

For Stuart and Kyle

Green Room II
© Gary Kelly

Foreword

When my best friend Kyle was killed in an auto accident I turned to drugs. Why not? I was already into substance abuse so it was easy to lean more heavily on my addiction to cope with my loss.

I was a year younger than Kyle who, at just 19, was poised for a career as a marine biologist. He had everything to live for; all cruelly snatched away in a few hours, leaving his family, friends and lovers devastated, particularly me.

"Come on, man, let's party!" he said when he phoned to ask me to join him that fateful night. But I was too busy, hoping to get my way with a new girlfriend, so I declined his invitation. If I'd accepted, things might have been different, and Kyle might still be alive today.

My name is Stuart Shaffer and this is the story of how Kyle's mentor and soul mate, G, helped me to escape the depths of suicidal depression, quit the drugs, and turn my life around...all via email. G was the only person in the world I could turn to; the only person I could trust with my darkest of secrets. Or was he?

Green Room II
Chapter 1

Hey, John. You need to write G and tell him about Kyle. There's a shit load of mail come in and one of them from a few weeks back is from G who thinks that Kyle's stuffing their friendship over. I thought that you would have written already. I don't want to sound all fucked up aggro but G did a lot for Kyle and I don't think it's fair that he thinks Kyle's forgotten him. And no I can't write the mail because I'm using Kyle's and just imagine that mail coming from Kyle's email addy. I also don't know what to say. I hate laying this on you but I thought you said you were going to write him. He'll be wondering about Graham and Brett as well. You can tell him they're okay. Graham has taken it the hardest but I think he'll be okay. Kyle was like his big brother. Rick has gone back to Canada. I'm okay. Like everyone, I'm totally lost but I guess everyone will come around in time. Christmas is a bad time of the year though, as you can imagine. I know that it's hard for you too even though you didn't have contact but you're the only person I can think of to write this thing to G. Please don't leave it too long. Thanks. Stuart.

John duly wrote G, who was predictably devastated by the news of Kyle's death but it provided an opportunity for us to meet via email. I knew of G through his friendship with Kyle, but never wrote to him while Kyle was alive. The more often I wrote G, and the more often he

replied, the greater my need to confide in him became. I began to tell G about my darker side, my evil side, always expecting to unleash his rage. But, no, his criticism was always tempered by diplomacy and calm advice. Slowly, I realized what Kyle saw in his fossil mate.

I admitted things I'd done to deliberately hurt Kyle, like having sex with his girlfriend Melanie, and organizing a couple of my druggie mates to assault Brett at a club one night. I hated the relationship that developed between Kyle and Brett; their closeness. I was insanely jealous. I wanted Kyle all to myself. But whenever things turned out in Kyle's favor, which they inevitably did, I launched into another drug binge and sent myself to another planet. Little did I realize then that Kyle had enough love to share with everyone. He had a limitless supply.

Kyle found me lying in my own puke in my room one day, and we fought. He beat the crap out of me. He was powerfully strong, and when he hit, you felt it big time. But he only lashed out when he was angry; a fire blazed in his hazel eyes as he vented his rage. He hated my dependence on drugs. But, often, after a fight, we made up. One time he wrote a poem about me titled Golden God:

*Hard muscle
Covered by silky gold
Piercing blue eyes
Looking into my soul*

Melanie was also into drugs before she met Kyle; ecstasy and coke. She attended a rehab program.

She did that for Kyle, who was none the wiser. I thought about it too. But it was always tomorrow, and tomorrow never came. I tried cold turkey and failed a stack of times, so what was the use? I was in too deep, not only using but dealing. Kyle never knew about that. He thought the stuff in my room was my own stash. Rick and Brett knew about it, though, and scored off me a few times—nothing hard, just grass. Brett and I got along okay, I suppose, but Rick hated me. He was the more clever and saw through me right away. He only reason he tolerated me was because Kyle liked me, and he loved Kyle big time.

Anyway, I did my best to convince G that I was an asshole—and he agreed! Hahaha! But he also insisted that that need not be the end of the story, that I could change, that I could be up there on the pedestal Kyle saw me on, that I could be loved and respected by the same people who currently loathed me, including myself. Yeah, right, G was in dreamland.

Melanie and I spent quite a lot of time together, much to my current girlfriend's chagrin. I'd always loved Melanie. Following a few arguments with my girlfriend, we split. Graham became a constant companion. He saw me as Kyle's best friend, so I guess that was some comfort to the little bloke. Whoa! Not so little any more. His body was experiencing a growth spurt. He also spent a lot of time listening to music in Kyle's room, which was just as Kyle left it—a shrine to the main man.

On the morning of November 3, Graham, as usual, breezed into his big bro's room to bounce on the bed. He loved to do that after Kyle had a big night out. But, this time, there was no Kyle. When Kyle's folks broke the news, the grommet was shattered beyond belief. He spent ages on Kyle's bed sobbing uncontrollably and calling his bro's name.

Melanie and I took Graham to see *Lord of the Rings* at the movies just before Christmas. We'd become like a family—brothers and sister.

On Christmas day, Melanie and I visited the Taranto house. We were treated like family by them too. All Kyle's friends were treated like family. Melanie brought a gift, an African violet. Mrs. T had tears in her eyes when she received it. Even Mr. T was all choked up.

Then I noticed some gifts under the tree. One was a present from Kyle, which he made before the accident. I read the card, then unwrapped the gift—a bead surfer necklace he made himself. Kyle was like that. He didn't have a lot of money, so he often gave things he crafted with his own hands. It took every ounce of control I could muster not to burst into tears as I fondled the beads, and imagined his fingers stringing them together.

The Ts were coping as well as could be expected, and were delighted to see us all. Graham arrived shortly afterwards, dressed in a new tank top and boardies, gifts from his folks. He was surprisingly chirpy, and gave a hand-made card to the Ts. It featured a drawing of Mr. T and Kyle on a Dawn Patrol; just a silhouette

of two surfers against the rising sun. The grommet was no great artist, but the gift was received with sincere gratitude, and would undoubtedly become a family treasure. In return, the Ts gave Graham Kyle's prized *Endless Summer* poster. He went ballistic, but asked if the poster could remain in Kyle's room, because that was where it rightfully belonged. "Besides, it gives me another excuse to come and visit more often." The Ts were charmed by that remark.

We all went outside to sit by the pool, where Mrs. T served juice and snacks. However, it was impossible not to notice the absence of Kyle. Brett and his girlfriend Candy, a total stunner, top class and beautiful, arrived later. Candy was an instant hit with everyone, including Graham, who told her about how Brett used to beat him up at school. Graham soon found himself being wrestled in the pool by a merciless Brett, whom the grommet loved to tease, and always called him 'Conan'.

Mr. T threw steaks and sausages on the barbecue for lunch. It was a wonderful day, sunny and warm, with the conversation, naturally enough, centering much of the time around Kyle; stories of his school days, as well as hiking and swim tours. Members of the swim team arrived mid afternoon. None of us was Kyle, but at least there was a little part of Kyle in each of us.

The next time I wrote G, I apologized for letting him down. Or had I let myself down? I'd suffered a major depression, drug induced, of

course, thinking about Kyle and how deeply I missed him.

My folks went on another of their endless trips, which left me in the care of the household staff—yeah, right. But I took advantage of the opportunity to invite Graham for a sleepover.

When he arrived at my front gate he appeared nervous at the prospect of being alone with me, so I invited him to chill out in the pool. My board shorts slipped off as I dove in. No biggie, I thought, so I tossed them on the lawn. I asked Graham if he wanted to ditch his Speedos, but he declined. Then I sat on the side of the pool, naked.

Graham exited the water, wrapped a towel around his narrow waist and asked if I was a fag. "A what?" I answered, totally shocked by his question.

"Remember that time I walked into Kyle's room and you guys were doing stuff? How am I supposed to forget that?"

"You think I'm twisted or something?"

"Go figure."

I lit a joint and smoked it right there in front of him, still sporting a boner. It then became apparent why he'd wrapped a towel around his waist. It barely hid the tell-tale bulge.

"Are you saying that Kyle was a fag?"

"I didn't say that. I know you were friends and did stuff together. Kyle never told anyone, he didn't need to. The look on your face is enough. So what did you guys do?" The

grommet's eyes focused on the reefer. "Can I have some of that?"

"Lose the towel." He did as I asked, and stood before me. His Speedos could barely contain what I estimated to be at least a seven. "So what's the problem? You think Kyle is gonna be mad if you get naked?" Graham was built beyond his years, more like a well-defined 18-year-old. He didn't answer my questions, rather he took a drag and exhaled a cloud of blue smoke without saying a word.

I felt the need to chill the tension, so I got a couple of beers from the kitchen and offered one to him. We sat by the pool for ages, discussing Kyle, surfing and various other topics. Eventually, the housekeeper emerged from the house to say goodnight. Graham must have figured she and I had a thing going because of the way she fondled me. But he was too plastered to take much notice.

It occurred to me what G might say if I told him about this. On the other hand, Kyle was always totally honest with G so maybe it would work for me as well.

After downing a few more beers, Graham dove into the pool, removed his Speedos and tossed them onto the wall. "Wanna come for a swim?"

I didn't need a second invite. As soon as I was in the water, I swam up behind him and placed my hands on his chest. "You got beautiful pecs, Graham."

"Beautiful is for tits, Stuart. Anyway, Kyle thought they were awesome."

"And your stomach is flat, flat, flat-not to mention defined."

The kid had huge hands and feet for his age, and was incredibly strong. His index finger was about a half inch longer than mine. When he lifted his arms, his biceps bulged with no effort at all. No wonder Kyle thought so much of the grommet—all that muscle and a wonderful nature made him a very special package.

However, the grommet was obviously affected by too much beer. I turned him around to face me, then kissed him. He responded in kind, then wrapped his arms around me. Suddenly, without warning, he withdrew. "Hey, I don't feel so good." He swam to the wall, heaved himself onto the lawn, and hurled his guts all over the grass. A few seconds later, he passed out, lying on his stomach.

I lit another reefer, sat beside him, and studied his body. Apart from a small bush of pubes and a black mop on his head, he was hairless.

I turned him over onto his back, but he quickly returned to all fours to puke again, then spent several minutes dry heaving. When he heard me laugh, he cried, "Fuck off! I'm dying!" Then he passed out again.

Even at just 55 kilograms, the grommet was a dead weight, and it took all my strength to toss him into the pool. He surfaced, coughed, spluttered, swore profusely, then returned to the lawn where he laid on his back. "I'm hungry." I waved my balls in his face. "For food, not those ugly things."

Five minutes later, I was back on the lawn and offered him re-heated pizza. But he'd already passed out

again. "Hey," I yelled, "wake up! I got some food."

After we ate, I asked if him if he'd like to go to bed. "No, it's cool. I think I should move on home."

"Are you chickening out on me? Why chicken out?" I reasoned. "We'll just sleep in my bed. Nothing will happen. Besides, it's 2am and I can't have you rocking up to your front door trashed like you are." He passed out again, so I carried him into the house and placed him in the shower. A blast of cold water shocked the crap out of him, but he was still not fully awake. I cleaned him up, then put him to bed. For a while, I studied his sleeping face—innocent, but not completely innocent. Nonetheless, he was an angel.

By then I was so wide awake, I grabbed my stash and 'tools' and shot myself up with coke. Then I phoned Melanie. "Hey, babe, you wanna come around here?" Whoa! She let me have it with both barrels. She knew I was trashed, so I called her a whore and hung up.

Green Room II
Chapter 2

Neither Brett nor I ever revealed to Kyle that Brett beat me to a pulp when he learned of my sexual encounter with Melanie. At the time, she and Kyle were an item. I pleaded with Brett to spare me; and explained that I'd already copped a severe hiding from Kyle, but Brett's response was brief and to the point: "You ain't seen nothin' yet, asshole." His fists became blurred pistons that hammered me mercilessly till I dropped to the floor.

Kyle and I were tight until Brett arrived on the scene. I hated that. One night, Brett stayed over at my place. I thought he wanted some action with me. Hahaha! Imagine if I'd pulled a stunt like that! What a mess I'd be right now. Instead we got Susan and Melanie to drop by and we had a massive orgy. Brett organized Melanie to join us and we both had sex with her. Yeah, how's that? And yeah, even with Susan. This was still in the early days. We were so badly up the tracks, though, Brett didn't notice my sex with Susan.

Hey, I'm getting carried away here—it happens when I shoot up. Woohoo! Check out the colors! Anyway, back to Graham ... he slept over and didn't wake until about noon. Then he dozed off and on until about 8 or 9pm. By then I'd already gotten off with the housekeeper. What the fuck? That's what household help is for! Hahahahaha! It was either that or rape Kyle's little mate. But he wouldn't have appreciated that.

Graham left for home later that night, but only after I'd managed to get him into the right frame of mind. Then I wrote G and told him all the shit I wrote above, and included some poems Kyle wrote for me. He always made me feel like a god. I wish I felt that way about myself. The other day I wrote a poem during one of my binges. Thought G might like to read it. Whoa! This screen is swimming! Doing the fly, I think. Maybe it's Kyle telling me to pull myself together AGAIN!!!!

ODE TO KYLE

*What kind of friend would do what you did?
You left me alone, to look after the kid.
We talk about you all the time in my bed.
And we whisper about the tears that we shed.*

*I loved you my friend, more than you knew.
I didnt always show it cos of the fists that flew.
A jealous heart cries now for what could have been,
But your love for all was boundless.
That was clearly to be seen.*

*Kyle, my Kyle, I loved you so much.
My body still trembles, as I remember your touch.
Your lips on mine, and the taste of our love,
Is there a chance now,
It might come from above?*

*The kid still loves you, and whispers
your name.
He tries to love me and make it the
same.
His heart is aching and longing for your
hand
Much as is mine, but I must take a
stand.*

*I have come to love him, as if he were
you.
I hope you forgive me the things that I
do.
He knows it's not you cos it can't be
the same,
But his rush of love makes him call out
your name.*

*I'm so sorry Kyle, that I wasn't there
for you
You would've been safe, if it were just
us two.
I can hear the screech of tires as your
driver drove his race
I get tears in my eyes at the metal
embrace.*

*I'm trying so hard to do what you would
like
But it's almost impossible, just one
more spike.
It's bad now, I know that you're
watching dear friend
But I hate that your life
In a flash
Had to end.*

*I look at the ocean and think of good
things
But it's hard when it's hazy, my love
still clings.
Colorful images and tears fall like
rain,*

*I cant wait and
Maybe quite soon, I'll meet you again.*

When I next emailed G I wished I could tell him I was okay, but I wasn't. I'm sorry to you and Kyle and Graham and Brett and Melanie and Rick. You don't know me too well, and probably don't like what you do know. So I'm gonna tell you straight what a fucked-up cunt I am. Then I told G about some bad shit I did with one of my cousins. When I got back to Byron Bay I went on one of the worst binges of my life. I wanted to kill myself because I knew there was something wrong with me, but I couldn't speak to anyone.

The same thing almost happened the other night with Graham. But it's different with him, I think I'm in love with him. It's like he's taken Kyle's place, and I want him so badly. But I screwed up.

No, I don't see what Kyle saw in me. I know I'm good looking, and that I have a good body—not from hard work, though, I'm just lucky. I never had a responsibility before, not like the one you and Kyle have given me. And I'm fucking terrified. Graham is such a nice kid. He even looks like Kyle because he has the same kinda lips Kyle had.

I also told G about Melanie's phone call. She said she never wanted to see me again, and that she couldn't understand what Kyle liked about me. I cussed at her and called her a whore. She slammed down the phone.

The following night, Brett called from Fremantle and warned me to stay away from Melanie or he'd

come to Byron and deal with me personally. "Yeah, well come then! I'm ready for you!" Hahahaha. Yeah, right—I'd run a mile if I thought that hunk was after me. If Brett lost a fight he needed to be seriously outnumbered.

Next morning, I phoned Graham, but he'd already gone surfing with his mates. I was being deserted, big time. I wrote G and explained that the reason I told him all the bad stuff about me was not because I wanted him to hate me. Hell, I had enough enemies already. I was screaming for help, but nobody listened except Kyle. Anyway, I apologized to G for doing what I did to Graham and Melanie. I don't know how, but I'll stay away from the grommet. I do love him, though.

By Monday, my mood had improved. I wrote G again to tell him that my folks were returning from overseas, and that I was actually looking forward to it. Initially, they wanted me to join them on the trip but I figured I could do more good here. Yeah, right—like that happened. Hahahaha!

I contemplated admission to a rehab tank, or maybe going away for a while until school resumed. I was repeating Year 12 because, with Kyle's death and other things (like being constantly smashed), I failed to write the previous year's exams. I preferred college on the Gold Coast but that would entail public transport. I didn't own a car, and my dad refused to give me one. "You're not getting a car until you pull yourself together and show some responsibility, or you'll end up like

your friend." He didn't even know Kyle's name. IT'S KYLE, DAD! IT'S FUCKING KYLE AND HE WAS MY BEST MATE! Yeah, right, like I'd say that to my father?

Dad wanted me to take a business degree course when I attended university. Kyle used to tell me he couldn't visualize me working in an office—not without board shorts and a nose smeared with zinc cream. One day he saw me wearing a tux. "Yeah, I can see it now," he laughed. When I think of his laugh I miss him so much. Sometimes I expect him to knock on my door to tell me the surf is outasight and to move my ass.

You would have loved him, G. No, I know you do—but more so if you'd met him. He lit up every place he went. Sure, some guys didn't get along with him, and the feeling was mutual, but what the hell. That's normal, right? I fantasized about Kyle all the time, even while screwing my girlfriend.

Kyle's eyes formed deep lines when he laughed. One time, he and I sat on our boards on the back line. The sea was flat, so we told jokes. We laughed so much our stomachs hurt.

My house is almost always vacant except for the staff, but for Kyle it was no biggie to walk through the house with his skin-splitter pointing skywards, then dive into the pool.

I have a lot of mending to do. I want to go around to Kyle's house this afternoon just to say g'day and to check Kyle's room. I'll ask his folks if there's any chores they need doing around the house, but I need to

check the vibe, first. I was never as close to the Ts as Kyle's other friends were. I think his folks knew I was always trashed.

I made a list of people I hurt. It's long, so it's gonna take some time. My first challenge is to contact my drug boss to tell him I won't sell for him any more. That could be pretty painful but I probably deserve what I get in return for cutting the ties. I never say prayers—not because I'm a non-believer—but there's another word for it. I prayed to Kyle and asked him to help me get through this. I told him how much I miss him, and how sorry I am for all the hurt I caused. I told him to leave all the angels alone, but he won't listen. That's not his style. I told him how good the surf is, but he knows that already. "So why aren't you surfing with Graham?" I heard him ask. Because I hurt him like I hurt you so many times, and I don't want to hurt him again. Kyle didn't answer that one. He just shook his head.

Okay, so this is the first day of the rest of my life. First job, phone Brett."

"I've actually got nothing to say to you, Stuart."

"I'm just calling to say that I'm sorry. Okay?"

"Tell that to Melanie, but I doubt she'll take your call."

"This is already hard enough. Don't make it harder for me, Brett. I'm sorry for being such a dick over the years."

"What do you want, Stuart?
Huh?"

"I just wanna talk."

"About?" Brett was abrupt and non-communicative.

"I wish you were still here in Byron Bay. It's hard not having you or Kyle around."

"You got a lot of friends. Give them a call."

"I'm depressed. I just need someone to talk to."

"You're going to kill yourself with those drugs."

"I've been clean for three days now, except for one joint."

"Acid?"

"Not for three days."

"That's pretty good ... for you."

"It's hard."

"Stay busy. Go for a surf or something."

Suddenly, a thought entered my head. Did Kyle put it there? "Brett, can I come to Fremantle and stay a few days? Please?" My request was met with dead silence. "Brett?"

"I'm here, but I don't think that's a good idea."

"Hey, I can lend a hand with the yacht. I'm desperate. There's other stuff I need to tell you as well, and I'd rather tell you to your face. What's a few days? Maybe five days? I won't get in the way between you and your girl. Promise."

"Are you any good at sanding? Are you any good at anything?"

"Can I come?"

"When?"

"When I get an air ticket. I'll let you know. Is it okay?"

"Yeah, it'll save me the trip to Byron. I can beat you up over here. You'll be sleeping on the couch."

Green Room II
Chapter 3

I postponed the visit to Kyle's folks that afternoon. Air tickets and other stuff needed attention. My dad (overseas) was peeved about my spending a week in Fremantle, and insisted I return home by the weekend. "And where did you get the money from?"

"Brett's paying for the ticket," I lied. The money was earned by selling drugs but, at least, it was put to good use—this time.

I felt totally amped to spend a week in Fremantle. If anybody could help me it was Brett. Besides, I needed to apologize in person for all the shit I caused. I needed to confess, to finally clear my conscience. That would take a while, of course, but Brett was a start in the right direction, and I had to begin somewhere.

Next job, phone the drug boss. It was a good thing I'd be out of town for a week. Nobody messed with those syndicate guys and got away with it. By the way, G, when I said I was a fucked up cunt, I don't need to tell you that every aspect of my life is the same. And I don't need you to tell me the obvious. Walk a mile in my shoes. I'm not Kyle. I know I'll never be but, for fuck sake, I didn't ask to be born rich, or like I am, and I didn't ask to be born bisexual. I know I need a rocket up my ass a lot of the time and I've done some stupid—okay, a lot of stupid things. I'll work at it. I tried before and failed but at least I do try. Were you this hard on Kyle when he first

became honest with you? Or is it just me? I need to say this because it would be easy for me to lie to you and get you to like me, but I'll do it Kyle's way. So expect a rocket up your ass from me too, G. Thanks for at least reading my mail.

Once all plans were in place to fly to Fremantle next morning, I thought I'd call Graham and ask him to go surfing with me. No, that wouldn't do. It was early days yet and I wasn't sure if he wanted to see me after my behavior during the sleep over.

At Fremantle airport, I headed for a payphone and called Brett. "Hey, Stuart, if you're so desperate to get here you can hitch a ride."

Hitch a ride? What kind of welcome was that? Kyle was killed hitching a ride for Christ sake! At least Brett gave me directions to his house. It was miles out of the city and took four rides to get there. Being a blond looker had certain advantages when it came to thumbing a lift. But being a blond looker certainly didn't cut any ice with Brett. That bloke was as hard as nails when he felt in the mood, and gave me the distinct impression he wasn't about to do me any favors. In fact, it seemed to me that he regretted his decision to invite me over.

I arrived at the house late at night. Brett answered the door mere seconds after I knocked. Before he said a word, he flat-handed me across the face. "That's for calling Melanie a whore."

I was stunned, not sure if I should cry or hitch a ride back to

the airport. While my brain reeled and my cheek stung, Brett grabbed my bag and headed inside the house. I followed, not knowing how to react.

The house was huge! Brett's suite is at the back of the house. He dropped my bag on the sleeper couch, which would be my bed for a few days. "Have you eaten anything?" he asked. "I made pasta. I just finished working and showering so your timing was cool."

"Thanks. I could eat the ass end of a low flying *Loxidonta africana*."

Despite Brett's flat-handed welcome across my face, I was glad to be there. It was a long way from the problems back in Byron, and offered the chance to speak to Brett about a whole lot of things that bothered me.

As my eyes scanned his suite, I saw that everything was neatly stowed in its proper place. I remembered Kyle telling me how neat and tidy Brett was, fastidious even. He was also that way about his body—every muscle perfectly placed and honed.

We spoke only a few words until we sat at the small kitchen table. His cooking was good, as was the beer. After a long day, the sight of Brett's strong handsome face, as well as the food and drink, were most welcome. I was in the company of someone I trusted and respected.

"I didn't think you were gonna come," he said.

"I had to. I'm going crazy in Byron."

"Melanie says you're tripping all the time, and she doesn't want to see you again. She said something

about you beating the crap out of Graham."

"She's lying about Graham. I never beat him up. We shared a reefer and some beers, and he got a major dose of the greenies. Sick as a dog."

Brett cocked an eyebrow and sighed. "Yeah, Kyle tried to help him but the grommet wouldn't listen. Your giving him grass doesn't help. Does it? But then you've always only thought about yourself."

"It wasn't Graham's fault. But, yeah, I am tripping a lot. Since Kyle's death, I've been high."

"You think that's gonna bring him back or something? You need to grow up, Stuart. You pissed Kyle off so badly with your habit."

"Can we stop about my habit already? You used to as well."

"I wasn't a coke or acid head but, yeah, I still smoke."

The situation became aggro. I needed to settle it down—and fast. "I'm not here to fight with you, Brett."

He dug his fork into the pasta and studied it for a moment. "Since your phone call, I tried to figure out why you wanted to come here. I don't get it."

Now was not a good time to explain things. As we spoke, another guy entered the house, then walked into Brett's suite. He was 40-ish but in good shape. Brett introduced him and we shook hands. He was Brett's boss, the builder of the yacht and owner of the house. He walked to the stove, checked the pasta, and asked if he could share it. Kyle often mentioned Brett's pasta, and how good it was. Meanwhile, I suspected that

the boss was curious about me—maybe even more than curious.

The bloke invited himself to the table and joined us. He seemed cool enough, smiling and friendly, and gave me the third degree about my background. He also asked how long I planned to stay in Fremantle—and even offered to show me around town.

After Brett explained that my bed was the couch, the boss offered me one of the many spare rooms. Brett declined on my behalf, which I thought was pretty cool. I needed to stay close to Brett, I needed a friend.

Following the meal, the boss disappeared to another part of the house. I helped Brett with the dishes, then took a shower while Brett organized the sleeper couch with sheets, a duvet and pillow—all pretty amazing for a guy who greeted me at the door with a backhander, and accused me over dinner of being an asshole. If he couldn't figure why I visited Fremantle, how was I to figure his actions? It didn't make sense.

Once showered, I entered the room to see Brett dressed only in boxer shorts, as I was. I was unsure of how he might react to my sleeping naked. The situation was already edgy, so I chose not to push my luck.

"I need sleep, Stuart. I'm bugged. You want me to wake you early or meet me later?"

"If it's okay, wake me early."

It took a while to get to sleep; my mind raced with a million thoughts. Instead, I watched Brett read a book. Talk about complex! He cooked like a chef, worked like a

Trojan, had an incredibly defined body, a handsome face, and loved to read. And, he and Kyle were close—incredibly close.

I did eventually doze off. When I woke, the first blinding rays of daylight already streamed through the window and filled the room. I flew here? I was in Brett's room? Yes, it was real all right, but also surreal.

Brett had gone, so I searched for him. His suite had its own rear entrance. I found him swimming laps in the pool. Pool? It was a mini ocean! And Brett wasn't just swimming laps, he sprinted. No surprise to me that he was one of the school team's top performers—powerful shoulders, strong arms, and a smooth even kick that propelled him through the water like a human torpedo.

When he saw me, he exited the water, which cascaded off his shiny, tanned torso as he grabbed a towel. He wore black Speedos that glistened in the morning light, and that clung to his ample package and muscular buns. That guy was a god, no doubt about it.

"Don't you think you should catch a piss before you come outside?" he asked.

"I will, but I wanted to find you first. Do you swim every morning?"

"Some mornings, if I feel like it. You can too if you want. I got a spare pair of shorts."

The boss called, then appeared at the back door. Brett wrapped the towel around his butt and told me to move my ass into the house as he approached his boss. Meanwhile, I showered. Brett entered his room as I

dressed. "Don't bother with anything except your jocks," he ordered. He took from his closet a pair of blue working overalls that he tossed to me. "It's bloody hot in that barn."

I dressed, and followed Brett to the front of the house, where an old Beetle was parked. Brett explained that he bought it from a friend of the boss. The car was in great condition. Yeah, I was impressed.

After beetling down a farm road, we arrived at the massive barn. Three Aborigines waited outside, presumably for us. They turned out to be great blokes, and obviously loved Brett to bits. They greeted him with big toothy grins. He spoke to them in broken English, mixed with some local dialect. "Where did you pick up the lingo?" I asked as he unlocked the barn door.

"Helps to get things done around here."

Yacht? Try ship! It was mammoth, with an enormous keel. It consumed almost all the space inside the barn, which was more like a monster warehouse, with scaffolding everywhere. Although still unfinished, the yacht was magnificent—sleek—and a stunning example of hydrodynamic art.

I followed Brett to a particular section of steps, which led to a landing, then to the deck and down to the rear of the boat. "Right," he said, "the bow is the sharp end and the stern is the blunt end. Remember that."

"I only look thick."

"No, you don't," he said, minus a smile, or any hint of humor.

Were all those blond jokes true? I wondered. My hair was not only straw blond but also long, down to my shoulders.

Brett took me on a tour of the blunt end, which was almost wholly consumed by a massive cabin. Some interior cupboards were partially complete while others needed a lot more work. "This is the stateroom," he informed me.

The intense heat and humidity inside the barn got to me despite being early morning. Brett tossed a sheet of sandpaper and a cork block at me. "Your job is to fine sand the cupboards." He showed me exactly what he wanted done, and how to accomplish it. "Don't round off the edges, they should be nice and smooth like this." Yeah, right, I thought, the sandpaper was so fine it made the job seem impossible. He handed me a paper surgical mask and told me to wear it all the time.

"Brett?" I called as he was about to leave me to my unpaid task.

"Yep?"

"Are you pissed at me because I wanted to come over here?"

"Why?"

"Because you're treating me like a piece of shit."

The black-haired god stared me directly in the eye. "I'll tell you what I really think. I think you were sent here by your (drug) boss to score, and you needed a place to stay. If you make any contacts while you're here, I'll put you in fucking hospital. I don't care much for the way you do things, Stuart, and the only reason you're here is because you're Kyle's friend. If I find you

came here for anything else, I'll
make you sorry you ever left Byron."

Green Room II
Chapter 4

Brett vanished before I had a chance to say a word in my defense. Suddenly, I regretted my decision to visit Fremantle. What the bloody hell for? What was the point? Brett didn't trust my motives. I needed a friend, but all I got was a bloke who hated me, who figured I was there because my boss sent me. MY EX BOSS! But, hey, what choice did I have? None, except to stay for the duration, and to follow Brett's orders. I knew that heavy shit waited for me back in Byron anyway.

I began to sand ... and sand, and sand, and sand until my arms threatened to fall off. The barn heat was stifling. I tied the top of the overall around my waste so that my torso could breathe. Rivers of perspiration ran as if I'd just stepped from a shower. Nevertheless, I continued to sand and sand and sand.

An electric sander just outside the stateroom door sent thin clouds of dust floating around the warehouse interior. After a couple of hours' torturous labor, one of the Aborigines told me to take a break. I followed him outside where Brett and the other two Aborigines drank cold juice and ate sandwiches. The bossman was also there, and stared at me. Brett noticed, and ordered me replace my overall top. "That place is loaded with fiberglass dust. You're gonna shit yourself if you don't cover up." However, outside the barn, all the guys had their tops down just to cool off. Now I appreciated why Brett's

body was more defined than ever—with all the sweat and intense labor, he couldn't help but look so damn cut. A real head-turner.

The bossman struck up a conversation with me—a welcome change from being ignored by Brett. He chatted to the black guys. The boss asked questions about my school, then the subject turned to surfing. He seemed a really pleasant bloke. Shortly afterward, he informed Brett that the yacht's designer was due later that day to check on progress.

Following the half-hour break, work resumed. I couldn't handle the heat, so I removed my top again. Brett was busy at the blunt end, sanding the hull. He resembled a pro-painter, working carefully as he went. Mr. Perfectionist. I understood now why the work took so damn long. Brett had been involved with the project from day one, and was obviously proud of it.

Later that afternoon, the designer showed. He was early-30s and chatted to Brett about the onboard showers and toilets, where the plumbing should go, etcetera. I had no idea what they were on about—all nautical gobbledegook to me.

After another short break during mid afternoon, work continued until 8pm. In all that time, slaving my guts out, not once did Brett visit the stateroom to inspect my efforts. What an asshole! Only one conclusion could be reached; he didn't want me there.

Back in Brett's suite, I peeled off my overall. Brett noticed my upper body. He told me I'd be in shit because my back was covered in

fiberglass dust. "You shower first," he ordered.

I was exhausted, but nonetheless felt good after working my ass off all day. I was also pissed at Brett for not bothering to check the results of my efforts in the stateroom.

After toweling, I saw that my chest, stomach and back were red raw, not to mention ITCHY! I didn't inform Brett because I knew he'd give me a load of uphill, like 'I told you so' bullshit, so I denied him the pleasure of gloating.

With a towel around my waist, I walked into the room. Brett was on the phone, talking to Candy—his regular evening call to catch up on all the gossip.

Following the call, he wrapped a towel around his waist before removing his shorts. Like he didn't want me to get an eyeful of his schlong? *Shrug*. Then he showered.

I had no idea what to expect that night until he entered the room and told me to dress. We were to dine with Fingers. Fingers? I remembered Kyle's reference to Brett's boss as Fingers but had no idea Brett also used that nickname. Kyle must have told G just about everything. Brett knew zip about G, so I decided to play dumb. Hey, I'm blond, right?

"Why do you call him Fingers?"

"Because he likes to touch guys. Just be cool about it, and don't let him get too touchy."

In the dining room, I noticed the table set for three places. Three poured beers awaited us, along with a ton of food—a casserole of chicken with chilies and rice.

The dinner conversation was dominated by Fingers and Brett, who discussed the yacht and the designer guy who was due again next day. Meanwhile, I squirmed around in my chair in a futile attempt to ease the itching.

"What's the problem?" Fingers asked.

Brett was quick to volunteer the answer. "He wouldn't listen, that's what the problem is. He's covered in fiberglass dust."

Fingers smiled and said he had stuff that would fix the itch. "I'll go fetch it."

At Fingers' departure from the table, Brett glared at me. What his beef was, I didn't know. Then Fingers returned and requested me to remove my shirt. I glanced at Brett, hoping for some sign of approval, but it wasn't forthcoming. All he did was shrug. Fingers asked me a second time to remove my shirt, which I did. Hey, there was no doubt I scored pretty high in the bod stakes. It was obvious to everyone, including me. Also obvious was that Fingers' boner was fighting for air inside his jeans at the thought of touching me.

He instructed me to stand, then rubbed oil over my back. He remained behind me as his oiled hands found my pecs and abs, those same muscles that Kyle found so attractive. Brett tried desperately to withhold a smile, but couldn't resist. In an attempt to hide his reaction, he rose from the table and announced that he would make coffee.

Fingers' breathing became more hectic. However, I enjoyed turning him on, as well as his turning me on.

His fingers did a minor invasion of the waistband of my shorts, and felt my pubes. Then he asked me to turn and face him. He blushed from ear to ear. "Do you mind what I'm doing, Stuart?"

"Not at all. It feels cool, and the itch has eased. Thanks."

Fingers' hands moved to my abs again, so I flattened my stomach to increase their prominence. It was fun to watch this guy get his jollies from touching me. Brett returned with the coffee, paused for a quick gawk, then left again to wash his hands. Fingers, meanwhile, asked me to leave my shirt off to allow the oil to do its thing. Hahahaha! Yeah, right.

When Fingers vacated the room to return the oil, Brett took advantage of the opportunity. "You need to be careful," he smiled. Oh, what a smile! Kyle loved it. "He'll do whatever you allow him to do, so watch yourself."

"Hey, as long as he doesn't whip out his wrinkly, it's cool."

"That's not what he wants. He wants yours."

"And yours?"

"Fuck you."

"He checks you out all the time, Brett." But my remark went unheeded, so I continued. "Does he oil you as well?"

"Sometimes he visits my room and gives me a massage with my morning coffee. But I don't think he will while you're here."

"Cock massage?"

"Fuck off, Stuart."

"This is the first I've seen you smile since I arrived."

Upon Fingers' return, the subject quickly changed. Hahaha! The bossman talked to Brett, but his eyes couldn't resist my chest and gut. I teased a little by tensing my muscles as I drank my coffee. It was the most fun I'd had in a long time. When Brett and I retired to his room, I fell on the couch, laughing. "That bloke will be jerking his turkey all night long!"

"You as well by the look of it."

My erection was not full on, but the blood was certainly flowing in all the right directions—something that hadn't escaped Brett's attention. But it was cool, Brett was a lot more relaxed than I'd seen in quite a while.

"You better wipe off that oil before you turn in," he suggested.

I took a towel from my bag and proceeded to remove the excess from my chest and abs. Then Brett took over and cleaned my back. "I'd prefer you to oil me than Fingers," I said. "He bathed me in the damn stuff."

"He enjoyed himself."

We undressed to our boxers, then I chose to sit on the couch and watch Brett. There wasn't an ounce of fat on that guy. Not one. He made more coffee, then sat at the small table. "Can I swim with you tomorrow?" I asked, sounding like a grommet who needed permission to be with the big guys.

"I'll be in the gym tomorrow, smacking a bag around."

"Sounds cool."

"Whatever blows your hair back."

After coffee, he laid on his back on the bed. My eyes traced the awesome contours of his chest, then down a steep descent to his stomach, which undulated over his six pack. I focused on the bulge in his boxers that flowed down to his strong muscular legs. 'How the hell had Kyle gotten through to this guy?' I wondered. Must have been Kyle's magic, there could be no other explanation.

"You're looking pretty good" I said, unable to resist the comment. "Do you swim or workout every day?"

"Most days." He followed that with an unexpected verbal sledgehammer. "You're looking shit. Do you get trashed or stoned every day?"

I didn't realize I looked that bad, and couldn't understand the motivation for the insult. In fact, I thought I looked pretty damn hot. So, for that matter, did Fingers. "I'm trying to get clean," I offered, "and it's been hard for a while now. But you wouldn't understand that."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah—when you stop all the self-pity shit and get a life."

The exchange was interrupted by a phone call. Brett answered it and, upon his return, said it was Candy. He had a leaking cockstand that he didn't bother to hide. "Must've been a pretty hot convo," I smiled. Then I got an erection that I also didn't bother to hide. Instead, I placed one hand inside my boxers and caressed it. He noticed, but refrained from comment. Meanwhile, I wished he'd lighten up and stop being so damn aggro towards me.

"Good night," he said before turning off the light.

I stared for ages into the darkness and thought about Kyle. My eyes began to sting. Brett was right; I was on this whole self-pity trip. How does one stop it, though? I pulled off my boxers and tossed them on the floor. I hate sleeping in any clothing. 'If Brett doesn't like it,' I thought, 'fuck him.' Hey, I was certain Brett didn't like sleeping in boxers either, so if he wanted to act like a precious virgin around me then I hoped the cotton would strangle his dick.

I eventually cried myself to sleep. I felt so worthless. You know something, G? Kyle was the only person who found anything worthwhile in me. Everyone—and that includes you—thinks I'm the scum of the earth. I guess Graham thinks so as well. My folks don't give a shit and my friends—who are not really friends—either deal with me or buy from me. Now Brett has made it clear that I'm disrupting his life. Who knows? Maybe Fingers is fucking him or blowing him or whatever. It was pretty open at the dinner table. Now Brett acts all fucking shy around me like some nerd boy.

At the time, I made it my mission to tell Brett what happened outside the Gold Coast nightclub, where I organized a couple of my druggie mates to beat him up—and to tell him how much I hated him for coming into Kyle's life, and stealing his heart.

But at the same time, G, I'm scared shitless of Brett's temper. I'm determined to come clean and then

say 'fuck it' if people don't like me. I've never written anything like this before but I read some of the stuff Kyle wrote you. He was sending reams of paper to you every day!

Don't get upset about what I'm writing here. It's how I felt at the time in Fremantle. I know you think Brett was God's gift to Kyle so don't get upset about my own thoughts. I told you to expect honesty when I write.

When G responded, he included this paragraph: *You're doing fine, mate. No amount of half-truths, deception or lies could ever compare to a single word of truth. I appreciate what you're doing and how hard you're trying.*

Green Room II
Chapter 5

I woke next morning when a cup of coffee was placed beside the bed. It was Fingers. The covers were off, as well as my boxers, as I lay face down. For a moment, I entertained the idea of giving Fingers a good look at my patch of blond curlies, but decided to renege.

Brett was still asleep. A cup of coffee was also beside his bed. Fingers asked if I had a good night's sleep, then walked to Brett's bed and sat on the edge— all the while keeping an eye on me. Brett woke immediately Fingers' hand touched his chest. "Morning, Brett. Sleep okay?"

"Pretty much," the god replied with a yawn and stretch. He sat up, but Fingers' hand remained on his mate's chest, then slid down to his stomach. With Brett awake, I pulled the covers back over my naked butt. Fingers' hands continued to play with Brett's pecs and abs, which caused me to wonder 'what the hell?' Just how far did he and Brett actually go? It wasn't as if the boss was ugly or whatever...

Brett rolled off the bed, trying unsuccessfully to hide his morning piss boner, then headed to the bathroom. "I'll bring breakfast over to the yacht a bit later," Fingers said.

I dozed off again only to be woken my Brett who insisted we get moving. "I thought you were gonna work out?" I asked.

"Already did."

"Damn! I wanted to join you!"

The rest of the day was virtually a mirror image of the previous, with Brett failing to inspect the progress of my work. This time I kept my overall on. Sweat poured off of me, and drenched the clothing. My wet boxers clung irritatingly to my skin.

Later, the designer arrived to inspect the boat. He bitched about some fault with the outside fairing. A lot of respraying needed doing. Brett nodded, listened intently and agreed with whatever shit the designer dude dictated. When they approached my area, the designer offered his hand, but Brett didn't even bother to introduce us. The older guy was pleasant enough, but one of those no-nonsense types. He looked mid thirties, and spent most of the day working alongside Brett. The hull at the blunt end needed attention. From where I worked in the stateroom, I could hear the problem being discussed.

After working like a dog, I finally completed the unit I'd started the previous day. Should I tell Brett? Fuck him. If he were interested he would have inspected it before. The problem was, as much as he annoyed me, and got under my skin, I really did want to get along with him. I wanted him to like me. "Hey, Brett, I finished the job. You wanna check to see if it's okay?"

He took fifteen minutes to inspect my work. "Pretty nice job, mate. The inside needs to be finished, though."

"I thought it would be okay."

"It's not. I know it's a bitch to get inside there, but it needs to look as good as the outside."

"Okay, I'll get to it right now."

"Take a break first, you look like you've been under a waterfall."

"Thanks. I will."

One of the Aborigines also took a break outside. His overall top was down, showing his firm pecs and meaty nipples, and an awesome six pack.

"You from Wollumbin?" he asked.

"Byron Bay? Yeah."

"It's nice. I got brother there."

"Cool. You been there?"

"Not yet. But when I get money I go help my brother."

"What does he do?"

"He build houses for Bundjalung people. You friend of Boss Brett?"

"You think so?"

He laughed, revealing a string of white pearlies, which contrasted with his black lips. His skin shone like polished ebony. "Okay, maybe friend of him."

"Yeah, I am."

"Good man. Work hard with us."

I understood enough about Aboriginal culture to know that calling Brett 'Man' was a sign of respect. "You like Boss Brett?" I asked.

"Yebo! He work like us. Strong like big red 'roo."

"You teach Brett your language?"

"Lots of fun," he laughed. "Fun to teach but he learn fast."

I enjoyed our chat, but all too soon it was back to work. Brett disappeared after lunch. Turned out

he needed to see some supplier for more materials. It was quite late when he fetched me. Then we beetled home across the farm.

"Those blokes like you a lot," I said after I told him about my chat with the Aborigine.

"Mainly because I speak their lingo."

"He said they had fun while you were trying to learn it."

Brett chuckled at the remark, and no doubt the memories. It sounded great to hear him happy. "They swore at me at first. But as I got better, they had to desist."

"No problems with them?"

"Not these guys. There was one I had a fight with. He was stoned, and produced a knife. The guy you spoke to made a grab for him to protect me, and was stabbed in the arm."

"I saw the scar, but didn't think anything of it."

"I fired the dude. It's one thing I don't like about them."

"What's that?"

"No value for life. If the guy with the knife had the chance, he would have killed me right there and then, and not given it a second thought. Would have been jailed for a couple of years, then released as though nothing happened."

"They seem cool to me."

"The guys there now work like slaves; we get along like friends."

"They say you work as hard as they do. They call you Boss Brett."

"That because I'm like boss boy of the group."

"He called you a boss man or something like that."

"It's an insult to call a black guy a boy." Then Brett changed the subject. "You've done some good work the last two days. That sanding is a real chore."

"Hahahaha! My arms are falling off!"

Brett parked the Beetle outside the house, then walked inside where a beautiful woman waited. She hugged him before he introduced her. She was Fingers' girlfriend, and a real stunner. Whoa! She didn't look much older than Brett or me. Later, I discovered that she drove out to the farm about once a week, and that she worked in Perth. "It's quite a trek to get out here every day."

Fingers entered the room to inform us that supper was almost ready, and that Brett and I should join them.

Supper was roast beef with potatoes and veg. Mmmmm! I was starving! Then, fresh fruit and cream for dessert. By the time I shoveled all that inside, I thought I'd explode! The wine was good, too. I guzzled reds and whites along with my beer. Party time!

Dinner conversation was also enjoyable, and reminded me all too often that Fingers' girlfriend was an absolute honey. And it was apparent who wore the pants. They were first to say goodnight. No doubt Fingers was gonna get his end wet. Hahahaha!

I was a mess when Brett and I retired to his suite, drunk stupid and unsteady. Brett was okay despite drinking as much as I did. Once undressed, I collapsed onto the couch. The room spun; round and round and round we go! I placed one foot

and one hand on the floor but it didn't help. I staggered to the bathroom to puke.

Brett appeared at the door to ask if I was okay. Yeah, right. I must've looked a pitiful sight with my head in the toilet bowl. And that's the position I maintained after falling asleep. Later, I woke and felt like death—probably looked worse. Brett had left the light on but was fast asleep. Then I noticed his boxers lying in a crumpled heap on the floor. Hello?

In the morning, I felt terrible. My eyes stung, and refused to focus properly. I heard a noise, and assumed that Brett was jacking off. Whatever he was doing, he stopped when he saw me stirring slowly back to life. I did, however, note an obvious bulge in the towel he quickly wrapped around his waist. "G'day," I groaned.

"You look like shit." He disappeared into the bathroom, probably pissed at me for interrupting his morning ritual. When he emerged, he asked if I wanted to swim a few lengths of the pool.

"I'll drown."

"It'll wake you up. Come on."

I rummaged around in my bag and found a pair of black briefs that promised to reveal my entire family history. Then, with great difficulty, I followed Brett outside. Fingers must have been busy with his girlfriend. He was nowhere in sight.

When I dove into the icy-cold water, the wind was immediately expelled from my lungs—and my briefs vanished. I couldn't see them anywhere, so I dove to the bottom for

an urgent search and rescue. Then I swam lazy laps of the huge pool. I felt better, but was also conscious of the beginnings of a headache, which I knew had the potential to be a killer. However, an hour's swim eased the threat.

"I'll get on with the inside of that cabinet today," I said to break the silence as the Beetle trundled over the farm fields.

"Okay. Listen, we're all going to a restaurant tonight, including Candy. Is it okay with you if I leave you on your own tonight? I'll be staying at her place. If it isn't, let me know and I'll make another plan."

"I don't want you to think I'm in the way."

"Hasn't been much of a trip for you, has it."

"It's been okay. I thought you'd stay pissed at me the whole time, but it's getting better."

"It's not that I'm pissed at you, Stuart. Well, I guess I was in a way because of the drugs thing. I got a lot on my plate, and I wasn't sure how the hell I would entertain you for a week."

"I needed to get out of Byron, so just being here is important right now. I also need to speak to you before I leave—just you and me."

"Let me know when you're ready."

Work finished a little earlier that day. At home, I pulled on a pair of beige chinos. Brett loaned me a redish colored shirt, which smelled of him. Cool with me. I liked that bloke. I was a god too but he was a little godlier, hahahaha!

Candy arrived, and gushed when she saw me, which made me feel pretty spesh. She owned a Beemer that rocked! I took the back seat while she sat next to Brett and allowed him to drive. I couldn't picture her at Byron with our group. She was such a special lady and Brett was lucky to have her. Or was it the other way around?

Fingers met us at the restaurant, along with two other people I hadn't met, some business folk from Perth. Various women in the restaurant gave me the usual ogle, so my ego was nicely massaged, thank you very much. I felt good; a combination of the hard work, being relaxed and in good company.

I stuck to beer this time, but had too many. Always did. But I behaved—no puking or wobbling. Everyone had a great time; the food was excellent and the conversation stimulating. It was obvious that Brett and Candy were very much in love.

When it came time to leave, Brett offered to drop me at the house on his way to Candy's but Fingers insisted on driving me. He was headed straight home anyway. Brett mouthed something about keeping an eye on Fingers, but I winked and told him I'd be fine.

Green Room II
Chapter 6

On the way home in the car, in the middle of nowhere, Fingers asked if I was gay. "What makes you ask that?"

"Just curious. I'll be honest, I think you're a great kid. I'm bi."

What a revelation! It wasn't easy to suppress a giggle. "You been with guys before?"

"No. But it's something I've thought about."

Unsure how to respond, I studied in silence the powerful headlights gobble up the country miles. But curiosity got the better of me. "Can I ask what you're thinking?"

"I've been in a few situations with mates. Tame stuff. Not like you imagine."

"What do you think I'm thinking?"

"Not sure. You're very good looking and you have a nice body. I don't want this to sound wrong, but I enjoyed touching you the other night."

No kidding, I thought. "I was cool with that."

"It's just you and me tonight. Any chance I can massage you again?"

Oops! Time for a decision. Despite my nervousness, I remained calm. "I'm cool with that."

"Are you shy about this?"

"Depends on whether or not you are."

Once inside the house, Fingers made a dash for the fridge and produced two beers. We entered the den where he approached me and began

to undo my shirt buttons. His hands shook and his fingers fumbled. "Are you sure you're okay with this, Stuart?"

"Looks like you're gonna have a heart attack, mate. Just relax and let your fingers do the walking."

He nervously admitted that he'd never been in a situation like this before, where a guy actually allowed him to be this close. Perspiration formed on his brow and his breathing became erratic. It didn't worry me, though. This bloke opened his house to me and treated me generously. I felt good. Better still, I enjoyed the way he admired me. He was also quite handsome, and I didn't mind what I saw. He worked out and kept himself in good shape. To assist him, I undid his shirt buttons, which freaked him a little.

"You might not like what's under there," he apologized in anticipation.

"Not too bad for a bloke of 40," I remarked as I peeled off his shirt and let it drop to the floor. I guessed he used hair remover; smooth as a baby's butt. There was a little excess weight around the stomach, otherwise he was fit, with well toned skin and muscle. "So, what now?" I asked when my shirt joined his on the carpet.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" he repeated.

"Why not? You're not gonna rape me. Or are you?"

He laughed. "I don't need anyone to know about this, Stuart."

"You've not done this with Brett?"

"Not like this. He allows me to massage him sometimes but if I get too adventurous he loses his temper and doesn't speak to me for days. Unlike you, he's somewhat homophobic."

"Have you been naked with a guy?"

"Never. Well ... on school camps when we skinny dipped. But we were all shy and ran for our towels after leaving the water."

"Okay, so let's swim nude. That's pretty cool and normal."

"Do you smoke?"

"Cigarettes?"

"No. Forget it."

"I'll share a joint if you have one."

As he left to get a reefer, I went to the pool and stripped. He emerged from the door to see me starkers; his eyes popped. My feet dangled in the pool. Although the night air was cool, the water felt quite warm.

"You don't have a problem being naked," he remarked as he sat beside me.

"Nope, so now it's your turn."

I could have bust laughing when he stood, turned his back and dropped his pants. I studied his muscular buns and figured they could push 20 kegs apiece with no trouble. He turned to face me and revealed a rock-hard dick, which I actually took as a compliment. However, I played down the situation and acted nonchalantly. It worked.

He sat beside me, dangled his legs in the water, then passed the joint. The matt black sky was alive with a million twinkling stars, some

of which were in Fingers' eyes as he admired me. Hey, why not? So many people back in Byron loathed my guts, so this was a welcome change. Maybe G was right. Maybe there was a hero inside me, buried deep down.

I took the last drag of the joint and flicked it into the garden, then eased myself into the water, followed by Fingers. We drifted around, taking a few leisurely strokes here and there. Without warning, he grabbed me from behind and we wrestled, just as Kyle and I did. Fingers' body was that a mid twenties guy, one that was fit but hadn't exercised in a while. But he was one strong mother. "Do you need to go back to Byron?" he asked as he held me in a bear hug from behind.

"Yeah, I do. Hey, I gotta go back to school to repeat my final year."

"Would you visit for school holidays if I provided the air ticket?"

"Not sure Brett would appreciate that. I don't want Brett to know about this either. He doesn't know I'm bi." It occurred to me then that Brett probably was aware of the relationship between Kyle and me.

"So we share a secret," Fingers smiled. "I'd like to see you again, Stuart. My God! I'm in love with you!"

So what's cooking here, G? Did I do something insane? Fact is, as the night wore on, I enjoyed Fingers even more. I didn't see any harm. But if Brett knew, he'd give me a helluva hard time.

Speak of the devil, he arrived home, beaming from ear to ear.

Fingers and I sat at the breakfast table. I was dressed only in boxers because I needed a clean overall.

"Hope you guys behaved," he joked.

"Yeah, right, you were out bonking Candy while I was home watching boring TV!"

"Pull the other leg. Hope you left my stash alone."

Brett joined us for breakfast, but said nothing about his night with Candy. He didn't need to, his happy disposition said it all.

By midday, I felt tired because of the heat in the barn, and my total lack of sleep. I thought a great deal about the previous night and how much I liked Fingers. He was the type of bloke who always had a lot of people around for one reason or another, but was lonely—alot like me, especially with Kyle gone. I wondered what Kyle would think of what happened between Fingers and me. Maybe he would disapprove. He hated my relationship with a middle age woman a while back. He accused me of being her male whore. That relationship sparked a lot of fights between Kyle and me, but we stopped when Brett arrived on the scene and eventually befriended Kyle.

Fingers didn't show for most of the day, which surprised me. I thought he'd be all over me like a rash but was also thankful he wasn't. I didn't need Brett chewing my ear about what took place. Actually, Brett was too busy to even speak to me for a minute or two. That pissed me off because I itched to know all the grotty details about his night with Candy. Hahahaha! Yeah, right.

Imagine my asking him about that. He would have clobbered me.

Fingers had a date with his girlfriend that night, which provided an ideal opportunity to talk with Brett privately. How would he react to my ugly confession? Despite my apprehension, I knew it had to be done.

After beetling back to the house I discovered Fingers gone. That was a relief; I didn't need him to ogle me while Brett was present.

Brett was chirpy, telling me what a great day he had with the yacht. He lit the outside barbecue and prepared steaks for dinner. I wore boardies while he was clad in cargo shorts. The evening was magic, one of those typical West Australian evenings—a huge open sky colored a marvelous palette of pinks and crimsons by the setting sun. We downed a beer each before Brett lit a joint, one for him and one for me. "So what did you guys get up to last night?" he asked.

"Not much," I lied.

"Fingers didn't rape you or anything?" he laughed.

"Why? Did he try that with you?"

"Christ, mate! The first night here I almost put a fist through his head. He massaged me like he did you, but when his hands went beyond my waistband I let him have it." Then he laughed again. "But you're just a slut so I guess it's okay."

"You and Candy are pretty tight."

Brett took a drag of the joint, then studied the cloud of blue smoke that drifted from his lips. "She's the

finest woman on this earth—treats me like a king, and she's an expert in the art of making love."

"Tell me more!"

"Pervert."

At that moment, I became the sudden and unwilling victim of Brett's considerable strength. He grabbed my arm and threw me into the pool. Those black guys weren't kidding when they described him as strong as a red 'roo. He cracked when he saw the joint in my mouth turn to shredded flotsam. But the water was great, so I hung by my elbows and watched him light another joint for me. "Don't you normally go out with her on Fridays?" I asked.

"She didn't want a blond himbo hovering around so she gave me the night off."

"Hey, she didn't want you to see her gawking at my blond good looks and god body."

"She probably did gawk at you, but she prefers men."

"Ouch!"

Brett's mood shifted to solemn. "I'm sorry I haven't spent much time with you—seriously. But you've seen how hectic it is around here."

"I've had a blast here, and Fingers is pretty cool."

"Oh? How cool?"

"I mean, just getting away from Byron is what I needed, and I also need to speak to you one to one."

"What about?"

"Since Kyle died, I've been a wreck. I spent most of my time tripping, and I was desperate for a break. I also wanted to apologize to your face."

"For what?"

I took a deep breath and steeled myself for what I was about to reveal. "I've done some evil things, and one of them was getting my drug mates to beat you up."

"That weed's gone to your head, mate. Which time? I've been in a million fights."

"You, Susan, Kyle and Melanie went clubbing. You were met by some guys outside who laid into you. Worked you over a bit—okay, a lot."

Brett became silent, then walked to the barbecue where he turned the steaks. I exited the pool and stood opposite.

"You got balls, Stuart—telling me that. But I don't believe you. You'd be too chicken to arrange something like that in case I found out. Why would you do that anyway?"

"I was jealous of the friendship you had with Kyle, and worried about what it did to Kyle and me. I hated you back then."

"Why didn't you do the job yourself?"

"You know that already."

"Yeah, because you're a spineless user and loser. You used everyone around you."

"Please! I came here to apologize."

"Why the guilts now, huh? Why now? And why did you come here? I know why. There's a pile of shit in Byron you don't wanna face. So you chickened out to Fremantle."

"You don't understand shit."

"Oh? On the contrary—I understand you, you little fuckweed. Don't tell me I don't understand. If you and Kyle were such good friends, why did you fuck his girlfriend? Huh?"

You were never his friend, you were his user. You hated him because he never bought your smack, you cunt."

My fist caught Brett unawares on the jaw. His head snapped back. He glared at me. His lip bled. His eyes were afire. "Hit me again," he snarled.

"I'm sorry, Brett, please."

His one fist connected with my mouth, the other with my gut. I crumbled to the ground, doubled up on my knees. The pain was intolerable. I tried not to cry and cough but failed. Luckily, I saw his foot coming and managed to roll to one side to avoid my ribs being caved in. I stood, and held him in a tight bear hug. But he was awesomely strong. "Brett! Stop it, stop it! This is going all terribly wrong!"

He broke away and hit me again in the gut, then left me coughing and choking on the ground while he returned to the barbecue and downed the rest of his beer, still glaring at me, until I began to cough blood.

Instantly concerned, he sprang to my aid. Or was it to gloat? My tears flowed freely from the intense pain. Then he offered his hand, and pulled me to my feet. "You better go clean yourself."

"I'm okay."

Green Room II
Chapter 7

For the next half hour we exchanged not a word but ate in silence. Following the meal, Brett asked if I wanted another beer. The moment he disappeared into the house, I dove into the pool to clean off the blood and dirt. "I'll give you some credit," he said upon his return, "you got bull's balls for coming here to tell me what you did."

"I'm trying to straighten things out with people, that's all. You were the first on my list. And, yes, I am in shit. I told my supplier I'm not dealing anymore."

"Not sure I believe you, but if that's true, it's pretty hectic."

"Only for a while. The heat will cool eventually. This trip was worth it, though—gave me time to think about things."

"I didn't mean what I said about Kyle. I know he thought the world of you. Pity you wasted all that."

"He thought the world of everyone. I haven't handled his absence. I'm taking too long to get over it."

"We never will, you know. He got under our skin and into our hearts. You don't ever get over someone like Kyle—too many memories. I don't ever want to forget him. I owe him the rest of my life."

"Think we'll ever meet someone like him again?"

"Not in this lifetime."

"Imagine him here right now, running around with a massive boner bouncing all over the place, and

laughing. He was always laughing, and calling us wusses for keeping our shorts on."

Brett responded to my remark in a way that totally took me by surprise. He dropped his shorts, then raised his beer and said: "To Kyle." I followed suit: "To Kyle."

In Kyle's honor, we remained naked the rest of the night. Once in a while, we got an erection, which soon deflated, but never became totally flaccid. Brett began to debate cut versus uncut, which was the more sensitive, and which could satisfy a girl more. He was cut, as was Kyle. "I can last longer," I grinned.

By midnight, we were on our backs, studying the heavens from the lawn. Brett switched off all lights. We tried to spot satellites in the perfectly clear West Australian sky. "He's up there now, laughing his tits off," Brett commented.

"You really believe that?"

"I do. I honestly think he watches over us every single day."

"I'd like to believe that."

"I do."

"I've done some really stupid things, and I want to set them right."

"Apology accepted. You got some serious mending to do back in Byron, mate—Melanie, for one. I also think you should stay away from Graham. He's an easy drug target and can be a real little jerkoff when he's stubborn. He's too much like Kyle in some ways. Melanie told me you spiked Kyle's drinks one time. I think I might know why, and I think you're playing with fire. For all Graham's

shit, I'll look after him because that's what Kyle would want. And if anyone fucks with the grommet, I'll do some serious damage."

"Can I visit here again, maybe during school breaks, and again after I graduate?"

"Ask me later. Right now there's too much anger in me, directed at you. It's cool that you apologized, but there's an issue of trust here, and that's gonna take a long time to mend."

"I think I understand."

"Tell me, what was your scene with Kyle?"

"How do you mean?"

"Were you into a sexual relationship?" I didn't dare answer the question. Instead, I continued to gaze at the starlit sky. "I think you were," he continued, "together with others."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because of the man. He had no conventional boundaries. If he fell in love, it meant an act of love for him to show it."

"And that would mean...?"

"Yeah, it does. But you've not answered my question, Stuart."

"We were pretty intense."

"How intense? I want to know."

I took a while to summon the nerve to reveal the truth. "All the way." You could have knocked me down with a feather when I heard Brett laugh.

"Kyle," he giggled as he studied the heavens, "you're in the wrong place, bro, you need to get your ass downstairs." With that, we both cracked. Then Brett added, "Melanie knew from the beginning

about you two. At the time I thought she talked crap. Don't ask me how she knew, Kyle never spoke a word to her about it. He would never do that. We all have these Kyle secrets that we carry in our hearts."

"So, how intense were you guys?"

"Pretty much but, no, we didn't go that far. It just didn't appeal to me. I think he wanted it, though."

Brett cracked again. "Caught his index up my ass a few times, though!"

