He smiled that extra-bright smile. The one that lit me up and made me dizzy at the same time. I wanted that smile in my life forever. This was not a phase for me. This was not an experiment and he was more than just a friend. This was real, and Luca was the center of it all.

“Yeah.” I traced his brow with my thumb and pressed kisses on his cheeks. “This might land us on social media later, which definitely was not what I had in mind, but it seemed really fucking important to let you know that I’m crazy about you. Head-over-heels crazy. You feel like home to me, Luca. Not this town, not the ocean. You. Just you.”

Luca launched himself at me.

We clung to each other, wrapped in an invisible shroud that somehow blocked out the noise. I heard voices, not words. I saw lights but couldn’t make out figures.

The real world would seep in eventually—it always did. And we’d be ready for it. Together. We could carve our own path and celebrate our own fresh start, right where we began... out in the surf.

EPILOGUE

“**H**aving begun to love you, I love you forever.”
—Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

LUCA

A buzzer broke the silence in the shop. We were expecting a big shipment this morning. Huge. I had no idea where everything was going to fit, but storage was a temporary problem. As soon as the remodel was complete, there'd be plenty of space for twice the amount of surf gear we currently fit at CaLuca's Surf Shop.

Okay, the name change was still up for debate. Cal and I couldn't decide if we wanted to leave it as is or begin our new era with a snazzy logo and title. We went ahead with the logo change and added a small C and L at the bottom of a wave. It was simple yet cool. And it went well with our expansion.

Cal leaned against the door with his hip and heaved an oversized box onto the counter. “The delivery truck has at least ten more of these. What the hell did we order?”

I cut through the tape, flipped the top open, and pulled out a bubble-wrapped package. I grinned as I popped the plastic wrap, unrolling a ceramic mug with surfboards. I held it up for my boyfriend to inspect before turning it upside down, pointing at the engraved heart with our initials on the bottom.

“I couldn't resist.” I kissed his cheek and handed it to him, adding, “Don't worry. I only bought a dozen of these. This

shipment is part apparel and part surfboard-making crap.”

Cal set the mug aside and snaked his arms around my waist. “Crap? I’m gonna let that slide ’cause I need to tell you I think you’re fucking amazing. I can’t believe you made those.”

“My ceramics days are over, babe. I ordered those.”

“I figured that out, but I still love it. It’s like a hidden treasure in a store full of—”

“Crap?” I supplied, nibbling on his bottom lip.

Cal smacked my ass and squeezed me tighter. “Something like that. What time is the construction crew arriving?”

“Eight a.m.,” I groaned. “Everything happens so damn early when you’re an adult.”

“Ha. I think you’re used to it now.”

I was. When your live-in boyfriend and business partner surfed every day, waking up at the ass crack of dawn was part of the deal.

Rising early was hardly the biggest change in my life over the past nine months. Geez, everything was different.

I’d declined the job with the Sharks, much to everyone’s chagrin. I didn’t want to move again. And when I thought it through, it occurred to me that I could put my degree to use by helping Cal get his business up and running. He couldn’t afford to pay me, so I became a part owner instead. And took a position with an accounting firm based in Long Beach.

Perfect solution, right? I used my savings and a small loan from my parents, who drew up a contract to keep things legal. Cal had the flux of money he needed for the down payment and some operating cash, and I had a vested interest in making our shop a success. No, I hadn’t set out to become part owner of a surf shop, but I loved it.

Cal and I moved into a cute bungalow in town last spring when my lease was up on my apartment. Living at the shop during renovations wasn’t a viable option, and it needed a lot of updating. We planned to make the upstairs into an office.

And turning Cal's old room into a storage area would free up space to expand the storefront and give him a larger area to work on custom boards.

We waited to begin the remodel until after the summer rush was over. Smart move on our part. We were three weeks into construction now, and it was a bit dusty. It would be worth it in the long run, though. Cal's vision was to become the go-to surfboard manufacturer in SoCal and to sponsor talent in local competitions. My goal was to go global. Eventually.

Don't worry...I still made time for hockey. I couldn't volunteer anymore, but I joined a rec league and played a couple of times a week. The level of play was nowhere near as physical as my college days, but that was okay. I didn't have anything to prove. The kid who skated like demons were coming for him knew there was no reason to run, no cause to hide. I knew I was tough. I didn't need confirmation.

I'd flown to California over a year ago, hoping to find a new purpose and found myself in the process. Best of all, I'd found Cal.

We leaned on each other and we were stronger for it. We were better together. Our friends and family recognized it, too. My folks met him when they came to LA earlier in the year, and they loved him. My mom especially.

She teased that Cal had called her last year because he'd had a crush on me. It made his ears turn pink, so there might have been some truth to that. My dad was intrigued with surfing, and the corporate lawyer in him was interested in helping us with the legalities involved in setting up our new enterprise.

Then again, they knew I was queer. Cal's folks hadn't known that about him, however, they didn't care. Like Cal, the Donnellys didn't have any hang-ups about sexuality, and neither did any of his friends. They just wanted him to be happy.

Me too.

I bit his shoulder playfully and pushed a lock of hair behind his ear. “Wanna organize the boxes with me before I have to go to work?”

“Nope.” Cal nipped my chin. “We’re letting Sarah do that, remember? It’s her job.”

“Mmm. You’re right, but she won’t know where everything goes.” I pointed at the shelves of T-shirts at the far end. “I want to stack the new merch by Hannah’s line.”

Yes, we’d agreed to carry Hannah’s brand, but only designs we liked. No cutesie dolphins. Cal left the wheeling and dealing to me. Which was cool with everyone. And I knew that having a nice working relationship with his ex was a relief to Cal.

“Got it. I’ll take care of it.” He nuzzled my neck and breathed me in. “Fuck, you smell good. If the contractors arrive at eight, we have thirty minutes of happy time.”

My chuckle morphed into a low moan. “I have to go to work, you know.”

“Fine. Twenty minutes.”

