

PORTS OF CALL



SEAN
KENNEDY



Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

PETE MARSHALL had become rusty.

Well, he was either rusty or he was getting old. And he would rather think that he was rusty.

The board was hard and warm beneath his stomach, and his arms ached as he paddled out further into the ocean. The sun was at its apex, and his wetsuit was beginning to bake him as if he were Sunday dinner.

He misjudged the wave as it began to swell. He was too late getting to his feet, and the wave's crest broke over him before he managed to ride it out. He fell beneath the water, his eardrums registering the pressure. His board, attached to his foot with a strap, followed him down. Pete had no sense of which way was up. The water rushing past him and sending him tumbling only served to disorient him further. From experience, he knew not to panic; his board, rapidly becoming buoyant again, was trying to reach the surface, so he now knew his bearings. It even helped to pull him up, and a few thrusts with his arms made him break back into the real world.

Free of the water, coughing and trying to wipe the salt sea from his eyes, Pete looked toward the beachfront and could see Jason. His partner was standing, watching for him, one hand shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun.

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

He looked tense, but when he saw Pete giving him a wave his posture visibly relaxed.

His arms folded defensively over his chest, Jason Stephens sighed to himself as Pete deftly turned back on his board and headed back out to the swells. This was the fifth time Jason had watched Pete be dumped by a wave, the fifth time he had held his breath until his partner re-emerged.

Jason was not an ocean man. Pete had tried to convince him that it was simply because he had never had much experience with it; Jason had moved straight from his hometown in the landlocked state of Pennsylvania to the deserts of Nevada. There had never been much free-range water in his life. Pete, however, was a true California boy. He was born with a surfboard in one hand and a skateboard in the other. Between the two sports it was a wonder he had even completed any education, but those loves had all but faded with his own move to Nevada. Jason could see that Pete had been away from the water for too long. The evidence was now on display with his sense of estrangement with the waves. He seemed to have no knowledge of them when once he was probably preternaturally synched with them.

Jason thought the ocean beautiful. He liked to look at it... but to be in it? Not so much. The past few days he had amused Pete by staying in the shallows, paling when Pete told him that most shark attacks occurred in waist-high water. With the theme of *Jaws* playing ominously in his head, Jason had moved back to their sanctuary of beach

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

towels, shade sails, six packs in coolers, and well-thumbed summer novels.

Watching Pete sitting out in the distance, assessing the viability of the waves, Jason sat back down with an unceremonious thud on his beach towel. Pete didn't seem in too much of a hurry to leave the water, and Jason didn't want to press the issue. They both needed this, but Jason knew that Pete thought he wasn't getting enough out of their vacation.

"I'm enjoying watching you," he had teased Pete, and he had been rewarded with his lascivious smirk.

"Eyeing the king of the waves, are you?" Pete had asked.

"I think you have to stay on your board and ride a wave before you can claim that title."

Pete had faked being shot in the heart, but Jason noticed that the next time he was on the waves he played up a little bit more, pushing himself to do better and show off for the benefit of his partner.

They had ended up staying an extra week longer than they originally planned. Jason had surprised Pete at Christmas with the tickets. They visited a couple of weeks with Pete's family in San Diego and then hired a car for the drive back home to Reno, stopping along the way at this run-down little motel by the sea. The ocean had seemed to have such a calming effect on Pete that Jason couldn't bear to take him back to Reno so soon.

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

The bruises had faded from his face, but Pete had lost weight. His cheeks were sallow and the bones were more prominent than ever. Pete's mother had burst into tears at the sight of him, and Jason had been relieved that she hadn't seen him in hospital at his worst.

Pete had been jumped leaving work one night, a normal everyday run-of-the-mill mugging. Pete was mortified by how many people had leapt to the assumption that it was a hate crime, just because of his sexuality. Sometimes gay people were simply mugged too, just for their wallet. And they lived in Reno for Chrissakes! It wasn't like muggings were a rarity there when people got robbed regularly just by the casinos whenever they went in or out.

Pete just wanted to put it all behind him, but he wasn't being entirely successful at it. Jason could see his apprehension swimming within him, even in the way he moved. He now walked slightly hunched over, as if trying to make himself unnoticeable. In reality he was making himself look like even more of a victim.

