

The Sweet Side Of The Ropes: Enthralling Tales Of Male-Male Romance by Kiernan Kelly

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## THE SWEET SIDE OF THE ROPE

Tales of Male-Male Lust

KIERNAN KELLY

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### **BALLIN' THE JACK**

It was Jack's favorite time of the afternoon—just after the noontime rush and before the after-work madness, when several hours stretched lazily ahead of him with nothing to fill them but daydreams. The bell over the door fell silent, the register stopped clanking and clattering and spitting up receipts, and a soothing quiet fell over the store like a warm, fuzzy blanket.

Damn, but his dogs hurt. He removed his shoes and socks, wiggling each toe in relief. Sighing, Jack leaned back in his chair and put his bare feet up on the counter, folding his arms behind his head.

Such was life for Jack McGill, proprietor of The Sensuous Shopper, the one and only erotic supply house in town—not that the lack of competition should be surprising. The town wasn't much more than a flyspeck on the map, located in the middle of God's hairy ass, with a population of less than what a good-sized stadium would hold. What was surprising was the fact that from the day he'd bought the store a year ago, business had been booming.

He didn't even really understand why he'd bought it. If he thought about it—which Jack tried not to do, since it gave him a bastard of a headache—purchasing an erotic supply store smack dab in the middle of nowhere should not have struck him as a sound financial investment. But when he'd seen the ad for its sale in the paper, just a tiny, three-line blurb in the

"for sale" column, he couldn't resist. He'd bought it sight unseen from an anonymous voice on the telephone.

As it turned out, it had been a very healthy move for Jack's portfolio.

One wouldn't think there were so very many horny people in and around the tiny backwater hamlet of Weesaw, Florida, but his sales receipts told a different story. Maybe, as Jack often theorized over the past year, it was something in the water.

Every Monday through Saturday, nine a.m. to eight p.m., Jack sat behind his counter and sold condoms, sensual oils, dvds, corsets, g-strings, whips, dildos, edible panties, anal plugs, and a plethora of other aids and devices to blue-haired old ladies, frog-voiced old men, housewives, mechanics, farmers, bankers, police officers, postal workers, and sales clerks. His customers were ordinary, everyday, average people, some as bold as you please, some blushing and not making eye contact, but all buying.

Why, just last week he'd sold an oversized jelly dildo aptly named Fat Boy," to the reverend of the First Baptist Church.

Jack had noticed during the next Sunday's services that the good reverend was walking with a bit of hitch in his getalong. Perhaps he should have talked Reverend Jenkins into purchasing something a bit less ... stout.

Then there was Mary Wilts, the librarian of the tiny Weesaw Public Library, who was single, lived with her mother, and had purchased so many boxes of condoms that Jack figured she was either a nymphomaniac, or was using them to build a latex hot air balloon.

Frank Wilcox, full-time Sheriff and co-owner of Frank and Bill's Bait and Tackle Shop, had custom ordered a corset for his wife, Esther. Of course, he'd ordered it in a size 44, while Esther wore a size six, but who was Jack to question his customer's needs? Jack supposed the corset went with the size XXXL pink lace thong and size fourteen black stiletto heels Frank had picked up last week.

Macy Lees, choir mistress at First Baptist and owner of the Cut 'n' Curl on Main Street had bought a life-sized, anatomically correct man doll, complete with a fully functional penis and a tongue that vibrated with three different speeds.

As Jack recalled, she'd named the doll Moses.

Pheromones, Jack decided, must saturate Weesaw to its very foundations, from one end of Main Street to the other. But for all the money spent in Jack's store, for all the squeaking mattresses and hoarse cries of ecstasy that floated from open windows at all hours of the day and night, Jack McGill himself had a painful, never-ending case of blue balls.

And he couldn't, for the life of him, figure out why.

It wasn't for lack of trying. He'd put himself on the market as soon as he'd moved into town, letting it be known through casual conversation that he was single, looking, and not particularly fussy.

But it seemed that as eager as the townsfolk were to purchase his wares, none were the least bit interested in using them on *him*.

Jack had always considered himself bi-curious, ready, willing and able to explore relationships with anyone who

could claim two things: that they were over twenty-one years of age, and that they were human.

Lately, things had been getting so bad that he'd conceded the last part might be negotiable. Hell, at this point, the pockets in the billiard table at the Dew Drop Inn were beginning to look damn attractive.

He knew he wasn't superstar material. Jack never claimed to be handsome, and knew that his body wasn't anything to write home about. He didn't have a six-pack, or bulging biceps, or rock-hard thighs. He'd never grace the cover of a romance novel. He'd never be a centerfold in a skin magazine, and never have his own month in a beefcake calendar.

But he wasn't exactly road kill, either.

At five foot nine, Jack was of average height and weight. He still had all of his hair, mousy brown though it was, and all of his teeth, which were practically straight and definitely white. Jack's skin was clear, with no pimples or extra facial features sprouting anywhere. He made a habit of showering regularly, used deodorant, and scraped his tongue after brushing and flossing.

He just couldn't understand it.

Marvin Sweetwater, the janitor for the municipal building, was almost wider than he was tall, had a mole on his cheek that grew more hair than he had on his head, and always smelled like a combination of mothballs and oregano. And yet Jack had seen him slipping into the janitor's closet at the town hall with Marybeth Wilson, the town clerk. Jack's guess, from the bangs, moans, and groans that had issued from the

closet shortly afterward, was that they hadn't been taking inventory of the cleaning supplies.

Now, if *Marvin* could get laid, why the hell couldn't Jack? Maybe he wasn't drinking enough of the water.

The bell over the door jangled, startling Jack out of his musings. He jumped, nearly falling out of his chair as he brought his bare feet down off the counter, striking his ankle painfully on the way. Standing on one foot, he bit back a curse and looked toward the door, wondering who was in shopping during the time of day when most folks in town were either working or watching *All My Children*.

Or getting laid.

"Good Afternoon." The speaker was a pleasant looking man in his early thirties. Nattily dressed in a nicely tailored suit and open-throated white shirt, he carried an oversized briefcase with him. Dark blue eyes twinkled with good humor, and a smile dimpled his cheek.

Not bad, Jack thought. He looks over twenty-one, and human. He's got the right résumé. He blinked, forcing the thought away. The man was obviously a salesman, wanting no more than to sell Jack a new line of lingerie, or a couple of dozen glow-in-the-dark, penis-shaped key chains.

"Mr. McGill? Might I have a moment of your time?"

"Yep. That's me. What can I do you for?" Jack decided to let the man make his pitch, even though there wasn't room on Jack's shelves for anything new. The man's voice was smooth, rich, like melted chocolate, the kind of voice that could recite the tax code and make it sound sexy. It was doing things to Jack's nether regions that made his khakis

uncomfortably tight. Sadly, it was more sexual stimulation than he'd gotten from anyone other than himself in the past year.

"My name is John Smith, and I represent Acme Novelties."

"Is this some kind of joke? Did Bob Anderson over at Weesaw Hardware put you up to this?" Jack snorted ... John Smith? Acme Novelty? Surely even Bob—who had about as much imagination as a can of tuna fish—could think of better names than those.

"No, I'm afraid not," John looked slightly puzzled. "I have some very interesting items I'd like to demonstrate for you." He slid his case onto the counter between them. "May I?"

"I guess so." Crap. That was the man's real name. Way to go, Romeo. "Um, sure. It won't get busy in here for another couple of hours."

"Great! Okay, if you'd just remove your clothes, we can get started." John smiled, and shrugged out of his jacket.

Jack dug a finger into his ear, rooting around for whatever had flown in and scrambled his hearing. Did the cute salesman with the absurdly common name, representing a company that might've been owned by the Roadrunner and Coyote, whom Jack had managed to insult within the first five seconds of their meeting, just ask him to strip? "Come again?"

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"I'll need you to be naked, please."
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Naked."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yes, sir."

<sup>&</sup>quot;As in ... no clothes? That kind of naked?"

"That would be the one, yes." John unbuttoned his shirt. He had a fabulous chest. Nice pecs, tight, rose-colored nipples. Smooth bronzed skin.

"Might I inquire as to why you need me naked?" Jack's mind tried to come up with a plausible explanation for what was happening, but failed abysmally. Are you crazy? Jack's inner voice screamed, as he mentally shook himself. What's wrong with you? The first human being in a year to ask you to get naked, and you want to play twenty questions? For God's sake, take off your clothes!

"I've found that demonstrating my products on the buyer is a much more effective sales tool than merely describing them, or handing over a sheaf of dry advertising pamphlets." John's smile never wavered as he slipped off his shoes and socks.

"Ah, well that makes sense." Jack made no move to undress even though his inner voice was throwing apoplectic fits inside his head. "What sort of merchandise is it?"

John unzipped his fly. "Oh, it's top of the line stuff of the highest quality." He stepped out of his pants, standing only in a pair of black silk jockeys. "You really should be naked in order to experience the full effect of the merchandise, Mr. McGill."

"I suppose you should call me Jack. It feels weird for you to call me Mr. McGill when you're standing there in your underwear."

The boxers were the next to go.

"Or, you know ... in nothing at all." Jack couldn't help staring at John, or rather, at John's naked flesh, especially at his exquisitely formed, surprisingly large, dangly bits.

Reverend Jenkins' "Fat Boy" had nothing on John.

"Very well, *Jack*. So, if you please..." John made a motion toward Jack, obviously meant to hurry Jack on his way toward nakedness.

Jack may not have been a rocket scientist, but he wasn't stupid, either. He knew when to take a hint, and when *not* to look a gift horse in the mouth. He stripped out of his shirt, khakis, and underwear fast enough to leave skid marks. Standing naked behind the sales counter, he bounced on his toes, waiting eagerly for John to open his case.

John crooked a finger at Jack. "Come around the counter, if you don't mind."

Jack tossed a look toward the front door of the shop, grateful for once that the windows had been blacked out. Still, someone could walk in at any time. While the townsfolk were a horny bunch, he wasn't certain that they'd appreciate the sight of their neighborhood smut merchant standing starkers in the middle of his store. "Maybe we should do this in the back room..."

"Nonsense. This is really no different than a salesman demonstrating vacuums or Ginsu knives."

"You don't need to be naked to get a demonstration of Ginsu knives."

"Heavens, no! That would be dangerous."

They both took a moment to flinch, hands cupping their privates as each visualized the dangers of Ginsu knife

demonstrations and certain delicate parts of the male anatomy. It slices, it dices, makes crinkle cut potatoes ... ouch.

Jack settled for dashing to the door, flipping the "Open" sign to read "Closed," and locking it.

John unsnapped the clips on the case, "If you would be so kind as to get down on your knees, Jack?" He popped open the lid.

This is definitely shaping up to be the most bizarre sales pitch in history, Jack thought as he lowered himself to the floor on his knees. From his new perspective, he got a mouthwatering view of John's oversized cock and furry balls, and curve of his delectable ass. Bizarre or not, the scenery was definitely worth the trip to the floor.

John removed a simple length of leather from the case. In the center of the leather strip was a small, dark brown ball.

"Um, I've got ball gags already." Jack nodded toward the display against the back wall. "Right over there, between the crops and the feather ticklers."

"Not like this one." John smiled, fitting the leather around Jack's head. "Open wide, please."

"But..."

"Open!" There was a tone of command in John's voice that sent a delicious ripple through Jack's balls.

Against his better judgment, Jack's mouth popped open. Wide.

John wedged the ball between Jack's teeth. Instantly, Jack's mouth filled with the flavor of rich, dark chocolate.

Unable to swallow because of the ball lodged between his teeth, Jack drooled.

How attractive.

"See? It's flavored. This is one is our Swiss Dark Chocolate model. It also comes in Milk Chocolate, Strawberry, Watermelon, Kiwi, and Cheesecake."

Jack heard the clink of metal, and felt John's warm hands at his ankles. Before he could blink, John had Jack's feet bound, and was pulling Jack's arms behind his back. He went down on his belly as cold metal snapped around his wrists.

'Mmmf ... mmm ... mfff?" Jack's eyes widened. His inner voice had a million questions, all of which seemed to be variations of "What are you doing?" But the ball between his teeth disallowed articulation beyond a muffled, rather wet, grunting noise.

"Tsk, tsk. No speaking unless spoken to, Jack." John wiggled a finger in front of Jack's face. "Don't interrupt my sales pitch again or I'll be forced to punish you."

Jack took issue when John roughly yanked at his hips, pulling him up into a kneeling position with his forehead resting on the floor, but being trussed up like a turkey took most of the vinegar out of his protests.

"Mmff, mmm!" Jack tried to shake his head, but his position made even that form of communication nearly impossible. This was taking the term *captive audience* way too far.

Jack's eyes bugged out of his head and he yelped when the flat of John's hand slapped his ass. More than his flesh, it stung his pride. He hadn't been spanked since he was a kid. Funny thing was, it felt sort of good, too. The stinging was accompanied by a tingling of sorts, thrumming in his balls. His cock bobbed its head in agreement.

The ball gag stifled his cry of surprise, but not the lower, throaty groan of pleasure that followed it.

"Now, as I was saying, our *Tasty Balls* are the perfect sex aids. One size fits all. They're expertly made of strong, hand-tooled leather and foam rubber. And the flavor is guaranteed to last through up to six months of casual use." John's studied, salesman drone would ordinarily have lulled Jack to sleep had it not been for the fact that he had a hard-on of epic proportions virtually screaming for release, which precluded naps of any kind. "Of course, flavor restorer kits are available, which can extend the lifetime of your *Tasty Ball* indefinitely."

Honestly, Jack couldn't care less if the gags were made by Elves and flavored by the Easter Bunny. He wanted more of John's hand on his body. Frowning, he grunted behind the ball gag again, and shook his butt for good measure.

### Smack!

Oh, sweet Christ on toast! John's hand landed a little lower on Jack's cheeks than the last time, precariously near Jack's balls. The resulting sting zapped through Jack's balls directly to his cock. It lengthened and filled, aching sweetly. He wanted to stroke himself, but having his hands cuffed behind his back made that impossible. Houdini, Jack wasn't. He whined behind the ball gag, shooting John a mournful look over his shoulder.

"You really must learn to have a bit of patience, Jack. Now, I want you to take a moment to appreciate the fine, smooth texture of the ball. Not too soft, not too hard. It's flexible enough to sink your teeth into, but not so much so that you can take a bite out of it and possibly choke. Plus, it really does make for a pretty picture. Why, look at what you're doing to me, Jack."

Jack watched John wrap his hand around that thick piece of meat hanging between his legs, slowly fisting himself. Watching him was torture. Jack wanted that hand on *him*, wanted to put *his* hands on John. Stymied by both the ball gag and the cuffs and chain that bound him, Jack growled low in his throat.

"See what a difference our *Tasty Balls* make over the usual rubbery-tasting ball gags? Who would want something that tastes like old tires in their mouth, when they can have chocolate or strawberry, instead?" John stroked his hard-on. It was at full power now, grown ramrod straight before Jack's eyes.

Jack bared his teeth around the ball, his growl intensifying. "Exactly! Now, suggested retail price on these lovelies is \$24.99. Your cost is a mere \$15.00 per piece, two dozen

minimum." John grinned. His hand worked his cock expertly in long, languid strokes.

Smiling. John was *smiling*, while Jack was sporting a hardon that could split logs. *Get down here. Put those lips to better use than reciting a stupid sales pitch. Suck me, dammit!* Jack thought, while biting into the ball. More decadent chocolate flavoring filled his mouth, causing his drooling to intensify. A line of wetness snaked down across his chest, pooling under his chin. He undulated like a beached trout, hands and feet jangling the chains, frustrated that he couldn't get the words out around the gag.

John arched an eyebrow. "You're being a bad boy, Jack. Haven't you learned your lesson yet? If you keep interrupting me, we'll be here all day."

Jack yelped behind his gag when John delivered a series of several sharp blows to Jack's butt. "Your ass is turning the same color as our Cherry flavored *Tasty Balls*, Jack."

Jack moaned again, his cock twitching pitifully underneath him. The tip felt swollen and was probably already purple with, glistening drops of precum. *All day?* If John swatted his bottom just a few more times, Jack figured wouldn't last but a few more seconds.

He'd never felt as helpless as he did then—unable to talk, to ask for what he needed, unable to take care of the problem himself. Totally and completely dependent on the whim of a man he'd just met, a man who probably hadn't even given Jack his real name. *John Smith. Ri-ight.* 

Jack had also never been quite as turned on as he was at the moment. His cock felt like iron, his balls swollen and hard against his thighs. Chances were good that a year ago, when Jack had had a normal sex life, John would never have been able to get Jack to this point so quickly. But after more than three hundred and sixty five days of celibacy aside from close encounters with his own hand, Jack was more than ready to shoot off like a high-pressure fire hose.

John had walked around to face Jack, and pulled Jack up to his knees. Eyelevel with Jack was John's heavy cock, long, thick, and looking every bit as ready as Jack's own. The smooth rounded head was reddened and wet with the evidence of John's desire. He could smell the musky scent of it, the maleness of it. Jack swore silently, desperately wanting to taste John's flavor instead of the chocolate ball gag.

Jack closed his eyes and groaned as John's cock traced his cheek, leaving a streak of wetness along his jaw. His moan sounded suspiciously like a purr behind the ball of the gag as he rubbed his face against the heated skin of John's erection.

"That's a good boy."

For some unfathomable reason, John's little compliment made Jack blush and feel inordinately proud of himself, as if he'd mastered a difficult skill.

"You deserve a reward, I suppose. After all, you did allow me to make my sales pitch and demonstrate my product. Lie down, Jack, on your back."

Eagerly, albeit a little awkwardly, Jack fell to his side and rolled onto his back. It wasn't as easy a maneuver as he would have thought since his hands were still bound behind his back. His breath hitched in his chest when John lowered himself to the floor, spreading Jack's bent knees wide, feet held immobile by the cuffs at his ankles. "Shall I make you come, Jack? Have you been a good enough boy for that?"

Jack nodded vigorously, whimpering behind the gag. His hips lifted toward John, pumping his cock into the air. *Please.* Touch me. Give me just a little lick. Hell, just breathing on

the fucker will be enough. Do something, anything for pity's sake!

