



OUT IN THE
DEEP END

LANE HAYES

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

OUT IN THE DEEP END

By Lane Hayes

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 these authors 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 is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, 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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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

Two fierce competitors lunge up out of a pool of placid water, only their bare torsos showing. Their athletic bodies are bronzed and toned, and each of them wears a swim cap. They face each other, reaching up with arms extended aggressively. One player holds a ball in his left hand while the other, facing him, moves to block with his right hand. Their actions send sprays of water, foaming about them.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My water polo team is the most LGBT friendly team on campus. Literally half the team is queer and it's ok, you can be jealous. One of the reasons I was hella excited to come here, ha! But I don't care about the rest of the team right now, because all I can think about is this new freshman with the mad skills. Zev.

He has this gorgeous lob shot and makes our intense practices seem effortless. I swear if I hadn't just played an entire game, I would have gotten hard at the backhanded skip shot he scored last week. Seriously. It was amazing. And why does Zev have to be just as stunning out of the water? He's all dark hair and heavy brows and these hazel eyes that make me stutter like a fool.

I don't know why he's warmed up to everyone on the team but me. I'm the main driver, and he's a leftie, so we should clearly work together... I mean, aside from the fact I want into his pants.

Fuck it.

This is California, and it's college—it's pretty much the definition of fun. So what happens when we're assigned roommates for the three-day tournament in Long Beach?

Sincerely,

Onyx

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, athletes, water polo, first time, coming out, humorous, slow burn/UST, rivals to lovers

Word Count: 14,579

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Coach Myers called a meeting directly after practice to talk about the upcoming three-day tournament at Long Beach State. Any time there was a bus and sleeping logistics to go over, we all knew we were in for a longer than normal chat. I tried hard to stifle a yawn. I was beyond exhausted. Today's back-to-back scrimmages followed by a grueling cooldown swim set were torture. If I thought about the humanities essay due tomorrow that I had yet to write, I'd go bonkers. I fell into one of the gray plastic chairs in the classroom and leaned heavily on my elbow with my hand cradling my cheek.

"No sleeping for at least two hours, Adam. Coach looks like he's got a lot to say." Justin Sorensen slumped into the chair next to mine and bumped my elbow.

I rolled my eyes and gave my annoying friend a curious once-over. Justin was wearing a basic white T-shirt with the Pacific Sea Wolf water polo logo, but something looked off.

"Dude, did you shrink your shirt on purpose, or are you just trying to impress me with the size of your pecs? I've told you we can only be friends," I singsonged. "You're just not my type."

"Ha fucking ha. Ditto, Harrison. You're too skinny. I'd add ugly, but you're not that bad. And the days you actually remember to wear deodorant, you're downright pretty."

I slugged him, making sure to hit him square on his bicep as he cackled like an idiot. I hated being called pretty, and he knew it. I was six foot one with wavy blond hair that always needed a cut, blue eyes, and a perpetual California tan. Years spent in chlorine-laden pools kept most of the team smooth chested, but I barely had any scruff on my chin. I was probably a late bloomer, but either way, I looked younger than twenty.

"All right, boys! Harrison, Sorensen... care to share, or can I get started?" Coach asked with a scowl.

"Sorensen asked me out again, Coach. He won't take no for an answer," I replied in a matter-of-fact voice.

“You’re dead to me,” Justin taunted under his breath in his best *South Park* impression. I chuckled at his timing as our teammates guffawed in the brief comedic reprieve, before our notoriously long-winded leader got started.

Coach Myers shook his head and glanced at his watch as the last stragglers waltzed through the door. “Take a seat, gentlemen. I’m gonna make this short and sweet. You got something to say, Harrison?”

“No, sir,” I muttered. I was too afraid to jinx the promise of a shorter than usual meeting, and honestly, I was distracted by the appearance of the last guy to walk into the stuffy classroom.

Zev Vaughan. Fuck, he was hot.

Zev was a freshman from Southern California with an insane arm. He had a particular talent for mixing things up in the water. He could throw a backhanded cross-cage skip shot, then toss a snazzy-looking lob over the goalie’s head. His speed and agility made him a great new addition this season. He was significantly better than anyone who’d come in as a freshman last year. Except maybe for me, I mused. I was pretty damn good, if I did say so myself. Zev was definitely a faster swimmer, but as the main driver, I had a better-than-average shot and was quick at reading the pool to deliver a surefire assist. Zev had become one of my favorite targets because he was a leftie, and I’d seen that powerful arm in action. We were a good combo. Harrison sends the ball to Vaughan. Vaughan pump fakes and cans it in the upper-right corner. Score! The crowds loved it, our team loved it, and Coach loved it ’cause he knew we’d win. Again.

The only glaring problem was Zev didn’t seem to like me. At all.

It was weird. I didn’t mean that in a conceited sense but I had to be honest, anybody else on my team would most likely describe me as a gregarious, friendly, and kinda funny guy. I loved having a good time. This was college, and things could be very stressful between classes, practices, and water polo tournaments. The best way to combat the pressure was to laugh. Often, if possible. When I initially noticed he was a little chillier to me than some of our other teammates out of the pool, I wondered if he was a homophobe. I didn’t think so, though. Pacific College was a very LGBT-friendly campus and, hell, half the guys on the water polo team were gay. None of us were particularly flamboyant. We were just normal guys playing a sport that most of the country wasn’t sure was real until the summer Olympics came around every four years.

Anyone with a clue about water polo knew it was a serious contact sport that required superhuman strength and crazy endurance. Swimming non-stop

with muscular opponents trying to drag you under was not for the faint of heart. Most of what went on under the water was dirty and didn't get called by the refs. It was a free-for-all of kicking, slugging, or kneeing, while looking innocent as could be, as you politely passed the ball to your teammates. It was rugby in the water. It was rough and physically demanding. Not to mention a time drain. If I wasn't in class, I was in the pool. My closest friends from school had always been my teammates. We were like brothers. Or a private fraternity. We knew how hard we worked, in and out of the water, in a way no one else could appreciate. I won't claim I was the best of friends with every guy on the team, but I had everyone's back and knew they felt the same for me.

Except Zev.

I stretched my arms over my head and craned my neck to my far left to sneak a peek at him. Damn. He was maybe an inch taller than my six feet one, with short dark hair, olive skin, and gorgeous green eyes. He seemed kind of serious, but he was a freshman. Maybe he was homesick. Pacific College was in NorCal, an hour or so east of San Francisco. He was a plane flight or a seven-hour drive away from home. Or maybe it took him longer to warm up to people. Nah. He was whispering to Dave Braxton and chuckling softly at something he was showing him on his cell. Knowing Dave, it was probably some straight porn site. Hmph. Not my business. I knew better than to worry about people not liking me. I was a big boy, and I had plenty of friends. This was college. Time to have fun and leave stupid high school bullshit in the past. If Zev Vaughan didn't get the memo, that was his problem, not mine.

In the meantime, I'd enjoy the eye candy and ignore the negative vibe.

"I'm posting roommate info online tonight when I get home. Look for it. I don't want any dumbass questions, and before anyone asks, there will be no swapping roomies. No complaints. I don't wanna hear about Harrison's snoring or Dobrowki's messiness. Got it? Good. No practice tomorrow. You're welcome. See you Thursday at noon. Do not be late."

I jumped out of my chair the second Coach walked out. My essay wasn't going to write itself.

"Hey Adam! Wait up," Justin called.

I stopped in the doorway, intending to let my friend know I was in a hurry, when my shoulder collided with a wall of muscle. I put a hand out to offer a conciliatory high five to whomever I'd bumped into, but kept my gaze focused on Justin. When my gesture was ignored, I looked up to see who to razz for leaving me hanging.

Oh. Zev.

I watched his retreating form with a scowl. What a jerk. Sure, he was tall and lean with broad shoulders and a fine ass, but under the gorgeous exterior, the guy was a prick. I could only hope we weren't roommates this weekend.