This time at the beach was like an alternate world where they could pretend that they were free of worry; Pete from the new fears that had arisen about his safety since the mugging incident, and Jason from the guilt he felt over not being there even though it was entirely out of his control. Logically, Jason knew that he had nothing to feel guilty about, but the feelings were still there when Pete let his guard down and that haunted look returned to his face: the expression that Pete thought Jason couldn't see.

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

Jason looked up from his book to see Pete emerging from the water, the board under one arm as his free hand worked the shoulder straps of his wetsuit free and began to peel it down his chest. Jason was overwhelmed by the love he felt for his partner, and the spark of desire that bloomed within him, despite the shadow that occasionally loomed between them. He licked his lips, trying not to think of those awful days just after the mugging, and he smiled as Pete threw himself down beside him.

“This wetsuit is too damn hot,” Pete complained.

Jason wanted to say that the person inside it was as well, but Pete continued without pause.

“True surfers don’t wear wetsuits. I don’t know why I bought this.”

Jason opened his mouth, but to no avail.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I fell into the consumer trap, because it had been so long since I had surfed. That guy in the store saw a sucker as soon as he saw me walk in. As bad as a fucking used car salesman.” He looked up at Jason. “Why are you so quiet?”

Resisting the temptation to laugh, Jason shrugged.

Pete raised an eyebrow and then scrabbled in the cooler for two beers. He handed one to Jason, and they both twisted the caps off simultaneously and clinked the necks together before thirstily chugging down the cold amber liquid.

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

“It looks to me like all of the surfers out there are wearing wet suits,” Jason noted.

Pete shrugged. “Suckers. Just like me.”

“What is a real surfer meant to wear?” Jason challenged him, just wanting to hear him ramble on, which had become rare since the mugging.

“Nothing but his Hawaiian-print board shorts while his girl sits on the beach listening to the transistor.”

Jason laughed. “*Transistor?* That’s a nice, traditional, sixties-era dream you have there, babe. Does your girl look like Annette Funicello?”

“Only if she’s wearing her Mickey Mouse ears.”

Jason snorted and took a swig of his beer. “I guess dreams can be nice.”

“Yeah,” Pete agreed, his features darkening for a brief moment. “But, hey, so is reality. I got my boy on the beach watching me, except when he’s distracted by his book.” He stared pointedly at the tome in Jason’s hands.

Jason fanned the book to show the bookmark stuck in only a few pages beyond the cover. “You’re too distracting.”

“Fucking A,” Pete said smugly.

Jason rested his head against the crook of Pete’s neck. “Let’s stay here forever.”

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

“How will we support ourselves?” Pete asked, smiling, holding onto the dream as well.

“You can give surfing lessons on how to do it with Hawaiian shirts and transistors, and I’ll, well, I don’t know,” Jason mused. “Maybe I’ll sell Mickey Mouse ears from an ice-cream cart.”

“We’ll live like kings,” Pete laughed. “Good plan, Annette.”

Jason sprawled back on his towel and playfully toed his partner in the ribs.

Resting his beer between his knees and rubbing his side absent-mindedly, Pete continued staring out to the water, where the sun was now sinking dangerously close to the horizon. “I can’t believe this is our final day here.”

“I know.”

“If you stay out of the water for the rest of the day, Jase, we’ve guaranteed that old Bruce won’t eat you.”

Jason couldn’t help it if his only experience with the ocean before this was watching the *Jaws* movies as a child. “I would be more worried if I were you. That wetsuit makes you look more like a seal than I ever would.”

Pete flapped one of the empty arms around. “That’s what the reflective striping is for.” As he let the arm go, Jason became distracted by a rivulet of sweat that ran off

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

Pete's shoulder blade at an angle and made a beeline down the center of his chest.

His lips were dry again, but he thought it would be too noticeable if he licked them.

Pete caught the predatory look in Jason's eyes and thought that he was in danger of being attacked right then and there. The safest place for him at the moment probably *was* in the water with the sharks. The thought made him smile.

"What's so funny?" Jason asked as he caved in and licked his lips. The salt and the wind weren't helping as he tried to restore feeling to the chapped skin.

