

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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# THE IDIOTS' TANGO

## B. Snow

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# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## THE IDIOTS' TANGO

By **B. Snow**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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 they 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 Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, 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

1. At the beach, a man with close-cropped hair and the physique of a Greek god hefts a rugby ball. Dark hair dusts his arms, legs, and chest. Another smattering of hair dips from his navel into the waistband of a very small pair of shorts.
2. Two men grapple as they brawl, anger and adrenaline spurring them on. Neither will be the first to give in.
3. A young man with beautiful eyes and a two-day scruff of beard stands on a train platform. His jeans are worn, and his linen shirt is wrinkled but clean. He has a backpack slung over one shoulder, beaded bracelets on his left wrist and a fedora covering his dark hair.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*My two men can't STAND each other. It's not a general dislike and it's not a case where they can avoid each other.*

*Unfortunately, they share a circle of friends and family (though they are not related—more like their cousins were married... incest is NOT the best :P)*

*They met when they were in high school and there seemed to be a bit of attraction despite their vast differences (what those are, is for you dear Author to decide) but something (also Author's choice) happened and they are at each other's throats. Verbal throw-downs, the occasional thrown punch has happened at more than a few shared get-togethers.*

*Dear Author, how can two men who can't stand each other come to realize that the other man is the one person they can't and don't want to live without?*

*Sincerely,*

*Reece*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** enemies to lovers, boys will be boys, blowjobs, cluelessness, bickering, bisexuality, family

**Content warnings:** previous relationships, binge/underage drinking, secondary character deaths, fighting

**Word count:** 40,798

*Dedication*

Many thanks to Reece, whose photos and prompt didn't just speak to me, they shouted.



# THE IDIOTS' TANGO

By **B. Snow**

## CHAPTER ONE

The Dimitriou family went to the Edelsteins' house for the Seder that year, which was just weird. Josh would have been just as happy staying at home. No, he would have been happier. His sister roomed with Amy Edelstein at college; they didn't need to hang out during spring break, too, but whatever. He was used to his parents giving his sister anything she wanted. So, he'd get through the evening by stuffing himself with charoset and matzah, and drinking as much wine as he could sneak into his glass. And pretending not to stare at Stuart Edelstein.

Stu. Stupid Stu.

Josh had never met Stu before that night. They went to different high schools, and their parents sometimes hung out because their moms knew each other from work, but this was the first time both families had gotten together. Josh wouldn't have minded if it was the last, too.

Stu and Amy looked like their mother—delicate, small-boned, sharp-featured, wavy dark hair contrasting with pale skin and eyes like green glass. Josh felt like a huge, ugly giant, towering over Stu, who would have been almost pretty if it weren't for his thick, dark eyebrows and noticeable facial hair. Margo kept flicking her eyes over to him during dinner, even though she was two years older. Perv.

The only reason Josh looked at Stu was envy. Shit, every high school boy wanted to be able to grow a beard. Well, no, not an actual beard, that would be gross. But it would be cool to have to shave. Maybe Stu only shaved once a week, not every day, but that was still something, especially for a sixteen-year-old. Josh was still using the same razor he'd bought three years earlier, when he'd been fourteen and optimistic.

Stupid Stu. And Stupider Josh for not being able to stop staring at the five o'clock shadow that emphasized Stu's sharp jawline, thinned out as it got to his throat, and disappeared completely at his Adam's apple, which jutted out just as angular as the rest of him. It moved as he swallowed, like it was dragging Josh's eyes down to Stu's chest, hidden behind a white shirt and striped tie.

A hand moved over the shirt, picked up the tie. "Do I have food on me?" Stu asked, looking up from his shirt.

Caught. Josh shook his head and grabbed his water glass for something to do.

"What, then? Do you hate my tie? I do. My mom made me wear it. I like yours, though. Where'd you get it?"

Josh shrugged, wishing Stu would stop looking at him. He probably thought Josh was fat.

"You have to know where you got it."

"Well, I don't, okay?" He put the water glass down a little harder than he had to.

Stu blinked at him. "Okay, sorry. Geez." He gave Josh a long look, then turned away to laugh at two younger boys who were flicking salt water at each other with sprigs of parsley. Josh blew out a breath and went back to pretending not to stare at Stu, who made one little girl nearly fall off her chair laughing when he finally managed to hang a spoon from his nose. The spoon fell off when Stu looked over at Josh again. Josh picked up his wineglass and finished off the last few drops just as Mrs. Edelstein brought out dessert.

