

GREEN ROOM

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Synopsis

Kyle is a handsome, fit teen who acknowledges his attraction to both sexes but refuses to label his sexuality. He even rejects the bi-sexual label. He also recognizes that anything that smacks of 'gay' has great potential to attract scorn and ridicule from peer groups. He is therefore protective of the image he projects. Kyle is a keen sportsman; swimming and surfing among his favorite activities. He fights his battles with courage and honor, and learns much about himself (as well as his friends) in the process.

His friend Brett, on the other hand, was once a school bully and homophobe. A cruel and violent father tormented the first seven years of Brett's life, the remainder by his mother's boyfriend, the man who accedes to the role of "dungeon master".

At first meeting, Kyle and Brett are bitter enemies; a situation destined for truly remarkable change over the following few years.

One of the key players in this life-changing series of experiences is G (myself) who becomes Kyle's 'soul buddy' and mentor via email. G begins by indirectly saving Kyle and his best friend Rick from a suicide attempt, then continues to assist Kyle in dealing with a series personal challenges in relation to his young friends and lovers over the next four years. Based on actuality (with names and locations changed), this tale will greatly influence the attitudes and lives of its readers just as those same events affected the original, real-life players.

Location: Byron Bay, the most easterly point of Australia, and a mecca for serious surfers. A short drive to the west is Wollumbin, an extinct volcano sacred to the local Aborigines, the Bundjalung Nation.

The author: I met Kyle on the Internet in late 1997 when he was 15. I visited his fledgling website and found it impressive. Out of my fascination for his life and those of his friends, grew my appetite for writing stories based on his adventures as well as recollections of my own. Kyle loved the stories and looked forward to a new chapter each day. He used them to relate to his own experiences. Kyle and I were a mutual admiration society and became, as he put it, Soul Buddies.

Cover note

James Lokken

Writer, editor, San Francisco

I'm acquainted with Gary Kelly, the author, through his unique and fascinating web site. Over the past several years he has posted there a number of stories growing out of his extraordinary e-mail conversations with a teen-age surfer who shared with Gary the most intimate details of his life, his friendships, his angst, his doubts, his joys, his fears, his coming of age, his triumphs and his disappointments. Kyle (his name in *Green Room*) reveals in these conversations things about himself he could not share with his parents, his closest friends, or anyone else.

The two never met, except on the internet, and the story ends with Kyle's tragic death in an auto accident. The conversations nevertheless transformed both of them. Kyle was tempted by drugs, suicide, and self-doubt. The e-mail conversations sustained him. Gary was given a friend closer and more intimate than any whose physical presence he has known. It's a love story, a real one, and like much of life is more

improbable than fiction.

There's a deal of sex in this story. It will be viewed by some as pornography. I make a distinction between pornography and art. Porn is about body parts and sexual acts isolated from any context or personal relationships. Its goal is sexual arousal. Porn takes one to a fantasy world of erotic indulgence. Art is about reality, about life, about people in all their complexity, about relationships. Sexuality is a part of real life. In recent years sexuality has been treated in literature with much greater frankness and candor than it was even a generation ago. Some pornography exists in the imagination of the reader, and such readers may find it in *Green Room*. I find much more depth in the story than that. This is about people – real people, actually. This is not simplistic eroticism but extraordinary self-revelation by a truly amazing young man who, in struggling with the realities of his own life, is inspiring to others.

The intense sexuality of Kyle's life is not simplistic, not stereotypically gay or straight. Kyle loves and hates, sometimes both, his various friends, each in a different way because they're different people. At the same time he's very involved with the

world around him: the sea, the mountains, the beauty and wonder of all creation, and he feels himself part of it.

The Dialogue

Green Room could have been written entirely as a series of e-mails, and much of it is. Gary Kelly has elected to add connecting narration setting the internet messages in context, and including himself in the story. That helps, I think, make it an easier read than if the reader were left to figure all that out from the sometimes cryptic language of the e-mails.

In general I find the language in good form but idiosyncratic spelling, grammar, and syntax is integral to the teen-speak of the characters. There will also be localisms and teen jargon which will mystify, but Kelly has been good about explaining unfamiliar words and idioms. It's quite intelligible to this reader of U.S. English. The Aussie colloquialisms and surfer talk seem authentic, but I'm not an expert in those things. I've heard far more mystifying stuff from teens on the buses here in San Francisco.

The Title

Green Room is a play on words. It's sometimes

used to describe the place where performers wait before coming on stage. In this book, of course, the other meaning of the term is relevant. It's surfer talk for the space under the curl of a breaking wave, where a surfer can glide along for a few seconds entirely surrounded by churning water, a special place to feel intimate harmony with nature. The cover art removes the ambiguity.

Potential Market

Initially I thought primary audience for *Green Room* is gay men. Since the amazing popularity of *Brokeback Mountain*, however, I'm not so sure. That story and this one are both about love and the difficulty of homosexual relationships in a heterosexual culture.

My initial thoughts may be too modest. There may be potential in this story for a film like *Brokeback Mountain*. It might be too sexually explicit for the big screen, but these days, who can tell? Adolescent sexuality is pretty controversial stuff, and *Green Room* brings it out of the closet in a big way. Another inherent difficulty is in bringing off the page a conversation that existed only on the internet.

It reminds me of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*.

In that story the two central characters never speak to each other. The tension and drama exist entirely in the mind of Gustav Aschenbach, a man of great propriety and personal idealism who finds himself passionately attracted to Tadzio, a beautiful boy. His passion is unacceptable intellectually, but undeniable physically. In the book, visually realized in the film by Luchino Visconti and the opera by Benjamin Britten, the two main characters never dare to speak, though they are intensely aware of each other and of the tension between them. The plot echoes the classical struggle of Apollo and Dionysus, of reason and passion.

Green Room is the work of an author who is gifted in writing dialogue. The characters come to life in the words they use. Because it is a true story and the characters are real, the plot twists and turns as improbably as real life. This is not neatly contrived fiction. Those who want a conventional novel with conventional drama and a conventional ending will be disappointed. But I think that is the strength of this work. Its characters are not conventional, though any of us could recognize similarities with people we know. Its situations and resolutions proceed with the

drama and intensity of teen-age awareness, full of both achievements and disappointments. I think it's real. I think it has potential for a much wider audience.



Cover design, surferdude@ravemail.co.za

FOREWORD

Death is a Green Room, albeit one of a spiritual nature—and not as daunting as I imagined when I existed as flesh and blood.

My life affected the lives of my folks and friends in a more profound way than I could have possibly anticipated. I know that now because my celestial manifestation witnessed the memorial service held in my honor. I heard the speeches, saw the tears, sensed the hearts heavy with intense sadness and loss.

Fate snatched away my earthly presence without warning at age nineteen. After a few late-night beers with my workmates at the Gold Coast, I hitched a lift home to Byron Bay with a stranger. The car crashed at 160 kilometers per hour. A short time later, after frantic emergency surgery, I called it a day. I never regained consciousness.

A few hours beforehand, my life was a bud ready to blossom; my application to enter university to study marine biology accepted. The final countdown to a promising future. That was the most bitter of pills for my family and friends to swallow: cut off in the glorious prime of youth.

This story, however, is not about my death, it's about my life, in particular the last four years during which time I formed wonderful and inspiring relationships with new friends including "the old man far across the sea". He's the one whose

fingers are busily tapping the keyboard right now. We became email buddies when I was just fifteen and he was fifty something. He called me "One Awesome Dude" (OAD) and I called him "Awesome Old Dude" (AOD). We were true soul buddies.

G, as I also referred to him, was intrigued by the stories I told about my life. Nevertheless, he was aware of his inadequacy in terms of age to relate directly to me as a teen. So, he created one, Daniel, a fictional character whose life and times, and problems, bore striking similarities to my own. Daniel became a brother; I identified with him as closely as any real person I knew. And it was Daniel, as it turned out, who saved the life of my best friend Rick, as well as my own.

From kindergarten days, Rick and I were inseparable. Together, we surfed, hiked Wollumbin, attended the same classes at school, were active members of the swim team, slept over at each other's houses and shared the most intimate of secrets.

Rick and I were 15 when his folks decided to emigrate to Canada. Although overwhelmed by impossible grief, we kept our aching hearts to ourselves and formed a suicide pact.

One night, we attached a hose to the exhaust of my friend's family car and led it inside. We sat side by side in the front seats, with Rick behind the wheel. A final check ensured all windows and doors were shut. Then, a turn of the ignition key gave life to our executioner. We embraced for the

final time and sobbed our tearful goodbyes, promising to meet again in the hereafter.

As the rich smell of carbon monoxide intensified, I recalled something G wrote in a story. It told of a teen who dealt successfully with the gut-wrenching misery of separation from his best mate. "Rick!" I cried. "We can't do this!"

The unexpected recollection was a godsend. We immediately aborted our suicide attempt and flung open both front doors. Only at that point did the reality and sheer gravity of the situation dawn on our young minds. Fresh air never smelled so deliciously sweet.

Several months elapsed before I trusted G enough to tell him about that event; how close Rick and I came to "offing" ourselves. I told no one else. Neither did Rick.

"... well, unless you've come close to doing something like that you'll never know just how desperately down you are at the time, and just how close you are to doing the most drastic thing ever. Hell, you just don't think! As soon as you feel like that, call a friend, your folks, anyone. You need to know there's always something to live for, and that there's always someone out there for you."

Anyway, G appreciated my confession, thankful I was still alive, and pleased to have played a major role (unknowingly at the time he wrote the story) in saving two young lives.

The new and stronger bond between G and me meant that I could tell him anything, and I did. He sure came in handy when I was miserable after Rick departed for Canada. G was my dumping ground for excess emotional baggage. *Sorry to be always dumping my shit on you G. But at least I feel better! Hehehe.*

Why did G spend so much time and effort helping me with my problems? That recurring question puzzled me in the early days. Meanwhile, you can figure out the answer yourself as my story progresses.

Death is a change, and it scares me shitless. I was close once, but you changed that, G; made me believe in myself. I don't agree with John Lennon's remark about like getting out of one car and into another. I haven't convinced myself about life after death. I hear all the sayings like "Life is a journey, not a destination". Once I know the destination, I'll let you know how I feel about it.

CHAPTER 1

Rick and I made the most of every precious moment together during the final week leading to his departure for Canada. This totally surreal situation confounded my comprehension. My best mate gone? Half a world away? I could only imagine it as existing inside some sort of morbid vacuum.

With surfboards tucked under our arms, floral board shorts barely clinging to narrow hips (in the way surfers like to reveal their obliques), we jogged home from Watego's beach one afternoon.

"I got a surprise for you, Kyle."

"You mean...?" I asked tentatively. "You're not leaving?"

"I wish," he lamented. "No, mate. I organized a kind of going away party. Just you and me and a couple of girls."

"Girls? What girls?"

"You don't know them." He paused to smile. "Yet."

What was this all about? Spending every possible second with Rick was all that mattered. A party with girls I didn't even know seemed absurdly inappropriate; even blasphemous.

The appointed hour arrived. We stood at the front door of a house just a few blocks from our own. I reeked of my dad's after-shave, despite blushing cheeks yet to sprout even a single whisker. I intended to impress!

Rick was generally the more impressive one, though. Contrary to our sharing the same age and similar builds, he

was emotionally the more mature. He even had a girlfriend. And yes, they had "done it".

A few seconds following Rick's knock, the door creaked open revealing a dimly-lit interior and the sweet smell of incense. One of the girls invited us inside. It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the low light, and then, whoa! I got the shock of my life.

Girls? Yeah, right. They were women! There I was, a naive and virginal fifteen, and they were least twenty or thereabouts. They appeared... well, not so innocent, if you get my drift.

Following introductions, the taller woman, blonde and wearing enough eye shadow and rouge to last my mom a whole year, asked if I wanted cola. Cola? Hello? Obviously, the after-shave failed to create the desired effect, or maybe it was overpowered by the incense. "Beer," I said, lowering my voice an octave.

Our stay lasted just one hour, not a minute more. How odd, I thought. But during the walk home Rick explained an hour was all he could afford.

His comment momentarily stunned me. "Afford? You mean... you actually *paid* for that?"

His open hand slapped my back, then roughed up my spiky black hair. "You did it, man!" he declared enthusiastically. "You actually did it! I'm so proud of you, bro. I was kinda worried about leaving you here in Byron Bay all alone—a virgin. How do you feel? Stoked?"

"Not sure." I stooped to collect a small stone, then bowled it over-arm at a tree. "She said I was doing it like a ferret."

Rick burst into hysterics, then stumbled around in circles, clutching his stomach.

"What's so damn funny?" I demanded, puzzled. "Anyway, I don't even know what a ferret is. Is that like a weasel or something?"

My sudden elevation to non-virginal status was nothing like I expected. For starters, a cheering audience was never a consideration. Okay, so maybe it wasn't quite the disaster to end all disasters, but it felt uncomfortably close. I wasn't sure whether Rick deserved my thanks or a firing squad. I always imagined I'd go the traditional route of eventually meeting a girl, falling in love and... well, you know. But my first time was with a common slut! A pro! She probably already had hundreds of... Jeez! It didn't bear thinking about. No way would or could I tell my folks about that experience. No way.

G's response to my revelation surprised as well as angered me. *I wish it hadn't happened under those circumstances, mate. Your first time deserves to be special; something you never forget. Yeah, I'm disappointed, but not just because of what happened. It's also a sign that you're growing up. I don't think it will be long before this old fossil is of no further use as far as you're concerned.*

I couldn't wait to send a reply from my dad's computer, and give that dumb-ass fossil a piece of my mind. I was so mad

that I sent him a bunch of my photos as well. *What the hell makes you think my first time is gonna make any difference to our friendship? You want proof of how I feel about you? Okay. Here's a bunch of pics. One's a nudie. It was taken at a swim team initiation ceremony. I had to stand naked on a table and sink a beer without stopping. Would I send you pics of me if I didn't trust you as a close friend? You know how I feel about my anonymity on the 'net, G. Now, write back and chill out for Christ sake.*

A week later, the worst day of my life loomed like storm cloud above Gold Coast airport as my dad drove us toward the inevitable. Would I ever see Rick again? That was the question I repeatedly asked myself. Sure, I might see him sometime in years to come, but what about now? What about tomorrow? What about next week or next month? Hardly a word was uttered during the somber trip. Even my folks were unusually quiet.

The return trip was even worse. Thoughts of those final, heart-wrenching seconds before Rick vanished from view plundered my mind. They would haunt my memory forever. He paused at the boarding gate briefly to wave goodbye, wearing an expression of sad bewilderment. I guess we both did. Then, nothing—only a bunch of faceless strangers going about their airport business as though life remained fine and dandy. My throat jammed, and it took every ounce of mustered will to restrain the tears. I decided then and there that I detested airplanes and airports with a passion.

Rick wasn't an Internet person, and couldn't understand my obsession with it. He preferred the company of "real" people. I was lucky to get an email from him maybe once every two or three weeks. If it weren't for G, I don't know how I would have coped with my gloom. I ear bashed him every chance I got. It was good therapy for me, and he gladly obliged.

The experiences Rick and I shared during our years of growing up together took on a sharper clarity in his absence. The special places in Wollumbin and Nightcap National Parks we called our own. Devil's Chimney, a deep, meandering cave where childhood secrets were swapped, and where we vowed to be brothers forever. We swore never to tell anyone about our special places; the very same places I visited often and alone to commune with his spirit following his departure. I knew it was there, just like the spirit of Wollumbin itself was always there, ever since the dawn of Aboriginal Dreamtime.

I also needed to occasionally remind G during my depression that I wasn't going to do anything "stupid". He understood.

A month or two after Rick's departure, I arrived home from the surf wearing a grin even a Cheshire cat couldn't match, and itching to share my new experience. Dad was making coffee in the kitchen. Roo, my chocolate-brown kelpie, climbed all over me as if I'd been away for a month.

"I made a cool new friend," I explained, while trying to calm Roo. "His name is Stuart. We arranged to surf together again tomorrow. He's a wicked surfer, dad. Totally wicked!"

He's blond and a year younger than me. A grommet. He was doing airs and floaters like there was no tomorrow! Awesome!"

"Slow down, son. Slow down. I haven't seen a smile on your face that wide since... Is Stuart a local?"

"Yeah. Lives not far from here. His parents are loaded, but Stuart's cool. Not stuck up or anything. Goes to a private school. You'll like him a lot."

"Coffee?"

"Thanks."

I took my board to my room, hung it on the wall next to the Endless Summer poster, changed into fresh shorts, and returned to the kitchen. However, the joyful spring in my step quickly abated.

"Your mother and I have been worried about you lately," my dad admitted solemnly as he stirred his coffee. "Seriously worried. You want to talk about your depression?"

"What's there to talk about?" I shrugged. "I miss Rick. Simple. Wouldn't you miss me if I disappeared?"

"That's different. You're my son. I love you."

"I love Rick."

An oddly curious expression crept over my dad's handsome face. "How do you mean?"

"I'm not sure, dad. I love you, I love mom, and I love Rick. Hey, I love Roo too. Is there another word for 'love' I don't know of? I can't say I *like* Rick, that wouldn't be altogether correct. There are lots of people I like but don't love."

My dad seemed satisfied with my answer, or at least unwilling to comment further. "Tell me about this Stuart fellow," he asked.

"He's kind of like Rick in some ways. You know, he's a great surfer, wicked bod, wets all the girls' panties..."

Oops! What an inconvenient moment for my mother to enter the kitchen. She was always doing that; appearing out of thin air at precisely the wrong time. "What did I just hear you say, son?"

"It's true, mom. Stuart's a hottie. A surfer god. All the girls go crazy. Didn't you go crazy when dad was a teen surfer?"

An instant diversion was called for. "There's fresh coffee in the pot, Wendy," dad said quickly. "How was work today?"

Mom sat at the table, and dropped her handbag to the floor as if it weighed a ton. "Same old, same old," she sighed. "Can you pour me a coffee, Michael? I'm pooped." Then she returned her attention to me. "And no, I didn't go crazy. I wasn't a beach groupie. I had better things to do than gawk at silly egotistical boys."

"You married him."

"He married me."

"What's the difference?"

"Your mother's a lady," dad smiled as he placed mom's coffee on the table, and then sat down. "Make no mistake, son.

I had my share of groupie gawkers when I was your age. It boosted my ego, of course, but..."

"Did you do stuff? You know, birds and bees thingies...?"

Not surprisingly, dad ignored my attempt to probe the darker side of his secret past. "Those kinds of girls are not the type you marry, Kyle."

"Someone will."

"I'm not that type of someone." Dad glanced at my mom and gave her a sheepish grin.

"So, who is this Stuart you're talking about," mom asked. "Do I know him?"

"I met him surfing. We chatted for a while afterwards. I'd seen him around. He's a regular. But we never spoke till today. His last name is Shaffer."

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"They're rich folks. They live on the hill."

"Nob hill? I thought you didn't care for the nobs. Are you sure you want to make a friend of this boy?"

Mom was right. I didn't much care for rich folks. Their kids, often spoiled rotten, didn't need to do neighborhood chores like I did to earn some spending cash. My folks weren't poor, but money was something not to be wasted on extravagances. "Stuart is cool," I argued. "He's not like the other nobs."

My friendship with Stuart flourished for a month or two. I still missed Rick, of course, but at least my new mate provided an enjoyable diversion. Stuart was the quintessential

blond himbo, with more girls clamoring for his tanned, solidly-built bod and handsome face than I could count. Or he for that matter. It was a miracle he remembered all their names. And he was an ace surfer, one of the coolest around. At a surfer's mecca like Byron Bay, that said a lot.

To the great satisfaction of my ego, Stuart looked up to me, probably because I was older. One year is a big deal during early teens.

One day, after surfing, we dumped our boards at my house. Mom and dad were still at work.

"Hey, Kyle! Totally cool room, man." Stuart checked my Endless Summer poster, and commented on the signature. "Is that really Bruce Brown?"

"The man himself."

"Awesome!"

After showering, Stuart followed me to the kitchen, where I made cheese and Vegemite sandwiches and poured two juices. Our conversation centered on normal teen stuff: surfing, girls, music, movies. But I sensed a lot more to Stuart than he seemed inclined to expose. Many of the regulars at the beach, mainly guys, found him shallow. I didn't agree. At least, not then.

While wrestling on my bed, I made a grab at his crotch. My motive was to overpower him. He reacted violently by using his fists. Instinctively, I did likewise. Then he stormed out of the house, shouting profanities which smoldered like hot coals in his outraged brain.

I wrote G about it.

He's not so mad at you, Captain. He's mad at himself. Guys his age get all bent out of shape if they think there's something sexual going on, even if it's totally innocent. Sounds to me like some kind of identity crisis. Give it time. I'm sure the problem will sort itself out.

So what am I supposed to do in the meantime? I wondered. Stuart ignored me at the beach every day, aggravating my neurotic downer. The companionship of my other surfing buddies eased the distress somewhat, but they weren't the same. I'd grown to like Stuart a great deal, and I missed him big time. To exacerbate matters, the whole mess was clouded by a sense of destiny; to have friends continually walk out of my life. First Rick, now Stuart. Who would be next?

The resumption of school for the new year was a blessing. At least the swim team and study kept me occupied. Outside of surfing, swimming was my favorite sport. And I was bloody good at it.

After showering with the team, I noticed something attached to the side of my locker: an envelope with my name handwritten on the front, and marked "personal".

I tossed it unopened into my tog bag, fearing too much curiosity and sticky-beaking from the team guys dressing nearby, then headed home.

CHAPTER 2

People studiously scrutinize the front and back of an envelope before opening it in the hope of a clue as to what the contents might be. Yeah? The quickest way to discover what's inside is to open the bloody thing right away. But, you know, people are kind of crazy. And that includes me.

First off, I tried to recognize the handwriting. Nope. And there was nothing written on the back. I sniffed the envelope. No giveaway scent. But there was something semi-solid inside, as well as a folded piece of paper. I shook the envelope and heard a jingling sound. Then held it to the light. What was it? And from whom?

The side of my bed dipped a little as I sat down to unravel the mystery. I carefully peeled open the envelope flap so as not to tear the paper. Inside, appeared a silver chain with a silver surfboard attached. I took the note and unfolded it. *Hey, Kyle. I'm really sorry about the fight, man. I kinda lost it. I guess I got confused about stuff. Can we talk? I just want you to know that I'd like us to be mates again. Give me a call and maybe we can sort things out. Your friend, Stuart.*

I read the note again, then heard scratching sounds at the back door. Roo! Damn, I'd forgotten all about her.

"Sorry, Roo," I apologized after opening the door. Her legs propelled her down the hall, skidded to a halt, causing the hall runner to concertina into a series of rolling mounds,

then collided with the front door. The return trip was delayed a couple of seconds until her galloping paws managed to grip the exposed polished floorboards. If only people could be as open and honest with their emotions, I thought.

I didn't phone Stuart right away. There were chores to do. Roo's landmines for one, and weeding for another. There was also a note from dad, asking me to fix a loose tile on the roof. Those chores were a blessing really; they gave me a chance to think things through before making the phone call.

"Could I speak to Stuart Shaffer, please?"

"Just a moment. May I say who's calling?"

"Kyle Taranto."

That was weird. She sounded foreign. Some seconds later, I heard Stuart's voice. "Kyle?"

"Hi, mate. How's it?"

"Cool. Thanks for calling. Did you get my note?"

"How did you get into the school locker room?"

"Snuck in. No one was there."

"Who answered the phone just now?"

"The housemaid. We have staff here."

"Staff? Bloody hell! Anyway, thanks for the gift. I'm wearing it now. It rocks something fierce!"

"Can we talk?"

"Feel like catching a wave?"

I figured it preferable to meet on neutral ground. Surfing also diminished any potential chance of tension because it provided a diversion.

"I see you're wearing the necklace," he grinned as we sat on our boards out back, rising and falling with the swell, and waiting for a promising wave. "Why did you call?"

"You asked me to."

"Does that also mean you ... wanted to?"

"Sure. I missed you."

Next thing I knew, Stuart disappeared from view down the face of a four-footer rushing to shore. The following one was mine.

We surfed for about 90 minutes, meeting from time to time on the back line after a ride, exchanging pleasantries, but talked little about the cause of our recent dispute. It wasn't until we showered in our Speedos under the fresh-water beach tap that Stuart mentioned something I found disconcerting.

"You freak me out sometimes, Kyle."

"How so?"

"I dunno. The way you look at me, I guess."

"Like?"

He shut off the water and grabbed a towel, allowing me to take my turn at the shower. "Maybe it's me," he said, drying his longish, straight blond hair. "Forget it."

I said nothing, but understood what he meant about the way I looked at him. Hell, everybody gawked at Stuart. He was a major head-turner, blessed with a killer face, matched by his tanned, muscular body. He needed to make only the slightest movement for a muscle to bulge or flex or ripple. It was simply a phenomenon impossible to ignore ... or admire.

We walked home together, chatting about the surfing conditions and some of our better rides. Finally, my patience gave way to curiosity. I had to know what was eating him.

"Does it bother you when people check you out?"

"Ha! Why do you think I wear my boardies so low? It's cool to show a few curlies and a bit of butt to the chicks." There was a pause before he added, "Are you worried about what I said back at the shower?"

"Yeah."

"You're different, Kyle. You're my best mate. My other mates aren't the same. Don't ask me why. I don't really understand it myself. Somehow it's... special being with you. Maybe it's your smile and ready laugh or something. You don't bullshit like other guys do. It's like you're not competing with me. Know what I mean? You get just as excited as me when I do a 360 on a cool wave. You went totally ballistic out there—for me! I dunno, Kyle, I'm probably talking through my ass here. It's just that..." He hesitated a second. "It's just that I don't want anything to go wrong again ... wrong between you and me, that is."

I didn't quite follow him. "What could go wrong?"

We reached the corner of the road that led toward his house. "Nothing, I hope. See you tomorrow, Kyle."

"See you, Stuart." I watched him for about a minute, then yelled, "And thanks a stack for the necklace!"

G'day Captain. Yeah, it's a tricky one. I tend to think your problem is that you're unique. Rick grew up with you, so

he was used to the way you are. And vice versa. Stuart's only just come on board. You're a bit of a culture shock. I also think you're stirring unfamiliar feelings within your young friend. He's only 14, after all. My guess is he's apprehensive.

You have two choices here, mate. You can modify your behavior to suit him, or you can continue to be yourself. It's not an easy choice to make. But consider this: if you spend the rest of your life modifying your behavior to suit others, who is the real Kyle?

At the dinner table that night, I asked my folks if they modified their behavior to keep the peace at home.

"That's a strange question to ask," mom said, raising her eyebrows. "What on earth brought that on?"

Dad didn't wait for my answer. "Does this have something to do with your new friend Stuart?"

"We had a fight, but it's cool now. We surfed together this afternoon."

"So what else is new? You and Rick were always fighting, then making up. What did you and Stuart fight about?"

"We were wrestling and he kind of spat the dummy for no good reason."

"It must have been a good reason to him."

"So what about my question?" I reminded them.

"Modifying behavior?" Mom glanced at dad then continued after a moment's pause. "Well, yes—to an extent, that is. It's important to any relationship to give and take. You need to be

sensitive to your partner's—or friend's—needs. You can't have it all your own way, you know."

"Not that your mother doesn't stop trying," dad laughed, then got the predictable hairy eyeball.

"Okay," I responded, "let me put it this way. When you guys married, did you figure the other guy was unique? Like, is that why you married him? Uh, her?"

"How do you mean, son?"

"A friend told me today that you gotta be yourself. If you modify your behavior to suit everyone else, then who the hell are you?"

"There are degrees of modification, son," mom explained. "If your question is: did your father get the real me? then the answer is yes. And I got the real him. Shortly thereafter, we got the real Kyle."

My right hand made a desperate dash for the glass of water in front of me. I took a gulp, hoping to miraculously banish the sudden hot rush of blood to my cheeks.

"And did we?" mom continued. "Get the real you?"

"You didn't adopt me, mom. It's not like you checked me out before deciding to keep me. You got what popped out."

"To turn your question back on you, Kyle," my dad intervened, "have you modified your behavior to please your mother and me?"

I shoveled the last of the chicken casserole into my mouth and used the chewing time to contemplate my answer. "I

guess so," I concluded. "I do my chores, my homework, and stuff like that."

"Why?"

"To stay out of trouble."

"Really?" mom asked with a wink. "Is that all?"

Then the truth dawned. "Okay, because I love you."

It was true; I loved my folks with all my heart. They were the best folks a bloke could wish for. Dad was the one who took me surfing when I was a little Kyle. He taught me to paddle around in the mush until I grew big enough and sufficiently confident to ride the waves by myself. And ever since those early days, surfing stayed in my blood. It became a religion almost; a way of life. A culture.

But my passion went further than simply riding waves. I fell in love with the sea, and all the wonderful creatures in it. As a boy, I made up my mind to become a marine biologist.

Dad also introduced me to Mount Warning (Wollumbin), which quickly became "my mountain". It was an endless source of high adventure and fascination. Rick and I hiked there regularly, and sometimes other guys from the school swim team joined us. Those were awesome times that would remain with me forever.

No matter where you are in Byron Bay or the surrounding shire, Wollumbin dominates the land and seascape. It may be an extinct volcano but it's also a living museum, the last refuge of ancient rainforest from a time when Australia was part of the pre-historic super-continent, Gondwanaland.

Wollumbin is sacred to all the tribes of the Bundjalung Nation. It's the place where the Law Men gather to receive guidance from Babara (God) and put Natural Laws into practice for the well-being of Marmeng (Mother Earth), rather like the Bundjalung version of Moses and Mount Sinai. The wise and respected Bundjalung elder, Uncle Eric Walker, said: *It's a holy mountain to us, it's just like a cathedral or a church, you know. It was at that place that our old people used to go up and talk to God and God would give them old elders the directions and give them the laws and they would come back and tell our young people. But the young people had to be initiated. Dont kill, dont steal, dont be greedy... It was the same law that Moses got when he came down from Mt Sinai. They were exactly the same, they were strict laws, they were good laws. They did not make them today and break them tomorrow like they do today. If you broke them you had to pay the price.*

My dad and I often visited the local Bundjalung fishermen at the beach. They called him "boss", which was their habit when addressing him, and they called me "little boss". They fished to feed their families, but always offered us one or two fish to take home. To refuse would be insulting. I got the feeling those wizened old guys with weathered faces and gentle smiling eyes had wisdom to burn, disguised perhaps by their

poor social and financial status. It was a different story when you got to know them.

"Respect everyone," my dad told me, "and you'll learn a lot."

Meanwhile, my relationship with Stuart puzzled me. It was cool that he had lots of friends, and a different girl every other day, but I sensed something wrong; or going wrong. He seemed distant. You can imagine my surprise when he blamed me.

We sat in my room while he helped me with my math homework. "Kyle? Is anything wrong?"

"Yeah, my brain. How the hell do you understand all this algebra shit?"

"I mean with you. You've been kind of distant lately."

"Distant? Me? How so?"

"I dunno—like you don't care or something. Are you losing interest?"

"In you? In our friendship? No way! What makes you think that?"

"You've changed."

He was right. I had changed. Ever since G's email about modifying behavior, and my chat over dinner with my folks, my awareness of how and how not to behave in company was almost paranoiac. I focused on not rocking the boat. "I guess I'm confused about stuff."

"Like what?"

"I don't wanna upset you by doing something totally lame, Stuart. I don't want us to fight again."

And G's advice? *That's a very noble goal, Captain, but I'm afraid it's not terribly realistic. Conflict is part of life, particularly in the case of a fiery hot-head like you. When conflict occurs, as it inevitably will from time to time, the important thing is how you deal with it. And I'm talking about the REAL you!*

Chapter 3

Over time, the bond between Stuart and me strengthened noticeably, but not to the same degree as my friendship with Rick. Rick and I saw each other daily; lives interwoven like a taut ball of twine; a situation I learned to accept as normal. Didn't everyone have a best friend? A confidant? A constant companion? Someone with whom even the most personal of secrets were willingly, even eagerly, shared?

Stuart led another life with his posh friends and their wild parties, at which (it was common knowledge) drugs flowed freely. Also, his obsession with girls began to annoy the crap out of me; a new one every five minutes, or so it seemed. What was he trying to prove? Sure, I was jealous, and tired of constantly hearing about his sexual conquests. Blah, blah, blah...

"Chill, Kyle, that's what mates do for Christ sake. They tell each other about stuff like that. All the guys do. Well, all the guys except you."

"You disappear for weeks and then show up out of the blue like it's no big deal. We're supposed to be friends, Stuart."

"You're becoming way too possessive, Kyle, like some of the girls I know. Don't fence me in. Okay?"

Other times, he slept over at my house, or I his, and it was like we were comfortably cocooned in a private and intimate world; having quietly detached itself from reality. I

sometimes read Kahlil Gibran's poetry aloud as we lay on top of the bed.

On Friendship

And a youth said, "Speak to us of Friendship."

Your friend is your needs answered.

He is your field which you sow with love and reap with thanksgiving.

And he is your board and your fireside.

For you come to him with your hunger, and you seek him for peace.

When your friend speaks his mind you fear not the "nay" in your own mind, nor do you withhold the "ay."

And when he is silent your heart ceases not to listen to his heart;

For without words, in friendship, all thoughts, all desires, all expectations are born and shared, with joy that is unacclaimed.

When you part from your friend, you grieve not;

For that which you love most in him may be clearer in his absence, as the mountain to the climber is clearer from the plain.

And let there be no purpose in friendship save the deepening of the spirit.

For love that seeks aught but the disclosure of its own mystery is not love but a net cast forth: and only the unprofitable is caught.

And let your best be for your friend.

If he must know the ebb of your tide, let him know its flood also.

For what is your friend that you should seek him with hours to kill?

Seek him always with hours to live.

For it is his to fill your need, but not your emptiness.

And in the sweetness of friendship let there be laughter, and sharing of pleasures.

For in the dew of little things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed.

My voice had a certain quality that Stuart found serene, almost hypnotic. He never mentioned it—hell, that wasn't the kind of compliment you paid to another guy—but it was apparent in his body language. My voice lulled him into a spell-like state of being.

Meanwhile, the secret question on both our minds was: Is this normal behavior for a couple of macho teens?

G'day, Captain. First, you need to understand the difference between 'normal' and 'natural'. I think you're confused, probably along with most of humanity. Everything is natural, otherwise it wouldn't exist. But not everything natural is normal. Normal is about averages. So the answer is: no, you are not completely normal, and the reason for that is that you're not completely average. You excel in many respects, one of them friendship. You have a special gift, Kyle. An extraordinary gift for loving, caring and sharing.

Share it your way, without undue concern or anxiety for the opinions of others.

I arrived home one afternoon after school and set about doing my usual backyard chores when I heard a voice. "G'day." I turned to see a kid on the other side of the fence. "I'm Graham. We moved in a week ago. Can I help with the chores?"

Yeah, right. I practically had to re-do everything he did. But his good nature and willingness to assist got to me. I figured his age at about 11 or so. "I'm going on 12." He looked quite mature for his age, and was solidly built. His black hair and facial features reminded me in many ways of a younger Rick. Or even a younger Kyle for that matter.

"How about I give you the Roo crap detail?"

"You got a pet kangaroo?"

"Roo's my pet kelpie."

With a name like Graham I found it impossible not to immediately nickname the little guy "grommet".

"What's grommet mean?"

"A kid surfer."

Throughout that year, he hopped the fence every day, whether to help with chores or breeze into my room like it was his own personal territory. My folks took to him as well. They loved him. We all loved him, and soon elevated him to family member number four. Or was the elevation his doing?

The grommet's obsession with learning how to surf was satisfied to some extent by Stuart and me. We regularly took him to the beach on weekends and let him ride our boards.

Sometimes I got lucky and borrowed a friend's board. At least one of us stayed with him at all times to make sure he didn't get into bother. Generally, though, the surf at Main Beach was mush, minimizing any real danger. Besides, my dad taught me to surf in mush.

Despite Graham's lack of experience, he showed gutsy determination beyond his tender years. Each time he got nailed by a wave, he surfaced blubbering and coughing, then, undeterred, paddled out again to meet the next challenge. There was no stopping this fearless little grommet.

A guy at school had a surfboard for sale, but my budget didn't stretch that far. I phoned Stuart and asked him if he wanted to contribute. "It's the grommet's birthday in August, and I wanna get him a leash as well."

Stuart, now quite attached to Graham, obliged: "Hey, mate, no problem. I'm happy to help out."

The morning of August 14 arrived and, sure enough, the energetic grommet bounced into my room. "Surf's up!" he beamed. "I checked already!"

"In a minute, in a minute. Settle down." I offered him a card I made myself. "Happy birthday, Graham."

He took it and read the message aloud: *Happy Birthday li'l bro. From your big bro, Kyle.* Hey! That's really cool! So now we're bros; bros forever, right?"

"Forever." I handed him a package wrapped in gift paper that featured printed images of surfing.

"Gee, thanks! What's in it?"

"Find out."

The little guy sat on the side of my bed and slowly opened his gift. "Awesome! A surfboard leash!" He studied the gift for a few seconds, wearing a puzzled expression. "But... I don't have a surfboard."

"Gotta start somewhere, bro. Let's go...and bring the leash with you." He follow me outside to the garage, where a surfboard leaned against the wall. "Here," I said, "you carry this one."

"Whose board is this?"

"I borrowed it from a guy at school. You can use it today, and we can all surf together; the three surf-cateers."

Stuart arrived and we set out barefoot from my house for Little Watego's. Stuart and I wore wetsuits, referred to by surfers as 'wetties'. August is mid winter in Byron Bay.

"You're gonna freeze your nuts off out there, Graham—wearing only board shorts."

"I'll be way too busy to get cold," he said defiantly, puffing out his bare chest, obviously pleased and excited to be carrying a third board in 'big guy' company. "Wow, this is a really neat stick. Now I look like a fair dinkum surfer too!"

Graham stood a tad over five feet tall. The board was just the right size, fitting neatly under his arm. He was also blown away by the design; an airbrushed skeleton surfer emerging from a tube: 'the Green Room'.

An hour later, after catching quite a few good rides, the three of us sat on our boards on the back line in sight of Wollumbin, the Aboriginal name for Mount Warning. "This is a killer board, Kyle. You gonna borrow it again?"

"No need to."

"Huh?"

"It's yours, li'l bro," I said matter-of-factly. "Stuart and I put some bucks together and bought it for you."

What followed was a brief interlude of wide-eyed, jaw-dropping disbelief. "You're joking, right?"

"Nope," I shrugged. Stuart, meanwhile, couldn't resist giggling at the grommet's bewilderment. "We figure you're good enough for your own board now. Besides, how are you gonna surf with us if we're always borrowing a stick? And then maybe not get one? The leash is new but the stick is used."

"I don't believe it! What have I done for you guys to do this for me?"

"Just keep us laughing, mate, that's all."

Later that afternoon, I was busy in my room with school homework when Graham breezed in. "Hi Kyle. Rave session today, man. Got a sec?"

"Stuart and I were watching you. You're getting pretty damn good. I reckon you'll be an ace surfer in no time."

"I need to say something."

"No worries."

"That board is the best thing anyone has ever, ever given me." He shifted some books without asking and parked half his

butt on the corner of my desk. "My parents could never afford to give me something like that. I know it sounds lamo, but I think you and Stuart a pretty damn great to do that for someone."

"Not just someone, bro. I reckon you're part of us now—you've been surfing with us a while, and you needed a stick. Anyway, we both enjoy having you around."

"I thought I was being a pain a lot of the time."

"No way, bro."

"Now I know why you measured my height the other day. And all those neighborhood chores you do? I thought you were saving for a wettie. You said you needed a new one."

"Some other time. You needed a stick."

"I don't want you getting any ideas, Kyle, but I need to do something." The little guy threw his arms around me and gave me the most enormous hug, which took me by surprise.

"Thanks, Kyle. Thanks a stack!"

"Hey, take it easy, Graham, you're gonna crush me to death!"

He relaxed his grip, and explained that he was just so happy he could bust. "By the way, I found out what you told my mom about the board, and she freaked because of the cost."

"Yeah, my dad did, too. Well, at first he did, and then he chilled. He wanted to know where I got the money from and I told him it came out of my savings, plus what I earned from chores. Anyway, after what started as a lecture about finances, he said something really special."

"Yeah?"

"He said he wished he was still a teenager and had a friend like me."

"Yeah, well I'm almost a teen and I've got a friend like you!" And with that, he hugged the hell out of me again.

"By the way, Graham," I asked as I disentangled myself from his strong arms, "didn't you freeze your ass off out there today?"

"I had boardies on."

"You mean almost on."

"Yeah."

The little scallywag's talent for winning hearts was unmatched by anyone I'd ever known. Was it my imagination or did he spend more time at my house than his own? He and my dad got along like a house on fire, often discussing (or arguing about) football, cricket, swimming and other sports. Graham was a dedicated rugby fan, and a member of his school team, as well as the swim and cricket teams. And now he was a surfer fan, rapidly improving his natural talents.

Yet, the void Rick left behind remained. Sure, Graham and Stuart were fantastic company and kept me occupied—and I did love them both—but nothing was able to replace Rick.

Replace is not the right word, Captain. You never replace a friend like Rick, just as you can never replace all those years you shared. They are part of history now, permanently, and will stay with you all your days. What you must do now is keep sharing your love. That's what it's there for, and your

new friends are very fortunate to be the recipients. Stay on track, mate, you're doing just fine.

Chapter 4

G was right; I had plenty of friends and, as far as I knew, no enemies. As a school swim team member, I was surrounded by good mates. We clubbed, surfed and hiked Wollumbin together. We were a tight group.

Frank, the team captain, was a strapping lad with a natural air of authority; intelligent, exceptionally handsome, and armed with a wicked sense of humor. One day in the showers after training, he fooled around as usual, and boasted about the sex he planned that night with his girlfriend.

"Look familiar?" I joked as I parted my butt cheeks and brown-eyed him.

"Careful, Kyle. I might just take you up on that."

Raucous laughter filled the room. Even the new guy, a mean looking mother with a shaved head, giggled. It was the first time I'd seen him smile. His normal demeanor now appeared almost redeemable.

Next day in the quadrangle during recess, I heard a voice call, "Hey, gay boy!" It was the new guy directing his insult at me.

"Say what?" I demanded as I strode up to him; hazel eyes ignited and hair bristling.

"Do you show your ring to everybody or is it just Frank you fancy?" A group of his sycophantic goons laughed as he added, "You're a faggot."

Frank stood beside me and whispered a private message. A second later, the blurred action of my fists placed the new dude flat on his butt. He wiped his bloodied mouth with the back of his hand, glared at me, then scrambled to his feet. But he was restrained by two of his goons. A passing teacher asked the reason for the commotion. "The guy slipped and fell," Frank lied.

When the teacher left and the situation cooled, Frank turned his attention to the new guy. "I should pull you off the swim team, asshole, but Kyle asked me not to. He says you got what was coming and I should leave it at that. You gotta learn a few things, Brett. All us guys fool around like Kyle does. And when we go on tour, we all brown-eye passing cars from the bus. So you better chill, man. We don't need any of your aggro crap on this team. Loosen up, okay? Or piss off."

Next day, hell bent on revenge, Brett waited for me after training. "No one's watching now, dude," he smirked. "Let's have it out".

"There's no need." I ignored his taunting shove and continued toward the change rooms. One of his goons stopped me at the entrance. "You don't get through until Brett says it's okay, mister." The moment I turned to face Brett again, he slammed me in the gut. I went down like a stone and passed out.

Brett was triumphant, or was he? Confident that the score was even, and he'd won the respect of the team, he approached

Frank during the following day's practice and tried to make friendly conversation.

"Piss off, Brett. Kyle's times are down because of what you did, asshole."

Brett caught my eye, expecting resentment. But I read his mind: *"Why the hell isn't this guy mad at me?"* he must have asked himself. And that thought made me smile.

During the next few weeks, Brett mellowed sufficiently to become more accepted by the guys, except Frank. Frank remained strictly business-like and only spoke to Brett if the topic concerned swimming.

Darren, last year's captain and senior, visited the school one day and rated the guys' physiques on a scale of zero to ten. Darren, himself, was way off the scale; a living god. It was quite normal for the guys to comment on each other's looks and fitness. After all, we spent much of our time together dressed only in Speedos or naked in the showers.

One bloke suggested we stage a strip show for the girls. Skeptical, Brett reluctantly agreed to participate. He probably figured it would improve his social standing in the group. Brett, by the way, rated an 8.

"No way, Brett," Frank ordered. "You're not invited."

I chose a private moment to chat to Frank: "You're a bit tough on Brett. He's not such a bad guy and, well, I kinda like him."

"You what? After what he did to you? Listen, Kyle, I've known you all my life, and I know you're not the type to hold

a grudge..." Frank paused a moment to search my hazel eyes.

"Okay, okay," he relented, "I'll invite him to join the strip team. But if you guys end up fighting, it's your fault!"

The party was held on a farm a few miles out of town, in a big barn decorated for the occasion by at least a hundred girls, all eager to see the show. Fifteen of the swim team guys volunteered to be the main attraction. I was one of them, albeit with nagging reservation.

A plentiful supply of beer, compliments of the girls, ensured no lack of Dutch courage for the strippers. Surprisingly, a young shy guy named Maurice volunteered to go first. He must have been primed with alcohol. Equally unexpected was the quality of his performance. To the driving beat of techno music, he teased and stripped down to his Speedos, then jumped off the makeshift stage to writhe his away among the screaming girls. "Get it off, get it off!" they shrieked, touching him anywhere and everywhere they wanted. The show was off to a sensational start.

A 30-minute break followed the first half of the night's performance, then it was my turn to hit the stage. Too zonked to remember much about it afterwards, I do recall that once down to my Speedos, I walked through the cheering crowd and stopped beside Stuart and his latest girlfriend. I thrust my hips at her and invited her to touch me, which she did. Stuart didn't flinch. If I were in his shoes, and he did that to my girlfriend, I would have flattened him.

Stuart wasn't a pupil at my school, but I talked Frank into inviting him anyway. He was pretty much affected by booze and pot by the time he performed, but managed nonetheless to thrill the crowd with his 10-plus blond surfer looks.

However, the final act stole the show. Frank teased and taunted until the audience's screams reached fever pitch. Even the guys went ballistic. At the conclusion of Frank's performance, his girlfriend pulled the front of his Speedos down and kissed his manhood. The joint erupted with unanimous approval and deafening enthusiasm.

A committee of girls voted: Frank 1st, Stuart 2nd, some guy I didn't know 3rd, and Brett 4th. Me? Don't ask, but I did okay. Once the excitement of the show subsided, people drifted away. Minus an offer of a lift home, I crashed outside the barn with some girl who did me a 'favor'. In the morning, I took a cold shower in the open air. I was naked and had an audience, but I didn't care. Luckily, a friend offered me a ride home in his VW Beetle.

During Spring break, the team went on tour to Coffs Harbor to compete at an inter-school comp. I was billeted with a guy named Kim: tall, blond, handsome as all hell, a champion swimmer, and an ego you couldn't pole-vault.

The first week of competition went well, and my times were great. On the Friday, Kim invited me to spend our free weekend with a friend of his; a guy in his thirties who owned a horse farm. The following Monday, the second week of competition began. My times were disappointing to say the

least. I was a total failure. I'd let Frank and the guys down big time, as well as myself. I resigned from the team.

I tried to explain to G the cause of the problem but lacked the courage, at least initially. I'd let him down, too. On the bus trip home to Byron Bay I sat alone, trying to figure out how the hell I could have done things contrary to what G believed I stood for. I was his hero. If I told him what happened that weekend at the farm, he would certainly reject me. Captain Kyle, the loser.

There's something I need to tell you, G. I can't tell anyone else. I haven't told anyone, not even Rick. There's no one but you who would understand, and I'm not even sure you will. I owe you an explanation as to why I blew the swim comp and resigned. Just give me time to sort it out in my head before I write you about it.

G's response was cool. He didn't pressure me at all and virtually guaranteed to be non-judgmental if I chose to reveal my dark secret. Yeah, right. We'd see about that. I was about to risk one of the greatest and most important friendships of my life; one that would never be repeated in a million years. Why? Because it got to the point where I simply could no longer carry the emotional baggage of that weekend alone. I was desperate to at least share it with someone, and that someone was G. I was faced with no other choice.

On the Friday, Kim said he wanted to go to a farm out of town, and invited me along. It belonged to a friend of his who had horses on the property. He said we could chill out for the weekend and be back by Sunday night for week

two of the comp. His dad lent him one of the family cars -- a small Ford truck. The drive was about 20 kilometers or so. When we arrived, it was impossible not to admire the local scenery--beautiful green forests surrounded the farm, and a river ran through it. It rocked something wicked.

That's where I met Robert, Kim's friend. He was about thirty, but with the body of a younger man, and cool looking--like a film star. He was shirtless and sweating. He approached us and shook my hand as Kim introduced us. "This is Kyle, the guy I told you about on the phone." Then he kissed Kim, full on, right in front of me. I'm like whoa! I guess that's when I began to feel a bit nervous about being there.

As I entered the house, I noticed another dude. I figured he was about my age--maybe a year younger. He was pretty good looking except that he was totally spaced out. He wore shorts without briefs; I could see the shape of his cock clearly.

The inside of the house was just like I'd expected--high ceilings constructed of dark timber and supported by thick, wooden beams. The floor was polished timber decorated with scatter rugs. Kim walked over to the younger dude and stood him up. "This is Gareth." Gareth stared blankly at me and offered his hand. I noticed his pretty strong grip before he sat down again. Kim took something out of a box, placed it in his mouth and lit it. "Want a smoke, Kyle?"

"Nope, don't smoke. Thanks."

"Not a ciggie. It's a joint. Wanna pull?" I shook my head.

Robert smiled. "Kyle, it's an herb. It's grass. It'll help you relax. You're looking as tense as hell, man, and nobody here is gonna hurt you. Here, take a drag." He took the joint from Kim and put it to my lips. I sucked too hard and launched into a coughing fit. Despite that, I could hear Gareth giggling and I felt like kicking his smartass teeth down his throat. I was angry, but I also felt like crying and saying that I wanted to go home. Yeah, right. I would've sounded like a right wuss if I had.

Robert handed Kim a beer and me a Coke. By then, I could feel my head becoming as light as a feather. It was a totally cool sensation, and I was definitely beginning to relax.

It was like a dream world. I watched as Robert stood behind Kim and peeled off his shirt, then kissed him on the neck. His hands slid down to Kim's waist and he removed his jeans. Kim, with a raging boner, then undressed Robert and all three had sex, both oral and anal, right there in front of me. It was weird -- like a ballet -- everything was in slow motion.

Robert faced me. "Wanna join us, Kyle?"

So, anyway, I can't even remember exactly how I answered Robert's question but Gareth approached me, undressed me and went down on me. What I do remember, though, is that I was horny as hell, maybe from the grass.

I remember Kim giving me another smoke after that, while he and Robert also had one each. Gareth, meantime, was popping some pills. I still don't know what they were.

I woke next morning with Robert sitting on the edge of my bed. The covers were off and I was lying there with my morning piss boner hugging my stomach. His hand was on it. "Does it make you uncomfortable if I do this?"

"Nope." I was being honest 'cause I think I was still dopey from the shit I'd been smoking the night before. He continued to stroke me for a while, then Kim walked into the room. He came up behind Robert, put his arms around him and they kissed.

Robert glanced down at me. "Kim tells me that you're a virgin, Kyle."

"Guess so." Then he stood up and I realized that everyone was nude. I got out of bed and grabbed my shorts.

"You won't need those," Robert smiled, "we're naked for the weekend. There's nobody around for miles."

Kim explained that we were all going horse riding. I'd never been on a horse before, so Robert insisted I ride with him.

Everybody looked way awesome—like Indians in a cowboy movie. There were no saddles on the horses, and I remember how rough the horse's rump felt against my bare ass after Robert took my hand and heaved me up behind him. Then he grabbed my arms and locked them around his waist. I could feel just how damn strong he was. Then he forced my hands down to his crotch. I wanted to pull away, but I didn't.

Meanwhile, I watched Kim and Gareth on their horses. Kim's long, muscular legs looked so damn impressive draped over that animal's ribs.

We stopped at a spot where the river formed a huge pool. The surface was so calm it resembled a mirror. We dismounted and dove in. The water was totally rad and kind of made me feel a lot better. Kim and Robert began to wrestle before tackling me. Then Gareth joined in. It ended up with me and Gareth against the bigger guys, but they were just too damn strong. One time, Kim picked me up, raised me above his head then threw me into the water like I weighed nothing. I weigh about 135 pounds, by the way.

The bigger guys exited the water, sat on the bank and lit two joints while they watched me and Gareth fooling around. "Hey, Kyle, you wanna fuck me?" I couldn't say anything. I just stared at him. "It's cool, man. I'll help you. I think you're hot, and I want you to fuck my lights out now." I just laughed at him, trying to make a joke of the situation while I headed for shore. He tackled me as I reached the bank and climbed on my back. "Don't laugh, Kyle, I'm being serious."

I felt his hardness against my butt and knew that he was gonna go further if I didn't move quickly. I used all the power I could summon, rolled over and dislodged him. I could hear the other two guys laughing at us. Then Kim yelled, "Almost fucked you, Kyle—almost." I chose to laugh along with them because I wanted to make out like I was sharing the joke.

Gareth passed me his joint and I smoked the rest of it. OK, G, so I enjoyed how it made me feel, like the night before. Sorry. Okay?

Later, at the house, we had a barbecue. I was getting so used to us all being naked, I really didn't pay much

attention. Anyway, we had a few beers, then went into the sitting room to watch some porn movies.

After the movie, I went for a swim in the river to try and get my head sorted out. Gareth followed me in his zonked state, but just sat on the bank watching me while he smoked another joint. "Hey, Kyle, come here and jack me off, bro."

Kim and Robert arrived on the scene. Kim grabbed Gareth and wrestled him to the ground. I remember Gareth screaming as Kim had his way with the kid. Kim had no mercy. He giggled all the while.

"Hey, Kyle, wanna wrestle?" Robert asked.

"Not right now, thanks." I walked to the house where I could still hear them laughing down by the river.

I must've fallen asleep in the sitting room because it was dark when Kim shook me awake. I opened my eyes as a joint was shoved between my lips. "There's a drink on the table, buddy. It'll help you to relax a bit."

It was then that I became aware of Gareth and Robert in the room.

I was lying face down when two hands touched my hips, then Robert's face came down next to mine. "Hey, Kyle, I'll be gentle, buddy. Just relax, okay?" Kim's arms were around my shoulders. He was kissing me and holding my head, so I couldn't answer.

I felt Robert putting KY gel into me—then I felt IT. It seemed as though my ass was being split open as his donkey cockhead penetrated. I was screaming while Kim was still kissing me, and I started to cry. The worst part, though, was each time Robert pulled back—it felt like he was pulling my insides along with it.

His thrusting got faster and faster, and I could hear his heavy breathing at my ear. His hands were tight around my waist; strong fingers dug into my skin.

It seemed my whole insides were being filled with this massive intrusion—then it was like a flood of warm jelly exploding within me. He kept his cock jammed in my hole as

I sensed it getting lazy. I wanted to move but I couldn't because of Kim's grip. Robert's hands found my cock. Then I felt his again inside me; it began to harden once more. Robert raped me a second time.

My mind switched off at some stage because the next thing I remember was him pulling his cock out, turning me over and straddling me. He shoved his pulsating monster into my mouth and immediately shot a huge load that almost choked me. I remember Kim dislodging Robert as I desperately gagged for air.

Robert was like a crazed animal. I'd never seen anyone like him before. I laid there for ages covered in his mess, there was blood on me as well. I knew it was from my ass because I was bleeding down there.

Kim lifted me and took me to the bathroom where he cleaned me. I remember him saying "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!", over and over and over again. He passed me a joint and said, "Kyle, smoke that, please."

It was like a movie on fast-forward. I remember him putting stuff in my ass—like antiseptic stuff—that burnt my skin like all hell. I had this feeling like I desperately needed to crap, but I didn't dare because I was in so much damn pain.

Afterwards, I remember Kim screaming at Robert in the sitting room, with Gareth giggling, and more screaming. Kim helped me to the bedroom where I passed out.

Kim woke me next morning. He'd obviously been sleeping with me. "Are you OK?" I seemed to be fine. It was only when I stood up that I noticed the pain in my ass. There was blood on the sheet as well. I needed to take a dump, so I did. It wasn't too bad but there was still some sign of blood, and that worried me. Kim said it was OK, and that it was common for guys to bleed after their first time because the skin tears. Later, when we showered, Kim inspected the damage and put some ointment on it for me.

Anyway, I went through to the kitchen to get something to eat and Gareth was there eating breakfast. He laughed when he saw me. "Kyle, I'm gonna screw you today. I don't normally screw virgins, but you're not a virgin any more." I lost it and told him to fuck off and go screw his hand. I

could tell that he was getting aggro but, I swear, I would've hurt him bad if he'd decided to stand up to me then.

Kim and Robert disappeared to the main bedroom for most of the morning, and I guessed they were screwing each other stupid judging by the sounds I could hear.

Just before lunch, Kim and I left the farm for his place. All I wanted to do was get home but Kim talked me into staying with him for a few more days. I liked him a lot, in spite of everything. He was like a puppy around me. I guess he had the guilts pretty bad for getting me into that situation at the farm.

The night before I left, Kim handed me \$100. "What the hell is that for?"

"It's from Robert."

"I don't want it."

"It's a gift, Kyle, nothing else."

"And what's my return gift? Let him fuck me again, huh?"

"Kyle, if you don't take it, I'll burn it, I promise."

"Screw you and Robert's money."

He took a lighter and started to burn one of the bills before I grabbed it. "I'll think of something to do with it."

"We'll meet again, Kyle. I'm sorry for what happened but I really like you a lot. You also like me a little bit—I think."

"By the way, who's Gareth?"

"He's a local from around here. He sees Robert every weekend."

"Is he also sixteen?"

"Thirteen."

I took a bus home. My mind was racing the whole time with all sorts of things. The one special thing I'd been saving was ruined by a stranger. I still didn't understand the setup between Robert and Kim, and tried to figure it out. Smoking grass? Well, I've promised myself that I'll never do it again. I lost control and I can't afford that. I didn't like it.

What would my friends think of me if they found out? I thought about that a lot and realized I'd have to tell someone I could trust. I had to tell you because there was no one else I could turn to—not to help but just to listen and, hopefully, understand.

The worst part was on the night I got home. There was a phone call. It was Robert. My folks wanted to know who it was and I told them it was a mate I met on the trip. Robert said he was gonna visit Byron Bay and wanted to meet with me at his motel. I don't know how the hell he got my number, unless I gave it to him when I was all smoked up.

"No way."

"There's another \$100 in it for you, Kyle. But it's more than that. I think I'm in love with you."

"Har-de-fucking-har! No way, Jose."

"Hey, fucker, who knows that you're a faggot? Do your folks know? Your school buddies?"

"So who the fuck knows that you're a pedo who fucks thirteen year olds?"

The phone went dead, but it left me pretty shaken for a long while. He hasn't phoned again—yet. And I sure hope he doesn't.

Well, that's about the story, G, as best as I can remember it. There's a lot I can't remember, and maybe it's just as well. I know you're probably disappointed in me and I need to say I'm sorry. I know that a lotta my friends would never expect me to get into such serious crap. I also know that I could've said no to those guys and, at the end of the day, Kim probably would've liked and respected me more for standing up to them.

Well, I guess I've just gotta start over again. I've learnt a huge lesson, and wondered about what might happen if I ended up at a place like that again—where I couldn't escape. What if? Well, I guess I can only answer that question if it happens.

Some of my friends have noticed a change in me. Stuart told me he wanted the old Kyle back again. He said I should go down to the bay and just watch the sun rise. "Whatever's bugging you man, you need to lock it away. I need you so damn much." So I got up real early and went down to the bay. He was right. I sat there and watched the first rays of dawn peeking over the horizon. It made me feel a whole bunch better. I thought how everything that had happened to me was like some surreal painting that should be hung in the attic or basement or somewhere where it couldn't be seen.

I laid awake the other night thinking about Kim. He seemed to be pretty strong and I hope he can get out of the mess he's in. Gareth I feel sorry for. I think he's way too far gone.

When G replied, he was cool. Anyway, Kyle, what happened to you in just a few days shouldn't affect all those other days, or those in the future. You're going on seventeen; what's 17 times 365? That's over 6000 days you've lived already. It's all out of proportion, mate. So I figure, rather than start over, you should just pick up where you left off. Don't let those assholes change you—you're too good for that. I'm not saying you'll ever forget what happened, but I am saying that you've gotta see it from its true perspective.

I thanked G for his understanding. You were so damn cool and I feel a lot better now. I thought about what you said about picking up where I left off—and you were right. I can't let that experience get out of all proportion. And guess what? I figured out what I'd do with the money that asshole Robert gave me. I've been teaching Graham how to roller blade. Anyway, he doesn't have a pair and he's always borrowing mine or somebody else's. So I'm gonna buy him a pair. Cool, huh? I could've used the money for other stuff I need but, hey, the kid needs blades.

Chapter 5

Upon my return to school, following a week's absence, Frank asked me to rejoin the swim team. The winter champs were due in a few weeks and I was one of the team's better performers. As the weather cooled, we trained at the local health club, equipped with a heated pool and sauna. Frank and I were the only two who sat on the wooden sauna benches with our legs wide apart. We were proud of our jewels and welcomed inspection from anyone willing to take mental notes. Brett, on the other hand, was far more modest despite being well equipped. In many ways he was a contradiction.

On the weekend I visited the local hospital. Brett was a patient there after being involved in a serious nightclub brawl on the Gold Coast.

