

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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SHOOTING THE CURL

Madeleine Ribbon

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

SHOOTING THE CURL

By Madeleine Ribbon

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A fit young man with blond curly hair lifts a little boy up into the air with one arm. They're dressed for the beach and wearing matching sunglasses.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm not sure what to do. For three years, Little Dude has been my whole life. I made the choice to adopt as a single father, and I'm darn good at being a dad. Except, well, there's this person I can't get out of my mind, which is weird because I haven't given a thought to sex and relationships since Little Dude and I became Team One. The other weird thing? He's a guy. Yeah. And seems the total opposite of me. Plus, I think he's straight, but I swear sometimes he looks at me and is thinking about how good we'd be together. It makes me a little nervous. And a little hot.

Whatever I do, I have to put Little Dude first. Hey, I don't even know if this guy likes kids!

Requests: Caleb calls his kid Little Dude.

Caleb's job involves surfing. (LAPD undercover beach beat/pro surfer/surf teacher/board maker...?)

Gay-for-you for both parties

Bonus if other guy is a little chubby (10-20 lbs. overweight)

Please no super buff muscle-bound overconfident men.

Other guy is not the nanny.

No evil ex-wives/girlfriends.

Sincerely,

Caleb

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: gay for you, men with children, surfer, IT

Word count: 13,592

SHOOTING THE CURL

By Madeleine Ribbon

I'd been trying to catch the perfect wave for two days, but my surfing skills had definitely deteriorated a little since I'd moved away from Oahu. That, and the crowds were horrendous. Lucky for me, my dodging skills hadn't disappeared over the years. I was still a pro at swerving through the other surfers as they sat on their boards and waited for the next wave.

This time, I finally got a turn on the pipeline. I managed to lock in right where the wave curled over and broke, and I rode there for what felt like ages. The spray slammed me in the face, prickling like needles. The crashing wave rumbled and roared behind me.

It was awesome.

I eased back until the water arced over me and crashed down on the other side, a glassy green tunnel I hadn't experienced in years. The wave roared in my ears, echoing fiercely in the little room made of water. I laughed at the freedom, the rush, the intensity that shooting the curl had always given me. This used to be normal. God, how I'd taken it for granted. It had been so long since—

My board lifted. I knew I was a goner.

The water picked me up, pushed me over the lip of the wave, and dashed me down. Hard. The water hit me like a ton of rocks. Searing pain shot through my side, and the sleek, waxed surface of my board shot past me. Then there was water rushing into my lungs, up my nose, smothering me until the green-tinged light of the sky above darkened into near black.

The water pushed me down until I smashed into the sand, then bounced me around like a giant pinball machine. I clenched my eyes and waited for the rough ride to end.

My panic was muffled, waiting at the edges of my consciousness as I kicked for the surface. I had to come up soon, or Leo would freak. On the

beach, he probably expected world-class surfing from me, not a total wipeout. He'd never seen me go down so hard before. Granted, he'd never seen me ride the pipeline in person, either.

I popped up just in time to miss another killer wave. I grabbed the leash still tied to my ankle and hauled my board back to me. It was time to head in. I was no longer used to sand facials, and I wanted to get the burn of saltwater out of my nose and check out the bruises I could already feel forming all up and down my side and hip.

"Daddy!" I heard Leo screaming from the beach, where he sat with the woman I'd gone to Hawaii to visit. Sheila had been one of my best surfer buddies and my on-and-off girlfriend, but that was six years ago, before my motorcycle accident, before leaving Hawaii, before Leo came into my life. She'd invited me back to Hawaii for a surfing vacation, and since she'd provided plane tickets for both Leo and me, I could hardly say no.

I think she'd expected at least a little romance from my visit, even with my four-year-old along. Frankly, so had I, but it hadn't happened that way. I didn't have the hots for her anymore. Not like I used to. Thankfully, the romance seemed to have died on her end, too, so I didn't feel too guilty.

It was too bad, though. I'd been hoping she'd be able to fix the niggling feeling of incompleteness that had lodged itself in the dark corners of my mind. She'd kissed me just once when I first arrived, and the entire time I thought of my neighbor. Trevor. A dude.

I'd been thinking of him a lot since he'd first moved in six months ago, but I thought a little time with a girl would make the racier thoughts disappear.

Nope. No such luck. Apparently, my body had turned traitor and entirely given up on tits. I wasn't terribly alarmed about the change in my sexuality, but I did have to wonder what it could mean for Leo and me in the future. Leo was my everything.

I hauled my board out of the water and struggled against the fierce undertow as I waded toward dry sand. Leo ran toward me as I got close to the beach. Sheila grabbed him before he reached the surf. He pushed at Sheila's

arms and jabbed one elbows hard into her ribs when she picked him up. He needed reassurance that I was okay.

“I’m fine, Little Dude. Wasn’t that so cool?”

Leo stopped wriggling quite so fiercely. Sheila gave me a small, tight-lipped smile. The poor girl was going to have bruises. They wouldn’t be as impressive as mine, though. I swept Leo out of her arms and threw him up into the air before putting him back on his feet.

“Your turn, Sheila. I’m done for the day. I think I hit the fin.”

“Nice, Caleb. Very artistic.” She touched my side, right over the forming bruise. My side burned, but it wasn’t horrible. I’d had worse. The bruises were going to be annoying, but that was all. “You aren’t going to start pissing blood, right?”

“Shh. Little ears.” I glanced down at Leo, who was watching me carefully with his owlish stare.

“Are you hurt?”

“No. I don’t think it’s bad. I’ll be fine. Go surf.”

“Are you sure you’ll be content building sandcastles for a few hours?” Sheila grabbed her own board from the sand.

“More content than you’ve been.” I grinned. She was practically twitching; she was so desperate to get into the water.

“I really don’t have the patience for kids like you do,” she said. “Good thing I wasn’t relying on you to sweep me off my feet when I invited you out here.”

“Your first love will always be the ocean, won’t it?”

“Probably. And yours is that little gremlin.” She winked at Leo and took off toward the water.

Leo yanked my arm until I knelt down next to him. He chewed on his lip a little as he looked me in the eye. This was Leo’s serious face, and I knew I’d be scowled at if I dared laugh at the sheer adorableness of it all.

“You got ouchies.”

“I did. But I had a lot of fun, too.”

Leo considered that for a moment before breaking into a huge grin.

“That was awesome, Daddy.”

“Thanks, Little Dude.” I grabbed a towel from the bags under our umbrella and ran it through my curly hair, making the blond twists stick out all over the place. I pushed the mess out of my eyes, and then snapped the towel in Leo’s direction.

“What do you say? Should we make sand castles? Or should we watch the other surfers for a little while?”

“Watch them.”

Now that his panic died down, his eyes were half closing. He’d tired himself out riding with me earlier this morning. We’d tandem surfed the first decent-sized waves of his life, though none were quite as insane as the pipeline. I wouldn’t let him near that, not until he was a lot older than four. He’d long ago mastered the waves back home in Ocean City, Maryland—I didn’t ride with him often anymore, though I still had to help him paddle out—but even the tame waves of the morning were far bigger than what he was used to.

He fell asleep in my arms as we sat beneath the umbrella. I wondered if I’d ever figure out what I was missing to make our family perfect. Sheila wasn’t it. Neither were the big waves, though it felt incredibly good getting back here.

I’d just have to keep looking.

My hand shook a little as I dabbed bright-yellow paint into the outline of a stylized marigold. We’d only gotten back from Hawaii two days before, and I hadn’t had the chance to catch up on sleep yet. The rush that kept me going all through our week-long vacation was finally fading. I still hurt, but the ache made me think of how awesome our trip had been. My arms ached, my

shoulders ached, my sides ached, my legs ached, and I had green and yellow bruises all down my left side. But the pain was totally worth it.