"I'm just thinking how hot I am," Pete teased, the double entendre out in the open for Jason to grab on to.

"No argument here," Jason agreed affably.

"I'm just thinking it might be time to call it a day, head back to the motel, and... cool off."

"Good idea," Jason was already starting to pack up their belongings, but he also had to admit he was feeling a certain nervousness. He had treated Pete like a fragile object since the mugging, and it had only helped Pete retreat further into himself. He had to stop it, because it would only get worse.

"Come on," Pete implored, while using the old scoop-and-chuck method of packing.

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

They scurried across the hot sand like crabs, although it wasn't just the warmth beneath their feet that was making them rush. Jason could already feel his cock singing for attention within his shorts, and he was glad he had the cooler to hold in front of himself. They paused for traffic at the sidewalk and ran across the road, foolishly dicing with one-ton metal monsters until they reached the door of their motel room. Jason scrambled within the cooler to retrieve the key he had thrown in earlier. It was cold to the touch, and as soon as the door opened he flung it into the corner of their room.

“Eager, aren't you?” Pete teased as he kicked the door shut with his foot and let all the stuff he was carrying drop to the floor. Jason did the same with the cooler and turned to him. They kissed hungrily, their hands pawing ineffectually at the few clothes they were wearing.

“And to think you were worried about the sharks,” Pete gasped between breaths. “I should have been wary of you.”

Jason laughed. “Nothing to be wary of.” But his hands impatiently cupped Pete's butt, which was moulded to the wetsuit. He grunted in frustration, unable to get under the neoprene as it was still moist and suctioned to Pete's skin. Pete moaned appreciatively as he managed to wrestle Jason's wet board shorts down his legs. Jason shivered slightly as cold air hit his body, but his cock had already slapped to attention, practically hitting his belly, and he shuddered as Pete took the length of it in his hand and slowly pumped it.

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

“Pete, don’t...,” he moaned, feeling dangerously close to the edge already.

But he should have known better. Pete always refused to listen. Silently, Pete dropped to his knees and released his grip on Jason, letting his hand travel further until he cupped his balls, his touch feathery. Jason leaned against the wall, and his eyes closed of their own accord. They sprang open again when he felt Pete lift his cock against his belly and slowly run his tongue across the veins of his shaft. He let his fingers wander, entwining in Pete’s short hair, holding him closer as Pete let him go. His mouth was upon him then, warm and wet, taking him in fully and then withdrawing enough to lick tenderly at the slit of the head of his cock.

“Oh, fuck!” Jason cried, unable to help himself.

Pete laughed, and the vibrations coming from the cavern of his mouth only heightened the experience. Jason’s knees turned to rubber as his balls tightened, but Pete kept one strong hand against Jason’s stomach, pinning him against the wall. He could tell Jason was close, and secretly he was glad that after all this time they could still make each other so crazy that they were almost randy teenagers. Jason gave a guttural moan, and he flooded Pete’s mouth. Pete took it all, his hand slowly pumping him until he was dry, and Jason sagged even further. Pete finally let him drop to the floor beside him, and he leaned over him for a kiss. Jason opened his mouth eagerly, and his tongue probed within Pete’s, tasting himself, tasting Pete, wanting more.

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

Smug at giving his partner a fantastic blowjob that temporarily rendered him speechless and brought him to his knees, Pete snuggled into Jason's chest contentedly. Jason's breath was still ragged, but he finally managed to pant, "We're not finished yet."

Pete laughed. "I hope not."

Jason's hand circled around his waist and crept further south, his fingers resting upon the hardened bulge in Pete's wetsuit. He teased him slowly by using his nails to scratch along the visible shaft. "We have *got* to get you out of this," he whispered. "It's only fair I return the favor." He shakily got to his feet and pulled Pete up with him.

"I don't have a problem with that," Pete replied hoarsely.

Together, they struggled to release Pete from the confines of the wetsuit.

"I remember reading somewhere that it was useful to apply detergent to your skin before you put on a wetsuit, so it could be removed easily," Jason grimaced as he pulled at the reluctant material again.

"Your head is full of useless trivia."