John crawled forward between Jack's spread knees, aligning their cocks. Velvety foreskin rubbed against Jack's erection in a long, blisteringly hot stroke. Precum slicked their organs as John slid against Jack's flesh. Once. Twice. Three times' the charm.

Jack came hard, biting deeply into the ball as his hips thrust against the hard length of John's cock. A guttural cry tore from his throat, the ball gag doing little to suppress the volume as he screamed his release. Jack's head snapped from side to side, the tendons in his necks bulging like steel cables. His climax seemed to go on forever, every muscle in his body contracting with its power.

Only after he'd ridden the monster to its end, lying boneless and sated and still drooling chocolate spittle, did Jack realize that at some point during his record-breaking orgasm, John had joined him.

John was smiling as he removed the cuffs and ball gag from Jack, freeing him. He had good reason to smile, Jack thought. He'd just put in a helluva performance—a sales pitch for the ages.

Jack wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'll take four dozen," he managed to rasp, returning John's smile.

\* \* \* \*

The room snapped to attention as the general, polished eagles winking in the overhead lighting, walked in. Armed

guards stood sentry at the door, expressions hard and cold, weapons gleaming darkly at their sides.

Small blue eyes scanned the bank of video cams as he accepted a clipboard proffered by one of the men. A quick inspection of the data confirmed what he already knew—the experiment looked to be at least a partial success. Weesaw, Florida had been a perfect choice of location. Secluded, low population, water derived from a community well, it had fit the criteria to a tee. The real challenge had been in installing the surveillance equipment.

Darting back to the video screens, his eyes alit on camera 157. A small, neat white label under the monitor read, Sensuous Shopper, Subject 709, Repellant.

"I take it that there's a problem with the repellant?" His voice was gruff, used to be immediately obeyed.

"Not really a problem, sir. The repellant lasted nearly one year to the day, but as you can see, it's apparently worn off." The speaker was a bespectacled man in his forties, balding, dressed in a white lab coat. His nametag read *Miller, William.* "However, during that period it was completely effective. No one wanted anything to do with Subject 709 sexually. The subject seemed frustrated, but not enough so to do anything other than masturbate."

"Maybe we should try something other than injecting it into his laundry detergent. Maybe it needs to be taken internally, like Lot 889." Lot 889, cheekily dubbed *Screw Brew* by the team overseeing the project, was the most potent aphrodisiac known to man. They'd found that it was most effective when dispensed through the town's water supply.

Lot 890, on the other hand, administered to one Mr. Jack McGill, acted as both a repellent and an immunization against the effects of Lot 889.

"That's the next step in our protocol, General."

"It's imperative that we nail down the most effective way to administer the repellent. We want our enemies banging each other on the battlefield, not our troops."

"Yes sir. Understood."

"Is that Captain Smith?" He squinted at the small screen. "I almost didn't recognize him out of uniform."

"Yes, sir. He did a commendable job, completely believable in his role as a salesman."

"His father was a door-to-door salesman. I'll keep your recommendation in mind when his evaluation comes due." His eyes swept briefly across the other screens, wincing at Cam 320, which showed an obese man with a large, hairy mole doing obscene things with an older woman and a life-sized male mannequin. He shuddered, handing the clipboard back to Miller. "Keep me updated."

"Yes, sir."

The general took his leave, followed by his entourage. In a much better mood than when he'd arrived, he almost smiled. He'd have good news to report at his meeting at the Pentagon that afternoon. The experiment in Weesaw was shaping up to be a success, and the Brass would have their new chemical weapon.

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#### **BLIND FAITH**

"Are you *sure* you want to go through with this? It's not necessary, you know. We can just forget about the whole thing." Jules' fingers drummed a nervous beat on the table. He looked jumpy, skittish.

"I'm positive. We've discussed this before, Julian." I used his full name just so he'd know I was being serious. "At some length, as I recall."

"I know, it's just that—"

"Just what?"

"It can be difficult, Devin. Frightening. With your claustrophobia, I'm afraid that—"

"If it gets to be too much for me, I'll tell you. I want this experience, Jules. If I'm going to write about a vision-challenged character, then I need to know how he feels, how he perceives the world, how his other senses come into play."

"You can just interview me. I'll tell you everything you need to know." Jules light gray eyes rested at a point somewhere just above my right shoulder. Jules had the most beautiful eyes I'd ever seen, although I'd never tell him that. He was sensitive about his eyes, and besides, we didn't do the sickly-sweet compliment thing. The most I'd ever said was, "I like your eyes." They were intense, though, and striking. Pale gray, with a thin, darker band circling the iris, framed by thick black lashes, they were as startling as they were captivating.

I'd first met Julian when he was a teaching an Intro to Ancient Greece class. I remember passing his classroom on the way to mine. He was sitting perched on the edge of his desk, regaling his class in a voice hot enough to melt steel. Smoky and rich, you didn't just *hear* Julian's voice—you *felt* it with your entire body. It wrapped itself around me in a warm, velvety cocoon, drawing me into the doorway.

I remember him pausing mid-speech and cocking his head as if he'd heard something no else had, before smiling and continuing on. I would have stood there all day listening to him, if I hadn't had a class of my own to teach.

Later that day I ran into him in the teacher's lounge.

He walked in, his gait fluid and graceful. A thin white cane lightly tapped the floor before him. It was only then that I'd realized he was blind.

He paused and tilted his head again in that way he has, as if he's listening to music only he can hear, then walked directly over to me. He had spoken in a sinfully rich voice. "Did you enjoy my lecture on early Greek civilization?".

"How did you know I was there? Or here for that matter?" The questions were out of my mouth before I could stop them, and I could have kicked myself halfway across the campus. "Oh man, I'm sorry. That was insensitive, wasn't it?" This time I wasn't asking a question—I was stating fact and was very glad that he couldn't see my cheeks heat.

"Not at all. It's a natural question. I could smell your cologne. *Dolce and Gabbana*, isn't it?" Jules smiled. "Julian DeMarco," he extended his hand in my general direction.

I took it, shaking it. "Devin Holmes, and that was very impressive, Julian."

"Not really. I just follow my nose, so to speak." He laughed. "Join me for lunch?"

It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. As it turned out, we had a lot more in common than just our tastes in cologne. We both shared a love of Italian cuisine; both had attended State universities on scholarships, had no families to speak of, and were fans of film noir to the point of obsession.

We were also both gay. I can't lie—I was attracted to Jules from the first moment I laid eyes on him. His smoky voice did things to my body that made sitting through my next class more than a little uncomfortable. But that was as far as it had ever gone. I'd hinted at more but he'd backed away, and although I was disappointed to say the least, in the interest of our friendship I'd let go of any romantic aspirations.

He just wasn't interested in me, not in that way, which was fine with me. Sex I could get anywhere. Real friendship was something much more difficult to find.

After a time, when our friendship reached the point where I felt comfortable talking to him about his condition, I broached the subject of my writing a blind character into my next book. The character I had in mind lost his sight unexpectedly as an adult. In a way, I wanted to base the character on Jules, and I tried to explain that I wanted to conduct a small experiment so I might better understand.

It took a great deal of cajoling and pleading to get Julian to agree to help me.

"Hearing about it isn't the same as experiencing it. I need firsthand knowledge if I'm going to write a character that's believable, Jules."

"That's my point. You don't understand what it's like, Devin. You'd be totally dependent on me for *everything*. It takes time to learn how to do for yourself when your vision is taken away. You have no idea how difficult it can be. Or how frustrating."

"Exactly why I need to experience it, Jules. Because I have no idea." I patted his knee then pasted a pair of selfadhering, thick gauze pads over my closed eyes. I added a pair of dark wrap-around sunglasses, which blocked out what little light slipped through the gauze. "Okay. I'm ready, Jules."

"You can't see anything?"

I felt his hand on mine, reassuring, warm.

"Nope. Not a blessed thing."

"You doing okay?"

"It's been all of half a minute, Jules. I'm fine."

"Okay, then. What do you want to do first?"

"Well, I need to call my editor about a deadline." I thought it to be a simple enough task. Using the phone was something I did many times in a single day. I could handle that, easy.

Not.

Patting my pants, I realized that I'd forgotten my cell phone in my backpack, which I'd left in the bedroom. Standing up, I turned toward where I knew the doorway to Jules' guestroom was, took two steps and promptly tripped

over the coffee table, nearly falling flat on my face. Only Julian's strong arm hooked under mine kept me from knocking loose a couple of teeth.

I detected a trace of humor in Jules' voice. "Lesson Number One: learn where things are, and then leave them there,. The coffee table is two steps from the sofa. The doorway is six steps from the coffee table. The television is two steps to your right, the wing chair is two steps to your left."

I tried forming a map of the room in my mind, but it was still difficult. Stepping forward without being able to see where I was going, especially after falling over the coffee table, was easier said than done. My hands automatically flew up in front of me, fingers splayed, trying to feel for obstacles.

"Put your hands down, Devin. You look like a mummy from a bad 50's "B" horror flick. Here, take my cane, instead." Julian pressed his thin cane into my hand.

I tried to mimic his light tapping, sweeping the cane across the floor in front of me, and ended up clipping his dog, Buster. His startled yip scared the hell out of me. I realized that I had been "blind" for all of three minutes and was already as tense as a nun at a porn star convention.

Jules whispered in my ear

His breathe warmed my cheek

Jules' breath warmed my cheek as he whispered in my ear. Damn he smelled good. "Take a deep breath and try again." He was wearing my favorite scent, Dolce and Gabanna, *Light Blue*. When did he start wearing it? I hadn't smelled it on him before.

Slowly, feeling as though I was going to step off a cliff at any moment, I took a few steps forward.

"That's it. You're doing fine." His hand cupped my elbow. "Cane travel is like dancing. Your body moves, and the cane is the rhythm it dances to." His warm hand covered mine, showing me how to swing the cane in front of me in an arc that was slightly wider than my shoulders. "Step left, tap right. Step right, tap left."

The cane tapped against the wall, and I continued to flick it lightly against the floorboard until I found the open doorway. Making my way into the bedroom without further mishap felt like a major accomplishment to me, and I was inordinately proud of myself.

"Crap." I bit my lip and swung my head back and forth out of habit, although I couldn't see a goddamn thing. "I forgot where I put my backpack. I think I left it on the bed, but I can't remember."

Jules laughed. "I refer you back to Rule Number One. Everything has a place, and if you don't return it to its proper place you may someday end up brushing your teeth with epoxy glue."

Good point. I swept the cane over the surface of my bed, feeling it hit something solid. I smiled in triumph. "Aha! I *did* leave it on the bed!"

Sitting down on the edge of the mattress, I felt for my backpack. Finding my flip phone wasn't so bad, but dialing it was another story entirely. The buttons were so tiny and flat that I could barely feel where one ended and the next began, and I had a hard time remembering their sequence. My phone

also had several extraneous buttons including send, end, and directional keys. Which was which? I frowned, trying to picture the face of my phone in my mind.

After a few minutes, I felt Jules take my phone from my hands. "Try mine"." He slipped a streamlined object into my hand.

"This is a phone?" I ran my hands over the bumpy texture. I could feel the buttons; each had raised dots that I knew must be Braille. "It feels like a remote control. Where's the screen?"

"And I would need a display because...?"

"Oh, right." I felt my face heat, and was glad he couldn't see me blush. My cheeks must have turned fire engine red. Of course he wouldn't need an LCD screen.

"This phone is designed for the visually impaired, Devin. It has Braille keys, as well as voice dialing capability, and talking Caller ID, signal and battery strength, phonebooks ... every function speaks to you."

"Cool!" I was thoroughly impressed. "But I don't know the Braille system."

Jules took the phone for a moment then handed it back. "Say the number slowly and clearly."

I did, and heard the call ring through. I spent the next few minutes talking to my editor. When I was through I handed the phone back to Jules.

"I felt him stand up, his weight lifting from the mattress. His voice came from my right. "Hungry?"

I was, but I had another, more pressing need. "Actually, I have to ... uh..."

"Ah, you need a bathroom break. Okay, let's go."

Now this was going to be embarrassing, I just knew it.

Using the tap-step method Jules had taught me, I found my way to the bathroom.

"Okay, drop your drawers and have a seat," he said when my cane chinked against the porcelain. There was a smile tilting his lips, I just knew it. I could hear it in his voice.

"Sit? I only have to piss."

"Doesn't matter. The easiest way to relieve yourself when you're visually impaired is by sitting down. Otherwise, it's pretty much hit or miss."

Jesus. I'd never thought of that. I hadn't peed sitting down since I was in potty training.

Jules chuckled. He probably guessed what I was thinking. "I suppose you can handle this by yourself. I'll be right outside when you're done."

I heard him leave, closing the door behind him. Quickly, I attended to my business, flushed, washed and dried my hands, and did all of it without falling, tripping, or cracking my skull open on the bathtub.

Opening the door, I was smiling as broadly as any three year old who'd finally mastered the art of the toilet.

"Jules?"

"I'm in the kitchen!" Jules' voice echoed in the hallway.

Following my nose, carefully sweeping my cane in front of me, I made it to the kitchen and took a seat at the table. Delicious smells were coming from the direction of the stove, making my stomach rumble.

A few moments later, the aroma of eggs and bacon wafted up as I heard Jules set my plate down in front of me. He took my hands and placed them over a napkin and a cold metal utensil. "Here's your fork." He let my fingers feel the shape of the tines. "Glass of orange juice is at one o'clock. On your plate you have scrambled eggs at six o'clock and bacon at twelve."

Eating without seeing was an experience in and of itself. Half a dozen times my fork reached my mouth with nothing on it. I spilled the orange juice and knocked over the salt-and-pepper shakers.

In the end I managed to feed myself. I couldn't imagine having to have cooked anything, though. I'd probably have set myself on fire, and told Jules so.

He laughed. "You've only lost your vision for a day, Devin. Children who lose their sight or who are born blind learn as any child would, but it takes in-depth rehabilitation to learn to care for yourself and to be independent when you become visually impaired as an adult."

He cleared the table and then took my arm. "Come on, I want to show you something," he pulled me up from my seat.

Jules led me back into the bedroom. "Wait here for a minute."

I could hear clothes rustling, felt the breeze of his passing as he moved about the room. Finally, I felt his hand on my arm. "Do you trust me, Devin?"

"Of course I trust you," I answered without hesitation. "Why?"

"Because I want to show you what it's like."

#### "What what's like?"

He didn't answer. Instead, I felt Jules' lips, warm and petal-soft, press against mine. Suddenly, I was enveloped with the subtle fragrance of his cologne, detecting hints of orange and chocolate in it that I'd never been aware it possessed, even though I wore it myself. I could feel the bristles of his facial hair against my cheek; I could almost hear them scrape across my skin.

Moaning, I opened for him, welcoming his tongue. It was cool and sweet from the orange juice he'd drunk. I warmed to the kiss quickly..

I found myself enthralled by the texture and taste of him. It was as if I'd never been kissed before. My entire world was reduced to his velvety tongue, to his warm breath, to his sweet taste. To the sounds of his breathing, and the small, eager noises he made in his throat as he kissed me.

Touching him, revealed bare, sleek skin. I ran my hands over his biceps and shoulders. Cupping his scruffy cheeks in my palms, I tried to picture him in my mind. I knew his face well, knew the angle of his jaw and the shape of his nose. In my mind I saw the fullness of his lips, the deep cleft in his chin, and the beauty of his eyes.

His fingers unbuttoned my shirt, sliding it from my shoulders. The cooler air raised the hair on my arms, and sent a shiver down my spine. Jules' long, elegant fingers ran lightly over my chest, pausing to tease at my nipples. His touch was electrical, light and easy, then gone as he worked my belt free and unzipped my khakis.

"Lie down on the bed." Jules pressed against me, backing me up until my calves felt the mattress behind them. I sat, and felt him pull at my shoes and socks, first one foot then the other.

Something warm and wet slid up the center of the sole of my left foot, and it took a moment for my mind to register that it was Jules' tongue. Funny, but I'd never realized how exquisitely sensitive feet were, not until his lips closed over each toe in turn, pulling them one by one into his warm and wet mouth. His teeth nipped at the delicate skin over my anklebone, his fingers massaging my instep. By the time he turned his attentions to my right foot, my hands were twisted in the sheets and my body burned for him.

His hands slid under my hips, pulling both my pants and underwear off. Blood suffused my skin, warming it to a blush, knowing that I was now lying naked on his bed. God knew why—I was hardly a virgin and Jules couldn't see me. Maybe that was it—he was seeing me with his hands, with his mouth, and somehow that made it much more intimate than any other encounter I'd ever had. There was no hiding anything from his gently probing, questing fingers and tongue.

Something soft and silky dragged across my belly and chest, making my skin ripple and my cock fill. I saw a shadow of light against the gauze pads that covered my eyes as Jules removed my sunglasses, then full dark returned as he draped the silk over them. He lifted my head, tying the scarf in place. Each silken fold of the material caressed my skin like cool water; I could smell his cologne in the fibers.

I felt strangely vulnerable, and a shiver ran through me. No wonder Jules had asked if I'd trusted him—I couldn't imagine doing this with someone I only knew casually. Not knowing where he would touch me next was unnerving; not being able to see the expression on his face was downright frightening. Was he enjoying himself? Did he like the way I felt? Or was he repulsed and just going through the motions? I was besieged by a sudden, paralyzing uncertainty.

"Jules?" My fingers danced in the air, searching for his face. "I'm ... are you...?" My chest began to tighten as a familiar vise squeezed. I'd always been claustrophobic, uncomfortable enough in elevators to avoid them at all costs. Any small space drew the same reaction from me—my heart would begin to race, a cold sweat beading on my brow and panic clawing at my gut. Now, for the first time since I'd voluntarily surrendered my vision, I felt the beginnings of a panic attack. Even though I was in a large, airy bedroom, the darkness pressed against me, flattening me to the bed.

"Shh ... breathe, Devin." Jules' whisper was soothing. He stretched out next to me, wrapping his body around me.

His closeness calmed me further. Grateful that he was so patient, so understanding, my hand found his cheek and I pulled him closer, resting my forehead against his.

"Just lie back and *feel*, Devin. Let me show you." He kissed my palm.

