

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

DOGWATCH

Kiernan Kelly

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

DOGWATCH

By Kiernan Kelly

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A black-and-white photo of four seamen lounging on a ship. Two of the sailors are looking off into the distance, while the other two are looking at each other. The photo was taken in what looks like the early fifties, perhaps during the Korean Conflict.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

That's me in the middle, I'm a city kid tossed on a boat in the 50's. I got the one job everyone hated, cooking. I started out low man on the totem pole, till they saw what I could do. Then I got fans and now I'm the happiest seaman on the ocean.

Tell me how I got there and what I did that made them like me so much, and which of us didn't make it home.

Light D/s is ok, but please no major BDSM. Wanting a romance but I'm not sure which one. Probably the guy behind him.

Sincerely,

Joe

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: action/adventure, sailors, Korean conflict, navy men, masturbation

Content Warnings: there is some violence (the aftermath of an explosion at sea), but it's not overly graphic.

Word Count: 7,408

DOGWATCH
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Prologue

I felt the explosion before I heard it. At least, that's how it seemed. One minute I was hoisting a fifty-pound bag of potatoes up onto my shoulder, struggling under its weight and bemoaning the fact that if the other guys assigned to KP didn't show up soon, I'd have to peel the fuckers myself, and the next, I was thrown across the galley, banging my head against the giant mixing machine's stainless steel bowl. The bag split open, spuds flying free from the burlap, rolling across the galley floor every which way.

My ears were ringing with thunderous metallic screams that seemed to come from deep in the ship's belly, but I couldn't understand what was causing them. I must've banged my head pretty damn hard, because nothing made sense to me. What was making that God-awful noise? Why was I on the floor, and who had tossed all the fucking spuds out of the bag? There was no one else in the galley but me. The other four sailors assigned KP duty hadn't shown up yet. They were probably catching a few winks before reporting for duty. Believe you me, if the lieutenant found out they were late, there'd be hell to pay. Not that I'd rat on them, but still, I couldn't feed the whole fucking crew by myself, and I was sure there was a line waiting in the mess for my fried chicken and garlic smashed potatoes.

I brought a hand up to gingerly touch my scalp, and my fingers came away bloody. Well, fuck. I'd split my head open on the damn mixer. Who was going to peel the potatoes if I was stuck in sickbay getting my head sewn up? Maybe I could just bandage it with one of the kitchen towels. I'd promised the boys garlic smashed potatoes on the menu tonight. Nobody made 'em like me, and the boys would be spitting like housecats if I didn't come through.

Still didn't explain what knocked me off my feet, though.

I was still trying to make sense of it all when the sirens went off, and the call for all hands on deck sounded. What the fuck was going on? Struggling to my feet, my hand clamped over the cut on my forehead, I tried to make sense of it all.

Potatoes began rolling again, all going in a single direction, thumping and bumping across the metal-plated floor, careening off the ovens and sinks toward the far right corner of the galley. The floor under my feet slanted in that direction too, throwing me off balance. I nearly fell again, and had to grab the edge of the mixing bowl to steady myself.

That's when I realized the entire ship had tilted in that direction, and I finally began to understand what had likely happened. We'd been hit! Were we going down?

What did it then? A torpedo? Nah. We hadn't seen an enemy ship anywhere in the nearby area. It was more likely we'd hit a mine. After all, that was our job. The *Magpie* was a minesweeper, and we were operating off the east coast of Korea with our sister ship *Merganser*.

Understanding what happened didn't make the situation any less dire. I had to get up to the top deck before the whole damn ship sank and took me down with it!

Black, oily smoke began to billow in from the air vents and doorway. I heard several more explosions, and shouting. The floor beneath my feet tipped to a steeper angle, and I had to fight to get to the door and stairs leading up to the top deck and not slide backwards.

The smoke made it difficult to breathe as well as to see, and I choked and gasped for air as I made my way up the steep, narrow stairs. I was nearly to the top when the ship lurched under me, knocking me off my feet again. I clung to the banister to keep from falling down the stairs, as the ship's bow rose at a sharp angle. In order to reach the deck, I had to scale the stairs like a rock climber, feeling for hand- and footholds through the thick smoke.