"I fantasized about you and Kyle together sometimes," I admitted. "Hell, I fantasized about you and me together." This was confession time, right? So I got a little adventurous and let my hand slide down his chest to his pubes.

"You're an inch away from getting your arm broken and shoved up your ass."

"Promise?"

"Just don't go there, Stuart. For all that happened between Kyle and me, that was something unique and special, and you'll never step into those shoes."

"I guess a kiss is out of the question?"

"You're a fucking genius."

"So why are you allowing me to touch you?"

"Because it feels good."

"Like a Fingers' massage?"

"He also knows his limits."

"How about giving me a massage?"

Brett straddled my back without hesitation. His talented fingers soon found the knots in my muscles and worked them beautifully. I could easily have dozed off, but I wanted

to remember his doing this to and for me. He massaged for twenty minutes, then I offered to massage him.

As my fingers worked his incredible definition, he mumbled, "It's going to be hard for you—you know—to quit the dealing."

"I'm scared about that," I confessed. "I'm not big into pain. I attended one of the syndicate's discipline meetings. There was a little junior school kid there. They beat him up, then threatened to kill him if he quit. He's still dealing."

"So who's your boss?"

"He's not the main man. He controls just one area—black guy—Moroccan, I think. Wanna turn over?"

"You better sit to one side, then," he grinned, referring to his erection. He rolled onto his back and allowed my one hand to explore his chest and abs. "I remember when Kyle touched me like that," he said softly. "You could almost not feel his fingertips, just the electricity tingle my skin."

"I wish I could turn back the clock and make everything right with him."

"He's watching us all the time. He'll know when you've made things right. He sometimes spoke about how much he missed you. He got so crazy mad at you and the drugs thing. I hurt him as well. Sometimes I rocked up to his house, all spaced out. One time his dad opened the door and I almost burst out laughing. Kyle was sooooo pissed off at me. Then I riled him to get a reaction. Always did." Brett's tone changed dramatically. "Move your hand before I move it for you."

My hand retreated instantly from his crotch. "Is it really so bad for you when I do that?"

"Don't spoil it."

"There's no need for aggro, Brett. Kyle was one of the few guys I loved. He taught me how to love."

"You must've gotten a C."

"Meaning?"

"The way you treated him, Stuart. You've no idea how much he loved us—all of us—and you treated him like shit. His problem was that he always came back for more."

I dove into the pool, swam a few laps, then hung by my elbows on the wall. "We used to be good friends, you and me. Any chance we can again?"

"Nothing's changed. We're still friends, otherwise you wouldn't be here. What are you looking for, Stuart? Do you want me to tell you how much I love you? If that's what you want, be prepared for a rocky ride, boyo, because Kyle had to fight his way into my heart." Brett paused to light another joint, then added thoughtfully: "But when he got there, I loved him more than anyone in the whole world—and still do. If Kyle lived to 100, I still couldn't repay him for what he gave me."

"And what was that?"

"Self respect. He made me feel I was worth something. Most of all, he gave his unconditional friendship—for better or worse."

"Sounds like a marriage."

"Marriage could never be that good."

"Were you jealous?"

"Only when we first met. I thought he was an arrogant fuck. I

was jealous of the way he attracted friends."

"Me too. I wanted him all to myself. Only after he was killed did I realize what I had."

"All of us."

"Do you reckon he would have become a marine biologist?"

"Not sure. He planned to go to university this year but I don't know if he could have managed the financial side of things. He would have ended up doing something in relation to the sea, though."

"Will you ever get over him, Brett?"

"People will get over his death, but nobody will get over the person he was, and what they have become as a result of his influence."

"Graham still breaks down and cries for no reason when we're in the surf together."

"Graham lost a brother. None of us will ever understand what that's like."

We chatted for ages about Kyle; the memories, the fun times. Brett's mood lightened quite a bit. He eventually admitted that the physical side of his relationship with Kyle—after completely blowing his mind—was among the most special times of his life. "It's weird," he said, "trying to imagine you and Kyle together. But, then, reflecting on our own intimate moments, maybe it's not so hard. People who never knew him would never understand."

"He thought of you as a god."

"In his mind, all his friends were gods. Each friendship was unique. He made each of us feel as though we were the only friend he

had. That was his style. His big thing was touching and being close. If it went any further, it was mutual."

"That's why I never thought the friendship between you and Kyle would work. I'm surprised it went that far."

"We were friends for a long time before it got to the stage you're referring to. It was when Rick arrived from Canada for Kyle's eighteenth birthday that I realized those feelings were, to Kyle, normal—his way of expressing love for a friend. He often told me not to be afraid of getting too close to a friend." Brett burst into laughter. "At first, I thought he was a lunatic!"

"I've longed to talk to someone about my experiences with Kyle."

"Yeah, well, just knowing Kyle was itself an awesome experience."

Time for the biggie. "Could I sleep in your bed tonight, Brett? Not to do anything; just to be close to someone. It's okay if you'd rather not."

"Up early in the morning. I don't want Fingers getting any ideas."

"Is that a yes?"

Green Room II
Chapter 8

Before we turned in, I waited at Brett's bedside for him to dress in boxers. He didn't, and remained naked. I followed his example. With his back to me, I snuggled up to his warm, comforting body and draped an arm over his chest. Apparently, my cockstand didn't bother him. The most special thing happened when he took my forearm for a second and gave it a squeeze to let me know that everything was cool, which I appreciated big time.

Exhausted, I fell asleep right away. But, on reflection, I don't think Brett did. He woke me early morning and asked me to continue my sleep on the couch. He didn't want Fingers to walk in and see us in the same bed.

I figured he stayed awake, or swam in the pool or spent time jogging or working out in the gym. He was pretty much a fitness fanatic. Or maybe not—he drank and smoked. Nonetheless, his body was in peak condition—perfection on two legs. Was I far behind? Hahahaha! Maybe not so much.

Fingers eventually woke me with his hand on my erection and a coffee on the floor. I wasn't sure which was the more welcome. He asked Brett's whereabouts but I had no clue. He kissed me gently on the lips, to which I responded favorably. I'd come to like that guy. And, in a way, I felt sorry for him.

Brett returned as I showered. He explained he'd gone to the yacht because one of the black guys needed

to work on something or other. Brett provided access to the tool shed.

I thanked him for last night. "I really needed that."

"I think I did as well."

Fingers' girlfriend arrived just after lunch, closely followed by Candy. They split, and left me alone to laze by the pool and sleep a little more. However, Fingers and I did spend the night together—and I mean together.

Next day, Fingers prepared the barbecue for lunch while I swam in the pool. Brett returned late that morning, in a chipper mood, and joined in the swim. But, all too soon, it was time to pack my bags for the trip back to Byron. Fingers and I were alone when I told him I would leave that afternoon. He produced an envelope. Inside was \$1000, which I immediately returned to him.

"Hey, I had a very special time here, and you're a fantastic, fantastic person, not to mention a hunk." That remark brought a huge smile to his face. "But I can't take the money. It would cheapen the time we had together—including our intimate moments, like last night. I would feel like your toy boy, and neither of us wants that."

"The cash is to use—to get you out of trouble with your boss," he explained, and offered the envelope once more.

I pushed it away. "That's for me to sort out for myself."

"Will I see you again?" He hugged me warmly, and I kissed him. We both struggled to restrain the tears. Then I went back to the yard to speak to Brett.

"I gotta get moving or I'll never get to the airport. It's been fantastic, and I just wanna say thanks for everything."

"Where are you going?"

"Down the highway. I gotta get moving."

"I'll drive you."

As the Beetle sped towards Fremantle, it provided another opportunity to talk privately. "So what happens now?" he asked.

"Damage control. I need to sort out a lotta stuff."

"How serious is this quitting the dealing business gonna be?"

"I'm scared to death," I said truthfully. "I know I'll at least get a beating for it. Hopefully, that will be the end of it. I don't handle pain too well, though. Hahahaha!"

"It'll be hard to stop using."

"I know. It's been difficult this past week. But I worked at it, so I know it can happen."

"I'm a phone call away if you need to talk. And a flight away if you need to get away for a while."

"Yeah, right, like you need me here."

"I never understood you. You got everything I wished for, and yet you stuffed up your life. You even had Kyle, and tried to stuff up that relationship. If he'd been anyone else, you would have lost him a long time ago."

"Did you know that Kyle was raped?"

"He probably bent over and offered himself."

"I'm serious, Brett. It happened on a swim tour. I didn't

know either until... I don't think anyone did."

"How did you find out?"

"A diary Kyle kept on disk. Remember that guy who was billeted with Kyle during the last tour—the good looking blond guy?"

"Yeah, Kyle hated him."

"Now you know why. Kyle got wasted with him, and an older guy climbed into him. Total bondage stuff. It's like a newspaper headline."

"That explains why he was so anti-drugs. You live and learn, huh?" At that point, the airport buildings loomed into view. "Stuart, Kyle must have seen something in you that you don't recognize. Not even now. How will you sort yourself out?"

"Hard work—trying hard."

"I'm serious about your coming back here. I'd like to think you and I can get along like Kyle wanted us to. You also need to take care of the grommet."

"That's the last thing Graham wants right now."

"Don't you believe it. He has the same problem you have. You guys can help each other. Melanie endured the same problem but stopped totally when she dated Kyle."

"Melanie won't want to see me again."

"Like I told you, you broke a lot of trust, and that takes time to mend. Ask Kyle about time and friendship; it's hard work."

Brett accompanied me to the airport departure lounge where we drank coffee. "You got a cool boss," I said. "Treat him gently."

"He's very cool. I'm glad he didn't freak you out."

"I like him quite a lot."

"It's obvious he thinks the same of you," Brett agreed, knowingly.

"I'll miss you; I can't handle not having Kyle around."

"Visit Fremantle next school vacation. There's plenty of work here, and maybe you can earn a few bucks next time."

"I might take you up on that."

My flight was called. We stood and hugged like best mates. I entered the boarding gate, then turned to see Brett still standing there. He gave me a friendly and encouraging wave. Yes, he was everything Kyle admired, and more.

During the flight home, my mind was overtaken by thoughts of how I might manage to survive the situation that awaited me, and start life again. My fantastic week in Fremantle with Brett and Fingers was behind me now as I jetted at 1000 kph back to reality.

Night had fallen by the time I arrived at the front gate after hitching a ride home. Two guys grabbed me, ordered me not to resist, and bundled me inside the house. "Phone the boss," one ordered.

Once connected, the boss wasted no time in telling me he wanted his money. I was \$599 short after spending some of it on the ticket to Fremantle. "I'll give it to you during the week—promise. I've been straight for a week, and I wanna stay straight. I wanna move on."

One of the goons grabbed the phone and spoke to the boss. After a

short conversation, both guys laid into me with a flurry of fists, ripping off my shirt in the process. Then I saw the needle. At first I feared an overdose. I was gonna die. "You owe us for this cocktail as well, boyo," one smirked as he jabbed my arm. He pushed the plunger while the other guy forcibly restrained me.

I've been climbing the fucking walls, G. I'm still coming down. I don't know how much cocktail they gave me but I'm coming down hard. The gardener found me lying naked in the flower bed. Hahaha! He thought I was dead. I tried to swim in the pool but panicked. Of course, I could just take another fix to sort me out. But I WON'T. I want you to know that it was great with Brett. I've been good so don't go thinking shit about me. Okay? I'm trying not to take anything right now. Had such a cool time in Fremantle but I can't phone Brett right now because I'm not straight. If he hears me he'll think I'm back into taking stuff. BUT IT WASN'T MY FUCKING FAULT! You were right about Brett. He's cool. I just want to let you know I'm okay and I'll write soon. So don't hassle. Okay? Cya. I need sleep. Zzzzzzzzzz. Hahahaha!

My world went crazy. Email arrived from everywhere, much of it written by G's friends and forwarded to me. Everyone tried to do the right thing by me, and offer support, which was cool, but I wasn't sure I could handle the pressure, especially while I was still under the influence of the cocktail forced into my veins.

Hi, G. I'm getting there. I've been as sick as a dog but at least my head is clear, kind of, and I can see

straight. I still suffer from the shakes but it's getting better. I got a 'work' problem because I found all the stuff left in my drawer. I thought the goons took it all, but no. The message is I gotta pay for it all or they'll throw me on the city dump. They won't do that, though. A friend defaulted and the worst they did was take him up the highway, strip him, give him a cocktail and beat him.

The cops found him with a stash in a baggie up his ass. He was jailed and charged with possession, but was okay after a month. So if that's what's waiting for me, so be it. The other option is to hit the clubs and sell it off. The first option is probably my punishment for getting the stuff in the first place. I try to be strong but it's bloody hard.

Kyle never knew I dealt in the hard stuff. He knew I sold grass but that's all. He thought it was my own stash. But I have tools and crack on my desk right now and I'm staring at it and saying, "Fuck you! You won't beat me!" It's laughing at me. What keeps me going is my need to connect with Graham. Maybe my downer is more to do with needing him rather than a hit. I won't connect with him until I'm clean, though, so it'll take a while.

The email about the Fremantle story took almost three days to write, G. I've not been able to sleep so the story kept me busy.

School starts next week and there's a lot to sort out. The syndicate contacted me twice for the money, and said they'd finalize the contract when paid. I know what that

means. Fingers would give me the money in a flash. I can't ask my folks. They arrived home yesterday. I look at my dad differently now. He's younger than Fingers but such a jerkoff. I wouldn't mind if he gave me a beating now and then. I think he's pissed that I was ever born. It's been a hassle for them to look after me and do their own thing. My mom's okay—at least we can have a friendly talk. My dad? I once told him to fuck off because I wanted him to hit me. He's such a non-event, he just walked away.

I'm waiting for a school mate to call. He said he would buy my stash and take it over. He thinks I got a death wish. I know now why Kyle wrote you so often. It's therapy. I'm not Kyle, though, so don't expect a lot of email from me.

This is an uphill battle I'm not used to. I'll miss the extra cash I had in my pocket. Kyle thought it was an allowance from my folks. What a joke. I think of Brett's comment about what Kyle saw in me. I thought it was my body and looks because Kyle raved about me, as you know. That's what I also miss; someone to tell me I'm good looking and attractive. It's fine to know but better when a mate tells you.

Fingers was a revelation. Ask me a week ago about what I did with him and I'd say no way! But he's different, and a real honey, and I do have a genuine soft spot for him. It's not a user thing. I hope that makes sense because I know how I feel. By the same token, it's not like he would be my life partner. I spoke to him about that, anyway. I am

a nympho and I've been that way for ages. Kyle often accused me of that but he was very different.

I've not seen or heard from Melanie or Graham since my return to Byron. I haven't even surfed. I'm in hiding until I can sort out this whole sorry mess. If those syndicate guys get me in the open there's no telling what they might try. However, while my folks are home it should be cool.

I phoned Brett to say thanks. I waited until I felt less trashed. It's so hard, G. I know I've gotten out of hand. The stomach pains and sickness get to me. I can't eat because I can't hold anything down. I smoked a joint hoping it might help but all it did was spin me into another paranoia trip. That's never happened before. My face looks like that of a dying person, with dark rings around my eyes and pale skin. I might go for a surf later when it gets dark.

One local friend is trying to help. He used to buy from me, then stopped after ending up in hospital. He hates the syndicate even more than he used to hate me, so I'm moving up a bit. Hahaha! He's a bit of a computer nerd but digs hanging with me, and he's got a car. He's due this afternoon, and we'll go surfing down the coast somewhere further away.

Don't hold your breath, G. I've tried and failed before. But, being with Brett and Fingers makes me more determined. I'll write when I get the chance. Your reply to my last mail was pretty laid back. Thanks for not blowing your cool. I know I shouldn't write when I'm trashed but I get this

thing in my head where I don't give a fuck for people or what they think, and try to piss them off even more. Sometimes, that's the only way I've been able to get a response.

I've never been a hero, G.

Writing this email reminds me of what a total asshole I've been. Everything that should be dear to me I treated like shit. That time Kyle bonked my girlfriend to prove she was a whore blew my brain. I don't know if he told you but that was one of my worst binges. I went to his house and, before he had a chance to speak, I smacked his face. I kept hitting him before he could retaliate because I knew the power of his punches. Then, inexplicably, we made up. That was the way of our relationship. Fights and love—well, not always, not in the beginning but it became that way.

I'm sure I never experienced what Brett and Kyle had, or what Graham and Kyle had. I was a coward. Kyle once called me a coward and it hurt more than you realize. Don't get me wrong. I loved Kyle so much but didn't know how to embrace that emotion. To him, I was a very good friend. I don't think he realized how much he meant to me, and I figure that was my own fault.

For anyone to see me as a hero doesn't make sense to me. I got the Midas touch in reverse. Everything I touch turns to shit. You need a hero to fill the void Kyle left behind and I need my dad. What are the chances? I need my dad to join me at the beach and watch me surf, and to be proud of his son. I need him to sit on my bed and tell me about his day, and ask me about mine. I need him to spend a

whole week at home without trying to escape from me. Most of all I need him to give me a hug. That's what I miss most; someone to hug me and tell me he's proud. Maybe that's why I like Fingers so much, but he's not my dad or Kyle. Heroes don't come along every day and they're not made. They are people with a unique quality and, fuck me, I don't see that in myself.

I read the way you speak about Kyle now that he's gone. The problem is you are just too fucking brave. I still cry, and Graham hasn't stopped. During my week with Brett he got choked up sometimes. I think Kyle knew that you would be brave the way you are but I'm sure he knows that you also need to cry—not to rid your system of anything but to actually come to terms with what happened. Yeah, right. I still can't believe it. None of us can.

I've thought about the last day of Kyle's life and wondered if it could have been different. Kyle asked me to join him that night because I know some of the guys. But I was on a mission with my girl to get laid. So ask me how I live with myself. I've not told anyone about that. I try instead to get a decent night's sleep. His question constantly rolls around in my head: "It's gonna be a rave, Stuart! C'mon! Let's party!" So cry, G. Kyle will be there with you. He's been with me the past three days—guiding my fingers on the keyboard.

Keep cool, G
Your friend and Kyle's
Stuart

Green Room II
Chapter 9

It's 5am and I just got home. I read your email and understand why Kyle fell in love with you, G. Not sure if you know that, but Kyle was crazy about you. I think he would have told the world around him about his fav fossil but you realize why he couldn't. I guess I'm in the same situation.

About sending some of Kyle's belongings to you. Just be patient. I'm yet to visit his folks. I want to, but I got the withdrawal shakes like a real druggie. It's never been this bad before. I'm in and out of depression since returning from Fremantle.

The exchange last night with the guy who bought my stash wasn't what I expected. He shortchanged me, but made up the difference by organizing two escort jobs for me—both women. He said I could make triple that if I escorted guys. No way. Hahahaha! That would be uncool, and he would have spread the word like wildfire.

The jobs weren't bad, and could have been worse. One was in her 40s and a dog. I was outta there in a flash when it was over, hahahaha! The other wants to see me again. Yeah, right. She was okay, though, and gave me some extra money, which I didn't tell the dealer about. Anyway, I got the cash now and I'll hand it over Monday night. They'll tell me where to rendezvous. Even after I settle the debt I'll be in for a rough ride. Then, at least, I hope it's over.

Sunday, 2am: I just cleaned out half a bottle of whisky from my dad's bar. I'm wearing the bead necklace Kyle made for my birthday—for the first time. The beads fit snug around my neck. Maybe he wanted to choke me, hahahaha! I'm a fucking wreck, G, crying the whole time. It might have something to do with the withdrawals—I'm not sure. It's never been this bad.

I read the email Kyle sent the day after my 17th birthday. He was here that day, and saw the stash, but said nothing. *"Happy birthday, Stuart. I wish you knew how much I love you so you'll stop the shit you're doing. You know what gets to me? I hate what you're doing to yourself. I hate being with you when you're all drugged up. You get aggro and fulla shit, and I can't handle that. You say you try but it's hard. So try harder! You ask me why I'm so anti after sharing your shit one time. I wish I could tell you but maybe you need to fall down that hole yourself. Don't get aggro about what I've written. I know you. I've never needed to write you mail before but you've changed and I need to tell you that. I'd tell you to your face but we'd fight again. I could stand back and watch what happens to you, but I can't do that either because I love you too much. You were there when I needed a friend so badly.*

*Loveya mate
More than you realize,
Kyle"*

Monday: Hi, G. The tears aren't over yet. I'm sending this mail now rather than diary each day. I don't know when I'll get the chance to

write, so I write when I can—especially after tonight's handover of the money to the syndicate where anything might happen. I'll meet Graham later today for a surf. Last night, I was busy on the comp looking for stuff when Graham phoned. He was totally upset.

"Where have you been?"

"Busy with stuff, Graham."

"I need to see you now!"

"I'll be there in ten."

"I'm not home. I'm in a call box. My folks think I'm sleeping over at a mate's house. So where the hell have you been, Stuart?"

"I can meet you somewhere, or you can come here."

"You alone?"

"Always alone."

"I'm coming now."

He arrived 15 minutes later, and reeked of booze. I waited at the front gate. He wore a Nike fleecy top and jeans, and looked really low. The moment I opened the gate, he threw his arms around me and sobbed his little heart out. "Where have you been?" he asked. "I thought you died. One of my friends died the other night." He bawled and choked so much I hardly understood a word. A friend of his raced a motor bike, hit a bump, lost control and was thrown over the handle bars. He became comatose, and died on the way to hospital. He was 16.

I took Graham inside and made coffee, a strong one for the grommet. His face was covered in tears, and his eyes were bloodshot. All of a sudden, he was the vulnerable little bloke I met years ago. "Everyone's

dying," he sobbed. "Every friend I got is going away."

I held him again while his sobbing continued. "I'm sorry about the other night," I apologized, "I really am sorry for what I did. It wasn't supposed to be like that."

"I thought you died. I didn't want to see you again, and then Callan got killed and I had no one to speak to about how I feel. And what you did to me I hated you for. I hated you for what you did. But you're all I got left, you asshole bastard."

Without warning, Graham lost it. His fists flew wildly. I grabbed his wrists and held them. Then, he fell against me and cried. I lost control as well, and hugged him as hard as I could. For ages, we hugged and cried. Eventually, I sat him down in my room. "Hey, mate, you can't go home like this. You want to sleep over? Just us."

"Where were you?"

"I had important stuff to do, mate, things to sort out."

"Where must I sleep?" he sniffled, and wiped his tears with the back of his hand.

"I can get a mattress if you prefer."

"What about your folks?"

"They're away again."

"Can I sleep in your bed?"

"Sure."

He stripped to his briefs, army camouflage bikini type that hugged his hips and butt, and showed off his physique. Dressed only in boxers, I joined him and turned off the light. He cuddled up behind me and it felt wonderful, just so wonderful. The

only erection was mine, but I kept it hidden. He had an arm draped over my chest. "Stuart?"

"Yep?"

"Do you still think of Kyle?"

"All the time."

"Me too. I miss him so much."

"You still visit his folks?"

"I sit in his room most days and listen to his music. His folks are so cool about it."

"How are they coping?"

Graham's hand rubbed my stomach, and I felt the warmth of his breath against my shoulder blades. "They're okay, at least when I'm around."

"I'm sorry for what I did, okay?"

"Okay."

"I love you, Graham. A lot. I'd like to try to be a friend like Kyle was."

"I'd like that."

Graham then spoke about his friend Callan who was killed, and what a great guy he was. They skated together. Callan was the kind of guy who got along with everyone, and had looks to kill. Such a waste.

I couldn't sleep, and rose at 4am. Besides, if I stayed in bed, I might be tempted to fondle my little mate. When he woke, I asked if he wanted to take a swim while I fixed breakfast. "I'm not hungry, but I'll take a swim. Can I have more coffee? And I need to borrow a toothbrush."

I tossed him a pair of black Speedos that were a little large, but managed to hold on. Graham is about Kyle's height now, but narrower at the waist. I made coffee while he swam, then drank it poolside. We

arranged to go surfing even if the waves were crap.

I was almost in tears when Graham left for home, then emailed G a shortie to let him know I'd write later during the week, and that, if things worked out, I'd burn my tools and stash—a kind of celebration.

At night, after delivering the cash to the syndicate, I spent a long time writing G about what took place. But, after re-reading it, I trashed it. It was horrendous stuff from the shadowy and violent world of drugs. I didn't know how to tell the story without worrying G or disappointing him. What kind of hero was I? Yeah, right.

Next day, I summoned the courage to write again, and told G about trashing the previous email attempt.

Hey, G, I'm alive. I thought I'd write and let you know that, at least. I needed to inject last night with some stuff I got from a friend because I was in a helluva mess. I went to school today—difficult to focus but at least I appeared straight, kind of.

I need to contact Graham. He walked into my room yesterday while I laid in a bed of puke and crap. You understand why I can't tell him the full story. There was a stuffup Monday night with the money. They want an extra 500, a "chicken shit" fee they call it. A friend said he'd give me the cash for nothing, just to keep me out of trouble. The dealer guys worked me over pretty good. They're clever. They left my face alone so I don't get questioned by teachers or my folks. I expect to

come down hard this time because a friend said he thinks they spun me with a dose of H. There's a fresh track on my arm. That explains the paranoia, shitting and puke. I'm scared because I've not taken heroin before. I've seen guys who looked like they were dying before they got better. Apart from this stuffup, I've used only coke or acid.

Luckily, a friend drove me close to the pickup point, so he knew more or less where to find me. He discovered me later, trashed at the back of some alley, and took me home. I guess I should just back away and move on-if they'll let me.

I can't go and tell Kyle's dad, G, like you suggested. I never had the same vibe with Kyle's folks as his other friends did. I blame myself because I was so high most of the time, and I get paranoia trips. Wouldn't surprise me if they actually asked Kyle to stay away from me. Maybe I just don't fucking know anymore.

I'll phone Graham later to ask if we can meet at the beach. Fuck knows what he thought when he saw me lying in all the shit and puke. When I woke, I didn't even realize I was home, and my bed looked like a shithole. The housekeeper helped me to the shower to get clean. Then she organized someone to clean the mess.

The stuff from my mate helped me to lie my way through the day. School was a haze. Oh, yeah, about the email I deleted. Well, you don't know me, not really, and I shouldn't write stuff when I'm trashed. Maybe that's why Rick doesn't write me. A couple of times I lost my rag with

him. We fought when he was here for Kyle's 18th birthday. He called me a cokehead or whatever, hahaha! I smacked him. No need to tell you the result of that. If you think Brett has a short fuse, Rick's is even shorter. He beat me up good and solid. So I deleted what I wrote to you on Tuesday because I've already caused so much fucking pain without making things worse.

When I first met Kyle, I didn't want to admit I had a thing for guys. I was scared, and even blamed Kyle for influencing me. Then I cried like a baby in his room one time when I told him I thought I might be gay. It was just so damn stupid. He said you figured that was the reason I porked every bitch in town, to prove I wasn't gay, hahahaha! I hated you back then, and the influence you had over Kyle. But he shared what he learned from you without telling other people where he got his knowledge.

Green Room II
Chapter 10

G'day, G. I need to get through the weekend without taking anything. Just one day at a time. A mate at school threatened me. He was told to put pressure on me to return to selling. I was their best salesman, so they're gonna miss me. I could have sold a fortune's worth during the last three days of school and around the hood. Everybody wants their stuff for the weekend. Anyway, my mate Bob took up the slack by selling both his and mine. That's not bad income for a 17 year old.

We were good mates up until now, and I hope that won't change. We've been dealing now for about four years. The difference is he doesn't use the shit except to smoke weed.

Hey, G, I know you're gonna write back and tell me not to associate with this guy, that he's dealing in misery or whatever, and an asshole. You gotta understand his story. He was 11 when he sold grass to his friends. Then he got involved in a relationship with a guy in his thirties, who was involved with a syndicate. By age 12, Bob was raped by this guy, continually, and he sold hard shit even to adults. Can you imagine that? Adults buying their heavy shit from a kid who didn't even have pubes yet? He's not openly gay, either, so don't think he walks around in a pink frock. He's one tough mother.

At age 14, he went on a rush with a bunch of older guys. It ended in an orgy with a lot of S&M. Bob got badly damaged. They were all into his

tight little white ass and hurt him bad. He decided then not to sell the hard stuff any longer if that's what it did to people.

He was stabbed three times one night after his decision to quit. He survived, but I don't think he was expected to make it through the stabbing. Despite that, he stuck by his resolve to stop selling.

Shortly after, a friend of his was beaten so badly he was hospitalized. Now Bob is terrified of quitting because his friends and family are in danger. So he's back selling, but keeps a low profile. Now you know why he doesn't use the stuff, either.

And me? I got hooked by experimenting with drugs and enjoyed the trip, so much so, I ignored the downers. The big sales are mainly E but crack is up there as well. It's mainly the younger kids who buy weed.

Things could be a lot better right now. I called Graham a few nights ago. Thank God he was the one who answered the phone. I told him I wanted to see him but he gave me serious uphill about being an acid head. "Graham, if you don't get your ass down to the beach I'll cut off your cock and balls and have them bronzed!" Hahahaha!

"That's only 'cause you're jealous."

He's almost right. His hands are already bigger than mine, as are his feet. He's as tall as Kyle was, and outstandingly good looking. He was cocky when he arrived at the beach. "Yeah, so?" was his opening remark.

"I hear you walked in on me when I was a bit trashed."

"A bit? You looked like someone who died and rotted there in your own mess. I'm not sure I wanna hang with you anyway. I'm battling to stop using, and it won't help to be with you. I think Kyle would suss it that way as well."

"To hell with Kyle! You're not giving me a chance to explain anything!"

"You don't need to explain anything to me, I'm just a grommet anyway. So why all the hassle to speak to me? And go fuck yourself, leave Kyle out of this."

"I didn't mean it to sound like that, and I don't think of you as a grommet. You know that. You look 16, and I can talk to you as a friend. At least, I used to. I'm also trying to stop using. You don't understand what's going on right now."

"Hahahaha! Yeah, right. Every time I see you, Stuart, you're trashed. Even that night I slept over, you had the shakes. And look at you now! It's like you're diseased, man."

"You've been there, so I guess you know everything now, huh?"

I didn't want to make him totally mad at me, G. Even standing there in his fleecy top and jeans, he looked fantastic. His chest filled his top, then dropped away to a flat stomach. And there was a neat bulge in his jeans. I know that sounds crazy, G, but I wanted to sleep with him. I wanted us to be best mates. The problem with Graham is that he's a helluva lot like Brett with his temper. I think it started after Kyle

died. Maybe he doesn't give a damn whether he has friends or not. I know you think it's cool, G, but I think Graham spends way too much time in Kyle's room alone. Anyway, back to the convo between Graham and me.

"I've been nowhere compared to you," he snapped. "So I know shit. Why did you want to see me? So you can ogle and then go home and jack off thinking about us having sex or something? I know what you want because you made it plain." He lifted his top to reveal his pecs and sixpack. "Here, check this out and then go fuck yourself. Wanna run your hands over that, huh? Wanna touch me all over?"

"Are you crazy? People are staring at us."

"They can go jack off as well." He pulled his top down, unaware that we had an audience, then blushed with embarrassment and turned crimson.

"Stop being a prick, Graham. I want to be your friend."

"You want me to be your toy boy, so go ahead and say it."

"You make it sound crude."

"You're a joke, Stuart. So why did you call me down here?"

"Why did you bother to come?"

His eyes welled with tears.

"Because I can't believe that someone who was Kyle's and my friend, and so cool and good looking, now looks like a deadbeat."

His comment hurt like a knife in the gut. "Do I really look that bad?"

"You used to be my surf hero, and sometimes I jacked off thinking about you. Now you look gross."

"Do you need to be so honest?"

"If you can't handle it, too bad."

"Reckon we might be mates?"

"Tell you what. I'll sleep over at your house Friday, and you can give me a blowjob. I haven't had one in months. And then I'll consider being mates. Don't expect a BJ in return, though, because you're dirty."

"I'll give you a clout across the ear if you don't calm down."

"I'm calm. You're the one who's stressing."

Fucking hell, G, I shook with rage, ready to smack his head right off his shoulders. I sensed him slipping away from me. I was desperate. Anyway, he wasn't that calm because he bounced up and down on his toes, and moved his arms the whole time as if he wanted to escape.

"What about all the cool stuff you said the other night?" I asked. "Worrying about me and needing me?"

"I needed to talk to someone."

"I'm chuffed you chose me."

"I was desperate."

"You hugged me in bed."

"I gotta get home. Told my mom I wouldn't be long."

"So what now, Graham? Does that mean it's over between us? I don't think I can handle that. I love you too much, bro."

His eyes remained bright with tears, but that failed to soften his attitude. "Just now you said 'to hell with Kyle'. What do you think he'd say about that, huh? And that night you touched me all over when I was spaced out and couldn't resist. I'm not even sure what you did to me that night, and you'll never tell me."

You're a molester and an acid head. I'm not sure why I came here. I thought maybe it would be okay but you're all drugged up. Anyway, I gotta go. See ya."

He split before I could say anything further. I wanted to explain that I wasn't drugged up. I should have known better than to see him while I still suffered withdrawals. No, G, I wasn't drugged up if that's what you're thinking. I haven't used anything voluntarily for weeks now.

When I look in the mirror, my eyes are a million miles away. My gut's gone soft as well—still got the sixpack but it's not as defined as it was. I don't blame Graham for thinking what he did. My skin is pale and my eyes are buried deep in their sockets. I feel depressed because I want Graham so badly, and the idea of him hanging with his friends instead of me rips me to pieces.

Do you have any idea how hard this is? I get the most incredible stomach cramps. I can't sleep at all. Yeah, so I got myself into all this shit. But why does it need to be so impossibly difficult?

When Graham spoke to me, I could almost hear you agreeing with him. The only reason I refrained from beating the shit out of him is because I want him to be my mate. Graham can see that I've had fuck all sleep. How am I supposed to look? He knows what I want, so he teases my brain. At least Bob loves me when I'm fucked, G. Even when I'm fucked. Could you love me when I'm like this?

I want Graham. I've also done like you said, and tried. I need to get through this weekend. Bob invited

me to stay over at his place, so I might accept the offer just to stay clean. I'm shitting myself in case I need to lay my hands on any of that crap right now. Instead, I'll rave on to you by writing this email until I get myself sorted out. What the hell if you don't read any of this? It's good just to write it down, and it keeps me busy during sleepless nights.

Yesterday afternoon, I walked to the beach. Graham was there with his mates. I waved, but he ignored me. Then, last night, I got a call from some kid. When I answered the phone, he screamed 'ACID HEAD'. I heard laughter in the background. I'm sure it was Graham's doing. He's planning to make my life a misery, and play stupid games.

It's cool if he chooses to ignore me, G. But if he wants to play games, I'll beat his head in. He's forgotten how Kyle helped him when he was in big trouble. One time, Kyle thought he was gonna die.

One of Graham's mates also phoned to buy some stuff, so maybe Graham's not as clean as he wants me to believe. On the other hand, it may have been a ploy to see if I was still dealing.

School is a nightmare. I can't concentrate on anything. If Kyle were alive, he would stand by me right now—although he never saw me as fucked as I've been the last few weeks. BUT THAT'S NOT MY FUCKING FAULT! Right now I need to sleep, then make a plan for what I'll do tonight.

Later: G emailed a bunch of questions for an interview on his web site. Here it is:

You were a grommet when you met Kyle some years ago. Do you remember your first impressions?

I met Kyle in the surf. The first thing I noticed was him taking off on a grauncher and making the cut. Back on the beach, I told him the ride looked pretty rad. His smile hooked me right away, and I was impressed with how friendly and good looking he was. You need to understand me in a way; I was into pics of guys in magazines and checked out guys surfing. I didn't understand that at all, because I was supposed to be straight. So here was this guy chatting at the beach and we became friends right away. That night, I entertained erotic thoughts about Kyle for the first time.

If you could bottle one of Kyle's qualities, which would it be?

The way he made each person feel like they were the only friend he had, and the way he expressed love like it was the most natural thing in the world. If you had a problem it became his problem too. His friendship had no boundaries and he never judged people.

If Kyle bottled one of your qualities, which would it be?

I don't know. Kyle told me how good looking I was and what a great bod I had. He made me feel worthwhile in almost every way. I did nothing in return but disappoint him so many times. The way I feel now, there's nothing about me worth bottling.

To have the awesome looks you have would seem to us mere mortals to be a ticket to happiness.

Well, G, I don't need to answer that one, you know it already. I guess it's like looking at Kyle's Wollumbin every day and not noticing because it's always there. Kyle looked at that mountain every day and admired it every single time, and never took it for granted. To be honest with myself, the only happiness I knew in my entire life were times spent with Kyle. And now that's gone.

Kyle once told me he never saw himself as a hunk. He had a complex about his lips. How did you see him?

When I tell you that every time Kyle walked into a room he filled it with light, it's no exaggeration. Kyle had a comp about his lips but you didn't notice them because they belonged to him. He also went on and on and on about how we had sixpacks and he didn't despite 100 situps a day. His bod was beautiful with a flat stomach. His sixpack showed when he moved. His meaty pecs were awesome, with broad strong shoulders and prominent biceps. He had thick black hair and eyes that laughed. You felt the solid muscle beneath his smooth skin when you caressed him. Kyle could wear a sack and still be the most beautiful guy you ever saw. I could go on and on about Kyle, but, yeah well...

Why do you think Kyle fell in love with you?

Again, I'm not sure. Maybe it was his friendliness on the beach. I immediately took to him. He wore a pair of briefs with an Aboriginal

print when I first visited his house. He arrived at the door and didn't bother to dress. We both got erections and I knew then we would become more than just surf mates. I hurt Kyle a lot, and regret every moment of it—like the time I slept with Melanie. It wasn't so much that that screwed Kyle's brain, it was my betrayal of a friend's trust. Our friendship was never the same after that, although Kyle never showed it. When he continued to see me as a friend, only he knew how he truly felt.

Graham?

Graham is a cutie and lived next door. He was a damn pest (like Kyle could be if he considered you a friend). But you got to know him and like him. His personality is a lot like Kyle's, but he lost that tolerance after Kyle was killed. He won't tolerate crap, and is easily aggravated. He loved Kyle probably more than anyone, and saw him as his older bro and teacher. Kyle loved Graham because he was so funny and full of fun. None of us will ever understand what he's suffering right now.

Brett?

It's difficult to understand the Brett relationship. Brett carried a lot of baggage and was often moody. But Kyle broke down the barriers and helped Brett a lot more than Brett cares to admit. The fact they were lovers floored me because Brett is the quintessential heterosexual hunk, with the looks and body that turn even male heads. In a good mood, he has the most amazing personality. I think Kyle helped Brett reach the

conclusion that friendship is cool, and Brett saw in Kyle a friend he could trust with his life. I'm sure Kyle saw Brett as a challenge, and wanted him badly enough to fight for his affection.

Melanie?

Brett was the matchmaker because he worried about Kyle not having a girlfriend, and perhaps becoming weird. Hahahaha! The relationship began slowly, but Kyle fell in love with Melanie. I think he saw her as a partner he could spend the rest of his life with. Melanie also understood Kyle's love for his friends, and probably suspected how far that love extended. The two together were magic. They had a beautiful open relationship and spoke about anything...almost. Why Melanie agreed to sleep with me, I don't know. Maybe to try a different partner and test her love for Kyle? I don't know.

Me?

This may sound crazy, but I got the impression that, of all Kyle's friends, you were the one to make the biggest impression on his life. Because of his sexuality, Kyle had no one to speak to. At least, not adult, until you came along. You became the ears to listen to anything he needed to say. He relied on your advice when he was in trouble or upset. He told you about the rape, which I only discovered after he died. I wish he'd trusted the rest of us with his secret. Actually, it wasn't a trust issue; he was embarrassed that it could happen to him. Kyle's anti drug campaign became obsessive after that. You actually stopped him committing

suicide one time. My brain fries when I imagine him and Rick lying lifeless together, and robbing me of the opportunity to get to know him.

Like Kyle, you're not stereotypically gay. You have many masculine qualities. What is it that attracts you to the same sex on occasion? Is it purely physical, or are there other considerations?

Before Kyle, I knew there was something different about me. I screwed one girl after another, but fantasized about guys, even when I was with those girls. Kyle made me realize how natural it was to be the way I am. He taught me how to love. I don't think my attraction to Kyle was physical at first. His personality overwhelmed me. But I often saw him naked, exiting the shower and not bothering to cover up. Then the physical side emerged. Even so, the love between two guys who are mates is never just physical. Kyle's voice was full of fun and laughter. When he laughed, you laughed as well, even if you didn't think it was funny. Brett's voice is very mature. He could easily be an announcer. Mine? Dunno. Hahahaha!

You obviously have many fond memories of Kyle. Which stands out the most?

To choose one of thousands is difficult. I get teary when I think of the times we sat in his room. If I was upset about something he put his arm around me, and we talked and talked. Then he'd convince me to lighten up and we laughed together. If ever there was a time I needed Kyle, it's right now. You're right, I will never ever forget Kyle. Not as

long as I live. And dying will never
be a problem. I know that the best
friend I ever had will be on the
other side.

Green Room II
Chapter 11

Monday, 6:12am. I've been up all night. I'm on such a high you won't believe it! Hahahaha! Hey, I can see your bushies rising. I'm straight, G. I've not taken anything, so don't stress.

School went well today. There's a lot of catch-up because I accomplished little during the first three days. I spent most of the weekend with Bob, who overdosed me on vitamin B and C. He was like a mother looking after me. My piss is still bright yellow and stinks like hell. So does my crap but maybe we shouldn't go there.

So, Dear Diary, how did the weekend start? Let's see. Another shit day at school Friday because I drifted from one minute to the next like a blind man in the hope that someone would take my arm and lead the way. THANKS BOB!

I was quite upset, and wondered what it is that drifts away from me so very quickly. But there's not a lot I can do about it. The thing is, maybe I want Bob to leave me alone as well if I'm to cope with everything. I'm at a loss at the moment. I'll phone Melanie—maybe go to a movie or something. Okay, okay, not such a great idea. She can be cruel. What is this? Is she on a mission to make my life a misery? Maybe I should phone Bob. Nope, he's playing dealer dealer at a club tonight, but he promised to collect me tomorrow. Okay then, my girlfriend? Piss off, Stuart. Whew! Gets a bit hectic when you lose your looks and have no personality to back

it up. Yo mirror! Butt check. Hey, there's plenty of personality there. Quite cute, actually. I know! Brett! I forgot I'm supposed to keep in touch, and he's been worried. Think, think. Okay, so I'm not in Fremantle, and I can't ask Brett for a bonk. Maybe Fingers will catch the midnight flight and... No, bad thoughts, bad thoughts. He's one of the good guys.

I know! I'll go into town, make some bucks, and find a girl. Nope, I'm not in shape. I'll end up puking all over her—or him. Kyle? Nope, Kyle's not around anymore. Anyway, he'd be out with that bitch, Melanie. Sorry, Melanie. You're a great bonk, and I'm sure Kyle thought so too. I never said you're a bitch. Would I lie? Me?

How about a chat with my mom and dad? Nope, they're away. Must've heard of my plan. I know! The household help! Forget it. Thanks Mr. Diary for helping me work through that awful Friday.

Dear Diary, Saturday. Surf? No. Still too paranoid. I don't want to get all jerky in the swell. Bob? Still sleeping, probably until this afternoon, the lazy fuck. Melanie? No. Graham? Yeah, right. Oh, hello? Thought you'd gone to heaven. Okay, a good wank. No, forget that. I'll save the juice for later with Bob.

Another phone call: "Hey, acid head, you gonna get wasted in the surf today?" I slammed down the phone. I won't get riled today. Swim in the pool. Black Speedos with a narrow waist. Those were Kyle's, so I'll wear them. Now I got it; I need some exercise in the gym room. Cycled for a whole five minutes, then pushed

a whole 40kg and felt drained. Hey, Diary, I used to do 80 situps no worries. Help me out here, okay? No. Back to sleep.

Checked mail from G. Replied. Phone rings. Okay, Bob, come fetch me. Ah, what must I wear? Okay, Dear Diary, you should have seen the look on Bob's face when I walked out the door naked. Hahahaha! It was priceless! "Hey, Bob, you said just bring yourself, so here I am." Party pooper. He chased me back inside the house to clothe myself. Made him horny as hell, though. Come on, Diary, you know our driveway can't be seen from the street, so stop bitching.

Bob's house is pretty rad. He also has fucked-up folks who don't give a shit. But what a pad! A whole house-size section to himself. *C'mon, dad, can't I have one of those too? Gym section with sauna and a massive pool?*

The worst thing that could happen did. I was horny without a toad. "Don't worry about it, Stuart, it happens, bro."

"Not to me. What's going on?"

Bob pulled me toward him and hugged me. "You're body is ratshit, Stuart. We need to do something about it."

He mixed a drink that tasted revolting. "Bleh! What is this stuff, anyway?"

"Pure Bs. Vitamin B concoction. I could give you an injection, which would work faster, but that drink should do the trick. I'll give you more to take home."

Later, we did three circuits of high-intensity cardio and aerobic

exercise. I sweated buckets. Each time I wanted to quit, he pushed me further. Our clothes were see-through drenched by the time we finished.

Then it was the sauna for 20 minutes. I was on fire in there. We showered, then laid on his bed where we spoke for a long time. "When I heard you wanted to quit selling, I worried," he said. He knew the syndicate guys would make my life hell. I told Bob about Graham's attitude. Don't worry, Diary, Bob's the only one who knows how I feel about Graham, and he thinks Graham is totally straight. He doesn't know about Kyle and me, though. During the convo with Bob, he said a friend of Graham's was buying, and that Graham should dump his friend ASAP. "I've seen Graham more than once, lying on the sidewalk, puking his guts up."

After arriving home, I showered again. To my horror and despair, my body's steady deterioration had become more obvious. In Fremantle, with all the hard work, I was fit. Not now. I searched the fridge for leftovers then checked email. G again. I told him I didn't care about my image in the story he was writing, and that I was surprised he considered it even worth telling. Basically, it's the way I am all the time anyway—people are always telling me how fucked up I am.

Bob was pissed off big time when I phoned at 4 that morning. "Do you realize what time it is?"

"I'm shaking. I'm in a bad way."

"I won't supply you, Stuart."

"Why? I can't quit yet. I'm desperate. Maybe it's all that

vitamin crap you fed me on the weekend."

"You can't do it, Stuart. Just hang in there."

"If you don't get your ass over here right now I'll phone the dealers. They'll bring as much as I want."

"You know what it will do to you."

"I'm sick, dammit. I need something right now. I'll never speak to you again. Fuck it! Forget it. I'll phone them right now."

"I'm coming over."

I met Bob in the street because I didn't want to wake my folks or the staff. He handed me two envelopes. "You've been crying," I said as I took the packages.

"I marked the one with the vitamin B tabs. The other is crack. No needles."

"Thanks. I'll smoke it."

"The H is causing your problem, Stuart. The crack won't help. Take the B, mate, please! You already know what will happen."

"Get me heroin, then. I'm sick. Look at me! I'm shaking. My stomach is twisted in a million knots. You don't know this pain, Bob. It's unbearable!"

"Just take the B."

I returned to the house as he drove off. For ages, I studied the envelopes. I got sick again, and my stomach cramped so bad, I had to stuff a pillow in my mouth to silence my screams. Screams, G. Screams! You get the message here? Every muscle cramped. My bed was soaked in sweat. I think I actually passed out because of the pain.

I was fine when I woke, but still a bit sick in the stomach. I took the B tabs. But I can't go through another night like this, G. I'm sorry, but if it happens again, I won't handle that kind of pain and nausea. It's not standard hangover I'm talking about. Ever had a leg cramp in your sleep? Like in your calf muscle? Imagine your whole body like that, and your stomach cramped in knots. Then the blinding headaches start.

I'M NO FUCKING HERO! I CANNOT STAND THE PAIN!

No, I won't smoke it now. I'm fine for the time being. I might be fine tomorrow. I might be fine the next day. I need the crack here in case the pain returns. I'm sorry if you're disappointed. Join the fucking crowd.

Monday night: At the moment I'm feeling okay. Had a cool weekend with Bob and school was okay. I sweat a lot and still feel nauseous. I hope this whole email makes sense because I wrote it in bits and pieces, and moved stuff around. I'm really tired right now. Gotta sleep, and hopefully sleep right though.

A few days later: So how's it going? Yeah, I'm fine. Still shaking and not sleeping, and still getting sick, but, hey, whatever.

A friend told me who phones me and calls me a coke head. His mates dared him to do it the first time, then he got carried away. The other night he phoned again and went through this whole routine with all his dickhead mates laughing in the background. I thought it was Graham. I phoned him to tell him to stop

harassing me, but his mom answered. She said he was with Sean. So I phoned Sean who said Graham refused to speak to me.

"Then give him a message. Tell him to stop his stupid crank calls."

"It's not Graham. It's Joe."

When I arrived home from school the next day, I sensed I was being shadowed. Sure enough, I got another call. CRACK HEAD! HEHEHEHE! I went to the beach and saw Graham and his grommet mates surfing. I'm still not fit enough to surf, so I waited on the sand. When Graham emerged from the water, I asked him which guy was Joe. He ignored me and walked right past like I was Mr. Invisible.

One of the grommets approached me and said he was Joe. "What's the problem?" he asked. I backhanded him so hard he bawled right away. My hand stung, but I felt great. The nick on his cheek was open and red.

"Don't fuck with me, grommet, or you'll feel more pain than you can handle."

I scored more bad points with Graham, though, who swore at me and warned me to watch my back.

That night, Sean phoned to say that Joe's older brother might come looking for me. Whoa! Somebody on my side! "So tell me how this whole thing started?" I asked.

"It was Graham who amped all the guys to give you a hard time. But he chickened out when the first call was made."

So, G, there's another hero for you. You know what the worst is? I can't get the grommet out of my head. I want to be his friend—or I need to get over him real fast. Otherwise,

I'll go insane. What you wrote me about him thinking I'm a hero is wishful crap.

This morning, I took a run. Can you believe that? It wasn't a marathon, and my legs hurt. It was a slow run but felt good. I also did situps and pushups, and lifted a few weights. I need to build my biceps again—those perfect bicep balls I used to have, like Graham's. I tire quickly, though, because I get virtually no sleep. And I take all this vitamin B, which I get myself at the pharmacy.

My erections are back to normal. Woohoo! That makes me feel better. I also used my dad's account to order boxing gloves and a bag. Bugger him. If he's not happy, he can return the merchandise when he gets home. I figure boxing is good exercise and could be fun. Anyway, considering the shit I manage to get myself into these days, it might be an idea to be fighting fit. Yeah! Bring on Joe's older bro. Come on, come on! Hahahaha! Hey, I didn't even know the little shit had an older bro. If I had, I might have left him alone. You see what a chickenshit I am for a hero? Hell, when I heard that Kyle was on the rampage about Melanie and me, I phoned every mate in my book to back me. All I wanted back then was Kyle to be bashed enough not to come near me. Ended up having to do the job myself, though. Anyway, maybe Joe's older bro is a skinny dude who doesn't wanna mess with G's hero. Hahahaha!

Green Room II
Chapter 12

Oh, did I tell you the really great news? My dad actually asked if was okay the other day. How wild is that? He took one look at how trashed I was and couldn't wait to get out of there quick enough. Hahahaha! What a loser!

If you're wondering about the crack in my closet, it's still there. Bob said he'd buy it. Hey, I haven't even paid for it yet! With what? I told him to piss off and leave it there. He's still my mate, though, so at least I have one friend. Okay, so he's after my bod. Could be worse.

So what else is happening? Not much. Some school work, but it's a stuff up. I can't even afford to get the juniors to do my homework assignments for me.

My face looks exhausted, like I've been on drugs. Hahahaha! I don't sleep because I'm too scared. When I try, I lie there like a zombie. Actually, with my rehabilitated cockstand, I look more like a mummy. All stiff. Hahahaha! I get nightmares and wake in a cold sweat. I manage an hour or two, then I'm awake the whole time. Of course, Bob's got something for that too. What kind of question is that? You know the answer. I don't know how long this misery is supposed to last. It's a waking hell.

Just squashed a fly walking on my desk. S-Q-U-I-S-H. Poor bastard, but at least he's better off than me right now. I guess you know a fly with no wings is a walk, huh? And a

fly with no legs is a raisin.
Hahahaha!

Hey, what the hell, if I'm gonna be awake all night I'll keep everyone else awake. Guess you won't believe me if I tell you I never got badly trashed on drugs when Kyle was here. Sure, I smoked and snorted some but never ever got this bad while he was around. I was more spacey. Then he gave me what for. Smack! Take this! Smack! Take that! Nah, Kyle wasn't like that. He hated drugs, but kinda handled my habit most times. He loved me too much. I wish I could turn back the clock. Shut the fuck up, G! Let me wish if I want to. Just about all I got at the moment is to wish. S-wish, s-wish. Another fly. Hahahaha! Oh, Jesus, I need to sleep so badly. 3:30am. How time flies. Flies! Get it? How time flies when you're having fun, huh? Right now I feel like a good cry, so I will.

3:52am. Getting there slowly but surely. There's a pic of Graham on the side of this note. Not sure if you know that model Marcus Schenkenberg or whatever, but that's the kinda bod Graham's got. Same peccs, too. It's a disgrace that a 14 year old can have a body like that. How come he hates me so much, G? I can understand why he's angry or disappointed, but he openly hates me. Why is that? When I saw his face at the beach—when he swore at me—I hated him too, right there and then. His neck muscles bulged and turned red because he stressed so much. And why does Melanie hate me? I did nothing to her. I don't hate Graham. I hate the fact that he wants fuckall to do with me. I hate that it's come down

to all this shit. AND I HATE THAT KYLE LEFT ME LIKE HE DID! He didn't need to hitch a ride. He could have called his dad for a lift home. So that's his way to get back at me? "Hey, Stuart! C'mon, mate, it's gonna be a rave!" Yeah, Kyle, you bastard, look what you did.

So what now, G, huh? I'm shaking like a leaf here, and I need something badly. I don't sleep. The stuff in the closet? I can't take it after all your fucking mail. It's a conspiracy between you and Kyle. Isn't it?

A pic of me? If I took one now and sent it to you, your mail would dry up like a lake in a desert. I look like shit.

I wonder if the school phoned my folks? Maybe my folks will have me arrested if they get the opportunity. That would be cool for them, huh? Get me out of their hair for a while. Not too bad being molested by all those studs in the cells. Maybe Joe's big bro will put me in hospital. That would suit my folks as well. Nope, come to think of it, that would mean hospital bills, which would be almost like giving me money. Know where I got all my money from, G? Well, that's all dried up now. You happy now? Hahahaha! Just pissing on your battery. Don't stress.

Why do I think about Joe's bro anyway? If he's a skinny dude, Graham will let it happen. If he's a Brett clone, Graham will stop him. So why worry? BRING HIM ON! Hahahaha!

Graham would throw a party if this guy beat me up. Shut up, Stuart, for fuck sake! The grommet was probably just pulling my chain

anyway. There's no need to worry about Joe's bro.

6:45am. Just dozed off. Sorry about that. I'm awake now. BUT, I gotta get ready for school. Thank Christ we don't wear uniforms. I can dress in boardies and a top. Sorry about the top, G. I know you prefer me without one, hahahaha! You're obsessed by pecs. Don't go away. I'll be back later. But I might have an assignment so, I'll just save this email as another hidden file on my comp. I know my dad checks what I got on here. Okay, okay, school time.

Back! Now I'm ready for another sleepless night, so you better be ready for my bullshit. Maybe I should spend the night with Bob so I'll have something to write about. Maybe I should borrow one of his toys. He's got an auto-masturbator that looks like a hair dryer. He wanted to use it on me the other day. No! I need to try and get some sleep. So let me send this now. I look like something out of a horror zombie movie. On second thought, they look better than this.

Thursday, 2am: Bob just left. He's the only person I can call right now. I've been doubled up with pain since 4 yesterday afternoon. How's that? I managed an hour's sleep. I took a swim when my stomach cramped so bad I couldn't move. I sweated like it was 90 degrees in a pool of cold water! Hahahaha! I thought Kyle had called me 'up there' a bit earlier than I planned. I don't know how, but I managed to get to the pool steps where I doubled up in agony.

When it eased, I phoned Bob. I told him about what happened but he

said he had nothing to help me. "If you're not here with something for me in half an hour, I'll smoke the whole damn crack stash. Live with that on your conscience!" I was mad as all hell.

Right now my gut feels like it was slammed by a sledgehammer. Anyway, Bob arrived on time, in a real spin. He found me doubled over in the shower with the cold water running. The dealers must have known the cocktail injection would cause me to suffer like this. Low-life assholes.

Bob was in a spin because he had to cancel a deal. I guess I did my bit for the day, except maybe land Bob in a lot of crap. Meanwhile, he didn't leave me until he was sure I was okay. While here, he took a call for me from Sean. He asked to see me at the beach tomorrow because Joe wanted to apologize. Maybe I smacked Joe's brains into shape or something.

I gotta try some schoolwork, so let me get going with that. I can't concentrate in class. Too knackered.

4am. I dozed during homework, so I got a half hour of really deep sleep. I feel better. So you're picturing me sitting at my desk and wondering what I'm wearing? Gray fleecy gym shorts.

I wonder if Graham is behind this meeting with Joe tomorrow. Maybe he wants to sort things out with me. That would be cool. But he'll take one look at me and run for the hills.

I'll lie down for a while. I need more sleep. Bob said he'd give me a lift to school, so I'll finish this email later, alligator.

10:41pm. I laid in the dark for a while, trying to recall exactly the first time I got wasted. I can't remember. I tried to justify everything I've done in my life. I can't do that either. I tried to figure why I had such a good mate, and ruined it. The only reason I can think of is because I'm selfish. I was spoiled by the money I got from dealing.

I laid there wondering, yes, wondering, why you're trying to make a hero out of me, G. I tried to think of just one thing I did in my life for someone else, when I wasn't thinking of just me. I'm not finding any answers here, G. And now I wonder why I write all this stuff to you. That's selfish as well. It's not for you, or because of Kyle, it's because I can write. And that's fucking all.

I'll tell you about heroes, G. You can draw your own conclusions. I was so, so, so, so, so amped for this meeting with Joe at the beach. When I got there, all the guys were in the water. I was nervous because I wanted to make things right with Graham. I figured if Joe needed to apologize to me, then Graham must know the reason I smacked him.

They emerged from the water as a group. Then two guys sitting on the beach approached me and asked if my name was Stuart. One, who wore a sleeveless muscle top, and who obviously pushed iron, was Joe's brother.

"Why did you fuck with my baby bro?"

I tried to explain, while Graham and his mates stood nearby. Graham could have told big bro the

story, but no. Big bro pushed me:
"Maybe you want to smack somebody
your own size."

"I don't want to fight you."

"Why? Chicken?"

"I don't have a beef with you."

He smacked me so hard, it sent
my head sideways, and stung like
hell. "Got a beef with me now?" he
snarled.

"I'm not going to fight with
you. No way."

A crowd gathered to gawk.
Graham and his mates watched. Big bro
pushed me again. "You only bully
lighties? Come on, fucker, I want to
smack you like you smacked my baby
bro." He pushed me again.

I lost it, and took a swing. He
expected it, then wound up a swing of
his own which rammmed into my stomach.
I saw lights, and held onto his arm,
otherwise I'd have hit the deck face
down. He reacted by pulling his arm
free, and hit me with his other fist.
I felt the cut on my cheek, and
crumbled knees first to the sand.

"Get up, you bully," he
ordered. His mate pulled him away,
but the guy was in a rage and rearing
to go.

I struggled to my feet. Graham
stared at me with tears in his eyes,
and shook his head. He waited until I
stood fully upright, then grabbed his
board and walked away.

So why did he have tears in his
eyes, G? He knew the answers. He
could have supported my explanation
to big bro. Was he part of the setup
as well? If I see Sean again I'll
nail the bastard, big bro or not. He
phoned me later just to let me know

how much he enjoyed seeing me groveling on the deck.

Thought I might need stitches in my cheek. But it was more blood than anything. He caught me on the cheek bone. I feel like I was run over by a truck. Now, come on, G. You're so good at justifying things, justify why this guy bashed me. Kyle would have done the same thing if he were in big bro's shoes. Of all people, why did Graham help set me up? I was so amped that we could be friends again. I made plans already for us to go surfing together. And he could just maybe be with me while I build up my fitness and overcome the paranoia.

I'm gonna get a hand-drawn birthday card from Graham like he made for Kyle? Yeah, right. "Happy birthday ACID HEAD. Stay out of my life forever!"

Don't stop reading now, G. Fuck, I got all night to go. It's only 00:21 on my clock here. So you think I should have defended myself today? Seriously, do I just forget this whole thing or what?

Dear Diary, why am I so uncool? I hope you get lots of hate mail for my story, G. How cool would that be? Then I can write them and give them a real reason to hate me. Had to change the light bulb just now 'cause it blew. Hahahahaha! Everything is stuffed up!

It must be lust. Kyle was right. I'm a boy slut. AND REVELATION! I get off on the pain! I've been staring at the screen, wondering what gets me into so much crap. It must be the pain. Even when that guy hit me, although it hurt, I

got off on it. Would have gotten off even more if I was the one who hurt him. Why did I hurt Graham? Because I wanted to see him in pain! Right? That's it. It's the only answer. Why did Kyle and I fight so much? I think it was me who started it all the time because I wanted to feel pain and dish it out. There's something for your story, G. You can tell the readers how I hurt Kyle just to get off on his pain. That's why I bonked Melanie, so see him hurt. I'm a monster. I need sleep. My mind is racing on a track to nowhere.

1:27am. Dozed for a while but couldn't sleep. This inability to sleep is worse than the downers. The nightmares get to me. I see Kyle battered and in pain, screaming for me to help him. But I can't reach him in time. I run in a thick syrupy liquid that sucks the energy from my legs. When our hands almost touch, he falls into a black pit with his face expressing total pain. He screams my name, but there's fuckall I can do. Then I sit up in a cold sweat with my skin burning hot. I can't handle the dreams. I can't believe I wrote all that stuff up there, G. What was I thinking? I could just erase it all but I won't. I want you to see what kind of megalomaniac you're dealing with. Hahahahaha! I'm schizo! YEAH! SO AM I! HAHAHAAAAHA! Oh, fuck.