"There were too many of them to handle so I bolted for the bus station," he explained from his bed. "That's the last thing I remember before being wheeled in here."

"Jeez, man, those guys must've given you a real hiding. You're all..."

"Spare me the details, Kyle. I've heard it a million times already. The doc says I most likely got a boot to the head. He says my swollen lip is even bigger than yours." Brett managed a feeble chuckle, subdued by his sore ribs. And, yes, I did have a bit of a complex about my larger-than-normal lower lip. "The good news is just about every chick in town

has visited me. Great way to get attention, I guess, if not the smartest. Lots of the guys have visited, too."

At visitor closing time, I asked the nurse if I could hang around a while longer.

"Hey, man," Brett insisted, "I'm not dying for Christ sake. I'll be out of here in a day or two. Anyway, what makes you wanna stay?"

"I dunno," I lied. "Nothing else to do."

When Brett did return to school after spending a few extra days at home, he explained that his extended absence was due to being too ugly during his convalescence. He was reticent to parade around in Speedos looking like something the cat refused to drag in.

Most of that week I spent swimming, studying for exams, then sitting for the papers. You had to be an Einstein to crack the math paper. Bloody hell! All the guys were complaining about it.

"Hey, bud, what's up?" Brett asked as I got ready to leave school for the day.

"Nothing. Why?"

"You look lower than shark shit."

"Just feeling a bit down. Dunno why exactly."

"Got some time? I wanna show you what I do when things are getting me down."

Brett led me to the gym and asked if I had any togs with me. I didn't so he reached into his tog bag and tossed a pair of boxing shorts my way. Eventually, we came to a small

training room equipped with a couple of punching bags suspended from the ceiling.

I watched the shirtless Brett hit one of the bags with all the force he could muster. Impressive muscles revealed their unexpected presence beneath his smooth skin. That guy could easily have done me like a dinner during our encounter at the change rooms. I figured he must have gone easy on me. But why? How odd.

"Your turn," he grinned as he stood back, gleaming pectorals and abdominals pumped to eye-catching definition.

I whacked that heavy, leather-clad bag for all I was worth and it felt great! Woohoo! Anxiety and frustration ebbed away with each solid punch. And the more I punched, the more euphoric I became. It was so enjoyable, our workout lasted two exhausting hours.

We were such a lather of perspiration by the time we hit the showers our boxing shorts had formed a second skin.

"Feeling better now?"

"And how! Thanks, Brett, I really needed that."

"Yeah, I could tell. So what's the prob?"

"I dunno. I guess it's the frustration of not surfing because of all the studying and exams. I've been grounded."

"Yep, I know the feeling, although I don't surf."

Brett and I were soon regulars at the gym each morning before classes. It was great exercise and a fun way to let off steam. From the boxing bag, I graduated to sparring with Brett in the ring. One day, the coach and some of the boxing team

guys organized an in-house competition, and I was silly enough to volunteer.

"Hey, bud," Brett said to me in the showers afterwards, "you got potential. Maybe you should join the team."

"Nah, I enjoy going a few rounds and hitting the bag with you, but it's swimming and surfing for me."

"You're right about letting off steam. I'd be a right asshole if I didn't box."

"What makes you think you aren't already?"

"You serious?"

"Well, mate, in the ring you're as aggro as all getout. But you're a different person afterwards."

"Like how?"

"Kinda laid back."

"You a shrink or something?"

"Nothing about me shrinks," I laughed as I thrust my hips forward.

The exam results were predictable; most of us were down an average 15 percent. My folks were reasonably cool about it, though, once they heard similar reports from other parents.

During the upcoming school break, Stuart and I planned a trip to Surfer's Paradise for the Billabong Surf Championships so it was a surprise when Brett approached me on the last day of the semester.

"Hey, mate, I'm feeling a bit tense. Wanna go a few rounds with me after final assembly?"

"You look aggro."

"Yeah, I feel like beating up on somebody. You wanna be that somebody?"

"Hell, yeah!"

That afternoon, we donned our headgear and gum guards and went for it. Brett was by far the superior boxer but I was determined to give as good as I got, and laid into him at every opportunity. It was plain that Brett respected my spirited attitude. Each time I made a mistake, he stopped the match and took time out to explain what I was doing wrong. Unfortunately for him, I was a quick learner and his ribs and abs soon paid a painful price for his generous edification.

In the showers, Brett revealed he was contesting a junior tournament during the holidays. "Wish you could be there to see me but you'll be away."

"I would if I could, Brett. Honest. I'd love to see you in a tournament. I reckon you'll be awesome."

"Like you on your surfboard?"

"Better."

For some inexplicable reason at the time, I introduced the subject of masturbation and, surprisingly, he was happy to admit to being something of an enthusiast. "Doesn't everybody?" But after explaining my own personal technique to Brett, he suggested an alternative.

"You need a girlfriend, mate."

July 1 was the day Stuart and I were to leave for Surfer's. It was also my seventeenth birthday. Birthdays had

never been a big deal for me so I wasn't concerned about being away from home.

The night before, my mom told me Stuart called. Apparently, there was no message, but my first thought was that he was sick or whatever, and wanted to cancel the trip. "He needs to discuss something with you in person," was all my mom said.

I arrived at his house to be told some cock and bull about what he should pack for the trip. "You're kidding," I complained. "You brought me all the way over here just to ask me what kind of underwear you should bring?"

"Sorry, mate. I'll walk you home."

My house was in darkness. Strange. Had my folks gone out? I led Stuart through to the den. Suddenly, a bright light and singing filled the room. "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Kyle, happy birthday to you!" Everyone was there... well almost. Some of the guys and their girlfriends from the swim team, Graham, Brett and, of course, mom and dad...and a big chocolate cake with seventeen flickering candles right in the center of the room. I was speechless.

Then the penny dropped. I spun around to see Stuart standing behind me grinning like the Sydney Luna Park mask. "You! You knew all the damn time!"

Mom approached, threw her arms around me and gave me the most enormous hug. "Hey, you didn't think we were going to let

you go without a small celebration, did you? Your dad's got something for you."

The package was quite large. What could it be? It seemed to take forever to remove the wrapping. Meanwhile, the room was packed with craning necks; friends and family eager to see what treasure was about to be revealed.

My eyes popped and my mouth fell open, but no words emerged, at least not at first. I couldn't believe what I saw. I shook my head in disbelief, then lifted the gift from the box. I held it aloft for everyone to admire. Finally, words came to me: "A brand new wetsuit!" It was a Rip Curl, and black. "Wow! It even smells new!" I hugged my dad, then my mom, and just about everyone else in the room. Brett? I think I did. It was all a bit of a blur, like a surreal dream.

The trip north to Surfers was fantastic. Stuart and I hitched our way. During the competition, we met a couple of girls on the beach who invited us back to their folks' holiday house and asked us to stay for the weekend. Was that okay with their folks? Who knows? They were elsewhere. But it sure was cool with Stuart and me; we'd expected to camp out. Instead, we had all the comforts of home and a bit of shenanigans as well. Up until then, my only sexual experience was confined to the prostitute Rick organized, and the chick out back of the barn at the strip party, so I felt better about myself as a ... you know, regular guy. No, I didn't go all the way, but it was far enough.

Predictably, a couple of guys carrying surfboards find it difficult sometimes to hitch a ride. We were on the road back home one night, rucksacks on our backs, boards under our arms, thumbs pleading for a lift, when I stopped and asked Stuart to listen.

"To what?" he shrugged. "I don't hear anything."

I got mad and told him again to listen. Then he became aware.

"Crickets? Yeah! I can hear them now. Funny how I didn't notice before." As we walked further, he kept referring to the sound of the crickets and how loud they were. "Thanks, Kyle. It makes the night all the more special."

I figured the only way we were gonna get a ride was to employ some kind of drastic and creative strategy.

"You're kidding, Kyle. No way I'm gonna hang my dick out of my boardshorts."

Well, he relented and sure enough the next pair of headlights to illuminate the darkness stopped and gave us a ride all the way back to Byron Bay.

Next time I saw Brett was at the school gym. He had a big shiner, the result of a fight with some guy at a club who tried to hit on Susan, his girlfriend.

"And what happened to him?" I asked as we skipped and danced, ducked and weaved, around the ring.

"He won't try it again."

"Was it worth it?"

"You're lucky it wasn't you and me, Kyle. I totally lost it. That guy will think again before he tries anything with Susan."

"Your eye is still pretty swollen. Looks like he got a punch in."

"Yeah, his last punch before I trashed his brains."

"You got a short fuse, huh?"

"Nope. Just don't mess with me. Simple."

"So how come you didn't beat me up when you had the chance that time?"

"Because you're a wuss, Kyle, and I didn't wanna make you cry."

"Oh, yeah? Take this!" I jabbed him right in the breadbox. Not that it hurt him; his abs provided a rock-hard defense.

"That was a lucky punch, man. You won't be so lucky in the pool this afternoon. I'm gonna drown you."

I couldn't shake the feeling that Brett was a deeply troubled guy; something seriously bothered him. Curiosity got the better of me so, in the showers, I asked: "Don't get pissed at me, Brett, but there's something I wanna know."

"Like what?" he said, soaping his chest under one of the several shower heads that protruded from a featureless, painted wall.

"How come you're in a shitty mood most of the time?"

"Just a few hassles I'm trying to sort out."

"Anything you wanna talk about?"

"Nope," he shrugged. "Anyway, it's personal stuff. No biggie. Actually, I didn't realize I appeared to be that way until you mentioned it just now. Guess you're trying to figure out why I beat you up in the ring this morning."

"Yeah, right! Who beat who?"

"Hey, in a real match I'd flatten you. Don't push it."

"See what I mean? You're getting aggro again."

"I'm not, man," he protested. "That's just being me. Stop trying to uncover something that's not there."

"How's the eye?" I asked in an attempt to change the subject, but Brett was no longer in the mood to chat.

Next morning, he caught me momentarily off guard. He hooked me and sent me flat on my butt. "That'll teach you to keep your hands up next time, Kyle."

Chapter 6

What made Brett tick? The better I knew him, the more convinced I was that something sinister simmered just below the surface. I was desperate to know exactly what. In the gym showers one morning, following a pretty wild sparring session, I asked him if Susan was his steady girlfriend.

"We go out, that's all. My last steady gave me too much grief. I play the field now."

"Is she the one you got beaten up over?"

"Yep. But I also wanted to beat up on that guy. He'd been needling me all night."

"Why are you so aggro all the time?"

"I'm not really. I just want the other guys to think I am so they leave me alone."

"Why?"

"Why, why, why. Enough with the third degree, damn it!"

"Okay, okay. Cool it."

"Sorry."

"See what I mean? Hey, your eye's looking a lot better. Maybe I should convince you to grow your hair a bit longer."

"I like it shaved."

"Makes you look mean, but I know you're not really mean. Sure, you get aggro sometimes but..."

Brett interrupted with a most unexpected request: "Hey, Kyle, you wanna come around to my house this afternoon after swim training?"

"Oh! I'll probably be surfing with Stuart and Graham."
Oops! I wasn't thinking straight. I'd blown it big time. Brett mumbled something about it being no big deal, then towed his head to hide his disappointment. Kyle to the rescue! "But I can come around afterwards if that's okay."

"Hey, it's no biggie, Kyle. If you're busy..."

"Honest. I'd really like to."

Brett greeted me at the door and introduced his mom, a handsome woman in her late thirties who treated me as if I were the Prodigal Son or something. Because she made such a fuss, Brett figured I needed salvaging from his mom's clutches. He asked me if I wanted to see his room.

"Wow! This is really cool," I said as I entered, then went to the window to observe the lush greenness of the park next door. "Makes me feel kinda privileged. I mean, I see you every day but this is your own personal space."

Posters of rock bands and one topless girly picture plastered his walls.

"Her? I dunno, just some chick from a horny mag. It's my jacking poster."

"You jack off?"

"Like you don't?"

"I just thought with all the girls you screw and all..."

"Hey, Kyle, I don't screw everything that moves, okay. But I do jack off most every morning before I shower."

"At night?"

"Sometimes. But in the mornings I have this total cockstand, so I do it then. And you?"

"Hell, every bloody night!"

Brett placed a Powderfinger CD into the player, turned up the volume, then proceeded to remove his school uniform. I found it curious that he remained naked while hanging his clothes in the closet before dressing in jeans and a tee. I'd seen him in the buff a thousand times but, for some reason, each time was like the first time. He was in superb physical shape which, to my mind, warranted constant and detailed scrutiny.

My new friend became more and more of a puzzle each day. One time in the ring, he pummeled the hell out of me despite my indignant protests. But, later, following a stony silence in the showers, he draped an arm around my shoulders. He withdrew it just as quickly, as if to suddenly realize it might suggest a sign of weakness. And then: "Sorry if I lost it this morning, mate. Guess I just had to let off a lot of steam. But I feel better now that I've hurt you."

Later that day, during lunch, we sat together outdoors on a school bench. "Thanks for putting your arm around me this morning, Brett."

"It kinda happened."

"I'm glad it did. It said a lot. A hell of a lot. Hey, why don't you come around to my house sometime?"

"I'd like to, honest. But with all the sports I do at school and the chores I do at home for my mom, it's kinda hard

to find the time. And when I do, I like to go clubbing because I can hang loose and get all the shit out of my head."

I was tempted to ask him what shit. What the hell was bothering him so much that he suffered from so much aggression and anxiety?

I wanted Brett to know that I liked him. I guessed he knew already, but I felt the need to actually say so. After a sparring session in the ring one morning, the words tumbled out of my mouth: "Hey, Brett, do you know something?"

"Like?"

"Like I think you're pretty cool."

He shook his head. "Like how?"

"Well, don't get the wrong message, Brett, but you're pretty hot looking. I guess you've got all the chicks wetting their panties when you're around." Brett removed his gloves, trying to appear nonchalant, so I continued. "I mean, it's like when I was at your house—how you can just go ahead and fix things like you do; and you work hard. It's like you don't need anybody around because you're so good at everything. You're strong and you look after yourself."

"Is that all?" he said, unable to control the grin that spread across his killer face.

"So you want me to go on?" I laughed.

"Hey, Kyle, I'll let you in on a little secret. I'm not that great. I seem to piss people off more than anything, and there's a whole bunch of stuff I can't fix. But thanks."

"Maybe you wouldn't piss people off if you smiled a bit more. Makes you look different—kinda cute even."

"Bloody hell, Kyle," he cracked, "if I didn't know you better I'd think you were hitting on me."

"Now there's a thought, but your dick's too tiny."

"You're jealous."

"Yeah, right." I pulled down my shorts, removed the cod-piece and flopped out the old fella. "Let me tell you something, when you're this well furnished you don't need to be jealous of anything."

He followed my example: "Now, Kyle, I want you to look real hard. You've got to admit, THAT is a cock. And it's a pussy eater as well."

"Okay," I admitted, "yours is a little bigger—but only a little."

"And getting bigger."

All this talk about size stimulated testosterone and, sure enough, the topic got around to masturbation again. I didn't want to give the impression I was obsessed with the activity so I invented a little white lie: "It's like a sort of study I'm conducting. Guys are always putting shit on other guys who admit to wanking, but I'm discovering that, if truth be known, most of the critics are wankers themselves."

"All of them, buddy," Brett said emphatically. "Remember that swim tour we did last year? Well, a few of the guys and I had a jacking competition."

"Outtasight!" Oops! Maybe my response sounded overly enthusiastic, but it apparently didn't bother my mate.

"Yeah, those sessions are awesome because you go all crazy watching the other dudes milk their lizards."

"You mean me?"

"No, you idiot! You, me, them—all guys do. Anyway, are we gonna shower or what?"

Both of us sported skin-splitters in the showers. It was embarrassing but also a sign of camaraderie; a sharing of experiences and information that couldn't be freely discussed with parents or most peers.

At lunch, Brett surprised me by re-introducing the topic. "Hey, that convo we had—you know about what. That was pretty cool! I've never spoken to anyone about that kinda stuff before without getting totally red-faced."

"You mean that? Well, I figure most guys think it's uncool to talk about jacking because it doesn't fit their dumbass macho image."

"I guess so. And that other stuff you said about me—y'know, about me looking hunky. Thanks. I think you're a pretty cool guy as well." He allowed a broad grin to claim his face. "Okay, maybe not too much on the hunky stuff but, hey, I can't be choosy."

The school bully was a guy named Mitch. Graham and Mitch's younger brother Ryan had become good friends, and it was Ryan who told me that Graham had been molested by Mitch

during a sleep-over. I was enraged, to say the least, and challenged Mitch to a few supervised rounds in the ring.

Brett knew I was mad about something, but not the reason why. Then he discovered I'd nominated him as my second for the match; to be refereed by the coach.

"You're crazy, Kyle. I can beat the hell out of you but Mitch is a much bigger guy. What is it with you two anyway? Did he call you a faggot or something?"

"Nope. He doesn't have the guts to pick on me. He picks on the little guys."

"So you picked on him?"

"Sort of."

Mitch and I settled into our corners as the coach read the riot act, then asked us to don our headgear. Brett was beside me: "Watch out for Mitch; be boxed as a lighty before he got so damn fat."

"Now you tell me?"

I panicked for a few seconds, fearing obliteration, but forced myself to concentrate on the job at hand. After all, my little bro's honor was at stake. The bell rang, and I jumped into center ring. Mitch walked straight into my fists which sent him flat on his butt. Woohoo! My confidence soared. Mitch leaped to his feet; eyes burning with hate. He lost his cool and I flattened him again. Yes! Mitch's second, a big guy we called Jolly Jim, shook his head in despair. Jim was a popular guy on the swim team and I couldn't figure why he accepted the job as Mitch's second.

Mitch was so riled, he struggled to his feet again and launched a flurry of fists at me even before the coach had a chance to continue the match. I copped a smack on the cheek that sent me reeling. Then I heard the coach call "Break!"

Fortunately for me, Mitch's total lack of cool in the third round gave me the opportunity to send that ton of lard crashing unceremoniously to the canvas for the third time. The coach called an immediate halt to the match. Mitch seethed with hostility but it was too late; the ref's decision was final.

As I emerged from the showers I saw Brett waiting for me. "I wanna know what that was all about," he demanded.

I nursed a bruised scratch from where Mitch's glove caught me illegally. "Hey, Brett, you're a real friend. Just believe me when I say I can't tell you, at least not right now."

"Whatever—but be careful, okay? Mitch has a lot of school friends who stick by him. Take my advice, Kyle, I know the evil bastard. Watch your back."

"Thanks for the warning, but I'll be okay."

"Famous last words. Are you going to the Powderfinger concert Saturday?"

"Nah, can't afford it."

"I know why you can't afford it. You're always spending your damn money on other people. Stuart told me you bought the little grommet a used surfboard. Anyway, I'll tell you all about the concert on Monday. I wanna see you suffer."

"You should grin more often, Brett. It suits you."

"By the way, you surprised me today, mate. You outclassed that guy by a country mile. Congrats. But, like I said, watch your back."

That afternoon after school, Brett invited me to share a Coke at the local shop. The conversation was mostly idle chat but friendly, and I took it to mean he enjoyed my company. However, it was Sunday evening before I heard from him again. He phoned unexpectedly.

"Hey, Kyle. How's it going?"

I was pleased to hear his voice and couldn't resist revealing my joy. "Hey, mate! It's going cool. What's up?"

"Nothing much. Had a cool weekend. The concert was great. Stuart got totally trashed."

"Yeah, I saw him in the surf today. He looked like crap."

"I'm surprised he made it. Must be one fit mother."

"You better believe it. You and Stuart get along pretty well, huh?"

"Yeah, he's cool. His folks are rich and I know some of his friends are tossers but Stuart doesn't carry on with all that posh bullshit. He's a regular guy. Anyway, I just thought I'd call you to see if everything's okay."

"Yeah, pretty much."

"See you early tomorrow at the gym?"

"Yeppo."

"Neat."

"Cheers."

Now what was all that about? I wondered as I replaced the receiver. He called just to check if everything was okay with me? Nope. I didn't buy it. I figured there was something else on his mind but, for whatever reason, he decided against telling me about it.

Next morning in the ring, Brett jabbed me in the breadbox so hard I went down like the proverbial sack of potatoes. "Your gut's too soft," he deduced, then lectured me about needing a million sit-ups a day. "You gotta harden up, matey."

Brett invited me to hit his stomach with as much force as I normally used to hit the punching bag. He was kidding, right? But no. "Go for it."

After several punches, I backed away. "Damn! I'm having no effect!" That six-pack of his was like a wall of iron.

"Not that you can see," he said, "but let me tell you, there's enough power in your fists to floor the average bloke. And, yeah, it was painful. If I didn't have strong stomach muscles each one of those punches would have toppled me."

"You got super abs."

"I'd be a liar if I denied it, but I work at it."

Swim training was on in earnest as the winter champs drew closer; just two weeks away. Three other schools were involved. The coach organized billets and I volunteered to host Kim, Robert's friend. That wasn't such a stroke of genius as it turned out. But I had a more pressing problem to attend to. Coach gave me permission to be excused from training. I

was about to head home when Brett approached me, wanting to know why.

Chapter 7

Brett didn't buy the old 'I'm-not-feeling-well' routine and insisted I tell the truth. "Something is wrong," he asserted, then continued, "Listen up, I'm gonna rock over to your house after swim prac. If you don't tell me what really happened I'm gonna beat you up good and proper tomorrow morning in the gym, even more than I did this morning. Got it?" Brett had a talent for being unapologetically blunt.

He arrived after supper explaining he'd had several chores to do at home. I led him to my room as he asked how I felt. "Okay except for the high-pitch voice."

"So?"

"So what?"

"So what happened? And stop fooling around with words."

I sat at my desk while he chose to plant his butt on the side of my bed. "I guess Mitch is pissed at losing the boxing match."

"What happened?" he demanded again.

"He got me in the change room when I went for a leak during break."

"Alone?"

"He had backup but he took me alone."

"He didn't take you alone, Kyle. I heard what happened. It wasn't even a fight. It was an ambush."

"If you heard what happened, why are you asking?"

"I wanna hear it from you."

I couldn't quite figure whether Brett was mad at me or Mitch or both. I sought clarification. "What exactly did you hear?"

"I heard you went to the change room to take a leak. When you zipped and turned to leave, Mitch and two of his goons confronted you. You were nervous; I can understand that. So you extended your hand and told Mitch no hard feelings. Then the asshole took your hand, pulled you toward him and kneed you hard in the balls. Next thing you knew, a teacher knelt over you waving smelling salts under your nose."

"Hey," I shrugged, "so now you know. Just don't go looking for any shit. Okay? Mitch's got a lotta backup at school and all those guys are seniors."

"We'll see."

"Don't do anything, Brett," I pleaded in earnest. "It's no good starting a war at school. Some of those guys are packing."

"Knives?"

"Yeah, and you never know who's packing and who's not."

Brett more or less ignored my concern and turned the subject 180 degrees. "Do you have any girlfriends?"

"Nah. Guess I really don't have the time. They get pissed at me whenever I'm with friends or surfing or whatever. I don't need that sort of possessive shit."

The vibe in my room being amiable at the time, it struck me that the moment was apropos for Brett to answer a question

I'd been pondering. "Why did you call me a faggot in the quad that time?"

"It's a long story, Kyle, and I was being stupid at the time. I acted for the group, and the last thing I expected was for you to react the way you did. But," he paused to reflect, "I'm glad you did."

That comment was a bolt from the blue. "Why?"

"Gave me a chance to beat up on you," he cracked.

"So what's the story with the guys?"

"It's supposed to be a secret."

"Oh, okay."

"But you and I are mates, so I figure it's okay to tell you. Besides, you know what I'll do if you open your big mouth."

"Shoot."

"I was clubbing with Frank one time and we got totally shitfaced on booze. He told me how you and he jacked off together on mountain hikes and stuff. Then he told me you're the horniest person he knows."

"Oh? But that still doesn't explain why you called me a faggot."

"Hey, Kyle, I dunno. I didn't know you all that well back then. I'd just joined the swim team and I guess I was jealous of how well you always performed as a swimmer. You were just a target and I'm sorry I said what I did. I know now that I was totally out of line. Forgive me?"

Whoa! What was happening here? Forgive him? This was Brett? All I could think of saying was "Yeah, sure." Then he surprised the hell out of me again by giving me a huge bear hug.

"Mates, right?" he asked.

"You bet! Hey, can I ask you something now?"

"Shoot, Sherlock."

"Why are you always so damn aggro?"

"I don't know. Well, I think I know, but I'm not sure."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"One day, maybe."

The reason Brett asked me about girlfriends became apparent a few days later when he invited me to join him and Susan clubbing. "I can organize a blind date if you want."

I wasn't sure how to answer. A blind date? What would that lead to? "I'll let you know," was the lame response that came to mind.

Meanwhile, Brett's foul moods still puzzled me. One morning in the gym he was hitting the bag so hard I almost expected it to bust wide open. Naturally, albeit not so diplomatically, I asked him again why he was so aggro.

"I'm not in the mood for small talk, man. You can leave if you want to."

"Leave? Hey, this is our arrangement. I thought you liked us training together."

"I do. I just feel fucked up this morning. And don't ask a lotta questions for Christ sake. I can't tell you anything."

In the ring, I changed tack by skipping, shadow boxing and teasing him. "Bet you can't hit a moving target."

"You serious? I'm in a major hostile mood and you want to ring it with me?"

"Why not? You're not gonna hit me for shit."

"You're on, dude," he grinned in a menacing way. "But if I get you you're gonna be in a lotta pain."

"Quit yapping and let's go!"

Well, I was lucky. He pummeled the hell out of me but withheld a lot of his power. I could tell I was appealing to the better side of his nature. In the showers, I quizzed him again. "You sure you don't wanna tell me what's bugging you?"

"Yep, I'm sure."

"Well, hey, I got a pair of ears that aren't too busy most times, so if you wanna give them some work to do, they're all yours."

Brett's riposte was unexpected as well as, it seemed, involuntary. "It's my mom's boyfriend." He immediately noted the look of puzzlement on my face, then quickly added, "Oh, shit. It's nothing. Let's drop it."

"Well, I'm here if you change your mind."

That evening, Graham breezed into my room as usual except for one thing: he was nursing a cut to his cheek. "I was at Ryan's house boasting about you beating the crap out of his big bro, Mitch, so he backhanded me."

"Ryan?"

"No, Mitch."

"That disgusting lump of lard hit you?"

"And he said he's gonna give you something to think about."

"He already did; he kneed me in the nuts."

"He said that's just for starters."

Next morning in the ring, I reversed the normal situation. Brett was in a good mood and I was ready to kill someone. As it happened, I didn't do any real damage to Brett, but it wasn't for lack of trying. I was furious about Graham being smacked by that bully Mitch.

At lunch break, I sat with Brett and saw Mitch heading for the change room. This was my chance to even the score. I told Brett I'd be back shortly and took off after Mitch. The moment I entered the change room, I recognized a set-up. What now? There were four guys plus the lump of lard. "Take him out, Mitch," one of the goons said, "he's a little wussy boy."

Mitch stood a few feet distant but I managed a quick connecting punch. It opened the cut on his cheek where I'd hit him during the boxing match. "Hey, Kyle," he sneered, "one on one, now. Come and get me." His hands mockingly beckoned as two of his goons restrained my arms. "So what are you gonna do now, wussy boy?"

Certain I was dead meat, I was relieved to hear a familiar voice. "He's not gonna do anything, and neither are you or your friends."

"Fuck off, Frank," Mitch glared.

"It's not just me, dude," was Frank's unruffled response. He stood to one side of the doorway and allowed the rest of the swim team to enter the change room, including Jolly Jim. My jaw bounced off the floor. The two guys holding me freaked and retreated a few paces.

"It's not your fight, Frank." There was a quiver in Mitch's voice. He wasn't accustomed to being outnumbered.

"You turned it into a fight when you were too chickenshit to take Kyle on his own. He gave you the chance and you fucked up, dude."

"Okay, big shot, what now?" Mitch demanded, wiping the blood from his face.

"You wanna take Kyle on? Like right now? We'll make sure it's one on one."

Mitch glanced at me then lowered his head. "No."

"Then it's over," Frank declared. "If you or any of your so-called friends get in Kyle's way, you deal with us. Oh, and there's another thing: leave the little guys alone, in or out of school, or the same deal applies."

Back on the school bench, I asked Brett how the guys knew I was deep trouble.

"We've all known since last night," he laughed.

"Say what?"

"Mitch's little bro phoned me. Remember, Mitch and I used to be buds on the boxing team. Anyway, he told me about Mitch and his goons baiting you into the change rooms. They were gonna make sure you were carried out of there."

"You mean like it was all arranged?"

"Seems like it. Hey, you cut Mitch's cheek. Tell me what happened."

"Mitch was zipping up when I went in there. 'Kyle, buddy,' he says, 'feeling nutty?' He and his morons thought it was a pretty cool joke. So I told him he was a coward and a bully. I was pretty damn mad. Then I told him we needed to sort things out just between the two of us, and that he should leave the little guys alone because they had nothing to do with this shit. 'Yeah,' he says, 'well they think you're a big fucking hero, and one of them's got a big mouth.' Anyway," I concluded, "I guess you know the rest."

"I've got a feeling I don't but that'll do."

"Tell me, why did Ryan phone you? What kind of brother would do that?"

"He said Mitch beat up on a friend of his called Graham, and that Graham was also a friend of yours. I couldn't understand the whole story but you told me about Graham, your little grommet surfing buddy."

"And Jolly Jim?"

"Well, Jim said he never wanted to end up in the ring with you after he saw you trash Mitch that time, and also that you're his swim team mate. Apparently, he's seen the other side of Mitch."

"Think it's over?"

"Oh, yeah. Mitch is a bully and bullies are chickenshit on their own. I know because I used to be one." That admission

caused me to crack. Brett waited for my laughter to subside before continuing: "But there's one helluva thing that's happened here this morning."

"What's that?"

"The guys on the swim team are always looking after themselves—taking care of number one—getting better times, fighting for places in the competitions. This is the first time I've seen them like a real team, with a common purpose."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. Anyway, thanks a stack for what you did. But Mitch needs to thank you as well."

"Oh?"

"I was gonna hit him so hard, he would've gotten a speeding ticket on the way to New Zealand."

We both cracked at the mental vision of that blimp hurtling across the Tasman. Then Brett resurrected the subject of a date. "Hey, listen, you still wanna go out with Susan and me? I think Stuart and some chick will be coming. And I've organized a blind date for you. No—it's not Mitch in a pink tutu."

"Sounds cool, but I'll need to check with my folks first."

"Check with your folks? Kyle, you're not a little kid any more."

"Have you been eyeing my jewels again? Anyway, that's how it is at my house. I always ask my folks if it's okay to go out. If they say no, then it's no. I'll be pissed if they say

no, though," I laughed, then raised my voice to falsetto, "because Kyle's been a good boy!"

Well, my folks did give me permission to go out clubbing. Stuart wasn't sure he could make it. His folks had organized some posh penguin-suit do that required his attendance. Meanwhile, I was, to say the least, curious about what my date looked like. According to Brett, I'd find out soon enough. "I think you'll like her."

Chapter 8

The entire house reeked of Brut. Dad's nose followed the evidence to its source; my room. Then he noticed the condom on my bedside table. He took the small silver package in his fingers and handed it to me while giving me the hairy eyeball. "This isn't a license to drill every hole you see," he suggested sternly.

I felt my ears burn and my cheeks blush like a beet. "It's just 'in case', dad," I offered meekly. Then I put it in my pocket while he lectured me about his days as a teen, screwing around.

"You need to be careful, son," he continued, once seated on the side of my bed, "because you might get the wrong girl pregnant. You're a good-looking kid with a body to match."

Oh? That was an unexpected compliment, especially from my dad who was still quite a looker himself at middle age. Anyway, he was pretty cool about my first date and later, in the kitchen, insisted on my giving him hug after I hugged my mom. She has this rule: before anyone leaves the house, even just to visit the local shop, we hug each other because it could be the last time we get the chance.

Brett answered his front door and immediately commented on the Brut. "You use the whole damn bottle?"

"That bad, huh?"

"No, but it must've been when you first sprayed it on." He checked my outfit, which met with his approval: a white

tank top over black jeans, a Billabong jersey and black sneakers. "You're out to kill, huh?"

"Don't you talk!" I followed him to his room. Brett wore Skater cargo pants with side pockets and an unbuttoned shirt over a white tank. Pretty damn hunky, I thought.

On the walk to his girlfriend's house, I told of my conversation with dad about the condom, and also about my mom's rule.

"Cool rule, man. The whole world should have that rule."

Susan and her best friend Melanie were waiting for us. Susan's folks went out for the evening. Both girls wore tight, butt-clinging jeans and short tops that exposed their sexy navels. Woohoo! They led us to the living room where we chilled over a few beers. The Gold Coast clubs didn't really come alive until after 11pm anyway.

Me? Nervous? Awkward? You bet. And I constantly worried about the wafting scent of Brut dominating the room. How the hell did you dilute that stuff? Melanie, meanwhile, seemed the shy type, so Brett did a sterling job of keeping the conversation flowing.

Green Room was the first club we hit, then Purple Alien. Brett couldn't handle the claustrophobic atmosphere. He split with Susan for a while and left Melanie and me to get to know each other on the crowded and humid dancefloor. It was 3am before we reassembled and decided to hitch a ride home. The night air chilled our noses and fingers, and the traffic was

sparse. For an hour or more, thumbing a ride seemed an impossible task. What a great way to impress my date!

After leaving the girls at Susan's house, Brett and I walked to his place. Earlier, I saw him giving his girl a serious game of tonsil hockey. He wanted to know if I kissed Melanie.

"Sure! She's totally neat. We got to know each other pretty well despite all the damn noise. She's into surfing and riding horses and all kinds of cool stuff. We ended up talking and laughing like best friends, which was pretty neat. And just now she told me she had a really good night."

"Still got your condom?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, Kyle, you wanna sleep over in my room? It'll be cool."

I was so taken aback by his offer that I over-reacted: way too enthusiastically, but he didn't seem to mind. A little further on, we arrived at an intersection with traffic lights, which reminded me of an incident in one of G's stories. "Hey, Brett, let's catch a piss under the lights."

"You're crazy! We'll be busted!"

"Okay, if you're too chicken."

That got him. Hehehe. We stood side by side under the lights and proceeded to splash the asphalt for all the world to see, not that anyone else was around to witness the rivulets and rising steam. Still giggling when we reached his front door, Brett tried valiantly with zero dexterity to

insert a key in a lock that refused to stay in focus. "Shhhh, Kyle. Be quiet."

"Me?"

Once in his room, he stripped to his briefs, then crashed backwards, spread-eagled on his bed. "I can't sleep in these briefs," he mumbled, and tossed them onto the floor. I stood there in my boxers wondering where I should sleep. "Hey, you can keep your boxers on," he laughed, "I won't touch you. We can sleep head to toe."

Next thing I knew, Brett was dressed and peering down at me. "You okay, mate?" Harsh daylight streaming through the window stabbed and pained my eyes for a second till I shut them again. Oh, God!

"Feels like my head is a bass drum with a hyperactive footpedal."

"I gotta go shopping for mom."

Not until school resumed after winter break did I discover where Brett and Susan disappeared to at the club. He told me they had clean rooms there at 10 bucks a half hour. "Why not your place or hers? Why the club?"

"Because I don't need an audience."

"But, jeez, you guys don't have time for ... foreplay or anything."

"We try."

I seized the opportunity to ask about fellatio, a subject that often intrigued me despite my total lack of experience.

"You gotta be kidding, Kyle. Have you ever seen one up close?"

On that occasion, we were in the gym showers after an exceptionally enjoyable workout, when the subject drifted to Melanie. "Yeah, she's neat," I said. "Turned a few heads yesterday at the beach. My grommet buddy pulled his shorts down a bit further when he met her. He's lucky his cock didn't jump out."

"Just don't get too hung up on her, okay? She's not the type to stick with just one guy."

"Does she screw around?"

"No, not that. She avoids being too attached. I dated her before I met Susan and she drove me crazy jealous before we decided to call it quits."

"She says she surfs."

"She's a pretty hot surfer as well, and I think that's her problem. Surfing comes before any steady guys."

"How come I've never seen her around before?"

"She's from over west; arrived with her folks a few months ago."

"You have sex with her?"

"Once."

"And...?"

"And what?" he asked as I observed soapy suds slithering down his shiny body. "Find out for yourself, mate. Enough already! Now I've got a bloody hardon."

"So, where did you guys go yesterday?" I inquired diplomatically, pretending to ignore his embarrassment.

"Susan and I hiked Wollumbin—the Lyrebird Track and through the palm forest."

"Kinda hard to imagine you doing that—specially after spending time with you in the ring when you're hell bent on murdering somebody."

"What's wussy about enjoying nature? Anyway, after belting the crap outta you I need to do something different," he grinned, then added: "Who's that lighty who surfs with you guys?"

"Graham the grommet."

"Melanie mentioned him to Susan yesterday. I think he's gonna be your biggest problem. Melanie thinks he's cute for a little bloke, and from what she could see, he's pretty respectable in the furniture department."

"That's exactly what the cheeky little shit wanted her to notice. That's why he pulled his boardies down so low. He's an okay little dude though—tough for his age. He's only 12."

"Oops! I think Melanie thinks he's like 14 or something."

Later that week, 50 guys from other schools arrived for the Winter Swim Championships. Kim stood out like an Adonis; tall, blond, broad-shouldered. He had an arrogant air of superiority about him, as usual, to which Brett took an instant dislike. However, Brett was more concerned about the guy billeted with him. His previous experience at hosting a blow-in was a disaster—"he was a slob and left his crap all

over the floor"—and I figured this new guy was in for four days of Brett-style hell.

The visiting team proved to be a lot stiffer competition than anyone in our team anticipated. Kim creamed the opposition in every race he entered. According to one theory, our team had over-trained. The really annoying thing about Kim was the way he strutted around, toweling himself after winning, and checking to see who was ogling him. Next day, however, he was beaten in the freestyle by one of our guys; a win made all the sweeter because our guy was swimming outside his age group. Woohoo!

Things went pretty well for me. I progressed through all my rounds, then the second rounds of breast and backstroke, so I looked forward to the semis. The main highlight of the day was winning the butterfly. Brett managed a respectable third. Graham was there in the bleachers especially to see the race and went totally ballistic as I raised my dripping fist in triumph. Brett was more subdued but also congratulated me. Then Melanie arrived in her school uniform looking stunning nonetheless. She hugged me and left conspicuous evidence of her effect in the pouch of my Speedos.

A lot of the guys decided to hit the clubs that night, so I felt obliged to invite Kim. Big mistake. He asked Susan for a dance, which didn't upset Brett too much, but when Kim tried to put his hand up Susan's blouse, all hell broke loose. Brett made it abundantly clear to the Adonis that Susan was off limits. He succeeded but bought, instead, a tirade of abuse

from his girl who accused him of bullying and having a short fuse. Sheesh.

Saturday afternoon, during the last heats before the finals that night, Brett noticed some scratches on my back. "From Melanie?" he grinned. "Jeez, you guys must've had a helluva session."

I explained that Kim and I fought the previous night, but didn't elaborate further. Kim and I were in my room when he mocked me about last year's rape by Robert. I lost it completely and tried to inflict as much pain on him as I'd suffered. In fact, and I'm not proud of this, I shoved my fist up Kim's butt and grabbed his prostate. "This is what it felt like," I snarled and ignored his cries of agony. Brett was unaware of the farm situation and I certainly wasn't about to enlighten him—or anyone else apart from G.

"I guess you know I can't stand that tall piece of shit," Brett said during the meet. "I'm gonna do something."

"No fights!" I demanded. "You'll be disqualified from the competition!"

"Don't worry," he smiled before leaving to speak to Frank. I was out of earshot so I had to wait until his return for an explanation.

"What was that all about?"

"I asked the coach for permission to swim in the 200m backstroke."

"What for? You're not one of the original entries. And you're not eligible for a medal."

"Kim's in that race."

He had to be kidding. Kim won every race he entered except the freestyle when Frank beat him. With my heart in my mouth, I watched the guys on the starting blocks. Unable to hide his nervousness, Brett shook his arms and limbered up. The starter's gun fired, followed by a clean break as six super-fit bodies penetrated the water simultaneously. By the final lap it was down to a two-man race. The remainder of the field lagged far behind. Brett powered home, creating a spectacular bow wave across his forehead. Where the hell did he get the extra energy? I couldn't believe my eyes. The crowd rose as one, cheered and craned their necks. Inch by painful slow-motion inch, Brett drew away from his opponent and won by half a second. The whole place erupted! Brett didn't win a medal, but Kim forfeited the gold. I beamed from ear to ear when Brett's eyes found mine in the crowd. Victory! Sweet, glorious victory!

Chapter 9

At the gym Monday morning, Brett's chipper mood was a conspicuous departure from the norm. Why?

"One guess."

"Beating Kim in the backstroke?"

"You got it. Now keep hitting me."

Brett stood with his gloved hands rested on his head, and instructed me to punch his gut for three periods of 30 seconds each. It was like hitting a securely anchored punching bag. After the third period, I invited him to do the same to me.

"You're kidding, Kyle," the 300-situps-a-day pugilist warned. "You're not fit enough."

He was right, but I managed to survive two periods of his aggressive pummeling. "You're a sucker for punishment," he grinned when I surrendered.

"Yeah, that's why I hang with you." Then I asked what drove him to compete against Kim in the pool on Saturday.

"I knew I could beat him. You knew as well."

"How so?"

"It's like wishing for things. Sometimes you put this negative thought in your brain that you're unable to accomplish something, so you never do. The reverse is also true. You convince yourself that you can, and you do."

"Oh? You mean like I convince myself my cock is better than yours, and it is. Like that, you mean?"

Fortunately for my health, Brett cracked up laughing instead of cracking my ribs. "Hey, Kyle, you know exactly what I mean—and your cock will never be better. Anyway, it would have been cool to take that asshole Kim's medal, but at least he didn't get the gold." After a thoughtful pause he added, "Kyle, can I ask you something?" His serious expression concerned me somewhat. "What was it between you and that Kim guy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why did you hate him so much? I mean, he was a dick but you really hated him."

"Did it show that much? Anyway, it's a long complicated story."

"I'm listening."

"Will you understand if I can't tell you?"

"Whatever it was, it must've been pretty bad."

What an understatement. I explained to Brett that I regretted keeping secrets from him, and appreciated his friendship. "It's just something I can't discuss with anybody."

"Okay, but try to remember this: don't ever think you can't talk to me about anything. At least I can listen."

Brett noted my moistening eyes and refrained from further interrogation. Was his need to confide his secrets as strong as my need to share mine? I guess at that moment I empathized with both our motives for keeping certain things to ourselves.

One morning, my shoulder troubled me during a sparring session. Brett offered to apply Reparil gel after we showered. Once his strong, soothing hands had banished my soreness, he asked: "Hey, you doing anything tonight?"

"No. You wanna go somewhere?"

"Not a club or anything. It's just that..." His voice trailed off as he replaced the cap on the tube of ointment. I gathered his mind was busy searching for appropriate words. "Well, you're always going on about your folks and everything... I mean, I've seen your mom at the swim meets and, well, you know, it would be kinda cool to meet them."

I was thrilled. "You wanna meet my folks? Like one on one? Hey! That would be wicked!"

"What should I wear?"

Later, after school, Graham breezed into my room to show me his first pube. "Gimme a closer look," I asked, then grabbed the tiny hair between my thumb and forefinger and plucked it. His initial shock turned to fury!

"Do you realize how long it's taken me to grow that thing? Now I don't have any!"

I handed him the pube and said, "Sure you do. Put it in a matchbox as a keepsake."

"Yeah, right. So at the beach I show the girls a pube in a matchbox. How are they gonna know it's really mine?"

Meanwhile, I'd organized a special gift for my younger mate. As previously arranged, Stuart arrived and placed a blindfold on the little guy. Then we stripped him and bound

his wrists behind his back. "What are you guys doing?" He was genuinely worried. I eased his anxiety by telling him I was about to fit him with my old wetsuit. "That old piss-filled thing? Yuck!" I ordered him to shut up and remain still.

Stuart and I took each side of the bottom half and pulled it up his legs toward his waist. Graham complained of his nuts being crushed. "It's okay," I said, "they're only little ones." In fact, Stuart and I pulled so hard we lifted the grommet off the floor.

When the suit was fitted, and his nuts rearranged (compliments of my helping hand), we stood Graham in front of the bedroom mirror, then untied the blindfold. The kid was speechless. He stared in disbelief at his reflection for at least a full minute before I broke the stunned silence: "Pretty cool, huh?"

Finally, Graham softly muttered a few words: "Hey, Kyle, this isn't your old wettie. This is a new wettie."

"Well, it's not quite new, but it's in helluva good nick."

"Oh! This is awesome!" Then he almost shattered me with an unexpected declaration: he couldn't accept it. A long interval followed before I asked gently, "Why?"

"'Cause."

"'Cause why?"

"'Cause I see you doing chores around the 'hood and stuff to make money and this must've cost a whack. And I'm never gonna be able to give you anything like this—ever."

"Hey, Graham, it's not about you giving me or Stuart anything in return; it's about you making us laugh and having fun; being the guy you already are. And it didn't take a whole lotta chores. Stuart put some bucks in as well. We both knew you'd love the wettie, and that you'd take good care of it. Besides, the girls are gonna love it as well."

"This is so cool," he gushed, still admiring his reflection. "I don't know what to say."

"A hug would be cool."

"It doesn't sound like enough, though."

"A hug would be fine."

Following two enormous hugs, one for me and one for the beaming blond, the little guy asked, "Do I look as good as I think I do?"

"Totally spiff," I smiled. And he did. A better looking or cuter grommet you never did see. "When I saw it for sale in the surf shop, I figured it would be a good fit, but I didn't expect it to fit as well as it does. The beach groupies aren't gonna miss out on a single muscle, bro. They all show."

After Graham and Stuart left, I was busy on the phone to Graham's mom, trying to calm her, when dad answered the front door bell. I heard him say, "I'm very proud of my son," before informing the visitor about the wetsuit I bought for Graham's birthday. Then I recognized Brett's voice. He wore beige chinos with side pockets, a white t-shirt hanging loose—accentuating his impressive pecs and flat stomach—and his best

sneakers. Meanwhile, I continued my efforts on the phone to calm the grommet's mom about the cost. She freaked big time.

Brett favorably impressed my folks that evening and vice versa, for which I was chuffed. It was important to me to have my folks approve of my friends, and a bonus if the reverse was also the case.

Clubbing with Melanie, Brett and Susan became a regular Friday or Saturday night event, so I guess it wasn't surprising in the gym one day when Brett asked if Melanie and I had 'done it'. "Not yet. We're both still trying to find out about each other."

Brett mimicked the act of intercourse, which I found somewhat irritating and even demeaning. "You don't know what you're missing, mate," he teased as his hips stabbed the air.

"Can we change the subject?"

"Am I embarrassing you?"

I ignored his remark. Fact is, I was pissed at being interrogated about a subject most guys at school boasted of despite never having laid eyes on a damn pussy, let alone done anything with one. Brett sensed my mood and got back to the business of sparring by asking me to tape his hands. "I usually do it myself," he explained, "but it's something you also need to learn."

"Nah, it's too much of a hassle," I argued. "Besides, you're my only spar partner."

"I thought you enjoyed working out."

"I do, but not enough to take up boxing as a sport. Maybe it's the company," I grinned.

Brett was engaged to compete in a boxing tournament due shortly and asked if I'd like to attend. "The tourney's gonna be cool: it's a club comp with little guys from 9 years up to 19 year old seniors. You wanna come and watch?"

"Depends. I'd like to."

"Just watch your tongue. Don't go yelling anything stupid while I'm in the ring. Okay?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, you!"

That night the home phone rang. It was Brett. "Hey," he said rather hesitantly, "I had such a cool time with your folks the other night, I was wondering if it would be okay if I rocked over for a while."

"Are you kidding? You don't visit often enough, bro!"

I was excited: that stomach-churning anticipation of something wonderful about to happen. That's the way it always was with Brett, at least for me. At the front door, it was all smiles, then all smiles again with my folks in the living room where the conversation got around to the upcoming boxing tournament. My dad surprised me by demonstrating great interest, which impressed Brett. Questions were fired from all directions and my handsome mate was only too eager to satisfy everyone's curiosity about his sport.

After Brett left for the night, I was in the kitchen with my mom, helping with the dishes.

"He's going to turn a lot of heads, that one."

"Who?" I asked casually.

"Your friend, Brett."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, he's very good looking but, at the same time, a little rough around the edges—a bit like someone else I know."

"Dad?"

"Yes, but also like you."

My next question tumbled out of my mouth before I had a chance to consider it. "You think I'm good looking?"

"Haven't any girls told you?"

"Not like that," I said modestly as I placed a stack of dishes in a cupboard. At the same time I wondered what the hell my mom was getting at.

"Okay, then, I don't want to give you a swollen head, but you and Brett won't remain as handsome as you are now if you keep boxing. You're older now, and your punches are a lot harder. You'll get badly hurt if you continue. It's time to grow up, Kyle, and—what's the word?—chill."

On the morning of the tournament, although I wasn't directly involved, I attended the team training session. Brett was as tight as a barramundi's rectum. "I've never seen you so determined," I remarked as he left the ring after a few rounds with the coach.

"The guy I'm fighting tonight is from one of the fancy rich schools. He beat me twice already and both times I got

hurt. I was hoping I wouldn't be facing the same guy this time."

"Well, I know you're not in the mood for being talkative right now, but I'm here if you need me." Later, during recess, I quizzed him. "What's the buzz? I've never seen you this intense before. Are you scared?"

"Scared? Me? No way, Jose. It's just this guy. It's more a psycho thing than anything else. He goes all out to hurt me because he knows where I'm vulnerable."

"Oh? So tell me."

"Why? So you can hit me there too?" he grinned, then decided to confess: "In the ribs, just under my armpits. I keep lifting my arm to hit him and his timing is always perfect. Folds me like a piece of paper." He pointed to the spot under his arm. "Just there. Lemme show you."

I lifted my arm as instructed and received a poke from his finger. "Ouch! Wow, that really is a soft spot for sure! Damn!"

Then another surprise. "Hey, Kyle?"

"Hmmm?"

"Wanna hang a bit after school? We can go for a juice or something."

"Cool, but don't you need to rest a while before the tourney?"

"Yeah—but I just need to hang for a bit."

Brett's anxiety concerned me. This was so contrary to his normally confident, even arrogant, behavior. Following extra

team training that afternoon, we strolled in silence to the beach where we bought a couple of fruit juices that we drank on the sidewalk. Not a word was spoken, not even during the walk back to our respective houses. "Thanks a stack," he said as he paused to enter his front gate.

"Before you go, can I tell you something my dad said?"

"Sure."

"He said you'll win even if you come second because you're that kinda dude. And he said none of my friends is a loser."

"Your dad rocks, Kyle. He truly does. See you at the tourney tonight."

Chapter 10

Byron Bay Police, Citizens and Youth Club buzzed with the hubbub of a thousand voices, eagerly awaiting an evening of pugilistic thrills. Seated beside me were my dad, Graham, a bunch of guys from the swim team, Stuart, Susan and Melanie. Brett sat with his team mates some distance away. He saw my hand wave and returned the gesture. Face tensed, he then anxiously re-focused on the task ahead.

"Where do you think you're going?" my dad asked as I rose from my seat.

"I'm just gonna give Brett a bit of encouragement."

"This is not the time, boyo. Grow up."

I bit my lip and sat down. Grow up? Brett was my mate for Christ sake. My dad's remark wounded my pride, but I kept my simmering frustration to myself.

The lighties were first to belt the crap out of each other in the ring, followed by an interval prior to the senior competition. A couple of the guys and I chose that time to head for the refreshments area. When I returned to my seat, dad was missing. I checked the crowd and spotted him chatting to Brett. Upon his return, I asked him why he could talk to Brett but not me.

"Chill, Kyle."

Chill? My face glowed beet red. I was so mad I could spit. Brett caught my glance and smiled knowingly. What was going on here? Some sort of conspiracy?

Time dragged before Brett's division was called. My bud wore a red top with gold shorts while his opponent wore blue and white. They were about the same size, but the other guy had slightly bigger arms and neck-less, bull-like shoulders. Brett bounced around the ring appearing calm and confident; a good and uplifting omen I thought. After listening to the referee explain the rules, the guys touched gloves. The big moment arrived at last and the crowd roared itself hoarse.

Damn! Just after the first bell, Brett caught a jab in his weak spot. What the hell? He backed off right away. The remainder of the round resembled two dancing roosters, each sizing up the other for the inevitable kill.

The start of round two quickly became a disaster. Brett completely lost his cool, often raising his arm, and provided several opportunities for his opponent to hammer his weak spot. Then, halfway through the round, a perfect jab sent the other guy flat on the canvas. At the count of 8, he struggled to his feet. Brett was back in control. Woohoo! The ref signaled for the match to resume.

Brett jabbed with his left, but this time pulled it short. Bullneck fell for the ploy and, once again, aimed for Brett's weak spot. With precision timing, Brett lifted his right and connected with Bullneck's jaw. It was all over bar the shouting, and there was no shortage of that from the ecstatic onlookers who rose as one from their seats. Brett's opponent was unable to find his feet in time for the count.

The ref took my mate's arm, raised it in triumph, and declared him the winner.

Brett's eyes found us, and saw all of us jumping, screaming, and frantically waving our arms. Sweet, glorious victory! I think it was Graham who made the most noise, but my dad wasn't far behind and I was somewhere in the middle.

Toward the end of the tourney, Brett made his way over to our group after showering and changing into his school uniform. Susan greeted her beaming hero with a huge hug and kiss, then the rest of us shook his hand until it was at risk of amputation. Even Graham, who hardly knew my mate, impulsively threw his arms around Brett's neck then hugged the hell out of me. What a marvelous and lovable little bloke.

We all piled into my dad's VW Kombi. It was his treat for 'shakes all round. Later, after dropping off the girls, we drove Brett home. He took my dad's hand firmly in his and thanked him. Thanked him? "For what?" I asked as the Kombi pulled away from Brett's house.

"A bit of advice."

"What advice?"

"That I gave him."

"About what?"

"Boxing."

"Boxing," I laughed. "You?"

"Don't knock it. I boxed when I was Graham's age, and I've always followed the sport."

I was amazed. "No shit? So what did you tell him?"

"To hit the deck before the other guy's glove gets him, and to play dead."

I cracked up, knowing my dad was joking. But he was also keeping something from me. He could be an infuriating tease sometimes; a character trait, according to my friends, that I'd inherited. "Come on, dad, cut the crap and tell me what happened."

Shortly after we arrived home, my mom answered the phone, then handed it to my dad. I could tell from his half of the conversation that the caller was Brett, who then asked to speak to me.

"Hey, bro, I just wanted to say thanks again, not just for tonight but also for chillin' with me this afternoon at the beach. And, hey, your father's one helluva special man."

"Yeah, I know."

"Well, if he hadn't spoken to me tonight, I might have lost. Did he tell you?"

"Yeah, about your weak spot, and how to pull that jab so you could line up that bloke's jaw. I told dad earlier about your weak spot. I guess he figured out how to turn it to your advantage, then told you. I was mad at the time, though."

"When he spoke to me before the match?"

"Yeah, I wanted to speak to you and let you know we were all rootin' for you big time, but he told me to chill."

"Yeah," he laughed, "I saw you turn scarlet. So how come he never told you he boxed before?"

"Tell me about it—it was a surprise to me too!"

"Well, mate, I'm bushed. See you in the morning. And thanks again, big time."

"Night, mate."

I found it curious that Brett thought so much of my dad yet never spoke about his own. He confessed to me one day that the first time he phoned my house to ask if he could visit, he tried several times but hung up before punching in the final two digits. Brett was by no means timid, so why he should be nervous about me or my folks was a riddle.

His mood swings also puzzled me. Sometimes his disposition was so ugly he targeted his aggression toward me in the ring, and made no secret of it. If I complained, he accused me of wussing out on him.

I suspected part of the cause was his mom's boyfriend whom he occasionally mentioned but not in sufficient detail to enlighten me: until one day in the gym showers.

"What does your mom say?"

"I don't think she can see what's actually going on. She doesn't know about the violence. Problem is she really likes the guy. And he's good to her, as well as good for her. She's also had a pretty rough time since my old man walked out."

"You're gonna need to sit down with them and talk, before you do something really stupid."

"It's cool, Kyle. I'm okay."

"Oh? Like this morning when you seriously hurt me in the ring?"

"Hey, just let me deal with this thing."

"How?"

"Beat you up every morning to release the tension," he joked laconically. I lunged and tried to bear hug him, but he pushed me away. "Fuck, Kyle! Put on some pants, dude. What if someone walked in here and saw us wrestling nude?"

"Yeah, you're right. I kinda forgot we're naked. Sorry."

"It's cool. Just think first."

"You wanna come around to my place after school?"

I was on the roof fixing tiles that had shifted during a recent storm when Brett arrived. "G'day. Wanna hand?"

"Yeah, you can jack me off while I fix the tiles."

"Sicko."

"Thanks, Brett. I need about four hands up here."

He wore a tank top that exposed the bulging of his biceps each time he lifted a tile. It was one of those Mr Fitness attributes that compelled observation. "I just wanted to chill with you a while before I see Susan later on," he said.

Normally it was me who quizzed Brett about stuff, but he decided to reverse that role one time in the quad during school recess.

"So you went around to Melanie's house Saturday night?"

"Yep."

"And her folks were out?"

"Yep."

"That's two 'yeps' so far. Did you guys have sex?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"We just did some necking and stuff."

"She gives pretty good head, huh?"

"Huh?"

Brett cracked big time at my startled expression, and slapped his knee. "Melanie phoned Susan first thing Sunday morning to tell her she'd gotten into your pants. She said you were nervous as all hell, especially when she took you in her mouth."

My neck and face were a raging inferno but I tried desperately to remain calm. "Yeah, well, I wasn't expecting it."

"Oh, yeah! Tell me another one. Into her house and nobody's home? And you didn't wanna do the big number?"

"I had no protection on me, anyway."

"Are you getting mad at this convo?"

"Nope, I'm just pissed at Melanie phoning Susan with the details."

"Don't sweat it, mate. I'm sure Susan tells Melanie about her and me. Anyway, Melanie's been talking about seeing you naked ever since your first date, and she's not disappointed. So just enjoy it."

"So what's the story?" I snapped. "Each time we do something she phones Susan?"

"Hey, Kyle, chill for Christ sake. We do the same thing."

"I guess so. You just caught me by surprise."

"Weeeell," Brett began with an evil grin, "she described your boner the way I see it every morning in the showers. So how was it?"

"Awesome."

"So when are you gonna go all the way?"

I snapped again. "Fucking hell! Why is that so important to you?"

"Whoa! Hold it! I'm sorry I even brought it up, okay?"

"I'm not mad at you, Brett. It's just that it's such a huge deal that all the guys at school have to get laid."

"Well, it's better than spending every night wanking."

Time to change tack, I thought. "I had a cool chat with Melanie last night. She visited my place."

"About?"

"I asked her what it was like when you were dating her."

"And?"

"I'm not sure I should tell you."

"Cut the crap, Kyle. We're mates."

"She said she likes you a helluva lot but she couldn't handle your mood swings from one day to the next. She couldn't predict what kinda mood you were gonna be in."

"You seem to handle my moods okay."

"You've got a hot bod."

"Fuck off, Kyle. Every time I ask you something serious you change the subject and talk shit."

"It's not shit. Anyway, I handle your moods because I wanna. Sure I get pissed when you act like the world's gonna end, but you're my mate, and that's what mates do."

"How hot?"

"What?"

"My bod."

"Probably an 8."

"Is that closer to a 9?"

"Pretty close. Anyway, Melanie says I got a pretty neat room."

A man's house is his castle, but in the case of a teen it's his room. According to my little grommet buddy next door it was *our* room. He slept over often, bombarding me with questions about sex. Melanie fascinated him. He wanted to know all about her, and what she and I did together during our intimate moments. His interrogations were different to Brett's; Graham was a boy approaching puberty and I was his "big bro", willing to chat about the things he was reticent to discuss with his parents.

I wondered about the relationships established by children without siblings. All of us were in the same boat: Brett, Melanie, Susan, Graham, Stuart and me. Was that why we developed such close bonds? Would a real brother or sister be any closer? Was blood really thicker than water? If that were the case, I couldn't imagine it being so. All my friends were family to me, and not just me. My folks embraced my friends as

family, too, especially Graham who probably spent as much time in our house as his own.

Chapter 11

What a feeling! Snug and warm in bed on a chilly and stormy morning, knowing the alarm isn't due to sound for another two blissful hours.

"Son, wake up."

"Dad?" I asked, rubbing sleep from my eyes. "Is something wrong?"

"On the contrary," he grinned, "Watego's is kicking serious butt."

An eerie silver-gray luminescence highlighted the rolling whitecaps as we ran down the sand toward the foaming, swirling shore-break, protected from the chill by our neoprene wet suits. Thick fog was too dense for the rising sun to penetrate. Even Byron Bay headland, to our immediate right, was a faint mist-shrouded smudge.

I never saw my dad ride five to six feet surf. He amazed me by styling big time, and catching several wicked waves, including two green rooms. If only my surfing buddies could see him now, I thought. My dad rules.

After 45 minutes, we headed home. "I'm feeling totally stoked," he repeated several times. Then it was time to dress for work and school respectively. Dad was gonna be late for the office, but he was so pumped he didn't care. As a surfer, I knew that feeling well.

"Must be cool to have a dad like that," Brett remarked at recess. "More like a friend than a dad."

"Yeah, he's wicked. I wanna be just like him one day."

"That's a pretty awesome thing to say about your dad."