Later that night, after I'd turned in my essay online and got a head start on my poli-sci reading, I lay back in bed to check messages on my cell. I'd missed a couple texts. The first from a guy named Ryan I'd hooked up with last weekend, wanting to know if I was free Friday night. No can do. Too bad. I liked Ryan. I sent him a quick response to let him know I'd be away this weekend, but would definitely call him when I got back. The next text was a one-word message from Justin.

Lucky

Huh? I typed a question mark and turned my attention to my emails when my phone lit up.

Your roomie's hot

I frowned as I reread Justin's message. It was weird. Our teammates were like brothers to us. I wouldn't go out with any of them. Even if a few of them were good-looking, there was no mystery. We knew way too much about each other, and we spent so much time together, we tended to get a little too comfortable. Belching and farting contests in the locker room were commonplace. And the only guy I thought was truly spectacular had turned out to be a dick.

Oh. Shit.

I tossed my phone aside and scrambled to get to Coach's website to check the roommate post. Please don't let it be Zev. Please don't—

Zev Vaughan and Adam Harrison

I closed my eyes and banged my head against the desk. Fuck. Not good. I shook off my sense of dread with practiced ease. It wasn't in my nature to let things or people get me down for long. We were going to Long Beach to kick ass in the water. I didn't have to spend any time outside of the pool with my roomie, other than to get some shut-eye. This wasn't a problem. I wouldn't let it be one.

The bus ride to Long Beach took about six hours. As usual, the back part of the bus was where the bulk of crude, stupid humor and downright silly sophomoric pranks took place. And yeah, I was in the middle of it. By the time we reached the hotel, my sides hurt from Jordan Farris's retelling of the "condom incident." Suffice it to say, it boiled down to a jumbo pack of latex being blown into balloons and left floating in the quad fountain to commemorate the annual Homecoming game. I was wiping tears from my eyes as I shuffled along the narrow aisle with my duffel bag over my shoulder. Gone was my earlier trepidation.

I caught a glimpse of Zev as I stepped off the bus. He was laughing at something one of the other freshman players was saying. His handsome face was lit with easy humor. He had a beautiful smile, I mused as I tripped over the last stair and careened into Justin. I recovered quickly and made a joke of it, but I realized I had to be careful. Zev wasn't gay, and he didn't like me. It was probably best to keep my interaction with him cordial, but distant, out of the pool. In other words, I was going to have to put on an act.

Zev gave me a weak upturn of the lips, which I took as a brief acknowledgment of our roommate status. Otherwise, he said nothing until he handed me the second key card to the room and mumbled something about putting his bag there. I smiled, and was about to make a friendly comment I hoped would dispel my growing reticence, but he was already moving toward the elevator. I watched him clandestinely for a moment and decided my immediate goal was to avoid him until bedtime.

Mission accomplished.

After a brief practice, we had a team dinner at one of the hotel restaurants. Nothing fancy. It was basically carb overload, buffet style. Coach gave a long-winded inspirational speech along with his usual warnings to get enough rest and be ready for the games tomorrow. The first one was at eight a.m.; the second was set for early afternoon. All other game times would be determined by how we placed after tomorrow. The competition was fierce, but the general consensus was we should do well.

I hung back with a few of the older guys after dinner, listening to them gripe about the various coaches and players on other teams. The water polo world was relatively small. There were a few programs on the East Coast, but the bulk were in the west, primarily in California. Which meant chances were good most

of us had played with or against our opponents at some point in the past. Hell, I'd already run into a guy I'd gone to middle school with who played for UC Berkeley now.

I stifled a yawn and glanced at my cell to check the time. Nine forty-five. It should officially be safe to head up to my room and climb in bed with minimal roommate interaction. After a round of good-byes, I made my way to the fifth floor and pulled my key from my back pocket. I swiped it in the lock and waited for the green light to flash. Red. I tried again. No luck, still red. I groaned and quickly weighed my options. I could go back to the lobby and get a new one or... I could knock and get my roomie to open the door.

This was crazy. I wasn't afraid of the guy. I tapped lightly on the door and waited.

Nothing.

I tried again. Nada. Ugh. I was about to walk away when the latch clicked and the door inched open.

"Hey, it's me. Adam. My key isn't working, and—"

The door opened a little wider before it headed back toward the jamb. I put my hand out to stop it from closing and being locked out again. What the fuck?

It was dark in the room. Hotel room dark. I couldn't see a fucking thing without turning on a light. I opted for the bathroom light, thinking it would be the least intrusive. I grabbed my pajamas and toiletries from my duffel bag and then headed back to the bathroom. I set my things on the narrow counter, noting he hadn't left me much room, as I reached for my toothbrush. Curiosity got the better of me. I took a peek into his designer toiletry case. Nothing exciting. He used the same brand toothpaste, deodorant, and even dental floss as me. Hmm. No condoms. I rolled my eyes at myself in the mirror and leaned on my left hand, neatly knocking over his open case and sending the contents flying onto the floor.

Oh shit. I spit and rinsed quickly before bending to pick up his things. My pulse went into overdrive. If my roommate had been anyone else, we'd have been laughing about my klutzy move instead of me scrambling on my hands and knees trying to retrieve his shit without creating any unnecessary waves. Ugh. I pushed both our toiletry cases as close to the mirror as possible before changing into my pj's, turning off the light, and heading for bed. I was nearly there, when I tripped over a shoe. I let out a strangled cry and made a dive for my pillow.

“Are you sure you don’t want to turn the lights on and maybe blast the television now that we’re all awake?”

“I’m sorry, but it’s dark in here. I can’t see a damn thing. I didn’t think you’d be in bed so early.”

“It’s ten. It’s not early. Show some consideration.”

I should have let it go. I tried counting to ten. I tried reminding myself he was probably just tired, on top of being a dick. But I saw red, and all bets were off.

“I’ll keep that in mind, Zev. Thanks for the friendly suggestion.” I turned over and added, “asshole,” loudly enough for him to hear.

He sighed heavily but didn’t respond. Hmph. And things were going so well, I thought sarcastically.

Thankfully, he was up and out of the room before me the next morning. I saw him in the lobby with a couple of our teammates when I went downstairs to catch the bus to the pool. He looked... normal. Not hostile, angry, or unpleasant. I didn’t trust his moodiness, though. I was steering clear. I found Justin standing near a potted palm tree next to the hotel entry.

“How’s it going? Ready for the game?”

“Yep! This one should be easy. We need to kick ass so we can come back and eat a real breakfast. I want a stack of pancakes, eggs, and bacon. Maybe I’ll throw in some oatmeal, and fruit, and—”

“You better watch your girlish figure, Jus. You need to fit into that Speedo, babe.”

“Aww. I love it when you call me babe. C’mere. Give me a kiss.”

I laughed and punched his arm hard. He was an idiot, but it felt nice to hang around someone... pleasant. When one of the older guys waved us onto the bus, I picked up my bag and caught Zev’s profile in my peripheral vision. I turned and found him much closer than I expected. He looked up at the last second and held eye contact. No smile. Though, in his defense, he wasn’t scowling, either. He looked thoughtful. Whatever. I gave up. I was terrible at mind reading. It was time to get my head in the game.

We beat Santa Clara easily. 10–5. It was a good win, but expected. The next game was going to be a lot tougher. UC Davis was stiff competition, and though we were sure we could beat them, it would be a challenge. We went back to the hotel, ate breakfast, and chilled for a while until the bus took us back for game two.

The Long Beach tournament was midlevel in terms of prestige. It wasn't going to influence ranking later in the season, but it was a chance to play against serious competition, and get a look at some of the better players' style. For a freshman like Zev, it was an opportunity to show your stuff. He'd been good in our first game, but he didn't seem as sharp as usual. I chalked it up to nerves. Hell, I'd been the same way last year. I wanted to say something encouraging so he'd relax, because regardless of how he felt about me off the pool deck, we were still on the same team. I never had the chance, though—I didn't see him again until it was time to warm up for game two.

The normal warm-up routine was for us to swim a few laps, and then practice our shooting and passing with a partner in the swim lanes roped off from the Olympic-sized pool. Once we had access to the goals, we'd practice our shots on the goalie. I had just thrown my first pass to Justin when Zev swam up next to me. Without his cap, his dark hair glistened in the sunlight, making his eyes sparkle. Even with a scowl, he was stunning.