“Deal.” I gazed into his eyes for a long moment. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Luca. So fucking much.” He sucked on my bottom lip and kissed it better.

“Just for that, I’m gonna give you twenty-one minutes.”

He barked a laugh and held me close. “I’ll take it.”

I grinned into the crook of his neck and didn’t let go until the delivery guy cleared his throat and asked where we wanted the rest of the boxes. Cal’s cheeks looked a bit flushed, but he didn’t miss a beat. He pointed toward the far end of the shop and barked orders like a boss.

And me? I pinched myself and thanked my lucky stars... for a new start, a new path, and for Cal.

I sometimes jokingly referred to that first fateful surf lesson as the day Cal saved me. He’d roll his eyes and tell me I

had a flair for drama. But it was true. He literally and figuratively saved me. I wasn't lost anymore. I'd changed directions and found my way.

Maybe that day changed Cal too. Sure, he'd always known what he wanted, but he realized now that he didn't have to do it all alone.

It was okay to let others dream with him. It was okay to ask for help. And it was a beautiful thing to come out in the surf.

I HOPE you enjoyed Cal and Luca's story! Turn the page for the bonus short, New Tides, and a little more of our surfer boys!

And if you're in the mood for some freebie reads, be sure to subscribe to my newsletter, [Lane's Letters](#) too. I have quite a few free shorts available.

BONUS CHAPTER- NEW TIDES

New Tides

Cal

“Rex helped the UPS man bring in the new delivery. We now have ten giant pieces of block foam in the middle of the store.”

I hummed distractedly and continued ticking off inventory items, my eyes fixed on my iPad. “Cool.”

“Cool?” Luca huffed. “That’s not cool. In fact, nothing’s cool. It’s hot as fuck outside. We’re talkin’ fry-some-eggs-on-the-sidewalk hot. And the last thing I want to do is move a bunch of foam boards. Those things are heavier than they look.”

I glanced up, an eye roll locked and loaded, but did a cartoon-style double take when my boyfriend yanked his T-shirt over his head and wiped his brow. Damn, he was gorgeous.

Was I ever going to get used to this?

Luca Rossiter was one sexy motherfucker, and he was all mine. I’d kissed and licked every inch of that tanned, toned, muscular body. You’d think my libido would have evened out

a bit over the past three years, but...no. I wanted him more every day.

He was my partner in crime. My best friend, my ride or die, my love. The funniest, best-natured goofball with a heart of gold—who currently looked like he wanted to hurt someone.

I set the iPad on a shelf and studied him, letting my gaze wander all over his sweat-slicked olive skin. “Need help?”

“Yeah, gimme a sec.” He sauntered to the fridge and grabbed two bottles. “Want one?”

“Sure, thanks.”

Luca tossed me a water bottle before uncapping his and guzzling the whole thing. He gave a sheepish smile and shrugged. “Thirsty.”

I chuckled as I handed over my water bottle. “Here. You need this more than I do. And if you could just tilt your head so I get the full Adam’s apple porn thing in while you’re drinking it, that would be great.”

“Adam’s apple porn? Really?”

“Yep.” I kissed his cheek and nibbled his ear. “You’re a sexy beast, baby. I love you. And I appreciate you.”

Luca’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “Prove it.”

I gave him the eye roll I’d been saving. “I’m not sucking your dick during store hours.”

“Sarah closed up twenty minutes ago.”

“She did?”

I stepped into the doorway between the storage area and the store to peek through the bank of windows facing the ocean. The fading sunlight cast long shadows over the racks of clothing and made the foam boards stacked against the register look like pillars from a prehistoric age. I counted ten boards and made a mental note to buy more.

CaLuca boards were in high demand, I mused as Luca pointed at the setting summer sun.

“It’s later than it looks. I think that’s why Rex was in hurry—he wanted to drive to Newport to catch some bigger waves. Apparently, the local ones are too mellow.” Luca raked his fingers through his dark hair and narrowed his eyes. “He asked if you’d been training.”

“For what?”

“The competition after the US Open.” He snapped his fingers as if it might help jog his memory. “Big Wave Classic. I think we had a booth there last year.”

“We did, but no, I didn’t sign up to compete.” I marched over to the eight-foot foam boards I planned to fashion into high-tech surfboards and hiked one under my right arm. “Will you help get these into the shop?”

“Sure...after you tell me why you’re not entering this year. You did last year.”

I frowned. “Yeah, I’m done competing. I told you that. I’m pretty sure I told Rex too.”

“O-kay, but...why? I mean, you’re only thirty-two. Old, but not too old.” He chuckled when I flipped him off, then tugged my wrist and pulled me against his chest.

That was probably my cue to pretend to be grossed out by my sweaty man, but he knew I didn’t mind.

“It’s old enough to remember I have other obligations. Between making boards, supervising the surf camp, surf lessons, and managing the store and the booths we’re running at various events, I’m tapped out. I don’t have time to train.”

All true.

But it was also true that we had great help. We’d hired a group of talented surfers to run the camp and give lessons. Sarah managed the store full-time so I could concentrate on crafting boards, and she was usually responsible for making sure the booths were manned.

When we’d first expanded and remodeled, Luca and I had agreed that delegating was the key to a successful enterprise... and a healthy relationship. As co-owner, Luca was always

willing to help, but he had a job in the finance world and other interests, like hockey. I couldn't expect him to devote his free time to schlepping boards.

Summertime was particularly chaotic for the average surf shop in So Cal, and we didn't set out to be average. Luca and I wanted to grow our brand and support new talent on an international level. We weren't quite there yet, but we were making progress. And part of that progress could be attributed to the giant foam monoliths currently crowding the store.

My custom boards started at a thousand a piece, and some went for over three thousand dollars. They were a lucrative part of the business and since I was the only one who knew how to make them, this was where I needed to be. Not on the beach.

I sucked in a breath and prepared to bore my boyfriend with my to-do list, but he spoke up first.