I'm looking at a pic of Graham. That's all I have now, just a pic. I lost them all, G. I lost them when I lost Kyle. I lost them when I lost myself. I can write how bad I feel, but they're all just words on paper and nothing else. I could take a swim because I'm burning up inside. I

could swim until my arms fail to hold me, and I won't even feel the water cover my head. It would be over, and the pain would be gone. Hey! There's crack in my closet. I'd feel better in seconds! One hit, and I'm in heaven! Shut the fuck up, G. I'm not gonna smoke it. Not yet. You've gone and told all those readers that I'm beating this thing but I'M NOT! How could you do that?

Green Room II
Chapter 13

Today I'll meet up with all my friends at school—all one of me. They want nothing to do with me since I stopped dealing drugs. Bob can't be seen in my company at school because it would damage him. What's the point of attending school anyway? I can't think, and I'm sick of teachers giving me the third degree about my tired face.

Bob has Mandrax tabs that will make me sleep. They were sleeping pills before being banned as a narcotic. I'll ask for one, just to get a single night's sleep. One night's sleep! Wow, what a luxury!

So how's the story coming along? Have I rescued any damsels in distress yet? Did I fight off the hordes and banish them? Tell you what, G, if you're gonna write about that fight with big bro, make me the winner. Okay? I want to fist that mongrel and put the boot in when he's down. Graham can raise his arms and scream with pride. Then Melanie jumps into my arms as I grab a board leash with one hand, and swing across the rooftops into the sunset. Because I'm holding her with the other hand, dumbass! Hahahaha! Oh, Christ, it hurts to laugh.

Just cut my fingernails so I don't scratch myself. Supper? It was grilled chicken with veg and roast potatoes. I'll ask the cook to roast a whole chicken for me one evening, then take it to bed and make love to it. The chicken, not the cook. That'll be a lotta protein, not to mention horny fun. Hahahaha! Just

picture it-me on my back sliding this chicken up and down. Oh shit, now I got the giggles. I'll call it KFC, Kentucky Fucked Chicken. Hahahahaha! With 11 herbs and spices and extra protein. It's the water, Dear Diary, promise. It's full of alien stuff that sends me crazy. Once more unto the breach, dear friends. We'll fight them in the school grounds and take no prisoners.

Did I tell you Brett phoned? No? Probably because he didn't. What to wear to school today. Decisions, decisions. Wonder what comments my face will attract today. Slipped on a bar of soap, sir.

Actually, G, next time, you don't need to read all this shit. I'm doing this to keep myself occupied during sleepless nights. On the other hand, maybe you should read it to see what kind of crazy bastard I am. It's all because I'm 18. Being 18 is soooooooooo hard! That's why you need friends to help you through this time of life. Difficult to party all alone, yeah? I could hang with Bob but he can't keep his hands off me.

4:44am. All the fours. Did you know Kyle was asked to be in a movie? Too true. Actually, more than one. A guy in LA said he already had the script, and that Kyle would star with another hunky teen in a porno. A guy in the UK offered the same. Kyle received stacks of offers to pose for pics. One said it was because of his smile. Hahahahaha!

6:07am. Not long now before it's time to wake up. Hahahahaha! Gonna put a plaster over the cut on my cheek because the bone is tender. Gonna get a lift from Bob again. All

I want to do is sleep. Just sleep.
I'm fucking exhausted.

I read your story of me, THE HERO! Hahahaha! The blond guy sounds hot. Is that really me? Oh, fuck. What I desperately do need is some grass. But the cupboard is bare, except for the crack. Three joints and a bottle of whisky would sort me out. I'm not crazy, G. Three joints and a bottle of Johnnys would kill me. I NEED TO SLEEP!

It's not the H any longer. I'm sure I'm over that now. I feel like jerking the turkey but the turkey's asleep. I need to shower. This has been one fucked up night again.

2:13pm. Back from school. I think Bob has the answer; I've overdosed on the Bs and Cs. I'll cool it with those for a couple of days. He said I should only take the Bs in the morning, AFTER SLEEPING! Hello? I haven't take any today. I'm well and truly stuffed now. I'm gonna sleep.

A few days later: I'm feeling okay now. On Friday after school I slept right through until 5 next morning, and felt quite rested. I ambled down to the beach on a totally glorious morning. The surf was small and glassy but the shape was perfect, and the peaks were there. Another guy was out in the water.

I paddled out but can't adequately describe the feeling of elation at being in the surf again. To Kyle and me, the surf was our second home. For me, maybe my first home. I was always happy there in the bosom of Mother Ocean.

Thank Christ Graham and his gang were not around, that would have ruined my whole scene. The sets were

not big so paddling out was okay, despite my lack of fitness. As I headed toward the peaks, the other guy sat quietly on his board watching the sun rise. The first dawn rays lit Byron headland, Australia's most easterly point, just as it did during Kyle's Dawn Patrols.

When I took off on my first wave, the skill of surfing returned instantly and naturally. Not a great ride—short, but it felt awesome to be back in the water. I paddled out again and felt my muscles working. The sensation was totally unreal! Got to the line where the swell peaked and saw the other surfer wave. Couldn't make out who he was, though; he was silhouetted against the bright sun.

I paddled over and recognized Kyle's dad. "G'day, Mr. T." His eyes were red, so I knew he'd been crying. He looked good and fit, though, sitting on his stick like he owned the whole ocean.

"G'day, Stuart. How are you doing, boy?"

"Doing better today," I laughed. "How are you guys, you and Mrs. T?"

"Ups and down, as expected, but it's getting better. A lot of Kyle's friends are in and out of the house, which is cool. We haven't seen you around, though, Stuart—and I think I can see why."

I blushed big time and tried to avoid his gaze. "Sorry. I've not slept lately."

"Sure that's it?"

"I guess you heard about the drugs and stuff, Mr. T. I'm trying to get there. It's over a week now and

it's hard. I'm getting there on my own."

"Did Kyle ever try the hard stuff? You can tell me. I can't exactly beat him over the head."

"Kyle hated it. It was the cause of a lot of fights between us. He wanted me to stop, and I couldn't."

"What about little Graham? Sometimes I see his eyes all glassy and I wonder."

"I don't think Graham is into it. He might smoke a reefer with his mates sometimes, but that's it."

"Think that's cool? Smoking weed? I did that at your age. They locked you away if you were caught in those days. Now the kids get away with most of it and the authorities turn a blind eye. I remember hiding from the cops and my folks when I smoked, always in dark dingy hideouts, and never really enjoying it once the euphoria passed."

"No, sir."

"Kyle chose his friends well, Stuart. He must have recognized something other than the crap you use. Mrs. T and I would like to see some of what Kyle saw, and we'd like you to visit sometimes. Graham spends a lot of time there, even sleeps over now and then."

"I don't think Graham would appreciate my being there right now."

"I know the story, well, at least his version—your being aggressive and a bully—beating one of his mates because of a prank. I know where Graham's coming from, though. He misses Kyle terribly and looks for him in his other friends, but can't find it. If you look at Brett,

yourself and all of Kyle's other mates, there's a bit of Kyle in each of you, and it's those bits that his mom and I enjoy seeing. Put you all together and it's almost like Kyle being there in our midst."

I was unsure how to respond, so I stared blankly at the horizon, and felt guilty. After a few moments, he continued: "That's what you need to find, Stuart. Find the bit that Kyle found in you and you'll discover something really special about yourself."

I tried my best not to cry, which must have been obvious to Mr. T. He watched me closely as he resumed his little speech. "You arrived shortly after Rick left for Canada. We remember how Kyle came alive after his deep depression. You were good for him. So what happened, Stuart? As time passed, I know how you guys fought more often, and saw each other less and less. It happens to many of us, but you guys were like two thieves: inseparable."

"It was the drugs. Kyle hated them. And Brett was part of the scene. I didn't want to get in the way."

"You won't come clean without help, Stuart. It's too hard. You may be clean for a week or a month or even longer, but you'll drift back."

"I need to try by myself because of... circumstances."

"Your folks will understand if you need to get to a clinic. Won't they?"

"You still surf in the mornings, Mr. T?"

"Sometimes. I feel that Kyle is here with me. I was very lucky as a

dad that he enjoyed my company. Our Dawn Patrols became our special time together. We didn't do it often enough, now that I think about it."

"I haven't surfed for a while."

"You've not lost it, though. It may have been the day Kyle met you—the first time we saw him so happy and joyful after Rick left. He told us about this blond guy who ripped apart every wave he rode."

"Hahahahaha! Hey, you're not so bad either."

"For an old bloke, huh?" he smiled.

"Jeez, Mr. T, you surf as well as any of us."

"Maybe just a little more cautious. Hey, I better get home before Kyle's mom blames me for a spoiled breakfast. Go well, Stuart, and visit us for supper one evening."

"I'll phone you. Thanks."

"Good to see you again, Stuart, albeit looking like shit. I hope you get there. I'll tell Graham you were here."

"I doubt if Graham will think it's cool—rather not say anything."

Once Mr. T turned his board and headed for the beach, my emotions took utter control. I cried my aching heart out as the rollers rose and fell in silence. Did I feel sorry for myself again? Maybe. I really don't know. But talking to Kyle's dad in the surf was just too fucking much for me to handle. I sat there for an hour, riding the gentle swell, without paddling a single stroke—a lone figure beneath the rising sun. Then I returned home.

Green Room II
Chapter 14

I arrived home and took a good look at my room. Ugh. Like my head, it was a mess; soiled clothing strewn everywhere, stinking the place; a reefer butt in the ashtray, left over from a week ago. I tidied the place, then laid on top of the bed where I slept until 5 that afternoon. I felt weak.

Once awake, I swam in the pool in the hope of being refreshed. No, G, I'm not Kyle; I wear Speedos. After swimming as strongly as I could, I was drained. Bob's phone rang several times before it was finally answered. His breathing was heavy, so I assumed he was involved in a steamy sex session. "Hey, is it cool?" I asked.

"Can't speak now."

Hahahaha! He breathed so hard he couldn't speak properly. He sounded like an asthmatic. "I won't put the phone down until you tell me."

"Shhhh! He's HOT! Aaagggghhhhh!" The phone fell silent for about two minutes, but I heard telltale noises in the background. "That was bad timing," he complained upon his return. "You have no sense of right or wrong, Stuart."

"I need some weed."

"I'll swap you for the crack in your closet."

"No. Not yet. I'm not ready."

After a relatively good night's sleep, and only one nightmare, I wandered into the kitchen where my mom fixed breakfast for my dad. I hugged her. "That's for making

breakfast for me too," I explained. So she did: bacon, eggs, tomato and mushrooms. Mmmmm!

On the patio overlooking the pool, I ate, still clad only in boxers. My dad, unimpressed, gave me the hairy eyeball. I ignored him as he did me.

In my room, I studied my reflection in the mirror and saw an image that resembled a refugee from a concentration camp. I'd lost much weight, and had bruises all over. My face was a wreck, and I noted a large bruise on my ribs. I had no idea of the cause. Then I saw scratches on my back. Another mystery. There was also a bruise on my ass, and, no, I couldn't fathom that either. For the first time, I realized the extent to which I'd deteriorated. It was no surprise as to why everyone gave me such a wide berth.

I popped some Bs and Cs, then stuffed around in the gym. I phoned Fremantle but Brett but was out. Fingers answered. He didn't speak for long because his girlfriend was there. Hahahahaha! But he managed to whisper that he was madly in love with me, and asked when I would next visit Fremantle. Yadda, yadda, yadda. He really is so damn cool, though.

Phoned Melanie. "Don't put the phone down! I'm just saying hello." I heard a voice in the background. "Who's there?"

"Graham."

"What, like just visiting?"

"It's a long story, Stuart. And I'm not in the mood to get into that with you right now."

"Hahahahaha! You and he going out together now?"

"It's got fuck all to do with you, Stuart."

"Chill, babes. Does he know you're talking to me?"

"I'm sure he does," she giggled.

"What's so funny, Melanie?"

"It's nothing. Look, I gotta go."

"Can I call you again sometime? My situation is improving."

"So I hear."

"Do you believe everything Graham told you about me?"

"That you beat up a kid on the beach half your size? Who's gonna believe that?"

"Did he tell you the whole story?"

"Bye."

Phoned Bob to ask about my stash. He immediately recognized my abruptness and understood I was in no mood to play games. He asked me to meet him outside, with the cash ready. He knew I was broke, so I borrowed some from my dad's wallet. Borrowed, G. I'll replace it when I get the cash, so don't stress.

It was good stuff. Rolled a big one and smoked it by the pool. Made my head spin because it had been a while.

Melanie and Graham? There's a combo made in hell. So why was I jealous all of a sudden? Jealous of Graham getting the girl, and jealous of the girl getting her hands on the little hunk. He was probably screwing her lights out.

Hey, Kyle, what do you think of that, huh? Do you see the smoke coming out of my ears? Well, fuck you! Maybe I should introduce Graham

to Bob and get him into some bondage. Do I sound mad, G? Because I try to set things right, I get this little gnome who goes out of his way to screw every step I take. I can picture him and Melanie talking the greatest load of crap about me, and getting their jollies from it.

So where did all this shit start? It can't be due to that one time he was trashed at my house. No way. It's not like I raped him. He had a thing for me when he first met me. Oh, sorry, G. I keep forgetting that Graham is a hero too. Him and Brett. I bow before the heroes of this world. Maybe I should join their fan club.

By the way, you haven't written lately, G. Are you ignoring me? Am I too gross for you to handle?

I was such a good little nerd in school today. Bob wants his crack back, or payment. I told him he could rent me for the night. He's not getting it back.

(I was wrong about G. His mail wasn't getting through for some reason so he forwarded his most recent. I wrote to let him know I received it).

As to Graham, don't hold your breath, G. I'm beginning to regret ever meeting Kyle, not because he was Kyle, hell, I loved him more than I dare say. It's because of what I have now; Graham and Kyle's bitch girlfriend Melanie. The only genuine person in this whole fucking plot is Brett.

By the way, G, I don't want you suggesting that I meet up with some friend of yours in Byron. It's like Mr. T said, I live in a dingy world

of fucked-up nothing right now. I'm fighting for air, and I need to get out of this shit by myself.

Next day: G'day, G. Sleeping right through now. Supper tomorrow night at Kyle's. I owe his folks, especially after speaking to Mr. T in the surf. He was pretty cool towards me. Bob and I will skip school Friday. He accepted my offer to pay him my way, and asked if I was prepared to 'do anything he liked' with me. Can't be worse than whatever else that's happened to me, and everyone wanting fuckall to do with me.

I phoned Melanie again last night, just to speak—a bit of friendly chit chat. But the convo turned sour and I cussed and became hysterical. She held the phone away from her ear, then asked if I was quite finished. She summed up pretty much everything about me, a waste of human flesh. She couldn't give a damn if I OD'd. Another hero fan. I'm thinking what's the use of everything at the moment? At least the coke I took previously kept me sane.

At the beach yesterday, all the grommet bastards were in the surf. I returned home. That is soooooo unfucking-cool. I no longer think I love Graham. It's a lust thing. To hell with the heroes. I'm in such a fucked up aggressive mood. If anyone at school gives me lip, I'll knock his head off his shoulders.

You need me, G? You want me to live up to your expectations? Thanks for the pressure. Truth? I bought some H and a couple of lines of coke direct from the dealers. Bob would never sell it to me. Don't ask how I

paid for it. Plan? The plan was to shoot myself up with so much shit and sleep—just sleep—and the pain and hurt would go away. So why don't I do it right now? I owe Kyle. I owe him for giving me his love and nothing else. He didn't spend his money on me, he spent his emotions on me. And now you're doing the same fucking thing. What am I supposed to do with you, huh? As much as I piss on your battery you come back for more!

How long will I write you? I don't know. When I exhaust my will to write and no longer feel the need to confide in anyone, I'll take a break. You'll know when that happens. Don't go all paranoid on me. When the time comes that I've absolutely had enough, I'll let you know that too—not because I want to cause you pain, but to make you understand. You don't know me, G. You try to outguess me and predict my path ahead. What Melanie said is true. What did Kyle see in me? Fuck knows. I've searched.

Tomorrow night will be painful; seeing Kyle's room again—trying to live up to a responsibility I can't handle. I didn't want the job, remember! Melanie and Graham are doing their own thing now, whatever that is.

Do you have any idea how hard this is, G? It's a copout, right? Not quite what you expected, I reckon. There's grease on the ladder that leads to the top of the pedestal, G. Sorry.

Smile, G. I haven't slit my wrists yet.

G'day, Stuart,

I hope Mr. T says or does something to change your current

attitude. Maybe you prefer your own dad, he doesn't expect anything of you.

You did amazing things in Fremantle. You won both Fingers' and Brett's hearts and respect. You returned home and continued to do amazing things. And now you're telling me that the price you're willing to pay for H and crack is humiliation from Bob?

I believe the good in you can prevail if you keep trying, if you summon the will to win. Read the chapters about your trip to Fremantle. The proof of your ability to make the necessary changes is right there, staring you in the face.

You're angry, and I don't blame you. I'd be angry too if I woke in my own puke and mess. You're not angry at me, Stuart, you're angry at yourself, and you're taking it out on everyone else. That anger will be returned. Not from me, though, I'm old enough to understand that anger is a waste of time and energy, and is pointless. I'm not angry at you.

You've all but told me to piss off, to get out of your life. If that's what you want, I accept it. Until then, or if you manage to convince me that you're willing to allow evil to take control of your life, I'll hang in there. And I hope Kyle does the same for all our sakes.

So, you catch me with these mails before school? So the G battery is well and truly pissed? Cool. I wondered when that would happen. Didn't think it was possible to make you mad. Here's the deal. If you stop connecting with me, I will be off this fucking planet in a jizz shot.

Right now, there's nobody else I can talk to. And if you can't handle what I'm dealing with here, you can fuck off.

I'm sorry for the way I feel. I can't change that. But I'm telling you this, if you split, then that's the last link with Kyle I have to keep me going. Don't feel guilty about anything, G, you kept me going this far. I knew what was waiting for me when I returned from Fremantle. I got off lightly, and I don't think it's the end of it yet.

I'll be at Kyle's tonight to see if there's anything left for me, G. If you believe I'm on the road to nowhere, that confirms everything I've written. Tell me, if you want to drop my story, then fuck off. My fingers have been glued to this keyboard, hoping for something, anything inside my soul, to keep me going.

I'm late for school now because I just read the whole Fremantle story. You did a good job. Brought back memories of Fingers and what a cool time we had. Oh, fuck, let me go to school. It's not up to me, G. Sorry I'm so fucked up right now, and if you can't handle it, I'll understand. No one else can handle me either.

Green Room II
Chapter 15

After emailing G, I was overwhelmed by guilt and misery in the knowledge that I'd cut my only remaining ties with sanity and hope.

Surprise! G'day, Stuart!

So you love me! Woohoo! I am stoked! I feel like you and Kyle did when you made up after a fight. Hey, you got a funny way of telling me how much I mean to you, but that's okay. I can read between the lines. You didn't even say hello or goodbye; you must have been mad as hell. But for all the right reasons.

You need me? Do you have any idea what that means to me? Sure I tested you in my last email, but you also tested me. I took a stand, not to mention a risk. But it worked.

Anyway, mate, you're the surfer god and I'm the fossil, but we're equals. You have your qualities and I have mine, just like it was with Kyle and me.

I'm delighted you got mad at me. You could have walked away, and I worried that you would. But I needed to take a stand, together with what that stand involved. Mind you, I'm not happy with your latest drug purchase. I don't approve of the way you cave in under pressure. I don't like your tantrums or attitude when depressed. However, I do my best to empathize with your predicament.

When I'm mad at you, I remember the things Kyle said about you, the things Brett said about you once he cooled down, the things Fingers said about you. I remember how incredibly

brave you've been. But your moods are like a swinging pendulum.

I'm just about to serve my favorite curry: a wonderful blend of flavors that reminds me of you. Together, the ingredients are awesome, but some are bitter by themselves.

Hey, Stuart, I'm no different. I need to be needed too. I'm chuffed that we need each other. However, I must admit I'm pretty strong. I've survived many past dramas and I'll survive a few more. But existing from day to day is not my ideal. I want more. I want somebody on a pedestal. Okay, the ladder is greased but I can wait.

The answers to your problems are not simple. No way. You've grabbed at straws almost all of your young life. There's much confusion about who you are: the blond surfer god or the tragic druggie. What a contrast.

Me? Confirm that you're on the road to ruin? Nope, I won't do that because I know that's what you expect me to do. I chose my words very carefully when I last wrote you. Confirmation of your own self image is what you seek. You were successful in turning Melanie and Graham against you. Let me say this: if you can turn the wheel one way, you can turn it the other. When Brett first met Kyle, he thought he was a lunatic, and the feeling was mutual. What does Brett think now? "I loved him more than anyone in the whole world, and still do." When Brett's pendulum swung, it stayed swung. I believe the same can happen in the case of Melanie and Graham.

"Here's the deal," you said in your email. Well, here's my deal. As long as I believe you're trying, and being fair dinkum, you and I will remain joined at the hip. I expect honesty, and I won't go to pieces if you occasionally stumble. That's not a license to be weak, by the way.

I am a strong person, but my strength alone is not sufficient. I don't want to be the only palm tree in a hurricane. I need to draw strength from you, like I did from Kyle. And I want you to draw strength from me.

Thanks for being mad at me. Thanks for calling me every name under the sun. And thanks for making it clear that you need me. And so, my tall handsome mate with the smile that Kyle adored, let's work together for a common purpose: to make you happy. Your smiles will be my smiles, just as your tears will be mine also. However, I need to draw the line somewhere, and you know where that line is.

As I write this, you're probably dining with the Ts. You've probably seen Kyle's room, and been flooded with countless memories. Lucky you. I wish.

G'day, G,

This is not a bonus mail. I just need to write. Yesterday, after I sent that last mail, I became depressed like never before. I battled to sleep, thinking about... thinking about everything; my life, Kyle, Brett, Melanie, Graham, you... everything.

I wasn't sure what best course of action to take; I entertained the idea of shooting up everything I

could lay my hands on. I reckoned that would be easier because I'd be unconscious when the pain and paranoia hit, and just sleep my way through. Thought about dying, and the possibility of meeting Kyle again. Or is that all just bullshit?

This morning, I received your mail. You know how I feel about it because I replied right away. And even got another from you this afternoon.

My intention was not to get into H. It was to get off the planet. The depression is the hardest to take. I sit and think about Kyle and Graham and dissolve into tears.

Your comment about my dad not expecting anything from me was so low, it hurt bad. I was so pissed off, I smashed the full length mirror on my bedroom wall. No one here bothered to check: "Oh, it's Stuart again on another trip." But I'm a backup person; I got another full length mirror on my closet door. Hahahaha!

Yep, my comment about your dad was meant to hit you right between the eyes, Stuart, but not to smash your mirror. Sometimes, pussy-footing around gets you nowhere. I knew that note was risky but you were at a stage where I felt I had no choice.

Bob tomorrow? Blame curiosity. I'm not selling my body to him for H. He would never sell that stuff to me, knowing my current mood. It's weird, but you'd actually like him, G ... not for the business he's in, but for who he is.

I try hard to dismiss Graham from my mind. There's a pic of him on my notice board with pins in it.

Maybe he'll suffer headaches or something. Maybe I do deserve his anger but I didn't ask for those grommet morons to call me 'acid head' on the phone, or to be beaten to a pulp by the older brother. They asked for that. If anything, the whole bunch deserve their asses kicked.

No, I haven't been to the Ts yet. That's this evening. I'm incredibly nervous, and tempted to phone Mr. T with some lame excuse. But I need to be near Kyle again, just to feel his presence.

I ironed my chinos and shirt about a hundred times. Doing a Brett impersonation, hahahaha! It's just that I can't handle anyone around me right now. So I did the ironing myself, and polished my leathers. Check the halo.

It would be easy for you and me to stop the emailing right now, and go our separate ways. But right now, this minute, I'm just so fucking lonely.

I'm sorry for what I said to you. You're the last person who deserves that kinda shit from a screwed teenager. Thumbs up for me tonight, G. I'm shitting myself.

Next day: A lot happened during the past 24 hours. Late yesterday afternoon, I showered and dressed in my beige chinos, which fit snug and show off my butt. I wore a dark blue, short sleeve, button up shirt. I sprayed Blue Stratos under my arms and on my chest and stomach. Yes, hahaha, before I put on the shirt. I also wore my only pair of black leather shoes and checked that my hair was tidy. The bruise on my cheek is fading, and the cut is healing.

Looked pretty damn snazz if I do say so myself.

I was so nervous you won't believe it. I took a box of chocolates I bought, and rocked up to the T's front door. Mr. T answered the knock, and I saw that he was okay impressed.

"G'day Stuart," he smiled as he shook my hand. "Come on in, Mrs. T is in the kitchen."

Besides my nervousness, my heart was incredibly heavy. The house hadn't changed, it was still Kyle's special place. Mrs. T beamed when she saw me. I gave her the chocolates and got a peck on the cheek in return. "Did you think we were having a formal dinner, Stuart? You look so smart!"

I followed Kyle's dad through to the den where a million memories instantly flooded my mind; memories of the many happy times that Kyle and I shared in this room filled with so much history. One of the first things I noticed was a range of photographs of Kyle on the TV cabinet. One was an enlargement of him in Speedos, exiting the water at night. I know you have that pic, G, the one of his smiling face and laughing eyes.

As a result of my valiant effort to restrain the tears, my throat became sore. Luckily, Mr. T launched immediately into conversation, and wanted to know how I was doing at school and surfing. I lied about visiting the surf again—I said I had. Then he asked about school sport. The convo was cool and relaxed. He noticed my hands shaking like I needed a stiff drink, so he enquired about the kind of shit I was

on. "I haven't taken anything for quite a while." He probably figured I was still undergoing serious withdrawals.

Mrs. T joined us and the convo got around to Brett and my trip to Fremantle. She asked about his welfare and stuff about the yacht. Brett was like a son to the Ts as well.

Supper was roast lamb with baked mixed veg and potatoes. Delicious! Kyle always praised his mom's cooking, and he was right.

"So, why haven't we seen you lately?" she asked.

It was a question I couldn't—or wasn't prepared to—answer right then. Instead, I made some of the lamest excuses of my life. I sensed that Mr. T understood, though. He knew I invented all that crap as I went along. Meanwhile, I wondered if Mrs. T was giving me the eye like she did Brett. Hahaha! She's a good-looking woman, a fact Kyle was aware and proud of.

His folks made me feel completely at home. That's their traditional style, always treating friends like family.

After supper, Mr. T invited me to visit Kyle's room if I wanted. Mrs. T stacked dishes as I left the kitchen and walked down the hall which led to Kyle's pad. I switched on the light and saw that everything remained as Kyle last saw it the night he was killed. His room had obviously been kept clean, but every item was in its regular place. Right away, my eyes filled with stinging tears ... the books and magazines, the poster of Endless Summer. His wetsuit

hung next to his surfboard. I ran my fingers over the smooth glass of the board and felt the last coating of wax. Tears streamed freely down my face, and my chest heaved. "Damn you, Kyle!" I pictured that board flying through the surf with Kyle's feet shuffling as he changed tactics or direction—his outstretched hand scraping the inside of a wave as he turned sharply to cut back or line up—his fists stabbing the air with absolute delight as he raved about a wicked ride.

There's a picture stuck to his closet door that he got from you, G. It's a pic of a Kyle look-alike taken from the air, probably a chopper. Underneath, the caption reads 'Kyle Hero'.

"It's almost like you can smell him, huh?"

I recognized the voice right away and turned to face Graham, who wore brown cargo shorts that hung below his knees, and a red fleecy top. I was too choked to speak. "It's like he's here but invisible," he continued. "He'd dig it to see you here right now, Stuart. I know that for a fact."

I broke down completely and sobbed, my arms hung like dead weights at my sides. I was unable to stop the flow of tears as Graham approached me from behind. "Hey, I'm sorry," he said softly.

I turned to face him again and noted his watery eyes. I knew he wanted to hug me, so I took the initiative, wrapped him in my arms and hugged him long and hard. Somewhere and somehow through the tears I managed to say how much I

loved him and missed him. I don't know how long we stood there in each other's embrace, but eventually the tears abated and we drew apart. For a moment or two, the situation was uncomfortable. Neither of us knew what to say. Then he spoke first.

"I didn't realize your situation was so uncool. I didn't know you tried so hard to quit the drugs. I don't think Kyle would dig how I treated you. I'm not going with Melanie. That was just another way to get under your skin. It was soooooo not good."

Kyle's folks appeared at the doorway to announce drinks and dessert by the pool. I dried my tears as best I could, as did Graham. Then, for no apparent reason other than immense relief, he cracked up laughing, and I followed suit.

The remainder of the evening was fantastic, and I managed to relax a lot more. We spoke of so many things, for the most part, I can't remember it all. The ambience was surreal and a haze. A Kyle haze. But it was magic, as if he were there with us.

When I had to leave, Graham did too, which gave us an opportunity to speak privately on the street. "I'm sorry for what I did, Stuart. I was a right jerk."

"Do you realize how happy I am now?"

"Fucking happy?"

"Fuck you, grommet. You know already how much I've missed you, and how I hated being unable to tell you what was happening to me. I so badly wanted to see you beaten up and hurt."

"Mr. T is a snitch; he told me all about it, at least what he knew." Graham raised his arms and flexed his biceps, which formed two solid balls. "Dunno about beating me up, though. I do boxing training at school."

"Wanna hit the surf sometime?"

"Gotta sort things out with the guys first. Hope you can handle that."

"Cool," I responded, despite my heart sinking. "I'd like us to be mates again."

"I'd like that too."

"How did you know I was at Kyle's?"

"Mr. T told me you were coming. Wanted me to be there for supper but I wasn't sure about us being friends again."

"So why did you come over?"

"Hey! You were in my room! I saw the light come on while I did my homework." Graham turned to ponder the house once more, then he offered to walk me a ways. It was as though Kyle's voice told his li'l bro to go easy on me.

When we arrived at the end of the road, Graham gave me a quick hug. I carried on home while he stood and watched me for a minute or two. Then he waved before heading back to his house. I hoped he felt as elated as I did.

Green Room II
Chapter 16

I was on a major high when I arrived home. Got undressed and hung my chinos in the closet. I take good care of those because they fit so damn well. Then I noticed my 'stuff' on the shelf; the strap, the needle and other bits and pieces, just as they were before I left for Kyle's. The battle would intensify even more, I reckoned.

I phoned Bob to check about tomorrow's appointment. He asked if I wanted to chicken out, and said a third guy would be there, his new boyfriend. After that, I slept like a baby.

Bob collected me early Friday morning and we drove straight to his place. I won't tell you what happened there, G. You wouldn't dig it, especially the fact that I enjoyed it, maybe more than I should have.

So where to now? First off, start over with Graham. He's changed too, grown up a bit. The drugs are still in the closet in case you wondered if I returned them to Bob. I won't use it now, but you must understand why it needs to stay there, at least for the moment. Will I use it sometime? I can't answer that. The H? After the trip I experienced visiting Kyle's folks, I don't think I could handle the downers again. But... I can't answer what you're thinking right now, G. I hope you appreciate how hard this is.

Graham's comment that he needed to clear things with his mates before he's prepared to hang with me again? I could have lost my rag when I heard

that, but I didn't. You pissed me off badly with that email about my dad, G. I want you to know that.

Before my visit to Kyle's last night, and seeing Graham again, I didn't have a lot to live for. But, deep down, I had the correspondence from you and a means to offload my feelings. It was like being on a psycho's couch, able to say anything I wanted. But those psychos know fuck all. I saw one when I was 13. My folks caught me with coke and figured this old shrink could sort me out. He was ancient, and wore glasses. I was terrified, and didn't resist while he stroked me into a hardon. He tried to convince me I didn't have a problem. I jizzed in my pants, and was embarrassed while he got off on my heavy breathing. Back home, I washed my own briefs and pants before my mom found them.

I never told my folks because they would not have believed me. The worst was I often wondered if I enjoyed it. Anyway, I never saw that lamo fuck again.

So what's that, G? Seeing Kyle's folks and Graham: is that the first rung on the hero ladder? I wish I could tell you I'll be fine, and that everything is okay, and that I'll be a right saint. I'd be liar if I did that. I've never asked anyone for much, but right now... I dunno. You got me this far, you and Kyle. I'm no hero, but it would be cool to be just a little decent.

A letter from Spencer to G: *How ya doin'? I just read, then re-read, the latest chapters of the Stuart story. This love/hate syndrome you describe is exactly what I went*

through with my bud Willie during his rehab group counseling sessions. He would say—no, scream is more like it—'I HATE YOU MOTHER FUCKER! GET OUT OF MY LIFE!' At the end of the session he would hug me and tell me how much he loved me. All the group participants went through the same stuff. It was an emotional rollercoaster for sure. I came so close to quitting the sessions sometimes. Maybe I liked the abuse. Ha! Actually, I did get off by screaming back at him the same shit. One time another bud attended the session with me, and Willie screamed at both of us: 'YOU TWO GOT EACH OTHER TO FUCK AND I GOT NOBODY WHO EVEN CARES!' We were mortified as you can well imagine, in a room full of strangers, including parents. My bud answered calmly, "That's because no one likes you," and walked out. Meanwhile, I just wanted to die. My bud never went back even after Willie asked because he wanted to apologize.

I can see the parallels between Willie and what Stuart is suffering right now ... uncaring parents, no buds that really care. Ya know, if Stuart did attend rehab, those group sessions are mandatory, and who could Stuart ask to accompany him? Who would put up with all the sexuality and other shit? Stuart needs to come to terms with himself or he ain't ever gonna get better. "Hey, I'm gay, okay?"

So hang in there, G. You're making a big difference to the dude's life and he's got nobody else now. That's what my dad said when I wanted to quit Willie's sessions. If I'd known how things would turn out in

the end between Willie and me, as close buds, I would never have considered quitting. You got an advantage with email cuz you can choose your words. Face to face, you sorta fly off the handle at times.

Friday night, before clubbing, I phoned Melanie to ask her out.

"Leave Graham alone, Stuart."

"What's your problem, Melanie?"

"You're 18 and he's 14, that's the problem."

"Why is that suddenly an issue? Why wasn't it an issue with Kyle?"

"Because you're an evil son of a bitch, and will never be like Kyle."

"Are you going to hate me forever?"

"And longer."

"Cheers, Melanie."

"If you touch him ... any which way ... if I learn he even had so much as his shirt off in front of you, I'll get money and pay Brett's airfare to Byron."

"And what then, Melanie?"

"You know what Brett will do."

I slammed down the phone, literally shaking with rage. Then I went clubbing. Big bro was there but I don't think he saw me. I kept a low profile.

I got home about 1am, sat by the pool and smoked a joint. I spoke to you and Kyle. I guess you must've heard me. I told Kyle about all the shit you give me. Hahaha! He told me to watch out for the devious old fossil.

Got naked and checked my battered reflection in the mirror, and realized I needed to put everything back together. I've lost

so much weight! The bruises are healing, though. My eyes are sunken, with dark rings around them.

I meant what I said, G, about ceasing to write at some stage, especially if I'm busy surfing and hanging with Graham. That's if Melanie butts out. She knows I'll be careful with her so I don't upset the grommet.

I phoned a friend about 2am and spent the night with her. When I got home, I slept most of the day. Late that evening I took a walk down to the beach to do some thinking, and to remember Kyle.

Sunday I spent locked in my room, studying school work, then went for a late surf. Found an uncrowded spot on the backline and chilled out. No word from Graham so maybe Melanie chewed his ear or something. I don't know.

So, another week ... can't be any worse than the last. And there you have it, G. Boring, boring, boring.

So you had a boring weekend? Obviously not from the lack of activity, just the lack of mental stimulation. Anyway, it's normal for teens to be easily bored, which explains their susceptibility to drugs, music that further deafens a deaf man, and clothes that make a 'statement'. Teens are impatient. They want to live life to the full. They can't see themselves at 25 or 30. Everything needs to happen NOW. Sooner or later, you'll appreciate that brick walls are built with one brick at a time.

Monday, I trained with Bob at his place. He trains three times a week. It's better to train with him

than try to motivate myself alone at home. He has more gym equipment anyway, and a better kit. Besides, he gave me a BJ while I worked the lat machine. Hahaha! And he forbid me to let go of the handles.

Sean phoned me at home just to annoy me. "You're a shit stirrer, Sean, why don't you piss off."

"Come and make me, or are you shitters for Joe's brother?"

"What's your problem, huh?"

"No problem, just making convo. Thought you might like someone to speak to because, the word is, all your friends have ducked. Need boxing lessons or something?" he laughed. "Maybe Graham can train you. He hammered a guy good and solid at school the other day."

"When?"

"About a week back. Graham is just soooo cool."

"Yeah? And big bro called me a bully?"

"Hey, this guy's a senior!" More laughing. "How ace is that? Joe should've asked Graham to take you instead of his big bro. That would be solid!"

"When you guys are ready, you can come get me anytime."

"I'll make sure Graham gets your message."

"You know what I meant. You're chicken shit."

"I'm shaking in my boots. Oooooo!"

"See ya, Sean."

"No worries. See you on the tarmac." More laughing.

So what do you think, G? I thought Graham would have phoned me after our meeting at Kyle's. I

picture him getting some screwed message from Sean, and not bothering to check its authenticity with me. Maybe Melanie is in on the conspiracy as well.

My boxing bag and kit should arrive soon. I expect it to cause a total freakout with my dad, but I want to train. Kyle changed a lot when he boxed regularly with Brett. Besides letting off steam, his fitness improved.

On Tuesday I woke and promised myself a smoke-free day. But I lit a joint anyway and smoked by the pool. I thought about Kyle and the trip we took to the Gold Coast for the surfing comp. That is definitely one of the most awesome memories I have of him. Just the two of us hitched there and back. Two hunky teen surfers walking along the side of the road with just our backpacks and boards. We were frustrated by trying to hitch a ride while carrying our sticks. You know what Kyle was like. We were on a long stretch of road coming into Murwillumbah and could not get a ride. Kyle took off his shorts and scants, and dared me to do likewise. We walked like that for about 5 kilometers in the dark. It must have been the night air that caused our woodies to rise.

The first car to approach, pulled over. It must have been the funniest sight; the two of us struggling to get our shorts back on before the driver backed up. We left our briefs in our backpacks. The driver was a hoot, though. "I thought you guys had mini shorts on. Then I caught sight of your dicks as I drove past. I couldn't believe it!"

Hahahaha! So he stopped to offer us a ride, and laughed all the way to Byron.

Have a cool Valentine's, G. I know you'll be thinking of Kyle too.

What did Kyle see in you, Stuart? I think you're beginning to see it yourself.

Green Room II
Chapter 17

Today was an up day. Just after 6am, I visited the beach. Not much surf to speak of, but it had a nice glassy surface and a couple of swells that were okay-okay for a grommet learning to surf, that is. Maybe that's what I'd reverted to, hahahaha! Caught a small bitch swell for my first ride and fell on my ass because the damn thing had no power. Thank Christ no one else was there or I'd have felt like a right fool. At least I got to paddle around. If the swell was a little taller, with more power, it would have been a Kyle morning.

I know what you're saying about Graham, but I desperately need to see him. I'm thinking maybe Melanie is right about my motives. As to one of your readers asking about Kyle's accident, there was a two-liner in the paper about two people killed in a road accident, together with a number of other accident reports. Two lines, huh? That's almost as tragic as the crash itself.

Kyle's folks asked that rather than spend money on flowers and tributes, it be donated to animal and marine welfare groups. That's what we all did, even if it was just a few bucks. And that's what Kyle would want.

That Gold Coast trip I did with Kyle—the one he wrote about in a diary on floppy disk—I helped write it, and I remember how acid he was when the disk became corrupted. I'll try to put the pieces together one day, and write what I can recall.

That was the funniest thing I remembered, though—the two of us hitching a ride with our boners stabbing the night air.

The juice tree? Hahahaha! It's still there. I look at it differently now—our seed is on that tree, together forever. The Kyle tree. It's not a big tree or even pretty, but it's one to remember forever. Kyle was like that, even worse if he was trashed. He had us walk down the white center line of the road one night, with our boxers down around our ankles. You're right. All of us who knew Kyle are the luckiest of people.

It's happening, G. It's a touch of Kyle. I got this feeling that maybe, just maybe, I'll quit the drugs this time.

A lot of the peeps at school got Valentine's stuff today. It was cool to watch their faces as they tried to guess who might have sent the cards. Bob received a delivery of red roses in class. He quizzed me later, and I told him to get knotted. Hahahaha! A lot of girls admire him, and I don't blame them.

My Valentine's gift? Those two photos you sent of the Kyle wine glasses. I love that blue dolphin in the stem. That's Kyle now, diving out to sea. They're just wicked. Thanks.

I guess you know Kyle would be screaming HAPPY VALENTINE'S to you. I hope you had a good one, and enjoyed the graphic I sent you. I thought of Kyle a lot. I can almost feel his skin again. He had this thing where he ran his fingers over you, and touched those fine hairs you can't

see. You felt the electricity screaming through your body.

I got a call from my ex-girlfriend, whom I hadn't seen for ages. She asked if I had a nice Valentine's. "You could've made it better," I answered. She's dating a new guy now, but she thought of me and wanted to know how I was doing. How cool was that? Ours was the longest relationship I've had with a girl. She managed to sort me out quite a bit. Kyle reckoned she was good for me, but I didn't recognize that after he died. The girl couldn't handle my depressions and inability to deal with Kyle's death.

A few of the guys from school will hit the town tonight, so I think I will too. Meanwhile, I'll catch a few Zs—right after I check what's under my foreskin. Hahaha!

As it turned out, I didn't go clubbing last night. An old girlfriend called and invited me to a house party. Guess who rocks up to the party? Big bro and his girlfriend, with Sean and his girl in tow.

It was a rave. I ignored the others and danced with my girl, and got a little mellow from a J and booze. Everyone did the same, and it was a really mellow evening.

After midnight big bro approached me. "I hear you're looking for me, Stuart." By then he was pretty much sauced, with the same aggro attitude he had at the beach when he flattened me. I knew I was in for another hiding. My other problem was that I'd also had quite a few drinks. Typically, everyone sensed a fight was brewing, and shifted us

from the house into the garden. Then the crowd gathered around like bees to honey.

"I don't know where you heard that," I said.

"I hear from my bro that you're ready to fuck me up," he snarled as he shoved me.

Ah, yes, I remembered my phone convo with Sean. Meanwhile, my chick tugged at my shirt, trying to get me to back off, while big bro's girl did likewise. "It's cool if you want to believe that fuckhead Sean, but he's talking shit."

"Well, now's a cool time to carry out your threat, and you'll have witnesses to prove it."

"It's a cool party. Let's not spoil it, huh?" I reasoned. My chick still tugged furiously at my shirt but big bro's girl gave up and sulked in a corner of the garden.

The moron flathanded me. "Nah, let's rumble—just to liven up the party."

My shirt was still stretched to hell, so I turned to ask my chick to let go. I hoped to catch big bro off guard, but as I began to face him, I walked right into his fist and saw stars. Blood flew everywhere, and gave the impression he bust my nose. I was too slow. His second punch, to the gut, sent me to sleep.

I was out for maybe a minute, and woke to see a bunch of faces peering down at me. Big bro had returned to the house where he partied and laughed with his mates. My chick insisted I clean up in the bathroom, but I chose instead to split back to her house.

Yeah, G, I know it was a chickenshit move but it was the second time that fucker climbed into me, and it wasn't like a bee sting either. That guy packed a helluva whallop. My nose burst a blood vessel which I managed to fix. But my solar plexus was extremely painful. Got my reward, though. All I needed to do at the chick's house was lay on my back.

I remember how Graham complained to Kyle about big bro, and how he intimidated the juniors to leave the school pool in order to have it all to himself. He's under the impression that his shit doesn't stink. He's the fool, not you. And his mates are even more foolish for acting as sycophants, gleeful in their own stupidity and ignorance. It's only a matter of time before big bro gets his come-uppance. And when he goes down, his sycophants will find a new ass to lick. Big bro is destined to never know the kind of love and friendship you had with Kyle. Big bro is a loser. I know that doesn't solve your problem, Stuart, but at least it puts it in perspective.

Saturday morning, following the pummeling by big bro, I felt pretty tender, so the chick and I stayed in bed until about 11. Then I gave her a special goodbye bonk for taking care of me. At home, I got a message from the housekeeper that Graham called three times already. I returned the call right away.

"I heard from Joe that you picked a fight with big bro and you got hammered again."

"I didn't start the fight, Graham."

"Beat you bad?"

"I'll live. What's up?"

"Nothin'. I just wanted to check if you were okay. Joe pissed me off with his whole attitude, bragging about his bro and how you got nailed. Big bro can be a real prick sometimes."

"Are we gonna connect sometime?"

"It's hard right now."

"Because of your mates?"

"Kinda. They don't dig you, and it's a pain to listen to their crap while I say nothing in your defense."

"Thanks a stack."

"I'm just being honest."

"I'd like us to get together sometime, just for a chat or a burger."

"How's it going with the drugs thing?"

"Right now I'm clean. I still hang out for something—smoke a joint now and then."

"Me too." He paused a moment, then: "Hey! There's a school swim comp soon. Why don't you rock over and cheer for me?"

"Hahahaha! Sounds pretty wild. Sure you want me to be there?"

"Put a sack over your head so nobody recognizes you. Big bro will be there, so maybe you don't wanna cheer for me."

"Let me know when. I'll keep low—maybe check out the scene through the legs from under the bleachers."

"Now you're sounding like Stuart," he giggled.

"Hey, I just wanna check out my hot mate in his Speedos. Any chance for a chat?"

"I'll make a plan."

I spent most of Saturday tidying my room. How boring! That night I phoned a friend and we hung out at his place where we downed a few beers, listened to music and played computer games.

Sunday morning was cold, and a strong SE wind turned the surf to mush. I sat on the beach not expecting Graham to show, especially in these lousy conditions. But he did—complete with wet suit and board! Hahahaha! He said he wondered if I'd be here.

"I thought the same about you, Graham."

"This is really not so cool," he complained as he studied the chop, then dropped his board and sat on the sand beside me.

"It's cool that you showed," I commented.

"No worries. I thought maybe we could still paddle around, but now I dunno. It's crap out there."

"You still boxing at school?"

"Not actually boxing, just training with the team. Those guys get hit in the face too much, and I'm way too pretty to get my face damaged." His wicked humor cracked us both.

"I bought a boxing bag and gloves. Thought maybe you could give me a hand at home—show me a few techniques—also just for training."

"When?"

"Whenever. You tell me."

"Maybe after a school a couple of afternoons."

"Hey, when you saw me in my room covered in puke and shit, you must've freaked. I'm sorry."

"I don't really wanna talk about that."

"It's a long story, mate, and one I need to tell you. I need you to know what happened."

Graham listened intently to everything I told him, from the time I arrived back from Fremantle to the present. You said, G, that I should confide in Graham when I felt the time was appropriate, and that morning on the beach seemed appropriate. If the surf had been good, we would be out there catching barrels. So this was the perfect situation for me to open up; just the two of us sitting on the beach with nothing better to do. Besides, I didn't want him to return home too quickly. Telling my story was one way to keep him there, at least for a while. I didn't mention the stuff that was still in my closet, though. That would freak him.

While I spoke, I couldn't resist ogling his perfect body. It was as if the wet suit had been poured over him and molded like a second skin to his awesomely defined shoulders and chest.

"Why didn't you tell me all this in the beginning?" he asked when I finished.

"You were already pissed off with me."

"But all that time you allowed us to believe you were still involved with the drug scene. Did Kyle know you sold stuff?"

"You think he would have hung with me if he did?"

"Reckon not."

Graham quizzed me for a long time about the kinds of drugs I used

and sold, who was buying, and how much money I made. It was like the 'everything you wanted to know but were afraid to ask' sort of thing. We sat for ages, staring at the slop. Glaring is probably a better word. To surfers, that slop is an insult. Eventually, we collected our sticks and headed home.

Green Room II
Chapter 18

My invitation to Graham to rock over to my house was declined. "I need time to think about a lotta things, like what you told me about the drugs and stuff, and the shit you went through. I need to think about what a total toss I was, misjudging you the way I did. And I need to think about you and me."

"I won't lie to you, Graham. Someone—make that Melanie—already said you're too young to be my friend. But I love you so much. You're all I think about apart from Kyle. Yes, I do want you, but I'm happy just to be near you, and to be your friend. I dunno what you'll think about this, mate, but right now, I need to know how you feel."

"I need to think about that too. I'm kinda scared."

"I'm sorry for what happened that night you were trashed."

"It's not that. I'm scared of becoming gay and people finding out. That's why I always wanted to be like Kyle. He had this scene where there was no gay or straight. We were just us. Hey, I'm not making sense, huh?"

"I know exactly what you're saying. I feel the same. It's cool if you just want to hang out with me, like surfing and whatever."

"I guess it's like eating an elephant, yeah? Just one bite at a time."

"Can I bite you already?"

Hahahaha! He fisted me right in the soft spot of my shoulder muscle and I almost dropped my board. I hoped to hear from him later that day

but didn't. At least he knows how I feel now. I was on a total high, and spent time in the home gym as well as the pool. How cool is that?

Monday I received mail from your readers. I never really thought of my dad having a problem. I thought he was just an incommunicative prick. Both my folks stay clear of my room, and don't ever come in to see what I'm doing or ask how my day was. When my mom is around the house, in the kitchen or somewhere, and I speak to her, she's cool. But my dad avoids me all the time.

About your dad, let he who is without sin cast the first stone. I think that your dad is convinced you hate his guts, and that there's no point in endeavoring to salvage the relationship. It's probably time for a heart to heart. When you feel the moment is appropriate, try something like: "Hey, dad, I want to love you and I want you to love me. I want you to be my dad and I want to be your son." The word 'want' is important because it's patently clear that there's an absence of love, at least on the surface. If he, for whatever reason, doesn't have the nerve to approach you with a white flag then it's up to you. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Give it a shot.

Another mail from some guy on Kyle's guest book said, 'Kyle, please reply, please be there!' I broke down and cried. I learn more about Kyle all the time; how he willingly helped young people his own age, and older, just by his words to them. He should still be here, G. So many people out

there need help, and he should still be helping them.

He is helping them, mate, through you and me, and through friends who email you and me. Make no mistake; Kyle is alive and well.

Late Monday, Graham visited my house. He phoned after school to ask if I wanted help with the boxing thing. He wore a loose-fitting white singlet (vest) and brown cargos. He smiled when I opened the door and that totally relaxed me because I worried about the vibe.

He didn't beat around the bush, so we got straight into boxing. I'd already hung the bag in the gym instead of the garage. Besides, the gym is fitted with mirrors hahahaha!

Graham was stoked to be first to hit the bag—well, second after me. It's still shiny and new. The grommet put on a pair of thin leather gloves and gave the bag a smack. Whoa! I'd hate to be on the wrong end of that fist! The entire supporting beam shook. And his arms! Aaagghhh!

He asked me to don gloves and hit the bag while he held it. Typically, I endeavored to hit the bag with all my might to impress the grommet but he simply absorbed the power as he stood behind it. It was a hot day. Soon, we perspired profusely.

"I can understand why big bro gets the better of you," he said. "You hit like a girl."

"Bullshit."

"You do!" he insisted, then burst into laughter, which was so cool to hear; that lilting sound boys make when their voice is not fully broken. He showed me how to position

my hands and feet, and how to use the power of my shoulder and body to add weight to the punch. I felt the difference right away, as sweat poured off my face.

When it was Graham's turn to knock the shine off the bag, I held it for him. He was in an up mood, and promised to return next day. "Hey, I'll do some sparring with you if you want."

My arms felt like lead as I watched him experiment with some of the gym equipment. But it was all over way too soon. He spent about 2 hours with me, which was great. And it seemed to me that he enjoyed his stay as well.

Next afternoon I got beaten up again! But who's complaining? Graham rocked up to my house right after school, still wearing his school tracksuit after swim training. He changed into shorts and a sleeveless vest in my room, then we hit the gym. "I'll take this slowly so I don't hurt you," he said matter-of-factly.

I was pretty sure he did want to hurt me, but he stuck by his promise and took it easy, showing me how to place my hands and feet properly. Then he asked me to hit him. Hit him? Yeah, right. My fist traveled only half the distance when he smacked me on the cheek. It rocked my head. In a flash, he stepped backwards so that he was out of my reach. Thank God he wore gloves! I tried to hit him again but his fist landed on my gut and sent me to my knees. "I thought this was supposed to be a training session to learn stuff, you little bastard."

"Yeah, well," he smiled as he danced teasingly around the room, "you're learning to get on your knees when I'm around."

For the next half hour, his fist kept connecting with my cheek or my stomach. One time I got so mad I asked, "How would you like it if I did the same to you?" He lifted his top and let it fall to the floor. SWOOOOOON! What a bod! Jeez, G, you'd be beside yourself if you saw him in real life.

"C'mon," he mocked. "Hit me." His arms remained loose at his sides while I rounded up a punch. I couldn't believe how his tightly compacted abs absorbed the punch as if it were a minor irritation. "Okay, now it's my turn. But you'll need to tighten that paunch. Take off your top."

I obeyed, and looked at my stomach. "What paunch?"

"That one," he said as his blurred fist connected.

His patience deserved credit, though. He spent ages teaching me to do things correctly. When we were done, I approached him from behind, wrapped my arms around him, and placed my hands on his solid pecs and fleshy nipples as he casually untied his gloves. But my hands shook and I lost control of them. Meanwhile, he said nothing, just carried on untying his glove laces. My hands descended to his smooth abs and I thanked him for the lesson.

"It's cool, but you're useless. It'll take some time before I can arrange a challenge between you and big bro."

"Don't you dare!"

I'm at the stage where I'm actually scared of big bro, G. He doesn't fuck around. Meanwhile, my hands found their way to the top of Graham's shorts.

"I gotta get home before my mom freaks," he explained as he turned to face me. "She doesn't know I'm here, and I got homework to do."

"Sorry. I shouldn't have gone that far."

"Why not? You're still Stuart, aren't you? But you're right, it scares me. And I don't know what to do about it."

"Thanks for coming here, I'm really chuffed."

"Hey, it's cool to beat you up for a change, rather than the other way around."

"Then you owe me a big hug, I reckon."

His arms tightened around me, and his hands patted my back as though he was encouraging me to stay fit and clean. Then he dressed and headed for the door.

THIS IS SO COOL, G!

Graham's still the little kid, but he's matured a great deal lately. He fools around a lot, but when he coaches me it's down to serious business, and I'm the one who feels like the kid, hahahaha!

He weighed himself on the gym scales and came in at 55kg (121 pounds) but he can lift me and carry me on his shoulders, and I weigh 74kg. He is soooo strong! He has huge hands and feet as well.

He's got elephant balls that make mine look like Peter Pan's. I know you say I should play it cool but it's a Catch 22. I want him now

before I lose him again, and I'm paranoid about losing him anyway before I get the chance to cement our friendship.

As to big bro, I'm shit scared of him and not too afraid to admit it. He hurt me twice already. Hey, G, thanks for the pic of you. That is just so damn neat.

I'm not reading the Stuart story yet. I did read the Fremantle bit and the first chapter after that, but I don't want to live through that shit again right now. I'm still borderline at the moment, so.....

That's the best news since you and Brett became friends in Fremantle. Woohoo! We're making real progress here, and I couldn't be happier for you. But we gotta tackle this paranoia thing before it gets outta hand.

We all suffer from paranoia just like we all suffer from jealousy. They sneak up on us and take over. The only way to deal with it is to understand it. Like me, you're a Virgo. According to the stars we're naturally analytical. My advice is to talk with Graham about your paranoia, about your fear of losing him because it happened before. Talk to him about it like you have to me. Let him reassure you but on no account pressure him. That's the worst thing you can do. He needs to feel relaxed. Like Brett said, you need to build trust again. Each time you're tempted to go too far think of the word TRUST. Have it in huge flashing neon letters in your mind. Actually, it's a good idea to talk to Graham about trust, and that your goal is to build a strong bond

between the two of you. He'll understand, and it'll empower him with a weapon if he feels you're getting a little too pushy. In other words, he won't be scared.

Talk, talk and talk some more. Allow him access to your heart and mind. Share your feelings and let him know how important he is to you. But don't sound possessive. Remember always that paranoia, jealousy and possessiveness are your enemies and should be treated as such.

Anyway, the fact that Graham volunteered to visit your house twice so far proves that he likes you and wants to be your mate. Actions speak louder than words. He probably lacks the words to express his feelings, so let the actions speak until he's comfortable to verbalize his feelings for you. Things at the mo are looking positive so DON'T FUCK IT UP!

You searched for love for a long time, from your folks, from all the girls you porked over the years. You probably thought love had eluded you until you befriended Kyle. Now you know that love finds you if you're tuned into the signal. You have mine, you have Brett's and now you have Graham's. The more love you receive from people the more 'finely tuned' you become. Brett is living proof of that.

One of your major problems was keeping your feelings bottled up. No wonder you turned to substance abuse for relief. I hope you become as addicted to your new friends as you did to that stuff. I need to be useful, and you make me feel very much useful. Right now, you're the

most important person in the world to me.

I don't blame you for being scared of big bro. Guys like him are scary. But if you peel away that macho crap, and his need to constantly prove himself, you'll find a serious case of insecurity. There's your weapon. Actually, you have two weapons. He won't improve, but you are and will continue to improve. You're building your arsenal with Graham's help. Right now, big bro thinks he can hurt you and not risk damage in return. Ask him if he knows a good dentist.

I can't wait! This is like the old cowboy movies (but with hotter lookers) where the goodie gets beaten to a pulp by the baddie, much to the amusement of the sycophantic moron gawkers—until the movie is almost over. Then WHAMMO! The baddie gets his come-uppance and the goodie wins the heart of the swooning damsel. But I like this movie better because the swooning damsel is Graham.

You're a wonderful young man, Stuart. Use your gifts to make other people happy. By doing that, you'll be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams.

Green Room II
Chapter 19

Graham failed to arrive Wednesday. He had swim training all day. I fooled around with the boxing bag for a while but it wasn't the same without him. Finished homework in my room, then phoned Melanie. I needed to. "Melanie? It's me."

"So I hear."

"I need to speak to you. What is the problem that we can't communicate any more?"

"You know what the problem is, Stuart. It's you. You think you're God's gift."

"Not true, Melanie. C'mon, we had something really special not so long ago."

"What is it, Stuart? Graham got a plug up his ass and now you want me?"

"Where the fuck did that come from? Is that what you think?"

"If you scream I'll hang up."

"Don't ... don't do that. Where did that comment come from?"

"If you hurt him, Stuart," she said through obvious tears, "I'll make sure you get the same. You always get your own way. What do you want from him?"

"Don't cry, Melanie, please."

"He's a little boy. What is it you want from him? Tell me!"

"Because he's Kyle."

"What?"

Suddenly, I realized the profundity of my words, and the real reason I needed Graham so much. "C'mon, Melanie, we've all seen it. Graham is Kyle. He's exactly the same as Kyle was. Why have you hung onto

him? We're all looking for Kyle right now, and Graham is him. I know you've seen that too. Stop the tears, girl. Can we meet somewhere? Maybe for coffee or a beer?"

I got a ride to within a block of her house, where she waited. She's still as spunky as ever, G. Kyle's girl. Her eyes were still red from tears.

We walked to a small beachside café where I had espresso while she chose cappuccino, with the froth on top. She cradled her chin in her hand, and stared at the cup. I took her other hand in mine. My face still looked pretty hectic so I understood why she avoided my eyes.

"Hey, I'm not Stuart. I'm Quasimodo, the lover in the tower." That raised a smile, at least. "That's better, babes. I'm glad I'm not the only one who suffers these kinds of days."

"He told me we would have a house full of little Kyles one day." Tears immediately sparkled in her eyes. "Every minute I knew him was special. There's a message in a bottle in my closet. I found it floating in the pool on my birthday last year. *'I will be by your side forever, Melanie. And I will love you forever. Your friend and lover, Kyle'*. I've had heaps of boyfriends but Kyle was the first I fell in love with, and finally discovered what love was all about."

"Got anyone now?" She shook her head. "Look, Melanie, I've been a real prick and I'd like to make it up to you—to be friends again, just friends. If it goes further, it'll be because it's mutual. For the moment,

I'm desperate for friends. Graham visited this week to show me how to use the boxing bag. The little prick enjoys beating me up as well." That remark amused Melanie. "I can see why Kyle loved you. When you smile you get those little dimples like he did. And your eyes light up."

"I'm not ready to go out with you, Stuart. In a minute you could be back into the drug scene, and the shit will start all over again. You don't realize what you look like when you're stoned or tripping."

Her words hit me like a bombshell. "Give me a chance, Melanie. I've come this far. Please?"

She dissolved into tears once more. "Look at me," she sobbed angrily, "do you get the impression I'm ready to be hurt all over again? Fuck you!"

"Just friends," I insisted quietly. "Just friends, no commitment, nothing more."

"Check your face, Stuart. You look like you were stoned just five minutes ago."

She was right. I felt the anger build inside me but I did well to control it. I paid for the coffee, then walked her home in silence. At her front gate, she thanked me for the coffee. My eyes pleaded with her to give me a chance. I leaned forward and kissed her tenderly. "Thanks for listening, Melanie. Cheers."

Fucking hell, G, am I that bad? What does Graham see when he visits my house? A weak, pathetic loser? Is that why he takes such delight in beating me? I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing by letting him take charge in the gym.

Thursday: Graham arrived, which pleased me. I worried about my intrusive behavior on Tuesday. Apparently, it wasn't a problem with him.

He is seriously into the gym kit at my house. I can't believe people like my folks have so much stuff in one place. Graham has a swim comp next week, and invited me to attend. It means I gotta get off school early or maybe take the day off. I'll see what happens.

Graham coerced me into working my guts out in the gym again. But it was cool. He punches the crap out of me at every opportunity but I managed to reciprocate a few times. *EVIL GRIN*. I don't think he felt them too much but he made sure I felt his! Hahahaha!

When we were done, I asked if he wanted to swim in the pool. "Can't stay too long, but I'll take a quick dip."

He wore his army camouflage briefs again. When wet, they crawled into his ass crack and outlined his schlong. He might as well be naked, I thought, but kept my comments to myself.