Metal screamed and the ship lurched yet again as I finally reached the deck. The incline was so steep I could barely stand upright, and nearly fell back into the stairwell. A strong hand grasping my wrist saved me. I looked into the ruggedly handsome face of Seaman First Class Vernon Thompson, who was one of my closest friends aboard ship, along with Seamen Glenn Altridge and Billy Ray Weaver (called "Bubba" by everyone but the brass). We spent almost all our off-duty time together, both aboard ship and on leave.

"Vernon! What's happened?" I clung to his hand, using him to pull myself back to my feet. The deck was nearly vertical, making it almost impossible to keep from sliding backward toward the stern, which I could see was already underwater.

"We hit a mine. We're going down!"

"Where's Bubba and Glenn?"

"Don't know. Come on!" He tugged on my arm, pulling me toward the starboard side of the ship.

I pulled back. “No, wait! We have to find them!” The thought of leaving them behind, especially Bubba, turned my guts to ice.

“They’ll be okay. We don’t have any more time, Joe. The ship’s going down any minute!”

As if to punctuate his words, the ship shuddered violently as another explosion ripped through her, and the belly of the ship belched up a cloud of fresh, black smoke. I could see fire crackling in the stairway I’d just climbed, and heard its angry hiss as the rapidly rising water extinguished the flames.

I had no choice but to let Vern pull me toward the starboard railing. We clung to it as the bow rose higher yet, the ship standing nearly perpendicular in the water.

“Jump!” Vern yelled at me. He motioned toward the water and began to climb over the railing.

As much as I wanted to go back and search for Bubba and Glenn, I knew jumping was our only option; indeed, our only hope at that point. The ship was sinking, and if we didn’t get off her right then, she’d take us down with her. I said a silent prayer that they’d gotten off the ship already.

It was a struggle getting over the railing, but I did it, and with an effort, I shoved off the ship’s side, trying to clear as much space between the ship and myself as I could. When she went down, I didn’t want to be close enough for her wake to suck me down into the depths.

The black water was bitterly cold, and when I hit it feet first, it enveloped me like a hard, icy fist, squeezing the breath from my lungs. For a moment, I felt paralyzed as I plunged far below the surface, but then I supposed my training and survival instincts kicked in, and I pushed up toward the light flickering on the waves far above my head.

My arms and legs already felt like frozen blocks of stone even though I’d only been submerged for seconds, partly because of the shock of hitting the icy water, and partly because of the terror of the sinking. It seemed to take forever, my lungs burning without air, but I finally broke the surface, gasping and sputtering.

To my left, great waves roared and sloshed over one another as the sea finished swallowing the *Magpie*. All around me, debris floated—bits of machinery, broken pieces of furniture, boxes, articles of clothing, and papers—some of it still burning. A broken piece of what looked as if it might once have

been a table floated nearby. I grabbed at it and clung to it, using it as a makeshift raft.

Numbness seeped into my bones from the cold, but I tried to ignore it as I frantically scanned the water around me. "Vern? Glenn? Oh, God... Bubba! Where are you? Bubba!" All I could see were pieces of debris bobbing in the dark water.

Fatigue began to drag my eyelids closed, and I fought harder than I ever had before to stay awake. To keep myself focused, I began to kick, trying to steer my improvised raft through the debris, searching for my friends and for one face in particular.

Bubba. Where was he? He had gotten off the ship, I was sure of it. He *had* to have gotten off in time. The alternative was too horrifying for me to contemplate.

I found two men floating in the water, both of them dead. Poor guys. I knew them both, although not well, but it still hurt like a bitch to see them floating in the water beyond mine or anyone's help. Guilt colored my sorrow, too, weighing me down, because I also felt relieved neither of them were Bubba, Vern, or Glenn. Moving away from them, I continued to search, all the time hollering for Bubba and the others until my voice grew hoarse.

I found more bodies; my friends were not among them, although each new death chipped away at what little energy I still possessed. My limbs felt heavier than ever; my heart, heavier still.

One thought alone kept me afloat and moving, despite the cold and pain wracking me and the horror I saw all around me. I had to find my friends. I had to find Bubba.