“What's up?” I asked nonchalantly. I kept my gaze on Justin so I wouldn't stare too long at Zev.

“Coach wants us together. He thinks our timing was off last game.”

Justin snorted and made a funny face before swimming away. No doubt my friend anticipated my reaction. I was pissed. My timing? My timing was spot-on. I gave Zev a tight smile and chucked the ball to him, making sure it landed short and splashed him obnoxiously.

“Oops. Sorry. Gotta work on that timing, don't I?”

I wasn't sure, but I could have sworn he hid a grin before he tossed it back to me. Maybe he was finally thawing.

He wasn't.

My optimistic nature tended to set me up for disappointment. I knew better than to think tentative smiles and shy sideways glances were indicative of melting ice or an olive branch. He'd probably been eyeing some girl on deck while we'd been passing the ball, and I'd misread him again. My teammate

slash weekend roomie was hella moody. And while having a competitive nature was vital to any sport, he took things to a new level. He wasn't playing well, and his aggravation was palpable.

Everyone had off games. We'd all been there. Zev didn't play horribly, but he wasn't himself. His shot choices were suspect. He either passed on a shot he should have nailed, or he took ones that had no hope of making it beyond a high school goalie, never mind a seasoned college one. Coach pulled him in the third quarter and didn't put him in again until the middle of the fourth when we were up two. He drew a five-meter foul within one minute and was pulled immediately. The rest of the quarter was a nail-biter. Truly exciting polo that had the crowds screaming in the stands. The score was tied until Jordan Farris nailed a cross-cage shot from the wing with five seconds on the clock. It was a huge win. Except, not really. We were expected to come away with the victory, and Coach was pissed we almost gave it away. He ranted for a good twenty minutes afterward, before finally letting us go. I saw him pull Zev aside separately, but I didn't wait around. In his current mood, he'd only bite my head off anyway.

An informal team dinner was scheduled at a Mexican restaurant within walking distance of the hotel. We had a couple hours to chill before we met up in the lobby. It wasn't mandatory, but no one usually missed these dinners unless they had family in town. My plan was to shower quickly and get the hell out of the room. I could hang out in Justin's until dinner, I decided. Anything to avoid a run-in with Zev.

But as I stood under the shower spray with warm water sluicing over my body and relaxing my muscles, I wondered if I was being unfair. I lathered soap in my hands and washed my chest in an unhurried motion. Everyone has bad days. It wasn't that big of a deal. We'd still won the game. Maybe it was my duty as his roommate to cheer him up. Coach may have even assigned us together knowing we were complete opposites. Hmm. I moved my hands lower to my heavy cock. I stroked myself languidly as my thoughts turned toward different ways I could make him feel better. I could palm his thick member through his Speedo until it literally was too big to be contained in the skimpy material. And when he pushed at my shoulder, wordlessly directing me to my knees, I'd be more than ready to taste him and—

A crashing noise jarred me from my sexy daydream. When it was followed by a second loud bang, I hurried to rinse and turn off the water. God, I was an idiot. Fantasy time was over. Reality was having a temper tantrum in the next room.

I wrapped a towel around my waist and opened the bathroom door. Zev was sitting on his bed typing furiously on his cell. I grunted a greeting as I looked for my duffel bag. I'd left it on the low dresser next to the television. I turned to my roomie with a furrowed brow.

“Where’s my bag?”

He pointed at my bed without lifting his gaze from his phone.

“How did it get here? I’m pretty sure I left it on the dresser,” I snapped.

“It was in the way.”

I moved toward my bed and unzipped the bag angrily. “In the way of what exactly?”

“The TV. Bags don’t belong on dressers.” His reply was matter of fact. Not hostile. The only hint at his sour mood was his violent tapping on his cell phone.

“Oh really? I didn’t realize that was in the rule book.”

“It’s common courtesy, Harrison.” Dark energy emanated from him in waves. His posture and mannerism were deceptively calm, but he had a dangerous air about him. And he still wouldn’t look at me. The urge to needle him and break his composure was strong. I warned myself to get dressed and leave. Zev wasn’t like the other guys. I couldn’t tell him to fuck off without starting something.

But I also couldn’t let it go.

“Really? No one told me,” I drawled in my best country hick accent. I made a production of checking my bag before turning to face him with one hand on my hip. “Everything is kinda jumbled in here. Are you sure you didn’t chuck it against the wall? I know that was a rough game, but c’mon man, everybody has ’em.”

I shook my head in mock woe, willing him to take the bait. He went still. The incessant tapping stopped, and he finally looked up at me. His dark brow was knit angrily, and his expression was fierce. I started to back down. I wasn’t the type to kick a guy when he was down. I opened my mouth to apologize, but the words dried up when he set his phone aside and stood so we were inches apart between the two double beds. So close I could see brown and gold flecks in his eyes, and something else. Desire.

No, that couldn't be right. The guy was straight, and at the moment, he looked angry too. I was obviously caught up in my shower fantasy where the tall, dark, handsome hunk with broad shoulders and big hands wants nothing more than my mouth on his dick. Real-life Zev wanted to hurt me, not fuck me. I backed up a step, wincing when my calf hit the side of the mattress. The flash of pain was enough to stir my temper. I was extraordinarily mild mannered, but everyone had their limit, and I'd just hit mine. I wasn't about to let this shithead bring me down because he'd had a bad day. I crossed my arms and gave him a feral grin.

“Yeah, it wasn't my best, but you were a little off too, Harrison. I let my frustration get away from me when I had to reach for a ball you underthrew for the tenth time. I should have—”

“My passes were money, dude, and you know it! Take responsibility for your lame-ass game. It was nobody else's fault and—”

Zev growled and lunged for me knocking me flat on my back. I had the presence of mind to bring him down with me but, unfortunately, not the sense to remember I was only wearing a towel. And we were trapped between the pillows and my duffel bag. There was no room to move him off me. I bucked my hips and pushed at his chest but he didn't budge. He captured my hands above my head roughly. I struggled and managed to free myself. I shoved him hard, lifting my right leg and hooking it to gain momentum, and push him on his back. My fucking bag was still in the way. I flung it aside and attacked fast, flattening my body over his as we wrestled for dominance. We were an even match, but I had the advantage. Until my towel slipped, leaving me bare-ass naked and half hard, on top of the guy I'd been lusting over for three months.

I tried to ignore my exposed state at first, but it was too obvious. This wasn't Justin or one of the other guys. He wasn't going to tease me good-naturedly and ease us out of this ridiculous fight. No. He'd use it against me. I'd be the homo who got a hard-on in the wrestling match I started. I'd be fodder for ridicule for days. Certainly, for the rest of this trip. Fuck him. I felt a surge of anger heat my veins as I gripped his hands firmly and held him steady. With my ankles wrapped around his upper thigh, I had him. I looked down in triumph, belatedly noticing he'd gone completely still.

I loosened my hold but didn't move. I watched him for clues. The set of his jaw, his rapid heartbeat, and the slow sexy move of his Adam's apple made me think things weren't as I assumed. But it was the look of blatant desire in his

gaze that gave him away. I moved on impulse alone and leaned forward to touch my lips to his. Just a touch. Not a true kiss. He'd either throw me off of him in disgust or he'd respond. The moment stretched between us. It was poignant and intense, like standing on the edge of a cliff waiting for the wind to sweep you away. I shifted slightly and he pounced.

Zev grabbed my face in his hands and plunged his tongue deep inside my mouth. There was no finesse involved. It was a hungry release that turned into a passionate fusion when he effortlessly rolled me over so he was on top. His lightweight shorts were no match for his obvious erection. He anchored my hips to the mattress, grinding his thick member alongside mine as he snaked his arms around me and licked my lips. The kiss was feverish and all consuming. Unlike anything I'd ever experienced. I wound my legs around him and dug my heels into his ass. I was desperate for friction, and his frantic humping motion told me he felt the same. I slipped my hands inside his shorts and ran a finger along his crack. He groaned and lifted himself on his elbows in a move I translated into an invitation to help him remove them. The second I reached for his zipper, he pulled back.

