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LOTHIAN

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*To Chris, Ava and Alex –
the threads this story is woven from.*



CHAPTER ONE

‘Sarah, can I come over to your house?’ I squeaked into the phone, blinking away tears and shoving clothes into a suitcase.

‘What’s wrong, Ava?’ she asked. ‘You sound like you’re crying.’

‘My crazy parents are being crazy, like always,’ I said, wedging the phone between my ear and shoulder while sitting on the too-full suitcase. I jerked the zipper along. Clothes were still trying to explode out, but I didn’t care. ‘See you in five minutes, I’ll explain everything then.’

Angrily jamming the mobile into my pocket, I started dragging the heavy suitcase downstairs. My big brother Shane was at the dining table looking as grumpy as I felt. His dark wavy locks hid his face and his skinny body was slouched over an empty plate.

Shane looked up and his eyes widened. 'Where are you going?' he asked.

'I'm moving to Sarah's,' I said, flicking my long black hair over my shoulder and giving him a look that said, 'just try me'. Sometimes having an older brother is a real pain in the . . .

'Mum!' Shane yelled out with a stupid smile on his face. 'Ava's running away from home.'

'But it's pizza night, Ava,' Mum's voice floated out from the kitchen. 'I'm making your favourite.' She appeared holding a perfect pizza slice, with a brown crispy top and melty cheese strings hanging off the side.

'I'll never eat pizza again!' I yelled while yanking the front door open. 'Especially not any made in your stupid café!'

Mum's expression went from surprised to hurt. Usually I would never speak to her like that. I loved my parents, but they were about to ruin my life with this ridiculous café idea.

Stomping across the road through the rain and wind I went straight into Sarah's house without bothering to knock. We had lived across the street from each other since we were little and I was allowed to come over anytime without having to ask.

Storming to the end of the corridor I threw open the door to her room. She was on her queen-sized bed, staring at her iPad. Her blue eyes looked me up and down and she started chewing on the end of one of her blonde plaits. I looked crazy in a fluffy yellow dressing gown over my ugg boots and school dress, with wet windswept hair and eyes puffy from crying. To top it all off, when I threw my suitcase on the floor it burst open, spewing clothes out everywhere. Including undies.

'My parents bought a café and we're moving away forever!' I said, throwing myself down on her soft pink doona. 'I'm going to start high school someplace where

I won't know anyone, and we're moving as soon as term ends!'

Sarah reached out and grabbed my hand.

'Can I move in with you?' I wiped tears from my eyes.

'Sure. In fact, let's run away to New Zealand together and live with my uncle Rob over summer. We can come home when your parents are sane again.' Suddenly she sat up. 'What about New Zealand? You're still coming on our ski holiday right?'

I felt the tears start again and my chest go tight. The biggest and most important holiday of the whole year. Sarah's uncle Rob lived near Otago in New Zealand, and every year since forever our families had spent mid-year holidays staying with him and going out to the snow every day. I had already decided that next year I would tackle my first black run – now who knew if I would ever see the snow again? It wasn't fair.

'No,' I wailed. 'They said we have to spend the first few years working on the café – we can't afford to go anywhere! They'll make me the dishwasher. My hands

will crack and prune up and my fingers will fall off and I'll never become a world-famous snowboarder.'

'Don't be silly, Ava,' Sarah's mum Kerry said from the doorway, 'they'll never make *you* the dishwasher, you'd break too many glasses. Plus, you don't need fingers for snowboarding anyway. Just don't wash the dishes with your toes!' She sat on the bed and pulled me in for a cuddle. 'And we'll come and visit you in the school holidays. I know you don't want to leave and we'll miss you a lot, but there are exciting things to look forward to when you move to a new place. Who knows what fun things you'll find in Beachcrest? Maybe this is the start of something really great.'

I wasn't so sure.

Sarah and her mums Kerry and Hollie spent the next half hour cheering me up with cuddles and promises that Sarah would call me every day. Then Kerry called my mum, and she, Dad and Shane came over. We all sat in the lounge room squished on the couches, eating the pizza and garlic bread Mum had brought over.

‘This pizza is *soooo* delicious,’ Hollie said, picking up another slice. ‘I can’t wait to come and eat at your café, Helen!’ She licked her fingers.

Mum beamed – she was an amazing cook. Mum and Dad had been saying they weren’t enjoying their jobs for a while now. They had talked about opening a café together ever since I was little, but I never thought they would actually do it. And so far away from all of my friends! This big move would affect everyone, but Mum and Dad had made it without including me and Shane in the discussion.

This wasn’t the first time they had surprised us like this. Even though they seemed like normal parents, every now and then they would do crazy stuff. For example, packing our bags one morning and driving seven hours to their friend’s commune in the country for two weeks. We had to poo in a hole in the ground and there wasn’t even any wi-fi! Shane and I had tried to hitchhike home, but the only vehicle we saw was a farmer on a tractor and he said we wouldn’t fit.

I would never have expected something like this, though. I felt betrayed.

‘There are only a few cafés in town,’ Mum interrupted my thoughts, ‘so not too much competition. And the house we’re buying has enough land for Joey to grow vegetables.’ Dad smiled from a stool over by the oven where he was supervising the next batch of pizzas. Mum looked at my brother who was inhaling some garlic bread, having now recovered his ginormous appetite. ‘And Shane is excited he won’t have to catch buses and trains for an hour to go surf.’

Shane shot her back a look that said ‘Don’t talk to me’, but to be honest that was the only look he gave any of us at the moment. He also seemed to need a lot of sleep-ins – but only during weekdays. On weekends he would get up at dawn, grab his surfboard and trek over to the other side of the city as the sun rose. After surfing all day he’d come back for dinner, eat three meals in one sitting, and go to sleep in front of a surfing movie.

I’d tried surfing once or twice when I was little, but don’t remember being excited about it. Snowboarding was my sport. Both Shane and I loved it and we looked forward to our snow trip every year. Just thinking of

flying through the powder and racing to the bottom made my heart sing.

None of that mattered anymore, now that we were never going to see the snow again. I felt a big teary lump growing in my throat just thinking about how unfair it all was.

‘And Ava will be starting high school,’ Mum said smiling over at me. ‘You and Shane will be at Beachcrest High together.’

I was meant to be going to an all-girls selective high school in the city, most of my friends had gotten in. But, of course, everything was different now, thanks to the big move. I was glad Shane would be at my new school, he was four years older than me so would be starting Year Eleven. Even if he was a pain sometimes, I knew deep down that he would look after me.

Sarah reached over and gripped my hand. She was boy crazy, and I knew she was already thinking about how I could be her link to a bunch of cute surfers. I didn’t feel anywhere near as excited, but I wasn’t very excited about anything right now. Maybe I would make some great new guy friends, but all I could think

about at the moment was not seeing my BFF every day. It would be like having an arm cut off; I couldn't imagine even doing little things without her. Who would walk to school with me? Who would I sit with in class? Even though we still had weeks left together, I already missed her.

Later that night, our parents had tea and chatted about the move to Beachcrest, while Sarah and I hid in our favourite secret spot, the cupboard under the stairs (just like in *Harry Potter*).

'I bet you'll have a boyfriend after your first week at school.' Sarah laced her hand in mine. 'You have to promise to text me as soon as you get one, everyone will be so jealous.'

'Gross, no thanks,' I responded, 'but I'll find one for you if you want.'

'Yes, please!' she laughed. 'Find me one that has a big fluffy cat and a cute dog that chews everything, since I'm not allowed any pets. Oh, and maybe a goldfish too? And he should live in a mansion so we can get more pets. And then you can come and live with us too!'

I scrunched up my face. 'I'm trying to picture the mystery boyfriend, but all I can see are the pets, the house, and me. Are you sure you don't just want some pets?'

Sarah giggled. 'No, I want all the animals and the house and the boy, thank you very much.'

'Your wish is my command.' I crossed my arms and nodded my head like a genie.



CHAPTER TWO

The first lunch break at Beachcrest High was hard. Looking out over the oval at everyone sitting in groups reminded me of my old school. My friends were still all together, hours away from here. I'd never felt this alone before.

When we lived in the city I'd always loved the cosy feeling of knowing other people were close by in the office blocks and apartment buildings. The first thing I noticed when we moved to the tiny town of Beachcrest was that there was almost too much space – big wide empty streets with row after row of quiet fibro houses

and yellow-green lawns. I did love our new wooden house though, especially the wrap-around veranda and my massive bedroom with its own French doors.

‘No sneaking out to late-night dance parties,’ Dad had joked as he helped me push them open for the first time. I ignored him and admired the view out over the veranda into the backyard. As much as I liked our new place I wasn’t going to admit it out loud yet; I was still mad at my parents for ruining my life and making us move.

One room up from me, Shane stepped out from his doors grinning. Dad’s face became serious as he realised that while he didn’t need to worry about me sneaking out, Shane was another matter.

Actually, Shane had been really good to me all summer holidays, more like when we were younger and used to hang out together. In the afternoons, when Mum and Dad worked on getting the new café ready, he took me to the beach and taught me how to body-surf, whenever the surf was small. It had been small a lot this summer; he and Dad were always moaning about it.

We started out in the shallows with waves that had already broken. Shane and I would crouch down low until a tiny frothy one was right behind us. Then we would push hard with our legs and propel ourselves forward as the crest of the wave touched our backs. The momentum would carry us with it as long as you stayed rigid like a board. Shane even used his arm like a propeller to go faster, or he would make goofy jokes like pretending to be a dolphin, calling out to me with funny clicks and squeaks. It was easy and by the end of the first day I could do it with my eyes shut. Shane said that meant it was time for me to move onto the next step, catching a wave before it broke.

On New Year's Day, after a few days of waves surging past my head or flipping me onto the sandy seabed, I finally caught my first proper one. The waves were just over a foot high and were forming peaks, breaking close to the shoreline. Shane and I swam past the people standing in the shallows, but not as far as the surfers out the back. You had to work out your position and then stay there while you waited for a set to come in. I went to catch a wave, swimming freestyle

as hard as I could while the peak came towards us. I tried to move as fast as the wave. Pushing off the ground was the easy option, swimming was harder. The water started to pull me back as it got closer and closer. But, as usual, when I looked back over my shoulder I lost my nerve and the wave pushed past, leaving me behind.

Shane swam over and gave me a pep talk. 'You have to commit one hundred per cent to the wave,' he said. 'Once you see it has enough power, that it's going to break at the right time and that you're in the right position, you have to go for it.'

'But I'm scared of getting dumped by the wave!' I wailed.

'Have you been dumped before?' he asked. I nodded. Yes, I had, many, many, many times. 'But if you relax, and just let it roll you around for a bit, is it really that bad?'

I shook my head. It was a bit scary at first, but after I learnt not to panic and to go floppy like a ragdoll, it wasn't so bad. Eventually the washing machine

of churning water would stop and I would rise to the surface.

As the next set of waves came in, Shane started cheering for me, 'Woo, go Ava – you can do it!' I wanted to disappear. Now everyone was staring at me, waiting to see if I could catch one. An older lady smiled and gave me a thumbs up. Another guy started cheering, 'Go for it, Ava! Paddle hard!'

The water started pulling me back as the wave got closer, and I looked over my shoulder to check I was in the right position. The wave looked huge, but I didn't stop swimming, I wanted to show everyone that I could do it. I gave it everything I had; kicking and paddling with my arms until they started to burn. Then suddenly I didn't need to paddle because I became part of the wave, rushing forward like a torpedo, hurtling towards the shore. It was an amazing feeling. For a moment it felt like I was at the snow again, on a toboggan rushing face first down a hillside. I was flying, arms back at my sides, a huge smile on my face. I could hear Shane calling, 'Yeeeeewwww!' from

out the back: the sound surfers made when someone caught a great wave.

That was the happiest I felt the whole summer.

But that was back then, in the school holidays when Shane had wanted to hang out with me. Now, we were at school, and he had made it very clear this morning, on our very first day, that I couldn't go public about us being related. I could see him now, sitting with a group of guys his age, laughing and joking around. I felt alone and upset. Why was Shane going back to the way he treated me before we moved? A little smile from him would have been enough to make me feel better. For the millionth time that day, I wished I could teleport to be beside Sarah.

Deciding to find some quiet place to read a book, I turned away. When my pocket vibrated, I pulled out my phone and saw I'd been sent a photo. Sarah and some girls from my old class were sitting around their pooled-together lunches.

The message caption said, *Miss you!* and there were a *lot* of love hearts. I wished I had something to send

her back. A photo of me sitting by myself didn't seem as cool.

I'd spent my first classes pretending to study worksheets, but not actually reading anything, while I listened to everyone else chat and catch up on holiday news. At morning tea break I'd joined the longest line in the canteen to buy a crappy old banana. I wasn't even hungry; I just didn't want to sit by myself feeling sad.

'Hey, is that the new iPhone?' a voice to my left asked. It was a girl I had seen in a few classes already. She was short with mottled brown hair in a bob cut and freckles all over her face.