"Hey, you gotta join me on a Dawn Patrol one time. It would need to be warmer, though, because you don't have a wettie. And maybe we could borrow a body board or something. I want you to see the sun rise over the horizon when everything is so damn perfect."

"That good, huh?"

"Can I ask you something personal?"

"Since when have you bothered to ask?"

"Well, now that Melanie gave me a BJ, I wonder if she wants me to return the favor; like, well, you know."

"Just use your finger if you're not into it. I do that to Susan and she climaxes over and over. Then when I'm inside she goes totally wild."

"She always on the bottom?"

"Not always. We like to experiment. Now, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"How many girls have you been with, Kyle?"

"One."

"Thought so."

"Why?"

"Melanie said—not to me—to Susan—that you're helluva nervous with her. Anyway, Susan told her to be gentle with you and to give you time."

"Susan tells you everything?"

"Pretty much."

"Do you tell her everything?"

"Most stuff. She'd freak if I told her everything."

"Like?"

"Like nothing." Brett clammed up at that point. I figured I'd hit a raw nerve.

That night he decided to visit my house. My folks and I were halfway through dinner, which made him feel a little awkward, but my mom insisted he join us at the table and share our food despite having already eaten at home.

My dad immediately introduced the subject of boxing, which put Brett at ease right away. After the meal, Brett helped my mom do the dishes while I was outside brushing the pool. Later, we chilled in my room, listening to music and just chatting about this and that. It meant something very special to have Brett in my room; sharing my personal space.

Brett visited again the following night, this time after supper. That morning in the gym, I had a tendonitis problem with my left shoulder and Brett massaged the soreness with Reparil gel. He suggested a second session before I went to bed so I invited him over.

"Hey, you're late!" I joked when I answered the door.

"The dishes are done already."

I heard my mom's voice from inside, "Kyle! You've got to put a stop to this business of getting your friends to do your chores for you. Like a certain young person who collects Roo's droppings, for example!"

"Jeez, mom, you can't blame a guy for trying."

Once in my room, Brett asked about my shoulder. "Feels a lot better than it did this morning," I answered. "That gel really helped."

"Not to mention my expert massage. Want me to rub it again?"

What kinda question was that? "Yeah," I said, maybe a little too exuberantly.

When he finished, I offered to rub his back. He removed his shirt and sat on the side of my bed while I squeezed a little gel onto my fingers. "Are you worried what my folks might think if they walk in here right now?"

"Just hurry up, will you!"

"I can't believe your muscles, Brett. It's like everytime you twitch, something ripples."

It wasn't until the following morning in the gym that I decided to quiz Brett about the massage. "You got a hangup about the backrub last night?"

"I did have. Have you?"

"No way! What's wrong with it? If I were the coach and gave you a backrub it wouldn't matter. So why should it matter if it's you or me?"

"Yeah, I know," he admitted, "it's just that... hell, I don't know."

"Don't know what?"

"I don't know," he snapped.

"Hey, if it makes you horny I'm the same. I didn't say anything last night but I noticed a bulge in your shorts."

"Your giving me a rub is the last thing that's gonna give me a boner, Kyle, so just drop it. Okay? I don't know what it is."

"Then smile, will you? You're pissed off with the world again. I wrote something once: *Friends shouldn't be afraid to be close*. Think about it."

Brett lightened up a little, albeit with an insult.
"You're not normal. You know that?"

"Why?"

"Fucking hell, Kyle, nobody likes me at school, but you hang with me and still manage to keep your other friends."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it's true, dammit!"

"Bullshit, mate. You're carrying baggage, and you're taking it out on everyone. You don't let the guys near you. You're like paranoid to make friends. So how come you hang with me?"

"Hey, you invited yourself."

"You never chased me?"

"You're different."

"How?"

"Shut up already. You gonna train or what?"

At lunch, Brett remained sullen for quite a while, so I let him be. Then, out of the blue, he began to giggle. I asked him why.

"Jane Austen the author. She wrote, '*I do not want people to be very agreeable as it saves me the trouble of liking them a great deal*'."

"Melanie phoned last night. She asked if I wanted to go clubbing with you guys tomorrow night."

"She asked you?" he said, turning to face me. "Jeez, man, you've got damn pull. How do you do it?"

"I dunno," I shrugged, feigning modesty. "Magnetic personality, I guess."

Next morning in the gym, Brett asked if I remembered the first time he invited me to punch the bag with him.

"Yeah," I answered, "I was stressed big time."

"I'm glad you said 'yes'."

"Why?"

"I just am."

Normally, I was a beer drinker, but Brett decided to 'educate' me that night at the Purple Alien, and treated me to several vodkas. I was legless by the time we managed to hitch a ride home. The driver was cool and took us all the way to Melanie's house, from where we walked to Susan's. Walked? Brett threw me over his shoulder. Not a good move. I puked down the back of his shirt.

Waking in the morning, to the beat of a thousand jungle drums, was a slow and painful process. I was naked and in strange surroundings. Brett's face gradually came into focus as he hovered above me.

"Susan undressed you."

"She could've left my boxers on."

"She wanted to check out your cock."

"Bet she was impressed, huh?"

"Made her horny as hell, so while you were sleeping we made awesome love."

"Damn! Why didn't you wake me? I could've watched you hump Susan!"

"You're fucking twisted," he laughed.

I surfed all of Sunday with Stuart and Graham so it wasn't until Monday at school that I spoke with Brett again. We sat together as usual during lunch break. "Thanks for looking after me on Friday night," I said. "If it hadn't been for you... well, who knows? Anyway, I just want you to know something—I'm here for you if ever you need to chat about stuff that bugs you. Okay? And by the way, I reckon I owe you an explanation about why I baited Mitch that time." I went on to explain how Mitch molested Graham during a sleepover with Ryan, and smacked the grommet across the face when he complained.

"If I'd known that, I wouldn't have given you the chance to get to that asshole."

"That's why I didn't tell you."

"Is he the little bloke you bought the surfboard for?"

"Same."

"Why did you do that?"

"He's like a little bro, and I think he's a cool little bloke."

"Fuck! For a surfboard I'd almost let you blow me. Hey... I said 'almost'." Brett's own joked cracked him up, for which I was pleased. It was the first time he laughed loudly that day.

But my reply was almost instant. "Hmmm, now that's an offer I'll have to consider. When do you wanna start surfing?"

"Cool it, Kyle. You're almost being serious."

"Okay, for some surf wax can I jack you?"

Brett's guffaws could be heard a mile away. Then, he became pensive again. "You ever jack someone else before?"

"You really wanna know?"

"Maybe."

"And if?"

"If what? You tell me and I'll tell you."

"Yeah, I have—so now you know one of my best-kept secrets."

"Someone I know?"

"Now who's being quizzy? Anyway, you said you'd tell me something."

He studied the ground for a moment. "I have too." His revelation caused me to go dead quiet. "Kyle? You there? Earth calling Kyle. I bet you're disappointed."

"Why should I be if I have too? Do you still?"

"No. Don't be crazy. It's like cool when you're little but now guys would think I was gay." He paused a moment then asked: "Do you?"

"Think you're gay? No."

"I mean do you still jack off other guys?"

"Sometimes."

"Aren't you concerned about what other guys might think?"

"Who's to know? Anyway, you already called me a faggot."

"That had nothing to do with anything. You already know why I did that."

"So, are you gonna tell Susan or Melanie?"

"I'm not fucking stupid—then lose you as a friend? Anyway, you could tell the whole world that I jacked a guy, and was jacked by a guy, if you wanted to screw my life."

"By the way," I observed, "you got a boner. Do you feel guilty about it?"

"About jacking another guy? Yeah. And in case you're wondering, there's only one."

"Yeah," I admitted, "I had the guilts forever about it. Thought I was a freak."

Just then the bell rang for class. "Hey," Brett said as we both stood, "am I the only other person you've told about this?"

"Yep. I haven't even told the person I jacked yet."

"That's a pretty huge secret to be telling me, Kyle. Are you worried?"

"Should I be?"

"No."

"Then I'm not worried. You're my mate and, one day, when you wanna tell me something, I'll be there for you. Just remember that."

I was totally pissed that the bell intruded on our conversation. We were just beginning to chill and it was so damn cool.

Chapter 12

Spring break was a contradiction. Break? Apart from surfing with my buds, chores around the neighborhood devoured much of the time. Then the guys on the swim team were asked to volunteer to clean the school pool, change-rooms and gym. Graham, despite being in junior school, offered to help. It was the first time he and Brett spent more than a few minutes together, and I was pleased to see them getting along well—considering the grommet's incessant teasing and practical joking, and Brett's vigorous and regular attempts to drown him.

One night about midnight, my dad woke me. "There's something I want you to see."

I staggered sleepily to the backyard wondering what the hell my dad was on about when I saw a magnificent apparition. I immediately hopped the fence and knocked on Graham's bedroom window. "Graham! Wake up! There's something you gotta see!"

The kid was half asleep and mumbled something or other as he followed me in his PJs to my backyard. "A flower?"

It wasn't just any flower. It was G's flower. Some months ago my mom and I shopped at the Mall when I saw a potted cactus. It reminded me of G; tough, determined, resilient, able to handle anything that came his way. I asked my mom if she would buy it for me.

That night, my dad decided to enjoy a glass of wine in the backyard before bedtime, and that's when he spotted the

cactus beginning to bloom. According to my dad, this particular species of cactus flowered only at night, and only once a year.

As the petals slowly unraveled, it revealed the bluest blue I ever saw. It was truly spectacular. Eventually, it became as big as my fist. I couldn't wait to email G and tell him. *I named it after you, G, and painted a big 'G' on the side of the pot. Both the rose and cactus have thorns, but also beautiful flowers. The rose needs friends—other roses—but the cactus? He's a loner, kinda like a rebellious teen who does his own thing, and produces a single flower. It's an event and makes a statement. That's why it reminds me of you.* The fossil was totally chuffed.

After spring break, swim training resumed in earnest. Brett excelled in most of the strokes but not the butterfly. That was my specialty.

Normally, Brett waited until all the guys had showered before he entered the change rooms. "Haven't you showered already?" he asked.

"Yep."

"So why are you showering again?"

"It's hot, and my armpits are smelly."

"So I noticed," he laughed. "And you creamed me in the heats for the butterfly, asshole."

"You beat me in the freestyle, though. Hey, can I ask you something personal?"

"Again? Bloody hell! Depends on how personal."

"It's just that I noticed you wait for the guys to leave before you shower."

"I don't like guys gawking at me."

"Does that mean you're shy?"

"Maybe."

"Fair dinkum, Brett, you got nothing to be shy about. You got a killer bod with a good dick and good hangers."

"Graham told me you think I'm some kinda god or whatever. But he neglected to mention your interest in my dick or hangers."

"All I'm saying is that you look better than most of the dudes on the team, and you look so damn strong."

"Maybe that's the problem."

"You mean they stare at you because you're better looking?"

"Maybe."

"But it's more than that, right?"

"What is this? The Spanish Inquisition?"

"I've noticed how you wrap a towel around your waist when you finish showering. The other guys just hang their towels on the locker door."

"So?"

"And when you're wearing Speedos you tuck your dick under so nobody can see its size or anything. There's just a bulge that looks like you stuck a sock down there."

"What are you? My manager or something?"

"I just notice things."

"It's the things you notice that worry me, mate."

"I'm observant."

"Listen up, Kyle. You're you and I'm me. You parade yourself around... sorry, I didn't mean that. It's just that you don't seem to have any hangups. But not everybody's like you. Okay? Haven't you heard of modesty? Sorry, I didn't mean that either. It's just that I don't like being stared at."

"Well, that's too bad because you're the kinda guy that a lotta people can't help staring at."

Brett surprised me that evening by calling to my house unannounced. I was so pleased to see him at the front door I had to wish away my impulse to hug him. "Hey, bro," I gushed, "this is neat, you coming around."

"I had to get out of there. That cunt is driving me up the fucking wall."

"Your mom's boyfriend?"

"He's a prick, and my mom's always taking his side when we argue. That sucks!"

I invited him inside where he spent a while chatting with my dad. In no time Brett's sour mood had abated and he was enjoying a few laughs. Later, Brett and I chilled in my room, listening to a few tapes of CDs that Stuart loaned me. "You and my dad get along really well," I said as I changed tapes. "He genuinely likes you."

"Ditto."

"And you know something else? When you laugh you must be one of the most handsome dudes on the planet."

"Are you hitting on me, Kyle?"

"I'm just telling you something I thought you ought to know."

"Hey, I appreciate it. Okay? But there's a lot you don't understand about me, so drop it."

"I like what I do understand. So does my dad."

"Just drop it."

At swim training next day, a couple of juniors goofing off snuck up behind Frank, Maurice and Brett and pulled their Speedos down. In 100 degree heat, Brett snapped. He spun around and fisted the kid's face. Before any further damage was done, I intervened. "Quit it, man," I demanded. "It was just a joke. They're only kids. Did you have to over-react like that?"

"If you did that to me in front of everyone, I would've fucked you up too."

"You went way over the top, Brett."

"Hey," he snarled, pushing me away, "whose side are you on anyway?"

"I'm your friend. I'm allowed to tell you when you're getting out of hand. Remember?"

Everyone ignored Brett for the rest of the swim session except me. The little guy's swollen lip, punctured by his teeth, was stitched by a medic. When Brett spoke again, he asked, "Why aren't you giving me the silent treatment like the rest of the team?"

"Because I like your bod," I grinned.

"Don't make me laugh, Kyle. I'm not in the mood."

"Listen up. Everyone thinks you over-reacted this morning. But they'll get over it. It was just a joke. The juniors always get up to shit like that, especially at the start of the season."

"Maybe it's just me—Weirdo Bretto—the mutant from Hell."

"Maybe you should lighten up a bit, smile more. Remember what I said about your smile last night? A lotta guys are shit scared of you because you always look like you're mad at something." Brett couldn't resist giving me a smile. "There you go!" I cried joyfully. "Hold that pose!"

"My face hurts."

"Because it's out of damn practice!"

"Aren't you worried the guys won't talk to you because you hang with me?"

"You've got a serious complex, bro. A lotta guys would hang with you if you gave them half a chance. Maybe you should start by telling that little dude you didn't mean to hit him so hard."

"He's lucky you stopped me."

"I'm lucky you didn't belt me when I did."

"That too."

One October morning at school we were told that a sexologist would give a talk in the auditorium before first recess. It reminded me of the old joke about a father telling his son it was time for a chat about the birds and the bees.

"Okay, dad, what do you want to know?"

"Good morning, boys. My name is Henry Fotheringham. I'm a professor and sexologist. I'm married with three children; two boys, one of whom is in the same grade as yourselves, but attending another school, and he's as hunky as they come."

What? A murmur rippled through the assembled students, wondering what the hell this dude was on about. Hunky?

"My elder son attends university, and my daughter is married and living overseas. There's something else I think you should know about me before I go any further. I'm a born-again Christian."

Mine were not the only pair of eyeballs to roll around in their sockets. Here we were about to be earbashed by a Bible freak. The bloke continued to talk about sex outside of marriage and how it went against acceptable Christian standards. Was this guy for real? There wasn't a kid in that hall who hadn't bonked a girl, or at least jacked off thinking about it. He carried on, referring to intimacy between teens and what was required for two people to engage in sex.

"The main requisite is that you love each other. It's not just a sex act to get your cocks wet. Your cock is not just a dip-stick to measure the depth of a girl's sex organ."

Suddenly, at the mention of "cock", the assemblage sat up and took notice. This guy spoke our language. Then he spoke about the use of condoms and venereal disease.

"Okay, now let me ask you a question: Who amongst you has a best friend at school?" Almost all the guys raised their

hands. "Oh," he said, scanning the room, "so we have a school full of homosexuals here?"

You could hear a pin drop. Nobody knew where to look. We were all stunned.

The professor smiled and asked: "How many boys here hate gays?" He waited for a response but the crowd remained silent. "Okay, that's cool but I don't believe you. At least, not all of you. My guess is that most of you hate homosexuals. I figure all of you have heard the word "homophobia". He waited until we all nodded. "But what about this word—"homophilia"? Is anyone here familiar with that word?" We shook our heads. "Okay, let me explain. Any guy who hasn't loved another guy, or is in love with another guy, must be a very strange and unique person."

Once again, silence reigned. No one dared look sideways. All eyes focused on the professor.

"Let me explain. It's very common as well as normal for best friends to want to be together as often as possible. Best friends hug each other. Best friends sleep over at each other's houses, often in the same bed. Best friends phone each other because one misses the other's company. In all of those cases, what we call "friendship" is actually a very deep, romantic love. Yes, you heard me right. It's a very deep, romantic love that best friends feel for each other. But!" He paused a moment to study our faces. "There's nothing sexual about it. It's called homophilia and it's quite different to homosexuality."

The prof's speech knocked everyone's socks off. For me, he took all the pieces of the puzzle that never made sense and assembled them in a logical and credible order.

"Often we see two boys who always hang out, to use your generation's expression. And because of what we've been told or led to believe we conclude they must be gay. That's a huge problem among teens because they often associate homophilia with homosexuality. In some cases, a boy who has a deep, romantic love for another boy can become confused about his sexuality. He may consider himself gay because of the pressure brought about by his peers, when, in fact, he's not gay at all."

The sigh of relief amongst the audience was not audible, but you could sense it.

"When I was in varsity, I was madly in love with a male professor. We would hang out at every opportunity. We loved each other's company and we even got down to some hugging and massaging. But we weren't gay. Our relationship never became sexual. All we wanted was to be close to each other. At the time, I had many girlfriends, one of whom eventually became my wife.

"So, basically, what I'm saying is this: It's perfectly okay to be close to another guy. It's perfectly okay to love another guy. When God told us to love our neighbor, he didn't specify which sex." The audience cracked up. "And it's important to remember this: if you love another boy as a best

friend, you're quite normal. Not only that, you're quite lucky. And so is he."

At second recess, Brett demanded to know where I disappeared to during the first. "I was in the comp room writing some stuff."

"An email to that cactus dude or fossil or whatever the hell you call him?"

"Yeah. I wanted to tell him about the prof while it was still fresh in my mind."

"Well, you pissed me off big time. I searched everywhere for you. I wanted to talk to you about what the prof said. What did you think of it?"

"I thought it was pretty cool."

"Yeah, but I mean like what he said... You know... about how guys can be in love with guys and not be gay."

"First time I ever heard anyone say that, but it kinda makes sense."

"If you heard a guy was in love with another guy, what would you have thought?"

"That he's gay, I guess."

"And now?"

"I'm confused," I answered. "I guess after what the prof said, then no—not if they're not having sex."

"I used to think the same thing; if a guy loved another guy then he must be gay."

"So if I tell you that I love you, would you think I'm gay?"

"Only if your cock was jammed up my butt at the time,"
Brett laughed.

"So that bloke's talk really got to you, huh?"

"You got no idea how much it got to me."

"Why?"

"Just the things he explained."

"Really hassled you, huh?"

"No! That's the thing! Just the opposite! It gave me a
really good feeling."

"So all the guys in school had better watch out now,
huh?"

"Nope," he cracked, "not all."

Chapter 13

My life and those of my friends fascinated G; a soap opera he followed with a passion as if it filled a void in his own experience. At the computer one day I was inspired to write him something of a *précis*.

I figure I got the coolest friends a guy could have. Frank? Well, he's a totally serious dude. But when he gets down to it, he can be totally loose; like on the last mountain hike, and the strip thingy the swim team did for the girls, and the nights we get together and go clubbing. My folks have known Frank's folks like forever and we're all pretty close.

Stuart and me? Well, I guess we're about as close as two guys can get. Mind you, we didn't hit it off right away. There were fights—serious fights. When Rick left Australia for Canada, I thought I'd never be as close to another guy as I was to him. At the airport, when he and his folks flew out, I felt part of me had been torn away—ripped like a shark would tear off your leg. No mercy. It was like Rick and I were the only two people on earth who really understood the pain and hurt back then. It almost destroyed us. Yeah, I do love Stuart and he loves me. It's weird because he's moistened just about every pair of panties in town. He's a macho guy.

Brett? He's the same—macho, tough, sporty, cocky—and all that shit. But he's starting to lighten up and he's arousing my curiosity big time. He's getting closer to me. Not so long ago he hid inside his shell and refused to open up about

anything personal. The change in Brett is not just the result of our friendship; he's changed noticeably since the professor's lecture the other day at school.

Graham? Well, what can I say about Graham? He's Graham and he's the coolest little dude on the planet.

Melanie? Well, Melanie made me feel a lot different about myself and I feel different towards her, too—not like the guys. She makes me feel good about myself and I think we're getting close to a time when the two of us are gonna get it on quite seriously.

And you, G? I know it sounds weird but you're pretty teeny for a fossil. You help me a lot. Hey, you saved my life. You own a big slice of my heart's real estate.

One hot afternoon after school Graham hopped the fence as usual and helped with my regular chores. "How come your dog craps so much? And how come there are so many sloppy ones?"

Later, I invited my little bud to cool off in the pool with me. He was about to go get his boardies when I stopped him. "No need for that. My folks aren't home so let's skinny dip."

In half an hour, the doorbell rang. I wasn't expecting anyone, so I stopped by my room to grab my boardies on the way to the door. Brett greeted me with a puzzled expression, noticing my dripping-wet skin contrasted by dry shorts. "Is it okay to come in?"

"Sure!" I beamed; pleased to see him. "The little guy from next door is in the pool."

"Graham?" he asked as I led him to my room.

"Yeah, he helped with some chores. You wanna join us in the pool?"

"I'll need a pair of shorts or something."

Not in the least fazed by Brett's surprise arrival, the grommet continued swimming naked. Eventually, though, my young bud needed to return home, so I chose that moment to ask Brett if he'd like to stay for supper.

"You sure it's okay with your folks?"

"Hey, my folks like you a lot. You wanna check with your mom?"

"I'm seventeen not seven."

During the meal, my dad apologized for a problem with the stereo. "When I raise the volume, one of the speakers dies. Probably cost a fortune to fix."

"I'll check it out," Brett offered.

After coffee, my folks and I watched fascinated as Brett poked around with the internals of the stereo. Within ten minutes it was working perfectly, much to the delight of my dad who was highly impressed with my handsome friend.

"Where did you learn about that stuff?" I asked as we entered my room.

"I fix most things at home. No way we can afford trades people to do it. Sometimes I can, sometimes I can't. Depends on the problem."

"That was impressive! You scored big points with my dad."

"I like doing stuff for him. He helped big time at the boxing tourney. I'll never forget that." Then Brett revealed the real reason for his visit as I inserted a CD into my player. "Hey, about sleeping over at my place."

"I'll check with my folks." I left the room and approached my mom somewhat sheepishly.

"You promised your father and me you'd spend the weekend studying. You told us you'd work extra hard this term." Her voice was loud enough for Brett to hear and I was embarrassed at my own mental image of his reaction. But good ol' dad sprang to the rescue.

"The boy promised he will study at Brett's house. Does it matter where he studies? Besides, they attend the same school and share the same classes. It makes sense for them to study together."

Later, two beaming faces greeted each other at my mate's front door. We'd been apart for some hours but that was more than sufficient time to be pleased to see each other again.

"I organized a couple of movies," he announced as I followed him to the living room. "And I got some beers. They're in the fridge."

During the movies we chatted about Susan and Melanie, what we might expect from the swim season, mountain hikes and a range of mutual interests. Before we knew it, the VCR clock showed 1:30am. Brett stood, wobbled a bit from too many beers and headed to the bathroom to shower.

After my turn, dressed only in boxer shorts, I appeared at his doorway. "Okay," he mumbled into the pillow, "now you can give me that body rub you promised."

He hadn't mentioned the body-rub all night, so I assumed he forgot about it. I wasn't willing to raise the topic either because I figured it might upset him and spoil the night's vibe. But there on his dresser was a bottle of scented massage oil. Apparently he gave some thought to my earlier promise in the gym. Hmmm.

After pouring a little oil onto the palm of my hand, I began by rubbing his shoulders and neck. "You must've done this before," he sighed. "Who else do you massage?"

"Nobody. Maybe it's a natural talent."

"Feels wicked."

"So do your muscles. They're helluva toned. I can trace every one of them." I continued to massage his powerful back, then concentrated on his legs right up to his tight butt cheeks. "Okay, you can roll over now."

He hesitated. The reason why became obvious when he did somewhat reluctantly roll over onto his back. There was a tell-tale bulge in his shorts. Mine too, for that matter. My hand, of its own accord, touched his boner, which jumped. Uncertainty and nervousness caused me to instantly retreat. Nothing was said. Then I went about the business of massaging his awesomely defined chest. By the time my busy fingers moved to his abdominals, I could no longer resist the urge to comment.

"How come they're so flat?" I asked. "And how come mine aren't?" He didn't answer. I then worked the tops of his legs, occasionally placing my oiled fingers a little too close to his crotch, fascinated by the way his boner jumped. But I dared not go any further than that.

Eventually, I capped the bottle of oil and returned it to the dresser.

"Whoa, Kyle! That was awesome! For a mo there, I thought you were gonna jack me off, and I was getting ready to break your nose for you. Now, I'm gonna sleep like a baby." We both did, head to toe under the covers, wearing our boxers.

Next morning, Brett was in unusually high spirits. After I showered, he asked me if it was okay to walk me home. "Sure, my folks think you're way cool. You know that already."

We arrived at my house to the sounds of Graham and my dad arguing about a rugby football match on TV. A surprised Brett thought it strange that my dad handled the precocious grommet with such infinite patience and humor. As expected, my folks insisted Brett stay for breakfast and lunch before spending the rest of the afternoon with his girlfriend.

At first recess on Monday, Brett asked me to thank my folks for their hospitality on Sunday. "I had a really good time."

"That's cool. So did I."

"Do your dad and that lighty always fight like that?"

"Nah," I laughed. "They stuff around with each other. My dad's impressed with the way Graham comes back for more, and dishes it out."

"My dad would clout me big time if I spoke to him like that."

"My dad can lose it sometimes, but not for something like football on TV."

"I thought Saturday night was cool as well."

"Yeah, I had a pretty good time," I answered casually.

"You were impressed?"

"By?"

"My boner! I wasn't so pissed I didn't feel you touch it."

"Just wanted to feel if it was up to standard, and what Susan was getting so much of."

"And? Did it measure up?"

I studied Brett's eyes for a moment. "This doesn't sound like you talking."

"Why?"

"C'mon, Brett, you're like always so shy about your dick. You even sleep with boxers on."

"I guess it's because you don't give a damn. Anyway, you slept with boxers on as well."

"Hey, if you stripped, I would as well. Believe me, I hate sleeping with anything on. Ask my mom! She gets pretty red-faced some mornings when I've kicked the covers off." I

waited a moment for Brett's laughter to subside. "And, if you sleep over at my place, NO BOXERS ALLOWED!"

"So? You never answered me. Did it measure up?"

"Pretty much. That is some damn weapon."

"Can I ask you something serious? You don't need to answer because it might be outta line."

"Shoot."

We discussed this subject once before, but for some reason Brett re-introduced it. "You ever jack anyone else off?" Then he quickly backtracked. "Hell, you don't need to answer that."

"Yeah, I have," I said with a shrug. "I told you that already. It's no biggie. Had someone jack me as well."

"Me too. We were lighties," he explained, facing me. "Kids. Me and my bud. We just... did it."

"Just once?"

"A few times. It was the first sex I had, besides jacking myself."

"And you've been thinking how weird you are? Right?"

"Of course. How many guys do that kinda stuff?"

"Stacks! Believe me! Stacks!"

"Maybe."

"No maybes."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

"Yeah, right, Kyle," he said as the school bell rang for class.

The night of the Halloween party at my house was a riot. I did my best to remain anonymous, wearing a black cape and ghost mask, but my trademark spiky black hair gave the game away. Brett wore a black vest a couple of sizes too small, skin-tight black jeans and a faceful of black makeup courtesy of Susan. He came as a crow. Susan and Melanie resembled characters out of Frankenstein with hair dyed five different colors. But the most outstanding costume was Stuart's. He was covered in green body-paint and wore torn shorts and t-shirt. The Hulk with long blond hair? Oh, well... maybe the blond hair was out of place but the rest of him certainly wasn't.

Back at school it was down to the serious business of swim training. Frank selected Brett and me to compete, one on one, in the butterfly. When we reached the wall, Brett almost shoved an angry finger up my nose. "Don't you ever do that again," he snarled.

"What?" I asked, feigning innocence.

"Kick out a beat while we're racing."

"I didn't," I lied.

"Don't fuck with me, Kyle. I don't need that from you. I'll beat you fair and square in a race, but don't treat me like an idiot or I'll cream you."

After exiting the pool, Brett stormed off, leaving me standing there like a dork while Frank read the riot act. "If I were Brett, I'd smack you—one time."

My impulsive reaction was to lose my cool and become defensive. "So," I threatened, "you wanna try, huh?"

"Don't push it, Kyle. I can take you off the team."

"Yep, but that would be a chickenshit move because you're too scared to smack me."

"You know and I know I'm not scared. But you also know I want to be the captain again next year. Are you trying to fuck that up for me?"

"Enough already," I said, backing off. "Brett's been feeling down lately and I thought I was doing him a favor."

"Yeah, well you have. You've stuffed the confidence he's been trying to build up all season."

Rarely had I felt so damn stupid or remorseful. At recess, Brett and I spoke again. "Sorry," I said softly. "You weren't supposed to see that missed kick."

"Yeah, and the whole damn team too. How was I supposed to feel, huh?"

"Hey, I was just trying..."

"I know what you were trying, Kyle," he interrupted, softening his anger. "Stop! We're friends, but shit like that doesn't help anyone. And I'm sorry for this morning. I got few enough friends as it is without driving you away."

I felt better immediately, even elated, and allowed a smile to spread across my face. "Me? Away? No way! I like your bod too much."

Brett returned my grin. "You're totally crazy. Cool, but way damn crazy."

"It's worth it just to see you smile. You got the most wicked smile, Brett."

Chapter 14

Intense interest focused on the World Cup Rugby—the upcoming match between the South African Springboks and the Aussies. The winner would play France in the final. It would be no fun for Brett to watch the game at home alone, so I invited him to share the excitement with my folks, Graham and me at my place. We made so much noise barracking for the Wallabies the entire neighborhood could easily have heard us. It sure didn't help the 'Boks, though. We creamed them. The match was telecast from England quite early in the morning our time and by sparrow's fart Graham had expired; depleted of his last drop of energy. As I gathered the little guy in my arms before taking him home, he opened his eyes and nodded approvingly before falling fast asleep again. Tender moments like that clearly brought home just how much my little bro meant to me.

Swim training next day had already been cancelled in anticipation of the early morning football, and students were allowed to wear civvies instead of the school uniform. I rocked up in my Billabong boardies, a loose t-shirt and Biotribe sandals.

During recess, Brett invited me to chill after school in his room for a while. I eagerly accepted as I did any and all opportunities to spend time with my best mate.

As I sat on his bed, the door opened unexpectedly and there stood the infamous boyfriend about whom I'd yet to hear

anything complimentary. "So, Kyle, are you also a wanker like Brett?" he sneered. I was at a loss to know which way to look or how to respond to his insult. Then Brett told the guy:

"Fuck off out of my room, dickhead".

"Who do you think you're talking to?" the boyfriend demanded with a snarl; eyes ablaze.

"You, you prick. Now get out."

Actually, I was the one to get out and head home. The boyfriend was madder than a hornet. Thick veins popped from his strong neck and arms. For a moment, I expected an all-in brawl. Brett suggested I leave and promised to call around to my house later.

"What was all that about?" I asked as he followed me down the hall to my room.

"He's a fuckwit."

"So what's the story about me being a wanker?"

"Okay, so you're no brain surgeon, Kyle, but I don't need to elaborate. I hate that bastard."

"He ever beat up on you?"

"Let's drop it. I could've stayed home if I wanted to talk about him."

Next time Brett visited, he brought his school books along. Exams were due soon and study was our major priority. Conversation was minimal except for our quizzing each other about the science text. I suggested he was a real brainbox but he insisted his knowledge was the result of hard study. In any event, I discovered a different side to my mate: serious but

without the aggro mood. I also found his handwriting impressive; unusually neat, with little side notes made at the edges of each page.

I walked Brett home that day, babbling on about how grateful I was for his friendship and that I should compliment him more often. But his mind was elsewhere. He remained pretty much incommunicado and elusive. He thanked me for the night, then disappeared through his front door, leaving me to try and unravel the mystery of the secretive and moody teen.

He and Susan joined my dad, Graham, Stuart and me at the beach next day. The surf was up big time; six-foot swells battled a stiff offshore wind as the mountains of blue/green rolled determinedly forward, peaking to perfection. Stuart disappeared into green rooms with incredible regularity while Graham rode anything and everything that came his way. One big wave unceremoniously dumped the grommet. We held our breath as his board soared into the air then threatened to clobber his head on its wild downward spiral. Luckily, he ducked just in time. Unfazed, the fearless little guy paddled out for more merciless punishment.

Happy to leave the risk-taking to us younger guys, my dad chose his rides carefully. Melanie, by contrast, styled impressively. Sometimes she acted more like a boy than a girl. Maybe it was an equality of the sexes thing with her. But she was one helluva surfer chick, and always made me proud to be her guy.

Studying with Brett in my room became routine as the exams drew closer. One evening, my dad gave Brett a friendly punch on the arm as he arrived, making it clear that he had great affection for my friend. Brett also had great respect for my dad; a man's man. "Kyle has good taste in friends, Brett. You're welcome here anytime."

Study wasn't limited to reading and taking notes, though. Brett and I quizzed each other and discussed the whys and wherefores of what we learned. It helped us not only to understand the material but also why it was part of the syllabus. And there was another bonus: we enjoyed each other's company immensely.

On the weekend, I organized a barbecue to which I invited the guys on the swim team. Guests included Brett and Susan, Jolly Jim (the only black guy), Stuart and his girl, Maurice and a bud from his school, Melanie, Frank and his girl, and, of course, the precocious star of the show, Graham. The grommet brought a cute little blonde beach groupie, one of his many admirers. His black hair was spiked with gel and he wore tight black jeans, a white open-neck shirt which hung loose, and sneakers. He timed his arrival with the precision of a Hollywood star to gain maximum attention, and gave us that "shuddup" look before we got a chance to fire a million questions. But we all happily ensured that he and his girl felt welcome and at one with the older crowd.

My folks went out for the night, trusting us teens to do our thing without adult supervision. They were not

disappointed. My respect for them would never allow me to provoke their disapproval.

The new millennium was just six weeks away. Two triple zero had a special magic about it as though it had the potential to instantly transform the world into a better place. "Everyone is focusing on it," I said to Brett. "It might be a good time for people to discard their old baggage and take a whole new look at things, and start fresh. I know that's supposed to happen every New Year but maybe people might think more about it this time round."

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it, Kyle. Right now, we got a technology paper to worry about."

Our attention was also focused on plans we had for summer vacation. Hiking Wollumbin and Nightcap National Parks was one. Another was a swim meet organized by the school's "old boys".

The meet took place after our English Lit exam on a Friday afternoon. Mitch and his goons were present to watch me swim like a stone. "Hey, Brett," Mitch yelled after seeing my bud thrash two of the old boys in the butterfly, "great swim, dude. Well done for beating Kyle!" Brett was red faced. So was I but bit my tongue and tried to ignore the blimp's sarcasm.

Frank won the freestyle by a split second ahead of Brett. I arrived fourth behind Jim. It just wasn't my day. Constant smartass comments from Mitch and his brain surgeons made me increasingly furious. So too was Frank, who strode up to the gang of dimwits in the stand to deliver his angry ultimatum.

"Hey, you guys, swim or shut the fuck up." When Frank was mad, nobody argued. One of Mitch's arrogant morons piped up: "Hey, I can beat Kyle."

Frank put the guy in the breast-stroke. I preferred backstroke but Frank declined my request. I lost by two lengths. That embarrassment inspired Mitch and his goon squad to launch into another barrage of puerile abuse while the cocky swimmer paraded around like he'd won a gold medal.

"Hey, what happened," Brett asked. "Did you feel sorry for that dude or something? You should've creamed that race, Kyle."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"Those guys are really getting to you, huh?"

"Nope. I'm just swimming like a jerk."

"Yep."

"Thanks. I needed that."

"Whoa! You said it, not me."

"Yeah, well, whatever."

"Don't get mad at me," Brett snapped. "I'm on your side."

"I'll live."

"You're mad at me. I can tell."

"No, I'm mad at myself for thinking for one second I might get some support from a best mate."

"I don't believe what you're saying, Kyle. You're being a jerk."

"Yep, a real little jerkoff."

"Shit, Kyle, you need to cool off before we say things to each other we don't mean."

Instead of clubbing that night, we all gathered at the Mall pizza restaurant. I'd calmed down by then and was once more my normal happy self. Melanie's company helped a stack—she was almost always cheerful and an inspiration to be likewise, and so did the thought of sleeping over at Brett's. He escorted Susan home early because of an argument between them.

As we undressed down to our boxers for bed, Brett asked if Melanie and I had intercourse yet.

"Nope."

"You know what I think?"

"I'm gonna hear it anyway."

"I think you're scared you won't live up to her expectations. It's all in your head, mate."

"What was the argument with Susan about?"

"Don't change the subject, Kyle. Besides, I don't talk about the fights I have with Susan."

"You're pissed off. I guess you were looking forward to a night of lovemaking."

"Well, at least you called it 'lovemaking'."

We got under the covers, laid on our backs, and began talking about girls for a while. "Listen up, Kyle, sex with a girl doesn't require a degree. You don't need to be Einstein. Even dickheads like Mitch can do it. Hmmm, maybe that was a bad example."

"That's not the point," I argued. "I know that heaps of guys fuck themselves stupid but I'm talking about Melanie."

"So? She's a girl and she likes you. She thinks you're a hunk."

"That's the problem; I've never done it before. Well, except for one time when the girl said I was fucking like a damn ferret."

Brett exploded into raucous laughter. "Okay," he said after catching his breath. "That was your first time. That's understandable."

"You don't get it, Brett. You used to go with Melanie."

"So?" he said. Then my meaning dawned on him. "Oh, I see. You're worried she might compare you with me. Is that it?"

"Kinda," I admitted.

"Listen, mate, it's not like some damn contest. It's not like the swim meet today. It's not like I win and you lose. Anyway, you're forgetting something. I don't go with Melanie any more. You're the bloke she wants."

"It's a lot to live up to, though. You're...well, you know."

"I'm what?"

"A total hunk."

"Hey, Kyle, you're pretty okay too. Don't underestimate yourself. Melanie doesn't waste her time with losers, if you know what I mean."

Two prominent bulges under the covers indicated without doubt that we each had a serious erection. The other thing I

couldn't help noticing was Brett's unique and special odor, which filled my nostrils with spicy warmth and an attraction that intensified the pleasure of being close to him. However, I thought better of saying so. During the conversation, I stared at the ceiling, but Brett's face often turned towards mine; studying it for clues, maybe. "Has Melanie commented on your hazel eyes?" he asked.

"Yeah, she said they're dreamy."

Chapter 15

I am. A tapping sound at my bedroom window woke me. Who the bloody hell was giggling, I wondered, as I slid open the window. "Do you know what time it is?" I asked in a hushed but annoyed tone. "We have another exam paper in the morning!"

"Chill," Brett, obviously stoned, grinned. "I just wanna hang out for a few minutes."

"Hey, I'm serious! Do you know what time it is?"

The silly grin vanished. "I'm sorry, okay? I'll jet. See you in the morning."

"Wait! That's not what I meant. What's up?"

"I got the shits with my mom's boyfriend and we argued. He pulled a length of hose so I split."

His admission suddenly alerted my sleepy brain. "He pulled a what? Did he use it?"

"Nope," my mate sniggered. "I was too damn fast for him. He has before though."

"Was that the reason for the blue marks across your back at the gym a while back?"

Brett ignored me and glanced at his watch. "It should be cool now. I'm gonna split home. Check you later."

"Okay, then," I complained cynically, "don't tell me if you don't want to."

"It's not that I don't want to tell you. Hey, you talk about *me* having a short fuse. Anyway, I met up with Stuart tonight."

"My Stuart?"

"Yeah, your blond surfer mate."

"And?"

"He was stoned out of his bracket, man. Then he lit another joint and we shared it. Fuck, I never felt like this before! So I went home and the boyfriend saw me stoned. He tried to beat me."

"What for?" I asked sarcastically, annoyed by Brett's idiotic giggling. "You've beaten yourself already."

"Aww, c'mon, Kyle. Stuart told me you smoked it up with him before. So don't get heavy with me."

"Stuart's got a big mouth. Okay, so I tried it but I didn't like what it did to my brain. And you're acting like some stupid sheila."

"Cheers, Kyle. Go fuck your hand." And with that, he turned on his heels and vanished into the night.

Sleep denied me its refuge for hours as I tossed and turned, my mind buzzing with a thousand questions about what the hell had gotten into Brett. After waking late, I arrived at school just in time for the paper. Not surprisingly, I got the cold shoulder from my mate. And that's the way it remained for the rest of the week: a brief, half-hearted "g'day" in the morning and nothing after school. Brett's habit of walking me home ceased. Now he spent his afternoons with Stuart.

I wrote G about the situation but he was also at a loss to explain Brett's sudden and aloof detachment. *You've done nothing wrong, Kyle. Don't be tempted to blame yourself. Give*

Brett space for a while, and time to sort out whatever it is that bothers him. Meanwhile, as difficult as it might be, continue to be yourself. You are responsible for your own behavior, not his.

Separation from Brett led to a bout of depression that I desperately hid from my folks and Graham. The last thing I needed was an inquisition by people who basically did not understand my relationship with or my deep feelings for Brett. Hey, I battled to comprehend the situation myself. G talked about "hills and valleys"; that life's journey wasn't meant to be smooth; that we needed time to grasp and experience things from a variety of perspectives before being capable, in hindsight, of judging them with reasonable accuracy. Yeah, right. He was a fossil and I was 17. How long did I need to wait?

I met Stuart out surfing one afternoon. Had his friendship vanished too? Were he and Brett now mates to the exclusion of myself? "Say hi to Brett for me," I said, masking my misery and bewilderment.

The biology paper was one for which I studied extra hard. It kept me awake most of the night hitting the books. Next day, after the paper, I happened upon Brett in the school grounds and made the effort to appear friendly and normal.

"How did the paper go with you?" he asked.

"Okay, I think. And you?"

"So, so. I was up all night studying. Can't wait for Monday and the final paper."

"So what are you doing tonight?"

"Not sure. Green Room maybe. You?"

"Not sure either. Guess I'll check with Melanie."

"She's going to Green Room; at least that's what Susan told me."

"I guess it's Green Room then. I'll check with my folks."

"Well, maybe I'll see you there," he said, and turned to walk away.

"Hey, Brett?"

"Huh?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot." His response was somewhat reluctant and cautious.

"What's going on? What's happening? I thought we were pretty good mates; even close."

"Guess I need a break for a while. Guess I never had a friendship like this before."

"What's with the grass?"

He shook his head and laughed. "Fuck, Kyle, sometimes you can be so naïve. You're probably the only dude in school who doesn't smoke grass. Anyway, I don't smoke a helluva lot, and Stuart's got contacts. I don't see it as such a big deal."

"I've smoked before," I admitted.

"I know. Stuart told me. That's why I didn't understand your high and mighty attitude the other night."

"It's not like that."

"So how is it?"

"You get out of control sometimes."

"From grass? Crap!"

"Grass and those cocktail drinks you call 'shooters' make you crazy."

"And you can't handle that, right?"

"I'll handle whatever."

"Hey, who carries who home most of the time?"

"Okay, so next time leave me. I'll live."

"Jesus, Kyle, I think you're deliberately starting an argument here."

"I dunno," I commented facetiously, "I thought it was a pretty normal convo. So what do you and Stuart do all the time?"

"You really wanna know? We get fucking slaughtered together. And I think I know what your hassle is: you're jealous."

"Of what?"

"Stuart's like your best mate and he's been hanging with me."

"Well, you're my best mate too and you're hanging with him. So there you go; my two best mates hanging together. Totally fucking cool. So what's there to be jealous of?" The hairs on the back of my neck bristled.

"Why do our convos get totally out of hand whenever there's a problem, huh?"

"Because everybody talks and nobody listens. Anyway, you're right. Let's quit this convo while we're ahead. I gotta jet."

"Will I see you tonight?"

"I'll check (with my folks)."

I was some yards away when Brett yelled; "Hey, Kyle, if you can make it, call me."

My dad exploded with fury at the notion that I could even consider clubbing and getting slaughtered with only one more paper to write. "I don't want you spending the entire weekend nursing a hangover."

"Well, is it okay if I go to Brett's for a visit?"

"You're not going anywhere, boyo. Not after the way you just spoke to me."

He was right. My short fuse landed me in trouble again. Melanie called to check the situation. "Sorry, babe, I'm grounded for the whole weekend." She said she would go to Green Room anyway, and that I could sneak out after my folks went to bed. "Yeah, right, and be grounded for the rest of my life?"

The last thing I expected Sunday morning was a knock at the front door. Brett? My eyes popped like champagne corks and a broad smile instantly claimed my face. The impulse to hug him long and hard was a fraction short of overwhelming but I maintained my cool in order to avoid his possible disapproval. He was carrying his text books and asked if we could study in my room together. The science paper was due the following day.

For several hours it was down to the serious business of study. Nothing personal entered into the conversation. When the time came to leave, he stood at the front door and searched my hazel eyes for a moment. "Hey, Kyle, it's no big deal between Stuart and me. Okay? I just want you to know that."

"Yeah, I know. I just can't help it. Rick's leaving for Canada tore me to pieces. I guess the thought of losing another friend scares me shitless."

"Hey, you underestimate yourself, man. I'm not going anywhere. You can be a total pain in the ass but you're the only pain in the ass I got."

End of exams meant welcome relief from stress as well as the extra bonus of free time. A few guys at school organized a hike up Wollumbin. They invited Brett along, but it was left to me to seek permission from the Bundjalung elders. My dad knew them well and always sought permission to climb Wollumbin out of respect for their law and culture.

Mount Warning remains significant to Aboriginal people, providing a traditional mythology dating from the Dreamtime. The Aboriginal name for Mount Warning (named by Captain James Cook in 1770 to warn other sailors of the shallow shoals) is Wollumbin, meaning 'fighting chief of the mountains'. The Bundjalung people believe that lightning and thunder observed on the mountain were actually warring warriors and that landslides were wounds suffered in battle. The site retains enormous spiritual and cultural significance to the Bundjalung

Nation. Under Bundjalung law, only specifically chosen people are permitted to climb the mountain.

Private transport is the only way to reach Breakfast Creek parking area at the entrance to the reserve. With all of us on board my dad's VW Kombi, we took the hour-long drive via Murwillumbah then west along Tweed Valley Way, a picturesque road twisting and winding its scenic route through rich farm country that alternates with magnificent rainforest. We arrived at 7am in bright sunshine. "See you later this afternoon," my dad said before driving home. "And good luck!"

Some of the guys were new to climbing Wollumbin. "You gotta be joking," Graham complained at the base of the first 100 steps; a combination of timber planks and hewn rock. "It's way too steep!"

"People do it all the time, mate, even little wussy guys like you. It's only 3,280 feet so no worries, bro."

We carried only water, sandwiches and fruit on the 5-hour round trip. After climbing the first 100 stairs, some of the guys threatened mutiny. "Beat the stairs and you'll beat the mountain," I said cheerfully despite my own pain. "What have I got here? A bunch of bloody sheilas?"

A further few hundred steps on, we sweated profusely; thumping hearts and expanding lungs worked overtime. The stairs seemed endless. Even the fitter guys complained of aching feet and leg muscles of jelly. Finally, we reached the 1000th step, the equivalent of climbing a 30-storey building.

That was just the beginning. A lot more climbing lay ahead for our rubbery legs.

Several rest periods later, after using chains embedded in the steep rockface to haul ourselves up the final ascent, we stood triumphant (albeit totally buggered) at the summit, a leveled and fenced area with benches and tables, shrouded in gray cloud. Occasionally, the sun broke through long enough to reward us with spectacular 360 degree views: north to Queensland and the distant Glass House Mountains as well as a clear view of the Gold Coast high-rise skyline. To the east lay the endless blue of the Pacific Ocean. The Cape Byron lighthouse resembled a blip on the headland, while nearby Julian Rocks jutted out of the sea like the carcass of an old shipwreck. To the south, villages, dams, rivers, mountains, and the unbroken coastline separated the fertile volcanic land from the adjacent sea. To the west mountain peaks and green valleys reached all the way to the distant Great Dividing Range. Below us lay the luxuriant tropical green of Nightcap National Park, our hike destination for another time.

I explained to the guys that Wollumbin, a volcano that ceased to erupt 20 million years ago, rose to a height of over 2 kilometers, twice its current height. Layers of ash and lava were deposited over its outward slopes to a diameter of about 100 kilometers, from Byron Bay in the southeast, Lismore in the southwest, and north across the Queensland border to Mount Tamborine.

The huge size of the Tweed Valley is testament to the monster Mount Warning was in its fiery prehistoric days. Today, the caldera valley is over 1000 meters deep and over 40 kilometers in diameter, making it larger than the famous Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania.

"What's a caldera?" Graham asked.

"A bowl-shaped depression in the earth caused by the collapse or erosion of a volcanic cone. Don't you do geography at school, dumbass?"

"So where's the hole?"

"You're sitting on it...the central magma plug."

"You mean this is like a cork ready to pop?"

"I don't think so, mate. It's stayed corked for a lot longer than you've been around."

The return trip was, thankfully, much easier. We negotiated the first of the steps and enjoyed an easy walk to the carpark.

We spent the remainder of the afternoon in a rocky area where we enjoyed pot-holing and exploring the vertical cliffs. I showed Brett a small stream that formed a rock pool before continuing its winding journey. "I was a little Kyle when my dad first brought me here. It was my first trip to Wollumbin. My dad told me this was a pixie river and that, at night, the pixies mysteriously appeared and danced under the trees. Jeez, folks can lie," I laughed, "but it's something I'll always remember. It was my mom and dad who first got me interested in my mountain."

"Your mountain?"

"That's how I feel about it; my mountain. Rick and I hiked up here often. It was our special place."

I led Brett and a few others to a cave called Tree Snake. Inside, we investigated a central cavern, from which smaller circular tunnels extended and returned. The other guys eventually left Brett and me alone to go adventuring. "Wanna get naked?" I asked. "We can pretend to be cavemen."

Brett's reply surprised me. "Sure, we can go down one of the tunnels and you can blow me."

Was he joking? It wasn't worth the risk of returning to Byron in an ambulance. Rather, I ran my fingers over the bare volcanic rock walls of the cavern and pondered our apparent isolation from the lush and forested world we exited only moments ago. "Just imagine it was only you and me in here, and nobody else on the planet."

"I'd run and hide, Kyle. So would all the dinosaurs and giant wombats. On second thought, knowing you, the wombats would probably relate."

The unexpected return of the others from their short expedition abruptly ended our conversation. The group moved outside where we stood for a while in the intense heat enjoying the spectacular view. "That's where I'd like to be right now," Brett sighed, pointing to the distant ocean. "It's so damn hot here." I asked him if he was disappointed to be on the hike. "Nope. Actually, it's wicked; not like I thought. It's a whole different world."

For ten minutes or so, Brett quizzed me about nearby Nightcap National Park, its mountains and stunning scenery, the crystal pools and waterfalls, the dense tropical rainforest with its giant ferns, the magic places we would visit during our major hike. The more we talked, the more enthusiasm Brett showed for my special place. He began to appreciate where my soul resided—that the very core of my being was inextricably linked to the mountains and the sea.

Chapter 16

Together with the rest of the Grade Eights, Graham toured our school to meet the new teachers and familiarize himself with the school layout. For welcome light relief, Frank organized a swimming competition between our team and the new guys, an event Mitch and his goons relished as a perfect opportunity to insult me as I fussed over my little bro.

"So, Kyle, you really are into little boys."

My blood boiled instantly but, before I got the chance to react, Graham piped up: "Hey, Mitch, you still pissed off because I won't touch your ugly dick?" A heavy backhander from the blimp sent the grommet flat on his back.

Brett's response was immediate and instinctive. Two lightning-fast punches put the bully on his fat ass. Brett was also prepared for trouble from the goons who, wisely, kept their distance. One of them helped Mitch to his feet and led the pathetic sight away.

"Did you hear that crack?" I asked Brett. "Sounded like his nose."

"Serves the idiot right," he answered, then turned his attention to Graham. "Hey, you okay, mate?"

"Of course!" the little bloke lied; face smarting bright red from the smack; eyes on the verge of tears. Brett winked, then grabbed the grommet's arms while I took his ankles. "One, two, three!" We watched Graham hurtle clumsily through the air

before an undignified splashdown, a comical sight that relieved the tension and put the fun back into the day.

Later, Brett asked if the altercation between Mitch and Graham was the reason I fought the bully a few months back.

"He was into Graham's pants?"

"Sort of," I replied, unwilling to discuss the sordid details.

When the day arrived for Final Assembly, the last thing I expected was to hear Brett's name called by the principal. He never mentioned his nomination for prefect. "I didn't think I'd get it," he explained.

"You sure are full of surprises."

"Me? Yeah, right. Who do you think the principal was talking about when he said he hoped not too many of the boys would parade around the beach without clothes on, and give the teachers heart palpitations?" Brett's remark referred to a bunch of us who recently goofed off in the pool. A guy grabbed my Speedos and threw them toward the stands. To everyone's surprise, I casually exited the water and retrieved them, ensuring our female biology teacher got a good view of my lazy six swaying in the breeze. "Anyway," he added, "why didn't you nominate for prefect?"

"I'm not the type."

"Which means?"

"I'm just not the type, that's all. Anyway, I'll be helping the swim team train during vacation. That'll keep me out of crap."

"Yeah, right," he laughed. "Nothing will ever keep you out of crap."

Actually, the final day of school was tinged with sadness as well as joy. Many of the seniors took time to say their goodbyes to other pupils and teachers. For the seniors, a big chunk of their lives had drawn to a close. For those teachers who befriended students, it was a day when many familiar faces were destined to vanish from their daily routine.

The night prior to our ten-day hiking and camping trip at Nightcap, Graham breezed into my room and bounced his rucksack on my bed. "You're not gonna believe this," he bitched as he unzipped the bag, "my mom made me pack PJs. Two pair!" The PJs were immediately dispatched to the floor. "Who the hell wears PJs in a sleeping bag? And look at this! Socks! Ten! A pair for each day!"

As various items were tossed from the bag by the disgruntled grommet, I commented: "Rule number 1 on hiking trips, bro, never let your mom anywhere near your rucksack."

A few days into the Nightcap National Park hike, we made camp on the grassy bank of a mountain stream. Gareth, the hike leader and one of the previous year's seniors, approached me as I tended a small fire, preparing to boil the billy. "Your little buddy is loaded," he belly-laughed. "I went for a swim and saw Graham whacking his wand behind a tree. Hell, I never realized lighties had that much juice in them!"

Coffee-making postponed, I fell about, cracking up. "Did he see you?"

"Yeah, but he'd reached the point of no return by then. All he could do was say "g'day" between squirts. You should've been there, man. It was hilarious! The look on his startled face was priceless!"

Both Gareth and I bellowed so hysterically we woke the rest of the group. One by one, sleepy-heads staggered from their tents wondering what the hell triggered the mirth, then quickly retreated to the bushes for more urgent considerations, Nature's morning call.

Once coffee was brewed and served, I noticed Graham's absence from the group. I found him at the spot where Gareth took his earlier swim. Graham sat forlornly on the bank, playing with a blade of grass.

"What's up, mate?" I asked as I sat beside him.

"I'm embarrassed."

"Why?"

"Gareth caught me jacking."

"So he said."

"He told you?"

"He said you shot a bucket."

"Shit."

"Hey, don't beat yourself over it! Oops! Freudian slip. Sorry. Listen up, bro, all the guys will jack this trip. It's either that or wet dreamland."

"You too?" he asked, surprised and hopeful.

"Yeppo."

"When?"

"Hey, this is Kyle, remember. I've jacked every day since we started—in fact, twice yesterday." Graham's infectious smile return to his innocent face. Then, together, we indulged in a hearty laugh. "Take my advice," I said, "if you don't want the other guys to see you, don't go beating your meat near swimming places. Anyway, Gareth says you got quite a monster for a little guy."

"Serious?" Graham's brown eyes widened and sparkled. "Have you seen his? Whoa! It's huge! His veins look like a vine wrapped around a tree trunk."

We spent the morning swimming in the cool, crystal-clear mountain stream, marveling at the tranquility of the surrounding forest and the sheer isolation of a genuine boys' paradise where boys could indeed be boys. Well, frankly, it wasn't all that tranquil for Graham. He got more than his share of roughhousing from the older guys. But the little guy had surprising spirit, refusing to be dominated without a fiery struggle. His strength astonished many, some of whom had to settle for second best. Soon, all agreed that Graham was a tough little customer worthy of everyone's respect.

On the other hand, being a virgin hiker, Graham did not escape initiation. During the early stages of the hike, where the going was pretty heavy and the merciless summer sun cooked our skin, the grommet overheard us talking about dehydrated water as we trudged a narrow winding uphill trail, humping our backpacks.

"Kyle? Why didn't you tell me about dehydrated water? Then I wouldn't have to carry all these damn water bottles!"

Darren produced an empty bottle from his bag. "This is dehydrated water, bud. Want some?"

"Sure!" Graham watched Darren pour water from a full bottle into the empty one, which he then handed to the kid. "But this is your normal water," Graham complained, unable to hide his disappointment and puzzlement.

None of us could maintain control a moment longer. We fell about laughing, much to Graham's chagrin. On another occasion, Frank told Graham to fetch a sky-hook from Brett, who cracked up at hearing the request. "Frank wants a sky-hook. You got one?" But, that night, Brett became the target of sinister grommet retribution. He woke screaming after slipping into his sleeping bag wherein a creepy-crawly blue-tongue lizard lurked. The grommet's raucous laughter at seeing a naked Brett flee from his tent stamped him as the undisputed culprit. The boy, still inside his sleeping bag, was promptly bundled onto the upper branches of a tree, where his every delicate effort to free himself resulted in ominous creaks and groans and the threat of a harsh and painful landing. Considerable time elapsed before he managed to gingerly lower himself to safety, covered with scratches and mumbling profanities.

Graham knew well my stories of previous hikes, and how we often walked naked. "Let's do it now," he suggested at one point, wearing an impish grin. Darren agreed it was a cool

idea. And Brett? No way, Jose. But he relented because everyone else got naked—the peer pressure too great for him to ignore.

"Hey, Kyle," he said as he fell into line beside me, "what happens if someone else comes along and sees all these naked asses?"

"They might get as excited as you are," I answered, observing his boner.

"This is insane! A whole lotta guys naked on Peates Mountain! Ah! This is crazy! I can't walk down here with a hardon!"

"Look around you. Check what's hugging Graham's gut. He's not worried."

As it happened, we didn't see another soul during the afternoon hike, which was just as well. Brett was definitely not comfortable with the idea despite his generous endowment.

That night as we lay in our sleeping bags, he said: "I guess I gotta get used to this naked thing with you guys."

"Why?"

"Not my style—parading myself in front of guys like that."

"I don't know why you're so hung—excuse the expression—up about it. You got a killer bod and a cock a lotta guys would die for." Then I added an afterthought, "Oh, and a cute butt."

"I should've known not to get involved in a convo like this with you."

"Listen, the guys do it because they can, not because they're parading. All of us were shy the first time—you just get used to it."

"Graham's not shy."

"He's loaded in that department," I chuckled, "and he likes to show off."

"All that jacking he does?"

"So? Don't you?"

"Night, Kyle."

"You're gonna have a wet dream."

"Night, Kyle."

"Hehehe."

Not keeping a diary on the trip was a bummer. By the same token, maintaining a record of everything would have been a major hassle. And I was still peeved about losing the diary I kept during the Gold Coast surfing trip with Stuart. The disk became corrupted before I could email it to G.

The first day of the hike was hard slog to get us to the first peak and Mount Nardi proper. It took us all day and a lotta the guys struggled, particularly Graham. His bag was huge and heavy. Fortunately, his legs were strong; one of his better and most admirable features.

Brett, on the other hand—aided by his boxing, weight training and general fitness—took the hike in his stride. Stuart also handled it well, but his smoking habit took its toll by the time we reached the first peak.

We sat around the flickering glow of the campfire after dinner that night when Graham piped up, "So when's the jacking competition?"

Brett was stunned. "The what?"

"Kyle told me there's always a jacking competition on hikes to see who shoots the furthest."

"We don't always have one," Darren explained, diplomatically. "Depends on the mood. Anyway, it stops the guys from having wet dreams in their sleeping bags."

"Count me out," Brett mumbled as he poked the fire with a stick, sending a flurry of bright sparks into the night air.

"Count me in," Stuart grinned. "I reckon I could win that one."

"Yeah?" Graham asserted, puffing his chest. "You'll probably come second after me!"

Concern about Brett's discomfort with the direction of the convo prompted me to change the subject. "Anybody know anything about the different star constellations?" Darren took the bait and spent ages telling us about the stars and how to find the Southern Cross to navigate at night.

"How come you only use it at night?"

"Shuddup, Graham."

As the trip progressed, Brett and Gareth became tight buddies, often wrestling and roughhousing during skinny-dip sessions in the mountain pools and under waterfalls. It was pleasing to see Brett mellowing and enjoying the company of

his peers, including the physical contact; something he avoided and even resented until now.

One morning I woke early and waded into the river for a swim. Its surface was mirror smooth and glassy. Suspended just above it drifted an eerie white mist like something from a fairy tale. My strokes were slow and casual, sending quiet unhurried ripples to the rich-green grassy banks.