After staying with Sheila for a few days, we'd hung out with more of my old surfing buddies. I introduced them to Leo, the reason that I was no longer in the surfing world despite regaining my range of motion after the accident. They'd all fallen in love with the little dude the moment he got up on my board with me and we caught a respectable wave. He became their mascot when he made fun of me for yet another totally unnecessary wipeout.

I may have been showing off for him. Just a little. Talent-wise, Leo would be catching up to me soon enough. He was already better than most of the kids I gave lessons to during the tourist season. Thankfully, that was over now.

For the rest of the year, instead of giving surfing lessons and managing my dad's surf shop until too late at night, I got to spend time working on the boards. Custom paint jobs. Art and surfing, my two greatest talents, had somehow mashed together into one decent-paying job. I loved it. I still had to manage the shop on occasion, but the business would be so slow for the next seven months that I'd be able to paint there, too.

Movement from the house across the street jerked me right out of the zone, and I dropped my brush. I winced at the smear of yellow on a flower that shouldn't have been yellow at all and put the paintbrush away with a sigh.

Trevor must have just gotten home from work. I hadn't realized it had gotten so late in the afternoon.

The dark-haired man slammed the door of his sedan, his ever-present laptop bag slung over one shoulder. I waved at the first and only man I'd ever found attractive. Trevor waved back and smiled, his deep dimples showing from all the way across the street.

Oh, God, I wanted to jump him. He was cute. Huggable. Adorable. And maybe I had been spending too much time with my preschooler son, to be thinking in those terms.

Nah. No such thing. But still, I'd never thought this much about anyone since I'd adopted Leo. My little dude had turned my life upside-down, and I'd

spent the last four years laughing and joking and hugging and doing my best to make Leo's life perfect. Girls just didn't rate anymore. Sure, they were pretty and soft and curvy and fun to look at, but my hand didn't require well-thought-out dates and hours and hours of attention. It sure as hell gave a whole lot less drama.

Especially since I had a kid. I never, ever wanted Leo to be seen as baggage, and most girls I'd met balked at the thought of dating a guy with a kid. Sure, they thought I was a cute dad, but that was about as far as it went.

I'd been meaning to invite Trevor to dinner ever since he moved in six months before, but I always forgot to actually go over and ask. Leo would do something, or say something, or show up just at the right moment and distract me. And I'd let him. Leo would always come first.

Always.

But maybe it was time to get to know Trevor better. If we became friends, I wouldn't keep wondering what it'd be like to kiss him. I hoped.

I'd try to work something out next week. With that decision made, I tried to push my focus back on work. I looked around for the right color paint to touch up my mistake.

I wouldn't go ask him now. My fingers were covered in bright speckles, my son was due back from his first day of preschool any minute, and this shortboard needed just a bit more work and a coat of sealant before I brought it to Dad's surf shop for the customer to pick up.

Besides, Trevor had already disappeared inside his run-down little beach house.

I finished covering up my mistake and stepped back to look at the brightly colored design. It was a *Día de los Muertos* themed piece, a white skull on a background of Technicolor flowers, and all I needed to do was outline everything in black and seal the sucker.

It didn't take long. A little black paint pen went a long way. I'd just started washing out my brushes when a car pulled into my driveway. I waved as Dad cut the ignition and got out.

“Thanks again for picking him up and entertaining him for a few hours. I’d never have been done in time to get him.”

“I’m always looking to spend time with my favorite grandson. Especially since you two abandoned us for the wild waves for so long. It’s all he’s been able to talk about, according to his teacher. How’s the board?”

“Almost done, take a look.” I braced myself as Dad opened the rear door and my blond, blue-eyed little gremlin burst out of the car.

“Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy! Beach! Beach, beach, beach!”

Leo ran straight into my legs, nearly knocking us both into the table of paint containers I hadn’t quite found all the lids for yet. I reached out, snagged my destructively adorable son around the waist, and lifted him up in my arms before the paint could fly. Leo squealed and laughed and kicked, narrowly missing the surfboard I had just spent the last four hours painstakingly painting.

“Settle, Little Dude, settle! How was school?”

“Good, Daddy. Beach.”

I hoisted Leo up on my shoulder and walked out the open garage door to the driveway. Dad slammed the car doors shut and slung Leo’s tiny backpack over one shoulder. The strap barely fit around his arm. Dad poked his head into the garage to take a look at the shortboard’s paint job.

“Not bad. It just needs sealant?”

“Yeah, and it won’t take long. I can bring it to the shop this evening when I inevitably give in to the little dude.”

“Not a problem. The customer can’t use it until the weekend anyway. I’ll give her a call and let her know,” Dad said, handing over the backpack. “Beware. I don’t know what they fed Leo for snack time, but I’m pretty sure it was spiked. He was bouncing off the board racks the whole time I had him at the shop.”

“I’ll take him to the B-E-A-C-H for a while and let him run it off.”

Leo perked up at the spelling. The kid was getting smarter.

“Beach now!” Leo wriggled around and I set him down on the lawn as Dad took off.

“We’ll go after we poke a little dinner into your tummy and change you into your shorts, okay? Don’t go in the garage, please. I’ve got a board drying.”

Leo squeezed past me as I opened our green bungalow’s front door. I couldn’t help but glance at the house across the street before I went inside. Trevor had never put up curtains, and the blinds were always open if he was home. I had a clear view of him as he sat in the living room, hunched over his computer.

He was such a nerd. An adorable nerd.

Next week. I would ask him to the shop’s end-of-season cookout next week. And then I’d make more of an effort to get to know him. He made my heart race. It had been a long time since another person had done that to me.

The surface of the white sand still held the heat of the afternoon sun. I dug my toes deeper into it, searching for the cooler layers, as I sat on one of the folding chairs and enjoyed the surf shop’s end-of-year barbecue. Leo ran around screaming with his cousin Anna and a pair of twins who belonged to the store’s weekday manager. I spent most of my time alternating between tracking the little terrors as they ran around squealing and watching the long, sandy path that led from the beach house where the grill was running full-steam, over the dunes, and to the shore where we had all congregated after we finished our burgers and beer.

“I thought you said you were going to bring your neighbor,” Dad said as he sat down.

“I put the flier and a note in his mailbox. I knew I’d forget to tell him when he was actually home and didn’t have his number, so I went the easy route.”

“Bullshit.” Dad shook his head. “You were nervous, weren’t you?”

I shook my head and pushed my feet farther into the sand. Dad studied me intently for a few minutes before patting me on the shoulder and walking off.

He always saw right through me.

I had never been able to keep a secret from my dad. He probably already knew that I was freaking out over having dirty thoughts about men. Well, only one man. Not that it made me feel much better. My hand-led fantasies had of late focused entirely on Trevor, the penis-endowed, and it still weirded me out a little if I thought about it too much. Though it didn't scare me quite as much as it used to.

I'd just started building a sand castle with Leo when a shadow fell over me.

"Hey there, Caleb." Trevor's smooth, slow voice was barely noticeable over the waves.

I looked up from the castle and grinned. Trevor stood a few feet away, wearing khakis and a button-down like usual. Work clothes on a Saturday. Oh well. He'd showed up.

"Hi. I'm glad you showed. This is Leo, my little dude."

"I remember. Hi there, Leo. I wasn't planning on coming, really, but things actually went my way at work today and I didn't have to bring anything home. So here I am." Trevor's dimples made an appearance, and I got to my feet. Leo ignored us grown-ups and kept moving sand from one spot to another with all the intensity a child could give.

"Nice. I would have come over and asked in person instead of leaving the invite in your mailbox, but I'm usually running after Leo when you get home from work."

Trevor glanced down at Leo and nodded.

"Yeah, I get that."