I bit my bottom lip hard in an effort to get myself under control. I was a big boy. If he didn't want this, I could handle it. I sat up and looked over at him. My heart sank. He had an arm over his face, and his breathing had taken on an almost panicky panting quality that was borderline alarming. I picked up the towel to cover myself but decided to get dressed instead. My erection was waning at the sudden chill in the atmosphere. I pulled on briefs, shorts, and a polo T-shirt in record time before addressing the guy lying lifeless on my bed.

"You okay?"

Nothing.

"Zev? Hey, I'm—I'm not going to say anything if that's what you're freaking out about. I promise."

He let out a strangled sound I couldn't decipher and finally sat up, eyeing me with a mixture of fear and... wonder. I waited for him to speak. I could tell he had too much going on in his head. But I wouldn't push him, and I wasn't going to pretend I knew what he was thinking or feeling.

"I've never done that before. I've never kissed a guy. Ever. I'm sorry. I don't want you to think I'm... gay or..."

I tuned him out, letting out a heavy rush of air just as the first flush of heat traveled through me. I was a fucking idiot. What did I expect? Well, I knew

what I wouldn't do. I wasn't going to try to convince him he was wrong. Not my problem.

I picked up my wallet and cell from the dresser and shoved them in my back pocket before moving toward the door. "Right. Hey, it's cool. Forget it happened. See you at dinner."

Forgetting wasn't so easy. I was quiet and out of sorts at dinner. My friends were bound to notice I wasn't myself. And once Zev made an appearance, I lost my appetite too. We were seated at one of those family style Mexican restaurants that cater to large groups by putting them smack in the middle at three long rectangular tables that literally end up taking the entire space. I almost felt sorry for the other diners when our team walked in. We were a rowdy group of boisterous athletes used to yelling at each other in locker rooms. It was hard to adjust our volume when we were all together in public, regardless of the venue. This was a casual place, but I'd already caught a few curious glances thrown in our direction. Who could blame them? We were a group of twelve guys, six feet or taller, with broad shoulders, and clean-cut good looks. If I were at a nearby table, I'd be in eye-candy heaven. Tonight I couldn't seem to tear my gaze off the one guy I wish I didn't have to see every damn day. What had I done? How was I going to make it through two more nights of rooming with him?

I stole a glance at Zev sitting on the opposite end of the table, at the far side. He was listening to one of the guys tell some far-fetched story. The same kind of nonsense Justin was spewing on our end of the table, no doubt. Zev was clearly amused. His eyes creased at the corners and twinkled with easy humor. God, he was stunning. It transformed his face from hella good-looking to unbelievably gorgeous.

"Hey, snap out of it, dude." Just nudged my elbow and gave me a worried once-over. "You okay? You look weird."

"I'm fine. Just tired."

"I hope you're not catching mono. I heard it was going around and—"

I had to laugh. Justin was a well-known hypochondriac. A hint of a cough or the sniffles usually inspired him to immediately double up on his vitamin intake.

"I'm not catching anything, moron. I—oh... ah-ah-choo!" I made a wet sounding faux sneeze I knew would gross him out.

He didn't disappoint. And because he specialized in over-the-top affectation, he jumped up and made a production of taking a travel-sized bottle of hand sanitizer from his pocket and liberally dousing himself with the stuff. It was a somewhat predicable brand of silliness, but it helped put me back on track.

Until I caught Zev clandestinely checking me out from the other end of the table. I held his stare for a moment. Everything seemed to fade but him. The clinking of silverware, the softer chatter around us, and the far-off sound of the ubiquitous mariachi band playing somewhere in the crowded restaurant. All I could see was Zev.

Later that night, I made a point of getting to the room first. Some of the guys were heading to the Long Beach Harbor to check out the Queen Mary and see what there was to do in the area. I wasn't in the mood. When I told Justin I was feeling queasy, he didn't try to talk me into a night of debauchery. No one was getting crazy tonight. Not if they planned on playing in the morning. We were midseason and any alcohol consumption or partying was frowned upon. As in Coach would kill us. A night out with a fake ID wasn't worth sitting on a cold bench with a hangover for multiple games the next day, anyway.

I was immersed in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* when Zev returned to the room at ten o'clock. He nodded briefly at me in greeting before disappearing into the bathroom. I caught a whiff of soap and minty breath when he climbed into his own bed a few minutes later. He fluffed his pillow a couple times and rolled to his side, giving me a quizzical look.

"What are you reading?"

"Why do you care?"

"I don't. I'm being polite."

"Polite. Whatever." I held the book up with a wry half smile. "It's for my humanities class. It's actually pretty good."

"It's great." He chuckled at my expression. "I'm a humanities major. At least for now. One of my favorite classes in high school was American Lit. I read that book my senior year. Loved it."

"Huh. Yeah, I like it too. The thing about any book written over a hundred years ago is you have to get the cadence of the language down before the words actually make any sense."

“True. Once you do, it opens a whole new world.” I might have thought he was fucking with me, but his expression was so earnest.

“What are you planning to do with a humanities degree?”

Zev chuckled. The sound was sweet and made something inside me shift and settle. Gone was my earlier angst. It didn’t matter if he was straight, gay, or undecided. Right now we were two students talking about life after college.

“No clue. Maybe teach. I’ll probably go for a master’s, but it’s too soon to say. I’m only a freshman. I have time to decide. What about you? What’s your major?”

“Political science, which is code for ‘no fucking clue.’ I may switch to engineering but it’s a leap in class work and studying that I honestly don’t think I can handle with water polo, too.”

“Why engineering?”

I shrugged. “My dad’s an engineer. He owns his own company. They specialize in freeway construction. Bridges, overpasses... you know.”

“You don’t sound interested, Adam. I don’t know if that’s the gig for you, and as a future taxpayer I’m a little nervous thinking you might be the dude responsible for constructing a bridge you don’t give two shits about.”

I laughed at his astute observation. It kept me from dwelling on the fact he’d called me by name for the first time ever. I liked the way it sounded coming from him. Like a caress.

“I suppose you’re right. But if engineering is out, I’m back to square one. I have no clue.”

“What did you want to be when you were a kid? What were you always good at in school?”

“Lunch. Recess,” I deadpanned.

“Ha. Ha. Think of one thing, other than a sport, that stood out.”

“Um, I guess I always liked history and government classes.”

“Maybe you should be a lawyer. You can bullshit with the best. Chances are you’d be pretty good at it.”

I scowled as I set my book aside and turned on my side to face him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You make friends easily. You know how to talk to people and work things out so they don’t hate your guts for stating the obvious. It’s a talent. Trust me. I wish I had it.”

“You hardly know me. How do you know that’s true? I could be as awkward as you,” I said with a straight face, knowing he’d get the joke. I chuckled when he flipped me off with a Cheshire cat grin.

“You’re not. You’re comfortable in your skin, and you’re only... how old are you?” he asked.

“Twenty. How about you?”

“I just turned nineteen.”

“Well, maybe when you’re older and wiser like me, you’ll stop being a wallflower,” I teased.

“I’m not a wallflower. I—I just get nervous about stupid things sometimes. Whatever. Maybe it’s like Thoreau said, ‘The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.’ It would be nice to overcome feeling out of my depth all the time.”

I cocked my head, wondering at his wistful tone. Quoting Thoreau while lamenting personality quirks was an unexpected conversation twist. It didn’t feel heavy though. It felt cathartic.

“We all get there eventually. One day at a time. At least that’s what my mom always says. I don’t know if she’s right, but it sounds more promising than living a quietly desperate existence.”

“True. Are you close with your family? Do they know you’re... you know—”

“Gay?” I supplied with a grin.

His expression was closed suddenly, as though we were potentially embarking down a dark, scary road. I wanted him to smile again. He had looked so relaxed lying there, talking about dead poets and future career prospects a few minutes ago. I wished I could remember a quote or some poignant literary tidbit to make him laugh.