'You are *soooo* lucky, my parents say I can't get a new phone for ages!' she exclaimed. 'My stupid sisters all have the latest one, but I have to wait till one of them upgrades. Who are they?' she asked, pointing at the photo. 'Is that your old school?'

'I moved down from the city last month,' I responded. 'These are my friends.' I gazed at the photo and felt my heart pull a little. I missed them all so much. Then I realised there was now an awkward silence between

me and the girl, and that this was my first chance to potentially make a new friend.

‘I’m Ava Asquith,’ I said, not sure if we should shake hands or do something grown up – I mean, we were in high school now, how did older kids make friends?

‘I’m Alex, I’ve grown up here my whole life.’ She grabbed my hand and pulled me forward. ‘Come and meet some of the other girls in our year.’

We arrived at a group sitting under a fig tree, chatting to each other. Even though we all had the same uniform, you could see a hint of everyone’s personality – a band t-shirt peeping out from under a collar, or a bright blue sparkly hair clip. It was interesting imagining what they were like outside of school. All the little clues indicated they were different to my city friends, more surf rock, less city chic. Alex sat down and introduced me to everyone. They all smiled hello and then went back to their conversations while I sat quietly and listened. It wasn’t like me to be so shy, but it was hard to talk about people and places I didn’t know yet. Alex didn’t seem to mind, and when I told

her my parents were opening a new café in town she got really excited.

‘That is awesome news!’ she exclaimed, looking around at the other girls. ‘Can you ask them to make a burger and name it after me? “The Alex” – it can have salmon on it!’

A girl called Bronte looked disgusted and wrinkled her nose. ‘Gross, Alex you have such weird tastes.’

Alex shrugged, carefree. ‘It runs in my family,’ she laughed, ‘our favourite food is sashimi.’

Bronte looked like someone had just farted. ‘Raw fish? Double gross. You and your sisters spend so much time eating fish, you’ll turn into one soon,’ she said to Alex before turning away.

‘I’ll become a shark, and she’ll be my first meal,’ Alex whispered to me. Then she suddenly asked, ‘Do you know how to surf?’

I shook my head. I didn’t think she meant bodysurfing.

‘It doesn’t matter. Listen, they are offering surfing as a school sport for the first time ever, this year!’ she said. ‘Sign up with me, it will be awesome.’

I considered it for a moment. Shane had also offered to teach me to ride a surfboard, but I'd always preferred mucking around or relaxing at the beach, saving my sports focus for snowboarding. But if snowboarding was off the table for a while, maybe this could be another way to get that flying feeling? Plus, it looked like Alex could become a friend. It made sense to join whatever she was doing.

I got an unexpected thrill of excitement. 'Okay. Let's do it.'



CHAPTER THREE

The whole school was gathered in the main quadrangle after lunch, putting their names down for weekly sports. Alex was guiding me to one of the lines that had almost no girls in it. Why had I agreed to do this again?

‘Come on, Ava, we don’t want to miss out,’ she said, starting to push me forwards. I felt like digging my heels in, but got the impression Alex would just skip around and put my name on the list anyway. We joined the line.

A boy with shoulder-length, sun-bleached white hair and tanned skin turned around and gave us a dirty look. 'What are you doing here? You can't surf.'

'Oh yeah, James?' Alex retorted, leaning in. 'Well, if that's the case why did I spend all summer getting barrelled while you got dumped?'

James crossed his arms. 'As if. You couldn't catch a barrel if Kelly Slater was on the board helping you.'

'We'll see about that,' she said, also crossing her arms. 'Ava and I are going to snake you on every wave until you go back to the pee pool where you belong.'

I had no idea what snakes had to do with surfing, or what the hell a pee pool was, but I knew I wanted to be Alex's friend. So when James looked over, I toughened up my stance and gave him a glare.

'Who's this?' he said, flicking his head in my direction.

'I'm Ava Asquith,' I said. 'I just moved here from the city.'

'Ava's a kick-ass snowboarder,' Alex added. 'So she's going to be an even better surfer in no time.'

James let out a laugh and slapped his leg. 'So she doesn't even know how to surf yet? Seriously, why don't you join the gymnastics team where you belong?'

Alex turned around so her back was facing him. 'Ignore him, Ava – you're gonna be great in no time.' Her gaze shifted over my shoulder and she started waving. 'Janani! Molly!'

Two girls came over to stand with us. They had been sitting with the group at lunch, so I had kind of met them already. I knew that Janani's mum and dad were from Sri Lanka and ran a restaurant in town. She had sewn her own uniform, and she didn't like our English teacher, Mr Clayton. Molly had bright red hair, porcelain white skin and she was wearing a hat and sunglasses. She had a big sister who didn't go to our school, and they lived with her mum, who forced her to practise the piano day and night.

'I can't believe you talked us into this, Alex,' Janani said, shaking her head.

'My mum is going to flip out.' Molly grinned. 'She hates the outdoors – she wanted me to ask if I could play the piano instead of doing sport.'

'You guys copied me, this was totally my idea.'

Bronte joined us. She had olive skin and blonde hair that looked bleached like James's, except it was curled up in a bun on top of her head.

Alex rolled her eyes. 'If you don't want to join us, you're welcome to leave. I thought you'd be doing sport with Anastasia and those girls, anyway.'

Bronte looked bored and started wrapping some loose hair around a finger. 'They're all doing yoga, and there aren't many guys in the class . . .'

Alex rolled her eyes and turned away, muttering, 'Boy crazy.'

We were nearly at the front of the queue. James was talking to the teacher and waving his arms around, clearly annoyed. Eventually he stormed off and it was our turn.

Mr Chen, the PE teacher, grinned when he saw us. 'Girls, great to see you!'

'We're all joining,' Alex said. 'Where do we sign up?'

Mr Chen put his hands up and gestured for her to move back a little. 'Whoa, Alex, hang on a moment.'

It's not as easy as just putting your name down. I need to check you all qualify first.'

My heart plummeted. *Qualify??!!* I didn't know the first thing about surfing! Were we going to have to do a test?

Mr Chen pulled out a list and we each told him our names. Then he moved his pen over to make notes.

'Can you swim?' he asked. We all nodded.

'How many of you can do five laps of freestyle?' Again we all nodded, although Molly looked a bit worried.

'Have any of you surfed before?' he asked, and then clarified, 'Well I've seen you Alex, you're getting better.' She grinned. Janani and Molly shook their heads but Bronte nodded.

'I can bodysurf and snowboard,' I said, not sure what that would count for.

Mr Chen made some notes and looked up. 'I'm going to put you in the same group so you can help each other out. Alex and Bronte, you can be tutors for the others.' Alex jumped up and down in happiness but Bronte let out an exasperated sigh. 'You'll all be in the

beginners group. If you can all catch five waves in one lesson by the end of term, I'll think about moving you up to intermediate.'

As we walked back along the line, I noticed Shane in the queue and shot him a little smile and a wave before I remembered I wasn't supposed to show I knew him. Further back in the line, a girl with short brown hair who looked about Shane's age grinned and waved back. Did I know her?

'Alex!' she called out. 'What level are you in?'

Alex rushed over with a big smile and we followed. I noticed Shane turning to watch as we walked past. He looked surprised.

'This is one of my big sisters, Amanda,' Alex introduced me before continuing to talk to her sister. 'Me and my friends are all in beginners together. I get to help the others learn, and Mr Chen said if we all do well, we can move up a level next term!'

Amanda and Alex high fived. I looked over and saw Shane was still staring, looking like a zombie with his mouth hanging open. I gave him a confused look and then turned back to Amanda.

‘It’s awesome that you girls have signed up, we always want more girls in the water!’ she exclaimed.

‘Ava’s just moved here, she’s a snowboarder and her brother Shane taught her to bodysurf over the holidays. She’s going to be great,’ Alex said.

Amanda looked puzzled for a moment. ‘Shane, I’ve heard that name today. Is he in my year?’

I pointed to Shane despite knowing I would get in trouble for making the sibling connection. I couldn’t hide it forever! Besides, if Alex and I were going to be friends, her sister would find out for sure. ‘He’s up there, putting his name down too. We just moved here.’

Shane looked even more startled. Then he started turning red. I waved again but he just stood there. I figured he was building up to an ‘I can’t believe you did that, Ava’ kind of explosion, but I’d survived them before. Plus, he’d probably wait until after school to really let me have it.

Amanda gave him a wave and then turned away, continuing to chat to us, telling Molly and Janani they would pick up surfing in no time.

Alex leaned over and whispered, 'Is your brother okay? Can he talk?'

I shrugged my shoulders as if to say I didn't have a clue what was going on with him either. From the way Alex and her sister got along, she probably wouldn't understand anyway. For a moment I wished Shane would high five me in front of everyone too.

Eventually the crowd thinned out and we headed to our next class. Alex linked her arm in mine and we chatted about normal stuff like our favourite bands. It felt strange walking with someone other than Sarah, but it was comforting after my lonely morning. Kind of like wearing someone else's jumper – it fitted a little differently, but I was warmer wearing it.

We passed James walking by himself and looking furious.

'James!' Alex called out. 'I saw your name on the list with us in the beginners class. Funny, I thought you would be in advanced, or intermediate at the very least,' she said in a way that made it clear that wasn't what she thought at all.

James glared back. 'Get stuffed, Alex! Mr Chen put all of the Year Seven surfers in beginners to start with. I'll be in intermediate next term.'

'Really?' Alex said. 'Wanna bet on it?'

He spun around with his fists clenched by his side. 'Fine! But you have to be in on it too, since you think you're so good.' Alex stopped walking to listen to him. 'Whoever gets moved up to intermediate level first gets priority over the loser on the best waves for the rest of the year.'

Alex stiffened, thinking it over. From listening to Dad and Shane while they watched surfing competitions on TV, I knew that James meant whoever won would get to ride the biggest and best waves ahead of the loser any time they surfed together. Kind of like queue jumping with permission. It was a pretty big deal.

'Okay, you're on,' Alex replied, holding her head up and looking him in the eye. They shook on it, and then James stalked off.

Alex groaned, 'Me and my big mouth . . .'



CHAPTER FOUR

I loitered under a tree just past the school gates, waiting for Shane. He had pointed to the spot when we arrived at school this morning, telling me that only at this place, after school was over, would I go from being a stranger to being his little sister again. Clearly I hadn't stuck to that plan by pointing him out to Alex's big sister Amanda.

We were going to help Mum and Dad at the café, getting everything ready for the grand opening on Friday. They were going to host a free pizza party to celebrate, and I had already invited Alex, Janani and

Molly. My pocket buzzed and I pulled my phone out to find a message from Sarah: *How did it go???!!!*

I smiled and texted back, *Not too bad. I'll Skype you later.* It felt good to have some exciting news to share. I couldn't wait to fill her in on becoming a surfer. Of course, she would want to know about any cute boys, too. I decided to tell her about James and hoped she'd realise they were still gross.

I felt a breeze as Shane walked quickly past me. I scrambled after him, and a couple of blocks later he slowed so I could catch up.

'So you're going to learn to surf, huh?' he said.

'Yes, Alex talked me into it. Is it okay if I use one of your old boards?' I gave him my most winning smile.

'Sure,' he grunted, and then was silent again.

As we turned the next corner I could see our parents' café at the end of the street. It was a cute little fibro building that they had painted bright yellow with white trim. There was newspaper over the windows, hiding the changes we were making inside. As we approached it, Shane slowed down. A snail would have beat him to the front door.

‘So, you’re friends with Alex?’ he said suddenly.

‘Umm, yeah, I guess so.’

‘Is she going to come to the café opening on Friday?’
he asked.

‘She said she would.’ This conversation was getting stranger. Shane had never cared about my friends before. Plus, I thought I’d be getting into trouble right now for pointing him out to Amanda.

‘You should tell Alex to bring her big sister Amanda, too,’ he said, and then started striding towards the house so fast I had to jog to keep up. I couldn’t work out why Shane didn’t ask Amanda to come himself. Then I remembered the last time he had acted like this, on a ski holiday when he had a crush on a girl called Melissa. He froze every time he saw her, could barely get a sentence out and had practically fainted when she kissed him goodbye. I had almost passed out from laughing – she had kissed everybody goodbye; even I got a peck on the cheek. So today’s weird behaviour meant Shane had a crush on Amanda. I felt super smug knowing his secret. Watching this unfold was going to be hilarious.

Following Shane through the door I sniffed the air. The café smelt delicious. Mum rushed out from the kitchen to hug us.

‘How did it go?’ she asked excitedly. ‘I just made a batch of muffins to test out the new oven. Come sit and tell us all about your day. *Joouooooooooooooey!*’ she called out to my dad. ‘The kids are back!’

Dad came in through the side door wearing dirty old clothes with splashes of bright blue paint all over them. He clapped his hands together and smiled through his big bushy beard when he saw us.