"You need to make time, babe," Luca said softly. He shuffled us out of the store and leaned against the wall in the storage area, pulling me between his open legs. "For your own sake."

"What do you mean?"

"You're a god out there, Cal. You're so fucking good. The ocean is your passion, not your workshop. I know the boards help pay the bills, but we're not hurting for money. There's wiggle room to do the things we love too, you know? I don't want you to regret the things you didn't do or the chances you didn't take."

I pulled back to meet his gaze. "You sound like you've put some thought into that speech. Are you worried about me?"

"A little." He lifted a strand of hair from my eyes. "You work too hard."

"So do you."

"Me? Nah." Luca kissed my jaw and nipped my lower lip. "Hey, I'm not worried about any competition. I wouldn't have brought it up if I hadn't run into Rex. His theory that you're

avoiding competing against Andy Dugan didn't make sense, but I—”

“What? Why the fuck would I avoid Andy Dugan?”

“I don't know. Ask Rex.”

I pushed out of his arms and paced to the box of new merchandise Hannah had dropped off earlier today.

Hannah. Andy's wife and my ex-girlfriend.

Nothing complicated here, folks.

My knee-jerk frustration gave way to the very real fear that Luca might think for one second that I harbored any bad feelings about my ex marrying my rival last month. That couldn't have been further from the truth. I loved Luca. He was my everything.

And he made all of this possible.

Owning this shop might have been my dream, but Luca was the one with the plan that included financial backing and future expansion. He was the one who was always ready to dive into a new venture. He was fearless to the point of being reckless, and I supposed that was where I came in. We balanced each other, and we were good together.

So, last year, when Hannah announced that Andy had asked her to marry him, I'd sincerely congratulated them. Luca and I attended every pre-wedding event we were invited to and shucked out the money for a weekend in La Jolla at an expensive resort for the wedding. And we'd had fun.

We'd torn up the dance floor, partied with family and friends, and spent all our free time naked in our suite—alternately sipping champagne and fucking like animals.

Long story short, I'd never once thought I should have been the one at the altar with Hannah.

What I *had* thought was...

Well...shit.

Okay, fine. I'd wished it were Luca and me. And I didn't know if he was ready to hear that.

We'd been a couple for almost three years now and I didn't doubt his commitment to us, but marriage and commitment were seriously big concepts. Luca had just turned twenty-six. That was too young to promise someone forever. Wasn't it?

We weren't talking about us, though. We were talking about Andy fucking Dugan.

"I like Andy just fine."

"I know you do," Luca assured me patiently.

"But I like making money more than I like coming in second place. That's all."

A flash of hurt crossed his handsome face. I would have missed it if I didn't know him so well. He raised a brow and quirked a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Understandable."

I closed the distance between us till we stood flip-flop to running shoe. "Hey, I was not referring to Hannah. You know that, right?"

He nodded slowly. "I do, but...guys like Rex probably still think I'm a phase. I'm sure he said it to piss you off and fire you up. He delivered the message through me because...he likes to think I'm just a bro with benefits. No harm, no foul."

I snorted. "Rex is a good-natured moron."

"True."

I caressed his stubbled jaw and kissed him, caging him between my arms. "I love you. Do you need me to compete to prove that—"

"No. Don't be a dick," he snapped, reversing our positions so fast my head hit the wall.

"Ow."

"Sorry." He held my head in his big hands and pressed kisses over my forehead and cheeks before brushing his nose alongside mine. "You don't have to prove anything to me. I didn't relay Rex's message for assurance purposes. I know who we are. I just...I want to make sure you don't bury your

head in work and forget to have fun once in a while. That's all."

I narrowed my eyes. "I *am* having fun."

Luca hooked his thumb behind him. "So...checking inventory after hours is fun?"

"It got a lot more fun when you showed up," I rasped, resting my arms on his shoulders. I kissed the corner of his mouth and nipped his chin. "Hey, don't worry about me. I'm happy. Seriously...so fucking happy, baby. I love you."

Luca

Hearing those three little words never got old.

I flashed a crooked smile at him, intending to say something cool and witty I hoped would steer us back to neutral. I shouldn't have passed along Rex's message. That was a stupid move on my part. Not only had I put Cal on the defensive, but I'd exposed one of my biggest fears.

Look, I knew Cal didn't care that his ex had married his rival. I knew my man pretty damn well. We slept in the same bed, shared a bank account, and grumbled about whose turn it was to go grocery shopping. Hell, we owned a business together. I didn't doubt his commitment to me, but...I was only human.

And every once in a while, some dufus like Rex would make an off-the-cuff remark that made it clear that people Cal cared about were convinced our relationship was a reaction to something he'd lost.

Stupid, right?

I took pride in not giving a shit about other people's opinions. You had a problem with me, that was on you, not me. Cal and I had that in common. The difference was that Cal was relatively new to being out, and I worried sometimes that he felt the need to prove himself.

Like...building an international surf brand in record time.

I was just as invested in CaLuca's success as he was, but my day job and my rec hockey league gave me other outlets Cal didn't seem to allow himself. So yeah...that worried me.

"I love you too." I pecked his lips and cupped his ass, pulling his lean body closer. I knew I should have dropped the subject and moved on to something sexier, but I couldn't let it go. "What if *I* enter the competition?"

Cal furrowed his brow hard enough to give himself a headache. "The Big Wave?"

"Yeah."

"Why? What are you talking about?"

I squeezed his ass to keep him close. "You heard me. I'm a decent surfer and according to Rex, it's for all skill levels. I could do it."

"I know you could, but why would you want to?" he asked, clearly confused.

"They say you should always challenge yourself and try new things. It could be fun. Thing is...I'd need a coach." I rocked my semi against his and winked. "That's where you'd come in."

"You want me to be your coach. I—this is some kind of reverse psychology thing, huh?"