“Uh yeah. I mean, we don’t have to talk about it or—”

“Zev, I’m totally cool talking about it. I’m gay. I’m out. I’m proud. And yes, my family knows and they’re fine. It’s all good.”

“When did you know?”

“Probably when I was eleven or twelve.”

“Eleven or twelve? You’re kidding! How can you know something like that so young?”

I snorted in amusement. “I wasn’t completely positive, but there were clues... like my major crush on Joe Jonas.”

Zev guffawed. “Yeah, that sounds like a big clue.”

“I have an older sister who was really into them. She had posters in her room and played their CD nonstop. Thankfully, she was also into *High School Musical*. Zac Efron,” I sighed his name like a thirteen-year-old girl and fell back on my pillow theatrically.

“Dude, you sound really gay right now.”

“I am really gay. I like guys. That doesn’t mean I want to sleep with every dude I meet. And believe it or not, my days of mooning over heartthrob posters are over... mostly,” I said with a sly wink before continuing. “Now it means I’m free to be myself. I have good friends and an awesome family. And once I got to college, I stopped worrying about whether I’d be accepted. I don’t care if everyone likes me. The right ones do, and that’s what matters.”

“You have a good attitude... and a very healthy ego,” he teased. “You’ll make a great lawyer someday.”

“Hmm. Where are you from again?”

“Mission Viejo. It’s about an hour south of here. My parents are actually coming to the game Sunday.”

“What are they like?”

“They’re cool, but they’re pretty conservative. It’s kinda weird. This will be the first time I’ve seen them since they dropped me off at school a couple months ago. Everything feels... different now.”

“How so?”

“I guess it’s just that I’m making my own decisions for the first time. I like not answering to anyone. It’s liberating.”

“Aww. Look at you becoming a big boy!”

“Fuck off. You know what I mean.”

“I do. I’m only an hour and a half away from home, but I felt the same way. It was nice to have a fresh start. My way.”

I broke into the Frank Sinatra classic “My Way” for comedic effect. Zev busted up laughing.

“How do you know songs that old? That’s like our grandparents’ era.”

“I am the king of random trivia. Gimme a try. Ask me a question.”

“Um... okay. What is the longest river in the world?”

“The Nile. Although there are recent studies suggesting the Amazon may actually be longer. Next.”

“Damn. I can’t think of any. Let me look online.” He reached for his phone on the dresser between our beds and propped himself on his pillow. “Ready?”

“Yep. Give it your best shot.”

We spent a half hour with him peppering with me with questions, most of which I answered like a pro. When I was stumped by ‘Popeye has how many nephews?’ conversation turned to television shows we watched as kids (neither of us watched *Popeye*) to movies and music we loved growing up.

“So what was your favorite band? Don’t say Jonas Brothers. Be serious.”

I gasped in mock horror. Zev chuckled around a yawn and rolled his eyes. “Death Cab for Cutie. I still like them, so maybe that doesn’t count. I’m too tired to think of any other ones now. I need sleep. Lights out, young Zev. We must rest.”

“You’re a geek. G’night.” He let out a short laugh and turned off the light, sending the room into darkness.

“Night.”

It was quiet for a while. So quiet I was sure he’d fallen asleep. I was about to drift off when I heard a muffled “I’m sorry.” My eyes shot open. Huh?

“Sorry for what?”

“This afternoon.”

“Leave it alone, Zev. It’s not a big deal.”

Silence.

“It is a big deal. Figure it out.”

Huh? Was he trying to tell me he was sorry we kissed, or was he apologizing for his reaction? The earnest sincerity in his voice was hard to miss. I was inclined to make a joke, roll over, and put any awkwardness behind us. I was comfortable in my own skin, but that didn't mean I was bulletproof. My infatuation hadn't faded, and spending the last couple hours engaged in get-to-know-you pillow talk was a sort of sweet torture. Revisiting this afternoon's surprise make out session wouldn't be good for me.

“Good night, Zev.”

“I've always been curious and—”

“Good night.”

He sighed heavily. “Okay. G'night.”

The strained silence wasn't conducive to rest. I could practically see the energy in the dark room, like fog drifting across a pool at dusk. It was pervasive. There was no way to ignore its presence. I swallowed hard and closed my eyes tightly, willing myself to sleep. It wasn't working. My heart was pounding and every nerve ending was on fire. He had to feel it too.

“Zev?”

He didn't respond, which was fine because I honestly didn't know what I was going to say. I heard the rustle of sheets and footsteps. And then he was on top of me. He pushed me to my back so we were chest to chest. I could feel his breath on my lips. He was vibrating like a live wire. So tense, so needy.

“Adam, I want to kiss you again. It's hard to be in the same room with you and pretend I'm not thinking about it. I don't know if you—”

I cupped the back of his neck and pulled him down so his lips covered mine. Zev groaned into the connection and tilted his head before plunging his tongue inside my mouth. He was an expert kisser. His lips were soft but insistent. He licked and bit at me, only to ravish my mouth a moment later. Heat and energy. His need fed mine. I ran my hands under his T-shirt, desperate to feel his warm skin, and inadvertently flipped a switch. Zev rolled his hips so that his rock-hard dick nudged mine. I freed my legs and let them fall open to give him more room, as our tongues danced and twisted in a passionate fusion.

He pulled back slightly when the need for oxygen had us both gasping for breath. But his hips didn't stop. He moved against me hungrily, like a man possessed. The second I slipped my fingers under the elastic of his pajama bottoms and briefs, he went completely still.

“Sorry. I—”

“No. I want it. I want you, Adam.”

“What do you want exactly?”

“I want to fuck you, but I’m not—I’m not ready for that. I don’t know what to do. I’ve never done anything with a guy before and—”

“Shh.” I set a finger at his mouth and quickly replaced it with my tongue.

Maybe I was stalling. After all, this was the point of no return. A responsible, mature gay man would back away kindly from the curious straight boy. This wasn’t a good idea on so many different levels, starting with the fact we were teammates. But when his cock glided over mine, again, I gave up. I had no willpower when it came to Zev Vaughan. He was too fucking sexy to ignore.

“Take your clothes off,” I commanded in a low husky tone.

I felt his Adam’s apple move against my lips before he jumped out of bed and disrobed in seconds flat, carelessly flinging his clothes to the other bed. The room was dark, but my eyes had adjusted, so I could see his shadowed, muscular physique clearly. Lights would have been welcome, but I didn’t want him to freak out. I lifted my T-shirt over my head and slithered out of my pj’s before scooting over and patting the empty space beside me.

“Come here.”

He sat on the edge of the mattress observing me for a moment. I didn’t say a word. I didn’t know what was going on inside his head. I wouldn’t try to talk him into anything, nor would I give him an out. I would simply take his lead.

I breathed a sigh of relief when he lay down facing me. He set a tentative hand on mine and licked his lips.

“What happens now?”

I chuckled, and then pulled at his hand wordlessly, requesting him to move closer still. He complied, and we both gasped in pleasure when our cocks brushed against each other. Instinctively, I reached for his. My mouth watered. God, I wanted to taste him, but I’d settle for touching for now. I palmed him, loving the feel of his thick, long heavy member in my hand. I twisted my wrist slightly and tightened my hold. We were equal in size, I mused as I stroked his length. He hissed and bucked his hips into my fist.

“Fuck, that feels good.”

“Yeah,” I murmured, throwing my left leg over his so there was no space between us.

My throbbing cock bobbed against my slow-moving hand and Zev’s dick, smearing precum at each languid pass. I swiped my thumb over the heads of both shafts and spread the moisture over them before gripping us in a punishing hold. Zev pumped his hips forward as he leaned in to kiss me hard. He combed his fingers through my hair and held my head as he licked my lips and sucked at my tongue. His movement mirrored the steady motion of our hips. A hypnotic push and pull that threatened to take us to the brink.

I broke for air. I didn’t want this to end too soon. Not until he touched me too. I grasped his hand and guided him, closing his fingers over us, forgetting this was the first time he’d ever touched another man’s erect dick. He froze for a moment and let out a guttural noise as he recaptured my mouth and gripped us fiercely. He changed the pace. It was fast and furious now. There was no stopping him. I yanked at his hair, straining to get closer to him as my balls drew up and my spine tingled in warning. Zev met me thrust for thrust before coming apart. Our release spurted between us a second later, coating our fingers and stomachs with cum. I pulled him against me, holding him close as we shook in the aftermath.