May 1950

Apra Harbor, Guam

“Shine, you got those potatoes peeled yet? Shit, son, the men ain’t gonna want to wait until you’re good and ready to finish peeling those spuds. We got hungry sailors to feed. Get a move on!”

I made sure Cookie wasn’t looking, then rolled my eyes. “I’ve got ’em almost naked.”

“Almost don’t count except in horseshoes and hand grenades. Get ’em done!”

It was only my third month aboard the U.S.S. *Magpie*, a minesweeper. I was assigned to her fresh out of boot camp, and I admit as a sailor, I was raw and as green as a granny smith apple. I was hardworking and eager to learn, but a man sure could get tired of peeling spuds.

I’d been peeling potatoes since 0500 that morning. My hands were dry and dusty from the skins, my fingers cramping from holding the knife. At my feet lay knee-deep piles of peels, all cut in long spirals.

If there was one thing I could do right and quick, it was peel a fucking potato. I’d been doing it since I was old enough to hold a knife without cutting my own wrist. My pop owned a deli in Brooklyn, Shine’s Deli. “Best pastrami in the five boroughs,” was what the sign said out front. Me and my six brothers and sisters all worked there after school and weekends. Between you and me, I think the reason Pop and Mama *had* so many kids was for the cheap labor.

I hated working in the Deli. Hated the smell of cheese and dill that was soaked into the walls and floors; hated the splattering hot grease near the cook top, the constant yammering of the customers, and most of all, the never-ending mounds of potatoes that needed peeling.

When I turned seventeen, I’d had enough. I got mouthy, was what my pop said. Started dodging work, skipping school. Then, last summer, I started hanging out with the “wrong crowd”. Leather jacket guys, slicked hair and chains on their pockets. Got into some trouble joyriding. Pop knew the cops at the precinct and got me out of it, but my freedom came at a price. Pop gave me a choice—go to jail, or into the service. “It’ll make a man out of you,” he said.

I thought, “Sure. What the hell? It’s peacetime. The Big One was over for a half a decade already. I go in, serve my term, and see the world, right? Piece of cake, and beat all the shit out of going to prison. As soon as I turned eighteen, I took the oath.

What a load of malarkey.

So far, the only place I’ve been to is Guam, which is a pretty enough island, I guess, but it’s usually hot and humid, and it sits right in the middle of fucking Typhoon Alley. We had one hit soon after we arrived. The rain came in sideways, and the wind was strong enough to blow me overboard if I wasn’t careful. The raindrops hit my skin like beestings, and the lightning was so close it made the hair on my arms stand on end.

Oh, and my job assignment aboard ship? KP. Guess what I get to do every day. You got it... peel fucking potatoes. Pounds and pounds of them. Every. Fucking. Day. Guess nobody thought I was suited to anything else. After six months aboard ship, you’d think I’d be used to it.

I sliced the last bit of skin from the final potato, tossing it atop the others in the giant, stainless steel pot. “There you go, Cookie.” God knew what slop he would make out of them today. Cookie was a good enough guy for a salty, old seadog, but his smashed potatoes tasted like bland crap, and sat in a man’s stomach like a rock.

Cook sniffed at me, and turned to lift the pot up to the cook top. His face suddenly turned as white as his apron, and he grabbed his stomach. The pot fell to the floor with a clang, water sloshing over the sides.

“Cookie? You okay? What’s wrong?”

Whatever it was, it robbed him of his voice. The lines on his face were strained, and his eyes filled with tears. He turned away, obviously embarrassed more by his wet eyes than his pain.

I took his elbow, but he shook me off. “Knock it off, Cookie. I’m taking you up to sick bay. The doc will have a look at you.” I hooked my arm through his again.

He didn’t argue with me this time, but let me lead him up the narrow metal stairs to the next deck, and down the corridor to the sick bay. We got there just in time. I left him there, puking up into a bedpan.

“You got the galley, son?” The lieutenant, our Commanding Officer, had been in the hallway and spotted me half-dragging Cookie into sick bay.