"Hey, Little Dude?" I crouched down and tickled Leo's sides to get his attention. "I'm going to go sit and have some grown-up talk with our neighbor, Mr.—" What was his last name? I wasn't sure I'd ever heard it. "Mr. Trevor."

Leo wiggled away from the tickling fingers and waved his shovel at us.

“Mr. Trevor, build a castle with me and Daddy!”

“Um.” Trevor glanced down at his khakis and cringed a little.

“Yeah, we need to do something about that. In a while. Hey Leo, I think Anna wants to kick the beach ball around.” I pointed over at my sister’s six-year-old girl, who was hugging a colorful ball twice as big as Leo.

Leo dashed toward his cousin, sand flying behind him.

“Impressive,” Trevor said.

“Let’s go grab a drink and sit while we can. I just bought us ten minutes, but that might be it.”

We made our way back to the row of chairs just before the dunes. Dad brought us both sodas and patted Trevor on the shoulder.

“It was nice meeting you. Thanks again on the advertising advice,” he said before heading back to his own beach chair at the end of the row.

“You got caught in Dad’s social web?”

“He introduced himself as soon as I parked. Force-fed me a burger and everything. Your dad is nice.”

“The best, most of the time.” I would have a word with Dad about delaying my guest later.

“He said you used to surf for a living. How does that work? How did you end up here?”

“I guess the short story is that I was pretty good. I picked up sponsors and everything for my last year. Then a drunken idiot nudged my motorcycle in the middle of a busy highway and I ended up pretty much immovable for a few months. He crushed my knee. I moved back home for rehab and never left.”

“Really? I’d never have guessed.” Trevor glanced down at my legs. The spiderweb of scars across my knee looked white against my tan skin.

“I’m back to where I was six years ago, mobility-wise, but I knew after a year that I wouldn’t go back to surfing as a money maker. Not like I had.”

“Why not?” Trevor leaned back and took a swig from his soda.

“Because I knew I wanted a family of my own, and I didn’t want to wait. I ended up babysitting for Anna—the little pip-squeak over there—a lot while my leg was healing up. I realized that I wanted someone to love like that more than I wanted to ride the waves.”

“You can’t surf and have a family at the same time?”

“If I’d gone the natural way and knocked some girl up, maybe, but I wouldn’t have been able to adopt. Well, I might have been able to, but it’d have been even less likely. I mean I was a single guy. That put me at the bottom of most adoption agencies’ lists of potential families on its own. So I went and got myself a respectable job teaching surfing lessons and managing Dad’s shop.”

“And painting boards. You’re always painting.”

I was flattered that he’d noticed. “It’s my favorite part of the job.”

Trevor looked over at Leo, who was now screaming like a banshee as he chased Anna around and tried to grab the ball.

“So you adopted? I didn’t even know single men could do that.”

“I lucked out, hardcore. I put in my resume with one of those independent open adoption places. May, this tiny little fifteen-year-old girl, looked me up right away. She thought I’d be a cool dad. Over four years later, she still hasn’t regretted the decision. Thankfully.”

Trevor leaned a little closer, and I grinned from ear to ear. I loved talking about Leo. Leo was my everything. Trevor was acting genuinely interested, even if he hadn’t known what to do when Leo wanted to play. I looked over at Leo, just to make sure he hadn’t tried to drown his poor cousin. He kicked the beach ball he’d stolen away from Anna. Sand flew through the air every time his foot made contact with the colorful plastic.

“Does she see him?”

“Huh?” I looked back at Trevor, startled.

“The birth mom. You said it was an open adoption.”

“I mostly send her pictures. I can’t imagine not getting to see your baby at all, just because you couldn’t support him when you had him, you know? May has an open invitation at our house. She’s only met Leo once, for his first birthday. I think she felt a little overwhelmed and guilty, because she hasn’t come since. She’s a sweetheart, though. Sometimes they talk on the phone. Leo calls her Auntie May, and she’s happy with that. We’ll tell him the truth when he gets older and starts asking questions.”

“That’s wild.” Trevor shook his head. “I can’t imagine raising a kid like that. Then again, I’ve never really considered having kids at all.”

I held back a sigh. Talking to Trevor felt natural, like I’d known him for years. But if he didn’t like kids, maybe I didn’t have to worry about how this attraction I had for him would play out.

“You never thought about a family?”

“Not really. I never met the right girl, and my job now isn’t particularly conducive to dating. Sometimes I work weird hours. I never imagined trying to have a family without a wife. I don’t think I’m good with kids. I’ve never been around them much.”

Leo came running back to them, sand flying across our chairs.

“He’s a handful, but I wouldn’t give him up for the world.” I picked Leo up and cuddled him until the squirmy little boy couldn’t take it anymore and wiggled his way out of the hug. I held out a hand. “We’re a pair. Aren’t we, Little Dude?”

“Team One!” Leo high-fived me as hard as he could and ran off toward the water. Dad had wandered back to the wet sand with the twins, so I wouldn’t have to take off after Leo. For all his surfing abilities, I still got nervous if he went near the water alone.

“Team One? That’s cute.” Trevor brushed the sand off his khakis and smiled.

“He was kind of going through a phase last year and needed some assurance that he was the most important thing to me. He saw how much I loved surfing, and he wanted to know if I loved him more than I loved riding

waves. So, I told him we'd always be a team and we'd always stick together. The name stuck. Though he's already told me he loves surfing more than he loves his daddy." I grinned. My boy had been born a fish. I'd put him on the board with me at just over a year old, just like my dad had done for me.

"You're a good dad," Trevor said softly. I nodded. Yeah, I was. That was something I didn't doubt. I'd do anything for Leo.

"We ought to hang out and do dinner sometime soon," I said. "Since you're right across the street and I always make too much anyway. Leo is such a picky eater. He nibbles like a mouse."

"Sure. I like to grill. I can have you over, too." Trevor smiled, dimples deep in his cheeks.

"Let me have your cell number, so I won't have to resort to leaving notes in your mailbox again."

"That'd be good. I rarely check my mail these days. Once a week, tops."

"Trevor!" Dad came marching over with Mom in tow. "Let me introduce you to my wife, Emily." Mom gave me a wink and smoothed out her sundress before falling into the chair on the other side of Trevor.

"I think that's my cue to run screaming," I whispered.

Trevor laughed and shooed me off. "Call me when you're willing to feed me."

"Will do." I got to my feet and went over to where Leo chased the waves as they rolled in. Every time water lapped at his little feet, he squealed and laughed.

"Daddy! Take me surfing!" Leo hurled himself at my legs and tugged on my T-shirt.

The waves were fairly tame, the perfect size for paddling out and riding back in without worrying about Leo getting battered around too badly if he wiped out on his own.

"Surfing it is. Let me grab a longboard."

Leo ran over to where we'd left the surfboards and pulled his favorite one, with a clownfish painted on the top, over to me. I stripped out of my shirt—thankfully my bruises had faded to a tasteful yellow. I hoisted Leo up onto my shoulder, snagged the board, and took off for the surf.

I could feel Trevor's gaze on me as I got waist-deep in the water. I looked over and waved once, grinning like a madman. Even if we'd never be more than friends, I got to show Trevor all the things I loved today: Leo, the ocean, and surfing.

I sat Leo on the longboard, and my little boy knelt up near the nose of the board right away. Leo squealed happily as each new wave made the board rock and bob. He'd been surfing solo for almost a year now, and he still thought the first moment on the board was the greatest moment of his life each time we went out.

"Want me to ride with you this time, or do you want to do it yourself?" Leo was getting to be good on his own, though he still needed help paddling out.

"With you first, Daddy."

"You ready?"

"Yeah!" Leo patted the board and laughed as I hoisted myself onto my stomach on the back end. I paddled us out just past where the waves broke and turned the board around.