For sure, but I ignored the question and barreled on. "Look, my rec league takes the summer off. I won't have hockey practice again till late August. That's seven weeks from now, and the Big Wave competition is five or six weeks away. That would give us both a fun side project and an excuse to surf—which, if you think about it, is another way to sell our brand. Nothing says, 'Buy our shit 'cause we know what we're talking about' more than participating in a competition we're helping to sponsor. Right?"

Silence.

After a moment, Cal finally released a long rush of air. "Right. But...I can't help thinking there's an ulterior motive."

Couple truth time. These were not my favorite conversations. I'd hoped my dick would provide some distraction, but it seemed like I'd have to use some words too. *Ugh.*

"Fine. You work too much, and I think you avoid competing against Andy," I blurted.

"Okay, well...I want our business to succeed and like I said, I hate losing."

"I get that, but sometimes, it's not about winning or losing. It's about showing up. I know I'm gonna lose and I know I'll probably make a fool of myself, but I want to do it. And I'd love for it to be a team thing. Me and you. Out and proud in the surf."

Cal narrowed his eyes. "I like that idea, but you're not listening to me. I'm not avoiding competition because I have a fragile ego, Luca. I love surfing and that will never change, but...I want other things in life too."

"Such as?" I prodded.

He hesitated for a beat, then released a ragged sigh. "I want to get a head start on adult shit, like growing this business so I can contribute to...us. I mean, you make a great salary, and you invest time and money in this shop. Sometimes I feel like a slacker. Like I'm behind schedule. My friends are getting married, buying houses, and doing things...I want to do too."

Whoa, this just got real in a hurry.

I cleared my throat, hoping my voice didn't squeak when I spoke. "You...you want to get married?"

Cal snort-laughed. "Not tomorrow, babe. Relax. But... yeah, eventually, I do. And I feel like I made this weird. There's no rush. You're younger than me, and the last thing on your mind is marriage and kids and—"

"Kids?" I squeaked.

"Yeah. Someday."

My eyes had to be saucer-sized. "I like kids."

He flashed a lopsided grin that lit his face to perfection. “I know you do. You’ll be a great dad when the time comes. But that time isn’t now. We’ll know when it’s right. You’re only twenty-six and—”

“What does age have to do with anything? I’d marry you tomorrow at city fucking hall,” I assured him.

“Yeah?”

“Fuck, yeah. I just...didn’t know you were thinking those...thoughts,” I finished lamely.

“I’m a planner, Luca. I like clear goals and road maps to help me figure out how to get where I want to go. And none of that is romantic in the slightest, so that’s probably why I didn’t share what I was thinking. It has nothing to do with Andy. He’ll always compete. I don’t think he’d know what to do with his time if he wasn’t training for a meet. As for Rex...he’s Peter Pan, and he’s loaded. He’s never had to work a day in his life. Good for him, I guess, but his reality is skewed. When we’re sixty, he’ll still be that friend who wonders why I’m not surfing twenty-foot swells in Hawaii...like I did when we were twenty-two. I can’t worry about what everyone else is doing. I’ve got my own path.” He gave me a sheepish look and added, “With you.”

“I like that. So...when are we doing this marriage thing? Next month, next year? Or do you have some monetary goal associated with popping the question, Mr. Romance? Since I’m the guy you’re marrying, you might want to let me in on the finer points of your plan.”

Cal inclined his chin. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I should have done a better job of communicating. It just seemed...like I might jinx us if I said the M word out loud and—that’s dumb, huh?”

“A little.” But my heart felt like it might burst out of my chest, so I let him off the hook. “I love you, you know that?”

“Yeah, I had a feeling you did,” he replied, nipping my jaw.

“So...when *is* our wedding?”

His cheeks turned bright pink. “I don’t know. Geez, I, uh... um—”

I had to laugh. Cal was pretty fucking cute when he was flustered. I held his face in my hands and sealed my mouth over his.

“We’ll come back to that one later,” I said, breaking the kiss to brush my nose against his. “In the meantime, I’m signing up for that tournament.”

Cal cocked his head curiously. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

I paused to think my impetuous idea through before slowly nodding.

“Yeah. I am.” I snaked my hand between us and grabbed his junk. “So...wanna be my coach? Say yes. I’ve always had a hard-on for coach porn.”

Cal snort-laughed. “We can’t have sex here, Luca.”

“We own this place. We can have sex wherever we want.” I yanked his tee over his head and untied his board shorts, wrapping my fingers around his shaft through the thin fabric.

He licked his lips, sparing a quick glance toward the darkened storefront. I checked too. We could see out, but there was no way anyone could see in from our current vantage point.

“I guess that’s true,” he hummed.

“Mmm. I could get on my knees for you right here, right now.” I ghosted my mouth along his jawline and whispered in his ear. “Want me to suck your dick...Coach?”

He straightened and hooked his thumbs under his shorts, letting them drop to the floor in a whoosh. I gave him an appreciative head-to-toe once-over. Not many guys could rock the birthday suit with flip-flops like Cal.

He was stunning. My quintessential California surfer with sun-drenched shaggy hair, golden skin, sinewy lean muscles, and...a big fuckin’ boner. My mouth watered when he held himself at his base and stroked.

“Yeah. Suck me, hockey boy. Show me what you got,” he taunted.

I obeyed, unbuttoning and unzipping my shorts and kneeling on the cold concrete floor. I grabbed my cock with my right hand and his with my left, jacking us both with long, leisurely pulls.

He groaned my name as he leaned against the wall, running his fingers through my hair. I smiled when he met my gaze, then flattened my tongue over his slit and twirled it a few times to make him crazy before opening wide and swallowing him.

Sex was pretty much a daily occurrence in our house, and blowjobs featured prominently—sometimes as a prelude to fucking, but often on their own. The point was...I knew my boyfriend’s cock as well as I knew my own. He didn’t mind a little teasing, but he preferred to be deep-throated and sucked like a Hoover. I gave him what he loved, testing my throat muscles as I bobbed my head, stroking any part of his dick I couldn’t get in my mouth.

