Ride the Wave

Also by Katherine Reilly

Match Point

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KATHERINE REILLY



An Aria Book

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For my Wolders girls,
who make the whole place shimmer.

Prologue

It's late and the beach is empty, shrouded in darkness. The wind is battering dramatically against the coastline, the crash of the waves echoing around the natural amphitheatre of the cliffs. As he makes his way unsteadily down the wooden steps to the sand, his board tucked under his arm, he pauses to lean on the rail and peer out. His eyes are adjusting now and he can make out the mass of white foam tumbling towards shore from what must be towering waves. He can hear the roar of them in his ears.

If this was yesterday, he would make the decision not to go out.

The conditions are bad and getting worse. It's too risky. His instinct is to turn back.

But things are different now and tonight he will ignore that instinct. He will ignore it because for as long as he can remember he has had an aching need to surf, a need that burns through every cell of his body and has the capability to override any rational sober thoughts he may have. He

will continue down the steps and he will stumble across the sand towards the waves with his board, because this is all he is. This is the only way he knows how to be.

And he is too heartbroken to pay attention to instinct.

Later, when he is struggling underwater against the current that is crushing his lungs, when he helplessly tumbles and rolls through the pitch black, when he thinks *this is it, I've fucked it*, his instinct will kick in again.

It will tell him to fight.

One

'Iris, we'd like you to go to Portugal to interview…' Toni leaves a dramatic pause hanging in the air as she clicks on her mouse and then swivels her desktop to face the screen towards me '…him.'

As I peer at the image, the editor-in-chief of *Studio* magazine leans back in her cushioned, black office chair on the other side of the desk and removes her designer, black, square-frame glasses, a smug smile stretching across her lips as she awaits my reaction.

I raise my eyebrows a little, intrigued, but doing my best to keep a neutral expression. A professional expression. It's no use, though. Toni knows *exactly* what I'm thinking; that's why she's smirking. But it's impossible not to think what I'm thinking. This guy is hot. No, more than hot.

He's beautiful.

It's a striking picture too. The photographer has captured him mid-stride across the sandy beach, carrying a surfboard under one arm, fresh out of the sea with his

wetsuit peeled down to his waist, the low light of the sun bathing his muscled arms and ripped abs in a warm orange glow. His dark-brown hair is wet and tousled, beads of water trailing down his cheeks towards his strong, chiselled jawline, his full lips parted slightly, and his dark eyes locked on the camera lens as though he's just noticed he's being photographed.

I try to fight the fact I suddenly need to swallow, but I can't help it.

Toni notices my throat bob.

'Good. I hoped you'd say yes,' she says, placing her glasses down by the keyboard, her hazel eyes flashing at me.

'I haven't yet.'

'You will.'

I uncross my legs to cross them again the other way, which isn't as easy as it sounds in the fitted, black skirt I chose to wear with my black, cashmere, roll-neck top and over-the-knee heeled boots today.

Whenever I come to the *Studio* office, I tend to wear all black. It's safely stylish and the staff here are not messing around. You step through the elevator doors out onto this floor and you know instantly that you're surrounded by people who work for *the* leading fashion and lifestyle magazine in the UK. Toni is also in mostly black today, a sharp trouser suit with a white blouse and Louboutin heels, and flawless, barely-there make-up, her light-brown hair in a stylish short cut that complements her oval-shaped face.

I don't mind making the effort to ensure I don't look out of place when I have meetings at *Studio*; I happily took my time getting ready this morning. I've always taken a lot of pride in my clothes and make-up. I'm of the mind that if

I try to *look* in control then I *feel* in control, even if my life is all over the place.

Which, to be frank, a lot of the time, it is.

But if you looked at me now, hopefully, you wouldn't realise that, not with my long, dark hair swept up into a neat ponytail, bold, black, winged eyeliner framing my green eyes and carefully applied statement red lipstick.