"Here we go!" I started paddling back toward the beach in front of a good-sized wave. When the water caught us, I got up on my feet. Leo got up and found his balance right away.

We rolled in, nice and easy. Leo dropped to his knees and backed up into my legs when we neared the beach. I turned the board around and paddled us back out. This time, I slid off the board and let Leo ride in by himself.

After the seventh or eighth go, I glanced up to see if Trevor was watching.

He was, and his stare felt intensely focused. It sizzled through me. For a straight man, Trevor sure could pull out a scorching hot gaze. He probably

didn't mean to, but it made me want to go over and kiss him in front of everyone I worked with.

I slipped further down into the water, just to try and cool off a little.

Then Trevor smiled and waved, and the heat in his eyes disappeared.

"Daddy!" Leo splashed water at my face, and my attention turned once again to my son. "Does Mr. Trevor surf?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." I'd never seen any equipment across the street, anyway.

"We should teach him."

"He's not dressed for it, kiddo." Though the idea definitely had its merits.

"Please? Please? Let's do it!"

"I suppose I could see if Pop-Pop has some extra trunks around..."

How could I resist the opportunity to get Trevor out of those ugly khakis? I couldn't. Especially if Leo was instigating the whole thing. My little boy always ended up getting what he wanted.

Leo giggled as he pulled my arm. "Let's go ask, Daddy."

I hoisted myself on the back and paddled us in until a wave came and hurtled us toward the beach. Leo slid off the board as soon as he was in the shallows, and he struggled forward against the undertow. He hurtled himself straight at Trevor as I picked up the board. I had the sickening feeling I knew exactly what was about to happen. Leo did it enough with me, but I'd never been dressed for work at an *office* before.

"Leo, Leo, slow down. No jumping on Mr. Trevor's lap."

Too late.

"What? Whoa there, kid—" Trevor had a wet, sandy, squirmy little boy in his lap, dripping all over his clean khakis. "Ow. Watch the nuts."

"Sorry," Leo said, sounding entirely not sorry at all.

"It's okay. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

“Come surfing with us!”

I got there and hoisted Leo from Trevor’s lap.

“Sorry about that. Leo, do you remember that talk we had about personal space the other day?”

Leo looked up at me like I was crazy. He’d climbed all over my friends down in Hawaii, and I’d had to give him a lecture on not using everyone he met as a human jungle gym. “Okay, I guess we’ll revisit that later on. Um, Trevor, do you surf?”

Trevor shook his head.

“Leo wondered if you wanted to learn with us.”

“I always kind of wanted to, but I’m not dressed for it,” Trevor said with an amused glance down at his now-ruined pants.

“Well, we can find you some board shorts. That won’t be a problem. My dad always has some around, just in case.”

“I’ll go ask!” Leo wriggled down and sprinted to the other end of the chairs. Trevor stared rather intently at my bruised side, and then looked away.

“Um.”

“You don’t have to, if you don’t want to, but I’ll warn you now. Leo’s got the idea in his head and you won’t hear the end of it until you come out with us. Besides, there’s a washer and dryer up in the beach house. We can toss your pants in so they’ll be clean for your drive home.”

“How’d you get the bruises?”

“Surfing in Hawaii, of course.” I laughed. “Don’t worry, this was from my own stupidity. I tried showing off for Leo, and I ended up wiping out and landing hard on my board when I went down. These are well earned. You won’t have that kind of experience on mushy waves like these.”

“Mushy?” Trevor frowned.

“Slow rolling. They’re easy to learn on and softer if you fall.”

“Mmhmm.” Trevor didn’t look terribly reassured.

“You want to surf? I should have a pair of board shorts back in the truck that’ll fit you,” my dad said as he brought Leo back over to us. “Brand new, never been worn.”

“If that’s the case, I can pay for them—”

“Season’s over, son. They’d go on the clearance rack anyway. They’re yours. Besides, I never said they were pretty. Come on, we’ll get you fixed up.”

Dad hauled Trevor to his feet and headed back over the dunes. Trevor trailed along, giving me one mildly amused glance before rushing to keep up.

Trevor bobbed in the water next to me, board held like a shield in front of his pale chest. His discomfort of being shirtless practically oozed out of him. Not that he had much to worry about. He didn’t have a six-pack, not by any stretch of the imagination, but his weight didn’t look bad on him.

He was just right for cuddling, really.

I really had to stop thinking like that. Especially in my board shorts.

I’d shown him the basics on the sand—how to pop up once he got moving, how to paddle out, and how to protect his head in a wipeout. He’d done a few practice rounds in the water, paddling out and riding back in either lying prone or kneeling, just to get the feel of the water under the board.

“Okay, this time try and stand up.”

“Right. I’ll do my best.”

“Remember how I told you to protect your head if you fell?”

He nodded.

“Good. Try to fall backwards or bail to one side if you feel yourself going. If you fall off the front of the board, stay down under the water for a little bit so the board doesn’t slam into your head when the wave grabs it.”

“Right.” He took a deep breath, slithered onto the board, and paddled out. I watched him stop and turn himself around. A series of good-sized waves were

coming in from behind him, quite a bit bigger than the short ones he'd been practicing on.

"Come on! Paddle in! Faster!" I cheered as the first wave caught him and brought him forward. He managed to get to his feet, hung there for a few seconds with a huge grin on his face, and then tipped and went flying off the side of the board. I swam out after him, hoping he hadn't hit his head on the sand. That was disorienting as hell. Especially the first time. Poor Leo had come up sobbing when he had his first big fall.

Trevor came to the surface spluttering and laughing before I got halfway to him.

"Did you see that?" He was smiling so hard his nose wrinkled. I wanted to poke his dimples.

"I saw. You made it up! That was an awesome first run."

"Is that what it's like every time?" Trevor rooted around in the water, found the leash still attached to his ankle, and reeled the surfboard in.

"I hate to say it, but probably not. You'll get used to the rush. Eventually. Then you'll start chasing bigger and bigger thrills. Leo is the only person I know that still gets totally psyched every time he gets on a board. Then again, he's four. He gets totally psyched every time SpongeBob is on TV."

"So what gives you the rush? Getting bruises?" Trevor's gaze drifted downward again, toward my yellow- and green-splotched chest.

"Not so much, though that's a hell of an adrenaline rush. For me, the best part of surfing is when I find a wave big enough to curl over, and I ride right there, in that space where the top of the wave starts to spill. Getting surrounded by water, top, sides, and bottom, and I'm still moving, still soaring across the surface—that's my rush."

"I take it these waves are too small for that." Trevor looked at the incoming surf.

"Most of the time? Yes. Waves here are better when it isn't summer. Hurricane season is the best, if they haven't all blown out and gotten choppy."

“That sounds cold.”

“I have a decent wetsuit, and it’s totally worth it. I’ll also travel to hit the waves I really want when things are a little too tame here. Thus the Hawaii trip.”

“Do you do that often?”

“No. I’ll travel a few times a year, and I usually head down to the Florida beaches or the Outer Banks or up to the New England states. Everything else is too expensive. I hadn’t gone to Hawaii since the accident. Tickets were a birthday treat from one of my old surf buddies.”

Trevor just nodded.

“Ready to try again? The waves are decent today, so you should get in as much practice as possible.”

He got the board situated again, and I tried not to drool over him as he paddled away from me.

We definitely needed to hang out more often. I made a mental note to invite him to dinner the next night. If he said no, I could always sic Leo on him. That kid had the best beg-and-plead routine I’d ever seen. Then again, I could be biased.

I’d been hoping for a nice, relaxing evening at Trevor’s place. We’d been cooking for each other at least three times a week for the last month. We might not have had much in common, but we enjoyed each other’s company. My attraction for him still hadn’t gone away, not by any stretch of the imagination.