I had planned to only tell them about my sad morning so they felt bad about making us move and forcing me to go to a new school where I didn’t know anyone, but I couldn’t help smiling back at Dad. As far as first days went, it had actually been pretty cool. ‘I made a friend called Alex and she’s going to teach me how to surf!’ I exclaimed, running over to hug him, before then stopping short when I realised wet paint wouldn’t be a good addition to my uniform.

‘Ava, that’s awesome news,’ he said, offering me a paint-free high five.

‘Shane said I can use one of his old boards and Alex said I would pick it up in no time.’ I was so happy I danced around the room, right into a pile of cleaning equipment, which made me trip and fall onto Dad. He caught me and then we both looked down – now there were bright blue splotches on my uniform.

‘I’m so glad to hear you’ve made a friend already,’ Mum said, laughing and bringing over a wet cloth for me to rub the paint off. ‘Did you invite her to the pizza night?’

‘Yes, and two other girls – Janani and Molly,’ I said. Shane coughed. ‘Oh, and Alex’s sister Amanda might come, too,’ I said, trying not to look at him.

‘The more people coming the better,’ Mum said. ‘I met the owner of the local surf shop today and invited him and his family. His daughter Bronte is in your year I think?’

‘Yes, she’s going to be in my surfing class, too,’ I said, not bothering to explain that she wasn’t one of the nicest people I’d met today. Mum and Dad had a policy of being polite to everyone, even if they were rude.

Mum started to ask Shane about his day so I wandered off to the kitchen to eat a muffin. They were chocolate: light and fluffy, and I wanted another one as soon as I licked the last crumb off my finger. Looking around the kitchen, I rolled my eyes. Everything was a mess. My mum was terrible at keeping things tidy.

I started putting away the plates we had picked out from local op shops. Mum said the café's theme was going to be shabby chic, so we didn't have to spend money buying matching things. I had to admit it was starting to look cool, and kind of comfy, like you didn't have to sit up straight and use your best table manners.

Mum came in and started picking up things and putting them down again. 'Ava, are you still happy helping out as our waitress on opening night?' she asked.

'Sure,' I replied. I was actually looking forward to it. Sometimes I daydreamed about juggling six pizzas at once while the customers cheered and filled our tip jar.

'We also need to find some waitresses to help out regularly,' Mum said. 'I'll get Shane to ask around.'

We worked on the kitchen together for about an hour and talked about what pizzas Mum was going to make on Friday night. I suggested grosser and grosser toppings until she had to stop cleaning because she was laughing so hard.

‘Toenail clippings with melted snot on top?’ she wheezed.

‘Sounds delicious,’ Dad said as he walked into the kitchen, wiping his hands on a rag. ‘It must be time to head home for dinner.’

We all jumped into Dad’s beaten-up old ute. Home was only a five minute drive from the café and, unlike the city, there were no traffic jams. As soon as we walked in the door, Mum and Shane went into the kitchen to start getting dinner ready and I dumped my bag in my room. Mum and Dad had asked Shane to help out more regularly with meals, now that they were busier with the café. Back in the city, he would have complained and tried to get out of it. But he seemed happier with more responsibilities. I think he appreciated being treated more like a grown-up.

I was just turning on my laptop to see if Sarah was online when Dad appeared at the door. He beckoned me to follow him. We walked out back to the shed where he and Shane stored all their surfing gear. Dad crossed his arms, looked at the rack of surfboards and then looked over at me, raising an eyebrow.

‘Let’s find you the perfect learner board from our stash,’ he said. I felt a buzz of excitement; it had been ages since Dad, Shane and I had had something to share.

I walked over and touched them. They were all different, some made of hard fibreglass and only a little taller than me, others made of soft foam and taller than Dad. Some were pretty beaten up. Dad started picking out boards, holding them next to me.

‘It can’t be too small,’ he said, putting a little fibreglass one back. ‘The smaller the board, the harder it is to balance. Can’t be too big either,’ he said. ‘Big boards don’t turn easily and you need very particular swells to ride them.’

He pulled out a board that was about his height and made of a light foam. ‘This one is soft, so if you

fall off and hit yourself or anyone else, it won't do too much damage,' he said. 'And compared to you, it's big, which will make it easier to balance.'

He held out the board and I took it. It felt rubbery and springy. It was heavy too, but I kind of liked that. It felt secure, like it would hold onto the wave.

Dad helped me pick out a leg rope and attached it to the board. Then he showed me how to rub wax on the top to help my feet stick in place when I stood up. Once everything was ready, I took the board inside so I could show Sarah later tonight. On my way through the house I heard Shane whistle and turned to see him grinning.

'My little sister, the grommet,' he said.

'What's a grommet?'

'A kid who's learning to surf,' Dad replied. I liked it. Grommet was a weird-sounding name, but I felt like I was now part of something Dad and Shane had shared for years. Rushing into my room I took a selfie with the board and texted Sarah and Alex.

I'm a grommet! I wrote.



CHAPTER FIVE

Sport was on Wednesday and Shane and I took our boards to school together. Mine was in a bag with a strap so I could carry it over my shoulder. Dad had attached two big hooks onto the frame of Shane's bike. The hooks faced upwards and were wide enough that he could rest his surfboard on them and still pedal.

We went straight to the sports equipment shed. Alex and Janani were already there, dropping off their boards. Alex had a beaten-up fibreglass one she was borrowing from her sisters' spares. Janani had a boogie board that looked brand new.

‘I thought we were learning on surfboards,’ I said to her.

Alex butted in, ‘Janani’s board is bigger than the ones you see little kids using on holidays. Plus you have flippers and a leash – it’s called bodyboarding and it’s a proper sport, just like stand-up surfing.’

‘I talked to Mr Chen, and he suggested that Molly and I try it out first,’ Janani said, smiling. ‘It’s a bit easier to get started. We aren’t as confident in the water as you guys.’

‘Alright everyone, we’ll meet back here at the start of lunch.’ Mr Chen stepped into the shed, took my board and waved us off. ‘Everyone will head down to Perry’s together.’

Perry’s Beach was the closest to our school. On the way to class, Alex told me it was officially given this name a few years ago, after a local fisherman who had died from cancer.

‘He was a great guy,’ she said. ‘He always cheered on my sisters when they surfed. He that said girls could do anything.’ There was a brightly coloured mural of Perry on a brick wall down by the beach. The local

surfers had made it, so everyone could still say hi to him on their way out to surf.

Our lessons before lunch seemed to take forever. I could tell Alex was distracted, too, she kept looking out the window and squirming around in her chair. Finally, the lunch bell rang and we ran to the sports shed. There were kids everywhere, grabbing boards. Mr Chen got us to sit in our groups so he could do a headcount. There were twenty kids in beginners; most of them were in my year but there were a few who looked older. Ms Taylor and Mr Bently were there as well, to teach the intermediate and advanced classes.

Once everyone had arrived and been accounted for, we walked down to the beach. Alex, Janani, Molly, Bronte and I were the only girls in our group. Molly had a bodyboard like Janani's, but it was old and beaten up. She said her mum had had a fit about her bodyboarding and refused to buy her any gear. Luckily, Mr Chen had an old spare board and he had offered to lend it to her for the term. If she liked it enough she would save up some pocket money and buy her own.

Bronte had a brand-new fibreglass surfboard, which must have come from her dad's shop.

When we got to the beach, Mr Chen made us sit under some trees with our boards next to us. The intermediate and advanced classes had gone to get changed into their swimmers straight away.

'Now, I know you're all eager to get in the water,' Mr Chen said, 'but we need to talk about ocean safety first.' James groaned and Mr Chen turned to him. 'Knowing how rips and currents work could save your life one day,' he said. 'You have to take the ocean seriously every time you surf. It's a dangerous place but you can minimise risks by learning how to get out of a bad situation.'

'Like a shark attack!' someone called out.

'I've been surfing since I was about your age and I've never had to fight off a shark,' Mr Chen said. 'It's important to learn about *all* potential dangers. Now, to start with, who knows how to spot a rip?' he asked, gesturing to the water. 'Who can tell me where they are on Perry's Beach?'

I looked out at the ocean and then put my hand up with the majority of the class. Dad had taught me how to spot rips when we first moved down the coast. You could see them by looking for patches where waves weren't breaking. Instead of eventually curling over and crumbling into foam, they kept their peak.

'Tom Nguyen, can you please point out where you think the rips are?' Mr Chen asked a boy with straight black hair and brown eyes. Tom stood up, looking a little nervous, and pointed out two spots in the water.

'Very good,' Mr Chen said. 'Can you please explain to everyone how you could tell?'

'The waves aren't breaking consistently,' Tom said.

Alex leaned over and whispered to me, 'Everyone from nippers already knows this stuff.'

Nippers was run by the local surf club for kids five to thirteen years old. Alex had told me it was like junior lifesaving. They had sprint races on the sand, swam in the ocean and learnt about beach safety. Most kids in our class had been nippers at some stage.

'That's right, Tom, well done,' Mr Chen said. 'Now can anyone tell me what to do if you're caught in a rip?'

I put my hand up and he pointed to me.

‘Don’t try to swim against it,’ I said. ‘Alert the life-guard by waving your arm above your head and try to stay calm.’

‘Very good, Ava, that’s exactly right. The worst thing you can do when caught in a rip is panic and try to swim to shore,’ Mr Chen said.

For the next hour we talked about ocean safety: different kinds of rips (there were ‘fixed’, ‘flash’ and ‘topographic’), how currents work and how to avoid hitting other surfers and swimmers. Then we spent a while looking at everyone’s boards and why they were designed differently. Most kids had foam boards, like mine, or bodyboards like Janani and Molly. Only a few kids had fibreglass ones, and Mr Chen said they had to be especially careful not to hit other people in the water.

Finally, Mr Chen sent us to the change rooms to get into our swimmers. We all met again at the sea pool.

‘Okay, where are Ava and Tom?’ he asked and we stepped forward. ‘You both volunteered to answer questions first, so you can jump in however you want.’

Everyone else will join you afterwards – via the stairs or the ladder,’ Mr Chen said, gesturing to the pool.

I looked at Tom and he made his hand into a fist and extended out his pinky finger and thumb while jiggling his hand from side to side. ‘Yeeeeew,’ he said quietly to me. I smiled and did the hand signal back. I’d seen Shane and Dad do it to each other sometimes – it was called a ‘shaka’ and was like a surfer’s high five.

We both did big bombs, splashing the rest of the class. Then everyone else climbed in and Mr Chen got us to do some laps.

‘Being a strong swimmer is another important part of staying safe in the ocean,’ he said. ‘You need to know how far you can swim.’

I churned through some laps of freestyle with Alex, then accidentally ran into the back of someone and stopped.

‘Sorry, Molly,’ I said, hoping I hadn’t hurt her.

‘No problems. Sorry we’re so slow,’ she said as Janani pulled up beside her. Alex and Bronte swam over to join us too.

'I'm so crap at freestyle,' Janani said, sounding worried. 'I don't know if I can do this.'

I felt bad for her. I was comfortable in the water but still nervous about surfing. It must have been even scarier for her and Molly.

'You guys need to do some swim training,' Bronte said.

'That's a great idea!' Alex exclaimed. 'Why don't we help you? We could meet here on the weekend and do laps together.'

'Would you? That would be amazing!' said Molly. 'I guess it's just like piano: you need to practise again and again until you can do it in your sleep.'

Janani started laughing. 'Lol, yeah, and then we'll start doing freestyle in our sleep.' She pretended to swim and snore at the same time and we all giggled.

Bronte said she was too busy to practise – I got the feeling she was just busy not hanging around grommets like us.

'That's fine. Ava and I are happy to help,' Alex said. 'When should we meet?'

'I've got a piano recital on Saturday morning,' Molly said.

'And I have to help my parents in their restaurant on Sunday,' Janani added.

'I've been given chores on Saturday morning,' I chimed in.

'How about Saturday afternoon?' Alex asked, looking around. We all nodded in agreement.

'Awesome. Party at Ava's parents' café on Friday night, then swim training on Saturday afternoon. Best weekend ever!' Alex exclaimed.

I could almost hear Bronte roll her eyes as she swam away from us.



CHAPTER SIX

‘Ava, have you seen the parmesan anywhere? I know I got some yesterday, how can it be missing already?’ Sighing, I opened the fridge and showed Mum the big tub of grated parmesan cheese sitting at the back of the top shelf.

‘Thank you, my love. What would we do without our tidy daughter?’ she said, kissing the top of my head. She was covered in flour and had bits of pizza dough clinging to her hair. Tonight was the grand opening and Mum had been preparing for it all day. There were domes of soft dough that felt like marshmallows when

you stuck your finger in, and containers of various toppings, all lined up in a row. When they were ready, the pizzas would go on a big wooden paddle to be carried to the wood-fired oven, which looked like a big clay igloo. Once they were inside, the pizzas would cook perfectly in a few minutes.

‘Come on, Helen. Ava and Shane can finish setting up. We need to get ready,’ Dad said, catching Mum’s arm and playfully directing her outside to the car.