"Doesn't seem so useless at the moment, does it?"

"Would have helped if you had told me *before* I put this damn thing on," Pete grumbled childishly.

"I didn't think we would have to urgently get you out of it."

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

“Urgently, huh?”

Jason looked at him with his best seductive glance. “I have an urgent desire to have you in my mouth.”

Pete didn’t think he could get any harder than he was at this point of time. “Fuck, get this thing off me!”

“I’m trying!” Jason grunted as he gave another unsuccessful tug.

Pete sighed and allowed himself to fall back upon the bed. “Wet or dry?”

Jason looked up at him, his face pressed against Pete’s thigh. “Huh?”

“Liquid detergent or soap flakes?”

Jason shook his head, his nose being tickled by the hairs on Pete’s leg. “I can’t remember, actually.”

“It would have to be liquid. I bet the flakes would be as itchy as hell.”

“I don’t care about that right now.”

“Don’t worry,” Pete said, pointing to his groin. “This isn’t going anywhere! But I would kind of like to know for next time.”

“I’ll Google it later, I promise.” Jason clapped his hands. “Okay! Let’s try this again.”

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

Pete sighed as if he had the troubles of saints upon his shoulders and grabbed the headboard behind him for traction as Jason sweated and exerted in attempting to roll the wetsuit down past his waist. “Put some back into it,” he suggested mischievously.

The tip of Jason’s tongue appeared at the side of his mouth, a quirk that happened unconsciously when he was concentrating on some sort of task. Pete smiled at that little action that was so Jason-like, and he was warmed by the sense of love that rushed through him for the man who was currently trying to get him naked. *Urgently.*

Jason braced his feet against the posts at the foot of the bed; his fingers dug beneath the rubber ensnaring Pete’s hips, and he yanked with all his might.

Pete flew off the bed and onto the floor, landing heavily on his ass; Jason stumbled back and hit the wall, managing to keep himself upright by grabbing onto the small table that held the telephone.

They stared at each other in stunned silence for a moment, and then both burst into raucous laughter at the indignity of it all. Jason almost crossed the border into hysteria when he noticed that Pete’s wetsuit was now half bunched down his thighs, but his cock was rigid against his belly. Only the head and half the shaft were visible, the rest trapped by the neoprene.

Pete’s eyes narrowed as he tried to figure out what was causing the extra mirth from his partner. He followed

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

Jason's line of sight and saw his poor, captive cock, and felt he looked ridiculous. "This is fucking torture."

Jason wiped at his eyes and attempted to quell the laughter still bubbling within him. "If we're lucky we might finish by the time we have to leave tomorrow."

"Help me up," Pete implored.

Jason walked over to him, and Pete couldn't help but notice that *his* cock was swinging free and easy as he moved. It was a beautiful cock, though. His partner was a beautiful man, even when he was laughing at him. Jason now stood over him and offered his hand. Pete took it, and he was hoisted up gently. He flinched at the touch of Jason's hand against his own cock, even though it was a slight brush.

"Don't, I'm too close."

Jason took Pete's hands again and placed them over his own shoulders for support and balance while Jason began working on the wetsuit again. Slowly and methodically, it peeled away from Pete's skin, and they were finally naked against each other.

"That's more like it," Pete breathed.

Jason moved around him and sat on the end of the bed. He pulled himself up, and lay down. His cock was already hardening again, and he gave himself a gentle tug before rolling over and rooting in the bedside table. Pete sighed happily at the sight of the perfect valley situated between the globes of his ass, but it disappeared again as Jason rolled

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

back with lube and a condom in his hand. He moved back towards Pete and ripped the condom packet open with his teeth.

He looked up at Pete and said softly, "Make love to me."

"Are you sure?" Pete asked.

Jason nodded. "It's been too long."

And it had been. Since the mugging they had shied away from full penetrative sex. Jason thought Pete seemed too wounded, especially when the bruises were still visible all over his body, and Pete had suddenly felt that the act was all about power, and as he had had his own power taken away from him recently he didn't want to be responsible for taking it from anybody else. It was irrational and incomparable, but as he stared down at Jason and only saw love reflected in his eyes, that Jason's own fear was gone, it helped erase his own doubts.