But my hope for a peaceful dinner was as good as shot. Leo was in a bad mood, and when he got grumpy, the best cure was a good night’s sleep.

Leo had gone red-faced, and the first glimmer of angry tears welled up in the corners of his eyes. I crouched down in front of him as Dad locked the shop’s front door. It had been our last long-hours Saturday, and it had been filled with hours without a single customer—hours where I could work on painting boards behind the counter—interspersed by bursts of last-minute

vacationers taking advantage of the good early-October weather and off-season hotel specials. My mother had dropped Leo off before her weekly bingo game, and he'd played around in the store until closing time. We would walk the four blocks to our little house on the bayside half of the island together.

"No, Little Dude. We can't go surfing tonight. It's getting dark and we never, ever surf in the dark. Besides, it'll be dinner and bedtime by the time we get home. We're eating with Mr. Trevor tonight."

"Tomorrow."

"The storm is coming in. The waves are going to be too big, and the wind will make them choppy. Besides, we haven't gotten you a wetsuit yet."

"I can surf big waves now."

"I know, but just because they'll be big doesn't mean they'll be good for surfing."

"I wanna surf!" He stamped his bare foot.

I sighed and looked out the shop window. Dad's shop was half a block down from the boardwalk, and we had a pretty clear view of the ocean from the front display windows. Hurricane season was slowly picking up, and with the storms came storm surges that brought the best waves. Too bad the light was almost already gone. "I'm sorry, Little Dude. It's a no-go today. Even for your daddy." I wanted to be out there too. Unfortunately, I had to set a good example.

Leo stormed off toward the back door of the shop, bare feet slapping loud against the tile floor and lower lip jutting out like a shelf.

My cell phone buzzed. I pulled it out of my pocket and checked my texts. Trevor wanted to know when I was done with work. I shot off a quick estimate of when we'd get home.

"I'll finish the register. It's been a long day." Dad shooed me off toward the back storeroom.

“Thanks, Dad. See you Monday.” I headed into the back, grabbing the bag containing my paint kit. “Leo? Get your shoes on and grab your backpack.”

Silence.

“Leo? Little Dude?”

The little kid-sized table Leo usually used for coloring sat abandoned, Leo’s little backpack lying on top. He wasn’t back by the overstock shelves. The bathroom door stood open, light off.

Breathe. Breathe. He’d probably just gone back into the front of the store.

“Dad?”

“What is it?” Dad stuck his head into the storeroom.

“Is Leo up there?”

He shook his head.

“He’s not back here, either.”

“I’ll check the front again.”

I looked in all the corners, peeked at the empty shelves, and went to check the back door. Leo’s shoes were missing. Yeah. It was time to freak out.

“*Dad!* Leo’s shoes are gone.”

“His what?”

“His shoes! I can’t find him!” I ran around the back room again, just in case I’d missed Leo hiding in plain sight. Nothing. I felt the panic rise up, the kind of fear I didn’t get unless Leo wiped out on a big wave without me right next to him.

“He was here five minutes ago,” Dad said.

“And he’s not here now!”

“Well then get your ass out that door and look for him. If he isn’t in here, he’s out there. I’ll be right behind you. He wanted to surf, so check the beach.”

“Right. Right.” I flew out the back door and looked around for Leo’s messy blond hair. I saw nothing but the trash enclosure and an empty parking lot.

I took off toward the beach, looking both ways down the alley behind the boardwalk shops. Nothing. I scrambled over the mostly-deserted wooden walkway and down into the sand. The sun was setting behind me, and the line of surf looked dark and ominous as the light seeped from the sky. A few people were walking along the beach, and there—up a few blocks already—was the only child I could see. I took off in the kid’s direction, booking it hard for a couple hundred feet.

“Leo!”

Not Leo. Wrong clothes, shorter stature.

Shit. There were no other kids on the beach. My stomach rolled. I had to check the water next. I ran down into the surf and scanned the waves. I thought the swells were too big, for the first time in my life, and I kept seeing the breakwater and thinking I caught a glimpse of Leo’s blond curls in the froth.

If Leo had gone in the water, if I couldn’t find my son, I’d die. No question about it. My heart was already tearing itself apart with fear.

I kept yelling his name as I ran along the water, but the crashing surf muted my shouts.

My shorts vibrated. I yanked out my cell phone and answered, desperately hoping for good news.

“Dad? Did you find him?”

“You sound terrible, Caleb. Your voice is in shreds.”

Trevor. Right. I had completely forgotten about our dinner date. Not that it mattered. I had to find Leo.

“Leo’s missing.”

“Your son seems to have found his way home,” Trevor said. “Your dad called to tell me what was going on, so I started walking around. I just found

him about half a block down the street looking absolutely terrified. We're sitting on my front steps right now."

"What?" If Leo found his way home, that meant he'd crossed the highway on his own. I shuddered as I turned away from the waves.

Rustling sounded from the other end.

"I'm sorry, Daddy." Leo's teary voice made me weak in the knees. "I'm sorry, don't be mad!"

"Little Dude, I'm not mad, but you made me worry a lot. I was really scared something happened to you."

"I went home all by myself." Leo sounded so proud, even through his sniffles.

"I know you did, but please don't do it again. You scared me, and you scared Pop-Pop. We don't like to be scared."

"I'm sorry."

"I'll be home in a little bit, but listen to Mr. Trevor until then, okay?"

"Kay."

There was more rustling, and Trevor's voice came back over the line.

"Your dad is jogging up the road as we speak. I'll let him know you're on your way."

"Thanks. Seriously. I'll be there soon—I'm down on the beach. I have to check the shop, make sure we locked up before we went looking for Leo."

"The grill is going. I'll keep the munchkin entertained and start up the steaks and hotdogs, so we can eat when you get home. Leo can help me with dinner. Is it okay if I feed him now? He's tuckered and I don't know how long he'll stay awake."

"Sure. Thanks, Trevor."

"No problem. Get home. Leo looks like he could use a hug."

I probably needed it more than Leo did.

Half an hour later, I staggered up the front steps to Trevor's run-down little bungalow and knocked.

"It's open," Trevor called from inside.

I shoved the door open and looked around for my little troublemaker. I needed to see Leo, to hug him and make sure he was okay. The phone call hadn't been quite enough to dissipate all of my fear.

Trevor's living room was taken over by his office and at-home workstation. A single armchair sat in the corner. Trevor lay there with the footrest raised. Leo had cuddled against his side and zonked out like a light.

I knelt by the chair and brushed Leo's hair off his forehead. Relief hit me square in the chest as I inspected Leo from top to bottom.

My little boy was okay.

I sat down on the floor and leaned back against the wall for support. Leo was fine. Leo was perfectly okay. He hadn't died or gotten stolen off the street corner or drowned.

Leo was fine, and my incredibly attractive neighbor was a lot better with kids than he'd claimed to be. Maybe there was hope for Trevor yet. I could get used to seeing Leo and Trevor all curled up together. I really could.

"He fell asleep a few minutes ago," Trevor said. "Our dinner is keeping warm in the oven, but I fed him a hotdog and some green beans."

"You got him to eat something green?" That never happened. Never. I had started hiding spinach in everything I could, just to get more veggies into the boy. Pancakes, so far, had been my greatest spinach success, though it was only a matter of time before Leo asked what the little green flecks were.

"Put enough bacon in the beans, and just about anyone will eat them."

"Yeah, true. Bacon is a big hit with him."

"Caleb? You're shaking."

I was? I looked down at where my hands rested on the wood floor. They trembled a little.

“It’s just—I’m just—he’s okay. He ate beans. He’s alive. He’s here with you, and not drowned or run over or stolen or lost...”

Trevor gathered Leo up in his arms and got up off the recliner.

“Here. Sit. Hold him. I can’t imagine what you went through, worrying about him.”