‘Okay, okay,’ she said before taking one last look over her shoulder. ‘I feel bad, though. You kids shouldn’t be cleaning up my mess.’

Shane walked into the kitchen with packets of balloons and streamers. ‘Go on, Mum, we’ll be fine. And FYI I’m a teenager not a kid,’ he said, waving them off. He was looking pretty fancy wearing a collared shirt and his nicest pants. His hair was washed and brushed, and I even smelt some fancy goop in it when he walked past. My parents thought he was dressed up for the party, but I had a feeling that Alex’s big sister Amanda might have had something to do with it.

I was wearing a plain black dress with a white frilly apron, which Sarah had sent to complete my waitress outfit. Her mums had also sent a massive bunch of native flowers, which were in a vase on the counter. Everything at the front of the café looked stylish, like a scene for a photo shoot. Mum had great taste for decorating and all the mismatched second-hand furniture made it feel like you were in a cool beach shack from the past.

Sadly, the kitchen was another story. Mum was a messy cook and there was a big pile of washing-up to be done. Shane and I groaned and looked at each other before rolling up our sleeves to start scrubbing (okay, so I didn't actually have sleeves, but you get the idea). Shane put the radio on and we danced and sang while cleaning dishes. Despite the whole washing dishes part, it was nice hanging out together. Since he'd made friends at school, Shane was always out surfing with them, or in his room with the door shut – I missed goofing around with him.

Mum and Dad got back just before the official start time of six o'clock. They both looked great in their

posh outfits: Mum was wearing a black velvet dress and Dad had a maroon shirt with a navy-blue bow tie.

‘The kitchen looks amazing – thank you!’ Mum said, slipping her apron over her dress. ‘I’m going to start making pizzas now, I’ll come out a bit later once everyone’s been served.’

Shane stayed in the kitchen to help Mum while Dad and I went out to the front of the café to greet customers. The plan was Dad would make everyone’s drinks, and when the pizzas were cooked I’d take them around on a big tray, just like a proper waitress at a fancy party.

The bell on the front door tinkled as our first guests walked in. I rushed over to say hello and then stopped short when I saw it was Bronte and her family.

‘Hi Bronte,’ I said, forcing a smile. She hadn’t spoken to me since sport on Wednesday.

‘I’m Joey, Ava’s dad.’ Dad stepped past me and shook Bronte’s parents’ hands. Her big sister was also with them, looking even more bored than Bronte. She was in Year Twelve, and I knew they also had a brother at university.

‘I’m Sam. Great to meet you,’ Bronte’s dad said, smiling and showing his bright white teeth. ‘This place looks so different – we’re all glad to see a new family taking over the café.’

‘Yes, your interior design is so . . . interesting,’ Bronte’s mum said. She was wearing a cool kaftan and looked like she’d just stepped out of a salon.

‘Can I get everyone a drink?’ Dad said, herding them over to the retro bar we had got from an antique store.

‘Love one, mate. I’ll have a coffee and the girls will have lemonade,’ Sam said. Bronte walked right past me as if I didn’t exist and flopped onto one of the couches. She took out her mobile and started typing furiously. I guessed she was texting someone to tell them how lame our café was. I tried to shake it off, and, instead of waiting for her to say hi, I went into the kitchen and brought out some dips and bread that Mum had prepared that afternoon.

Soon more guests arrived. There were people that ran local businesses, people who had seen the flyers around town, and kids from our school with their

parents. A line started to form in front of the bar and I was flat out getting more supplies for Dad. Soon the bread and dips were almost gone and I could tell people were ready for the main course.

‘How long until the pizzas are done?’ I asked the next time I went into the kitchen. ‘Do we have any more glasses? People must be thirsty tonight, we’ve almost run out.’

Mum looked up. There was flour all through her hair. ‘I don’t have any more glasses! Can we use teacups instead? We’ll put the first pizzas on now.’ I looked over to Shane but he ignored me, he had food all over his good shirt and he seemed to be doing five things at once.

I went back out and saw more guests had arrived. People kept asking me questions. I felt very small and a little bit scared – I didn’t know which things to do first. *Don’t freak out*, I told myself, *just do one thing at a time*.

I went over to Dad and let him know we were out of glasses and that Mum said to use teacups. He was doing great: smiling and chatting to everyone as if he had all the time in the world. I wanted to be calm, too,

but there were so many people everywhere I couldn't concentrate.

I felt someone pull on my dress – it was Bronte's sister. 'I'm starving,' she said while still looking at the screen of her phone. 'I don't want dips, I came for pizza.' I looked over at Bronte who was sitting next to her sister. She had headphones on and ignored me again.

The front-door bell tinkled again and I wanted to run away. How could we fit any more people in this place? Instead of welcoming the newcomers or replying to Bronte's sister I went back into the kitchen where Mum had a huge stack of pizzas ready. They looked amazing with crispy brown tops and bright basil sprinkled over the melty cheese – just smelling them made my tummy growl. I grabbed one and walked back to what we now called front of house (which is hospitality speak for where the customers eat). Before I could get more than six steps out the kitchen door there were hands everywhere as guests crowded in on me. In a minute there was nothing left. I felt like crying. This was meant to be fun but I was overwhelmed by

it all – was it going to be this busy all the time? It wasn't how I imagined being a waitress would be.

'How's it going?' Mum asked as soon as I walked back into the kitchen. 'Do you need more pizza? There are lots ready to take out. They must like them – that's a good sign!'

My heart was beating like crazy in my chest and I felt like I couldn't breathe. Tears were forming in my eyes. 'There are way too many people and I can't keep up!' I wailed.

Mum rushed over and gave me a quick hug. She stroked the side of my face. 'It will be okay, darling, tonight is about us celebrating our new café. People didn't come for a proper sit-down dinner. They are all happy to chat and eat whatever we bring out, as we bring it out. There's no rush to feed everyone immediately.' I wanted to believe her, but I kept thinking about Bronte and her family. I couldn't stop imagining them telling everyone how lame our party was.

Mum gave me another quick hug then handed me a tray of pizza. 'You can do this, Ava. Your grandma always told me, "*fake it till you make it*" – just act like

everything is fine and eventually it will be,' she said, turning me around and gently pushing me towards the door.

I took a big breath and went to leave the kitchen, but someone tried to come in the door at the same time and hit the pizza tray. I yelled, 'Watch out!' But it was too late. Pizza slid all down the front of my apron and onto the floor.

It was official, my waitressing career was a total disaster.



CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Oh no, Ava, I’m so sorry!’

It was Alex, in jeans and a t-shirt, with a horrified look on her face. Behind her, Amanda and another older girl peered around the door to see the mess. I couldn’t say anything – I didn’t know what to do.

‘Are you okay?’ Alex asked worriedly. ‘Did I hit you with the door?’

I nodded my head miserably and looked down at the cheesy mess all down my front and on the floor.

‘It looks like you could use some help,’ Amanda said, looking down at the ruined pizza and then up

at Mum and me. 'This is our sister, Martha,' she said, gesturing to the girl behind her. 'We've done a bit of waitressing at Janani's mum's restaurant – could we help out the front?'

'Oh wonderful, thank you, girls. We would love some help! There are lots of pizzas ready – we just need to get them out to the hungry hordes,' Mum said.

Shane turned around from the washing-up and dropped a metal bowl when he saw Amanda. Dressed up for the party, she looked pretty in a maroon floaty top and short denim skirt. She smiled and waved, saying, 'Hi, Shane! You look busy!'

He looked down – his fancy shirt was covered in pizza ingredients. Looking up again he made a weird croaking sound.

Mum handed Amanda a freshly baked and sliced pizza. 'Amanda, please take this out. Martha, here's one for you; it's got chilli on it so be sure to let people know.' They both saluted Mum and left the kitchen. As they went out, Janani and Molly came in.

‘Alex’s mum said you guys were in –’ Stopping short, they looked at the mess all down the front of me and on the floor.

‘Hey, guys,’ Mum greeted them, ‘do you want to help us out and be pizza waitresses?’

Molly and Janani looked at each other and shrugged. ‘Sure thing. Sounds fun!’ they said.

I grabbed a broom and a mop to clean up the ruined pizza. It felt good to have a moment away from the crowd.

Mum smiled and winked at me as she announced, ‘Girls, you are amazing! I’m going to think of a really special way to say thank you for your help.’

Alex grinned. ‘Awesome! All I want is a mountain of ice-cream, or maybe just a giant pizza to eat.’ I smiled back. Suddenly everything didn’t seem so bad. I had friends!

I grabbed a pizza and even did a little dance as I picked it up. Going through the doors, I felt confident again. I smiled and offered slices to guests, telling them it was the best pizza they would ever eat. I saw Bronte and her sister sitting on the couch and went

over to offer them a slice, too. Bronte's sister took a piece without looking up, but Bronte's eyes bulged when she saw my dress. She took out her headphones.

'Ava, you've got pizza all down your front.' Rolling her eyes, she pulled the tray out of my hand. 'Give me this, I'll take it around while you clean up.'

'But . . . I thought you hated this party?' I was confused. Why did she want to help?

'I was bored of sitting here anyway,' she said. 'May as well do something while I have to be here.'

I smiled at her. I felt like she was just saying that to hide the fact that she wanted to do something nice. Maybe Bronte wasn't as mean as she seemed. Maybe she pretended to be bored all the time because she thought it made her look cool? And her older sister seemed to look constantly cranky – I preferred my goofy-but-enthusiastic older brother, but only when he was in a good mood!

Looking in the bathroom mirror, the smile was still on my face. I couldn't believe how much better I felt knowing I had some friends here. I touched the apron Sarah had sent. I knew she'd be happy for me too.

From that moment on, the night was really fun. Before long, everyone in the café was happily munching on pizzas and praising Mum's cooking.

Janani's mum was wearing a beautiful bright sari. She rushed up to me with half a pizza slice in her hand. 'Ava, I must meet your mother, she is an amazing cook! This pizza is delicious,' she said, taking another bite.

Mum had just come out of the kitchen and was helping Dad with the drinks. I took Janani's mum over and they started chatting about food.

Ding, ding, ding, ding. Dad was clinking a spoon against the side of a teacup.

'Everyone, if I could please have your attention for a moment, we'd like to say a few words,' he said. People stopped talking and turned to listen. Mum was standing next to him – she hated speaking in front of a crowd.

'Helen and I would like to say thank you to everyone for coming to our pizza party tonight. We're really excited to officially open our café – the Owl and the Pusycat.'

Everyone clapped and I felt proud. We'd all decided on the name together – it was the name of a poem Mum used to read us when we were little.

'This has been a dream of ours for some time,' Dad continued. 'Tonight, with the support of our amazing children,' I felt my face get hot as people peered over at me and Shane, 'and their friends,' Alex gave me a thumbs up, 'this party has been a wonderful way to not only officially open the café, but also to meet people from our new community. Hopefully we'll meet you all again *every* Tuesday to Sunday for breakfast and lunch, *and* dinner on weekends!' Everyone chuckled at Dad's lame joke as he went on, 'We look forward to filling your bellies with food and putting smiles on your faces.' Dad raised his glass, then everyone else raised theirs with resounding cheers and congratulations.

A little while later, when a few guests had left and things were quieter, Mum came over and told me to get everyone who had helped serve the pizzas and take them into the kitchen. Shane was already there, so I got Alex, Janani, Molly, Bronte, Amanda and Martha and we all went out the back.

On the main counter in the kitchen sat the biggest ice-cream sundae I had ever seen. There was chocolate and vanilla ice-cream, fudge sauce, cherries and nuts sprinkled on the top. We all rushed over to grab a bowl and spoon and dig in.

Mum and Dad walked in as we took our first mouthfuls.

‘Guys we just wanted to say thank you so much for helping us tonight. There were a lot more people than we’d expected, which is really exciting, but it was a bit of a surprise. Thanks Alex, Janani, Molly, Bronte, Amanda and Martha for your help with waitressing and cleaning up – we couldn’t have done it without you,’ Mum said.

‘I’ll help any time you want if I get paid in ice-cream!’ Alex exclaimed.

‘Sadly, you’re still a bit young to officially work here,’ Mum said, patting Alex’s back. ‘But I talked to Janani’s mum, and she said Amanda and Martha only work a shift each with her on a Friday or Saturday night. If you girls are looking for more after-school

work I'd be happy to pay you in money, or ice-cream. You're both excellent waitresses.'

Amanda and Martha both agreed they'd love to do a couple of shifts a week. I looked over at Shane and he had a giant grin plastered across his face. He had made a few little jokes with Amanda when she was taking out pizzas earlier – maybe working with her in a team had made it easier for him to talk to her like a normal person? Now, when she pointed out he had a chocolate moustache, he didn't freeze up, instead he pretended he was a snooty French waiter and made us all laugh until we cried. 'You're hilarious,' Amanda said, flicking a bit of ice-cream at him. Shane went red but then grinned and flicked some ice-cream back at her. Soon we were all laughing and using our spoons like catapults to shoot the melting ice-cream at each other.