The flourless chocolate cake was actually really good, way better than that gross sponge cake Josh's mom made every Passover. The kids wolfed down their cake and then were excused, leaving the adults to talk religion and politics over coffee. The girls went up to Amy's bedroom where they'd probably listen to boy bands and squeal over Justin Timberlake. Vomit. Josh followed Stu and the other boys down to the basement, where there was a Ping-Pong table, some exercise equipment, and a TV.

One of the younger boys pulled a Gameboy out of his jacket pocket and the other three crowded around him to watch. Stu looked at the kids, then took two Ping-Pong paddles from a holder on the wall. “Wanna play?” he asked Josh.

“Not really.” But Josh took one of the paddles from Stu, careful to keep their hands from touching. Even Ping-Pong would be better than having to spend one more minute pretending not to stare at Stu.

Stu took a ball out of the holder and walked to the far end of the table. “Do you know how to play?”

“No. I mean, you just hit the ball, right?”

“Yeah, pretty much. We can just practice if you want, we don’t have to keep score.”

“Okay.”

They hit the ball back and forth as videogame music played in the background. Stu was better than Josh, mostly because the Ping-Pong table was in his house, but also because Josh was a little buzzed from the first two glasses of wine. He kept hitting the ball off the table, and every time, Stu ran after it to pick it up and came back smiling, not getting pissed off about it like Josh would have.

And every time Stu bent over to pick up the ball, Josh examined the green surface of the Ping-Pong table, or picked at the edge of his paddle where the rubber was coming loose, or looked over at the younger kids still crowded around the Gameboy. The wine was messing up his head, because normally he didn’t have to force himself not to look at guys’ asses. And if he *was* going to look, he wouldn’t pick skinny little Stu Edelstein to start with.

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They played for what seemed like hours but was probably only fifteen or twenty minutes, because the wine still hadn’t worn off by the time Mr. Edelstein told everyone to start looking for the afikomen.

The little kids all went running off through the house, shrieking. Josh was both annoyed at their noise and relieved that the Seder would be over soon—once that hidden piece of matzah was divided up and eaten, they could get the hell out

of there. He wandered down the hall and ran into his mom, who had come downstairs to check on him. "I'm too old for this," he said, rolling his eyes.

"You're never too old to look for the afikomen," his mom said. "And anyway, you're a guest, so you'll be polite and start looking."

"Is Margo looking?"

"Of course! Not very hard, but she's at least making a show of it." She smiled and kissed him on the forehead, pulling his head down like she'd had to for the past two years, ever since he'd passed her in the height department. "So start looking, kiddo."

Josh watched her go back upstairs, then he went into the den and dropped onto a sofa. "Oh, wow, it's not here, too bad," he muttered to the empty room.

"Of course it isn't."

Josh twisted around to see where the voice had come from. Stu was holding onto both sides of the doorway and leaning into the room at a dangerous angle. "Dad has a few different hiding places. Not here. You want me to show you? I'll bet you could get ten bucks out of him if you find it."

"Why don't *you* find it?"

"I don't need the ten bucks, My aunt just sent me money for my birthday, which was back in August, but she's always late, so she adds extra to make it up to me. Come on." He jerked his head toward the hallway, and when Josh didn't move, he stepped forward and grabbed Josh's sleeve. "Come *on*. The sooner we find it, the sooner this can all be over and you can go home."

It was like he'd read Josh's mind. Josh shook his sleeve free and got up, then followed him down the hall and up the stairs.

They walked through the kitchen into the living room. Stu went over to the piano and opened the lid, then shut it. "Okay, strike one. Next stop: laundry room." He darted past Josh, who lumbered after him.

In the laundry room, Stu looked inside the washer and dryer and peered between them, but came up empty-handed and frowning. "Maybe he's wised up in his old age." He looked up at the ceiling, biting his lip.

Josh didn't even pretend not to stare at the dark dusting of hair on Stu's upper lip and the white teeth sinking into the lower one. Maybe he'd go easy on the last two glasses of wine since his head was still spinning from the first two.

Stu wandered out of the laundry room and back to the dining room, Josh following a few feet behind him. "No one's found it yet?"