"Hey."

I recognized Brett's voice. "G'day, mate."

"This is so beautiful," he remarked, standing naked on the bank, observing the wonder of a Nightcap dawn.

"It is, hey. C'mon in!"

"Later. I lit a fire just now for coffee."

I emerged from the water, sporting a boner, and joined Brett by the fire. "I need a woman," he lamented.

"Why?"

"'Because I'm turned on by the sight of you naked."

"Seriously?"

"Fuck off, Kyle. I'm joking." Then he cracked up. I loved to see Brett laugh. He always looked so cool and ...well, kind of vulnerable and huggable.

We took two cups of steaming coffee back to the river bank where we sat and watched the mist slowly evaporate, giving way to a hot new summer day. "Wicked coffee."

"Thanks."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Just this place—us—being naked and totally natural. Having fun and being free. I never thought a hike could be this good, and that's the truth, bro."

The tranquility was shattered by a sudden ruckus. We glanced over our shoulders to see Gareth and Richard carrying Graham, still in his sleeping bag, toward the river. We watched his unceremonious and short flight through the air before splashdown. Everyone cracked up, except Graham of course. He stood waist deep, clutching his drenched sleeping bag, and called each of us every name in the book, and then some.

Breakfast of bacon and eggs and toast, cooked over the hot coals, was a deliciously welcome treat. "Smells wicked," the grommet enthused, rubbing his hands in gleeful anticipation of filling a hungry belly.

"You're gonna have to do your share of cooking, Graham. Can't just sit there and be treated like Lord Muck."

"Yeah, right. Lord Muck? Like whose soaked sleeping bag is hanging on the fucking tree?"

I learned a lot about Brett on that trip. Much of his private shell had melted away. One night, as we sat around the campfire telling jokes and laughing, little Graham succumbed to sleep. His head rested against Brett's shoulder. I expected Brett to push the kid away, but no. He allowed the grommet to enjoy his peaceful slumber. Later, he helped the groggy little guy into his sleeping bag and put him to bed in his tent.

Chapter 17

At hike's end, Brett's tanned skin glowed with an erotic sheen that rippled and shimmered with his every move—minus a tan line—the reward of constant sun exposure. Woohoo! I wondered what Susan would say about that when she got an arousing eyeful.

During the Christmas holidays, Susan and Brett spent a lot of time with Melanie and me, including at the beach where Brett tried surfboarding. He lasted all of five wobbly seconds on his feet but enjoyed the experience. It gave him an insight into my addiction to the sport.

At times, I noticed bruises on Brett's back, no doubt the result of beatings by his mom's boyfriend. I chose not to comment. When Brett enjoyed a good mood, I daren't risk spoiling it.

Stuart, Graham and I got friendly with a group of Swedish teen tourists staying at a local Bed and Breakfast. I spent an enjoyable day teaching those Scandinavian blonds to ride a board. Being such hot lookers, they attracted girls like flies to you-know-what. Yeah, my generosity had an ulterior motive. Hey, blame the testosterone.

Christmas day was a quiet family affair so Brett was not expected to visit. When he did, I surprised him with two gifts. "Jeez, Kyle, I didn't get you a damn thing!"

"No prob, I wasn't expecting anything. Besides, you needed a new watch strap, so I got you one— island style. And a

thick book of jokes. That's to make you smile more often because you got such a wicked smile."

"Is there anything you don't notice about me? Forget it. Dumb question."

The following Monday, Brett visited again; this time carrying a cylindrical package. "Hey, bro, this is for you. Merry Christmas."

"Fair dinkum, mate, you didn't have to do that!" I was nonetheless pleased and curious. "What is it?"

"A three-foot condom. Man, I'm sorry I didn't give it to you before Christmas, but I wasn't sure what you'd say if I bought you something."

What did he mean by that? That gift-giving between friends was wussy? I invited him to my room where I unwrapped the tube and checked the contents. It was a totally neat surfing poster. Outtasight! "Thanks, Brett. Thanks a stack. Now I owe you a blow job."

"You're crazy, Kyle," he laughed. "Totally off the wall. But I'm really chuffed you like the poster."

"It rules. Absolutely rules. I'm gonna put it on my wall right now."

Brett helped me with the Blue Tac, then stood back to admire the poster. "Hey, Kyle," he said with some hesitancy, "Monday after New Year's my mom's going away for the night. You wanna sleep over?"

The local pizza restaurant was packed as usual. Stuart, Brett and Graham were there with their girlfriends. I got a

kick out of watching Graham's girl; she was besotted with her handsome pint-size beau, and a major cutie herself.

After walking the grommet and his girl home, the rest of us hit Green Room for a couple of beers. Couple? To make matters worse, Stuart and Brett disappeared for a while to smoke a joint. By night's end we guys were horribly trashed, which upset the girls big time. They toddled off in a steaming huff to Susan's place. Brett and I saw Stuart home before heading to Brett's where, immediately upon entering his room, Mr. Invincible crashed in a pathetic heap on his bed.

"Cool," I laughed. "Now that you're totally trashed I can give you that blow job I promised."

"Cut the crap, Kyle," he moaned, "I'm too stuffed to tolerate your idiotic bullshit."

I ignored my mate's lethargic protest and jumped on him. After ripping off his shirt, I started to undo his jeans.

"Touch me, Kyle, and you're dead meat."

"You're too stuffed, remember?"

An absence of further protest encouraged me to remove the rest of his clothes which left him lying there in his boxers. He didn't stay prone for long, though. My sick mate rolled off the bed and staggered to the bathroom where he spent an age puking noisily. Meanwhile, I undressed to my underwear.

The smell of peppermint toothpaste was on his breath after returning and collapsing once more onto his bed. "You okay?" I asked.

"As a dying dog."

No, I didn't go through with my promise of giving him a blow job. But we did enjoy mutual masturbation. Nothing was said; not a word. Then we took turns in the bathroom to clean ourselves. On my return to the bedroom, I dutifully stepped into my boxers and pulled them on before preparing to sleep head to toe as usual. "Fuck, Kyle," he grumbled, "lie here on the bed normally. It's just us." I gave my friend a sheepish grin, then laid next to him, head to head. His hand found my leg, an apparent gesture of consolation and empathy. He understood my embarrassment and concern.

"Hey, Brett, I don't know what you're feeling right now. Maybe what we did was weird or whatever but I thought it was pretty damn special. It probably won't happen again so I'll remember it forever."

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Kinda strange; different. You?"

"Fucking special." Brett cuddled up to me and placed his arm across my chest, then threw a leg across mine.

"You got a boner again," I chuckled.

"Night, Kyle."

"Night."

Brett had already showered when I woke. "There's a fresh towel in the bathroom," he offered.

"Thanks."

Over the next several days, neither of us mentioned what took place during the sleepover. One night, following an energetic stint at Green Room, and taking the girls home,

Brett and I strolled down to the beach. I figured it would be a good place to chill for a while, and maybe get to know what dark secrets were invading Brett's troubled mind.

We stopped at some rocks and rested our butts, taking a few moments to admire the twinkling stars and the swirling phosphorescence of the moonlit shore break. I eventually punctuated the absence of conversation: "So, you gonna hike with us again sometime?"

"You better believe it! That was one of the most unbelievable experiences I've had."

"I'm glad you liked it. It was cool having you along."

"And the guys are all great as well."

"Yeah," I laughed, "Gareth fancied your nads."

"He tried to grab them once when we were skinny dipping in the river, but that was cool ... the way the guys are totally relaxed around each other."

"I thought you'd blow a gasket when he did that."

"I almost did."

Time for the biggie. "And the other night?"

A long silence followed. Then: "Can I be honest with you?" he asked, eyes deliberately fixed on the white foam scampering to shore.

"You know you can."

"What I tell you doesn't go to Melanie?"

"You crazy or something? What do you think she'd say about what happened between you and me? *'That's really cute,*

Kyle'. Yeah, right. I don't think the girls need to know about this."

"No, just Melanie."

"Why?"

"When I went steady with Melanie, I always bagged fags and gays and queens. I was fanatical about it. If you'd so much as tried to touch me in those days you'd have ended up in hospital...or worse. I don't want Melanie thinking any different."

"Like she hasn't noticed a difference in you?"

"Such as?"

"All of a sudden you got a load of friends? School prefect?"

"I don't have a load of friends, Kyle. You, Stuart...sort of. Frank when I do well at swimming."

"Graham?"

"He's a cool little grommet but I don't class him as a friend."

"Anyway, we're drifting here. You were gonna say something about being honest with me."

"This is so damn difficult," Brett sighed, eyes searching the vagueness of the shimmering ocean. "It's just that the other night ... us ... I enjoyed that. And my mind is fucked up about it."

"Why? Because it's supposed to be a gay thing? And you're not supposed to enjoy it?"

"Maybe. But it's also because I enjoy touching you, and being touched by you. I can't explain how good it made me feel for us to be that close... and..." Brett's gaze fell to the sand at his feet. "It should feel wrong."

"Well, it felt pretty cool for me too. Not as good as the blow job I promised you, but, hey..."

"Fuck, Kyle, don't joke about it. I'm not comfortable with this convo as it is."

"I worry as well."

Brett's eyes met mine for a moment. "About what?"

"Well, once you called me a faggot, and I was wondering what went through your mind the other night."

"I've never thought of you as a fag. I already told you that." Then, without warning, Brett's solemn expression turned to laughter. "Got your attention though, didn't I? Hahaha!"

But I didn't share the humor. "And now?"

"If I labeled you now, I'd have to label myself. I'm feeling kinda guilty about it but at the same time..."

"At the same time?"

"I'm almost hoping we can do that again sometime...when or if it felt right for both of us." Brett's focus returned to the horizon. "Fuck, now I'm pissing you off, aren't I."

"Yeah, right," I cracked. "Now you've given me a hardon. Wanna blow me?" Brett relaxed, saw the funny side, and joined the laughter. "So, you enjoyed it?"

"It was like when I'm with Susan and we're naked together ... but different. Hey, I don't know what it is. I guess I'd explain it as *explosive*."

"Well, I've been thinking about getting that close to you for a long time. For me, it just makes our friendship that much more special. It started months ago when I met you for boxing in the mornings: the shoulder rubs, the shower boners. I felt pretty close to you then. But you were just so damn paranoid about getting close to me...or any other guy. The other night...when you put your leg and arm over me, and got right up close, that was pretty damn special. Jacking you was cool, but just being close was even more special. Real special. You surprised the hell outta me when you did that."

"By that stage it had gone so far I guess I didn't care anymore. And..."

"And?"

"I also wanted to be that close."

"Tell you what, though," I ventured, needing to know how far I could push the topic, "if we do get another chance, I might try to go further."

"You know I would not allow that. And I don't think you should try. It would just screw up our friendship." He paused a moment to search my eyes again. "Have you gone further?"

"You really want to know?"

"No."

Tank tops were the only protection we had from the chilly on-shore wind so we took a slow walk back to my house. At the

front gate, I threw my arms around Brett and put my cheek to his. He returned the hug and bade me goodnight.

Naturally, I kept G up to date with everything that happened. He wasn't surprised at all that Brett was warming to me. *You don't just make friends, Kyle. You form strong attachments. You bond—to quote your less than charming phrase—like shit to a blanket. There were times I thought Brett might be beyond redemption. Forgive me for doubting your determination and resilience. I'm not only pleased for you, my friend, but also pleased for Brett. Friends like you are a rare find indeed.*

Meanwhile, my mate Stuart's latest behavior was bizarre to say the least. He hooked up with a rich divorcee from Melbourne who made frequent business trips to the Gold Coast. She was loaded, and treated the blond himbo to the high life: posh hotels, restaurants, clothes, money, you name it. He was her toy boy. She was forty something but a real looker for her age. From what Stuart admitted, I gathered she was a sex freak who taught him a bunch of new tricks. That was a revelation; I thought Stuart knew it all.

How did I feel about it? Totally pissed off. He was a male whore and I deeply resented his obsession with a woman old enough to be his mother. I was also jealous, and hated his constant references to being a "real man". What was that supposed to infer? That I wasn't? To add salt to the wound, he was a year younger than me.

You're not the one who's jealous, Kyle. Stuart is. He's trying to prove something to himself via you. Stay out of his juvenile battles with his own identity crisis. Don't be his fall guy. Remain friendly but at an arm's length and give him time to work out his problems. One of you needs to be strong right now, and my money's on Captain Kyle.

Chapter 18

Despite my intolerance of substance abuse, Brett's more than occasional binges influenced me. One night, Susan and Melanie organized a girls-only pajama party, so Brett and I clubbed together. In the early hours, after a skinful of booze, we staggered and puked our way to the cold showers at the beach. Stripped to our boxers, we continued to puke even while showering.

Brett asked, "You didn't really drink before we met, huh?"

"Stuart and I got out of it a few times."

"I can't remember when I started to get trashed. It was before I met Susan, I know that much."

"How do you stay so fit?"

"That's easy," he laughed. "Hundreds of sit-ups, pushups, skipping every morning and night."

"I noticed the skipping rope on your bedroom wall. Is all that exercise for boxing?"

"Just for me."

"So why get trashed so much?"

"Helps me handle things."

"Like?"

"Shit-for-brains."

"Your mom's boyfriend?"

"The dungeon master himself. Hey, it's getting cold, mate. Let's get dressed and head home."

"Dressed? Let's walk home like this, in our boxers."

A few drivers honked their horns as we swayed and swaggered home, and a couple of wolf-whistling girls waved from their car windows. Our wet cotton boxers clung like a second skin and hid precious little in the glare of headlights.

Once home in his room, Brett raised his arms and asked me to pull his boxers off. "I'm gonna puke again if I bend down," he reasoned. After stepping out of his underwear, he collapsed backwards onto the bed, rolled over onto his stomach, and asked me to give him a back rub. I discarded my boxers and happily obliged.

"You ever consider becoming one of those massage dudes who visits old ladies at home?" Brett chuckled. "You'd have to massage more than their backs, though."

I finished his upper torso, buns and strong legs, then asked him to turn over. He resisted. "Why not?"

"Got a cockstand."

"Mine's not exactly shriveled."

My eyes feasted on a smorgasbord of physical perfection, heightened to a surreal level of intensity by intimacy. The human need to touch both overwhelmed and rewarded me. I drew a quick breath as my hands smoothed the silkiness of tanned skin fused to my friend's superb muscular definition. Not an ounce of fat was evident.

When Brett took his turn to massage me, he boosted my ego by complimenting my physique. It wasn't as tight as his, but my fitness was nonetheless apparent.

It is said that a standing cock has no conscience. Once again, we enjoyed mutual masturbation.

Next morning, Brett turned up at my house, cheerful and relaxed despite the night's activities, which I suspected led to some anxiety and soul searching on his part. We spent the day at the beach with Graham, Melanie and Stuart. Brett bodysurfed while the rest of us rode our boards. But he was happy with that. He was a good bodysurfer.

On the first day of the new school year, I found it strange to see Brett wearing a prefect badge. As we chatted in the quad, Mitch approached. He was a senior the previous year but his exam results were below university entrance requirements. He decided to repeat year 12. "Hey, corporal," he sneered.

"Can't get enough punishment?" Brett asked. "Watch your sleazy mouth, Mitch, or I'll rearrange it."

"Oh, yeah? Says who? You're a prefect now, dude. That means no more fights."

"It means no more fights here at school, fuckwit. You gonna hang around here 24 hours a day?"

Brett's retort did the trick. The fool wandered off. "You sure you're cut out to be a prefect?" I asked.

"No, not sure. For one thing, I get ground-monitoring duty to make sure guys don't smoke or take drugs on school

property, then there are prefect meetings, and now there's some leadership camp to attend. It sucks."

Meanwhile, a disagreement with a teacher led to my feeling down for the next few days. The word got around, and other teachers pre-empted anything I might say in class before I could open my mouth. "And in the event you feel compelled to disagree with the lesson, Kyle, keep your opinions to yourself." They bullied me into submission. I felt deprived of freedom of speech. Unfortunately, I vented my anger on Graham one afternoon after school. Brett recognized my mood next day and asked if I wanted to hit the bag with him.

"Too hot."

"You're too strung out."

"I'm okay."

"You're talking to me, Kyle. What's up?"

"Nothing."

"You haven't been jacking around lately like you normally do. You haven't mentioned dick once."

"Who's Dick?"

Well, that unexpectedly cracked us both up. "Seriously, mate," he said, "you look lower than shark shit."

"Okay, I upset Graham yesterday and he's taking it personally. I must've sounded like his dad."

"You blew up at everyone yesterday. I can't believe you had that showdown in class."

"Yeah, well, I'm tired of teachers being dictators."

"So why did you take it out on the grommet?"

"He's got this damn obsession about Melanie blowing him. He's been quizzing me relentlessly about what it's like. He reckons he and I are bros, so it's okay to share my girl. Yeah, right. He wants me to ask Melanie if she'll blow him."

Brett laughed so hard I thought he'd never stop. "C'mon, Kyle, the little bloke is finally learning what his dick is for, and he needs you to help him out here." Brett paused a moment to crack up again. "Hey, for a little bloke he's pretty well hung and he needs to do something else with it besides stir his Milo."

"It's not funny, Brett. He spoke to Melanie himself."

"I bet she said yeah."

"I think she did."

"I knew it."

"How?"

"Melanie is a totally cool chick but she used to drive me crazy jealous because of the way she eyeballed all the hunky good-looking guys. One time we were in bed and she told me about this gorgeous guy she saw at the mall."

"Me?"

"Piss off. Anyway, that basically ended our relationship. And you, Kyle," he added, poking my chest, "have got a tiny prob because that little guy's got it all going for him. I've never seen a 12 year-old with a bod like his. And he's got the looks, and a cock that's got his mates wondering where they went wrong."

"So what do you think?"

"Well, it's a tough one. I'm not sure I'd allow Susan to do that...blow Graham, I mean. Anyway, that's not Susan. But I'd love to be a fly on the wall when his face screws up in pain and his cock is all tender, and he thinks there's something wrong with it. Hey, Kyle, it's your call, mate. Honestly, I'd let it happen. Yeah, even with Susan now that I think about it. Then again, I guess it's Melanie's decision."

"She thinks I'm cool about it."

"Are you?"

"I think so...only because it's him."

"Then chill before I clout you...or put you on the detention record."

The following Friday, after school, I watched cricket on TV with Graham and my dad before rocking over to Brett's, where I met Susan, Melanie and Stuart (with yet another girlfriend). It was midnight before we hit Green Room which was humming. After a few drinks, I was legless.

"Hey, Stuart," Brett yelled above the pounding of the music, "what the hell did you put in Kyle's drink?"

"Nothing much. Just a little mickey to liven things up."

"You asshole. He's supposed to be going home later. How's he gonna do that under his own steam?"

Next thing I knew, I was at Susan's place being fed impossible quantities of black coffee. "How do you feel now?" Brett asked.

"Bloated. I feel like the Michelin Man." Then I passed out.

It was 6am before I was sufficiently steady on my feet for Brett to walk me home. He wanted to ensure I didn't get too much flak from my folks, and was ready to cover for me.

"We worry about him," my dad said at the front door. "But we'd worry a whole lot more if you weren't with him. Thanks for seeing him home, Brett."

Later in the week, Stuart and I skinny dipped in my pool when the phone rang. By the time I answered the call inside the house I was puffing. "What's up?" asked the voice. "You sound like you've been running or something."

"G'day, Brett. I was out back. Stuart's here."

"Oh? Well, I just wanted to check if it's okay to rock around earlier tonight for study, like about six."

"Cool. You can have dinner with us."

"Nah. I don't wanna cause any hassle. It'll be okay."

"It won't be okay with my mom. She'll shovel food down your screech whether you want it or not. She thinks you're sexy, and it'll give her time at the table to check you out."

"She said that? Yeah, right, Kyle, don't bullshit me."

"See you at six."

Brett dumped his school bag on my bed. "I hope Stuart didn't leave on account of me."

"Nope. We just fooled around in the pool for a while. He apologized for spiking my drink...said he got into a whole lotta crap with everyone at the club...thought you were gonna bash his brains in because you were so mad."

"I was more worried about you. You were totaled."

At the school pool, Graham complained of trouble meeting the swim team criteria so I offered to help with his training. It wasn't easy. I enlisted Brett's assistance.

"You're what?"

"Trying to help the grommet with team selection."

"That's gonna take every spare minute you got!"

"He's desperate."

"He'd have to be with you coaching him," Brett laughed.

"Wanna hand?"

Brett wasn't the kinda bloke to do things by half, and gave Graham a tough time in the water. "Listen up, if you want Kyle to help you then you gotta make a plan...and listen! Okay? I'm gonna swim a few laps with you, and stay behind. And if you don't pay attention to what I'm saying, I'll rip your Speedos off and burn 'em, because you won't be needing 'em."

"Yeah? Well, you'll have to catch me first!"

Suddenly, the fiery kid's stroke came together. Brett hung around the pool for an hour or so while I took over Graham's training. Before he left, he gave me this advice: "He's improved a helluva lot. Just keep him practicing his natural full stroke."

Next time I met Brett in the gym he'd arrived early. He was a lather of glistening sweat when I showed, beating the crap out of the bag and obviously not in a talkative mood. I went to the other side of the bag and noticed his swollen and bruised left cheek.

"I'm not in the mood for an inquisition, Kyle," he snapped, giving the bag another hammering.

"Did you watch the cricket last night?"

"No."

"Wanna talk?"

"No."

"You're stressing. Besides, somebody used you for a punching bag."

He dropped his hands and glared at me. "Kyle, I'm okay. I need some time to think. You're always trying to figure out my life for me. Just for once, leave me the fuck alone to sort it out by myself."

"Looks like you're getting it sorted out for you."

Brett lost control and pushed me hard against the wall. "Stop!" he growled. "You never know when to drop it. I'll sort myself out. If you carry on being a detective I'll brain you. Go help your grommet mate with his swimming or something."

"So what now? You think I'm not your mate? Your eyes are on fire, Brett. I'm just trying to help."

"I don't need help right now. I just need some space."

"Your mom's boyfriend do that to your face?"

The force of the jab to my gut caused me to double over. "You didn't need to do that, Brett," I complained as he returned to the bag. "I just asked a question."

"Yeah, life sucks. Now leave me alone."

"Why? Is our friendship getting too intense for you to handle?"

"Where the fuck did that come from?"

"Because if we're friends, then we can share problems, right?"

"I'll tell you something for nothing," he said, pausing to face me. "And you can take this any way you like. There are times when you ask too many questions. And when I don't answer, you carry on and on and fucking on."

"'Because I'm your mate."

"Don't think I don't know that already. You're the only real friend I've had. But! You can be so damn annoying!"

At break, Brett sat under a tree making notes in his little black book. I didn't bother him then or again later in class.

Next morning, Brett was on prefect duty at the school gate. Graham's blazer was unbuttoned. "Do it up," I ordered as we approached. He wanted to know why. "You'll get detention."

"But Conan's your mate."

"Just button your blazer, and button your lip while you're at it."

Chapter 19

Frank and Brett weren't the only top swimmers in the school team: five other human porpoises also flew through the water leaving me with no hope to qualify, especially in the freestyle.

Despite my woes, I did okay in the backstroke and butterfly but not well enough to rejuvenate my pride. Worse still, two of my best mates, Graham and Brett were part of my audience. And if that wasn't dispiriting enough, for some reason my e-mail failed to reach G, or so I thought. He hadn't replied for a week.

One afternoon, Brett suggested the use of my legs in the pool needed improvement. I almost bit his head off and rejected his offer to walk me home after showering. I dressed in my track suit and pissed off home by myself. Even Graham kept his distance to avoid becoming the target of my frustration. He was out back collecting Roo's crap when the phone rang. It was Brett.

"Hey, Kyle, what's up?"

"Nothing."

"You're always going on about being there for me when I need it. I just want you to know I'm also here for you. I understand you don't feel like talking right now, but when you do just shout. Okay?"

"Cool. Thanks."

Next morning, I failed the freestyle trials. Brett rubbed salt into the wound by beating Frank by half a second. So there I was, surrounded by winning mates, and couldn't even make the top six.

In the change room, I slapped Brett on the back, quite hard. He spun around, no doubt expecting to fist someone.

"Bloody hell, that is painful, bro."

"Want me to help you out of your black Speedos?"

"Shuddup, Kyle. What if someone hears you?"

"Okay, can I wash your back then?"

"Jesus Christ, Kyle, stop that!"

"By the way, you've got a boner."

Brett covered his waist with a towel, sat on a bench, and asked me to please go away.

"Okay," I shrugged. "See ya." Yeah, I was in the mood to annoy him. You know how it is; I was so pissed off with myself I wanted to piss everyone else off as well.

The following day, my performance improved as if by magic; I managed third in the 100m fly. That was just for starters. Later I won the 200 and 400. "You got lucky," Brett smiled as we exited the water. He was happy for me.

"Maybe I'll get lucky again," I said. And I did: second in 400m backstroke behind one of the fastest swimmers, a cocky bloke named Kenny. After the swim, I approached him with my hand outstretched to congratulate him, but he ignored my offer and shouldered past.

"Cease! Desist!" Brett warned, recognizing the fire in my eyes at being snubbed. "Do not think those thoughts. I'm a prefect and I'll bust you if you lay a hand on Kenny."

"Asshole. Him, not you."

"Yep, and a big asshole even though he's only 15."

"What's he doing in the senior squad?"

"He's faster than you in the backstroke, and he's right on your tail in the fly."

"He's 15 and he shouldered past me. I should smack him for shoving a senior. I would have copped a smack when I was 15."

"That's because you're so damn hittable," Brett laughed. "Hey, mate, that was some awesome swimming."

"Thanks. It's a pity Graham left before the trials, though. I wish he'd seen me kick ass."

"You wanna come round to my place after school? I gotta get changed before I meet Susan."

We entered his room where I sat on his bed and watched him remove his track pants and boxers. Then he stepped into a fresh pair that featured a neat pouch to accommodate his jewels, presenting an inviting bulge. I rose from the bed, stood behind my mate and placed my hand on his crotch. He immediately spun around to face me. "Whoa, boy! Hey, Kyle, that's not why I invited you around here."

My face and ears instantly caught fire. "Fuck! Sorry!"

With his hands on my shoulders Brett smiled. "Hey, mate, it's cool. It's just that there's a time and place for

everything, and I don't want you getting the wrong idea about us. Okay? What happened between us was pretty special for me, and I want those times to remain special."

"I'm sorry, I thought..."

"You thought I invited you here to jack me off?"

"Kinda," I said feebly, and lowered my eyes.

"Yeah, well you're my mate and I thought it would be cool to have you here while I change. Then I can walk you home before I go to Susan's."

"I feel pretty damn stupid."

"Why? Because you touched my dick?" Brett wrapped his fist around my cock and gave it a friendly tug, then resumed dressing. I watched his lats bulge like steel rods that ran the length of his sides as he pulled on his running shoes. And when he tied his laces, his biceps formed tight powerful balls.

"Thanks for not getting mad at me."

"Mad at you? I'm always mad at you, Kyle. Well, nearly always," he grinned.

That afternoon after school, Melanie called. As I spoke to her on the phone, the grommet breezed in. "Who are you talking to?"

"Melanie. She wants to blow you."

"Yeah, right." He grabbed the phone, thinking I was joking and that nobody was on the line. The grommet proceeded to carry on about blow jobs and how he couldn't wait for Melanie to do the dirty deed. Oops! When he heard Melanie's

voice he went into serious shock, apologizing profusely. "I'm sooooo sorry, Mel. I thought Kyle was joking. Oh, God! I'm soooo embarrassed!"

When I told Brett about it in the locker room next morning, he collapsed with laughter. It was a full minute before he could speak. "You are bloody low-down wicked, Kyle! I would've clobbered you!"

"He did." I showed Brett the bruise on my arm. "Check that."

"Good for him."

"Yeah? Well, you should see the bruises on his legs."

"Oh, so you beat up on lighties? You're a bully." As we continued to change into our school uniforms, the convo got around to Brett's affection for Susan. I asked him if he ever had those same feelings for Melanie. "You sure you wanna go in that direction?"

"Sure."

"Melanie and I never got any further than sex when we needed it. I'm surprised you and she have lasted as long as you have."

"It's my charm."

"I just don't wanna see you get hurt."

"We're in love!"

"You're in love!"

"Why do you say it like that; like it's one-sided?"

"Can I tell you something without you rushing off to tell Melanie?"

"Not sure. Depends."

"Then I can't tell you."

"Okay," I agreed. "I won't tell Mel."

"Sorry, Kyle," he said, changing his mind. "I can't tell you."

"Ahhhh, fuck! Don't do this! Now you're gonna have me wondering what the hell this is all about!"

"Hey, it's nothing anyway."

"So tell me."

"Forget it. I'm sorry I said anything."

"Some kinda mate you are."

"That's life."

"I hate it when you say that! So you're not gonna tell me?"

"Pretend I didn't say anything."

"Yeah, right. So I'll go ask Steph what it was you never told me."

"Now you're being stupid."

"That's life."

"Touché. Okay, if you're so desperate to know go ask Stuart."

"Ask him what?"

"What it was like fucking ."

"If Stuart told you that then he's lying."

Brett sat on a bench and put on his leather shoes. "No, Stuart didn't tell me. Susan did. She wasn't supposed to tell

me but we have this weird relationship where we don't have secrets."

What I was hearing simply could not be true. "Melanie wouldn't do that."

"No?" Brett stood, took his school blazer from the locker and threaded his arms through the sleeves. "She's a slut. That's why I left her."

My fist hit Brett so hard on the jaw it almost knocked him unconscious. He struggled to his feet and felt his swollen lip. "Fuck you, Kyle. I should break your fucking neck. You begged me to tell you and now you can't handle the truth."

"It's a lie!"

"Is it? Stuart's been fucking Melanie for a while now. That's the problem with having a mate like Stuart. He sees every chick as a conquest."

"Melanie wouldn't do it."

"Yeah? Well, he tried it with Susan as well."

"He's my best mate! He wouldn't do that with my girlfriend."

Brett buttoned his jacket, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He saw blood. "Maybe she came onto him."

"I'll phone Susan and ask if she thinks it's true."

"Leave Susan out of this, bro."

"Why? She told you didn't she?"

"Stop being childish and leave Susan alone."

"Scared I'm gonna fuck her?"

"You? Don't make me laugh, Kyle. Don't ever ask me anything again. You got a short fuse, and you better learn to deal with it before you get hurt."

I was so incensed by that stage I literally shook with rage. "So who's gonna hurt me? You?"

"Quit while you're ahead. Okay? Before we say things to each other we'll regret later."

"Nah, let's sort it out now and be friends later." I placed a hand on his chest and shoved him backwards.

"I can't believe you're doing this," he protested. "I'm doing everything I can to avoid hitting you because you're my mate."

"So? Hit me!"

"Fuck off, Kyle. I'm outta here. Speak to me when you cool off."

As he turned to leave, my fist grabbed his blazer. Fade to black. I regained consciousness about fifteen minutes later and headed home. Then I phoned Stuart.

"Is it true?"

"Yeah. She wants a man, Kyle, not some wussy gay boy."

Stuart answered the bell at the front security gate of his house. He appeared nervous and tried to calm the situation but my rage was unstoppable. The first punch sent him reeling. Then some back-up guy appeared at the doorway wanting to know what was going on. I didn't give a rat's ass. I was in a mood to take on twenty guys. But, as it happened, Stuart, who stood a head taller than me, took good care of himself. After five

minutes of copping blows and receiving a heavy kick to the groin, I staggered home, battered, bleeding, confused and, above all, hoping somehow G could make sense of this impossible catastrophe.

"Friends are there to fuck you up" was the subject line of the e-mail I sent to G from my dad's computer. I told him everything. But my inbox was still empty. Was he dead? Did he suffer a heart attack or something? Had his computer crashed? Right now, I needed G more than ever. I felt so alone, so helpless, so friendless. All my mates had deserted me. My girlfriend had deserted me. Worse, she had betrayed my trust. Okay, so Graham remained loyal but all he got in return was my bitterness and sharp rebuke.

When G finally managed to get his email server problem sorted, his reply was not what I expected. *To be fair, Kyle, you can't expect to be sharing yourself sexually with your friends and expect Melanie to remain faithful only to you. Not only that, having sex with Stuart's girlfriend on the weekend as payback solves zip. You're adding fuel to an already raging fire. Fires go out, mate. Once all the fuel is spent they fizzle, just like Wollumbin. What was a massive volcano is now a beautiful and peaceful Paradise.*

Despite the sage's blunt advice, Brett and I remained incommunicado. In class, we ignored each other and concentrated on our lessons. At swim prac, we acted like strangers. And all the while, Graham pestered me, wanting to know why Brett and I weren't talking.

On Tuesday, depression got the better of me and I stayed home from school. Even the weather was depressing; windy and chilly. Despite that, late in the afternoon, I walked down to Little Watego's beach below the Byron headland and lighthouse. The surf was flat and mush. I was alone. Even the regular rock fishermen were absent.

"Why weren't you at school today?"

I turned to see Brett seated on a rock next to mine. "I was sick this morning," I said blankly, and gave no indication I was pleased to see him.

"Yeah, right."

We sat there for a long time in contemplative silence, staring out to sea. It seemed the wind carried away whatever trace might remain of our friendship, leaving in its place an unfathomable vacuum. Then Brett spoke: "I'm turning in my prefect badge, Kyle."

That got my attention. "What the hell for?"

"Next time, I wanna be free to give you a good fucking hiding and knock the shit right outta you without worrying about my position at school."

I couldn't resist smiling. "Don't do that. If anyone deserves to wear that prefect badge it's you. You're one of the best prefects at school."

"Reckon?"

"Yep."

"Can I be honest with you, Kyle—as a mate?"

"I'm not in the mood for any heavy shit right now."

"You're never in the mood. You think that everything is supposed to be okay and happy, and that it's all some big game. The problem is that when something heavy comes down on you, you handle it like a bull in a china shop."

"Like?"

"Like everything, Kyle. You let Mitch get to you. And this whole stuffup with Stuart, your best friend. Melanie's been at Susan's place every day crying her eyes out. Graham comes to me every day to ask when you and I are gonna speak to each other again."

"He's a persistent bugger."

"He's just confused, Kyle. And he's feeling it as well. He says you've been miserable at home and abrupt with him."

"He said that?"

"Not in so many words. He gave me the impression he thought he was in the way."

"You're okay, though. Right?"

"Oh, yeah, sure. I'm fine, surrounded by friends. I'm doing okay. Hello, you dickhead, I'm not sleeping at night and Susan keeps telling me I'm like a million miles away. But, hey, I'll live."

"You're used to being a loner, anyway, so it shouldn't hassle you."

"Is that what you want, Kyle? For us to go our separate ways, and maybe back to how it was?"

"I thought maybe you were the one who wanted that. I dunno. My brain is fried, and I'm not thinking straight."

"Hey, Kyle," Brett said after a pause, "I haven't had a real friend for as long as I can remember. Oh, sure, I've had guys I hang out with, and guys I fight with and that kinda thing, but I never had a real friend until you came along. Fuck knows why but I like you...more than anyone I know besides Susan. You taught me what real friendship is all about. Your friends grow on fucking trees but for me? They come along once in a fucking blue moon."

"Was that a blue moon? I thought it was my nuts that were blue. You were peeking again, huh?"

My joke cracked us both: perfect timing. And the tension drained like a shore break rushing back to Mother Ocean. But Brett wasn't finished with his lecture.

"I'm here because I'm your mate, Kyle. Pulling this stunt today—staying away from school. That's not the Kyle I know. The Kyle I know faces his problems right between the eyes. I want us to be friends. Right about now I *need* a friend, and I can't afford to have you just walk away. If I know you as well as I think I do, then I think what happened with Stuart and Melanie is eating you up big time because you need friends too."

"Yep, pretty much."

"You crying?"

"Nope," I lied.

Chapter 20

Graham's nose worked overtime. He vaulted the fence the moment Brett and I arrived at my house, eager to know if we were mates again. The grommet didn't stay long, though. He sensed Brett and I needed time together to heal the wounds of friendship.

Brett stayed for dinner, at my folks' invitation. It was just like old times, albeit only a week ago. But for a while there, it seemed those "old times" would resist resurrection.

After the meal, we relaxed in my room, listening to music and making the occasional comment. But neither of us mentioned Stuart or Melanie. That topic remained taboo for the time being.

At swim training next day, Brett and I sat in the stands to watch the juniors practice, and check for mistakes. Graham, resembling a pint-size Adonis, exited the pool and approached us. "So you guys are mates again?"

"We never stopped being mates," I asserted. "We had a fight, that's all. And that's a lot different to not being mates."

Graham, hands on hips, assumed a mock pissed-off pose. "Oh? So you two are gonna make me your target now? Huh? You need someone to screw around and it's gonna be me? Just 'cause you're not giving each other a hard time anymore? Is that it?"

Brett grabbed the cheeky grommet, tossed him with ease over his shoulder, and headed for the pool. Still carrying the

protesting kid, he jumped in. A moment later, Brett exited the water holding aloft his trophy.

"Bring my Speedos back here," Graham demanded, shaking his fist, which cracked up the whole team. I was surprised he refused to leave the pool until one of his mates fetched a towel. Graham wasn't exactly under-endowed. "You better watch your back, Conan," he threatened. "Or super-glue your Speedos to your ass."

Brett phoned that night. "Hey, listen, I'm at Susan's house. Melanie's here. You wanna speak to her? She didn't phone because she thought you might hang up. Hey, if you're not up to it, I can tell her you're not home or something."

"It's okay."

Melanie apologized and said she'd like us to be friends again; at least speak to each other and maybe go out sometime. I told her it would be like starting over and that I was only prepared to take it one step at a time. I asked her about Stuart: "He keeps phoning, wanting to know if we can go steady now that... well, you know. But I'm not interested. You know Stuart; rejection doesn't stop his persistence."

"I thought I knew Stuart, but obviously I didn't. Anyway, babe, let's take things slowly and see how we go."

Next time Brett and I spoke was at swim training. He hadn't realized my face was damaged to the extent it was. "I didn't mean to give you stitches, mate, but I like the new shape."

"You didn't. Stuart did."

"You're kidding! I didn't know he hit you?"

"Lucky punch."

"Is the bruise on your ribs a lucky punch too?"

"What can I say?" I shrugged. "In my vengeful rage I forgot all the boxing skills you taught me."

"I honestly didn't think that blond himbo had it in him to hit you."

"Neither did I. I thought he'd just stand there and let me demolish him. Ha!"

"He never said a word about hitting you when he phoned me."

Now that was a revelation. "Oh?"

"Yeah, he phones just to check how it's going with me. He wants to go out Friday or Saturday night. Wanna come along?"

Part of our swim training was an hour of cardio-vascular work in the school gym. It was called "the circuit", designed to improve stamina and endurance. Brett and I usually worked together on the circuit. Our objective was to push the performance level of the other. My mate had the advantage, though. His constant skipping and boxing training placed him in the 'super fit' league. The only guy capable of out-pacing Brett was Jolly Jim. He used heavier weights as well. But, bloody hell, a giant like him was expected to out-perform the rest of us anyway.

The circuit rules allowed us a minute on each piece of equipment, followed by a 30-second break. We began with the running machines which, because of our standard of fitness,

were set at a steep angle and a hectic speed. Next, the lat machine that uses a weighted pulley system with a bar above our heads. We pull the bar down behind our shoulders, then again in front of our chests. That was followed by the step machine. We climb as many "floors" as possible within one minute, as if it were an endless staircase. Next, we lift weights in a curl fashion on the bicep machine. We then compete with the rowing machine itself over a one kilometer distance. That was my favorite because I won every time. Next, the pec machine. Brett particularly enjoyed that one. He was justly proud of his pecs.

Next, a separate circuit of sit-ups with five different sections of the abs routine. When finished, most of the guys were so sore they could hardly walk.

Despite the punishment, we also did leg-curl exercises; first for hamstrings, then quads. After that, we used the calf machine. The final exercise was cycling; pedaling for five minutes. It was supposed to be a "cool-down" drill but Brett loved to race that thing and pushed me to do the same. The guys called it the "circuit from hell". That particular week, it was more hell than usual. The school swim tour was scheduled for the following week, and all of us focused on being psyched to win.

Free weights and pull-down weights for shoulder strengthening followed the cycling, then bench and leg presses. Brett also elected to use dumbbells for bicep-curls and shoulder presses.

"Okay, guys," the coach yelled, "shower time! I don't want your sweaty slime in the pool."

Later that day, Graham was poised to put Brett's prefect responsibilities to the test. Brett and I were chatting during recess when we noticed a bunch of lighties running across the cricket field. "Better check to see what's happening," I suggested.

We arrived to see Graham on the ground wrestling another kid, fisting each other. Brett stepped in and separated them. The grommet's bleeding face was covered in dirt. His shirt was torn at the buttons. The other bloke had a fat lip, and his shirt was torn at the sleeve. "What's going on here?" Brett demanded.

After listening to the tirade of abuse between the two juniors Brett asked: "Is that what you're arguing over? Who bats first?"

"When he tried to take the bat," Graham protested, "he hit me with it. So I flattened him."

"Fuck off!" the other bloke barked. "Who flattened who?"

"Okay, I'm putting both you guys on detention."

"Oh, c'mon, Brett," Graham pleaded. "It's no biggie. Not detention!"

"You're written up, matey. Detention Friday."

"Can't Friday."

"Why not?"

"Surf's gonna be up."

"Any more crap outta you and I'll put you on detention for a whole bloody week. Now go clean yourselves up."

The boys, still abusing each other, shouldered their way through the gathering of amused onlookers. "See what you did?" "Me? You started it." "I should flatten you again." "Piss off. You couldn't flatten horseshit."

On the walk home from school, Graham, miffed, trailed Brett and me. "Hey, Kyle. Did you get detention when you fought the other day?"

"Nope."

"Oh, like teacher's pet, huh? Or is that the prefect's pet?"

"You got a choice here," Brett warned without turning around. "Let me beat the shit outta you and I'll let you off. That's the offer I made to Kyle."

"Cool. Am I allowed to hit back like Kyle did? 'Cause I feel like giving you a fat lip!"

"You're getting pretty cocky, Graham. I could have put you on report for that fight and you'd have faced suspension."

"Cool. More surfing time."

Brett spun around, grabbed Graham's collar with one hand and lifted the kid off the ground. "Listen up. Detention is not such a big fucking deal. I'd look a right prick if I let you off while I booked other guys. There's always a fight on the grounds. We'd end up with a free-for-all. So shut up before I shut you up."

"Whoa!" the wide-eyed dangling grommet squeaked. "Down boy! Hey, I'm sorry. I was just pissing on your battery."

An hour or two later, Graham phoned Brett to tender a formal apology, no doubt inspired by a major lecture from his dad about the cost of school clothing.

Meanwhile, Byron Bay was in the grip of an unseasonal heat wave so we made the most of the surf. Graham and I rode our boards while Brett body surfed. Stuart was there. He spoke to Brett and Graham at one stage, but ignored me. He snubbed me again later at the pizza restaurant. The rest of the guys hit the clubs that weekend but I stayed home with Melanie to save my money for the upcoming swim tour.

The night prior to leaving on tour, the home phone rang. It was Stuart asking if he could visit. He arrived in boardies and a loose T, and looked fantastic. My dad immediately chirped him for being so scarce lately.

In my room, as we sat on the bed, the atmosphere was tense and awkward. After a bunch of small talk, Stuart got around to explaining the reason for his visit. "Brett told me you guys were going on tour, so I wanted to check with you first. He said you might be wondering what Mel and I were getting up to while you were away."

"So how's it been going?"

"Up the shit. I screwed up badly. I'm not sure I can mend the damage I did, Kyle. And I'm not just talking about the stitches. If I say I'm sorry will that be enough to cut it?"

"You said some mean shit, like fucking Melanie because she needed a real man. That hurt, bro."

"My original intention was to make you mad."

"You succeeded big time."

"The thing with Mel was just being me, a male whore. She gave into me. But even while we were 'doing it', I knew she was thinking about you. I was mad jealous that you had her. I knew even then I'd never be able to take her from you. She told me she hoped you would never find out what happened."

"Brett told me, albeit under pressure."

Stuart wrung his fidgeting hands and studied them. "So what about us, you and me? I've missed you. You got no idea how. I went on a downer after you walked out my door that day."

"Staggered out. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss you. I watched you in the pizza restaurant and in the surf, and wondered if we would ever be mates again." Then I added, "Hey, I need to know something; that guy at your house."

"I was scared shitless. Brett told me you were on the rampage. I'd seen you beat the crap out of guys, Kyle, and figured you planned the same for me. The other guy was back-up. I didn't think I could damage you. My punch was a 'scared' punch. I got lucky. Or maybe unlucky—depends on your point of view."

I walked Stuart half way home, neither of us said much until we stopped at a tree. "Remember this?"

About a year ago after surfing all day, we acted kinda crazy, walking home with our boners protruding from our board shorts. It was dark, so we stopped at that particular tree and juiced it. I returned next morning to see if our juice was still there. It was.

"How could I ever forget?"

I thanked Stuart for his fantastic "going away" gift - apologizing and making up before the swim tour, then hugged him. I walked back home feeling on top of the world—on a total trip.

The team assembled outside school where a bus waited to take us up the coast to Surfer's Paradise. Everyone's folks were in attendance to wish us well, even Brett's mom, which I thought was neat. But he surprised me when he gave his mom a big, warm hug. I'd never seen him hug her before, not even at home.

Graham wasn't so keen to be hugged by his mom, though, which made me laugh. He was at that age where a mom's hug was uncool. Mine gave me the usual bear hug, but my dad was more diplomatic. He gave me a quickie then shook my hand.

The parents seemed more excited about the tour than the team. Hmmm. I figured the oldies were looking forward to a week of bedroom shenanigans without fear of unexpected intruders.

Our digs were a block of six holiday flats overlooking the beach, which made me feel right at home. I was billeted with Brett, Frank, Jolly Jim, Maurice and Carlos. The other

seniors occupied two other apartments, while the juniors bunked in the remaining three.

The first day of the tour was a 'relax' day to settle in. We spent part of the morning at the beach watching the locals surf. I itched to borrow a board but our stay was too short. Graham remained with the juniors, who (I guessed) were all worried sick about the upcoming and mandatory initiation. The initiation committee included Brett, Frank and Maurice. Their job was to strike terror into the hearts of the juniors. I rejected that role due to my association with Graham but, like all previously initiated seniors, was permitted to attend proceedings as a spectator.

During the afternoon, we visited Sea World to watch the dolphin show, which was mind-blowing and a lot of fun. Those creatures were so damn beautiful, with their shiny, smooth and exquisitely muscled bodies performing stunning acrobatics. Later, we rocked down to McDonalds (a franchise rejected by our local Byron Bay council) for burgers and fries. There, we met a team from another school, our arch enemies.

One bloke, Brandon—who won everything in his age group for the past three years—thought the sun shone outta his smartass butt. He shoved one of our juniors from the head of the restaurant queue and took his place. Graham was also in the queue. He didn't know Brandon, but told him nonetheless to "fuck off".

"Fuck off? I'll fuck you up, lighty. Go back to your cave."

Frank, who saw the incident, moved Graham aside and stepped in. "G'day, Brandon."

"G'day, Frank. What's with the lip from your lighties? You need to keep them under control, mate."

"I will. Meantime, watch your own lip. They were first in line."

"Says who?"

"Says me. Now move, or should I move you?"

I saw that Frank was amped for a fight. Brandon saw it too. He stepped aside and allowed the juniors to resume their positions, but was the type to insist on the last word. "Kiss my ass, Frank, when you're behind me at the meet tomorrow."

Chapter 21

After dark, Frank summoned the juniors to our apartment. They were told earlier to wear Speedos and bring a towel. "But that's it! Nothing else!" All furniture in the living room, except a table and some chairs for the initiation committee, was temporarily moved to another room. The remaining seniors stood behind the committee as spectators.

Brett, Maurice and Frank, also in Speedos, nothing more, wore deadly serious expressions as the juniors filed into the tension-filled room. Then Frank gave the usual speech.

"Now, listen, guys, this initiation is supposed to be fun for those who went through it before. It's important you participate in the right spirit. It's not like the end of the world even though you might think it is. There's absolutely nothing to worry about...provided, of course, you've all completed your last will and testament. Are you ready?"

The juniors formed a circle, then Frank shoved a marshmallow into one boy's mouth. "Okay, guys, pass it from mouth to mouth--no hands--until it reaches the last guy."

"This is gross!"

"Shuddup."

The funniest thing was watching the boys try to get the marshmallow between their teeth to avoid contact with the previous boy's saliva.

When the marshmallow returned to its starting point, Frank ordered the kid to swallow it. That was a newie for me.

The kid screwed his face, looked like he was gonna puke, and forced the spit-drenched thing down his throat. It was totally gross but we seniors pissed ourselves laughing.

Next, each of the guys was given a "job". Carlos stripped to reveal a tiny uncircumcised willie, and not a pube within cooee. Frank placed a tog bag in the center of the room and ordered Carlos to make love to it. Even the rest of the juniors cracked up at the sight of the little guy pumping away at the bag as if it were the horniest chick in town. Once into the rhythm, he developed a roaring boner. He oscillated, undulated, kissed and pounded the bag with such intensity even he embraced the spirit of fun. In fact, it was so hilarious, two other juniors were ordered to perform the same stunt, much to Carlos' delight.

When Graham was summoned, he was asked to strip. No worries; out of all the juniors he had the prize willie, luxuriously crowned by a dozen curlies. "Put this on," Frank ordered.

"A girl's dress? No way!" Nonetheless, the grommet slipped the mini dress over his head. "What now?"

"Walk down to McDonalds, buy a burger and bring it back."

"Yeah, right. I'm not going anywhere in a girl's dress! And that's final!"

Another senior and I were appointed to follow Graham just to ensure his safety. The dress barely covered his butt. At the entrance to the apartment block, he set off on a sprint down the street, but quickly realized the dress was lifting.

Then he settled for small careful steps, which cracked me up big time.

We reached the point in the street where McDonalds was directly opposite. Graham stood at the kerb for an age, checking traffic as well as the restaurant customers. Inside, swimmers from other teams constituted his major concern. He dreaded the inevitable razzing.

The moment Graham stepped through the door, the joint erupted into raucous laughter and wolf whistles. And not only from the swimmers; the regular crowd joined the ruckus too. Graham steeled himself, and strode to the counter. He ordered a plain Mac which took about a minute to arrive—the longest 60 seconds of the grommet's life.

As he turned to leave, a junior from another team asked Graham if he wanted a date.

"Stuff you!"

"Stuff you too! Wanna step outside?"

"Piss off, I'm busy."

"The dress suits you. You should've been a girl."

"You wanna step outside? Cool."

At that point the other senior and I stepped in and separated the pushing and shoving juniors. The spectacle of Graham in a dress, slogging it out with another grommet would have been too hilarious for words.

At the apartment, thunderous applause welcomed our little hero, whereupon he ditched the dress. By then, most of the other lighties had been initiated so I missed that. But

Graham's stunt at McDonalds took the cake, and was one of the highlights of the tour. However, more was to come.

After the completion of all individual initiations, the juniors were divided into two groups; those with pubes and those without. One by one they stood on a chair. Maurice, equipped with latex gloves, smeared each boy's groin with shaving cream, then proceeded to guillotine every little curly. Some of the guys couldn't resist sprouting a hardon, which added to the entertainment. Needless to say, Graham was totally pissed off at having his prized pubes mercilessly decapitated. "It's gonna take forever to grow these bloody things back!"

"Don't worry," Frank chuckled. "It'll help your speed in the water."

"Yeah, right."

Next morning it was down to the pool and down to business. Heats took all day but each member of our team qualified for at least one of the following day's events. I qualified for the 200m and 400m fly semis, while Brett and Frank made the freestyle and breaststroke. Graham qualified for the 200m and 400m freestyle, breaststroke and butterfly as well as the 100m fly. He swam like a genius inspired. The junior who gave him grief at McDonalds qualified for almost the same events and was a wicked freestyle swimmer. As anticipated, Brandon creamed all his heats.

Friday's semis were much more difficult. I failed to make the cut in the 200m fly. I was fourth. Brett sailed through

his heats and qualified for the 100m and 200m freestyle and breast events while Frank succeeded in all his events. Graham won the 200m fly.

Saturday was finals day and the pressure increased dramatically. The feature event was the 100m freestyle with Brett, Frank and Jolly Jim representing our school. Favored to win, however, was Prima Donna Brandon. He had stamped his name on that race at previous meets.

Within a split second of the starter's gun, Brett and Brandon hit the water simultaneously, with Frank in close proximity. Brandon was first to turn but Brett found something extra and hauled in his opponent with each gruelling meter of the final lap. Our school team sprang to its feet as one, a forest of waving arms and fists, as Brett touched the wall a good two seconds in front. Brandon heaved himself out of the water, then threw his cap to the ground in utter disgust. He proceeded to win all his later events, but his crown was irreconcilably tarnished. Brett, conversely, was crowned hero of the day. Frank managed second in most of his finals, but creamed the 100m and 200m backstroke while Graham won the 100m fly as if he were the only swimmer. He too received the hero treatment after that. And me? I didn't make the first three in the fly but I swam well for fourth. My competition included some top guys so I wasn't too disappointed. Besides, I was bouyed by the success of my mates.

Saturday night, we were allowed to do our own thing and rocked over to a disco organized at the local pool hall.

Brandon was there with a few of his buds. When he began to chirp, we decided to avoid trouble and split to the Sports Bar. That's when Brandon made a big mistake. He followed us.

By the time Brandon summoned the courage to approach Brett, and provoke him with a shove, Brett had already downed a few shots and was amped for a confrontation. The punches to the gut flew so thick and fast, Brandon didn't see them coming. Wearing a stunned expression, he crumpled to the deck, out cold.

Sunday we hit the beach where I managed to convince a local to reluctantly lend me his board. Graham tried the same trick but failed. Meanwhile, it was a real treat to be back riding the waves again for an hour or two.

After school Monday, Stuart visited my room. "You always do your homework in your boxers?"

"Always," I laughed.

"Heard you bummed out on the tour." He sounded sympathetic as he planted his butt on my bed.

"It was weird. I swam really well but wasn't getting anywhere."

"All the guys have one over you, Kyle, and you know it."

"Creatine?"

"All the guys take it now. Ian Thorpe must be doing the stuff as well."

"I hate supps."

"We're not talking 'roids, mate. It's the same stuff your body makes—it's totally natural."

"Is that why you've gotten so damn tight?"

"Yeppo," he grinned, flashing a perfect set of pearlies, then stood and paraded his tanned god-body around the room.

The blond Adonis had gone by the time my folks arrived home from work. I allowed them time to settle and relax before I quizzed my dad about Creatine.

"A lot of kids are using that stuff now," he said, stirring his coffee at the kitchen table. "The guys at the office talk about it. Damned expensive, though, Kyle."

"It cheeses me off. All the guys are using it—and beating me."

"You're gonna need to find work to pay for it if you choose to use it. I know Brett uses it."

"How do you know that?"

"Just look at him. He has helluva muscular development for his age. I've seen him box—he has oodles of energy. At first, I thought he might be on steroids or something similar."

"He wouldn't take 'roids, dad."

"I hope not. Is his mother quite well off?"

"I don't think so."

"Maybe he only buys Creatine when he can afford it. Most of the kids do that. They only use it when they need it, or when they're in training."

"So what do you think?"

"I've never been one for taking stuff like that, Kyle, but maybe you should try it to see if it helps. But! You're

gonna have to pay for it yourself, boyo. We don't have that kinda money to throw around."

"I know, dad."

Then my mom joined the convo. "If you ate your spinach when you were little you could've had a body like Brett's now."

"Hear that, dad?"

"I'm listening, I'm listening—and I ate all my spinach."

"He's a lady killer," my mom smiled.

"Brett?"

"Hmmm," was all my mom added. Dad smiled and shook his head, giving me the impression my mom felt horny, which obviously pleased him.

Next morning, Brett was on prefect duty so I didn't catch up with him until break. I asked him about Creatine. "Sure, I take courses of the stuff during boxing training. I also took a course for the swim tour. The whole team was on Creatine. Even the grommet asked the coach about it."

"He couldn't afford it."

"The coach gets the stuff at a discount. And sometimes he helps the younger guys, provided they produce a letter from their folks to say they're allowed to do a course. I get it from Stuart; he's got a contact. Shit! Just about all my money goes on it."

"Bloody hell."

"What's the prob?"

"I'm just not sure I wanna get into it."

"You don't need to, mate. It just depends on how badly you wanna win."

"Are you saying I can't win without it?"

"Not quite. But it does give the other guys that extra energy boost when they need it. It's not like a drug. I don't think there's a swimmer who doesn't take it...except Kyle."

"And Graham?"

"Oh, he took some. How do you think his swimming improved so quickly?"

"I thought..."

"You thought it was because of the extra training we gave him? Okay, his stroke was poor but the Creatine helped his speed and endurance."

"He didn't say a word to me about it."

"Because he's paranoid about what you might say. You'd probably go on and on about drugs and shit." That comment hurt. I was disappointed that my little bro kept his secret from me. I studied the ground at my feet, lost for words.

"Kyle, for crying out loud, don't look so down! The little bloke would've told you if he thought you'd be sympathetic to his side of the story. And it's not like he's taking drugs for fuck sake!"

G had previously emailed me his thoughts on the matter. "A friend said if you won by taking supps then it was the supps that did the winning."

"Another swimmer?"

"No—he doesn't do any sport."

"Oh, c'mon, Kyle. I hate it when we get into these heavies. But I feel like ramming your head against the wall. How the hell would he know what it's like to compete against every mother who uses supps? And you're coming last every time?"

"Not last."

"You know what I mean. So who's the brightspark friend?"

"You don't know him. He's a bloke I email."

"Well, tell him to look around; to ask his school mates because everyone is taking it."

"Now you're getting pissed off."

"I'm not getting pissed. I just get so mad at you sometimes because of the way you think. You're like so damn cautious about everything. And then you ride huge surf and don't give a rat's ass if you break your neck."

"I can't afford the shit anyway."

"So don't stress about it then."

"I stress because I still got two swimming seasons, and the way things are going I'll never make the winter team because all you guys are getting pumped."

"Aaaggghhh, Christ! Stop doing this! Now listen up—and I don't want you to think I'm dissing your email mate who, incidentally, knows fuck all about sports competition. All sports have changed, Kyle. Look around at some little guys. Hell, look at Graham: his increased performance, his increased strength and his muscle mass. That's how it's going, mate. The guys will take stuff to win, so long as it's not steroids or

addictive drugs—preferably something natural like Creatine. Guys who don't take supps are going nowhere. I know you're scared, honest, but there's nothing wrong with the stuff."

The argument was pointless. I couldn't afford the stuff, and neither could my folks. But just then, I remembered what my mom said about Brett. "By the way, my mom says you got a hot bod."

"Is your dad the only one at your house who's not ogling my bod?"

"My dad? Oh, yeah, he thinks you got a hot bod for your age."

"It's obviously a Taranto family thing."

"My folks aren't shy about telling it like it is. And if my mom thinks you're hot then you must be."

"Yeah? Well, I don't see what you guys see. But, then, I know you're crazy. Hey, change of sub. Stuart phoned the other night and told me you guys have sorted out your differences totally. He sounded pretty damn amped."

"Yeah. We've both chilled about it."

"Susan says Melanie's happy about you guys being back on track."

"It's going okay."

"Lighten up, Kyle, and stop stressing about supps. You'll always make the swim team. Apart from anything else, we'll always need a mascot."

Chapter 22

Within a few days of the tour, routine reclaimed control; school, swim training, surfing and clubbing on weekends. One Friday night, after taking the girls home, Brett asked me to sleep over. His folks were away for the weekend.

We sat naked on a wooden bench in the small, leafy courtyard where Brett smoked a joint. He already smoked one on the walk home. I declined his offer of a puff. I wasn't into drugs but nevertheless chose not to lecture him. The evening vibe was pleasant and I wanted to keep it that way.

"I've got the most incredible munchies," he announced after sending a cloud of blue smoke into the cool night air. "Hungry?"

"If you're gonna make something, I'll have some too."

"Bacon and egg zonks?"

I followed him into the kitchen and watched him fry bacon and eggs. Meanwhile, he mixed a sauce of mayonnaise, herbs, pickles and other condiments. He placed the fried bacon and eggs on two slices of buttered bread, topped them with tomato, onion and lettuce, then a generous dollop of mayo sauce, and, finally, two more slices of buttered bread.

Back in the courtyard, sitting on the same side of the timber table as my mate, I took my first bite. "Wow! These are fantastic!"

Following our meal, Brett about-faced, then laid back on the bench so that his head rested on my chest. One of his legs

stretched the length of the bench while the other dangled lazily over the side. He was totally relaxed. Instinctively, my arms enveloped his warmth and my fingers found the firm folds of his abs. Then, to my amazement, he took my arm in his hand. "This is so cool," he said, "and unreal." I didn't answer. I didn't need to. Bliss needed no words of explanation.

We remained in that position for a long time, occasionally sipping our drinks, but saying very little. Idle conversation seemed redundant in our private world, ruled by closeness and companionship: naked bodies, naked souls, gentle hearts.

Brett eventually dozed off, still leaning against my chest. I felt the weight of his body increase as he succumbed to deeper slumber. Even in sleep, his body was an inspired vision of tanned and perfectly defined symmetry. I couldn't resist sending my fingers on a gentle mission to his crotch where I explored his hardness. He had been erect all night, which made me wonder if I should take the liberty to... No, he might freak and that would spoil the moment. However, I did take advantage of his deep sleep to run my finger tips ever so lightly around his inner thighs and each perfect egg.

"Hey!" he yelled! "Wake up, you lazy fuck!"