"It has been," he said, finally.

That was that, then.

Jason's fingers deftly applied the tip of the condom to Pete's aching cock and unrolled it down the shaft. He uncapped the lube and squeezed a liberal amount upon him. The few strokes it took to make sure he was fully lubed up almost undid him.

"Jason..." Pete groaned, and he felt the tube being pressed into his hand. Jason lay back and offered himself to

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

his partner. Pete drizzled an amount of lube over his fingers and bent over Jason. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” Jason breathed as he felt Pete’s finger softly trace around his entrance. He rocked slightly on his back so that Pete’s finger was closer and winced slightly as Pete stopped teasing and breached entry. Pete stroked the inner walls and watched as his knuckle was swallowed up.

Sweat began to collect on Jason’s brow, and he bemoaned the lack of forethought or patience to switch on the air conditioner before this all started. But that was quickly forgotten in the heat of the moment as he felt the tip of Pete’s finger slide over the bundle of nerves that could bring worlds crashing down. “More,” he groaned, not caring how much that single word sounded like a plea.

Pete held Jason’s knee against his chest to support himself and allowed a second finger to join the first that was now within Jason. Sweat trickled from his forehead and down his temple. A large drop collected and fell upon Jason’s knee. Without thinking, Pete licked his partner’s kneecap and grinned as Jason squirmed even more beneath him.

He couldn’t help thinking: *I’m lucky to be here, and I don’t know how long it would have taken me to get to this point again if I hadn’t had Jason.* .

Such simple thoughts, and they came to him unbidden, released with that clarity that came when you allowed yourself to be naked both physically and emotionally with the person you loved.

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

He longed to say them aloud, but it didn't seem like the right moment. These words should be said when they couldn't easily be forgotten when overwhelmed by the throes that came with passion.

Jason had to bite his lip to stop from crying out as both of Pete's fingers now worked against his prostate. He nodded to indicate he was ready, and Pete stroked his knee with his free hand, before giving it a gentle kiss.

Jason wasn't as flexible as Pete, thanks to a football injury sustained in high school, so Pete tried to make him as comfortable as possible by holding his legs so as not to strain his muscles. Jason noticed the small gesture and appreciated it as the back of his knee fitted perfectly onto Pete's shoulder like a tongue-in-groove joint of wooden furniture.

Pete held the knee in place with his right hand while he guided his cock toward Jason's entrance with his left. Jason felt the head brush gently against him and moaned as Pete started to slide into him. He cried out, and Pete paused, but Jason inched himself towards Pete to start him moving again. Pete began slow, long thrusts, trying to sustain himself for as long as possible. The friction of the wetsuit and the many attempts to get it off him had almost gotten *him* off, to put it crudely. Pete bent over, Jason's leg straightening against his back, and he nuzzled at the hollow of Jason's neck, lapping at the sweat that had pooled there.

Jason reached up and grabbed him by the cheeks, pulling Pete's face up so he could kiss him, breathing hot

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

and hard into his mouth as he did so. Now Pete was abandoning himself, and his thrusts began to get shorter and faster, and Jason grunting below him was driving him wild. He licked along the side of Jason's neck, his hand reaching down between their stomachs and grasping Jason's cock, beginning to pump it in rhythm along with his own thrusts. He was rewarded with the sensation of warm cum flooding his fist, and Jason moaned something incomprehensible, although Pete was sure his name was in there somewhere. He waited for Jason to look up at him, and when he did so Pete slowly licked his fist clean.

Jason smiled and wrapped his other leg around Pete's ass, bringing him in further and helping him speed up until Pete was crying out, shuddering with his release. Jason's foot, his heel slightly in the groove of Pete's ass, kept him relentlessly moving, Pete's face contorting even further until he fell against Jason's chest. Pete felt Jason's arms wrap around him, holding him, but all he could do was try to capture his breath.

"You okay?" Jason asked huskily.

"Oh, fuck," Pete replied, and it felt like the right and only thing to say.

Jason began to laugh, and he felt Pete's softening cock beginning to slide out of him. Pete finally moved to reach down and secure the condom. He began to move off Jason, but Jason's grip on him was strong.

