

# First Kiss

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**T**HIS IS THE TALE OF THREE YOUNG MEN; the Red-Headed Kid, and, to a lesser extent, another Ensign and a Marine 2nd Lieutenant. All are in their early twenties, at the very beginning of their life-adventures. All are impossibly beautiful, as only the very young can be. The Ensign, who we shall call Mike, is an underwater demolition specialist who must *want* to die because he's obsessed with jumping out of airplanes. The Marine, who we shall call Steve, is the commanding officer of a small platoon Red's ship is transporting to Guantanamo Bay. On this particular day, they are putting into St. Thomas harbor, to show the flag at Charlotte Amalie, the capital city of the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The Caribbean is ravishing in the spring, the water utterly transparent, and all the sea creatures seem to reflect millions of iridescent colors—brilliant reds, shattering blues, exquisite shades of green, cerise, orange, and vermilion—from the sunlight, the water and the sky. But, they're not reflections. When one of these lovely animals dies, the light goes out and the corpse turns gray. It's the life force that provides that color, which is something we should all consider.

Not that our boys aren't warned. As soon as the ship is tied to the pier, the Executive Officer calls for all hands to assemble on deck—roughly seven-hundred men—and, in addition to letting them know that rubbers will be available on the quarter-deck for anyone who wants them, he tells them that queers are

all over the place on St. Thomas and to be extra careful not to be ensnared by any perverts. Red says it's hard to remember how he reacts to that news, but he's quite sure he has no intention of seeking out perverts, so what subsequently happens is entirely accidental. Or, maybe not. Who knows? Anyway ...

Red, Mike and Steve are shipboard buddies. They all report aboard at approximately the same time, and are all basically equal in rank, so it makes sense that in this instance, their first time on liberty, they should band together. So, after changing into civvies as quickly as possible — officers do not wear their uniforms on shore leave — they hit the pier and immediately rent a small “car” which is more like a golf cart with a fringe on top than an automobile. Since they have no idea where to go or what there is to do, they turn to the literature that came with their rental, and, right there, in the middle of a list of drinking establishments, is a bar called *The Fallen Angel*.

The Kid can only chuckle at his naiveté. As he learns later, *The Fallen Angel* is one of the most notorious queer bars in the Caribbean. Since finally giving up, the number of fallen angels he's encountered — both bars and people — can only be referred to as *Legion* because there are so many. Back then, however, the term hasn't been hacked to death — not even in queer culture, since there *isn't* any queer culture — and he's never heard it except as a reference to Paradise Lost. Neither have his comrades. If he heard it today, he'd understand the reference right away, and ... oh, hell. Enough excuses.

In seconds the boys are in their golf cart and putting toward one of the great adventures of their lives, giggling because none of them has ever driven on the left side of the road, which is harder than it sounds because the cart they're driving has a right-hand drive. Whatever, it's great fun, and their spirits could not be higher. The day is unforgettable. It's early afternoon, and the sunlight is so fresh it makes Charlotte Amalie, an ancient city

founded in 1666, look like it's been washed and dried. They feel so fine, they laugh all the way to the bar, and with more energy than Red can remember ever having, storm up the staircase leading to this second-floor night-spot two steps at a time.

There isn't anyone there. The door's open, and the bar isn't supposed to be closed, according to the hours given on the handouts, but it's completely empty; not even a bartender. Regardless, they sit down and act like sailors. They pound on the bar and yell for service. At first, nothing happens. Then, Red notices a somewhat limp older fellow peeking around a curtain in the corner. He waves and says something like "How about a beer," which makes everyone cheer. The older man comes out from behind the curtain.

"Weeell," he says with an enigmatic smile. "What have we here?"

"Are you open?" Mike asks?

"The brochure says you are," Steve adds.

"Weeell, we're not reeeeeeally open to the public today," he says with a lazy drawl. "There's going to be a private party." Then, he grins. "But, yooou can stay if you'd like."

Mike and Steve cheer. Red is speechless. What the hell? They've walked unknowingly into a den of those perverts they were warned about. He glances at his two buds, neither of whom seems to have any problem with the way this is playing out. The bartender is still grinning. Mike and Steve are whooping and chanting "beer, beer, beer," so what can one do?