Mr. Edelstein grinned and put his hands behind his head, tilting his chair back. "Nope. I told you it wasn't going to be easy this year."

Stu rolled his eyes. "I haven't checked the really obvious place yet."

"Go find it, then," his dad said, snickering.

"I will."

"Good."

"Okay!" Stu snapped, then looked at Josh. "Come on, I might need help reaching it."

"You won't need help reaching it!" Mr. Edelstein called after them as they left the room.

They walked back to the kitchen, and Stu opened the door to the pantry. "It's got to be in here somewhere. It's his third favorite place to hide it. Come on, help me look." He crouched and began pawing through the lower shelves. "You take the top shelves."

Josh eyed the pantry. There was no way both of them would fit in there. He looked at the top shelves, trying to see behind coffee cans and cake mix. "I don't see anything."

"You might have to move stuff," Stu said, shoving aside boxes of cereal. "Go ahead, Dad can put everything back later. It's his own fault if we mess things up."

Josh put one foot into the closet to get a little closer to the top shelf. As he did so, his calf brushed Stu's hip. "Sorry," he muttered, moving back. His heart pounded and sweat sprung up in his armpits. He took another step back, away from the pantry.

“I can’t believe it’s not here.” Stu stood, frowning, then his lips twisted and he laughed a little. “God, he’s going to be smug about this.” He leaned back against the pantry’s doorframe and sighed, tilting his head back and closing his eyes for a few seconds. Then he opened them and smiled up at Josh. “Got any ideas?”

Josh’s mind went blank. He thought he’d never have an idea ever again, so he didn’t understand why his feet were moving forward, why his hands were coming up to touch Stu’s face, or why he was bending down until his lips touched Stu’s.

His eyes closed when he tasted a hint of chocolate on those warm lips. Stu’s starter beard brushed against Josh’s face and tickled his fingers. The next second he was kissing air, his hands were empty, and Stu was three feet away, one hand wiping his mouth, the other clenched in a fist in front of his stomach. His eyes were huge in his face, and Josh cringed, because Stu looked scared.

“Sorry! I’m sorry! I don’t... oh, god. I don’t know why...” Josh stepped back to put a few more feet between them. “I’m so sorry. I think I’m drunk. Please don’t tell anyone.”

Stu’s expression didn’t change, but Josh didn’t feel fear coming off of him anymore. “Sorry. I, um... oh, god.” He took another step back, then another, and was about to turn and run when he heard shrieks of excitement coming from the other room.

“We found it! We found it!” A stampede of little feet made the house rumble as the younger kids rushed back to the dining room.

“We should get back,” Stu said, barely moving his mouth.

“I’m sorry.”

Stu didn’t respond; he just turned and walked out of the kitchen without looking at Josh again.

Shit, shit, shit.

When everyone had returned to the dining room, the afikomen was ransomed for a couple of dollars and some chocolate. Wine glasses were filled for the third time, but Josh reached for the pitcher of grape juice that the other kids were

drinking. All he needed to make the night a complete fuck-up would be to throw up wine all over the Edelsteins' house.

Somehow, he made it through the rest of the Seder without looking at Stu. "Can we go?" he whispered to his mom when the singing started.

"What's the matter, are you feeling sick?" She put her hand on his forehead, then his cheek. "You feel a little warm. We'll go after this song."

And thank God, no long, drawn-out goodbyes. They thanked their hosts, got their coats on, and left the house. The last thing Josh saw before the door closed was Stu sitting on the stairs, biting his lip again and looking pretty pissed off. Josh kind of wished he could apologize again, and kind of wished he could just wipe both their memories, because really, what the hell had he done? What had made him do that?

Well, it really didn't matter. The next time the families got together, he'd probably be away at college, so he wouldn't be seeing them for a while. Maybe not ever again. Josh slouched in the back seat on the drive home and closed his eyes, so tired and weirded out that he didn't know if that thought made him happy or sad.

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## CHAPTER TWO

College was, in a word, awesome. Granted, Josh had only been there for a month so far, but that month had been amazing. Some of the other people on his dorm floor were homesick, and Josh didn't get that at all. He loved his family, but all the freshmen had lived with their families for eighteen years, more or less, and they'd only been away from them for a month! How could they be homesick?

He got along well enough with his roommate, even though Matt was an engineering major, and he'd made a couple of friends with people in his classes. And then there was Nick.

