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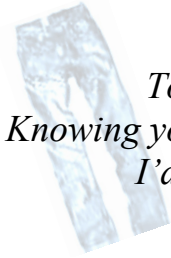
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WRONG TROUSERS

BY

Bryl R. Tyne

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CHAPTER ONE

This was not happening, not tonight. Or so Josh wished.

He recognized the voice and winced, as if he'd forked one of his metal fillings. Beyond the line of club patrons, he confirmed his dilemma. Two streets south, a man dressed in grey sweats closed the distance.

"Josh! Hey J—Morgan!"

Josh abandoned his place in line and his boyfriend, and hurried to the vacant strip mall's parking lot across the street.

"Dude, wait up!"

He could say he'd forgotten his ID. At least, that's the story Mike would be privy. In the alcove of an out-of-business dry cleaner, Josh huddled.

"What're you running from me for?" The young man braced himself on his knees.

Josh glared. His windbreaker catching on the building's chipped paint, as he leaned.

"Come on, Josh. Here, I thought you'd be happy to see *me*."

"What are you doing? Our meeting's scheduled for tomorrow morning. Get the hell out of here before someone sees us together."

"But, I don't like carrying this much cash." The man smacked a roll of bills into Josh's palm. "Besides, Mr. G. insists on promptness. I hope this doesn't affect our doing business. If you know what I mean."

Josh stuffed the two grand deep inside his front pocket, as

he massaged his temples between forefinger and thumb. It'd better be two—freaking—grand or this sonofabitch would pay for shorting him. As well as calling him out in public. *Idiot*. Josh rubbed his face.

Features shadowed by a large hood and hands inside his sweat pockets, the man bounced foot to foot like a hyperactive Chihuahua.

“You need to leave. *Now*.”

Mr. G's lackey tilted his head, as if he misunderstood. Josh shoved past and crossed the street, hurrying to shift his ID from wallet to pocket.

“Where the fuck did you run off to?” Mike spun around; disrupting the conversation he'd seemed so enthralled.

Josh whipped out his license and waved the ID in his boyfriend's face. “Left it in my car,” he said, feigning his best *Lucille Ball* dingbat moment. His grandfather's blessing of pale yellow curls had always helped lessen confrontations...when he'd remembered to use it to his advantage.

“Dumbass.” Mike shook his head and rejoined his clique.

Except for the chill in the air, tonight promised to yield nothing different from the last one-hundred and thirty-three nights he'd tagged behind Mike. Josh tucked a stray ringlet behind his ear, as he stood from tying his sneaker. Thankful the line began its shuffle toward the club entrance.

* * * *

Josh snapped to his senses, as the bottle shattered on the floor behind the bar. “What's your problem tonight?” Dustpan and broom in hand, Mr. McCarthy, the owner-bartender, rolled his eyes at Josh and began to sweep up the mess.

“Sorry. Could you get me another?” Josh grabbed the replacement straight out of McCarthy's hand.

“Whoa, kid. Whatever it is can't be that bad.”

Josh flashed him a mind-your-own-business glower, turned his back to the bar, and took up eying the crowd.

Kid...Where in the hell had Mike disappeared to now? The back room with his buddies? The bathroom—*again*? Josh snorted. Sure as shit, come time to leave, Mike would show up looking for a warm body to bed. But tonight was full of surprises. Josh had had enough.

As the place dimmed, Josh slammed the empty on the bar and snatched up his jacket. With a heavier beat from the DJ, multi-colored spotlights roamed the polished floor. On his way toward the exit, two *whoops* and a chorus of cheers garnered his attention. He paused at the edge of the dance floor.

Was it wrong for a man to flaunt his size or that slight curve to the left? Josh didn't think so. The pants appeared loose at the thighs. Maybe the definition came from the man's position. Whichever, Josh didn't care. He rested his weight to one side, enjoying the new drug.

Shoulders to the dance floor, the man humped the air before springing to his feet. What didn't shake bumped, and what didn't bump grinded. Unruly, carrot orange hair followed the man's jerking head like an afterthought. His neon green T-shirt...that could go. But damn, if it didn't cling to every layer of muscle strewn across the man's upper body.

For an instant, their eyes met. He tossed Josh a crooked smile before spinning to touch the floor. To Josh, the man palmed his sides with purpose, as he crept upright, writhing his ass, just as surely, in Josh's direction.

Hell, the energy exuded alone quickened Josh's pulse. He adjusted the front of his pants, eyeing the bar. He'd order another round, if it were possible to make his way home in one piece afterward.