'Who is this guy?' I ask, fiddling absent-mindedly with the butterfly of one of my small, gold, hoop earrings. 'Some kind of model, right?' I drop my hand, giving her a pointed look. 'You know that's not my area of expertise.'

Ever since I started writing on a freelance basis for *Studio*, its editor Toni Walker has been trying to get me to broaden my scope of work; sports journalism, my specialism, is 'a bit niche', she likes to remind me. I know that. I also know how lucky I am to be on *Studio*'s radar at all. It's a glossy brand that everyone has heard of and it has numerous international editions. But the British *Studio* is the original.

It's a stroke of luck that I got into Toni's good books and found myself in the comfortable position of receiving regular commissions from the country's top magazine. I used to be a sports writer for *The Daily Journal* newspaper, but with the way things were going there – like with all print media – I knew I wouldn't have a job for long so I took voluntary redundancy at the first opportunity and made the leap into freelance journalism.

Suddenly, I didn't have a stable income and I had to pitch ideas constantly to various publications in the hope of keeping up regular work. Then, former professional tennis player Kieran O'Sullivan offered me an exclusive interview. At first, I didn't believe him. I know him well now – he's the

fiancé of my best friend Flora – and Kieran is notoriously private and hates any kind of press intrusion in his personal life. For years, he shunned interviews, even after he retired the summer before last, and despite my teasing when they were first dating, I've never broached the subject of speaking to him in a professional capacity.

That's not my style.

But Kieran isn't an idiot and he knew that a bit of press would do wonders for the charity he founded, so he approached me last year with the idea of an interview about, well, everything: his career, his history, his relationships. Once we'd talked through how it would work, I didn't hesitate to write to Toni Walker at *Studio* to offer her the exclusive. I got a reply within two minutes and it was a big, resounding *yes*. No surprises there.

Toni's exactly the no-bullshit-type editor I like working for and, luckily for me, I'm the type of journalist she likes to work with: I'm passionate about what I'm writing and I've never missed a deadline. She's commissioned me to write several high-profile pieces about sport celebrities, but recently has tried to convince me to consider expanding my portfolio.

I guess that must be what is going on here with this handsome beach model she's presenting me with. It's going to be hard to say no to interviewing this dark-haired, half-naked Adonis, but I'm determined to stay focused on what I do best: sports journalism.

'He isn't a model,' she says to my surprise. 'He's a pro surfer. A former pro surfer, I should say. He retired a while ago. His name is Leo Silva. You heard of him?'

I shake my head.

She quirks a brow. 'And here I was thinking you were a sports expert.'

'Surfing isn't exactly my thing.'

'Well, you might want to make it your thing,' she suggests, clasping her hands in front of her on the table. 'I take it you know the name Michelle Martin.'

Of course I know Michelle Martin. She's the Australian media proprietor who owns Bind Inc., the international umbrella company of many media titles and brands, of which *Studio* is one. But most people know her because of a TV show she did years ago, *Pitch*, a documentary that followed her and her core team for a couple of months in her London offices as her largely-print media company battled to stay relevant in a digital world. Her ruthless opinions and tendency to interrupt people with a curt, 'Boring! Next!' became iconic.

She's always had a fiercely unapologetic, powerful and demanding reputation, but her popularity has dipped recently thanks to interviews that went viral for all the wrong reasons – mostly clips of her giving sneering responses to reasonable questions. She also likes to share her sharp opinions on social media and snap back at anyone who thinks differently, hurling personal insults without any thought.

'Yes, I know Michelle Martin,' I confirm. 'We're sitting in her building.'

Toni taps at her screen with her long, red, manicured fingernail. 'Leo Silva is her son.'

'This surfer is Michelle Martin's *son*?' I glance back at his picture. 'Whoa.'

Toni fights a smile. 'I know.'

'I'm not sure I knew she had a son. Maybe it rings a bell…'

'He hasn't appeared in any of her TV work, she never talked about him in front of a camera, and he's not affiliated with her company,' Toni explains frankly to clear up my confusion. 'They haven't been on the best terms.'