His soft kiss reassured me further. I lay back, taking a deep, calming breath, but it was difficult. Although the gauze and silk only covered my eyes, I felt as if the darkness was suffocating me. But even more than that, I wanted to see

Jules, wanted to watch him touch me, wanted to look into his eyes to see if I pleased him. It took all of my willpower to resist tearing away the silk that covered my eyes and ripping away the gauze pads.

Jules' body slid along mine. My skin felt hypersensitive; my body was exquisitely responsive to every hair, every pore, and every subtle imperfection of his skin. I was acutely aware of every point where his body touched mine—his thigh resting across my leg, his chest against my arm, his fingers brushing my nipple.

His touch was as light as air as his fingers ghosted over my flesh, a whisper made corporeal. I moaned, wanted more as he drove me crazy with his feather soft touches and butterfly kisses. Hard, my body was painfully needy; hungry for all of him instead of the teasing he'd allowed me thus far. My hands reached out, feeling for his and sought for him to hurry along.

His teeth nipped at the delicate skin under my jaw, and I heard him chuckle.

"Impatient are we?" Jules's breath tickled my ear, his tongue following his words, swirling along the folds, his teeth nibbling at the lobe.

Growling, I trapped the hand that had been worrying at my nipple. Wrapping my fingers around his wrist I forced it down toward the part of me he had steadfastly ignored.

Hissing through my teeth as his fingers wrapped around my length, I was unprepared for my body's reaction to his touch. Every muscle contracted momentarily, my back arching in an ecstatic spasm as he stroked my cock. Not since

I was a teenager had I come so close to climaxing at a single touch.

My body was electrified, every molecule charged with need and want, every nerve ending exposed and screaming to be satisfied. In a small corner of my mind I realized that my nervousness and claustrophobic fear had evaporated, leaving behind only a hunger so sharp that it was almost a physical pain.

Jules' thumb circled the head of my cock, spreading the wetness that had gathered there, my body shuddering in response. I imagined I could feel the nearly imperceptible swirls of his fingerprints against my skin, feel the pulse in his palm beat against my shaft.

Kissing his way down the length of my body, Jules' lips were warm and soft, his tongue hot, wet velvet that swirled over my nipples, teased at my navel. Then ... oh, then it was *there*, lapping at the head of my cock, searing me right to the core.

It traced the length of my erection from tip to root and back, following the thick vein that pulsed beneath the delicate skin. Flicking lightly under the ridge, his tongue brushed over the tiny slit, there, gone again, back. Again. Again, until I thought I'd lose my mind for want of more.

He must have felt me tensing, because just at the moment when I thought I would lose it and cry out begging for him to do more than just *taste*, he swallowed me whole.

Reason left me.

I'm not sure if in that moment I would have been able to remember my own name, had I been asked. The only thing I

was aware of was his mouth on me, and the combination of wet heat and silk that enveloped my cock. The moment stretched forever, and yet wasn't nearly long enough.

"Julian." His name was a prayer on my lips, an entreaty, a warning.

A splash of something hot and wet against my leg and a groan that vibrated around my cock set me off, rocketing, crying out against the sheer pleasure of it as an orgasm so powerful that it stole the breath from my throat, roared through me.

I finally settled, breathing hard, waiting for my heart, beating wildly against my breastbone, to quiet. I realized that the gauze covering my eyes felt wet. I was crying, although my clenched teeth caught my sobs. It was over, and I didn't want it to be. I wanted it to go on, greedy to keep him close, loathing the smallest space that might separate us. I'd never felt closer to another human being in my life as I did in that moment.

"Devin?" Jules" soft voice touched me as much as the fingers gently stroking my cheek. "You okay?"

Mutely, unable to trust myself to speak, I nodded.

"Intense, huh?"

Again I nodded. "I could feel *everything*, with every molecule of my body."

"I know."

His lips curved against my shoulder as he smiled and kissed me there. He placed another whisper soft kiss under my jaw, then another on my lips, sweet, warm, all too brief. "But here's the thing—it wasn't because of the blindfold. It's

because you trusted me, opened yourself up to me. That's what I wanted to show you."

"I don't understand."

"Did you ever wonder why I backed away when you made it obvious that you wanted more out of our relationship? It wasn't because I didn't want you—on the contrary. I wanted you so badly that it nearly killed me to say no to you. It was because you didn't trust me."

"I always trusted you!"

"Not in the way you think. You didn't have faith in me, in my abilities. You didn't really believe that I could be an equal partner. You worried when I went out alone, especially at night. Tell me, can you tell if it's day or night right now?"

"I answered slowly. "No. Dark is dark. I guess going out at night for you is no more dangerous than going out during the day."

"You constantly tried to move things out of my way. Did I have to run in front of you, pushing things out of your way so you didn't trip? Do you understand now how emasculating that would be for me?"

Again, I nodded my head.

"Whenever we had dinner together, you cooked. On the rare occasion you agreed to let me near the stove, I know that you checked to make sure I turned if off afterwards. Whenever we went out, you opened the doors. Whenever we—"

I moaned, feeling like an idiot. "I get it, I get it. I was totally insensitive."

"No, not insensitive, exactly ... you just didn't trust me. You didn't understand that, visual imparity aside, I'm no different from you. You treated me as if I were fragile, helpless. I couldn't let you into my heart, because I knew you would break it, Devin, even if you never meant to."

"I'm so sorry. Why didn't you just tell me I was being a jerk?"

Jules laughed then kissed me again. Thank God he wasn't angry, wasn't pulling away from me. I don't think I could have taken that.

"I didn't tell you because I was afraid. That's why I didn't want you to do this experiment. What if you still didn't understand? What if you still didn't trust me?" He laid his head on my chest. "But when I looked at you sitting in the kitchen, scrambled eggs on your shirt and orange juice pooling in your plate, I had to touch you. Had to know what it might be like if you opened yourself up to me, trusted me to take care of you."

"Oh, believe me, I trust you. I would never have been able to survive the afternoon without you. You took care of me, Jules. You taught me, helped me, but never made me feel incompetent. And now you..."

"Loved you? Yes. And I will again, if you still want me, and if you can accept me as an equal partner."

"I like the sound of that. *Partner*," I smiled. Partner. Lover. Yes, I definitely liked the sound of those words. They made me feel warm from the inside out.

My fingers touched the silken folds of the scarf he'd used as a blindfold, feeing the gauze pads underneath it. I realized

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that I really hadn't needed the experiment to understand him. I had only needed a little blind faith.

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## FIREHOUSE HEAT

Heat.

Ash Collins remembered his Lieutenant telling him heat is a firefighter's worst enemy and best friend. At the time he'd thought the man was being overly dramatic, but now, as Ash stood in full turn-out gear readying himself to follow his Lieutenant into a working house fire for the first time, and felt sweat already beginning to dribble down his spine and collect in the crack of his ass, he realized the truth of the statement—at least, the worst enemy part of it. It was the best friend part that left him puzzled. Ash hadn't even gone through the doorway yet and already he felt as if he were melting. He couldn't imagine how he would find himself friends with the unbearable heat.

Part of it was the fault of his equipment. His bunker pants and coat were of a heavy, water and flame resistant material and, added to the weight of the rest of his turnout gear, including his helmet, Nomex hood, boots, gloves, and SCBA pack, he was carrying at least fifty extra pounds of weight. Ash was physically fit, his 190 pounds of lean muscle sitting well on his six-foot frame, but carrying that extra weight in the middle of a hot August day made the inside of his gear feel like a sauna.

Add to that the adrenaline rush that had started when the bells rang in the firehouse and the call came over the scanner for a 10-75, their code for a fully-involved house fire, his nerves that were already stretching to the breaking point as

he faced the front of a house belching smoke and flame, and the temperature inside the blazing building which might at times reach 1200 degrees Fahrenheit, and you had the makings of one soggy probationary firefighter.

Air whooshed softly in his facemask and echoed in his ears along with his thudding heartbeat as his Lieutenant, Joe Murphy, forced open the front door with a Halligan tool, a spike used for forced entry. A staggering wave of heat blasted them. The room beyond was sizzling with heat and crackling with flames. The two firefighters moved inside the house, making their way slowly through thick, black smoke. As the first two firefighters on the scene, it was their job to perform a quick search for anyone who might be trapped inside the burning building.

Other firefighters advanced on the house carrying an inchand-a-half hose, ready to blast a jet of water on the raging inferno. Behind them the scene on the street seemed chaotic to the casual observer, but was in fact a well-choreographed dance. Red lights flashed, and sirens wailed as pumpers and aerial trucks arrived, and people sprang into action. Firefighters pulled hose and tapped hydrants, while police erected barriers, and paramedics set up a triage area.

None of which was at the forefront of Ash's mind as he followed closely behind Murphy. All he could think about was procedure, keeping up with his Lieutenant, searching for victims, and trying not to get dead in the process. As they reached the second floor of the building, they searched room by room, quickly and efficiently. In the last room, a bedroom,

they find the remains of the elderly couple who lived in the house.

Regardless of how prepared he might have thought he'd been before entering that bedroom, the sight of the dead couple nearly overwhelmed Ash. He'd seen photos of fire victims during his training, listened to lectures by seasoned firefighters and psychologists warning about the trauma a firefighter could experience in such a situation, but no photographs or speeches could truly prepare someone for this. In the firehouse, bodies in this condition were referred to as "crispy critters," an unfortunately accurate description of the human remains that lay heaped on the floor near a burning bed.

He swayed in his gear, but a strong hand on his arm held him upright. Looking into the facemask of his partner, he could see Murphy's blue eyes looking back, concerned but at the same time stern.

"You okay? Suck it up, Collins! We've got to get them out," Murphy ordered. His voice was muffled by his breathing apparatus, and his hand remained on Ash's arm as if waiting to make sure the rookie wasn't going to keel over or sick up into his facemask.

Ash nodded, swallowing hard to keep the bile down in his gut where it belonged and not splattered all over the inside of his mask. Together, he and Joe shouldered the bodies in a fireman's carry and carted them down the staircase, past firefighters who were training hoses on the flames downstairs.

Relieved of his grisly burden by other firefighters as soon as he cleared the house, Ash managed to walk away from the scene before collapsing to his knees near the rear tires of their firehouse's pumper truck. He ripped off his helmet, facemask and hood, gulping in a lungful of clean, fresh air, and fought the nausea threatening to overwhelm him.

A pair of boots appeared in front of him. Murphy squatted down, his own helmet tucked under his arm. "That was a trial by fire, rookie." He looked grim. "It doesn't get much worse than we had in there, but you did good. You okay?"

Ash looked up into Joe's handsome, soot-streaked face and nodded,. "Yeah, I'm fine, Lieutenant. Never better."

Joe chuckled. "Why don't I believe you? .You're looking green around the gills, rookie. Captain wants to know if you want to talk to somebody now, or later." It was departmental policy for firefighters to speak with a counselor whenever they encountered a fatality in a fire.

"Later. Right now I feel as if my body is ready to combust." Ash, wiped a hand across his sweat-beaded forehead, leaving a black smear behind.

"A shower should take care of that. We've been relieved of duty for today. We're to take the Captain's car back to the station." Murphy stood and offered a hand up to Ash.

Ash frowned as he stood up. "I don't need to go back to the station, Murphy. I'm fine."

"Sure you are. That's why you look like you're ready to puke up last week's breakfast."

"It's just the heat. I'm fine." Ash twisted his Nomex hood between his hands, wringing out some of the sweat, and started to pull it back over his head. Murphy snatched it out of his hand, shaking his head. "Not a chance, kid. The Captain says we go back, so we go back. I'm not any happier about it than you are, but we follow orders in this department. Just because we're a volunteer outfit doesn't mean we can do as we please. Trust me, this is going to catch up with you pretty damn soon, and you don't want it to happen here in front of civilians." He nodded toward the crowd that had gathered in front of the barricades, not far from where the pumper was parked. "We have more than enough manpower to cover this fire. Let's go."

Ash knew better than to argue with his Lieutenant. If his time in the Fire Academy had taught him anything, it was the importance of following orders. Still, he felt like a schoolboy sent home packing from his first game of the season because he'd skinned his knee at first base.

\* \* \* \*

The ride back to the firehouse was a silent one. Ash tried closing his eyes, enjoying the cold air conditioning that blasted him full force in the face as he rode shotgun next to Joe, but every time he did, the image of the burned bodies he and Joe found in the upstairs bedroom of the house danced behind his lids. He wondered if he'd be able to sleep that night, or *any* night for that matter.

Arriving back at the firehouse, Ash followed Murphy into the bay where the trucks were usually parked, and toward the stairs that led up into the living area of the firehouse. The kitchen was located downstairs, behind the truck bay, but aside from cooking and tending the equipment, most of the firemen's activities were centered upstairs.

A huge bar, surrounded by barstools, took up most of the upstairs room. Behind the bar hung a large mirror surmounted with their company's logo, a bulldog set in the center of a fireman's cross. Next to the bar a brass pole shone, rising up from the first floor truck bay through a hole cut in the floor. It was mostly for show and tradition, and although Ash had a go at sliding down it, the majority of the firefighters simply used the stairs. A pool table, three small round tables, a few chairs, and a television set on a rickety entertainment center rounded out the furnishings of the room. Near the back of the room a door led to the showers and another small room that held three single beds.

The showers and the beds were for the convenience of the firefighters of Engine Company 4, but were rarely used for their intended purpose. The community in which the firefighters served kept their company as a volunteer organization, and most firefighters went to their own homes to shower and sleep. The beds were used more by firefighters who had a date and needed somewhere to fuck other than their own beds. Considering that most of the company was married, with the exception of Murphy, Ash, and a few others, it was a convenient, discreet place to bring their dates after hours.

Needless to say, since the rest of the company was still at the house fire and likely would remain there for several hours at the least, the entire second floor of the firehouse was deserted. Ash and Joe wearily made their way across the recreation room, and toward the showers.

Murphy plopped his helmet on the pool table, stripping off his coat as he walked. He was in still in top shape, despite having seen the far side of thirty-five. His shoulders bulged with muscles clearly outlined under his thin, sweat-soaked tshirt, and his narrow waist seemed to swim in his bunker pants, which were held up by red suspenders.

Tired and hot, feeling disturbed, by his first real experience in a blazing building, Ash couldn't prevent the rush of blood to his groin as he walked behind Murphy toward the showers. He'd been attracted to Murphy's dark good looks since his first day on the force, and had been thrilled when the Captain had assigned him to the Lieutenant as his partner during his probationary period. Still, Murphy had never given him the slightest indication that Ash's attraction was reciprocated, and Ash kept his feelings to himself.

Now, as they both stripped in the small dressing room next to the showers, Ash purposefully took his time, not wanting to drop his bunker pants and reveal the erection rearing against his belly.

Murphy showed no sign of noticing Ash's reluctance to undress, busying himself by shedding the rest of his turnout gear. His sopping wet t-shirt and underwear came off. He walked naked into the showers.

In a moment, Ash heard the splattering of water against the tiles.

Murphy's rounded ass, dusted with dark hair rolled nicely with each step away from Ash and walked toward the

showers. The sight had done nothing to dispel the problem that rose between Ash's legs. Ash took a deep breath, and finally gave himself the pleasure of removing his turnout gear and underwear, wrinkling his nose at the smell of smoke and sweat clinging to them.

He walked into the showers, already clouding with steam from Murphy's cubicle, and slipped into another stall, pulling the shower curtain closed. He breathed a sigh of relief that he'd made it past his Lieutenant without Murphy noticing his hard-on.

Standing under the hot water of the shower, Ash allowed it to sluice away the worst of the grime that covered his skin. Picking up a bar of soap, Ash rubbed it over his tired and sore muscles, trying desperately to think of something, anything, other than his Lieutenant doing the same to his naked body not five feet away from where Ash stood. Just as Ash thought that he was going to have to jerk himself off in the shower to relieve his erection, the memory of the bodies they'd found that day loomed up in his mind.

In a flash it was almost as if Ash were back in the burning bedroom. The oppressive heat, and the sight of the burned flesh came roaring back. Ash groaned, leaned forward to brace himself against the slick tiles of the shower stall from assault of the memory.

He didn't hear the shower curtain move or realize that Murphy slipped into the stall with him until a pair of strong hands on his shoulders turned Ash away from the wall.

Ash trembled, his eyes wide and still seeing the inside of the burning bedroom. Murphy appeared, reaching behind Ash to turn off the water. "Aw, kid, I warned you that it was going to catch up with you." He led Ash out of the shower, grabbing a towel from the rack nearby. Leading Ash out of the showers and into the small dressing area, he sat Ash down on a bench, and gently toweled him dry before sitting down next to him. "Let it out, kid. Talk to me."

"I can't get it out of my head, Murphy. It's like I'm stuck in that bedroom with those two poor bastards. I can still *smell* them, Joe!" Ash ran his hands through his light brown hair, twisting the wet strands in his fingers. It was crazy, he knew. His facemask had prevented him from smelling anything, but his brain refused to admit it. He was gagging on a phantom smell of burned pork.

"I know, Ash. Believe me, I understand. Come on, I know what you need," Murphy pulled Ash up by the arm and led him back out into the common room, heedless of the fact that they were both still naked. He sat Ash on a barstool and slipped behind the bar, filling a couple of glasses with two fingers each of good scotch. He placed one glass on the counter before Ash., "What you need is my patented Crispy-Critter Recovery Plan. This is step one. Drink up. It'll do you good, kid." Murphy tossed his own back.

Ash lifted his with a trembling hand to his lips and slowly drained the glass. He coughed as the fiery liquid slid down his throat to warm his belly.

Murphy took the empty glasses and tossed them into the sink behind the bar, then walked around and grabbed Ash under one of his arms, urging him up from the barstool. "Let's

go, rookie. That scotch is just step number one in Murphy's Two-step Program." He smiled as he Ash into the back room where the beds were located.

Murphy put his hands on Ash's shoulders, pushing him onto his back on one of the cots, then sat himself down on the edge of the bed. "Remember what I told you about the heat, Ash? You've already learned that it's our worst enemy because it kills everything it touches. Now you need to learn about how it can be your best friend. Heat can make you forget, Ash. At least, *this* kind of heat can." He leaned down over the reclined firefighter. Gently he pressed his lips against Ash's. He trailed fingers lightly over Ash's furred sac, and ran them over Ash's softened cock.