Forget it. Checking the glowing blue face of his watch, he stepped out onto the sidewalk, and slung on his jacket. He needed to sleep. He would too, after boxing his soon-to-be ex's shit and hauling the load to the street.

* * * *

"Yo."

Josh jiggled the key into the lock. Hip against his '65 Mustang, he acknowledged the man's greeting with a curt wave. "Hey."

"I'm Dave."

Josh accepted the hand thrust his way. "Josh. Josh Morgan." His gaze traveled Dave's body head to toe and back again. He must've played football at some point, judging from the breadth of his chest.

"Tanner. Dave Tanner. Listen..." Dave raked a hand over his head, a futile attempt to untangle the sweat-soaked mess. "You always leave early on Fridays?"

Josh diverted his gaze from Dave's tiger-like eyes, noticing neither he nor Dave had yet to end the handshake.

"I was getting ready to buy you a drink," Dave said.

Warmth crawled into Josh's face, as he took in that same crooked smile from earlier. He pulled his hand to his side. Wasn't the first time a man had come on this strong. Josh just preferred making the first move. "Sorry. I've had enough for the night."

Dave caught him by the arm. "A bite to eat then?"

Callused but warm, Dave's grip showed no sign of weakening. Josh fumbled his key ring, his hand shaking. Hell, he hadn't gotten rid of one and, less than a shoe length away, another stood asking admittance. Into his life or into his bed, Josh pondered briefly, before trying to convince himself. He needed to box up Mike's crap. He needed to sleep. He needed to...*Oh, screw this.*

Josh turned into Dave's outstretched arm. Hand covering a rounded bicep as firm as a softball, he worked his touch along the damp T-shirt. "Don't you have a jacket?"

"It's above freezing. I'm all right."

Over a hard-curved deltoid, spanning the slight hump of Dave's shoulder, along his neck, Josh relished the—

Backed against his car, air forced from his lungs. Dave's mouth smothered his, intoxicating. Josh accepted the eager lips, fingering Dave's mussed orange mane. Fistfuls of hair and his T-shirt worked up and out of his jeans, Josh jerked Dave closer, crushing his lips, and forcing them to part. He glided his tongue over, under, and finally into the center of Dave's, tangling, coaxing. Josh invited the man deeper.

Dave's broadened hands moved torturously along Josh's back, a following draft prickling Josh's skin. Josh's jacket crinkling with each move, Dave palmed along Josh's sides, across his midsection, and up his chest. Josh moaned, his nipples reacting to the touch. Dave thumbed them again and a third time. Hips pressed firm, covered erections ground. Dave growled in aggravation, as Josh pushed him to arm's length.

Winded and panting, Josh righted himself, studying the other's bewildered expression. Dave's tensed neck displayed a rushing heartbeat. Crisp air beaded his nipples, tiny protrusions forcing the tacky green material, if possible, tighter across his well-stacked pecs. Josh licked his lips eying Dave's denim-constrained cock, bulged at the fly, as needy as Josh's own.

Dave stood dumbfounded, as Josh scurried behind the wheel and cranked down the window.

"Get in."

* * * *

Josh no sooner unlocked the door, flipped on the light, and entered his apartment. Dave kicked the door shut behind them and pinned Josh to the wall. *Damn.* The man knew what he wanted and made no bones about going for it. Josh reckoned he didn't mind.

Hungry and hurried, Dave licked Josh's lips apart. Josh gave willingly, yet took all he dared. Tastes of...*vodka, peppermint, a hint of cherry, and root beer...*drove him mad. *Root beer?* Unable

to define any one dominant flavor, Josh settled on branding the swirl “Dave Tanner.” It was enough, for now.

Though most likely short-lived, Josh enjoyed the ease of this hookup. No questions, no incessant talking...no mind games, Josh closed his eyes and melted into the other man. Roaming Dave’s back, Josh conquered hills of forged muscle. Dave deepened the kiss. Apparently adamant on discovering if Josh had his tonsils.

Now. Dave’s shirt had to go. Its gaudiness long forgotten, Josh needed to see that glorious chest, to feel each hard-packed, taunting lump under his touch. Hell bent on teasing each freckle with his teeth and tongue if Dave voiced no objection. From the guttural noises, escaping the others lips, Josh was pretty certain Dave wouldn’t be voicing anything except—*more, harder, and yes—*here in a minute.

Josh scrunched Dave’s shirt out of the way, smoothing over a chiseled torso. As the windbreaker fell from Josh’s shoulders and bunched at the elbows, he protested. One at a time, sleeves tugged over his arms, his grumble bordered a desperate whine.