'Oh. Did you say he's in Portugal?'

'That's where he's been hiding since he left Australia twelve years ago on his retirement from pro surfing at the age of twenty-four. Michelle's assistant tells me it's where his father resides. He stuck around to help with Leo while he was growing up, but moved back home to Portugal when Leo bought his own place at eighteen.'

'Okay, so Leo did well for himself early on, then.'

'There was a time that Leo Silva was the World Champion, a huge surf star.' She leans forward conspiratorially, resting her forearms on her desk. 'But he was also a notorious party boy: booze, drugs, famous flings. He was a tabloid favourite on the other side of the world. None of Michelle's rags, of course. His wild behaviour wasn't a great look for his mother, who was busy building her empire there and overseas. Fucking Christmas for her rivals. They plastered his antics all over their platforms.'

'I bet.'

'He lost his sponsors and damaged Michelle Martin's reputation by association at the time. You know how the business sharks think, especially of a woman back then: she couldn't handle her out-of-control son; what else couldn't she handle?'

'Okay, you've painted the picture. Fame, fortune and wasted potential. What's the hook? Why do you want this feature on him now?'

Her lips curl into a gratified smile at my impatience and curiosity. We both know she would be asking the exact same questions.

'Leo was meant to be the next Kelly Slater,' she says. 'But his partying streak destroyed his career. Then he… disappeared. Retired early and fled overnight. No more parties, no more press, and no more surfing. Strange, right?'

'So, what happened?' I ask, unable to fight the urge to gaze at his image. 'He woke up one morning and decided to just… give up? Did something happen to him? Why leave the country altogether?'

Toni lifts her finger, pointing it at me. 'These are the questions I want you to answer and more, Iris. What is his story? Why has he been hiding away all these years? And why has he chosen to come back now?'

'He's surfing again?'

'Here we come to the hook of our piece. Yes, and he is, in the words of his mother's publicist, a "changed man". In case it wasn't obvious, this feature was pitched by Michelle's team. Difficult one to say no to, if I'm honest.'

I grimace. 'We're doing an article at the behest of the magazine's owner.'

'*You're* doing this feature at her behest, yes. So no pressure,' she confirms unashamedly. 'I don't know whether you're aware, but Michelle is the subject of a new documentary. Cameras following her day-to-day life, that sort of thing.'

'Hasn't she already done that?'

'A long time ago. This is a new one. Her team are currently guiding her through a bit of a…' she pauses to search for the word '…publicity crisis. Or, as one of her

team put it, "a PR shitshow." There are rumours that the Bind Inc. board isn't thrilled by her reputation – and neither am I, to be honest. I assume you've seen the backlash she's had on social media?'

'I heard that there had been calls to boycott the Bind Inc. publications after some of her more… brutal remarks,' I say, trying to tread carefully.

'Exactly. Not helpful at all in today's climate. We're struggling to retain readers as it is. But a glittering documentary is hoping to change all that. Give the people the *real* Michelle Martin behind the fiery façade and win them over.' She rolls her eyes.

'Fine. But what does a feature on her surfer son have to do with her documentary?'

'Ah.' She straightens. 'Apparently, our boss wants the world to know that her wayward son is a new man. The reformed son of a supportive and loving mother, a surf star who hasn't given up on himself, an inspiration to budding athletes everywhere.' She gives a wave of her hand. 'You get the gist. They want to go big on his comeback.'

'Which is?' I prompt.

'Leo has accepted an invitation to take part in Australia's famous Rip Curl Pro Bells Beach contest this April. Michelle and her camera crew will be travelling there to cheer him on. Good optics, that: the devoted mother as well as a savvy businessperson. And to add a dash more entertainment to the already-moving narrative, one Ethan Anderson – Leo's old rival, apparently – has also decided to emerge from retirement to face him once again.'

I take a moment to let this all sink in.