I climbed into the chair and took Leo from Trevor. That little furnace of a body warmed me through and calmed me down.

“I kept thinking I saw him every time a wave broke. I’ve never been that terrified in my life.” I ran my fingers through Leo’s blond curls. My son was here. Real. Safe. Just fine.

“I’ll go get your dinner.”

“I don’t think I can eat yet.”

“Not hungry?”

“No, just... steak takes two hands, you know? I don’t want to move him yet.”

Trevor tilted his head as he looked down at Leo. His dark hair shifted and fell down in front of his eyes, veiling them from me.

“I think I’ve got a solution. Just stay put. What would you like to drink? I’ve got a six-pack of beer and some diet soda, and there’s always water. Leo drank the last of my milk,” he said as he pulled the TV tray closer to the side of the armchair.

“Water is fine,” I said.

“You sure you don’t want a beer? It’ll be good for your nerves.”

I wasn’t out on the beach, with its no-alcohol policy. Leo was already sleeping, and I didn’t have to drive anywhere. Trevor, who always seemed to act intensely responsible, had probably already weighed the pros and cons for me before he even offered.

“Okay then. Why not?”

Trevor disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a bottle of wheat beer and a bowl of green beans.

“Here. You need something to munch on. I can hear your stomach complaining from the other side of the room. Beans shouldn’t be too hard one-handed, right?”

“I guess. Thanks.” I speared a couple beans and popped the fork into my mouth. Yup. Good, bacony beans. I needed the recipe. Especially if Leo had willingly eaten it.

“I’ll be back in a second,” Trevor said, leaving me to my food.

I ate the whole bowl and drank down half the beer in under a minute.

“Good thing I made a bunch of food, huh?” Trevor laughed as he came back into the room with two plates, one full of bite-sized pieces of steak.

“You didn’t have to do all that, dude. Really.” I marveled at the pile of little squares of meat, seared brown on the tops and bottoms and pinkish in the middle. I popped one into my mouth and groaned. Good. So good. I didn’t realize I’d gotten so hungry running all over the beachfront. “You’re my hero right now. This is awesome.”

Trevor sat in his work chair and set his own plate on his knees. His cheeks turned pink. “Want any salt? Pepper? Steak sauce?”

“No, it’s perfect the way it is.”

Trevor’s whole face lit up with a smile. I had to tip my proverbial hat to the man. He sure knew how to calm me down with just a beer, some good steak, and company. I wanted to drag him out of his run-down bungalow and across the street permanently.

I focused on my bite-sized steak as Trevor began telling me about his latest computer project.

“Daddy?” Leo yawned and stretched in my lap. Trevor stopped talking and chuckled at the squeaky little voice.

“I’m here, Little Dude. I got you.”

“Sorry, Daddy. I had fun with Mr. Trevor. Can I do it again?”

“No more running away from me, okay? You’ll have to very politely ask Mr. Trevor if he wants to hang out with you before you come over.”

Leo looked over at Trevor and batted his eyelashes. The kid knew exactly how to get what he wanted. Most of the time.

“I don’t mind, munchkin.” Trevor smiled. “You’re pretty cool, to eat those green beans the way you did.”

I tried not to snort. If there was a surefire way to get Leo to eat his veggies, it was to flatter him into it. The man learned fast.

Now it was time for the worst part of parenting. I sighed and brushed Leo’s hair out of his face. “You know I’m going to have to give you a punishment for running away, right?”

Leo nodded, frowning.

“Your punishment is no surfing or beach time for the next two weeks,” I said. Leo’s eyes went wide as I held up two fingers. “I don’t want you to ever run away from me again. You scared me a lot. When I say the waves aren’t good for surfing, I’m not lying to you just so we don’t go surf. I say so because it really is dangerous. You shouldn’t run away because you don’t like my answer. Do you think that’s fair?”

Two big fat tears rolled down his cheeks. But he didn’t argue.

“Good. I’ll mark the calendar when we get home, and you can count down the days until we can go to the beach again.”

“Daddy? Can I go to bed now?”

“Sure. Let’s go across the street and get you settled.”

“Mr. Trevor? Tuck me in, too?”

Trevor looked over at me and shrugged.

“I have more beer in the fridge and a fresh batch of my mom’s homemade cookies for dessert, if you want to come hang out for a few hours. We can always pop in a movie.”

Trevor nodded and whisked the plates away into the dishwasher before slipping his shoes on.

“Can I have a cookie, Daddy?”

“Just one, and you have to eat it before we crawl into bed. You don’t want to get crumbs all over your sheets, do you? They might get itchy.”

Leo shook his head. “Table.”

“Good idea. I’ll eat mine at the table, too,” I said.

“Mr. Trevor?” Leo looked over as Trevor opened the front door for us. “Will you eat cookies at the table with me and Daddy?”

“You bet.” Trevor grinned and pulled the door closed behind us. I jogged across the empty street and unlocked my front door after setting Leo down on the welcome mat. As soon as the door opened, Leo beelined into the kitchen and went for plastic container full of cookies on the counter.

“I don’t know if I ever told you, but it really is nice in here,” Trevor said as he followed me inside. “I keep thinking about how I need to paint and get new carpet, but I never have the time.”

“Let me know if you want help. I spent a lot of time working on this place when I was a kid. This whole block of beach houses here were falling apart about twenty years ago. Dad bought up a few to restore during the off-season, just to give him something to do. He and mom lived in this house until I moved to Hawaii to surf. They got sick of boarding windows up and moving all their earthly belongings every time there was a threat of a hurricane, so they moved to the mainland and used this place for guests. I’m buying it off them.”

“Daddy, open.” Leo brought the cookie container over to me. “Please.”

I pried off the lid and handed my son a cookie. Trevor pulled out a chair and helped Leo up onto it.

“I must have gotten the single unrenovated house on the block, huh?”

“There are a few others that haven’t been updated, mostly because the owners ignore them entirely. How did you end up on the island, anyway? This

place is almost entirely populated by tourists in the summer and gets pretty desolate in the winter.”

“My grandmother left me the house and I moved down here when I decided I needed a change of pace. I grew up in New York and we rarely visited her, but I was her only grandchild, and she was my only living grandparent. We talked on the phone every week.”

Trevor took his own cookie and sat down next to Leo. The little boy was focused single-mindedly on picking the chocolate chips out and eating them first. Bits of cookie went rolling across the table.

“Classy, Little Dude. Are you showing off your destructive side?” I popped the top back on the container and put it back on the counter.

Leo folded his arms on the table and laid his head down on top of them.

“Bedtime?” Trevor grinned.

“Bedtime. Come on, Leo, let’s get you into jammies and into bed.”

Trevor followed us back to Leo’s bedroom and leaned against the doorframe as Leo tugged on his pirate-themed pajamas and crawled into bed. I slid open the bedroom window to let the nighttime breeze come swirling in, the faint scent of an incoming storm already permeating the salty air.

“Daddy?” Leo snuggled with the stuffed dog his birth mom had sent for his birthday last year.

“Yeah, Leo?”

“Do you think we can make Team One bigger than just you and me?”

I frowned. Leo had always insisted that Team One was just us. Just my little dude and me.

“Did you want to add Pop-Pop and Nana?”

Leo shook his head, then looked over at Trevor.

Trevor’s smile flared brightly for one brief moment. Then he met my gaze. His face fell, and he looked more like a deer caught in the headlights of a speeding semi.

Granted, I probably wore the same expression.

Trevor turned away and pretended to study a picture of Leo and me on the beach, one we'd taken the first day I'd gotten Leo on a surfboard. I wanted to reach out and pull Trevor into a hug, but Leo came first. I ran my fingers through Leo's curls. How did I approach this?

"I'm not going to say no, but I think you need to think very carefully about what it means to add to Team One."