Dave freed himself from his T-shirt and tossed it to the side. He flipped Josh face to the wall and shoved Josh’s shirt to his shoulders. Warm breath and a wet mouth descended on Josh’s back. Inch-by-inch, Dave licked a trail lower, his fingers busy at Josh’s fly.

Josh yearned for greater contact. Torn between the moist mouth at his back and the satisfaction each brush of those fingers promised. First button unfastened, Josh grunted, arching forward. At once, Dave’s exploration came to an abrupt stop. Fists and jaw clenched, Josh fought hard to contain his scream.

He swore the lips, pressed into the small of his back, curved into a smile. Within seconds, Dave snorted, chuckled, and ended up stammering backward, as he broke into a fit of laughter.

Incredulous, Josh jerked around and slammed against the wall, crossing his arms. Flashbacks of Mike’s constant chiding squelched Josh’s mood, as well as his, once raging, hard-on.

“Sorry, man,” Dave said, holding his stomach, allowing his humor to trickle to a halt. “Turn back around.”

“What?”

“It’s just a quirk I got. I notice weird things. Turn around. I want to see the back of your jeans again.”

Josh debated whether to throw the lunatic out into the cold or wait for the next unwelcome surprise. He assured himself this’d be the last time he invited a stranger to his apartment.

“They’re regular blue jeans. What the hell?” Josh scanned the front of his trousers. The only irregularity he noticed was the expression of his ready-for-action dick. Kaput—vanished.

“They’re Lee Dungarees, right?”

Josh banged his head on the wall, beseeching patience, maybe a clue, from the ceiling’s off-white paint. “If this is your idea of a joke...” Without finishing his statement, he unfastened his pants from the second button, shucked them to his knees, shook them to his ankles, and stomped out of the legs. *Freaking moron...Thinks he can intimidate me...* Josh snatched the jeans from the floor and recited the words from the leather placard stitched on the rear pocket. “*Lee Dungarees...Can’t Bust ‘em...Since eighteen-eighty-nine.*” Inside, he found the size tab too worn to read. “Last time I checked, I wore a thirty-four—thirty-six. Satisfied?”

Dave’s laughing turned riotous. “I’m sorry. Sorry...” He ambled over to Josh and gripped his shoulder. “Man, listen. I’ve never been with a guy who wore the same jeans I did. It’s too funny.”

What is it with attracting idiots? Josh glared, as Dave fought to catch his breath.

“I pegged you for some foreign brand.” Dave nudged Josh in the shoulder. “You know what’s even weirder?”

Josh bit the inside of his cheek to keep from replying, *you*. Dave hovered closer. “We wear the same size too.”

“Some foreign brand...What the hell’s any of this supposed to mean?”

“I told you. I get off on coincidences. This one...” He waved over the front of his jeans like a game show hostess presenting an exotic prize. “I’m chalking up to the strangest, I’ve had yet.”

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. Here. Let’s exchange numbers and call it a night.”

Dave scribbled a number on the notepad Josh fished from the pile on his catchall table.

“Listen, it’s just...” He placed the pencil down and scratched the back of his head. “You looked classy leaning on the bar. I was afraid you were out of my league. Almost didn’t chase you down. What are you? Nineteen? Twenty?”

Josh pointed toward the door.

“No. Hear me out. I was wrong... It was a relief to find out you aren’t anything like what I expected.”

Josh twisted his chin upward to the right then the left, releasing the stiffness in his stress-seized neck. “I’m twenty-three. Will you cut the crap?”

Dave palmed the side of Josh’s face and pushed a handful of wild curls behind one ear. “You’re so good looking.”

Josh dropped his pants, grabbed Dave behind the neck, and yanked, reuniting their mouths. Forget weirdoes. Forget jeans, packing Mike’s shit, or taking his freaking bullshit. Josh needed

this. If bedding Dave promised a night anywhere near as wicked as his kisses, Josh's need just edged into overdrive.

Dave kicked the boots from his feet, and used his toes to scrunch his socks. Josh gasped, as Dave, maintaining eye contact, broke the kiss and stepped away. Though Dave's stare intense, it radiated a kindness Josh understood. His breathing grew labored, and his racing pulse flooded his mind, as Dave's hips gyrated. One button, two...Dave's jeans, along with his briefs, fell to the carpet.