I stood rigidly at attention. "Yes, sir." I didn't really know if I could handle it, but I wasn't about to tell the lieutenant that.

"Get to it then, sailor."

I snapped off a salute, and headed back down to the galley. *Well, I thought, whatever I do, it can't be as bad as the slop Cookie dishes up.*

I'd just gotten down to the galley, when Bubba poked his head in. "Hey. Heard about Cookie. I'm off duty... can you use an extra hand?" Bubba's real name was Billy Ray Weaver. He was from South Carolina, and spoke with a thick southern drawl. At six foot four, he was a half foot taller than me, broad shouldered, and had an ass I could watch all day and night. Not that I did. Folks like Bubba and me, and our two other close friends, Vern and Glenn, we had to be real careful. Couldn't let anybody know we felt anything but friendship for each other. Not unless we wanted to end up in the brig waiting on a court-martial, or worse. There were stories of men tossed overboard for being found lovin' on each other. Don't know if those stories were true, but sure as hell, none of us were gonna risk it.

Bubba asked again, "Joe? You need help?"

I blinked, and nodded. "Sure could, thanks." I scanned the kitchen, opening the refrigeration unit, checking the shelves, and making a mental list of the ingredients I had available. "Looks like Cookie was going to make something with chipped beef." I turned and grinned at Bubba. "Shit on a shingle it is."

"Oh, man. I hate that stuff."

"Not the way *I* make it. I learned from my pop at the deli. It's actually really good. You want to help? You can take those potatoes and slice 'em up. I'll fry us up some home fries that'll have the boys coming in their pants."

Bubba snickered, and looked around. When he saw no one else in the galley, he swooped in for a quick kiss, his hand cupping my ass, giving it a good, hard squeeze.

I felt my cock respond, and pulled away before things got out of hand. "Are you crazy? Knock it off and get to work." I tried to sound stern, but couldn't help the smile on my face as I swatted him with a kitchen towel.

"You and me, later. We'll meet in the head, huh?" He was grinning as he went to wash the potatoes. I watched his ass hitch under his navy bell bottoms, firm and round and perfect.

“Maybe.” Shaking my head, I gathered the ingredients to make creamed chipped beef on toast and home fried potatoes. I had to stop thinking about Bubba’s ass. It was too dangerous.

It was also too damned tempting. I kept sneaking peeks the whole morning through, and knew if I could possibly make it, I’d be sneaking into the head with him later that evening for a quick fuck. Smiling, I began to heat the pan for the home fries.

After breakfast, I got a message that the lieutenant wanted to see me. I left the cleaning to the other two men assigned KP that day and hurried to the bridge. “Sir? You wanted to see me?”

“Oh, yes. Shine, is it? Cookie will be on sick leave until further notice. Seems he has a hernia, and the Doc believes he needs an operation. He’ll be airlifted to the States as soon as possible. You did a credible job with breakfast, under the circumstances. Until further notice, you’re the new cook for the *Magpie*. Congratulations, son.”

I stared at him for a moment, flabbergasted. How is it I’d joined the Navy to get away from the kitchen in the deli, only to become the cook aboard ship, responsible for preparing three square meals a day, including dessert, for a crew of thirty-two officers and enlisted men? That settled it. God hated me.

Somehow, I managed to smile. “Thank you, sir.”

Wait until I wrote home and told Pop. I could almost hear the sumbitch laughing already.

I headed back to the galley, worrying and trying to plan out a menu for the rest of the day. Hot sandwiches for lunch, maybe, meatloaf for dinner, with garlic smashed potatoes and green beans. Easy, hearty, and with a little bit of luck (providing I could remember my mama’s recipe), tasty.

The day flew by, and at the end of it, I was exhausted, but proud of myself. The crew seemed to enjoy both meals—or at least, I didn’t hear any complaints. I left cleanup to two sailors on KP, neither of whom looked any too happy to spend their evening scouring pots and pans.

Tough titties. I deserved a treat after delivering on lunch and dinner, and I knew exactly what I wanted. Bubba’s cock—thick, hard, and fucking me six ways to Sunday.

I found him on deck having a smoke. Pointing toward the hatchway with my chin, I slipped through it and found my way to the head. Bubba followed me in a few minutes later.