"Beer, beer, beer," Red mumbles helplessly.

The bartender picks up three frosted mugs. "It has to be Heineken," he says. "We're having a birthday party for the man who imports it into the United States."

"How much?" the Kid asks, as he reaches for his wallet.

The bartender fills the mugs and places them on the bar. "Oh, noooo," he laughs. "Don't be silly. You won't have to pay."

He smirks, winks and disappears into the back of the bar. Thus, the party begins. It lasts for three days, and the bartender is right on. When you're young and beautiful, you never have to pay.

Or, do you? That's an interesting question. This is the first time Red has ever encountered open homosexuality. Up until now, he's never even imagined such a thing. Queers are *always* nasty, aren't they? *Always* hiding in the dark? *Always* dirty old men who lurk in ancient buildings plotting to rape little boys? None of that is evident anywhere in this tiny little space. As the day progresses, and more guests arrive, they meet businessmen, athletes, artists, and tourists — mostly men, as one might expect, but also a substantial number of women; lesbians who turn out to be as much fun as anybody.

Nor are any of the guests old and desperate. The age range runs from the late teens to around thirty-five or forty. All in all, every cliché Red has ever heard about homosexuality is kicked in the ass that day, as the drinks keep coming and he and his buddies are treated more and more like prize bulls.

At first, the Kid isn't sure about Mike and Steve. As is his wont, he somehow blames himself for the situation they're in, so he frets and worries until the drinks begin to kick in. As far as he can tell, however, his two friends are enjoying the attention as much as he is, and after a drink or two — Red remembers this happening right after downing a shot of absinthe — he forgets about the others and starts enjoying himself. However Mike and Steve feel, it's a fact that all three stay for the entire celebration, which begins on Friday afternoon and ends at a cozy lesbian bar late on Sunday night.

Somehow, subtly, which suggests that the guests are not inexperienced at this sort of thing, our boys are separated. Looking back, the Kid thinks it was probably deliberate. The received wisdom is that, for easy access, sailors need to be split up, something he learns much later, when he's getting to know

the Atlantic Fleet. Whatever the reason, what happens is that each one is taken up by a circle of four or five friends with whom they spend the weekend. Red's includes the guest of honor, a man named Jay who turns out to be thirty-eight that day. He isn't that significant in this story. But, the fact that Red becomes part of his circle is crucial, as we shall see very shortly.

As evening approaches, the world turns into a multi-colored haze. There's dancing, entertainment, great food, wit, and drink after drink — no hard drugs, as it happens, unless you consider marijuana a hard drug — just laughter and friendship. No limp wrists, no drag queens, not even any cross-dressing, which has become more prevalent in the twenty-first century than Red would ever have expected; nothing to indicate that everyone present is a despicable pervert who should always be loathed and despised. And, did I mention that most of them are rich. I mean, really *rich*. That becomes clear when Red suddenly finds himself speeding away from the bar in a Lamborghini 350 GT.

"Jesus," Red whispers. "This is a 350 GT." Imagine, he once knew something about cars.

"Yeah," the driver nods. "Got it a couple weeks ago. Tried to get a GTV, but that was a prototype. This is number 105 ... 104 was the first production car."

"So, uh, this is the second GT produced?"

"Yeah, ain't that a crock? I wanted the first one. Some son-of-a-bitch got there first."

"Yeah, that's a crock," Red agrees, weakly.

"I'm Daniel." The driver grins and sticks out his hand.

"Hey," the Kid grabs Daniel's hand and shakes it.

"Hang on," Daniel says, as he guns the engine. It presses Red back into the soft, hand-tooled leather of his seat.

"Where we going?" Red yells.

"Gonna pick up Jay's birthday present," Daniel shouts over the wind.


“Oh,” the Kid says. This is a surprise. Jay has been unwrapping presents all afternoon. But, by now the car is doing almost ninety, and conversation is next to impossible, so Red just leans back, relaxes and enjoys the fresh, sea air blowing through his hair. For the first time in hours, his head clears. The island roads are narrow, and in a different situation, he might have been nervous. But, the faster Daniel pushes the car, the more securely it hugs the road, the result being a breathtakingly smooth ride. All in all, our hero enjoys this treat enormously. It’s one of the reasons he invests in a great car himself later in his tour.