"Wha...? Huh? Jeez!" It was morning.

"I made coffee," he grinned as he sat on the side of his bed, still occupied by me.

"You must've sorted yourself out already," I suggested, noting his lazy cock draped across his nads.

"That's for me to know and you to guess." He waited for me to take a sip of coffee before continuing. "I really enjoyed last night."

"Green Room always raves on a Friday."

"No, Kyle, I'm talking about afterwards. I really enjoyed that."

"Me too. It's weird how you can experience times like...you know...that feel really special. Coffee's good."

"You surfing today?"

"Home first. Then chores; a neighbor's garden. Surf later."

Back at school, after swim training, I waited in the locker room for Brett to finish his shower. A bright red welt glowed like a neon sign across his butt. "Sit on a hot poker or something?" I asked as he dressed.

"Don't start. Shit-for-brains sprung me taking some of his stash. Happy now? Anyway, it's not over yet. I scrambled outta there so damn quickly this morning."

"Not over yet?"

"I reckon he'll mess with me again later. I've never seen him that mad."

"I thought you got stuff from Stuart?"

"He wasn't around so I got into Shit-for-brains' stash."

"Thought about going to the cops?"

"Here we go, Kyle the not-so-bright mate," he mocked while sending his powerful arms down his shirt sleeves. "And then? Then what?"

"I dunno. Report him for abuse or something."

"Yeah, right. My mom will love me for that."

"What does she say about it?"

"She doesn't know. He never hits me when she's around. And he knows I won't tell her."

"You scared of him?"

"It's a long story, Kyle. Basically, she's happy with the bloke. I've never seen her happier, and I think she's in love with the fuck. I don't wanna screw things up for her."

"Does he hit her?"

"No. In fact, he's good to her and for her. I'm sure he loves her too, and he does a lot for her."

"You got your boxers on inside out."

"Damn."

"What's the buzz with you then?"

"Personality clash, I think. We've never liked each other."

"That is a total fuck-up, man."

"It's my problem. I'll handle it."

"Doesn't look like you're handling it very well."

"Like?"

"Every other week you've got new bruises."

"Hey, I enjoy getting beaten up. I get off on it. Anyway, you wouldn't handle it any differently."

"Come around to my place after school," I suggested.

"Wait for your mom to get home before you go back."

"Stop going into a fucking panic, dude."

"Kyle."

"What-fucking-ever."

His flippancy snapped my patience like a dry twig. I shoved him off balance. After a few wobbles, he steadied himself and glared fire in readiness to tear me apart, but chose instead to hear me out. "No! Not what-fucking-ever. My name is Kyle, not 'dude'. Stop treating me like a piece of shit whenever I want to help. Okay? I get fucked-up mad because one day you're not gonna be in school because he's beaten you into hospital or something!"

Brett used excessive strength to grab my wrists and hold them aloft. "Listen up, I've taken care of myself for ten years now—since I was seven—so I can handle it. Okay? But I'm not sure how to handle you! One of my biggest hassles is you, Kyle. One day you're not gonna be around. We're gonna go our separate ways. That's something I'm not sure I can deal with right now. So stop putting me on the back foot because I don't wanna fight with you."

Brett's eyes weren't the only ones watering. "Okay, okay. No more arguments...for now. Please let go of my wrists. My hands are turning blue."

Graham's cricket practice that afternoon prevented him from joining Brett and me on the walk home. Upon reaching Brett's gate, I asked if I could take a leak. When I emerged

from the loo, Shit-for-brains was standing just outside the door, facing Brett and holding a length of hose. My mate was shirtless, wearing only his khaki school pants and brown shoes. "You need to go, Kyle."

"Why?"

"Just go."

I was shocked, and felt helpless. The reality of Brett's predicament was right before my eyes. The bruises and the welts I saw so often in the gym flashed through my mind but this time the vision included a hose making contact with his naked skin.

"Your friend gonna go or what?" SFB demanded, menacingly.

"Get outta here, Kyle."

"Will you call me later?"

"Maybe. Just get the fuck outta here. Now."

"I can't. What's going on here?"

"You're friend is a thief," SFB thundered, "and needs to be taught a lesson."

"You're gonna hit him with a length of hosepipe?"

SFB slammed the hose against the wall, causing a loud and frightening bang. "Who do you think you're talking to?"

Brett manhandled me down the hall toward the door. "Fuck off, Kyle, before you get it too."

I was bordering on hysterical, but somehow managed to contain my emotion. "What? You're just gonna stand there and get beaten? That's not the Brett I know. Fight the fucker back!"

"Go home, Kyle."

The door closed in my face. I stood there on the stoop for a few moments and heard the sound of hitting but nothing more. No voices. How could this be? I ran home and phoned. No answer. I phoned again. Nothing. About an hour later, the phone rang.

"Hey."

"Hey. Are you okay?"

"Yep."

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Making supper—macaroni and cheese. Want some?"

When Brett's front door opened, there stood the shorts-clad Adonis wearing that special smile I cherished so much; that so captivated me and sent my spirit soaring. "Supper's almost ready. Follow me."

"Mmmmm," I gushed and watched his mittened hand remove the casserole dish from the oven. "Smells wicked! Shit over now?"

"Yep. Did you try to call?"

"All afternoon."

"Sorry, mate. I unplugged the phone. Did you tell your dad?"

"Thought about it, but I figured you'd be totally pissed off if I did."

Brett spooned the steaming macaroni onto two snow-white plates, then asked if I'd like to eat supper out on the bench.

"*The* bench?"

"What do you mean *the* bench? There's only one bench. Oh...I see. Yeah, *that* bench."

"Is the food edible?"

"I'm a fuckup most of the time," he joked, "but I can cook."

We sat at the outdoor table where I took my first mouthful. "Oh-this-is-good!" was my instant and genuine verdict. "Mmmmm! Delish! You're gonna need to teach me to cook sometime. Wicked!"

"Your hike food was pretty good. I can still see you squatting by the gas bottle cooking bacon and eggs in the pan. Nothing tastes as good as bacon and eggs out there in the bush, mate. Good tucker."

"Yeah, but I can't eat hike food all my life."

Conversation was limited to occasional small talk during the meal. I got the impression my company was what Brett most needed right then; a friend to reassure him that the world, or at least his world, wasn't all bad.

After eating, Brett took the empty plates to the kitchen and made tea. "Kyle, I need you to do something for me."

"Anything."

"Susan's out with friends. I need you to sort out this cut for me. And, don't worry, I've already showered."

"I could care less if you were covered in mud."

"Why am I not surprised to hear that?"

He handed me the tube of antiseptic cream then about-faced and dropped his shorts and boxers to his ankles while I

knelt behind him. Actually, I felt kinda weird squatting there, just inches away, checking out his hairless butt. "Crikey! You got a bright red stripe across your cheeks. The skin has lifted. Not that big but it looks nasty."

I took my time cleaning the wound, then smeared it with antiseptic cream. Ya know... I mean, like how many chances does a bloke get to er... conduct a detailed—if not all that scientific—study of the all-time butt de la derriere?

"You gonna be there all bloody night?"

"I can see your hangers between your legs. They're kinda pear-shaped. Your hangers, I mean."

"It's not my balls that are worrying me, Kyle."

"Just noticing."

"Yeah, right."

"Does Susan normally do this for you?"

"She has a few times."

"What do you tell her?"

"She knows better than to ask ... NOT like a certain friend of mine."

"Ever ask your mom?"

"Don't be stupid."

"Where's SFB now?"

"He and mom are visiting friends of his."

"Didn't think he had any."

Brett lifted his boxers and shorts. Then I helped him with the dishes. "When I saw the hose, I thought he was gonna whip your back."

"Hell no! He knows I'm on the swim team. He won't hit me there. Anyway, he normally only hits me once, sometimes with his fist."

"What are you gonna do about him?"

"Nothing. Another year and I'll get my own digs somewhere. Just need to find a job so I can afford it."

"What about school? I thought you might stay another year for post matriculation."

"Might still do that. Just need to work off school fees and shit like that."

"What if I chat to my folks about your staying with us?"

Brett stacked the last of the dishes in a cupboard and turned to face me. "Couldn't do that, Kyle. You don't know me. And once you did, you'd wish me the fuck outta there. Besides, you'd start working on my tits with all your interminable bloody questions."

"Interminable? What's that?"

Chapter 23

I couldn't wait to tell my mom about Brett's cooking and how awesome it was. "Oh, my kind of man," she sighed while my dad just winked and laughed.

When I told Brett during lunch break next day, as we sat together on a bench, he shook his head. "I dunno why you guys make such a big deal about me."

"By the way, do you just stand there while SFB lays into you?"

"Here we go, question time again." He lowered his half-eaten sandwich between his knees, reflected for a moment, then decided to answer me. "The first time he hit me, I totally lost my rag and fisted him. Then I copped the worst beating of my life. Even my dad never beat me that bad...from what I remember."

"Do you actually bend over so he can beat you?"

"No way. But I no longer retaliate. If he wants to hit me, I stand there and glare at him, and wish away the pain until he leaves. Drives him crazy."

"Ever hear from your dad?"

"He phoned about two years ago. I told him never to contact me again. He blew his chances. I don't have a dad."

Tears began to well in Brett's eyes, so I changed the subject. "I dunno what you put in that macaroni and cheese but I blasted myself outta bed this morning. I'm gonna need half a dozen cans of air freshener to get back in there." It worked.

Brett burst into laughter. "Jeez, I love to see you laugh," I added.

During swim practice, I sat on a bench and observed Brett as he emerged dripping wet from the pool. He chose a bench across the way, planted his butt and leaned against the wall. I couldn't help thinking it should be almost illegal for a guy to be so facially good looking while also blessed with such a killer bod. He carried not an ounce of fat. And with every move, a muscle or two flinched. Each gesture, each motion, no matter how incidental, was inherently provocative.

His wet mop of short black hair clung to his forehead as he casually lifted a towel to dry his face. The iron rods of his forearms rippled and his biceps bulged like footballs. I marveled at the cobra-like lats that traveled the entire length of his flawless torso. Water trickled in a tiny river from his navel down a thin line of hair to the tie of his Speedos. He normally shaved that hair before a comp, even though it was barely visible. His dick was tucked down, forming a neat package wrapped in shiny Lycra.

My trance broke suddenly when I realized he was aware of my gawking. He waved and smiled. Then his thigh muscles popped as he stood to come join me. Actually, he and Graham had similar builds, perfectly proportioned without being overly muscular. The only difference was Graham's thin layer of puppy fat. He looked a little softer than Brett.

"Looks like you're in another world," he remarked as he sat beside me.

"My mind's a million miles away. Not sure what I'm thinking."

"You look beat."

"Yeah, I hammered myself in the pool after Frank found fault with my turns."

Later in the week, the swim team organized a challenge between Brett and me just for a hell of it. I was no match for Brett in the freestyle events, but I managed to make him nervous in the backstroke. I touched the wall a second behind the bastard. The butterfly was a different story. We were neck and neck in the final lap and I nailed him! I told him later I almost died doing it. No way I was gonna allow him to cream me in every event.

Shortly after the comp, Graham's friend Robbie approached me. "Some kid followed Graham into the toilet block and kneed him in the balls. He screamed because the guy kicked him so hard."

"Show me who," I demanded as I quickly slipped into my track suit.

Robbie led me to the bully and pointed to him; a skinny kid about sixteen. I recognized him as one of Mitch's goons.

"Leave it, Kyle." A hand gripped my arm. It was Brett's. He overheard Robbie's comment and decided to follow me. "Let me book him."

"Book him later, Danno." My fists grabbed the kid's shirt and shook him hard.

"Mitch told me to do it!" he pleaded.

Brett intervened again as onlookers gathered. "Leave him, Kyle. Let me sort it out." But it was too late. My knee connected with the kid's nuts and sent him whimpering to the ground.

"I saw that!" I recognized Mitch's voice. "You'd better book him, Mr Prefect."

"Why don't you do your own fighting?" I snarled. "You overgrown herd of beef."

"Okay, Kyle," the blimp taunted with a sneer. "Take me now, if you got the guts. We can get your prefect buddy to ref."

Brett held my arm to restrain me. "Leave it, mate. You're in enough shit already." But I ignored him and walked straight into Mitch's fist. A tooth penetrated my lip and drew blood. Before I could react, Mitch fisted me again on the same spot. Brett stepped between us. "You guys need to walk away from this before it gets outta hand."

I was still seething when Mitch turned his back and wandered off with his mentals-deficient in tow. "I could've taken him out," I complained, using the back of my hand to wipe away the blood.

"Didn't look that way to me."

"I've taken him out before."

"That was before. Anyway, you're in enough crap, Kyle. Other prefects were watching so I can't erase your name from the book. You could face suspension."

"Cool. Early hols. I need to check on Graham."

"That was fucking stupid, Kyle," Brett yelled as I stormed off. "It could have waited until after school!"

"No it couldn't," I shouted without turning around.

Later, I attended a hearing in the school counselor's office. Brett was also present. He was great! He argued my side of the story; that I simply sorted out a bully. The counselor said my energy was "misguided" and that I had no right to take revenge on behalf of a friend. However, he reduced the penalty from suspension to work-squad duty after school hours. Once outside, I thanked my mate for his assistance and loyalty.

"It's better than a suspension, Kyle. At least it doesn't go on your record. Meanwhile, be careful of Mitch. Two weeks ago he kicked a guy from another school into hospital. Just watch your back."

"How come I didn't hear about that?"

"Nobody's saying a word in case they're next."

"The trouble is Mitch does all the needling. When the rest of us are just chillin', he starts trouble. I can't just sit there and be a target, and I won't allow Graham to be."

"He uses the grommet to get to you."

"I realize that. But why must the little guy get beaten for no good reason?"

"Mitch knows it hurts you, that's why. What are your folks gonna say about the letter from the counselor?"

"They'll freak, as usual, mom more than dad. Another fight at school. I reckon my dad was a bit of a scrapper in his youth so he's not so heavy with me. It's in the genes."

"Levis or Wranglers," Brett laughed. "Okay, I admit, you've got balls, Kyle."

"You should know. You saw them up close."

"Screw you, pervert."

Brett called around to my house that evening to see how my folks reacted, and to remind me to watch out for Mitch and his sycophants. "Bullies weren't invented yesterday, Kyle. Your dad probably knows how dangerous they can be. He worries about you. So does your mom. Hey, you can count me in as well."

One long weekend, the air temperature was so baking hot our group hit the beach: Brett, Susan, Stuart, Graham and his girl, Melanie and me. The water was quite cold so many people elected to sun bake on the sand and enjoy the sea breeze. For Graham, that meant an audience. He was Speedo-less under his low-slung board shorts, and spent most of the day riding his stick and taking every opportunity to moon anyone who might (or might not) be interested in the aesthetics of his ass crack.

Lunch consisted of burgers and chips at a nearby pub. Graham and his girl Candy couldn't enter licensed premises, so they sat on the perimeter wall where a swarm of the pair's admirers soon congregated.

"Is that a fold in Graham's shorts or a boner?" Brett asked.

"Boner."

"You sure? He doesn't seem embarrassed."

"Graham? Embarrassed? You're kidding. He likes to show the girls he's endowed with more than the average 12-year-old schlong."

Melanie rose from our table. "Watch this," she said with a wicked grin, then approached the grommet who was too busy chatting to his fans to notice Melanie standing behind him. She put her finger in her mouth to wet it, then stuck it in Graham's ear.

"It's called a 'wet willie'," I explained to Brett as the grommet jumped in fright, and almost toppled off the fence.

"I'm gonna get you in the surf, Melanie," he threatened. "But I guess you know that already."

"Promises, promises," Melanie smiled and returned to our table.

Also surrounded by a bunch of besotted groupies, Stuart looked the quintessential surfer, as always. A wet blond fringe clung to his forehead while the remainder of his sun-bleached locks draped over his tanned shoulders, providing a most erotic contrast of warm, inviting colors.

What pleased me most, though, was that Brett and Susan were part of our group, enjoying the camaraderie of good friendship.

Good friends? At our school Swim Gala, the juniors and seniors were divided into two house teams; each side represented by both age groups. Graham and Brett were on the team opposing mine. It was odd, as well as disconcerting, to hear Graham cheering his team mates and booing mine; me in particular. To make it worse, in the showers later, he and Brett acted like old mates just to further irritate me.

"I think we need to swap Kyle for a friend who can swim," the grommet chirped.

Brett agreed. "You're right. It's the age, though."

"Actually, it's because my dick's too big," I responded, casually. "It holds me back in the water. You guys with weenies are lucky when it comes to competitive swimming."

"Your dick's too big?" Graham mocked. "That little thing? I bet you ejaculate even while Melanie's still asking you when you're gonna put the damn thing in. Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

"Yeah? And by the time you offload your drips of water, your hand's fallen asleep!"

My comment cracked up everyone in the change room, causing Graham to turn a luminous shade of red. The only retort he managed to summon was: "It's pure mayo."

"Did Candy tell you she's allergic to mayo?"

"Har-de-bloody-har. Anyway, you guys got your ass whipped in the pool and you can't take it."

Jolly Jim, who was on my team, stepped up to the grommet. Graham's eyes popped. That monster black dick suspended in a lazy arc over a pair of bovine balls was enough to scare the

living daylights out of anyone with an orifice, particularly a tight one. "What was that you said?"

A nervous squeak emerged from Graham's lips. "I just said we beat you guys fair and square."

"What was that you said about ass?"

"Nothing...I was just kidding."

"That's good, because if you were serious I'd shove this thing up your ass and cum out your nose."

Everyone collapsed laughing, bar the grommet. He shat himself.

Hiya G,

Sorry I'm late with email. I got to school later than normal 'cause Roo was sick. My dad is taking her to the vet this morning. He thinks she might have to be put to sleep 'cause she's so old and starting to suffer arthritis. She's not getting around like she used to. We were up most of the night with her. She's 14 now. She was six weeks old when I got her, the bounciest of the litter...I was 3. When she was still able, I used to take her up the mountain and to the beach. She loved that. She scrambled up the mountain, then back down to me, then up again. At the beach, she sat and waited for me to finish surfing. The last couple of years she's just lazed around. Even when I take her for walks she takes it easy instead of darting across the park. Her favorite spot to sleep is on the floor at the end of my bed. When I shower, she waits at the door. When I arrive home from school she still manages to jump on me. I'm hoping she's just maybe sick and they can

get her sorted out 'cause I just can't imagine what it would be like without her hanging around me.

At lunchtime: Hiya G,

Not much happening here today. I guess we're all waiting for school to end tomorrow so we can go on hols. I'm cutting my last class to get home a bit earlier to see if Roo is okay.

Next morning in the comp lab at school: Hiya G,

Yesterday arvo when I got home the yard was clean and all Roo's dishes and things were packed away. Obviously, she wasn't there. I went down to the beach just to be alone and kinda remember all the things we did together, and all the really stupid funny things she used to get up to. She loved eating slices of bread. She'd be a million miles away and still hear the bread bin open.

My dad knew exactly where to find me when he got home from work. The beach is my happy place. It's where I go when I feel really shitty. I can sit on the rocks and cry my eyes out without worrying about people seeing me. Dad didn't say a helluva lot. He didn't need to. He felt the same. After a while we walked home together. There was hardly anyone on the beach because the wind was blowing like crazy.

Anyway, G, I'm gonna jet. I just wanna swim a few laps and chill. I'll write ya later.

Chapter 24

Graham and Brett accepted my folks' invitation (at my request) to join us on a holiday at Lake Somerset, NW of Brisbane, renowned for its fresh-water fishing and boating. For us salts, it meant a week's change from the seaside.

My mates slept overnight in order to get an early start next morning. Meanwhile, that afternoon, mom made her super-duper special burgers with double everything. The moment the aroma wafted into the house next door, Graham appeared, wearing a cool surfer T and cargo shorts.

"Your nose is working okay," dad grinned as the grommet jumped the fence, then dropped his bag on the lawn. "Your timing is perfect."

"Smells great!" A third of the burger vanished between his lips, then, with his mouth full, he turned to Brett, "How's it, Conan?"

"Just remember one thing, Lighty, there'll be no place to run and hide at the holiday park."

"Yeah, but I've got Mr Taranto on my side."

"Leave me out of your fights!" dad smiled. "I don't have the energy to keep up with you kids."

"Oh, c'mon Mr T! You can't leave me at the mercy of these bullies!"

I woke next morning to the sight of two empty spare beds. The ensuite shower was running. Then Brett came into the room,

carrying two coffees. He was already dressed in board shorts and a loose singlet.

"Cover that thing before I come anywhere near you," he ordered, eyeing my piss boner.

"How come you're up so early?" I asked as I rearranged the covers.

Brett placed the coffees on the bedside table. "Too excited to sleep. Besides, I helped your dad pack the Kombi."

"Packed already?"

"We were gonna leave your slack ass behind but your mom protested. She said she couldn't leave her little baby all alone to fend for himself."

We hit the road before sunrise. Graham fell asleep within less than half an hour. For my folks, this was a special trip; the 18th anniversary of their honeymoon at the park. There, a certain little tadpole got together with a certain little egg, and a certain little pink and wrinkled Kyle emerged nine months later.

After settling into our bungalow at the park, Brett, Graham and I set out to take a look around. We stopped at the park hall where quite a few teens were gathered, playing table tennis, video games, pool and table soccer. We ordered cold drinks at the counter, then sat at a table to suss out the scene. A group of three girls made no secret of their interest in us. One of them approached, revealing an open midriff; always a turn-on for me. And she was pretty. They all were. "Do you mind if we join you?" she smiled sweetly.

The bare midriff belonged to Rochelle. She definitely had her eye on Brett. Hey, so did the other two who introduced themselves as Tammy and Mo, Mo being short for Maureen. They hailed from over west, Perth, and had traveled cross-country with their folks—all of them friends—in three separate trailers—kinda like a huge family vacation. Meanwhile, they were under the impression that Graham was 15. I was about to correct them when a sudden pain shot through my shin. It hurt so much I wanted to nail the little shit, but he continued to wear his innocent grin, secure in the knowledge that he was safe. At least for now.

We met the girls again that night at the hall. Brett and Rochelle quickly became an item. On the walk back to our bungalow, Graham asked Brett, "does she know you wanna get into her pants?"

"I think she wants it, mate...even more than I do."

"You'd reckon she'd be more choosy, huh?" The grommet ducked but not in time to avoid a clip across the ear.

When I woke next morning, Brett and my dad were already fishing on the lake. I joined my mom in the open-plan kitchen where she was preparing breakfast. "Having a good time, mom?"

"Lovely." Mom was a very good looking woman. She easily turned heads, even Brett's. "I remember when your father and I came here for our honeymoon. This is where you were conceived."

"You're looking pretty relaxed...and pretty."

"Aren't I always pretty?"

"Yeah, mom—but you know what I mean."

"I know," she smiled before hugging me. "And thanks for saying that."

Just then, Graham wandered into the room, making no attempt to hide the woody lurking within his boxers. "Cool, do we all get a hug in the morning?"

"Want one?" my mom asked.

"Sure."

Prior to breakfast, Graham and I donned our Speedos and took a swim in the lake. The early mist still hovered lazily over the glassy surface. In the silver haze, we saw the silhouette of Brett and my dad sitting in the rowboat: an idyllic scene, but I didn't have the patience for fishing, and my dad knew it. That's why I wasn't invited. Meanwhile, Graham and I enjoyed the cool caress of the fresh water; swimming and splashing around like a couple of idiots.

"Hey, Kyle! There's nobody around. Let's swim nude!"

"What if the girls arrive?"

"They'll run for the hills once they see my sea-monster!"

"Or die laughing."

"Yeah...when they see *yours*, you mean."

An hour later, as the boat glided silently to shore, Brett's eyes popped when he realized Graham and I were naked. However, dad, unperturbed, simply carried on regardless and pulled the boat onto the grassy bank. His nonchalance managed to calm Brett who, in any case, was more interested in showing off their two good-size bass.

"Jeez! I didn't know the fish in there were that big!" Graham commented with raised eyebrows. "I'm not swimming naked in there again!"

"Don't worry, boyo," my dad laughed, holding the two fish aloft. "These guys don't care too much for worm."

Back at the bungalow, Brett gutted and scaled our breakfast, and impressed the hell outta my folks with his expertise in the kitchen. He grilled the fish to perfection, and served them with fried tomato and mushrooms on toast. The meal was a huge hit with everyone, including the beaming chef himself.

We took a trip in the Kombi that day to see the local sights and to look for bargains at the arts and crafts market in town. Brett spotted a cool necklace made of polished abalone which he bought for Susan. I found a pair of Ezekiel board shorts in my size. As a cheapskate, I usually waited for the sales but my size had inevitably sold out by then. The shorts featured a button fly and a zip pocket over the side pocket. They showed off my legs pretty well and the button fly accentuated my bulge. Yeah! They also hung low on the hips and stopped just above the knees. My folks were cool enough to buy them for me.

By late afternoon we'd returned to the holiday park where Brett and I helped my dad collect firewood for the barbecue. The air was still warm, but tempered a little by the setting orange sun which cast long cool shadows across the green.

Brett and dad planned another fishing trip for early next morning. "You and my dad are getting along like mates rather than a dad and a teen," I commented later.

"Your dad is totally cool, and he *is* more like a friend than a dad. He doesn't treat me like a kid. Hey, he doesn't even treat the grommet like a kid...well, except for the ban on beer."

After the barbie, we hit the hall to shoot a little pool. Rochelle made an instant beeline for Brett. They chatted for a minute, then took a walk, but not before Brett gave me a wink. I watched him place his arm around her shoulder as they disappeared into the night. Then Tammy and Mo invited Graham and me for a walk down to the lake.

Graham was first to ditch his clothes and dive in. He was waist-deep and bug-eyed when he saw Tammy's firm moonlit breasts bouncing toward him. A minute later, the rest of us were also skinny dipping.

Mo surprised me by lunging and pressing her lips to mine. Her tongue sprang into action and immediately searched for my tonsils. At the same time, my erection pressed against her stomach. I noticed Graham staring at us in mild shock. Tammy made a desperate dash for the grommet who quickly dove to one side, then swam like the dickens for shore. He was in no mood to risk his virginity that particular night.

I was first to wake next morning and decided to go for a run through the park, then up the highway and into town. It was one of those magic mornings when the air seemed unusually

invigorating. Its freshness and coolness inspired the energy in me, which seemed in bizarre contrast to the tranquility of the still-sleeping town. By the time I returned, Brett and dad were heading to the jetty, which jutted into the fog-laden lake like something from a fairy tale. My mate, who carried a box of fishing tackle, greeted my breathless arrival with a horrified, "Ew! You're all damn sweaty!"

"Run?" my dad asked. "You? This is my son?"

"C'mon, dad. I run now and then."

Mom was tidying the main bedroom when I wandered in. "You boys must pick up all those clothes lying on the floor of your room."

"It's a boys' room, mom. It's supposed to look like that." For a moment I wondered if she'd spotted, as I did earlier, the tell-tale love stains on Brett's boxers. Then I kissed mom on the cheek.

"Yuck! You're all sweaty!"

"Yep!" I wrapped her in my arms and gave her a big bear hug.

She couldn't resist a giggle, but turned her head away and screwed her nose. "Yuck! And you smell awful!"

Just then, Graham waddled sleepily through the kitchen on his way to the toilet. "G'day, Mrs T." Once again, he made no secret of the tent in his boxers, which bemused my mom.

Brett and dad arrived home with more fish, which our personal chef cooked for breakfast. Then we teens hired three mountain bikes and spent most of the day touring the hilly

wooded areas and hiking trails that offer spectacular views of the lake, with its surface area of more than 10,000 acres. The scenery was so awe-inspiring our conversation reflected that of a group of conservationists and environmentalists rather than a bunch of teens. We were genuinely impressed—in an almost spiritual way.

Upon reaching the holiday park via the back roads, we returned the bikes, then dumped our clothing and dove into the refreshing coolness of the lake. We were so damn hot we didn't care about revealing our naughty bits. Neither did anyone else, for that matter. The atmosphere at the park was laidback and friendly.

That night we dined at a restaurant. Brett and I were allowed a beer each but the grommet was restricted to cola. That didn't stop his enthusiasm for talking over the top of Brett in his eagerness to tell my folks about the fantastic day we enjoyed. I sat back and let them do all the chatting, chuffed that my two special mates were sharing such a great experience on a family holiday with my folks.

Later in the week, the girls invited us to visit their trailer. "My folks are going out," Rochelle explained. "Maybe we can play cards or something. How about strip poker?"

"Hey," Brett laughed. "We'll trash you guys."

"Don't bet on it."

After supper, Brett, Graham and I were dressing in our room when I noticed Graham putting on an extra pair of everything. "What the hell are you doing?"

"They might catch me cheating so I'm going prepared."

"You're scared to sit there naked? Because that's what's gonna happen, mate. Those girls are gonna whip your naked grommet ass."

"No they won't!"

"Yeah, right. This I gotta see."

Rochelle's trailer was immense and featured all the mod cons! I figured her folks must be loaded. "We've decided," she began after we'd all settled around the dining table, "that we're going to blow your lights out after you've lost all your clothes. That's our bonus."

Brett was shocked but remained straight-faced. "You're not serious?"

"Why not? You chicken?"

"Piss off, Rochelle. It's just that...Jesus...like with everyone staring?"

"Hey, chill. We can go somewhere if you want."

Not surprisingly, Graham was busted for cheating after the first couple of hands. He removed two items of clothing; his sneakers. They were the only things he couldn't duplicate. Rochelle lost the first game and elected to remove her top. It was a dirty, low-down trick to focus the boys' beady eyes on her breasts, which adversely affected our concentration.

As the evening progressed, Graham was forced to shed more and more clothing. Eventually, he had nowhere to hide stolen aces. Each time he lost, he cussed like a trooper, only worse, causing the rest of us to crack up big time.

He was down to his boxers while everyone else was still comparatively clothed. My shoes, socks and shirt were off. Brett lost only one shoe—the clever dick. The girls' tops were off, while Mo was down to her panties.

With only one item of clothing remaining, and despite having worn enough gear to keep an Eskimo warm for an entire winter, Graham lost again. He gave me a pleading look as if I should save him from the inevitable. "Don't stare at me, mate," I grinned. "Take 'em off."

Dead silence followed my comment as all eyes focused on the blushing and nervous grommet. He slowly removed his boxers with no chance of hiding his boner or the shiny blob of leakage. The girls were most impressed. "Next time you lose," Rochelle announced with an evil grin, "the winner gets to eat you."

"What if I win?" Brett smirked.

But Rochelle soon wiped the smug look off his face. "Then you eat him."

"Yeah, right. I'll eat a bowl of hot sour chili first."

As expected, Graham lost the next game. "Here," Rochelle said as she threw a pillow in his direction, "cover your face with this and pretend it's just you and me here." Then she ordered him to lie on his back.

All we heard from the grommet was a muffled whimper as Rochelle began to perform the deed. After a while, Graham removed the pillow and gazed—with a mix of fear and wonder—down the length of his muscled torso. Then, without warning,

he threw his head back, raised his knees, and let out a helluva cry. A minute or two later, after regaining a modicum of composure, he gasped: "That's the most awesome thing that's ever happened to me."

Chapter 25

Following the holiday, school life quickly returned to normal. Brett and I argued a few times but nothing too serious. I figured SFB was getting to him again. However, he did admit that he enjoyed the holiday immensely, and would never forget the look on Graham's face during his first BJ. Actually, I told Melanie about it and she thought it was hilarious.

"You didn't tell Melanie about Rochelle, I hope."

"Hey, I'm not stupid."

One long weekend, we took the girls to a pub at Ballina, a town just south of Byron Bay. We played pool all night but went easy on the drinks. It took ages to hitch a lift home so Brett and Susan shared a joint by the roadside. I declined the offer of a puff. So did Melanie, probably to avoid a lecture from the Reverend Kyle. Hey, I had my principles and I stuck to them. No drugs.

We all bunked down at Susan's house. Melanie and I shared the guest room while Brett and Susan slept in her room. Mel and I were just getting into a serious love-making session when the door opened. "Don't panic," I told Mel. "My goodies are hiding yours."

"Sorry to butt—let me rephrase that—sorry to interrupt, mate, but do you have a spare condom? It's an emergency."

"The side pocket of my cargos."

A moment later I received a slap across my bare ass from Brett. "Thanks, mate," he laughed. "Hey, Melanie, you're looking hot, babe." His comment cracked both Mel and me and we burst into hysterical laughter. Goodbye erection.

Next morning, Brett cooked breakfast for all. "No point in asking you," he said to me. "Your gastronomical flair is limited to peanut butter sandwiches ... toasted if you're feeling extra creative."

With winter approaching, Brett resumed boxing training in earnest. "You're looking pretty damn buff," I commented as I arrived at the gym. He ignored me except for a grunt and continued to hit the bag. "And you look even better when you're all sweaty and punch the bag like you do."

"You gonna hold the bag for me or keep talking shit?"

Later that day, Brett caught a couple of lighties fighting. He let them off with a caution. Big mistake. Somebody reported Brett to a teacher. "You're a prefect, Brett. Your job is to spot trouble and book offenders. How do you think this school is supposed to maintain control over its students if you turn a blind eye? It's not your prerogative to be an adjudicator of such situations. That prerogative belongs to us, the teachers, not the prefects. Is that clear?"

"It was just a scuffle. No biggie. Kids fight all the time."

"And they will continue to fight as long as you allow them to. You should have booked them!"

"If you think you can do a better job take my badge."

"You're being insolent! I demand an apology this minute! Otherwise I'll report you to the headmaster."

"So go ahead and report me."

I waited at the school gate for Brett to arrive. "How did the meeting with the head go?" I asked as we walked home.

"You really don't know how to unglue yourself, do you? I got into an argument with the teacher in the presence of the head. I was totally pissed off that he made a fool of me in front of other students. Why couldn't the prick let me get on with the job? I knew what I was doing."

"What did the head say?"

"He was pretty cool, I guess, under the circumstances. He put me in charge of the work detail after school tomorrow. But I'm still pissed off."

"So why didn't you just hand in your badge?"

"Dunno."

"You've been threatening to do it for ages."

"Hey, Kyle, all my life I've been a fuckup. Sometimes I think my folks broke up because of me. My mom was so chuffed when I got this badge it would really disappoint her if I gave it up."

"She'll support you, though."

"Yep, but she'd still be disappointed."

On Friday, we hit the Gold Coast and Purple Alien. Stuart went down like a sack of potatoes after his mates bought him a drink. We suspected it was laced with Rohypnol, the date rape drug. He was out cold.

I was too busy trying to help Stuart to notice Brett disappear. Then I saw a bunch of Stuart's mates headed for the toilets. I arrived on the scene to see Brett on the tiled floor, covered in blood.

"I saw one of bastards wearing a smartass grin so I followed him into the toilets. I asked him what he put in Stuart's drink. He laughed and told me to fuck off, so I gave him a few punches to the chin. As soon as he crumpled, I felt a blow to the back of my head. I went down. All I could do was cover my face to avoid the boots. Three or four guys were laying into me like they wanted to kill me."

"You look like you were involved with an axe murderer."

"Don't worry. It's superficial. Most of the blood came out of my mouth." Brett removed his shirt, which was drenched in blood, and tossed it into the used-towel bin. "Let's go."

One of the guys at the club offered us a ride to Susan's place. Both girls were hysterical and on the verge of tears. Stuart was still non compos mentis.

I phoned Susan's place next morning and spoke to Brett. "Stuart puked a few times during the night but he's okay now, except for a huge headache."

"And you?"

"Hey, mate, I'm okay. Fat lip is all, and bruised ribs. Plus a never-ending lecture from Susan. In any case, I get beaten up like that all the time in boxing, so it's no biggie. I'm used to it. You and Mel okay?"

"Yeah. I walked her home but her folks were there, so I didn't stay over. Hey, I didn't even jack off last night. That's gotta be a first, huh? I couldn't stop thinking about all the shit that went down."

"Those assholes are gonna go down, mate. Fucking wombats. Hit from behind then split. That's their style. If you see them, tell them it ain't over, not by a bloody long shot."

"If I see them first, there'll be nothing left for you."

"See ya, mate."

"Pizza tonight?"

"We'll be there."

After pizza, the six of us (including the grommet and his grommetess) walked along the beach. "Can you imagine not living here?" I asked anyone who cared to listen. "I mean here, near the ocean. It's just so damn cool, like our own private playground."

"It's like two different places," Melanie commented. "One during the day with the sun and all the people, then another at night with the stars and the moon. Even the waves look different at night."

"That's the phosphorescence. It glows."

"Like the stuff they use in matches?" Graham asked.

"Kinda spooky, huh?"

"I think it's romantic," Susan said with a sigh. Her comment must've given Graham's girl a few ideas. When we got to her place, she and Graham played a game of tonsil hockey. I noticed her hand buried in his cargoes, while his were

fondling her cute little breasts. It took an age for them to untangle.

"Seems you're getting there," I smiled as we continued on our way.

"You guys shouldn't have been looking."

"Yeah, right...like you don't look at a plane crash."

By Monday, I'd caught a serious cold. Nevertheless, I attended school that day—a waste of time. I sneezed so much on the walk home with Brett, he became irritated. "Will you shut the hell up? It's like you're allergic to something."

"Yeah—your deo."

"If you weren't looking so damn crook I'd thump you."

I took the following two days off school, sick as a dog. Brett phoned after school Wednesday and heard my croaking.

"You don't sound too good, mate."

"Being sick is the pits! Oh, mate, I never felt this crook. Ever! When I got home Monday I thought my damn head was gonna fall off."

"Could be an improvement."

"Yeah, right. Anyway, when I started my homework my nose ran like a damn tap, and still is. It's as tender as anything because of all the blowing. I gotta use toilet paper because I blow holes through the soft tissues."

"Spare me the details, Kyle."

"And I can't handle carrying a snot-filled cotton hanky in my pocket..."

"Kyle!"

"...because you always put your hand on the slimy bits when you take it out."

"SHUT UP! Anyway, I phoned in case you wanted me to rock around with the latest homework from school."

It was a buzz to see my mate again. We spent about two hours going through the homework. "You're in a wicked mood tonight, Brett."

"I am?"

"Yeah. You must be glad to see me."

"I think you're the one who's glad to see me, mate. Your leg's been rubbing mine all bloody night."

"Can I help it if I got a small desk? Anyway, I've been reading some cool books. I just finished Clive Cussler's *The Serpent*. And now I'm reading *The Testament* by John Grisham. I read *The Brethren* before that. Wicked story. You read it?"

"You don't seem the type to read books."

"Why not?"

"I dunno. You're too much of a damn rebel. And you're hardly ever outta the damn water!"

"They haven't invented waterproof books yet. Anyway, there's not much else to do when you got the flu." Then I grinned and added; "I still got time to jack off, though."

"You got no damn shame, Kyle. No damn shame."

Brett was back again the following night with more homework plus an assignment that needed to be finished by the following Monday. He wore jeans and a loose fitting sweat top. "What the hell are you gawking at?"

Yeah, right. Like he needed to ask. "Nothing. It's just that you could wear a bloody sack and still look hot."

"Don't you ever think about anything else?"

"Not when you're around. You don't seem to realize that..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Cut the crap. I guess you're grounded tomorrow night?"

"There's no way my folks will allow me out after time off school and not feeling hundreds."

"Yeah, I guessed that."

"So what are you guys gonna do?"

"Not sure. Maybe take Susan to a movie or something." Then Brett started laughing. I asked him what was so funny. "You and the relationship you have with your folks, man."

"What are you talking about?"

"Hey, I know a lotta guys who cock their folks and fuck off to where ever they want to go without their folks' okay."

"Yeah, well, maybe I'm just a wuss."

"That's not what I mean, Kyle. You have a good thing going with your folks. It's just that so many guys show no respect for their 'rents, and don't give a shit whether they upset them or not. I think it's pretty cool that you give them an ear."

"You and your mom are cool, though."

"True, but she wouldn't give a shit if I went out every single night—even if I were sick and off school."

"Maybe she's worried about upsetting you—you and your bloody short fuse."

"Maybe. You seen Melanie?"

"Nope. She phones, though. I think she's horny. Maybe I should send Graham over there to take care of things while I'm crook."

"Jeez, Kyle," Brett laughed, "you treat it like a joke now, but that little guy is gonna be 15 or 16 one of these days and he's gonna steal any girl you're with."

"Yeah, right."

"You don't believe it? He's good looking and you're ugly."

"That's why I hang with you. Two ugly guys together."

"That's spelled H-U-N-K-Y, mate. Me, that is. You should get a job as a circus clown, Kyle. They could save money on the red nose."

In fact, I had bronchitis. That could have led to pneumonia according to the doc if not diagnosed in time. Nonetheless, it was cool of Brett to rock over to my house every afternoon after school to help with my homework. One time I asked him why he didn't look like a nerd, with glasses and a skinny bod.

"Huh?"

"I don't get it, Brett. Your school notes are always so bloody neat. And you breeze through exams like you got a photographic memory or something. Then you beat the crap outta me in the gym. And you get all sweaty. And your muscles..."

"Sometimes I wish I were a nerd. Then you wouldn't crap on so much about my bod. Anyway, what the hell have muscles got to do with brains? Who says you can't have both?"

"It's not fair, that's all. And stop grinning like a bloody Cheshire cat!"

"Hey, did I tell you I might have a job?"

"Doing what?"

"I talked to the guy who runs the pizzeria. He said he'll give me a couple of training sessions. If I can handle it, learn the menu and shit like that, he'll give me a part-time job as a waiter."

"Brett the pizza boy!"

"Piss off, Kyle."

"Hey, you'll be great! I can see you now: going up to a table and saying, "what kinda shit do you want on your fucking pizza, assholes?" I shouldn't have said that. I began alternating between laughing my tits off and coughing my lungs up. I reckon if I hadn't been so sick, Brett would have clobbered me.

Chapter 26

The night before Father's Day Brett slept over. We were in deep trouble with the girls after the previous night's binge at the club. We reckoned we had good reason to let off a bit of steam. Mid-year exams were being held and our brains were fried. However, the girls were adamantly unsympathetic. "You've ruined our night," they complained as Brett and I staggered home, arm in arm, trailing the girls by some yards.

"Melanie okay now?" Brett asked as we sat side by side on my bed.

"I phoned this morning and apologized. How's Susan?"

"Pretty mad."

"You promised her a serious night of loving. Did you get it up?"

"Nope. The bloody thing hung like a deflated balloon. You get your dad something for Father's Day?"

"Yep." I went to my dresser and produced a pair of satin PJ shorts. "I haven't wrapped them yet. Cool, huh? I also made him this card..."

"Hang on a sec," Brett interrupted. "These shorts have 'Eat me' printed on them! What the hell's your dad gonna say when he sees that?"

"I dunno. I guess he'll wear them to bed and...well...you know. Anyway, I made this totally cool card using the pic of Endless Summer. Wicked, huh?" Then I noticed Brett's eyes

watering. Naturally, I asked him what was wrong but he told me to forget it.

It was 2am before I asked Brett if he wanted to sleep in my bed rather than on the spare mattress on the floor.

"Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice but I'd like it if you slept in my bed. I like to feel you up close."

"I'm not Melanie."

"Doh."

Sunlight streamed through the bedroom window when I opened my eyes. One leg and an arm were draped over my mate. "Hey, Kyle," he smiled, "time to rise and shine, you lazy slob."

"Five more minutes."

After Brett showered, and wished my dad happy Father's Day, he returned to my room. "Kyle?"

"You wanna come back to bed, right?"

"Wrong. I want you to ask your folks something for me."

"Sure."

"Ask if I can use the phone. I'll pay for the call."

"It'll be cool. Go for it."

"Ask your folks first. I wanna call long distance."

"Hang. I'll take a quick shower."

I left the room to allow Brett privacy while he made the long-distance call, but...well...I didn't go very far up the hall.

"G'day, dad ... Yeah, it's me ... Just wanted to wish you happy Father's Day ... It's going okay, school's fine, mom's

fine ... No, she doesn't know I'm phoning ... I'm calling from a friend's house ... It's okay, dad, I got money. Stop stressing ... I'll see. When? ... Maybe. ... Love you too, dad."

I was back in my room in a flash. "And now?"

"You were listening."

"I accidentally overheard."

"Yeah, right. So, now what?"

"What made you call your dad? I thought you were never gonna speak to him again."

"I dunno. Seeing you with your folks. Anyway, things change. I can't go through my whole life being a jerk." He paused a while, doubtless trying to untangle his jumbled thoughts. "I dunno, man, it's kinda crazy. I want to see him again. We haven't spoken face-to-face for years. He says he's coming to Byron Bay on business soon and wants us to meet somewhere."

"Will you?"

"I'm nervous."

"Yeah, right. You?"

Boxing returned to the agenda during winter, and I was more than willing to be Brett's sparring partner. In the showers after a pretty strenuous session he complimented me. "It's a good thing we wear headgear, Kyle, otherwise some of your punches would knock me cold."

"Any more news about the pizza job," I asked, making no attempt to hide my erection.

"I trained at the restaurant last night; in the kitchen where they make all the toppings."

"Like extra mozzarella?"

"Is that supposed to be a joke? Anyway, you got no idea, bro. You just sit at a table and eat the shit. But I gotta know each and every pizza, what goes on it and what it's supposed to look like when it's taken outta the wood oven."

"You get paid for training?"

"No. I will when I start waiting on tables."

"If you give me a shit pizza can I send it back?"

"You're dead meat if you embarrass me in front of anyone."

One afternoon I invited myself into Brett's townhouse on the walk home after school, and watched him change into his civvies. "I gotta do the laundry and the breakfast dishes," he explained while stepping into a fresh pair of boxers.

"That's cool. I'll hang around."

"I'll make coffee after I do the dishes."

During coffee, we talked about school, the upcoming winter holidays, exam results and whatever, when he asked why I wasn't surfing.

"It's crapped out."

"Otherwise you would be?"

"Maybe."

"So that's why you're here?"

"Not the only reason. You're my mate."

"And you like the way I wash my clothes and do the dishes?"

"Yeah...I do."

"You're crazy, Kyle. You know that?"

"Why? Because I like to be with you? Hey, you punched the shit outta me in the ring this morning, and you threw me around like a rag doll yesterday when we wrestled. Doesn't that kinda give you a teensie weensie clue?"

"That you're crazy? Yeah, it does."

"So you want me to leave?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Brett pursed his lips and took a sip of coffee. "It's easy for you to express your feelings, Kyle. You just open your bloody mouth and out it comes. It's not so easy for me. You had to be there."

"Where?"

"Where I come from. You come from the 'House of Hugs'. It's like you and your folks spend half the damn day hugging. That kinda thing never happens here...it never has...'cept for mom."

"You and Susan hug, though."

"Susan's not family, Kyle. It's different with her."

"I'm not family either."

"Maybe not. But who else would wanna hang around to watch me in the laundry or doing the dishes?"

"Or watch you change outta your school uniform into a fresh pair of boxers..."

"You're so fulla shit, Kyle. So why are you still here?"

"Why did you visit me almost every day when I was sick with bronchitis, and keep me up to date with schoolwork?"

"We're in the same classes."

"Was that the only reason?"

"No."

"Listen, Brett, I know there are some things you don't wanna talk about—or can't—stuff you find difficult to express. But you don't need words, mate. You say it all by the way you act. And you know what they say about actions and words. Right?"

"Like when I punch the crap outta you in the ring?"

"When we were sitting on the rocks at the beach in that strong wind—the night after what happened between Melanie and Stuart—and you came down and sat next to me, and you said that I was the one who taught you the real meaning of friendship. You think it's all been a one-way street? You think you haven't taught me stuff?"

"Like?"

"Like how many times you and I have argued and fought; like how many times we've blown our short fuses; like how many times we could have ended our friendship right there and then; but we didn't. Brett, making friends is easy, keeping them ain't so easy."

"For you, making friends is easy. For you, it's like falling off a bloody log. And that's the thing that puzzles me about you. Why me? And don't give me that lamo shit about my bod. Why me?"

"I hated you at first. I thought you were a fucking jerk. Then you chilled and invited me to punch the bag with you. Even then you were still aggro and fulla crap. But I guess I got kinda curious. It was like I had some kinda notion that there was a nice guy in there trying to get out."

"I've given you a million reasons to piss off, but you never did."

"How do you know they weren't a million reasons to hang around?"

"Nobody else would have."

"So they lose and I win."

"Win what?"

"You really don't see it, do you?"

"My bod? Sure I see it. And you keep making a big bloody deal about it. So that's it, huh?"

"It helps," I grinned. "But it's not just your bod. You make great coffee—and macaroni and cheese."

"I really don't get it, Kyle. You act like I'm Mr fucking Perfect or whatever. So why don't I have a stack of friends like you do?"

"You don't allow people to be close. You wouldn't let me get close either, at first, but I wouldn't take no for an answer."

"You can bloodywell say that again," he smiled.

"Are you glad?"

"Yeah, I suppose I am," he shrugged. "Okay, okay, yes I am. But I still don't understand it. To tell you the truth, Kyle, if I were someone else I wouldn't want me as a friend."

"How can you say that? You're not someone else. You know what I think? I think you're scared of people liking you in case they discover the 'real' you ... the 'you' you're afraid of ... the 'you' you imagine is hidden deep down somewhere ... the disappointing 'you' that will surface all of a sudden ... the 'you' your dad beat up on ... the 'you'..."

"Stop it, Kyle. Drop it."

"Brett, why can't you just accept my friendship without all this analytical bullshit? I'm here because I wanna be here. Being with you is totally cool, whether you're doing laundry or sitting at my desk at home or sparring in the gym or just having lunch together at school or whatever. Why can't you just accept that?"

"I dunno, mate. There's a lotta stuff you don't understand."

"Maybe there's a lotta stuff you don't understand."

Later in the week we were back in the courtyard drinking coffee when Brett told me about his job at the pizzeria. He said the pay was lousy but the tips were good—and a few customers had asked for his phone number. "And don't you dare mention that to Susan!" On the down side, at least as far as his homophobic streak was concerned, there was an Aboriginal

gay guy in the kitchen who took a fancy to rubbing Brett's butt. "I told him to take his hand away or I'd break his neck. And to make matters worse, the manager stresses everytime we get busy and craps on everyone."

"This Aboriginal guy a young guy?"

"What difference would that make? Yes, he is."

"Just asking. How many shifts do you do?"

"One tonight, another tomorrow night, then day shifts on the weekend."

"So you're free Friday night?"

"I'm not going to any club. I told Susan I'd take her somewhere special. Just the two of us. A celebration. Maybe a restaurant with something other than pizza. That'll give you and Melanie a chance to be alone as well."

"What time do you finish on Saturday?"

"Not sure."

"But you are coming to the party, right?"

"What party?" My heart plummeted. It was my eighteenth birthday party on Saturday night and I desperately wanted Brett to attend. Fortunately, the teasing bastard was joking. "Bloody hell, Kyle! I'm kidding! Of course we'll be there."

Friday night I took Melanie to the pizzeria. It wasn't easy but we managed to manipulate the situation in order that Brett waited our table. "Hey!" He looked awesome in his jeans and green top with its 'Brett' nametag.

"You're not supposed to say 'Hey!'," I reprimanded.
"You're supposed to say, 'Hi, I'm Brett and I'll be your waiter. Can I get you anything to drink?'"

"Shuddup, Kyle. What do you want?"

"Okay, no tip for you."

Brett couldn't stay to chat. The restaurant was hectically busy. Occasionally, I gawked at his cute butt when he attended another table, and wondered if Melanie was aware of my admiration for Brett. If she were, she didn't mention it. By the same token, I also wondered if other patrons noticed the fact that Melanie's right hand was almost always under the table massaging my vulnerability.

Chapter 27

June 30, 2000. I woke early after hearing my dad rummaging around in the kitchen. He wore the Father's Day 'Eat Me' boxers I'd given him. And I noticed a huge bulge in the crotch. "You got a boner, dad."

"So have you. Coffee? Looks like you need it."

"Nice boxers, dad."

"Yeah, but your mom doesn't read."

"Can I borrow them? Melanie reads."

"I'm sure. Can I borrow Melanie?" My dad was still a hot looker for an older guy. He could turn girls' heads no problem. "Do you have any plans for tonight, Kyle?"

"Not yet."

"Your mom and I want to take you out to dinner. Into it?"

"Cool."

"Want to invite a friend?"

"No. Just us will be fine. We don't always get a stack of time together. Dad? How about taking today off work? We can go surfing together. There's a good off-shore wind blowing."

"I wish. I'll try to get a half-day off. Maybe I can join you guys later."

"Neat."

My folks took me to a local restaurant with a nautical theme; lots of brass fittings, heavy timber beams and ship memorabilia. My dad bought me a beer while he chose a bottle of chilled rose.

I'd received birthday cards before but not buried inside a steak! I opened the card and saw something I never expected in a million years. "Two hundred bucks! I don't believe it! Hey, you can't afford this! Dad? Mom?"

"It's for you to spend on yourself," mom said with watery eyes. "On whatever you want."

I never saw so much damn money in my whole life, and kept staring at it. Then mom got all soppy and said she could still remember changing my diapers like it was yesterday. "Yeah," dad laughed, "how could anyone ever forget a stink like that?" We all cracked up.

It was awesome sitting there with my folks, chatting about all kinds of things. We'd always been a close family but that night was somehow different. I was one day away from my being legally an adult; a teen but also a young man. Mom and dad always looked the same to me. I wasn't able to detect any changes. But, to them, I'd gone through many stages, each one dramatically different to the next: from diapers to my first day at school, from primary to high school, from a grommet who could hardly balance himself on a surfboard to a guy who was the skilled captain of his stick, from a boy whose life revolved around his best mate Paul to a teen with many friends including a girl friend.

By the end of the night, I'd had a few too many beers. We arrived home and mom made three Irish coffees. I thanked my folks for a very special night, explained that I was feeling a

bit trashed, and retired to my room. But at the stroke of midnight I woke to the sound of loud knocking at my window.

"Graham! Do you know what time it is?"

"It's midnight."

"So?"

"So here," he grinned, and thrust something toward me.

"Happy birthday, Kyle."

It was a handmade card. *To my big brother, Kyle. Stay around forever. Your little brother, Graham.* Then another package was thrust my way. "And here."

I unwrapped the gift to reveal a pair of Billabong socks and a new surfboard leash. He beamed from ear to ear as I thanked him. "That is awesome, bro."

"Like it?"

"Love it. Can I give you a hug?" Graham raised his arms as I leaned out the window, then I squeezed the hell outta my special friend. "Do your folks know you're out?"

"Nope. I snuck out quickly. I'm going back to bed now."

"That is so damn awesome."

"What?"

"That you woke up specially to wish me. You're the first one on my birthday. Thanks a stack."

"It's my pleasure. Anyway, if you were my real bro I wouldn't have to sneak out in the cold. I'd just walk down the hall to your room."

"Night, mate."

"You gonna jack off now?"

"I'm bushed."

"I'm gonna jack now."

"Night, mate," I laughed. Then his beaming face disappeared into the night.

Next morning, my folks singing 'Happy Birthday' woke me. In their arms, they held a pile of prezzies, which I opened enthusiastically: new satin boxers, a new white Billabong button-up shirt with olive-green prints, gray denim cargos, plus the \$200 from last night. Wicked! That was followed by a HUGE breakfast.

Later, I checked my email. There was a stack from all over the place but, disappointingly, nothing from Rick in Canada. G put up a special tribute on his web site. Then the phone went berserk: Melanie, Stuart, Brett and even Susan! I felt like the most important person in the world, and chuffed to have so many special friends.

By 8 that night, everybody began to rock up to my 'Mask Party'. Melanie and I had had our ups and downs but she left no doubt in my mind about her true feelings when she presented me with a silver chain attached to a silver heart engraved with our names. Stuart gave me a card with cash inside. Actually, I got cash from most people. They figured cash was better because I could get whatever I wanted for myself. But Brett had already anticipated my needs. He gave me a totally rad pair of red satin boxer shorts. "You can practice in your dreams," he said, and totally cracked me up.

The party was a huge hit with everyone enjoying a rave time. My only disappointment was the absence of Rick; not even an email from him. All the guys wore full-head rubber masks, but I knew who they were. At least, I thought I did. Brett was the hardest to pick. The only reason I uncovered his disguise was because Susan told me. He wore the mask of a withered old man with a squillion wrinkles and droopy eyes. Stuart was easy to pick because of his height and build. Graham was a cinch. He wore an evil goblin mask. One disguise I thought was kinda odd, though, was a Pierre Trudeau mask. I figured it had to be Frank.

11pm was time for me to guess correctly who was under each mask before it was removed. Each time I failed, I had to take a swig of beer. The guests assembled in a semi-circle around me. Oops! I got Stuart wrong; he wore a Spiderman mask, so I took a swig of beer as 'punishment'. I guessed Brett and Graham correctly. Then, when I got to the Pierre Trudeau mask I confidently said, "You're Frank!" But, as the mask lifted, the chin wasn't Frank's, nor the nose. Who the hell...???

Tears instantly welled in my eyes as I recognized a face that beamed with pure joy. There he was, my lifelong friend, standing right before me. "Rick!" This was the happiest day of my entire life.

"G'day, Kyle."

I threw my arms around him and held him as tightly as possible for at least two minutes. Both of us cried uncontrollably. I wasn't aware of how the rest of the guests

reacted. I didn't care. All I knew, and all that mattered, was that I was hugging a special mate I thought I'd never see again. "Oh, my fuck! When did you get here?"

"This morning. Darren fetched me. I stayed at his place today...had some things to take care of."

"Oh, Jesus, Rick! I'm just so incredibly happy!" Then I noticed the other guests: mom bawling her eyes out, dad's eyes watering big time, while everyone else stood staring and stunned. "But how the...?"

"I told your mom I wanted to be here for your eighteenth, and spend the week with you. Your folks arranged everything with Brett, Stuart, Frank, Darren and a few others. I've been saving up for the airfare."

"Brett knew?"

"Yep."

I introduced Rick to the guys who all eagerly shook his hand. They heard me speak of him often, and now it was time to meet him in the flesh. To me, the remainder of the party was a blur of excitement—chatting, laughing, drinking—a joyful crowd of smiling, animated faces. From time to time, I found myself staring at Rick in an effort to fully comprehend his presence. It was a miracle! And as the shock gradually abated, I began to realize just how awesome he looked. He'd always been a hottie but now he was hotter than ever!

By 3am, Rick, Brett and Susan were the only remaining guests. They helped tidy the yard and house. Brett spoke to me before leaving: "That was worth a million bucks."

"What?"

"Seeing your face when you recognized Rick."

"It showed, huh?"

Rick helped me and my folks put a few more things away, then went to my room. "You gonna shower?"

"Yeah, I've still got the smell of jet fuel all over me."

Rick followed me into the bathroom. When I leaned forward to turn on the taps, I saw something astonishing. "Well," he said quietly over my shoulder, "I couldn't rock up to your party without something to give you, could I?"

Standing in the shower was a brand new Nev surfboard; pure white, like snow white, with contrasting black grips. Totally outtasight. "Anyway," he continued while I was still speechless, "I'm gonna need to borrow my old stick while I'm here. Kyle?" he asked, then placed his hands on my shoulders. "Hey, mate, for Christ sake stop blubbering."

I took the board to my room, slid it under the bed, then returned to the bathroom to shower. I was still in a state of shock when I realized why Graham, the little shit, bought me a new leash for my birthday. He obviously knew about the surprise and, for once in his life, kept his mouth shut.

Brett showered, then climbed under the covers next to me. It was like going back a hundred years. He smelled the same, that special smell permanently etched in my memory even during his absence. "I notice your folks still put the spare mattress out."

"Yeah," I laughed. "But I'm sure they know it rarely gets used."

It pleased Rick to see that I'd broadened my social horizons and made lots of new friends. He liked Melanie. "She's ace, mate, and a hot looker."

"Did you really save for the airfare? How long did you plan this?"

"Ages. I wanted desperately to be here for your birthday."

"When you didn't email I thought you'd lost interest."

"Hey, you know me. I got this anti-net image to maintain. I'm surprised you still have those net friends of yours...TJ and that fossil dude. Anyway, I can't handle cyber relationships. I'm physical, and being here with you beats the pants off any bloody email."

We surfed the rest of that day. The new stick was wicked, not only to ride but also visually. Rick rode his old stick which he gave me as a parting gift before moving to Canada. It was a fantastic day, and one that gave him a chance to catch up with old mates.

Monday morning, after my folks left for work, Rick and I showered, then made breakfast while still naked. When the doorbell rang unexpectedly, Rick offered to answer it and wrapped a towel around his waist as he made his way up the hall. When he returned to the kitchen, with Brett following, the towel was casually draped over his shoulder. Then Brett

saw I was also naked. "Are you guys gonna stay naked the whole damn time?"

Rick cracked completely, no doubt reminded of the time he answered the door to collect a pizza. The towel wrapped around his waist unraveled and fell to the floor while he fumbled with change. The young pizza bloke didn't know which way to look. Then Rick "accidentally" dropped the change and the pizza guy got to his knees to collect it, right in front of Rick's considerable assets. What a hoot that was! Nudity never bothered Rick, not even at home with his folks. "Hey," he said to Brett, "you can undress too. Kyle's been telling me how hot you are."

"Don't shit me. Kyle's a pervert."

"I know that."

"Hey!" I protested as I buttered toast. "You blokes speak for your bloody selves!"

Rick asked if I'd help him undress Brett. "Or do I have to do it myself?"

Brett freaked and backed off. "You come near me," he threatened, "and I'll break your nose." At that point, Brett was unaware of Rick's karate expertise.

"Don't stress, man. It's not good for your health." And with that, Rick and I donned shorts and invited Brett to join us for breakfast.

"I was only kidding about undressing you," Rick explained. "Kyle tells me you're pretty buff. I've been working out at a gym in Canada but it's bloody tough yakka."