Nick had come up to him on the second day of the semester as Josh had stood in the middle of the quad, map in hand, trying to figure out how to get to his next class. Nick pointed him in the right direction, and then gave him a shove.

"What the hell?" Josh said, utterly confused.

"Just seeing how hard you are to move. Ever played rugby?"

"No."

"You got the shoulders for it. Move some of the weight from your gut to your chest and you'd be unstoppable."

Insulting. And interesting. But Josh hadn't played team sports outside of P.E., when he'd been forced to. He'd always been the big, clumsy kid, and there was no reason to think he'd suddenly developed any athletic ability just because a good-looking guy with dark hair and darker eyes was telling him he might.

"I'm no good at sports," Josh began, wanting to get it out of the way.

"Come to a practice, try it out. If you like it, I'll help you get in shape, but just playing'll do a lot of that for you." He tore a piece of paper out of a notebook and wrote a phone number on it. "Thursdays at four and Saturdays at ten, on the north field."

Josh had gone to the next practice, and yeah, no sudden speed or skill, but Nick had been right about his shoulders and how hard he would be to stop. He



still lumbered, but he could push his way through a line of defenders, even if he did it pretty slowly. After five minutes on the field he was winded, after ten he was gasping for breath.

“You’ll get there,” Nick said. “You’ll build up stamina in no time. Are you even eighteen yet?”

“In November.”

“Awesome. So you’ll keep playing with us?”

Josh looked around at the other players. None of them looked back with disgust at how out of shape he was. Instead, they grinned at him through the grass and mud smeared on their faces. They all had casually muscular bodies: strong shoulders, big thighs. Josh had always wanted a swimmer’s build, but he knew that was out of his genetic grasp. Someone slim like Stu Edelstein could probably—no. He wasn’t going to think about Stu. He was going to think about himself and how a rugby player’s body might be within reach. If he could look half as good as these guys... and if he could play for longer than ten minutes without needing oxygen, well, that’d be good, too.

“Yeah, sure. If you think I can do it.”

The team cheered and piled on top of him until he really could barely breathe, but he didn’t care. Life was great, and college was awesome.

A month later, college was even more awesome. Josh trained with the club four days a week and lifted weights the other three days. He hadn’t lost any weight, had gained some, in fact, but that weight had somehow... *shifted* into the right places. It was like his body was a tube of toothpaste that someone had squeezed in the middle: his waist had trimmed down while his shoulders and legs had gotten bigger. He wasn’t ashamed to take off his shirt anymore. Girls were starting to notice him the way they never had in high school.

“Dude, she was totally hitting on you!” Matt sighed as the girl walked away from their table. “God, look at that ass...”

“She was?” Josh looked at the girl, then back at Matt, who sighed again.

“You are fucking clueless when it comes to women, you know that, right?”

“Hey, gimme a fucking break! This is all new. None of the girls in my high school said a word to me. Except the, um...”

“The fat ones? Yeah, tell me about it. ‘Oh, Matty, you’re so cute!’” he sing-songed. “I got so sick of hearing that word.”

“I didn’t even get ‘cute’, so you can suck it.” Josh peered over the heads of the other students in the cafeteria and watched the girl walk out the door. “You really think she was hitting on me?”

“*Yeah*, dude.”

“Huh. Should I go talk to her?”

“Uh, yeah! I mean, unless, for some reason, you *don’t* want to get your hands on that body.”

Josh bussed his tray of dirty dishes and left the cafeteria, but when he got outside, he didn’t see the girl anywhere. He did see Nick, though.

“Hey, J,” Nick said. He grabbed Josh’s hand and gave him a bro hug. “You rushing off somewhere?”

“Yeah. Or no.”

“Yeah or no?”

“There was... um. I was gonna talk to someone, but, um, they’re gone.”

Nick threw a conspiratorial arm around Josh’s neck. “Girl problems?”

“Um. No. I mean, not yet. I mean—”

“I know what you mean, J. Been there, done that. Hey, this’ll make you feel better!” Nick tightened his arm and gave Josh a noogie, then let him go and danced away before Josh could retaliate.

“You’re a dick.”

“A big one,” Nick agreed, grinning.