The head was small, having only three stalls and four urinals along one wall, a line of shallow sinks along the opposite wall, and several shower stalls against the last. We squeezed into the stall furthest from the door, and slid the lock closed. It was a tight fit in there for two full grown men, but for what we had in mind, we didn't need much room.

It was a risk. Someone might come in at any time, and if we were caught it would've meant the end of our careers, and possibly our freedom. We kept our ears open for the sound of the door. If it opened, one of us would hop onto the toilet and duck down, while the other stood still, facing the door, so if any one looked underneath, they'd see only one set of feet, trousers down around the ankles. We'd stay that way until whoever it was left. Still, it was a dangerous undertaking, and we only rarely indulged ourselves. Usually, we'd do what everyone else did—jerk off and wait for shore leave.

Tonight, though, I needed it. I needed *him*.

“Been waiting all day.” Bubba's voice was growly and deep, and I could feel it rumble in my bones. His hands, rough and rawboned, grabbed my face and pulled me into a long, deep kiss. Bubba's tongue was hot, his mouth wet, and suddenly I couldn't get enough.

My hands fisted in his shirt as I returned his kiss full force. He was rough with me, as I knew he would be. When Bubba needed, he needed *now*. He pushed me backwards, and I banged my head against the door, but I wouldn't feel the lump until much later. All I knew, all I could feel, was Bubba's tongue pushing and swirling in my mouth, his hands squeezing my face, fingers sliding back into my hair, and his cock, hard already, pushing against mine.

His mouth finally left mine, and sought the tender skin below my jaw. I moaned, tilting my head, and slid my hand under his shirt. My palms skimmed over his abdomen, chiseled like marble, to his chest.

“I wish I could fuck you,” he whispered. “Fuck you hard in your tight hole, then come all over that sweet ass of yours. Then I'd make you come.” His tongue licked a path along my neck to my earlobe, and I shivered. “You'd like that, huh? Want me to fuck you?”

God, yes. “Can't. Not in here. No room.”

His lip curled and he growled. "Yeah."

I could hear the disappointment in his voice. I felt the same, but onboard ship, we took what we could get when we could get it.

Pulling away, he frowned at me. "Hurry up. We need to finish before somebody comes in to take a piss."

I fumbled with my belt, lowering my pants and underwear to my ankles. The air was cool against my newly freed prick.

Bubba did likewise, although he didn't drop his drawers in case he needed to hop up on the toilet. He merely opened the fly and pulled out his cock. A beautiful dick it was, too. Thicker than mine, long, and ruddy, with a fat, round head.

When I moved forward, he stopped me. "On your fucking knees first."

I was quick to obey, crouching down for a quick taste, sucking the rounded head into my mouth. Bubba thrust his hands into my hair, pushing me down, feeding me his length. His hips began to pump, and I tasted precome on my tongue. I pulled away, and he grunted irritably again.

My smile was probably a little conceited. I liked knowing he wanted me. Made me feel warm and proud at the same time. I stood up and stepped up close to him, and rubbed my thumb over the head of his cock, smearing his precome. My own dick was beading with it as well, stiff with need.

He sighed and sought my mouth again, kissing me deeply as he rubbed his shaft against mine. His cock felt like hot velvet against mine. Then he wrapped his big hand around both our cocks and began stroking them together.

I bit back a groan, and cupped his balls in my hand. Bubba had nice balls, big and round when they were swollen with lust, dusted with dark brown hair a shade darker than the ones on his head. After giving them a squeeze, I pulled on them lightly, and was rewarded by Bubba gasping, and the feel of his hot come as he climaxed. His come covered my dick and stomach, and seeing it, smelling it, and feeling it sent me over the edge. I came hard, bucking into his hand.

We paused a moment to catch our breath, then kissed again before cleaning up with toilet tissue and pulling up our pants.

"See you on deck." I gave him another kiss before slipping out of the stall and then the head. I didn't really take a worry-free breath until I'd gotten on deck without anyone seeing me.

I saw Vern and Glenn lounging near the gunwale, and joined them.