When my limbs finally relaxed and my heart rate returned to something close to normal, I loosened my hold, wondering how long it would take him to freak out. I had every negative reaction worked out in my head and was busily planning a response to rejection. It could be anything from him running to shower, or him changing and hiding under his covers, to him making me swear to never breathe a word of this to anyone. Ever. My lax muscles began to tense as the unwelcome scenarios played out in my head. But everything came to a halt when he sighed with pleasure and rolled to his back, pulling me to lie on his chest. Like lovers.

“That was so fucking amazing.”

Whoa. I didn’t expect that. At all. I lifted his hand and impulsively kissed his fingers. I didn’t have words, but I did agree... it was fucking hot.

We barely slept. My initial fear that Zev would surface from a dreamy orgasmic haze and panic never happened. In fact, it was the opposite. He was voracious. The lights went on, the lube came out, and we... played. All night

long. If it was a fierce sense of curiosity propelling him to explore, I didn't mind. He was wanton, responsive, and he couldn't seem to get enough. I felt the same way. I suddenly had zero willpower around him. He arched his back as he tugged at his rigid prick, and I salivated. I had to lick him. And if he let me, I really wanted to suck him. His hips shot off the bed when I knelt between his spread thighs and tongued his balls. I gave him the chance to stop me, but when it didn't happen, I licked his shaft from base to tip a couple times before swallowing him whole. He groaned loudly, writhing beneath me, pulling my hair. I stared up at him, letting the tip of my tongue rest on his slit.

"Keep going, Adam. So good, baby," he whispered, tapping his thick cock against my swollen lips with his right hand while the left pushed my head down. Right where he wanted me.

I sucked him furiously and didn't let go when he exploded a few minutes later. He trembled as I milked him dry. When the shaking subsided, he pulled me into his arms and kissed me senseless as he held me tightly to his chest. He finally passed out sometime around three a.m. Right after he experienced his first ever blow job given by a man. I wasn't going to go there tonight. It was too much, too soon, and his eagerness under the cover of night might not translate as well in the morning. Especially once we joined our teammates in the pool.

Obnoxious banging woke us up a few hours later. I jolted upright and sleepily took in my surroundings before moving from a drowsy state to wide awake and panicked. My reaction was nothing compared to Zev's. He looked terrified.

"Who is it?" he croaked with wide eyes as he scrambled out of my bed.

"Probably Justin. Go to the bathroom or something," I whispered through my teeth.

He nodded and then bolted around the corner. I pulled on my pajama bottoms and rushed to open the door when another round of incessant knocking began. I wondered if the room smelled like sex. I couldn't tell, but I knew better than to let Justin in.

"What took you so long?" he asked with a furrowed brow.

"I was asleep, asshole! Why are you banging on the door at—What time is it?" I held the door open with one hand leaning against the jamb. I was hoping to strike a casual vibe but still be able to stop him if he tried to push his way in.

“Dude, you’ve got fifteen minutes to get something to eat and get on the bus. I was thinking you really were sick and missed your alarm. Are you? You look pale.” Justin backed up a step with his arms outstretched when I coughed. “Stay away. But get your ass in gear. Coach doesn’t care if you’re dying. He needs you in the pool. And your roomie, too. Is he in the shower? We’re getting in the water in less than thirty minutes. God, people are weird! Hurry the fuck up, Harrison.”

He turned away before I could respond. Fifteen minutes. Shit!

We made it to the lobby with a minute to spare and even managed to stop by the morning breakfast buffet to grab bagels and bananas for the road. We had a brief, awkward chat about our game plan in the elevator.

“This is gonna be weird. I’m not sure I’m ready to—”

“Hey. Nothing’s changed, Zev. We’re going to play water polo now. That’s all you need to think about. Be yourself. Try not to overthink, okay?”

He nodded and swiped his hand through his damp hair. “Okay.”

“One more thing.” I waited for him to look at me. “When I pass you the fucking money shot, you need to score. Got it?”

“Fuck you. Throw a catchable ball, asshole!” he griped, turning to give me a silly grin just as the door slid open.

Coach was standing at the elevator and obviously heard Zev. He frowned as he gave us a thorough once-over.

“Nice to see you two are getting along,” he commented sarcastically. “Listen, I don’t give a rat’s ass if you hate each other’s guts, but I want you to leave the bullshit behind. You’ve got one responsibility now. Play your hearts out. We need two wins, boys. Let’s do this.”

Every now and then, your best effort exceeds expectation to the point of being extraordinary. I’d never played better in my life than I did that day, and while I couldn’t speak for Zev, I had a feeling he was in the same boat. We were unstoppable, completely in sync. I would sit at the point position with the ball, signal the play call and then pass the ball to the left flat player. We would change positions, and he would either feed me the ball to give to Zev to drive forward, or vice versa. Either way, we couldn’t be denied. Cross-cage high corner, low corner, lob shots, and even Zev’s special backhanded skip shot

were pure money. Everyone upped their game, and the result was exactly what we wanted. We won both games and secured our spot for the championship game Sunday afternoon.

The mood on deck was celebratory, but Coach warned us not to get ahead of ourselves. “We’ve got one more to go. Let’s go home champions. Eat a good dinner and get some rest tonight. In fact, do whatever Harrison and Vaughan did yesterday. Whatever it was, it worked.”

My eyes widened, and I grinned as I turned to look at Zev who pointedly ignored me. I wanted to tell him to relax. No one knew anything, and I wasn’t telling. There was nothing to worry about.

I thought there was a chance he’d pull me aside to remind me again that he wasn’t gay and that what had happened last night was an anomaly. But he didn’t. He dropped his bag the second the door closed behind us in the hotel room and pulled me against him in a strong embrace. I allowed the hug, even though it confused me. I wasn’t sure I trusted his emotions. This thing between us was less than twenty-four hours old. I had a feeling the bubble was going to burst any time. But when he tilted my chin and brushed a tender kiss on my lips, I forgot everything. Including my name.

“Let’s get ready for dinner. And later”—he licked the shell of my ear and bit my lobe before pulling back with a wicked smile—“we can sneak away. C’mon.”

He smacked my ass and kissed me again before heading toward the bathroom. I turned away before I could ask any crazy questions—like what the fuck were we doing?

Dinner was another loud, raucous affair at a chain restaurant that specialized in artisan beers. Most of the guys on the team were either of legal drinking age or had a fake ID like myself, but no one ordered booze. Coach would kill us, and all we really cared about was food. Piles of French fries, onion rings, and nachos graced the table for us to munch on until our dinners arrived. Our seating arrangement was much like the one last night. I sat on one end with Justin and a few other goofballs, while Zev sat on the opposite side. I caught his eye a couple times, but truthfully, we were each doing our best to ignore each other. It was silly, but then again, I didn’t know how to act. I’d never done this before. I didn’t know the rules.

After dinner we walked around the outdoor mall area where the restaurant was located. There were shops, a movie theater, a couple clubs, and even a Ferris wheel and roller coaster. I couldn't imagine getting on an amusement park ride, though, after the loaded burger and ton of fries I'd consumed at dinner. Our large group broke into a smaller one. We meandered through kitschy gift shops selling touristy T-shirts and specialty stores catering to surfwear. By the time we'd hit the sports store, there were still six of us. Zev sidled next to me, typing into his phone as he whispered, "What heroic group did d'Artagnan lead?"

"*The Three Musketeers*. What are you doing?" I chuckled, though I felt heat race through my blood when his shoulder brushed against mine.

"Killing time. Let's get out of here."

I glanced up at him and then at Justin who was flirting with one of the sales clerks. Thankfully, Dave was there in case Justin's gaydar was off, and he needed to get bailed out of an awkward situation. I waved at Dave and signaled we were heading out but didn't give him a chance to ask any questions.