Ash moaned into Murphy's mouth as Murphy deepened his kiss, pushing his tongue inside of Ash's mouth as fingers tightened around Ash's newly awakening erection. Murphy's thumb teased at the tiny slit on its head for a moment, before his fingers wrapped around the length of Ash's cock and stroked it slowly.

Tasting the scotch on Murphy's velvety soft tongue and the warmth of his hand curving around Ash's erection drove all thoughts but those of the muscular Lieutenant from Ash's mind. He tentatively reached out with one hand, and let his fingers slide over Murphy's hairy chest and belly. Murphy's cock was thick and heavy, and already beading with droplets of wetness. Its heat burned Ash's palm, and ignited his own groin with a fire much more pleasant than the one they'd attended to earlier.

Breaking away from Ash's soft, warm lips, Murphy stood up, and bent over the cot. His voice was rough with need. "Move over."

Ash scooted over as far as the narrow cot would allow and twisted onto his side, giving Murphy just enough room to lower himself down next to Ash. Murphy hovered over Ash's erection, and Ash found Murphy's cock bobbing close enough to hit him in the chin.

Murphy parted his lips and drew the head of Ash's cock into his mouth. His tongue swirled over the rounded head, flicking lightly along the ridge before drawing the length in deeply.

Ash's breath came in heavy pants as Murphy's talented tongue and lips did a number on Ash's cock. He lifted one of Murphy's muscular thighs and urged the Lieutenant to spread his legs. Faced with Murphy's hairy ass, Ash spread the Lieutenant's cheeks with his fingers, exposing his small, puckered brown asshole. Ash breathed deeply, allowing the musky scent of Murphy's sex to fill his lungs and overpower the lingering odor of smoke that Ash could still smell with every breath. Flicking out his tongue, he rimmed Murphy's wrinkled asshole, sucking and licking at it, before finally pushing his tongue into the Lieutenant's body.

Murphy rose to his knees, straddling Ash's shoulders.

From his moans, Ash could tell the tongue in his ass was driving him crazy. Encouraged, Ash's fingers wrapped around Murphy's erection, and jerked him with smooth movements as his tongue continued to lash Murphy's ass.

Bending over, Murphy renewed his attention to Ash's cock. Between the sweet suction on his dick, and the taste of man in his mouth, Ash couldn't hold back any longer. He came, hard, every muscle in his body becoming rigid with the power of his release.

As soon as Ash's orgasm waned, he thrust a finger deeply into Murphy's ass without warning, fucking him hard as Ash's other hand continued to pull on the tender foreskin of Murphy's cock. Being finger-fucked was evidently enough to do Murphy in, because he came in great, hot white spurts over the rookie's fist.

They lay together for a few moments feeling each other's spunk cooling on their skin before disentangling and sitting up on the bed.

Murphy grinned at Ash "Feel better?"

Ash blushed and nodded, unable to speak, and not sure of what to say.

"Good. Hit the showers, rookie. I'm going to take a quick one then go fry us up some burgers." He smacked Ash on the ass when Ash stood up and walked past him on the way to the showers. "Don't look so shocked, kid. Before it was *my* two-step program, it was the Captain's."

\* \* \* \*

It was a year later, almost to the day. Murphy sat next to Ash in the cab of the pumper as they sped along the streets of the city in route to a fire, sirens wailing and lights flashing. The Sweet Side Of The Ropes: Enthralling Tales Of Male-Male Romance by Kiernan Kelly

Ash ignored Murphy's snort as he lectured the rookie who'd been assigned to him by the Captain that very afternoon "Heat is a firefighter's worst enemy and best friend..."

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## THE SWEET SIDE OF THE ROPES

Cameras clicked and whirred, lights rapidly flashing his shadow against the brick wall of the restaurant as he was hustled out of the building and into the waiting limo by thicknecked bodyguards. Fans and camera crews had shown up outside the restaurant while Travis was ecstatically shoving a cannoli into his mouth, powdered sugar dusting the front of his black tee shirt.

Travis! Travis! Travis!

His name echoed all around him, screamed by the crowd of people who swarmed on the sidewalks. No doubt word leaked out that he'd be having dinner at Mamma Giovanni's tonight, and a throng of fans and curious rubber-neckers had gathered outside the tiny restaurant.

Travis supposed that he should be used to it by now. That's how it always happened in Tinseltown—somebody would post a word or two on their blog and the next thing you knew, you were clutching a garlic-scented doggy bag to your chest like a football, flanked by men big enough to have actually played for the NFL as they rushed your ass into the limo while fans screamed, and the paparazzi clicked away.

If Travis ever found out who leaked the news that he'd had a sudden hankering for spaghetti and meatballs, he'd beat the guy to a pulp, fire and then rehire the guy just so that he could have the pleasure of beating and firing him all over again.

All Travis wanted was a plate of Mamma Giovanni's homemade spaghetti and meatballs smothered with Romano cheese, and to eat it in relative peace and quiet. What he'd gotten was a media feeding frenzy and his face—mouth smeared with marina sauce, cheeks puffed out like a goddamn chipmunk—plastered on the front page of the tabloids in the morning.

And Bernie, Travis' manager, on the telephone, screaming his head off about it.

"Travis! What the hell were you thinking? Are you trying to kill me? Is that it? Oy! It would be kinder to just mix arsenic with my ulcer medication. Did you see the papers this morning? Did you?"

Bernie's voice wasn't easy on the ears on his best day. When he was angry, as he was now, it was positively *shrill*. Travis closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and let Bernie rant. Eventually, he'd run out of steam—he always did.

"Haven't I told you—begged you—to give me the heads up before you make a personal appearance? Did you see the photo on the front page of *Entertainment Now*?"

Of course Travis had seen it, although he wouldn't add fuel to Bernie's fire by telling him so. *Country Music's Most Eligible Bachelor Binges at Restaurant—Alone! Does America's Favorite Boy-Next-Door Suffer From Eating Disorder?* 

"Do you have any idea of what could happen to you if people spotted you on the street without a bodyguard? They'd rip you to pieces, Travis. Is that what you want? To be sent back to Hog Holler in a box? Hell, make that a *baggie*, because there wouldn't be enough left of you to *fill* a box."

Travis sighed. "I'm from Shelby, Tennessee, Bernie, not—" "Wherever—you're missing the point, Travis! Wasn't it bad enough when they started that rumor about you being you-know-what when you were spotted near the Tiger's Club? I still have a headache from trying to deal with that picture of you dancing with that underwear model, whatever his name was, that popped up on YouTube."

"I've already apologized for that, Bernie, and his name was Joshua. What do you expect me to do, anyway? I *am* gay, you know."

"Not to the millions of hormone factories who buy your music and posters, you're not! And what have I told you about using the "G" word? Do you want the Moral Majority to boycott your albums?"

"Bernie—"

"Don't get me started again, Travis. This fame you're sitting on is like a house of cards. One ill-blown breeze and it's going to come crashing down around your ears. It's not just *you* anymore, kid. Think about all the people who work for you who'd be out of a job if you crash and burn. Think about *me*, for chrissakes! My alimony isn't going to pay itself, you know."

"I understand, Bernie. I'm sorry. I only wanted a nice, quiet dinner out, no press, no fans, no spotlight..."

"That's impossible, and you know it. Look, Travis, you wanted to be famous, right? Wanted your songs on the radio and your CDs on the shelves, and a nice, thick bank account? Well, you got your dream. But I told you when I first signed

you that it was going to come at a price. Every time you fart it makes the evening news, Travis. You have to be careful!"

"I'm tired of being careful! I'm closing in on thirty years old! I want a life, Bernie!" Both Travis' voice and temper rose as he paced back and forth across the living room floor.

"You have a life, and it's a goddamn good one! People would kill for your life! You're fucking Travis Steel! You can't just up and decide to go out like normal people!"

Normal. Travis didn't think he knew what normal was, anymore. He used to know. Back when he was a skinny kid from the hills of Tennessee, long on dreams and short on cash, singing at every two-bit local bar that would have him. Back when Sunday dinners were covered dish potlucks, eaten after services in the field behind the church. Where a man wore jeans because they were sturdy and stood up under a hard day's work, and not because they had some hot-shot designer's name stitched on the rear end.

But Travis had wanted more for himself than a life spent carving coal out of a mountain, or digging in the dirt. He'd wanted fame and fortune, a big house, lots of shiny new toys.

Be careful what you wish for, his mother's voice whispered in his head. You might just get it.

"Travis? Travis! Are you listening to me?" Bernie's voice crackled over the phone.

"Yeah, Bernie. I hear you. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

Bernie sighed dramatically. "Okay. I'll see what I can do about damage control. Just keep your head down from now on, will you? No more surprise appearances. You want

Italian? Send for take-out and for God's sake, let one of the staff answer the door when it gets there!"

Click.

Travis flipped his phone closed and tucked it into his back pocket. He flopped onto the butter-soft, white leather sofa in the living room of his sprawling home in the hills of Beverly, letting his head fall back, staring at the vaulted ceiling.

It was times like this when he wanted to go home. When, more than anything, he wanted to be good ol' Travis McGentry again, the nobody with empty pockets and a secondhand guitar; back when he could walk down the streets of Nashville without anyone batting an eye.

Now he was Travis Steel, the bestselling country singer on the planet. His face was plastered on album covers, posters, calendars, mugs, t-shirts, on television—he'd even done a bit part in that action flick, *Warmonger*. Hell, he had his own action figure that came with a guitar and karate-chop action, and his own line of cologne.

Travis seriously doubted that there was a soul in the U.S., Canada, the larger part of Europe, and most of Japan who wouldn't recognize him on sight. Bernie was right. He couldn't expect to go anywhere without causing a scene simply by showing up.

He had millions of fans across the globe, and yet there he sat, all alone.

Maybe he should get a dog.

No, Travis frowned, correcting himself. Maybe he should get a *life*.

There was one place he could go where people would welcome him without fawning over him, where the only camera in sight would be an ancient Polaroid that sat on a shelf in the hall closet covered in a thick layer of dust.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his cell phone, flipped it open and pushed three on speed dial.

"Hey, Mama. It's me. I'm comin' home."

\* \* \* \*

"Bernie, I know, and I'm sorry. But I need this, Bernie. I need to go home for a while. It's too late, Bernie. I'm already in Tennessee. We just landed. I'm going to rent a truck and drive to my folk's place, and then on up to my daddy's cabin. Bernie ... Bernie, you'd best take one your stomach pills. I ain't coming back for a while, a month maybe. Bernie ... Bernie, I'm hanging up now. You take care. I'll call you when I get back in town. Bye, Bernie."

Travis hit "end" and looked at the phone, then tossed it into the first trash receptacle he passed. No more phone calls. No more headaches. No more demands. For the first time in years, Travis felt free.

He was wearing his oldest pair of jeans, plain old Levis, worn thin and shredded at the knees, and a red flannel shirt over a white tee. He'd dyed his trademark wheat-blond hair black, and had a ball cap pulled down low over his forehead. Aviator sunglasses and scuffed brown work boots completed his disguise.

Walking through the terminal toward Baggage, he kept his head down, making eye contact with no one. No use in tempting fate—so far, he hadn't been recognized and he wanted to keep it that way. Once he got home, it would be different. There he was still just Travis McGentry, Buck and Emmaline's oldest boy. He was Shelby born and bred, and in Shelby, that was all that mattered.

His bag came around on the carousel. It was a dull army green duffle that he'd bought as soon as he'd decided to go home and realized that his *Louis Vuitton* luggage would only attract unwanted attention to him. He grabbed it, slung the strap over his shoulder and headed for the car rental.

"Travis? Holy shit, is that you? What in the hell did you do to yourself?"

Travis' head snapped toward the tall, lanky man who was leaning against the wall near the rental counter. The man's sandy hair was cropped close on the top and sides and long in back in an honest-to-Christ mullet, and his blue eyes twinkled in a face that time hadn't yet managed to reshape. Travis recognized him in an instant.

"Booger?"

The man laughed, free and easy. "Yeah, it's me. And here I was, worried that you might have forgotten me."

"Hell, no! What are you doing here?" Travis walked over with his hand extended. He found himself pulled into a bone-crunching hug that lifted him clear off his feet, instead.

"Your Daddy couldn't come—Alba's fixin' to pop out a calf at any second. Your Ma asked me to come down and tote you back." "Oh." Travis cast a glance at the rental counter. "I was going to have Daddy rent a truck for me. Didn't want to do it myself because ... well, you know..."

"Boy, howdy! Your Ma drilled it into my head when she called me. Said nobody was to know you were here. Look, you don't have to rent a truck—you can use my old one while you're here. I bought a newer one last spring, a sweet Ford 250. She only had 75,000 miles and not a nick on her."

"Oh, man, that would be great. Thanks, Booger."

"Don't sweat it. Come on, now. If I don't get you home soon, your Ma's likely to be madder than a bee-stung dog. She'll get that big ol' wooden spoon of hers and take it out on my hide."

Travis laughed, shifting the weight of his duffle from one shoulder to the other. Damn, it felt good to be home, talking to a friendly face who didn't give a rat's ass about when his next album was coming out or who was sleeping in his bed.

"So, you still riding stallions instead of mares?"

He stood corrected. "Booger! What kind of a question is that?"

"An honest one. You know how folk think in Shelby. Just a friendly warning to keep your head down, is all."

Travis felt his cheeks heat up, and ducked his head.

"Understood. Look, Booger ... my folks don't know about—"

"Don't worry. I'm not going to say anything. Ain't my place to tell them."

"Thanks, Booger."

Booger led Travis to a dark blue Ford 250, splattered with mud, and sporting a gun rack mounted on the back window.

Travis threw his duffle into the back and settled down in the front passenger seat for the long ride up into the mountains to Shelby.

\* \* \* \*

Home was a large, split-log cabin built at the turn of the century by Travis' great-grandfather. Not much had changed about the place in the years that followed, aside from the addition of a generator, a tiny bathroom, and running water. It had only been during the past two years that Travis had a few luxuries—a new, more powerful generator, a big screen TV, satellite dish, and a washer and dryer—installed, and he'd had to fight tooth and nail with his parents to do *that* much. Not that his parents were against progress—it was the money he'd spent that they worried about. They knew Travis was well-off, but they just couldn't comprehend exactly how *much* money Travis had made, and they'd hated the thought of him spending a single nickel on them that wasn't necessary.

Hell, he'd offered to move them out to Beverly Hills and set them up in a house with a maid and a gardener, and his daddy had nearly popped a blood vessel. Their protests came from a lifetime spent counting pennies and pinching them for all they were worth. To them, tomorrow was just a nickel away from starvation, and they wouldn't allow Travis to spend any of his "nest egg" on them. Eventually, Travis had won them over, but other than those few changes, the cabin stood as it had for the past hundred years.

Everyone was there: Ma, Daddy, Travis' three younger sisters and four younger brothers, Aunt Alice, Ma's widowed

sister, and Nana, Daddy's mother. It was a family gathering just like the ones Travis remembered—a loud and comfortable chaos.

Booger stayed for dinner, venison stew with fresh baked biscuits, followed by Ma's deep dish cherry cobbler.

Afterward, Travis sat back in his chair sipping at a cup of coffee, just enjoying being home.

Booger scraped the last of the cherry cobbler off his plate and looked at Travis. "So, Travis ... what's it like, being a big shot singer out in California?"

Travis shrugged. "I don't know ... busy, I guess. I spend a lot of time in the studio, recording, and I have to make all sorts of appearances. Bernie—he's my manager—says that you've got to keep your face in front of the cameras all the time, don't let anyone ever forget what you look like. Gets annoying, that's for sure. I like to sing and write songs, but I ain't much for yakking it up on those talk shows and whatnot."

"Yeah, but you get special treatment, right? Good tables in restaurants and such?"

Travis nodded. "There's that. You get to be on the sweet side of the velvet ropes, where everyone else wants to be."

"Sounds pretty fine to me," Booger laughed, toasting Travis with his coffee mug. "So, why did you leave?"

"Yeah, well, it got to the point where I couldn't leave the house without getting mobbed. That's why I came home. I want to forget about the ropes and the fans and the hoopla for a while. Remember how to be me again." Travis stood up and stretched, then kissed his mother and grandmother on

their cheeks, shook his father's hand. "Where's that old truck of yours, Booger? I want to get up to the cabin before dark."

"It's already there. I figured you wouldn't be staying here since the bedrooms are full, so your daddy followed me up there and we parked it at the cabin. I'll drive you up."

\* \* \* \*

Travis spent the first few minutes of the drive to the cabin watching the scenery rush by. Autumn in the mountains had always been his favorite season. The trees were ablaze with color, from deep purples to fiery oranges and reds to brilliant yellows, and there was a nip in the air that foretold of quiet winters deep with snow.

After a while, he watched Booger out of the corner of his eye. Travis' lips quirked in an amused smile—nothing had changed about Booger in the ten years Travis had been gone, including his haircut. He was still as skinny as a matchstick and twice as hot. Long, lean, and strong, his biceps bulged against the fabric of his flannel shirt as he steered the truck over the pitted, rough dirt road that wound up deeper into the mountains.

Travis would never describe Booger as handsome. His jaw was too sharp, his lips were too thin, and his ears stuck out like jug handles on the sides of his head. But when he smiled, when his cheeks hitched up in that shit-eating grin of his, and those blue eyes sparkled, well then, Jethro "Booger" Howery was downright adorable.

Not that Travis would ever tell him that. Lord, no. Not unless he wanted to fork over a few thousand dollars for a set

of brand new teeth after Booger finished knocking out the ones God had planted in Travis' mouth.

Booger had been Travis' best friend throughout school and the last face he'd seen when Travis left Shelby. Booger was the one who'd driven Travis to the bus depot, and had loaded Travis and his guitar on the Greyhound to Nashville. Booger had never left Shelby as far as Travis knew. He took a job logging, like his daddy. That hadn't surprised Travis, but the fact that Booger had never married did. Most men in their neck of the woods were married right out of high school, if not sooner, usually to their childhood sweethearts.