It takes about thirty minutes to get where they’re going. As far as Red can tell, they drive over the hills to the Atlantic side of St. Thomas—the island marks the boundary between the Atlantic and the Caribbean—where Daniel stops at an electric gate. He presses a button on a device set under the dashboard, and the gate opens onto a narrow road that ultimately ends at a small, private pier.

“Good, they’re already here,” Daniel says, as he guides his exquisite toy onto the pier. He stops next to a large yacht. At the top of the gangplank is a handsome young man in his late teens. Daniel waves and the boy waves back as he walks down the plank.

“Who’s that?” Red asks.

Daniel turns and grins. “That’s Jay’s present,” he says. “His name’s Nacho. He’s from San Juan.”



His name is Nacho Santiago. Red has never forgotten. It’s one of the few names he remembers after fifty years of more or less identical young men. He’s about five-foot-eight, masculine, with curly black hair, brilliant teeth and an enchanting smile. When the Kid first meets him, he doesn’t know how to react. Not only because he’s overwhelmed by the boy’s beauty, but also

because he's the first real prostitute Red has ever met. Nacho is a Puerto Rican hustler, something that up until then has existed only in fantasy.

As soon as Daniel introduces him, Nacho begins to flirt. At first, Red discounts it as a sort of professional courtesy. I mean, the kid's a hustler, for God's sake. It's in his interest to charm every man he meets. As time passes, however, during the drive to Jay's palatial mountain-top estate — and, it *is* an estate, with incredible views of both the Caribbean and the Atlantic Ocean, a private beach, and a bevy of attentive servants that make it unnecessary to do *anything* for one's self — it becomes clear that Nacho is more attentive to Red than he is to Daniel.

This *does* change as soon as they reach the house. After a great deal of giggling, more drinking, and Red's first taste of pot, Jay is blindfolded and presented with his "gift," after which the two disappear and aren't seen until the next morning, when breakfast is served on the beach.

Thus begins the rest of this adventure which lingers in the Kid's mind more like a dream than anything else; a potpourri of splendor, unearthly opulence, incalculable amounts of money and lust, not to mention alcohol and pot. The pot doesn't do a lot for Red. Anyone who has ever tried it knows that it doesn't have much of an effect on beginners. It takes repeated use to develop the physical responses needed to make one high. This doesn't happen to the Kid until he's almost thirty.

There's also the fact that Red is still irredeemably middle-class. Between drinks, languid banquets on the beach, dancing the limbo at practically every cosmopolitan watering-hole in Charlotte Amalie, and being pampered like a cosseted child, he's still worrying about morality.

Nor does it help that he and Nacho are both treated in much the same way. After his long night with Jay, who is apparently so jaded that he loses interest in the handsome hustler almost

immediately, they both become treasured guests. After breakfast, Nacho happily folds himself into the “back seat” of the GT — actually, a tiny space behind the front seats — and rides along as they flit around the island, visiting hotels and restaurants and private houses and bars, partying and being entertained like kings. At first, Red is a little disturbed that he seems to be on an equal footing with a prostitute, in spite of being almost unbearably attracted to the boy, but that soon gets lost in the constant round of swimming, dancing and drinking. They never stop, it seems, and after a short time, all the Kid feels is exhilaration.

Several times they run into Mike or Steve, both equally surrounded, both equally bewildered by the attention they’re getting. But, none of them have an opportunity to speak, so they wave and grin and move on to the next event. By this time, moral misgivings or not, Red is so besotted by the novelty of it all, not to mention the vast wealth being lavished upon him, that there’s no way he can possibly say “no” or “stop.”

Which brings up the question about which we’ve all been wondering. What about sex? Exactly what does our beautiful boy have to pay for all this? He’s utterly inexperienced, has no idea what might be expected. At this point, he thinks of anal-intercourse as a dire perversion that nobody in their right mind would actually want to try — I mean, you have to stick your dick in there with all that ... well, you get the idea.

So, what does he do? He does what any sailor would do. That’s how he rationalizes it, anyway. The weekend costs him six blowjobs. He just lays back and gets his dick sucked; a time-honored act that feels great and does nothing to threaten his masculinity — used by men everywhere; by anyone who wants to perpetuate the lie that only the *receiving* partner is queer.