"I don't do gym all that much; mainly boxing and hundreds of sit-ups." An intense convo ensued about training and buffing up before Rick asked: "You wanna take off your shirt? I gotta see those abs Kyle always raves about."

Brett couldn't resist the opportunity to show off his six-pack to a fellow fitness enthusiast. He stood, pulled his T over his head, then sucked in his stomach to reveal the most awesome definition.

Rick ceased chewing and spoke with his mouth still full of bacon and egg. "Whoa! That is fucking impressive! Dammit! I can't get that cut."

"Just sit-ups and more sit-ups, mate." What followed was something that took me by total surprise. "You've got good legs, though."

"Soccer."

Rick quizzed me later about the kind of relationship I had with Brett, and suggested that maybe Brett was more fond of me than I suspected. "I saw the way he looks at you." I disagreed. Brett was straight. One hundred percent straight.

Chapter 28

Probably the most notable of Rick's influences on Brett was his willingness to exhibit his affection for me in a natural yet masculine way. There was nothing wussy about Rick. It demonstrated to Brett that being close to a best mate was cool. And it pleased me to see the two hunks quickly develop a great respect and liking for each other, reinforced by their mutual interest in physical fitness.

At the pizzeria one night, Brett served our table but spent too long chatting. His boss rebuked him in full view of everyone, which reddened his face. I thought Brett would plant that noisy twit right there and then, but he showed admirable restraint. And ... he needed the job.

Following Brett's shift, we rocked over to Susan's place where we chatted until the wee hours about a million things: the swim team, Graham's initiation on the swim tour (which Rick found hilarious), the Wollumbin hike, the adventures Rick and I shared before Brett came on the scene, and life in Canada. While we talked and laughed, Brett listened attentively to every word, learning more about me that night than he could have in a decade.

Next day, Rick and I visited our old stomping grounds at Wollumbin. We spoke very little. There was no need. As we trod

familiar tracks and trails that meandered through the dense rainforest, with its scented booyongs, yellow carrabeens, rosewoods and figs, and massive displays of colorful orchids, a tidal wave of emotional and vivid memories swamped our minds: the most precious of recollections. This Paradise of bangalow palms, woody vines and ancient ferns was our childhood playground, an enchanting source of adventure and wonder. To me, this visit felt like being transported back a hundred years. So much had changed in our lives since.

That night, the whole gang clubbed at the Gold Coast. Stuart dated the same girl twice, setting some sort of record. He was a dedicated field player, and how he played it! Mind you, he was incredibly good looking. Half his luck.

By night's end, Melanie was desperately hungry for love. She wanted me bad. I was horny too, but also obliged to tell her I couldn't leave Rick all alone. "So why not bring him to my place? He'll probably pass out anyway."

Wrong! Despite excessive booze consumption, he failed to fade. Instead, he watched while Melanie and I got cozy on the couch in the den. Then he rose from his chair and began to strip. We had no idea why until he stood beside Melanie, naked and erect, and announced: "What's good for Kyle is good for me!" With an odd mix of dismay and approval, I ogled the

length of his hardness disappearing between the softness of Melanie's welcoming lips.

To understand my sanction is to appreciate the intensely intimate relationship between Rick and me. We were like the same person sharing two separate bodies. As he said, "what's good for Kyle is good for me." Melanie accepted the rationale and happily pleased us both, as well as herself.

"I can see why you like Melanie so much," Rick said excitedly next morning after showering at my house. "She gives awesome head."

"There's more to Melanie than that."

"Sure, I understand that. But good sex is important. Make that vital."

"How come you got naked like that, and pointed your boner at her face? I could never do that to Susan, especially if Brett was present. Or even if he wasn't! Actually, if he were, I wouldn't be standing here now talking to you."

"Because Melanie is a part of you, and you're a part of me. We're part of each other. Anyway, Melanie didn't mind."

"What if I did that to your girlfriend?"

"Same deal."

Every chance we got we surfed. We'd been surfing mates since little grommets swallowing half the Pacific. But now, we were at one with our boards, able to toss them around with the

ease of a yo-yo. Stuart impressed Rick in the surf. Apart from being the quintessential blond hunk, he was a rave surfer almost equal to professional standard. Rick was aware of Stuart's inflated ego but the two got along pretty well.

My folks organized a farewell barbecue the night before Rick's scheduled departure for Canada. All the guys who attended the mask party were there, and the stories and laughs were in limitless supply. Rick and I didn't sleep a wink that night.

Next morning, my folks drove us to the airport. Brett joined us. He and Rick had formed a tight bond. We all tried valiantly to be cheery, but I was on the verge of tears the whole damn trip. The lump in my throat was the size of a tennis ball. As we neared Gold Coast airport, I saw those big silver birds leaving their vapor trails behind, heading to who-knew-where, and leaving me wretchedly heavy-hearted. In a matter of minutes, my best mate and I were to be torn apart like two paper dolls. The image of Rick taking off his mask at my birthday party flashed through my mind. It seemed a minute ago.

The dreaded moment arrived; the unstoppable force that treats life with contempt. Rick paused as he was about to enter the passport control. I lost it and broke down. I hugged

him long and hard in the vain hope that somehow he'd change his mind and stay. "Thanks for everything," I sobbed.

"Me too. I love you, Kyle."

"I love you, Rick."

On the return trip, Brett uttered hardly a word. Apart from empathizing with my feelings, I figured he felt crushed as well.

The sight of my empty room hit me like a sledgehammer. The finality of Rick's departure was irrevocable. He now sat aboard a plane headed for Vancouver but his unique smell remained on my pillow. I took it and pressed its soft plumpness to my face, taking deep lungfuls and allowing them to linger.

G'day Kyle,

Rick wrote me during his stay. I thought you should have this email.

LYT, G

Hi, G,

Thanks for your note. Kyle passed it on to me. The holiday has been fantastic. The weather's kind and it's like mid summer here. I think we've tried to put as much into the time as possible. We visited all the old haunts; beach, mountain, surf, pizza joint, old school. Managed to do quite a

bit of surfing as well, and met up with a bunch of old friends in and out of the surf.

Kyle seems to have a good lot of friends at the moment. I like Brett. He's probably the most mature of the bunch. His girlfriend Susan complements him a lot. Little Graham reminds me a great deal of what Kyle was like as a grommet, always putting his foot in it. He's a head-turner and you can actually have fun watching the young groupies reactions when he's on the beach. Kyle's girlfriend Melanie is very neat and I think the two of them will build quite a good relationship. The plus for her is that she allows Kyle a lot of space, which is more than I can say for most of the girlfriends I've had. Stuart is pretty cool except he's got an ego. He's totally good looking with a body to match. The only problem is he knows it. We get along okay, though.

Kyle? He hasn't changed. I love him to bits. He still tastes the same too. :>

As to the two of us, I think what I see in the future is probably both of us being married. But we will find the opportunities to get together and love each other much the same as we do now. I think it's important for people to express their love physically. I don't see him and myself as two guys, more like two people in love with our friendship. It's going to be very hard to leave (Byron) but we're both

realistic about it, and I think this holiday has made us both realize that it's not forever.

I'm going to go haul him out of the shower. He doesn't know that I'm sending this. After all, I have this anti-net image to maintain. ☺

Thanks for everything you've done for him. I really appreciate it.

All the best,

Rick

The first week back at school was hectic. Teachers crammed as much into our heads as possible, including revision of the previous two years' study. This was our third quarter of the school year, the lead-up to the big one: matriculation. On top of that, the teachers were undertaking evaluation for the Awards Evening due that September. Every pupil was under detailed scrutiny.

A junior, one of Mitch's new recruits, approached Brett in the quad and confessed to being ordered to beat up on Graham. "Mitch said he was a trouble-maker, but Graham's a mate so I refused. Then I got my ass kicked for not following orders. I tried to apologize to Graham but he doesn't wanna know me."

"So what happened?"

"After I got my ass kicked, Mitch and his gang cornered Graham and his friend Ryan in the change rooms. Graham copped a beating while Ryan tried to help, so Mitch beat up on his younger bro as well."

With the pressure of study as well as prefect duties, Brett was in no mood for Mitch's shit. He confronted the bully alone in the toilets. "Hey, asshole, I'm tired of hearing about you bullying the lighties. You're dead meat."

"Don't gimme that bullshit, Mr Prefect *sir*, you can't do anything to me without getting yourself into serious shit."

"You're the one who's in serious shit."

"I'm walking out of here," Mitch said confidently as he zipped his fly. "Any trouble from you Mr Prefect *sir* and I'll report you."

Brett's fist connected with the slob's jaw and sent him sprawling. "Okay, so report me. Now get up!" Mitch did so, took a wild swing, and was down again in a second with blood oozing from his lip. "Get up again," Brett ordered.

"Fuck off."

"Okay, I'll help you." And with that, Brett grabbed the guy's school blazer and hauled him to his feet. With one well-aimed punch, Brett flattened the bully's nose, accompanied by a loud crack. Mitch crumpled once more as many hands grabbed

Brett and held him. "Lemme go!" Brett insisted as he struggled wildly. "I'm gonna kill the cunt!"

"You've done enough damage already," somebody said.

Brett and I walked home from school that afternoon. "Mitch has been kinda quiet lately," I remarked. "Kinda disappeared into the woodwork. Won't be for long, though." Brett ignored me so I continued. "I checked Graham's bruises on his arms and chest. He was beaten pretty bad." Still no response from Brett. "How's Mitch? I hear his nose is broken."

"I don't wanna talk about it."

"I never saw you so strung out."

"Just drop it, Kyle."

"Okay, okay. Just asking."

"Don't."

"Did you catch the surf comp on TV? Danny Mills scored third in the finals. Totally hot surfer. Jeez, Taylor Knox from the US won." Nothing from Brett. "Brett?"

"What?"

"Melanie's been quizzing me about Rick. I think she's crazy about his king-size cock."

That got his attention. "She saw it?"

"Yeah, when we slept over at Melanie's place after clubbing."

"And it doesn't bother you?"

"Why should it?"

"Kyle," he said as we stopped at his front gate, "I don't get you. You breeze through life like it's some feel-good movie. Most of all, I don't understand why you hang with me when I'm in a bad mood."

"Rick and I used to fight a lot when we were lighties, but we always stayed mates. More than mates. It's the same with you."

"I'm not Rick. I suppose that means I'm some kinda substitute when he's not here?"

"You know better than that."

"Do I?"

That question irritated my sensibility the rest of the way home, and afterwards during homework. An hour later, I couldn't stand the irritation any longer so I phoned. "What did you mean by saying you're some kinda substitute for Rick?"

"Hey, he's not here and I am. Go figure."

"It was a surprise visit, remember? I didn't know he was coming to Byron. I befriended you over a year ago. How do you figure you're a substitute? That's bullshit!"

"Listen up, Kyle. You're the kinda guy who can't handle being alone and independent. You stick to your friends like shit to a blanket."

"Charming. Anyway, I thought about what you said. Seems to me like you found my friendship with Rick too intense. Maybe you think you can't fill his shoes or whatever."

"So now you're studying psychology?"

"I just wanted you to know that you don't need to fill his shoes—that's all—and he doesn't need to fill yours. That's not the way it works."

"Whatever. Listen, I've got a stack of homework—and so do you. Catch you later."

"Enjoy being alone and independent."

Well, he took my advice by retreating into his shell for the remainder of the week, almost incommunicado. How the hell was I supposed to understand that bloke? He probably figured I was the kinda guy who threw his arms around anything and everything that came within reach, and, come to think of it, I guess he was more accurate than not. What on earth went on in that handsome head of his? Fear of getting too close to a best mate? Fear of attachment? Fear of love? Fear of letting go when the time came to part? So many questions, so few answers.

Chapter 29

Regardless of what reaction I might tempt, I phoned Brett. His moods were unpredictable but, this time, I was in luck.

"Hey, mate, wanna rock over here for a while?" he said cheerily.

"I thought you were mad at me. You've been so damn quiet all week. You hardly said a word when we walked home this afternoon."

"Sorry, mate. It's the pressure of study and stuff. I'm still in uniform."

"Don't change until I get there!"

"Pervert."

Brett opened his front door and greeted me with a grin, then I followed him to his room. He was a very tidy person who took quite a while to change out of his school uniform, neatly folding and hanging his clothes. "Hey," I asked when he was almost finished. "You gonna stay in your boxers?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

"Because I feel like staying in my boxers, that's why. And if you stop staring at me long enough you can strip down to your boxers as well."

"I'm wearing briefs."

"So?"

My briefs were my favorite; white with a pouch and narrow sides. "That's the only prob with white briefs," I said as I stepped out of my shorts, "the wet spot makes them see-through."

"What wet spot?"

"The one I'm gonna get. That's why I tuck my dick down into the pouch."

"You should swim in those briefs. I'll take Susan along to watch. She'll get so horny she'll wanna make love all night."

"She fancies me, huh?"

"Get stuffed. She digs white briefs."

There we were, two horny teens in their underwear with neither having the courage to initiate some sort of shenanigans. Instead, we spent a while in the kitchen where Brett rustled up some food that we took back to his room. I sat on the side of his bed while he chose the chair at his desk.

"You still missing Rick?" he asked.

"A stack. But don't gimme that crap about your being a substitute again."

"Chill. I've had a chance to think about it. It's cool."

"Can I massage you?"

"Go for it."

I stood behind him and worked his powerful, silky-smooth shoulders. Occasionally, my hands explored his awesome pecs and squeezed them. He didn't seem to mind. Then, when I saw the telltale wet patch on his boxers, and the evidence of a major hardon, I reached down to the elastic waistband. He took my wrists and returned my hands to his shoulders.

"Sorry," I apologized.

"No biggie."

"Can you stretch? I wanna see something."

"Like what?"

Yeah, right, as if he didn't know. "Just stretch!" He clasped his hands on top of his head and leaned back to give me a topside view. "Wow! Every pec and ab muscle is screaming down there!"

He allowed my hands to glide over his exquisite definition before calling a halt. "Piss off, Kyle. I should've known better."

"If I were Susan you'd let me play a little."

"You're not Susan," he laughed, "so shuddup." Then he stood, pointed to his chair and asked me to sit and stretch the same as he did. His fingers lightly explored the contours

of my chest and abs. Then something weird happened. His hands began to shake and he withdrew.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

The phone rang at that very moment and Brett wasted no time answering it. The caller was Susan. He explained he had to go see her.

"You better change your boxers."

"What for? One wet patch is the same as another."

"So how come you got a wet patch now?"

"I gotta go, Kyle."

"Answer my question."

"Hey, I dunno why. Okay?" was his sharp reply as he dressed hurriedly. "We're all a pile of guts, mate, made from chemicals that do their own thing. I don't know why certain things happen, they just do."

"Thanks for inviting me over."

"Cool, bro. And I'm sorry for being moody lately."

"We're mates. Don't stress."

"Thanks."

One afternoon during homework in my room, Brett paid a surprise visit. He explained he couldn't stay long but that he needed to talk. There was a problem at the pizzeria. "You gonna quit? You make good bucks there."

"No, I'm not gonna quit but I sure as hell felt like it today," he said, planting his butt on the side of my bed. "I worked a long shift and felt pretty damn bushed when one of the kitchen staff stuffed up an order. The customer complained so I had to pay for the damn pizza. I was so mad I got into an argument in the kitchen."

"They gonna fire you?"

"Nah. I just needed to tell somebody."

"Somebody?"

"Hey, mate, you care what happens. Okay? Apart from Susan you're the only one who does."

"Have you seen Mitch's eye? It's taking ages to heal. You must've clobbered him good."

"He deserved it. Anyway, I gotta jet. Thanks for listening."

"No worries. Anytime. Hey, when's your birthday?"

"October 17. Why? Oh, I see. Hey, listen, Kyle, don't go making any fuss, okay? I don't need that kinda shit."

Friday rolled around and Brett chose to give me one helluva workout in the ring. Afterwards, in the showers, I complained. "Were you trying to hurt me? Because you did!"

"You know what to do if you can't take it."

"I *can* take it, Brett, but we're supposed to be training not trying to kill each other."

"Whatever."

I hated that word, as well as his offhandedness. "Has SFB been at it again? I worry about you, Brett. I wonder if you'll get married and think it's no big deal to climb into your kids."

"Jesus, Kyle, don't you have enough to worry about already without worrying about what might happen in ten years? For fuck sake, drop it."

One morning I did lose it. I ripped off my headgear and gloves and bitched, "Okay, Brett, you can keep your fucking boxing." But I was back next morning, and flattened him twice.

One weekend, Susan and Melanie organized a 'girls night out' so Brett and I played pool at a local pub. We sat at a table, opposite each other and, for a while, sipped our beers and watched the other pool players. Then, unexpectedly, Brett giggled. "I would never have seen us as mates. I used to see you hanging out with the swim team and thought what an arrogant prick you were; always loud, always laughing, always full of shit. Hell, Kyle, you still are! Then I got this brainwave. Because you're such a short shit, and there was no way you were gonna challenge me, I shouted 'faggot' across the quad just to burst your arrogant ass-bubble."

"Got to you, though, huh?"

"When you walked up to me, I had this thing about really putting you down. I was gonna send you flat on your smart ass. When you hit me, I knew you were dead meat. I was determined to hurt you and I did. So why did you bother?"

"Bother what?"

"To visit me in hospital? I thought you'd be the first to party."

"Nah. I had to see you in hospital because I knew you'd be naked under the sheets."

"Fuck off, Kyle. Jesus! I'm trying to be serious here."

"So am I." Brett raised his hand and threatened to smack me but I continued. "So you hated me because I was always laughing?"

"It pissed me off. So, why did you visit me in hospital?"

"To make sure you were hurting bad."

"You must've been pretty pleased, then."

"No," I admitted. "I came to see if you were okay because I liked you."

"For hurting you?"

"No. Because you're the tough, macho, Rambo type nobody fucks with. You were a challenge for me."

The conversation drifted to school, the girls, swimming, Brett's mom and SFB, before Brett made a surprise announcement. "My dad called. Actually, he called a few times

since Father's Day. He wants me to visit him in Perth for the school holidays."

"You gonna go?" I asked, as if he were about to disappear out of my life.

"Probably. I've been thinking about it quite a bit. Hey! Stop looking so down! It's only a week."

"I'm not down. Visiting your dad is cool."

"It's just that he's been on my mind lately, and I'd like to get a good relationship going. I really fucked up as a lightie, and he did his best. Well, the best he knew how, I guess."

The conversation, probably the most meaningful to date, was so engrossing, time evaporated. I invited Brett to sleep over, "my folks are out until the wee hours and I'm scared of the dark."

"I don't have my PJs with me."

"I got some really cool invisible ones."

A gourmet chef I was not, but Brett seemed happy with my toasted sandwiches, as well as the fact that I was fussing over him. We took the food out to the pool where we sat on the edge and dangled our feet. The underwater lights provided a shimmering, liquid canvas of dancing blues and whites and greens that proved too enticing for Brett to resist. "The water's like ice," he commented. "Wanna get wet?"

"You're kidding."

"Nope, I'm amped for a swim."

A few seconds later, I swam naked. Brett hesitated a moment before stripping, then dove in. I tackled him from behind, but he instinctively reached for my nuts and squeezed them hard, forcing me to release my grip. Then he quickly retreated to the steps and giggled but I was right behind the bastard. "It's not funny!" I complained, and cupped his balls in my hand.

"If you hurt me, Kyle, you're dead."

"They're huge—more than a handful—and they hang like a boxing spring ball."

"Just remember what I said."

In a timeless void that was exclusively ours, we swam around each other in circles, allowing our fingers to drift along the entire length of the other's body. It was a highly erotic water ballet using spontaneous choreography. A couple of times, we swam underwater at the deep end, each circling the other, and admiring the other's body. Eventually, Brett headed for the wall, heaved himself out of the water, and sat on the edge with his legs dangling. No longer was the water chilly. No longer did it matter. "You got a silly grin on your face," I said as I arrived between his knees. "What's so amusing?"

"This is so crazy it feels ordinary. I mean like natural ... and special. A while ago I could never have anticipated my being in such a situation."

"Like?"

"Like ... okay, can I say something without you doing an amateur Freud?"

"Shoot."

"I sometimes wonder what it would be like for a guy to be blown by another guy. And just now, underwater, I was waiting for you to take a chance, and wondering how I would react if you did."

"So, what would you do?"

"Because it's you? Probably nothing." Then he smiled and added, "maybe I'd even get a kick out of it." My arms rested on his thighs while my fingers played with his abs and belly button. "I'm not sure I'd have the guts to blow another guy," he said.

"In case the word got out?"

"It's not that. I'm just not sure."

"Would you let me blow you?"

"Not right now. But seriously, if I wanted a guy to blow me then I guess it would be you."

"Wanna have a competition to see who's best?"

"Best at what?"

I raised my fist. "Champion jacker! We play in the water and see who's first to grab the other guy's dick and jack him. First to cum is the loser."

"I'll take you on," Brett grinned as he slipped back into the pool. "But only because you think I'm too scared, you little fuck."

For the next few minutes, we sent tall sprays of water in all directions while we giggled, splashed, wrestled and writhed in a tangle of arms and legs. However, it was all over when Brett grabbed my boner and jacked it. In no time, long ribbons of thick juice rose to the surface, bobbing around like lazy invertebrates.

Brett exited the water with a single dolphin's leap. "Chicken," I yelled.

"I'm not swimming in your jizz!"

Chapter 30

Before succumbing to sleep that night, Brett asked an odd question. "Kyle," he began slowly, "do you think you know yourself pretty well?"

"I think so. Not sure. Why?"

"Nothing. I was just wondering if any of us knows himself at all."

"Why do you say that?"

"Before you came along, I figured I knew myself, and now I'm discovering that I don't—not really."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Nope. Not a bad thing. Night, mate."

"Night."

My main concern at that time was Graham and drugs. He was into some serious shit. Nothing I said, however diplomatically, affected him. In fact, he became defensive and even abusive at times. The problem, apparently, weighed more heavily on my mind than I realized. I'd developed a habit of sitting under a tree by myself during school recess, avoiding Brett, and even his homemade avocado and tomato sandwiches. One afternoon after school, he phoned and invited me over to his place, where we sat in the courtyard, drinking coffee.

"You worry about Graham," he insisted, "because he's your friend. You worry about me because I'm your friend. Hell, you worry about the nerd at school because he has no friends! You just worry, period! On the other hand, Graham must be in deep shit—you're obviously carrying a lot of baggage, Kyle."

His comment triggered an immediate flow of tears to my eyes. I tried to hide them but it was pointless. One trickled down my cheek as I spoke. "It's been happening since he befriended his mate Sean. They're getting into coke and fuck knows what else."

"Are you sure it's the drug thing that bothers you and not jealousy?"

"It's cool he has a mate his own age who surfs with him, but..."

"More coffee? Or something stronger?"

I ignored the offer. "His attitude is different, like he doesn't give a damn."

Brett stood behind me and massaged my shoulders while I alternated between sobbing and giggling, relieved to share my concerns with a caring mate. "That's a newie; you massaging me."

"Graham's a lightie, Kyle. He'll learn. Rick told me some stories about you and the shit you were into as a lightie."

"So that's where it came from? Graham told me he heard I was a coke head."

"They weren't Rick's words."

"Maybe not, but that's how Graham interpreted it."

"Because it suits him right now to say that kinda thing."

"Anyway, Brett, I gotta beetle before my folks get home from work. I'm supposed to be studying."

"I'll walk with you. I gotta stop off at Susan's."

"Oil change?"

"No!" he cracked. "You got a one-track mind. She borrowed one of my CDs."

I was unaware at the time that Brett had recruited Graham to the boxing team, and gave him personal tuition. He put him in the ring with one of the team's best juniors who sent Graham flat on his butt with the first punch. "Had to fetch the smelling salts," Brett explained. "He's strong, though; he just gets back up and takes it again."

"I can relate to that. So what's with the boxing?"

"Just a thought. Keeps him busy and, hopefully, out of crap. It also gave me the opportunity to speak to him in the change room. I told him you're worried about him and that you're his friend."

A few days later, Brett and I had other things on our minds—including the Senior Prom. We walked to the hire shop

together to check the temporary alterations to our tuxedos. As Brett admired his reflection in the mirror, he saw me standing behind him wearing a cheesy grin.

"What were you laughing at?" he asked on the walk home, carrying our hung suits wrapped in thin transparent plastic.

"I wasn't. I was thinking how wicked you look in your tux, like one of those hunk film stars, with your dimpled grin and gelled hair."

"You looked pretty wicked yourself, mate."

"Melanie bought a new dress; must've cost her folks a bomb!"

"Yeah? Get this: Susan's folks organized a limo to take us to and from the prom. Uniformed chauffeur and everything!"

"For all of us?"

"Yep. They wanna make sure we all get home in one piece."

My folks were so excited they insisted on waiting with me at the front gate for the limo's arrival. The damn thing was almost as long a cricket pitch! Brett, cutting a figure like a teenage James Bond, stepped out of the car to be immediately swamped by my mom's arms. My dad was less demonstrative and shook hands, but he was surely as proud of my best mate as he was of his own son.

The limo rolled to a gentle halt outside the house of a princess. With her hair worn up, and radiating exceptional

class, Susan approached the car, arm in arm with her handsome beau. Next stop, Melanie's house. What a stunner! She looked totally smashing, hair done in ringlets, scattered over bare shoulders. She wore a strapless evening gown, which revealed just enough cleavage to send most blokes troppo. I was totally dumbstruck by the magical apparition of my girl appearing so incredibly beautiful.

The grade 11s did a fantastic job of decorating the hall. Yards and yards of blue and white material hung from the ceiling, representing a summer sky with clouds. The walls and floor were decorated to simulate an underwater environment, on the seabed. And the special lighting caused all the decorations to shimmer like dancing, filtered sunlight. The grade 11s who were chosen to be waiters were athletically well-built and, as part of the nautical theme, wore mini skirts made of strips of green satin over their Speedos.

Everyone at the dance looked dazzling: Frank, Kev, Jolly Jim—no longer schoolboys but young adults. Even Mitch was halfway decent, escorting an absolute doll. How the hell...?

Each of the tables offered a bottle of wine to be shared by four people. Yeah, right. And inside every tuxedo jacket was a half jack of something a little stronger. Did the organizers think we were that dumb? Or innocent?

At 1am, the entire group headed to the same barn used some time ago by the swim team to stage its strip show. All the guys swapped tuxedos for jeans and Ts, although many elected to go topless because it was a hot night. Just before dawn, we hit the beach for a sunrise swim. The girls stripped down to panties and bras and the guys down to briefs and boxers. Before long, the group played 'strip the ladies' with Melanie being one of the many girls forcibly relieved of their bras. Later, we sat on the beach, shivering our asses off, and watched the first of the sun's gentle rays illuminate Byron Bay headland and the lighthouse.

"Can you believe this?" Brett asked. "Tuxedos one minute, boxers the next? Adults for a night then back to teens."

"My dad says teens are supposed to be crazy."

"I guess so."

"Wouldn't wanna change it 'though."

"Nope."

A couple of early-morning surfers jogged down the beach, boards tucked under their arms. They gave us a curious glance before they hit the surf and paddled out.

"You think they reckon we're crazy, sitting here almost naked?"

During the ride home, the limo driver praised us for being the best-behaved teens he'd seen in a long time.

A few nights later, Melanie and I were at her house, engaged in a passionate lovemaking session when the doorbell rang at 1am. She threw on a nightgown and left the room. Shortly afterwards, she and Brett appeared at the bedroom doorway. I quickly grabbed the sheet and covered myself. "Hey, mate, how's it going?" I asked, feigning normalcy.

"Susan's out with her folks. I wondered if you guys would like to go out for a beer or something."

"It's okay, Kyle," Melanie offered without consultation. "I need an early night anyway."

As we walked to Brett's house, he apologized for disturbing my evening. "Anyway, I decided if I wasn't getting any tonight, neither were you."

"Too late."

"So I gathered."

"No problem. Melanie's cool about it. Besides, I'm stoked you hunted me down like that."

"Call it desperation. I'd have to be desperate to track you down. Can you sleep over? My mom and SFB are away camping."

The conversation we'd had skinny-dipping in my pool some days earlier must have played on Brett's mind. During the battle between his nervousness and curiosity, the latter

triumphed, with a little encouragement from me. We were naked in his kitchen when I knelt before him.

"You're not my sex slave, Kyle. You don't need to do this. Besides, there's no way I could return the favor. I just couldn't do it."

"Hey, does it look like I'm being forced into anything here?"

Afterwards, Brett lay sprawled on his back on the courtyard table, naked and exhausted. "I guess I'm gonna have to finish making the coffee," I joked. "Some friend *you* are."

"Don't burn the coffee."

"How the hell could I burn coffee?"

"You'll find a way."

We remained silent as we sipped our brew, each pondering private thoughts about what had taken place. I wondered how on earth I'd gotten away with it, and he probably wondered why he allowed it to happen. His only comment just after he climaxed was, "Oh, my God! Never in my life did I imagine that another guy could make me feel so good!"

He woke me in the morning, one hand holding a coffee and his other wrapped around my piss boner. "Hey, Sleeping Beauty," he said, "here's something to wake you."

The moment I spotted his hand on my dick, he quickly removed it. But I grabbed his hand and put it back. "Keep it there."

"You're totally outrageous, Kyle. You're leading me astray. If Susan finds out..."

"She won't, and neither will Melanie," I said as I raised myself on one elbow and placed my coffee on the bedside table. "I'm sorry the night's over. I had an awesome time. Jeez, Brett, I got a lotta friends but nobody like you, except maybe for Rick."

"I guessed about you and Rick. It was so damn obvious I'd need to be blind not to notice."

"Hey, if you're not in a hurry, you wanna get back into bed?"

He obliged, but not as expected. He planted his butt on my stomach and tickled me. In a nano second I was a writhing, giggling, wriggling tangle of arms and legs, pleading with him to desist. "Stop, stop! I'm ticklish!"

"Really? Well, what do you know! Say 'please, Uncle Brett'."

"Please, Uncle Brett! Stop, stop!" But then I spotted his boner and grabbed it. "Now that looks delicious!"

"Let go, you horny toad!" And with that he retaliated by squeezing my nuts. "I gotta get ready for work."

Not a word was mentioned about that night for weeks. Instead, we carried on as though it never happened despite the fact that neither of us could deny it.

One morning in the gym, Brett whacked me on the nose and burst a blood vessel. It was superficial, no damage done, but it looked rather messy. Soon, word got around school that Brett and I were in a serious fight. 'Brett beat the hell out of Kyle'. It was an ideal opportunity for Mitch to seize upon. "Hey, Brett! Thanks, mate. I've been wanting to do that myself," he gloated within earshot of a crowd of students.

"No worries. Come over here and I'll show you how it's done, you prick."

"Yeah, you and the swim team. Challenge me on your own, dickhead."

Mitch was big and slow, or was he? Jolly Jim told me that Mitch was a lot stronger and faster than credited for. That aside, Brett was furious and itched to take out that bully once and for all. He asked me to second him in the ring.

"Forget him, mate. He's a pratt."

"Fuck that. He made me look like a right jerk."

"Forget it, Brett."

"Would you?"

"No."

"Then shut your mouth. You gonna second me or not?"

"It's the end of term! Jeez, Brett, it's hopeless talking to you when you're pissed off." But I relented and offered to second him.

What surprised both Brett and me was that Jolly Jim offered to second Mitch. Maybe he wanted to keep the fight fair or something. Meanwhile, Mitch must have turned over a new leaf. His gut had shrunk to reveal the hard lines of his six-pack, and his arms were more clearly defined. Added to that, the coach was dirty on Brett for organizing the fight after school hours.

Following the first bell, Brett danced confidently into center ring. Whammo! He was flat on his back on the canvas.

"What happened?" I asked in our corner as I dabbed his face with a damp towel.

"I thought he'd back off from the start and wait for a lucky punch."

The coach approached, after noticing Brett's bleeding mouth, and asked if he wanted to quit. Quit? Brett? "No way, coach. No way!"

During the remainder of round one, the guys gave each other body blows that obviously hurt. Then Mitch managed to land a winder on Brett's mouth. The coach ordered a minute's break.

"Stop the bleeding, Kyle, or the coach will stop the fight!"

"Maybe he should," I suggested. Then Brett grabbed the towel and insisted on doing the job himself. At that point we noticed Jolly Jim plugging Mitch's nose to stem the flow of blood. So Brett wasn't the only one to cop a hiding.

I managed to stop Brett's bleeding but noticed a lot of blood in his mouth. Mitch's first punch apparently dislodged the mouth guard, causing Brett to bite the inside of his lip. "I'll live," was his comment when I informed him of my observation.

Both fighters were more cautious during round two, dancing, bobbing and weaving, sizing, jabbing, and waiting for the chance to flatten the other. But just prior to the bell, Brett unwittingly walked into a left hook that sent him staggering into the ropes.

"Mitch opened your lip again. Your mouth's full of blood, and it's swelling. Brett? Are you listening? Let me stop the fight."

"I'm fine, Kyle. Stop stressing."

"I'm gonna throw in the towel."

"You do that, and you're history. I'll never speak to you again."

Well, that shut me up and I proceeded to patch him as best I could.

Back in the ring, Brett managed to penetrate a flurry of punches and connect with Mitch's vital spot. He crumpled vertically, with legs of jello, and ended on his knees and face. The entire scenario appeared to occur in deliciously victorious slow motion. Once the coach realized the untidy heap on the canvas wasn't about to get to its feet anytime soon, he called an end to the match. Brett returned to his corner and washed his face, saying he'd shower at home, then he rejoined Mitch to check his condition. Surprisingly, Mitch was quite gallant and civil in defeat. "Okay," he admitted, "so you don't need the whole swim team."

Chapter 31

Brett's flight to Perth to visit his dad was just a week hence, and he was nervous. He was only seven when they last saw each other. "Part of me is excited, part of me is freaking," my mate admitted. "I need to see him, though. If I don't take advantage of this opportunity it may never present itself again. Besides, it's a missing piece of the jigsaw, a major part of my life. And yet it's difficult to imagine my dad and me being like you and yours. Yours is just so damn cool. Remember when he and I went fishing on the lake during the holiday at Somerset? It wasn't like being with someone's dad, more like being with a mate. He treated me like an equal, not some teen." Brett shook his head. "I can't see my dad treating me like that."

After showering together at his place, we remained naked in the kitchen as I watched him pour two coffees. "You know something?" he said. "If you hadn't stuck by me—I mean, if you hadn't taken all the crap I dumped on you—the moods, the aggro—and come back for more, I could've been—well—I wouldn't have changed."

"You didn't change. You were always who you are. You just kept yourself hidden."

"Yeah? So how come I couldn't hide from you?" he asked, leading the way to the courtyard table.

"Intuition maybe. I don't know. I just had a feeling."

"Where?" he grinned.

"Fuck off, Brett! It's wasn't like that."

"Yeah, right."

"Okay," I admitted, "but in the main I was interested in you as a person. You were a challenge."

"And now?"

"You still are. I never take you for granted, Brett."

"Ditto. On the other hand, I know you'll stick around like shit to a blanket. That's the kinda bloke you are."

"And you're the kinda bloke who sticks up for his mates. You didn't fight Mitch today because he pissed you off, you fought him because he was crapping on me."

"One excuse is as good as another."

"Bullshit. What about the time you beat the crap outta him because he hassled Graham?"

"So what are you gonna do? Give me a medal?"

Friday was the last day before Spring Break, and our final assembly. I organized a few guys from the swim team, plus a few mates, for a get-together at my place. My dad already knew about Brett's planned meeting with his father.

"Your dad is probably just as nervous as you, maybe more so."

"It's hard to tell," Brett mused after ripping the ring-pull off a can of VB.

"Well, I can only judge it from my own perspective, and only imagine what it would be like for me to meet Kyle after ten years."

"It was you and Kyle who inspired me to phone my dad. I figure there was a chance that—maybe—you know—that maybe we could patch things up."

"You're like a brother to my son."

"Yeah, we kinda get along okay."

"Better than okay. His mother and I often felt guilty about not having more children. But not now. Kyle has you and Graham, and many other friends—just like an extended family. At least, that's how I feel about it."

"Thanks. I do, too."

My dad offered Brett a ride to the airport in the Kombi, for which my mate was grateful. And me? I spent the week visiting a friend on a farm near Lake Somerset in Queensland. But that's another story. Meanwhile, my dad revealed that he and mom did not have the money to keep me at school the following year for the post-matriculation course. Frankly, I wasn't too stressed about the news; planning instead to find a job and save enough to put myself through college in 2002 to study marine biology.

Brett and I got together again when school resumed, where, during recess, he told me all about his trip to Perth. "They have a son of ten; blond, swims, plays soccer. His sister is seven and a real little cutie. Both love me to bits, so does my dad and step mom. It was a completely new experience for me, Kyle—I mean, having a family like that and a strong sense of belonging. You've had it all your life, you're used to it. Anyway, I could easily live in Perth. There's loads of work there, and money to be made."

That last comment floored me. "You're not serious?"

"Hey, I'm not planning to go there right now. Stop stressing. Jesus, you make me nervous when you jump to conclusions like that."

"So how did you and your dad get along?"

"We had a lot of opportunities to chat; we have a good thing going now. I asked him why he treated my mom and me like he did. He said he really didn't have an answer except that he wasn't very happy in those days. He needed to escape the whole situation of marriage and fathering a kid. And now? He wants to make up for all the wrong he did, such as leaving me without a dad."

"You once told me, right here in the quad, that you didn't have a dad."

"That's the way I felt then, but it's different now."

"How different?"

"My dad said if I spent a few years in Perth he'd pay for college. He also said if I wanted to stay here in Byron Bay he'd help with college fees up the coast at Surfers, or maybe down south at Coffs Harbor."

"So what are you thinking?" I asked, fearing the worst.

"I don't think it would be fair to take my dad's money while living here on the east coast."

"So you're thinking of moving to Perth?"

"Jeez, Kyle, your bottom lip looks like it's been stepped on. Anyway, shut up. I never said I was going anywhere. I intend to work things out so that I can pay my own way. I told you that already. Jesus Christ, you'd swear we were lovers or something the way you carry on." Then the corners of his mouth turned into a smile, "and wipe that grin off your face!"

That week, the school conducted its Valedictory Service, the final assembly in the main hall for Year 12 students as pupils. All parents attended, including Brett's mom and SFB. During the ceremony, awards, based on votes by Years 10, 11 and 12, were presented to selected seniors. Frank was voted the person most likely to succeed. Bloody hell, that was no surprise to anyone. Mitch was awarded 'The person showing most signs of promise'. What signs? They must've used a microscope. Tears welled in my eyes when the headmaster announced the

winner of the certificate awarded to 'The most caring person for always putting others ahead of himself-Kyle Taranto'. I had no idea whether to appear happy or serious as I accepted the honor. Fortunately, the next award took the spotlight off me and focused its embarrassing attention on Brett, who reluctantly stepped forward to receive his certificate: 'The most likable person in school, a fair prefect and an example of honor for the school'. Brett was clearly mortified by the cheers and applause.

After the service, and singing of the school song, the Year 12s walked through the hall to farewell the rest of the students. Brett and I made our way together through the crowd and eventually joined Graham whose tears contradicted his beaming smile. "So, Conan, now you can't touch me anymore."

"Says who? I can still beat you up."

The grommet chose that moment to disappear. He would surely have cried his little heart out if he'd stayed a second longer. Hell, I wasn't doing much better.

It took me a while to find Graham, sitting on a yard bench on his lonesome, face buried in his hands. "You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, except school sucks."

"Why? Hey, Conan's leaving so he won't hassle you anymore." Graham's shoulders shook with sobs, otherwise he

remained silent. "It's gonna be okay, y'know. We'll still beat you up. And you live right next door."

"Not the same."

"Well, not exactly."

"Brett was helping me with boxing," he sniffled, "and you were always there to talk to."

"Brett can still help you with boxing. Hey, I'm not happy about leaving you to walk to school by yourself. I'm gonna miss this place. My whole life revolved around school and all my friends here. You got loads of friends here, too." I paused to wait for a reaction but all I got was sobbing and more sniffing. "Looks like what I'm saying isn't helping any. I know how you feel, though, because I feel the same. I'll miss the school and the vibe, big time. Sure, the classes and the studies get you down but I've had such a good time here, and made a stack of friends. I remember the Valedictory Service last year. Even the teachers were crying. And now it's my turn. It's so weird—saying goodbye to all the juniors we helped during the past two years on the swim team, and knowing that—apart from returning to write exams—this will be the last time we're in school. It's like—totally unreal."

"It sucks."

Later, Brett asked me about Graham. "No, he's not okay," I answered, "but it's one of those things he needs to handle."

It's not as if anyone can do anything about it. By the way, he's grown to like you a stack."

"I've always liked him. He's a kick-ass little shit with a big heart."

"You should get a job writing for Hallmark greeting cards." I cracked, then added, "The most likable person in school? You? The guy who called me a fag and had me beaten up?"

"Shut up, Kyle," he laughed, "before I smack you."

"Hey, I always reckoned you're likable. It's you who's always put yourself down."

"There's one amazing thing about my years at school, Kyle. You. They're right. You are the most caring person here. You were first to show me it's okay to care about someone, like when you visited me in hospital. Actually, I suspect you came just to see if I had bed covers."

"You would've done the same."

"Nope. Don't believe that. I was an angry, pissed-off-with-the-world person. Back then, the only reason I'd visit you in hospital is to gloat, hoping you were hurting more than I was. I learned a lot from you."

"Ooo! Want me to get down on my knees now? Is that a zip or button fly?"

Late afternoon, the Year 12s boarded a bus complete with driver, and rented by the students. On board was more booze than a pub. We toured the local area, drinking, laughing, joking and making a helluva noise, then drove down the coast to Ballina, where we stopped for fish 'n' chips. From there, we headed inland to Lismore, then back through the hilly coastal country to Byron Bay, arriving at 10pm.

Brett was too trashed to walk me home, so we said our goodnights at his gate. On the way to my place, I stopped at 'our' tree and took a leak. Suddenly, I felt so incredibly alone; a million school memories simultaneously flooded my mind. The end had screeched to a deafening halt, leaving in its wake an eerie, empty silence. It was over: school, friends, the swim team, everything.

"One door closes, another opens," Brett said when he phoned after lunch the next day.

"What door? It's like I'm not prepared for any of this. It's not like the end of a chapter, it's like the end of the whole damn book!"

"Hey, mate, you're stressed. It'll all work out."

"Yeah, right. And you'll be in Perth."

"Jesus, Kyle, I don't have any plans yet. Anyway, you got some vision of you and me in some Byron Bay nursing home in wheelchairs when we're both 100?"

"Don't make me laugh."

"You taught me to laugh. Now it's my turn. Feeling better now?"

"Yeah."

"You seen Stuart lately?"

"Nope. He's probably hanging with his posh mates. Leave me outta that."

"He was at Susan's while I was away. Susan told me about it. And I know he wasn't there for a cup of tea."

"Anything happen?"

"No, and I believe Susan. But you already know what went down between him and Melanie. That blond himbo can't help himself. It's as if he's gotta prove something over and over. What's the matter with him? He's got enough pussy to last him a lifetime."

"Insecurity."

"Insecurity? What the hell are you talking about? He's an ace surfer, looks to kill, popular—what else does he want?"

"I dunno. Maybe he feels like he's gotta keep testing people—you know, to see how far he can go."

"He won't be going very far if I catch him with Susan. Anyway, mate, I just thought I'd call to see how you are."

October 17, 2000, Brett's 18th birthday. He was a Harley Davidson fan, so Graham bought a Harley key ring and presented

him with a hand-made card. Susan bought a beautiful silver chain with a heart attached, inscribed with the date and 'Love, Susan'. Brett received a stack of presents from his mom and SFB, while I gave him a 2001 Harley Davidson calendar.

"I can see that, Kyle, so what are all these little notes written on each page?"

"Just stuff."

"This is the day we all went on holiday to Lake Somerset," he read aloud. "This is the day last year when you decked me. This is the day last year when we pissed against the old tree." He flicked through the rest of the calendar, then asked; "Jeez, Kyle, what's the matter with you? You keep a bloody diary or something?"

"Yeah, but I only write about stuff that's important."

Chapter 32

As final exams approached, I placed clubbing on hold for a while and devoted my time to serious study at home. One Friday night, I took an urgent message from Brett: "You better get your ass to Green Room. Graham's trashed big time."

Upon my arrival outside the club, I saw Susan trying to force black coffee down the grommet's throat. He was too spaced out to comprehend what the hell was going on and refused to swallow. Coffee dribbled out of his mouth and he stank of puke. His mates, gathered nearby on the street, considered it a big joke, calling him a wuss.

After checking Graham's bleary eyes, I lost my rag and confronted his mate Sean. I demanded to know what my little bro had taken.

"Hey, we snorted a bit and smoked a couple of joints. It's cool. Graham's handled it before."

I clearly didn't believe him. "What else?"

"Nothing."

I grabbed his collar, lifted his feet off the ground and repeated my question more aggressively. "What else?"

"Fuck off, man. You his fucking mother or something?"

"I'll kill you right here and now if you don't tell me what else."

"Okay, okay...so we gave him some 'e' as well...in his drink. But he was cool. Okay? Now put me the fuck down."

I backhanded the kid so hard he slid along the pavement. Then I turned and grabbed hold of Graham's shoulders as Brett ordered me to 'cool it'. "Don't give him coffee," I yelled, ignoring Brett, "give him water." Susan rushed into the club to fetch water while Sean, at a safe distance, called me every name under the sun. Then Brett intervened, sending Sean and his mates scattering.

Upon our return to Byron Bay, we carried Graham to the beach and stayed with him until dawn, giving him water each time he woke—and puked. "I never saw you so stressed," Brett commented. But it was more than stress; I felt utterly helpless. All I could do was look on while my little mate's sick body tried desperately to rid itself of poisons. As the sun rose and illuminated the distant peak of Mount Warning for the umpteen trillionth time, Graham revealed positive signs of improvement.

Stripped to my boxers, I headed for the surf where I stood knee-deep to watch the sun, and tried to make sense of that dreadful night. A few minutes later, I felt a tap on my shoulder. "I'm sorry," Graham sobbed as I faced the vision of wretchedness. "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to."

"You look a hundred years old," I answered, then threw my arms around my mate and held him as tightly as I could. "I don't get it, little bro. You look so strong but you're also so vulnerable. When are you gonna realize you're not fucking invincible?"

"What happened?" he asked, then listened intently while I recounted the night's events. "My folks are gonna kill me."

"You're lucky I didn't. Susan was fantastic, which was fortunate for you—I wanted to smack you. I felt so damn useless watching you puke and sleep, puke and sleep, and looking so trashed. Then you woke and cried. I couldn't handle it anymore without bursting into tears myself, so I came down here to the water. I dunno what it is about water but I felt I could swim forever."

Susan and Brett did their best to behave normally, despite the emotional scene they witnessed. Brett, rostered to work at the pizzeria that day, was anxious to get much-needed sleep. Graham was still too sick to be taken home so, thankfully, Susan offered to accommodate him at her house.

"Thanks for phoning me," I told Brett as we walked to his place.

"Hey, mate, I knew what that kid needed most ... you."

Wollumbin (Mount Warning) is essentially the gathering place where the Bundjalung Law Men receive guidance from

Babara (God) to put in place Natural Laws for the well-being of Marmeng (Mother Earth). High on the mountain, at my special place—the place Rick and I called our own, I reflected on what Elder Uncle Eric once said about this extinct volcano. *It's a holy mountain to us, like a cathedral or church. It was there that our older people talked to God, and God gave them directions and laws, and the elders came back down the mountain to tell our younger people. But the young people had to be initiated. Don't kill, don't steal, don't be greedy. It was the same law that Moses got when he descended Mount Sinai. They were exactly the same. They were strict laws, they were good laws. They did not enact them today and break them tomorrow like they do now. If you broke them, you had to pay the price.*

The primal energy of this planet is love. In the Dreaming, the awareness of connectivity, unity, supporting matrixes and the universal energies that play out in the phenomenal world is the very consciousness that allows the Aboriginal system to be truthful, compassionate, and considerate to all the phenomena that supports the human being in the physical world.

The primary energy system of all the ancient Aboriginal peoples of this planet is love. That is the energy that can be transferred and shared simultaneously for the good of all.

Love is the system that, within the human consciousness, provides for true co-operation. For humans there is always the perception of competition when individuals don't know to what they are connected. The so-called competitive system in nature is a way of recycling energy and it cycles away in a complex web of life.

Aboriginal peoples know the harmonic systems that allow coexistence in the natural environment. From an Aboriginal point of view we are very concerned that this place, Wollumbin, is not being looked after properly.

When you are a separate part of nature to study it, it will die. It's no longer connected. You might isolate a bacterial strain in a culture medium and it flourishes until the nutrients run out, then the culture collapses.

This mountain must remain sacred in our hearts. You don't need to be Aboriginal to know this. When wrong things are done, the Earth Mother kicks back, like she is sick. Even at the highest level of scientific knowledge, humanity knows this to be true. Our consciousness shapes that which will happen around us.

"Hey, loner."

"G'day," I smiled when I recognized Brett standing on a ledge just below. "How did you get here without my seeing you?"

"Because you didn't look for me. You were staring into the distance. What's up?"

"How did you find me?"

"Your mom told me you came up here to your special place. So what's up?"

"Nothing. Hey, I just felt like getting lost in my thoughts. I hitched a ride out here. Did you? And did you get permission from an elder?"

"Likewise, and of course. You should be studying."

"I'm relaxing—getting away from the bloody books for a while."

"How's it going, anyway?"

"Not that great. I can't seem to keep the shit in my head."

"Maybe you worry about it so much you don't have a place for the real stuff. What's really bugging you? This is the place you and Rick call your own, right?"

"Yeah," I laughed despite my melancholy. "I'm just so fucked up inside."

"Like how?"

"That's the prob. I don't know. I'm just feeling so empty and depressed about nothing."

"I have those feelings. I think it has something to do with leaving school, and facing major changes in our lives—

losing touch with what we have now, and what we love, things that get us amped. But, hey, mate, you don't even need those parameters. You're a worrier, period."

"My dad calls it resisting change. With me, it's more like a rebellion."

Brett climbed the ledge and sat beside me. "Looks beautiful, huh?"

"I never tire of it. But I'm wondering if Graham is out there on the coast somewhere where he belongs, or in some dingy hole getting high."

"He's surfing with Sean and Melanie. Susan told me."

"Thank Babara for that."

"Who?" I gestured toward the heavens. "Kyle?" he continued, "since you're determined to worry about every damn thing, do you ever worry about what I think of you?"

"I guess I could say no—that I don't give a rat's ass what you think—but that would be a lie. Yeah, I do worry a bit. I know how you used to feel and I'm not hundreds if you still do. I still think, deep down, you're a bit like you were when we met."

"Have you ever wondered why I visit your house quite often?"

"It's like one of life's mysteries," I shrugged, gazing at the endless panorama.

Brett's focus was also on the distant view. "A lot of it was curiosity. I wanted to know just how far you would go. I was ready to break off the friendship at one stage because I couldn't handle it. I felt dirty after the first time we masturbated each other. It wasn't right ... you know ... two guys. But, upon reflection, there was something different."

"Like?"

"You. You made it almost normal. Hey, sometimes I still get the guilts. I'm not gonna lie to you, Kyle. And sometimes I worry—about you—and what lies ahead."

"Oh? So I'm not the only one who worries, then?"

"I discovered something when I was dating Melanie. I've never told you about it. Think you can handle it?"

"She HIV positive or something?"

"No, no, no! Bloody hell, Kyle!"

"What then?"

Brett's focus returned to middle distance, and avoided my eyes. "You know how you and I are sometimes?"

"I'm not sure. How are we? I'm never hundreds about the way we are."

"Closer than brothers. Much closer."

"Okay...so what about Melanie?"

"She and Susan are the same."

I turned to study Brett's profile. "You're fucking joking!" I said slowly and deliberately.

"I walked in on them one Saturday morning. Susan slept over at Melanie's—that's when I was dating Mel. I found them making out on Mel's bed."

"Oh, my fuck!" I freaked as I placed my hands on my head. "Susan and Melanie?"

"Yep. Hey, don't look so surprised."

"You dumped Melanie because of that?"

"No—that came later. But when I busted them in bed, they invited me in. It became a threesome. Best sex I've had in my life."

"You didn't freak?"

"There was a time when some friends and I—guys I knew—used to get off watching blue movies of two chicks getting it on. I found it horny as hell. Melanie and I used to burn the sheets after she'd been with Susan."

"Burn the sheets?"

"Figuratively speaking. Burn equals hot...get it?"

"Why are you telling me all this now?"

"Hey," Brett said, extending his arms to embrace the sweeping landscape, "we're a million miles from anywhere—so I'll tell you. I can always push you off the mountain afterwards."

"Careful ... you might go first."

"When you and I became friends, I kinda figured you might want us to do stuff ... totally faggot, fruitcake, homo stuff. You couldn't hide the way you stared at me—and still do! Fuck! Why do you think I waited for everyone to go before I entered the showers after swim training? Susan talked about her and Melanie sometimes. Sometimes it pissed me off, and sometimes it didn't—depending on my mood. She joked about you and me making love, and I thought about leaving her then, but..."

"But?"

He shook his head. "The relationship between Melanie and Susan was just so...just so normal, and they are both normal girls. So it got me thinking."

"About what?"

"If you laugh, Kyle, I'll bloodywell brain you. I sometimes jacked off at night thinking about us—you and me—being naked and kissing and making all-out love."

"All-out?"

"No way! Never that far! Sensuous stuff. I'd get myself so worked up I'd be tempted to phone you. Then I'd shoot my load, and become aware of how dirty those thoughts made me feel, and how I wished I was in bed with Susan. It was as though we had animal sex and nothing more. As soon as I ejaculated, my feelings for you disappeared."

"Oh, thanks ... gone with the cum."

"Just bear with me, Kyle. I got no interest in guys. I don't gawk at other guys. It's not my thing. A nice chick-ass or a pair of tits is what gets my bells ringing. Then you come along and I start getting feelings for you that I'd normally have for a chick. For the last few months, we've been so damn close—you and me. And you did things to me that I'm not sure are right or wrong. All I know is—it's because of you. You make it right. But I've worried because I've not done the same for you. And you've no idea about the thoughts that have gone through my head."

"What are you getting at?"

"Well ... I think the point is seeing you like this, lower than shark shit. I just wanted ... I just wanted to tell you that I love you, Kyle. I love you very much. Hey, I don't see us changing diapers or whatever in the future. But I love you more than any friend I've had in my life. One day, I'll pluck up the courage and we'll make love to each other ... as long as you stay away from my ass, that is. It'll be special."

"Jeez! I can't believe what you're telling me! But it's also fair to say that I fantasize about you a lot."

"Oh? Okay, here's some encouragement."

Brett leaned toward me, took my head in his hand, and pulled my face to his. Suddenly, our tongues danced in each

other's mouths. It wasn't a mate's kiss, a brother's kiss, or a friend's kiss, it was a lover's kiss. Despite my profound shock, my fingers found their way under Brett's shirt and felt his chest. His skin trembled. Then I reached down to the rock-hardness of his crotch. But we continued to kiss. We kissed open-mouthed for a long time, wholly consumed by a mutually intense passion whose time had finally come.

Our lips eventually separated, then we each studied the panoramic view from Wollumbin in awkward silence; two bewildered minds trying to come to terms with such an astonishing occurrence.

Incapable of verbalizing anything appropriate, I broke the silence. "That was pretty special."

"Special? I thought it was awesome! You kiss pretty good—for a guy." That cracked me up big time, and Brett waited until my giggling subsided. "And I know about Stuart, Kyle. Don't interrupt, he didn't tell me. I reckon it's a good guess on my part. And I suspect it doesn't end there. You don't need to explain any of it, Kyle. I think I know you well enough to understand."

"Do you?"

"Yep. And thanks for not putting the pressure on me all this time, and for being such a good mate."

"You have no idea what this means to me, Brett—what you just did and said. No idea at all."

"To the contrary, matey. I know exactly what it means. And I'm not just talking about your hardon, either."

Chapter 33

My summer job was at a Gold Coast surf shop. According to Brett, the hardest thing I did all day was wrap something. He worked for a yacht-building firm nearby—hot, demanding work that improved his tan as well as his fitness. “I got muscles I didn’t even know I had.” Of a morning, we traveled separately but regularly met for coffee not far from our respective jobs. However, spending quality time in each other’s company, as we did at school, was rare.

One Thursday evening, after a hard day’s labor, Brett phoned and invited me over. Dressed only in gym shorts and looking awesome, he opened the door.

“G’day, hunk.”

“Jesus, don’t ever say that in front of Susan.”

“Why?” I asked as I followed his cute butt through to the kitchen. “She knows you’re a hunk.”

“She doesn’t need the competition—especially from a guy.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“Supper. I made lasagna, and I got a bottle of Shithead’s cabernet.”

“Not sure I know that brand.”

“And I got a joint I can either smoke by myself or share with you.”

As we ate and drank in the garden courtyard, I had to admit the cabernet was very much to my liking. Not being a regular wine drinker, however, it zapped straight to my head.

"So it's not just my bod?" Brett asked, referring to my enthusiastic appreciation of his culinary skill.

"It helps. So, who's gonna do the cooking when you and Susan get married?"

"I'm just out of high school, Kyle," he reminded me, "then there's college."

"Anyway, I think your cooking is sensational. It rules."

"You think everything about me is sensational," he laughed.

When the dishes were done, we returned to the garden with coffee. He lit his joint, took a drag, and offered it to me. I declined. "The cabernet's already given me enough of a buzz."

The conversation flew through the hours, ranging from job routines, my boss' invitation to take us SCUBA diving and Brett getting the eye from his boss' wife. "She's worse than you!"

Our first SCUBA dive was less than thrilling. My boss insisted on teaching us to breathe underwater in a pool before tackling the real thing. The air tanks were much heavier than I imagined, although more buoyant in the water. The rush of breathalyzer air bubbles also surprised me; louder than

expected. According to the instructor, we would wreck-dive the following weekend.

After the SCUBA lesson, I invited Brett to my house for a dip in the pool. My folks were home so we dressed in Speedos. "Pity my 'rents are here," I lamented as we trod water, "we could've gotten naked."

"When has that ever stopped you?"

"Hey, you're right!" I slipped out of my Speedos and tossed them onto the lawn.

"What if your mom walks through the back door?" No sooner had the question left Brett's lips than my mom appeared. Time for some fun, I thought. To my mate's horror, as well as my mom's, I walked casually up the pool steps.

"Kyle! Put your Speedos back on before the neighbors start rummaging around for their binoculars."

Instead, I walked up to my mother and planted a kiss on her cheek. "They don't need binoculars, mom. Do you think?" I looked down to my almost six inches of flaccidity, which caused my mom to respond with a hearty laugh. She then disappeared inside, probably to tell my dad. So I dove back into the pool.

"I can't believe you just did that!" Brett said with shocked amusement. "My mom would freak out totally!"

"Don't believe that, mate. Moms are cool. Hey, if you wanna get naked it won't faze my mom at all."

"Not bloody likely! What if I get an erection?"

"She'd feel pretty special," I grinned.

"Piss off, Kyle. That's your mom you're talking about."

"Yeah ... she's got good taste."

On the weekend, the four of us clubbed at Green Room, then stopped off at Purple Alien for drinks. A friend offered Brett and Susan the use of her Kombi van for a bit of hanky panky. They accepted. Melanie, meantime, pressured me to do likewise but I insisted on waiting until we got home. "I don't even know the chick." Besides, I detested the idea of having sex with Melanie in the back of a van parked in the street.

After seeing the girls home, I asked Brett if I could sleep over at his house. He grabbed two beers from the fridge and noted my stained pants. "How did you get so messed up, Kyle? Did the condom slip off your little dick?"

"I didn't have one."

"You crazy or something?"

"Did you see the mood Melanie was in? Anyway, I pulled out before I ejaculated."

"Doesn't matter. When Susan's in a mood like that we go straight to the dispenser. No rubber? You're a mental case. What if she gets pregnant?"

"What if, what if. Let's drop it." Brett then refused my request to remove his shirt, so I took control of the matter and, without resistance, lifted his shirt over his head.

"Cool, now I can sit here and gawk."

"Piss off, Kyle."

Then the bombshell dropped right out of left field, surprising even myself, inebriated though I was. "I love you."

"Yeah, and I love you too," he shrugged.

"No. I mean, I love you."

Brett's response was uncertain, even fearful. "Like how?"

"Like I'm *in* love with you."

"You're trashed, Kyle."

"Does it make you mad?"

"Scares me when you talk like that."

"Can't help it. I dream about us."

"They're just dreams, Kyle."

"On the mountain ... when you said you loved me. What did you mean?"

"I love you like a brother. Okay, maybe more than a brother. But it's not like you're thinking." Brett stood, went to the fridge, grabbed a glass of water and poured it down his throat. He then placed his palms on the fridge door, leaned forward and lowered his head. I asked what bothered him. "I'm

not sure. Yes, I am. It's you-the way you are with me-what you're doing to me."

I was genuinely puzzled. "Like what?"

"Like I'm terrified of where we're going with this. It feels right, then everything in my head tells me it's not. Then, when we're together again it feels right again."

With my arms wrapped around him from behind, I rested my cheek on his shoulder blade. "Why shouldn't it feel right? We're best mates, yeah?"

Brett turned to face me, took my hands in his and gave them a gentle squeeze. "We are best mates, Kyle. I don't know why but we are."

"I love you, Brett. Have I ever told you you got a beautiful bod?"

"A hundred times already. And I love you for saying that. You're good for my ego." He paused, then added. "And I need a joint."