Maybelle Atkins. That was the name of the girl Booger had been taken with when Travis left Shelby. "Hey, Booger? Whatever happened to Maybelle? I thought you'd be married to her with forty kids by now."

Booger snorted. "Nah. It didn't work out. She up and married Clinton Sawyer, from over on Potbelly Ridge. Got herself three little gap-toothed kids and another on the way. Me? I'm a tried and true bachelor."

"Well, ain't that something. You, who couldn't go more than two hours without getting laid—"

"Whoa. Didn't say I wasn't getting any. Said I didn't marry Maybelle."

"So, who is she?"

"Well, let me introduce you. Her name's Mary." Booger cracked a smile and held up his right hand. "She's got herself five sisters, and they all know how to take care of a man."

Travis hooted, batting Booger's hand away. Same old Booger.

An hour later, just as the sun was setting behind the mountain peaks, casting the surrounding forest in deepening shades of purple, they pulled up in front of a tiny cabin tucked up tight in a grove of blue-green pines. A faded red, beat-to-shit pickup sat next to it. The pickup was sprinkled with bird shit and had one primer-gray bumper.

The men in Travis' family had kept the small cabin for nearly as many years as they'd had the house. It was a getaway, somewhere they could go to fart and scratch their balls without the womenfolk a-huffing and puffing at them, as Travis' daddy would say. Where they'd run and hide when they did wrong was his Ma's explanation. It was very small, just one room. No electricity, no telephone, no running water, and the only amenity was the outhouse. But the one thing it had in spades was privacy.

"Come on, I'll help you get settled in." Booger turned off the motor. He was out of the truck and inside the door before Travis could say anything to the contrary.

The cabin smelled like old smoke and piss. The first thing Travis did was throw open the windows to air it out. Booger was already piling wood in the hearth, kindling the fire.

Travis noticed that someone had stocked the pantry shelves above the black, cast iron potbelly stove with canned stuff—beans, vegetables, tuna, and stew. There was a fresh loaf of home-baked bread, coffee, sugar, and a full case of beer.

Good ol' Booger, Travis thought, smiling. The man knew Travis like a book, even after all these years. He'd known that Travis wouldn't have thought to bring food up to the cabin.

Adding that to the sack of leftovers Ma had sent up with him would keep Travis from having to leave the cabin for a week.

Speaking of Booger, he'd stretched out on his back in front of the fireplace, forearms tucked under his head, ankles crossed, one foot tapping to a melody only he could hear. He was looking at Travis from under his eyelashes, studying him.

"Don't know if I like the black hair. And you're too damn skinny. I've seen more meat on a year-dead skeeter."

Travis blinked, automatically reaching for his head. "It's not forever. I had to dye it so that no one would recognize me. And I may not be fat, but I'm not anorexic, either."

"Son, from where I'm sitting it looks like you've got a north and a south, but no east or west."

"Since when do you care about stuff like that anyway?"
Travis felt a little offended, although he couldn't put his finger on why. It was only Booger, after all.

"Didn't say I cared. Just pointing out the obvious, is all." Booger turned his head away as if to stare at the dancing flames in the hearth.

Travis noticed that his foot began to tap faster, as if the music in Booger's head had picked up tempo.

"Well, what about you? You're as skinny as a rail, and still sporting a *mullet*, for chrissakes! It was already out of style ten years ago when you first got it."

"Betsy Hammond cuts it for me down at the Clip and Curl in Shelby. She says it makes me look like Billy Ray Cyrus."

Travis chuckled, shaking his head. "No way! He's got you by at least fifty pounds, and his hair is brown."

Booger arched an eyebrow. "You don't see the resemblance?"

"Nope. Not a bit."

"I can sing as good as he can. Don't tell my heart, my achy breaky heart..."

"Booger, I hate to break it to you, but music ain't one of your God-given talents."

"Yeah? Well, I can do a mean Achy Breaky dance."

"I'll have to take your word on that," Travis laughed.

"You should see my Tush Push."

Travis snorted. "Hell, Booger! That there's a picture I didn't need in my head,"

"Why? Something wrong with my tush?" Booger asked, looking affronted. He twisted, as if trying to get a look at his own behind.

Nope, Travis thought. There's not a damn thing wrong with that butt. It filled out the back of Booger's jeans perfectly. His laughter trailed off, his body tightening. Oh Lordy, what in hell is wrong with me? This is Booger, for God's sake—that settles it. I need to get laid as soon as I get back to California. It's been way too long, if thinking about Booger gives me a hard-on. Travis tore his eyes away, feeling his cheeks heat up. Walking to the small table under the window, Travis sat down, lifting his face and letting the brisk air that blew in cool his blush.

"It's nearly full dark, Booger." Travis barely managed to squeak it out as visions of Booger tush-pushing—naked—continued to float through his head. His cock filled, refusing to behave, even though Travis kept reminding it that this was

Booger he was fantasizing about. "Don't you think you ought to be getting on home?"

"Nah. I'll camp out here for the night. Don't want to risk scratching my new truck up trying to work my way down the mountain in the dark."

Shit! Travis swore silently. He couldn't insist that Booger leave—not after Booger had been kind enough to pick him up at the airport, drive him home and then up to the cabin, loan him his truck, stock the cabin with food...

It was going to be a long, long night.

He stood up, grabbed a couple of beers from the pantry shelf, tossed one to Booger and popped one open for himself. He drained it in several long swallows and reached for another.

Maybe, if he drank enough, he could drown his hard-on. If not, at least he'd be feeling no pain when Booger finally noticed it and beat the shit out of him.

\* \* \* \*

It was still full dark when Travis blinked awake. The fire was crackling in the hearth, casting an orange glow across the pine board floor. The window was still open, and the chill air raised gooseflesh on Travis' bare skin.

Whoa ... wait a minute. Bare skin?

The first thing that Travis noticed was that he was naked. The second was that his hands had been tied to the headboard of the bed, his ankles to the footboard. His heart began to thump wildly in his chest as fear made him begin to sweat despite the chill in the room. He instinctively began to

fight the ropes, thrashing on the mattress as questions shot through his mind like quicksilver. What the fuck happened? Who tied me up? Why? And where the hell is Booger?

Travis' last question was answered first when a low chuckle came from a chair set near the fireplace. Booger sat in it, feet propped up on a stool, arms crossed over his chest, watching Travis. The table nearby was strewn with empty beer cans.

Oh, Lord. How much did we drink last night?

"Booger? What the hell did you do?" Travis stilled, too relieved to be angry. It was nothing but a stupid practical joke. Booger had no doubt thought it would be funny for Travis to wake up and find himself naked and trussed up like a Christmas turkey. Stupid bastard. "Booger, turn me loose so I can beat the snot out of you."

"Nope. Sorry. No can do, Travis."

"Booger, this isn't funny!" Travis yelled, pulling hard at the ropes that held his hands and feet to the bed. The ropes were heavy nylon, and struggling did nothing to loosen them.
"What the hell's got into you? Turn. Me. Loose!"

"I can't, Travis. I promised your Ma."

"You promised Ma to strip me naked and tie me up?"

"Well, no ... that part was my idea. She asked me to keep you up here for a while. Said she was worried about you, that you sounded so damned unhappy when you called home. She doesn't like what that Bernie guy is doing to you, Travis—making you do this, and do that, go here, and go there. You said it yourself. You said that you can't even take a piss without someone popping out of the bowl with a camera."

The Sweet Side Of The Ropes: Enthralling Tales Of Male-Male Romance by Kiernan Kelly

"That's my job, Booger. I—"

"Thought your job was to make music." His normally husky voice dropped another octave, and sent a warm jolt through Travis' belly and made him forget about struggling against the ropes for a minute.

"It is, but—"

"But nothing. That Bernie guy has you all mixed up, Travis. You let him make you a prisoner in your own home, afraid to go out by yourself, always having to clear every move you make with him first. Ain't no different from me tying you up here. It's no way for a man to live."

"That's different! This is crazy, Booger!"

"No, it ain't. The only difference is that you let this Bernie guy tie you up with contracts and legal mumbo jumbo, instead of rope. But in the end, you're still a prisoner."

"Bernie doesn't strip me bare-assed and tie me to the bed!"

"No, I suppose he don't. But hell, if I *have* to baby sit your ass up here, I might as well enjoy the view."

Travis' jaw dropped. "What?"

"Oh, come on, Travis!" Booger snorted, looking at him as if Travis had a melon growing on his neck instead of a head. "Lord, that pretty face of yours is wrapped around a really thick skull, ain't it?"

"You don't ... you aren't..."

"Says who? It's why Maybelle and me broke up. I figured it out just in time, too—her daddy was shining up the shotgun and eyeing the preacher. She's cool with it now, but I wore a cast iron skillet in my pants for a month just in case I ran into

her daddy. Boy, howdy! He would have ripped my balls off and stuffed them up my ass if he had the chance."

Travis was floored by Booger's confession, but his stupor only lasted for the space of a few heartbeats before he tugged at the ropes again. "That's still no excuse, Booger. You can't just take my clothes and tie me up!"

"Sure I can. I just did. 'Course, you being passed out drunk helped a mite."

"This is illegal, Booger. You could go to jail! Is that what you want?"

Booger gave him one of those shit-eating grins. He stood up and walked over to the bed. "You gonna call the cops when I finally let you go? Turn your old pal in? Me? Booger? I always had your back when we were growing up. Remember that time when you broke the window of the First Baptist? That pretty stained glass one Reverend Aldritch was always abraggin' on?"

Damn it. Yes, Travis did remember it. Booger had stepped up and had taken the blame, sparing Travis both a lecture and a trip to the woodshed with Daddy.

"Or the time you said you was going necking with Emma Wilson, but I found you with her brother Bobby Lee instead?"

Yeah, he remembered that one, too. If Booger had gone to Ma and Daddy with *that* tale, Travis' backside would *still* be smarting, fifteen years later.

"Not to mention that your friend Bernie would probably be spitting kittens if'n word got out about you and me up here, alone, and you being tied up, naked. Figure them supermarket rag sheets would have a field day with a story like that."

"That's blackmail, Booger!"

"No, that's just the God's honest truth, Travis. I didn't say that I wanted to see that happen. I don't. Lord knows you worked hard enough to hide who you are from everybody. I'm not going to be the one to open the closet door and shine the light in on you."

Travis grunted and let his head fall back on the pillow in defeat. "So, what do you want from me, Booger?"

To Travis' surprise, Booger sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. He traced a finger along the white clothesline that bound Travis' hands to the headboard. "At supper, you talked about them velvet ropes, the ones that keep most folk out of places like those ritzy nightclubs in LA and New York. People try their whole lives to get inside those ropes—hell, you've been trying, too, and you finally made it. I'm real glad for you, Travis. Proud, too."

"Thanks. Now let me go."

"No. I ain't done, yet. Hear me out. You got yourself all wrapped up in those fancy velvet ropes, but they're *fake*, Travis. They're pretty, but they're worthless when it comes down to it. Put any kind of pressure on them and they'll snap. But this rope, this here plain old nylon, is the kind that gets a job done. It's dependable. It's strong. It won't break. You can count on it."

"Booger..."

"Aw, forget it. Guess it was a piss-poor idea, huh? I'll untie you."

Travis looked up into Booger's eyes. Soft blue, the same color as the creeping myrtle that grew wild on the hills around the cabin, they were shadowed with regret and a longing that both confused Travis and seared him to his core. What the hell was *really* going on inside Booger's head? He wasn't just talking about ropes, for sure. More than that, why was Travis' body tight with lust, when he should be fighting tooth and nail to get free?

Maybe, Travis realized, it was because nobody else he knew wanted Travis *McGentry*. His fans, the record label, the corporate sponsors, hell, even Bernie only wanted Travis *Steel*.

Not Booger. Booger didn't know the man Travis had become. He only knew the man Travis used to be and that was the man Booger had tied to the bed.

Wasn't that why Travis had come home? To shake himself loose of Travis Steel and find the man he'd once been? It had been so long since he'd had someone touch him without worrying about cameras or tabloids or YouTube videos...

"Wait," he whispered. "Show me. Show me the sweet side of *these* ropes, Booger."

Booger's cheek hitched in a smile. "You sure? Because if you still want to get loose..."

"You're gonna make me beg, now?"

"Maybe."

"Booger! You bas—"

Laughing, Booger leaned down and pressed his finger against Travis' lips, silencing the retort that was dancing behind his teeth. "Hush up, now."

Booger stared hard at him, silent, until Travis actually began to squirm on the mattress under his unwavering gaze. He wasn't doing anything. Why wasn't he doing something? "Booger..."

"Now, I said to hush, and I mean it, Travis. I reckon that pretty voice of yours could call the birds down from the sky, but I don't want to hear it right now. Not a word, not a sound. If'n you can't keep quiet, I've got a rag handy..."

Travis pressed his lips together tightly, shaking his head.

"Good boy." Booger's fingers left the rope that bound Travis' hands and slid slowly down his forearm, following the contours of the muscles under Travis' skin. They skimmed over Travis' shoulder to his chest, stopping midway between his nipples. "Got yourself a fine chest, Travis. Strong. Sexy. Know that album cover of yours, the one with you in that blue work shirt? Mmm, mmm, spent lots of nights looking at the picture, at the little bit of skin you was showing, wanting to rip it open and run my fingers through the hair on your chest. Just like this." Booger spread his fingers, pushing them through the curly blondish-red chest hair sprinkled over Travis' torso.

Travis bit his cheek to keep from crying out when Booger pinched one of his nipples, giving it a playful twist that sent a bolt of heat straight to Travis' groin. His cock jerked in response, bobbing up as if to tempt Booger's hand to play with it next.

Strong fingers trailed over Travis' flat stomach, circling his bellybutton, ghosting over his hipbones, squeezing his inner thighs—stroking him everywhere but the one place Travis sorely wanted Booger to touch. They wandered to the back of Travis' knee, his calf, the inside of his ankle, his instep, then slowly back up, over his hip, across his stomach, his chest, until Booger's hand cupped his jaw. Never once did Booger even brush against Travis' erection, and his dick was making its displeasure known. Travis couldn't remember the last time he'd been this turned on, this needful. *Damn it, Booger*, he thought, it you don't do something soon, I'm gonna pop like a shook-up bottle of Coke.

Booger's fingers tightened on his jaw, as if he could read Travis' thoughts. Leaning in, he kissed Travis hard, tongue pushing in, warm and wet and taking no prisoners.

Lord the man can kiss! Travis thought, trying to arch up into it, to taste more of it.

Booger wasn't having any of it, though. The flat of his hand smacked onto Travis' chest, pushing him back down. "Don't tempt me, boy. That rope can surely sting if'n I take it to your backside. Set still."

It was all Travis could do not to whine when Booger pulled away and stood up, but as he began to undress, Travis forgot his disappointment.

Under his flannel shirt and worn jeans, Booger was all lean, hard muscle. There wasn't an ounce of fat to spare on his long frame, just pounds of finely molded, firm flesh. Like a kid set loose in a candy store, Travis' eyes danced here and there, from shoulder to stomach, from hip to calf and back, not sure where he wanted to look next.

No fancy boxers or silky shorts for Booger—his underwear was as basic and as functional as he was, his white briefs

turned a little gray from frequent washings. He shimmied out of them quickly, leaving the rest of him bare to Travis' eyes.

His chest was smooth, his nipples large and peaked. Booger's stomach was ridged with muscle, undulating slightly as he breathed. Travis ached to touch him, to run his fingers—no, make that his *tongue* - across Booger's satin skin from his sternum to his crotch. *Lord*, Travis thought, *I could spend a month of Sundays down there alone*. Booger's cock was hard and thick, his balls swollen. Travis squeezed his eyes shut, taking a long, deep, shuddering breath. *Can't do it*, he thought. *Can't keep quiet and still when he looks so damn good!* 

The mattress dipped, and a weight settled over Travis' chest. Travis cracked open his eyes, his vision filled by Booger's heavy cock. He took a deep breath again, this time filling his nostrils with Booger's scent. Man and sex, thick and rich.

Wet with precum, Booger painted Travis' cheeks with fiery designs, dragging the head of his cock over the bristles of Travis' beard before brushing it over Travis' lips.

Without being told, Travis opened his mouth wide. *Give me*, he thought, looking up at Booger, silently begging. The first salty drop hit his tongue as Booger obliged; Booger's fat cock sliding past Travis' lips tasting better than anything Travis could remember putting in his mouth before. He opened even wider, lifting his head up, closing his lips over hot velvet skin, sucking hard.

"Lordy, Travis! You know how to do more with that mouth than sing, and that's the gospel truth." Booger moaned, and his hips tilted, feeding Travis more, until Travis felt Booger's cock hit the back of his throat and the fur on Booger's balls hit his chin. "Oh, fuck, yeah!" Booger howled as he came. "Take it, boy. Take it!"

Travis took it, all of it, as much as Booger wanted to feed him and still found himself wanting more. But Booger pulled away, dribbling the last few drops over Travis' bottom lip. Breathing heavily, he smiled that one-sided grin of his then scooted his bottom back a piece until Travis' aching cock was settled neatly between his cheeks.

"You've been a good boy, Travis. Did as you were told, didn't fuss. I reckon you earned it, huh?"

Travis nodded, still not allowing himself the smallest of sounds. His hands were numb, his arms ached from being tied overhead to the bed; his legs were stiff from his spreadeagled position, but he wasn't about to do a damn thing to ruin the moment. He wanted this so badly, more than he'd ever wanted anything, including his latest album to go platinum. He wasn't going to question the why of it—he just wanted to enjoy it.

Booger began to move, rocking Travis' cock between his cheeks as Travis' precum slicked the way. The hair that dusted Booger's asshole scraped against the sensitive skin of Travis' erection; his balls bounced lightly against Travis' belly. It didn't take long at all before Travis was there, right there, gritting his teeth to keep from shouting out. He teetered for a moment then fell over the edge, coming in spurts like an overheated volcano, hips thrusting up under Booger's ass.

Travis' head flopped back onto the pillow as he gasped for air. He knew he was smiling, grinning like a damn Cheshire cat, but he couldn't help himself. How long had it been since he'd experienced an orgasm like that? Hell, had he *ever* had one that powerful? His body felt as boneless as a sack of jellyfish, satisfied from the roots of his hair to the tips of his toes.