This makes Red feel strangely secure. No one presses him to do anything else, so he’s able to assume that he’s not seen as a true pervert. In retrospect, he realizes that the extremely



experienced men who were so generous during those three, short days, must have known full well the violence that can erupt when a very young, closeted man is forced to face the truth. Thus, they kept it simple, and everyone had a great time.

Saturday and Sunday stretch on forever. Nobody sleeps, it seems, and the celebrations go on and on and on. Amazing how much energy one can waste at twenty-two. Saturday drifts away during a sumptuous lobster and margarita feast at the lovely Hotel Mafolie on the hillside overlooking Charlotte Amalie. During that time, Nacho is always there, flirting, grinning, dripping testosterone out of every pore. He is now spending almost all his time with Red, who loves the attention but has no idea what to do.

Saturday segues into Sunday with more of the same. Around midnight, Red comes in third in a limbo contest at the Frenchman's Cove. As a reward, he's stretched across the low hood of the GT and gets another blowjob from Daniel, which is really amazing considering how long he's gone without sleep. After that, he basically passes out and doesn't remember much else until he wakes late on Sunday morning in someone's palatial, glass-enclosed bedroom. As far as he can recall, all he did that night was sleep.

Sunday is a little more relaxed. Everyone is beginning to slow down, although it's clear they still want to take advantage of the sailor in their clutches. By this time, the Kid doesn't mind in the slightest. During this short weekend, he receives more affection and attention than he can remember. A lot of time is spent on the beach, which is where Red sees all those jewel-encrusted fish, and Daniel lets him drive the Lamborghini, which is a never-to-be-forgotten thrill in itself.

As Sunday segues into evening, our hero finally begins to respond to Nacho. They wrestle, and roughhouse like school-boys; laughing and dancing around one another; nothing more,

because the Kid resists everything personal Nacho tries to do. Then, the day is gone, the moon rises, and paradise must come to an end.

Our boys have to report back to the ship by midnight. At 10:00 PM, everyone comes together again in a somewhat austere lesbian bar. Why a lesbian bar is a good question. But, Red says he can't even remember the name of the place, so why worry about it now. It's basically a large rectangle, with a wide veranda stretching along two sides. Mike is sitting at a grand piano, with his head on the shoulder of a good-looking fellow in a tuxedo, occasionally plunking a note or two, between repeated bouts of nodding off. Steve is a little more awake. He's at a table with Daniel and some other guy, rolling dice and laughing.

The moon is up, and light is dancing across the Caribbean like fairies in an English garden. Red is outside on the veranda, sitting on the balustrade, trying to clear his head. He's alone for the moment, for the first time since the beginning of the madness that has consumed them all since they walked into that bar three days earlier. He remembers hearing the notes of something by Irving Berlin floating through the air from the piano inside the bar. In his hand is his last drink, a jigger of Blue Label Scotch, neat.

It can't be said that he's anywhere near sober. The orgy of overindulgence with which he's been seduced has taken its toll. He's not feeling any guilt, strangely enough. The knowledge that he isn't completely alone is an eye-opener. But, for whatever reason, that has not helped him accept his nature. It seems to have strengthened his resolve to keep lying. Now he thinks he can play with whomever he wants and still live a middle-class life. All he did was enjoy six blowjobs. Who wouldn't like that? His shipmates talk about that sort of thing all the time. That's what he's thinking when he feels a hand on his shoulder.

After all this, is there any doubt who's there? "I guess this

is goodbye,” Nacho says softly. Red catches his breath, but he doesn’t pull away.

“Yeah, I guess it is. We have to go back to the ship.”

“Well,” he squeezes Red’s bicep. “It’s been fun, but I still want to ask you something.”

In spite of himself, in spite of a lifetime of saying *no*, our boy can’t help himself. “What’s that?” he asks, his words sticking in his throat.

“Aren’t you ever going to kiss me?” Nacho grins, takes Red in his arms, pulls his head down, and they kiss. Just like that. The first true kiss in twenty-two years. In an instant, the Kid’s last defense slips away. He takes a deep breath, closes his arms, and his life changes forever. ■