Mum and Dad had gone to the front of house to put away glasses, but when Dad came back into the kitchen, *SPLAT*. A big gob of ice-cream – launched by Alex, intended for Bronte – hit his shirt. Dad didn't have to say anything, the look on his face was enough.

‘Sorry!’ we all squealed in unison as we rushed to clean up the ice-cream from his shirt, the counter-top, the floor, and wherever else it had landed. Dad grunted, then walked back out again, casting a ‘there had better be no more of that kind of behaviour’ look over his shoulder.

‘So are we all still on for swim practice tomorrow afternoon?’ Alex asked Molly, Janani and me, as she wiped some chocolate ice-cream off her forehead. We all nodded.

‘What time are you meeting?’ Bronte asked. We all looked at her with surprise.

‘Ummm, after lunch, maybe two o’clock?’ Alex said, tipping her head to one side. ‘Do you want to come, too?’

Bronte put her hands on her hips. ‘I’ve done all my swimming levels and was the best in my nippers class every year. But I figure you grommets need someone there who actually knows what they are doing, so you don’t drown.’

Alex grinned and put her arms around Bronte’s neck. ‘Bronte! Of course, we’d love to have you on

our team. I knew it was only a matter of time until you cracked,' she said. 'Admit it, you can't resist our awesomeness.'

Bronte shrugged her off with a scowl. 'Whatever,' she muttered. But I could see she was secretly smiling.



CHAPTER EIGHT

The next day, Mum and Dad left early to open the café for its first official day of business. We had stayed back late cleaning up after the pizza party, so by the time I woke up, the sun was already streaming through the veranda windows and I could tell it was going to be a lovely warm day.

I jumped out of bed to attend to my growling stomach, making toast with melty peanut butter and a big glass of milk. As soon as I sat down to eat, Shane stumbled out of his room and reached over me, grabbing one of my pieces of toast.

'Hey quit it, jerkface!' I said, trying to grab it back. Shane just grinned and crammed the whole piece into his mouth.

'Aaaarrrrr uuu oing oo eh eech oobay?' he said, spitting crumbs out all over me.

I stuck my tongue out as a reply.

'Are you going to the beach today?' he asked again, once he'd finished chewing.

'Yep, I'm going to swim training with the girls from my surf class this afternoon.'

Shane made the surfing shaka gesture.

'Awesome, dude. I'll come over with you and surf while you guys swim. You might want to watch me. I'm kind of an inspiration to grommets everywhere,' he said as he turned away, tripped on the schoolbag he had left lying on the floor last night and fell onto the couch.

I snorted milk out of my nose as I laughed, which made us both laugh harder.

'Whatever. I'm going to be stealing your waves in no time,' I said, and we made faces at each other until we started laughing again.

'Why are you in such a good mood this morning?' I asked. 'Usually you wake up as grumpy as an old warty toad – it takes at least an hour before you start talking properly to me.'

Shane didn't say anything, but he started turning a bit red around the ears and suddenly pretended to be very interested in his phone.

'It's Amanda, isn't it?!' I crowed, loving how uncomfortable this was making him. 'You want to kiiiiisssss her, and take her floooowweeeers,' I sang, dancing around the table.

Shane kept ignoring me until I gave up and stopped, but I could see a little smile as he checked the surf on his phone. I was so right, Amanda was the princess that could make my toady brother a human again.

We slowly did our chores around the house for a few hours, or at least enough of them so Mum and Dad wouldn't get mad, then went to the café for lunch. There were a few people there already and I remembered some of them from last night. Tom, the kid who had answered the first question at our surf class, was having Mum's delicious corn fritters for lunch with

his parents and a bunch of other kids who looked like him, but younger. I figured they were his siblings. He came over to where Shane and I were sitting.

‘Hey, Ava,’ he said quietly.

‘Hey, Tom,’ I said. For some reason I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

‘Are you going to the beach with Alex today?’ he asked.

‘Yeah I am, with some other girls. We’re doing swim training.’

‘Maybe I’ll see you there. James and I are going to hang out at the beach, too,’ he said and then quickly turned and walked away without saying goodbye.

Shane nudged me. ‘Dude, you want to kiiiiisssss him, and take him floooowweeeers.’

I shoved him back. ‘Shut up, Shane,’ I muttered, but my face was burning up. Tom was nice, but all I wanted were new friends. Not boyfriends.

Mum and Dad seemed to be running things fine, so after lunch I texted my new friends and we headed straight to the beach. I could see Alex and the other girls were at the sea pool already.

Alex jumped up and down and called me over. I said goodbye to Shane and left him to wax his board.

I was already wearing my swimsuit, so when I got to the sea pool I pulled off my dress and chucked my bag over with the other girls'. They were all wearing swimmers, too, and Molly had a rash shirt on and zinc covered her face. The rest of them used sun block, but Molly said she would get burnt by just thinking about sitting outside – she had to be really careful because she got grounded for even the slightest bit of pink skin after going to the beach.

'My mum is super strict about sun safety. It's a pain but I get it,' she said. 'My uncle had to get some moles cut out and it sounded really scary, so I'm not taking any chances.'

'Enough chitchat, let's get in the water,' Bronte said as she did a perfect dive and disappeared into the cool blue pool.

First we got Janani and Molly to tread water with their hands on their heads to build up their leg muscles. Janani was really good at that part; she said she rode her bike everywhere which probably helped. Then we

practised swimming freestyle, and Bronte was even being nice while she coached us. She had some really great tips.

‘When you’re doing freestyle, it’s all about counting your strokes and timing your breaths,’ she said from the side of the pool as we swam past her in a line. ‘Stroke, one, two, three, breath, one, two, three, breath,’ she chanted.

Bronte and Alex agreed, for once, that breath control was an important part of feeling comfortable in the water. That made sense. Whenever I got dumped, the scariest part was not knowing how long I had to hold my breath for. I hated the tight feeling in my chest.

We decided to practise swimming underwater to see who could get the furthest along the pool. Alex and Bronte went first and they almost made it to the end. Bronte went a tiny bit further than Alex, and I could see that made Alex mad. I guess being the youngest of four sisters meant she was pretty competitive.

Janani and Molly pushed off from the end but only made it about halfway. They didn't seem to mind though. No matter what we did, they smiled and had fun, which was part of the reason it was so nice to hang out with them. I made a mental note to not complain next time Sarah wanted to do something I didn't understand or found boring. I wanted to be a good friend too!

It was my turn to swim to the end. I breathed out as much as I could, took a long breath in, crouched down under the water and pushed off from the pool wall. The first part was always the best, zooming along the sandy bottom like a fish. Then I started kicking my legs and swimming as hard as I could. I didn't have goggles on and my eyes were shut. I could hear the others calling out and I thought they were cheering me on.

Whoops.

I crashed into someone. Because I was surprised, I lost control of my breath and sucked in some sea water as I came up. My nose was gushing like a tap

and I was choking as I wiped my eyes and gasped out, 'Sorry!' to the person I had crashed into.

As soon as I opened my eyes I got a sinking feeling. It was Tom. He was trying to look concerned but I could tell he was laughing at the same time.

'Hey, Ava, are you okay?' he said.

I wanted to sink back under the water and swim out to sea, especially when I noticed James rolling around by the side of the pool, laughing so hard he was slapping the concrete with his palm. He sat up. 'Wow, Ava, do you have a crush on Tom or what? You went straight for him!' he said.

I looked over to where the other girls were. I must have gotten crooked when I pushed off and had gone diagonally across the pool, crashing into Tom who had been standing at the side.

'Yeah, I'm fine,' I said awkwardly, before turning and swimming over to the other girls, who were also cracking up.

'We tried to warn you but you couldn't hear us!' Alex said, holding her sides and laughing.

James walked around the pool to where we were.

‘Seriously, Ava, you’re wasting your time with this training. You’ll never be able to surf,’ he said, making me feel hot and angry. Why wouldn’t he just leave us alone?

‘Bronte, I don’t know why you’re hanging out with these losers. Anastasia and Bella and some of the guys from school are meeting up at the north end of the beach, you should come with us,’ he said. I looked over to Bronte who was staring out to sea at the surfers. It was impossible to tell what she was thinking. I remember her saying she had joined surfing to hang out with boys, I guessed that meant she would go with James and Tom.

‘Sorry, but I’m training,’ she said, turning her back to him and swimming towards the other end of the pool. I looked over at Alex with surprise and she grinned back – Bronte wanted to stay with us! I didn’t care anymore that I had just totally embarrassed myself in front of Tom and James, I felt proud that we were working together to become surfers. It didn’t matter if we mucked up sometimes or people

laughed at us, the important thing was that we had each other's backs.

Although it wouldn't be such a bad thing if we beat James by moving up to intermediate at the end of term . . .



CHAPTER NINE

The whole next week, I fidgeted just as much as Alex in the classes leading up to sport. The air was hot and stuffy; sweat trickled down my back just from trying to sit still. As soon as the lunch bell sounded we bolted to grab our boards, desperate to get to the water.

Down at Perry's, the waves looked perfect: small and breaking not too far from the shore, but not too close either. There was a little breeze coming in from the ocean and it felt heavenly. We got changed into swimmers and met by the water with our boards. Mr Chen was wearing shorts and a rashie.

‘Okay, everyone, lay your boards in the soft sand. I want to see your starting positions.’

We lay on our boards. The stand-up surfers positioned in the middle so they would be balanced. The bodyboarders had their legs hanging off the end and their chests lifted up; their arms were out in front, holding up their weight. It looked like a yoga pose I’d seen my mum do called upward dog.

‘Now a wave is coming, what do you do?’ Mr Chen asked.

The bodyboarders pretended to kick their legs and paddle with their arms at the same time. Surfers only used their arms, but looking around I giggled, seeing lots of kids with their legs bent up to the sky or kicking the air. Mr Chen said it was just something people did when they started learning.

‘You caught the wave, it’s time to ride it!’ he announced.

I pushed down hard with my arms and lifted my body as I pulled my legs from under me, up into crouching stance. Then I moved my legs along the length of the board, so they were a bit more than my

hips' width apart, then spread out my arms while I turned my head towards the front. My knees were bent a little, to help my balance, and I tried to stay 'relaxed but alert', which was the advice Shane had given me this morning.

'And it's Ava, surfing the wave of her life to win the world championship for the fourth time in a row!' Alex called out, using her hands as a loudspeaker.

I pretended to do tricks on my board like standing on one leg, waving to the imaginary crowd.

'If anyone wants to win a world championship, I would suggest they start practising standing up from a paddling position a few more times,' Mr Chen said, making me blush. James was mocking me pretending to do ballet moves on the board. He was looking over at Tom, expecting him to laugh, but he wasn't paying attention. He was practising pushing to stand up on the board and actually looked like he knew what he was doing. I was impressed.

We practised for another five or ten minutes, then Mr Chen said we could go in the water and try using what we had learnt. Janani and Molly had to put some

tight rubber flippers on first, to help them get enough speed to catch a wave. They looked like they hurt, but Mr Chen said they were mandatory if you wanted to bodyboard properly and that the girls would get used to them, just like with new shoes.

To begin with, it was really hard to stay on my board. I could see Janani and Molly were having problems too, trying to find the best way to balance and still be able to paddle and kick. Alex and Bronte had both surfed before, so they easily paddled out just past where the waves broke and then sat balanced on their boards with their legs dangling on either side. I thought they both looked like professionals. Then Alex wobbled and fell off, which made me laugh.

Finally, Molly, Janani and I made it out to Alex and Bronte. We rested our arms on the boards while they held us afloat – I didn't think I could balance well enough to sit on my board just yet.

A little wave was coming and Bronte lay down flat on her board and started paddling. It seemed like she wasn't moving at all, but you could see she was giving it everything. The wave came and I lost sight of her for

a moment as the crest rushed past. I could hear Alex whooping and cheering Bronte on. When I could see her again, she was crouched down. Then slowly she stood up, wobbling a little. She was standing! Bronte was surfing a wave! We all cheered and she shot us a tiny smile before jumping off the board and into the water so she didn't crash onto the sand.

'My turn! My turn!' Alex said as she saw another wave coming. Just like Bronte, she lay down and started paddling as hard as she could. As the wave came up behind her she just managed to catch it, but as she tried to stand up she wobbled and crashed back into the water. Luckily she had her leg rope on so her board didn't wash away, but I saw how fast it moved through the water and shuddered. I would be careful around it, I didn't want to get hit by her heavy fibre-glass board.

Molly, Janani and I tried to catch some waves but it was hard. You had to stay balanced on the board while paddling or kicking, so you were wobbling all over the place. We usually had the waves wash over us or knock us off our boards.

Finally, Janani and Molly both started getting the hang of it and caught a wave each into the shore. I was happy for them but worried too. Would I be the only one who didn't catch a wave today?