I wore black Speedos as I joined him. We wrestled for a while, and laughed and played while I tried valiantly to avoid any action that might freak him.

After five or so minutes, he exited the pool. I watched him as I treaded water. He toweled himself and shook his hair, which I discovered to my surprise was not completely jet black. It featured streaks of brown. "You coming again tomorrow?" I asked.

"I need to check. I'm supposed to go to the movies with friends. And I want to catch a wave after school. You want to be there?"

"Cool."

Each time Graham leaves, I wonder when I'll see him again—or if. I phoned Bob and visited his house. He was busy recording CDs so I lay on the bed and thumbed through a mag. I was glad he was busy—all I really wanted was company.

I pretended to read the mag while I observed him stuffing around with the CDs. His body is in such good shape. He's much shorter than I but perfectly proportioned. When he works, his forearm muscles perform an erotic dance, almost resembling a shark's muscular body. His tight top showed off his prominent pecs, and how his torso narrowed to a flat stomach. Even his obliques were clearly visible.

"You're looking good, Bob."

"Thanks, man," he smiled.

On the walk home, I enjoyed a warm feeling about Bob. Why don't I get more involved? He's very good looking with a body to match. But he doesn't want any heavy emotional involvement. We don't really connect at school due to his drug dealing. Despite that, with all his shit, he's such a cool mate.

I think your meeting with Melanie was a fine thing. It may seem a small step, but I believe it was a major stride. At least she's aware of your effort to quit. As Brett said, it takes time.

What I really want to discuss is you and Graham and your fear of losing him again. If you allow all

those negative thoughts to gain root, you can be sure he won't return. He knows how much you love him, but if your feelings overwhelm him, and he feels unable to return them, he'll back off.

You're handling the situation quite well by gathering new and old friends. Melanie is slowly returning to the fold. The more friends you make of that caliber, the easier it will be to put Graham in proper perspective. Kyle and Graham were as thick as thieves, but they each led separate lives. There was no pressure, no possessiveness. When they were together they were together because that's what they both wanted. When they were apart, they filled their time with other pursuits and friends. Neither felt 'owned'.

By your own admission, you allow paranoia and jealousy to dominate your thinking. You should be expert at recognizing the symptoms. Each time a negative thought threatens, tell it to piss off. Do that often enough and it becomes second nature.

Inexplicably, humans have a predilection for thinking the worst. It's as though we're programmed to self-destruct. Not long ago, you convinced yourself that you were the most despised person on the planet. Then you found me, and began to rise from the ashes. It's only a matter of time before you strut your stuff again.

When you're tempted to lean on someone, remember that others need someone to lean on too. Melanie falls into that category right now. You're asking to lean on her, but how about

inviting her to lean on you? Ha! What a joke! Lean on Stuart? He'd fall apart. Is that true, Stuart? Are you a taker and not a giver? Are you so focused on yourself that you can't empathize with others?

Here's the deal. I want you to be strong. People admire strength, and are attracted to it. The gym gives you physical strength, exercising your mind will give you mental and emotional strength. The way to exercise your mind is to welcome positive thoughts and banish the negative.

I can see you now; tall, strong and dependable, earning Graham's admiration and respect. What's that negative little voice in your head saying now, Stuart? That G's fulla shit? Don't believe it. I know what I'm talking about, and I know your potential.

You once told me you couldn't understand why I wanted to write your story. Are you beginning to now? I think you are. I'm very proud to be your friend, Stuart.

I spent three hours in the surf on Friday. It was crowded so I stayed to one side. Graham was there with his dopey mates. He said 'hi' at one stage, but then paddled back to his gang. It was good to get back into surfing, and I did pretty well. Normally, I hang at the beach but not this time, not now. There's still too much crap going on.

Saturday night I attended a house party. Bob accompanied me. A queen took a liking to me and made a bloody fuss all night. Bob got jealous. He became so angry he cried. At one stage, he grabbed me and asked

me to leave with him. He'd discovered that most of the party guests were snorting coke. I was unaware at the time, and wondered why everyone was so damn high. I totally lost the plot and did a few lines, G. I'm sorry. I also drank too much. As soon as Bob found out he was onto me, and treated me like a little kid. I was ready to smack him.

Eventually, he took me home. I don't remember much of what happened, only that I woke at Bob's place. As soon as I opened my eyes he told me to fuck off from his house.

"What's your case?"

"You! I'm sick and tired of you using me. You go on and on about coming clean, and you see one little line of coke and can't wait to snort it."

"So? I'm sorry. Get a life, okay?"

"Listen to yourself, bigshot. That's what happens when you get wasted. Stop using me as a crutch."

"What? Stuff you! Who do you think you're talking to? You probably supplied that party with coke."

Bob sent a stinging backhand across my face, then continued with a verbal assault. "That party was your turf when you were dealing. Now I got the problem of covering your slack ass."

"If you hit me again I'll fuck you up."

"Like you did with big bro at the beach? Gimme a break for Christ sake! Maybe if I was five years younger and 20kg lighter."

"Jesus! You're just like them."

He apologized immediately, and raised his hands palm side up as a

sign of truce. "I don't know where that came from. You make me so crazy, I say stupid things. I'm sorry, sorry, sorry. I didn't mean any of it. Okay?"

I remained silent for a while as I fumed. The situation had already reached a knife-edge stage that jeopardized our friendship.

"You can't do that," he pleaded, breaking the silence. "You can't just go back to drugs whenever the opportunity arises. You need to walk away."

"Saint fucking Bob! Hey, I couldn't help it."

"That's the problem—you'll never walk away. I'll make a deal with you. Why? Because I thought you were gonna die last night when I dragged you home."

"I'm not good at deals."

Then came Bob's big surprise. "I'll stop dealing if you stop using."

"Oh, yeah? Now who's the big shot? They'll kill you if you stop selling."

"They won't. Too much attention."

"You won't handle it, Bob—not what I went through."

"I already spoke to a guy who's connected to the syndicate. He thinks it's possible because they're pissed at the kids at school who think it's all a game. He says it's possible, and I should just handle the damage if it comes down. I can handle anything, right?"

"You won't handle what the syndicate deals out. And what about losing all that cash income?"

"I get more cash from my folks than I know what to do with. I don't need extra. I sold because I enjoyed the rush. So did you in the beginning."

"Was I really that bad last night?"

Green Room II
Chapter 20

Bob won't handle his punishment from the syndicate if he quits selling. He's not a user, so what happens if they spike him with H or even worse? I dare not try to persuade him either way. If he's lucky, they'll beat him into an emergency ward and leave it at that.

I think the pressure from taking over my turf gets to him as well. It's just too much, like a permanent job, hustling every night and dealing at school. His anger at me has more to do with quitting and getting his life back together than me snorting a few lines. We both know that.

He's right about controlling myself. He says I should avoid house parties and clubs because the stuff is too easily available.

There was a lot of talk at school about me and the party. I was obviously way over the edge for a lot of people's comfort. I discovered that the queen's hands were in my pants. I didn't realize it (or can't remember). That's probably what angered Bob so much.

Well, you're mad at yourself, which is a good sign. Another good sign is that you wrote and told me what happened. A friend of mine was in rehab once and told the nurse, "this is a helluva way to die." She responded with, "looks like a helluva way to live."

Am I disappointed in you? Nope. Hey, I've skinned my knees plenty of times. You have every right to be mad at yourself, as I have so often been

at myself. It's a good sign. You showed great courage in telling me the truth about the party, and what followed.

As to your avoidance of Graham's mates in the surf, that's the price you pay for past mistakes. I don't know how long it will take for that situation to resolve itself but it will eventually if you continue to head in the right direction. Graham needs to prove he did the right thing by befriending you again and you need to help him achieve that end.

A while ago I decided to write all the stuff that happens and mail you three times a week. So why am I writing today? I never wanted to write a novel about my life but I enjoy writing, and that's one of the pleasures Kyle and I shared. We wrote stories together, and argued about characters and plots. It was cool.

Sometimes I re-read stuff I send you before I make the decision to send it or trash it. I ask myself will this piss off G or what? Sometimes I wonder if I should include certain details, such as telling you on a Friday that I intend to party go clubbing.

It must seem that Kyle affected the whole of Byron and the Gold Coast, and that the whole joint is gay. Fact is, most of the stuff that happens in pubs is macho, like when guys rub another guy's crotch as a joke. I've seen it often.

I wasn't involved in my current scene when I met Kyle. One of the first convos I had with him was when I asked if he was gay because of the way he looked at me. That was the

first time he openly spoke to me about you, G, and some of what you wrote him. I told him then that I thought I was gay because of my attraction to him.

Kyle never kissed a guy before I came along. At least, that's what I think. He kept his mouth firmly shut when I tried to poke my tongue in there. I don't know why I did that, but I told him I was in love with him. Back then, I was not the type to admit that to a guy. No way! It's just that Kyle made it so easy for me to express my feelings.

Damn, I totally missed the point here. What I want to say is that, apart from a few guys, my scene is limited to a small circle of friends. I'm sure Brett and Fingers think I'm more straight than not. Brett knows I loved Kyle, but the love guys had for Kyle was much different to anything gay. I don't want to be outside my close circle. The more people I know, and who get to know the real me, the wider that circle becomes. It will spread like a web and increase the number of people who know me for what I am. Then the shit hits the fan, and I would not be able to deal with that situation. I just need you to know that, G ... like connecting with some of the people you suggested. They all have their own friends, and the circles are intertwined.

I don't think I would enjoy the traditional gay scene. I've seen a few at parties, teens who behave like fairies. I feel like slapping them for acting so over the top.

The guys I organized to beat Kyle that time would not think twice

about reducing me to pulp if they knew about the relationship I had with Kyle. They'd beat the crap out of me, then ensure that I never lived it down.

Graham arrived here yesterday, which was cool, if only for a short while. We hit the bag then sparred. He knocked the crap out of me again. It must be some kinda control thing with him. He knows I want him and he taunts me. Each time I show any sign of pain, he tells me I fight like a girl, or that I'm useless.

He did pay one compliment, though. He was impressed with my surf session the other day. Sean told him I surfed like a grommet, so Graham told Sean to shut the fuck up. Hahaha!

"What is it with you and Sean, anyway?" I asked as we sparred. "He's a little prick."

"Don't start! Kyle used to go on and on about Sean this and Sean that. You don't know him. He's cool."

Graham turned aggro, and wore a look of hate on his face as his fists flew. I did my best to avoid them. "I don't want to fight with you," I reasoned. "Sean caused a lot of shit between you and me."

"So now it's his fault that you were slaughtered?"

"Whoa, boy! I'm sorry I mentioned it." Then he sent one helluva shot that rocked my head. He dropped his guard for a second, which allowed me to respond with a punch that brought tears to his eyes. "Something in your eye?" I asked.

"Fuck off," he grumbled, then untied his laces and removed his gloves.

"What's the prob? Am I getting too good for you?"

"Shut up, Stuart."

"Oh, so it's okay for me to get clobbered but not you?"

"It wasn't that hard. A lucky punch. I've gotta split, that's all."

"I guess I shouldn't hit you any more because you'll spit the dummy and sulk."

"Stuff you! I've gotta jet."

I grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "You're not leaving here pissed at me. Okay? You're coming back here tomorrow so I can give you a real hiding."

He shrugged my hands off his shoulders and collected his bag. His cheek was bright red from my punch. I almost felt guilty ... almost. However, after he left, depression took control again.

I'm reminded of the message Kyle used at the bottom of his emails: "Everyone has the right to be respected for their differences, and the responsibility to respect others for theirs." Kyle understood the meaning of those words, which helped him be true to his individuality. Mind you, he also projected a public persona in order to be accepted by his peers and others. However, I believe he understood the difference between an image and what lies beneath it.

Graham wants you to be like Kyle. He'll taunt you until you're better than he is. He wants you to toughen up; he wants a hero. When he and Kyle wrestled, Kyle inevitably won. Graham cussed and complained but he loved his big bro's dominance. Kyle was also kind and gentle, and

massaged Graham's ego when necessary. There was a balance. Graham wants the doubting Thomases in his group to eat humble pie.

You both need a Kyle clone, but that ain't what you're gonna get. You'll get a Graham and he'll get a Stuart. That's okay. If you were both good enough for Kyle, you're good enough for each other.

Graham was here again yesterday, on an up because he did well at swim training, and was selected for all his age group races. I asked if he felt like a late surfing session.

"Can't. I'm surfing with Sean and Joe, you don't like them and they don't like you."

"I thought we could spend some time in the surf together, but it's cool."

"Has to be cool, huh?"

"Can't you stop treating me like a prick now?"

"Drop the 'tude, and stop being a tryhard. I treat you the same as always."

"You're not, you know ... not since I quit drugs."

"Can't help that because I don't know if I feel differently now."

"Okay, so maybe you wanna sleep over here Friday or Saturday night?"

"I'll need to check with my folks."

"Just to hang out. Nothing else, I promise. I won't touch you."

"Stop sounding so damn desperate! That is so lame!"

"It's just that I'd like to spend some time with you, that's all."

"If you tried anything," he said in all seriousness, "I'd fuck you up."

"What happens one day when I beat the shit out of you?"

"Won't happen."

"Will you lighten up, for Christ sake?"

I get so down at the thought of him slipping away. I've waited for the phone call to let me know it's okay for him to sleep over. He's so independent now. He used to rely on Kyle for everything. And now? Now he relies on nobody. I know it's more paranoia but I can't help it. Waiting, waiting, waiting. I'm tired of walking on eggshells when he's here, and apologizing for everything I say. I'll try what you suggested in your email, G. The problem is he's not receptive to whatever I say.

All of a sudden, a lot of people are discovering Kyle's passing and, when I answer the mail, I relive the whole incident over and over. It tears me to pieces.

You need to take a leaf from Kyle's book. Graham was always the one to breeze into Kyle's room like he owned it. If Kyle was busy with homework or whatever, Graham lay on the bed and read a mag. There was never any pressure. When Graham started high school, he stuck to Kyle and Brett like glue. After a while, he joined the rugby, swim and cricket teams and made his own friends. He became independent.

When Kyle graduated from high school, Graham was devastated. But how far did the grommet drift away? Not far at all. And then, despite his

many new friends, he slowly drifted back.

Graham is disappointed in you and your lack of leadership. Kyle is gone and there remains a vacuum he wants you to fill. But you fill it with apologies and lame statements like 'I won't touch you, I promise'. Kyle would never say anything like that. You're acting like a masked man who walks into a bank and tries to convince the tellers he's not there to rob the joint. Methinks you protesteth too loudly.

Sean and Joe look up to Graham; he's their hero. But heroes need heroes too, and there's no way a fellow grommet will fill those shoes. He wants you, but you let him down. He remembers the time you were king of the waves, and he wants that guy back. He pushes you, but you crumble, and he's disappointed. Don't you think he's also worried about you slipping away?

I'm almost as frustrated as Graham is. I know your potential, and it pisses me off that you don't recognize it.

Meanwhile, Sunshine, hold your head high and don't let the dickheads get you down. The only power they have is the power you give them. It really is that simple.

Green Room II
Chapter 21

Graham phoned last night to say he'll sleep over at my place Friday. Wooooooooooooohoooooooooooooooooooo!

I arrived home from school today intending to hit the bag in the gym, but my dad beat me to it! Can you believe that? He punched the crap out of the damn thing as well, putting his whole shoulder into it and sweating like a pig. When I turned to leave the room he asked me to stay. That was a first.

"This is a good idea," he said, "getting the boxing bag. You should have checked with me first, though, Stuart."

"And what then? You and I both know your answer would be no."

"On the contrary—the answer would be no if you asked for money to buy it. It's a great idea and I'm glad you thought of it."

"Cool. I'll come back later." As I walked away, I hoped he would ask me to stay. Please! But he didn't. I returned to my room and caught up with homework.

When I figured he'd finished with the gym, I found it empty. The gloves he used were still damp from perspiration. That's the first time I saw my dad so physical. The professional way he hit the bag truly impressed me.

Then I imagined him as the bag, and I pummeled that thing with all my might. Why didn't he call me back? Even just to hold the bag for him? I worked myself into such a frenzy, I hit the bag wild, and even kicked it and cussed at it. Afterwards, I sat

out back in the garden and smoked a joint. I returned to my room to finish a school assignment, but decided otherwise. My mood was shattered.

Next day, I received your mail, G. Am I really that bad? I know Graham thinks I'm a loser anyway. He saw me beaten by big bro at the beach, lying in a pathetic heap. Graham tries to dominate me during practice in the gym. I'm sure he has an image of me totally wrecked, lying helpless in my own mess.

I'm not likely to start a permanent relationship with my ex, or Melanie for that matter. Melanie's spot on; I've been a user of people all my life. Guess I used Kyle as well to justify some of my feelings. But he saw through me most of the time. I loved him because he was always so genuine about his feelings for me. Took me a while to figure out how he could be so honest with me, and treat me as the equal of his other friends.

I visited Bob for a while. He massaged me with vitamin E oil, which is supposed to be good for the skin. Then I massaged him. No, G, we behaved ourselves. He's like a doctor with all the vitamins he carries. He says he spread the word that he wants out of dealing drugs. He said the guy he works through is always cool, and hopes they can stay in touch. He treats Bob well, with bonuses and whatever. If Bob gets lucky, he'll walk away from the syndicate. How is that, G? The condition? I stop using and he stops selling, and he insists I return the crack in my closet.

I don't trust those dealers, though, not after what they did to me, and I worry about Bob. He comes across as all tough and macho, but he won't handle what I suffered.

Later, I phoned Graham. His dad answered and wanted to know who I was. When Graham answered, I wished him well for the school swim meet next day.

"That is so cool, man. Thanks. You gonna be there?"

"Yeah, I'll skip school, so you'll need to write me a note explaining my absence."

"That's bitching," he laughed. "Cool! See you there!"

Next day, at the school interhouse meet, I took refuge among the parents. Graham competed in quite a few races, and whoa!, can that kid lose his temper! In one freestyle race he lost the plot and finished 5th. He was so enraged as he exited the water, it's a wonder his neck muscles didn't pop.

However, Graham redeemed himself in most of his races, finishing first or second. He saw me sitting in the bleachers during his first race, so he was aware of my presence. He didn't wave, probably because he preferred not to draw attention to me.

The first race in which big bro competed got my immediate attention. When he removed his track suit, my eyes popped! That guy is built! He has a body to die for. He didn't see me, though, thank Christ. If that guy got seriously aggro at me he could do real damage. His shoulders are Herculean. He powered his way through

every race to win easily. His following at school is huge as well.

Before the final senior's race, I took my leave in order to avoid possible trouble.

I'll try it your way, G. Who knows? You might be on track. Graham arrived at my house late afternoon with his board and a backpack. I'd previously arranged for Bob to drive us to a beach further north. I took your advice and raved about how impressed I was with Graham's pool performance earlier, and how awesome he looked in his Speedos. "You should do modeling, mate." He was stoked! So was Bob, who realized my admiration for my grommet mate was well founded.

The surf was cool, but packed with riders. Nonetheless, we raved. We surfed until late, but Bob got antsy about needing to make a connection. This would be his last weekend on the 'job' so he needed to get rid of his stash.

By the time Graham and I arrived home, we were totally stuffed from surfing. Graham met my folks, who were okay about it. Nothing like Kyle's folks, though, but they did manage to raise a neighborly smile.

I ordered pizzas, which we ate in my room while we watched videos; two Jim Carrey movies. Graham is a big time fan of Carrey. Sometimes he laughed so much, he elbowed me in the ribs. I think I watched him more than the movie. Hey, even an elbow in the ribs is a touch, right?

About midnight, we called it a day, still exhausted from all the surfing. I congratulated him again on his swimming performances, which provided an excuse to hug him. Yeah,

I know, I'm devious. Then I panicked about where he would sleep, and wondered if he would dress like an Eskimo. He wore satin boxers with a ripped crotch. Every time he bent over, his balls slipped through the tear like a couple of rocks being lowered by a crane. I collapsed laughing when I saw that. He reacted by turning crimson, and explained the boxers were ripped on a swim tour. They were a little too big for him at the time so a senior put them on, and tore open the whole crotch when he sat down. Hahaha!

"Yeah, right," I cracked, "I bet your girlfriend Candy tore them open to get to the real candy."

"Get knotted," he giggled, then blushed again.

"C'mon, she gets into your pants, right?"

"Only if I get her excited. She jacks me sometimes, but she's only blown me once. She freaked when the hose opened," he belly-laughed. "She couldn't control it, and my spunk sprayed all over her clothes."

By that stage, Graham laughed so much he could barely speak. I was equally hysterical.

"I bet she can't keep her hands off you, bro. Hey, listen, I'll sleep on the camp mat on the floor and you can sleep in my bed. Is that cool?"

"I guess," he said despondently. "But, Kyle and I slept in the same bed, and that was okay. Why?"

"I don't want you to freak if my hands end up where you don't want them."

"I could have slept at home if I wanted to be in bed alone. What's the point?"

"Are you okay with that?"

"You're my mate, right? Why shouldn't it be okay?"

Now, come on, G, I didn't need another invite. Okay? I slipped on a pair of sleeper shorts that fit snug around my butt while allowing my jewels some breathing room. Then I climbed into bed next to him.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"Yep. You?"

"I'm cool. Remember when we used to sleep in Kyle's room?"

"I think about it a lot."

Bloody hell, G, I was so nervous!

"I got so mad," he laughed, "because I had to sleep on the spare mattress while you guys did stuff."

"I wondered if you knew about that."

"I was a grommet," he laughed again, "not a moron. I dug pissing you guys off by waking and asking questions while you were busy. I remember sometimes Kyle couldn't speak because... well, you know."

"We tried to be quiet. Guess we weren't."

"Think I slept? I remember one time Kyle cried out like he was in pain. I was scared that night because I wasn't sure what was happening."

"I didn't realize you knew about that... except one day you arrived home from school and saw us doing it. Did that hassle you?"

"It did then because I didn't understand how it was possible—physically, I mean."

"Hahahaha! You make it sound gross."

"You gonna jack tonight? I'm not sure what you think about me right now."

"It's cool if you want to, Graham. Kyle and I did all the time. It was soooo cool."

"Are you going to?"

"Not now. But you can if you want."

"I guess I can leave it."

I switched off the bed light, and turned my back to him, when he piped up again. "Stuart? Is it okay if I snuggle up behind you?"

"That would be awesome."

I felt his erection pressed against me; he obviously wasn't embarrassed. He placed an arm over mine, and rested his hand on my chest. I took it in mine and experienced a comforting, all-over warmness that dramatically elevated my sense of well-being.

I didn't sleep for ages, preferring to savor the absolute bliss. His face was cradled in the nape of my neck, his breath was warm, and his body hot against mine.

I woke early, saw that Graham was still asleep, and went to the kitchen where I prepared two coffees. The house was quiet, and daylight still waited in the wings. When I returned to my room, Graham had kicked off the covers, and slept on his stomach. Even so relaxed, his back muscles were tight. I sat on the side of the bed and massaged his shoulder. "Hey, mate, coffee's ready."

His eyes opened a fraction, but closed again to avoid the light of the bedlamp. "Thanks. Why are you up so early? It's dark outside."

"Thought you might wanna take a swim."

"You gonna?" He took a sip of the coffee which was apparently still too hot.

"The water's cool this time of day."

Graham swung his legs over the side of the bed, causing the tear in his boxers to reveal his low hangers. His ab muscles contracted. And each time he raised the coffee cup to his lips, his bicep curled into a perfect ball.

I grabbed two towels, and threw one at him. As we walked the path that leads to the pool, the brisk morning air attacked our skin. Graham wrapped his arms around his upper body. "Jeez, it's cold!" he complained. Then he draped his towel over his shoulders and held it tight.

Upon arrival at the pool, Graham stood on the top step, dipped his toe into the water and declared it too cold. Sorry, mate. I couldn't resist taking him with me as I dove into the icy blue. A second later, he broke the surface like missile from a sub, and headed like the dickens back to the steps, but I halted his progress as he simultaneously laughed and cussed. "I need to piss! Let me go!" I dove on top of him and felt his warm urine against my leg as his bladder lost control. Once again, his strength impressed me greatly as we wrestled. He's incredibly strong for a bloke his age and size. Soon, exhausted, we opted to lazily float around and enjoy the cold water.

I exited the pool first, and saw that my wet boxers weren't hiding a thing. "When you're wet," Graham

shouted, "you look quite tight. All the training, I bet."

"You drive me pretty hard in the gym, mate. You're looking good too."

He left the water, turned his back as he dropped his boxers, and wrapped the towel around his narrow waist. Hahahaha! That did little to hide his manhood as well. I chose to face him when I dropped my boxers, and I know he couldn't resist a peek at my goodies.

Back in my room, he checked my CDs and selected Just Jinger. Once dressed in track pants and a T, I noticed the redness in Graham's eyes. "It's been really cool having you here, Graham. I had a total blast."

He nodded, but kept his focus on the CD cover as he turned it over and over in his hands. The track playing was 'Shallow Waters'. Kyle loved that song.

I sat on the bed next to the grommet. "It's cool, you know. Cool to remember him."

He wiped away a trail of snot that dribbled onto his upper lip, then wiped his eyes with the heels of his palms. "I didn't know you had this CD. Kyle's got it too. Sometimes it's so hard. Sometimes it's cool until I think of things that make it so hard." The poor little bloke sniffled and took a deep breath.

"He thought the world of you, you know. He told everyone you were his little bro. He loved you to bits."

"Does it get easier? ...to remember him without feeling like shit?"

"I'd like to say yeah, but I still feel that way too. I think it does get easier, but it takes time. How about breakfast? Cereal or eggs?"

"Eggs on toast sounds cool."

"Then you better hold the fort while I destroy the kitchen."

Bloody hell, G, I'm useless in the kitchen. I placed a pan on the stove to heat, and tried to break an egg on the side. Egg went fucking everywhere. Graham took one look at my face and burst into laughter. I failed to crack the second egg hard enough, so my thumb pierced the shell and pushed it inside. "You sure you want eggs?"

"You bet!" he said in a vain attempt to disguise his giggling.

"I'm not gonna miss this show for anything."

"Okay, scrambled it is." At least I managed to pour juice without making a mess.

After breakfast, Graham went to my room to sort out his gear. He had a cycling appointment. He's in training for a cycle tour next weekend. It's over 100k in the saddle, which gives you an idea of how fit this little bloke is.

I cleaned the kitchen, which I'd practically demolished, and returned to my room. Graham was ready to leave. "Have a cool ride, mate," I said. "It's been awesome having you here."

"I had a rad time too. Thanks."

So are you proud of me, G? That I didn't molest him or whatever?

I wish I'd been a fly on the wall. But, first, to your dad. I'm amazed by how impressed you were with his bag punching, and yet you didn't

elaborate. Do you dance? I guess you do, but I doubt it's the tango. I'm sure you've heard the expression: it takes two... I'm not suggesting you and your dad sweep around the gym entwined in each other's arms, but it would have been cool if you'd commented on your dad's bag technique. What stopped you? Pride? You hoped he'd ask you to stay. You wanted him to reach out to you. Even if it does take two to tango, it begins with one person asking the other for a dance. Does it matter who does the asking?

Graham's mental image of you? He didn't visit you because he remembers you in a pathetic heap at the beach, or because he remembers you lying in your own mess. He likes you, dickhead. How many times did he see you and Kyle carving up the waves? Thousands? How many times did he see you trashed? Thousands? Or beaten up? Thousands? Go figure.

You may not realize it, Stuart, but you're going through a process of earning respect. Not too many people would survive what you've experienced, or shown as much courage. Beneath all that blond, tanned glam beats the heart of a man. Hey, as I write this, you and Graham could be having the barney to end all barneys. So what's new? All you guys barney.

The bottom line is that Graham has visited you several times of his own free will. And you were present at the swim meet. That's the glue of friendship. Graham saw you at your worst, but also at your best. So did Kyle. I sure hope he's watching you now. He'd be proud of you as punch.

Green Room II
Chapter 22

The moment Graham left, and closed the door, depression overwhelmed me. Sorry, G, but I couldn't help it. From that moment, my day turned to hell.

I dressed in a vest and shorts, and went to the gym to punch away my anger. My dad was already there, which frustrated me even more so. I thought I'd be clever, and asked him if he wanted to spar. He agreed. This would be my chance to get even. I was amped to see him bleed; to see *anyone* bleed.

I danced around, using techniques I learned from Graham. My dad played with me, jab, jab, jab—soft punches to the arms and forearms, most of which I blocked.

With a hateful stare, I flew a right hook, which he blocked. Then he upped me in the stomach and knocked the wind right of out me, all without a word. Neither of us spoke.

I coughed a while until I caught my breath. We danced again. I caught my dad with a jab to the mouth. He bit his lip. The sight of his blood excited me, so I jabbed him again. He kept dancing, so I took another swing and connected. His lip was a little swollen by that stage, then he let me have it. His first punch snapped my head back. It felt like my teeth had penetrated my jaw bone. His glove swung to the side of my head, rattling my teeth again. I became so disoriented, I dropped my guard. That provided an opportunity for him to smack my ribs.

At that point, I made a fatal mistake. I lost my temper. Each time I tried to close in, I dropped my guard. The worst was an upper cut to my gut, which sent a searing pain to my balls. I collapsed to my hands and knees, and spat blood from a cut lip. One of my dad's gloves dropped to the floor in front of my eyes. The fight was over as far as he was concerned.

"Stay the fuck there!" I demanded. "Where the fuck do you think you're going, you cunt?" I was so angry, I almost cried—more angry with myself for showing him how weak I was.

Without a word from my dad, he retrieved his gloves and put them back on. He waited until I got to my feet. I swung, but he hit me instead. I swung again, but he connected a second time. He waited patiently for my wild swings before hitting me until my head felt like porridge. Tears and blood poured down my face, and my vest was bright red. Sweat drenched us both.

"C'mon," I teased, "hit me again, you fucking prick."

He did, with an almighty smack. It was the most reaction I'd gotten from him, ever. As far as I could remember, it was the closest contact we'd shared. I swung another shot and caught his ear. He retaliated with a flurry of short punches to the ribs and stomach until I collapsed in a heap on the floor. My whole body was wracked with pain. I heard him walk to the door.

"C'mon," I yelled. "Finish the job! At least say something!"

"Finish what, Stuart?" he asked, eyes filled with anger. "Do

you want to tell me the pain you're suffering is just a small part of the pain we suffer every time you're high or pissed out of your skull? Is that what you want to hear? Do you want me to tell you I can't speak to you most of the time because you're flying on another fucking planet? You want me to tell you about the nights your mother and I lie awake, scared the phone will ring with bad news? Do you want me to tell you I wish we could be together but don't know what to say to you? Wake up, boy, before you kill yourself. And what the hell was all this sparring in aid of?"

He disappeared through the door before he heard my response. "Maybe because I love you, dad."

I rolled onto my back and lay there, still wearing my gloves, and stared at the ceiling. If he really cared, I thought, he would have spoken to me ages ago. Scared the phone might ring with bad news? He'd probably celebrate. Where does he get off trying to lay the guilt trip on me? As to us being together, what a joke. What we shared in the gym this day was the most togetherness we ever had. And I thought that was pretty cool, hahahaha! Wake up, boy, before you kill yourself? Fuck him. I'll wake him up next time we're in the gym.

I lay on the gym floor for ages with my mind a jumble of confused images and thoughts. When I eventually stood, I checked the mirror and saw someone who'd just stepped from a session with Mike Tyson. My left eye was swollen closed and seriously bruised. My vest was spattered with patches of red from my

bleeding mouth. My lip resembled a Michelin tire. You worked me over good, dad. Even my fringe hair was matted with blood.

I showered and checked my face. It was a nightmare, so that put paid to going out that night. From my room, I heard my mom and dad argue about the fight. Much later, my dad entered my room to ask how I felt. He got me to stand in order to check my eye, which worried him. At least, that's what he said. He didn't stay long. Then the housekeeper arrived and asked me to lie on the bed. She patched my eyes with used tea bags. They actually did reduce the swelling quite a bit. Then she turned her interest to the swelling in my shorts.

Later, my mom informed me, to my surprise, that dad was a junior boxing champ at school. Hahaha! Oh, Stuart, you stuffed up so badly.

I fell asleep, then slept through the day and all of the night.

Sunday I spent time in the gym on the chin bar, stretching my back to ease the ache in my muscles. My face still resembled a connection with an express train.

That night I visited a mate, the one with all the computer games. When I explained that my dad did the damage to my face, he suggested I lay a charge. I explained that I was the one who provoked the altercation.

I arrived home to a message to phone Brett. It was late but I phoned anyway. The first thing he said was that Melanie had called him. Uh, oh, I was in trouble again.

"She said she had a cool afternoon with you."

"Serious?"

"She feels guilty about how she treated you, and wanted advice. What is it with you guys in Byron?"

"All I wanted was to connect and maybe go out sometime. Just friend type stuff."

"She doesn't believe you, though. She said she'd like that but doesn't want to get involved in a Stuart romance."

"I asked for friendship, not a bloody romance."

"Try again. She wasn't thinking when she spoke to you."

"Yeah, well, right now I resemble a train wreck."

"Stuart! You promised to quit!"

"No, no, no, my dad beat the crap out of me."

"Yeah, sure."

"I'm serious!" Then I told him the full story.

"Go dad!"

"Stuff him."

"Next time you visit Fremantle, I'll give you boxing lessons."

"Yeah, right ... so you can enjoy beating me up."

"That too. So what's the matter? You sound lower than shark shit."

That did it. The dam burst and I cried like a baby. "I don't know what the matter is," I sobbed. "I'm depressed all the time. Hell, Brett, I'm not handling anything at all."

"Mate, cool it for a sec. If you're off the shit like you say, it's probably because of that. Just a chemical reaction or something."

"It's this whole mess with my dad as well. My friends have all

crawled into the woodwork. And you're a thousand miles away."

"Hey, hey, Stuart. Calm the fuck down. I heard from Melanie that you've been in one fight after another. Now your dad? I tell you what it sounds like to me; it sounds like you actually want people to treat you that way to reinforce your miserable self image. You need to stop being a punching bag or you'll end up psycho, making yourself a continual victim. You need to get your ass over here. I'll teach you how to deal with any prick who wants to take you on."

"That'll give you an excuse to have a go at me as well, hahahaha!"

"Fingers says you're coming over here during school vacation."

"I'd like to if you can handle that."

"I'm serious about training you, Stuart. I'll give you a hard time if you visit, and you know I will."

"Promise?"

"Fuck off. You know what I mean. And there's still the unfinished sanding business on the yacht."

"I'll look forward to that. Thanks, man."

"For what?"

"For listening. At least you still listen to all my bullshit."

That's about where the call ended. I so much wanted to be in control of myself but I couldn't help breaking down.

At school today, I pushed a kid around but backed off when a friend of his rocked up. My face is still painful, and I couldn't handle

another fist. It was the stupid comment he made that angered me—something about my girlfriend being too rough or whatever. A really lame comment he probably meant as a joke.

Yes, I am proud of you, Stuart. You accomplished a great deal on Friday night, maybe more than you realize. You elevated yourself in Graham's eyes, and gave him something important to cling to when he remembers the bad times.

I'm glad you complimented him on his swimming, but don't overdo it or it will begin to sound false.

I feel inadequate to comment on what took place between you and your dad. I don't know the man. Obviously, there's a lot of hate that has simmered for years. Who's fault is that? In any confrontation, each side blames the other. I hope the fight in the gym leads to something positive. Stranger things have happened.

Could it be that the two of you mirror aspects of character that are common to you both. You wrote recently to say you couldn't remember anything you did for someone else that wasn't motivated by selfishness. Do you have that in common with your dad? I ask these questions because sometimes they lead to answers.

Meanwhile, your mom is the meat in the sandwich, and probably resists taking sides. However, it's a good idea to chat with her one day about the relationship you have with your dad. Maybe she can unravel the mystery. You and your dad need to sort out this mess. The sooner the better. Hate is a festering sore that won't heal if not treated.

Brett hit the nail on the head when he suggested that you've been beaten so many times that you're developing a serious complex. And now your dad's joined the ranks of the Stuart bashers. If there is one guy who can toughen you, it's Brett. Mind you, I think you're tougher than he realizes. You showed remarkable courage and resilience lately that no amount of muscle could handle. You've been to hell and back. Give yourself credit, Stuart. You're probably tougher than a busload of big bros. And, one day, your dad will admit how wrong he was.

Green Room II
Chapter 23

When next Graham visited, he thought big bro had climbed into me. I explained that my facial damage was the result of sparring with my dad, but avoided any further comment about our father-son relationship. Actually, the mood between my dad and me has improved. We're not the greatest of friends, but he asked if I wanted to train with him after work. We held the bag for each other. He didn't say a helluva lot but he did thank me afterwards. It's weird that we don't know what to say to each other.

Earlier, Graham and I worked out in the gym. I showed him how to use the equipment properly before he killed himself. He chose the heaviest weights and risked a bloody hernia. He stayed only a short time because of a cycling commitment, but his attitude was cool.

Yesterday, we trained again. I worked out on the step and rowing machines, which severely tested my fitness level. Graham challenged me to situps and pushups, and creamed me. I managed about 70 crunches to his 120. Ditto with pushups. My stamina is stuffed. The grommet hardly raised a sweat while I gasped. Not exactly hero material, G.

I walked him home, then headed for the beach with my board. Got a few looks there ... at my face, G. I'm the personification of a gargoyle. Surf was lousy but I paddled a lot. Paddle, rest, paddle, rest, paddle again. But I felt great after that! I figure the salt water did the trick.

I thought about where I'm at and where I'm headed. Hell, I don't know where I'm headed, except to Fremantle in a few weeks. I need to lay my hands on the airfare. Fingers offered to fork out, but I can't handle that. I don't want to sound like a beggar.

A lady friend of mine is due in Byron in a week or two. She offered money in return for a night out with me. Stop raising your bushies, G. She and I had a relationship once, and she treated me like a king. She always spent a load of money on me. Kyle disapproved of the relationship because she's over 40. He said I was her male whore. Hey, if her ex-husband couldn't satisfy her, I will. One thing I know how to do is show a woman a good time.

The other option is a 'job' with someone else. A businessman on a visit could earn me \$500 a night. But all they do is play and ogle. This woman is okay. I know her. She loves me. Why not, huh? And she's outrageous in bed.

I could take over Bob's route and make a fortune. But we both know that's not an option. Right? And, no, I can't ask my folks for the money.

Saturday: I'll meet my lady friend tonight. I didn't think it would happen so fast but she made a plan to spend the weekend in Byron. I'll stay over at her hotel tonight.

Last night, we spoke for ages on the phone. Yeah, she was cool. I'll make enough money for the airfare to Fremantle. She doesn't know what the cash is for, otherwise she'd want to connect over there.

She's from Perth. Hey, I've got other plans. Hahahaha!

She's happy to join me at the start of Graham's cycle tour. Then we'll take a taxi to the finish line and wait there.

Sunday: Watched Graham at the start and finish of the tour today. His folks were among the crowd. He was stuffed, but half an hour later he looked as if he could do it all again with ease. He had a good ride and was stoked to see me at the finish line. I phoned a few minutes ago to ask how he was doing. He slept after the tour, and is now catching up with homework.

It was an awesome night last night. My lady friend and I dined at a posh restaurant. I explained my facial damage by lying about a fight at school. C'mon, G, you didn't expect me to bust my dad to her, did you? I told her if she thought I looked bad, she should see the other guy. Hahahaha!

From the restaurant we crossed the road to her hotel. We dressed in bathrobes and ordered drinks, then relaxed on the balcony overlooking the beach and chatted about all kinds of things. The evening was laid back and her company was most enjoyable.

For her age, she has the most smashing bod. She's beautiful as well as energetic. Over the years I've known her, we've become great friends. When we were naked on the bed, we spent ages exploring each other's bodies. She knows all the right buttons to make me horny, and I know quite a few of hers as well.

I'd be bullshitting if I said the sex wasn't special. I've always

enjoyed sex with her. We slept, but not for longer than a few minutes at a time. I can't even remember how many times I entered her. One time, still inside her, I dozed off. Hahahaha!

As the sun rose, she ordered breakfast. We sat starkers on the bed while we ate, laughed and joked. She wanted to resurrect the old days. But I was honest and explained that I had a lot on my plate that needed to be sorted out. Getting back together would cramp my style. She laughed and said it was cool. "I'll hire you each time I'm in town."

Naturally, Graham tried to charm my lady friend at the end of the tour, but he was too stuffed. Hahahaha! I worried about his folks, though, and what they thought of my lady. But on reflection, she looks in her 20s anyhow.

After we made love several more times at the hotel, she ordered a taxi to bring me home. And here I am. She gave me enough money for the airfare, plus. Am I supposed to feel guilty? Nope, because we had a really awesome time together. It's not like I gave her a receipt for tax deductions.

School tomorrow, and I know some of the guys who saw me with my lady friend will quiz me. They were all hard just ogling her.

I thought about writing a tribute to Kyle. But all the words are so lame compared to the way he was. He shared something special inside himself. And how do you put that into words?

Your friend sounds like a very sophisticated lady to me. If she

wants to spend her money on a surfergod that's her prerogative. Most of all, she's not possessive. She doesn't want you as her permanent toy boy. She understands the limits of the 'relationship' and is content with the current arrangement. So it's a win-win. You got your airfare without resorting to anything sinister. And I loved your line about tax deductions.

Bob quit selling and got off Scott free. Well, not entirely—they played mind games ... bound and blindfolded him and threatened all kinds of 'punishment'. But nothing happened. He says he doesn't know how long he stood there blindfolded, hands on a table, waiting for the pain to start. He eventually removed the blindfold and saw that he was alone in the room. How's that? Not a scratch! So what the hell did they have against me, for Christ sake?

Bob phoned at 1am. He was on the verge of tears because he got such a fright at the thought of what might have been. I'd waited all night for that call—or a call from the syndicate to say Bob was lying somewhere in a gutter, and to fetch him.

Yesterday, I enjoyed a good surf. It's going well. Just about back to top form, like I was before Kyle's death. It was a solid 3 feet off a small reef break.

Last night, I visited Kyle's folks. Just dropped by. It was cool—even shared a beer with Mr. T. I needed to explain the condition of my face, and the guy I battled at school. Mr. T reminisced about Kyle, and how he often arrived home cut and

bleeding, school clothes ripped. "He makes you look like a saint, Stuart, the way he always got into fights. He took no crap from anyone, not even Brett."

It was a pleasant and entertaining evening. I left about 10. Mr. T gave me a ride back to my place and insisted I visit more often. Not sure why I visited in the first place—just one of those impulsive things.

I chose not to visit Kyle's room. I was emotionally unprepared to handle that.

I finished my school work about midnight, and was about to turn in when I noticed a reefer in my desk drawer. I'd had such a cool evening, it felt right to go down to the garden and pool, sit and smoke it. I didn't smoke it all, though. My tolerance level has diminished. I used to smoke 3 reefers a night and drink all night, and be okay. Now? Weird.

Wednesday afternoon, Graham and I surfed at the local. Had a rave session in a 3-4 foot swell that seriously cooked. As we showered at the beach afterwards, Graham said he watched my one ride where I floated for ages. He thought it was pretty rad. ONE RIDE? Bloody hell, I floated almost every second ride. THE SURFERGOD IS BACK!!!! Anyway, my concentration was elsewhere as I ogled Graham's pecs and abs.

A few of the grommets checked me out. Actually, a few of the regs checked me out as well, probably waiting for me to fall on my ass. That happened, but not often.

I studied my bod's reflection in my bedroom mirror. I'm getting back into good shape. Actually, there's more muscle there now due to the training and boxing. My face is still not hundreds—my eye features a huge bruise. However, the bruises on my ribs have almost disappeared.

Bob accompanied me home from school, then drove to the travel office where I booked my ticket to Fremantle. I leave Wednesday next week.

We argued about the stash which is still in my closet. He wants me to give it to him so that he can get rid of it, but I refused. Now he wants to check if it's still there, and that I haven't used it.

Last night, I phoned Fremantle. Brett was out. Guess who answered? Fingers went on and on and on about how much he missed me and yadda, yadda, yadda. Hahahaha! I can't wait to see him again.

Bob accompanied me home from school again next day, and asked to see the stash in my closet. "Why don't you just give it to me so I can get rid of it?"

"Just leave it, and stop hassling. Okay?"

"As long as it's there, you have not stopped using—not until you get rid of it."

"You're like a stress machine, bro. Drop it."

At the moment, I still battle with feelings and temptations within myself. The thought of connecting with a dealer still haunts me. Fuck knows how I've resisted the crack stash so far. But it needs to stay where it is. Maybe it's hard for

people to understand that, and fuck knows I could use it. I hope Bob is wrong, and that I continue to resist it.

Not sure I understand the crack thing, and why it needs to remain there. I can only guess you can't trust the 'New Stuart' yet. I know other addicts who say the craving never really leaves you, even if it becomes manageable. A good analogy is marriage. Just because you're married doesn't stop you fantasizing about another woman. But if you were to dabble, you would lose your wife. In your case, you'll lose Graham and Brett, not to mention Kyle's folks and your own. I guess you have a way to go yet before the 'New Stuart' dominates the old. Answer? Just keep doing what you're doing. You're traveling better than most of us expected.

Meanwhile, your enemy still lurks in your closet. It understands your vulnerability to paranoia, and your reluctance to completely divorce yourself from your past.

Green Room II
Chapter 24

Last night, Bob and I played pool in town. We were in the mood to celebrate Bob's first day of freedom from the drug biz. Big bro was there with a group of friends. The moment I spotted them, I wanted to leave. "Ignore them and enjoy the evening," was Bob's advice. It was his treat, and I was reticent to spoil his night.

We played a few games between ourselves and some other guys until quite late, when Big bro approached Bruce and insisted on using the table. Bob explained that we had a game to finish, and that another group was already in line. Big bro poked Bob in the chest and, again, demanded the table. I grabbed Bob and suggested we leave. A fight with Big bro would be another one too many. Big bro took a handful of my shirt and snarled: "It's a pity you've turned into such a chicken shit." I should have raised my hands in surrender. Instead I took hold of his wrist. His knee immediately struck my balls and sent a searing pain through my groin, then to my head. My knees buckled. Bob was amped to climb into Big bro, and would surely have beaten the crap out of him, but I convinced my mate to leave.

"Don't fucking do that!" he complained angrily as we entered his car. "You can become a target if you want but don't turn me into a lowlife chickenshit. I could have handled that dickhead."

"Yeah, right," I groaned as I cradled my nuts in an attempt to ease

the pain. "Sorry for being such a lowlife chickenshit. Go back to the pub and beat him up. I'll phone the hospital and tell them to expect you."

"Jesus, you've changed."

"Yeah ... getting beaten up regularly by fists does that to a person."

"I hate to spoil this evening, Stuart, but you just stood there like a dork while he climbed into you, for fuck sake. A while ago you would have flattened him before he got a chance to raise his hands."

"I was waiting for him to give me a blow job."

Bob collapsed laughing, which eased the tension. "That's what I'm here for."

Graham arrived late Sunday to ask if I would join him and his girlfriend for pizza. It was okay but by night's end I felt like a spare wheel. No need to peek under the table to know she was playing with his thighs. He sported a huge hardon when he rose to leave the table. All night, they pecked at each other and, one time, he attacked her neck in vampire fashion. Hahahaha! He made me realize he was no longer a little kid. Meanwhile, I felt uncomfortable and wished Melanie was there to make it a foursome.

I noticed a friend of mine outside the restaurant and spent a while chatting to him and his girl. This was not a cool time for me, and I was pretty sure Graham knew it despite my attempts to appear normal.

Much later, Graham and his girl were ready to leave the restaurant. I arranged to meet him back at my place

for his sleepover. But on arrival home, I worried about his safety, and whether I should have accompanied him and his girl back to her house. However, he rocked up quite soon with a small rucksack on his back.

"I'm sorry for what happened," he said as he dropped his bag on my bed. "I should have made it another night. You looked totally raw."

"I felt like a spare wheel."

"I'm sorry."

"Anyway, you're here and that's what matters. What would you like to do?"

"Check out a surf vid?"

It was an old surf movie, probably made in the 70s. It was a good laugh to watch a whole different vibe back then, and to hear Graham's chirps about the hairstyles and baggies. We sank a few beers, then I took a shower while he listened to music. Later, I made hotdogs in the kitchen. I can do that. Hahaha!

Dressed in our boxers, we sat on my bed to eat. Graham had me in hysterics as he spoke about his swimming. But once he mentioned Big bro and how brilliant a swimmer he was/is, I told him about the confrontation at the pub. "Oh? So you learned nothing from what I taught you about boxing?" The little shit.

"There's a crumb on your pec," I observed as I used a finger to flick it off, but not before I fingered his nipple. "Did you and Kyle ever kiss?"

"Why? I can't remember. I don't think so."

"I just wondered."

"Isn't it weird, though? Two guys kissing?"

"It's cool."

"Are you asking me because you want to kiss me or something?"

"I'd like to taste what your girlfriend tasted." Actually, his casual attitude toward the convo surprised me. I thought he might freak but he didn't.

"Like tongue kissing?"

"Yeah."

"So?"

"So?"

"So you want to like... try to kiss me?"

I did, and he responded with astonishing enthusiasm. When our lips finally peeled apart, I asked: "So, I guess I kiss pretty good, huh?"

"So why don't you have a girlfriend?"

"I dunno. Maybe because my face is still a mess after my dad beat me." I paused a moment. "Graham?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you enjoying this?"

"I guess."

The last time I visited Fremantle, I had to make my own way to the house. Then I was greeted at the door by a slap across the chops. What would happen this time? I wondered as I entered the airport baggage area.

I can't begin to tell you how cool it was to see Brett's smiling face waiting for me. He was relaxed and friendly, which made me feel more than welcome. You need to understand something about Brett's face, G. He's capable of making you feel lower than shark shit, but also of elevating your spirits to dizzying heights. In this case, it was the latter. I felt 10 feet tall, and beamed from ear to

ear. It was just so damn good to see him.

"How's it going in Byron?" he asked as we shook hands, and then headed to the parking lot.

"Pretty cool. Got a lotta catch-up to do at school. Stuffed up the first term. Been surfing with Graham a lot."

"You really like that kid."

"He reminds me of Kyle in so many ways."

"How are the Ts?"

"Okay. They spend a lot more time together now. You know, going out to dinner, weekends away. That kinda thing. They were always close, but I guess they realize how important being together is now that Kyle's gone. Every moment is just so precious."

"They're wonderful people; always treated me like a son."

On the trip back to the house in the Bug, Brett informed me that Fingers was away for the week, which meant Brett and I would share the house alone—a chance to get to know each other again. My feeling was that Brett and I were friendly but not actual friends. He had a way of keeping himself at an arm's length. Not the easiest person to get to know on a more personal and intimate level.

Brett was aware of my pathetic inadequacies in the kitchen, so he elected to be chief chef. He had me there, though, helping, showing me what to do, teaching me to cook. He was like a mother. And that was another fascinating aspect of Brett's character: tough as nails one minute, yet treating you as family the next.

"Where did you learn all this stuff?" I asked as I peeled a carrot.

"I had no choice. It was just me and my mom after dad split. I had to clean, wash, cook, iron and all that other crap. But it's handy. You should learn, mate."

"No need. We got a housekeeper and staff."

"So the staff is smarter than the boss?"

"Never thought of it that way."

His vibe meant that sex was an inappropriate topic. Even when we discussed Kyle sex never entered into the conversation. The vibe was comfortable, and the absence of sex as a topic didn't bother me at all. Okay, so I cracked a boner each time I saw Brett in briefs or boxers, but I sorted that out later in the shower. You gotta believe me, G, when I say that Brett is a god. That bloke is simply awesome.

The black guys at the barn where the yacht was under construction were all rows of sparkling pearlies when they saw me. No way a white bloke could smile like those fellas. They shook my hand 'til I thought it would fall off. But it was great to be welcomed back with such cheerful enthusiasm and affection.

Thankfully, I didn't need to sand fiberglass during the first few days. I was able to work dressed in boxers without fear of fiberglass dust. Instead, I sanded timber. What I didn't realize at the time was the way wood dust penetrates your pubes and foreskin. What a hassle! In the shower, I saw little bits of mud

around my cockhead. Not a good look!
Hahahaha!

Fingers phoned the second night and we spoke for ages about how cool it was to have me as a guest. He couldn't wait to get home. Hey, I couldn't wait either!

The following night, Brett made it plain he wanted to be with his girlfriend. He left me home all alone with the TV remote and a fridge full of beer. Hello? Bleh. So I took a walk into town where I found a pub. Seemed inviting enough. I wandered in, ordered a beer, and saw a chick sitting by herself. She was mid 20s and latched on to me right away. What can I say? I wore Levis and an open shirt over a black T, which hugged my bod.

"The problem with good looking guys," she said, "is that they're always full of shit."

"How do you know?"

"Been there, done that—more times than I care to remember."

"Me too, but the other way around. I've had more bitches than you've had breakfasts, and they're all useless."

"Sounds to me," she smiled, "like we're both still searching for the right person to come along."

We laughed at the sound of our own sarcastic comments. After about 4 beers, her fingers found their way under my T and played with my pecs.

"What are you looking for?"

"A real man—like what's under your shirt, Stuart."

"I got other stuff I can show you, but it's not under my T."

"Oh?"

It was an offer she couldn't refuse. We left the pub and headed back to Fingers' house. Almost as soon as we opened the door, it became an orgy, which made me realize just how desperate I'd become for wild sex.

"Forget the condom."

"Sorry, babe—can't do that."

Then the shit happened. She rummaged around in her bag and produced the coke. By then I was way past refusing, so we snorted a few lines. Now I can't remember if I wore a condom the second time around.

Brett arrived home while the girl and I were in the act of snorting. He glared at us but didn't say a word to me. However, he told the girl to fuck off out of the house. Pronto.

Naturally, I was totally pissed at the way Brett handled the situation. "Listen, Brett..." was as far as I got before he pushed an angry finger up my nose.

"Don't," he growled in his deep voice. "I'm not interested. You're pissed and you're fucked."

When morning arrived, I was still dressed in the clothes I wore the previous night. I'd obviously passed out, and collapsed on the floor. I checked on Brett, who was still asleep.

I showered, pulled on a clean pair of briefs, made two coffees in the kitchen and took them back to his room. I shook his shoulder. He opened his eyes right away, but he was definitely not a happy little chappie.

Not a word was spoken while he made his breakfast in the kitchen,

all the while treating me as if I
didn't exist.

Green Room II
Chapter 25

Brett finished breakfast and said in a menacing tone, "I want to see you in the garage."

"My name is Stuart, in case you forgot."

"You got one minute," he ordered as he disappeared through the door.

It was way too early in the visit to stuff up so badly, so I decided an apology was in order. When I entered the garage, he was waiting for me. He tossed a pair of boxing gloves in my direction. "Let's see how useless you are."

As I fitted the gloves, I asked meekly, "Are you going to show me a few pointers?"

"I'm about to give you a hiding, and I expect you to hit back. When I'm finished, you can take the next flight back to Byron. I'll get you to the airport." Just as I assumed I'd gotten my final marching orders, he added: "Or you can stay. If you get high again, I'll put you in a transit hospital before your flight."

Once my arms were in position, he launched into me like a boxing bag. First in the gut, then in the ribs. One punch was almost too low! The more he hit, the madder he got, as though his mission was to reduce me to the status of a rag doll. But I got madder too. I decided right then and there to show him I could handle any shit he dealt, and then return some of his own medicine. I lashed out, but he blocked my wild punches.

He saw the opening, and hit me again. It was a repeat of my dad and me in the gym. Eventually, I screamed 'Stop!' Yeah, right. He roundhoused me on the cheek and I saw stars. My knees buckled and I landed flat on the deck. I waited for the kick, but the boot didn't arrive. After a moment or two, he offered his hand and pulled me to my feet. There were scratches on my ribs and abs.

"I'm sorry I fucked up last night, okay?"

"How many times are you going to say that, Stuart?"

"I didn't know she had the coke when I met her. It got out of hand."

"You're a pig. There's a used condom in the den, and the place is a mess. You don't realize how bad you are when you're out of control."

"Do me a favor. Don't stay mad at me like last time."

"Me? Mad? I'll enjoy having you here as a punching bag."

I figured the boxing match was over, but no. He demonstrated with masochistic delight what he knew about pugilistic art. Jab, jab, jab. I felt the pain, and he relished it. But I wasn't about to surrender. I bit my lip and took all his punishment to minimize any satisfaction he might glean from his superiority.

By the time he finished with me, I was a wreck. However, I learned something valuable; how to stand and how to use my bodyweight to add power to my punches. One time he momentarily dropped his guard and I took advantage immediately, sending a shot right to his gut. Hahaha! But the god didn't flinch. His stomach

was like an iron grid. Mine wasn't too bad, but there was no way I could absorb what he threw at me, especially when he put all his power behind it.

For the next few days, our activities became routine. We woke at sparrow's, ran for an hour, boxed for another hour and showered—but not for an hour, hahahaha! Our friendship improved a stack as it went along. He even confided about how his stepdad treated him, which was the reason he embraced boxing, determined never to be intimidated or brutalized by anyone ever again.

"Kyle saw it one time. He visited my place and witnessed SFB ready to beat me with a rubber hose. I told Kyle to fuck off outta there."

"Why did you let SFB treat you like that?"

"My mom loves him. Don't ask any more questions."

Following our morning running/boxing ritual, we were too buggered to eat breakfast, so we ate at the boatshed. It was cool because we ate with the black guys. Ol' scarface offered me some of his traditional meal. Witchetty grubs? YUCK, YECH, PUKE! No thanks. When the black guys discovered that Brett was training me to box, scarface offered to spar with me during a break. No gloves.

"No gloves?"

"No gloves," he grinned as he flashed a blinding set of pearlies.

Hey, G, you need to know these guys are all Tony Mundines. With or without training, they know a lot about the sport. SMACK! Right into the ribs. I thought I heard something

crack. Maybe it was just my brain making shut-down noises. You better believe that bare fists against bare ribs hurt like hell. Even, so I managed to stay on my feet and somehow accomplish a few punches to his gut. I might as well have been a fly for all the damage I did. His steel muscles felt nothing.

Brett and I relaxed by the pool that night. "You're either very brave or very stupid to take on one of those black guys," he said.

"You mean scarface? I told him about your lessons and we just kinda fooled around."

"Use your head, bro. It lights up their life to beat up a white boy. You're built, so you think you're strong—until you're up against one of those mothers."

That was quite a compliment coming from Brett. "Built?"

"Those blokes see a muscular white boy who's too big for his boots."

"You really think so?"

"They'll beat you to a pulp at the drop of a hat."

"That's not what I meant. You really think I'm built?"

"That's what *they* see."

"That's not what *they* said. That's what *you* said! You said I'm pretty built and muscular."

"You're getting carried away with ego again, and fishing for compliments. You're as ugly as shit."

"Fingers disagrees."

"What would he know?"

"He's got good taste in hunks. Hahahaha! Gotcha!"

After showering, I checked my bod in the mirror. Brett was right. I

was getting back into shape, the result of running and training with Brett in the mornings. My abs were there, just, and my stomach was nice and flat. My obliques were more defined, as were my arms, chest and shoulders. Hey, even my boner looked good! Hahahaha!

I waited for ages for the damn thing to deflate, but it refused. I flattened it against my gut, wrapped a towel around my waist to keep my erection from Brett's prying eyes. I wasn't sure why I suddenly worried about his reaction, but I did.

He was already dozing when I entered the room. His one arm was above the covers, a strong, muscular limb with smooth, tanned skin, which didn't do anything for boner deflation either.

Next morning was virtually a repeat of the others; running then boxing training. My fitness continued to improve, and I felt it. My thighs were pumped, and my breathing easier. Hey, Kyle, check this out, mate! Pretty awesome, huh? After training, Brett showered while I hit the pool.

"G'day, mate."

It was fantastic to hear Fingers' voice. He looked wicked. I climbed out of the pool in a second to give him a big wet hug. No, I wasn't naked. I wore my own personal Speedos from home. Fingers' bod felt terrific, like he'd been working out. Later, I discovered that was indeed the case. Since my last visit, he'd exercised regularly in the gym and lost the little fat he had. Anyway, I hugged him so hard I almost squashed him. "It's just so good to see you," I beamed.

"I was hoping you'd still be here."

Brett joined us in the kitchen as we chatted ... complete with morning piss boner taking star billing in his boxers. "You wanna take the day off work?" he asked.

"Thanks, mate, but no. I'm amped to go because I'm just so damn full of energy!" The other reason was that Finger's planned a full day of office stuff after his return. If I remained at home it would mean a day wasted.

As it turned out, Brett had a date with his girl that night. "You can spend the evening catching up with the 'old man'." Yeah! That suited me just fine. Actually, Brett didn't even stay for dinner. He showered and was off after announcing he wouldn't be back until morning. Woohoo!

By the pool, I helped Fingers stoke the barbecue. We then returned to the kitchen to make a small green salad and a potato salad. Next, he took two big juicy steaks and marinated them in red wine and spices. As I watched him, I realized as I stood there that I was falling in love with a man twice my age. I didn't know why, only that it was happening. I wanted him to touch me, and I wanted to touch him. I stood behind him and ran my hands over his abs. "Hey, you really have been working out!" My hands also noticed the absence of hair on his chest and stomach.

"I forgot what it's like having you here in Fremantle. I feel 16 again." He lifted my shirt and let it fall to the floor, then caressed my

lats and hips. He makes me feel so special, G. Nobody has done that since Kyle.

Back at the barbecue, I remained shirtless, and felt the warmth of the fire on my skin. It was soothing. As Fingers worked with the steaks, he exuded an air of confidence, an aura that demanded admiration.

After I fetched two beers from the kitchen, I asked him to remove his shirt. "It's okay," he said, "maybe later."

"You embarrassed about your bod or something? Hey, this is Stuart here! HELLO?"

Suddenly, his air of confidence vanished, replaced by the look of a shy little kid who'd just been busted raiding the cookie jar. "I removed all my body hair," he explained. "I've been doing that ever since you last visited."

"Why?"

"Forget it, Stuart. It's stupid."

"You figure it's stupid because you're trying to be 18 all over again? Scared I'll laugh at you?"