Booger returned his grin. "Now, don't these ropes beat those fancy velvet ones you was talking about?" He leaned down and pressed a soft, sweet kiss to Travis' smile.

"Oh, can I talk now?" Travis somehow found the energy to cock an eyebrow. He was sleepy in that warm, incredibly sated way a man got after emptying his balls until they rang hollow, and was wallowing in the happy, lazy feeling. His arms sagged, pulling at the ropes that bound his hands.

Snorting, Booger worked at the knots, letting Travis' hands fall free., They flopped onto the bed like a pair of dead fish. "I suppose so. Don't know why you want to waste that pretty mouth on words, though. It was doing just fine without them." Booger laughed, then untied his ankles and rolled off Travis, stretching out next to him.

Taking a deep breath, summoning his strength, Travis flipped over on top of Booger, his hands seizing Booger's wrists tightly, holding them over his head. Using his body weight, he pinned Booger to the bed and grabbed the ropes, quickly securing Booger's wrists to the bedposts.

"Well, lookee here. How's it feel, Booger?" Travis grinned down at him. "Maybe I'll keep you tied up for the rest of the week, see how you like it." He wouldn't, of course. Not the

whole week, anyway. He'd liked what Booger had done, how Booger had made him feel, but his pride insisted that he return the favor, if only for a little while.

To his surprise, Booger grinned at him. "Knew it," he said, looking up at Travis, beaming.

"Knew what?"

"That you'd learn."

"Learn what, Booger? How to tie a knot? My daddy taught me how to do that when I was ten."

Booger laughed. "No. How to fight. How to take back control. You forgot *how*, Travis. That's why those people out in California got you all twisted up in them velvet ropes. You *let* them, Travis, just like you let me tie you up."

"Damn it, Booger..." Travis sighed. "Okay, okay. I get the picture. When I get back to LA, I'm going to have a talk with Bernie." He smiled and bent his head, taking Booger's earlobe into his mouth. He worked his way down, nibbling at the sensitive skin below Booger's ear, slowly rubbing his softened erection against Booger's tight abdomen. When he had Booger squirming on the mattress, he let go and grinned down at him. "Who knows? Maybe I'll move back home, fly to Nashville or out to LA when I need to record. But there's one thing we're going to need if I do decide to move back," Travis said, looking directly into Booger's eyes.

"What's that?"

"A helluva lot more rope." Travis laughed and then kissed Booger until his eyes crossed and his knees knocked.

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## WAITING FOR DIMI

Foreclosure.

It's an ugly word that ranks right up there with *castration* and *emasculation*. God knows it has damn well near the same results, at least for me.

Yesterday, I owned a beautiful three bedroom, two-bath ranch on a quarter acre of land in a peaceful if older, pretty little subdivision. Today, all I have to my name are three small cardboard boxes and a plastic Hefty bag full of clothes, old remote controls, and a few mismatched pieces of dinnerware.

The bank took everything else.

Or rather, the bank took whatever my ex had turned her surgically sculpted nose up at during the divorce. Which wasn't much.

Bitch.

It was Tennyson, I think, who said, 'Tis better to have loved and lost then never to have loved at all.' Bullshit. I've loved and lost, and trust me, the lost part sucks the big fat one.

Actually, that isn't really fair. I know that I never really loved Holly. But the divorce still sucked big time, and believe me, I'm paying for my crimes in blood.

She wasn't content to simply dump me and run off with her new boy toy with his tennis whites, bottle tan, and capped teeth. Oh, no. She had to grab my balls in an iron fist and tear them clean off my body, via my wallet. No anesthetic either, unless you counted the bottle of Jack Daniels I drank last night during my final hours in the house I used to own. It didn't numb the pain, but it did give me the satisfaction of blowing chunks all over the new rugs we had put in last spring.

The only reason she'd been generous enough to give me the house during the divorce was because it was mortgaged up to the shingles. And did I see a single penny of the money we'd taken out against it? No, of course not. *She* needed a new BMW. *She* needed a cruise to the Virgin Islands. *She* needed a fucking fifteen hundred-dollar blue horse coat Shar Pei, whom she promptly named Princess, spoiled rotten, and slept with more than she did me.

All *I* needed was to have my head examined. But as with everything else, what I needed wasn't on her priority list.

The mortgage payment was simply beyond my means now I had to pay alimony. I'd tried everything to keep it, taking on an extra part-time job, advertising for roommates, but it wasn't enough. I tried to sell the house, but the market was in a slump. By the time sales revived, it was too late. I'd lost my home.

But that's the story of my fucking life—a day late and a dollar short.

And so I'm sitting on the curb with a handful of worthless junk and a hangover that could bring Superman to his knees as the sheriff slaps a big, silver padlock on the door of what used to be my home, waiting on the one person in my life that I knew I could always count on. Demetrjusz. *Dimi* to the world at large—only his mother, an immigrant from Poland,

called him by his full name. Hell, only his mother could *pronounce* it.

Growing up, Dimi's family lived above the delicatessen they owned down on the corner of Midland Avenue. I spent many nights in Dimi's family's kitchen eating *golumpki* and *pierogis*, listening to Dimi's mother sing off-key in Polish while Dimi's father sat in front of their old 19" television set laughing his ass off watching *Night Court* and *Family Ties*. As time went on, they became more family to me than my own.

Both of *my* parents had crawled into a bottle shortly after I turned five and had never come back out.

Not their fault, I guess. My oldest brother, David, had died two months short of his high school graduation. It was a drunk driving accident—he was DUI. From that day on I don't think my parents were ever sober enough to recognize the irony.

But Dimi ... Dimi had been my best friend since kindergarten. It was destiny that had brought us together on our first day at school—his last name is Peretzie, mine is Peterson, and by virtue of the Universal Grade School Law of Alphabetical Seating, our desks were next to each other.

I remember it as clearly as if it was yesterday. Dimi came to class that first day dressed like a miniature of his father in a pair of long pants and suspenders, a long-sleeve buttondown shirt, and a Windsor-knotted tie. Who sends their kid to public school wearing a freaking *necktie*?

He was a marked man from day one.

Dimi did, however, have a Transformers lunchbox, which was probably the only thing that stood between him and bodily harm at the hands of the third graders at recess.

Now, you have to understand that to grade school boys in 1985, the Transformers were *gods*. When the teacher asked me what my father's name was, I answered, "Optimus Prime."

Which resulted in my very first trip to the principal's office, but that's another story entirely.

I was in awe of Dimi's bright red metal lunchbox, with its colorful Transformers artwork on the lid and matching plastic Thermos.

I didn't have a lunchbox, Transformers or otherwise. I had a soggy-bottomed brown paper bag that smelled strongly of the wet tuna fish sandwich my bleary-eyed mother had shoved in there before I boarded the school bus that morning.

I'm not fishing for sympathy here. Believe me, my adult life warrants far more pity than anything I experienced before I became legal. No, I'm simply explaining why I latched on to Dimi with a death grip that has never quite loosened, even after all these years.

Dimi's mother made him peanut butter and jelly sandwiches—with the crusts sliced off and cut in half diagonally, which to a kindergartener equated to five-star cuisine—and always packed him more than one. On that first day at recess as I sat looking blankly at the sodden mess in front of me that smelled like tuna but looked like wet cotton, Dimi opened his magic Transformers lunchbox. Without

saying a word, he slid his spare sandwich over to me, winning my heart forever.

He shared his lunch with me every day thereafter.

In return, I stood between him and the rest of the kids whose greatest joy would have been to de-pant Dimi in the hallway. And so it continued from kindergarten on up to eighth grade, only the cartoons on the lunchboxes changing. From Transformers to Thundercats, He-Man, and Teenaged Mutant Ninja Turtles, all the way to the Super Mario Brothers, which I believe starred on Dimi's last lunchbox.

The sad fact was that the other boys just didn't like Dimi. It may have been because they coveted his lunchboxes, but I think the real reason was that Dimi, through no fault of his own, was *different*. Not that Dimi wasn't smart—just the opposite. He was a whiz at every subject. I don't think he ever got less than a "B" in anything ... except for physical education. In gym, Dimi stank like cow shit on a hot summer day.

Slender and pale, his blue eyes looked enormous behind his Coke-bottle glasses. His hair was so blond that it was nearly white, thick and silky and cut by his mother with kitchen shears using an honest-to-god mixing bowl as a guide. But his looks alone weren't the problem. The sad truth was that Dimi wasn't very coordinated. He couldn't catch a ball, couldn't throw one either. Even worse, he ran funny. Not, ha-ha-oh-isn't-that-cute funny. No, Dimi ran Bozo-funny. When he tried very hard to run fast, he'd end up literally kicking himself in the ass.

So you can imagine the suffering the poor kid went through during gym class. Dimi could have been the recipient of the first Lifetime Wedgie Achievement Award, if there were such a thing. I think his underwear spent more time inside the crack of his ass than it did covering it. There was always a spitball or two stuck to the back of his head, just as there was always a foot waiting to trip him up when he wasn't looking.

Dimi was always the last one to get picked for a team in Phys. Ed.—until the sixth grade.

That's when I grew three inches taller than every boy in my class and was made Softball Team Captain (a position second only to that of Jesus Christ in the eyes of sixth grade boys) by Mr. Lensik, the gym teacher. From sixth grade on, Dimi was always the first one I called in to my team.

Didn't win me any points with the other boys, but since I continued to enjoy Mrs. Peretzie's cooking on a daily basis, I figured it was the least I could do for her son. Besides, Dimi was my best friend.

We did everything together. Watched cartoons, built model cars, played video games; if anyone saw one of us, chances are the other wasn't far behind.

What I liked best about Dimi was his sense of humor. He could always find something funny, no matter how serious a shitpile he was buried in. Of course, most of his humor was self-deprecating, a defense mechanism that I didn't understand until I was much, much older. Dimi laughed first and laughed loudest, especially at himself. But knowing him the way I did, I could see the pain that flickered in his eyes as if his heart never quite got the joke.

Being a typical twelve-year old boy, I did my best to ignore what I saw, and chose to believe that Dimi was fine with it all.

\* \* \* \*

Damn, I wish he'd hurry up and come get me. The neighbors are peeking out at me from behind their Venetian blinds, no doubt worrying that I might take up permanent residence curbside. Any minute now, Mrs. Johnson, she of the mile-wide backside and cottage cheese thighs, is going to call out the Neighborhood Watch. The last thing I need is to have to do battle against a golf cart full of eighty-year old men in Bermuda shorts.

Dimi would no doubt find that quite amusing. He always had the knack for finding something funny in any given situation—the silver lining as it were, especially if the silver was lamee.

Oh, yes ... in case I've forgotten to mention it, Dimi is gay. Which may explain why he spent four years of high school fucking everything in a skirt. And I do mean *everything*. He even did Roberta Maxwell, the school's sixty-two-year old Biology teacher—on the lab table between the dissected frogs and the beakers and Petri dishes, no less. Or at least, that's what it said on the wall of the last stall in the boys' washroom. Dimi would never talk about it, not even to me. But Old Lady Maxwell always seemed to have a silly smile on her face when Dimi was in class.

Of course, everyone with a vagina seemed to have smiles on their faces when Dimi was around, and with good reason. By our freshman year, Dimi had grown from an oddlooking boy into a beautiful young man. I use the word 'beautiful' not because of his later-realized sexual preferences, but because it's really the only word in the English language that suits him.

Dimi was, and remains, beautiful.

His skin, always so pale that it was nearly transparent, tanned surprising well. A few hours outside raking leaves to earn pocket money turned his skin a deep golden brown. His thick shock of white-gold hair and his wide, expressive blue eyes lent him a California surfer-look (the day he got contact lenses, we broke his Coke-bottle eyeglasses in half and burned them in a solemn, if slightly bizarre, ceremony over a trash barrel in back of the deli). It was a look that women—at least of the high school variety—couldn't seem to resist.

Sprouting like a weed, he'd shot up past me in height to brush the six-foot mark, and had me by at least fifteen pounds—all of which was pure muscle from hefting heavy boxes at the deli—before our freshman Homecoming Dance. That first year of high school he discarded the suspenders-and-tie look, preferring ripped denim and tight tee shirts. When we arrived at the gym in time for the Pep Rally before the dance, every female eye zeroed in on him and remained there for the next four years.

I, myself, wasn't exactly a bottom-feeder when it came to looks, but I couldn't compete with Dimi. No one could. He was perfection in Tommy Hilfiger jeans.

I did, however, get lucky by association. What I mean by that is whichever girls weren't fortunate enough to snag a

second date with Dimi (which, looking back I realize were *all* of them) got me as the consolation prize.

Somehow, even back then, I thought Dimi's exploits were a little ... forced. As if he kept trying to prove to the entire world that he was the Stud of the Century, when everyone already knew he owned the title.

\* \* \* \*

Mrs. Johnson doesn't look happy to see that I'm still here. I wish she'd go back to her frozen Lean Cuisine dinner and stop spying on me. What is it that she thinks I'm going to do? Steal the fucking shrubbery? Commit lewd and obscene acts with the squirrels? Pee on her rhododendron?

Damn it, Dimi, hurry up.

\* \* \* \*

Sometimes it seems that I've spent most of my life waiting for Dimi. Waiting for him after school. Waiting for him to dump a girl so that I could offer her a sympathetic shoulder (and other less compassionate body parts) to lean on. Waiting for him to finish washing his clothes so that I could do mine in the rinky-dink Whirlpool washer/dryer combination at our dorm.

College really opened our eyes. We both attended State, roomed together for that matter. I studied computer science, while Dimi majored in Graphic Design and minored in sex. Well, maybe not *minored*—by that time he already had his PhD in the subject by virtue of life experience.

Or so I thought.

What I didn't know at the time was that Dimi had discovered something about himself that he'd been frantically trying to bury all through high school. Which was, of course, that Dimi liked men.

The sex he was getting in college was a whole other animal than what he'd gotten in high school.

He didn't exactly out himself to me, at least not on purpose. It was totally accidental, and completely memorable. I know. I spent the next five years trying to forget it.

On our first night in our dorm room—a tiny eight-by-ten foot room with a window that overlooked the cafeteria dumpsters and twin beds—we'd realized that there might be occasions when we'd want to bring dates home with us. We decided on a system to warn the other when one of us was utilizing the room for purposes other than sleep. 'Other than sleep,' being a metaphor for the horizontal mambo.

The system was simple. Should one of us require the other to curl up on the sofa downstairs in the common room for oh, say an hour or three, we'd hang a sign on our doorknob. Said sign reading 'Get lost, I'm getting laid.'

Hey, I said the system was simple, not necessarily clever. Dimi, needless to say, used that fucking sign a helluva lot more often than I did.

It had worked perfectly for us until one crisp fall night during our junior year. I'd had a late study group session at the library, and had come home at just past midnight.

This is the point at which Dimi and I disagree—he swears that he put the sign up, while I know that there was nothing hanging on our doorknob. No warning at all. It's possible that

someone snagged our sign from the door (I was never able to find it afterwards and had to make a new one), but I think Dimi was just too fucking horny to remember to put it up, and tossed it later to cover up his faux pas.

Still, why the sign wasn't up really doesn't matter. What matters is that when I opened the door and walked into the room, I found Dimi bare-ass naked, hooked up to the plumbing of one of the football team's linebackers and riding him like a fucking jackhammer.

Dimi's eyes went wide when he saw me, but man, those hips never even slowed down.

Until that night I'd never seen two men fuck. I'd never even given much thought to the mechanics behind it. I knew gay men existed, of course. Saw the rallies and protests around campus for gay rights. I even signed petitions supporting same-sex marriage and for equal protection under the law. I knew that men and women engaged in same-sex relationships, but somehow I'd never really thought about what that meant in terms of the physical act. Lesbians, yeah, sure—I'd seen my share of porn flicks after all. But men? It was sort of like thinking about your parents. You know that they loved each other, lived together, had children and so forth and so on, but you never really pictured them doing the Big Nasty.

Like I said, college was an eye-opener.

I remember standing there with my mouth hanging open. It took a few seconds for my brain to process what I was seeing—my first thought was that Dimi, for some reason I

couldn't fathom, had chosen to have sex with an incredibly large, ugly woman.

That was until I realized that the large, ugly woman had a dick big enough to qualify for a zip code, and a heavy five o'clock shadow.

I couldn't move. Couldn't think. I damn near couldn't breathe.

Then Dimi, being ... well, Dimi, spoke.

"Either get in here and drop your pants or get out, James, but close the fucking door. I'm getting a draft."

His words gave wings to my feet.

I turned tail and ran, not stopping until my legs gave out.

Nothing I did thereafter could ever totally erase the image that was burned into my brain that night. In all my years as Dimi's friend, I'd never seen him naked before. Not completely, at any rate. I'd seen him shirtless on many occasions, and often enough in only his jockeys since we'd been rooming together, but that was the extent of it.

To see him, not only completely starkers but in motion, was something I simply couldn't forget. I wanted to. I tried. Believe me, I tried. But the image would pop back into my mind's eye when I'd least expect it, and almost always at the most inopportune moments.

Like when I was having sex.

There I'd be, hip deep in some chick I'd picked up on campus, going for the gold and then ... blam! Out of nowhere, the image of Dimi's smooth round ass would loom up, his lean hips pumping for all he was worth, cock sliding in and out of that football player's butt ... I'd try to force myself

to think of something else, to concentrate on the girl underneath me, but it was a struggle that I usually lost.

It was interfering with my performance, if you catch my drift. If I came, it was with that image of Dimi in my head. If I didn't come, I *still* had the picture of him in my mind. I just couldn't win.

\* \* \* \*

That's Mr. Alexander giving me the evil eye from across the street. You'd think I was sitting here in a hockey mask revving a chainsaw like some splatter-movie maniac rather than just waiting for my ride. When Holly left me she took my reputation with her, leaving me just a hair above serial killer in the eyes of my neighbors. Even Mr. Alexander's wife's Pomeranian hates me. Damn thing looks like a yapping Q-Tip. Then again, so does Mr. Alexander's wife.