I decided to put all my effort into paddling, pushing hard with every stroke, telling myself that I could do this if I tried hard enough. Suddenly I felt the board hold onto a wave's current. I was moving with the wave and it was lifting me up, shooting me forward like a rocket. I was so excited I almost couldn't remember what came next, but luckily we had practised standing up so many times. I pushed with my arms and dragged my legs up under me (ouch – that hurt a bit), then got into a crouching position. I could see the shore rushing towards me and I felt like it was almost too late but decided to try anyway, pushing down hard with my legs. My arms came out like I was star jumping – and suddenly I was standing up! On a surfboard! I was surfing! Well, only for a moment, because as soon as I stood up I wobbled and lost balance, falling into the water. But I didn't mind, I could hear the girls cheering

and I turned to give them a triumphant wave and a big smile. I felt like queen of the world.

I turned around and paddled back out, ready to do it all again.

‘Ava, high five!’ Alex said, and we slapped palms.

‘I saw you catch a wave too, you were awesome!’ I said.

‘But you did look a tiny bit wobbly,’ Janani said to Alex, stifling a giggle.

I thought Janani’s laughing was a bit rude, but she did have a point. Alex was meant to be helping us, not learning with us. ‘When did you learn to surf?’ I asked her.

Alex looked sheepish. ‘Okay, so I haven’t done much stand-up surfing, really,’ she confessed. ‘Whenever my sisters went surfing I used to bodyboard, same as James. Actually we used to kind of bodyboard together in the shallows sometimes. But then last summer, before we started high school, James changed. His older brother Caleb started teasing him about us surfing together. Caleb said James should stop surfing with a runt like me, and instead he should join Caleb and his friends

out the back. All those guys have always hassled me in the surf. My sisters wanted to step in but I told them I could handle it myself because I thought James had my back.'

She looked over and shot a dirty look at him. He couldn't hear us, but stuck out his tongue anyway. 'Instead of sticking up for me, James started joining in when they teased me, and if we surfed near each other he would try to steal my waves. Basically he turned into a jerk, and that's how he's been ever since.' Alex looked out to the horizon. I could see she was still upset about losing a friend – and gaining an enemy.

Right then we heard James yell out. As we looked over we could see he was standing on his board, looking very wobbly but with the biggest smile I had ever seen on his face. Tom was cheering him on.

Alex shook herself like a dog that had just had a bath. 'Who needs him anyway? Not me, especially now I have you guys to surf with.' Her usual grin returned. We spent the rest of the lesson trying, and mostly failing, to catch more waves. By the end of the class my arms felt like lead and my stomach and legs

were all stretched out and tired. But my brain was buzzing and I wanted to do it all over again tomorrow, just like when I used to snowboard. It was official, I had a crush, a big one – on surfing.



CHAPTER TEN

‘Paaaaaaaarrrrrtyyyyyyy!’

Alex was at my front door. We were hosting a sleepover for my new friends to say thank you for helping on the café’s opening night. Alex, Janani, Molly and even Bronte were coming over for a personal pizza party. Mum had suggested doing something different, like sushi or burgers, but I shook my head and explained that the girls *still* talked about her pizzas all the time. There was no way we could celebrate with anything else.

I had wondered about asking Amanda and Martha, since they had helped out with waitressing too, but Mum had given Shane some money to take them both to the bowling alley instead. Shane had looked so nervous I thought he would spew when he left to go meet them. I guess the thought of spending so much time with his crush Amanda was still a bit overwhelming. I wondered if they would finally kiss and become boyfriend and girlfriend . . . Gross!

I opened the door for Alex and she catapulted through it, already dressed in her pyjamas and waving her iPad.

‘I stole some of my sisters’ surf movies for us to watch and some salmon to put on the pizzas, and I brought my fluffy bunny slippers and this is going to be the best pizza party ever!’

Mum came out to say hello to Alex’s mum, who was standing at the door just behind her.

‘Hi, Nellie,’ Mum said. ‘It looks like Alex is ready to have some fun tonight.’

Nellie grimaced. ‘I just hope she calms down a bit before she drives you crazy.’

Mum laughed and shook her head. 'Not a problem, Ava's excited, too.'

I looked at Alex, who was running from room to room checking out all our stuff. She was like an over-excited puppy, only not as cute.

Molly and Janani arrived next. Molly's mum dropped them both off since Janani's parents were working at their restaurant. Molly's mum was very neat, and she peered around our door as if she expected a lion to be on the other side. When she saw what my mum likes to call 'our comfy chaos' – which is mum-speak for 'nothing ever really gets put away properly and there is mess all over our house' – she shuddered and left without taking up Mum's offer of a cup of tea, saying that Molly's sister was waiting in the car.

Of course, Bronte was fashionably late and came alone. Her dad had dropped her out the front but had to rush off to some important party for a surf brand. Bronte had told me that the only reason she was coming to my sleepover was so she didn't have to hang out with her sister. I wondered if she knew saying that made me feel bad, like I wasn't interesting. I reminded

myself that Bronte could be nice. Maybe she really was excited to hang out but just couldn't show it?

Mum and Dad left us alone when everyone had arrived. They said they were going to pretend to be teenagers, too, and eat pizza and watch movies in their room. I knew from experience that meant they were going to eat a pizza and fall asleep, probably because they always picked such boring movies to watch.

The pizza bases were all set out in the kitchen and we each got to use whatever toppings we wanted. I made the Ava special, which had salami, olives and slices of tomato.

When our pizzas were in the oven, we set up the lounge room. We pulled out mattresses and lay them on the floor with mounds of pillows and doonas, so the whole area was a massive bed. Then we set out the pizzas on the coffee table, with garlic bread and a glass of yummy punch Mum had made earlier, with soda, juice, fresh mint and chunks of pineapple. My mouth started watering straight away – everyone's pizza looked delicious.

While we ate, we watched the movie *Blue Crush*, which I had never seen before. Alex knew most of the lines because she had watched it loads of times with her sisters. It's about a girl who lives in Hawaii in a house with her friends and her little sister. She wants to win a surfing competition but she's scared because of an accident where she nearly drowned. Whenever the girl in the movie surfed we all cheered her on just like she could hear us, and when she was in the big competition and nearly drowned again we all started screaming and running around the room.

Mum appeared at the door with her fingers in her ears.

'It sounds like you guys still have plenty of energy. How about I get DJ Dad to play some songs? You can dance out your screams and then have dessert and another movie,' she said.

Bronte sat on the lounge saying that dancing was lame, but the rest of us ignored her. Dad put a record on (Dad is old school) and we started dancing around on our beds, falling over onto the doonas and pillows. Dad was playing what he called 'surfer

rock', which was really old, but still pretty cool. We all knew the songs by The Beach Boys and sang 'Surfin' Safari' really loud. Even Bronte gave in eventually and joined us; I think I actually saw her smile. Dad put on his favourite song, called 'Surf Rider'. There were no words, just instruments. We all pretended to ride surfboards as we danced, doing surfer shakas in time with the music.

Shane got home as we were dancing. He jumped straight in the middle of us and started doing hilarious dance moves like the snorkel. We were all dancing and laughing and I felt like I wanted to run around and hug everyone because I was so happy. It was a big change from when Mum and Dad first told me we were moving and I swore to never eat pizza again. Here I was, hosting a pizza party and having the best time ever! Sarah's mum was right when she said the big move might not be so bad.

After a few songs, Mum and Dad went back to their room and we had dessert in the kitchen. We made our own sundaes; Shane's was a giant tower of ice-cream covered in chocolate sauce and crushed peanuts.

While we sat around the kitchen table eating, Shane told us that bowling had been pretty cool, but from his blushing I guessed he actually thought Amanda was pretty cool.

Molly started telling him about the movie we'd watched, and how awesome all the girl surfers in it were. Suddenly Alex stood up and waved her spoon in the air.

'Guys, guys, guys, I have an idea,' she said. We all turned to listen.

'What if we started a surfing club and met every Saturday afternoon and practised surfing together?' she said. 'Anyone can join, all you have to do is turn up, and we can do other cool stuff like watch surfing competitions together and . . .' she trailed off.

Bronte raised an eyebrow. 'Basically it sounds like you just love surfing and you want to make a club to hang out with other people who also like surfing?' she said.

'Yeah . . . I guess that's it?' Alex said, shrugging her shoulders.

Janani grinned. 'I'm in!' she said. 'But is it okay if we do mornings? Sometimes I have to help out with getting the restaurant ready for dinner service.'

Molly nodded. 'I'll have to work out how to convince my mum to give me time off from my piano studies to do more sport, but hey, you guys are worth it,' she said smiling and putting her arm around Alex.

I said I would be in the club too, then we all looked at Bronte. She rolled her eyes and said, 'Okay. You guys need someone who actually knows what they're doing, so I'll join too.'

We all cheered and put our spoons in the middle to toast our new club.

'But we need a name,' Janani said. 'Something to do with surfing.'

'Something cool,' Bronte said.

'Something unique,' Molly added.

'Something we could print on t-shirts!' Alex exclaimed.

We all thought about it.

'What about Gnarly Grommet Girls?' Shane suggested.

We all gave it the thumbs down. 'It sounds silly,' Molly said, 'and what if boys want to join?' We all looked at her in surprise. 'What? You never know,' she said laughing.

We all went quiet again while we thought of names. Shane was humming the song we had just danced to. Suddenly I had an idea.

'What about Surf Riders Club?' I said.

'I like it – very cool,' Shane said, smiling.

Alex jumped up from the table and took a surfing stance on the rug. 'And it's Alex from Surf Riders Club, defending her eighth world championship, the crowd is cheering her on!'

We all started cheering, until Alex pronounced herself the winner and we all danced to some more surf rock to celebrate.

Later that night – once we had watched another movie and were told to go to sleep about a million times – I was lying in the doona nest, listening to the other girls sigh off into sleep one by one. I felt like there was a little candle of happiness inside me which grew brighter any time I thought about our new club. Then

I thought about the school surf lessons and trying to get into the intermediate class and my happy candle flickered a little with worry. I had to move up a level to stay with my friends! That meant catching five waves in one lesson.

Would I be able to do it?



CHAPTER ELEVEN

As the end of term drew closer I started to have nightmares about trying to get into the intermediate surf class. In the dreams I was always the last kid still in the water: everyone else had already got their five waves and the whole class was watching me from the shore. The waves started getting bigger and bigger but I was frozen on my board, too scared to paddle. Then a giant wave taller than a two-storey house appeared on the horizon and I knew I was going to get dumped. Badly. Suddenly I would wake up, and sometimes I was so scared I even put my bedside lamp on like a little kid.

The night before our last surf lesson for the term I even cried out when I woke up. Dad must have heard because he came into my room in his old worn pyjamas.

He sat on my bed and patted my back.

‘Are you feeling anxious about trying to get into the intermediate class tomorrow?’ he asked softly.

I nodded my head, too miserable to speak.

‘Whatever happens, you’ll be fine, Ava,’ he said. ‘Just think of how far you’ve come already. You started this term not knowing how to surf and without knowing anyone. Now you have Surf Riders Club and you can catch waves standing up. I’ve seen you!’

It was true. Over the term I had gotten much better at catching waves – practising with the other girls on Saturday mornings had made a big difference. We had caught five waves the last time we met up, just to make sure we could all do it. So why was I doubting myself now?

I rolled over and looked at Dad, he was smiling at me and held my hand. I knew he believed in me.

‘What if I stuff it up?’ I said in a tiny voice. ‘What if I don’t get the five waves and the other

girls all do? I don't want to be alone in beginners class next term.'

Dad thought about it for a moment. He always took my worries seriously.

'Well, in the very unlikely scenario that that does happen, would it really be that bad?' he asked, raising his eyebrows. 'There would be new kids starting next term and they are going to need someone to help them, just like Alex helped you. Wouldn't it be nice to be the one tutoring other grommets?'

I nodded my head slowly, looking at his hands because I knew I would cry if I looked right at him.

He gave me a kiss on the head. 'Just remember, when you're out there catching waves tomorrow, that we all think you're amazing. No matter what happens, we are going to have a big celebration. You and Shane have already achieved so much this term. If you move up to intermediate in surfing it will be the cherry on top. If you don't, we'll still have lots of ice-cream.'

I finally looked Dad in the face and smiled. 'Can we have chocolate *and* lemon ice-cream?' I asked.

‘Of course! What’s a celebration without at least two flavours?’

Dad gave me another kiss and left to go back to bed.

I drifted off to sleep and didn’t dream again, which was fine with me. Suddenly, in what seemed like only ten minutes but must have been hours later, I was jolted awake by my alarm and the sun was streaming through the curtains. Today was the day, and I felt kind of relieved. At least the waiting and worrying would be over soon!

After jumping out of bed, I banged on Shane’s door to wake him up. Mum and Dad had already left to open the café. On the breakfast table they had left a note that said, *We love you, Ava! Good luck today!*

Shane stumbled out of his room and looked at the note. He held up his hand like he was swearing an oath and made me do the same.

‘Okay, repeat after me,’ he said.