Glenn looked up and arched an eyebrow at me. "What are you smiling about?"

I shrugged, but smiled a bit wider, and dropped down to the deck to sit with them.

Vern elbowed Glenn. "Shit! Somebody got himself some," he said, keeping his voice to a whisper.

Glenn snorted and chuckled. He had a shock of dark hair that was badly in need of a cut. It bobbed over his forehead when he laughed.

I rolled my eyes and smirked at them. "Jealous?"

"Shit, yeah!" Vern smacked me on the leg. "Where's Bubba now?"

"Probably showering the come outta his hair," Glenn said.

"I heard that." Bubba joined us. "You better hope nobody else did."

"Yeah." I moved over to make room for Bubba to squeeze in behind me, and rested my head against his flat stomach. Glenn, lazy ass that he is, lay back against me, using me for a pillow. I smacked him on top of his head. "Pipe down before somebody hears you and we end up in the brig."

Vern scooted back to sit next to Bubba. "With as much as you two get together, I'm surprised you don't rub your fucking dicks right off your bodies."

We laughed and shared a cigarette, watching the sun paint the horizon with reds and purples. I felt more content than I ever had before in my life. I had a man I loved, who couldn't keep his hands off me, two friends I adored even when they irritated the hell out of me, and a new job I thought I just might be good at.

Life was good.

Turns out, I took to cooking like a fly to a sugar cube, and found I liked it, even though I would've rather bitten off my own tongue than admit to it. Cooking was like an art to me, and I was fucking DaVinnie, or whatever his name was—the guy who painted the broad with a goofy smile. My hands could work miracles with a little salt, pepper, onion, and garlic. Best of all, I never had to peel another fucking potato. The men assigned to KP duty did that for me.

The crew was happy with me, too. For the first time, they looked forward to getting in the chow line. Poor Cookie was stateside recuperating from his operation, and for that I was glad. He would've been heartbroken to see how much the men favored my cooking over his. Rumor had it he was going to retire after he was released from the hospital. I wished him well.

Things were finally going my way. That is, until word came that the conflict in Korea was heating up. By the time June rolled around and I was just getting comfortable in my new position as cook, the skipper told us we were being deployed to Korea.

That's when shit got real for all of us, and peeling potatoes suddenly didn't seem like such a big fucking deal anymore.

September 1950

Sasebo, Japan

It'd been a long, rough month.

Our orders were to sail north to Japan, meet up with our sister ship, the *Merganser*, and from there, move on to Korea. Just getting to Japan was a trial in and of itself.

We followed on the tail end of a powerful typhoon that kept the seas boiling under us. The rough water made for a piss-poor, dangerous voyage. It got so bad as we approached Iwo Jima, that the skipper decided to cut to the lee side of the island to avoid the storm.

The thing is, Iwo Jima has sulfur beds on it. I don't know what was worse: the rough tossing of the ship in the storm, or the stench of rotten eggs that wafted over the ship from the island. I think we would've been better off with the typhoon.

We finally got to Sasebo, Japan, on September 27, where we refueled and took on a full load of ammunition. We also met up with the *Merganser* and readied ourselves to sail to Korea.

War. *Real* war, the kind Pop always used to talk about. He'd been in the Big One, WWII. Sailed on the *U.S.S. Washington*, and fought in Guadalcanal. Got a Purple Heart for when he got shot in the leg. Still limped from that wound, Pop did. Said he thought he was going to die.

I didn't want to die. I didn't even want to fight, not really. I was a cook, for Chrissakes! Of course, I kept my feelings to myself. The men might think I was a coward, which I wasn't. If I had to fight, I would. And I'd win. My pop didn't raise a sissy. In boot camp, I earned a marksman medal.

Besides, I told myself, we're gonna be fine. The Magpie is a minesweeper, not a battleship or a submarine. We'll patrol the harbor, that's all. Nothing's going to happen to us.

We were all convinced the war would be over soon, and we'd be heading back home. Not home to Brooklyn—no, in Brooklyn it would be like Bubba and me were hiding in the head again, always afraid of being caught. No, Bubba and me, we'd go somewhere else, somewhere far from Brooklyn and

Pop's deli. Maybe California. It was supposed to be real nice out there. We could live on the beach. See movie stars. Stuff like that. Maybe Vern and Glenn would come with us. That sure would be a kick, wouldn't it? Us four, living it up out in sunny California. I smiled to myself thinking about it.