Cal’s hands were in my hair now, and his hips were moving. I thought he was talking, but I couldn’t dissect meaning in his words. I was all about action now. I gripped him as I rolled my tongue over his balls, flicking the sensitive skin under his sac.

He released my hair with a low moan. “Fuck, Luca.”

I smeared the precum pooling on my tip over my pole as I glanced up at him. So fucking hot. I wanted more.

“Turn around. Hands on the wall.”

Cal went still. “Luca, we can’t—”

“We can. Do it,” I barked. “I want to see your ass.”

He didn’t hesitate. A true sign that he was already as horned out as I was.

I didn’t give him a chance to think twice. I pulled his cheeks apart and licked his hole.

“Fuuuuck.”

I flicked my tongue over his puckered entrance till he was weak-kneed and whimpering with need. I sucked my middle finger and tapped before easing it inside him.

“You like that, huh?”

“More,” he grunted. “Fuck me.”

I stood on wobbly feet and stepped out of my shorts. “We need lube. I can’t—oh, hang on.”

“Don’t even think about using sunscreen.”

“As if,” I huffed, digging in my wallet for the travel-sized packet of lube I’d stuffed in it when we went hiking last weekend. “I tried jerking off with SPF Thirty when I was fifteen. Bad idea. It rubbed in all the wrong ways.”

Cal chuckled, hanging his head with a sigh when I drizzled lube on his cock and mine, and pushed a slick finger inside him.

And a second one.

“Yes, do it. I want you.”

“Say it. Tell me what you want,” I purred, covering his body like a cloak.

“Fuck me. Gimme your dick. Give it to me now.”

I tsked as I nudged his hole with the tip of my overeager cock. “Such a bossy bottom.”

We both snickered at that. Cal had lost all his inhibitions a while ago. We were both versatile, but the more in tune he’d become with his prostate, the more he wanted me to top. Or maybe he just knew I preferred it. One of the things I liked best about us was that we had no problem discussing what we wanted in the bedroom.

Or in the storeroom.

I lifted my leg for leverage as I pushed inside my lover.

“Oh, fuck.” He shivered all over, bracing himself on his forearms.

“Shh. You’re okay. I’m right here and I’m going slow, so —”

“Fuck slow. I want to feel you, Luca. I want—oh, yeah. That’s it. *Ooh...*”

I kissed his neck when he dipped his head back and murmured dirty compliments in his ear. The kind I knew would make him blush. His hole was mine. I wanted to fuck it, own it...own him.

No one else...only Cal.

I wrapped my fingers around his and stroked while I thrust deeper. And just to drive him a little nuts, I pulled almost all the way out and slammed in again. And again. His blissed-out cry made me dizzy with lust. I tried to go slower, hoping to draw out his pleasure, but that wasn’t realistic. I wanted everything he’d give me all at once. I basically had the willpower of a kid in a candy shop.

In my defense, getting down and dirty in the storeroom wasn’t a regular occurrence. We’d done it a couple of times, but we were more likely to stick to private spaces like the adjacent studio where there were no windows overlooking a major thoroughfare. No, this was kinda dangerous. So even though screwing against a wall wasn’t super comfortable, it was hot as fuck.

Cal swatted my hand off his cock and bucked backward in a wordless request for me to pick up the pace. Message received. I held his hips and moved like thunder, pounding his hole relentlessly. The sound of heavy breathing and the slap of skin permeated the cavernous space. I licked sweat from his shoulder as I reached around to cup his balls.

“You’re close. I can tell.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m gonna...”

My roar of release drowned him out. I came so hard, I swore I saw stars. And I couldn’t stop moving. Like I wanted to be sure to fill him with every last drop and give him everything I had.

When I thought I could stand on my own, I pulled out and braced my right hand on the wall.

“Wow,” I panted.

He chuckled, kissing me breathless before burying his face in my neck. “Doesn’t the coach usually fuck the player?”

I barked a laugh and shrugged. “Does that mean you’ll be my coach?”

“You really want to sign up for this?”

No, it wasn’t exactly high on my list of things I really wanted, but...I had a feeling it might be good for us, personally and professionally. So...

“Yeah.”

Cal smiled. “Then let’s do it. You’ve got yourself a coach.”

Five weeks later, I wondered what the fuck I’d gotten myself into.

Cal was a great coach and instructor. He was patient and dedicated, and there was no mistaking his love of the sport. Or of me. But he was kind of...intense.

When we surfed together casually, we wriggled into our wetsuits, grabbed our boards, and jumped into the ocean. For training purposes, Cal insisted on a more exacting routine that included vigorous stretching and diet modification.

Stretching...okay, but his new carb and junk food aversion was driving me up a wall. He didn’t police my intake—however, he was obviously trying to lead by example and it wasn’t going so well.

I caught his side-eye as I bit into my egg-and-sausage bagel sandwich.

“Wanna bite?” I asked midchew.

“No, and you shouldn’t be eating that either. You need to fuel your body with healthy food, not greasy junk.” Cal stabbed a chunk of melon from the plastic container on the store counter and lifted it to my lips. “Try this.”

I finished swallowing and dutifully bit into the juicy melon. “Yum.”

“See? There’s more in the storeroom fridge if you’re interested.”

I shook my head, chomping into my greasy morning bagel. “Nope, I’m good.”

He heaved a sigh and commenced quietly snacking on fruit, his gaze fixed on his iPad. I mentally sorted through the list of things I needed to accomplish that day. I had a meeting with a new client at ten, a company meeting at one, and a shitload of busywork in between. If I wanted to be home early tonight to help deal with the last wave of the summer shipment we were expecting, I had to get my day started.

I finished my breakfast and crushed the wrapper into a ball, tossing it at the wastebasket behind the register and pumping my fist when it went in.

Cal chuckled at my antics as he pushed his iPad away. “You going home?”

“Yeah, I need a shower, etcetera.” I kissed his cheek and cupped his ass, smacking it once for good measure. “I’ll be back later to help with the delivery. Love you.”