"It means forever. Mr. Trevor can't stay forever?" Leo looked positively heartbroken at the thought.

I know Leo had been getting rather attached to Trevor over the last month, but I didn't think it had gone quite this far.

"That's up to Mr. Trevor. We can invite him to join, but the decision to stay is his. He might want to move away some day, or get married or something."

"Oh."

"We'll talk about it tomorrow, okay? For now, sweet dreams." Leo nodded, eyes drifting shut as I kissed him on the forehead.

I followed Trevor out of the room, pulled the door half shut, and left Leo to fall asleep to the soundtrack of Ocean City in the background—car engines and sea gulls and the faint lapping of waves.

Trevor stood by the side of the couch, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"I'll grab you a beer and bring the cookies in here." I smiled.

"I'm sorry, I don't know why he—"

"Trevor? Relax. My little boy has a good sense of character, and if he wants you around forever, you're definitely worth cultivating a long-lasting friendship with."

"Friendship." Trevor muttered the word, as if the mention was unnerving. "I don't know if I can, Caleb. I don't want to disappoint Leo but..."

“What do you mean?” I went over to Trevor and touched his shoulder. Trevor tensed. Something in my chest squeezed tight as I pulled my hand away. I didn’t want to lose Trevor yet. I’d barely started to get to know the man. Had he picked up on the feelings I’d tried to keep quiet?

“I don’t think I could keep this up without doing something stupid to ruin it.” Trevor’s gaze dropped to the floor.

“What sort of stupid thing do you think will happen?”

Trevor looked at me, and for a moment I didn’t think he’d answer the question. Then he reached out and grabbed me by the back of the neck. His lips smashed into mine, the kiss hard and needy.

I barely had time to realize what was happening before Trevor pulled back, threw open the front door, and fled. I touched my lips and stared at Trevor’s back as he ran across the street and disappeared into his own house.

“Daddy?”

Oh hell. This was going to be fun.

“Yeah, Little Dude?” I turned around to find Leo staring at me with his big blue eyes.

“Did Mr. Trevor just kiss you?”

I really didn’t want to do this yet, but I certainly wasn’t going to lie.

“Yes, he did. What are you doing out of bed?”

“I want a drink. Are boys allowed to kiss other boys?” Leo tilted his head to one side like a little bird. He always did that when he was thinking really, really hard about something.

“Sometimes they can, if they really like each other.”

“Do you like Mr. Trevor?”

“I do.”

“Okay.” Leo nodded, as if that settled everything. And maybe, for both of us, it did. I just had to figure out how to get Trevor not to run away from me the next time we saw each other.

I picked up the phone for a little plotting.

The hard rain soaked into my shirt as I left the safety of my front porch. Leo followed behind me, his little army-green umbrella keeping the worst off of him. Dad opened the car door for Leo and helped him climb in the back seat.

“Thanks, Dad. I know it was last-minute.”

“Are you going to tell me what this is about? I know you. You’ve got something up that sleeve of yours.”

I squeezed past Dad and buckled Leo into the car seat.

“You’ll get Mr. Trevor to be happy, right?”

“I’m going to try, Little Dude.”

“Trevor’s the one to get you all mixed up, huh?” Dad chuckled. “That explains things. You know dating a boy won’t bother me, Caleb.”

I backed out of the car and looked him in the eye.

“I never ever thought I’d fall for a guy, Dad. I never looked at one twice before.”

“I didn’t think you would either, kiddo, but love is love. Sometimes you can’t help what happens. I never expected to go after your mother.”

“That isn’t quite the same thing and you know it. I know you see yourself as a laid-back surfer hippie, but are you really okay if I do date Trevor? Because I think he’d be good for Leo and me both.”

“Oh, I agree. He might actually get you to be on time for things. You’re my son, and I’ll be happy with whomever you choose. Just remember that I’m not the only one you’ll have to have a discussion with. Your mother wants more grandchildren, you know. You’ll just have to explain to her that you can always adopt again.”

“And Leo’s birth mom might not like it, either.”

“May will probably think it’s totally awesome. You know her. Though you may want to tell her right away, instead of having Leo drop the bomb next time she calls.”

I nodded.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Anytime. Now we need to go get Leo to his Nana’s. She’s making bread today and needs a little helper.” He closed the car door and slid into the driver’s seat.

I stepped back and waved as they pulled out of the driveway. Then I set off down the driveway and across the street to Trevor’s house. Trevor’s car sat in the driveway. He had to be home. I marched up the front steps and knocked.

The door opened a crack, and one of Trevor’s warm brown eyes peered out.

“Are you here to punch me?”

Punch him? Was that what he’d been afraid of when he took off running? I shook my head.

“No. Let me in, Trevor. I think we need to talk.”

Trevor backed up a little, and the door swung open a few inches.

“I really don’t want to.” He looked down at the stained living room carpet. I pushed my way inside and closed the door behind me. I stepped up to Trevor and tilted his chin up until our eyes met.

I leaned forward and kissed his plump lips. I put all my confused emotions into the kiss, hoping Trevor would get the picture. When Trevor didn’t respond right away, I stepped back and closed my eyes.

“Did I get this wrong? Do you want to punch *me* now?”

Silence. My gut clenched.

“Please tell me I wasn’t wrong.”

“You weren’t wrong,” Trevor whispered. I opened my eyes to find Trevor standing still, one hand resting against his lips. “I thought you were straight.”

“I am. Was. I guess I was more asexual than anything, lately. I could have sworn you were straight, too.”

“I kind of was.” Trevor’s lips twitched and pulled into a reluctant smile. “I beat myself up over you. I thought my celibacy over the last few years had driven me crazy. I tried finding a girl, in the beginning, just to prove to myself I hadn’t turned gay. But I couldn’t do it.”

“It’s going to be weird, isn’t it?” I grinned.

“What?”

“Kissing the hell out of each other. I’m completely weirded out by the idea, but yet not, you know?”

“Are you okay with this? Really? I waited all night for you to come over here and beat the shit out of me with one of your surfboards.”

“Hell yes, I’m okay. Leo’s the one who put it into perspective for me. He saw you kiss me.”

“Shit.” Trevor shook his head. “That’s not good.”

“It’s fine. He’ll have to get used to it, if we do start dating.” I pulled Trevor’s body to my own and held him close, relishing the feel of his body against mine—not hard and lean and unforgiving, but just soft enough to be comfortable. Snuggly. Nice. “That’s where this is all going, right? This isn’t just a one-time thing?”

“I don’t know.” Trevor’s arms slid around me and pulled us tight together.

I sighed. “I don’t want to chase this thing unless I know it’s going to last.” The contact felt so nice, though. I didn’t want to think about losing it now. “Leo needs stability. He always, always comes first for me.”

“I get it,” Trevor said. “I really do. I want you, Caleb, and I want Leo in my life too. Just... I need to think the decision through completely. When we date, I’m going to want to tell people, and I need to make sure I don’t get any backlash that’ll seriously affect us. I have no idea if my mother will be okay with it. My biggest customer is a notorious homophobe and I have to prep for

the loss of his business. I need to get my finances in order, if I'm going to be responsible for more than just myself."

That was a little more serious than I'd been thinking when I'd said Leo needed stability. I just didn't want Trevor running off the first time he got overwhelmed.

"We aren't getting married or anything, just dating with an eye out for making it long-term. Money isn't an issue. I make enough. Your customer doesn't need to know, if you think it'll be bad for business, right? Does he ask about your personal life? Are you going to put pictures of us together where he can see them?"

"No. True. We communicate via email most of the time, and it's all business."

"Then don't worry so much. I think you're reading too much into what could happen. But about the mother thing? I can kind of relate. My dad guessed what was going on earlier."

"How'd it go?" Trevor hugged me just a little bit tighter.