'It's a good story, Iris,' Toni presses. 'The troubled son of

a famous media proprietor, a surf prodigy who went off the rails, disappeared from public life and hid away in a tiny town in Portugal. Now he's back in his mid-thirties to face his former rival once again and is ready to heal old wounds with his mother. I sense it will be quite the tear-jerker and, if he wins…' she exhales, tilting her head at me '…it's a Hollywood movie in the making.'

I roll my eyes. 'It also sounds like it's been constructed and contrived by an overzealous production team and camera crew.'

'Tell me you're not tempted,' she says, jerking her head at the screen.

'Honestly, I don't know anything about surfing and I'm not sure how I feel about writing a feature for the head of this corporation,' I say bluntly.

'Her team has assured me we have full control, no funny business.'

'What, she's not going to ask to see it pre-publication? Let's be real.'

'It will go to press how I see fit,' she assures me impatiently. 'I'm sure she trusts me to do what's best for the magazine.'

'If she trusts you, then why don't *you* write it?'

'With my boundless free time? Iris, I barely see my daughter as it is. I don't have time to write articles. Editors rarely have time to actually write,' she says with a hint of regret. 'Besides, according to her team, Michelle Martin asked for you specifically.'

I stare at her, waiting for her to laugh her statement off as a joke, but she doesn't.

'Really? But why?' I stammer, bewildered she's even heard of me.

'Apparently, she was distinctly impressed by your last piece for *Studio*, the one on the playboy skier who no one took seriously until your piece on him went stratospheric. She also mentioned your article on the gymnast who got injured, became addicted to painkillers, went to rehab and came back to win gold. And Kieran O'Sullivan's interview of course: the lost tennis champion saved by love.'

'So… Michelle Martin likes the way I write sport stars.'

'She likes the way you write *redemption*,' Toni emphasises. 'You remind readers that athletes are human. You make them relatable. *Likeable*. That's not easy. This is Michelle's son. She needs to know that it's in safe hands.'

I sigh. 'It's a lot of pressure, and I'm really not a beach person…'

She snorts. 'You're not a gymnast or a cyclist either, are you? But you managed to capture those worlds beautifully. I'm talking about sending you to *Portugal* here, Iris. You'll have two weeks there to shadow him. Don't be a moron; take the bloody job.'

I hesitate. 'Isn't the big competition in Australia?'

She quirks a brow. 'Don't push it. Our budget won't stretch to cover those long-haul flights. But you needn't worry; Michelle will be out there to cover that part of the story with her documentary crew. You can get back to England and she can tell us how it ends.'

'Let's say we'll play it by ear.'

Toni allows a small smile. 'You know, Iris, I had a meeting this morning with Elena Cerenzo, our European editorial director. We discussed the idea of creating a role of a sports feature director, an editor who would work across

our European publications. Your name was mentioned in that discussion.'

I stare at her, my stomach twisting.

'I appreciate you are a freelance journalist,' she continues, 'but out of curiosity, might you ever be tempted to consider a fixed role again?'

Oh my God. This is… this is *huge*. A dream job.

I nod thoughtfully, trying to play it cool. 'It might be something I'd think about, yes.'

She looks satisfied. 'Good. Well, should you produce yet another one of your winning features on our lead surfer here, I'd say you'd be in a very good position to prove to the executive leadership team that you'd be a good fit.' She pauses. 'But I'm getting ahead of myself. You haven't formally accepted this commission yet.' She straightens, reaching for her glasses and putting them on as she returns her attention to an email on her screen.

I sit in silence, well aware that she's making a point. She needs an answer on this now. It's rare for a freelancer to turn down work and even rarer to say no to work that offers the opportunity to go abroad. But there's a reason surfing isn't my thing – a reason I can't admit to her – and if this big job wasn't being dangled in front of me, I'd probably say no.

Toni coolly taps away at her keyboard, knowing I can't turn this down.

'All right,' I say to absolutely no one's surprise. 'When am I flying to Portugal?'