Josh fought to push the sudden abundance of saliva past his throat. Dave padded closer. Each movement contorted the twists and curves of his perfect musculature, added a bounce to his jutted cock. Amber eyes locked on Josh as if he were the next meal.

Josh sucked in his bottom lip, hypnotized by strolling beauty. Without blinking, he whipped his T-shirt over his head.

Dave converged, kissing Josh's shoulders, using teeth and tongue, tormented his chest. "Jesus. You're beautiful." Dave whispered, but Josh failed to hear under the urgency of Dave's touch. When Dave pulled Josh's hardened nipples between his lips, Josh lost it.

Determination in his face, Josh reciprocated each fondle, grope, and bite. Stiff, and now, beyond falter, he reached for Dave and palmed along the underside of his shaft to the base. Josh closed his hand and, with a hiss, slid to the head. With a firm but easy grip, he worked the pliable skin over a rigid inner core. His other hand cupping Dave's balls, Josh gave each a healthy squeeze, pulling them upward. He moved, once again, to encircle the base of Dave's cock.

"Jesus...Yes." Dave sounded hoarse.

Fistful of cock, Josh captured Dave's mouth under his, and steered him backward. The pair flipped over the sofa arm and landed cockeyed. With a duo of grunts, they rode the overturned cushions onto the carpet.

CHAPTER TWO

Dave opened his eyes and rolled over.

Josh slept peacefully, the sheet about his hips. Ratted curls splayed across his forehead and cheek, head burrowed halfway into the pillow, he snored lightly. He wouldn't wake any time soon if he was half as exhausted as Dave felt.

In the blind-filtered glow from a street lamp, Dave memorized Josh's every detail. He wanted one last touch of that supple skin. Maybe, entangle his fingers in that soft mop. Drool drenched or not, to place one final kiss on those pouting lips. Half a minute passed before he convinced himself it was a bad idea.

Jesus. Life's so unfair.

He covered Josh with the blankets, slipped quietly from the bed, and stammered toward the door. Hand resting on the jamb, he captured one final mental image. The lump of blankets rose and fell, an outline in the night begging him not to go. With a heavy sigh, Dave turned and walked out of the room.

On hands and knees, he foraged on the living room carpet. Fear of waking *Sleeping Beauty* his only concern. In the dark, he located his clothes. Jeans and shirt secured, he slipped into his boots, and hurried outside, locking the door behind him.

Dave stretched, filling his lungs. The briskness of early morning jarred his wiped out limbs, awakened his overextended muscles. Jesus, what didn't they do last night? He chuckled. Josh Morgan was a goddamned sex fiend...and young, a dream. Too bad, that's all he'd ever be.

Dave crossed the lot to the street and headed west. The ma

and pa joint his sister worked should be opening for the morning crowd about now.

* * * *

Bells tinkled, as Dave pushed open the glass door.

“Hey Joe! Grab a seat. I’ll be over in a sec.” His sister bustled past balancing three breakfast plates on each arm.

Dave sauntered toward a booth in the back corner. No sooner had he slid across the vinyl, she dropped a cup of steaming coffee and a menu in front of him and disappeared into the kitchen.

He skimmed over the menu then closed it. *Right.*

“Hey. Come on, Joe,” she said, returning to the table. “I know your hungry as hell. I’ll buy. Go ahead.” Pad in hand, Stephanie stood at the end of the booth, in unison, tapping pencil and toe.

“It’s okay, sis. I didn’t come here to eat.”

She wedged the pencil behind her ear, slipped the order book into her apron, and leaned, one handed, on the table. “What do you need?” She asked, not loud nor accusing, but knowing. Dave focused on the menu, as he flipped it over and back. With Stephanie, *just knowing* was bad enough.

“I’m not going to give you excuses, sis. But, I-didn’t-make-my-rent-again.”

“What’d you do with all your stuff?”

“I hocked it—”

“Your guitar and—”

“Everything. Still not enough.” He brought the cup to his lips and blew across the top without meeting her stare.

Bells jingled and a couple entered arm in arm. Stephanie sighed louder than Dave had anticipated and shoved away from the table, ordering him not to leave.

What in the hell had he been thinking last night? It was not like him to be fascinated by anyone to the point he’d follow the guy anywhere. He could blame the booze. He could. *Josh Morgan.* Dave thought the name sounded distinguished. Another one of his freaky quirks, he figured. Smiling, he repeated the name again.