‘Okay, repeat after me,’ I copied him, giggling. He pretended to be annoyed but I could see he was laughing, too.

‘I, Ava, from the Surf Riders Club,’ he said.
I repeated it.

‘Promise to surf my guts out today.’

‘Promise to surf my guts out today.’

‘And if I get scared by a big wave or a shark or whatever,’ Shane intoned.

‘A shark!!!’ He gave me a stern look. ‘Okay, okay. And if I get scared by a big wave or a shark or whatever,’ I repeated.

‘I won’t give up, because I know my handsome, amazing and smarter older brother will be there cheering me on from the beach.’

‘I won’t give up, because my stinky, dorky and kind-of-okay older brother will be standing on the beach, ready to come fight off a shark if I need him to.’

Shane high fived me. ‘Close enough. I reckon I could wrestle a shark but let’s hope I don’t have to try.’

We had breakfast, got ready and walked to school together.

All throughout our classes in the lead-up to sport it felt like the clock was going backwards because time was moving so slowly. Then, when the bell rang for

lunch, I felt like it had gone too fast. Suddenly I wanted to be in maths again!

We grabbed our boards from the shed and walked down to Perry's Beach. Alex chattered on about nothing the whole time until Bronte told her to be quiet. We were all pretty tense by the time we got to the beach. We got changed and met out the front, but Alex pulled us away from the group for a moment and took us over to the mural of Perry, the fisherman who had died.

'Alright, guys, let's promise to help each other get five waves – I know we can do it.' She pointed to the mural. 'Perry always said girls were the best surfers, let's prove him right!'

We all squished together for a group hug (okay, so we all squished into Bronte who was trying to hide from our group hug) and then went back to where the rest of the class was standing in front of Mr Chen.

'Okay, everyone gather in,' he said, motioning for us to come closer.

'Today is going to be a bit different from our usual lessons. Everyone is going to go out into the water

together and your goal is to catch five waves. Those who manage to do it will move up to intermediate class next term. I know it will be hard for me to see everyone's waves, so the advanced class have very kindly offered to help watch you surf. They will each be allocated a beginner to watch. Once you get five, they will wave their arms, and that means you can come in to shore. You'll have one hour out there, so make every minute count.'

The advanced class came over while he was speaking and stood behind him. There were lots of older kids, mainly from Year Ten up. It was pretty intimidating, but at the same time I was glad someone would be keeping an eye on me the whole time, in case I needed help.

'Alright, beginners, please line up. Advanced class, please come over and pick a grommet to watch.'

We all stood in a line and the older kids came and partnered with us. Shane came over to where I was standing and Amanda quickly found Alex. Martha paired with Janani, and two other friendly looking girls joined Bronte and Molly.

Even though I totally wasn't looking on purpose, I noticed Tom and one of Shane's friends had paired up, which made me happy. For no reason at all of course. Well, maybe because I think he's nice. That's all.

'You better be one of the first to get five waves,' I heard an advanced class boy say to James, pushing his shoulder with a mean look on his face. I figured it must be James's older brother. 'I don't want to sit around watching you for a whole hour, I've got better things to do,' he said.

I felt sorry for James. No wonder he was so desperate to move up a class. His brother was probably even meaner to him at home.

I saw Alex looking over at James sympathetically, but he returned it with an angry grimace before turning to his brother. 'No sweat, man,' he said. 'I'll be done in ten minutes.'

'Make it five,' his brother replied.

'Alright, everyone, line up at the shoreline!' Mr Chen called out.

Shane lent in and whispered to me, 'Go out there and rip it up, Ava!'

I nodded and turned towards the ocean, feeling determined and ready to go. I was going to give this everything I had. I looked over at Alex, Bronte, Janani and Molly, who were all standing in line with me. We all smiled at each other, it was time for Surf Riders Club to show everyone just how great we were and how hard we had worked over the term.

It was time to catch some waves.

CHAPTER TWELVE

'Tweeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeet'

Mr Chen blew his whistle and we ran forwards, splashing into the shallows and jumping onto our boards, paddling out towards the horizon.

‘Come on, girls!’ I called out. ‘Let’s go!’

We paddled past the small breaking waves. The surf was the perfect size. Not so big that it was scary, but frequent enough that you could see plenty of glassy waves peeling in towards us. I grinned. This might actually be fun!

Once we got out to where the bigger waves were coming through unbroken, we stopped and grouped together.

‘Alright, guys, call out to us if you’re going to try for a wave and we’ll stay back so you have it to yourself,’ Alex said.

‘Okay, I’m taking this one, then,’ Bronte said, looking behind Alex’s head where a wave was coming in from the horizon.

We moved out of her way as she started paddling. In one smooth action Bronte caught the wave and stood up – she made it look easy. Bronte had one wave on her tally! We all cheered and I could hear Alex’s sisters and their friends whooping and celebrating on the beach.

Next, Janani caught one, then Alex, then I did too! I was glad that we had spent all those Saturdays practising; now it was really paying off. Kids were riding waves and falling off all around us, it was chaos. Almost everyone was smiling, except James. He looked frustrated. I’d seen him catch three waves already but he wasn’t celebrating. I felt like he was missing out on

the fun because of the extra pressure his brother was putting on him. I hoped Alex wouldn't make a big deal of it if she got five waves first.

Mr Chen announced through his megaphone, 'Half an hour has passed. You are now halfway through your time!'

As he said it, Bronte caught another wave. It was the last one she needed. She looked back at us as she jumped off her board and flashed us a thumbs up. One member of the Surf Riders Club was through to intermediate class!

Over the next fifteen minutes, Janani and Molly got their five waves too. Suddenly it was just Alex and me left. Alex had four waves and I had three. I started getting that tight feeling in my chest again. What if my nightmare came true? What if I was the last one left out the back?

Most of the beginners class were now either finished and watching us from the sand, or they had given up and were paddling in to shore. There were four of us still out the back: Alex, James, Tom and me. James and Tom moved closer to where we were sitting on our

boards. It was a good spot and the best waves were coming to us.

‘I’m on four. I thought I’d wait for you to catch up,’ James called out to Alex. She shot him an angry glare and I groaned inwardly. Couldn’t she see he was just doing it to make her mad?

A wave started building up behind us and I called out to Alex, ‘I’m taking it!’

I started paddling, but so did James. Trying my best to ignore him, I tensed, ready to spring up as the current took hold of my board. Shooting forward I moved into a crouching position, and pushed myself up to standing. But as I did, in the corner of my eye I saw James on the wave next to me. He was trying to stand but was wobbling. I got so freaked out that I lost concentration and fell off my board. The waves tossed me around under the water and it took a moment before I could work out which way was up. The surf was getting bigger and that made me feel even more anxious. I wasn’t sure this was fun anymore.

Surfacing, I could hear Alex yelling at James, telling him off for freaking me out. He snapped back that

we should go in and give up – it was a total lovefest (not). I looked over to Tom, who was frowning. He looked at me and shook his head a little as if to say, ‘They’re crazy.’ Then he grinned and gave the shaka symbol while indicating with his head that I should look out to the horizon. A swell was coming in, and if I paddled hard I could make the first wave of the set. Alex and James had been so busy arguing they hadn’t even noticed it coming. I pushed myself to concentrate despite obvious distractions (Alex was calling James ‘the stink that lingers around a dead rat’) and caught the wave. As it petered out I didn’t even stop to celebrate. Time wasn’t on my side: I had to get out back as quickly as possible. Turning my board around I saw Tom had caught the next wave, which meant he was finished. That left Alex, James and me with four waves each. It was make-or-break time.

Another wave came through, Alex called out to me that she wanted it, so I moved out of the way, but again James started paddling. He was trying to catch the wave first and psych Alex out. They were so close

I called out, 'Watch out, James! You're going to hit her!' But it was too late.

As Alex was getting up into a standing position, James tried to do the same, but his position in the wave was wrong. Again, he wobbled, but this time he fell over right next to Alex, and then she fell off, too. I saw their boards get thrown around in the churning water. Once the wave passed there was foam everywhere. Alex surfaced about five metres away, looking angry. Her leash had broken and I could see her board being swept into shore. She would never make her fifth wave now.

'James, I am going to kill you!' she screamed.

We looked around – where was James? I spotted his board way out to our left. James was half lying on it but something was wrong. He wasn't trying to get back on. He slowly looked up and we could see blood pouring down his face from a cut above his eye.

'Something hit me,' he said slowly; we could only just hear him. I looked at Alex – we both knew this was bad. Alex's board must have hit him in the head when they got dumped. I felt panic rising up from my stomach. What were we going to do? I could see

some people on the shore running into the water to come out and help us, but more waves were coming in from out the back. We knew it was dangerous for James to get dumped again while he was injured.

‘We need to get him to safety!’ Alex yelled, looking at me. Quickly, I pulled off my leash and let my board go. It would get washed into shore eventually. Then Alex and I both swam to James’s board and held it steady.

‘James, you have to get on the board, we’ll help you,’ Alex said, holding his shoulder. He groaned but started pulling himself up. We had to grab his board shorts and help drag him on. Once he was safely lying along the middle of the board, Alex and I grabbed a side each. Alex held on with her right arm and used her left to paddle, which was good since she was the stronger swimmer. We started kicking and slowly moving towards the shore. I looked back and saw another wave coming: it was huge. We had to get far enough in front so it would break before it hit us. Then we could use the foamy white water to help push James to safety.

'Kick, Alex!' I screamed. We both gave it everything we had. Gripping the board as hard as I could with my left arm, I cycled my right arm in and out of the water with a cupped hand, so it worked like an oar on a dingy, pulling us towards the beach. I kept my legs and feet under the water for maximum push while thrashing them up and down. All my muscles started to feel hot, tight and painful. Clenching my jaw and focusing, I didn't look back, didn't worry about the pain or the wave behind us. I just held onto the board and kicked as if there was a shark nibbling my toes. I felt the spray on the back of my head and neck as the wave crashed down behind us. We were just far enough in front of it. The foam rushed up and helped push us closer in to shore. Suddenly it felt like someone else had taken control of the board, almost as if the three of us were holding onto a sleigh in the snow and it was harnessed to a pony that was pulling us towards safety.

The surge of water propelled us along. Alex and I started to whoop from relief and excitement. Mr Chen was only metres away. He was running through the

water, which meant we were close to the shallows. I stuck my leg down and it just hit the sand. Kicking down again I gave the board a big push. Alex and James shot forward and Mr Chen grabbed the tip of the board to pull them in. We were safe.

I felt strong hands grabbing me and pulling me in. It was Shane, looking very worried.

‘Ava! Are you hurt? Are you okay?’ he said, looking me up and down.

I was too freaked out to say anything, instead I nodded my head. Shane gave me a big hug.

‘You and Alex were so amazing out there helping James. I can’t believe you got him back safely!’ he said.

We looked over to where James was being taken for first aid. Mr Chen was supporting him from one side, Alex was on the other. I hoped this would be the end of their silly rivalry. Caleb stormed over towards where they were sitting. Instead of appearing worried about James, he had an angry look on his face, as if his brother had embarrassed him. Alex jumped up and I saw her stop him before he got close. She glared at him and said something I couldn’t hear, but

it mustn't have been nice. Caleb looked at her, and then Mr Chen – who was busy with James and hadn't noticed him – and then walked away.

Suddenly I was smooshed into a big hug by Molly and Janani. They both talked at the same time, telling me how scared they had been and how awesome Alex and I were. Bronte came over to give me an awkward hug and patted my back.

'But I didn't catch my fifth wave, I'm still stuck in beginners,' I wailed, feeling teary again. I knew it shouldn't matter, but I was still disappointed.

'You, Alex and James all got your fifth wave together!' Shane said. 'Right at the end, when you were pushing him in to safety.'

'Yeah, we all saw it.' Bronte smiled at me. 'For sure, you all got your five waves.'

I looked at them and shrugged my shoulders. I hoped they were right.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

‘Paaaaaaarrrrrtyyyyyyy!’

It was Alex, of course. She rushed through the doors of my parents’ café. It was the last day of term and everyone was coming over for a Mexican fiesta dinner – which really just meant loads of nachos and a piñata. Sarah and her mums had driven down straight after school for the party too. They were going to spend a whole week of school holidays at our house. I had been worried that things would be weird between Sarah and me after so much time apart, but as soon as I saw her everything was the same. We talked nonstop

for an hour and had almost made each other wet our pants from laughing so hard. Now it was time for her to meet the friends I had told her about all term.

‘Sarah, this is my friend Alex. She’s in the Surf Riders Club that I was telling you about,’ I said as they stood in front of each other for the first time.

Before Sarah could say anything, Alex pulled her into a big hug while also jumping up and down. ‘Sarah! It’s so awesome to finally meet you, you have to join our Surf Riders Club! Ava told us you’re a snowboarder so you’ll pick it up straight away. Just give me two hours tomorrow morning and I’ll have you surfing. You’re a natural! I can already tell.’