The neighbors must have had a field day talking about Holly and me and our break up. Lord knows it wasn't quiet and amicable. We had some really loud fights complete with name-calling, doors slamming, and smashed china.

\* \* \* \*

Dimi tried to talk to me about what had happened, but I wasn't listening. I couldn't. Mainly, because every time I looked at him my mind's eye saw him naked. It was too hard to hold an intelligent conversation with him when I kept picturing him in nothing but his skin. Every time he'd try to bring the subject up, I wanted to either give in to maniacal laughter or run away screaming.

Mostly, I chose the running away option, even when I forwent the screaming part.

On the outside, I tried to pretend that nothing had changed. I went to class, slept on my side of our room, studied, and went to parties. I did everything, in fact, except talk to Dimi beyond what was absolutely necessary.

Inside, my emotions were running headfirst toward a meltdown. I was angry, furious that Dimi had kept such a secret from me, outraged that he had had such a secret to keep in the first place. How *could* he be gay? He was *Dimi*, for shit's sake, the High School Sex God, the Walking Pheromone. He was my best friend! It was a mistake, I told myself. A fluke. Maybe he was drunk. Stoned. Maybe it had been a dare, a wager that he didn't want to lose.

And maybe if I buried my head far enough in the sand I'd see China.

Dimi walked on eggshells around me. He was overly polite, exceedingly considerate, extraordinarily agreeable, giving in without question to any demand I made, no matter how outrageous. In a rare moment of truth, I acknowledged to myself that I was seeking to punish him for what I perceived as a betrayal on his part. But even that epiphany didn't stop me, didn't force me to sit down and talk it out with him.

I did notice that he never used our new sign. If Dimi was getting any, he wasn't getting it in our dorm room.

But the yoke he'd placed himself under was starting to chafe. He became irritable, sullen. Stayed out late, left early in the morning, even on days when he didn't have class. I might have been living by myself, for all that I saw of him. I stuffed my own anger way down deep, where the only thing it affected was my stomach. If this kept up much longer, I was going to develop ulcers. As it was, I virtually lived on Pepto-Bismol and antacids.

Things came to a head a month later. I don't know what happened to set him off, what I finally did that pushed him over the brink, but when I came home after class one day, he was waiting for me.

When I walked in, I knew immediately that something was wrong. The air was fairly crackling with tension. I felt it just like you'd feel a lightning bolt a second or two before it hit. My back stiffened and my stomach clenched, as if my body were preparing itself for an attack. Three steps into the room, I realized that Dimi had slipped in behind me, closing and locking the door, barring my exit.

Dimi's eyes were dark with an anger I'd never seen in them before. His face was painted with a fury so powerful that it changed him, altering his features until he looked like a stranger. Dimi's nostrils flared with each breath he took, his hands were curled into hard fists at his sides.

If it had been anyone but Dimi, I would have pissed my pants in terror, sure that I was about to be murdered in my dorm room.

When he finally spoke, he said only two words, both through clenched teeth, a small muscle twitching in his jaw. "Sit. Down."

I sat.

Dimi paced.

Back and forth, he was wearing a groove in the dorm room's construction grade carpeting. His hands were clenched behind his back so tightly they gave me the impression that the left was keeping the right from taking a swing at me.

It probably was. Lord knew I deserved it. I'd put him through hell those past four weeks.

"What the fuck is *wrong* with you?" he finally asked, coming to rest in front of me, glaring down.

What was wrong with *me*? Was he kidding? "Nothing is wrong with *me*."

"And that's supposed to mean ... what?" he growled. I could feel his anger rise another notch, along with his hackles.

"Nothing," I answered, gritting my teeth to keep my opinions safely behind them. I didn't want to talk about it. Talking about it would make it real, and I'd nearly convinced myself that it had all been a bad dream. If we didn't ever speak about it, it would all go away.

"Really? Because I could swear that something crawled up your ass and died, ever since you walked in on Darryl and me."

Oh, God. The linebacker had a name. Somehow that made it even worse. I lost my tenuous hold on my tongue.

"Well, you would be the expert on asses and things that go up them, now wouldn't you?" I snarled as my own anger boiled over in a gush of nastiness.

"Low blow, brother."

"Do you really want to get into things that blow, too? How could you, Dimi? How can you be a fucking queer?" I poured

gallons of venom into the epithet, throwing it at him like a dagger.

"Wow. You're on a roll. Want to call me 'faggot' or 'ass jockey' now and get it out of the way?" Dimi shot back.

I mentally tried both of those names on my tongue but they tasted like poison. As angry as I was, I couldn't get them past my teeth. Sighing, I pushed the anger away. It was one of the most difficult things I'd ever done, but I managed. "No. What I want to know is why, Dimi? *Why*?"

"Why not?"

"That's not an answer. Don't be flippant. Not now."

He seemed to deflate before my very eyes, as if someone had pulled a plug and let the air out of him. He slumped onto the bed next to me. I noticed that he was careful to keep a distance between us. Looking down at his hands, he sat quietly for a few minutes, his long fingers fidgeting.

"How do I explain it? I like men for all the same reasons you like women. I like the way we look, the way we feel. The deepness of a man's voice, the scratch of his beard, the hardness of his body. The way he knows just how to touch me to make me fly. I like cock, and I like ass better than pussy."

"Oh, God, Dimi..."

"You wanted to know why. I'm trying to tell you, so just sit there and listen," he hissed. "This isn't easy for me, okay? You're like my brother. Closer than that—you're like my fucking *twin*. Do you have any idea of how hard it is for me to talk to you about this?"

Yeah. I could understand that much, at least. It was probably about as difficult for him to say as it was for me to hear it. "Sorry. Go on," I said, although I was cringing on the inside at the picture he was painting.

"Even in high school I knew. I didn't want to believe it then. I was so afraid that people would know just by looking at me. I figured that if I fucked around enough, eventually I'd find a girl who would chase away the fantasies I had in my head. That I'd stop thinking about guys, wondering what they looked like naked, and what they'd taste like. What it would feel like to have a man under me in bed. I don't know, maybe I was trying to convince myself that I was like everyone else."

"Why didn't you ever say anything?" I asked, already knowing the answer but unable to stop myself.

"Because of *this*, of what happened between us when you found out. I was afraid that after all the years we'd been friends, you'd turn your back on me. This last month just about killed me, you know. And back then I wouldn't have blamed you if you did dump me. Even I thought I was a freak."

"You're not a freak."

He smiled a little at that. "I know that now. When we started college, I found that I wasn't alone. After I joined the GBLT group on campus, I realized that being gay was just who I was. That there wasn't anything wrong with me."

"Why didn't you tell me then?"

"Because I knew you would wig out, and I wanted to spare you that. Look, this doesn't change who I am, you know. I'm still *me*."

"Yeah, I guess so," I said hesitantly. "Does your family know?"

Dimi looked stricken at the very thought. "No! Shit, my mother would probably call in a priest to do an exorcism."

I laughed in spite of myself, nodding. She would at that—Dimi's mom was a devout Roman Catholic, of the sort that still thought eating meat on Fridays would buy you a pitchfork and a pair of cloven feet. She went to Mass faithfully every Sunday, rain or shine, wearing a little bit of lace covering her hair, convinced that a woman shouldn't bare her head in Church. As much as I loved her, I knew that telling her that her baby boy was gay would be no less devastating than telling her he was the Antichrist.

"Are we okay?" Dimi asked. He suddenly looked like that skinny little boy in long pants and tie, holding his Transformers lunchbox and worrying that the third graders would beat him up after school. I felt the strongest urge to pull him into my arms and hug him close, to protect him.

That scared the bejesus out of me.

I folded my arms across my chest to keep my hands where they belonged.

"Yeah, we're okay," I said. "I don't pretend to understand any of this, Dimi, but I'm good with it, I think. Just do me a favor, will you?"

"What?"

"Make sure you use the fucking sign. I felt like I needed to scrub my brain out with steel wool after seeing what I saw. I do *not* need another picture of your hairy ass in my head."

The Sweet Side Of The Ropes: Enthralling Tales Of Male-Male Romance by Kiernan Kelly

Dimi laughed, and the sound was like music, light and breezy. "Deal," he said, smiling that double-dimpled grin of his.

\* \* \* \*

Those black clouds over to the west look like rain. Wouldn't that just be the icing on the cake? Sitting here, piss-poor and sopping wet? Shit, it can't get any worse, can it?

It was raining the day Holly finally threw me out, too. I went straight to Dimi's, of course. He was living with his boyfriend at the time, Harry, who was not pleased to see me standing on their doorstep, bag in hand.

Not that Dimi even hesitated. He'd opened the door, taken one look at me, and swept me inside, letting me drip all over their deep pile carpeting. I could hear him arguing with Harry that night, as I lay awake in their guest room.

Poor Harry didn't stand a chance against our friendship. Dimi pitched a fit that Harry would even dare suggest that I stay in a motel. I was his brother, he said. Family.

God love him.

Their fight ended with Harry slamming out of the house. I felt like shit on as stick for causing Dimi trouble, but when I tried to apologize, to tell him that I would be fine at a motel, he nearly bit my head off.

"That bastard has caused me enough heartache. This had nothing to do with you, really. It's been coming on for a while. Good riddance to bad rubbish," he said, then dragged me into the kitchen and took a bottle of tequila out of the

cabinet. We spent half the night getting as drunk as humanly possible, and reminiscing.

\* \* \* \*

Dimi went through boyfriends like most people went through paper plates. It seemed to me that men were disposable to him, good for a few helpings of sex and then tossed away. He treated dating in college, especially our senior year, the same way he had in high school, the only difference being that this time he fucked everything in pants instead of skirts. It made me wonder what he was trying to hide *this* time out.

"Who's Ben?" I asked, when Dimi informed me that he wouldn't be home that weekend because he was going to the lake with Ben.

"My boyfriend," Dimi replied, as if I should have known that already.

"What happened to Theo?"

Dimi rolled his eyes. "Dude, try to keep up, will ya? Theo and I broke up. I'm seeing Ben, now."

This happened on a regular basis. I could never keep up with Dimi's flings. Sometimes I wondered if even *he* could keep their names straight. Personally, I think he had to use a spreadsheet, and told him so. He laughed, and went on his merry way with Ben or Bill or Pedro, or whoever the flavor of the month was at the time.

I, on the other hand, had found Holly the week after Dimi and I had had our heart-to-heart. Holly was smart, levelheaded, and grounded, if a little rigid. She knew precisely what she wanted in life; had everything planned out and written down in a journal she kept. She was exactly what I needed—or so I told myself. A month after I met her, I married her, against Dimi's strenuous objections.

"Are you crazy? You aren't even finished with school, yet!" he thundered when I showed him the tiny diamond-chip ring I planned on giving Holly that evening. "Don't do this," he pleaded. "Don't throw your life away."

"I don't consider marrying the woman of my dreams to be throwing my life away," I huffed, snapping the small, black velvet box shut with a *clack*. "And here I was, planning to ask you to be my best man!"

Dimi sighed. "You know that I'll be there for you, man. I just think it's a mistake. Its nuts! You've only known her for a week!"

"I know what I feel, Dimi."

"Do you? How can you be so sure so soon?"

"Look, I'm not like you, Dimi. I don't want any more onenight stands. I want permanency. Stability. A family."

"You think that because I'm gay I don't want a family someday? That I want to spend my entire life whoring around? Did you ever think that maybe I'm looking for the right person, too?"

"I didn't mean that," I said, trying to smooth his ruffled feathers. Damn it! I always managed to say the wrong thing to him lately. "I'm just nervous, and I need your support, Dimi."

Dimi nodded, then smiled, although his grin looked a little too wide, as if he were forcing it. "Holy shit! My best friend is getting married!" he cried. Then, before I could blink, he had me in a hug that left absolutely no space between us. It wasn't one of those stiff, uncomfortable man-hugs, the ones you get from your dad once you pass puberty, or from your uncle at Christmas, where you both sort of lean in and pat each other's backs. No, I felt every inch of Dimi pressed up against me, felt every hard plane and sharp angle of his body from his feet to his forehead.

Suddenly I broke out into a cold sweat.

Because for just an instant, only the space of a heartbeat or two, I'd *liked* the way he'd felt, and my body had responded accordingly.

I broke away in a flash, backing up as though I was a dried-up piece of kindling and he was a lit match.

"What's wrong?" Dimi asked, frowning.

"Nothing, nothing at all. I'm just excited. About Holly—excited about asking her to marry me," I stammered.

And that's all it was, I convinced myself afterwards. It was only misplaced excitement, a bad case of nerves on one of the biggest days of my life.

I caught Dimi looking at me oddly a few times after that, but I didn't have the balls to ask him what he was thinking. I wasn't sure I would like his answer.

The wedding was set for a Friday afternoon at the courthouse downtown. Holly and I had both agreed that waiting was unnecessary, and that a big wedding would be a waste of perfectly good money. We were both anxious to get our own place and play house; a quick trip to whichever judge was available, and the deed would be done.

On the night before my wedding Dimi threw me a bachelor party—of sorts. He and at least a half-dozen of his friends showed up after my last class and hijacked me in broad daylight.

Our first stop was my favorite restaurant, a country-themed, hokey establishment that served huge steaks and five-dollar pitchers of beer. It was the sort of place that gave you a bowl of peanuts for the table, and let you chuck the shells onto the floor. Dimi used to say that my love of that restaurant proved that somewhere deep inside me the little kid who loved to make a mess was still alive and well. I just thought it was cool; I liked the music, and the sound the peanut shells made when they crunched underfoot. I loved it, but Holly hated it. She thought it was uncouth, so I rarely got to eat there anymore.

Dimi's friends were a friendly, funny bunch who drank like fish and knew the words to every song ever written. Or so it seemed as they sang along to the jukebox, everything from Patsy Cline's *Crazy* to Toby Keith's *Who's Your Daddy*.

By the time we'd finished dinner, we'd gone through three full pitchers of beer, the last with shots of Jack back. I was having a ball, feeling more than fine, and my head was buzzing pleasantly when we left the restaurant.

It was a good thing I was halfway to a full drunk, because we ended up next in *The Blue Moon*, Dimi's favorite gay bar. If I'd been sober, I'm sure I would have objected. As it was I wasn't really certain where we were until after we'd taken seats at a table and had bent our elbows a few more times.

Then something in my liquored-up brain clicked and I realized that for a club, there were surprisingly few women.

And the men were dancing with one another.

Slow dancing.

Then it dawned on me that the women weren't really women at all.

Oh.

Dimi ordered another round, shots of something blue that smelled like cotton candy, burned like hell going down, and made the room spin until my eyes crossed.

After that, things got a little blurry.

The only thing I remember from that point on was Dimi supporting my drunken ass (quite a feat since he was none too steady himself), climbing the stairs to our dorm room. He propped me against the wall as he fished for his keys. That I remember, because I couldn't seem to stand up straight, even with the wall behind me. I kept tilting to the left, and Dimi had to keep grabbing my arm to keep me from falling over.

He found his keys and opened the door, half-dragging my sorry ass inside.

I remember Dimi helping me to my bed, lying me down and removing my shoes. The whole room was spinning, and I think I might have been singing *YMCA*. No, wait ... it might have been *In the Navy*. In any case, it was some song by the Village People that I vaguely remembered dancing to earlier.

Then suddenly Dimi's handsome face was hovering inches from mine. Damn, but the man was beautiful. The thought kept repeating over and over in my mind like a mantra, except that now I think I might have said it out loud, too. Beautiful Dimi. Beautiful Dimi.

That's when he kissed me.

Full on the mouth, lips, teeth, tongue and all.

Everything up until that moment may have been a drunken blur, but *that* I remember very clearly.

Just as I remember that I kissed him back.

\* \* \* \*

Where in the blue hell is he? I'm wet and now I'm cold, and my ass is going numb from sitting on the hard concrete curb for so long. Knowing Dimi, he's probably lost, even though he's been to my house a thousand times. Dimi never did have a very good sense of direction. I remember teasing him about it when he got his first car. I told him he'd better have a map and a compass with him at all times, or he'd never make it from his driveway to the street.

Holly used to wish that he'd get lost permanently. She truly disliked Dimi, did from the first moment she'd met him. Thinking back, Holly was the only woman I'd ever known who didn't take an instant shine to Dimi. The only one, in fact, who didn't want to get into his pants. I didn't know what it was about him that rubbed her the wrong way, but she hated him on sight. I called her homophobic; she called me every synonym for asshole ever invented. We had a huge to-do over the fact that he was to be my best man at our wedding. It was almost bad enough to make us reconsider the whole thing. Taking into account how things worked out, we would have been better off if we had.

But she caved in eventually. I think she figured that once she was my wife she could put her foot down, force me to end my friendship with him.

Yeah, fat chance. The day I'd set my best friend aside would be the day they put me on the wrong side of the grass.

\* \* \* \*

Kill me.

That's what went through my mind when I woke the morning after my bachelor party and the memory of what had happened exploded into my brain along with one of the worst hangovers on record.

Just kill me now.

"Don't even go there," Dimi said from across the room the minute I sat up and groaned. He waved a dismissive hand at me, then walked over and handed me a glass of water and three aspirin. "I know that look. You're getting ready to have a full-fledged panic attack. I was drunk, you were drunk, and it didn't mean a fucking thing. Don't read into it. Don't blow it out of proportion. Just forget it ever happened."

Forget it? Forget that my best friend nearly sucked my face right off my skull? Not freaking likely.

Oh, God, it ranked right up there with the memory of seeing him naked and fucking the linebacker. Worse, because this time it involved *me*.

I could feel panic rising along with bile, and I barely made it into the bathroom in time to kiss the porcelain. Wracked by dry heaves, I spent an hour with my head in the toilet, wondering what in the hell I was supposed to do now. How was I ever supposed to look Dimi in the eye again and *not* think about it? What about Holly? Would she know just by looking at me? Or by the way I looked at Dimi or he looked at me?

Maybe I should just tell her, laugh it off. It wasn't as if I'd kissed another woman. It didn't qualify as cheating, right? She'd understand.

Yeah, and maybe I should just feed my nuts into a wood chipper. The result would be the same.

Forget it, I told myself. Take Dimi's advice and put it behind you. It was just a fucking kiss, after all. A stupid, meaningless, drunken kiss between two people who'd stopped drinking just short of full-blown alcohol poisoning. Put it out of your head right now.