Josh’s age and where he worked the extent of his bio. Dave hadn’t delved into the man’s life. Hadn’t seemed like the talking atmosphere, Josh being just as needy. They’d had a silent, mutual agreement, a one time deal, both wanting, both giving, both taking. *Jesus.* He adjusted the front of his pants. It wasn’t supposed to feel this way the morning after. He had no clue what to do with this feeling.

“Sorry ‘bout that, Joe.”

Dave lurched from his thoughts. Deer eyed, he gazed up at

Stephanie.

“Listen. I’m up to my ass in work, but if you need somewhere to rest your head... You know, ‘til you get back on your feet. You know I got room.”

She slid a breakfast platter across the table and scurried away. Scrambled eggs, sausage links, a short-stack of buttermilk pancakes, and toast beckoned his taste buds. Dave reached for his fork and the warmed carafe of maple syrup. He was starving.

Tab in hand, he hovered near the register. Even if he couldn’t pay, he hated anyone to know. Stephanie took the bill from him, reaching into her skirt pocket. After ringing out the order, she yelled to her boss, and walked Dave outside.

“Thanks.” Dave wrapped her in his arms and squeezed. She patted his shoulder, as he crushed her tiny body in his embrace.

At once, she shoved away, glaring. “What the fuck’s wrong with you, Joe? *Jesus*.”

Brows arched high; Dave shrugged, wondering what he’d missed.

She scoured over his fly with scrutiny.

“*What?*” Dave scanned the front of his pants. “What are you—?”

He shrieked, as she grabbed his crotch and squeezed. For a petite, thirty-year-old, she had one hell of a grip. She stumbled backward showing more bewilderment on her face than Dave now held.

“What in the hell are you doing?”

“You had a freaking boner, you perv. I felt it!”

Dave patted the front of his jeans, hesitating on a lump near the inside of his left thigh. He dug into his pocket and nearly choked, revealing a wad of tightly rolled bills, double-wrapped in two rubber bands.

“You mooch!” She smacked him on the arm. “You told me you were broke.”

“T-This ain’t mine. I haven’t seen this much cash in... Well, not since I got back.”

“It was in your pocket, dipshit. Whose is it then?”

Dave’s heart raced as fast as his mind. That ass, the sofa, the carpet, the coffee table, the kitchen table, the hallway wall, his bed, his apartment...his jeans...it was dark. *Josh*. On the drive from the club, Josh had mentioned he worked at Cameron Software Engineering. Dave eyed the money again. *Doing what?*

“They’re his.” He regretted the words, as they slipped past his lips.

“Whose?”

Heat raced over Dave’s skin. He stuffed the wad deep into his—*Josh*’s—pocket.

Hands on hips, Stephanie scowled. “I don’t believe this. How in the hell did you get into some other guy’s pa—?” She looked at the ground, rubbing her forehead. “Never mind, don’t answer that.”

“Hey. At least you won’t have to worry about me crashing at your place.”

Her eyes met Dave’s in less time than it took him to inhale a full breath. “You are not keeping someone else’s money, Joe. For chrissake, you of all people should know better. Mom and Dad didn’t ship you off to the Marines ten years ago because you were dying to serve your country.”

Dave counted the passing cars on a side street. “You don’t get it, sis. He—It was just a fuck.” Last night’s description burned, as it razed over his tongue. He shuddered at the gnawing in his gut.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you. You can’t name one time you didn’t pay for your screw-ups.”

Dave rubbed the back of his neck, now naming the various vehicles.

“You’re impossible!” Stephanie threw her arms in the air and stomped into the restaurant.

* * * *

Josh stretched, missing Dave’s warmth, but discovered only cold sheets. Scratching the sleep from the corners of his eyes, he focused on the alarm’s red digits. *Twelve-thirty, already?* He chuckled at having slept in late. Who wouldn’t have, after a reaming by someone as fine as Dave Tanner?

The man had experience. That’s for sure. He had to be older than he looked, or acted, or danced, or...Josh snagged the pillow Dave had used and brought it to his nose. Pulling in a lungful of air, he conceded. He’d never forget last night.

He slid from the bed, shuffled on a robe, and traipsed to the kitchen. As he filled the decanter and flipped the brew switch, a Norah Jones tune, *I’ve Got to See You Again*, filtered through his thin walls from the neighbor’s place. He was surprised to catch himself humming along.

At least Dave left his phone number. Josh assured himself, after checking, but not finding a note. He lifted the scratchpad from the table, closed his eyes, and exhaled slowly. Never particularly fond of redheads, Dave had been the exception, would be the exception. *Damn*. One-night stands weren’t supposed to leave him all flustered inside and giddy. He let out a groan and padded to the bathroom.