An offshore breeze blew across the boardwalk as Zev and I made our way back to the hotel. I stuffed my hands deep in my sweatshirt pockets to ward off the chill and threw my head back, laughing at some story he was retelling from his end of the dinner table tonight.

"Geez, those guys can be such dumb shits sometimes," he said with an exaggerated sigh.

"Yeah, but they're all good guys. Any one of them would have your back if you needed them. We're lucky."

"Hmm. I wonder if they'd still feel that way if they knew about us."

"Zev, don't worry about it. No one has to know anything. Okay?"

"I guess, but eventually they'll know, and it's going to be weird."

"Uh... what do you mean, eventually?"

"When I come out, idiot."

I swallowed hard as I studied his handsome profile. Come out?

"Zev, don't rush into anything. Are you even really sure you're gay?"

He scoffed and gave me an incredulous sideways glance. "Adam, all I could think about today was getting naked with you tonight. I didn't care about the

games. I wanted to win, don't get me wrong. But I wanted you more. That sounds kinda gay to me."

"Or are you curious?"

"Are you trying to talk me out of being gay?"

"No. You are what you are. But... Look, I don't want you to say words you can't unsay because you need to label what we did last night, or because you think I need to hear them. I don't want you to come out until you really know in your heart you're doing it for yourself. It's a personal thing. It's your truth, Zev. Not mine, not our team's, not your parents'."

"I get that. I'm definitely not ready to tell my folks. That may take a while, but as far as being honest with myself... I've been lying all along, Adam."

"Huh?"

"I've never been with anyone but you, but I've known I was gay since I was sixteen and Jen Carpenter shoved her hand down my Speedo. She was the hottest girl in school. I should have gotten hard just thinking about her wanting to feel me up. She cornered me in the side room next to the lockers, stuck her tongue in my mouth, and stroked my dick like a pro."

"Did you come?"

"Of course. I was sixteen. I could have come by brushing up against the lane lines in the pool. I had a perpetual boner. I'm still horny twenty-four seven, but at least I'm able to exercise a little more self-control now. And I doubt a girl would do it for me anyway. Every wet dream I have nowadays features ripped guys in Speedos. Or unbuttoned jeans with no shirt. Or a firefighter—with no shirt. Or a cowboy with a badass Stetson and—"

"No shirt," I supplied with a chuckle.

"You're catching on."

He nudged my elbow in a teasing manner. I turned to look at him and was taken aback by the sincerity of his smile. He was serious. He meant everything he said. He was gay. I felt oddly off-balance suddenly, and I couldn't figure out why. Maybe it was because I had yet to figure him out.

"Why were you such a jerk to me? There are at least five other gay guys on the team." I bumped his arm playfully and gave a small half laugh. "Or maybe six. I really didn't think you were homophobic but I didn't get why—"

“Cause I had a crush on you, dummy. I was so torn when I found out we were rooming together. Think about it. I’m not out, and I’m being paired with the guy I’ve been drooling over since summer league practice. I was scared I’d not only out myself but end up looking like a major dork, too. Falling for a teammate is a bad idea.”

I didn’t say a word. He’d skated over those last two statements with matter-of-fact ease, as though they weren’t two huge red flags. Closet case and teammate. I wasn’t prepared to have this conversation now, but as we stepped into the hotel elevator and he laced his fingers in mine behind his back so no one else could see, I knew this weekend was all we’d have. The thought made me unbearably sad. Zev was gorgeous and sweet with a fiercely competitive side that would serve him well. I wanted him in a way I’d never wanted anything in my life. But this was a road to certain heartache. Or as he’d said... a bad idea.

Reality could wait for tomorrow. I was determined to enjoy every last moment with him. We spent the entire night in naked exploration—licking, tasting, sucking, pushing and pulling. I was wrung out and in an erotic haze by the time I finally curled into his side sometime after one. My head was on his chest, our legs were entwined, but it was his fingers in my hair and the tender kisses he pressed on my forehead that made me ache to do this every night. It wasn’t fair to find something this good only to have to give it up.

I’d rolled to my side at some point and woke up early in the morning with an erect penis nudging my backside. I grinned as I reached behind to run my hand over Zev’s hip, pushing back to give him a teasing friction. He groaned as he wrapped his arms around me, letting his hand float to my cock while he grinded against my ass and nuzzled my neck. I couldn’t believe I had anything left in me, but when he gently pushed me onto my knees and slid his hard flesh against my crack while he jacked me off, it didn’t take long for me to fall apart. The feel of Zev’s cum spraying my lower back was delicious. A primal, erotic way to claim someone as yours.

He wiped my back with the hotel towel we’d ordained our “cum rag” the night before and then collapsed on the bed beside me.

“Have you ever...?”

“What?” I prodded.

I rose up on my elbow and smiled at my sexy lover. His dark hair was tousled, and his eyes were tired, but he looked very satisfied. He returned my grin and rolled to his side, laying a hand on my ass.

“I’m sure you have, but I was wondering what it—I mean, I’m kind of hoping you’ll want to do it, and—”

I chuckled. “What are you asking me?”

He smacked my ass and growled, “If you’ve had anal, and if you want to... you know, with me.”

I closed my eyes for a brief second before answering. “Yes. It’s awesome with the right partner. I was seventeen my first time, and I lucked out. My first boyfriend was patient and gentle. I’ve been with guys who have zero finesse. They’re all about shoving their dicks in and getting off, which feels great to them but not to the bottom.”

“Do you ever like to top?” he asked somewhat shyly.

“Eh. I prefer to bottom.”

“Cool. I think we’ll work out fine, then,” he said with a wicked grin.

A sudden flush covered my skin, like prickly pine needles. We had a game to play in a few hours. I had to reset expectations now.

“Zev, we can’t do this after today. This isn’t going to work.”

He studied me carefully with a disconcerting intensity. I wanted to get up and pace around as I attempted to remember the reasons we were doomed. At the moment, I was coming up blank. Maybe it would help if I got dressed, I mused. I started to get up but he stopped me.

“Why not?”

“You said it yourself last night. You’re in the closet. No one on campus knows you’re gay. When you come out, it should be something you’ve given some thought to and not because you spent a weekend in bed with a teammate.” I stood up and made my way to the bathroom.

“Wait a second. Where are you going? We’re in the middle of a conversation.”

“No, we aren’t. It’s over, Zev.”

He was at my side so fast I didn’t see him coming. The back of my knee hit the bed, reminding me of the argument that led to our first kiss. It seemed like

such a long time ago now. I swallowed hard as I met Zev's stare. He'd grabbed my arm to steady me and was looking into my eyes with an earnest expression on his handsome face.

"No. You're wrong. This isn't an end. It's a beginning. I'm not sure what I have to do to convince you, but I'm going to find a way."

"I don't want you to come out for me. Don't you get it? It has to be for you. No regrets."

"So if I come out, you'll go out with me?"

"No. I'm not giving you an ultimatum. I'm not an asshole."

"What if I told you I know the time is right for me? It's not about falling for an incredible guy I think is funny, smart, and quirky in all the best ways. It's about—"

"Quirky? How am I quirky?"

"Nobody knows that much Trivial Pursuit without being a little weird, babe. Look... maybe I have a few issues to address, but I can only do it one step at a time. I'm going to come out. To the team and at school. I'll do it soon, like next week. No, let me finish." He traced my jaw lovingly and continued, "My family will be tougher, but I'll get there. The only thing I can't do is quit the team. Is that a deal breaker? Or, do you think you might be willing to take a chance on me?"

"I can't work on a timeline. I'm not holding you to anything or asking for more than you're ready to give. You have to do this on your own. Without me."

It was an odd standoff, but there was nothing left to say. My head hurt, and my stomach lurched uncomfortably as my eyes welled. I wished I could say yes, but he needed time and the freedom to move at his own pace.

I moved out of his reach but stopped at the bathroom door when he spoke.

"I have a question. If you were meeting me for the first time and knew I was gay... would you go out with me? Would you be interested?"

"Yes, but—"

"All right, then."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing. I'm meeting my parents this morning for breakfast. I'll see you later at the pool. And Harrison?"