“Love you too.” He tugged my wrist before I stepped aside. “Hey...you’re looking good out there.”

“Thanks.” I grinned, then inclined my chin toward Hannah and Andy unloading boxes from an SUV parked in front of the store. “You think I could beat that guy?”

Cal turned on cue and made a funny face I couldn’t quite decipher, which bugged the hell out of me. I needed to pay better attention or ask better questions.

“No, but he’s not your competition. Win or lose, you’ll do well in your heat.”

“I think so too. And when they ask me the secret of my success, I’m gonna tell them I have a great coach and I eat an egg-and-sausage bagel every day.”

Cal chuckled merrily. It was my favorite kind of twinkly-eyed laugh that showed off his dimples and bathed him in a warm glow that made my heart race.

“Please don’t.” He pointed at the door and shooed me off. “Have a good day and—”

“Oh, man. They’re at it again,” Andy grouched, lumbering toward us with his arms full of dolphin tote bags.

A note about Andy Dugan: He was a tall, lean, surfer dude with longish blond hair, who quite frankly, resembled every other guy I’d met since I’d moved to the beach. Decent-looking, but not a standout. Nice guy but kind of a simpleton. The thing that made him special was his skill on a board. He’d been on the circuit for almost two decades and had accrued top-tier sponsorships that enabled him to chase waves across the globe. He really was that good.

But unless the conversation was centered around waves, visibility, a new competition, or something surf-related, Andy didn’t have much to add. If you asked me, he was a little... boring. Cal was right. Surfing was the only life Andy knew. I felt ashamed for suggesting Cal harbored some kind of jealousy toward his old rival when they were so obviously different people with different goals.

“Mornin’, Andy. You bringing us more whale shit to sell?”

“That’s dolphin shit to you, dude.” He gave us each bro handshakes, then adjusted his ball cap and hooked his thumb at the street. “Hannah’s organizing some sweatshirts out there. She wanted me to put these in the back, or should I just leave them here?”

Cal glanced at the stack of T-shirts and mail he’d been planning on organizing before opening. “Uh...the storeroom for sure. I’ll show you where they go.”

I grabbed my keys from my pocket and waved. “Later, guys.”

Andy gave me a thumbs-up while Cal gave me a heart-stopping smile. “Love you, Luca.”

Call me easy, but I felt like I was walking on a cloud as I stepped outside and slipped my sunglasses on my nose.

“Hey, Hannah. How’s it going?” I asked, twirling my keys.

Hannah pushed a strand of her long blond hair behind her ears and sighed. “Fine. Just a little stressed. We have another drop-off in San Clemente, and the traffic is going to suck.”

I nodded. “Yep. For me too. I’d better—”

“Are you ready for this weekend?” she intercepted.

“Yeah, sure. It’s all for fun. Cal’s a great coach, but he’s not working with the raw talent here, ya know?”

“I don’t think he minds at all. He looks seriously happy out there.”

“He loves the water.”

“And he loves you,” she countered.

My answering grin hurt my cheeks. Yeah, I didn’t doubt it for a second.

I waved good-bye and turned to get on with my day. But at the last second, I blurted, “Hey, how’s married life?”

Hannah blinked, no doubt surprised by my intense expression. Then she grinned one of those ear-to-ear, heart-stopping beautiful smiles that answered her question before a single word passed her lips.

“It’s the best thing ever,” she gushed. “I’m lucky. I married my best friend and my favorite person. I thought we should wait until our lives were more settled at first, but what’s the point? When you know, you know.”

I gave her a lazy thumbs-up and headed for my car, jingling my keys as though I didn’t have a care in the world.

But my stomach was lodged in my throat, and my palms were sweaty as fuck.

When you know, you know.

I knew. And Cal knew.

I wasn't too young, and we didn't need a mortgage or a sensible stock portfolio as some kind of insurance policy to prove we were grown up enough to handle daunting concepts like...forever. I was ready now. If Andy and Hannah weren't in the store, I would have been tempted to hurry back, get on one knee, and ask him to marry me.

Damn it, I needed a ring too. Did he want platinum, gold, titanium? Should I wing it, or should we discuss it first? I swiped my hand over my face and took a deep breath. Chill. One thing at a time.

First up, the tournament. With any luck, I'd amaze my boyfriend with my newfound surfing skills, and he'd be so gobsmacked and in awe that he'd agree there was no point in waiting. We could have it all now.

Good plan, I mused, shoving my key in the ignition.

Of course, it would help if I didn't totally suck this weekend.

Cal

The Big Wave competition was a family favorite when I was a kid. My dad used to register the whole clan, and he'd insist on taking the same silly photo of all of us in wetsuits sporting shaka signs. They were still hanging on a wall in their family room in a place of honor. Goofy, but special at the same time. I hoped Luca realized my mom had big plans to add his photo to the collection.

“Is Luca okay out there? Can you see him?” Mom asked, aiming her binoculars at the Pacific.

I pointed in his general direction. “He’s doing fine, Ma. He should be coming in soon.”

Mom stuffed her binoculars in her beach bag and nudged my elbow playfully. “You’re not worried, are you?”

“No, he’s done well today.”

That was true. Luca might not place, but he’d stayed on his board and ridden a decent-sized wave in without spinning in whitewash. Not bad for a guy who’d never been surfing before he met me. I was proud of him. And I was glad my folks had insisted on coming to cheer him on.

My mom and dad loved Luca. It had taken them a second to wrap their heads around the idea of me with a man, but Luca was an insta-hit. His gregarious nature and wacky sense of humor had won them over on day one. Now, they practically ran his fan club.

“He’s a quick learner and so athletic,” Mom gushed. See? “And he has a great coach.”

“He sure does,” Dad agreed. “We’re proud of you, son. You and Luca. Between running a new business, sponsoring new talent, and participating in events, you’ve got your hands full. It’s a lot of work, but hard work breeds success. We’ll have to drink a toast to CaLuca’s tonight.”