Josh replayed *everything* Dave. That magnificent body resting sturdy against his back, softened-callused hands stretched

taught and searching. Cat-like eyes that showed longing as well as appreciation, and the smell and taste of his sweat-covered skin under a fine layer of light auburn hair.

Never enough hot water when he truly needed it. Monday, he'd call maintenance and demand a new water heater. He cranked off the tap and snatched a towel from the bar, as he stomped from the shower.

Three cups of coffee later, he busied himself straightening his apartment. In slow motion, he lollygagged, room to room, picking up dirty glasses and clothes, stuffing books back on the shelves and dusting. No matter how or what he tried, his feet never quite touched the floor. At half past two, he called the senselessness quits.

His line of thinking was borderline ludicrousness. Infatuation, nothing more, he told himself. Twenty-three year olds didn't fall in love...*Do they?*

He shook the jeans from the living room carpet, turned them this way and that before deciding they needed washed.

Last night's exchange, at once remembered, he dived into his front left pocket. Then the right, then both back pockets, and resorted to crawling around. Like some crazed animal, he hunted under furniture and behind drapes, his chest pounding the longer the search and rescue mission dragged. A futile ten minutes later, he admitted defeat.

As if they'd give up their secret, he stood, holding the jeans before him. His money was there on the ride home. He'd checked. Perhaps Dave departed with more than his clothes. Josh's stomach caved inward, but he laughed. They wore identical jeans. A mix-up, that's all this was. He'd call Dave right away and inquire.

On the second ring, perspiration dotted his brow. The third carried a soured taste from his belly to his throat and into the fourth, which produced only a recorded message:

"We're sorry, the number you have dialed is not in service. Please check the number and try your call again."

"What—the—fuck?" Josh stared at the cell phone in his shaking hand. "That sonofabitch."

CHAPTER THREE

Dave stepped through the sliding doors.

A motor scooter on the edge of a used car lot he'd passed had tempted him. Though, minutes later, a near miss with a city bus had him rethinking Stephanie's words. Surely, it wouldn't hurt to buy a few necessities. He yanked a shopping cart from the pile and headed for the dry goods section.

After perusing three aisles, he still couldn't shake his sister's warning. Jesus, she knew how to spread the guilt thick. Money unspent, he made his way to replace the cart. A glint from the snack aisle caught his eye. One tiny item wouldn't warrant the bad karma bomb his sister had prophesized. He snapped the aluminum container from the hanging display and marched to a checkout lane.

The horizon showed late afternoon as he reached his sister's house. He knocked and was surprised by the immediate greeting. "Oh! I was just heading out. Change your mind?"

"Where're you going?"

"To pick up my dress from the cleaners. Bob's taking me out to dinner tonight. It's Valentine's Day."

"Don't mind if I crash for a while do you?"

Stephanie fiddled with the straps of her purse. "Did you give that guy back his money?"

Dave tucked the folded paper sack under his arm a little further.

Like a chastising schoolteacher, Stephanie shook her head, but unblocked the doorway and motioned Dave inside. "Just be

here when I get back.”

“Yes, mother.” Dave ambled over the threshold and closed the door.

* * * *

“Just a minute!” Josh whipped open the door with a growl. Before him, stood the young man in grey sweats, hood up and drawstrings pulled tight.

“What the fuck? Now you’re stalking me. Get the hell out of here before I call the cops.”

“Wait. Josh, dude. Listen. I gotta get that money back or Mr. G’s gonna kill me. Actually, he said he’d kill both of us. He hates the program, says there’re too many glitches.”

“Well. I-I don’t have the money...Besides a deals a deal.” Josh focused on nothing in particular over the man’s right shoulder.

“Mr. G’s not gonna be happy.”

“It’s in the bank already. M-Monday—Monday I’ll get it to you, but I’m releasing a bug. Tell him he’d better spend the weekend backing up his shit.”

Grey sweats disappeared around the corner and Josh closed the door. His head *thunked* hard, as he fell against it. The last thing he needed was a hit put out on him.

He paced, counting the rings. “Yes. Mr. McCarthy. Hey, it’s Josh. Yeah...No, I’m not hung over...Listen, do you think you could help me? I’m looking for this guy, who was there last night. Well no, I don’t know if he’s a regular...Okay...Bright orange hair, really well built, and he could dance like...oh...Sure? Thanks anyway.”

He had to get that money. If only he knew where to find Dave Tanner.

* * * *

Dave toppled off the stepladder with the slam of the door. “Joe? You still—What’s that god-awful smell?”