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Josh never did talk to that girl. On his eighteenth birthday, the rugby team took him out to dinner, then over to a teammate’s house for some officially

unofficial underage drinking. While the other guys were setting up beer pong, Nick took Josh into an upstairs bedroom and gave him the safe-sex talk and a box of condoms. Josh rolled his eyes during the talk, thanked him for the condoms, then froze like a deer in the headlights when Nick squeezed Josh's ass with one hand and cupped his crotch with the other. "Been waiting months for this, bro," he murmured into Josh's neck.

"What—what—what—"

"'Til you were legal. You ever had a blowjob before?" Nick undid the button on Josh's jeans with one hand and tugged down the zipper.

Josh couldn't speak. Hell, he couldn't *think*. All he could do was watch as Nick dropped to his knees, gave him a wicked grin, and then reached into Josh's briefs, wrapping his hand around the already rock-hard cock there, and when had that happened?

Nick pulled it free from its tight, white confines. "Oh, hell yeah." He breathed on the head, then sucked it down.

Josh's eyes squeezed shut, then flew open. No, he'd never had a blowjob. He'd never even had a kiss, unless he counted that horrible time with Stu Edelstein eight months earlier, which he didn't, and he really, *really* did not want to be thinking about Stu just then. Although... as Josh looked down, watching his own dick sliding in and out of Nick's mouth, he realized that maybe there was a reason he'd noticed Stu's eyes and his lips and his Adam's apple.

Then Nick stopped sucking and started jerking, teasing the slit with his tongue as he moved his hand up and down. Josh's mind emptied when his balls did. When he was able to think again, he decided there was something to the idea that a man's brain resided in his dick. He also started to wonder if he was gay.

Nick came back from the bathroom with a warm, damp washcloth and tossed it to Josh. As if he'd read Josh's mind, he said, "You don't have to put a label on anything, okay? I just wanna have some fun, and I thought maybe you'd want to, too."

Nick stripped off his shirt and dropped it on the floor. Josh watched him, remembering how he'd thought a rugby player's body might be within his reach. Turned out, he was right.

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## CHAPTER THREE

“I don’t want to go to Mexico.” Josh ignored the daggers coming from Margo’s eyes and just slouched in his chair. He repeated what he’d said, in case it hadn’t been clear enough the first time. “I don’t. Want. To go. To Mexico.”

Margo threw up her hands. “So he doesn’t want to go. Whatever. Amy and I will just—”

“We are not letting the two of you go to Mexico by yourselves,” their dad said. “End of discussion.”

“We’re adults,” Margo began, “so we really don’t need your permission to go.”

“No, but you want it.” Their mother came around the counter and wrapped her arms around Margo, resting her chin on Margo’s shoulder. “You know we’d be terrified the whole time that you were gone.”

“God dammit,” Margo muttered.

Their mom laughed, then looked over at Josh. “And you—why on earth would you not want to go on a free trip to Mexico? There’s no drinking age there. There are beaches and snorkeling and clubs and women in bikinis, everything a nineteen-year-old boy could want.”

Josh’s heart rate sped up, but he played it casual. “If our team makes it to the playoffs, we’ll have matches through the end of May. I can’t just desert them.” He didn’t feel the need to mention that Nick had come back to coach them for the last few games of the season.

“I *can’t* just *desert* them,” Margo mocked. “Drama queen.”

Josh’s lip curled. “You wouldn’t understand. You don’t have friends, you have *friend*.”

“Yeah, Amy is my *best* friend, but I do have other friends, jerk. Just because I don’t run around grabbing them and throwing them face-first into the mud doesn’t mean we’re not friends.”

“It’s nice to see how well you understand something that means so much to me—”

“—and this trip means so much to me. It’s the last time me and Amy’ll really spend any time together before I start my job.”

“Oh, waah—”

“Okay, time out,” their mom said, stepping between them. “This seems easy enough to fix. Margo, why not just go in June?”

“Because everything is more expensive then, plus they want me to start as soon as possible—”

Their mom held up her hand. “Josh, could you go in June?”

Aw, crap. “I thought I might get a job and stay at school over the summer.” And spend more quality and/or naked time with Nick. “I can’t take just take two weeks off.”

“So get a job when you get back.”

“They’ll all be gone by then. And besides, I’ve got to keep up with my training.”

“You can get a job here, and train here,” his dad said. “We’d love to see more of you.” He reached out and ruffled Josh’s hair, looking so hopeful...