I opened my mouth to remind him we had a long way to go, but the words caught in my throat when Luca emerged from the ocean with his board tucked under his arm, looking like a sea god. I watched a few spectators greet him with high fives, and I smiled when Hannah hugged him and Andy gave him a fist bump.

I followed as he made his way to the pop-up tent pitched in the sand to check in. The tent with our logo emblazoned on top—a joint design and a symbolic nod that we were a team.

Pride swelled in my chest for him and my stupid, fabulous luck. That man was mine.

I loved his spirit and relentless energy. I loved that he constantly challenged himself and sought to make a difference

where he could. And I loved that he reminded me to do the same...leading by example.

Fuck, I loved him.

I left my folks at the shoreline and trudged through the warm sand, weaving through the throng of surf enthusiasts to join him at the tent.

I rolled my eyes when Rex made a beeline to congratulate Luca, knowing my old buddy was more concerned about saying hi to Zoe and the posse of college friends Luca had kept in touch with. I stopped to greet the girls, letting out an undignified *oomph* when Zoe practically leaped into my arms.

“Oh, my God! Can you believe him?” she squealed gleefully, releasing me to hug my boyfriend. “I was there day one. You couldn’t stay on a board to save your life and now look at you! Luca, baby, I’m so proud!”

“Thanks.” Luca grinned, shaking his head and dousing her with excess water till she punched his biceps and pushed him away.

“Grr!” She scowled playfully, glancing between us. “Don’t forget the party at my place tonight. Be there. We have to celebrate.”

“We’ll have to catch you next time, Zoe. We’re busy tonight.” I kissed her cheek, then pulled Luca behind the tent for a modicum of privacy.

“So we’re busy, eh?”

I crashed my mouth over his in response, molding our lips and sliding inside. We didn’t linger, but we were still breathless when we parted. I raked his damp hair out of his eyes and nodded.

“Yeah, we’re gonna celebrate on our own tonight. Okay by you?”

He beamed. “Clothing optional?”

“Definitely. Hey, you did good out there.”

“Thanks, baby.”

I basked in his sunny grin, content to let the moment be for now.

We had things to do here. The day was far from over. Our booth was busy, a local station wanted to interview Luca and me after the competition, and yeah...we were literally surrounded by friends and family. Schmoopy sentiments would have to wait.

Later that night, we took a bottle of wine to the deck to watch the sunset and replay the day's events.

"...I almost wiped out twice," Luca snorted. "But I told myself there was no fucking way I'd finish my first competition being hailed by a helicopter and rescued by a lifeguard boat. No way."

I snickered softly. "That was never going to happen."

"Nah, I'm not so bad out there," he bragged. He sipped his wine and narrowed his eyes. "Do you think I'm going to make the family shaka wall this year?"

I massaged his neck and nodded ruefully. "Afraid so."

Luca nodded, turning his gaze to the ocean before letting a monster smile spread across his sinfully handsome face. "Cool."

I studied him in the pinkish evening light, suddenly overcome with a rush of love and pride so strong, it rendered me speechless for a minute. When I found my voice again, it was weak and scratchy.

"I love you," I whispered.

Luca did a double take and cocked his head.

"I love you, too." He set his glass on a nearby side table and rested a hand on my hip. "Is something wrong?"

“No, no. Everything’s good.”

“You sure? You look kinda pale.”

“I’m just...nervous,” I admitted, digging into my pocket.

“Why would you be—what are you doing?”

I sank to my knees and held up the platinum band I’d bought five weeks ago.

“Marry me, Luca. I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. We can wait if you want. We can go to City Hall or elope in Hawaii or Vegas or wherever. The details don’t matter. I just want you. Forever.”

His jaw hung open for so long, I wondered if I’d gotten it wrong.

I’d bought the ring soon after the day we’d talked about marriage. I mean, what was I waiting for? The business I wanted to grow belonged to both of us, and the house I wanted to save for would be ours...to raise a family together. Someday. Or whenever Luca said yes.

And damn, I really hoped he said yes soon, ’cause I was low-key freaking out now.

That was my last thought before he pulled me to my feet and crashed his mouth over mine. When we came up for air, he laughed, his eyes creased with joy. “I can’t believe you beat me to it. I have an appointment with a jeweler tomorrow.”

“What? Why?”

“I was going to ask you to marry me, dufus,” he replied affectionately.

My heart soared. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Luca pushed my hair from my eyes and gazed at me with so much love, I felt weak in the knees. “You’re the smartest, coolest, best man I know. I want a lifetime with you, Cal. A whole fucking lifetime.”

I grinned. “Same, baby. But you still haven’t answered the question. Will you marry me?”

“Yes. Yes, yes, yes.”

I slipped the ring onto his finger, kissed it, and just...kept smiling. I didn't know what else to say other than—

“I love you, Luca. I'm so fucking grateful you're mine.”

He stared at the ring for a beat, then beamed at me. “Same, baby. I love you.”

Luca pulled me to him and held me close. I held on, memorizing the feel of his body, the colors of the sky, and the hum of traffic in the distance.

Our story had begun a few years ago, but I couldn't help thinking this was a new beginning. I was grateful for a chance at a lifetime with Luca. We'd have a family of our own someday and open stores around the world, but we'd always know we'd started here...out in the surf.

I HOPE you enjoyed Cal and Luca's story!

If you're in the mood for some freebie reads, be sure to subscribe to my newsletter, [Lane's Letters](#) too. I have quite a few free shorts available.

A NOTE FROM LANE...

Thank you for reading! I live in sunny Southern California near the ocean—surf country! I admit I've never been on a board but thanks to one of my sons, my garage is filled with wetsuits, boards, fins, and other surf accessories. I'm fortunate to have an expert in the family to remind me what a barrel is and how to be true to the lexicon. Trust me, surfer-speak is a thing. It's epic, dude!