But I couldn't.

Dimi's lips had been so soft, so warm. His tongue had felt like velvet fire against mine, his taste sweeter than the Godiva chocolates he'd bought me for my birthday. I remembered the way his bristly five o'clock shadow scratched my cheeks and sent shivers racing across my skin. His stupid, meaningless, drunken kiss had scorched me right down to my toes, branded itself into my mind.

I'd *liked* it.

What the fuck was wrong with me? I wasn't gay. I was as far from being gay as a man could possibly get. I was the *antithesis* of gay. The only thing I felt for Dimi was love of the brotherly variety.

Right?

Oh, get a grip, I told myself as I splashed ice-cold water over my face and tried to brush a night's worth of excess out of my mouth. It was just a kiss. What you're suffering from is a textbook case of pre-marital jitters, and nothing more.

Walking out of the bathroom, I did what any selfrespecting straight guy would do in my situation. I smiled at Dimi, got dressed, went down to the courthouse, and got married.

The ceremony was brief, a judge performing the honors. No music, no procession up the aisle by flower girls strewing rose petals. Holly wore a simple pale pink suit, and I wore a serious case of nerves.

To make matters worse, Dimi stood close by me, and his mere presence was making me want to hyperventilate. I thought that everybody must know what happened between us. The clerk, the judge, the three women who were in line waiting to renew their driver's licenses ... weren't they all looking at us out of the corners of their eyes, smirking?

Oh, God. I was losing my mind.

"It's not too late," he whispered as I stood shaking near the judge, waiting for Holly to show up with her maid of honor. She was late, probably stuck in the downtown traffic. Well, that was her fault, not mine. She'd insisted that we couldn't drive in together, saying that the groom couldn't see the bride before the wedding. It would have been bad luck.

Yeah, seeing the bride before the wedding would have been a helluva lot worse than the groom making out with the best man the night before the wedding.

"Are you okay?" Dimi asked.

"I'm getting married," I replied, wincing. I'd tried to sound convincing, but I sounded more like I was getting convicted. I might as well have said, "I'm getting the electric chair," instead.

Then Holly had arrived, blowing me a kiss and shooting Dimi a black look, and someone hit the fast-forward button. Before I knew it, I had a ring on my finger and a wife on my arm.

\* \* \* \*

Goddamn, but the curb under my ass is as cold as Holly was during the last months of our marriage.

I never knew a woman could be so nasty, so bitter. Then again, according to her she had every right to be pissed off. I was a jackass. A totally self-indulgent, uncaring, unfeeling, lying sack of shit who'd ruined her life.

Sad thing was, she was right.

Not that I hadn't tried. I had, and with every ounce of resolve I could muster. I'd struggled to give her everything she wanted, never argued, never once said no to anything she asked. Except for saying goodbye to Dimi. On that I wasn't budging, and I knew it galled her that I wouldn't give up my friendship with him.

\* \* \* \*

One year almost to the day after the wedding, right after graduation, we bought the house together, settled in, and decorated it according to Holly's tastes. There was really

nothing of me in the house, except for the imprint of my ass on the sofa, and my signature on the mortgage payments.

I dedicated all of my free time to Holly, spending every waking moment that I wasn't at work with her. Except for Wednesday nights—Wednesdays were *my* time. Not even a weekend night—I claimed a single, unimportant weekday evening as my own, so that my plans wouldn't interfere with entertaining and hobnobbing with her friends on the weekends.

Wednesday nights I spent with Dimi. He'd come to the house and we'd watch a movie or shoot a game of pool, or else we'd go to the movies or to a bar for a few hours.

Holly snidely referred to Wednesday as my 'date night with the Fag.' I can't recall ever hearing her refer to Dimi by name. He was always just 'the Fag.' I could actually hear the capital "F" when she said it, as if it were his name. After a while it began to really grate on my nerves.

For over four years we had the same tired argument every Tuesday night. Holly would snarl, scream, and threaten, trying to get me to cancel my plans with Dimi, and I would firmly but kindly tell her to mind her own fucking business.

The beginning of the end came one bright Sunday afternoon two months before our fifth wedding anniversary. Holly had been planning a big do, a formal affair at a classy, expensive restaurant downtown.

As usual, I'd nodded and given her my patented whateveryou-want dear smile—until I'd gotten a look at the guest list. Not surprisingly, Dimi wasn't on it. "You forgot someone," I said, trying to keep the malice out of my voice. I knew she hadn't forgotten. She'd like nothing better than for Dimi to drop off the face of the planet.

"No, I haven't," Holly replied, her eyes narrowed and flashing, daring me to contradict her.

I did more than that. I exploded.

"Goddamn it, Holly! I'm sick and tired of having this same argument all the time! He's my friend—my best friend. I've known him all of my life, and it's about time you got used to the fact that he's going to remain my best friend until the day I drop dead!" I screamed.

Grabbing her pen from her hand, I added "DIMI" in large, block letters at the bottom of the guest list.

"No!" she cried, yanking the pen back, leaving a long, blue ink mark across my palm. She scratched out Dimi's name, making furious little zigzags across it, the tip of the pen nearly biting through the paper. "I am *not* going to be embarrassed again! Don't you understand? The way you two act when you're together, whispering and laughing ... do you know what people must think?"

I looked at her blankly, although my stomach twisted violently in my gut.

Holly gave a tight little scream, banging her fist on the table so hard that it rattled, her pen rolling off and hit the floor. "They think you're gay, too! Don't you understand? Why else would a married man want to spend so much time with a queer? Do you know what that's like for me? Knowing that people are whispering about poor Holly, the woman whose pervert husband is cheating on her with another man, right in

her own house?" She picked up a vase that sat on the table and hurled it at my head.

I ducked, but felt like I'd been hit anyway. The vase exploded against the wall behind me.

"Dimi and I are friends. Do I accuse you of having an affair with Cynthia or Sally, or any of the rest of your friends?" I countered, still trying to hold on to the last vestiges of my self-control and at least *pretend* to be an adult about it.

That only seemed to infuriate her further.

"Are you?"

"Am I what?" I asked, wondering if the Ginsu knives were going to fly at me next and whether I would be fast enough to get out of the way. They sat on the counter within Holly's reach, a wedding present from her aunt.

"Are you gay?" she spat, half-rising from her chair. Her eyes were slits, alive with hate, and I knew in that moment that if it weren't for the mess, those Ginsu knives would be making confetti out of my hide. "Are you fucking him? You are, aren't you?"

Watching her bristle, I was immediately overcome with the memory of Dimi's lips pressed against mine, of his soft warm tongue and the way he had tasted. Even after five years the memory was still so vivid and so clear that it rocked me on my feet.

She knew!

She doesn't know, I told myself firmly. She couldn't. She was insecure, threatened by my close relationship with Dimi, that's all. It was because I was having a little trouble in the bedroom. That's what this was really about. Well, I was

seeing the doctor about that wasn't I? What more did she want from me? I wasn't gay.

I wasn't.

"He'll be there or I won't," I snarled, turning on my heel and stalking out.

It was only later that I realized that I'd never bothered to contradict her.

After that, things went to hell in a hand basket. Three months later, Holly started screwing around with her tennis instructor (could it possibly get more pathetically cliché?) not bothering to hide her affair—flaunting it in fact—and two months after that, she'd filed for divorce.

\* \* \* \*

If it rains any harder, Dimi may have to pick me up in a rowboat instead of his Chevy. I must look a sight, sitting here holding my Hefty bag of clothing on top of my head, rain dripping off the end of my nose, wet clothes plastered to my body.

God, I'm shivering so hard that my teeth are chattering. What I wouldn't give for one of Dimi's hot toddies right now. The kind that warms you up from the inside out, and leaves you pleasantly buzzed at the same time.

I could use a little buzz right now. Actually, I could use a full out, DefCon 4, state of emergency drunk. I deserve it. My life, such as it is, is in shambles.

My credit rating is in the negative number range. I've lost my house, my car, and nearly my sanity. But I can bear it.

The night Holly and I broke up I wasn't so sure. If it wasn't for a heinous fear of heights, I might have seriously considered taking a swan dive off the roof of the high-rise condo Holly bought with her tennis slut.

Luckily for me, I'm a coward at heart who takes to bed when I get a paper cut. Offing myself was not an option. What I did do after Holly kicked me and my few pathetic belongings to the curb was what I always did when my life was threatening to come apart at the seams—I went looking for Dimi.

\* \* \* \*

As it turned out, the night Holly sent me packing was both the worst and best night of my life.

Dimi sent Harry out, and brought me into the kitchen for a man's version of the heart-to-heart. He set the tequila bottle between us, gave us each a shot glass, and proceeded to do what he always did—make me feel better.

Dimi's bottle of tequila was empty by three that morning, and he and I were swaying bleary-eyed in our seats. We'd talked for five hours nonstop, reminiscing about everything from our days playing video games to the college professors we most hated.

He even finally 'fessed up about Old Lady Maxwell, our high school biology teacher. No, he hadn't fucked her, but only because as he'd bent her over the lab table she'd accidentally hit her head on the cabinet, knocking herself out cold.

Which explained the oversized Band-Aid she'd sported over her left eye for two weeks.

"Come on, we should get some sheep," Dimi had said, when the tequila finally ran out.

"Sleep."

"That's what I said."

"No, you said sheep, not sleep."

"You want to sleep with sheep? That's sick, man."

"Not me, you."

"I have never been attracted to livestock—unless you count Peter. He wasn't a sheep, he just smelled like one."

That was our conversation as we helped one another climb the stairs to the second floor bedrooms. Stumbling into one of the smaller rooms, I fell across the bed, out before my face hit the pillow.

It couldn't have been more than an hour later before something woke me. I was never sure if it was Dimi, or some sixth sense that I was no longer alone that roused me, but when my eyes fluttered opened, he was standing in the doorway watching me.

"Dimi?" I asked, squinting to separate him from the shadows. "That you?"

"Yeah," he said. He took a step into the room, and I realized that he was naked.

And was sporting a hard-on, no less.

That sobered me up pretty damn quick.

My heart began to flutter against my breastbone, and my blood pounded in my ears as he sat down on the edge of the bed. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe. I also couldn't get up and run unless I wanted to dump his butt on the floor.

I'd just decided to do that, to push him off the bed and hightail it out of the house; to try to outrun the disturbing warmth that flushed my skin at the sight of his naked body, when he asked me a question that shocked me into immobility.

"How long?" he asked, looking down at me with tears glistening in his eyes. "How long are we going to ignore this?"

"Ignore what?" I managed to croak, fisting my hands in the sheets to keep them from going to Dimi's face to wipe away his tears.

"This. Us. We've been dancing this same, sad dance for years. I've been afraid of losing my best friend, and you've been afraid of admitting that you're attracted to me, that you want me."

"I'm not gay," I said out of habit. I tried to ignore the fact that my voice lacked conviction. But if I didn't say the words then that might make it true, and I wasn't ready to face that possibility.

Dimi just shook his head sadly. "There's nobody here that you need to defend yourself against. There's only me, and you know that I would never judge you.

"Do you remember when I kissed you on the night before your wedding?" he asked, his voice soft. "I still dream about that kiss. Getting up and walking away from your bed that night was the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life. I wanted so much more than just a simple kiss. I still do."

The memory of his taste came rushing back and this time, once remembered, wouldn't allow itself to be forgotten. It burned on my lips, heating me from the inside out.

He leaned in closer, and closer yet, until I could feel his warm breath against my cheek, feel his lips brush my ear as he whispered, "I've always loved you."

And I knew it was true.

Holly had never loved me. She'd wanted me, needed me, perhaps, but she'd never truly *loved* me. That was only fair, since I realized at that moment that I'd never loved her, either. She was my safety net, a disguise; a costume I wore to keep hidden from the world what I really wanted. I'd worn that costume so well that I'd fooled everyone; Holly, our friends, even myself.

But I hadn't fooled Dimi. Dimi, my friend, my brother in spirit, had seen through me, through the lies I'd told myself and everyone else, but he'd never hurt me by calling me on my deception. He'd never given me away, never pushed; he'd simply made sure that he was there to catch me each time I fell.

Dimi truly loved me. And in a perfect moment of clarity, I realized that I loved him, too.

Turning my head, I kissed him.

Every bit as soft and warm as I remembered them to be, Dimi's lips shot a sizzling bolt of need to my very core. Our kiss knocked down what flimsy, brittle walls remained between us, and the resulting flood of desire that rushed through me took my breath away.

No one had ever made me feel this way, this keyed up, this needy. Only Dimi. Only now.

He broke away, sitting up, eyes hooded, a small smile playing at his lips. Slowly, as if he thought that if he moved too quickly I'd bolt (my running days were over, and I knew it even if he didn't) he began to unbutton my shirt.

I blushed.

God, I hadn't felt my face heat up like that since junior high. I felt positively virginal as he peeled my shirt away and raked my skin with a heated glance. His look burned, made me instantly hard, which in turn made my cheeks burn even more.

He didn't touch me, not yet. Instead he contented himself with just looking, as if he were taking the time to appreciate the presentation of a five-star meal before actually sampling the fare.

Dimi's fingers drifted to my belt buckle, barely skimming the skin of my stomach along the way. Light as his touch had been, my body reacted violently to it, a delicious shiver rippling my flesh.

As I lay there unbuckled, unbuttoned, and unzipped, Dimi exchanged one last long look with me before pulling my pants and underwear off. As naked as he was, I felt exposed and vulnerable, unsure of what to do, what to say.

As it turned out, I didn't need to do or say anything. Dimi crawled up onto the bed with me, lying on top of me, belly to belly. "Wait. Don't move," he whispered, staring into my eyes. "I want to enjoy the feeling of you underneath me."

Wait? I suddenly didn't want to wait. I wanted to taste, to touch; to take huge bites out of him. I wanted to explore, to compare the differences and similarities between us. I wanted to wrap myself around him, crawl inside him, meld with him until I couldn't tell where I ended and Dimi began.

But I lay perfectly still, every one of my nerve endings crackling, exquisitely sensitive to the sensation of his body lying flush with mine. I could feel every inch of him, every hair, every scar, every pore. His cock was rock hard and molten hot against my groin; I could feel the moisture that gathered at the tip wet my skin. His crisp curls scraped the delicate skin of my erection, so hard now that it bordered on painful.

"Need you," I finally whispered when the waiting became too much to bear. "Need *something...*" I wasn't even sure what I was asking him for. What he'd done with the linebacker? Maybe. The thought of him entering my body frightened me a little ... more than a little.

The fear must have showed in my eyes. Dimi smiled, then kissed me until I moaned into his mouth, my tongue curling around his, my fingers tightening around his biceps. He began to rock his hips, sliding his cock against mine.

Yes! This was what I needed, what I wanted. My Dimi. *Mine*.

"Come for me," he groaned against my lips, nipping and teasing them with his teeth and tongue. He slipped one hand between us, wrapping his fingers around our cocks, squeezing them together.

Trapped between Dimi's hand and his cock, I thought I might lose my mind as my balls swelled, tightening. Crying out, I came hard, every muscle in my body clenching tight. My eyes screwed shut against the incredible pleasure that rocketed through me as Dimi continued to stroke us together, until he'd coaxed the very last drop out of me.

When at last I opened my eyes, Dimi was smiling softly at me, looking at me from under his thick lashes. He hadn't come, was still hard and dripping against my softening cock. Biting my lip, I reached between our bellies and took him in my hand.

I'd never touched another man's cock before. It felt like mine, but hotter, harder, soft velvet and solid iron. I sucked my breath in between my teeth as his heat scorched my palm.

I knew what to do. Touched him the way I liked to be touched, long slow strokes, fingers squeezing and pulsing along his shaft. Thumb circling the head of his cock, teasing at the slit, spreading his precum.

Then faster, matching every breath he took until he shuddered, gritting his teeth, and I felt liquid heat dapple my belly.

When he opened his eyes again, they were soft with all of the same emotions I was feeling. "Dimi," I whispered, "I love you."

I know," he said, smiling. "I've always known. It just took you a while to come around."

Yeah, I guess it did, at that.

We drifted off to sleep then, he and I, wrapped in each other's arms, and it was the most peaceful sleep I can ever remember enjoying.

The following morning, there was a gift waiting for me on the kitchen table. Dimi had already left for work after kissing me and making me promise to be there when he returned.

I stared at the gift for a while, wondering what he'd bought and when he'd had the time to buy it. He hadn't known I was coming; couldn't have guessed that that we would share what we had the night before.

Carefully I opened it, slowly peeling away the paper from the box. Lifting the lid, I peered inside, and nearly broke down into sobs when I read the note Dimi had left on top.

"This has been waiting for you for a long, long time. I love you, and I always have. Ever since the first day we met. Even before I knew what love was, then later, when my mind wouldn't accept it, my heart always knew. Forever yours, Dimi."

Nestled inside the box amid a fluff of white tissue paper, was a bright red metal Transformers lunch box.

\* \* \* \*

Finally! Dimi's car is pulling up to the curb and he hops out, an apology for making me wait for so long in the rain on his lips.

I don't need an apology. I need his arms around me, his lips on mine, and I pull him into my arms and kiss him with a passion that's been building all afternoon. *Mine.* He's mine now and forever.

The Sweet Side Of The Ropes: Enthralling Tales Of Male-Male Romance by Kiernan Kelly

Suddenly the house behind me ceases to be important. Every pain I'd felt, every regret I've ever had melts away into nothingness, replaced by the love I can feel in his arms, hear in his voice, taste on his lips.

I've finally come home, and no bank, no one, nothing can ever take that away from me. Not now. I've waited for Dimi long enough.

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## **About the Author**

Kiernan Kelly lives in the wilds of the alligator-infested U.S. Southeast, slathered in SPF 45, drinking colorful tropical, hioctane concoctions served by thong-clad cabana boys.

The truth is that she spends her time locked in the dark recesses of her office, writing gay erotic romance while chained to a temperamental Macintosh, drinking coffee, and *dreaming* of thong-clad cabana boys.

To date, Kiernan has seven novels in print, a plethora of short stories in e-format ... and still no cabana boy of her own, although her husband may beg to differ.

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