Sarah giggled at me over Alex’s shoulder, she raised an eyebrow as if to say ‘Uh-oh’, but in a nice way.

Bronte was the next to arrive. I had worried she would pretend to be too cool to talk to Sarah, but in fact she was really interested in her city life. She loved hearing all about the stuff Sarah got to see and do (well, to be honest, a lot of it was about the shops Sarah went to, but at least they were getting along).

Molly and Janani seemed to be running late, so I sent them a text to check if they were still coming. Molly texted back, *On our way x*, so I put down my phone and joined the celebrations.

Just as Alex was telling Sarah the story about us rescuing James – she had already told everyone else about a million times – I heard the front-door bell tinkle, and there he was. James looked sheepish. He had a big white cotton bandage stuck over the cut above his eye. A bit like a pirate who didn't know where to put his eye patch. He was followed into the café by Tom, who nudged him in our direction. They were both wearing bright board shorts and t-shirts. It looked like they were here to join the fiesta.

James shuffled over nervously and stood in front of us.

'I'm sorry I kept dropping in on you both out in the surf. It was a really dumb thing to do. And thanks for helping me when I got smashed,' he muttered, looking at the floor.

'James, you are annoying most of the time . . .'

I looked at Alex in surprise. Was she really going to

be mean to him even after he apologised? 'But that doesn't mean that I want you to get eaten by sharks. Truthfully, when you're not being annoying, you're a pretty good surfer.' She started laughing, and James and the rest of us laughed too. I felt relieved, the fighting between them had been silly! Especially since they were both so surf mad. It made way more sense for them to be friends rather than enemies.

After that, everybody got along great. We all ate nachos and had competitions to see who could make the longest melted cheese strand, who could eat a slice of jalapeno (James and Alex both ate it whole and had to rush to the kitchen to put ice-cream on their tongues) and who could crunch a corn chip the loudest. I didn't even notice when Molly and Janani arrived. Suddenly they were standing at the table, and Mr Chen was with them. I was surprised – why was Mr Chen here? Did they invite him over to eat nachos with us? I thought he was an awesome teacher, but it was a bit weird imagining having dinner with him. I looked at Janani and she gave me a little half smile, like she knew some good news.

James had his back to the door so didn't notice them arrive. He was trying to fan his stuck-out tongue with his hands to cool it down.

'James, it's good to see you're feeling better,' Mr Chen said, and we could see he was trying hard not to laugh as James spun around. 'I just wanted to tell you all how impressed I've been with the hard work you've put into learning to surf this term,' he said. 'Also, Alex and Ava, you were both so quick to respond when James was hurt and I think you should be really proud of how you reacted to a dangerous situation.'

I felt my face going red and the room suddenly felt hotter than a sauna.

'Janani and Molly told me you were worried about whether you had caught five waves or not, and I wanted to let you know that I consider all of you ready to go up to the intermediate class next term. Although you didn't catch your last waves on your own boards, you did all catch a wave together, and in my opinion that still counts. Congratulations!' he said, smiling and reaching out his hand for us to shake.

Everyone started cheering and yelling at once. Sarah grabbed me and gave me a big hug – she knew how much moving up to intermediate meant. Tom gave me a high five, which didn't seem to help with my blushing, and even James gave Alex a pat on the back.

Mum and Dad came over to see what all the fuss was about.

'Well done, everyone!' Dad said, giving me a kiss on the head. 'I knew you could do it! And, in fact, I have an announcement, too,' he said. We all went quiet, what could he possibly have kept secret from me and Shane? Suddenly I had a crazy thought: did he and Mum want to move back to the city? I realised I didn't want them to. Beachcrest was my home now and I didn't want to leave. My heart beat faster as I waited to hear what he had to say.

'I've contacted the people at Surfing Australia,' he said, 'and I've registered your Surf Riders Club with them so you guys are officially a team!'

Alex's mouth fell open. I'd never seen that happen without some kind of noise coming out. I wondered

if it was possible to have a heart attack when you're only twelve.

Dad smiled at all of our shocked faces. 'Now you have to have things like a club president and treasurer and a couple of other bits and pieces, but Helen and I will help you with that. But it does mean you can compete in official competitions, and you'll be listed on the Surfing Australia website, so other grommets can see your club and ask to join.'

'Oh. My. Gosh. Yessssssssss!' Alex ran over and hugged Dad, and then ran around hugging everyone. We all started laughing and hugging again, this was so cool! The Surf Riders Club was officially official, not just kids meeting once a week to hang out.

'We can get team t-shirts, and win all the trophies, and go on world tours, and –' Alex suddenly stopped, 'and just be the most awesome club ever I guess!?' She shrugged her shoulders. We all laughed and then Dad poured us all glasses of lemonade to toast our new club.

Suddenly, I realised Shane was in the kitchen cleaning and he had missed out on all the news, so I

rushed off to tell him. I sped through the door to the kitchen yelling out, 'Shane you'll never gue—'

Then I stopped. He and Amanda were standing close together in front of the washing-up sink, looking at me with surprise. When I say they were standing close, I mean they were standing super, super close. Like KISSING close. And Shane's face was bright red. *Grooooooooooooooooooooo*.

'Ummmmmmmm, I just wanted you to know I moved up into intermediate level for next term and our Surf Riders Club is now official 'cos Dad registered it and that's all, byeeeeeee,' I said quickly, turning and running out the door. I was glad Shane finally got to kiss his crush, but that didn't mean I wanted to see it happen!

Alex was walking towards the door to the kitchen when I came out. I spun her around and said, 'Trust me, you don't want to go in there, something gross is going on.' She looked confused. 'But I want to tell Amanda and Shane . . .' As she realised what was going on in the kitchen, her eyes went wide. 'Yuck. Oh, man that *is* gross!'

We joined the others again and after we had all finished our nachos it was time to break the piñata. It was the shape of a surfboard. Dad had it made especially for us. Everyone put on blindfolds and took turns hitting it. While I watched everyone cheering each other on and swinging wildly at the piñata with a broom handle, I felt warm and tingly with happiness. When Mum and Dad said we were moving to Beachcrest, I could never have guessed I'd find such great friends and a new obsession. I still missed parts of my old city life, like Sarah and her mums, but I could still see them and stay connected. Who knew what the future held for us all? Maybe we would be world champion surfers? Anything was possible.

'Hey, Ava, it's your turn!' Sarah called over to me, peeking out from under her blindfold.

I walked over feeling determined. First on my list of new adventures? Get those lollies out of the piñata.



Keep reading for a sneak peek at the next exciting
Surf Riders Club story, *Bronte's Big Sister Problem* . . .



CHAPTER ONE

All I had to do was walk down the hallway. Not usually a big deal (I'm thirteen – I've mastered walking by now), but I had to pass my big sister Carrie's room and I could hear her talking. Usually when she wakes up on the weekend I've already left for training. This morning was different. Her voice was excited, but she was trying to whisper too, which meant she was probably talking about boys. Leigh – her current crush – must have asked her out at the party last night. I was happy for her, but if she knew I was up she'd want to tell me everything, and that could take hours. Which would make me late for Surf Riders Club.

The club is made up of me and four other girls: Alex, Janani, Molly (we all grew up together) and Ava, who moved to our town from the city this year. We all started at Beachcrest High together and picked surfing for our school sport. I already knew how to surf, but some of the other girls needed help so we began training on weekends. Alex, who could surf a bit already, and I were their coaches. I thought it would be boring, but it was actually really fun. So now every Saturday morning we meet at Perry's Beach to train together . . . but not too seriously – we muck around a lot. My sister thinks the club is lame, so I knew she wouldn't care about making me late.

I had my swimmers on, towel over my shoulder, board under my arm, thongs in my hand, and was tiptoeing down the wooden hallway when I saw our cat, Frank. Frank is a big, fat, fluffy light-beige Burmese with green eyes that were crankily looking at me and saying, 'Feed me NOW.' When he meowed it was so loud you could hear it all over the house. If he started, Carrie would hear him and know I was up.

I tried communicating with him telepathically:
I promise I'll feed you an extra big breakfast, just please, please, please stay quiet! He ran over to me, and started rubbing against my legs right outside Carrie's door. I juggled everything and scooped him up for a cuddle to try to keep him quiet, but as I lifted him he let out a very loud and demanding MEEEEEEAAA OOOOOWWWWWW.

I froze, but it was too late.

'Hang on a second, Jess. Bronte?! Is that you?' Carrie called out.

Mentally, I facepalmed. I could walk away, but that would annoy her, and when Carrie is annoyed she can make life really hard for me.

'Bronte, bring Frank in here, I *have* to tell you all about what happened last night.'

I looked down at Frank and shook my head. 'Nice one, you stupid cat,' I whispered. 'Now you'll be late for breakfast, and I'll be late for my surf.'

Frank meowed angrily and struggled to jump out of my arms, but I held him tightly. If I had to listen to my sister, so would he.

Putting down my surf gear, I pushed Carrie's door open. Her room was a total pigsty from when she and her friends got ready for the party last night. Clothes were all over the floor, make-up was scattered on every surface, and she was still in bed with her mobile glued to her ear.

Looking at my sister is like looking into a slightly older mirror. We're really similar: both of us have long hair bleached blonde by the sun and salt water. We've got olive-brown skin with not too many pimples, and blue eyes. Our parents own a surf shop in town, Surf to Sand, and we get to wear free clothing samples that brands send them. Actually my sister picks through them first and takes all the good stuff; after she's worn something for a month or two she gives it to me.

We also have an older brother called Oscar, but he moved to the city at the start of the year to go to university. I miss him so much, and our family feels different without him.

'Okay, bye, bye, *byeEEEEEEEEEEEE*,' Carrie sang into the phone, before putting it down and staring at me from her pillow castle. She patted the bed next to her.

‘Come sit down and talk to me – you’ll never guess what happened at the party!’

I stayed at the door. ‘I’ve got my Surf Riders Club this morning and I don’t want to be late. The others are probably already at Perry’s Beach.’

Carrie rolled her eyes in disgust. ‘Don’t. Even. Bronte. All I want is five minutes of your precious time! Is that stupid club more important than your own sister?’

I sighed, walked in and sat down on the bed, putting Frank in my lap. I figured after ten minutes he’d be even hungrier (that’s when you get angry because you’re so hungry: hangry) and really start to lose it, which would give me an excuse to escape.

‘So, you know how I’m totally obsessed with Leigh from school,’ Carrie said. I nodded, remembering a guy with spikey brown hair and freckles. ‘Well, last night at the party, he asked me out!’ she squealed, clapping her hands.

‘Oh, wow, that’s awesome.’ I tried to sound enthusiastic. A couple of months ago I would have been way more excited, because I’d been boy crazy too. But back then I’d been into everything Carrie liked. Since

starting high school I'd been getting into different stuff, like my surf club, even though Carrie thought it was lame. I wasn't sure why I had changed interests, it had just started to happen.

She grabbed my hand. 'I know, it's so cool, right??!! Oh my god, he's so dreamy. Anyway, I was talking to Jess on the way home and we were stalking his Instagram when I remembered he's got a little brother in your year.'

I nodded. Daniel was in some of my classes, but I didn't really talk to him. He had shaggy blond hair, and was a pretty good bodyboarder, but that was all I knew.

'Well, Jess and I think it would be super cute if you guys went on a date!'

I stared at Carrie. She must have thought I'd hyperventilate with excitement at the idea of a date with Daniel. The old Bronte would have, but the new Bronte wasn't so keen.

'Um, I don't really know him. Sorry, but I don't think I want to,' I said. Carrie's face darkened and she dropped my hand.

‘Oh my god, Bronte, don’t be such a pain. It’s just one date. I’m not saying marry him. But imagine if you guys did get together. Leigh and I will be the coolest couple in our year, and you and Daniel would be the coolest couple in yours. It would be the best!’

‘No, thanks,’ I said, standing up with Frank in my arms.

‘Bronte!’ Carrie sat up and crossed her arms. ‘Why is it so hard for you to say yes to going on a date with a cute boy? You’re so irritating! Don’t you even want a boyfriend?’

I didn’t know what to say. I love Carrie, but recently it was getting harder and harder to please her and myself.

‘Look, Carrie, I don’t want to go on a date with Daniel. I don’t even know him. And if I did want to, I’d make up my own mind about it, I wouldn’t do it because you told me to.’

Her posture changed. She shut down and looked at her phone again, like I was nothing more than a speck of dirt. ‘Fine, Bronte, whatever. If you want to go and hang out with your stupid surf club friends instead of

messaging Daniel with me, then that's fine. Close the door on your way out.'

I was hurt. I hated it when she turned on me for no reason. Why did she always try to control what I did or who I hung out with? I wanted us to be friends again, but I couldn't see how to make it work without doing everything she wanted. And I couldn't do that anymore. It was time to make my own path.

I left the room, trying not to let her see that I was upset. Frank was now hot on my heels, still meowing for breakfast. I comforted myself with the thought that at least now I was finally free to go surfing, and that always made me happy.



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