"He just smiled and nodded and said it was fine."

"That's a relief. I really don't want him punching me in the face either."

"Like my dad would ever do that. He likes you. But if you really want time to think this through, I can give you time. Not much, though. Hugging feels too good."

"I don't really want time." Trevor chuckled. "I already know it's what I want. You talked me into it."

"So my parents have Leo until five. Got any plans for your afternoon?"

"Maybe we should try out what we'd be like together. See if things work, or if we just get grossed out." Trevor licked his way down my neck.

"You mean in bed?" Parts of me were definitely getting interested in that idea.

“Mmhhh.” Trevor placed a hot, sucking kiss along my collarbone. He pressed his body against mine. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one excited.

“I can handle that. A nice, long round of experimentation sounds just right.”

“Good. Bed.” Trevor pulled me through the living room and down the hall to the bedroom. I barely got a glimpse of the small room before Trevor pushed me down onto the mattress. I bounced as Trevor hurled himself down next to me.

“Kiss me again. Please, kiss me again,” I said, reaching for him.

“Hang on. Stop. Back up.” Trevor laughed. “You’re soaked to the bone. Take that shirt off.”

“You just want to get me naked.” I sat up and plucked at my polo, the pale-blue splotched dark around my shoulders and down my back.

“True. Now strip.” Trevor laughed. “You made me go shirtless to surf, you can do it for a make-out session.”

“I didn’t make you do anything then, you did that yourself. With a little encouragement from my dad.” I pulled the shirt over my head and tossed it to the ground. “I’m willing to take off more than that, if you want me to.”

“Ooh.” Trevor’s eyes ran over me, his gaze hot and hungry. “This might actually be easier than I thought.”

“Come here, you.” I laughed and pulled Trevor on top of me. Trevor dove down for another kiss, and I opened up to him. The slick heat of his tongue slipping between my lips made me groan. His kisses felt like everything I’d been missing in the last few years. All the memories of passion I’d had with others, long before Leo came along, paled in comparison to what Trevor drew out of me.

Trevor pulled away and grinned. “This is good.”

“Yeah. Yeah, it is. Your turn to remove clothing.” I wanted to see more of him.

Trevor got up and yanked his shirt off. He tossed it into the hamper and started fumbling with his belt. I hadn't expected him to go that far, but I wasn't about to stop him, either. I'd hoped we go that far eventually, but with as self-conscious as he'd been during our surfing lesson, I expected more of a fight.

He whipped his belt from his pants and tossed it to the floor. He undid the top button of his pants, and then looked up at me. He froze with his fingers on the zipper.

"Um. This is weird."

"What is?" I didn't want to stop, not now that I had Trevor where I wanted him.

"I'm not freaking, and that's making me feel weird."

"So you're weirded out over the fact that you're not weirded out?" I grinned. "I guess I can kind of relate. If we really were good little straight boys, we'd be running for our lives now, wouldn't we?"

Trevor nodded.

"Well, feel free to keep going with the striptease," I said. "Or is it my turn?"

"Your turn." He sat down on the edge of the bed.

Fair enough. I popped the buttons of my jeans and slithered out of them. All I had left were the nicest pair of boxers I owned. I'd definitely been dreaming when I got dressed for the day.

Trevor stared at me for a long time. His gaze dropped from my face to my chest and down my legs, then returned to my face, just to do the whole circuit all over again. And again.

He swallowed.

"Is it too much?" I grabbed my jeans from where they'd landed. "We can always go back a few steps."

He grunted and tugged his zipper down. He kicked off his khakis and—

Tighty-whities. I should have guessed. They were so very Trevor-like. He filled the front out quite nicely, and I had to stare at the obvious outline of his cock. I gave him the same up-and-down look he'd given me. He bit his lip and watched me check him out.

He made no move to cover himself.

"More?" I grinned and ran a finger under the waistband of my boxers.

"God, yes."

I pulled my underwear off and spread out on his bed so he could look his fill.

"I don't think I'm going to have a problem with this," Trevor said with a short laugh. "Even my freak-out over not freaking out is over."

"Good. Now take 'em off." I snuck a look down his body again. The bulge in his briefs had definitely grown.

Trevor slowly slid the white cotton down. Oh. Wow. He was beautiful. I hadn't expected to find him so beautiful. I'd never considered a man's body before, not like this. I'd had plenty of heated dreams about what Trevor might be like without his clothing, but nothing compared to reality. Heat spiked through me, and I knew there wouldn't be any problems on my end, either. I beckoned him to me, catching his hand in mine as he stepped back over to the bed.

"Come on. Naked make-out time."

"Fuck," he said. "Please tell me we'll come at the end of it."

"Oh yeah."

"Nothing... internal."

"Internal?" God, that was such a Trevor-like word, wasn't it?

"I want a proper discussion about boundaries and safety and everything, before we make an even bigger leap into whatever this is going to be."

Even now, Trevor was being the responsible one. Good. I certainly hadn't thought of potential safety hazards. I definitely didn't have condoms back home, and I seriously doubted if Trevor had any here.

"Dry humping sounds awesome to me, man." I pulled him down. He collapsed half over me, but tried to move off right away. I held him tightly. "You're fine right there. More than fine."

He felt warm. Perfect. Hard and soft in all the right places. How did I ever get so lucky? First I got the best little boy in the world, and then I found Trevor.

My cock pushed up against his and hardened further. Our mouths crashed together again, and this time the kiss was fierce and demanding. We devoured each other. He wrapped one arm around the back of my neck, and I grabbed a fistful of his hair as our teeth mashed together.

Trevor pushed his hips against mine, and I groaned and thrust back.

I nearly saw sparks as we rubbed up against each other. The kiss and our frantic thrusts couldn't have lasted more than five minutes before I lost it. My whole body tight, as if my skin shrank over my bones. The rush was far better than shooting the curl and having a perfect ride.

I came all over both our stomachs. Trevor's cock pushed through the slick mess a few more times, and then he grunted as more heat and wetness splashed between us.

"Holy hell," he said, gasping.

I started laughing. Hysterically. I had no idea why, but it was all I could do to keep it to a regular laugh and not fly into the psychotic crazy cackle I could feel my brain trying for. Trevor looked at me for a few seconds, and I wasn't sure if he was going to push me away. Then he started laughing, too. We laughed until tears squeezed from our eyes and dried on our cheeks. It slowly died down, and we stared at each other while we gasped for breath.

"Sorry. I don't know what got into me. I think I'm relieved," I said.

"That we work?" Trevor nodded. "Me too."

“I made a mess.”

“So did I,” Trevor said. “I’m kind of afraid to look down. We should probably peel ourselves apart and take a shower.”

“You’re definitely going to be the responsible one in this relationship.” I grinned as we both got up off the bed.

“And you’re going to get me to do things I’d never agree to do on my own. You already got me on a surfboard. What’s next? Skydiving?”

“No, I’m not the sort to jump out of a perfectly good airplane. Surfing can get crazy enough.”

Trevor led me to the bathroom and started the shower.

“One at a time would probably be best if we want to be presentable by the time your parents bring Leo back. We should also probably have that awkward conversation about physical limits,” Trevor said.

“After the shower.” I kissed Trevor once before darting under the spray. “I’ll save you some hot water, I promise.”

“Good. Then we can plan dinner. I have some asparagus I was thinking of wrapping in bacon, Leo might be willing to try that tonight...”

That was it.

I was never letting this man go.

THE END

Author Bio

Madeleine Ribbon lives on the outskirts of Baltimore, Maryland, but was born and raised in Iowa. She still gets claustrophobic in forests and prefers to see her tornados coming. When she isn't writing, she spends much of her time playing video games, brewing beer and mead, and trying not to blow up the kitchen while trying new recipes.

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