Yeah, we'd be just fine.

Famous last words.

We got to Korea on September 30. On October 1, we started sweeping the coast for mines, running in tandem with the *Merganser*. From on deck, the mines looked like giant jellyfish with tentacles trailing out from them. See, the *Magpie* had these mechanical devices called "sweeps" that we used to hook onto the mines and tow them in, where they could be defused or destroyed. That's what our job was—to sweep the mines out of the water and make a safe passage for our other ships.

Anyway, it was about 1700 hours. I was busy down in the galley, dishing up supper and getting things ready for the morning rush. Tonight it was fried chicken, done to a crispy brown in the fryers, juicy and tender on the inside. I served it with the garlic smashed potatoes the men liked, and creamed spinach. For dessert, I had apple cobbler. The savory smells drew the men like flies to cow pies, and I knew there'd be a long line of sailors waiting for their grub. The line stretched all the way out of the mess.

Before I could see to dinner, though, I needed to get the last bag of potatoes ready for the morning. I hoisted it to my shoulder, grumbling because the other two men assigned to KP that day were late getting to the galley, and that was keeping me from getting to the mess deck.

Bubba wouldn't be in the mess, but I knew that already. He'd drawn the last dogwatch, which was sentry duty from 1800 to 2000. I supposed he was topside, scanning the water for those telltale tentacles. I'd see him later on, after his watch. Glenn and Vern would be coming for chow, though. I expected to see both of them when I got up to the mess.

Much later, I was told we'd hit a thousand pound mine. When it blew, it took out the entire bridge. The officers and personnel who were up there died instantly.

Mind you, we'd just picked up a full cargo of ammunition in Japan. Between the ammo and the mine, the explosions blew off part of the aft, as well as the main magazines. That any of us survived is a miracle.

Now, I struggled in ice-cold water, trying to keep my head above the waves while searching frantically for the man I loved and my friends. I bumped painfully into wreckage, and wept at the sight of bodies bobbing in the water.

The *Merganser* sent lifeboats over quickly, and began plucking survivors out of the water. I fought against the hands that tried to pull me up into the lifeboat. “No! I haven’t found Bubba yet. Bubba! Where are you?”

“Calm down, sailor. We’ve got you. Come on, now.”

I was weak from pain and shock; they pulled me into the boat against my protests. Still, I leaned over the side, squinting into the growing darkness, trying to find him. “Bubba!”

“Joe? Oh, thank God, Joe!” It was Glenn. He scooted next to me, hugging me. “Are you okay? Did you see Vern and Bubba?”

“No! I can’t find him. Vern got me out. I need to find Bubba!” Tears traced cold, wet paths down my cheeks, but I didn’t care. All I felt was terror.

When the lifeboat began to travel back toward the *Merganser*, I raged at the crew. “Where the fuck are you going? You can’t leave them out there! You have to go back. Bubba and Vern, and the rest of the crew... they’re still out there!”

No one would listen to me. They thought I was out of my head with shock and grief—which I was—and were determined to take me to the *Merganser* for treatment for exposure. By the time I reached the ship, weariness had taken its toll. I slumped against Glenn, a deep, black depression settling over me like a shroud.

They were gone. I was sure of it. Bubba and Vern both. I cried and didn’t care who saw me or what they thought of me. I’d lost two dear friends, one of which was the person I thought I’d spend the rest of my life loving. I didn’t want to go on. I wanted to dive into the water and let myself sink to the bottom.

I think I would’ve, too, if it wasn’t for Glenn. He kept his arm locked around my shoulders. When the men of the *Merganser* put me on a cot in their sickbay, he kept a vigil with me, refusing to leave me alone for even a second.

“They’ll find them, Joe. You’ll see. They’ll be fine. They’re probably on a lifeboat right now, Bubba and Vern both.”