Shit!

He scrambled to the third step and scrubbed the cupboards above the range hood with more fervor.

Stephanie rounded the kitchen entryway. “What the hell did you do to my kitchen?”

Dave dropped the scouring pad, along with his shoulders, and descended the steps. “It was an accident, sis.” He offered a half-hearted shrug, as she shoved past him to survey the damage.

“I hope this isn’t another one of your stupid experiments.”

“I was cooking popcorn. You know, the kind we had when we were kids,” he said, as if his reason would make a difference to his sister and her half-burnt kitchen.

She whipped around, hands on hips. “I didn’t have any— You spent some of that money didn’t you?”

Dave’s biceps fought to keep him from crossing his arms, as he leaned on the table. “It was only two dollars and thirty-nine cents. I didn’t think it would matter.”

“Sit down.”

Dave sat before she dragged out a chair and plopped onto the seat. “I don’t know what’s going on with this guy, and I don’t care. But, you have to give his money back, Joe. It’s not right.”

“You don’t think I know that, huh?” Dave slammed his elbows on the table. Head in hands, he fistfisted his hair.

“All right, Joe. Jesus, just calm down.”

“I lied to him, sis—name, number, everything. Fucked his brains out and left.”

“Oh brother, not like you’ve never left a guy hanging.”

Dave’s stomach knotted tighter. For a millisecond, he met his sister’s all-knowing glare. His gaze darted from his dirty hands to the blackened stovetop, to the curtains above the sink. Finally, he settled on the cracked Merrimac tabletop.

Stephanie shoved to her feet, cupped his chin, and twisted his face to meet hers. “I see. You *like* this one, don’t you?”

He tried turning from his accuser, anything to avoid—*the look*.

Busting out laughing, she tightened her grip and shook his head as if he were a child. “And by the way you’re acting, I’d say—A lot.”

* * * *

Josh stared at the cell phone, well aware of what to expect. He punched in the number.

“Yeah, uh...hey Mike...Fine, I guess...Yeah, no biggy, your stuff will be out front in the morning...Hey...Was wondering if you might help me...No, no not money...Well...You know most of the guys from McCarthy’s, right?”

Josh rolled his eyes, as Mike began naming off his numerous romps and, at random, *sexcapades*.

“You don’t happen to know a Dave Tanner, do you? What’s he...? Oh...orange hair, amber eyes kind of like a cat’s, and his chest—”

His phone clattered as it hit the floorboard and skid out of view. Josh’s slow motion from earlier was nothing compared to the still-frames he now, tried maneuvering as he fingered his phone

from under the brake pedal. Mike's puzzled voice rambled from the speaker, as Josh lifted and replaced the phone to his ear.

"What did you say—Joe?" Josh's stomach boiled. His head ached. "You're sure...Positive?" He brushed some dust off the dash. "N-No reason."

Phone at arms length, voice blaring on the other end, Josh rolled into his bank's parking lot. "Fine! Just freaking drop it...Yes, I like him...Yeah...I got what I wanted..." Josh snapped the cell phone shut on Mike's nauseating laughter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dave quirked a brow at his sister's suggestion.

"I got it, okay? I just don't get how it's supposed to help."

The sound of heavy knocking echoed into the kitchen. "It's Bob! Can you get that? I have to finish my makeup."

Stephanie raced down the hall, as Dave made his way into the living room. He tugged open the door. "Hey, Bob."

"Joe." Bob stepped inside and stood awkwardly beside the entrance. "So Joe, find a job yet?"

Dave glared at him, as he shut the door. Silently, he recited, this was his sister's home, his sister's boyfriend. "I have a job."

Bob smirked. "Still hosing out those rentals?"

Without another word, Dave marched back into the kitchen. Maybe scrubbing charred paint would keep him from punching his sister's boyfriend in the face.

"Joe. We're leaving. You need us to drop you somewhere?"

"Give me five minutes."

Dave washed his arms to the elbow and ran his wetted hands through his hair. He dried with a towel slung through a cupboard handle, studying the small box his sister had placed on the table. Two seconds later, he scratched away on a notepad at the end of the kitchen counter.

After placing the rolled up bills inside the box, he dropped in the sixty-one cents, positioned the lid, and secured it with some twine he'd rummaged from a junk drawer.

He made his way into the living room, stuffing the box in

his pocket. “Ready. Hey.” He grasped Bob’s hand in a hearty shake. “Thanks for the ride, Bob.”