“What?”

“Don’t throw me any crappy passes.”

“Fuck you.” I gave him a lopsided smile, grateful for his sense of humor. It didn’t change the heavy feeling in my heart. I didn’t want to give him up. I didn’t want to just be friends. But I supposed it was better than him hating me.

The afternoon was perfect. Beautiful blue skies and the warm California sun. Only a few deciduous trees hinted this was a fall day. I was nervous, and for once, my pre-game jitters had nothing to do with the sport. I kept a cautious gaze on Zev, thinking he might be feeling the same, but he seemed fine. In fact, he was more relaxed and downright jovial than I’d ever seen him. Especially before a championship game. He caught me staring at one point and gave me a winning smile I didn’t know how to translate. Could it be that I’d blown this thing out of proportion all along? I didn’t know anything anymore, and my desire to be alone, to make sense of my feelings, wouldn’t be a reality for hours. I had to suck it up like a big boy.

“Hey. I wasn’t kidding about the passing, Harrison. Keep your head in the game,” Zev warned me with a wry grin as he swam into position.

I slapped water into his face before he reached the pool wall. “I wasn’t kidding either, Vaughan. Fuck off.”

For whatever reason, that little jab helped me set aside my angst and put the game first. The results were pure magic. Once again, we were the dream team—a fierce twosome setting a dominant tone from start to finish. We killed the competition fair and square. It may not have been an important tournament, but it was a sweet victory.

The mood afterward was jubilant. If we had been allowed to crack open a bottle of champagne on the pool deck, we certainly would have. Coach Myers wasn’t the overly effusive type. He wasn’t quick to give compliments or praise, so when he did, it was a big deal.

“Great work, boys. Incredible win! I’m unbelievably proud of you all. This is a team effort, but man, we owe a lot to Harrison and Vaughan. You are our joint MVPs. Congrats. Adam, do you have anything to say? Any words of wisdom?”

I knew the question was rhetorical. Coach didn’t expect or necessarily want me to make a speech, but the lighthearted mood seemed to call for a dose of silliness.

“I’d like to thank the academy, the great state of California, the fine coaching staff at Pacific... even Coach Myers. But I’d especially like to thank the fans. I wouldn’t be here today without you.”

“You’re such a homo,” Justin said, laughing like a loon with the rest of guys.

“Yes, I am, my friend. Yes, I am.”

“All right, all right. You got something to say, Vaughan?” Coach asked with the wide indulgent smile of a proud papa.

“Uh, yeah. I guess Adam summed it up, but I want to say one other thing. This was my first big tournament with the team, and it’s been amazing. I’ve learned a lot. I’ve only been in college a couple months, but this feels like the first time I could honestly say I felt like part of something big that allowed me to be myself, instead of getting lost in the crowd. So, thanks. Oh, and one more thing...” Zev stopped and looked at me before turning to the team. “This is kind of awkward. It’s—I’ve never said it out loud I mean, but... I’m gay, too. That’s all.”

Everyone went quiet for a moment. It wasn’t an uncomfortable silence, though. It felt more like a question—a polite lull to adjust to a personal admission, a moment to process, and finally... affirmation and acceptance.

The team cheered and gave backslaps, bro hugs, and a round of high fives. My smile felt too big for my face. The serenity in Zev’s expression somehow let me know he was at peace with his declaration, as though he’d let go of a heavy burden and felt a lightness he hadn’t in a while. I didn’t know what it meant for us, but I was happy for him.

“Aww. I’m gonna cry. Can you feel the love, Simba?” Dave joked, offering Zev a high five. He burst into a painfully off-key rendition of *The Lion King* classic, making us all groan.

Coach thankfully shut him down quickly. “We’re done here. You have time to grab a shower, something to eat, and pack up. The bus is leaving at four o’clock sharp. No exceptions.”

By the time everyone had dispersed, Zev was gone. Later, I saw him in the crowd, chatting with a good-looking couple. Probably his parents, I mused. I headed back to the hotel with Justin and few others, hoping I’d get a chance to speak to Zev privately before we were trapped on a bus for six hours. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to say, but an unsettling feeling gripped me. I hated feeling

so unsure of myself, so emotionally shaky. So, he'd shocked the hell out of me when he came out to the team. Did it change anything? I couldn't tell. And I wasn't going to know any time soon. His things were gone. There was no trace of him in the room we'd shared for three nights.

I was one of the first guys on the bus. I started to head toward my usual spot in the back, but something stopped me. Intuition or melancholy, I couldn't decide. I sat in the middle and pulled out my iPhone and earbuds. My plan was to tune out for as long as possible.

"Dude. What are you doing? Get to the back, man. We need you," Justin said, smacking my shoulder with his backpack.

"I know, but—ah-ah-choo!"

"Never mind. See you at school." He made a comical face and moved on. "Stay clear of Harrison. He's got the plague!"

I rolled my eyes and adjusted the sound on an old Death Cab song just as someone sat down next to me.

Zev.

"Is this seat taken?"

"He's diseased, Vaughan! Come sit back here with us," Justin yelled from the back of the bus.

He gave them a vague smile but didn't leave. "Diseased, eh? I'll take my chances. So..."

I turned in my seat to get a good look at him. We were all dressed similarly in our team polo shirts and shorts, but somehow, Zev stood out. I didn't think it was his gorgeous exterior this time, though, yeah, he filled out that shirt better than any guy on the team. No, there was something within him, a new sense of confidence, maybe. Whatever it was, I had a hard time looking away.

"You did it. Congrats."

His smile was radiant, making his hazel eyes look impossibly green. God, he was hot. "I'm glad I did. You're right. It is freeing. I want you to know I did it for me. It was time. I haven't told my family, but I will, though. Probably during the holidays. It will give me a chance to figure out how to tell them we're moving in together, too. Best to spill it all at once, ya know?"

"Moving in—What? Are you high? I'm not ready to—"

Zev put his hand over my mouth and busted up laughing. He pulled it away with a scowl when I bit the fleshy part of his palm. “Ouch.”

“You’re fine. Mental, maybe, but I don’t know if there’s a cure for that.”

“Smartass. Neither of us is ready for anything big. In a way, we just met. But I like you, Adam. A lot. I’m going to have a hard time pretending I don’t want to shove you against a locker-room wall and fuck your brains out after practice, but I’ll try. If I manage to not get a boner in my Speedo when I see you in the pool, I’ll call it progress. When we’re at practice or a game or a team event, we’ll keep things kosher, but I don’t see why we can’t be together in between. I want to walk you to class, help you study for humanities quizzes, and try to stump you at trivia questions. I want to know you. All of you. This weekend was great, and coming out to the team was a big step, but I know it won’t always be simple. In a way, I feel like I’m learning how to swim in the deep end. I’m treading water pretty well, but I’m not sure how I’ll handle going under. I could be a disaster. Are you ready for that, or am I in the deep end without a life preserver?”

I scoffed, though I couldn’t contain my grin if I tried. “Are you asking me to be your preserver?”

“Sounds better than floaties, right?”

“You’re going to be fine. You know how to swim, and... I’m not going anywhere. I’m here. If you need me.”

“I need you. And I want you.”

We shared a sappy smile—the kind that erased all the noise and nonsense around us. We were on a bus, waiting to return to school after a long weekend away. This was a typical end to a typical away-game scenario. The difference was in the guy sitting next to me with a hopeful gaze and a newfound confidence that made my heart skip a beat. I had a good feeling this ending was really our beginning.

The End

Author Bio

Lane Hayes is grateful to finally be doing what she loves best. Writing full time! It's no secret Lane loves a good romance novel. An avid reader from an early age, she has always been drawn to a well-told love story with beautifully written characters. These days she prefers that the leading roles both be men! Lane discovered the M/M genre a few years ago and was instantly hooked. Her first novel was a finalist in the 2013 Rainbow Awards, and her third received an Honorable Mention in the 2014 Rainbow Awards. She loves travel, chocolate, and wine (in no particular order). Lane lives in Southern California with her amazing husband and the coolest yellow lab ever, in an almost empty nest.

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