"Don't want you going anywhere," he drawled.

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

Pete blushed, and Jason was amazed that he could still do that to him, after so long together.

“I’m taking three steps to the bathroom, and I’m coming right back,” Pete assured him.

“Sounds too long to me,” Jason teased. “Better you should stay here.”

Pete kissed him, and while Jason was distracted and his grip loosened as he began running his hands up Pete’s back, Pete made his escape. He pulled away, and Jason swore audibly as he watched his partner run into the bathroom. He thumped his palms flat against the sheets, hearing Pete running water in the sink.

“What are you doing?” he yelled.

“Stop being impatient,” Pete reprimanded him as he entered the room carrying a damp washcloth. Jason admired his long lean body as it came toward him and reached out hungrily.

“Not so fast,” Pete said. He began wiping Jason down, and his partner luxuriated in the short sponge bath. He then made a move to wipe at himself, but Jason reached for the towel so he could return the favor.

“Thanks,” Pete said. “If you wanted me to stay, I didn’t want us sticky.” His eyes widened. “Hang on!”

He jumped up again, and Jason howled with disappointment.

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

“Four seconds!” Pete laughed, now fiddling with the air conditioner controls.

Jason sighed with relief as the machine kicked on, and cool air began to filter across the room. “Okay, I’m not going to complain about that.”

“Now I can stay for as long as you want,” Pete grinned, clambering back on top of him.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“I should hope not.”

Jason aimed the towel at the bathroom sink through the open door, but it missed and fell to the tiled floor. Pete stared after it, frowning.

“Don’t even think about getting up again.” As quick as a flash, Jason grabbed him and flipped him over, covering his body with his own. Pete squirmed and laughed.

“I won’t! I like it right here.”

“This dirty little weekend was a good idea, wasn’t it?” Jason asked, peppering Pete’s shoulder with kisses. The cool air was now drying the sweat from their bodies, and it was becoming even more heavenly to be against each other.

“It was more like a dirty *week*, but yeah, it was a pretty damn good idea.” Pete lazily scratched at the back of Jason’s neck, tracing the line where skin and hair met.

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

“I don’t want to take you back to Reno,” Jason said suddenly, his kisses ceasing.

Pete looked up to see Jason’s eyes tearing up. Jason pulled away and muttered an apology. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat with his back to Pete.

He felt Pete move behind him, his arms coming over his shoulders and crossing over his chest.

“Hey,” Pete murmured. “I’m okay.”

The sound of their breathing fell into rhythm with the sound of the air conditioner, and both men were aware how much of a lie that statement was. A lie said to try and make the situation better, but a lie nonetheless.

Pete sighed, knowing that Jason deserved the truth. “Well, maybe not a hundred percent. I probably won’t be feeling anywhere close to that until the trial’s over, but I’m getting there.”

He didn’t even want to think about the trial, about the line-up he had to witness, or the trial that would follow his fingering of the suspect.

Jason wiped at his eyes and held the bridge of his nose in an effort to calm himself. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey!” Pete said, moving over beside him. “You have nothing to be sorry for. This has hurt you as well.”

“Not like you were hurt.”

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

“Doesn’t make any difference.” Pete sighed and took one of Jason’s hands in his own. “Don’t you think I would be feeling the same if our positions were reversed?” He brushed Jason’s knuckles against his lips.

“I just want things to go easy for once,” Jason said.

“There are no guarantees that things will ever go easy in life,” Pete shrugged. “In fact, it’s pretty much guaranteed that life will be difficult.”

“Gee, thanks, Pete, for cheering me up.”

“Well, I’m not going to lie to you,” Pete said earnestly. “But what I also meant to say is that life has its good moments too. Like this, like us together. And if we work at it, we’ll get through whatever happens.”

“Uh huh.” Jason steadfastly refused to look at him.

“Uh huh,” Pete echoed back at him. “It’s what we do. Now come lie back down.”

Jason felt Pete’s warmth leave him, and all he wanted to do was return to it. He turned back to find Pete holding out his arms for him and sank down next to him. Pete directed Jason’s head upon his chest, and Jason knew he couldn’t get any closer. Their fingers entwined and rested upon Pete’s stomach, rising and falling slightly with each breath he took.