We sat in the garden while he puffed away, escaping to wherever the THC hijacked his thoughts. "I dig your hair too," I continued, "looks better at normal length. And I love the way you spike it up in the mornings before work. It suits you; makes you look even more beautiful."

"Beautiful? What kinda word is that? Guys aren't beautiful, Kyle."

"Since when?"

"You're off your rocker, Kyle. You know that? Nuts."

"I never thought I could love another guy as much as I love Rick. My love for Rick hasn't diminished; it's just that I love you too."

"And Melanie?"

"Yep, I also love Melanie—a stack. But you're different."

"I hope so."

"I think it's because you and I have been through so much together, y'know, like a bonding thing. I feel so damn close to you."

"That's what worries me. Well, it does and it doesn't. It's like what they say about women: you can't live with 'em and you can't live without 'em."

"I'm not a woman. I'm a guy."

"Not just any guy, Kyle. Not just any guy. They threw the bloody mold away when they made you."

Later in the week, the whole gang took in a horror movie then hit the pizzeria. Graham and I were still in hysterics laughing about the movie when, from time to time, Brett caught my attention, rolled his eyes and shook his head. What was that all about? I discovered the reason after I orchestrated everything to ensure Brett and I were the last to arrive home.

"So what was all the eye-rolling crap about?" I asked when we stopped by his front gate.

"Kyle ... you animal!"

"Huh?"

"Susan's been burning my ear about you and Melanie being on fire."

"So Susan wants me, huh?"

"Yeah, right. Susan says Melanie was on the phone to her, describing in sordid detail every sensation you gave her. Were you on Viagra or something?"

"Piss off. But, hey, that's cool—Melanie boasting about me."

"She says you were an animal, and I know what you did this summer."

"Har-de-har, so what did I do besides make love to Melanie?"

"Cunnilingus! And you said you didn't like seafood!" With that, Brett jumped up and down with unrestrained glee and threw his arms around me. "I can't believe you ate her out! And she said it was like you knew exactly what to do to drive her wild!"

Despite his exuberant hugging, I remained calm. "Hey, I'm not fussy what I eat. Want me to show you?"

"Not fucking likely—go wash your mouth out first."

"Then can I?"

"See what I mean? I can't take you anywhere—except a second time to apologize for the first time."

One morning, we met for coffee as usual before work. When the young waitress approached our table I told her that Brett thought she had cute tits. Brett kicked my shin under the table and glared at me but the girl nonetheless gave him a sweet smile. When she headed to the kitchen with our order, Brett glared again and threatened to kill me.

"Hey, she's been giving you the eye since we walked in here," I reasoned.

"How can you say that? You got no damn culture."

"Did you see the smile you got?"

"I can't believe you did that. Do you know her?"

"Not yet, but her left tit's name is Sam."

"What are you on about?"

"The name tag on her left tit says 'Sam'."

"You're impossible," he grinned. "Unbelievably impossible."

Not surprisingly, Sam popped into the surf shop later to quiz me about my mate. She wanted to know if either of us was unattached. Sorry, babe.

My folks organized a Christmas day barbecue to which they invited their own friends as well as mine. Prior to Christmas,

Brett and I promised not to buy each other gifts; our main priority was to save for college. Yeah, right. "I know we had a deal," he apologized, "but I had to buy you a little something."

He watched me unwrap the gift. "Hey! A surfer wristband! Cool!"

"There's a message embroidered on it."

It read: 'No fear'. "Of what? Sharks or you?" Then I admitted to also breaking our promise. "It's just a little pocketbook thingy. Nothing major."

Brett opened the gift and read the first page. 'To a special friend. Thanks for listening even when I'm not speaking.' "What am I gonna do with you?" he asked as his strong arms enveloped me.

"You'll think of something."

"Okay, this book is pretty special, but what does it actually mean?"

"It means thanks for understanding me."

"Not in a million years."

Shortly after Christmas, we received the results of our final exams. The first thing my folks did was break out the champagne. Then Brett phoned with the news he also passed with a matriculation exemption. We were both eligible for university. "Congratulations, Kyle. I was kinda worried..."

"That I would fail? You're not the only one, mate! I'm stoked!"

"Me too—for you."

Chapter 34

My boss drove his two young sons, Brett and me to a rocky reef down the coast. Our first real SCUBA experience was supposed to be a wreck dive; however, we were not sufficiently skilled for that. Instead, the boss chose a spot for a reef dive.

"Hey, Kyle," Brett whispered as the car rolled to a halt, "I'm not sure I wanna do this."

"Chicken shit. If you bail out now I'll drown you myself."

Neither of us owned diving suits so the boss loaned us each a vest and pair of dive pants, those that buckle up under the crotch. I felt like one of King Arthur's knights wrapped in rubber instead of chain mail.

First, we tested the SCUBA gear: tank pressure, various hand signals, breathing technique, etcetera. Then we jumped feet first off the rocks and into the water. Woohoo! No walls, no tiles! This was the genuine article! The dive was fairly shallow because we were on a shelf, but it was awesome nonetheless, immersed in a liquid world of dazzling colors, exotic fish and plant life. The current drifted like a silent wind that caused fern corals and various seaweeds to sway gently back and forth.

The boss' sons, resembling two tadpoles in their dive suits, styled through the water like pros, relegating us novices to pitiful shame.

It seemed an age underwater as we investigated all the nooks and crannies around the reefs, home to a myriad of exotic life but, in fact, it was just twenty minutes. During that time we observed jet-propelled seals and penguins darting this way and that, a pod of playful dolphins and, by contrast, a few cruising reef sharks; relatively harmless critters that, despite their reputation as non-aggressive, suggested otherwise. Nonetheless, the experience was truly amazing, something like visiting a totally alien world. For one thing, we were weightless, just as we would be in space.

A few days later, I stopped by Brett's place on my way to Melanie's house. He was about to leave for work at the Pizzeria. "Yeah, I know," I explained. "Had a shit day at work and I needed to see you."

"What's the prob?"

"Downers. I got trashed last night. My dad's pissed off, my boss is pissed off, and I found a joint in Graham's pocket."

"You're scratching around in his pockets now?"

"No, no. It fell out when he removed his shorts before a swim in the pool. I quizzed him and he lied about it. That's what got to me."

"Is that why you got trashed?"

"I got trashed because everyone was out last night and I was on my lonesome. Went to the pub to play pool and nobody was there. Got into a hassle with the barman for giving shit to some bloke—can't even remember what it was about. Can't even remember what I was drinking. Then Graham saw me when I got home—fine example I am."

"Drinking on your own is no bloody good, mate."

"At least it gave me time to think about us."

"Us?"

"You and me."

"Whoa!" he said, glancing at his bedside table. "Check the time, man. I gotta move."

"Saved by the bell, huh?"

At 2am, returning home from Melanie's house, I saw the light on in Brett's room. I went to his open window. "G'day, mate."

"Hey, what are you doing up this late?"

"Just come from Melanie's and took a chance you'd be here."

"I just got back from Susan's. What's up?"

"Nothing. Just wanted to say g'night and ... and I love ya."

"Same. See you for coffee in the morning?"

"Yeah. See ya."

"Later, Kyle. Thanks for stopping by."

"Cool. 'Night." I turned to leave when Brett asked if I was all right. "Not really."

Brett jumped from the window and joined me on the lawn, where we sat side by side. "So what's wrong?"

"Not sure—I think about us a lot."

"So what's the prob?"

"I get the downers when I don't see you for a whole day."

"Me too. You're the best mate I got, but we both have lives to get on with, yeah?"

"I know that, but I worry about what will happen in the future."

"Like what?"

"Us—you going your way and me going mine. Maybe us losing contact."

"I don't think that will happen, Kyle. Even if I go to Perth or somewhere, we won't lose contact."

"Why do you say that? Perth, I mean."

"No particular reason. It's just that a bloke visited the yacht yard and offered me a job earning twice what I make here, working on boat building in Perth."

"And?"

"And nothing. I told him I'd think about it. My living expenses would be paid for so it's not like I'd pay for accommodation or whatever." By that stage, I was a sniveling wreck. "Oh, fuck, Kyle! Don't do that. If it weren't for you and Susan I'd have fuck all to think about. I'd just pack up and go. It's not that easy."

"But you're thinking about it."

"I have to, Kyle."

"Where will you stay?"

"I could stay with my dad but that would sour within days. This bloke has a spare room in his house. He lives alone but he travels a lot." He paused while I took a long noisy snuffle. "Bloody hell, Kyle! Stop that!"

"I can't help it," I sobbed. "I can't stand the idea of you not being here in Byron. I couldn't even stand one day without seeing you, and got into deep shit. What's gonna happen now?"

"Hey, you've never needed any help getting yourself into shit."

"I love you so damn much."

"I love you too, mate, that's why I just can't get up and go."

"Yeah, but I don't want you telling me you can't do what you want just because of me."

"It's not like that. If I need to go I'll tell you first."

"I don't wanna know about it, though."

"Then I'll have to go without telling you."

"Then I'll have to hunt you down and kill you."

"You?" he laughed. "Yeah, I guess you would."

I placed my hand on his thigh and felt the night chill settling on his skin. "You're cold. Wanna go back to bed?"

"Nah, let's sit here a while." His hand gave my leg a squeeze, then a comforting rub. We sat in silence for a while, each keeping our thoughts to ourselves. Then he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. "Guess we'd better get some shut-eye, Kyle."

"When I get home and get into bed, I'm gonna think about you."

"Don't worry, Kyle. Okay?" He pressed a finger to my chest. "I'll be right here."

One night Susan and Melanie decided to go see a "girl's" flick—which guaranteed an overdose of romantic mush—so Brett and I hit the local pub to play pool. Two other guys asked if

we'd like to play doubles. The losing team would provide the drinks. My mate and I didn't buy a drink all night. Ha!

Back at Brett's house, we ate leftovers, fooled around, wrestled a bit and listened to music in the den. I asked him about his 'treasure trail', the thin line of hair from his navel to his pubes. "Do you shave your stomach?"

"Yeah, and my nipples. I get little bushes there. You know what puzzles me about you, Kyle? When we were out in the courtyard just now, I wondered why you think my bod is more special than anyone else's. Check yourself out."

"You're being freaky. It's not normal for you to make those kinda comments about my bod."

"Just stand up, I want to show you something." I hesitated, which prompted him to repeat his order more aggressively. "Okay, okay," he continued as I stood, "check this out, and listen up, I'm gonna tell you what Melanie sees." He placed his hands on my chest. "Smooth, good-looking pecs—defined—nice nipples—and getting hard. Strong neck and muscular shoulders. Let's check the biceps." He grabbed my upper arm. "C'mon, make a muscle for me." I obliged and formed my bicep into a ball. "Hmmm, hard and perfect. Okay, guts." He placed his hands on my stomach.

"You're examining me like some biology class project," I giggled.

"Shut up. Okay, hard, flat. Hmmm, so the six-pack went for lunch."

"You're tickling me."

"Ah! There it is," he remarked as the giggling flattened my stomach. "Hmmm, nice. Melanie's a lucky chick." He then backhanded my gut and asked me to about face. I hesitated again so he gave me another backhand. "Turn, dork!" I felt his hands cruise my back, then down my lats to my hips. "Definitely your strong point, wide shoulders, strong muscular blades, narrow hips, smooth. Okay, about turn." I faced him wearing a silly grin. "Stop smiling, soldier, this is no laughing matter."

"You're crazy, Brett."

"Shut up, no back chat. Let's check the legs." He untied my shoelaces, then unbuckled my belt. I obliged by lifting one leg at a time while he undressed me down to my boxers.

"I feel like a total geek," I complained. But he ignored my protest, stood back, placed a hand on his chin and studied my bod for a minute. Then he knelt before me and rubbed his hands up and down each leg.

"Hmmm, nice shape, strong, hairless..." He looked closer. "And SHAVED!"

"Only the bottoms," I explained with some embarrassment. "The tops don't have hair."

"YOU TALK ABOUT ME AND YOU SHAVE AS WELL!"

"Only the bloody bottoms, Brett. Piss off!"

"Poodle legs," he cried, rolling around on the floor and holding his gut.

"Shut up! I should have taken a clean shave before I went out tonight."

Then, without warning, he sent my boxers to my ankles. "Okay, so what else do you shave?" As soon as my boner was freed, it slapped against my gut. "NOW I KNOW WHAT MELANIE SEES," he laughed. "A steel pin!"

"Brett, I'm feeling fucking stupid now. Are you finished?"

"Be quiet. Not by a long shot. Stay there." Brett took his beer to the couch and sat down, sipping his drink and scrutinizing my bod. I asked for another beer. "Don't move," he ordered before dashing into the kitchen and returning almost instantly with another Fosters. After an eternity, Brett rose from the couch and stood before me. "See? There's nothing wrong with your bod. But you go crazy about mine for some inexplicable reason."

A period where eyes searched eyes followed, then his face drew closer to mine. First, lips then tongues. I removed his jeans as we descended slowly to the carpeted floor, open mouths still joined. He then moved away and used his tongue to

trace circles around my nipples while his hand slid toward my crotch, electrifying my groin with the most incredible sensations.

"Oh, my God, Brett! What's happening here?"

"I don't know."

What followed surprised us both—oral sex, sixty-nine style, with me on the bottom. However, unlike me, Brett was reluctant to dine on several wads of protein, so he wore mine in his hair.

Eventually, Brett rolled to one side, stood and offered his hand. We retired to the garden where he retrieved a joint from a flowerbed (SFB's private stash) and lit it. He offered it to me. Surprise number two—I took a puff. "You know this won't last forever, Kyle."

"Shhhh. Let's not talk about that."

"You're unbelievable ... and I love you, Kyle."

I turned my head at the sound of a car door closing.

"What was that?"

"Oh, shit!" We ran to the den, collected our clothes and blasted into Brett's room. Panic set in as Brett struggled with his briefs and jeans. I wobbled all over the place trying desperately to get into my pants. "Kyle! Quick! Get under the bed!"

Like a disoriented crab terrified out of its wits, I clambered under the bed. Brett's heel followed, kicking the rest of my gear out of sight. I heard the door open and recognized SFB's voice. "Hi, Brett."

"G'day. You guys have a good time?"

"So, so. What are you up to? You're sweating like a pig."

"Sit-ups and stuff."

"You're unfit, boy, totally out of breath—it's all the shit you smoke."

"I take after you then, don't I."

"Fuck you. Your mother wants coffee."

"I'll be there in a sec."

Once SFB left, Brett asked if I was okay. "Jesus! My breathing sounds like a steam train. And my heart sounds like..."

"Shhhh!"

"Hi, Brett."

"Hi, mom."

"You alright? You're totally out of breath."

"I'm fine. I was exercising. I'll make you coffee in a sec."

"Great. I want to take a bath."

I heard the sound of a kiss, then she left the room.

"Kyle! Wait until I'm out of here, then climb out the window. Dress first, though! Jesus!"

Brett switched off the light as he exited. Bloody great! Now I had to fumble around in the dark to find my clothes. I quickly dressed, ducked out the window, and jumped the wall. What a way to end a perfect evening. I was still breathing heavily from the fright when I stopped at a tree for a leak. Something tackled me and sent me sprawling. I almost shat myself.

"Hey," Brett grinned, "I couldn't let you leave without saying good night. I just wanted to let you know that what happened tonight was totally special, and that you're special. Hey, coffee's percolating, I gotta jet."

"Love ya."

"Me too, Kyle. Me too."

Chapter 35

Brett's mood was exceedingly somber when we met for coffee one morning before starting work at our respective jobs. "Cheers," was all he said before leaving.

Next morning, he appeared with cuts to his ear and cheek. "SFB?" I asked.

"He doesn't approve of my drinking his beer and smoking his stash."

"That figures."

Brett leaned back as coffees were placed on our table. He waited for the waitress to leave before moving forward again. "Listen, Kyle," he announced. "I'm going to Perth."

"You've decided?"

"I almost killed SFB last night. My mom was in tears and screaming at me. If not for her hysteria, I would have put a carving knife through the bastard."

"Shit!"

"It was intense; I lost my head completely. I had him over the kitchen sink with a knife at his throat. We screamed blue murder at each other."

An uncontrollable welling of tears immediately took my eyes hostage. "That's why you're leaving?"

"Last night made up my mind. As you know, I've been thinking about it." Brett saw I was too choked up to respond, so he continued. "That guy who offered me the job in Perth is visiting the Gold Coast, probably next week. I phoned my dad about 3 this morning, about midnight his time. He says if it doesn't work out, I can stay with him for as long as I need to, or I can get my own digs and he'll help out." I still couldn't respond. "Jesus, Kyle, that's the most maudlin look I've ever seen. Don't put me on a guilt trip, please."

"I'm trying not to. I can't help it. But I understand you need to go."

"I'll probably move into Susan's place this weekend if her folks approve."

"You can move into my house for a short time."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I just can't."

"You can," I insisted. "My folks will be cool about it."

"And you'd be all over me like a fucking rash every minute. You're my mate, Kyle, and the other night was special, but I can't do that all the time. It drives me crazy."

"I won't. You can sleep in the spare room or the den."

"It won't work. You'll be watching every move I make."

"C'mon, Brett, we're mates," I pleaded. "It'll be a short while and I won't hassle you."

"Stop it! It's not gonna happen."

"Maybe Susan's folks won't let you stay there."

"Then I'll make a plan."

"Then consider my offer."

"No! Listen up, dumbass. You took me on a journey I didn't believe could ever happen. I'm not gonna say I didn't like it; I did. But I cannot do that all the time. I'm not like you, Kyle. I'm madly in love with Susan and I can't afford to stuff up the relationship."

"But the other night?"

"Was fucking wrong! And I should never have done what I did. It was my fault because I wanted it to happen. I needed to see what makes you tick."

"You've lost me. I'm not understanding anything here."

"Just gimme a break; my mind's swimming. Kyle, I don't want to hurt you, okay? You don't deserve that."

"When are you going?"

"It depends on this other bloke from Perth."

"Maybe he's gay and he wants you."

"He's not. I would have sensed it. Don't think that possibility didn't occur to me. Anyway, so what? Gay is a dirty word now? With you? That's a turn-up for the books."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot—you got a gay girlfriend."

Brett's fist slammed my jaw with such power I saw stars. The nearby restaurant patrons sat bug-eyed. "Fuck you, Kyle!" Brett snarled. He appeared ready to hit me again. Veins in his forehead bulged and pulsated. If he had hit me a second time, he would have sent me clear into the next world. Instead, he rose from the table and spat the words, "Stay away from me!" Then he stormed off, leaving me sitting there stunned.

Friday night, I phoned Brett but he was out. I phoned Susan. "He says he doesn't want to speak to you, Kyle. What's going on?"

"Hey, ask him."

My folks were out so I stayed home. I tried surfing the internet but my brain refused to focus. I searched for friends on line with zero result. Then I checked a few porno pics and got naked. How pathetic, I thought, if Brett could see me now.

My folks arrived home about 1am. Good ol' mom. She entered my room after knocking and asked how I felt. "I'm cool, mom," I lied, "just having a quiet one at home for a change."

She placed a hand on my forehead as I lay in bed. "You don't feel ill."

"I'm fine, mom. Really."

"Sure you are, son. You're feeling on top of the world. So, tell me, why are your eyes are watering?"

"I had a helluva barney with Brett," I admitted.

"Hmmm, so let me calculate what number fight this is," she smiled. "And that explains the cut and bruise."

"This was different."

"Would you like to talk about it? Or maybe with dad?"

"Nah, it'll be cool—really."

As expected, mom spoke to dad who, after a few minutes, entered my room and sat on the side of my bed. The conversation began with small talk about surfing conditions and weather but soon graduated to the obvious topic at hand. "I had a friend when I was about your age," he volunteered without prompting, "We were tight. So tight, I'm sure some people had strange thoughts about us. One day, we argued about something stupid. I said something—I can't even remember what it was—and we never spoke to each other again. I went into depression; I was stubborn. And so was he."

"So you never saw him again?"

"Never. And I suspect you and Brett hurt each other with words—and that the bruise on your cheek doesn't bother you at all. You young blokes suit each other as friends, and I think Brett is pretty much a no-bullshit person, whereas you, son, can be stubborn. Don't throw it away, Kyle. Even if you don't

see each other for a while, get the words happening. If you throw it all away, all the good memories will go with it."

Later, I phoned the shipyard. A woman answered. "Brett?" she yelled, "you're wanted on the phone." After a pause, she relayed his message: "He said he's busy and can't take the call."

That night, I phoned Brett at home. His mother answered. "Brett, it's Kyle for you."

He must have been in close proximity to the phone because I overheard him say, "Tell him I'm showering." Nonetheless, I rocked over to his house. His bedroom door was closed. I knocked and announced myself. A few seconds elapsed, then the door opened. Brett immediately turned his back and resumed packing two open sports bags on his bed. He was normally a tidy person so I was surprised to see him shoving stuff in like it was meant for the laundry.

Eventually he turned to face me. His eyes were red from crying. "What the fuck do you want, Kyle?"

"I didn't mean what I said about Susan, you know I didn't." He ignored me and continued packing. "Where are you going?" I asked. Still with his back to me, he said he had a small garden flat on the Gold Coast. "The Gold Coast!"

Brett began to pack his toiletries while I stood there, silent and dumbfounded. Then he rolled his quilt around his

pillow and folded sheets. By that stage, tears rolled down his cheeks and his nose ran. He brushed past me on his way to the ensuite shower where he blew his nose.

"How are you getting there?" I asked upon his return.

"Bus."

"With all your stuff?"

"Two bags and some bedding. It's cool."

"My dad will take you."

"It's okay, I can manage." He went to his desk, took an envelope and handed it to me. I saw my name written on the front.

"It's for me?"

"I was going to give it to Melanie. Don't open it now."

"Why don't you just tell me what's written inside. I'm here."

"You can read it later."

"Will you ever come back to this house?"

"Yeah, right."

"What about Susan. Have you seen her? Does she know you're leaving?"

"Yep."

"Are you leaving because of me?"

"You know that's not the reason."

"Will I see you again?"

"Maybe."

"Are we still friends?"

Despite the tears brimming in his eyes, Brett turned to face me directly and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Mates forever, right?"

"Forever."

"I need to say goodbye to my mom, Kyle. Maybe you don't want to be here."

"I can give you a hand with your stuff."

"I can manage."

"You want me to leave?"

"I think it's better—for now."

"Catch you for coffee as usual in the mornings?"

"I'll see."

"How can I get in touch with you?"

"You can't."

"Will you phone me?"

"I'll see, Kyle."

"I'm fucking hating this!"

"Look—I'll try to phone you later, or maybe see you for coffee."

"Promise?"

"I'll see." He offered me his hand and we shook. "See you, Kyle."

"See you, Brett. I love ya."

"Cheers, Kyle."

About half way to the bus station, I sat on the curb under a street light and opened the envelope:

Kyle,

Please don't show this note to anyone. Get rid of it when you read it.

By the time you get this I will be out of my house. My boss and his wife offered me a garden flat at their house on the Gold Coast. The rent will be taken out of my wages. It's not free but he says it won't be too expensive.

I can't fathom what's going on in my head at the moment. It may be best if we don't see each other for a while. There are many things I want to say but can't. I figured it might be easier to write them down.

I met a lot of guys I thought were mates but I never really knew what a friend was until I met you. You're a pain in the ass sometimes but I understand that I can be as well. You showed me what real friendship is all about and now I've screwed that up. I hope that, one day, we can get it back together again.

I realized the other night that you are like no other person I've met or will meet during my whole life. I want you to know something: I loved the night we shared together, every

special moment of it. I can't describe exactly what I felt. I would never have believed I could have such strong feelings—and still have.

I need to sort myself out, Kyle. I need the space to think things through. You know how I feel about certain issues and that hasn't changed. I have feelings for you that I find difficult to cope with.

I know you won't be happy with my decision to leave without letting you know, but it's better for both of us. Look after yourself, mate. I'm sorry for the things we said to each other.

Love,

Brett.

"Hey!" I called the moment I spotted Brett on his way to the bus station, laden with all his belongings.

"Thought you'd gone."

"Yeah, well, I knew you'd need a hand." I grabbed one of his bags and walked beside him. "Anyway, I wanna make sure you leave." After a pause, I told him I read his note.

"I knew you would before you got home, because you never bloody listen."

"I'm gonna hate not being able to rock over to your house to see you."

"I just need some time."

"Will you ever move back?"

"My mom wants me to stay but she also understands."

"I know you need to move but I don't have to like it."

"I'll miss Byron."

"Thanks for the note."

"Cool."

"I also thought what you wrote was pretty damn special."

We sat quietly on a bench at the bus station where the coach waited, engine idling. Nothing remained to be said that hadn't been said already. The horrible scenario I dreaded had materialized. I was completely at the mercy of destiny's course.

Eventually, Brett loaded his luggage and prepared to board. "See you for coffee on Monday," he said solemnly. I watched the fading lights of the bus until they vanished from view.

Chapter 36

If not for my surfing with Graham and Stuart, I doubted my sanity would survive the first week of Brett's absence. Every morning before work, I waited at the coffee shop only to be disillusioned by his non-appearance. Sometimes, I phoned him at work but he was always too busy to talk. In desperation, I visited his girlfriend and asked her for his phone number at the flat. "He told me not to give it to anybody, Kyle, and that includes you." Calling Susan a bitch didn't help. When she told Brett, he phoned and threatened to break my face.

"Can I get a straight answer, Brett? Are you trying to avoid me?"

"Crap. I've been working my butt off, including nights. Besides, we need to chat."

Oh? Next morning at the coffee shop, whatever he had in mind to tell me failed to eventuate. He didn't show. I took a risk and phoned him at work. "I'm not handling your evasive behavior, Brett. You said we needed to chat so I expected to see you for coffee."

"I said I'd see. Anyway, you're gonna need to handle it, Kyle. I'm going to Perth for a while."

"What about your job here?"

"It's mine as soon as I return."

"Will you?"

"I don't know. Maybe Perth will pan out. If it doesn't, I'll come back. If it does, well, we'll see."

To my surprised delight, Brett arrived for coffee next morning. He wore a T-shirt that clung to his muscular torso, and shorts that were noticeably intimate with his ass crack. His hair was a little longer on top, but short at the sides. "How's it?" he asked as he gave me a friendly punch on the arm, and sat opposite.

"Cool. I thought you weren't coming."

"Stop looking so damn miserable. I'm here."

"You're relaxed and smiling as if we'd met every day. I've missed you, man."

"Same."

"So tell me what's happening."

"Busy as all getup. The boss is impressed with my work."

"He should be; you got good legs."

"Cut the crap," he smiled, then paused while two coffees arrived at our table. "I'm going to Perth," he resumed, but cut me short. "Wait, wait, wait! Give me a chance to explain. It's for a short while, and then I'll be back. My boss says my job is safe, anytime. The other bloke, the one from Perth,

says he's got a car I can use, plus a room and everything I need."

"You don't have a driver's license."

"There's more. He'll pay for my learner's then license."

"That's cool," I mocked.

"Stop looking so miserable."

"I can't help it. I miss you, and I can't get hold of you. When are you getting a cell phone?"

"Not sure."

"I sit here every morning, waiting and hoping you'll show. And then you don't."

"Yeah, well ... I'm sorry."

"So when do I see you again?"

"Stop bitching for fuck sake, I'm here now!"

"When are you leaving for Perth?"

"I don't know."

"Can I phone you over there?"

"I'm not sure."

"But you *are* getting a cell phone, right?"

"Yes! Stop with the questions already!"

"I'm not gonna handle this," I sighed with resignation.

"You can handle it. Hey, Kyle, I want you to be happy for me. There are things happening now that promise an exciting time for me. I know you'll be unhappy for a while, but you'll

get over it. We're mates forever. This is not goodbye. This is I'm-gonna-see-you-again-soon time."

"You might like Perth."

"Look at me," he asked, causing me to raise my lowered eyes. "The worst thing about this whole trip is that I won't be seeing you for a while. But I think it will be good for both of us."

"What does Susan say?"

"Well, that's something I haven't told you yet. But I think you need to know everything right now. Susan and I are splitting."

"Now you're joking, right? So you're not coming back?"

"Susan and I spoke about it when she stayed over at the flat. We agreed it's all for the best. She still has a year of school. She can concentrate on her final year. I'll be away most of the time. It also takes the pressure off her to hang around and wait for me."

"You're not coming back," I said softly but with conviction.

"I'm not sure when. There's a lot of work over there in Fremantle."

Hiding my emotions was next to impossible, which must have been obvious to Brett. "It's gonna be hard, Brett. I thought things were coming together for us."

"And that's another thing, Kyle. I need to sort out my mind. I felt something the other night when we were together at my mom's place—something I never felt before."

"My lips?"

"Atta boy!" he laughed. "I love you, Kyle. You'll never understand how much. This move isn't easy for me. There's a lot of shit in my head at the moment. But this is something I need to do."

"I know I've been coming on too strong."

"You were being you."

"Can we see each other? Like a sleep-over before you go?"

"I'll try ... really."

Brett changed the subject and spoke enthusiastically about the yachties he befriended, and how much he enjoyed sailing. It was an exciting new world for him. His green eyes sparkled with a dream I couldn't share. "Early days yet, Kyle, but I dream of owning my own yacht some day and maybe sailing the world. How awesome would that be?"

"All you need now is a pipe and a supply of spinach."

While my best mate spent Sunday saying his goodbyes to Susan, I devoted the day to reorganizing my wardrobe. Brett's looked like something out of Mary Poppins—all his t-shirts folded and stacked neatly on one shelf. Shorts on another. Briefs folded in one drawer. Another drawer for socks. Button-

up shirts hung in a row. Jeans folded neatly on a shelf. Chinos, cargos and smart pants all on hangers. However, within an hour, my closet looked the same! My mom couldn't believe her eyes when she saw it. Something inexplicably foreign had happened to her son.

Then I used a blank tape to record all my favorite songs for Brett as a parting gift. But the first song was the one with the most profound meaning.

On Monday morning, Brett breezed into the coffee shop, sat opposite me, and gave me his most evil grin. "Hey, mate, I hope you don't mind."

"Mind what?"

"I took Susan to your special place on Wollumbin yesterday."

"No worries. That's cool."

"This whole thing isn't easy for me or her, so it was good to be at your special place to chat. It was weird. I felt your presence there with us, and I wondered what you were doing."

"You were thinking of me? That's pretty damn cool."

"Yeah, I was thinking of you."

"You're gonna miss Susan a stack, huh?"

"Susan—and you. Yeah, I'll miss her a lot, but it's best to separate this way. Susan always made me feel king of the

world. She taught me how to make love, and I guess you taught me how to love."

"I could teach you more if you stayed."

"Don't push your luck," he laughed. "Susan and I said our goodbyes up there on the mountain."

When we left the café, Brett promised to phone me, and he did. It was just a 'howzit' call but a welcome one. That night, however, depression swept down from nowhere and imprisoned me in its talons. One minute, I was eating dinner with my folks and the next I felt a severe lump in my throat. With tears in my eyes, I excused myself from the table. My folks didn't intervene; they understood how devastated I was about Brett's leaving. By 9pm, I'd cried myself to sleep.

Next morning, at coffee, Brett sat opposite and said, "It's not working, Kyle. That plastic switched-on smile doesn't cut it. And there are tears in your eyes."

Awkward silence prevailed for some minutes as we sipped coffee and tried valiantly to think of something worthwhile to say. But then: "Kyle? Wanna spend the night?"

"Spend what night?"

"The night before I leave for Perth—at my garden flat."

"You know the answer to that," I beamed. "You got two beds?"

"Nope. One single."

"Damn! Then it's the hard floor for me."

"Nope."

"What about your boss and his wife?"

"They leave this morning for Coffs Harbor to inspect someone's yacht."

"Will you do me a fav?"

"Depends."

"Come home with me this afternoon after work just to say goodbye to my folks. They'd appreciate that."

"I'd like that too."

During the bus trip home I promised to show Brett something really special. "We're going surfing," I announced. "You can use my stick."

"I don't have a wetsuit. I'll freeze my nuts off out there."

"I won't wear mine either. She'll be right, mate. No worries."

My spare boardies struggled to grip Brett's narrow waist, which was maybe an inch or two narrower than mine. Once we paddled beyond the moderate swell, we sat side-by-side on our boards. Brett commented on the lack of rideable surf, and wondered what the hell we were doing out back sitting atop a flat ocean.

"I checked from the bus, and knew there was no surf. I just wanted to show you another of my happy places."

"I've always known you loved this place."

"I wanted you to share it with me for a while. Listen."

We sat quietly, noting the squawking of the gulls contrasting with the gentle lapping sounds of our boards. It was a peaceful place, rather like my mountain in that respect. Wollumbin towered imposingly in the distance, as it had for eons, caressed by angels in the form of fluffy white clouds. Both these happy places allowed one's spirit to absorb effortlessly the soothing beauty of nature. "You haven't told me when you're leaving," I said.

"I planned to tell you tonight. I leave tomorrow, Kyle. I catch a bus to Brisbane airport after work."

"Tell me you'll be back one day, Brett. Please?"

"I'd like that. You know that. I'm shit scared, Kyle. I'm not sure what's gonna happen."

My folks had become Brett's adopted family. Mom's eyes were full of tears during the goodbyes, which was to be expected but Brett certainly didn't anticipate a huge, affectionate hug from my dad, who offered to drive us to Brett's flat. I slid my toothbrush into the side pocket of my cargos and off we went.

Chapter 37

While Brett was torn between choices, loyalties, friendships and family, as well as his future, I was torn - period.

Hiya, G,

Brett is giving Perth some serious thought. I thought about the bloke who offered Brett the job and maybe being like me, wanting to live with Brett so he can gawk at him, although, Brett would never allow that. I don't dare say something like that to Brett because he would freak. I'm not sure I can handle Brett leaving. Every day I fall into this hopeless pit where every thought of every minute of every day is filled with Brett. I get excited each time he phones, and the other day, when I didn't see him, I descended into a total fucking downer. This is a lot worse than it was when Rick was here because we were always together. And, although I fantasize about having some sort of physical activity with Brett, that's not important any more. Just being with him makes me happy—like the other day when we were just chatting about shit and laughing—that made my day.

I just had to write you about all that's happening, though, because this is one valley I'm not gonna handle.

G'day, Kyle.

You'll handle it. You'll handle it because you love your parents. You'll handle it because you love Graham. You'll handle it because you love Melanie. You'll handle it because I'll come over there and beat the crap out of you if you don't. You'll handle it because that's what Brett expects of you. Think about it, Kyle. Think about the difference you made to Brett since those early dark days. Think about the life you gave him. Yep. The life you gave him. No way would he be the bloke he is now if you hadn't clobbered him in the school quad two years ago. Be grateful. Be thankful for the opportunity to make a huge difference to a person's life (not to mention mine). And be thankful for the difference Brett made to your life. What you gave to each other is immeasurable, and will stay with each of you for the rest of your lives.

Be sad, but also grateful for the sadness. One day, you will realize that this sadness is, in fact, a very special gift. Remember when Rick removed his mask at your birthday party? That is the kind of joy no amount of money could ever buy. It's the kind of joy only a heart, once broken, could ever know.

Hey, Kyle, what happens when you get trashed by a wave? Lemme guess. You paddle out again to catch the next. Am I right?

Late last year you thanked me for my patience. You were hitting the books because your future was at stake. I took a back seat. The most important thing about my friendship with you is you. Your happiness and success is numero uno. Recently, you wrote to tell me you passed your final exams with flying colors. My patience was rewarded by your success.

You need to understand something, Kyle. In my 50+ years there's only been one Kyle. There will only ever be one Kyle. But that's not to say other people don't exist. They do. But right now, I know from whence the sun shines.

When you love somebody, truly love somebody, they come first. Consider this scenario. Brett rejects the job offer in Perth. He declines a rare opportunity in order to stay with you. Is that what you really want? Somewhere down the track, when you two have another argument (and you're forever arguing) do you want him to say, "Damn you, Kyle, I could be earning twice the money I earn now, with better prospects! But I turned it down. Why?"

One day, Kyle, you're gonna be a marine biologist. Why? Because it will buy you a big expensive house? Nope. You're going to be a marine biologist because you want to contribute something worthwhile to the oceans. You want to improve the lot of nature's marine creatures.

Believe me, I know how much Brett means to you. I know how much you love him. But if he were a bird would you put him in a cage? If he were a dolphin would you put him in a tank?

I also know these questions are not easy to answer. They're painful. You'd rather they didn't exist, and that life could be simple. Life will never be simple, Kyle. And there will always be difficult questions to answer. Many times during your life the question will be posed: "Do I face this problem or turn my back?"

To solve the Brett problem is pretty straight forward. Support whatever is best for him. If he decides to remain in Byron Bay, cool. He will have made that decision without pressure from you. If he decides to embrace Perth, he will have made that decision with your support, albeit support tinged with sadness. But, sadness is preferable to regret, and he will always love you for being a true friend.

The reason I'm not beating around the bush in this email is because the situation is like surfing. Make a wrong move and you're ass over tit. The waves dictate the terms, and waves are like life. Life often dictates the terms. To ride life's waves you gotta learn to stay on your pinkies.

Sometimes you go to the beach and the surf is crap. Other times it's rocking. What does that teach you about life?

I lived all but a few years of my life without a Kyle. I suspect there will be a time when my life is once again Kyle-less. I hope not, but I'm prepared. I have two choices: to be thankful for the experience or be pissed off at the loss. Which reaction do I choose? I'm no hero, mate. Bottom line is this: should Brett's happiness also be yours? That's a question we all need to ask about the people we love.

You've been around long enough, and had sufficient experience, to know that hills can't exist without valleys. Imagine if I'd been able to tell you three years ago, when your heart broke because of Rick's departure for Canada, that Graham, Melanie, Stuart and Brett were on the horizon. Back then, it was impossible for you to imagine anything or anyone filling the void Rick left behind. Go figure.

None of us has a crystal ball but we can have faith in ourselves. Some people call it hope, but I don't believe in hope per se. Some people spend a lifetime hoping to win the lottery. Yeah, right. If you want money, earn it. If you want friends, earn them. You've done both, and you will continue to do both. You will continue to be the kind of person who brings light into dark lives. Some of those lives will move on and take your gift with them. But there will always be a queue of lives waiting to also be touched by your magic.

Meanwhile, you need to decide whether or not jealousy and possessiveness have any place in your own definition of love. Since I've known you, you've worked for everything you have. You've earned all you have—except me. You got me for nothing. Just joking. So don't lose the plot, mate. Keep working. Keep trying. Never give up no matter what happens. If you want the sun to rise, swim over to the horizon and drag the fucker up if you have to.

When Brett poked your chest with his finger and said, "I'll be right here", he promised you that he won't forget you no matter where he goes—just like E.T. But even E.T. had to go home. And where's home? Brett's home is in his dreams, the dreams he's had since he was a little boy without a dad. Brett is still searching for himself. You've helped him enormously in that search but it ain't over 'til the fat lady sings.

Your friend and fan, G.

Brett's 'little flat', itself a mini mansion, and part of a much larger grand house, knocked me for six when I first laid eyes on it. "You call this little? It's awesome!" The self-contained guest accommodation was now exclusively Brett's, whose boss explained that the main house was more than capable of accommodating any guests that might visit. The flat was his for as long as he wanted.

I watched him prepare chicken casserole. Like everything else he did, it was neat and perfect. "Feel like a beer?" he asked as he slid the dish into the oven.

While we reminisced and laughed about old times, he suddenly stood and invited me to skinny dip in the monster flood-lit pool. What the hell, we were alone. Sure enough, without a word spoken, wrestling was immediately on the agenda. So were bouncing boners but we didn't care. Then he managed to grab me from behind and wrap his strong arms around my upper body: "I don't know what you've done to me, Kyle, but I love you. I don't always show it but I do. You're not going to believe this but I am going to miss you. I'm going to miss this—being with you."

As we entered his eat-in kitchen, Brett insisted on dressing for dinner, albeit in shorts. "It's kinda ceremonial," he explained, "I'll lend you a pair of my boxers."

His thin cotton gym shorts were a little tight around the waist—his was 28 inches to my 30. "At least my dick can breathe," I joked.

The casserole was delicious as well as an ideal accompaniment to the conversation, which ranged from hiking tours and swim-team tours to girlfriends and mates.

"You and Rick were helluva close," Brett remarked, changing the topic slightly. "I got a question for you but you don't need to answer it, Kyle."

"Sounds ominous."

Brett's face blushed. "Did you and Rick ever go further than oral?"

"Not until he visited for my 18th birthday. Hey, chill," I ordered before he got the chance to freak, "I know I can share stuff with you now. Yes, Rick and I went the whole nine yards. But before your brain starts playing games, it was very special for both of us." A pause followed while Brett quietly considered my revelation. "Are you hassled by that?" I asked.

"It's weird but ... I'm not. And I think it has something to do with your relationship with Rick. I'm not gonna be your judge, Kyle. It's not the kind of thing I can even imagine properly. But, then, a lot about me has changed, including my whole attitude toward the way you are." Brett paused to note my watery eyes. "You seem to be in deep thought, mate."

"I've been pretty good, don't you think? I mean about your leaving and all. Fact is, I dunno what I'm gonna do when you're gone. I guess time will take care of things like they did when Rick moved to Canada. But I'm really battling to handle people vacating my life. It's not just that I love you, Brett, it's that I'm *in* love with you. There's a huge

difference." Surprisingly, I found my inability to control myself quite humorous, and fell about laughing. "I'm not handling this too well, hey, Brett?"

"You made me aware of how I must appear to other people. Are you sure you're not just in love with what you see? I don't want it to sound cheap or anything, I just want you to sort it out in your own head. I know that I love you very much, but there is a difference. If I were *in* love with you I'd be thinking about spending the rest of my life with you. You need to understand why that can't happen. At the same time, Kyle, I want you to know that you have this huge piece of my heart that no one can ever take away."

"I know I can't have you forever," I admitted sadly.

"I'm also pretty proud of you, mate. I appreciate how hard this is for you. It's difficult enough for me. I also know you've been working on your smiley face for my benefit. What I feel for you is very different from anything I felt for anyone else, ever."

With the meal finished, I helped Brett do the dishes and cleaning before we retired to the living room couch to enjoy a glass or two of wine and more conversation.

Brett said he didn't want our relationship to sound cheap. I don't either. So I won't detail all of what took place that night, except to say that Brett and I didn't go

'the whole nine yards'. However, those yards we did travel were remarkably and truly special to both of us. Maybe my best mate wasn't *in* love with me, but it certainly felt like he was.

Brett woke during the night in response to my finger tracing the outlines of his nose and face in bed. "Not sleeping?" he asked.

"No. I wanna remember everything about you."

"Cool." Then he returned to deep slumber.

He woke again in the morning to find himself tangled in a web of arms and legs—mine, of course. I was woken soon afterward by the sound of a splash outside. A minute later, I flew through the air and dove into the refreshing brisk coolness of the pool. "So you finally went to sleep," he laughed as I surfaced and shook the water from my face and hair.

"Yeah, I had my fun last night—touching you all over like a little Kyle about to get his hand smacked."

After showering, we made our way to the coffee shop for a quick breakfast. Ahead, for us both, was a busy day at our respective workplaces, and Brett's airport bus was due to leave at 7 that evening.

Chapter 38

After work, Brett met me at the surf shop. From there, we traveled to his flat. I thought it was curious that Susan was absent. "We already said our goodbyes," he explained.

"And why did you choose me for the final goodbye?"

"Good question."

With the last of his belongings packed into two sports bags, he zipped the top and faced me. "I'm not going to kiss you in public, Kyle. May I now?"

At the bus station, Brett appeared like a little kid about to run away from home, with his sports bags slung over his shoulders and his bedding wrapped and strapped. It wasn't a time for talking, however; we hardly spoke a word while waiting for the boarding announcement. Both hearts were heavy with profound sadness that threatened to erupt if we dared look at the other's face. We chose instead to stare into emptiness and remain silent.

Finally and inevitably, the boarding announcement penetrated the gloom. Brett stood, threw his arms around me and hugged me harder than ever before. Tears flowed freely. "If you don't get a cell phone," I sobbed, "I'll come over there and hunt you down like a dog."

"Love you, Kyle. Thanks for everything. Keep smiling, huh?"

"Yeah, right."

We released our grip and tried vainly to dry our eyes. Then I reached into my pocket and handed something to Brett. "I want you to listen to this tape as soon as the bus leaves. I made it specially for you."

"Thanks, mate."

'SHALLOW WATERS' Just Jinger.

I'm leaving tomorrow, I don't know why

There's something that's not right with my soul

I have no goal, I have no goal.

I'm leaving shallow waters

I'm leaving all my dreams of you

I can't go on, I want to run away

I think I'll go today ... tomorrow

Well, it won't help me at all, it won't help me at all

There's something that I told you and you don't know

That it's true

That it's true, oh, that it's true now.

The bus slowly pulled away, and left me alone in a world gone mad. When my dad arrived in the Kombi, he saw me still seated on the bench trying to control myself. My dad didn't need to say anything; he understood how I felt ... Rick all over again.

Next day, no word from Brett. I hated the whole day. But he phoned that night to say that his new boss met him at the airport in Perth and drove him home. He said he was chuffed with the setup there, and his own digs. Nevertheless, I sensed he felt somehow a little disoriented.

"Hey, Kyle, it's not Shallow Waters. I'm not leaving anything of you behind. Love you. And yes, it is a kind of runaway, but not from you. You know that."

We didn't speak long, but I was thrilled to hear from him. Soon enough, he would have a cell phone, and I'd be able to contact him anytime.

Predictably, G soon became the target of my misery email. He kept telling me to be strong for the sake of my folks and friends. He made sense, of course, but it wasn't easy to be strong. Meanwhile, Melanie was a blessing; she slept over quite often. And Graham's constant visits to 'our room' also kept my mind occupied. One morning he woke me at sparrow's fart to go cycling. He was training for an upcoming long-distance race.

The following night, I was out by the garage fixing a ding in my board, and another in Graham's, when the phone rang. It was Brett, and I let him have both barrels for not phoning earlier. How did he react? He laughed at me.

"Don't laugh! I miss you big time, you prick!"

"Big prick ... don't forget that."

"And I've got a big mouth, right?"

"You're disgusting, you know that?"

"Yeah, I know ... so tell me, what's the buzz?"

"We're in the middle of nowhere here, inland from Fremantle, miles from town."

"Cool, so you can behave."

"I'm bored shitless, Kyle. I need to get my driver's license. But where I'm staying is pretty damn neat. I have this huge room with a walk-in robe. It's like something out of a movie, and this dude is gonna buy a TV for my room. There's already a small stereo."

"He's after your body."

"Okay, here's the buzz," Brett said, dismissing my comment, "and don't you breathe a word or I'll break your legs."

"I was right, he wants your body. Tell him it's mine."

"Shut the fuck up for a minute! The second day I was here, he showed me around and says right to my face that I got a well-developed body."

"So he didn't notice your bod back here at the Gold Coast? Yeah, right."

"Shut up, Kyle. So I thought, 'well fuck this, I need to ask him straight out if he's gay.' He says no, he's not, but he's always been interested in being with a guy, and that he's sure he's bi. I told him I don't have a prob with that. But he keeps on and on about spending a night with a guy."

"A guy? *Which* guy?"

"He's got a hot chick, though. She's about 20 and, bloody hell, Kyle, she looks like a model, so I'm not sure what the case is."

"I told you, didn't I? Get back here where you're safe!"

"Safe? Safe from what? You? Yeah, right. Listen up, he tells me how hot I am and would I mind if, like, he touches my shoulders and stomach. He's desperate. So I told him if he touches my stomach I'll fix his jaw."

"Good. Now tell me he's fat and ugly and gross."

"Nope. None of that, but he's like 40 or something. Pretty good bod for his age, and spends a lot of time in the gym. And that's another thing, he says he'll get me a gym

membership. He reminds me a bit of your dad, a recycled teenager."

"Come the fuck home!"

"Chill, Kyle. Do you really think I'll let this guy get into my pants? Anyway, he's pretty cool. I don't think he'll try anything. And he's nice to me. BRINGS ME COFFEE IN THE MORNINGS! You never did that."

I enjoyed hearing Brett's laughter as I visualized his dimpled grin. "Coffee in the mornings?"

"Yeah, and he sits on the bed and chats. Okay, so he gawks. So what? Before I met you that would have freaked me out. If you'd been here, you would've gotten a kick outta his getting an erection when he stares at me."

"He WHAT?"

"Hey, he tries to hide it, but it's nature, my bro."

"Be careful, he might try to drug you or something."

"Nah, he wouldn't. Hey! You must see this damn ship he's building here. I don't know how they're gonna get this thing over to Fremantle. It's enormous! Just a shell at the moment and there's still a lot of work to do."

"Oh, shit! So you're gonna be away forever!"

"Nope. When I need some sex, I'll fly over there to see you. It's as hot as hell here, and dry. Last night we had an electrical storm. Awesome!"

"I can smell the sea from here."

"Yeah? That's your blood you're smelling."

"Can I phone you there? What's the number?"

"He's buying me a cell phone—says I can keep it."

"It's not the cell phone he's buying, Brett."

"He knows that's not gonna happen, Kyle. Anyway, as soon as I get the phone I'll give you the number."

"Had sex with Susan the other night. Says it's the best she ever had."

"Yeah, right. She use tweezers to find that little thing?"

That comment cracked me right up, and it was a while before I could speak again. "I really miss you," I lamented. "Can you get over here for the old boys swim comp?"

"I wish."

"Do you really?"

"Yes, Kyle, I really do. Honest."

"So you miss me?"

"Hey, we're mates, right? Of course I miss you! I phoned, right? Hello? This is Brett here."

"Do you jack off thinking about me?"

"Jesus, Kyle!"

"Well, do you?"

"You're fucking outrageous—totally."

"Do you?"

"Sometimes."

"How often is sometimes?"

"Next question."

I invented reason after reason to keep the conversation flowing. I desperately wanted to hear his voice for as long as possible. I loved that voice. But, finally, he insisted on terminating the call. "I gotta jet, Kyle. I don't wanna take advantage of this. I'll try to call you later in the week. And don't worry, okay? I'm not stupid or naïve. I know where this dude's coming from and, trust me, he really is cool."

Replacing the receiver reminded me of the night the bus left the station. Gone again. Poof! It was a battle to handle Brett's absence, but I guessed it was 'chin up'. I wrote G often to tell him how hard I was trying but, sometimes, the downers took control and caught me by surprise.

I can understand why Brett had a habit of shrugging off a problem with the comment, 'that's life', Kyle. You've led a charmed life by comparison to Brett's. His dad walked out when he was just a boy and then in walked SFB. You never arrived home to a rubber hose, mate. You always came home to a loving family, so it's not difficult to see where Brett is coming from. And you gotta hand it to him. He rose above all that crap; rose above all attempts to intimidate him. He survived.

And when he says things like 'that's life', which pisses you off, you need to remember that his attitude is what saved his sanity.

You're very fortunate to have Graham's grinning face bobbing up out of the blue, ordering you about, getting you to train for the cycle race and the School Swim Gala. He keeps you busy. So does Melanie, for that matter, in more ways than one. Ha! She's a wonderful person, Kyle, and I think she understands a lot more than you realize.

Brett phoned again later in the week. I couldn't resist feeling disappointed at hearing his relaxed and happy tone. It was cool that he enjoyed himself over in Perth but it sucked that he wasn't homesick. His boss gave him a 250cc off-road motorbike to use.

Brett also mentioned that his boss' girlfriend was peeved about how much time he spent with him. The boss even left her home alone one time while he took Brett to a nightclub. Then the bloke got all miserable when Brett got himself attached to some chick. Brett said he hated upsetting the guy because of everything he was doing for him. Every morning, the boss took coffee to Brett's room, sat on the bed, and massaged Brett's back. "But I always make sure I'm not naked when he's around. One evening he asked me why I was so shy about being nude, and not to be concerned because he would not touch me. He's cool,

Kyle, but the other morning he waltzed into my room while I was pulling on my boxers and caught a gander at my bare ass."

Brett was patently keen on that girl he met at the nightclub, and told me they would connect on the weekend for a movie. At that point I became quiet and he asked what was wrong. "Nothing, except that I miss you."

His response was that he missed me too. "Hey, maybe you can visit Perth for the weekend or something. How about that?"

"Yeah, and then get depressed all over again when I have to leave."

"Hey, it's just a suggestion. Anyway, I guess it would be too expensive."

"Yeah, yeah."

"What's wrong?"

"You're getting hung up with that girl there?"

"Not really, just met her. What's happening in Byron. Gimme the news."

We chatted about work, weather, all our friends but, as we talked, I got the impression Brett was pretty amped about the way things worked out in Perth. Most surprising was his attitude to his boss. I thought Brett would freak at talk about sexuality and nudity from a guy twice his age. Maybe I hoped that would be the case, but apparently it was not.

Anyway, I knew Brett well enough to be confident he could, and would, handle any awkward situation that might arise.

The remainder of my week was a total drag; work, work, work. My boss was pleased, though. Sales were up. My only chance to email G from the local internet café was Friday. I dreaded opening my own mail because I anticipated a stack. I had the guilts big time about my lack of opportunity to answer everyone, unlike my time at school where I could use the computer lab pretty much whenever I pleased.

There were good days, though, like when a couple of U.K. tourists asked me to be their surfing guide for the afternoon. My boss happily approved. The guys treated me to supper that day because we finished quite late.

Chapter 39

Try not to be so negative on the phone, G wrote. If you're miserable every time Brett phones, he'll stop. Try to be positive. Be happy for him. Let him know you love him and miss him, but don't give him the guilts. It won't be easy but it'll pay dividends.

Next time Brett called, I was cheerful, and so was he. He spoke about how he loved the motorbike and the freedom it gave him. In addition, he and the girl he met had a good thing going. "She slept over Friday night."

"Melanie slept over too."

"Slept?"

"Eventually," I laughed. "Brett, are you planning to stay in Perth?"

"Not sure. I've been happy here. Met my dad this afternoon, and my little bro and sis. We had a cool time. My dad wants me to study over here, and offered to help pay for it. No pressure. He wants me to stay with the yacht thing and maybe do a skipper course."

"So you're not coming back to Byron?"

"I'm not sure, Kyle."

Over the next month, I began gradually to come to terms with Brett's absence. He phoned two or three times a week,

which allayed any fear I had of his forgetting me. Melanie, Graham, Stuart and other friends kept me occupied, especially Graham who appointed me as his 'coach' for the upcoming swim gala. And there was no shortage of busy days at the surf shop.

One day, a group of first year varsity guys entered the shop to sell their 'rag' mag to raise money for student health and welfare. Frank was with them. All the students, dressed in weird fashion, were no match for Frank. With his hair dyed bright red, he wore battered old sneakers, a pair of torn boxers over his Speedos, and no top. Not too many guys looked as good as Frank in the chest department. Woohoo! A pair of braces slung over his powerful, tanned shoulders supported the broken elastic waistband of his boxers. He was by far the best mag seller of the group, with buyers all over him like a rash, including me. We discussed the swim gala the following Saturday. Frank was amped, and determined to thrash the 'schoolies'. He'd already spoken to Darren, and they were ready for this thing. "We're gonna kick ass."

Brett phoned that night to tell me that he and his girlfriend, Candy, were almost joined at the hip.

"How's Fingers?"

"Who's Fingers."

"The bloke who brings you coffee every morning."

"He bought a gym set and installed it in the spare room. He wants me to help him train."

"He did it so he can watch *you* train!"

"I know that, but it's cool. He can watch all he likes. I told him about my boxing at school, so he bought a punching bag as well. You'd piss yourself laughing if you were here, Kyle. He wants me to push him to get fit, but he pisses water after exercising for just two minutes. He's cool, though. You'd like him."

"Does he freak you out with all the touching?"

"Sunday morning he did. I was making breakfast?"

"Oh? So you're cooking breakfast for him now?"

"Shut up and listen. I was making breakfast and he came up behind me. Normal thing—hands on the shoulders and massaging. Then he put his hands around me, under my shirt and onto my stomach. Now *that* freaked me out. I told him to remove his hands or I'd break his arms."

"What's the diff? Your shoulders or your stomach?"

"He was pressed against me, and as soon as he touched my stomach he got an erection. That freaked me. Anyway, he left the kitchen and looked pissed off for most of the morning. He relaxed afterwards, though, and was back to normal. He's terrified of upsetting me."

"I can identify with that."

"So then his girlfriend arrived and took him out somewhere. Later, when he and I were alone, he started to quiz me—like you do. He asked what the big deal about touching my stomach was, and how good I looked and all that shit. I eventually told him to shut the fuck up, but in a friendly way."

"Oh, yeah—like shut the fuck up—but with a smile on your face."

"Exactly."

"What does Candy say about Fingers?"

"I haven't told her what he's like. You're the only one who knows. I don't wanna stuff things up here. He's been good to me as well as a good friend. Who knows? One day I might piss Candy off or something, and then she goes and spills the beans to this bloke's friends, or some shit like that."

"By the way, Susan's got a new boyfriend."

"I know. She and I spoke. He's pretty cool. They were friends long before I arrived on the scene."

"He's a prick."

"He's good for Susan."

"Except he thinks he's God's gift to women."

"Susan's choice. Craig and I got along okay. Sounds like you and he don't."

"We met at Susan's. He says you're history and let's not talk about you. I think he's itching to trash me."

"Don't even start with that bloke, mate. Craig has a rep as a no-rules street fighter. If he gets you down, his boot's gonna go in."

"Don't worry. I'm not looking for shit with him. He's built, but not as built as you."

After swim training, at which Graham and I performed exceptionally well, I quizzed the grommet about his school grades as we walked home. The local buzz was that his academic performance was well below standard.

"They're cool."

"Don't talk shit to me. We're bros, right?"

"Okay, they're not so cool."

"How not so cool?"

"Very...not so cool."

"You'll be dropped from cricket and swimming."

"Yeah, right. I'm the best swimmer in school and my cricket's ace."

"Are you listening to me? You'll be dropped from sport unless your grades improve."

"The school said that to my folks so they could crap all over me. Anyway, it's no biggie, I can still surf."

"Yeah...and eventually drop outta school because there'll be nothing to keep you there. And your folks will probably ground you from surfing. Anyway, that's beside the point."

"So what is the point?"

"I'm gonna clout you. You're not listening."

"You're sounding like my dad. Maybe that's why."

"Would you like me to help you with your study and homework?"

"I'm a dunce, Kyle. I don't understand the shit."

"Keep saying that and you'll believe it. It's called a self-fulfilling prophecy."

"What's that?"

"When you start believing everything you think, and what other people say about you."

Following supper, Graham waltzed into my room with his schoolbooks. "Know anything about geography?"

Suddenly, Saturday morning arrived, the day of the School Swim Gala. I was showering when Graham appeared and abused me for being lazy. "Move your ass, Kyle. I gotta help organize stuff for the judges and shit."

"So go ahead without me. Bye."

"No way! Then you might not come!"

"My name's not Dickhead."

"You mad at me?"

"Nope. Just nervous."

"You too, huh?"

"You're nervous?"

"Yeah ... because of *you* competing today!"

Some of the juniors were already at the pool when we arrived early, placing clothing on the judge's tables or cleaning the pool. I helped position the starting blocks while Graham assisted with setting the lane markers. Then the coach asked if I was ready for the competition.

"About as ready as I'll ever be."

"Just do your best, Kyle. Don't expect any help from the top boys, though."

"I'm just here to enjoy the vibe, coach. It's cool to be back at school."

"I wish everyone thought like you do."

Craig arrived in the company of another schoolie, and approached me. He was his usual loud, egotistical self, constantly swiveling his head to see who was 'admiring' him. "I'm sorry, Kyle, but you'll definitely see the back of my Speedos today."

"You guys are in training, but that doesn't mean I'm gonna roll over and play dead."

"Might as well," he grinned as he patted my back, "might as well."

The meet started at 9am, by which time the bleachers were packed with parents, teachers and various other spectators. First off the blocks were the juniors. The grommet could not have been more impressive. He won all his events, including the 100m butterfly, which was most difficult of all. Each time my little mate (not so little, really) exited the pool, he positively beamed at his folks and me.

Soon enough, it was time for the older boys to compete against the school seniors. Some of the alma mater, like Darren, were seniors when I was still a junior. Frank, Kevin and another guy were the only ones from my class.

With so many competitors, we swam heats to eliminate the slower swimmers. That knocked me out of the 200m freestyle. To humiliate me further, Craig slapped me on the back after my failure. "Hard luck, Kyle. Guess you might as well be here just for the fun of it."

However, I did manage to make two of the finals, the 100m freestyle and butterfly. In the final of the freestyle, Frank and Craig were first to turn at the 50m mark. Craig then powered home to beat Frank by a length. And me? Sixth. I swam like a stone. I sat next to Graham after the race. He didn't say a word for fear of being bitten by a pissed-off Kyle.

When we stood on the blocks ready for the 100m butterfly, Craig and I occupied adjacent lanes. The 'fly was my best

stroke, but I reckoned I had a snowflake's chance in hell of beating Mr. Unbeatable. During earlier training, the coach warned me I'd need to make up 3 seconds against Craig, and that was totally out of the question.

After the 50m turn, I saw that my head was in line with Craig's Speedos, and I was sure, at any moment, he would begin to pull away. I don't know where or how I found the strength but either Craig was slowing or I was gaining. As my head reached his, I heard the crowd screaming. "Go, Kyle! Go, Kyle!" With each of the remaining seconds, I continued to gain, inch by exhausting inch. Finally, at the absolute limit of my endurance, I touched the wall a full two seconds ahead of Craig. The stands erupted. The crowd went ballistic. And there was Graham, yelling and screaming over the top of everyone else.

Craig exited the pool, met with his mate and began arguing about something. Then Darren, Frank and Kevin swarmed all over me with shouts of congratulations.