"When you left last time, I couldn't get you out of my head. Every night, every morning, every day, all I thought about was you, and how you could live with me, and how I might arrange that. I was almost in a state of depression. It took a long time to get over you, Stuart. And now? All those warm, wonderful feelings of love are rushing back like a swirling, out-of-control flood. I so desperately want you, but I can't have you."

"Says who?"

"You know what I mean, Stuart. Maybe for you I'm just someone to play with, and to play with you, but each time we're together I fall madly in love. And I know that's not possible."

"I know that," I agreed. "But I do too ... love you, I mean. At least, I think it's love. Feels kinda weird. I feel comfortable with you, and I can say stuff to you, and you listen to me. You're only the second guy I ever kissed ... for now. Hahaha!" My laughter didn't hide the stinging tears in my eyes, though. I simply didn't understand what was happening to me. I couldn't fathom it, but I kept talking. "I can speak to you about stuff I can't discuss with anyone else."

"Your sexuality?"

"As well as other stuff. Truth? I don't know where I'm headed. I was high most of the time following Kyle's death. I'm scared of where I'm going, or maybe I don't know where I'm going. I get like this—confusion thing—and I need a fix to escape. Then I suffer the downers and get sick, and I want to crawl into a deeper hole. And that makes me feel like another fix. And then another. I was shot-up by some dealers with H after I arrived home last time. Thought I was gonna die. But, even worse, was the realization afterwards that I enjoyed the high."

"So what are you doing about it?"

"Going cold turkey. I have to deal with it myself. I smoke a J occasionally which helps me over a small hump."

"And the big humps?"

"Sometimes too big."

"Speak to your folks?"

"Yeah, right—my dad beat the crud out of me."

"Stop lying, Stuart. Brett told me about the phone convo he had with you—about the boxing match with your dad."

"Yeah, so I'm a liar," I said, and bit my lip to refrain from a snarl. I hate being second guessed.

"Is it so difficult to allow your dad to get close? Is that the real reason you like me so much? Do you imagine me as your dad? I want to be your friend, Stuart. Sounds to me like your dad is desperate for you to be his son."

"If you wanna be my friend, stop finding excuses for him. He's had 18 fucking years to be my dad."

"Okay, I won't mention him again. Meanwhile, don't treat me like your dad. Okay?"

Green Room II
Chapter 26

So magnificent was the night, with its zillion twinkling stars against a matt-black sky, we ate our steaks in the fresh air by the pool. "Hey," I said, "you wanna see an elephant? Kyle knew a guy at school who did this in class." I turned out my pockets, unzipped my fly and produced my schlong. "See? Two ears and a trunk. Pretty cool, huh?" Then I gazed into the vastness of the great unknown and said g'day to Kyle.

"Huh?"

"He's gotta be out there somewhere, and I figure he's watching us. Did you know that Kyle was the one to nickname you Fingers?"

"Did he give you or Brett a nickname?"

"Not really, but Graham calls Brett 'Conan', as in Barbarian. Kyle never nicknamed Brett or me. He sometimes referred to us as boygods, though."

"Was he a boygod?"

"More than that. He was the most special friend anyone could hope to have."

Next morning, Fingers and I devoured toast spread with avocado and sprinkled with ground pepper when Brett rocked into the kitchen. He wore an ear-to-ear grin, which made it patently obvious he'd enjoyed his night with his girl.

I spent the rest of the day listening to Fingers' music. You'd be right at home, G. Moody Blues, Def Leopard (Jesus, what were those guys

on?), Bread (way cool music) and, yes, loads of Pink Floyd.

Fingers had a date with his girl that night, and apologized profusely. Hey, she's the main thing in his life and I certainly wasn't about to stand in the way. Besides, it also provided Brett and me with an opportunity to be together by the pool and chat. He eventually got into a really deep convo about his concern for me and drugs, and where I was headed. However, he wasn't all serious. We enjoyed a few good belly laughs along the way, sharing jokes or inventing weird scenarios about Kyle. Kyle entered our convo quite a bit. That was to be expected because I met Brett through Kyle.

As we talked and laughed, I asked him to hang for a moment while I darted into the house to fetch two beers. When I returned, I placed my hands on his bare shoulders. He didn't flinch.

"I worry about you, Stuart."

"Don't sweat it," I said while I kneaded his shoulder blades. "Half the world is worried about me already. Hell, even my dad speaks to me now."

"Yeah—with his fists. That seems to be the only talk you understand these days."

"Oh? So tell me you didn't enjoy beating the crap out of me in the garage. Just a bit."

"No shit! I enjoyed hitting you a lot!" he laughed.

"That's what Kyle loved about you—that annoying laugh of yours."

"Stuff you, mate," he laughed again, but nonetheless enjoyed my touch. "That feels wicked, man"

"So let's go inside and I'll give you a fair dinkum massage."

Guessing which way Brett's mood would swing at any given moment was like trying to pick the winning number of a lottery. I was never hundreds about Brett, so you can imagine my relief when he wasted no time in lying on his stomach on the couch. Woohoo! He wasn't mad at me, but how far could I push my luck?

I placed my hands on the waist of his jeans, then moved under his stomach to reach his fly buttons. Hello? No resistance. In fact, he raised his hips to allow my fingers access. Once his fly buttons were undone, I slipped his jeans down his legs. Oops! His boxers came with them, and I got a gawk at the cutest butt on the planet-hard and tight. But, just as quickly, he reached for his boxers and pulled them back up. Damn! What a party pooper!

Nonetheless, I massaged his powerful, muscular back as he closed his eyes and allowed me to transport him to the land of bliss. I learned my massage technique from Kyle. He was the best at massaging. He ruled.

We didn't speak, at least not until my hands arrived at his legs, which were like solid oak, except better looking. Brett's skin is smooth, and cling-wraps the muscles. A boner? Me? Go figure.

"You're putting me to sleep," he mumbled. "That feels A1, mate."

"I'm enjoying it too. You got a good bod."

No response to my last comment, not even a thanks. I wanted to massage him the whole damn night, just to feel the erotic smoothness of

his skin—with permission. Interestingly, he didn't bother to reclaim his jeans when I finished, and he didn't mind my gawking at his semi, which fought for air in his boxers. The vibe was cool and I wanted him to not toddle off to bed—just yet. I needed an excuse to keep him awake, and in my company. I loved every minute of it.

"Feel like sharing a joint?"

"Why not?" he said, and smiled *that* smile.

Out in the garden, I noticed the air had cooled significantly. I lit the joint and took a deep drag, and felt the wave invade my entire body, a sensation that is difficult to describe to a non-smoker. I watched Brett take the joint and put it to his lips. He held the smoke in his lungs for a while, then exhaled a rapidly expanding cloud of blue-gray. Like me, he knew the longer you held the smoke, the more quickly it affected the brain.

"Was Kyle the only guy you ever BJ'd?" It was a question out of the blue, and I wasn't sure what prompted me to ask it. It was as much of a surprise to me as it was to Brett. And right away, I expected him to bite off my head. But he didn't.

"What inspired that question?"

"Just thinking aloud—wondering what it's like, I guess."

"Can I ask you a straight-up question?"

Before answering, I took another deep drag of the J once he'd passed it to me. "Sounds like you will anyway."

"I'm confused about you, Stuart. You can get any chick you

want, any time you want. There's no question that chicks think you're hot. So here's the question: are you gay?"

"Do you think Kyle was gay?"

"He was bi. I don't think he hid that from his friends. He hated the label, though. All he wanted was for his ... his bisexuality ... to be accepted as normal. But back to the question: are you?"

"Gay? Because I have my eye on you?"

"I hadn't noticed."

"Yeah, right."

"You're the one who says I'm hunky. So ... are you? And stop avoiding the question."

"Okay, I'd like to suck you off. I think you're a god, and so did Kyle. Happy now?"

Brett nodded for a while, deep in thought. And then: "Before I met Kyle, I would have beaten you to a pulp for what you said just now."

"Okay, you wanna wrestle?"

Each movement Brett made was calculated. He took a last drag of the J and stubbed it out on the barbecue. Without warning, he charged at me and grabbed me around the waist. The force allowed him to carry me all the way to the pool where we both flew into the icy water. *KER-SPLASH!*

The chill immediately took my breath away, then I waited in panic for the punches to fly. I waved my arms frantically in an endeavor to fend off the imaginary fists, stirring up the water like a high-revving outboard. But they never arrived. What the ... ???

I opened my eyes to see Brett standing waist deep, and tossing his head to flick the hair from his face. He then laughed—a real belly-laugh that inspired me to join the mirth. “You should see yourself, Stuart! What’s with the bloody dance?”

“I thought you were gonna lay into me.” My laughter quickly subsided to a nervous giggle.

“Why should I? You’re already doing that to yourself.” And with that caustic remark, he turned to walk up the steps, but then paused to face me. “You better get out of that water before you catch cold, mate.”

While still in the pool, I removed my jeans. Ever tried to remove wet jeans on dry land? I also removed my boxers and noticed my lazy cock hanging over my nads, which took a swing or two as I exited. Meanwhile, Brett entered the house to fetch a couple of towels, one of which he threw at me. The night chill had begun to bite my skin and caused goosebumps to blossom all over. I looked like a plucked chicken, only slightly sexier. Brett, still dressed in wet boxers, toweled himself, looking like a million bux. You had to be there, G. That guy is a living god.

“So,” I said as I eyed his bod, “you shy in front of me now? Scared I’ll eyeball your jewels or something?”

Brett’s face was blank, as was his mind. He hadn’t a clue how to respond. I approached him, knelt before him and dug my fingers into the waistband of his boxers. At any moment, I expected a fist, but I was

too trashed to give a damn.
Apparently, so was he.

Somehow, for a reason I failed to comprehend, he raised his feet to allow me to remove his boxers. His cock was at eye level, and I watched in awe as it rose in response to my attention. Brett caught his breath as I cupped his weighty nads in my hand.

"What the hell are we doing, Stuart?"

That sounded to me like a question that needed a serious answer. I removed my hand, stood, and faced him directly in the eye. "I really want to do this, mate. You don't need to do anything. I just want to experience what Kyle experienced. I'd really like that, but I'll understand if you don't want to. Hey, Brett, it's just the two of us here."

I felt his hand on my head, eager to keep it where it was as I pleased him and sent him to heaven. His other hand made an erotic tour of his chest and abs. Instinct took control, and his hips jerked back and forth, sending his length as far down my throat as possible. "I'm cumming!"

I moved my face to one side. His knees buckled. My cheeks, eyebrows, and chin became the recipient of a dozen bullseyes, some of which entered my mouth. How on earth he managed to remain upright is a mystery.

"Oh, my fuck!" he gasped and wobbled.

But my mouth was currently occupied by his slowly deflating manhood, which prevented any intelligible utterance from me. Besides, I didn't want to let the

damn thing go. This is what Kyle experienced.

Then, I suddenly felt stupid, and wondered what the hell he was thinking. It seemed an age that I remained in position, staring at his thick, awesome prize as it floated about in the night air.

"You gonna stay down there forever, Stuart?"

I stood, wearing a sheepish expression, and looked him in the eye. Without warning, he burst into laughter. "What's so funny?" I asked.

"You dickhead," he guffawed, "you look like you had a fight with a meringue pie!"

Immediately upon hearing a brilliant line like that, I couldn't help but to dissolve into hysterical laughter. I could easily picture how I must have appeared. I heard him still belly laughing on the lawn as I disappeared into the house to clean up. You could have heard him all the way from Byron. Hahahaha!

When I emerged from the bathroom, Brett was fixing coffee in the kitchen. Neither of us bothered to dress, and sat naked at the table. However, I was still curious about his thoughts. Did he think I was crazy? A loopy? Gay? Then he spoke two words that absolutely floored me. "Thanks, mate."

Green Room II
Chapter 27

'Thanks, mate?' What the...???

The last time I visited Fremantle, Brett threatened to pulverize me. And now he thanked me? Thanked me for what I just did? What happened to him? What changed his attitude? "Why did you allow me to do that?" I asked.

He smiled *that* smile again, the one Kyle loved so much. "You begged. We both knew it was bound to happen sometime. We had a mutual friend who taught us that it was okay. Are you surprised?"

"Pretty much, yeah. Last time I was here, everything in your boxers was out of bounds. You're a god, Brett. I've always wanted you. Those times you visited my place to make a buy, I masturbated after you left—thinking about—well, stuff like what happened tonight."

"You sound like Kyle, but that's okay. Feel like another smoke?"

He didn't wait for an answer, instead he rose from the table and headed for the bedroom, undoubtedly aware that I eagerly watched his muscular back as he walked—those wide shoulders that tapered down to a narrow waist, and those two awesome orbs on strong legs. Fact was, he lit up that kitchen like some erotic hero from a sci-fi movie. He was almost too awesome to be true.

"Should we go outside?" I asked upon his return.

"I'll burn some incense."

He sat down, lit the joint, and passed it to me. Then he asked what I was thinking.

"I'd like to kiss you and make love to you."

"Fingers will be home soon."

"He can join us."

"Stuff you! He'd love that!"

My mention of Fingers caused Brett to suddenly realize the gravity of what took place between us. He arrived back on earth with a thud, grabbed his boxers and pulled them on. Sensing the mood change, I took a shower.

The days flew by far too quickly after that. Brett behaved very differently after our 'encounter' by the pool—he was much friendlier and treated me like a real mate. However, the mateship diminished significantly during our sparring matches in the garage. Once that bloke put gloves on, he was hard as hails, thumping the crap out of me with all his power whenever an opportunity arose, which, I have to admit, became less frequent as my skill improved.

Brett had a date with his girl. I spent the night with Fingers, who woke me in the morning with coffee. "I'll miss you, Stuart—again. But I guess that's the way it needs to be. Meanwhile, I think you should patch things up with your folks. Brett told me about your dad taking control in the ring during that boxing match."

"It wasn't like that," I argued, then sat up in bed to take a sip of coffee. "Ah, that's good. You make a great brew."

"Adults criticize teens for seeking attention. I think it was

your dad's way of doing just that. I think he needs you to acknowledge him and notice him. Stuart? Are you listening to me?"

"Why do I always feel like the heavy when people mention my dad?"

"It's give and take, Stuart."

"Yeah, well, he gave it and I took it," I laughed, and almost spilled the coffee, which I placed out of harm's way on the bedside table. Then I threw off the covers and laid there starkers.

"Not now, Stuart."

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

Tears welled in his eyes before he turned and went to the kitchen. I'd gone too far. I rolled off the bed, and took a quick leak in the bathroom before I joined him as he poured more coffee. By that stage, his face was streaked with tears.

"I didn't mean that," I apologized. "I didn't mean to hurt you. Bloody hell, I really didn't mean to hurt you."

Fingers took a deep breath and sighed. "It hurt ... because I love you, and I know I can't have you. But you treat it like a game, Stuart, and that hurts even more. Last night was special. This morning you're almost selling yourself to me. Life is not all about sex, Stuart. It's about sharing and enjoying one another's company. Seeing your face, seeing your smile, being in your embrace, having you close to me, hearing nice words."

"Don't sell yourself short. I get turned on by you as well, you know, and that monster. Ever thought about breeding horses?"

He laughed, which was cool. Then we sat and drank more coffee. Fingers launched into a long speech about how much he loved me, and how much he enjoyed our being together. He also lectured me about my dad, and suggested maybe I should learn how to show him respect, simply because he was my dad.

One night, Brett and I rocked over to the local for a few beers. We spoke idle shit all night as we sat in the half-crowded bar. Eventually, though, the topic got around to what happened between us that night by the pool, but he was hesitant to discuss it. "So, are you just gonna pretend it didn't happen?" I asked.

"It was something that took place at that particular moment, Stuart. It doesn't mean you get a mouthful every time we bloodywell meet."

"I enjoyed it."

"Shut the fuck up," he snapped as his eyes darted around the room. "Christ, there are people in here!"

"Yeah, well, I did," I pretended to shout. "I enjoyed having your..."

Brett stood, and headed to the outdoor beer garden. I was hard on his heels, laughing like crazy. And I could tell by the way his shoulders shook that he was giggling as well.

"I wish I had what you and Kyle had," I lamented as I placed my beer on the table.

"Why? You and Kyle had your own relationship, which was unique."

"Maybe it's just you I want. Sorry, mate. Freak if you want, but you're a god, Brett. And I loved the other night."

"Yeah, well, whatever blows your hair back. That night is over."

"What is it with me, Brett? Me and sex? Ever since Kyle, I can't get enough of any good looking guy."

Brett seemed surprised. "What? Bloody hell! How many guys have you been with?"

"Sorry, that came out wrong. It's just that I fantasize about hotties. Wanna know how many times I give the old fella a workout while fantasizing about you and me?"

"NO!"

"Just about every night," I admitted, while ignoring his reprimand. "Every other night is reserved for Kyle."

His fist connected with my arm, which went lame immediately—the result of a muscle spasm. Kyle called it a 'mousey' because it was like a mouse running around under the skin. But both Brett and I enjoyed a good laugh. Well, for him it was laughter. For me, it was a mix of laughter and tears because of the pain in my arm.

"I love you, Brett—as a friend—I really do."

"Love is not the word to use, Stuart. I think you're a good mate too—a bit fucked in the head, but you're okay. You need to sort yourself out, bro. Get yourself back on track, back to the days when Kyle was alive. Don't tell me how hard it is. I've heard it all that shit before. You got a life to live, and you're getting all fucked in the brain because you refuse to move on. Don't you think Kyle will be pissed off if that's the case? Meanwhile, think about Melanie or your

girlfriend when you spank the monkey, not me."

Following that little speech, Brett spoke at length about moving out of Kyle's shadow, to stop living my life as if Kyle were still alive. "Kyle was all about life, not death. Life hasn't stopped for you or me or any of his friends. Life moves on. That's the way Kyle would want it. Live your life like he lived his—to the full—and with no regrets."

Next day I felt miserable about leaving Fremantle and returning home to pick up the pieces. AGAIN! Brett was right, I needed to start over and get my life together. It wasn't about falling in love with guys, it was about sex. Ditto with Graham; it wasn't him I loved but his body.

Our goodbyes at the airport were difficult this time. Brett and I had become firm friends; soul buddies as Kyle termed it. Maybe it was because Brett enjoyed beating me to a pulp during training sessions. Hahahaha! Actually, my bod was hard and defined after all the training, and I felt pretty damn good about myself.

"Take care of yourself," Brett said as we hugged in the departure lounge.

"I wish I could give that job to you, Brett. I really do. You're the most together person I've met, apart from Kyle."

"You can do it, mate. Learn to rely on yourself a bit more. You'll be surprised at what you find inside if you search hard enough. That's what Kyle taught me."

And Fingers? I read the sadness in his eyes before I left the house.

They searched mine for non-existent answers as we said our goodbyes. He was totally miserable despite his efforts to hide it. But I figured he'd get over it. I was just some blond himbo who walked into his life for a brief period, and swept him off his feet for a while. Once I boarded the jet to Byron, he'd go back to the routine of building his yacht, his girlfriend, and waking Brett in the mornings with coffee.

And me? What the hell did I have to go home to? Byron was like an empty town without Kyle there. Sure, there was Graham, but he had his other grommet friends. On top of all that, my school grades were pathetic. I'd trashed myself too many times after Kyle's death to focus on homework. And I'd spent the first term of my repeat year feeling sorry for myself or whatever. I was a mess.

"You can do it, mate. Learn to rely on yourself a bit more. You'll be surprised at what you find inside if you search hard enough."

Brett's words, and the memories of the cool times I had in Fremantle, reverberated through my mind as the flight headed to the east coast. Brett and Fingers were very special guys. The best. But as each cloud drifted past the plane window, I knew I would never see that particular cloud again. Gone forever.

Hey, G, I'm up to my neck in schoolwork. Arrived back from Fremantle last week. Right away, I joined a week's leadership hike with the Grade 12s. I haven't touched sides with anything else, and I'm stressing like crazy at the moment.

"Let me know how you're doing, Stuart. Just a few lines will do."
Hell, you make it sound like I'm not interested. I look at school assignments and other school stuff and it's like a bloody zoo already. I wasted a whole school quarter with my bullshit and now I gotta catch up.

The surf is rocking and I'm amped to get down there. But right now I gotta finish up here and get back to school. I start at 10:30am but work through until late. I'll write soon, I promise. Just give me time to get my feet back on the ground here.

Green Room II
Chapter 28

Upon my return to Byron, I stepped into a pressure cooker. School was full on, I had homework up to my ears, and relations with my dad remained icy. He approached me in the garden one night and busted me smoking a joint. He sat beside me and proceeded to lecture me about my 'habit' and my rock-bottom grades at school. I just managed a passing grade in Math and English. The remaining subjects I plugged. The drill from my dad was to achieve decent grades by mid year or find a job.

He found my stash in my closet, and showed it to me. I lost my cool totally, and resented his scratching around in my room, invading my privacy. That triggered the ultimatum; better grades or find a job.

But that wasn't the worst of it, no way. My dad insisted I attend rehab for at least a month. Rehab? Yeah, right. Like prison, where fucked-up things happened to the guys in there: bashings, rapes, whatever. My life would be school every day, then back to the locked-gate confines of rehab. Incarceration. I'd rather shoot myself. So my options were: improved grades and rehab. "I'll think about it."

"Think about it when you're not smoking a joint, son. How do you expect your brain to make sensible decisions while it's swimming around in that lunatic stuff?"

Where had he been for the last five years, I thought, when my grades

were up there with the best? Huh, dad? Where were you then? Anyway, what choice did I have? I was forced to up my grade performance and decide which subjects to dump. I'd been living like a monk since I arrived back from Fremantle.

Graham was cool. We spoke a few times but that was about the extent of it. It wasn't like a big 'Welcome Home Stuart' party. Maybe my stress communicated the wrong vibes or whatever. My brain was fried. The possibility of rehab played tricks on my mind, and I didn't need that kinda stress on top of everything else that bothered me.

A week later I wrote G. Guess he was pissed off about my procrastination. I told him I didn't even have time to check the incoming mail. My life was a whirlwind, spinning my mind around like a blurred top.

Meanwhile, I tried to avoid Graham. Hell, I tried to avoid everyone to give myself time and solitude to think. My mind was still a stew. By the same token, I put a lot of time into schoolwork in order to impress my dad.

The other reason for my avoidance of Graham was that I believed I couldn't trust myself around him, especially if he sent a consensual signal.

It wasn't all bad news on the social scene. I connected with my ex-girlfriend a few times. She was in between boyfriends which gave us an opportunity to become good friends. One Saturday night, I was convinced I could score. Woohoo! But she made it clear that she had no intention of

being my slut, despite wanting to make love to me. That was so cruel! However, our friendship was on track, and a big improvement on our previous relationship when we were simply sex partners.

I also visited Kyle's folks to deliver a card and letter from Brett. The Ts invited me to stay for supper. We sat at the table and chatted about Fremantle and, of course, Brett. They loved him like a second son, and were pleased that he was doing well. They had to laugh, though, when I told them we were up at sparrow's each morning, jogging for miles, then sparring in the garage before swimming several laps of the pool. "They don't come any fitter than Brett," I smiled. "But I can also feel the difference in myself after all that hard work."

The Ts seem to be fairing much better these days, involved in various activities together. Not that they were never close, but lately they were on some kinda mission to spend more time together, like weekend trips away. I figured Kyle's death acted as a wake-up call. Things you treasure most in life can disappear in the blink of an eye.

I'm reminded of Kyle a lot; a song on the radio, a movie, something that happens in the surf, things that trigger vivid images of his smiling face, his laugh, his temper: he could look mad as hell sometimes.

I cry a lot. Sounds wussy, I know, but there's something in my life that vanished, something I took for granted, and now gone forever. Fate gave me the opportunity to have the best mate in the whole world, but

I stuffed it. Lots of lessons to be learned which I probably won't truly appreciate until I'm an old fart like you, G. And then it will be too late.

Don't go looking for Kyle, G, because you won't find him. What you will find are the things he loved so madly: blue skies, oceans with rolling surf, mountains that beg to be climbed, and views to admire. The silences and the mad noises of Nature.

I'll never forget the time we hitched to the Gold Coast for a surf comp. On the way home, as we walked along the road with our thumbs out, he stopped and asked me to listen. Okay, so I listened and heard fuck all. He got mad and said, "Just listen, you dumb fuck!"

Then I realized I could hear a loud noise, the chirping of beetles. It was so weird! I'd never heard them at all until Kyle told me to stop and listen.

We moved on, and I heard the beetles all the time, which made the night so much more special. It's like the crashing of the waves at night. I hear them every night now, and didn't before. I just took it all for granted.

Graham visited my house regularly during the past week. Nothing special, just calling in to say g'day. But it was nonetheless wonderful to see his face; his awesome face. One day, we actually took a swim together in the pool. For some reason, his friendliness toward me was less inhibited.

Yesterday, he visited again. He laid on my bed and read a surf mag. His T was folded at the base, and I

could see his stomach, an invitation impossible to resist. I sat beside him and slid my hand under his shirt. To touch Graham's smooth tanned skin was to touch electricity. He pretended not to notice, and carried on reading the mag. Yeah, right. "Cool mag, huh?"

"Yeah," he shrugged without taking his eyes off the page. And then: "Sometimes I think you wanna be like Kyle. You know that's not gonna happen. I wish you'd be like the guy you were when Kyle was here. You and me had such rad times together, wrestling and stuff without... Hey, it's cool how you touch me. I'm not complaining. But I miss the rough stuff we used to do."

"You do?"

"Yeah, I miss the old Stuart."

We spoke for a while, massaging each other's egos, then, all too soon, he had to leave. His absence turned my room into a vacuum. It was empty again. How I missed his face, his warmth, and his company. Falling in love with Graham was just too damn easy.

I spent the weekend away with my folks at a family wedding. When I returned, I couldn't wait to tell G all about it.

We drove to a small inland town, then to a farm on the outskirts. Everyone we knew, and their dogs, was there. My little cousin was amped to meet me again. Hey, not so little any more. He was a hunk. It ran in the family—blond hair and all that good stuff. Hahahaha! My older cousin, with whom I didn't get along, had turned into a hunk as well. When he arrived at the farm, he

ignored me. Fine by me. However, my younger cousin and I were chatting when older bro called him away—probably worried I'd lead him astray or something. Hey, if I didn't, there were a hundred other people at the wedding who gave him the eye. Yep, my little cousin was now a major hottie.

The wedding was neat, held under a huge acacia tree. Bales of hay provided the seating. I dressed in smart pants and button-up shirt. My blond locks were gelled into place. Pretty damn spiffy if you ask me.

Following the ceremony, we got stuck into champagne. THE REAL STUFF! I drank about 4 glasses and felt pretty damn wicked. I mean like, REALLY wicked! I was one of the few dudes there without a chick. My cousin's girl gave me the eye, and we chatted at the reception. That's where button-up shirts come in handy. She fingered one of the buttons and asked to feel my abs. Hey, G, I promise I had no intention of humping this chick. I mean, how could she leave her boyfriend and hunt me down like that? Okay, so I know the answer to that question. Hahahaha! Meanwhile, we fed each other drinks. She tried hard to get me drunk. I enjoyed her company, though. She was a hot looker and made me laugh a lot. Or was that the booze?

"Want to share this with me?" she asked as she produced a joint from her cleavage. My eyes followed the joint as it returned to the narrow gap between her breasts. That's when the shit started with the boyfriend, who (I discovered later)

had followed the girl and me as we disappeared behind the stables.

"If you want to share it with me," she purred, "you'll have to get it."

The moment my fingers entered her cleavage, I felt two hands on my shoulders. A second later, I was flat on my ass in the hay. THANK YOU, HAY! Then I saw my cousin. "So you're not into boys any more?" he snarled. His eyes were hot coals, and his fists were readied for battle.

"I never was," I snapped as I stood. "But you led the way."

He threw a right, but I managed to duck despite the booze. My left fist connected with his gut, but clashed with steel-hard abs. Oops! The force of my punch rocked him back on his heels, nonetheless. Then his elbow collided with my face, and it hurt like hell. I turned to face him again and thought, 'fuck it!' My fist slammed into his ribs. He tried to deflect the punch and, in so doing, lost his cover and I slammed him right in the breadbox. THANK YOU, BRETT! I LOVE YOU, BRO!

The dude's legs buckled and he dropped to the ground, coughing. That's when I figured I had the upper hand. Wrong! He pulled my legs from under me and dove on top. We wrestled and tore each other's shirts to shreds. Hey, G, I couldn't help but notice how hot his bod was but, given the circumstances, I wasn't in a position to admire it other than momentarily.

Brett had warned me about dropping my guard when I had the upper hand, but I totally forgot. In a split second, my cousin got to his

feet and put his boot into my stomach. If he'd connected with my ribs, he would surely have cracked a few. Then the chick rushed to the rescue and grabbed her boyfriend's arm. "Leave him alone!" she shrieked.

A whole bunch of shouting and shrieking ensued but I didn't absorb much of it, except his warning to stay away from his girl. It all turned out okay for me, though, else she would have tugged at my arm in an attempt to pull me off of him.

"Back off," she yelled. "I'm a big girl now and I can do what I like!"

Hahahaha! I can still see the look on that bloke's face as she bent over me, cooing. She unbuttoned what was left of my shirt to inspect the damage. Then she ran a flat hand over my chest and abs. "You work out or something?" she asked as she examined my tanned lumps and bumps. "You have a model's build."

"I try."

"Seems like he didn't damage anything."

"You sure? Not even the other stuff?"

What followed was one of the wildest and most passionate lovemaking experiences of my life. She was hungry for me, and I her.

Later, we rejoined the wedding party. I wore a T that I'd previously collected from my folks' cabin.

Meanwhile, my cousin became increasingly slaughtered at the bar. And me? I still wallowed in seventh heaven, thinking of the incredible sex I had with his girlfriend.

She didn't hang around after that. Instead, she got involved in an

argument with her boyfriend, then the two disappeared—probably for some more wild sex, provided he was capable.

Lucky bitch, I thought. When I got an eyeful of his bod while we tore each other's shirts off, I wanted him! Hahahaha! He was so slaughtered, I probably could have had my way with him. Pity his girl didn't leave him alone just a little while longer.

Now that big bro was absent, the younger cousin hovered around, and we got into a serious chat about surfing. From what I gathered, he was a rocking surfer dude, familiar with most of the hot spots along the east coast. By the same token, he gave the impression he could turn any hot spot into a hotter spot just by being there.

Green Room II
Chapter 29

Once the oldies were tucked away in bed, the younger people organized an impromptu party of their own. It was wild, and held in the stables, which is where we slept for the night. I can't remember if I had sex. Don't think so. It's all a bit of a blur.

Next morning, we were treated to a huge farm-style breakfast; eggs, bacon, chops, sausages, toast, pancakes, juice, cereal, coffee, you name it. Managed to get my cousin's girlfriend's email address. She slipped it to me, as well as her phone number, when her boyfriend wasn't looking.

It turned out to be a wicked weekend. My younger cousin and I are great mates now. Okay, so his older bro is a real prick, but I knew that already.

I don't see Bob much these days. He's focused on getting his school work together. Graham phoned last night. I told him all about my wild weekend. He must've had a raging cockstand by the time I finished. Also told him about my younger cousin and how hunky he is. Hahahaha!

"Yeah? I'll beat him up, and then he won't look so hunky anymore."

"Doubt it, mate. He looks pretty strong to me." Oops! That wasn't such a smart thing to say to my little ego-sensitive grommet friend. I could tell he was pissed when he said, "Might see you during the week. Gotta go!"

"Hey! I'm only kidding, Graham. Don't get so hung up. You could beat

him with one hand tied behind your back. Actually, you and he would be pretty good mates. He's an ace surfer as well."

"So when's he coming to Byron? I can beat him up first, and then surf with him later."

"Hahahaha! You're worse than me, bro."

"Well, you beat up his older bro, so I'll kinda balance the family, hehehehe." Graham's a 'hehehehe' person, and I'm the 'hahahaha' type.

That night, I decided to read my story as G had written it. I'd already read the Fremantle chapters, but not the others; they reminded me too much of the fucked-up Stuart I used to be. Used to be? Lately, I took advantage of the winter swell and surfed daily. It was especially good this past week, and my surfer mate Graham was out there catching barrels with me most days.

Sex with him (albeit pretty tame)? Nope, not recently. I'd backed off quite a bit, with the result that the grommet felt a lot more comfortable in my company, and treated me like a good mate. So maybe the sex thing was a bad idea in the first place.

I also studied hard for the half-yearly exams in June. I figured Bob and I could study together since we shared the same classes. But each time I rocked around to his place, we studied each other's bods instead. It was impossible to hit the school books.

Anyway, I finally found time to read the whole Stuart story, up to its current stage. I could not

believe I was that bad. At the time of reading, I hadn't even smoked so much as a joint for quite a few weeks. Serious. The last one was with that chick at the wedding. Okay, so being off drugs still wasn't easy street. I occasionally suffered the shakes and pains in the gut. And I'd sink into depression without any logical reason.

No, I hadn't grown a halo yet. But some things were on the improve. The atmos with my folks had gotten better as well. Hey, G, can you believe we actually sit together at meal times now? I can hardly believe it myself. We dine together and talk about everything; well, almost everything. What the hell had I missed all these years? And where had my folks been? Maybe the question was: where had I been?

Also cool is my new girlfriend, Julie. A really nice girl—shortish blonde hair and totally cute. She's a year older than me—the 'older woman' story again. Hahahaha!

About a week later, I wrote G again, with 'Just Something' in the subject line: I've been a total prick because I keep promising myself to write and thank you for everything you did for me, but I keep forgetting. Guess it's still a bit of the old acid head shit than stuffs my memory.

I read the Stuart story over and over again. I was so bad. I don't know how I got away with it for so long. And what I did to Graham, and the way I treated him, was soooooo bad.

I understand now why he started that whole acid head campaign against

me. If I were him, I would have done a lot worse. However, we're such good friends now, and it's cool. He likes Julie as well, and thinks she's totally adorable and cute. Don't we all?

You're not gonna believe this, G, but I haven't slipped my ol' fella into her yet. I dig her too much to risk spoiling what we have. We're into each other's pants, though, and enjoy stroking each other, and we get each other horny as hell. It's just that she's really special, and I don't wanna fuck things up like I always do.

With Graham now, we say whatever we like to each other, and things always turn out okay, which says a lot about how our friendship has developed. He still turns me on—make no mistake. And I guess there will be another time we sleep together. I'd like it to be more than sex, though. I'll do a caring Kyle instead of a fucked-up Stuart.

I see Susan and Melanie now and then. They're still good friends despite the lengthy separation.

It's not been easy for me the past few weeks. I guess it's like someone who quit smoking. I'm tempted to grab things and throw them around because my head gets so messed up. I don't miss the grass, which is weird. But then, that stuff's not so addictive. It's the shit that goes with it.

Meanwhile, things with my folks are getting there. That's like the biggest surprise of all for me. My dad even gave me some bucks the other night to take Julie out. He likes

her, and thinks she'll be good for me.

My dad and I stuff around with the boxing bag about twice a week. Hey, G, don't hassle. I go easy on him. Hahahaha! But the bastard hit me a shot the other day that sent me flying back on my ass. He waited for me to get to my feet, and shout and cuss, but when that didn't happen, he got all worried that he'd hurt me. "Hey! You think you got a wuss for a son or what?"

My dad and I have yet to reach the hug stage—if it ever happens. I hug my mom, though, and she even said she thought I was a hunky dude. Yo!

Kyle's folks? They're doing well. The difficult time is not far off, though. His birthday is July 1, the first since he died.

Graham is organizing a few of the juniors in the swim team that Kyle helped train, to go out on their surfboards to commemorate the Starman's birthday on the back line. He invited me to join them. I'm not sure if Mr. or Mrs. T will be there. But, at least, they'll know the guys will be there, and that they all still love Kyle a stack.

I joined Kyle's folks for dinner the other night. It was really cool because we were able to talk about Kyle and laugh at the things we fondly remember. Always the joker; always so full of life and fun. And it was great to know the Ts enjoyed the conversation.

I can't believe that Kyle's room is still the same. Dusted and clean, surfboard on the wall, still waxed from the last time he applied it, Endless Summer poster, everything

just as he left it—a special place for Graham to visit. A shrine.

Once I've had a few weeks of staying clean, Kyle's folks will take Julie, Graham, his girl, and me to dinner as a reward. Cool, huh? Mr. T has been really good for me. I'm beginning to see more of him in my own dad, now that I've stopped all my fucked-up bullshit.

Graham still spends a load of time at Kyle's house. He breezes in every day, all chirpy and beaming. He's very special to the Ts, like Kyle's younger bro.

So, G, you can see things are going pretty tightly at the mo. That wouldn't be the case if you hadn't pushed and pushed me, and kept at me. For what it's worth, thanks a stack. I reckon the full impact of what you have done for me won't register fully until later. But I know what it's worth right now, after reading the Stuart story several times.

I felt better after sending that email to G. I said things I wouldn't have thought possible a few months ago, from a fucked-up Stuart to respectable Stuart. Woohoo! And suddenly I had internet friends who read G's account of my woes and generously offered their support and encouragement.

Next thing, I was back hitting the books for the upcoming mid-year exams. I studied my tits off—cool tits, mind you. In order to study properly, I wrote little points as I went through the work. I broke the day into 3 segments of one subject each, taking short breaks in between.

I told G I'd just finished my Math 1 paper. It went well, but math

had always been one of my better subjects. It helped me gauge the size of a willie just by observing the bulge in the crotch. Hahahaha! Or the curves on a hot chick. Those kinda questions weren't part of the paper, though. Hahaha!

Hey, what was I laughing at? Those thoughts made me horny. I hadn't had sex in ages, and the muscles in my right wrist were getting buff. Had to keep the motor running, I reckoned, or I'd end up with a permanently limp dick.

I also told G about the latest sparring session with my dad. I got him really sweating, hahaha! I figured he was confused as to why I was no longer such an easy target. But it wasn't only my boxing defense that improved, I landed a few smacks on him as well. Thanks for the lessons, Brett.

Meanwhile, we were in for a wet weekend, which, hopefully, promised good surf. We'd enjoyed really awesome surf lately, and I managed at least an hour a day. "You're surfing well now, Graham, but you got no bloody fear!" That was my comment one afternoon as we walked home barefoot, boards tucked under our arms.

"So what the hell did I do now?"

"You almost killed yourself out there."

"I'm still here, aren't I?"

"I remember the first time you paddled out there with Kyle and me—the first few times, actually, and you used to get nailed."

"I don't remember getting nailed."

"Yeah, right, but you kept going back for more!"

"That's how you learn, right? Now I just totally rave on anything and everything that comes my way. Cool, huh?"

"You still get nailed, mate, but I have to admit your recovery is damn quick these days. Hey, we all get nailed. I got hammered by a wave the other day and thought I was gonna drown. I tried to paddle over that mountain of water, but my timing was shit, and the huge thing took me down big time. It seemed I was underwater for way too many seconds. I began to panic because it took so bloody long to surface. My lungs were on fire before I managed to breathe fresh air again. Pretty damn scary!"

"Wuss."

"Yeah, right. You've forgotten about that time at Ballina, you smartass grommet. Remember that? You going over the falls shortly after you first started surfing? You were totally nailed to the deck, coughing and spluttering and freaking. Kyle saw it happen, and he and I helped you get back on your stick, and head back to the surf." Graham became emotional so I asked him what the matter was.

"Nothing."

"You're all teary."

"Can't help it. Kyle saved my life that day."

"Kyle saved a lotta lives, Graham. More than you'll ever know."

"Not yours. You're an ace surfer."

"I'm not just talking about surfing, mate."

Green Room II
Chapter 30

During my rent-boy days, the first job organized for me was with an older guy. It was also the first time I'd been paid to let a guy play with me. A major concern at the time was my friendship with Kyle, which was still relatively new. However, by that stage, Kyle and I had engaged in sex. I enjoyed it so much I thought it would be like that with everyone, but I was too young to understand. Okay, so now I know better, but I nonetheless got off on the power trip. This older guy wanted me so bad that, instead of just one hour, I stayed the whole night and earned a fortune in cash. It was too easy, with no intercourse involved. The only downside was my red-raw cock in the morning.

However, I made sure I knew when that guy was due in town again, and the same thing happened once more—except, this time, I refused to allow him into my mouth. He didn't complain, and paid even more than last time. I told him if he didn't, he would never see me again.

He never did see me again, anyway, because I hated him. And I hated him touching me. I never confided in Kyle about those times, but I suspected he was aware of my depressed state. Despite his sixth sense, however, he never figured out the real reason. Sometimes, to his bewilderment, I dumped my depressions on him.

At the time, it dawned on me that all was not well with my sexuality. At least, that's how I

felt. I was 16; on the one hand naïve but on the other powerful. I used my looks to control people for money and drugs, not realizing the consequences. It was the beginning of all the crap I've dealt with since then.

Graham, his girl, Julie and I took in a movie Saturday night and afterwards dined on pizza and shakes. Shakes? Yeah! Can you believe that?

After we escorted the girls home, Graham and I rocked over to my house, where we watched a cool movie called Con Air. Later, we climbed into my bed, wearing our boxers. Graham snuggled up behind me and placed his warm hands on my abs. We both fell asleep.

Now, that is the route I take with Graham. If things graduate to something more erotic, it would need to be mutual. I need his trust, and it's forthcoming. Sleeping in the same bed is just so normal, just like sharing the same bed with Kyle.

Surfed Saturday, studied in the afternoon, visited Julie for an hour then resumed study. Sunday morning I slept in, unaware that the grommet had arrived. I was still in land of Zs when he jumped on my back, and sent a helluva fisty to my shoulder. I thought my arm would go lame. I grabbed him, and we wrestled. A minute later, my bed looked like it had barely survived a twister.

"I just popped in to say g'day 'cause I'm going out for the day with my folks."

"Thanks for letting me know."

Sunday night I watched the Grand Prix on TV. Actually, things were deadly quiet for me, a guy used

to action and excitement. I still had moments when I felt like a fix so badly but I forced myself to handle it. It drove me insane, however, when those dreaded yearnings consumed me.

I miss Kyle so much when detailed memories of him invade my mind. He was beautiful, G, in every respect. I can still smell and taste him, and remember exactly the smooth texture of his skin. Hey, I know that Kyle's watching us down here. You take care, huh.

The rest of the week was stressful, it really was. So Friday couldn't arrive quickly enough. I needed to de-stress, so much so, I cancelled my date with Julie.

During the week, a chick at school showed a few guys and me some modeling pics taken of her by her 'agent'. Yeah, right. One showed her in a mini school skirt with her blouse tied up around her tits. It was helluva horny, and had all the guys stiff as boards. Her boyfriend is a school jock. Go figure. This is the dude who gets totally pissed off about us gawking at the pics, but what could he do if she wanted to show herself off like that? "Hey, dude," I said to him, "live with it."

Father's Day was due shortly so I made a plan to visit Mr. T. I knew already that Graham organized a gift. Kyle would have also organized something for his dad; he always did. Often, the two of them went on a Dawn Patrol. Kyle had a very special dad, and his dad had a very special son. Dawn Patrols were their special times together.

I bought my dad a packet of Biltong, like beef jerky but a

hundred times better—not so dry. Anyway, G, I want you to know that you really helped Kyle with your stories. You made him feel good about himself, and who he was. I know that if it weren't for you and Kyle, he and I would never have enjoyed the friendship we had. Through your stories, I got to know my friend much better, and appreciate what made him tick, even though, at the time, I didn't appreciate him as much as I should. Tell all your readers they need to get out there and hug all their friends, and to tell them they love them. And here's a special one for you, G. (O) HUGS! And thanks for everything. It's not over for me yet, but you made it easier in hundreds of ways by just being there. Thanks a stack.

Meanwhile, I feel guilty about sharing a joint with Graham on Friday night. He had two in his pocket. I remembered how Kyle got so pissed at Graham for smoking weed, and that's what triggered the guilts. Kyle would have been pissed at me too.

Don't even think about saying what you're thinking, G. I know already. I didn't tell you about it on the weekend because I didn't need you to be pissed at me right then.

Julie and I played pool and had a really nice evening together. She didn't want a late night because she'd been working her backside off with school studies. She's attending her first year of varsity and finds it difficult.

Outside the pool hall, Graham was with his grommet mates doing their 'hanging out' scene, conning the older guys into buying their

beers, and sneaking them out. Graham had obviously drunk too many beers by the time Julie and I caught up with him, and she was NOT impressed! He tried his macho thing with her and she thought he was too big for his boots. Anyway, I told her to lighten up, and explained that Kyle and I always treated the grommet like one of us, one of the big guys.

"I don't need a kid coming on to me, Stuart."

"Just take it as a compliment, okay? You thought he was cool before."

"Before he got tanked."

I saw Julie home, then walked with Graham to his place. I told him what Julie had said.

"Hey, if she wants to bitch, let her. She's just pissed 'cause I won't let her into my pants." At that point, he grabbed his crotch and simulated a sex movement.

"Quit being a jerk, Graham."

"Okay, Bob."

"Bob?"

"Babes over buds."

"Hahahaha! Stuff you!" That's when Graham produced the joint from his pocket.

"Okay," he said as he shoved it under my nose, "so here. If you're my bud, you'll share it with me."

"If I'm your bud I should throw it away."

"I got another one." He was in an aggro, cocky mood, probably due to Julie's comment. He saw his need to take control of the situation, which made me uncomfortable and a tad angry.

I watched as he lit the joint, which seemed so wrong. He was still

just a little guy despite his well-developed body. Anyway, I shared the joint with him as we walked home in the darkness. "Sorry, Kyle."

After reading G's account of the time Kyle was raped, I easily understood why he was vehemently anti-drugs. I guessed someone needed an experience like that to fully appreciate the evil.

Once Graham was safely home, I walked the long walk back to my house. I sensed the THC wave enveloping and spinning my brain, and I felt so damn guilty.

My dad was blown away by his Father's Day gift, the Biltong. According to my recollection, it was the first time since age 14 that I'd given him anything. Back then, my mom bought things for me to give him.

Graham, in his usual style, gave Mr. T a hand-made card. *"From your other little boy. Thanks for everything you help me with."* He'd obviously made something else for his own dad, rather like trying to diplomatically balance two sets of folks simultaneously.

After my surfing session with Graham on Sunday, I rocked over to the Ts to wish Kyle's dad happy father's day. "How are you doing, Mr. T?"

"Today could be better but I'm doing okay. Brett phoned early this morning as well. So I reckon all my boys are keeping in touch. And you? You're looking good, Stuart."

"Getting there." He and I spoke for a while about surfing conditions and the weather. It was a good relax. Kyle's dad was the coolest. My boys? Yeah, we were all his boys; all

Kyle's bros; all Mr. T's sons. He loved us all, and we loved him.

The next day, I invented an excuse not to see Julie. Instead, I took Graham to see Star Wars II. It was a total blast. We enjoyed it so much we planned to see it again. Kyle was a major Star Wars fan, and he'd have loved this new one. He probably would have done the popcorn trick again: opening the bottom of the cardboard cup and putting his dick in there before offering the popcorn around. Hahahahaha! If only...

A few days later, I wrote G again. The exams were almost over, only one more paper to go. I reckoned I should have creamed this crap the second time around (repeating the final year). Yeah right. Why was I battling so bloody much? My science paper was crap. I couldn't believe it! I knew I'd battled with the questions but I crapped out badly. I failed to make the high grade, and only just managed a standard grade mark. That sucked big time. Worse still, our science teacher was a prick. I'll live, I thought. I already knew the reason I'd stuffed the paper, and threw 100 marks down the toilet.

Graham visited after school, and raised my testosterone level instantly. He's just so incredibly good looking! He wore blue jeans with a dark-blue fleecy pullover surf top with hood attached. The day was cold and the little dude looked invitingly warm and cuddly. When he dressed that way, he didn't appear to be all that well built. But under all that nice warm clothing...

"You look all warm and cuddly."

"I'm cold, so come keep me warm." Then he kidded around and pushed me back on the bed. He laid on top of me and said in a mock child's voice, "Okay, I'll keep my baby Stuey-woeey all nice and warm, 'cept my baby Stuey is getting a boner."

I packed up laughing at his joke, and the way he acted so cute and cheeky. Then he suddenly lifted himself and sat on the bed. "I can't even touch you without you getting a boner," he complained.

"So? What's wrong with that? You turn me on."

"Why?"

"Because you're a hunk."

"So tell my girlfriend."

"She knows already."

"Yeah, but now she's getting all uppity because she watched a program on tele about guys taking advantage of girls to get blowjobs. So she asked me about my hygiene 'cause they said teen guys didn't care much about hygiene. What a load of crap."

I knew Graham was as fanatical about cleanliness as Kyle was. The two were responsible for using half the neighborhood's water supply. And Graham's hair always smelled of shampoo. Oops! But he had a few zits. Hahahaha! "Want me to check if you're clean? Then you can check me."

"No, because you just wanna gawk at my cock."

"It's not a cock, it's a wiener."

That dented the little dude's ego. He jumped at me and punched the crap out of my arm. I pulled his top over his head to blind him, then threw my arm around his neck and held

him in a headlock. I tickled him, which made him giggle, but he struggled nonetheless, and hit out and kicked in all directions. I quickly released the writhing, wriggling bundle of energy before I copped a flying fist.

He laid on the bed, laughing his tits off. "Are you wearing briefs?" I asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"I couldn't see your boxers. Thought maybe you weren't wearing anything under there." I stood, leaving the grommet lying on the bed. He placed his hands behind his head, an action that caused his top to rise and reveal about two inches of tanned, velvety belly. "Have you ever eaten pussy?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"And?"

"And ... what's it like? I figure if I get to eat my girl she'll go down on me."

"She's got a problem with you not washing—the hygiene thing. There's no way she's gonna blow you."

"I DO wash!"

"Lemme check."

"Stuff you! Go check yourself out. I heard that uncut guys grow cheese under their foreskins."

"So you dig cheese? Hahahaha!"

"Har-de-fucking-har. Cheese dick."

"Uncut guys get to last longer. You cut guys just go into pain spasms and fake it."

"Cheese dick, cheese dick, hehehehe!"

"Got nothing to say because you've never been there, huh?"

"Bugger off, cheese dick."

"Pussy virgin. How come you've never 'done it' with a girl? I can't figure that because you're so hot looking and all."

"Because I'm fussy."

"I think you're scared."

"Yeah, right," he said defiantly as he rubbed his crotch.

"This is pussy eater right here."

I sat beside him and sent my hand under his top, and felt his nipple harden. "Want a hand job?"

"No, it's cool."

"I love to watch you enjoy this. Did Kyle do this a lot?"

"Massages." Then the kid's eyes became teary as his voice faltered. "Kyle loved to give me a massage. He was ace at it."

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

"Want a massage?"

"I gotta get movin'."

I walked my mate to the door, then to the road. "Hey, Graham, I'm not Kyle, and I know how you feel about him. I'm trying real hard just to be your friend. And I want to say thanks for the past couple of weeks. I dig you a stack. I need you to know that. I understand how you miss Kyle, and so do I. Remember his dog Roo?" He nodded silently. "It took quite a while for Kyle to get over that loss. But everything—life itself—carried on. You remind me so much of Kyle. Bet he wished he had your sixpack, though." At least that got a giggle out of him.

He turned and began to walk home. I watched his broad shoulders that appeared even broader in contrast to his narrow, butt-hugging jeans, and those awesome legs of his.

But, in truth, he was a little bloke,
a grommet, a kid of 14. And my heart
followed him down the road as he
bounced into the distance, then
disappeared.

Green Room II
Chapter 31

With Kyle's birthday just one week away, I found myself giggling as I remembered his laugh, and the way he goofed off. Did I ever tell you about the time we arrived home totally slaughtered? We stopped at a tree and juiced the damn thing! There we were, in the middle of the neighborhood, two lighties jacking ourselves stupid, giggling like crazy at the sight of our juice dribbling down the bark. It was one of those nights we hardly slept. We giggled again and again at the mention of the most stupid things. Kyle would say something like 'tree', and we held our stomachs as we succumbed to more hysterics. Or we heard a dog bark and say, "Guess what he's barking at?" Hahahaha! Bloody hell, those were the most awesome of awesome times.

As Kyle's birthday neared, Graham descended further into depression. I thought about treating him to the movies, but I also needed to check with Julie.

Meanwhile, during my last visit to the Ts, I found three disks in Kyle's draw. I checked them at home and emailed G right away.

Hey, G, if you cry when you read this, don't hassle because I did too. It's Kyle's last message. He was about to post it on his web site, but didn't make it that far.

So the big surprise is that I'm going to varsity to study marine bio. Yep! I've been keeping 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.

As it turned out, Graham didn't sleep over Sunday night. Instead, we connected early next morning at the beach for July 1, Kyle's birthday. It was one of those stunning dawns common to winter: not a breath of wind and a calm sea, with a gentle swell that soon lapped beneath our boards. The rays of the rising sun had only just begun to peek over the horizon and illuminate the Byron headland.

Graham was with five of his school mates from the swim team. All of them knew Kyle because he helped train them. At first, I was a little disappointed because I expected a bigger crowd, but that was not to be. The guys in Kyle's graduating class were all working or attending varsity.

All the grommets wore wetsuits, and resembled little gods. Only one recognized me as a fellow surfer at the local. As the sun slowly rose, it threw long golden rays across the glassy surface of the sea, and toward the beach. The air was fresh and cool. Graham appeared edgy as he grabbed the rails of his stick and led the group in a V formation out to the backline. I followed a short distance behind.

The surf was small but good. I was in a position to watch the silhouettes of the guys in front as they paddled to where Kyle had surfed countless times before.

Eventually, we all stopped paddling, and I wondered 'what now?' One of the guys headed for the peaks to catch a ride, and the others followed. Only Graham and I remained sitting on our boards, rising and falling with the gentle swell.

"Are you gonna catch a wave ... for Kyle?"

"In a while," answered the grommet.

"This is pretty damn cool, Graham ... organizing this Dawn Patrol for our mate."

"Yeah." The grommet's eyes shone with tears. Mine began to sting a little as well.

"I reckon he's watching us right now, probably surfing a cloud and yelling for us to check him out."

"Think?" he asked hopefully, then sniffled.

"Hey, this is Kyle we're talking about, Graham. It's his birthday, mate. I think he wants you to be happy for him."

The flood of tears could no longer be restrained, and the grommet's shoulders shook with grief. I paddled closer and placed a comforting hand on his neoprene-clad leg. "I'm here for you if you need to offload the tears, or even if you feel the need to punch someone. I love you, mate. And Kyle did as well—more than you probably know."

I remained patient as I waited for the sobs to subside. The poor little dude. Then I led him to the waves, where we surfed for a couple of hours. Each time I caught a wave, I thought about how many times I'd seen Kyle styling on his stick. He was a totally cool surfer, and I figured Graham entertained the same thoughts.

Graham and I agreed to meet later at Kyle's house. Kyle had a book we used to read to each other—Kahlil Gibran's 'The Prophet'. If Kyle had a religion, it was in that book. I wanted Graham to read the piece about 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.

I could hear Kyle's soft voice now.
 Soft. He laid with his head on my chest and
 held the book to his face as he read the
 words. Some of the passages he knew by heart.
 I had my hand on his stomach and felt his

breathing as he spoke. It was another of those special times we shared together.

Meanwhile, Graham was much happier after the surf. We walked home with our boards tucked under our arms, and trod the same ground that the grommet and Kyle trod a thousand times as the pair headed home after a session at the local.

"Kyle would love what you did for him. That was pretty special."

"I hoped his dad would be there."

"Did you tell him?"

"I went to his house early this morning, but Kyle's folks are feeling down. Said I'd see them a bit later, maybe."

"Want to rock over to my place later?"

"I'll check."

So that was the birthday. No flashing lights in the sky, but I knew that Kyle had watched us.

This is such a totally fucked-up sad time, G. And it's really difficult to deal with right now. Kyle was like a blood brother to Graham, and it's hard to imagine what that little bloke is suffering right now. I just hope he understands that I'm there for him when he needs a shoulder.

G had lost a lot of email from Kyle due to computer crashes over the years or whatever, so I searched Eudora and uncovered a stack that I zipped and forwarded to the fossil. One of the letters reminded me of a time Kyle confessed to email he received from guys with sexuality problems. Kyle bitched about them because it took ages to compose his responses.

"Why bother?"

"Because my life was saved like that, by someone who cared enough to give me the time of day. Not everyone is like you, Stuart."

I remember that day like it was yesterday. It was one of our worst arguments. "What do you mean 'like me'?"

"You don't give a stuff about anything except Stuart."

"Yeah? Well, stuff you! What damn difference will you make to any of those dudes, Kyle?"

"How will I know if I don't at least try?"

"So now you're 'Dear Dorothy' for the net? And then you bitch about the amount of mail you get?"

"I bitch because I don't always have the time to respond. But it's cool that they mail me."

That was the reason Kyle became so liked by everyone. He always made time for others, whether or not he knew them. I needed Kyle the other day because I was in the shit with my dad, AGAIN!

I was online in chat when my dad walked into my room, and noticed a joint on my desk. It had been there for two days, unsmoked. He turned, and slammed the door behind him. Then I heard him arguing with my mom. I thought 'stuff him' because I wasn't in the mood for his shit. Shortly after, he stormed into my room again and said he wanted to see me 'right now'.

"Are you still taking drugs, Stuart?"

"No."

"Then what's that on your desk?"

"A joint."

"But it's not yours, right?"

"Yes it is, and you know it. It's been sitting there for two days already."

"You weren't going to smoke it? Is that what you're saying?"

"Why don't you just take me out to the garage and give me a hiding instead of this shit?"

"Because that doesn't work for you, nor me."

"It works for me just fine." My dad hated back chat like that from me, and wasn't handling my lip at all.

"And arriving home stinking drunk yesterday?"

"I can't explain that to you because you wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"It was my mate's birthday on Monday—the one who got killed."

"So he would've wanted you to get drunk?"

"No. It just helps me handle not having him around."

"You're becoming a damn alcoholic."

"An embarrassment, huh? Big shot's son found drunk in the gutter. No good for your image?"

My dad reacted impulsively, and hit me across the face. I couldn't hold back the tears because the blow was so painful. But I was determined not to cry. Not in front of him. No way.

"I'm not one of your drug-addict mates, Stuart. Don't speak to me that way."

"You finished?"

"What do you want? You want your mother and me to leave you alone so you can ruin your life? Is that it?"

"I thought things were improving."

"So did we. And don't use your friend's death as an excuse. You've changed during the past two or three years, and we don't know why. I see you drifting further and further away, and I don't know what to do about it."

"I try. I have tried. It's just right now."

Well, my feeble explanation didn't prevent my dad from launching a long lecture about this being my last chance to reform or suffer rehab. Even then he was undecided as to wanting me back home again. My mom was elsewhere so I wasn't sure if she was a party to the 'get rid of Stuart' plan. In any case, I'd blown any chance I might have had to join my folks on their upcoming tour of Europe. "Not on your fucking life!" he replied when I

asked. It was the first time he swore during the convo.

It was difficult for my folks to appreciate how much Kyle meant to me. I think it's difficult for a lot of people to understand what Kyle meant to his friends. I'm not talking sex here, but about the way he was, his personality and character. He was able to put people in a good mood.

You know what, G? Kyle was the first guy to kiss me. I almost shat myself. But it was the most incredible moment of my life because, all of a sudden, our relationship was normal. That one experience changed the way I thought of myself.

Yeah, I can hear you ask why did I fuck it all up? I wish I knew, and I wish I could make everything different.

It's Wednesday afternoon now, and I feel fantastic after spending two hours in the gym, and taking a shower. I'm wearing a towel around my waist because I'm burning up after all that exercise.

Sermon on the Mount.

I climbed Wollumbin yesterday to visit Kyle's and Rick's special place. And yes, I was stalked by a guy with spiky black hair and a big cheesy smile. I sat on a rock that Kyle must have planted his butt on many times, and stared at the impressive view that stretched eastward to the Byron coast, and north to the Gold Coast. "Hey, Kyle, what are you doing here?" I asked a drifting cloud.

"Checking up on you. Want me to tell you how proud I am of you?"

"So why aren't you really here?"

"I'm in your head, Stuart. Are you just imagining this convo or what? I'll leave that to you to figure out."

"I've read though a lot of your email to G, mate."

"You're a snoop."

"I hurt you a lot, but never realized how much."

"That's the thing. I've had oodles of time up here to figure it all out. A lot of the problem was me expecting too much of you as well. It didn't occur to me that you had your own life."

"Is that what you call it? My own life? Spaced and slaughtered?"

"That's another thing. Check. It's called Life 101. It's where you live and learn. It's like climbing this mountain, my mountain. You don't always notice the rocks and stones along the way, so you sometimes trip and fall flat on your ass, but you always pick yourself up, and then keep heading for the summit. It's not like you gave up and turned back."

I could see the distant white caps at Byron, the local beach where Kyle and I surfed together. Roll, roll, roll, rolled the swells, just as they had since time immemorial. From the mountain top, I felt like God surveying his creation. "What did you ever see in my folks, Kyle?" I said aloud. "Especially my dad. He hates me."

"I'm not the prophet, Stuart. That comes from Folks 101. I remember when you used to go places in the company of your folks overseas, posh parties—dressed in your tux like a penguin—partly because you were on the lookout for some old wrinkly lady to screw, but also because you wanted to share time with your folks. Your dad doesn't hate you, he just doesn't know how to love the new son you've become. He doesn't know how to get close to someone who won't allow him to. Your folks were always pretty cool towards me. So your dad doesn't remember my name? You've had way too many friends, Stuart. Is that fair? To expect your dad to remember them all?"

"But you were special."

"To you, yes. But, to your dad, it's you and your mom who are special."

"There's a huge hole in my heart since you left, Kyle. And it's not being filled."

"Maybe that's because you're trying to kill yourself with drugs. Maybe you're trying too hard to make friends. Or maybe you're not trying at all. You tried it your way, and that hole is still there. Why not try it a different way?"

"Have a great birthday, mate."

"Don't change the subject."

"What's a different way, Kyle? I've always been fucked up. I can see that now by reading all the mail you sent G."

"It's called Reading 101. You're only seeing the bad stuff ... Eudora trashed the rest, hehehehe."

"Fuck off, Kyle, you're not helping."