I hope you enjoyed Cal and Luca's story. I have more fun projects coming up. I just released a standalone called [Fairy Cakes in Winter](#), a grumpy/sunshine, age-gap story set in jolly old England! And in coming soon news— Look for book two in the Baxter Chronicles, [Baxter's Right-Hand-Man](#) this spring!

OUT IN COLLEGE SERIES

Out in College is my new adult series set in Southern California. Each book has a sports theme and though some characters will be featured in other stories, these books can be read on their own and in any order. So far, we've got water polo, football, baseball, ice hockey, volleyball, skiing, and... surfing too!

Check out the entire series...

Out in the Deep, Book 1

Out in the End Zone, Book 2

Out in the Offense, Book 3

Out in Field, Book 4

Out on the Ice, Book 5

Out in Spring, Book 6

Out on the Serve, Book 7

Out in Winter, Book 8

***Out for the Holidays/Out for Gold, A Derek & Gabe
Short Story - Book 9***

Out in the Surf, Book 10

**BAXTER'S RIGHT-HAND MAN-
COMING SPRING 2023**

EXCERPT FROM BAXTER'S RIGHT-HAND MAN- COMING SPRING 2023

“Hmm. What are you in the mood for?”

Uh-oh, that sounded flirty.

Not my intention, but I wouldn't apologize. Look, I sold pillows and accessories to rich folks with more money than they knew what to do with most days. The key to sweet a commission check was to show some interest in a client's personal life. This man wasn't a client, obvs...but, the same general rules probably applied.

And not to worry, it seemed like my powers of persuasion worked best when life choices revolved around stripes, solids, trendy wicker chandeliers and bouclé chairs 'cause my mystery friend didn't blink an eye.

He sucked in a deep breath of the cool evening air and released it slowly. “I'd like to get lost for a while and roam busy streets in cities I've never visited. No responsibilities whatsoever.”

“Oh, that would be a dream,” I agreed. “I'd settle for a pint of chocolate ice cream and a guarantee that those calories wouldn't go to my ass.”

He snorted. “*That's* your dream?”

“No, but I wouldn't pass it up.”

“Smart.”

A comfortable quiet settled between us. Of course, I had to be the one to break it.

“So...is she still madly in love with you?”

“Who? Oh.” He glanced over his shoulder distractedly and barked a laugh, tilting his glass to his lips. “Love was never part of the equation. To be honest, I’m not sure she liked me.”

“Ah, so it was a sex thing.” I unfurled the scarf around my neck and wrapped it around my shoulders when a cool gust of wind whistled through the canyon. “And if this actually is a sex party, I can see how it might be uncomfortable to bump into a sex ex.”

He promptly spit out his cocktail, snorting ineloquently in a valiant attempt to get his breathing under control. “A sex ex? Jesus. No, it wasn’t like that. I don’t think we had sex at all.”

I widened my eyes comically. “You never...got it on?”

He squinted behind his mask, then swallowed the last of his drink. “We made out a lot. Does that count?”

“Kissing? Absolutely not.”

“Making out is more than kissing, Lorenzo,” he asserted. “Other body parts get in on the action, you know?”

I shrugged and threw my hands in the air. “All right, fine. Whatever floats your boat. I’m too jaded to be allowed an opinion on the definition of romance.”

“It’s definitely not my area of expertise either.”

“No one’s an expert. We’re all faking it. After a while, we can’t tell the difference between what’s real and what’s a mirage anyway.” I frowned thoughtfully. “Maybe that’s why we’re always looking for physical proof...like rare flowers, Swiss chocolates, midnight kisses...dirty sex.”

He set his glass on the post as faced me. “This is getting deep.”

“Oh, no! We can’t let that happen,” I gasped. “Quick. What’s your favorite shop at the mall?”

“Mall? I don’t—I don’t go to the mall.”

“Ugh. Straight boys,” I chided playfully. “All right. What’s your favorite sport? Who’s your team?”

“Uh...I guess baseball, but I’m not really into sports.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What *are* you into?”

“I like cars.”

“Cars,” I repeated dully.

“Yeah, fast cars. Porsches, Ferraris...I drove a Bugatti once that was so fast it took my breath away. No kidding. I like classic rock too. Dylan, the Stones, the Kinks. And James Bond. I’m a huge 007 fan,” he gushed.

Wow.

Who was I and how had I ended up flirting with a straight man at a painfully hip party—in the dark no less? Why was I still standing here?

I didn’t engage in conversations about automobiles and old music unless I was sure I could sell ten designer pillows for my efforts. Never by choice. This had to be my cue to race to the nearest exit, make my escape pronto, and treat myself to a RuPaul drag-athon—cucumber eye mask and satin pajamas included.

“I see. Just to be clear, Kinks isn’t a sexual preference TMI moment?” I joked, wrapping the scarf a little tighter.

His hearty laughter echoed in the canyon and drifted over us like a cozy blanket. I supposed I had my answer to the “why was I still here?” query. I was a sucker for a sense of humor.

I chuckled along though I knew my quip wasn’t particularly funny.

It just felt...nice to be with this stranger. I hadn’t been attracted enough to linger in a man’s company in a long time. Figures he’d be mysterious and unattainable.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lane Hayes loves a good romance! An avid reader from an early age, she has always been drawn to well-told love story with beautifully written characters. She loves wine, chocolate and travel (in no particular order). Lane lives in Southern California with her amazing husband and her fabulous pup, George.

*Join Lane's reading group, [Lane's Lovers](#) for immediate updates!



ALSO BY LANE HAYES

Standalones

Fairy Cakes in Winter - MM Bisexual, Age-Gap, Grumpy-Sunshine

The Humbug Holiday- MM Bisexual, Age-Gap, Holiday

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Out in the Deep

Out in the End Zone

Out in the Offense

Out in the Field

Out on the Ice

Out in Spring

Out on the Serve

Out in Winter

Out for the Holidays/Out for Gold

Out in the Surf

The Baxter Chronicles

The Real Baxter

Baxter's Right-Hand Man - Coming Spring 2023

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