When the excitement subsided, I walked over to Craig and shook his hand. "You were right, mate. I am here for the fun of it. Are you enjoying it as much as I am?"

"Don't be a smartass, Kyle. One race is all it is. You guys wanna take us on in the 200m relay?"

I checked with Frank about Craig's challenge and he went right into action. He chose Darren and one of Darren's mates, himself and me as the relay team. The crowd must have considered the race to be the highlight of the meet given the electric ambience of excitement and apprehension as the guys took to the blocks for the start of the relay.

Darren, the first of our team to hit the water, finished a few seconds behind the schoolie. His mate made up the distance, though, and touched the wall at the same time as the second schoolie. We were even. Then it was Craig's mate against me. Freestyle was not my best stroke, so I lost a little time despite trying my guts out. However, that was more than compensated by Frank's lap against Craig. Frank must have saved something extra because he creamed the competition—and not by just a few seconds, he blitzed Craig.

The crowd exploded into a deafening roar, standing with arms raised. Not a single person remained seated. Graham and the rest of the juniors gathered around me and gave me the hero treatment. Yes! It was a sensational moment. They believed, like most of the crowd, that the relay was the one race we ex-schoolies could not possibly win. How wrong they were, and how glad they were to be wrong.

Chapter 40

Next time I saw Craig was at the town carnival, whose many beer halls accounted for his inebriated state. He draped an arm around my shoulders, like a drunken sailor, and told me what an awesome swimmer I was. Then he related the same thing to his mates. They were pretty trashed as well. However, I appreciated Craig's new sentiment because I liked him despite his inflated ego. In any case, he had a wicked bod.

After seeing Graham and his girl home that evening, I walked Melanie to her place. Her mood was incredibly sexy. In her room, she asked me to stand while she undressed me, then kissed my body all over. She sure knew how to make a guy feel ten feet tall, and almost as long. "I want to reward you for your swimming success." We had awesome sex. I figured if the rewards were gonna be that good, my swimming would improve accordingly.

Brett phoned Saturday night and again the following night. "Cool! So what's this? Be kind to Kyle weekend?"

"I told Candy about your swim. I'm so proud of you, mate, I just wanted to tell you that."

"Thanks. You just topped off a perfect weekend for me." Then I told him about Melanie's 'reward'."

"She's good for you, Kyle."

"Yeah, she keeps me fit."

"That's not what I meant! She's good for you because she keeps you balanced! Candy does the same for me."

"Good sex, huh?"

"I'm gonna call you 'One Track' from now on. And by the way, she *is* an animal."

"So are you."

"So, you can imagine."

"No ... I'd rather you tell me."

"She gives me a swelled head."

"Good head?"

"I said SWELLED...head."

"How so?"

"She tells me it's the best sex she ever had. And most of her boyfriends have been older than her."

"I think she likes that thick, sticky power pole of yours inside her. Maybe her other boyfriends had weenies."

"You're disgusting ... but you know that already."

"Yeah, cool, huh? Eat her out yet?"

"Yeah."

"She blow you?"

"Yeah."

"Want me to blow you?"

"Maybe I can send her to you to give her lessons."

"That bad, huh?"

Brett responded by cracking up. "That's not what I said."

"So what are you saying?"

"You gave me the best blow jobs I've had. There, happy now? Huh? Huh? Huh? Aquaboy?"

"How's Fingers?"

"He's cool," Brett laughed. "Heavy sometimes, but cool."

"Tell him not to rest all his weight on you."

"Fuck you! Fuck you, Kyle! Jesus!"

"Hey...kidding. So he's still massaging you with coffee in the mornings?"

"No, he uses his fingers."

"Har-de-har. I wish it were me doing it in the mornings. But I know you'd get me into your boxers."

"He told me the other day he would wake me by putting ice down my boxers."

"So you told him you'd break his arms."

"Nah...didn't say anything. He wouldn't dare try that."

"How's his girlfriend?"

"Up and down. Some days she speaks to me, other days she treats me like shit. But, hey, she's gotta learn to deal with it. Her boyfriend and I are good mates. That's it."

"He must be doing shit to make her react to you like that, though."

"The other night, Candy and I had an argument on the phone, so I went for a walk and stayed out for a few hours. He drove his car to search for me. When I arrived home, he burst into tears because he was worried that something might have happened to me. He gave me this huge hug while she sat on the couch, watching."

"Shit!"

"Yeah, well, I feel for him, you know. He treats me like a king here. And, yeah, maybe he feels more for me than he should but I can't hurt him."

"He still talk about the two of you? Like in touching and stuff?"

"Yeah, but he says those things in a joking manner now—like the ice in my boxers."

"Hey, if he's good looking, he can put ice in mine."

"Isn't that thing of yours small enough already? Ha, ha, ha, ho, ho, ho, he, he, he!"

"Shut up."

"I gotta jet, Kyle. I just wanted to tell you how awesome I feel about your winning that race."

"Thanks for calling. When are you getting your cell phone?"

"Not sure."

"Okay. Love ya stacks."

"Me too, mate. See ya."

How cool was that? Phoning me just to say how proud he was of my win at the swim gala! His comments about Fingers were also fascinating. This wasn't the same Brett, no way. I remembered the first convo we had about his initial offer of a job in Perth. He would have known if the guy was gay, he said. Yeah, right. And now? Now it didn't bother him. He knows Fingers is crazy about him but he doesn't want to hurt his feelings. Talk about mellowing almost overnight. And I'd given him the best blow job he'd ever had? Whoa! Come back to Byron, Brett, like now!

All the guys at the surf shop called me Kyle Spitz after I told them about my win at the swim meet. And when I mentioned to my boss my plan to continue swimming at school, he gave me a brand new pair of Speedos and goggles for free. "I need guys in the store who do sport," he explained. "They know what they're talking about when they serve customers."

My bicycle had had little use since my interests broadened to include 'adult' stuff like girlfriends. I, nonetheless, managed to dust it off, oil it, and get it working again to accompany Graham on his training missions for the upcoming cycle tour.

I told Brett about it, and blasted him for not phoning more often.

"Stop stressing."

"Yeah, well maybe our friendship means more to me than you," I bitched.

"Oh, for fuck sake, Kyle, don't start now, okay?"

"You know what I hate? I hate not being able to contact you. What's happening about the bloody cell phone?"

"I don't have one yet."

"So what's the number there?"

"I don't want people calling me on this number."

"Why? You worried Fingers might hit on me or something?"

"I just don't want guys phoning me here." Then he spat the dummy. "Oh, fuck! I'm outta here."

"Wait, wait, wait!" I pleaded, realizing I'd pushed him too far. "I'm sorry. What have you been up to?"

"Working my ass off. But it's cool. Took Candy to a club in Fremantle on Saturday night."

"Cool. Sound's like you're getting into the scene over there."

"Candy and I have a few friends, but during the week I work all day and night, so it's just the weekends we have together."

"How's Fingers?"

"You really must stop that!" he protested. "I almost called him Fingers the other morning by mistake."

I cracked totally at hearing that. "He still brings you morning coffee in bed?"

"Yeah, he hangs around me whenever he's here."

"No ice in your boxers yet?"

"No shit, Sherlock. I think he knows the consequences of trying that. He started wrestling me the other morning. He's a strong bugger, too."

"Hope you were dressed."

"He tickled my ribs while he massaged me. He wouldn't stop, so I stood and grabbed hold of him. I was still wearing boxers, for Christ sake."

"Bet he enjoyed that."

"So what? It's cool ... almost like having a dad."

"Except your dad wouldn't sport a boner if he wrestled you."

"Hey, can we have a bloody normal conversation here, just for a change?"

"How can we have a normal convo if I'm not normal?"

"That's for fucking sure," was the pissed-off reply.

"What do you expect, Kyle? Huh? I phone you to catch up on the Byron news but everything with you revolves around sex. Oh, damn, I gotta go."

"Fingers?"

"Yep."

"Did he hear what you just said?"

"Yep ... cheers."

"Was he standing there listening to your phone convo?"

"Don't know."

"Still there?"

"Nope."

"Where?"

"Not sure. I gotta move. I'll phone during the week."

"I'm missing you here. Love ya stacks."

"Same here. Cheers."

When I hung up, I stared at the silent phone and wished I hadn't said some of the things I did. How bloody dumb. But there was a problem I couldn't control. Every time I spoke to Brett on the phone, I felt depressed about his being so distant. Sure, it was cool to hear his voice, but I couldn't resist getting a little bitchy, which upset him, and which was the last thing I wanted. Damn it!

Despite my reticence to annoy my best mate, I phoned his previous workplace at the Gold Coast and asked for Brett's new number. Whammo! I studied the piece of paper with those magic digits written there and thought, 'There you are, you elusive bastard ... right there at the end of those numbers.'

As I punched the phone keypad, I knew it was a big risk. My stomach churned with a strange mix of fear and excitement.

But I wanted—no, needed—to apologize for the remarks I made the last time I spoke to him.

After a couple of rings, a guy answered, then called for Brett. Should I hang up while I still had the chance?

"Hello."

"Gotcha!"

"Kyle? How the hell did you get this number?"

"I got spies everywhere."

"No, seriously, it's cool that you phoned but who gave you the number?"

"Your old boss."

"Okay, so you're not just a pretty face. Actually, you're not even a pretty face."

"Har-de-har. I'm sorry about the other night. I miss you, and I won't call this number again, promise. And I promise I won't talk about sex. I'll just masturbate while I'm talking to you and you won't even be aware."

"Do you have the slightest idea of just how disgusting you are?" he asked, but couldn't hide the sound of his laughter, which was a huge relief for me.

"Sorry. What was that? I didn't hear."

"Because you're not concentrating."

"Okay, seriously, how's it going?"

"It's actually going really well. The work is good. I finish up late at night covered in dirt. The best part is taking a shower then chilling with a beer before I turn in. I've lost some weight because of the heat in the warehouse."

"Warehouse? I thought it was like some farm place."

"Not quite a warehouse, rather a huge shed covering the boat. It needs to be broken into pieces when the boat is finished."

"So you're getting all skinny now?"

"Nope. Actually, I've buffed up. But any extra weight I had is gone."

Extra weight? Yeah, right. Brett was always lean and mean, bloody perfect if you ask me, and I couldn't help but visualize his awesome bod as we chatted. "You had no extra weight. You were all muscle."

"Even I can see that I'm more cut now. The work here is helluva physical but it's enjoyable. I wish you could make a plan to visit for a while, Kyle, if you can manage some time off. You'll be impressed with this yacht."

"Yeah, because they got a good guy working on it." I was tempted to say the yacht was not the only thing that would impress me, but I held my tongue.

"Thanks, mate."

"You always did work hard."

"How are things there with you?"

"I coach the junior swimmers at school."

"Great. And the shop?"

"Some of the guys hassle me because they stuff around or go for a smoko while I keep working. They think I'm ass-creeping."

"Bugger 'em. Just do your own thing. Any more diving?"

"Don't mention it. My boss hasn't SCUBA dived for ages now, and he's talking about diving Thailand or some place with his family. How are things with Candy?"

"Very good friends and lovers but not committed to anything long term. She's pretty much a career person, and works late hours. We get along well, though, and look forward to seeing each other on weekends. You'll like her. How are your folks and Melanie?"

"Folks are cool. My dad gave me a hard time the other night about my drinking, but I think he was aggro about something else...just a downer mood. He told me I'm a bad influence on Graham."

"Graham's a lighty. He can be such a toss sometimes. Hey, if it weren't for you he'd be a crackhead right now."

"He's a cool lighty—just needs someone to talk to. I think his folks are helluva straight and don't discuss any controversial issues with him."

"So now you're his dad? C'mon, Kyle."

"You know what Graham's like, and how he looks up to me. I like to be there for him."

"Yeah? Next thing he'll be getting you to check his homework instead of his folks doing it."

I decided not to mention that that was already the case. "Yep, I'm still putting a smile on Melanie's face," I laughed. "She misses you, though."

"She said that?"

"She misses the old times, I think—all of us hanging together."

"She and Susan still an item?"

"Yep, they still hang together, but Susan does her own thing on weekends. She's got a bastard of a boyfriend."

Before we ended the conversation, I asked if it would be cool to phone this number again. "Just remember I work late. Might be best if I call you, otherwise your folks are gonna receive an eye-popping bill."

So how was that? He wasn't mad at me for calling! And he ended the call with 'Love ya'. Woohoo!

Chapter 41

Hiya G,

I know what you're saying about me hassling Brett but it's frustrating when he doesn't phone. Even though I have his number I hate to call because then I'm doing what you say I shouldn't. I think the big diff is that he doesn't feel about me the same as I do about him. And why should he? I know there's really no future for the two of us. Fact is, I know what I need to do; eventually marry and have a million kids.

The funny thing is, when Melanie and I are together, it's like we're in our own private world because we make each other feel special. And I told you before it's not just the sex, which is fantastic, we're able to talk to each other about anything. Well, not quite anything but you know what I mean. We really are good friends and lovers, and that seems to be different to what I observe about other guys and their girlfriends. Melanie and I do stuff together that would embarrass other guys, like when I parade in front of her wearing the sarong she gave me. She arranges it in all kinds of styles for me to model. We both get turned on by the whole game—just doing silly stuff together.

When I go surfing and she can't join me, she's quite happy for me to hang out with the guys. Actually, she never

bitches when it's a boys' night out. So I guess it's logical for me to start appreciating what I have in Melanie, and come to grips with the reality of Brett in my life. However, that's easier said than done. Whenever I tell Brett that I love him, I don't think he realizes that I'm in love with him. Or, if he does, he dismisses it, hoping it will go away because it makes him uncomfortable.

No calls from Brett this week, so I'll just wait and see. What was it you said? Set it free and, if it comes back, it's yours?

Six weeks elapsed before I emailed G again. And with the passing of each week, it became more difficult to write. What was I supposed to say? That I was sorry? How lame would that be. When I finally did write, I admitted I had no excuse except that I was busy with all kinds of crap, mainly related to trying to sort out my head. Melanie and I were now the real thing, madly in love. I guessed I had Brett to thank for that. He made it plain to me that what we had was a very special friendship, but that friendship was its limitation. He also worried about me, and the way I was. It was a genuine concern, given the extent of society's homophobia.

To make matters worse, I hadn't checked my email for over a month and was shit scared of all the mail waiting for me. I was sure there would be a couple from G as well, worried as

per usual when I'd been absent. But it wasn't just a matter of being sorry and having the guilts, it was also because I honestly felt that I'd dried up with the whole Internet thing; lost interest was probably a more accurate assessment.

Surfing occupied much of my time, usually accompanied by Melanie. She was one helluva surfer which gave us that much more in common. Graham and his mate Jason had become best friends, which was one of the books. It happened on a school swim tour. I wrote a huge email about it on floppy disk, ready to send to G, when a power failure stuffed the whole thing. I stared in disbelief at the PC monitor and thought, 'Fuck it!' That's when I realized how fanatical I'd become about cyber space.

I hadn't changed all that much, though, not as a person. That night I hardly slept, suffering a guilt trip in relation to being such a prick about not writing G. Adding fuel to the downer situation was my gran. She was ill, which depressed my dad big time. He visited the hospital every night.

The next few weeks brought sensational weather, as well as surf. The local beach featured solid, six-foot waves, with glassy conditions. Graham, Stuart and I raved every day until dark. What a gas!

Meanwhile, Brett phoned three times a week on a regular basis. About mid May, he told me he got a job crewing a yacht

that planned to sail around the Great Australian Bight and up the east coast to Surfers. He wanted to know if my folks would be okay about letting him stay for a few days before flying back to Perth. This was Brett talking?

"Are you sure you can trust me?"

"Maybe I should bring Candy along."

"Cool. I'm sure she'll enjoy watching." Then the chicken-shit quickly changed the subject to the weather and the latest neighborhood news.

It was late May when he phoned on a Monday night. He'd been water skiing over the weekend with Candy and a few friends. He was definitely relaxed and seemed to be enjoying life in Perth. And me? I remained controlled and didn't mention sex once. Well...

"Fingers watched me through the frosted-glass shower door and the bloody water went cold! No way I was gonna leave the shower while he was there! I eventually did, but with a towel wrapped around my waist. He was still there, and quizzed me about why I was so shy around him. But I told him it wasn't like that." Brett also mentioned work on the yacht. "We're hardly anywhere with the damn thing. It's slow because of the high-quality work we're doing. We haven't even started on the interior yet. We're still doing fairing and shit like that."

"Fairing?"

"Exterior finishes and superstructure."

In early June, I responded to an email from G.

I still think about your humor and smile stupidly. People are curious about what goes on in my head. The sad thing is that I can't speak to anyone about you and me. Rick can't handle the way I'm so into the Internet and your stories. He says I need to come back to earth. I spoke about it to Stuart. He said he could understand where I was coming from, but not why I spent so much time at the computer and getting so involved in it.

That's something I can't speak to Brett about. For starters, it would create a massive fallout. Despite everything, I believe Brett has convinced himself that I am totally straight, and that what we did together has nothing to do with sexual orientation apart from the feelings we share.

I could never speak to Graham about it either. Besides, the opportunity has never arisen. And I don't want him to think that what we share is a gay sexual thing. He would hate me for that because he sees our relationship as a natural progression of friendship. Ironically, I'm convinced that he and his best mate Jason have a sexual thing going, albeit pretty innocent. He doesn't talk about it, and I don't ask him about it. It reminds me of the relationship Rick and I shared as youngsters, not untypical of the grommet stage.

The manager of the internet café dug around the mysterious innards of a computer, endeavoring to fix something. I was the only other person there, out of sight at the back of the café. *Hey, G, I'm gonna put a smile on your grumpy old dial. I just whipped out the ol' thingamejingy thingy and stroked it into a boner. And now I'm battling to get the damn thing back into my pants! Hehehe. Bloody hell! I gotta jet before I get busted. How the hell do you stroke these things DOWN? See what I do for you? Dammit! DOWN BOY!!!!*

I wrote again later:

So what's my plan for the weekend? I'm waiting for a tall, well-built, handsome Aussie with black spiky hair to knock on my door and say, "G'day, Kyle". He hasn't contacted me for a week so I hope he's on his way up the coast, crewing the yacht that brings him to Surfers. I'll wait and see.

By mid-June, Brett still hadn't showed. Meanwhile, I'd been away on a surfing safari with a group of German tourists. I wrote G about it: *The safari was pretty cool. I had to teach one of the guys to surf. The other three were okay. How do Germans learn to surf like that? Anyway, they were pretty damn impressed with me. NO! NOT MY JEWELS! Get your fossil mind above your navel. Actually, I wondered about them; one was a bit chubby—make that a lot chubby, but he surfed pretty well.*

They asked me to find some pot because they were all into it. At first, I didn't know where to search, but it turned out to be dead easy. I approached a young bloke at the local markets and simply handed him the bucks. He knew exactly what I wanted. He passed me an arm, so the Germans were shitfaced every night at the campsite.

I connected with a chick I met during a previous visit and spent the night with her. Her boyfriend was away on business somewhere. He's a data comms project leader or whatever. Anyway, I gave the chick something to remember. 😊

I often wondered about G's reaction to my sexual exploits with girls. The first time I mentioned it, a few years ago when Rick treated me to a 'going away' present, he blew a gasket. He said we were headed in opposite directions, growing apart, and that our friendship was ultimately doomed. I wrote back and gave him both barrels; sorted him out good and proper. He was okay after that.

When Brett did finally call, he explained that the boat still needed work before it was ready to sail. SHIT!!!

G'day, G,

This is cool. I actually have some time to relax and catch up with email. My mate here at the net café lets me use the comp free. How cool is that? He's a total guru with the comps here—always got one open to dig around inside.

Sunday night I visited Graham's house. He wrote his final exam today, working his butt off. Fact is, I've hardly seen the little runt apart from surfing. He's been hitting the books and done a real academic turnaround. I suspect his mate Jason is the inspiration for that.

Everything is pretty quiet here. I saw Melanie Friday—she's busy studying too for exams starting Monday. Stuart's also writing exams but not at the expense of surfing. He's permanently wet. He bitched about his latest girlfriend the other day but is still with her. I guess he might finally be settling down—or under the perennial nagger's thumb.

Still haven't heard a word from Brett. I phoned Perth and some bloke said that Brett was already on the high seas. Hopefully, he'll arrive in a few days. Do I sound desperate? Hehehe.

Friday, June 29, 1pm. I was at the surf shop, arranging some of the merchandise. Same old, same old, just another day. Then I felt a tap on my shoulder from behind. "Hey, fuckhead. You wanna show me some of that stuff?"

I spun around, totally pissed off at some stranger who didn't even know me calling me a 'fuckhead', and was ready to plant the asshole. Then, to my absolute elation, I recognized my best mate's grinning face. I went totally ballistic.

Brett looked nothing less than fantastic! Tanned to perfection; hair a bit longer; wicked smile, just as I remembered. He wore a light blue top, like all the yachties wear and, underneath, a white T-shirt. A pair of blue Levis seductively hugged his hips, and on his feet were blue/gray sneakers. He was buff! Woohoo! So totally buff! That was plain to see by the way his t-shirt glued itself to the awesome contours of his chest. Yeah, well, I kinda notice those things. Oh, my God, he looked so cool, not to mention relaxed and so wonderfully happy!

"Hey!" I said in a mild panic as I remembered something important, "I gotta run a quick errand."

"Kyle?" he yelled as I sprinted to the shop door. "Where the hell are you going? You've been given the afternoon off! Let's get the bloody hell outta here!"

I paused at the door. "Seriously," I laughed, "just give me five minutes. Please? There's something I gotta do real quick."

After rushing like a madman into the net café to let G know via email that my birthday pressie had arrived, I quickly returned to the shop, and a bewildered Brett. "Where the hell did you disappear to?" he demanded.

"Stop bitching. It was something I needed to do. So how come I got the afternoon off?"

"I arranged it with your boss over the phone. You got the whole weekend off, but you gotta be back at work Monday."

Rather than hitch, we caught a bus back to Byron. "So take that goofy grin off your face," Brett said as the bus pulled away.

"Can't help it. I thought I'd never see you again. You're looking good. Matter of fact, I detect a new, more confident air about you. It's in your appearance and even in the way you move."

"You too, Kyle. Somehow different." Then he laughed as he checked the top of my head. "Can't get rid of that spiky hair, though, huh?"

"It's the way I cut it. Shut up."

As the bus made its unhurried journey to Byron, Brett chatted about various things, including his time at sea. "We hit a storm off Eden so we decided to anchor there for a few days. It's incredibly hard work, Kyle—sailing. When the weather's crap, there's a million things to do, and it all happens at once. Makes you feel alive and excited, though. Awesome, actually. One time I was at the helm, trying desperately to hold the yacht on course. But the force of the wind was so fierce, the waves kept looming toward the bow like huge, green skyscrapers, and the helm threatened to fly out of

my grip. I hung on to that thing for dear life, man. It felt like my arms were about to be torn from their sockets."

As he related the story with all the theatrical melodrama he could muster, I couldn't resist visualizing a tall, shirtless hunk, muscles pumped and straining as he gripped the wheel with all his might, struggling determinedly to win the raging battle against the angry sea.

"I'm totally amped about the whole yachting thing, Kyle. At the moment, I need supervision because I'm not licensed. So I'm gonna do a Mariner's training program. My dad will pay half the fee, and Fingers will chip in, plus my old boss and some of guys I worked with. Cool, huh?"

"Why them?"

"They say I'll be useful to crew some of their yachts for delivery around the world. Kyle? You hear what I'm saying? Can you believe things have turned out this way for me? Do you realize what this all means? Now I understand your obsession with the ocean. It's magic out there, wild and free."

I had to smile at his exuberance. Like him, I could never have anticipated a situation like the one Brett so easily and conveniently fell into, and was so delighted with.

All too soon we arrived home. My folks were over the moon at seeing him again. My friend was their friend, and I was

chuffed about that. My mom hugged him a little longer than necessary, which pleased me.

"You should do modeling," she smiled as she stood back at arm's length and admired him. "All the girls would have your picture pinned to their bedroom walls."

"Including my mom," I joked.

Brett blushed big time, which launched my dad into a fit of laughter.

Once in my room, Brett unpacked his stuff. Then my dad arrived to place the spare mattress against the wall. We were all overjoyed to have Brett with us, just like part of the family. Our house was a place he could always call home, and where he would always be more than welcome.

After supper, Brett explained that he needed to see his mom. I understood, despite my reluctance to see him go. Meanwhile, I helped my mom clean the kitchen and dishes. Yeah, right. For three hours? I couldn't find enough to do. Time dragged. Every minute was like an hour.

Finally, Brett returned, wearing the dimpled smile to which I was hopelessly addicted. His mom was naturally excited to see him again, and the visit went well. Even SFB was cordial, asking all the right questions, and complimenting Brett on how good he looked; how fit and buff he was. On the

down side, for me, was that Brett promised he would spend Sunday with them. Damn! That was my birthday for fuck sake!

Later, he phoned Susan. I stood nearby and heard her scream with delight at the sound of Brett's voice. She told him that she and the new boyfriend Shane bought tickets to a rock concert, the same concert for which I'd also purchased tickets for Brett, Melanie and me. It was the hottest gig on the coast and a must see.

"So what's with Susan," I asked when the call finished.

"She'll meet me at the gig."

"What about Shane? He hates me."

"Ignore him."

Upon arrival at Melanie's house, Brett was overwhelmed by a huge and eager hug from my girl. Go figure. Who wouldn't? The gig was raging by the time we arrived at 10pm—with a wall-to-wall and shoulder-to-shoulder crowd. Many angry people were turned away despite having tickets.

Eventually, we made it inside and organized drinks. Then Brett began to search for Susan. Yeah, right. The crowd was impossibly dense. With determination and patience, Melanie finally found Susan and Shane and returned them to where Brett and I stood. A second later, Brett and Susan disappeared onto the dance floor. That left me with Melanie and Shane, who constantly craned his neck, hoping to spot his girl and Brett

somewhere in the crush of humanity. Fat chance. Melanie tried to calm Shane but he was far too agitated and distracted to take heed, no doubt suspicious of what might be happening between Brett and Susan.

Shane's problems weren't mine so I took Melanie to the dance floor for a jive. The night was a total rave.

Brett had little to say on the way back to Melanie's house. For one thing he was plastered. At Melanie's front gate, I explained to her that I needed to walk Brett home. She was cool about it.

Once Brett and I had gone a few yards down the road, he grinned at me and said, "Now, *that* was a rave!"

"I hardly saw you guys all night," I pouted.

"I made love to Susan in Shane's car," he giggled. "How's that, mate."

His continuing and infectious giggle caused me to join in. "You're a dog," I laughed. Nonetheless, I derived a degree of sadistic pleasure in learning that Brett and Susan got off in Shane's car. I loathed that smartass.

"Too bloody right, mate! Serves the fucker right for being down on her."

"Who had the stash?"

"What stash?"

"Hey, this is Kyle, remember. I know you've smoked it up."

"Susan had it. Good stuff too." Then he giggled again, sending his shoulders into a flurry of involuntary activity. "Oh, my, my, my. What a night!" He reached into his top pocket and produced another joint, then lit it.

"Susan had it?"

"Yeah, and I rolled this one in Shane's car, for right now, walking home with you. It's been ages since I had a chance to really chill out. Just me and my best mate." He threw his arm around my shoulder, took a drag, and exhaled a cloud of blue/gray smoke, which was quickly devoured by the cool night air.

Despite feeling over the moon at his spontaneous show of affection, I was worried. "I think you might have gotten Susan into some serious shit with Shane."

"Bugger him. Anyway, we both wanted it. It's not like I forced her. That horny wench is as good as ever."

Chapter 42

Brett lay on his back on my bed, eyes closed, as I returned from the shower, dressed in satin sleep shorts so as not to freak him. "You gonna shower?" I asked.

"In the morning. I'm too stuffed to anything right now." He opened his eyes and gave my bod the once-over. "You're looking good, Kyle."

"Thanks," I shrugged, feigning modesty. "You gonna undress and get into bed?"

He rose to a sitting position, removed his shoes, then jacket and shirt. As always, the sight of his bare chest stirred my groin. He resembled a sleek animal; a panther. He removed his jeans to reveal a pair of black satin boxers, like gym shorts, with an open slit at the side of each leg. They hugged him beautifully; molded erotically to his prominent package and tight buns. Off came the socks, then he laid on his stomach on the spare mattress.

"You don't need to sleep there. You know that."

"Yep, but I'm fine here, Kyle. Really."

"Those boxers are way cool. They look good on you."

"A gift from Candy—she said the same thing. Then she bought two extra pair, same style in white and blue."

The sight of his killer bod was too much. I knelt over him and began to massage his powerful shoulders. "That feels great," he sighed as my fingers worked his warm, tanned skin and solid muscle beneath.

He fell asleep after a minute but I continued to massage for a while longer. In bed, I laid awake for ages thinking about his being in my room, and having him all to myself. There he was, just a few feet away, living and breathing, as real as I was. How awesome!

Eventually, he rolled onto his back; his normal sleeping position. I asked if he was awake. No answer. Then the inevitable happened. I began to explore his body with nervous fingers, terrified he might wake. He stirred a little, which caused me to freeze in fright. But only for a moment or two. Then I laid on my side and watched the gentle rise and fall of his stomach and the smoothness of his magnificently defined chest as he breathed. My thoughts dwelt on the night at his Gold Coast flat—so tender and loving, yet, a wild animal.

With great difficulty, I muffled my groans of pleasure during ejaculation. Then, as I cleaned myself with a tissue, his voice broke the silence of my room, causing me to freeze in fright again. "Hey, mate, you've given me a boner."

"You were awake the whole time?"

"You woke Mr. Snake and he woke me."

"So why didn't you answer when I asked if you were awake?"

"Would have spoiled the fun. Anyway, bro, I'm gonna get some sleep. See you in the morning."

Whoa! He was awake the whole time I fondled his bod? And he didn't complain? Come to think of it, why should he? He had the most awesome bod and was acutely aware of it.

My dad arrived (make that picked his way through the clothes that littered the floor) in my room at 11am with coffee. Brett, still groggy, sat up. "Looks like you two had a good night out," dad smiled, and placed the two mugs of steaming coffee on the bedside chest.

"Morning," Brett croaked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Hi—enjoy your evening?"

"Yeah, it rocked."

"Thanks for the detailed narrative."

After dad departed, I watched Brett's V-shaped back disappear into the ensuite. He was the type who aimed his dick directly at the bottom of the toilet bowl and made sufficient noise to shame Niagara. When finished, he took his coffee and planted his cute butt on the side of my bed.

"So what are your plans for today?" I asked.

"Not sure yet. I'd like to catch up with Susan ... said I'd see her later this afternoon."

"Is that clever?"

"What? Seeing Susan?"

"You'll be gone soon, leaving Susan holding the can ... or the baby."

"Shane will be cool about it. He knows I won't be here long, and he's not aware that Susan and I had sex last night."

"What about this Candy chick in Perth?"

"She's no chick, she's a real lady. You'll meet her one day, mate. She is absolutely and totally beautiful, and she's done a lot for me."

"*Old lady*," I chuckled before copping a painful elbow to the ribs.

"She may be almost 30 but she can teach both Susan and Melanie a few things. She's total class, and she doesn't treat me like a kid either. She treats me like a damn god. And, boy! Can she make love! She exhausts me."

"That's why you're looking so good—it's all the exercise."

"Pervert," he laughed.

"So tell me about Fingers."

"He's very cool—a bit twisted but cool. Best boss a bloke could wish for, I suppose."

"Except he's a pervert."

"Nah—he's okay. Sure, he loves to touch me but he knows if he makes a break for my boxers, he's dead. I told him already if he tries to put his hand anywhere near my dick or legs or chest I'll break his neck."

"You're harsh."

"So far it's cool. Every morning, my boss ... hear that, Kyle? MY BOSS wakes me with coffee. Then he sits on the bed and rubs my shoulders. He gets a kick out of it, and it feels good. Besides that, he's a totally cool bloke. Maybe a bit messed up because he gets depressed whenever I go off for the weekend with Candy, and that really affects his girlfriend's attitude as well. He loves to wrestle me and tickle me, which pissed me off at first, but then I thought 'What the hell?' So long as he doesn't try anything with me. His girlfriend hates the way he is with me. She asked me to fuck off one time. I told her to get him to tell me that. Now she and I barely tolerate each other. She's got Fingers pretty well taped, though."

"Do you touch him?"

"Sometimes—like when he's working at his desk late at night. I'll make something for us to drink, and stand behind him while I treat him to little shoulder massage. He likes that. But that's it."

"What do you mean 'that's it'? Bloody hell, for you that's loads!" I placed my hand on Brett's leg and let it cruise up and down between his knee and crotch. "I remember when doing this would have gotten me a week-long shiner."

"Yeah," he grinned as he placed his empty mug on the bedside chest. "But I understand you, and you're a pervert."

Quick as a flash, he leapt on top of me, tickling the hell outta my vulnerable spots. I writhed and giggled so much, I was breathless. Every muscle was tight from laughing, but his fingers continuously dug into my ribs despite my indecipherable protests. Eventually, I managed to position one leg so that I could send him flying backwards onto the spare mattress, where he rolled around guffawing like crazy.

After breakfast, Brett left to visit Susan. He was no sooner gone than the grommet paraded into my room like a landlord. I was folding and storing Brett's and my clothes, and tidying the place. "Was that Conan I saw leaving just now?"

"Yep."

"Cool. Is he back in town?"

"Just for the weekend. I thought you knew that."

"I haven't been here this week—been skating, surfing and hanging at the mall with my mates."

"Surf's been huge."

"Too huge for me, but I still surfed the middle and got nailed."

"So what's up?"

"Nothing much—I saw Conan and wanted to know if it was him. Looked like him but different—I needed to check to see if you had a new mate. Anyway, I got some stuff to do then I'm gonna hit the surf. What are you doing?"

"Just stuff around the house, so I'll be hanging here."

"Tell Conan I said g'day."

I thought it best not to tell Graham I'd rather wait for Brett's return than go surfing. No way would Graham appreciate the intensity of my relationship with Brett, or that every single moment I could spend with Brett while he was in town was far too precious to waste.

The morning dragged into the afternoon; each second attached to a lead weight. I regularly glanced at my wristwatch, hoping five minutes had elapsed. But, no, more like five seconds. How could this be? How could I be so deeply in love with another guy? The only response I could give that persistent question was a shake of my baffled head.

When Brett returned, I was relieved to learn that Shane was already at Susan's house when Brett arrived. The three rapped over a few beers and that was it; no sex. I tried to

hide my relief but, hey, the more time I spent with my best mate, the better. Hahaha, hehehehe, hohohoho!

Brett asked if I felt like a walk to the beach. Sure! The weather was cold so we both donned thickly-padded jackets over Ts and jeans. As we walked, it occurred to me that we had dressed alike. That was typical of the effect my best mate had on me. Not only did I need to be with him but also a part of him; attached in every way possible.

"So what are your plans, Kyle?" he asked as footprints propagated behind us in the damp sand, our hands warmly stuffed in our jacket pockets.

"What plans?"

"College plans, study plans, future plans, plan plans."

"Shit, I don't know. Seriously, I don't know any more. I'll have enough money at the end of the year for the first year of college, but then what? Anyway, I'm not sure what I want anymore."

"So the famous Dirk Pitt is changing direction?"

"Something like that."

"What about crewing—crewing yachts. There's always demand for extra hands."

"Oh, yeah, what a great future," I shrugged with more than a hint of sarcasm.

"I'm serious. As it is now, you're heading nowhere in that surf shop. You think that's what you wanna do all your life?"

"Fuck no!"

"It's just an idea. There are always yachties looking for crews. You love the sea. I don't know what you ultimately wanna do, Kyle, but this is a door. Quite a good one, too."

"Is that what you plan to do?"

"I think so," he smiled as if to encourage me. "It's the first time in my life that I might actually have a goal—to get a skipper license and sail all over the world. Some guys are forever delivering to owners from one place to the other."

"I'll think about it."

"Okay, but make sure you *do* think about it. I reckon crewing is something you'd love. You don't mind hard work, because it is. But it's fun as well, and you'll always be at sea." After a brief pause, he looked me directly in the eye. "Kyle?"

"What?"

"There's a bit of money to be made, quite a bit."

We spoke for a long time as we ambled along the beach, with its chilly wind and pounding waves, each scampering up the sand, testing terra firma, then rejecting it in favor of

returning to the bosom of Mother Ocean. Was there a message there for me?

The more Brett spoke about his new life the more hyped I became, mainly because of the enthusiasm he showed for the whole yachting lifestyle. He planned eventually to sail new yachts from the shipyards to their new owners around the world. "And I want to get into racing, Kyle. That would be just so damn exciting!"

The more I listened the more sense he made, primarily because I, unlike him, lacked direction and purpose. Being at one with the sea was definitely right up there as far as my own priorities were concerned.

The evening of June 30, 2001, the last day of my eighteenth year. Brett and I decided to go to a club up the coast. Cool with me! The more time I spent in his company the better! It was an opportunity for us to hang out on the balcony, sip a beer and talk. And, boy, did we talk! The street scene below provided visual amusement; car horns tooting, crowds loitering outside nearby clubs, minor argie bargies with a bit of pushing and shoving—one guy got planted over the hood of his car.

"Are you listening to me, Kyle?"

"Yeah."

"You gotta promise me that you'll think about what I said. I'm worried about you."

"Why?"

"Because you're suddenly not focused, and that's not the Kyle I know. You're slowly succumbing to a rut, and what you're doing is not what you'll want to be doing later."

We hitched a ride home, arriving at 3am. Amazingly, we were not trashed. We'd had a totally cool evening, just talking and drinking moderately. Within a minute of settling into my room, Brett stripped to his boxers. I asked him if he wanted to shower.

"It'll wake your folks."

"Not a prob. You can if you want."

It's cool. Stop hassling."

I undressed to my boxers and tossed my clothes onto my desk. Then, from behind, I felt his arms around my upper torso, and his hands slide down to my stomach. My hands automatically found his. "Well," he said, breathing his warmth into my ear, "I just remembered my best friend is having a birthday today."

Chapter 43

My folks woke me in the morning with a kiss from each. A goodnight or goodbye peck on the cheek was a family custom for as long as I could remember. Fortunately, Brett was on the spare mattress; he must have moved there after I dozed off.

Brett slowly stirred as my folks sat on the side of my bed and wished me many happy returns. It took my mate five or ten seconds to realize what was happening. My mom handed me a nicely wrapped gift, which I was tempted to tear to shreds in my haste to discover its contents. But I resisted, and opened the package carefully. Wow! A pair of Replay sneakers, a couple of cool T-shirts and the CD soundtrack of Tomb Raider. Fantastic! My immediate response was to hug both my folks, with the result that the bed covers slipped off and exposed my pride and joy.

Once my folks left the room, Brett cracked up completely. It had been ages since I'd heard him laugh so heartily. "Kyle! I can't believe you did that!"

"What," I asked innocently.

"Hugged your old lady with a boner."

"I didn't. I used my arms." My answer cracked him even further. "Besides, it was only a semi. The fresh air turned it into a boner."

Brett sat up, leaned over, and treated me to a nice, big, warm hug. "Happy birthday, bro."

Then I took hold of Brett's crotch. "Now *that's* a boner, so don't talk crap to me. Thanks for the hug, though—and last night."

He rummaged around in his tog bag for a few seconds and produced a small package. Inside was a card, which I read aloud. "*Your gift of friendship has always been the most valuable gift I've received from anybody. Have a great birthday, mate. Love, Brett.*" My eyes watered instantly upon reading those precious words written in his neat hand. My throat closed as I searched my mind for something to say. The card was fantastic. I didn't need anything else, but inside the package was something more—two pair of boxers just like Brett's, a white pair and a black pair.

"Those are from Candy," he explained. "The card is from me. I told her you would dig those. I tried to organize Rick again but couldn't find a big enough box. Sorry."

"Your being here has really made this day special," I squeaked. "And I love the card. It's awesome. And tell Candy the boxers are totally cool."

"So try the black ones on."

I was chuffed with the way the satin hugged my furniture and butt. Slits at the sides made bending easy, and they showed off my attributes a treat—made me feel damn good.

"Now I can tell Candy the boxers are super cool. And they fit perfectly. I was worried you'd gotten a big butt as well as fat while I was away."

"Har-de-bloody-har."

After showering (separately), we sat at the breakfast table with my folks when in bounced the whirlwind. "Hey! Happy birthday, man! So how's your birthday been so far?"

"Cool. What did you bring me?"

"Kyle!" mom scolded.

"I'm kidding, mom."

"Oh, yeah—right," Graham grinned. "I did bring you something." He handed me a card.

I figured it must have taken him all night to create this hand-drawn copy of my Endless Summer poster. But, instead of the normal title, he wrote: *To my older brother...* And on the inside: *Even though we hardly see each other, now that you're no longer at school, you're still the best bro a little grommet could have. I hope you have a totally super day. Happy Birthday, Kyle ... from your little bro, Graham.*

"That is pretty damn stylish, bro."

"Pretty wicked, huh?" he beamed. Then slapped Brett's back so hard even I could feel it. "So how's Conan?"

"Fit enough to beat you up."

"Yeah, but you old codgers can't run anymore. Anyway, I gotta jet. Kyle? I'll check you later—maybe go for a wave or something." And with that, the whirlwind vanished out the door.

Following breakfast, Brett helped with a few chores around the house, then visited his mom for lunch. While he was away, I gave serious thought to his comments about my loss of focus and lack of plans. Maybe crewing yachts was not such a bad option after all.

Brett returned early afternoon. We sat in my room where he told me about lunch: "It went pretty well. Even SFB was civil." Then my dad appeared at the door to ask Brett what time he wanted to leave for the airport.

"Airport?" I said after my dad left. "I thought you'd be here for a few more days!"

"I wish. I didn't tell you when I arrived because you would have been in a shit mood the whole damn time. Now I only have to handle your shit for a few hours."

"Can I talk to you about last night in my bed?"

"What about it?"

"I just want to say that it was pretty damn special, especially because you initiated it."

"That was my birthday present to you, Kyle. It was special for me too. Actually ... it was incredibly special."

"Do you think about it? About us? Like when we were at your flat at the Gold Coast, and we spent that time together?"

"Sure ... but not the way you do. I think more about the closeness of our being together than anything physical that happens as a consequence. The sex is the result of how I feel, but it's the feeling of closeness that's really important."

"Does the physical stuff worry you?"

"No—and that's honest. I know it's something special we share. It's because you're special to me that I don't let it hassle me. It could ... but I don't let it."

"You've definitely changed," I mused as I studied his green eyes. "But, sometimes, I wish things could be different—like you still living in Byron. But ... I guess I need to be happy the way things are, which, I have to admit, are pretty awesome."

"Kyle, there's something I want you to do."

"Anything for a best mate."

"Nope, it's for you. Remember the things I spoke about? I want you to write down the things you wanna do, then write how

you think you'll achieve those things. After that, make a plan based on what you wrote, and go out and do it."

"Like yachting?"

"That was just an idea, but I think you'd enjoy it. You're very focused on who you think you are. At the same time, I don't think you really know who that person is. And I reckon that is what prevents you from starting the adventure."

"Whoa, boy! You're getting quite heavy."

"Crap. I don't mean to sound heavy. It's just that Candy taught me so much about myself; how to look forward, how to set goals for myself. There's not a thing you can't do, Kyle. But you need to get out of that cocoon you've wrapped yourself in. I can't put my finger on it, but I know you're in it—like a rut—a comfortable rut. You got so much bloody potential to go out and do whatever you want, bro."

"Jesus! That *is* pretty deep shit. I'm gonna need to think about it."

"Hey," he smiled, "that's a start."

We spent the remainder of the afternoon just chilling and talking about all kinds of stuff. Then, all too soon, it was time to head to the airport. *Shallow Waters* all over again.

We drank coffee in an airport café while we waited for Brett's flight to be announced over the PA. Brett actually seemed more upset than I was feeling. I surprised myself by my

own self-control. Truth was, it was pretty damn neat—my folks, Brett and me chatting. My folks listened intently as Brett told of his life in Perth, Candy ... then, mid sentence, he was interrupted by the boarding announcement.

Brett became suddenly anxious and nervous. He treated my mom to a big bear hug, then shook my dad's hand and thanked my folks for the weekend. Okay, okay, so then I lost some of my self-control. My eyes watered profusely—dust or something—yeah, right.

Brett and I hugged warmly, patting each other's back, then, without a word, he turned toward the boarding gate. He never looked back.

Surprise number two was me; I didn't feel as morose as I thought I might. Maybe I was getting used to these goodbyes. I simply stood there and watched him walk away, and wondered when I would see him again.

That night, in bed, I could still feel him and smell him. I could hear him speaking to me. I loved his voice. It was a special voice, a voice that spoke intimately to the very depths of my soul.

He phoned Monday night to tell me what a great weekend he had in Byron and to remind me of what he said about planning my future, and yachting.

And that, G, is why this bloody email has taken so damn long to write. Since Brett left, I've been in and out of depression, not so much because I miss him or our relationship but because of my situation and me.

Bloody hell, G, I've been so deep in thought that, at one stage, I thought I was having an out-of-body experience. Have you ever asked that question, 'Who am I?' over and over again, and really wondered what the fuck you're doing here? That's what I've been doing, and I wrote down a lotta things. Then I tore up the papers and threw them away. Meanwhile, I've been working my ass off at the shop, and went on a two-day surfing trip, which provided an opportunity to think.

A whole lot has changed, G. I often wish I was still at school. It was a safe haven for me. Hehehehe. Yeah, despite all the fighting and crap. Rick's gone. Brett's in Perth, and who knows where after that. Stuart's thinking of going to Hawaii to try his hand at surfing the north shore. Graham is really nailed to his group of mates now, and that's how it should be. I see him often, though, and we still enjoy being close to each other—it's now much more of an older and younger brother thing. A lot of my friends are in college and a lot more are overseas to work in summer camps, or study in the U.S. on sports scholarships. Who knows what Melanie is gonna do? She says she'll finish school this year but is not sure

what might happen after graduation. Her dad suggested she travel on a student work permit for a year or so. He even asked if I should go as well because it's easier to travel in pairs. That's something else I'm giving thought to.

I really don't know what I wanna do just yet. My grades at school are good enough to get a college scholarship somewhere overseas, like the States or wherever, but I don't wanna leave my family right now. It's not just a comfort zone thing, it's just that I'm not quite up to it right now. Besides, my savings are coming together, kinda, so we'll see where it goes from there.

Anyway, G, I'm gonna send this off now, confusing as it all is. There's really something I need to be thankful for, though, and that's the fact that you've always been there to pick me up when I needed it, and slap me around when I needed that as well.

**Shiny skin,
Gliding,
Flying,
Muscles taut -
A foot movement,
Direction change,
Hit the lip and turn,
Bottoms up,
Floater comin'
Glide and Zip
Matted hair dripping,
A hand clears the vision,
A golden vortex appears,
Fly in fly in...
The voices call.**

A careful balance,
 Sturdy feet,
 Crouch
 Cover up
 The hush
 The whisper of the gods
 The solace
 The friendship
 The roar and rumble
 The rush of air
 The take off and spit out.
 My arms raised in triumph.

I have not conquered the wave,
 She has allowed me to experience her thrill
 Once more.
 My blood racin'
 My stick stylin'
 Speed
 Smooth
 A wavin' hand
 A smile
 From a friend.
 In the surf?

No,
 A friend in the spirit,
 Across the wide wide sea.
 I see him and he sees me.
 The old man of the sea?

No!
 A friend in the spirit,
 But - he does see
 Right inside of me.

The wave peels,
 The concentration falters,
 The sand below,
 Over the falls.
 I hear my friend,
 It wont be the last -
 The pain and the hurt,
 But learn you will.

My eyes cast out -
 I see him,
 My invisible friend
 Across the sea.
 I reach out.
 The golden wave tumbles,
 Roars.

**I turn
Smilin'**

**This is where you left off-
I hear the voice say -
Don't start over..
Start from here.**

**My arms move
The stick starts flyin'
A push,
My feet stand firm,
A vortex appears...
Yes - this is it -
The continuum of nature
the continuum of life.
Another challenge -
and yet another.**

**I look over my shoulder
at my invisible friend
He sits on the chair on his verandah,
He smiles -
I smile back, the Captain of my stick.
A voice calls out...
Write your name Captain -
Write your name upon the waves -
And find the solace you so crave.**

**Thanks my friend.
The surf is my haven and my inner thoughts but,
my solace comes from knowing you.**

I managed to convince Brett to get an email addy to save on the cost of calls. But he called anyway, following an email I wrote about our more intimate moments.

"Are your folks home?"

"Nope," I answered. "By the way, did you get my mail?"

"Are you outta your fucking skull, Kyle? Huh? How the fuck could you write about that stuff?"

"Whoa! Sorry, I didn't mean to freak you out."

"Hey, I know how you feel about me. Okay? And I love you too, and I enjoy being close to you, but I don't want you writing about it. Okay?"

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not sure you are, Kyle. Do you get off writing that shit? Huh? Jack off after writing all that crap?"

"I just wrote about how I feel," I said meekly.

"About my cock? Are you mad?"

"Calm down. I hear you."

"Yeah, whatever. You really know how to piss me off. You know that?"

"I said I'm sorry. What else must I say?"

"Say goodbye. I'll chat later sometime."

"What a second!"

Too late. He hung up.

September 11, 2001. The phone rang at the shop. It was Brett. "I guess you heard the news already."

"Melanie phoned. She was freaking big time because her folks are in Europe and she's home alone."

"They should nuke those terrorist bastards. Hey, Kyle, I'm totally amped to get into some army and kick butt."

"Calm down, Brett. You're shouting."

"Did you see the pics on TV? The WTC towers crumbling? Of course, I'm shouting! Those assholes need annihilating, and I'm amped to do it."

"Sorry, Brett, I'm getting the hairy eyeball from the boss. He doesn't like me taking personal calls at work. I gotta split. Catch you later."

Chapter 44

During the following weeks, Brett and I kept in regular contact by phone and email. One time, he handed the phone to Candy.

"She sounds really cool," I told Brett afterward, "a helluva lot more mature than the chicks we normally hang with. It's the way she talks—her maturity. And does she have a sexy voice or what?"

"Calm down. You'll give yourself a hernia."

"You got one yet?"

"Hey, mate, listen up. Candy and I talked about maybe getting some time off work, and we can both rock over to Byron in December."

"You serious? Woohoooooooo! That would be awesome!"

"I'll let you know our plans next time I call. See ya, mate."

"Wait! I forgot to tell you—I had a really cool dawn patrol with my dad the other day. We hadn't done that in ages, and it was sooooo awesome. It was great to see him relax a bit because he's been kinda stressed lately."

"Your dad's a top bloke, Kyle. Tell him I often think of him and your mom for always treating me like a son. I owe them big time."

Hiya G

So the big surprise is that I'm going to varsity to study marine bio. Yep! I kept my acceptance as a surprise from everyone, even you. The only other person who knows is my dad because he had to sign the damn papers. Otherwise, it would have been a surprise for him as well. I think my mom is gonna be pretty stoked about it. Her little baby going out into the big wide world. So am I raving or what? Hehehehe. Okay, so I'm a little excited. Live with it. Have a cool 2002 'cause I know I am.

December 16, 2001. A note from John, a friend of Kyle:

Hello, Gary,

This is the hardest correspondence I've ever had to write and I hope you understand, once you read it, why it has taken so long.

Kyle was involved in a very serious motor accident during the early hours of Saturday, November 3. He hitched a ride home after enjoying a few drinks with his work mates, a sort of end-of-year celebration before going to college. The car crashed at 160 kph. He was admitted to hospital and underwent emergency surgery. His injuries were incredibly serious and he never regained consciousness. He passed away a few hours after surgery.

I wish there were something more comforting I could say to you because I know that you have lost a son, at least that is the impression I always gained from you, and most certainly from Kyle who loved you so incredibly. So no, I don't know how you must feel at learning this terrible news so I will refrain from the cliché.

A memorial service was held for Kyle, attended by hundreds of his friends, including Rick who arrived from Canada on the day of the service. He and Brett read the tributes, which was more than I could bear so I left the service at that stage.

A private cremation was held and Kyle's ashes were scattered on Sunday, November 18.

Rick delivers his eulogy at the memorial service, attended by Kyle's school friends, the swim team, work mates and even the junior swimmers he helped coach. Also in attendance are Kyle's folks, the folks of his friends, Graham, Stuart, Melanie, Susan and Brett:

Hi, excuse me if I ramble a bit. It was very difficult to try to find something special to say about Kyle. Everything he did and everything he was, was special to all of us, not only his family and friends, but also his school mates and neighbors.

Kyle was the first real friend I had. We met as toddlers, and became closer than brothers over the years. We could take the worst situation and turn it around. He taught me to appreciate everything around me. He had a passion for the outdoors. We used to go to the top of Wollumbin together just to sit and watch the world below us. He was a friend in his laughter as well as in his silences. He could manipulate those around him to do the most outrageous things. On one of our hiking trips, when the summer sun was beating down, he convinced all of us to walk along the trail with nothing on except our backpacks, naked as day, to act innocently whenever a couple walked by and didn't know where on earth to look. Kyle was a fun-loving person with an infectious sense of adventure.

Rick paused at that point to wait for the congregation's laughter to subside.

Kyle was on the school swim team, and pushed himself harder than any of us. He even wrote an essay about going to the 2000 Sydney Olympics and winning a medal. It was a story he wrote as an inspiration to himself. Was he disappointed that he never got to compete at the Olympics? No, because he knew there would be plenty more opportunities over the next hill.

Everyone here was and is touched by Kyle in some way or other. Whether you were school buddy or on the swim team, or hiking or surfing, or a work mate, you were all his friends. Kyle gave his friendship to all of us unconditionally, no strings attached. We could take it or leave it. Not all of us understood what that meant.

I remember Kyle spending many of his school breaks, when he wasn't swimming, in the computer lab at school. He was catching up with his internet friends around the world. On days when the system was down, he was mad as hell. I told him that he was crazy and that those friends weren't real. But to Kyle, they were as real as you and me in this room. Friends were very important to him. If his friends were in need, Kyle made sure those needs were met. Kyle was also tough. He didn't tolerate bullies, a few of whom discovered the hard way to what lengths Kyle would go to protect his friends or the little guys at school.

Time was something Kyle had for everyone. Some days, when the surf crapped out, he went down to the beach to sit on the rocks and talk to the fisher folks. Often, he took food with him and ate with them. He took the time to talk to the juniors at school, or the hobo on the street, and absorb what they had to say.

Kyle had a great love for his folks. Where a lot of guys his age wouldn't be seen dead going out with their parents, Kyle thrived on it. He enjoyed the closeness of being in a restaurant with his mom and dad, sharing thoughts and stories. His dad and he loved to tease the waitresses while his mom wished she could find a place to hide. Kyle's folks became folks to his friends. Kyle's home was our home, Kyle's room was our room, and being at his home gave me some of my most wonderful memories. Kyle kept a spare mattress permanently in his room for his friends when they slept over, which was often.

There is a rule that Kyle lived by: to hug and kiss his folks whenever he was about to go out. It was a rule his mom gave him, just in case that person was never to be seen again.

On the Friday morning before Kyle left for work at the surf shop, when he would normally say to his mom, "see ya", he strangely said, "cheers, mom. Loveya."

For all of us there will be a piece of our lives missing, and a sadness knowing that we will never see Kyle smiling again. I know that he is with us now. He will be in the surf and on the mountain, and he will be looking out for us like he always did.

Christmas is just around the corner, and I'd like to leave you with this thought about my friend: His gift to all

of us is the most wonderful memories that anyone could ever hope for. It's a gift to last a lifetime, one that will bring smiles to our faces and a warm feeling to our hearts. We can all be thankful for knowing Kyle in some way or other. We are richer for having known him, and he will live in our hearts forever. I'm going to end with one of Kyle's favorite quotes: "Loveya stacks."

Rest in peace, bro. Loveya stacks.

Brett now takes the stand.

I just want to say a few words about my friend Kyle. I want to tell Mr and Mrs Taranto that all our thoughts are with them always, and I want to thank them publicly for taking me into their home and treating me as a son.

I'll tell you how special my friend was. When other people wrote me off, and I was on a road to ruin, Kyle walked into my life. It was a rocky start. We tried to beat each other up at school. I realized then that Kyle was dangerously courageous. Nonetheless, I was determined to show him who was boss. How do you beat a spirit that won't die?

After one of my many street-fight encounters, I landed in hospital. The only person from school who visited my bed was Kyle. Even then, I didn't appreciate him. I didn't trust his motives. Maybe he was there to smirk, I thought.

Back at school, I began to accept his friendship with a degree of suspicion. But as I got to know him better, I realized he was gutsier than I'd given him credit for. He was like a dog with a bone, and worked diligently at winning me over. However, I remained stubborn and suspicious.

As our friendship developed, I grew to understand the enormous capacity for love that Kyle had; not just for people. He loved Wollumbin, which he called his mountain. He had a passion for the sea, in which he spent a great deal of his life. Most of all, he demonstrated great love for his family and friends. Some of us were closer to Kyle than others, and my heart goes out to Graham, Rick, Stuart and Melanie. We knew Kyle probably better than most, besides his folks.

Kyle shared a love that has no measure. And I will forever be in his debt. God help me if Kyle hadn't fought his way into my life. He gave me lessons of life, and memories I will hold dear for as long as I live, memories I will treasure with every breath I take.

So how do you beat a spirit that refuses to die? You don't. You take it with both hands, put your arms around it and love it with all your heart.

We love you, Kyle. Enjoy your new green room, mate.

A note from Stuart:

Hi, G

This took a while to write but I know you understand. Sunday before last we scattered Kyle's ashes behind the back line at the 'local'. It was difficult to say the least. The group consisted of Mr T, Graham, Rick, Brett, Melanie, a few other surf friends and me. It was one of those magic mornings that Kyle enjoyed on his dawn patrols, so I know that, along with everything else, this was even more difficult for his dad. Kyle's mom declined to be at the beach. You can imagine why.

Oh, my fuck, this is so hard to write. It's like I can see the whole ceremony happening again, right now.

Mr T wanted Graham to paddle the ashes out, but the grommet simply couldn't comply. The little dude cried his eyes out the whole time, which certainly didn't help my self-control. Mr T's eyes teared all the while and I don't know how he managed to stay relatively composed.

Brett volunteered to carry the ashes. I'd seen him paddle before and I fully expected him to drop the ashes on the shoreline. But it was like he felt Kyle was there with him so he took it slow and easy all the way, and paddled like a pro. The ambience was exceptionally quiet. The surf was gentle, with glassy rollers more than anything else. The temperature was quite warm so none of us wore wetsuits. No one said a word on the way out. It was my first time in the surf since the

accident and I kind of expected to see Kyle paddling out next to me, chirping his normal bullshit. I think that was the hardest thing for me, not seeing Kyle out on his stick.

We followed Mr T to the backline, then sat silently on our boards. Graham earned a lot of respect from all the guys at that moment because we were like sitting on our boards not knowing what to do next. He piped up and said, "Hey, what's with all the sad faces? That's bullshit! That's not how Kyle would've wanted this to be!"

Then Brett told us the story about the time he first befriended Kyle, the time in hospital, the fights they had, and how they used to laugh together. That was the bitterest pill to swallow; Kyle laughed almost all of the time, when he wasn't shoving his fist into my face or someone else's.

Mr T took the ashes from Brett and scattered them. That action was so final and fucked up, it was more than any of us could handle. Graham paddled away from the group and sat, staring at the sea. Rick, Brett and I paddled over to the little bloke and sat with him, gazing at the rollers and the horizon, wondering ... well, you know.

The T's are handling it okay now—as well as anyone could expect them to. Christmas is going to be the hardest time for them as well as everyone else, but the T's are pretty strong. We all visit them often and I think they appreciate that. They

put on a brave show when I visit. Graham almost camps at the house, and spends a lot of time in Kyle's room, which is exactly as he left it.

Kyle has the final word:

Hiya, G,

This afternoon, when I was out there catching barrels, there was this one—I'm gonna remember it for a long time. Another guy and I were surfing when this massive set came through. We paddled like crazy to avoid getting nailed. This one wave came along and the other guy turned to me and said, "Hey, mate! Catch it or you're gonna get drilled!"

All I could see in front of me was this huge wall of water building up over my head, and the other guy paddling furiously to get over the shoulder. I knew he was right about the danger of getting drilled. There was no way I could sub deep enough to avoid it pulling me down.

I turned just in the nick of time and felt the wave lift me. I pushed down on my stick and stood up right away, then put weight down on my front foot—my left one because I ride natural—and then I felt the drop. Whoa!

I turned halfway down the wave because I could sense the lip hovering over my head. It was huge! I could choose to ride over the back at that point because I had so much speed, but I was so fucking amped to take the risk—it was so damn big and fast!

Then I saw it peaking in front of me and I knew I was gonna get nailed to hell and gone. I pushed and went in under

the lip. It was like being in the middle of a hurricane—the wind was loud and the sound of the wave was loud. Then, suddenly, everything went dead quiet—just the soft whooshing sound of my board. I was in the green room! The fucking green room, man! I was in it!

I was surrounded by this huge tunnel of water and it felt way awesome! It couldn't have lasted for more than a few seconds but it seemed like ages, like a time warp that telescopes seconds into minutes.

And you know what happened, G? I got this huge lump in my throat and wished that you were there with me to see it. Then it closed out and put me into the washing machine.

When I surfaced, the other guy was screaming at the top of his voice. He raved! I told him it was better than any wave I'd ever caught before.

Damn, it was weird. Ya know, G, if you rap with the guys, the ones who catch a lot of barrels, there's always one that seems more special than any other. That was it for me.

Seeya, G

Your friend

Kyle.