"I'm not allowed to cuss up here."

"Cool."

"You're forgetting that I was human when I wrote all that stuff to G. I picked up on a lotta the bad stuff you used to do. After the swim tour was when it hit me, like how bad the whole drug scene is. It took the rape for me to wise up."

"Why did you never tell me about that?"

"Because everything I was, everything I represented, was stolen from me. Gone. In a flash. I wasn't in control. How can I expect you or anyone else to understand the enormity of what happened? And not just the physical aspect, but me, myself, my self-respect, my folks' son, everything I was that suddenly disappeared. It took months to pluck up the nerve to tell G about it. I figured I'd let him down."

"It wasn't your fault, Kyle."

"It was. Drugs weren't forced down my throat. I need you to understand something, Stuart."

"Here we go, Lecture 101."

"Hehehe. Shuddup and listen. When you're all drugged up, it's not you anymore. It's not Stuart. All anyone sees then is a loser."

"Thanks, Kyle."

"It breaks my heart to see people treat you like crap because I know the real you. For that matter, so do you. I know the love we shared. I had you inside me. That was so special, Stuart, you have no idea."

Again, I studied the distant shore and the landmarks so easily recognized from Wollumbin's peak. "I suppose now I have to live up to the expectations of G and his friends."

"They have nothing to gain from your reformation, but you do. You've got everything to gain, including your folks. You can enjoy the same thing with your dad that I enjoyed with mine. Besides, my mom thinks you're cute."

"Really?"

"Yeah, but she's got an appointment with an optometrist."

"Har-de-fucking-har."

"Meanwhile, Graham needs someone he can trust, Stuart. Someone older to whom he can take his probs and talk them through. He's heading along the same road you're traveling, and he won't handle it unless he has someone like you he can confide in."

"I've tried many times to reform, but I keep going back to my old ways."

"It's when you stop trying that you'll have a much more serious problem, Stuart. You'll always trip and fall. Check my mail to G, it's called 'hills and valleys'. The hills, like up here on my mountain, are way cool. You can see things from up here that you can't see from down there."

I stared again at the same scene Kyle admired a thousand times during his life, and played our conversation over and over in my head. I imagined him sitting there with me. Hahahaha! I even mimicked his voice sometimes.

One time, the little hairs on my arm bristled and I got goosebumps. Kyle called them 'chicken babies'.

I tried to imagine what he might have said to me in the only way I knew how. Reading his mail was a huge eye-opener for me. I never realized some of the pain he suffered; with me, with Brett when he left Byron for Fremantle, with the rape on the swim tour. Despite his own pain, he worried constantly about us, his friends. I wish I'd managed to find and save all his mail, especially the first mails he sent you, G. I was 14 when we became mates—two lighties on a high—a high of friendship.

Green Room II
Chapter 32

G'day Stuart. I've not read all of Kyle's emails you sent me but what I have read so far is as though he's still here talking to me. I stared at his photos on the mantle yesterday. Every time I asked him where he was he replied, "Here". The great bulk of Kyle's mail was written early mornings in the school comp lab before classes. After he graduated, the volume of mail decreased significantly because he relied mostly on a local internet café. If he'd lived, he would no doubt take advantage of the comp lab at university.

The convo you had with Kyle on the mountain fascinated me. I wondered when you'd get around to visiting his special place. His room and the surf are his special places too, but Wollumbin was where he searched his soul. He had much to say during his young life, and I was fortunate enough to be on the receiving end. Life would have been very different for both of us if we hadn't met. The same can be said for you.

I know you get the guilts when you read about the crap you dished out to Kyle, but you need to remember you were not the only one. Practically all of Kyle's friends gave him grief at one time or another, even Graham. When a friend of mine experienced a similar situation with his mate over drugs, he asked his dad what he should do about it. "You need to make a choice, son, do you want a friend or an

enemy?" Kyle often asked the same question in relation to you and his answer was always 'friend'. When you apologized to Kyle after the Melanie fiasco, your answer to the same question was also 'friend'. Seems to me that you can ask the same question about your dad. What do you want from him? We both know the answer to that one, so go get it.

Think yourself lucky that you and Kyle were friends and lovers before he died. If he'd died during one of your fights, you would never forgive yourself. Anyway, it's too late now to 'make everything right'. It's a good lesson to keep in mind as you continue life's journey. You can't go back but you can go forward.

Yep, Kyle wasn't afraid to kiss. He even planted one on Graham for his birthday, which shocked the hell outta the grommet. Kyle's turn to be startled was when Brett planted one on him during their soul talk on the mountain. Brett's excuse was that Kyle was the kinda guy who attracted that sort of affection. Hmmmm. I've never seen anyone dance the tango solo.

Two hours in the gym, huh? If I tried that you'd be sending me get-well flowers.

Anyway, I'm glad you snooped and read Kyle's email. He may have been talking to me but now he's talking to you. He's not there to haunt you; he's there to help you. And, as a result, you're doing a lot of soul searching. Be careful not to judge yourself too harshly. We all make mistakes and, hopefully, learn from them. Kyle learned from his mistakes and Brett did likewise.

You're learning from yours. And, you can be there for Graham when he inevitably stumbles.

When I told my dad that I was gay, his response was, "Where did I go wrong?". He referred to his parenting, not my sexuality. If my dad went 'wrong' it was because he was a lousy communicator. That wasn't his fault. Maybe your dad is asking himself the same question. He housed you, fed you, clothed you and educated you. Is the rest up to you? As you know only too well, lack of communication leads to negative consequences. And communication is a two-way street.

Kyle solved a lot of his problems and heartache by communicating with me. Although he kept secrets from his folks and friends, including you, there was at least one person with whom he could share them. I was his safety valve, his mentor, and he knew that his life was as important to me as it was to him. Some people choose God as their dumping ground. But for Kyle, the Aussie fossil was preferable because he REPLIED in writing!

Never underestimate the value of Kyle's legacy to us. We are two of the luckiest blokes alive to have known that youthful sage. And, might I say, he was also lucky to have known us. As Mr. T told you, Kyle was thrilled to bits when he met the blond bombshell grommet named Stuart. You arrived at a time in his life when he desperately needed a friend and confidant.

And that hole in your heart? It ain't a hole, mate. It's another of

Kyle's special places, and you better believe it.

Home alone: that's me. I've been given a position of trust while my folks are in Europe and the staff enjoys a week's break. I spoke to Bob about the situation: "Hey, mate, I'm scared to be home alone."

"Yeah, right. The only thing that scares you is starving to death."

"That too. Wanna stay here for a couple of days? Pleeeeeeeease?"

I was exhausted after those few days. Go figure. Actually, I was buggered anyway because of all the recent activity, such as visiting Kyle's special place on the mountain. I slept for four hours after that, then Julie and I hit the town. That's when THE DRAMA STARTED!

Julie and Big Bro's girlfriend were good mates, something I discovered at the pizzeria. Julie and I sat at a table, eating pizza and drinking beer, when Big Bro Craig of 'demolish Stuart' fame walked in with his chick. The two girls were all over each other with a bunch of 'howzits' and shit. Craig gave Julie a kiss because they were also friends. By that stage I was boiling!

Craig ignored me which was cool. I couldn't stand the creep. And I couldn't understand why Kyle had been friendly with that asshole.

Julie invited them to our table. Craig knew I wouldn't spark any aggro because he'd flattened me on two previous occasions. He initiated a three-way convo between him and the girls, which left me feeling like a spare prick at a wedding. From time to time, Julie

attempted to involve me in the convo, but Craig continually manipulated the chat back his way. Eventually, I suggested to Julie that we should move. "I'm becoming claustrophobic." Why? Because I was sick and tired of listening to that pumped-up gorilla talk about himself.

Craig's face turned crimson, but I felt safe. No way would he try anything in the pizzeria. But Julie said she preferred to remain with her friends. I'd had enough at that point. "Okay, suit yourself and stay." I left the table and walked out of the restaurant.

As I headed down the road, hoping to catch a ride home, I felt a fist connect with the back of my head. It was you-know-who. The moment I turned to face him, he threw another punch. Thankfully, I ducked. But he planted me again in the breadbox. I felt my knees weaken, and I couldn't stand. A wave of nausea overwhelmed me.

Craig went berserk, cussing and warning he would fuck me up if he ever saw me again.

"Julie invited you to our table, not me," I insisted. "Why the fuck don't you just stay out of our way, huh?"

"You're still a bloody chickenshit," he snarled, and used his dancing hands as a signal to engage in combat. "Why don't you just come and take me out of your way, huh?"

"And give you an excuse to beat the crap out of me? No way."

He about turned and fumed his way back to the restaurant. Julie phoned later and blasted me for

embarrassing her. Apparently, she was unaware of the roadside confrontation, and I chose not to mention it.

Anyway, G, I've had enough of her. She treats me like a kid, and I can't handle that. If I want a virgin I'll find a nun.

I phoned Melanie and organized a rendezvous for coffee. She was pretty cool on the phone and said she was between boyfriends at the moment. Did that mean...? Nah, perish the thought of a threesome.

I really like Melanie, and I know a hundred reasons why Kyle loved her. So it was cool. I suspected she might tell me to piss off when I called, but no. I figured she'd had time to calm down. Besides, I'd been ... sort of clean.

The morning I wrote G, I cruised around the house. Got out of bed about 10am, and made toast with cheese. Yes, I can do that, smartass. G is a bit of a gastronome in the kitchen.

Graham was expected to return from his rugby tour on Sunday or Monday, probably the latter. That meant the two of us could surf out the remainder of the school vacation. It was also Graham's birthday in a month or so and I needed to check the date—some time in August.

Meanwhile, I was pretty sure my relationship with Julie belonged to the past. Next day, I met with Melanie for cappuccinos. SHE SMOKES! That was a new one. She started on Dunhill Ultimate Lights about four months ago. She's still beautiful, G, just as she was when Kyle was here. What didn't we speak about? Well, we

didn't talk about us going steady or anything. Actually, we kinda touched on it, but no talk of sex. Well, not really. And we didn't discuss Julie. Oops, yes we did; I called her a bitch. Melanie reckons I probably used that same word to describe her as well, and she laughed.

"Any girl you can't screw is a bitch, Stuart. Get used to it. The woods are full of them."

"So, is Melanie a bitch?"

"What would you say?" she smiled.

"What if I said I want to go out with you?"

"Think you could step into Kyle's shoes, Stuart? I was spoiled by him, and the way he treated me."

"Don't ask me to do that. Just let me be me. There's no one who could step into those shoes, and you know it. But it's time for all of us to stop hiding, Melanie. I was lost in my own self-pity, and during the past week a million things dawned on me about what a shit I've been."

"How about we just start as friends?"

"Then I can't screw you, Melanie. Damn!"

She laughed her tits off at my remark, and it seemed that Kyle was sitting there with us. It was the same laugh she laughed when she was with him, and it was just so damn good to hear. "It's called love making, Stuart, and yes we can—when we're both ready."

"I'm ready, I'm ready!"

"You're horny ... nice, but horny."

"I'm pulling your chain, babes. I realize we both need time. But I

need someone next to me I can talk to, and tell things to. I'm not comfortable with Julie like I am with you."

She took my hand in hers, which I appreciated as a wonderful gesture. "I'm not sure, Stuart. I think I love you but I'm not certain. I've always had a soft spot for your looks, even when Kyle and I were dating. But you were always so egocentric, like no one mattered except you. Then again, you've changed since the last time we spoke, and maybe it's because we all needed some time out. I think I'll always love Kyle, and to contemplate what might have been."

Melanie totally knocked my socks off when she confessed her feelings toward me.

After coffee, we chatted in the drizzle on the beach for a while, just holding hands and talking. She even let me kiss her before I walked her home.

I'm not sure how much Melanie knows about Kyle and me. I'd gone through Kyle's mail with a fine tooth comb searching for anything he might have said to Melanie about his relationship with his mates, particularly me. But if she did know, or suspect, then it appeared that Kyle never wrote about it. Maybe he wasn't sure either.

And Julie? I phoned and told her how I felt, that it was over between us. At first, she screamed and cussed—went totally ballistic. Then the anger turned to tears which rattled my brain big time. She begged to give our relationship another chance, but I declined. That scene at the pizzeria was a total stuff up,

and showed me a side of her that I found unacceptable.

With all the kerfuffle this past week, I'm looking forward to Graham's return. I can't wait to hear all about his rugger tour, and how he enjoyed himself. I miss that little grommet and his cheeky grin.

Green Room II
Chapter 33

Bob stayed over an extra day, which was cool. He's a damn good cook, and taught me how to make macaroni cheese and chicken casserole. I'd stuff it big time if I tried to make it on my own, I reckon.

He and I get along well, no strings attached. With my folks and the staff away, we could walk around the house naked. Which reminds me, I could never figure how Kyle walked around his house naked when his folks were home. It was no biggie for him to step out of the shower and stroll nonchalantly into the kitchen to make a sandwich, then return to his room with his six inches swaying in the breeze. He embarrassed the crap out of his friends whenever he exited the pool to hug his mom after she arrived home from wherever. The rest of us squeezed our crotches against the pool wall to hide our jewels, hahahaha!

Nakedness to Kyle was never a big deal. Never. One time he laughed as he told the story of sending Graham home in the buff because he wouldn't allow the grommet to retrieve his clothes from the washing machine. Graham had to walk through the front garden in full view of any passer-by, then jump the wall. Kyle held his stomach as he related the story because he laughed so much at the recollection of Graham's two ass cheeks disappearing like lightning over the fence. I laughed hysterically as well, and each time we made a comment about the grommet's butt flying over the fence, we

collapsed into more guffaws. Oh, my God, those were such good times.

Meanwhile, Graham arrived back from his rucker tour, and visited my house yesterday, wearing jeans that hung half way down his ass, and revealed the waistband of his bright blue/green cartoon boxer shorts. He also wore a thick fleecy blue hoody. His skateboard was in his hand, and his face beamed as I opened the front door to greet him.

"So?" he asked. "You stick your thing into her yet?"

"Julie?"

"No, Melanie. I saw her and she told me you guys might be an item."

"So you reckon I should stick my 'thing' into her to do what? Take her temperature maybe? You gonna come inside or just stand there and be so fucked-up disgusting?"

"How come you're swearing so loud? Your folks home?"

"Nah."

"Coolio!"

The grommet placed his skateboard on the floor and rode it to the kitchen where he opened the fridge and grabbed a 2-liter bottle of fresh orange juice. Without hesitation, he put it to his mouth. I took the bottle and placed it on the table. "Get a glass, you grub."

"Okay," he grinned, "just checked to see how you'd react." His grin is a heart-stealer.

"Have a good tour?"

"Awesome," he said as he filled a glass with juice.

"Win any games?"

"Two out of five. It was cool, though, I scored four tries and beat

up a guy who wanted to tangle with me."

"A midget?"

"He was a troll, man—thought he could push me around because I'm little. Showed the fucker good."

"Wow! Did you learn to cuss like that on the tour?"

"Nope, learned that from you," he grinned again, "anyway, I don't cuss."

"Hey, mate, when's your birthday?"

"August 15, why?"

"Maybe I'll give you a blowjob for your 12th."

"Fifteen!" he insisted. "I'll be fifteen!"

"Crap, man. You still look like eleven."

"Screw you!" He lowered his boxers and raised his hood. "Check these out. They're pubes. P-U-B-E-S! You don't get those on an 11-year-old grom."

"Yuck! I suppose your balls are all hairy as well."

"Nope, my eggs are like yours and Kyle's—smooth."

"Guess I'll have to believe you."

Graham pulled up his boxers, replaced the hood on his head, then told me all about the tour. Sounded like they all had a ball. He and a few of his mates sneaked out of the hostel one night and got trashed at a pool bar. Talked some older guys into buying them Bacardi Breezes and alcoholic cider. Meanwhile, he was convinced his mate Joe lost his virginity on the tour, which pissed off the grommet big time. Apparently, Joe disappeared with a girl while the

others were busy getting trashed. He returned later to announce he'd just had his first nooky. The guys teased him with "yeah, right". But Graham believed his mate's version, and was accordingly miffed.

"So tell Joe you lost your virginity on the previous tour."

"I did, but he didn't believe me, so I told him the truth."

Later, the grommet and I surfed—it was really bitching out there, so we made a plan to surf again next day.

Hey, G, I made breakfast this morning—how cool is that? Toasted cheese sandwiches, hahahaha! Yeah, I agree that this smoking cigarettes thing with Melanie is not good. Maybe she can quit. I dunno.

As to your mention of Big Bro Craig, I reckon I could have taken him down the other day. Seriously. By the same token, I really am a chickenshit, and I remember all too well how he hurt me previously. Maybe he's not deluded about his ability to hammer the crap out of me.

Melanie and I will take in a movie tonight, then pig out on pizza. She's phoned every evening. So has Julie. Julie can't believe I dumped her spunky ass. I told her to go blow Craig and she said she'd pass on the message. Hahahaha!

Following winter break, I'm back at school for the third quarter, and need to knuckle down harder. This year is a repeat of my final, so it's graduate or bust.

Melanie and I took in a movie and pizza. She was relaxed because it was a no-pressure evening. Hey, we didn't even need to hitch a ride

there and back because she organized a friend to drive us. To me, it was like a first date. She slept over at a friend's house, while I hitched a ride from there to my place. Seems to me that both Melanie and I have changed dramatically since Kyle's death. He is the glue that continues to bind us.

Saturday morning I surfed with Graham. He'd attended a house party the night before at Sean's. I detest that pumped-up little asshole, Sean. He's arrogant, and jealous of the friendship between Graham and me.

Graham still suffered the effects of the party, and was shitfaced in the water, as well as miserable. When Graham is hung over, it's pointless to talk to him. His moods had gotten worse since Kyle's accident. My invitation to have him sleep over that night was met with, "You'll have to wank instead because I'm busy." He and his mates organized a computer games evening using linked PCs to play games on line within a small network in a single house. Meanwhile Graham's comment (about my needing to wank instead) pissed me off totally.

That night, I played pool with some friends at a local pub, and got myself slaughtered. Ended up snorting a few lines with one of the guys. Hey, G, I could've told you we had Pepsi or whatever. I can't help myself in those kinda situations. And I was in no mood to stay home alone again. I'm sick of it.

Sunday I played the good son because my folks arrived home from Europe. They were surprised to see the house hadn't been trashed. They

had a blast, and my dad bought me a couple of CDs in between business meetings.

Later, I managed to get hold of Graham. "I've been grounded because my folks want me to get my school shit together," he complained. I asked him again to think about sleeping over one night on the weekend.

I'm depressed again, G, about fuckall. I'd like to think Graham is my best mate, but I'm never certain about his moods. Meanwhile, Bob hooked up with a girl. I'm pretty sure he's never had a steady girl in his life. Lately, I notice certain differences in his appearance. He dresses differently, and gells his hair. Hahahaha! Kyle did that whenever he went on the town all smart. Bob also looks pretty ripped. His thighs were always muscular but they look even better now. And his gut is more cut. He's one of those lucky blokes who doesn't need to work on his pecs because he has a naturally good looking chest. That was also an advantage Kyle possessed.

Bob wore a pair of my favorite jeans, which fitted snug but not overly so. They showed off all his goodies; narrow waist, cool legs, cute butt and ample package. And he was madly in love! Hahahaha! Poor dude. Not sure if he's still a pussy virgin or what. If he is, I'll invite him to watch while I screw his chick. That's what mates are for, right? Oh, the sacrifices I make for my mates!

XCUSE me but I shared a joint with a mate and I'm winging now. It's bad you know. I pull back my foreskin and have conversations with my

cockhead. I squeeze it to make the hole move like a mouth as it talks to me. Hello, hello, hello? Do you have any idea how bad that is when your cock talks back to you? At least I have you to talk to, G, huh?

Bob wants a tattoo. I'm toying with accompanying him. Maybe I'll get a navel ring or something. Bob reckons I should get a nipple ring.

Oh yeah, almost forgot to tell you. Your hero Rick left a message on Kyle's web site, 'Cya on the lip' (surf talk for the lip of a wave). No mail to me, though, to say the site looks cool or whatever. Anyway, it shouldn't upset me. Hahahahaha!

Thought about visiting Kyle's special place on the mountain yesterday. But I was too trashed and lethargic.

Meanwhile, my folks think I'm cool. Hey, I play this little game. I arrive home from school and get stuck into my homework like a good little Stewie. Then I go surfing and get all redeye at the beach. That's what salt water does to your eyes anyway, doesn't it? Then I return home and eat my whole meal because I get the munchies so bad. Hey, don't hassle, G. Smoked a couple of Js, that's all.

Phoned Graham; he's glad to be back at school and kicking a rugger ball around. He's back into boxing training at the local gym, and hitting the gym pool as well. He and his mates organized a deal with the gym for reduced membership fees if they belong to a school team.

Melanie's chuffed about our date the other night. She really enjoyed herself, and wants a repeat

this Friday but I promised to connect with some mates.

Dammit, I'm suffering the downers again. Better get some shuteye before I tackle my homework.

Green Room II
Chapter 34

I survived the first week of school without damage or attracting any shit, which was neat. Friday night I was scheduled to meet some school mates, so I asked Melanie if we could postpone our date 'til Saturday.

Bob declined to join me and my mates because the guys were mostly ex-customers of his and mine. Besides, he had a date with his girl to dip his wick. We wanted him to be our designated driver because he didn't drink. Weird, huh? He sold all that shit to everyone else for years but didn't use it himself. He enjoyed the occasional drink, but never to excess. Ditto grass. He smoked a little just to mellow out.

But, all of a sudden, he was into this fitness thing, tripping on looks. I figure he turned my invite down because he was pissed at my connecting with my old customers.

Also had a call from Graham. How strange. The little bloke got himself into a pickle. A group of chicks sent him messages that one of their friends wanted Graham to screw her. They were all desperate to convince him to do the deed. And now, that girl had invited him to visit her place, supposedly to watch vids. The reason he called me? He wanted Melanie and me to accompany him.

"Why?"

"Just because, that's all. It's important."

"Scared she'll seduce you, huh?"

"Yes! Damn it, Stuart, I don't know what to do! And I'm not sure I wanna do it with her!"

"Maybe she just wants to blow you or something. Hahahahaha!"

"It's not bloody funny! And it's not just that, not just a BJ. She told her friends she wants me to screw her because she thinks I've done it before."

"You've got a big mouth."

"You gonna come with me or not?"

"Can't. Got a thing on with some mates tonight."

"Cool. I'll check to see if Joe wants to come with me."

"You gonna be okay?"

"Maybe I'll be sick or something. Cheers." He slammed down the phone.

So, G, you're thinking Melanie and I should have accompanied the grommet? Well, fact is, I needed Graham the other day when he was his moody grommet self and wasn't there for me. He preferred to play computer games with his mates, and told me I'd have to wank. Yeah, well, I didn't stay home and wank. I went out and got slaughtered instead, and snorted a couple of lines with a dickhead.

Anyway, I expect Graham to be okay. I don't see him porking this chick. I think his manhood will be seriously tested and he'll wuss out totally. Hahahaha! Sounded like a scared kid on the phone.

(Later). I managed to meet with Melanie on Saturday night, despite the after effects of too much of whatever I'd been on. I need to stop, G. I mean it. I'm not saying that

just to make you feel good. I'm desperate.

One of the guys I was with on Friday had a syringe, and injected H. He offered it to me, but I said no. Didn't stop me from popping acid, though, and I suffered serious downers on Saturday. I was still fucked when I fetched Melanie. I hardly slept a wink and I feel like shit right now. The guys and I trashed ourselves with concoctions of acid and coke, and I can't even remember what booze.

Two of the guys pissed me off because they went on and on about faggots. Yeah, right. Then the guys blew each other to show everyone how gross it was. Hello? I accused them of acting like jerks and that maybe they were gay. I almost ended up in a fist fight.

I asked one prick, Charl, why he neglected to swallow his mate's cum, and what kind of mate was he. He pulled me up by the shirt, and flathanded me across the face, but not too hard because I would've climbed into him. Think I wouldn't?

Anyway, Melanie wasn't too happy with me when I showed up. We didn't go out because she couldn't handle the way I looked. Instead, we hung out at her place and spoke. She told me she couldn't handle the whole drug scene. It was then I discovered she'd been clean for months. Not so much as a joint. She currently attended counseling with a friend, but kept it secret from her folks.

"I can get you into the program if you want, Stuart. I go once a week. My folks think I'm at a friend's house doing homework."

So I thought about attending counseling sessions with her. The counselors were all ex-druggies, so they knew the drill. And the sessions were held at a private house—no flashing neons or whatever.

Brett phoned Sunday night and laid into me after he received a call from Melanie. She said he was the only person who might talk sense into me. "I'll give it to you straight, Stuart. You won't be welcome to visit Fremantle to see Fingers or me until you're clean. Got it?"

Brett reminded me of the time I snorted coke at his place with that dumb chick I met at a pub. Hey, he didn't scream at me, just spoke straight up. Later, I phoned Graham to ask what happened between him and that chick who lusted after him.

"What chick?"

"The one you told me about, the one who came onto you, the one who had her hand down your pants, the one who wanted to give you a BJ in front of your mate Joe."

"Can you narrow it down a bit?"

"Hahahaha! So what happened?"

"Joe came with me."

Graham confessed he panicked because he might have been coerced into screwing the chick. He was terrified of that possibility. Without the chick's knowledge, Joe sent an SMS to his folks to fetch him, which meant Graham didn't have to bail out on the chick's attempt to steal his cherry. His excuse was that Joe's folks were outside waiting for him. Hahahaha!

I didn't ask, but I wondered if Graham and Joe got it on together. Anyway, Graham promised to visit the

chick's house the following week, and planned to round up a bunch of his mates to go with him. Hahahaha!

By the time I wrote G again, the weather in Byron had turned to total shit, with howling wind and rain. I surfed the previous afternoon and took off on a particular wave. The wind gusted unexpectedly and blew my board off the lip, then back onto me! I was quick enough with my hands to avoid damage to my face. The afternoon wasn't all bad, but that freak accident pissed me off. There were only two other guys out, and it was freezing! Half-inch freezing if you know what I mean.

Melanie and I planned to date again that night, and I looked forward to it. Meanwhile, Graham was off to that chick's place again with all his mates in tow to protect him. Hahahaha! I didn't blame him. He visited earlier the previous day when I returned home from surfing. He told me he went for a piss in the chick's upstairs toilet and busted her younger sister giving a blow job to a little guy who was no more than 10 years old! The sister was about 12, and the parents were at a dinner party next door. Can you believe that, G?

"Sure, people go to dinner parties all the time."

Obviously, the girls were into sex big time. The older teens at the party were snorting. Graham said he was frightened by the whole scene, but also that he'd fallen for this girl-or so he reckons-probably because she had her hand in his pants the whole night. But he's also a

little kid, G, if you know what I mean. I feel for the grommet.

I must tell you, G, that I sparred with my dad last night in the gym, and it was really, really cool. Okay, so we hit each other hard but we wore headgear. There's no way I'd spar with my dad without protective headgear, but he still managed to hit me like a sledgehammer in the gut.

He was the one, however, to lower his gloves first and say, "Enough's enough!" Hahahaha! Then he threw an arm around me and we headed for the shower. TWO SEPARATE SHOWERS, G.

Hey, G, I must come clean now. I want to be clean. I felt so damn good last night after I sparred with my dad, and I want to enjoy that feeling all the time. I'm sick and tired of being trashed, and I hope this counseling thing works for me. It's just that it's so incredibly difficult not to be tempted when there's coke or whatever going on around me. I can't stop myself.

The acid fucked my brain the other night, and I hallucinated badly. LSD is a new thing for me and I'm not sure how I got onto that track at all. It's not good, and I realize that. But try to convince my brain of that when there are guys around me popping. I know it's stupid, G, but you try quitting your tobacco and tell me how easy it is. I can't believe how fucked my life has become since Kyle died. I know it's my own fault, but still...

I mailed G again later and told him I wrote a story for his birthday, and that I wanted him to post it on his website on the day itself.

One reason I sometimes found it difficult to write G was because I could never figure out what to put in the subject line. "*I can't figure what to put here.*" The surfing weather was stunning, almost as stunning as me in Speedos, hahahaha! Anyway, there wasn't a helluva lot to tell G except that I set aside Tuesday night for the counseling session with Melanie.

The previous Friday Graham visited his new 'girlfriend's' house again, which was virtually a repeat of the earlier visit. His mates got involved in playing CDs and shit, and left Graham and the girl to graunch. I thought he'd broken up with his other girl, but it turned out that she got wind of his latest crusade via the grapevine. He hadn't spoken to his ex-ish yet, but he heard that she was aware of his new romance. So the little dude was in for some serious birdcrap, hahahahaha! He didn't tell me all the news, though. Most of the blabbing came from his mate Joe. Hey, I should have been an interrogator.

From what I gathered, Joe was pissed at Graham's obsession with this new bird. Joe expressed his displeasure when he and Graham went to the movies Saturday. They arrived early for a burger and chat. But Graham spent the whole time on the phone to his girl. One of her friends apparently had the hots for Joe, and wanted both Graham and Joe to visit the new girl's house that night. Graham was in a pickle because he promised his time to Joe. Ah, the trials and tribulations of grommethood. Is that a word? It is

now. Anyway, at least Graham and I enjoyed great surf over the weekend.

Saturday I attended a barbeque at a mate's house. I was undecided at first, but relented. Smoked a joint but left the chemicals alone. Also drank too many vodkas. There were a few E tabs there as well, but the guys wanted to save them for clubbing later.

I didn't go clubbing with them. I was too far gone from the J and vodka anyway. Pissed off the mates a bit when I got a chance to graunch with one of the lone chicks. I passed out. They battled to wake me, then told me to piss off so they could get moving. Hahahaha!

Okay, G, it's Wednesday already. Last night? I'm not sure if I handled the counseling all that well. But don't sweat it because I'll go again next week. One chick there really worked on my tits about trying harder and how easy it was and blah, blah, blah. Bloody hell, I felt like getting stoned just to get away from her.

A few of the people there are like really weird, and all over you like a rash. Melanie was content to giggle and leave me to my fate. She also doesn't dig some of the people there. But there are a few okay ones.

They showed us some shock police pictures of teens who OD'd. A couple were pretty horrifying. One guy about 13 wore a tourniquet and still had a needle stuck in his arm. However, all the faces were blurred to avoid identification.

The woman who organizes the sessions is a Christian and is very cool. You feel no pressure from her

at all. She supplies cookies and tea.
Damn! No beer!

If Kyle were there he would have mentioned Natalie du Toit, the swimmer who did well in the Commonwealth Games in Manchester. She lost a leg but still competes with able swimmers, and still slices through the water. Kyle spoke of her often. He thought she was gutsy for simply getting on with life despite the handicap.

Green Room II
Chapter 35

Hey, G, I just want to say thanks for everything you've done. I understand now why Kyle thought so much of you, and how you helped him through all the crap he handled. I think often of the rape, and how he managed to pull himself together afterwards. Not a lot of people realize just how bad that was. His mates could tell that he wasn't himself for a long time, but never knew the reason.

All I remember about that period—now that I'm trying to piece all the bits together—is that his swim times were shit, and he risked losing his place on the team. His relationship with everyone was one of suspicion on his part, and it was difficult to get close to him. Then it was like someone pulled a switch and made everything turn around. I guess the person who pulled the switch was you because you gave Kyle an outlet to offload and tell his story.

I wish his mail from that time still existed so I could read what he wrote back then. Besides you and your friends who read the story, I think I'm the only one who knows. One day I may tell Melanie because we're at a stage now where we have pretty hectic conversations that run deep.

Melanie joined me at the beach the other day while I surfed. She sat on the sand and watched. What went through her brain at that time? Hell knows. Graham arrived a bit later and rapped with Melanie for a while before he paddled out to join me.

Hey, I know he stole a kiss from her. Hahaha! The two enjoy an awesome relationship, a younger bro and older sis arrangement. And they have Kyle in common.

The surf was decent, three feet and glassy, and the sun was warm. Hell, the temp was mid 20s C all weekend.

As the morning progressed, the surf became busier, and a few of Graham's mates rocked up. Joe's become a cool dude, and took the time to say g'day to me. He's cocky but pleasant enough, not like his asshole older bro Craig. I can see why Joe and Graham are such good mates—they share the same attitude.

I left the grommets to surf and returned to the beach to join Melanie. I flopped onto the towel next to her, with my wettie pulled down to my waist. I asked if she enjoyed the warmth of sun but her eyes filled with tears and she began to sob. "Hey, babes, what's wrong?"

"This is the first time I've sat on the beach since Kyle..."

"I'm sorry. You want to maybe leave or something? I'll walk with you because I'm all surfed out anyway."

"Has it gotten better for you, Stuart? Remembering Kyle, I mean. Not a day goes by without me crying."

I draped an arm around her while we watched the guys in the water. "It doesn't ever get better—I think. But we learn to handle it in our own ways. I tried different ways, some of them not cool. I don't need to tell you that."

"Sometimes when I'm asleep, I smell his scent, and throw my arm out

to pull him closer. Then I wake and realize what I did. I feel like a total idiot."

"Does it help to talk about him?"

"When I'm with people who knew him, yeah. It makes sense to them because they appreciate what he was like, and that he's not just some fantasy."

After chatting for a while, our convo became more relaxed, even about us. Melanie's problem, and mine in a way, was her unwillingness to compare me to Kyle. For one thing, comparing me to Kyle would not have done me any good, and I reckon it wouldn't help Melanie if every time she hugged me she thought of Kyle.

No, G, we're nowhere near having sex yet. I asked if she'd like to stop off at the Ts on our way home. But she made a lame excuse. I think she doesn't want the Ts to see us together in case it's perceived as a betrayal of their son.

I don't push Melanie for anything now. It's the strangest setup. With Julie, I was hungry for sex. But with Melanie, I'm hungry just to be together. I can place an arm around her now in the knowledge that she enjoys it. She hugs me in return, and I know she's sincere.

Friday we took in a movie, but the best part was sitting together in a coffee shop. I can talk to her about anything now; surfing, drugs, everything.

I phoned Graham Saturday but he was already surfing, so I joined him at the beach. Hey, I think he needs a larger wettie crotch. Hahahahaha! That kid has balls!

Bloody hell he made me laugh. He went out with his mates and the girls Friday night. Yes, G, seems like he's permanently into his new girlfriend. Her name is Jacky. She's all over him like a rash. Anyway, they went to a restaurant for dessert after the movies. One of his mates accidentally banged his nuts on the queue rail. The poor kid was in total agony, so Graham piped up: "You need to soak your nads in warm milk, but you gotta use full cream milk 'cause the low fat stuff doesn't get that nice thick layer of skin when it's boiled. Then you need to bite on a stick while Joe scoops the skin off the boiled milk and applies it to your aching hangers."

He told me Joe gave him a lame punch on the arm, but that he and Joe were crawling on the floor from hysterical laughter, despite Joe's agony. Even as Graham told me the story, he hosed himself. They kept asking Joe if he wanted nuts on his dessert, which sparked more hysterics. Hahahaha! My stomach ached at the way Graham told the story in between bursts of guffaws.

"Hey, Graham, you wanna sleep over tonight?"

"Gotta check with my folks, but it sounds cool. Got any vids or something?"

"I got a game on my comp called MDK you might like."

"I know it! Hey, that's cool!"

"Yeah, the hero's got a cute butt like yours. So, no date with your girlfriend tonight?"

"Her folks won't let me see her because she got trashed at a party

last night, and they reckon it's my fault."

"That's uncool, mate. Are you banned for life?"

"It's up to her. She wants me, and I think she's pretty cool."

"Had sex yet?"

"No, and you know it, Stuart. So cool it with the sex quiz. I already get enough crap from Joe about how he's screwing his girl and what it's like and, and, and... I'll beat that big mouth senseless one day."

"Joe's probably just boasting."

"No! Everyone knows, including my girl. She wants me to screw her, but I don't want to."

"Scared?"

"Yeah, right. No! Because it's not right. She can blow me or something but I'm not gonna screw her. Not yet."

I got the impression as we sat on our boards waiting for the next set, that Graham was determined not to screw Jacky "yet", but he was happy to be given a BJ. After all, Melanie introduced him to that little stunt some time ago. "So has she?"

"Has she what?"

"Blown you?"

"Nah, she digs to jack me off."

"What about your ex?"

"She dumped me because of Jacky. She said Jacky is a slut out to use me and then dump me. Anyway, she doesn't dig me anymore."

"I reckon she does, meantime you're infatuated with Jacky."

"So? Bugger everyone else. It's my life."

I dropped the subject. Graham became increasingly aggro at the

mention of the two girls. We surfed a while longer then went our separate ways.

I figured it was unlikely Graham would sleep over that night because of his mood, so he surprised me by phoning to say he had permission from his folks. That meant I'd be able to give him his birthday gift. I made a bead surfer wristband. Actually, I made two, one for the grommet and second for another mate's birthday.

Graham rocked over with his jeans desperate to succumb to gravity. His colorful boxers showed about two inches above his jeans waistband. He wore his favorite thick blue fleecy hoody, with a white singlet underneath. Perched on his back was his old worn-out mini backpack that followed him practically everywhere. I invited him to follow me through to the den to say g'day to my folks.

Yes, G, the vibe with my folks is very different now, and it's like a new experience for me. Anyway, the main reason the grommet slept over was because we planned a Dawn Patrol next morning. That was the story, and thankfully he had his stick under his arm.

Graham was the kind of bloke everyone liked. Even my folks! He exhibits really cool manners in the company of adults, and they enjoy him.

In my room, he headed straight for my CD collection. He listened to a few tracks through headphones while I booted the PC to launch the game, then left him to play the game while I took a shower. Hey, I didn't want

any problems with "cheese dick",
hahahaha!

On my return, I stood behind him and thumb massaged his shoulders, which he seemed to appreciate. Later, I loaded an old surf movie into the VCR, and we climbed under the bed covers, dressed in our boxers, to watch the show. I had a box of chocolate cookies and told him if he made a mess I'd force him to lick the sheets clean.

Later, we watched an old Friday the 13th movie. He hadn't seen it before so that was cool. Then I rolled off the side of the bed to retrieve the bead wristband. "Happy birthday, mate."

"This is awesome!" he beamed enthusiastically. He placed the band on his wrist and hugged me. And that's how we fell asleep.

Sunday was a blur. We rocked down to the beach for an early morning surf—not quite the Dawn Patrol we planned. After that, Graham left for home and more study.

This email has gone on and on, G. It's hard to explain how I feel right now. Graham, Melanie—this is everything I wanted since last year, like the three of us being such good friends. Ditto my relationship with my folks. Thanks to you, I'm off the shit I was on, and I think I'm just about there.

End of year study will take up a huge amount of my time but it's coming together. I haven't spoken to Graham since he left Sunday morning. I'm careful not to push him or make a big deal out of our sleeping together or the intimacy we share. I want him to think of it as the most natural

thing between two best mates. That's the way Kyle handled it, and it worked for him.

Two days later I wrote G again after attending my second counselor meeting with Melanie. Some of those people were psycho. Tea and bloody cookies. I didn't understand how Melanie handled it for so long because I wasn't. I knew I was required to speak and listen at those meetings but I really couldn't handle it, and resented being treated like I should be wrapped in cotton wool.

Last night one guy asked me to stand and make a speech about my story. "There's no story to tell," I said. "I dig drugs and I dig the highs. I cope with the downers."

When I made that monumental statement, everyone stared at me. Melanie dug me in the ribs and told me it was obvious I was in denial, and that I needed to speak about it. 'Fuck it,' I thought, and stood. "I don't want to speak about it." I was spitting mad at that point. On top of everything else, I was embarrassed. I felt like grabbing that chair and beating the crap out of that guy.

During the break, I accompanied Melanie to the kitchen to make tea. "I'll have coffee—preferably a beer."

"Drink tea. It'll make you feel better."

"No, Melanie. A beer will make me feel better, and a joint would make me feel best. Are you telling me there's no coffee here?"

"Keep your damn voice down, please!"

"I'm sorry. These people string me out badly."

Melanie spoke to one of the women, who produced a coffee. I had the shakes, and spilled the damn stuff all over the place. I wasn't sure if it was the result of anger or withdrawals. I'd suffered the shakes for the past few days at school as well.

Later, I was soooooo happy to get out of that claustrophobic place! What a relief! One of Melanie's friends collected us and drove us home. I hadn't met him before, but the prick was a hot looker. Meanwhile, I retreated into my own little shit world with no one to pin the blame on.

Green Room II
Chapter 36

On Monday, storm surf was running, with just a few guys out. Graham was busy with school ruggger. In any case, I doubted he would risk tackling that wild surf, with waves about 5 feet and powerful. It was a helluva hard paddle to get through those tons of rising and rushing water, even for a surf hero like me. Hahahaha! Despite duck diving to avoid their ferocious power, they continued to nail me and force me back a few meters at regular intervals. But what a bitching session!

As I walked home, my shoulders were pumped and my arms threatened to detach themselves at any second. My back muscles and shoulder blades were incredibly tight so, instead of a shower, I took a long, soaking bath and relaxed in some of my mom's herbal aromatherapy goodies.

Things with my dad are better. He asks about school and studies, and offers to help with homework if I need a hand. It's been a total turnaround for him, which causes me to see him with new eyes lately. He's no longer the old guy—a total stranger. Now, he seems to appear younger—perhaps due to his beating me up in the ring. Hahahaha!

Hey, G, he doesn't always get his own way with me in the gym. The other day we sparred and I forced myself to stop because we became so aggro. His punches began to hurt, and everyone knows I'm a chickenshit in the pain department. He now insists that both of us wear headgear. I

think maybe my punches hurt.
 Hahahaha! Just a little bit. THANKS
 BRETT!

I wrote G again a couple of days after I received his replies. I wasn't sure what to write anymore. I'd been on such a natural high that week. Graham's birthday was Thursday.

The grommet arrived before I had the chance to print a birthday card on the comp. My mom had a program called American Greeting Cards, which I planned to use. It allowed the placement of a trademark on the back, like a personal stamp. But the grommet arrived before I did any of that, and wore the wristband I gave him.

"Happy birthday, grommet mate," I said as I answered the front door. It was so good and uplifting to see his wonderful face, smiling its toothy greeting. That little guy has wicked teeth. They sparkle and always add something special to his winning grin.

"Thanks, man," he said. "Can I come in for a sec and steal some orange juice?" Before I had a chance to invite him inside, he bounced through to the kitchen. By the time I arrived he was already pouring juice.

He's a mature little grommet, G, with a tight bod that's solid as a rock. He's also grown his mop of black hair a little longer. He's beautiful.

He swallowed a mouthful of juice, then said in his young teen voice, "I just wanted to say thanks for the wristband, Stuart. It rules."

"Hey, mate, it was ace to make it for you. Now you got yourself a

genuine surf culcha wristy. So, are you having a good birthday or what?"

"Pretty cool. Got money from family and friends and stuff, so I'm gonna buy a CD and save the rest. Got clothes from my folks and a pair of new boardies." He took another sip of juice, and changed his expression to serious. "Can I ask you about the other night?"

My heart sank like a stone. I dreaded the worst but, somehow, managed to remain calm. "Sure, mate, go ahead."

"Kyle and I used to do that, and it was always cool. And it felt good. The other night with you was cool too, and you were different to the way you normally are. Almost like Kyle. It was like I couldn't stop what happened, and didn't want to."

"Hey! You think I wanted to stop?"

Then the bombshell hit. "I just don't want you to think I'm gay and stuff."

So that's what really hassled him? "Do you think I'm gay? Or that maybe Kyle was gay?"

"I know Kyle wasn't, but we did stuff together. And I know that you and he did other kinda stuff together."

"You think the *other stuff* is a bit too hectic, huh?"

"Kinda."

"Hey, mate, can I tell you a Kyle secret that you need to keep to yourself?"

"You're gonna tell me he was gay, right?"

"No. He'd come down here from heaven and beat the crap outta me if I said that." At least that comment

lightened the atmos a bit, and caused the grommet to laugh. "Kyle and Brett did the same stuff you and I did the other night."

"Brett? Conan? Yeah, right. No way, man. Whoever told you that is chirping serious crap."

"You don't have to believe it, mate. What I'm getting at is the way Kyle taught us to be, that being good friends like we are means that it's normal to be close. To enjoy each other's bods while we're close is just a spontaneous thing, not something you need to contemplate or analyze. It simply happens of its own accord. You can sense if your mate doesn't want you to go there. Kyle and I used to kiss—and I mean kiss."

"I know."

"So don't let the other night hassle you. I know you're not gay. Just don't start pinning labels all over. You know I love you, right?"

"Yeah."

Before I continued the convo, I placed an arm around his shoulder. "The other night," I began, "was the most special thing for me since Kyle died. And because it was you, it was very, very special. I love you—not like a girlfriend or whatever, but I love you like a true blue, fair dinkum mate. It was like having Kyle with me all over again—you're so much like him."

"That's what Melanie says, too."

"That's because you're special. Can I ask you something without you getting mad at me?"

"You can try."

"I thought maybe you and Joe and Sean might also do what we did."

"We did once, but I got the guilts about it. Sometimes we jack each other, but when I think about it later I think it's wrong. With Kyle it was different, and with you the other night was different too."

"You drove me crazy because you're such a little hunk." He laughed at my comment because he usually conceals his hunky looks with baggy clothes. "It's difficult to describe how good it felt to be close to your hot bod."

"You're the same, Stuart, and I liked it. I don't want you to think I didn't. I'd like to do it again because I dig you, and Kyle dug you too."

"Tellya what, if the time's right and we both want it, it'll happen without either of us thinking about it. Can I give you a hug for your birthday?"

Graham's iron-hard body highlighted impressive muscle tone. He squeezed me hard, not realizing his own strength. Then, it was time for him to leave, but as he bounced down the road, he turned and shouted, "Thanks for the wristy!"

On the weekend, my dad was busy sorting out unwanted stuff in the garage. I helped carry it to the end of the driveway where it would be collected by truck. The weird thing was we got around to the subject of cars. My dad asked what kind of cars I liked, which demonstrated how little we'd conversed in the past. I said I really dug the Honda Civic—even an older one that I could strip and rebuild.

I connected with Graham again on Sunday. He and Joe went to the

movies Saturday night, "and Friday I was at a house party with my mates and all the girls."

"You're pretty busy lately."

"Check what I'm wearing."

"The wristy! Hey, that's damn cool, mate."

"How was your weekend?"

"Boring."

Actually, I'd been busy organizing a package to send G, but I forgot to include the postcode and wondered if the damn thing got lost somewhere. After two weeks, I began to despair. Then, out of the blue, G emailed me to say he received the package. He was completely blown away.

I wrote a note, which I included in the package. *I wanted you to have a special birthday, G, so I put a few things together I'm sure you'll appreciate more than anyone I know.*

The black flannel gym shorts are part of Kyle's school togs. The Speedos are those he brought around to my place one day when my folks were home, which meant he couldn't swim naked like he usually did. He looked cool when the wet material molded to his skin. They've not been washed since he exited the pool that day.

The T-shirt is another of his leftovers that found their way into my closet. Same story with the check boxers. He preferred satin boxers so I guess that's why didn't bother to retrieve those. Or maybe they were purposely left behind in case he needed to cover his ass another time.

There are two sets of beads. One is a bead necklace Kyle made for

me for Christmas. He made it just before he died, and left it under the T's Christmas tree. I know what you're thinking, but hear me out. I honestly think if Kyle had the chance he would have made one for you and sent it to you. I made a necklace for Kyle one day and he wanted to know how to make them. I showed him, and I guess that's why he made that one for me. I already have a necklace Kyle used to wear, so don't think I'm parting with Kyle because I sent that one to you. I know you'll appreciate the fingers that threaded those beads, and the teeth that helped tie the knots. The other set is a wristy I made for you to wear. Sometimes those things break and come apart so you need to be careful.

We'll never meet, G. That's a fact of life. But I wanted to do something really special for you, and I know that right now, as you read this note, you're beaming—or crying, or both.

I know this won't be the happiest birthday for you. You had four of those recently while Kyle was alive. But I hope these gifts go some way to make it a good one.

Your friend and Kyle's
Stuart.

Last night I attended the counselor session again with Melanie. The first thing she said was "behave!" More an order than a suggestion—I had to laugh, though.

Okay, so I behaved, but I still couldn't wait for the session to end. I wasn't sure if it was the session or just Melanie's company that did me good, plus the fact that I was now

cozily entrenched in Melanie's and Graham's favor.

Graham skateboarded over to my place earlier that day, with his top tied around his waist and bare chested. Whoa! As usual, I was knocked out by his body. His cargos were held up by his dick—I figure his waist is too narrow to cope. He wanted to know if I'd visit Kyle's folks but I already had a date with the counselors. Pity. I hadn't seen them for a while and knew I needed to visit soon, even just to say g'day. I always enjoyed seeing the Ts, and I guessed they were glad to see me as well.

Graham still practically lived at Kyle's house, which was good for Mr. and Mrs. T. Kyle's room was still a shrine in the eyes of the grommet, which meant it wasn't just a room of fading memories. It remained alive with Graham's presence, and that's how Kyle would want it.

Kyle managed his daily schedule so damn well. He always had time for his net friends, local mates, Melanie, me, hiking, camping, me, surfing, G and me. The more I thought about it, the less I understood how he managed his time. I figured he did most of his email stuff at school. He always carried a box of disks in his school bag.

Oops! I lost the plot. I was telling G about Graham visiting me yesterday. Okay, so he stayed a while and we talked. Nope, I never touched him? Why? Because he visited shirtless, and that's how I wanted to see him more often. I needed him to feel comfortable, and not fear my

getting carried away. I didn't want him to get the jitters in my company.

He said he wanted to grow his hair longer when he left school, and wear a ponytail. It would suit him, I reckon, because of his thick black hair. Actually, it has a brownish tint, probably caused by long exposure to sun and surf.

Hey, G, I dropped a few tears when I put that birthday package together for you. I remember Kyle often wearing those clothes.

I slept last night cuddling Kyle's T. When I first received the package, I was confused. I expected a card. At first, I thought the clothes were meant for me. Then I noticed they weren't new. I thought maybe they were yours. When I read your letter, I went to pieces. Took me forever; one sentence or maybe just a few words at a time, in between grabbing fistfuls of tissues. I kept fingering the clothing, trying to come to terms with the reality of having part of Kyle in my hands.

Kyle must have planned to make several gifts for his friends last Christmas, G. But the only one he got to finish was the bead necklace for me. To take that home with me was gut wrenching because I felt as though I'd removed part of Kyle from his folks. His fingers threaded those beads, and his teeth tied the knots. His facial expression would have been very serious as he worked to get it right.

I know Kyle would want you to have that necklace because of everything you did for him. Meanwhile, now you know the reason I

made two wristies; one for Graham and one for you.

You may be tempted to send me something in return. Don't. The return address on the package is fake. I know you respect my privacy just as you respected Kyle's. You've given me so much during the past 18 months I'm not sure how to thank you.

I spoke recently to some folks about drug withdrawals. Most agreed that after a month or so of being clean, I might suffer some serious pain. That was the dangerous part which may cause 'attitude reversal' or some such shit.

Separate ways one day, G. But now you have something from Kyle I know you'll treasure and respect because they belonged to the most awesome friend anyone could hope to have.

So, will this make your birthday better? Nah, I don't think so. But I think it might make it a bit more bearable even though Kyle is not here at the end of this mail.

Peace, love, respect
Your friend and Kyle's
Stuart.

Green Room II
Chapter 37

Brett phoned to ask about the counseling thing, then congratulated me on making an effort in the right direction. It was a short call, but I appreciated it big time.

The surf was shitters this afternoon, so Graham and I hit the boxing bag for a while. In that kinda situation, he's totally focused, which explains why he learned to surf so quickly. He jacks around like a lighty but is very mature mentally. He's also bright, but only due to hard work, a quality he shares with Kyle. Kyle certainly wasn't a bloke with a photographic memory, he read a lot and studied like hell. He worked hard for every percentage point he earned at school. Graham's the same. Sometimes, when get gets stuck with homework, he phones me. I'm not always able to help, which makes me feel like an idiot because he expects me to know bloody everything. That's Kyle's fault, he insisted that I was the brightest dude on the planet. According to convos I have with my dad, he doesn't altogether agree. Hahahaha!

Actually, my dad and I discussed what choices I'll make at varsity next year. I know you'll raise those bushies of yours as well, G. I plan to do psychology for the first year. The courses are generic, so if I change my mind later, it's no biggie.

Psychology?!?!?! I can hear you going apeshit from here. But it's a choice I've given a lot of thought to. I've read a few books. Yeah, I do

read sometimes when my eyes aren't bloodshot. Psych is not as adventurous as marine bio like Kyle planned, but by studying psych, my intention is not to eventually become a shrink or to analyze what makes people tick. I already know what makes you tick, G ... that pendulum thing! Hahahahaha! I reckon psych is a good basic for everything else. Ultimately, I'd like to do marketing design. Oh, shit, here comes Kyle...

"Psychology? Are you a dimwit or something? What about a career in the outdoors where you can breathe fresh air?"

"I'm doing psych so I can figure out how you screw my brain."

"Is that where your brain is?"

"Piss off ... be serious."

"Okay, I think psych is cool."

"Really?"

"No, but it'll make you happy if I say so."

"You're still the same."

"Seriously, Stuart, it doesn't matter what you do as long as it's what you want and not what someone else wants."

"It's what I want ... for now."

"Then everything's cool. I still love ya even if you are all screwed up. Hehehe! Byeeeeeeee!"

Then he disappeared. Anyway, I'm pretty sure that's how Kyle would respond to my decision. I remember his saying that he could never see me working in a building because that's not how he saw himself. He said that one day he saw himself in San Diego or Miami to further his studies. He thought they were the best bases for marine biology.

And he would have succeeded, G. It was his style to focus and work hard for what he wanted. I think he tried to organize some sort of pact that would see all of us based together at the same place.

The one thing that upset him about the idea of being based in Miami was the need to leave Oz for a while. His ultimate goal was to return here and start his own business. There was nothing small about the way Kyle thought.

I still find it difficult to let go of Kyle and get on with my life. It's like walking through molasses.

You're right, your news about doing psych did raise my bushies. It's a long way from math, but I think it's a good move. After all, you'll be dealing with people the rest of your life—it'll help you to better understand them.

Don't think of moving on as letting go of Kyle, or walking through molasses. Think of him as your foundation, the rock upon which you build your future. Take him with you, as I take him with me. That's the way he was in life, and is now in death. Remember his award at the Valedictory Service? His award was for caring and always putting others before himself. Never underestimate what Kyle did for us, and continues to do. Why let go?

Hey, G, it's Saturday morning. Guess what happened last night? Graham phoned and asked if we could hang out. "So what's with your chick?"

"She's busy, or her folks gated her or whatever. Can I hang out with

you, or are you going out with Melanie?"

We all ended up at Melanie's house and watched a video of Shrek. The grommet suffered a bit of a downer and was not all that bouncy. Didn't stop him ogling Melanie, though. Hahahaha!

In G's reply, he mentioned the 'Peace, Love, Respect' thing. I told him I stole it from a mate. All surfers use it as an email sign-off. I think it's pretty cool, something I must try to live up to.

Next time I invited Graham to the movies, he played a little game and phoned Melanie. "Hey, Melanie, Stuart and I are going to the movies, wanna come?" The reason for that was to invite Jacky along. Hahaha! Sneaky little shit. So the night became a foursome.

It was cool to be with Melanie at the movies, but I also enjoy time alone with the grommet. When he's with Jacky, he's a dog in heat. I don't understand why he doesn't screw her and get it over with. Hahahaha! Hey, he's too scared.

It was a good evening, though. We dined on pizza afterwards—some of my school mates were at the restaurant, giving Melanie the big ogle.

Friday's history paper was pretty hectic, but we were warned beforehand to expect it. I breezed through the thing. I just hope I got all the answers right. Hahahaha!

After school the surf bitched, so I took a break from study and hit the waves. What an awesome session! Airs, floaters, green rooms and a couple of wipeouts. But it was a

welcome change from classrooms and the pressure of exams. Like Kyle said, surfing clears the cobwebs.

When I arrived home, there was a message to phone Melanie. Woohoo! She wanted to take in a movie because she also suffered study stress. I asked if she'd rather hire a vid and relax at her place. We chose Castaway with Tom Hanks, a kickass movie.

We just kinda snuggled up and didn't do anything. WASH YOUR MOUTH OUT WITH SOAP, G! Did I get a hardon? Nah. I got an erection! Hahaha! Her folks were in and out of the den all night, and I'm sure they noticed my bulge. Melanie continually giggled because I whispered stuff about needing her to pat my boner and tell me everything was cool. Anyway, she enjoyed the vibe and I enjoyed her company.

"Want to go out again tomorrow?" I asked. "Maybe for pizza or a burger or whatever?"

"I promised my mom I'd study. How's yours going? Do you still take time out to think about me and get all horny?"

"You're naughty, you know that? Hey, seriously, thanks for helping me, babes ... with the counseling thing."

"You're helping yourself, Stuart. I can point you in the direction but it's up to you to decide to go there."

"You sound like Kyle. Thanks for being with me. That's what I mean—being there for me. I guess tomorrow I'll have to jack off AGAIN!"

"Now you're sounding like Kyle," she laughed. "Do all guys jack off a lot?"

"For sure. A lotta guys are like me—with girlfriends who won't allow certain favors."

She kissed my cheek and said, "It'll happen when we're both ready, Stuart. Okay? I love you."

"And I love you."

One of G's friends, Clint, emailed a song for my birthday, Your Song. He sang it himself. "How wonderful life is while you're in the world." Is that me, G? Nah, can't be. I can't believe someone would do that for me. Only one person would do that, and he's not around anymore. That's the only fuckup with my birthday, that I don't get a Kyle hug. Kyle never needed to buy me anything, his hugs were million-dollar hugs because they were genuine.

I know what he meant when he said he was the richest kid in the world because of his many friends. I understand now how he felt.

After I emailed G, my dad entered my room to ask if there was anything special I wanted for my birthday. "Yeah, dad, there is."

"So tell me now because your mother and I are going shopping."

"I just want a hug, dad, from you and mom. Maybe the three of us can go out tomorrow night for a bite and a chat. I don't need you to buy anything for me."

Oh, my God! I'd never seen my dad cry before, not unless he was in a rage directed at me. He was speechless, and had to leave my room.

Shortly afterwards, he returned to announce that the three of us would go to a restaurant the next night, which was the best birthday present I could think of.

I feel on top of the world about everything you and your friends have done for me, G. The letters of support, the birthday wishes, the song from Clint. Later, I'll connect with Graham for a surf. I'll get stuck into study now. On Monday we write English Lit. I read the books. King Lear? Bleh. Thanks again for everything, G. You've no fucking idea.

Green Room II
Chapter 38

Saturday, August 31, Bob collected me in his car and drove to his place. We planned to go to the movies. Hey, suited me—besides, he ditched his girl to be with me for the night. No hanky panky, just a movie and a few drinks afterwards.

His house was in total darkness because his folks were out for the night. He led me through the pitch blackness to the garden entrance of his room. "Be quiet," he ordered.

"I thought your folks weren't home?"

"They're not, but my great aunt is here for the week, and she's got ears like a bat. That's why we're using the garden entrance." Once inside, Bob asked me to fetch his cell phone. "It's on the kitchen table."

"I can't see! It's pitch black!" Nonetheless, from memory, I made my way to the kitchen. Great aunt? Fetch his cell phone? What the bloody hell was this all about? I almost shat myself as a pair of arms surrounded me from the gloom, and drifted underneath my shirt to my abs and pecs.

"Now do I look like a great aunt?" said the voice, which I immediately recognized.

"I thought you were supposed to be studying?"

"I am. I'm studying you."

As my eyes slowly adjusted, Melanie's familiar face took shape. "So what's up? Are we gonna use Bob's bed?" At that precise moment, the lights turned on. I blinked a few

times, then saw a couple of school mates and their girlfriends. Graham was there with Jacky, and Bob's girl was present. Hello? What was this all about?

Somebody whistled. Another said, "Hey, can we use Bob's bed when you're finished?" As I stood there mystified, I resembled a stunned mullet.

I discovered later that Melanie and Bob organized a few friends to surprise me for my birthday. And it was so tight to see Graham there. The little guy beamed, and laughed at the other guys' jokes.

After all the handshakes and 'howzits' and hugs and kisses—no, I didn't kiss the grommet—I managed to get Melanie alone. "So you knew about this?"

"Of course!"

No sooner did the convo between Melanie and me begin, Graham crashed our private scene, still beaming and holding a Smirnoff Ice in his paw. "Pretty cool, huh?"

"Hey, mate."

"So how old you gonna be tomorrow? 100 or something?"

"I can still beat you up, lightly."

"You gotta catch me first, old man."

The party was ace—lots of jiving and drinking (a little too much). At one stage, a couple of my school mates invited me to the bathroom but I declined. They were snorting a couple of lines. It was tempted, but I couldn't do that to Bob and Melanie.

The party still raged when Bob's folks arrived home. They

shouted their g'days and disappeared (most likely to seek refuge) into their room. I figured Bob hoped the guys hadn't stained his folks' bedsheets. More than a few bed-wrestling activities took place that night. Hahahahaha! And no, Melanie and I refrained.

Shortly before the party ended, Bob called me into his room and closed the door behind us. He handed me a gift-wrapped package. "What is it?" I asked, stupidly.

"Open it, you bloody twit, and find out."

Inside, was a small pair of briefs—pure white with a pouch. Bob was the kinda guy who got his jollies from giving me such stuff. And what's wrong with that? He was good for my ego.

We ended up with erections that needed to be beaten to death before we emerged from his room feigning innocence. Yeah, right.

Eagle-eye Melanie checked my jeans as I entered the main room. I suspected she knew Bob and I had at least kissed. Meanwhile, I left the briefs in Bob's room for later retrieval. I certainly didn't want the rest of the guys to get an eyeful of those skimpies and serve me no end of uphill.

About 2am, we cleaned the house. Then Bob drove a few of the guys home before he ferried Melanie, Graham, Jacky and me home. Jacky arranged to sleep over at Melanie's house.

It was a really cool evening. Graham was dead on his feet when I made sure he arrived home safely. He danced all night, and probably downed

a few Smirnoff Ices too many. I also suspected he smoked a joint with two of the other guys.