I couldn’t find the energy to reply. Besides, I didn’t believe him. Bubba was gone, and he’d taken my will to live with him. What was the point of going on,

anyway? To do what? Go back to Brooklyn and work for the rest of my life in Pop's deli? Jerking off by myself at night, or maybe getting a quick lay by some faceless guy in an alley or cheap motel, a one-night stand, never loving anybody, never being loved? What kind of fucked up life was that to look forward to?

I must have dozed off, forced into sleep by misery and my ordeal, because there was light streaming in from the portal when a hand shook me awake. "Joe? Wake up. Oh, thank God! Joe, hon, are you okay?"

Blinking, I tried to focus on the voice. I thought I was still dreaming, because the deep southern drawl was as familiar to me as my own. But it couldn't be... "Bubba?"

His face swam into view, that handsome face I loved to kiss. He was pale, and his hair was sopping, dripping water onto my face, but it was Bubba, and he was grinning at me. I reached for him, and he fell into my arms. "I thought you were dead!"

"So did I. I was aft when the mine blew. It's a miracle it didn't blow me to smithereens. If I hadn't been standing just behind the hatch door, I would've been killed. The door saved my life, do you believe it? A stupid, crummy door." Tears streamed down his cheeks. "I saw men... parts of them... oh, Joe. It was awful. I floated almost all night with the fucking dead. It wasn't until almost dawn before somebody spotted me and got me out of the water."

"Thank God you're okay. What about Vern? Have you seen him?"

He shook his head, sadness bringing fresh tears to his eyes. "No. Nobody has. I've been asking. Mostly for you, but for Vern and Glenn, too. I saw Glenn when they brought me in here, but nobody's seen Vern."

"He... he must be okay. Right? He saved me, Bubba. If it wasn't for Vern, I would've died in the galley."

"I don't know, Joe. I hope he is, but I just don't know."

When our tour finally ended, we went to Arlington National Cemetery before heading out to California. Glenn wasn't with us—he'd decided to go home to Iowa. I think he'd had enough of the ocean to suit him. I didn't blame him, either. I know losing Vern was a blow he never quite got over.

Bubba and I stood in front of the small white stone, so much like the others, rows and rows of them, thousands, each one marking the grave of a fallen hero.

This particular marker read “Vernon Thompson, U.S. Navy, Sea1, Korea, January 3, 1931 – October 1, 1950.”

He'd been only nineteen when he died. So young, just like the rest of us. He should be alive, getting ready to settle in, find a job, get drunk, eat at restaurants, fuck pretty men, and otherwise enjoy life. Such a waste. That thought alone was enough to bring tears to my eyes, although I thought I was all cried out by then.

I knelt down, and placed the palm of my hand against his tombstone. “Thank you, Vern. Thank you for being our friend, and for saving my life. I wish you could be here with us. We'll never forget you.” Bubba's hand on my shoulder gave a gentle squeeze. I heard him sniff and clear his throat.

“I owe you, Vern,” he said. “If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have Joe here with me today. You're a hero, buddy.”

We stayed a while longer, silent, each of us remembering.

Then we left, heading west, and looked toward our future together. Whatever it brought us, wherever it led us, we knew we'd see each other through. We'd already been through hell. All we had left to look forward to was heaven.

The End

Author's Note

While the characters in *Dogwatch* are fictional and bear no purposeful resemblance to anyone living or dead, the events in the story are true. The USS *Magpie*, while doing minesweeping duty off the coast of South Korea during the height of the Korean Conflict, struck a floating mine on October 1, 1950 and sank. Twenty-one sailors were lost at sea. The remains of Ensign Robert W. Langwell were found in 2008, and he was finally laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery in 2010. The bodies of the other twenty men lost that day have never been found.

*“Hark, now hear the sailors cry,
smell the sea, and feel the sky
let your soul and spirit fly, into the mystic...”*

—Van Morrison

Author Bio

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

Actually, the truth is that she spends her time locked in the dark recesses of her office writing gay erotica while chained to a temperamental laptop, drinking coffee, and dreaming about thong-clad cabana boys.

Sigh.

To date, Kiernan has thirteen novels and a plethora of novellas and short stories available in both print and e-format.

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