“It was good to get back in the ocean,” Pete murmured, sounding sleepy. “Was it stupid of me, to want to show off for

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

you? I think I've been wanting to step on a surfboard and show you my mad skills ever since I met you."

"Why?" Jason asked.

"Just to prove to you that there was something else to me that you hadn't seen."

"You have nothing to prove to me."

Pete could practically feel Jason's smile against his skin. Jason, at that moment, was recollecting that Pete had actually spent more time off the board in the water than he actually did *on* it.

"I know I don't," Pete murmured. "Just, it felt good to be doing something other than being the victim."

"You're not *just* a victim," Jason said. "But you have to accept that it happened and that people want to help you and support you. Maybe if it's even just for their sakes rather than yours."

"I guess I've been pretty stupid about it."

"No, not stupid," Jason said firmly.

"But something, though."

"You were just being you."

Both men laughed in the gathering dark. Neither moved to put on the light.

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

“I thought you were the Big Kahuna out there,” Jason said.

Pete bellowed with laughter. “The Big Kahuna’s a *wave*, Jase.”

“Well, you were the Big Kahuna of the Big Kahuna.” As Jason’s eyes grew heavy, his last thoughts were that Pete *was* a wave, always coming at you and crashing into you in the best possible way. And his thoughts were proven by the fact that he was currently riding on the crest of Pete’s chest, undulating with each breath he took, his skin warm against his cheek. It was in this fashion that he was lulled to sleep.

THE next morning was a rush of bag packing, loading the car, and frenzied kisses in-between which spoke of a desire to stay in this private little world even longer.

“Come on, Pete,” Jason moaned from where Pete had pinned him against the wall and was trying his damndest to relieve him of his clothes. “We have to return the key. It’s check-out time.”

“Just a little bit longer,” Pete pleaded, his hands working their way under Jason’s shirt and trying to get beneath the waistband of his jeans.

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

Jason placed his hands on either side of Pete's head and gently tilted it so Pete had to look him in the eyes. "I thought you were the one reassuring me that it would all be okay?"

Pete seemed to deflate in front of him. "I know."

Jason wrapped his arms around his partner and held him tightly. They couldn't say anything else to each other; they just took solace in the moment and dreamt of the next time they would be able to find escape again.

"We got everything?" Pete asked, pulling away from him reluctantly.

"I think so," Jason replied, trying to sound jovial for his sake.

"Then let's go," Pete picked up his bags and walked out of the room without looking back. If he looked back, he wouldn't be able to leave.

Jason looked, however, and closed the door on the one place they had guaranteed themselves a sanctuary away from the ills of the world.

They didn't waste any time in signing out and returning the keys.

In the car, Pete was finding it more and more difficult to allow himself to be driven away from where he had felt so safe for the past week. Jason was behind the steering wheel, and Pete sat in the passenger seat with his feet resting upon the dashboard and his arms around his knees. To the casual

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

observer it might have looked as if he was at ease, but Jason knew it was a reflection of how tense he was feeling about returning to Reno. He let his hand rest upon Pete's knee for a moment and felt the warmth of Pete's hand closing briefly over his before Jason had to pull it away so he could drive properly.

Pete rolled down the window of their truck so he could say a silent goodbye to something other than mere reflection. He wished they could be walking along that pier again; they had spent most of their nights out there sitting on the edge with their legs dangling over the water. He had allowed himself to forget about the mugging and the looming trial. He had been free of nightmares, and sleep had come easily to him. Just the realization that they were headed back towards the highway that would lead them away from the ocean and back into the desert was enough to make his gut twist painfully. As the truck took them onward, Pete looked back at the pier once more and saw ghosts of themselves sitting, laughing as if it were centuries before, not a few days ago.

He closed his eyes even though sleep would bring him back to Reno quicker. It seemed preferable to be unconscious than left to dwell on his own thoughts.

Jason watched Pete fall asleep, the tense setting of his lips giving him concern. He couldn't help but feel the sense of foreboding return as well, and he wished he could just make the truck keep moving as if it had a mind of its own,

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

willing it to bypass Reno and take them on to any other place that would promise them further sanctuary.