I woke next morning to the sound of my mom calling my name. She offered a cup of steaming coffee, and wished me happy birthday. Then she hugged me. Yes, I was naked. And yes, I did have my dangly bits covered, although they weren't all that dangly at that time of the morning.

I wanted to jump out of bed and give my mom a decent hug but I figured she might freak. Kyle could hug his mom while he sported a piss boner, but I'm not Kyle.

I was still dripping wet from a shower, and wore a towel around my waist, when my dad entered my room. He presented me with a gift, which I opened, and was thrilled to see a red Ferrari sweat top. I was ecstatic! I'd always supported Ferrari in the F1.

My dad seemed uncomfortable; disoriented, like he was unsure how to behave. I came to the rescue, wrapped my arms around him and hugged him hard. He failed to respond for a moment, then tightened his grip around me, so much so, I thought he might crush me to death.

How did it feel? It felt awesome. It was a beginning; a step in the right direction for all of us. A small start, but a start.

Shortly afterwards, and with no warning, the phantom grommet breezed into my room and dove onto my bed. He bounced a few times, then tossed a small package in my direction.

"What's this?"

"Open it!"

It was a CD of my fav band. I'd often mentioned it to Graham. So that's why he took such a great interest in my current collection? He also made a card in the comp lab at school, the same comp lab Kyle practically had shares in because he spent so much time there. The cover was a really cool pic of a surfer. Inside, he wrote: *'You're cool. Have a rad birthday and thanks for being around for me.'*

Hey! So the grommet learned to make cards on the computer! I was chuffed! Then, as I tried to load the CD into the player, he jumped off the bed and pulled the towel from my waist. "See?" He laughed. "I toldya you're getting old. You want a crutch for old limpy there?"

My mom invited the grommet to stay for breakfast. He had a cycling engagement after that, while I buried myself in school books. Brett phoned to wish me happy birthday, as did Mr. T, who extended an invitation to join him and Mrs. T for supper. "Bring your friends if you like."

"I'll definitely take you up on that offer, Mr. T. I've been meaning to visit but, well, you know, study, exams and stuff. I'll give you a call in a day or two. Maybe we can get together Friday night."

Last night, my folks took me to a restaurant by the beach. I'm learning more about my dad all the time, G. He also supports Ferrari, so we talked a lot about Schumacher. Hey, he even mentioned my surfing and fitness. "I'd like to get more regularly involved with you in the gym, Stuart. Are you up to it?"

"Are you?"

My mom supports McLaren so we teased her about having a crush on Kimi Raikonen, hahahaha! She blushed big time.

To see my folks in that situation, and how they interacted, made me aware of the pressure I'd put on their marriage in recent times. Their love for each other was plain to see. It was different to the love between Mr. and Mrs. T, but the result was the same. Love is love.

I don't remember a helluva lot about my previous birthdays, G, apart from my 17th with Kyle, but this one definitely rates. I mean, I got wishes from all over the world from people who only know me from your stories. Hell, if I'd known *that* Stuart, I wouldn't give him the time of day.

I got wishes from you, the Ferrari top from my folks, the CD and special card from Graham, the surprise birthday party at Bob's, calls from Kyle's folks and Brett, a little surfer alien and card from Melanie that said: *Be yourself. Happy Birthday, love Melanie.*

Say thanks to everyone for me, G, it was very special. It might be a while before I get the chance to write again. Thanks, thanks and more thanks.

Shortly after the euphoria of my birthday, I was thrust back into reality. Wrote the Geography 1 paper mid week and it was pretty cool. Ha! And they said it was gonna be difficult.

I'm missing the surf, though, which has been crap lately, and I didn't have the time to hunt the

coast for better conditions. To ease the boredom, I figured a spar with Graham would be fun, but his mom revealed he got a week's detention for fighting at school.

"I got into an argument with Joe about my girlfriend," he explained on the phone. "I tried to convince him that all the stories about her were not true."

"How do you know they're not true? Where there's smoke there's fire, mate."

"Because I know—that's how. Anyway, Joe said something about her being an open-legged slut so I planted him. We got into a rumble even the teachers found difficult to separate. I'm telling you, Stuart, if those teachers hadn't managed to pull us apart, I would've nailed him good."

"So, what now? Are you blokes enemies after being such good mates?"

"No way! We're still good mates. But he knows not to talk shit about Jacky or I'll sort him out. No, shit, we surfed together yesterday afternoon. I think Joe's aggro because I spend a lotta time with Jacky."

"Surfing? You took your boards out in that slush?"

"It was more about us getting together to show that we're still mates."

"Thanks again for the card and the CD. It rocks. Where'd you get the money?"

"Working around the 'hood. Selling my body to little old ladies. I thought of asking you to do the same, but they're not into old guys."

"You are so bad, mate. So what's the work? Gardens and stuff?"

"Anything worth bucks. All Kyle's customers. They've got me doing some pretty hectic stuff, though ... drilling holes, fixing electric plugs. I even had to hang a small window for an old biddy."

"Hope you had your clothes on."

"Yeah," he giggled, "including my shirt. It's too cold."

"Anyway, I just called to ask you to rock over here for a spar in the ring. Sorry about the detention."

"I can handle it. I'm studying too, so maybe the spar will have to wait a while."

The grommet turned up a few days later because the surf was crap, so we gymmed and sparred, and hit the crud out of each other. Man, that little guy can hit! I donned headgear but he insisted it was unnecessary in his case. Yeah, right. That was until I rounded him in the ear. He quickly changed his mind. Hahahaha!

I wrote G again later to say it was a stunning day. The surf rocked as I waited for a call from the grommet. The past few days were boring, G, and it's all your fault. Melanie had plans for last night, as did Bob. And Graham was out with his mates. I did absolutely SFA. This hero shit is boring.

That kinda shit went straight over the fossil's head, so I wasted my time. He paid no attention to my grumblings and complaints. Hahahaha! But my ordeal wasn't over yet. I woke at 2am in agony with cramps. Every muscle known to medical science it seemed was severely cramped, and the pain was almost insufferable.

On the positive side, I had a dinner date with the Ts, and looked forward to it. Meanwhile, my lack of social activity meant I could devote time to answering email from all the guys who wished me happy birthday.

Green Room II
Chapter 39

I explained to G that I didn't understand the cause of the muscle cramps. During sleep, my stomach turns into a knot. Then I experience the most unbelievable pain as my stomach muscles cramp, followed by every other muscle in my body.

On a lighter note, I managed a bit of surfing, not a lot but a couple of nice rides. Sunday night, I fulfilled my dinner date with the Ts. We talked about old surfboard planks. Mr. T remembered the old 'barges' he rode as a teen. They were so heavy and big, it took three of them as kids to carry just one to the beach. He said they were all little guys back then, and that he didn't remember teens being as big as they are nowadays.

Graham studied at home and was conspicuous by his absence at the table. The grommet was totally pissed off about that according to Mr. T, but agreed with Graham's folks that the kid needed to get his priorities sorted.

I hadn't realized that Brett phones the Ts a lot to catch up on goss. He also keeps the Ts informed of the goss at his end. I enjoyed the supper and the evening and could've stayed all night listening to Kyle's folks tell stories about their magic son.

Mr. T introduced Kyle to Wollumbin when he was just 4. They sat together to admire the view while Mr. T told Kyle blood-curdling stories about pirates. Two years afterwards, Kyle got his first ride

on a surfboard. His dad surfed regularly, and wanted to spend quality time with his son. He solved the problem by teaching Kyle to surf.

Mrs. T is unable to become pregnant again, G. How's that for a bust? They wanted to have more kids after Kyle was born but that was impossible. Mr. T says Kyle broke the mold when he came into the world. Hahaha! Mr. T had me in hysterics as we imagined Kyle smashing that mold to smithereens.

I asked if the Ts wanted more kids now that Kyle was gone, but Mr. T said he didn't wish to be an old man at his kid's 21st. He wanted to hike and surf and camp with his kid. He reasoned it would be unfair on the lightie if his dad couldn't be an active companion until the kid formed his own circle of friends.

The convo eventually turned to drugs, which Mr. T was willing to discuss in the presence of his wife. At first, I glowed beet red with embarrassment. However, he soon put me at ease. I told him about Melanie and me attending counseling as well as dating.

"Do you think it's cool, Mr. T?"

"I think it rocks—you and Melanie going out together. We love Melanie as if she were our own daughter."

"The reason she hasn't mentioned it is because she's concerned that you may interpret it as a betrayal of Kyle."

"Nonsense! Betrayal of Kyle? That's ridiculous! Kyle would wholeheartedly approve of your going steady. At first, she dated Brett,

then Kyle and now you. Makes sense to me—keeping it in the family.”

Graham arrived next afternoon for a gym session. Unexpectedly, I got to appreciate the limits of the grommet’s pain threshold. He caught his hand in the weight cable of the pec machine. His hand was crushed between the cable and the roller, but the little bloke didn’t flinch. He calmly pulled down the cable to relax the tension and released his hand. There was a helluva cut, which I cleaned despite his lack of complaint about any pain or discomfort. Anyone else would have screamed!

He phoned later to say his dad took him to the doc for a check, and that everything was okay—nothing broken.

“I told my dad already that my hand was cool.”

“Wasn’t it sore?”

“Yeah.”

“I would have screamed!”

“Because you’re old.”

“Not too old to beat the crap outta you, you little runt.”

“At least I’m a handful, huh?”

I laughed myself stupid at his wisecrack, and then, “So when do I get another?”

“Can’t talk now—I dug it, though—just so you know.”

“Cool. Hey, maybe there’ll be surf this weekend.”

“Maybe you can get your mates to drive us up the coast a bit.”

“I’ll check. Love ya, mate.”

“Cool. Seeya.”

My relationship with Melanie had also improved. One night we took in a movie and pizza, then went to a nightclub. Craig was there with a few

of his mates, but was pretty much out of it by the time we arrived. He whistled at Melanie which, at the time, didn't bother me. But it bothered her. She squeezed my hand as we made our way to the rear of the club.

Once we were seated, Craig appeared complete with beer in hand. I was okay with him initially because I figured he might jive Melanie a little—tell her how good she looked, and ask why she associated with an idiot like me. I could handle that. But the first thing he said to her was, "You look good enough to fuck. Want to experience a real cock in your pussy?"

Before Melanie could stop me, I stood and asked Craig if he wanted to see some real pussy outside the club.

"You looking for another hiding, acid head?" he growled.

My head nodded 'yes' but my hands shook. It was too late. The challenge had been issued, which was the last thing I wanted.

As the three of us walked outside, Melanie made it plain she was mad as hell. Craig insisted on going further up the road where we were out of sight. That worried me. As I led the way, he struck the back of my head—his usual style. Instinctively, I spun and hit him from nowhere. That was a lesson from Brett—to get the guy on the deck quick smart. I gave it no thought, it just happened in an instant. Next, I sent a fist to his gut. He gasped and crumbled.

Two of his goons dashed to his aid and helped him to his feet. I was ready for them too—by then, smoke

billowed from my ears. Craig stood and took a swing which I blocked, and hit him again. He buckled and fell in a heap. I was tempted to put the boot in as well, and would have if not for Melanie's freaking and shouting to stop.

Too bad about Melanie's distracting hysterics—one of Craig's mates took a swing and sent me flying. Craig seized the opportunity to put his boot into my ribs. I was sure right there and then that he'd cracked a few.

I am in so much bloody pain, G, but only when I breathe. Hahahaha! Oops! I behaved, though. My folks don't know about the damage. That would only cause more aggro. I just need to make a plan in case my dad wants to spar with me. He'd kill me! One shot to the ribs is all it would take.

I'd never been interested in all this fighting crap until Kyle came along. He was not the type to stand back from anybody. He and Craig almost came to blows at a swim meet but the coach stepped in and stopped it. Craig never bothered Kyle again. He knew Kyle was not afraid.

Graham rocked over one afternoon with Jacky in tow. "I want to show Jacky your battle scars," he explained at the door.

My instinctive reaction was, "Piss off!" but then realized I was in female company. "Sorry, Jacky."

"That's okay. You think Graham never speaks like that?"

The pair followed me to my room where Graham lifted my T. He wasn't prepared for what he saw. His eyes grew as big as dinner plates.

"Something's broken," he concluded,
"that is soooo bad."

"It is? It only occurs to me
when people comment."

Jacky made no secret of ogling
my abs. I asked her to put some
arnica oil on the bruises. Before she
could respond, Graham snatched the
bottle from me and volunteered to
apply the oil. Sorry, kiddo. Quick as
a flash, Jacky grabbed the bottle
from the grommet. "I can manage," she
insisted. Hahahaha! Graham was under
the thumb!

I was high on the fact that she
admired me, so I removed my T and
stood motionless while she rubbed the
oil into my skin. Even then, it was
painful. The bruises were
purple/black from obvious damage.

After she finished, I replaced
my T and headed to the kitchen for
drinks. Upon my return, the pair was
lying on my bed, with Graham's arm
draped over his lady. They stared
into each other's faces, madly in
love and momentarily oblivious to my
presence. Red-faced when he saw me,
Graham rolled off the bed and grabbed
the two glasses of juice. They left
soon afterwards, but not before
Graham said he thought it was cool
that I flattened Joe's big brother.

Towards evening, Melanie
arrived. She'd cooled off and was
okay about the Craig thing. However,
she suggested I needed to tell my
folks about it. "I can't do that,
Melanie. There's bugger all they can
do about cracked ribs. Besides, it
would open a can of worms I'd rather
keep the lid on."

"You need those bruises
attended to."

"You're hired."

I handed Melanie some surgical tape and asked to be strapped good and tight. "Ouch! Not that tight!" I thought I'd crawl across the ceiling one time when she accidentally nabbed a tender spot.

When I plucked up the nerve to tell my folks about the damage, they sent me to the doc who, in turn, sent me to the hospital for x-rays. They revealed no major damage—no cracks or fractures. However, a layer of muscle suffered injury which the doc explained was soft tissue that took ages to heal.

What did my folks say about the fight with Craig? I didn't tell them. I lied, and explained the damage was caused by a surfing accident. My dad would freak if he knew I'd been kicked. He'd want to lay charges. Can you imagine the consequences of that? Meanwhile, I worked harder in the gym. No way would all this Craig shit slow my fitness program.

I discovered later that my manager also kept himself busy. My manager? Meet Graham. He'd arranged the title fight between Craig and me for a date in the near future. "So I told Craig it was cool," announced the grommet. "I told him you were prepared to take him on in the school gym."

"Have you gone berserk? Mental or something? In the school gym? His home turf? Anyway, who said I'd take him on? I planned to talk to him, Graham ... talk! You made this whole situation worse than it already is."

"Yeah, well, okay then. Next time I see him I'll tell him you're a

chickenshit. And that you're gonna run every time you see him."

"Graham, you know that feeling you get when you're so damn mad you wanna choke someone? I'm close to that right now. And you're the one I wanna choke! You think I'm totally new to fights? The problem now is that we're bigger. We hit harder and cause more damage. And, yeah, I'm not too crazy about pain. You're different, you can handle pain."

"So can you. I'll train you to screw him." Graham's accidental double entendre crossed my mind and caused me to smile. "So what are you grinning about? Reckon I can't train you?"

"Listen, mate, I want to speak to him first. Okay? Everyone says I should beat the crap out of him but it's not that easy. Sure, I realize you can show me a few moves but that's not enough. Craig has the balls for a fight and that makes all the difference."

"Kyle would've taken him out right now after what he did to you. And I know you've got the balls for this too, because I felt them. Nice hanging ones."

"What's Joe's position on this?"

"He reckons Craig will wipe the floor with you. But you can do it, Stuart. Serious! I really think you can take him on. C'mon, man, look at you! You're as big as he is."

"I'll think about it. Do you mind if I speak to Craig first?"

"Yeah, right. Like he's gonna listen to you? He wants your heart for breakfast."

"Okay," I relented after a long pause, during which Graham's face lost its happy glow. "If Craig refuses to listen to sense I'll take him on, but only because you'll be my second and I'll give him a hiding to remember ... plus an extra shot or two for you so you can boast to Joe."

"Ace!" The beaming smile instantly returned to the grommet's face. "Then Joe can shut the fuck up and clean up his bro's mess. Hehehehe!"

Green Room II
Chapter 40

The phone convo with Craig was as Graham predicted. "Craig? It's Stuart here."

"Yeah?"

"Listen, I'm not sure what Graham's plan is but I didn't ask him to organize a fight between you and me. I think we've fought enough as it is."

"Yeah."

"Can we be friends or something? Or at least not be at each other's throats all the time?"

"Fuck that, mate. You made the challenge in front of your chick, and now you wanna bail? Then you try something when I least expect it? Piss off. You're dead meat. And if you don't make a time, I'll make a time."

"There's no reason to fight. I don't even understand how all this aggro started."

"It started when you smacked my little bro. So now you're saying you can't take on someone your own size? I promise to go easy on you. Graham says it's gonna be all legal with the coach there. But he's my coach, so he's gonna want me to win anyway, hahahahaha!"

"Think you've got the balls to beat me in a fair fight?"

"Say what?"

"You heard me. I'll take you apart, fucker, once and for all."

Craig was so angry and loud, his voice was barely distinguishable. "You are dead meat, bro!"

"So now I'm your bro? Fuck you!"

He slammed down the phone so hard my ears rang. Cool, huh? Now I have the chance to demolish him. Yeah, right. I don't need this kinda stress. I know from experience how hard that moron can hit; instant stars. But, hey, this time his blows will be cushioned by gloves. I'll wear a steel jockstrap, and a medieval knight helmet. No worries.

Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to death we go! I'm dead, I'm dead, it's off with my bloody head!

Now Graham will need to visit every day to train me—at least train me to be fit enough to last three minutes in the ring as I try to avoid Craig, hahaha! I've never been inside one of those things. Kyle went a few rounds with the guys at school and said those rings are huge when you first step inside. But when you try to avoid an opponent, the size shrinks to a phone box.

Hey, G, I'm reading your mail and it sounds like you also want me to take out Craig. I'm chuffed that everyone has confidence in me while my balls shrink and my knees shake. BRETT COME BACK! ALL IS FORGIVEN! Now, there's a thought: what if I invite Brett to Byron and offer him to Craig as a birthday present?

Actually, now that I've considered my idea a little more deeply, I remember Craig and Brett were swim team mates. Fact is I'll be doing situps till I can no longer breathe. That's where Craig nails me every time, right in the gut. And I'll wear headgear so there's no chance of a knockout. Hahahaha!

I wrote G again two days later, and told him I thought Graham was

selling tickets to the match, and probably taking bets as well. And me? I kept doing situps in the gym while my trainer watched.

"Everyone wants to be there, Stuart. All the junior swimmers wanna see you give Craig a hiding. That bully is dead meat, I told them. Joe says if you beat his big bro he'll challenge me to a match. Hey! That is so bitching because the whole school will see me flatten Joe."

"Hey, knucklehead, why don't you organize a fight between you and Joe and leave me out of it?"

"Because Craig is full of shit, and we all wanna see him down for a change."

"51 ... 52 ... 53 ... 54 ... Graham, my gut's hurting like hell now."

"Just a few more..."

"55 ... 100."

"That's cheating! Listen, Stuart, there's nothing wrong with you. I reckon you could take him right now."

"Cool it with this damn fight thing already!"

Despite my protests, what really worried me was disappointing the grommet. He was obsessed with my winning, but I wasn't so confident. Craig was mentally wired for this battle, and I wasn't ... nor anywhere near as motivated. Enough of that. One thing is certain, Graham is determined to get me to peak fitness.

Meanwhile, the pain of the bruises has eased. I admit, I initially exaggerated the extent of damage but, at the time, I didn't think so. I still have one massive bruise.

I was on internet chat Friday night, receiving advice from all over, as well as via email. It was obvious everyone rooted for me. Thanks for the vote of confidence, guys. HAVE YOU SEEN THIS CRAIG MORON?

1. Somehow get Brett to help me.
2. Speak to Mr. T. Ask him to check out this Craig and give me a few tips.
3. Speak to my dad.
4. Persist with Graham's training regime. At least he'll get me fitter than I was.

Everyone forgets that no spectators are allowed at the match. Graham says that whenever there's a conflict between two guys that needs one-on-one settlement, no one is allowed at the match except the boxers and their seconds, one for each corner. That put paid to the idea of having Mr. T or my dad present. Graham would be my second ... "because I wanna see Craig go down ... and you'll need someone to throw the towel for you, hehehehe."

School is on Spring break at the moment, which gives me time to plan a strategy, like find a flight of stairs in Philadelphia to climb and throw my arms in the air, like Rocky. Yeah, right. I don't have Sly's bod. If I did, I'd be invincible.

The total plus is that Graham now spends more time with me. Make no mistake, he's in charge, ensuring I train till I drop: situps, chinups, pushups, throwups and cockups. I also swim a lot; slow strokes that make me feel good afterwards. I figure that's

because I stretch my obliques and warm them gradually.

By the time Saturday rolled around, I felt like something other than situps or punching the bag. I WAS HORNY! What to do? Nothing, except spend another quiet evening with Melanie. AGAIN!

When I reached Melanie's house, her folks were about to go out, but had organized snacks for us lovebirds to munch while we watched vids. AND, a couple of bottles of Smirnoff Ice. My baby smiled when she answered the front door. Hey, shut up, G. I'm cute! I wore loose-fitting beige chinos, a loose white T and a surf hoody. It was cold, okay? Melanie wore ... a tracksuit. Okay, so it WAS cold.

Shortly after her folks left, Melanie grabbed a couple of vids from the cabinet but didn't insert one into the player. Instead, she brought a tray of snacks and drinks to where I stood, and asked to see my bruises. "They're looking better," she commented after I removed my top. "Still a weird color, but you don't flinch when I run my fingers over your ribs."

"Hey, babes, you're giving me a woody."

We kissed as I took off her top, then fell back onto the couch.

I've had a few chicks in my life, G, but last night with Melanie was the most special I've had with a girl ... ever. Just the two of us, with thoughts of only us, and absolute intimacy ... naked together, embarrassed about nothing.

Snacks? They were forgotten as we became lost in our lovemaking,

which was even more intense the second time around. Any residual pain from the bruising was gone. Our love for each other was sealed last night.

We did eventually get around to the snacks and drinks, but remained naked; both totally consumed by the magic of what took place. "You'll give birth to three of my kids in nine months time," I smiled as she sat on my lap, and caused yet another erection. "I used my teeth to make holes in the condoms." She responded with her wonderfully infectious laugh. Then I suggested she remain seated on my lap until her folks arrived home.

"Okay, we can tell my mom we're making babies for her to look after."

"Melanie and Stuart babies! Woohoo! They'll be the cutest little monkeys ever. Hey, check out the carpet-incriminating evidence all over the place. I think we better clean it up, like now!"

We busied ourselves with the clean up, then Melanie used her hairdryer to banish the damp spots. Afterwards, I laid on my back while she rested her elbow on my chest and cupped her chin in her hand. "What's going through that pretty head?" I asked as she gazed at me.

"Everything and nothing."

"Him?" I was unable to ignore the subject of Kyle. This night was so special, I needed to know if Melanie felt the same way.

"Yeah," she said thoughtfully after a pause. "It's not you Stuart, or us. I remember the last time we-Kyle and I-were together and tonight was like a replay. But I'm okay, and I think we're okay." Her eyes misted

for a moment. "And I know he's okay with it."

I agreed.

The sound of a car entering the drive immediately broke our trance. We quickly moved to the den where we frantically dressed. By the time the folks walked in, Melanie and I were seated at the kitchen table, drinking coffee. "Hope you enjoyed the drinks and vids," her dad smiled.

"Yeah, best vids and snacks ever!"

Hey, G, I keep playing last night over and over in my head. I remember clearly each feeling of each and every awesome moment. I appreciate Kyle's love for Melanie. It's something you can't help. I think Melanie's insistence on waiting for the right time was a good idea. I also suspect last night was planned. She's a devious lady, G, and I love her.

So, is Stuart straight? Yeah, about as straight as Kyle was: straight in that you get max value from every friendship you have. That's something I learned from reading Kyle's old mail, and from Graham and Melanie. Even from Brett, in a way, but mostly from what Kyle wrote. There are no boundaries in friendship; love is something that needs to be demonstrated.

Speaking of love—my boxing coach is due here soon to give me a hard time. Which reminds me, I need to call Brett. I've also made mental notes to speak to my dad and Mr. T. They've not seen Craig in action so I guess there's not a lot they can offer in terms of pugilistic strategy. Why me?

Green Room II
Chapter 41

My arrival at Mr. T's house was expected. Blabbermouth Graham spilled the beans, as well as the reason for my visit. Mr. T began by asking a load of questions about my attitude towards Craig. The two had already met. He admitted that Craig was a spoiled brat, but cautioned that Craig is an awesome swimmer and very strong.

THANKS A BLOODY LOT! I KNEW THAT ALREADY! Don't worry, G, I didn't say that aloud. Mr. T also thought Craig was a nice kid. NICE KID??? Was he referring to the same Craig? Yes, he was. Mt. T had met Craig a few times, but said that I could beat him in a fight if I got him angry enough to do something stupid.

"You need to watch his eyes at all times, Stuart. His eyes will signal exactly what his next move will be, or where he aims to plant you."

"Think I can beat him?"

"Craig's a good kid, but he can get too cocky. Make him mad enough and he'll make mistakes. He and Kyle faced each other once, and Craig backed off. Kyle got angry, yes, but he channeled his anger the correct way. Stuart, I'm not saying it's cool that you blokes want to knock each other's blocks off, especially not now. You're both old enough to do serious damage. But, from what you tell me, Craig will follow you around forever if you don't stand up to him. It will be good to settle this dispute. I also don't like what he

said to Melanie, so you have me in your corner, mate."

"Thanks."

"No problem. But don't try any power shit with him or he'll beat you. Use your head to control your fists."

I also spoke to my dad during a gym session while I held the bag as he pummeled it. Held it? It was more like struggling to stay on my feet. WHAMMO! In a corner, Graham quietly watched proceedings.

"So what do you say, dad? You've been pretty quiet about this whole Craig thing."

"Is he on the school boxing team?"

"Don't think so. He's a swimmer, but he hits around in the gym quite a bit."

"I'm not happy, son. If he trains with boxers then he's got boxing savvy. Stuart! Don't look at me like that! I realize this is something you must do—to meet this challenge. But that doesn't mean I have to be happy about it. I've seen a lot of damage done, even to guys who wear protective headgear."

"I think I can beat him, dad. I really do."

"I don't know this Craig fellow, but I think I can give you some pointers."

My dad then instructed me on how to take a hiding. Each time I backed off, he hooked me. Each time I moved in, he hooked me. Even when I was a decent arm's length away, he hooked me! Thank Christ he didn't put all his power into the punches. Nonetheless, he gave me a helluva work over.

The lesson? Don't give Craig the space to throw a hook. Then my chin took a hammering. "Block! Keep your gloves up and your elbows in!" OOOMPH! My dad connected me in the abs, then, as if I were an expendable trifling, asked Graham if he'd like a spar.

It was cool to watch the grommet. He didn't give a damn. He threw a flurry of punches as hard as my dad's. Even when my dad began to increase his power, Graham somehow managed to penetrate the blur of punches. Lesson? Allow Craig to power punch because it's difficult to control an opponent who uses measured tactics. Don't stand flat-footed.

Actually, G, my dad spoke almost exclusively to Graham. Why? Maybe because he reminded him of the son he lost. Who knows? But it was cool to see my dad loosen up. I think he even smiled once. Hahahaha! Nah, he was amused at Graham's fiery determination to give as good as he got.

Okay, so I've been a good boy and followed everyone's advice. Now it's time to phone Brett for his opinion.

"Have you tried to speak to Craig, Stuart?"

"Yeah. He answered with his fists and his boot."

"How deep are you into this fight?"

"Pretty much. My dad and Graham have helped me with training and advice. I've focused on fitness. Brett, if you're suggesting I walk away from this fight, it's too late."

"Craig's not a great boxer, but he's incredibly strong. Anyway, what

possessed you to arrange the fight at school?"

"I didn't arrange it, okay? Now you're not helping at all."

"Okay, if you have to do it, that's it. He'll try to psyche you out—might even get some of his mates to phone you at home before the fight. Remember, he's on his own turf so he'll organize his mates to be present even if they can't watch the match. They'll stare you down and intimidate you. You're not welcome there, Stuart."

"Thanks."

"Pleasure. And remember this, every time they try to psyche you out, respond by directing your anger at Craig, not his mates. Don't internalize the shit they dish out. Go to your gym and smack the bag hard. When the big day arrives, and the coach gives the signal to begin, Craig will plough right into you because you won't expect it. But now you do. Right? RIGHT???"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I hear you."

"Then say so! Serious question: what do you think your chances are? Even without help."

"I think I can take him, and beat him."

"Don't place your bets on what you did with me here in Fremantle. That was play. But anyone can beat anyone else if their mind is set. Keep your gloves up, and your elbows close together. He'll go for your gut, but forget about going for his. He's very muscular, and you'll do minimum damage. Go for his face and head, especially at the start because he won't expect that from you."

"What's his weak spot?"

"He doesn't have one."

"So I'm dead?"

"Only if you listen to yourself. Craig rides on a massive ego. He has more to lose than you do. His ego is his weakness. Sounds to me like you need to get your mind right. Want me to rock over there and smack you around a bit?"

"Hahahaha! Sounds cool."

"Each time doubt creeps into your brain, remember what he said to Melanie, and what he did to you. You could win this thing, Stuart."

"Do you think you could beat him?"

"I was a boxer; that's the difference. That's also your advantage. He swims and you surf. You both train. He's stronger but I think you have more savvy. I think you can beat him if you maintain the right focus. Don't look away if he stares at you. Keep your eyes on his all the time. You'll detect little hints about what he plans to do. Don't fall for the dummies. Watch the eyes."

Spring school break was pretty damn hectic with rigorous training and psyching sessions. But I felt confident of winning this fight. Fact is, I know I can beat Craig. I've trained hard, and feel much stronger. Maybe that puts paid to Brett's comment about Craig being stronger. At the time of writing this, I know I could get Craig down in a wrestle if we were to engage in one.

Graham visits every day, and puts me through the whole fitness routine, as well as punching the bag. "You should get a speedball. It improves reflexes and sharpens aim and timing." Melanie, meanwhile, has

come to terms with the situation. She now realizes a bloke's gotta do what a bloke's gotta do.

Let's get this 'Kyle's passing is sealed' thing out of the way, Stuart. Your making love to Melanie is another milestone in the aftermath of Kyle's death. One of the first, one which I found difficult to deal with, was the scattering of his ashes. I couldn't wrap my mind around an urn full of ash as being Kyle. He was all about life and energy, but I didn't blame Mr. T for scattering his son's ashes, just as I don't blame you and Melanie for making love. And I certainly don't think you made love simply to 'score points'.

I wrote what I wrote because that's how I felt at the time I read your email. It had nothing to do with you or Melanie personally. I'm just pissed off at the way life marches on without Kyle. Like you can, I'm unable to pick up the phone to be comforted by Mr. or Mrs. T, or Brett or even you. My only link with Kyle now is you, Mr. Invisible. That's how it was for you earlier this year. I was your only link. Now, that's changed. All Kyle's friends are your friends, and his folks welcome you as a son. Come to think of it, all my friends are now yours too. And that's how it should be. But don't lose sight of where I am, still hanging by a single thread—you.

Good advice from Mr. T about Craig. I agree that his weakness is his temper. I like your confidence, Stuart, but don't get carried away or underestimate your opponent. You spoke to Brett, Mr. T, your dad and Graham all of whom analyzed Craig

pretty well, from various perspectives. That's your edge. Craig knows very little about you. He'll be fighting the mystery man!

Hey, Stuart, you began the year virtually friendless, except for Bob. Since then, you've earned the respect of many friends, including cyber friends.

Making love to Melanie the other night was very special, G. Nothing will ever erase the magic. Despite that, I still think of Kyle and me together, with my head on his chest while his fingers play with my hair. The feel, the smell, and the sound of his voice are as clear to me now as they were a year ago. I don't expect anyone else to quite understand, but I'm glad his memory is as strong now as ever, and I hope it continues.

Is that void filled by Kyle's friends? Nobody is capable of that, or to simulate the effect he had on my heart and my head. And the more I reflect on what we had, the guiltier I feel about not fully appreciating what Kyle and I had, or showing him how much I loved him. I'm sure Kyle thought I treated our relationship as ordinary. I robbed him of the chance to truly know just how much I appreciated him.

When he died, and I dove into the more hard core drugs, it was supposed to be a temporary escape, just to help me over the hard times. But drugs took control, and I lost sight of my future.

Kyle once told me he had some email debates with you, G, about Christianity. You had different views. Kyle chose the view that

people should live decent and honest lives and embrace respectable spiritual values, where nobody hurt anybody else, and differences are accepted or at least tolerated.

Kyle spoke often of you, G. He had enormous respect for you and felt the need to talk to someone about his old fossil friend. Do you think I would have pestered John to inform you of Kyle's death if I didn't believe that?

Don't give up on what you do, G. Kyle wasn't your friend for 4 years for you to turn your back on what you and he shared. You have the respect of so many people, G.

Hey, Kyle saw some good in me that I never expected. That has to count for something, right? And a lot of what he saw he learned from you.

Do I see any good in Craig? Sure I do! I reckon Craig will look pretty damn good lying on his back in the ring while the coach lifts my arm into the air and declares me the victor! So you see? There's even good in that mongrel. Hahahahaha!

Graham sticks rigidly to his daily training lessons at my place. He's becoming stronger too because he does it all with me. My dad takes a keen interest in my technique as well. But Melanie, being female, still thinks I should find a way to end this dispute peacefully—somehow. Yeah, right.

Am I worried about Tuesday? Not as much as I was previously. I have confidence now. In fact, I'm almost positive I can beat Craig. I've worked my butt off and believe it must pay off. Do I look forward to the match? Hell no! I know he'll get

a fist in there somewhere, and he hits damn hard. I rather look forward to the end of the match when I help him up from the canvas to shake his hand and declare a truce.

Green Room II
Chapter 42

Graham has a major job tomorrow. A strong wind the other day blew down an old lady's gate, so she asked the grommet to fix it. He said he might give me a shout to help him if Joe's busy. Graham's good with his hands and fixes just about everything. He knows his way around tools. His dad spends time with him and gets him involved in chores around the house. He shows his son how things work, like machinery. Graham helps his dad with the car as well, and is not afraid to get his hands dirty. I have a lot of time for the grommet.

You asked about Graham's dad and Mr. T. I think they're good neighbors rather than mates. The families get together for a barbecue now and then but that's about it.

At the end of the week I plan to connect with Melanie. No particular reason except I need to stay away from crap for a while. So it'll probably be pizza and a movie, or a movie and pizza, or maybe just half a pizza each with a movie, or a movie with half a pizza each, or stay home at her house and order pizza delivered. Staying away from crap sounds like a lotta fun, huh?

No mail from G for a few days? Was he mad at me? Maybe he was pissed off at some stuff I wrote about the Iraq war. I'm totally against it. Another Vietnam.

Three days later I learned that G suffered a heart attack, and was hospitalized. I felt guilty, and responsible for placing him under a

great deal of pressure over the past year or so. *I just want you to know that I'm thinking of you and ... yeah, praying as well.*

Hey, the man is back! So you're back harassing everyone. Kewl! Hahahahaha! This is such a relief! Now I can resume my studies instead of figuring how to get flowers to the hospital.

Subject line: STUART IS ONCE AGAIN CLOBBERED BY CRAIG!

Yeah, well after all the hype from your internet friends, and allowing my ego to run away, I made a total idiot of myself by walking into Craig.

Meanwhile, it's cool that you're okay. You've no idea the panic that spread across the net. That's why I lost the fight. Gotta have some sort of excuse, right? Next time, get your timing right. How was Kyle supposed to help you and me at the same time? He was so busy with you he missed the punch that floored me. Hahahaha!

I couldn't have suffered the likes of Kyle's death again. My head couldn't handle two deaths in a row. And with final exams looming, I saw myself repeating year 12 a third time. They'd probably pension me off from school like an aged citizen or something.

Tell me this. You own a car. What possessed you to ride a bicycle the day of the heart attack? Are you blond or something?

I want you to know that I missed the after-valedictory party. How could I could I party after reading about your heart attack? No, don't feel bad about it. I planned to

excuse myself from the party anyway. The snow and ice flowed and I wouldn't have had the guts to refuse any offers. Bob phoned to tell me what a blast I missed. Then he said all the guys were totaled and most of the girls as well. They organized open top buses to tour the Gold Coast, which was a cool idea, and the weather was perfect. According to Bob, one of our friends screwed his girlfriend on the bus. Most of the other guys didn't notice because she sat on his lap. The only giveaway was the expression on their faces during climax. Hahahahaha! It was wild and I would have dug to go. But if I had I'd be writing you real shit. I still suffer from temptations and the occasional craving.

So tell me the dirty little details. Did any of the nurses try to get into your pajamas? Hahahaha! Bet you got an erection every time they put their hands on you, you dirty old man. Of course, I refer to the male nurses.

A lotta your friends emailed me to ask about you, so you can imagine the panic. Cool that you're back. Meanwhile, here's what I wrote while you were away:

Monday: Mail to myself. I suppose this will be a diary type thing which I'm not sure will ever be mailed. How do I feel right now? Scared. Not of Craig. Bugger him. I know I can beat him and win our little joust of egos. I'm scared of the 'what if'.

Graham has been great during the school break, making sure I train every day. He's much more relaxed about our friendship now. I don't

wanna disappoint his expectations which are pretty high about my winning the fight. I'd prefer that the venue wasn't his school, though. It gives Craig a home turf advantage.

My concentration is screwed at the moment because of my concern about your health. Have I upset you that much?

I probably need to just get on with my life. Things are better now than they have been all year. My folks are cool, and they like Melanie.

It's good therapy to write stuff to you, G. Helps me analyze myself. Why have I opened up so much of my life to you? Not sure. I suppose, like Kyle, the anonymity of the net makes me feel secure—that it's cool to open up and spew out my innermost feelings, and details of what occurs here in Byron.

How the hell could I have hurt Kyle like I did? I despise the memory of the look on his face when he discovered that I screwed his girl. I'd never seen him so angry or seething with hate. I still don't know why I did it. To prove I could get his girl? To show him life wasn't just a bed of roses and cooey, cooey, coo? I don't know. I don't know why I did it—or why Melanie allowed me to.

Three more days of school and that's it. No more—well, no more high school. I'll miss some of my best mates. Bob will still be in my shorts. God knows, he's been good for me this year. I don't know how I'd have coped if he hadn't rescued me from a couple of scrapes.

Not sure what's up with G. Still no mail or site updates. I'll

write some guys and ask if they know anything. I'd hate to hear the worst after a year of no Kyle. Yet, with all this uncertainty, I need to focus on my fight with Craig tomorrow.

Early Tuesday morning: I hardly slept a wink because of this damn fight. School resumed yesterday so it was routine as normal, except we finish this week with a valedictory service. That's the official end of school apart from the grind of study for finals. It's gonna be a hectic time if I must improve my grades.

Graham challenged me to a strength exercise yesterday. "I just wanna check if you'll go down when Craig hits you." It was shirts off and gloves on, and he asked me to hit his abs. "I'm not a girl," he complained. "You gotta hit me harder!" Before I reacted, he shot a powerful punch to my midsection. It rocked me, but I managed to absorb it. That was satisfying; I remained upright. But it was nonetheless painful. I hit Graham again, and sent him three steps backwards. He also managed to absorb the impact. He weighs only 58 kilos but he's solid muscle.

We quit when our abs were red from punches. "I won't train you too hard—just a bit of sparring," he said. Yeah, right. The bloody liar walloped me every chance he got, which wasn't too often. Okay, so my trainer says I'm ready for Tyson, and that Craig doesn't rate a chance to put me on the canvas.

The only call I received Monday night was from Melanie. She didn't mention the fight because she doesn't approve of Craig and me one on one.

She doesn't understand what I hope to prove by being hospitalized.

"Think it will be that bad?"

"Maybe not, but I don't want you to go ahead with this lunacy."

First thing Tuesday I phoned Brett. It was early but I'm aware of his fitness routine before he heads for the boatshed. "Happy birthday!"

"Stuart? Cool! Are you calling from the emergency room?"

"Piss off! The fight's scheduled for this afternoon."

"I think you can beat him. That would be a rocking birthday gift."

"I thought about what I could get you for your birthday. I came up with nothing because I'm not there to give you a hug."

"Just remembering is enough.

Kyle was the only other person to phone me for my birthday if we weren't together somewhere. But if you tried to hug me, Stuart, I'd give you to Craig on a platter—of chopped liver. Yours! How do you feel about this fight?"

"Nervous, scared, hell knows."

"That's normal, and good.

You'll be okay. How are the bruises?"

"Healing—still a bit tender in places. But I'm okay. It doesn't hassle me."

"Call me again this evening. I wanna know what happened. It'll be a points thing with no real winner. I don't think he'll beat you."

Okay, so I won't be drinking meals through a straw? That's good to know, right? Now I appreciate how an alien feels when he visits this planet. I'm sure Kyle felt that way when he first arrived from Mars.

I dressed as casual as possible for the fight; just jeans and a T. Graham said the coach would give me shorts when I arrived, and that I could wear normal sneakers provided they had white non-slip soles. I borrowed Bob's squash shoes. "I'm totally pissed I can't be there to watch you," he bitched. "I'd love to see you wipe the floor with that ego-infested moron."

After all the advice and training, there was no way known I'd lose to Craig. Brett advised me to allow Craig to channel all his energy into his attitude while I channeled mine into my head and fists. Hey, I'm nervous. Make no mistake about that.

When I walked into that school, so familiar to Kyle and Graham, I felt like an intruder—familiar territory for them but totally foreign territory to me. Even late afternoon, a lot of students remained in the grounds, probably just to gawk at me.

Graham greeted me at the front gate and accompanied me to the gym hall. A couple of guys wolf-whistled and gave me the hairy eyeball. One of them was the same guy who took a swipe at me during my last encounter with Craig. At least, from what I understood, he wasn't allowed to watch this fight.

It was then I asked myself the question: What the fuck am I doing here? I'm a lover not a fighter. But this mess needed to be sorted once and for all, something that demanded to be faced. Otherwise, I'd be constantly on the run and catching fives.

The grommet wore a school tracksuit and looked like he owned the joint. He also appeared more nervous than I felt—and I felt bloody nervous! Not so much nervous about the fight any more, I'd passed that stage. It was because I was on strange ground—a stranger viewed with suspicion. These were the grounds and buildings Kyle thought the world of—his home away from home.

I followed Graham to the 'visitors' dressing room, which made me smile. I was the enemy there. The gloves given me were lighter than my own, which I guessed prevented less damage to the opponent. Graham then handed me headgear, box, shorts and gumguard. "Whose is this?" I asked.

"Mine. I use it for rugby. But it's cool; you can use it. I soaked it in warm water so you need to bite into it and let it mold to your teeth."

The gumguard felt like a brick in my mouth; huge and somewhat uncomfortable. "How many people are here?"

"Don't sweat. Only five. You, me, coach, Craig and Jonathon."

"Jonathon?"

"Craig's sparring partner and second. Hey, you look cool, man. Ready? Because we need to go through to the gym when you're ready."

"Got a spare singlet or something?"

"Nah, but it's cool. And you look great. Now calm down, Stuart. You ready?"

Green Room II
Chapter 43

It wasn't me who needed to calm down, it was Graham. "Are you ready to go now?" he asked in an agitated manner.

"Yes, for Christ sake! Now you're making me nervous!"

I tried unsuccessfully to resist laughing at Graham's antics in favor of my main priority which was to psyche myself for the battle. *Watch his eyes.* That's what Mr. T said. *Watch his eyes the whole time because they'll tell you what his next move will be. Keep your elbows in and protect your chin.*

I loosened my arm and other muscles as we followed the passage that led to the gym. Graham carried a water bottle, towel and small first-aid kit. How bloody reassuring! "The towel is to dry you off." And I was determined that would be the limit of its purpose.

The gym and equipment was eerily quiet as we entered and proceeded to a smaller anti-room which housed the boxing ring. Craig was there, throwing practice punches at Jonathon. He stopped as I appeared and smiled at Jonathon who gave his mate the thumbs up sign. Yeah, right, I thought, I'm ready for you. Then a million butterflies attacked my stomach and I felt sick. I'd psyched myself up to a point where I was tempted to give Graham a smack just for the hell of it.

When the coach spotted me he beckoned Jonathon and Craig to approach him. The coach offered me his hand which I shook. "Stuart,

right?" he asked. I nodded. "Okay, you guys know why you're here and I don't give a damn about the details. The deal with this ring is that whatever happens in here happens. When it's over, no more beef between you two. Okay? You kids meet on the street and you smile. Got it?"

I nodded while Craig and Jonathon continued to smile at each other. I guessed it was an attempt to psyche me out, but I rejected the bait. Brett had warned me about that. *They'll try to drive you crazy to make you do something stupid. Just get madder at them.*

The butterflies in my gut turned to dragons and I thought I might puke. Then the coach had this to say: "Max three rounds, two minutes each. If either of you feels he's had enough, your seconds know the drill—the towel flies. Graham? Jonathon? You got that? Graham nodded furiously while Jonathon smiled at Craig. Fuck you two, I thought. I'm ready! Then the coach turned his attention to me. "You ever box in a ring before?"

"No."

"No, sir!"

"No, sir."

"You ever box in a match before?"

"No, sir."

"But you still want to do this thing?"

"Yep."

"Yes, sir!"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, let's get it over."

Craig removed his top and looked good, real good. He's a typical swimmer but his definition is

more cut than most swimmers, except for Graham and a few others. Craig's shoulders are powerful, with bulging biceps. I might have cracked a hardon if it weren't for the dragons gnawing at my gut. BUT, I looked just as good. All that training over the past week or two revealed obvious results. I felt strong and knew right then I would win this fight. There were too many positives going for me ... like G said, Kyle was there, watching ... watching and waiting to cheer me on.

Craig stretched and warmed up in his corner, so I copied him. I clasped my hands behind my back and raised them as high as possible, then bent forward with my head close to my knees. When Craig did the same, he just about kissed his own ass. I figured he had so many mates kissing his ass he didn't need to do it himself. Hahahaha! Actually, through the soft satin shorts, his ass looked kinda cute. Tight. Shuddup, G.

The coach climbed into the ring and called us to the center where he asked us to shake hands. Craig gave my glove a slight push, which I guessed was what boxers did before a bout. Then the coach stepped back and gave the signal to fight. What? Like now? I hadn't even raised my hands when I felt an explosion inside my head as Craig's fist connected with the side of my headgear, sending it sideways. I lost my balance and slid on my ass toward the ropes. The coach ordered Craig back to his corner. "You guys want to stop this thing right now?"

"I'm fine."

Everything was like a blur. As if Graham's voice came from some

distance away, I heard him telling me to raise my hands. Yeah, I knew I'd make a big mistake but so had Craig. He did as Brett predicted and launched right at me from the very start because he thought me an easy target. I could hear Brett: *He'll come right at you. Make sure your hands are up. When he gets there, all you need to do is plant your fist in his face.*

The coach recalled us to our positions and told us to fight. Craig walked right into it. He charged at me with his arms loosely bent at the elbows so I stuck my fist in his nose. His head snapped back and he retreated. Blood spattered his face and dribbled down his chest. I had the bastard now, but the coach stopped the fight and sent Craig back to his corner to have his nose plugged or some damn thing.

Back in my corner, Graham tried hard not to smile while we observed the frantic convo taking place in the opposite corner. "Now you got him," beamed the grommet. "He's mad so he'll act stupid. You're gonna stay cool so you can flatten him. You got about a minute left in this round."

Again, the coach beckoned us to center ring and told us to fight. Craig changed tack, stepped back and waited for me to walk into him. However, I kept my distance while he and I threw dummy punches, maybe wishing one or the other would make a move.

The round ended and we returned to our corners. Time dragged as if we'd been in the ring for an hour. Already I sweated like a pig. Graham spoke about tactics but my head

wasn't receptive—it pounded, probably as a result of the first punch. I heard voices from the opposite corner as well. Just two more rounds—maybe that wasn't so bad. But I needed to get up close. My dad said not to give Craig room to hook or he'd have the advantage. *Get in close. With his headgear you'll need to go for his gut. Pummel it—you're fit enough to punch like pistons. Just remember to keep yourself closed up.*

Once more, the coach gave instructions to resume the fight. Craig got closer and threw two quick punches that hit my arms. That forced me to lower their position to protect my gut. He jabbed my jaw, and sent my head back. My gumguard flew out of my mouth. No one noticed, so I thought 'fuck it'. Anyway, it was like having a mouthful of bull's balls.

Craig wound up a punch. I saw it coming and ducked. Then I slipped. "There's water on the floor," I explained to the coach. Graham jumped the ropes and wiped the water/sweat mix from the canvas. Meanwhile, Craig and Jonathon still smiled at each other. They'd obviously discussed a new strategy. Fine with me, I had plans of my own.

Once the fight resumed, Craig closed in again, jabbing and jabbing. I pushed him away and side-winded him a second time, same place, right on the nose. His plugs fell away and his nose bled like shit. Again, the coach halted the fight until Jonathon had stemmed Craig's bleeding. Then we were at it once more, but I found myself lighter on my feet which prevented Craig from getting too close. Each time he approached, I

clobbered him, first against his headgear because he'd learned to keep his face well covered, then against his ribs. Just before the end of the second round, he tried to back away but I followed and let his ribs have it good and solid. He dropped his defense to cover his ribs, so I mocked his face. He instinctively covered his face so I returned to the ribs. Woohoo!

When the coach called a halt, Craig didn't look so cocky any more. However, I reckoned we were both hurting. My ribs had taken a helluva beating, and I began to hurt again where he'd kicked me in the street.

"Ace," Graham whispered in my ear. "He's finished—you gotta flatten him. This is the final round now."

When the coach called us back, the seconds made sure there was no water in the ring. Craig immediately came at me with his piston fists. I held his arms until the coach separated us. I tried to remember all the advice but my brain had fried. Craig closed in again and stepped into my left hook, which sent him flying onto the ropes. *Once he's on the ropes, he's dead. He's all yours with nowhere to run, Brett said.*

How dumb could I get? Craig's fist arrived outta nowhere and rammed into my ribs—the same place. The remnants of my street-fight bruise gave him a target. He drove his punch, using his whole body weight and shoulders behind it. It felt like a steel hammer. My knees buckled, overwhelmed by a single mass of intense pain. I saw stars, then nothing. As I faded fast, I grabbed hold of him and held on. He reversed

and caused me to fall face-first to the canvas. That's all I remember until I woke with smelling salts under my nose. All four faces stared down at me. My body suffered the kind of pain you get when kicked in the nuts, the kind that travels up to your throat and down to your groin.

Jonathan and Graham helped me to my feet as the coach announced the end of the fight. He called Craig and me to center ring. It was then I realized my headgear had been removed. Craig had also removed his. His left eye was swollen but I couldn't remember how that came about. His nose was also swollen, still oozing crimson.

"Shake hands," the coach ordered.

"C'mon, coach!" Craig chirped. "Aren't you gonna raise my arm in triumph or something?"

"I said shake hands. You think you're a winner because Stuart made a stupid mistake and gave you an opening? You're both losers because you ended up here in my ring. You kids think you can sort out everything with your fists. Now shake hands."

The coach was obviously pissed off, so much so I thought he might flatten both of us right there and then. Anyway, we touched gloves for a moment, then Craig walked away.

Graham and I thanked the coach, climbed from the ring and walked slowly down the passage that led to the visitors' dressing room. "Do you wanna take a shower?"

"It's cool, Graham. I just wanna get outta here."

"That was a pretty hectic fight—you got him good. Did you check out his face?"

"You must have missed the last punch, mate. Didn't you pay attention while he whipped my ass?"

"Crap. He never whipped your ass. If only you'd managed to stay on your feet you'd have out pointed him big time. I think it was cool how you stood up to him. You were awesome until you did that blond thing."

"That's what blonds do," I smiled as we entered the dressing room. "Anyway, I didn't think I'd win, not after that first round. At least he didn't send me to the doctor."

"Gimme your gloves," the grommet ordered before opening the flap and untying the laces. "I thought you won totally—kicked his ass all over the place."

"You disappointed? You won't get the chance to beat the crap outta Joe now."

"Disappointed? Hell no! I'm stoked! Don't hassle about Joe and me, we barney all the time anyway."

"Is there a rear door anywhere? I don't wanna face Craig's dickheads out there."

Graham checked the terrain. A minute later, he returned to inform me that a bunch of guys were outside talking to Jonathon. "Maybe you wanna hang around here for a while—take a shower."

During a quick shower, I noticed my ribs were slaughtered again. Then I toweled and dressed. Shortly afterward, Graham and I decided we'd waited long enough and

that it was time to leave. Yeah, right—bad timing.

As soon as we emerged from the building, we saw all the guys waiting—11 or 12 of them—including Craig dressed in a school tracksuit. His eye was still puffy and he held something to his nose to prevent further bleeding. I tried to avoid eye contact with any of them as we made our way toward the school gate. We'd almost made it when I heard Craig's voice behind me. "Hey, acid head."

I thought 'no fucking more'. I hoped our confrontation was over. Nonetheless, I stopped and faced him. I was still angry as the group stared at me. Then, the surprise to end all surprises—Craig approached Graham and me and offered his hand. "That was a good fight," he said. "Put it there, bro, and tell Melanie I'm sorry."

As I shook his hand I detected the faintest of smiles. At least, that's what I thought. The only words Graham and I exchanged as we walked through the gate were, "Fucking Ace!"

Green Room II
Chapter 44

Jeez, what the hell was I laughing at? My ribs hurt all over again after the pummeling, but I knew nothing was broken or fractured. Besides, the pain was worth the elation! Craig actually shook my hand and apologized to Melanie? Woohoo!

That night I phoned Brett and brought him up to speed. "I told you he was a cool bloke, didn't I?" he said.

"Yeah, right. You told me to beat the crap out of him."

"Not quite. But you did anyway. Well done, mate. That's a cool birthday gift."

"How do you mean?"

"You learned to stand up for something you believe in."

A little later, Graham phoned. "You what???"

"I told Mr. T you won the fight."

"I was knocked out, dammit!"

"That was after you won the fight, hehehe."

My dad was equally stoked that I hadn't been damaged. I figured that was his main concern. But I also hoped he might be stoked about what I'd actually accomplished. He always gave the impression he thought I was a wuss in relation to fights and shit like that. Later, I called Melanie to relay Craig's apology. We spoke for ages.

I wonder how Kyle handled fight situations. This whole episode strung me out totally and I wasn't sure I could handle similar situations on a regular basis. Then I thought how

Brett looked lately; big, strong and fit, and tried to imagine the sight of Kyle sending Brett to the deck in front of the whole school, back in the days they first met. I honestly couldn't imagine Kyle doing that, but he did. What's more, the spiky-haired scallywag got away with it.

Apart from my concern over the mysterious disappearance of G, I felt good, totally fucking good, especially now that this dispute between Craig and me was sorted. I don't think I disappointed any one. The fact that I had the guts to climb into the ring with that hunk was enough already. At the time, I was tempted to jump into my running shoes and hightail it outta there.

Why is it that people do what they do? Adrenalin, I guessed. Like when you take off on a huge peak in the surf that threatens to hurl you over the falls, but you hang in there and take the drop. Why? The feeling of speed and the power of the wave as it propels you faster and faster. That's the kinda thrill only understood by guys who surf.

On the coming Monday I would write the first of my final papers for the year and the entire school term, English Lit. It was time to focus my mind for the next six weeks on exams and study. I could have done without the recent Craig stress but, hey, it went with the territory.

That week was school valedictory, my last official day at high school AGAIN! I tried to remember the previous year's valedictory but it was a blur. The guys at the time were my mates with whom I spent the whole year. They

walked out the gate while I walked back in to repeat my final year.

New mates? Yeah, right. They saw me as a fucked-up druggie riding in my dad's wallet. A few of the new guys became mates—no, actually more like acquaintances. They fell into the same group, snorting and lining. Mates or customers? I wasn't sure. Maybe a bit of both.

Bob didn't expect me to attend school on the morning of the valedictory. "I didn't think Craig would let you walk out of there, not even if you did flatten him. You know what I mean, Stuart—he and his goon squad."

Hahahaha! Yeah, so it was cool—just a bit of a cheek bruise was all, kinda like a medal of honor, and the fact that I actually got into the ring with that vicious mother.

Fuck! G had a heart attack. I just received an email from one of his friends. So what was this? A replay of Kyle's accident? Was I being tested to see if I could handle it a second time around? WELL, FUCK YOU BECAUSE I CAN'T DO THIS ANYMORE! I shouldn't have checked my mail. That was all. Cream the system. G was right, it's all over. All I wanted to do right then was lie down on my bed, which I did, then this damn nightmare would be over, and would turn out to be just a dream. I'd stressed G to the limit with all my shit, and now this.

Wednesday night I checked my mail again. Everyone told me to check G's web site because a news item was posted with a picture of G wearing his apprentice angel outfit, and sitting in a hospital bed like there

was nothing wrong. I read the news post and gathered that he was home again. Whew! So I finished up my latest email and sent it. Still no mail from him, though, so I wasn't sure what cruised beneath that mop of white hair. That uncertainty changed the next day when I received a note from G.

Hey, Stuart, after what I went through I ain't scared of nothin' no more. First off, I gotta say how proud of you I am. You did extremely well with Craig in the ring. I also think the outcome was perfect. You proved you could stand up to that ego-infested bully and give him a thing or two to think about. If you had flattened him, he may not have been so willing to shake your hand and apologize to Melanie. So it all ended well and Graham was happy.

I thought the coach's attitude was cool...a no-nonsense bloke with little time for dickhead lighties.

Yes, you did trip over your ego, but that's okay. It comes with teenage territory. We older guys mellow. Meanwhile, don't be too concerned about who/what you are. For starters, your life is much more entertaining than mine! And that's one hell of an understatement!

So everyone's in a tizz about me? It'll take more than some dumb heart attack to push this fossil off the perch. Nonetheless, I am touched by your concern—but not so good at handling people who make a fuss over me. By the way, I gave my camera to the nurse: "Why on earth do you want me to take a photo of you all wired up in emergency?" "Because I'll never look like this again!"

Congrats again, Stuart, you're a hero.

Getting older has its downside, right? Tick tock tick. WHAM! Tick tock tick tock tick tock... That's better, just gotta check on that damn ticker of yours every now and then, G, and make sure the ticks rhyme with the tocks or what-bloody-ever. But the silly old geyser didn't notice the difference between the ticks and the tocks before the WHAM. He missed the whole point of the joke! Why did I bother?

Meanwhile, there was a load of shit going down during the aftermath of the valedictory party. The school head sent letters to all parents about students being spaced and drunk. Hey, if the school was so concerned why didn't it get involved in organizing the party, and ask parents to be more involved? Anyway, the drugs and booze thing has happened for years and all of a sudden there's this hassle. Some parents complained to the school so the head needed to pretend he was interested. Aaaaagggggghhhhhh! I got so pissed off about that. He could stick his letter where the sun don't shine.

Bob arrived while I studied English Lit at home. "Monday is our language paper, Stuart. We write English Language on Monday."

"Bullshit, it's Lit—I checked."

We both checked. Okay, so it was Language. I did the blond thing again. But that was okay, Language wasn't an ace paper and I always did okay with it.

Last night, I visited the Ts with Melanie, Graham and Jacky. The Ts ordered a bucket of KFC while Mrs. T made a special Malva pudding—Graham's fav.

Melanie and Jacky got into a major tongue-wag with Mrs. T—the girl thing—while Graham insisted on re-enacting the whole Craig Vs Stuart issue in great detail for the benefit of Mr. T, and had us in stitches. Maybe I was a little dozy in the ring because I don't remember Craig hitting the canvas 15 times, hahahaha! I remember him with a shiner and a bloody nose but, according to the grommet's version, with its liberal dose of creative license, Craig's face resembled a pumpkin run over by a truck.

Oh, my God, that little bloke was so incredibly funny as he took center stage in the den, mimicking all the actions of my fists flying and Craig hitting the deck. Oh, jeez, if only...!

However, Mr. T didn't believe a word of Graham's melodramatic account. Nonetheless, he continued to encourage the budding thespian to finish his story. The more Graham worked himself up, the more damage Craig suffered, and the more animated the grommet's performance became. Anyway, the night remained a celebration of my relatively unscathed survival.

Mr. T related the story of a couple of fights he had as a youngster. "I was about Graham's age but bigger than most juniors so the coach put me in the ring with a senior. I received the worst hiding of my life because the senior assumed

I was the same age as he! I only had myself to blame. I told the coach I could take on that senior and win. I was cocky. Are you listening, Graham? Are you paying attention?"

"Yep," the grommet nodded.

"I couldn't box for months after that because I was so badly messed up."

"So why did you do it?"

"Like I said, I was cocky. Do I remind you of anyone?"

"Kyle."

"And?"

"Me, hehehehe."

"That incident taught me a lesson, a huge lesson. It taught me that I wasn't as invincible as I thought. None of us is."

As Mr. T spoke to Graham, I got the impression he was aware of a lot of the shit the grommet had been involved in, some of which called for Kyle's urgent assistance. However, the evening was so enjoyable we left quite late, and promised a repeat session soon.

Jacky spent the night at Graham's house where she had use of the spare room whenever she slept over. She was always welcome at the grommet's house because his folks liked her immensely. Mr. T drove Melanie and me to her house from where I intended to make my own way home. I needed to spend a few minutes alone with her anyway, and didn't want Mr. T waiting in his car for me.

Melanie and I did really dumb kid things as we said goodnight—kissed and smooched and got each other all worked up, knowing we were destined for separate beds that night.

I left Melanie's place and stopped off at a friend's house at about 1am. Yes, I knew he'd have some weed but I felt like mellowing out with a reefer. He and I talked shit for a while, then I left for home. The trip seemed to take forever. I rolled the reefer as I walked, then smoked it. Talk about a head rush! I hadn't smoked for a while so it was a total zing. I wasn't in the mood for an early night so I played computer games in my room, and got annihilated by the animated demons. Hahahaha!