* * * *

Josh squeezed his Mustang into a guest-parking place. Whichever neighbor occupied his spot would hear from him later. Rationale gone, he knew he needed to barricade himself inside his apartment or he’d deck the first person that looked at him cross-eyed.

His visit to the ATM reassured him he had enough to cover Mr. G., though spending next semester’s tuition wasn’t on Josh’s agenda. He’d do it to keep the hit off his head. Maybe it was time to reconsider trafficking Cameron’s pre-released software.

He rounded the corner of his building and froze. In front of the apartment, Dave stood digging in his pocket. Without a thought, Josh flew. “You—sonofabitch!” He clocked Dave in the side of the face, satisfied the person deserving his anger had received it.

Dave stumbled, but regained his footing. He dove at Josh, catching him in a bear-like hold. Slamming him against the building, Dave held him in place. “What the hell is your problem?”

“I want my money, Dave—*Joe*—whatever the fuck your name is!”

“Just calm down.”

Struggling for air, Josh shifted against the weighty arm pressed to his chest. “Get off! I can’t breathe, you ass.”

“Listen. I got your money.” Dave eased the pressure—some. “I-I grabbed the wrong jeans.”

Dave presented the squashed package. “Here,” he said, handing it to Josh and releasing him.

Josh wasted no time tearing the string and popping the lid. He ripped the wadded up bills from the box and stuffed them in his pocket, lifting his brow at the shiny coins. “What’s this?”

“It’s all there...Except two dollars and thirty nine cents.”

“Two dollars and thirty—”

“Yeah. I-I got a craving for popcorn. You know the kind in the aluminum package you cook on your stove?”

Josh poured the coins into his palm, shaking his head. “Leave.”

Without question, Dave turned and lumbered toward the highway, shoulders slumped.

Under the outside light, Josh picked the folded paper from the box’s bottom, barely managing to catch the object that slid out, as he unfolded the note.

Josh Morgan,
Jesus, I like the sound of your name. Dorky, I know. My sis said I should give you something for Valentine's Day. I don't have much to give but these old tags. You can chuck them or keep them—your choice. Maybe they could remind you of last night. I know I won't forget it. I shouldn't have lied.
Joe "Dave Tanner" Nichols

Josh examined the chain and dog tags under the light. Another turn of the screw and his vice-gripped chest might explode. In the dark, he combed the lot and trotted toward the complex's cinderblock barrier. Joe sat atop the three-foot wall, thumb to the road.

Joe's worn T-shirt offered no protection against the elements. Josh noticed the shiver that coursed over the man. At least, his shirt wasn't neon green tonight. "Hey."

"Yo."

Josh hiked a hip and settled beside Joe on the stucco-coated blocks. "Names, Josh. Josh Morgan."

Joe's thumb remained prominent for the passing cars.

"Nice to meet you Josh—Morgan." Though Joe tried to hide it, Josh caught the edge of a smile. "I'm Joe. Joe Nichols, high school, family, Marine reject. Strong suit—getting caught in compromising positions."

Josh chuckled under his breath. "Supposed to get below thirty tonight."

"Yep. Soon as I hitch a ride, I'll be all right."

Josh wiped his sweaty palms on his denim-covered thighs. "Yeah."

"Nice trousers, by the way," Joe said, his eyes never leaving the oncoming traffic.

Josh didn't need to look to know Joe wore an identical pair of jeans—*his* jeans.

"You know..." Directing Joe's focus away from the road, Josh tugged the man's thumbing arm into his lap. His chest pounded, as he slid his palm over the open hand, and intertwined their fingers. "Y-You should let me take care of that eye right away. I have some ice...in my apartment."

"Ice? After the day I've had? All I want's a hot shower and a clean pair of jeans."

Josh swallowed hard, as Joe's *ah-my-next-meal* gaze traveled lower and hesitated on unmistakable excitement trapped behind Josh's fly. Josh reciprocated the caress on the back of his hand. "You could always borrow mine..."

"I don't think that's such a great idea." Joe's sudden outburst earned him a shove to the shoulder. "Isn't that what got us

into this mess in the first place?”

Yanking Joe to his feet, Josh hopped from the wall and led the way to his apartment. “I meant my *shower* smartass.”



AUTHOR BIO

Bryl R. Tyne resides on a modest, forested retreat in the Upstate of South Carolina. A whip-cracking, advertising coordinator during the week, Bryl's nights and weekends are reserved for writing assorted erotic fiction. Regardless of genre, Bryl's works convey the timeless message that *Love holds no Boundaries*.

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