But the highway home it was. There was no escaping your destiny.

THEY stopped for bad roadside food a hundred miles out of Reno, eating mostly in silence. Post-holiday blues had definitely settled in. By this time tomorrow they would be back at work, having stretched their holiday to the last possible minute instead of allowing themselves a day or two of detox at home.

Jason was starting to think that had been a bad decision, especially when he looked at Pete. The closer they got home, the more it seemed as if a weight was settling upon his shoulders. Maybe he was just being paranoid and overprotective, but he couldn't help it.

Pete felt the worried glances and tapped his fingers against his knees. "Maybe we could pretend we got food poisoning at the diner. I mean, it looked like the kind of place where you could get food poisoning. That way we can call in sick and spend the next couple of days watching DVDs and playing the Wii."

"We haven't got a Wii, Pete," Jason replied, humoring him.

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

“We could get one.” Pete grinned. “You could test me on my baseball skills, see how far along I’ve come.”

Jason groaned. “Don’t tempt me.”

“I’m making it sound tempting?”

“Of course you are. But real life awaits us.”

“Real life sucks.”

“I think you said it better yesterday.” Jason grinned. “At least it sounded less childish yesterday.”

“Childish?” Pete threw a fry at him, and it struck off the end of Jason’s nose.

“You just proved my point.”

Pete rolled his eyes. “They’re on sale, you know.”

“What?” Jason asked distractedly as he swept up their rubbish into one tidy pile.

“Wiis.”

“Are they paying you for product placement?”

“No, it’s just another game platform I’ve been wanting to kick your ass in.”

“Is that so?”

“Why not? I have with every other game console.”

Jason laughed derisively. “Yeah, right.”

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

“You scared?” Pete asked mockingly.

“Of what?”

“Me.”

“I’m always scared of you.”

“Prove me wrong, then.”

“That’s it,” Jason slapped his hands on the table. “We’re going shopping for one this weekend.”

The chuckle from the other side of the table lightened Jason’s heart instantly; it was the first true laugh Pete had uttered since they had left the sea.

Back on the road, the tension that had sprung up between them was completely gone. They were both apprehensive about the future, but they knew they had to tackle it no matter what. As the skyline of Reno shimmered into being before them, they lapsed into a comfortable silence.

“Home sweet home,” Pete breathed.

“Yeah,” Jason replied, not really having anything to say, but wanting his voice to be heard.

Pete stared down at his feet and then inwardly berated himself. He forced himself to lift his gaze and stare the city down. It thought it had beaten him, but he was back, and both he and Jason were tenacious bastards. All Pete knew

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

was that they were still here, and they would continue to stay here.

Reno was a city that dreamed about beating the odds. And although the odds were realistically stacked against you, there were still the success stories that allowed all the losers to continue to dream.

Pete resolved that he and Jason would be one of those success stories. So he continued staring the city down, as it drew closer and closer. He even engaged Jason in normal conversation, trying to sound like any other couple returning home from holiday without a care in the world. Because they were.

Their hearts lifted as they turned into their driveway, and Pete was surprised at how happy he was to see their house. He actually *was* glad to be home, and the familiar smell as they opened the front door brought all the pleasant associations of their life flooding back to him.

“You know what?” he said to Jason. “I’m glad to be back.”

Jason beamed at him, unable to hide his joy at Pete’s revelation. “Me too.”

That night in bed they lay wrapped up in each other, despite the heat. This time, instead of the gentle sound of the waves breaking upon the beach acting as their own personal lullaby, it was the drone of the air conditioner. And it worked

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

just as well, for they had now found sanctuary in their own home. Which was where they belonged.

“A smooth sea never made a skilled mariner.”

English Proverb

Ports of Call

Sean Kennedy

SEAN KENNEDY lives in the second-most isolated city in the world, so it's just as well he has his imagination for company when real-life friends are otherwise occupied. He has far too many ideas and wishes he had the power to feed them directly from his brain into the laptop so they won't get lost in the ether.

Visit Sean's Blog at <http://kennsea.livejournal.com/>

Ports of Call

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Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design by Catt Ford

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Released in the United States of America
January, 2009