Green Room II
Chapter 45

No social life, no visits during 8 weeks of final exams. It wasn't such a big deal because Melanie and I didn't normally connect on weekdays, so my scene was going to bed early to explore my toolkit in the interests of ensuring everything functioned correctly.

Melanie and I also hadn't attended counseling sessions lately, not since the scene with Craig at the nightclub. But all was well. Melanie promised to quit the ciggies, not that she smoked in my company.

Graham caught a smack from Craig one night during a visit to see Joe. He turned up at my place for a short while Monday afternoon to raid my fridge and my stash of potato crisps. He pointed to his cheek as we entered my room. "That's where Craig smacked me."

"Where?"

"There! Where I'm pointing!"

"I can't see it."

"Stop being blond."

"Oh, there!" I said as I poked the spot with my finger.

"Ouch! Shit!"

"So what's the story? You want me to beat him up again?"

"Again? I seem to remember you lying on your face on the canvas. But I know what you mean. I reckon you could have beaten him, and that's why I got this smack. I told Craig he was lucky."

"How the hell do you get into these scrapes?"

A mouthful of food and drink failed to prevent the grommet's

reply. "It started with Joe. He and his bro were involved in a little barney when I rocked in. They argued about whose turn it was to do the dishes and shit. Joe made a joke about wishing Acid Head—that's you—was there to teach Craig a lesson. Craig wrapped his hand around Joe's throat and pushed him against the kitchen sink. That's when I chirped that Craig wouldn't do that because he'd get nailed. Hehehehe. He was mad as hell so he smacked me."

"Acid head?"

"Yeah, well you call me grommet and everyone calls you Acid Head because you're so hot. Hehehehe. I told Joe to stop calling you that name but he dared me to stop him. Maybe I will one day."

"Hey!" I complained as I rescued the few remaining crumbs from the plundered chip bag. "You're like a damn vacuum cleaner. You open the food cupboards and all I hear is 'whoosh!'"

"Can't help it. I like chutney flavored chips."

"Would you like your back tickled?"

"Cool." He pulled his T over his head and flopped on the bed. The top of his bright blue satin boxers protruded above the waist of his shorts, rather like an invitation for me to get a little adventurous. "That feels cool," he mumbled. "You wanna hit the bag later?"

"Can do. I hoped you'd continue to call around regularly to keep me fit—just in case you ever need backup."

"It's not *me* who needs backup—it's you!"

The grommet's back and shoulder muscles are impressively prominent. When I place a flat hand over them, and they move, it feels overwhelmingly erotic. His eyes were closed, and he was totally relaxed, obviously enjoying the massage. Then it was his turn to massage me.

I removed my top and laid on my stomach. He took immediate advantage and jumped me, planting his knees squarely in the middle of my back. "Ouch!" That led to a free-for-all. We wrestled as if our very lives depended on the outcome. Arms and legs flew all over the place until I overpowered him. Hahahaha! I held him aloft and threw him onto the bed, but he wriggled sideways and robbed me of the opportunity to pounce. Soon, my room resembled the aftermath of a severe missile attack, with bedding strewn everywhere. We never did get to hit the bag because we were way too buggered after the wrestle.

As he prepared to leave, I asked him not to piss Craig off again.

"What makes you think I will?"

"You're fiery, and you don't back down. You're so much like Kyle it's scary."

"Being like Kyle is scary? How do you figure that?" He asked the question as he sat on the side of my bed, causing his abs to wrinkle; a bunch of thin horizontal lines that spread across his normally flat stomach.

"In many ways, you're a living reminder of Kyle."

Oops! I forgot to tell you, G. I ended up at the doc's on Saturday morning, right after I sent a bunch

of emails. I doubled over from the pain of cramps that were so debilitating, I couldn't stand upright. My mom took me to the doc's surgery. It wasn't all bad because the doc employs a cute assistant nurse. She digs it when I visit and I suspect she's trying to drag me away from Melanie.

I sat on the table while the doc prodded and poked. I needed to explain the bruises so I told him about the fight, loudly enough to ensure the assistant overheard every word. "Oh, dear," she cried as she touched the bruises. Yeah, right, that touch was definitely not a 'check-out' touch. It was one of those 'let's get it on' touches.

Be careful, Stuart, she might be one of those nasty seductresses with no scruples who wants to get into your pants and lead you astray.

You're learning, G. The doc suggested the cramps might be the result of a diet deficiency, especially since I've been so buffed lately. He gave my mom a script for some tablets I must take for a while—a mix of mineral salts and vitamins.

When the nurse vacated the room, and left the doc and me alone, he asked if I was on any 'substances'. What could I say? I answered no. He explained that he'd seen many teen patients who complained of similar cramps and who admitted to 'spiking up'. "I'm not one of them," I said as I redressed. As to the nurse, well, Melanie is cuter, and I have no intention of jeopardizing our relationship. Maybe I can just invite the nurse to help me with my biology studies. Hahahaha!

Hey, G, about that email crap going on between you and some of your mates with regard to your opinions of Saddam and Iraq. I didn't realize adults could carry on like a bunch of old ladies with sore tits. Kyle used that expression to describe the girls when they were pissed off with us. They got their panties in a twist while Kyle had us hosing ourselves with laughter, which made the girls even madder.

Anyway, that's what this email bitch between you old blokes seems like to me. And they say teens are screwed? No wonder there's so much shit in the world. Kyle would have told you to stop your nappy rash and accept the other guy's point of view, like it or not. One point of view ain't gonna change someone else's.

I'm generalizing here, not pointing the finger at anyone in particular. But if the email flying around is a demonstration of adult logic, then fuck that. I'll stay a teen forever! Teens have two heads, one screwed on and the other screwed in. Hahahaha!

On Thursday, I surfed at a beach up the coast. Kyle and I visited the place often, at least whenever we could scrounge a ride. One time, Kyle and I were there during a thunderstorm with a monster whale nearby. I'm talking 40 tons or whatever, not too far away from where we surfed. Its tail was out of the water, and it created a massive silhouette against the huge strikes of lightning that forked their way through the dark gray sky. It was breathtaking, too fantastic for

words, and a vision you could never forget.

However, back to my recent trip—a north wind arrived and caused the surf to stand high. Totally awesome! Only a few surfers were out because you need transport to get to this particular beach. It's miles from local transport. I was lucky because Bob dropped me there and promised to collect me later. I asked him to stay and watch but he had some shit or other that needed attention.

Before we left Byron, I tried to call Graham but his phone rang and rang. He was probably at the local because the surf was pumping there too. But where I was, it was much bigger and faster!

Next day, Graham phoned and we rocked down to the local together. It was storm surf but it cooked. One of the amazing things about my grommet mate is the way he paddles through the surf with the best of them. He's incredibly strong for his age, with stamina to spare. He rarely sits still in the water, preferring to constantly paddle—out, in, across, back out and back in again. He's almost always on the move.

Joe was with us that day as well. He made a comment to me while we showered on the beach. "Graham's lucky to have the build he has," he mused but didn't elaborate about the specifics such as abs, pecs, muscle bulk or good looks. However, he must have been aware of those attributes just as anyone with a pair of eyes that paid even the most scant attention has to be. Actually, chatting to Joe was cool. He didn't appear motivated by ego, despite not

being too shy of Graham in the bod and looks departments. Judging by the way his wettie clung to his crotch, he hadn't been denied more than adequate privileges by the hardware department either.

The contrast between Joe and his brother amazes me. Craig has an ego bigger than mine (if that's possible), and Joe is very laid back. As far as he's concerned, you can take him or leave him. That's probably why Joe and Graham get along so well—they're both cocky little buggers, always chirping each other, but always laughing—very tight mates.

I actually respect Joe for not allowing anyone to criticize his brother. If anyone says anything nasty about Craig, Joe is willing to get hurt in order to defend his bro's honor. So there you go—they fight like typical brothers but, at the same time, also stand up for each other.

Graham and Joe? They fight like typical mates but also stand up for (and to) each other. The difference with Joe is that he puts his brother first and Graham second. In my case, I don't have a brother so I don't quite understand why anyone would defend a dickhead like Craig.

Last night, Melanie and I planned to go somewhere but, as it happened, my folks went out. I asked Melanie if she'd prefer to spend the evening at my house, "Just the two of us". And that's what she did. My dad drove me to her house to fetch her. He was not normally very talkative around my friends but he liked Melanie. On the return trip, we stopped at KFC to get take out.

Later, after my folks left for the night, Melanie and I talked about exams, school and surfing, and even chatted about the fight with Craig. And after that? Go figure.

Bloody hell, G, I was inside the most beautiful girl in the world without a condom! Then we showered together, and took the time to explore and savor each other's body. We were determined, even in silence under the warm cascading water, to know everything there was to know about each other. We could have made love again; but just caressing each other's slippery, shiny, sudsy skin was wild enough.

After the shower, Melanie phoned her folks to ask permission to sleep over at my house. They declined, rationalizing that she should have arranged it beforehand. Besides, her dad wanted to know what time he should fetch her.

I slept like a log, totally passed out. Plans for today? Not sure. I've only just surfaced as I write this. It's 7:30am.

Green Room II
Chapter 46

Saturday, I managed a couple of hours at the beach and the surf rocked. Actually, it was good the whole weekend, so Graham and I hit the beach again Sunday. He wore only boardies that, as usual, threatened to plummet from his hips at any second. "Where's your wettie?"

"Too hot for a wettie."

He changed his mind the moment he hit the freezing water and dashed home to retrieve his neoprene suit. "That's what happens when you try to impress the girls," I laughed upon his return to the back line. "Your macho days are over, mate. You're too old to handle the cold, hahahaha!"

"Piss off."

I received an email from one of G's friends to say he thought the Stuart Story was coming along well. I guessed G was doing a good job. I promised myself I'd take time off one day to read the whole sorry saga and remind myself of what this dickhead had done with his life.

In my last mail to G, I mentioned I'd chatted to Graham's mate Joe. I found it easy to talk to Joe and thought he was pretty cool. Okay, so I gave him a smack that time on the beach, but that was then. Things had improved a helluva lot since those bad old days, including the fact that Craig and I settled our differences. Although Joe and I had a mutual friend in Graham, he and I weren't major buddies. What puzzled me about Joe was how he could be a good bloke and have a bro like fuckwit Craig. I'd seen the older bro

recently and, like all seniors, he was studying like crazy for the school finals.

Meanwhile, things between Melanie and me progressed well. I asked my mom if it would be cool to have Melanie sleep over one evening. "It shouldn't be a problem. We can make up the spare room for her. Have you asked your father?"

"Not yet. Hey, mom, you don't understand. I want Melanie to sleep with me—like, you know, in my bed!" Oops! It was immediately obvious I'd dropped a major bombshell. My mom stared at me in stunned silence. "Mom," I continued in earnest, "I'm 19 and Melanie is 18, and she's on the pill. Anyway, it's not so much about sex as her company."

"18 and 19 and no sex?" My mom couldn't hide the gleam in her eye. "My, my, how times have changed."

"Melanie and I have slept together before. We are sexually active. She's on the pill."

"I'll speak to your father. It's just so ... hard to come to terms with your being an adult already. I seem to have missed everything that led up to it."

My impulsive response was to hug my mom, a big, tight, warm one. "If it's not okay, mum, just say so. I don't want to hurt you guys again, okay."

"I'm sure it'll be fine, Stuart" she smiled. "Perhaps you should speak to your father. It'll be better coming from you. It's fine with me."

Cool! My dad was in the study and I was amped to get this convo sorted right away. I entered the room

and approached the front of his imposing polished-timber desk. "Dad? I want to have sex with Melanie in my bed. We want to make you a granddad. Hahahaha!" No, that's not what I said. Here's what really happened.

"Dad? Got a mo?" I asked as I sat in a chair opposite.

"Sure."

"Could Melanie stay over one night? Like—in my room?"

"In your bed?"

I blushed like a lighthouse. "Yeah."

"What do her parents say?"

"I'm not sure, I haven't spoken to Melanie yet. I don't know what they'll say. She's on the pill, dad. Anyway, it's not for sex. We just want to spend a night together ... doing whatever."

"Try to convince her parents it's not for sex."

"It may lead to that, and it won't be the first time."

"Spare me the details."

"As always."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. Is it okay?" I ran short of patience, and got hot under the collar. "Put your fucking pen down for a second."

"What?"

"C'mon, dad, every time I try to talk to you you're writing something and not even listening."

"Okay," he relented as he placed his gold ballpoint on the table. "I'm listening."

"Is it okay if Melanie stays over?"

"In the spare room, and only if her parents give her permission ... and they need to speak to your mother."

"What's the difference if Melanie stays over in my room, dad?"

"There's a huge difference. Take it or leave it."

"Were you as much of a prick at my age as you are now?"

Hahaha! I didn't expect my dad to move so damn fast. He grabbed hold of my T with both hands and practically dragged me across the top of the desk. A foot or two further and I'd be in his lap. "You can say just about anything you please to me, but if you cuss at me, or your mother, one more time, I'll give you a hiding you'll never forget."

"Dad," I insisted with a hint of aggro, "let me go. And don't think of hitting me because I'll definitely hit you back."

He seethed with anger, but released his grip and allowed me to slide back into the chair. "I don't want to make you mad again," I continued, "and I don't want us to say things that will screw up where and what we are right now. I just want you to understand how I feel about Melanie."

"I've already given you your options, Stuart."

"But we slept together before, and it's not just about sex. Please, dad."

"Did you speak to your mother?"

"Yeah, and she said it's cool as long as you agree. Please, dad, I know you like Melanie and I'd rather not do anything behind your back. If she sleeps in the spare room I'm just gonna sneak in there and sleep there anyway. Then wake early so you won't know about it."

"What if I sit outside the door with a shotgun?"

"Yeah, you and Melanie's dad can keep each other company while I sneak in through the window."

My dad tried to resist a laugh, but smiled nonetheless. Hey, he looked cool when he smiled. "Ask your mother to check with Melanie's folks—and to tell Melanie's father he can take shotgun duty outside the window."

"That's cool," I said as I rose to leave the study.

"Stuart?"

"Yep?"

"Your mother had better tell Melanie's folks that she's sleeping in the spare room."

"You mean ... ???"

"Just get out of here before I rethink this whole thing."

My dad must have heard my joyous yelps as I hurried down the passage to tell my mom. YES, YES, YES! I also couldn't wait to phone Melanie to share the good news. She said she'd need to check with her folks and that maybe she could sleep over this coming Friday. Woohoo!

Hello, what's this? Condoms under my pillow? I suspected my mother put them there. Hmmm, plain ol' Durex. I should have told my mom that Melanie prefers strawberry flavored. Hahahaha! My mom must believe that my fitness level has improved a stack because she left two packs of three.

Anyway, as it happened, Melanie was denied permission to sleep over. I thought I heard a collective sigh of relief coming from the kitchen and the study as I replaced the phone.

Melanie's folks decided that their daughter needed to concentrate on her studies, but I knew that wasn't the sole reason. Melanie's mom argued that it was the weekend and she needed free time and blah, blah, blah.

So for the time being it seemed like it would be a cozy and intimate evening with just Mr. Snake and me. We'd need to play tug-o-war because the dumb thing didn't know how to play Heroes or Star Craft.

G asked earlier about Craig, and was he a surfer. Yep, he surfed but I'd always ignored him in the water. Out there, it was just the surfer and the surf, and a contest for a wave if the lineup was busy. Actually, I have to admit, Craig does look pretty damn hot in a wettie.

With Melanie unavailable, I phoned Graham to ask what he planned for Friday night. "Nothing yet. Joe's organized a Saturday barbecue for all the guys on the swim team. You wanna come?"

"Swim team? Craig? Yeah, right, is he gonna be there?"

"Yeah, but he's cool. Why don't you come along?"

"I'll think about it but if it's a swim team thing maybe I shouldn't."

"It's not just the swim team, friends are invited as well."

"I'll check with Melanie."

"Cool. So what's happening Friday?"

"I thought you might wanna visit—just to play computer games and whatever."

"I think Jacky wants to see a movie but if we're going to the

barbie Saturday, maybe I can skip the movies."

"How's school? I haven't seen much of you lately, and I miss you."

"Totally hectic, swimming every day, cricket some days. Did you surf Wednesday night?"

"Yeah but I didn't see you."

"I was there. It was cool, huh?"

"Totally, but way too packed. That's the hassle, when the surf's up all the grommets come out of the bloody woodwork."

"Tell me about it. Hey, I must tell you, my ex is talking crap to Jacky about me. It's such a load of bullshit."

"Like what?"

"Crap, like I mess with other girls and slept with one of her friends. Total codswallop. Jacky told her to stay out of our lives. But she asked me if I still dig my ex because she stole me away. Girls!"

"Sounds like a cat fight."

"I mean, hey, is it my fault if all the chicks want a piece of me?"

"Maybe you shouldn't go steady—just play the field and have fun. It's better than being tied down and putting up with all the bitching."

"I dig Jacky, though. Everyone tells me she just wants to score but it's not like that. I haven't scored yet but we're still really cool with each other."

"You guys haven't done anything yet?"

"Like what?"

"BJ or whatever."

"We feel each other and she likes my finger. Hehehe. Took a long time to get my finger going."

"Has she asked you to go further?"

"I think she fears rejection or something. She's probably waiting for me to make a move."

"So what's the prob?"

"I'm scared! Doh! Anyway it's not like sex is a major thing in my life."

"Hahahaha! Yeah, we had this kinda convo before. Anyway, it's cool for you guys to be the way you are. Sex puts more pressure on a relationship."

"Are you and Melanie doing it yet?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you're fucking like rabbits."

"It's called making love, you disgusting grommet. Melanie and I make love."

"Yeah, right—more like making babies, hehehe. So is everything cool between you guys?"

"Yep."

"Wicked! I really like Melanie. If you hurt her I'll come over there and beat you to a pulp. You know that, huh?"

"I'm shaking in my boots already."

"You'll think I'm kidding until you hit the deck, hehehe."

"So come over and try."

"Can't right now. I gotta go—my dad wants to use the phone."

"Hey, I love ya."

"Same. Bye."

Was that it? 'Same, bye'. I studied the phone resting in its cradle. A few moments ago we were chatting; I heard his voice and enjoyed our convo. Now the phone lay

silent. What to do? Write a note to Kyle and include it in my email to G.

Hey, Kyle, you made it so easy for friends to get close. Why then does it seem so difficult for me sometimes? Not only getting close but also expressing my feelings. When I'm with Graham I feel so incredibly close, and wish I had the same relationship with him as I have with Melanie, including the physical aspect.

When Graham departs for home or wherever, I'm overwhelmed by a depressing emptiness I don't understand. Why is everything in my life so damned hard? When I tell Graham I love him I hope to make him understand that it's the same love I feel for Melanie and you.

Actually, I worry sometimes about my feelings for you, Kyle. You seem to be in my thoughts less and less nowadays. I still remember times we shared and it's like you're there with me, but sometimes the scene fades and it's difficult to resurrect it. I try to refocus but it fades to a blur. That scares me because I want to remember how you feel and smell, and the sound of your whispered words of love in my ear, and your warm breath on my chest.

It's almost a year, Kyle, and already the memories are losing clarity. Everyone thinks I cope well. Fact is, I'm not coping at all. In the past, I found relief and release in drugs and, yes, I miss that. I do. I miss disappearing into a world where everything is perfect and beautiful.

On the comp, I created words and pictures for the anniversary of

the day you left me. It's all so lame, though. I feel like I'm on a race track and November 3 is rushing toward me. Everything is too fast and out of control. I don't want that day to arrive.

Yeah, there are tears in my eyes right now because I feel so sad. I want you to be with Melanie. She still wants you. It's an awareness I have when she and I make love. No, not a comparison but rather the way you were with her, that Kyle magic, those softly spoken words and the gentle touch, that sweet breath.

I wish it were me who was taken that day. The world would be none the wiser about me, and far less people would be hurt. Speak to me, Kyle, for fuck sake! Just give me some sign that you hear me! I love you and miss you so much. I can see your laughing eyes now. I remember how your eyes widened and shone when you laughed. They turned a lighter shade of brown and sparkled, and those little crinkly lines on the side of your nose came to life.

I want your arms around me to hold me tight, and I want you to kiss me just one more time. Oh my fuck, Kyle! Why?

Green Room II
Chapter 47

I next wrote G on a Saturday morning. The howling wind was gale force, and I'd just arrived home. Melanie and I connected the previous night for pizza and a few drinks, but she wanted an early night. That left me high and dry—well, kinda. Graham was out with Joe and their girlfriends for the night, so ol' dumbass here went for drinks on his own. Got myself totally shitfaced. Bob hardly understood a word I said (or endeavored to). His girlfriend was pissed off with me for ruining their evening, and asked Bob to take her home. Bob then drove me to his place where I passed out. I figured he was also pissed off with me because I woke with all my clothes on. Hahahaha!

So, yeah, with all the wind blowing and no company my only option is to get stuck into the books. I need to sleep first, though, because I'm suffering the hangover from hell. There's an axe buried deep in my forehead.

Your memories of Kyle will fade with time. That's the way it is, and the reason why widows and widowers remarry. That's the reason Melanie is falling in love with you. To spend the rest of your life living in the past is to stop the clock. Your memories of Kyle will diminish but not disappear. They will settle and assume their rightful place in your personal scheme of things. Kyle left his mark on you as he did with all of us, which means that, every day, people like us are walking, talking,

and living monuments to Kyle's legacy of love and friendship. More importantly, we can pass on his legacy to others.

You miss the drugs? Because they helped you cope? You wanna run that by me again? Helped you to cope? Stuart, it's exactly the opposite. They helped you turn your back on coping. What did you do before the fight with Craig? Watch TV and eat chocolate? No, you trained; you improved your level of fitness to match Craig's. That fight is what life is all about. You cope by training. You cope by facing problems and dealing with them.

Wishing you were the person taken on November 3 instead of Kyle is a load of old codswallop. You're wallowing in self pity. Face the facts and deal with them. Kyle does speak to you. He gives you signs but you fail to recognize them. Look at Graham, look at Melanie, look at Brett, look at the Ts, look at yourself, look at me; that's where Kyle lives. None of us can expect a tap on the shoulder. Whatever lies on the 'other side' is no longer physical. Despite claims by various religions, none of us really comprehends it.

Being pissed off at Kyle's death is cool, missing him is cool. No, you don't want Kyle to kiss you one last time because one last time is never enough. Be thankful for what he gave you. Kyle loved a handful of people in real life and you were one of them.

Yes, I've done the self pity trick and gone out by myself to get blotto. Many a morning I woke and

wondered what the hell I'd done the previous night. I even found a stranger or two in my bed. EEEEEEEK! And here I am, the wise old fossil who spent most of his life wandering in circles. Can you imagine breezing through life without making mistakes? What knowledge would you accumulate? No point in splitting the atom if you can't boil an egg.

Despite Graham's insistence that I was welcome at Joe's barbecue, I remained unconvinced—but Melanie had other ideas. "If Graham invited us it's because he wants us there."

"It's a school thing, Melanie. We'll be like Sid Vicious in a church choir. Besides, Craig will be there."

"You and Craig have sorted your differences, so it shouldn't be a problem. Anyway, I'm going."

"Pardon?"

"You heard me—I'm going—whether you go or not. I want to ogle all the hunks in the swim team."

"You're impossible—you know that?"

"I'm a woman."

"Okay," I relented with a sigh, "we'll go. But if there's any shit with Craig be ready for an 'I told you so', okay?"

Melanie was so pleased with her Oscar-winning performance; she almost sang "see you later".

"Likewise, you sex machine."

In the absence of parents, Joe and Craig were left to their own devices. Their folks went out for the night. There were about 20 guys from the swim team, and their girlfriends, when Melanie and I arrived. Graham rocked over. "Cool that you guys could make it," he beamed. Melanie

handed him steaks and crisps, but I figured the Smirnoff was safer with me. Then Graham turned to Joe: "Hey, Joe, I told you they'd come—you owe me 10 bucks!"

Joe gave Melanie the testosterone eyeball and a big hug. His hair was spiked and he wore Levi hipsters and a T that was two sizes too small. But I guess he had all the right in the world to show off his muscles. That contrasted with Graham who wore everything fifty sizes too big. No one realized what a stunning build Graham had until his T came off or when he wore his wetsuit. By the same token, interested observers could guess his build by the way his loose T hung off his chest and away from his flat stomach.

I spotted Craig heading toward us and expected the obligatory chirp. But, no, he was all smiles. "Hey, guys, I heard you were coming." Then he hugged Melanie and gave her a peck on the cheek before he offered his raised hand in a teen-type hi-five.

I wasn't sure how to respond but felt compelled to make some kind of friendly convo. "Cool place you got here."

"Thanks—follow me around back. Everyone's hanging around the fire."

The rear yard was professionally landscaped and featured a large pool. Very impressive. The barbecue, complete with an adjoining bar, was protected from the weather by a thatched roof that covered half the total area. I recognized a few of the guys there, including Dillon, who quickly resumed talking to his friends the moment he spotted me. A couple of them

eyeballed Melanie and me, so I guessed Dillon was chirping about the fight between Craig and me. Provided he gave them the whole story and not just the ending, it was cool with me.

Graham and Jacky approached us, and the girls did the usual hug and 'howzit' routine. But I was still a long way from being relaxed. Apart from Graham and Jacky, and maybe Joe, I wasn't amongst friends. And to make matters worse, Graham and Jacky disappeared from time to time to leave me alone with the girls to make small talk. Each time the grommet and his girl did return, they were more plastered than the previous visit. "Where the hell are you guys disappearing to?" I asked when Graham and I were alone. "You're getting hammered."

"Joe's got some killer weed. Join us for a smoke."

"Yeah, right, and get Melanie pissed off?"

"Just one smoke. It'll mellow you out. You're looking totally strung."

As the evening progressed, we got to know more of the guys there. Melanie knew quite a few of the girls so she busied herself chatting to them. Craig spent his time with the swim team—the Dillon clique. After a while, the notion of smoking a joint with Graham appealed to me. In any case, a lot of the guys smoked as they gathered around the fire, not bothering to hide the fact. Melanie was aware of proceedings. She saw me and didn't freak, so I figured it was cool.

Later, as I mellowed further, one of the guys invited me to share

some powder with the group. For a long time, I declined. Eventually, however, the weed and the booze weakened my resolve and I finally accepted. We went to Craig's ensuite bathroom where other guys were snorting.

A chilly wind at 1am failed to deter a lot of the guys from hitting the pool. Most of us swam in boxers or briefs. The swim team guys wore Speedos, which they brought with them in anticipation of the night's inevitable degradation. The night, however, turned out to be a pretty good blast. We guys cajoled, coaxed and even pushed a load of girls into the water. But not Melanie, no way, she was way too smart and fast and knew exactly how and where to escape the madness.

My only hassle, thus far, was with one of the guys whose girlfriend's tits I fondled. He took exception to my adventurous spirit. Why, I didn't understand, because she had a great pair. But before the bloke could cause much trouble, Craig pulled him off of me. Just as well. I could easily have hammered that guy. Hahahaha!

I managed a few more lines of coke to keep me happy as the night continued to degenerate. I suspected that Craig and his swim team mates stayed away from the stuff, and I guessed they also gave the weed a wide berth. It was when Melanie and I decided to leave that the shit started. I felt totally straight, apart from the effects of a little too much vodka, when Melanie climbed into me. "How could you share a joint with Graham?" she demanded. "You're

supposed to be his friend, Stuart. How can you give him the impression that smoking is cool?"

I wanted to disappear into the nearest hole. Okay, so I was a tad drunk, but Melanie's reprimand made me feel like a stupid little kid. "Uh, in case you didn't notice," I whispered in her ear, "it was Graham who made the offer. Also, he was the one smoking it up with his best mate Joe before we arrived. So before we get involved in a barney, let's drop it. Okay?"

"You can smoke yourself stupid, Stuart, but I worry about Graham and what he might experiment with next. He thinks it's cool because his big mate does it. Do you know what was used at that party tonight?"

"I'm not blind, babes, I know about the coke."

"I know you know because you disappeared with some of the guys and we all knew what they were up to. Is the drug scene gonna start all over again with you?"

"Don't start a lecture, okay? I'm not hooked, and it was just a few lines. I'm fine now. Well, kinda ... hahahaha!"

"Just take me home."

"Don't cry. Stop this shit! You're carrying on like it's the end of the world. So I did a few lines. Fuck it, Melanie, stop walking away from me!"

She spun on her heels and faced me. "Do you realize how different you are when you're high?"

"No, I don't. I'm not high, but tell me anyway."

"You and the guys in the pool behaved like lunatics, fondling the

girls. And they were also so damn high they encouraged it!"

"I didn't fondle anyone."

"You don't even remember what you did. That's what I'm talking about; you get totally arrogant, and no one can speak to you without sending you off the deep end."

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry. Okay? I didn't mean to piss you off."

"Kyle would never behave like that when we were out together."

I held her arm and stared her in the eye. "Look at me," I snapped, "I am not Kyle. Kyle is dead. I will never be Kyle, and nobody else will be either. I'm sorry I can't be a Kyle for you, Melanie, but Kyle's not here any more, and I'm me, Stuart. Not Kyle, not Graham, not Craig, not Brett or who-fucking-ever. I'm Stuart, and the sooner you and everyone else get that through their thick skulls the better. I do not want to be a Kyle. I love you but if it's Kyle you're after then I'm gone."

My anger quickly subsided as Melanie dissolved into tears. I felt like an idiot after my outburst. The only reaction that came immediately to mind was to place my arm around her and apologize. "I'm sorry, babes. I didn't mean to upset you."

Green Room II
Chapter 48

Well, that little altercation sure screwed the rest of the evening. In my room, I laid on the bed and stared at the ceiling—naked, legs wide apart and hands behind my head. I felt a slight breeze pass over me and imagined my spirit leaving my body so that I could stare down at myself, lying there. I'm not sure why I did that. Maybe I wanted to see what other people saw. Maybe ... maybe I was just getting off on another kinky mission.

For the next few days I buried myself in school books and studied like crazy. It was Wednesday before the howling wind stepped down a notch or two. I hadn't spoken to Melanie since the barbecue—or anyone else now that I think about it. Where the hell had the time gone?

Hey, G, I'm going through a mountain of math papers. Boring, boring, boring! I hope you're not using this crap in the book. Hahahaha! People must think this is the ideal cure for insomnia.

By the way, I've not phoned Brett about visiting Fremantle for the school hols yet. I'll do it soon enough. I see this huge fork in the road now and it's like 'yeah, well, which way now?' The big wide world.

I was about to mail G when Graham interrupted me. The moment I opened the front door I knew the grommet was pissed off about something. I spent quality time with him because I figured someone at school needed a lesson in how to treat my little mate. His left

cheekbone was bruised. As I discovered later in my room, it was caused by some guy's motorbike helmet. "I was with Joe, standing outside the school gates yesterday when two blokes rode past on a motorbike—one of those farty little 125cc things. The rider did a wheelie so I chirped something. The pillion rider gave me the finger. No prob, I showed him mine in return."

I had to laugh at Graham's hilariously animated telling of the story. "It's not funny, Stuart. So the riders turned around and headed toward us as Craig arrived on the scene."

"Sounds like a lucky break."

"No way. The rider shoved his finger up my nose and told me to watch my back. After the guys took off, Craig wanted to know the story. He'd heard that Joe and I rattled the rider's cage. 'It's no biggie,' I explained, 'the guys were showing off like they were big men or whatever. So I told them to stop their macho bullshit because they were riding a sewing machine'." That comment cracked me up big time. "Anyway, those assholes were even more pissed off. Craig told me to be careful. He knew those guys, and one of them was a 'loose canon' who carried a knife. On top of that, he's a grade ahead of us."

"So where did the bruise come from?"

"This afternoon the same blokes rode past and did another wheelie. The same moron gave me the finger. So I did likewise. They stopped and the dude took off his helmet, walked toward me and started an argument."

"You need to be more careful, Graham, he's a year older than you. You're not exactly the biggest guy in your grade. Okay, so you're strong, but not in the same league as a bigger bloke who's aggro to boot."

"Are you gonna listen to me or what? So, the guy grabbed my shirt and I told him to let go. Instead, he pushed me all over the place while I'm telling him to leave me alone. He didn't listen so my hands found his throat. I pushed him against a wall and told him again to leave me alone. That's when he swiped me with the helmet and caused the bruise. But it didn't end there. He warned that he wasn't through with me yet, and that I'd better be sure to always be surrounded by mates."

I was reminded of my recent predicament of always being told by enemies to watch my back. "How do you intend to handle this situation?"

"Joe and my other mates reckon they can sort these morons out. They've caused shit this whole year, and pick any target they reckon they can handle. If it were Craig instead of me they'd back off pronto."

"How's the cheek?"

"Bloody sore, man. Fuck 'em. Let them try whatever. I'm not scared. And I told them so as well. They're always causing shit at school."

I felt sorry for the grommet. It seemed to me that he was in a situation he couldn't handle—all mouth and bravado—but that didn't appear to count for much as I checked his damaged cheek. It was red, and the bone itself was bruised. Obviously, those two bullies meant

serious business, but, no, I didn't contemplate getting myself involved.

From what Graham said, I gathered that most of his mates were anti those two dickheads anyway, and willing to give them a bit of stick if necessary. At the same time, I hated to see that little bloke beaten and feeling helpless. I'm aware of how strong he is, and big hearted, but at the end of the day I figure he's not too keen to be involved in a real fight situation with no rules. It also worries me that those two goons might take advantage of the situation because they figure Graham is scared. As big as Graham's mouth is, he's nonetheless nervous about the uncertainty.

On Friday, I was impatient for Graham to arrive home from school so I could phone him and get the latest. "It's cool, Stuart. Those guys are giving me a wide berth. Craig and Joe warned them that I'm capable of flattening them if they tangle with me. They said to Craig, 'yeah, he's tough because he always has his mates hanging around'. But Craig told them the little fucker could handle them on his own. Hehehe. He asked the goons if they noticed the size of my hands and the guy said, 'yeah, he had his hands around my throat'. Anyway, Stuart, it's cool now after the word spread that I'm dangerous. How cool is that?"

"Glad to hear it."

It's true that Graham is strong, with hands bigger than mine already. Sometimes he fists me on the arm and I try valiantly not to show pain. Hahahaha! 'Ouch!' I can't help it. But I figure he'll be okay-my

little mate—he handles himself pretty well in both good and bad situations. According to him, his strength has improved since he started metal work at school. It requires fine work with his fingers. He's also resistant to pain, such as heat. So watch out, goons! You've bitten off more than you can chew!

Whenever I thought about the approach of Sunday November 3, I took a deep breath and tried to focus on something else. I had nothing major planned that day but needed to be on my own—maybe hit the surf or climb Wollumbin or stroll along a beach, thinking thoughts of Kyle.

I canceled my date with Melanie last night. I was exhausted from all the study, and suffered serious burnout. Actually, it had been a lousy week. Friday, I wrote the first math paper. I think I did okay. The second math paper is scheduled for the following Friday, so this weekend will be sleep and relax time.

Hi, G. The weekend went WHOOSH! And so did I, but I guess you knew I'd take the easy way out, huh? Oh, my God, what a RUUUUUUUUUUSH! Like the inside of a tube, except more radical like you can't see the end of it. I saw him there. How's that? He was there. He said nothing, just stared at me the whole time. I'm sorry, Kyle. I'm soooooooo fucking sorry for taking the easy way out on the anniversary of your accident. I just couldn't see myself doing the homage thing without suffering a total breakdown.

So that was the way out for me. Was it a crackerjack day? Who knew? I disappeared into the mists of ... hmmm,

now I can't remember what I was gonna write there. Hahahaha! How fucked up is that?

No, Bob was unaware of my little excursion into la-la land. He would have been pissed off at me, big time, and sulked the whole day. I'm cool now, though. My mates and I debated whether smoking is addictive or not because it's supposedly non-addictive when you snort it. Anyway, that's what we decided. It's a short rush and then it's all over. Unless you overdo it, it's like a theme park of total fun. And he was there. Okay, he was there in spirit.

So, G, I fucked up badly. It's not what I planned but that's the way it turned out. I planned to maybe climb Wollumbin, to Kyle's special place. He used to enjoy that, even sometimes alone.

This week, I write two history papers and another math paper. Hahahaha! Jesus Christ, Stuart, you better get your act together, you dumbass idiot.

Melanie and Graham? I think they're okay. I haven't heard from them so I guess they're fine. I could phone right now but Melanie made it plain the other night that she needs some space-AGAIN!

It's just as well that November 3 was easy for me. At least I'm not battling like everyone else. Yeah, Go Stuart! Show everyone how strong you are, boyo! Yes!

A couple of the guys I was with on Sunday were tripping, but I chose not to. So I guess it wasn't a total disaster. I wanted to, but I know that will lead to the point of no return if I travel that road. Kinda

like a train—if it doesn't stay on the rails it crashes and burns.

I'll climb the mountain after exams are over. The difference will be that it's a day chosen by me and not some lunatic driving at 160kph.

Maybe you can explain to me, Stuart, how you summon the courage to get into a boxing ring with Craig but not the courage to say no to drugs. I don't get it. You've been to hell and back. I would have thought you have better reasons to say no to drugs than I have to say no to tobacco. Hopefully, it's an aberration. I worry about you stuffing up your final exams. AGAIN! Once was bad enough—life is not too generous with second chances.

I also don't understand why you chose to 'take the easy way out' on November 3. I re-read some of Kyle's mail. He wrote of a fight between you two, and how miserable he was afterward—how he lost interest in school and the swim team—how he was removed from the team for an upcoming meet. His friend Darren and he walked along a beach while Darren quizzed him about his problems. Kyle lied, choosing not to reveal how much he missed you. When he phoned you at home, your mother answered with the message that you refused to speak to Kyle. Back then, you also took 'the easy way out'.

I don't understand what is 'easy' about it. How can it be easy if it exacerbates the difficulty? If you chose not to face Craig in the ring would that have been the easy way out? What would it have accomplished? What did you achieve last Sunday by turning your back on

Kyle in favor of drugs with your dingaling mates? I stuck my big toe into the surf at a local beach and baptized Kyle's bead necklace and your wristie. I figured that was the least I could do to honor the one and only Kyle, as well as your gift to me.

What do you mean when you say you need to be strong? What do you mean when you say you risked a total breakdown by properly honoring the first anniversary of Kyle's death? The word 'strong' is not included in your 'Peace, Love, Respect' signoff. But 'respect' is. I would have thought respect is the only motivation you need to honor November 3. But you ran away, just as you ran away like a frightened rabbit some years ago when Kyle awakened something about your sexuality. Okay, so you learned to accept that, and everything calmed down. What are you afraid to face this time? The recollections of November 3 last year? The memorial service? The scattering of the ashes? What frightens you? Reality? Is that the purpose of drugs; to make reality vanish? Explain to me how reality can vanish. I don't comprehend.

Yes, I'm disappointed, Stuart, but not surprised. You're a big, strong, blond hunk of muscle but I wonder about your heart. You seem to have sufficient heart to conquer many things, such as your earlier drug addiction, your friendships with Brett, Graham and Melanie, and your relationship with your folks. But you can't accept November 3. Why not? It won't bite you. It's a day to be honored. You know how many Kyle days

there are in a year? 365. Yep, there are three hundred and sixty five Kyle days in every year, and an extra one every leap year. The only difference between all the other Kyle days and November 3 and July 1 is that certain days have a more focused significance because of a particular event. However, the fact remains that every day is a Kyle day. Every day is a special day because that's how Kyle lived them.

You're such a worry, Stuart. You have a giant ego but it's made of eggshell. You're simultaneously arrogant and fragile. You face certain problems but retreat from others. You know something, mate? All you need do to find the simple answers is to ask yourself the question: What would Kyle want me to do?

Here's a letter I received from a friend: 'One of the sad aspects of Stuart's story is the realization after Kyle's death that he experienced a true and unconditional romantic love and yet he was too self-absorbed and manipulative to appreciate it. When Kyle's body was reduced to ashes, so was Stuart's life. Occasionally he reveals an insight into the bankruptcy of his relationships, and I sometimes wish he would confront this more directly in his writing. His mentions of Kyle reveal how profoundly wounded he is by this experience. He certainly expresses a sense of guilt.'

And this from another friend: 'Last Sunday, November 3, it was a sad day for us because it was the anniversary of Kyle's death. You can call me sentimental but I became very

sad when I thought of how Kyle's parents will feel this day. I decided to do something positive in the better Kyle style. I went to the beach very early in the morning to watch the sun rise from the sea. It's my modest version of his 'Dawn Patrol'. As I like to do, I threw some hibiscus flowers into the sea and said a little prayer for Kyle. I'm not a religious guy but I think if God exists he must be good, and loves people who do good things. I'm sure, a year ago, he waited at the Pearly Gates and said to Kyle, "Come on, boy, we have a lot to do for the people who are still on Earth."

Green Room II
Chapter 49

When I read G's comments, my blood boiled. Turn my back on Kyle? How dare you say that to me. Is it because I missed a day that some fucker decided was Kyle's time? Huh? I don't need a November 3 to remind me of Kyle. There's not a day that passes without my thinking of Kyle, and it tears my heart every time. So you can take your November 3 and stick it up your ass.

I don't see the point of celebrating the death of a person who was so full of life. And, yeah, I'm self-absorbed; I spent my whole life thinking of ways to screw Kyle over in order to benefit from it. So you're disappointed but not surprised? Join the fucking crowd.

Just for your info, I don't need to wait until November 3 rolls around again. I honor Kyle every single day by thinking about him for a second, a minute or an hour. If I decide to leave the planet every November 3, that will be in his honor too, because I'll celebrate his life.

Maybe you and Melanie and Brett and others will disagree. Tough. I'm getting the real drift of your mail as well. You re-read Kyle's mail to make it appear that I treated my mate like a prick all my life. That's not true, I loved him more than a brother.

I just read your mail for a third time and I'm trying to fathom it. I can't believe some of the stuff you wrote. It's as if you looked for an excuse to express everything you bottled up over the past year. How's

this for an idea? You and my dad can get together and compare notes, because he doesn't know half the shit you know about me. Actually, I don't give a fuck about that anyway.

One last thing, G, don't assume you know how much respect I show Kyle. Just keep assuming that I'm self-absorbed and manipulative.

I have a very vivid memory of November 3. A few hours earlier on November 2, he phoned: "Come on, Stuart. Let's party! It's gonna be a total blast, then you can sleep over at my place." But I was too self-absorbed and had other plans that night.

You seem to forget where I got my information, Stuart. It wasn't second hand and it wasn't an educated guess. It was direct from you. And now you're busy interpreting what I wrote. I didn't say you needed a November 3 to remember Kyle. I said it was a Kyle day 365 days a year. I also didn't say anything about "celebrating the death of a person who was so full of life". I used the words 'honor' and 'respect' in relation to November 3, not 'celebrate'.

Of course I was angry when I read about your being trashed on the anniversary of Kyle's accident. Of course I was disappointed. What did you expect?

You say I went through Kyle's mail to search for reasons to criticize you. How do you spell paranoia? I chose to read some of Kyle's mail on the morning of November 3 to feel his presence. I read them at random. One of them happened to mention the fight you

blokes had just after you first met. It's not a conspiracy, Stuart, despite your predilection to believe the whole world is against you.

My mail sounds like an excuse to say the things I bottled up for a whole year? Where on earth did you get that idea? Since when don't I say what I think when I think it? I'm forever getting myself into shit because I speak my mind. I don't bottle anything.

It's interesting you should mention your dad and me getting together to compare notes. When I wrote my last mail I figured you'd say, "you sound just like my dad". Fact is, I don't think your dad is your worst critic, your worst critic is you. How many times have you referred to yourself as 'fucked up Stuart'? But, let anyone else criticize Stuart and all hell breaks loose.

Maybe you should spend more time trying to fathom your own words instead of mine. On the one hand, you try to justify your behavior on November 3 while, on the other, you apologize for it. If I'm a little confused, whose fault is that?

You're not angry at me, Stuart. We both know who you're angry at. You're a drama queen, Stuart; a six foot, blond, tanned, muscle-bound drama queen. You can take a molehill and turn it into a mountain, no worries. However, I suspect that by now you've calmed down again.

If what I wrote means I have no respect for Kyle, or that I feel nothing for him, I'm not sure what else to say. Maybe it's best I don't. This has not been a good time for me;

sweating over exams, studying. Fortunately, it'll be over soon. Then it's a case of waiting for the results after Christmas.

I feel totally drained and exhausted at the moment. Melanie and I are going through a rough patch as well because of what happened at Craig's house. She's also sweating over final exams so maybe the pressure for both of us is too much. Graham starts his exams next week, so that puts paid to the rest of November. He'll be out of touch.

I'm not too sure what will happen now. I planned to visit Brett for a while and maybe earn some cash. But the guys who work on the yacht take a break over Christmas/New Year.

Sounds like the year is ending with an anticlimax. Can't have everything, huh? Roll up the titles.

I probably shouldn't have responded to your previous mail so quickly. However, what kinda hogwash is "I feel nothing for Kyle or I have no respect for him..." I referred to one day in particular, not every day. I don't know anyone who would agree with that assessment which, by the way, is yours not mine.

There's no doubt you have a drug problem that causes you to lose the plot sometimes. You're not Robinson Crusoe in that department. None of us is the same person when under the influence of a drug. However, it's a matter of degree. As to Melanie, she knows both Stuarts but only wants one. If the Stuart she doesn't want surfaces unexpectedly what is she to believe? The irony is when the negative Stuart is rejected, the positive Stuart spits the dummy.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? Is one's alter ego inseparable from one's true self or can the two be distinct? Is it possible to subdue the negative or even conquer it?

I suspect part of your problem is psychological. November 3 and its aftermath impacted on your life enormously, much worse than the impact on his folks and other friends. You convinced yourself that the anniversary of November 3 would be too much to handle. That's why you programmed yourself to seek solace in drugs that day. It wasn't a lack of feeling or respect for Kyle, it was fear.

You have conquered fear many times since I've known you. If you can conquer those fears, you can conquer anything. Our friend Brian burned a candle all day (and claimed it as a tax deduction hehehe). November 3 was not a day when the rest of us nailed ourselves to crosses. Kyle believed in simple values and I'm sure he appreciates his death being honored in a simple way.

Clint wrote that he planned to visit the lake and watch the tide roll in while he thought of Kyle. He changed his mind. What he did was better, he said. He told a few friends and his family that he loved them because THAT is what Kyle would have done.

David wrote that none of us is Kyle, but that Kyle is in all of us—and what a wonderful way to remember him.

Graham was busy with Year 10 finals and stressing big time. I spoke to him after he tackled his

science paper which was one of his major headaches. On the other hand, his math mark improved greatly because his mom sent him to a private tutor. "And my marks are flying!" He sits for all his subjects in higher grade to qualify for a matriculation exemption in Year 12 for automatic acceptance into varsity.

"Hey, bro, gimme a shout if you need a hand, either at your place or mine." It was the least I could do for my special mate.

Meanwhile, Melanie and I are on a level stretch for the time being. Apart from the stress of study and exams, the snorting thing at Craig's still bothers her. I'd totally stuffed our relationship with that stupid stunt. But, hey, that's life, huh?

The goss on the grapevine is that G and I had a falling out. Where the hell did that come from? Okay, I was pissed at him for sticking a rocket up my ass and accusing me of neglecting Kyle on November 3, but... It's like the internet imitating life.

Brett isn't sure of his Christmas/New Year plans. His girlfriend talks about maybe the two of them going away for a break, which gives him the guilts about letting me down. I told him not to worry; that it was cool and I'd find something else to do.

Actually, I've got the urge to get away, to anywhere. It would be wicked to see Brett and Fingers again but I guess that can wait. Maybe I'll hitch up or down the coast and stop wherever to meet and talk with

people, and give some thought to where I'm headed in life.

During the week I met an old school mate of Kyle's, a chiseled hunk of a black bloke Kyle nicknamed Jolly Jim. I'd met him only a few times at Kyle's house so it was weird that he remembered me. It was cool to bump into him—I never realized how tight he and Kyle were as mates. He had me in stitches when he related some of the old school stories, and how he often threatened to flatten Kyle because Kyle made jokes about Jim's folks attaching bricks to his tool when he was a lightie. Hahahahahaha!

I was already a varsity student when I wrote G again, and apologized for causing him to worry about me. Yes, it's me and I'm still clean! Cool, huh?

Varsity is going well, and my marks are reasonable. I could do better if I partied less. Melanie and I are pretty tight now. I even menaced a guy who tried to touch her up on the dance floor. He backed off—probably because he saw the fire in my eyes.

Graham and I are still good mates but, bloody hell, his testosterone levels are as bad as Brett's. On a percentage scale I'd say he's aggro and ready for a blue 70% of the time. He's still going with that bitch (yeah, that's how I feel about her now) and still pisses off his mates. Joe, who still speaks to me, tells me how they can't handle Graham's hostile 'tude.

Craig and I were at it again but I backed off before he could damage me. He was loud and arrogant

at the pub. One of my mates shouted 'shut the fuck up'. So Craig rocks over and asks me if I'm gonna accept responsibility for my mate. The guy who shouted shat himself because he's a bit of a physical microbe, and Craig is a hardcore jock. When he's mad you tend to need an instant change of underwear.

But, back to Graham—he stayed over a couple of weeks ago. We spent the weekend surfing, so he slept over Saturday night. It was a special night that I'll tell you about another time. I intended to write about it next day but realized I hadn't written in quite a while, so I got the guilts.

Brett spent time in Byron over Easter for a few days but stayed at his mom's house. He was alone because Candy was unable to organize time off work. We went to the Ts for dinner one night and had a ripper time. To speak of Kyle at the Ts is like so natural, with no downers. You'd think his folks would be miserable at the mention of his name but no, it livens up the convo—and inspires us to talk about some of things we all did together.

Brett related the story of the time he carried a very drunk Kyle home, and how Kyle puked down Brett's back which made Brett increasingly angry. "But how could I be angry at the sight of that poor sick bugger?" The way Brett told the story had us all in stitches. Each time he asked Kyle if he was okay, the response was a gagging sound and a warm feeling of fresh puke down his back.

Brett and I visited a club together, just us. We met a couple of

chicks and Brett disappeared for a while. And you think I'm bad! Our friendship is going well—Brett is such a serious bloke. He often lightens up but he can also get involved in quite deep and serious convos. I figure he thought twice about staying with his mom because he admitted having considered staying with me. But he owed his mom.

I know that if he stayed at my pad, nothing sexual would have happened. I suspect that sort of closeness is gone between us. We're both pretty much headed down the hetero path. But ... if the opportunity for me arose, go figure.

Meanwhile, varsity has opened a whole new world for Bob and me. To what degree I'm not sure but it's very different to school. Bob's other mate Krish—the Indian God—still hangs with us. Jeez, put a loincloth on that bloke and he could be Mowgli and make a million bucks.

I'm getting carried away here, G. Next time you write Kyle, tell him I said g'day. Hey, he knows that already—he reads over my shoulder.

Green Room II
Chapter 50

The night with Graham? Pretty damn special, and it came as a surprise to me—probably to him as well. He basically wanted an ear to chew, so I gave him something else instead. Hahahaha! Oops! I mustn't start my crap and lose the bloody plot.

He needed to talk because he wants to do the big number with his girlfriend but he's not hundreds that it's the right thing. So he comes to me for the best advice? Kyle obviously didn't reveal to the grommet the sinister secrets of my life at Graham's age.

He arrived at my house quite late, after he and his girl saw a movie and had a good graunch. I'm guessing about the graunch but I think it's a good guess. He was very polite at the door and asked if it was too late to talk. I invited him to sleep over, so he phoned his folks who gave him the okay. I was busy working on the PC while the grommet lay on my bed and paged through a Mens Health mag. "What was it like the first time?" he asked. "I mean with a girl."

"You mean fucking?"

"Not so gross, Stuart. Jacky wants to go the whole hog; talking and foreplay and then ... yadda, yadda, yadda."

"You guys talk all the time. Talking is not like some serious mission. Besides, you've got it pretty well sussed."

"Yeah, but when it's time to pull on the raincoat, Mr. Stiffy becomes Mr. Floppy."

I cracked totally at the seriousness with which he delivered that sentence. "Crap. You've worn a rubber before. What's the problem?"

"Because this is for real.

Don't laugh. You're the only person I can talk to about this, so don't be a prick. What about guys who don't have a mate to talk to?"

"They handle it, just like you will. I don't know what to tell you. Anyway, you've got a bone just talking about it. Check." There was no need to check—he was already aware of his skin-splitter.

Next morning, we showered together. I knew it was a night to be cherished, one that might never happen again. Kyle did a great job with Graham—he's as straight as any guy I've met. The fact that we got our rocks off together had nothing to do with his sexuality, but everything to do with expressing the friendship he feels toward me. At least, that's what I want to believe, and I think I'm right.

We spent the day surfing. Not a word was mentioned about the previous night. In fact, we've not spoken about it since. And, no, he doesn't hang around my place as often as he used to, which makes that night even more special. Not seeing each other as often is not a problem. He knows he's welcome to rock over here any time he wants.

Several months elapsed before I wrote G again, the day before his birthday. It was time for a catch-up on the goss.

A few guys from varsity organized a trip up the coast for a surfing safari. When I returned, I'd lost interest in the PC and the internet. I didn't mean to worry you, G.

You're probably wondering about everyone—Melanie and I are madly in love, and see each other at least once every day. I sometimes call in to her place for a chat. Weekends are ours, and she's back into surfing, which is totally hot because it means we see more of each other. I still haven't bonked her on the back line yet. Hahahaha!

Graham spends a lot of time with us and has slept over at my house a couple of times. If he's telling the truth, it means he and Tracy are 'doing it' on a regular basis. Now that he dates a chick that's totally into his bod it's become a license to screw. She's a sexy little thing as well. She wears low riders that expose her flat stomach. Graham is into those too, which show off his package. However, when he visits me, he wears baggy cargos that try like hell to grip his narrow hips. He says they're to give my hand room to maneuver—if I become desperate. Cheeky brat.

Brett phoned a few weeks back to say he might move north to work for a while, and hopes to go to Florida for a few months. He's well qualified to crew yachts anywhere in the world to gain further experience. His relationship with his girl is still full steam ahead—and steamy to boot. I think that worries him a little in terms of travel. She says

he should travel anyway, otherwise he'll always wonder 'what if?'

I visited the Ts the other night. It was like a family dinner with Melanie, Graham and me. The Ts asked Graham if he'd like to take Kyle's 'Endless Summer' poster home with him because he's not spending as much time in Kyle's room nowadays, and they want him to have it. I think the T's are getting ready to pack a lot of Kyle's things away. That's not exactly what they said but I read between the lines.

Yes, Stuart is fine. I've not been near drugs except for a joint occasionally. Bob and I are still tight mates—sometimes tighter than tight. Hahahaha! And I'm no longer dependent on the PC. We've ceased being joined at the hip.

I bet you thought I'd forget your birthday. No chance. I made some birthday graphics but I'm not hundreds about any of them, so I'll send the bloody lot. They're just to let you know that I spend time thinking about you and wondering how you're doing. Anyway, G, I wish you a good one. All the best.

I wrote G again in six weeks: I'll keep this fairly short—just a note to let you know that I'm okay, and that everything is fine. No drugs for ages now, and I'm pretty sure I'm absolutely clean.

My whole life has changed and I'm trying to find my own direction. I've been in Kyle's shadow too long. I expect an email from you lecturing me about my responsibility to Kyle. I hope not. I'm not likely to forget the best friend I ever had but I also

need to move forward with my own life now.

This first year at varsity hasn't been easy; it takes loads of work but I'm diligent with my studies. I just wish my grades would reflect that. Oh! I'm now a part time waiter. Yeah, I can hear you guffawing at that news. It's a nice restaurant out in the burbs.

Brett stays in touch and now works north of Perth. He plans to sail in a few months time to the Caribbean or Florida on some special working student visa thingy. Melanie and I split up but we are still good friends. We agreed that we had continued dating for the wrong reasons. I love her very much and I'm sure it's mutual but I think we need to test the waters a little more and give each other more space. I date a few girls who just want a casual relationship.

This note was sparked by the fact that I get a lot of email I don't answer. I'm rarely in front of the PC now. Some of the correspondents have become nasty about my so-called snub.

Graham is well and has his life pretty much sorted now. He phones occasionally to check on me, and we surf together quite often. He's a young adult these days and quite mature compared to his mates. He also has a job waiting tables during the summer holidays. The Ts are fine and I suspect they're thinking of emigrating.

On November 3, Brett was in town. He's useless on a surfboard but paddled out with Melanie, Graham and me to the backline where we placed a

wreath that Melanie made. Brett doesn't have a wettie so we all dressed in boardies. None of us said much—we all knew what thoughts occupied each other's minds.

I've learned to deal with Kyle's passing and I'm more comfortable with it now. I thank Kyle every single day for being my friend and for the positive influences he gave my life. It's only now that I'm experiencing the real benefits. I can't even tell you the last time I smoked a spiff, let alone anything else.

My relationship with my folks has improved out of sight. My dad and I have regular workouts in the gym—another of Kyle's influences.

First year of varsity went okay but I'll work harder next year. I passed all my papers but the results could have been better. Meantime, waiting tables is not my scene but my dad capped my allowance so I need the cash. The restaurant rocks, though, and the tips are generous.

The Ts have put the emigration idea on hold; they say there are still too many memories. Brett is away at sea somewhere—out of touch.

NEW YEAR: Christmas at Kyle's was awesome. The Ts are fine, and seem to have their lives in order. Kyle's room is now a reading room. Additions include a couple of huge comfortable easy chairs and creative lighting. It has a relaxed and pleasant feel to it. His stereo remains, and the walls still feature all Kyle's posters and stuff. His surfboard stands in one corner. The bed is gone in order to make room for the chairs.

The Endless Summer poster still adorns the wall, and I quizzed Graham about it. He says he'll probably never remove it—that's where it belongs, and he continues to spend a lot of time there, taping and listening to music. Yeah, well, we all get a little choked up when our thoughts drift to the history of that room but that will forever remain the case.

No, Brett wasn't present. I know how your mind works, G, and that you hoped he would be. He phoned Christmas morning, and plans to be back in Byron next Easter. He promised to connect with us all. He also phoned me which was cool.

THE FOLLOWING AUGUST: I'm still on the planet and still off the drugs. My life is very different now to the way it was at the beginning of the year. Varsity is going well but I'm not sure if I'll continue with psych. My dad suggested a gap year to consider my direction. Our relationship is brilliant. I might take his advice and get into graphic design.

Graham is well—still has his ups and downs—God knows with which chick. Hahahaha! We often surf together and he visits occasionally. The whole sexual thing between us has dissipated, which is great for our friendship.

I often visit the Ts. They're doing okay but I don't think they'll ever be same again. The possibility of moving overseas remains a consideration. Mr. T is not sure if the move will be permanent or temporary. He says the change will do them good. They'll keep the house.

Brett is somewhere in the Caribbean. He phoned last July on Kyle's birthday. He's doing great, and still with his girl. Melanie and I are tight, but it's a strange relationship: one minute we're madly in love and the next we fight like cats and dogs.

Have a great birthday, G, and give my best wishes to everyone. And did you notice? I didn't say 'fuck' once.

DECEMBER/JANUARY: Got pissed off with psych and haven't studied for a while. Instead, I've worked around a bit and traveled to Europe and the States. I met with Brett in Fort Lauderdale, and stayed in his garden apartment. It belongs to a yachtie friend of his who lets him use it whenever he visits Florida. He's doing really well, working on charters and crewing.

Last time I spoke to him he was headed for Hong Kong to deliver a newly-built yacht, then on to Perth and over to South Africa. The guy sure gets around! I can't wait to see him again in Byron. Brett and I have the same kind of relationship he had with Kyle, and that rocks. It's Kyle's legacy.

Guess what? Melanie and Graham are now an item. He and I had a helluva fight when I discovered he was sleeping with her. Melanie doesn't speak to me any more so I guess he's poisoned her mind. Brett admitted that he tolerated Graham because of Kyle, and thought the grommet was too big for his boots even back then. I suppose the positive is that Melanie keeps Graham off drugs. I believe Graham and I are

beyond ever being friends again. It's hard to believe he's 18 already with a serious testosterone problem—he's always looking for trouble. He planted me on my butt at a club a while back. Why? Because I asked Melanie why she was ignoring me. Graham is not the same kid Kyle knew.

The Ts still live in the old house. I visit them every now and then. They appear to be doing well. Their thoughts of moving overseas remain on hold. They're not in any hurry and Mr. T says there are still too many precious memories of Kyle to abandon.

I grab a job when and where I can, and managed to get work on a film set on the Gold Coast, working with the grips. It's cool but the hours are shocking.

Brett has mellowed since his involvement with the yachtie thing. He still parties—hell, he proved that in Florida. But Kyle left him with a sensitive side that makes Brett fantastic. The garden flat is in a 'hood called Mission Bay which is damn cool. We had dinner in a restaurant near Hollywood Beach, then he showed me around. We spoke about Kyle and Byron and laughed the whole damn night. He was really stoked to see me.

You need to picture how Brett has developed, G. He used to be tight, sinewy bulging muscle, but now he's rounded off to a smooth model's build with all the right stuff in all the right places. His attitude, however, has mellowed since the days he beat the crud out of me. He wears hipster jeans while I wear low riders. Just don't get a hardon in

low riders or you'll die. Brett's hipsters show off just how finely tuned his body is, from his broad shoulders and developed arms to his narrow waist and butt. Oh! His butt! The jeans also show off his ample package. His hair is kinda styled but still spiky, and jet black to collar length.

Brett was invited to join an intercoastal cruise from Fort Lauderdale to Miami and organized an invite for me. What can I say? We provided the eye candy for the chicks on board, as well as some of their boyfriends. I ogled one bloke, a blond from heaven with a body to match, but he was surrounded by twice as many chicks as I was.

JULY: G'day, G. Attached is a graphic I did for you. The background is Wollumbin, Kyle's mountain. He was there watching me—incredibly beautiful. I walked and climbed the mountain for most of the anniversary of his birthday and was reticent to leave. I cried a lot just remembering how it used to be and where it might be now if he were alive. I tried to picture him in his early 20s. He sends his love, G. How do I know that? There was a single blue flower blooming at his special place.

THE END