God dammit. School was only an hour away. Nick could drive up, or Josh could drive down. And they’d have April and May, anyway... “Okay, fine, I’ll go,” he said, sighing.

Margo jumped up and hugged him. “Thank youuuu! I’ll totally owe you! And you’ll love it, we’ll have such a good time.”

“Yeah, whatever.” He peeled her off. “So, what, I’m supposed to be their bodyguard or something?”

“Or something.” Their dad nodded. “I just don’t like the idea of two young girls alone in Mexico.”

Margo muttered, “We’re not young girls,” at the same time Josh grumbled, “They’re decrepit hags,” but their dad ignored their comments.

“If the men down there understand that Margo and Amy aren’t unescorted, aren’t unprotected—”

“You *do* know we’re not living in a Jane Austen novel, right?” Margo said, rolling her eyes.

“—I’d just feel better, is all,” their dad finished.

“So,” Josh began, “how is me being there going to help? Do I get to carry a Glock, in case we’re attacked by drug lord armies?” He pretended to cock and aim a handgun at Margo’s forehead. She smiled sarcastically in response.

Their mom shook her head. “Uh, *no*. No guns. We’re hoping that just having their brothers around will discourage the girls from getting any unwanted attention.”

Josh frowned. “Brothers?”

“Yeah, Stu’s going to come, too,” Margo said. “He’s too little to scare anyone off, but he speaks Spanish and he just finished his first year at Princeton. He’s the brains, and you’ll be the brawn.”

And that was how Josh found himself sharing a hotel room with Stu Edelstein.

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It could have been really awkward. In fact, Josh had done his best to *make* it awkward, by bringing up the kiss on the flight down to Mexico City. “Look, I just wanna get this out in the open,” he said, leaning towards Stu but not looking at him, hoping the noise from the engines would keep their sisters in the row in front from hearing anything. “I’m sorry about what happened before. At the Seder.”

He’d expected Stu to blush or stammer or pretend ignorance. He hadn’t expected Stu to laugh about it.

“I was wondering how long it would take you to bring that up.” Stu shut the book he was reading and smiled at Josh. “It’s okay. That was over two years ago. Amy told me afterwards how much wine you’d had. You weren’t yourself, I get it. So let’s just put it behind us now, ’cause it’s gonna be a long trip if you’re

walking on eggshells around me because you think I'm still freaked out or something." Stu stuck out his hand.

Josh shook it, but Stu's words swirled in his head. Not yourself? How much would Stu freak out if Josh explained that the kiss was him being more himself than he'd ever been up to that point? If Stu knew that he'd be sharing a room with a guy who had spent his first two years of college having sex with another guy? Josh probably should have said something, at least to his family, but that would have meant explaining everything, including Nick, and he wasn't sure his parents wanted to hear that their son was sleeping with his rugby coach, even if Nick hadn't been his rugby coach at the beginning. They wouldn't understand the concept of fuck buddies, or if they did, they'd hate it. He knew that his parents hadn't been virgins when they got married, but their mom had always tried to convince them that sex and romance should be linked. Josh didn't want to admit that some of her words had rubbed off on him, enough to make him less-than-happy about Nick sleeping with other guys while he was in town. "I don't have 'boyfriends'," he'd told Josh. "You know I don't like labels."

Josh had hoped that he wasn't the type to be clingy or needy. He *really* hoped his playing wasn't affected by Nick's apparently newfound ability to keep his hands off Josh, but *something* had taken the edge off his game. He'd played so poorly in April that they didn't even get into the playoffs. Josh worried that he'd been subconsciously selfish, tanking the rest of the season so he wouldn't have to stick around school while Nick ignored him.

No, that couldn't be it. Anything would have been better than spending twenty-four hours a day with Stu, Amy, and Margo.

They spent a week in Mexico City, then they took a series of bus rides eastward, stopping once or twice in small towns with colorful markets, snapping photos of pre-Columbian pyramids and finally getting some beach time on the Riviera Maya.

Josh was surprised at how much he wasn't hating it. Amy and Margo kept to themselves as much as possible and, shockingly, didn't complain about anything. He hadn't known that his sister could be so low-maintenance, but she'd taken



everything in stride, even keeping them all entertained when the bus broke down on the way to Mérida.

Even Stu was easy to travel with. His Spanish wasn't great, but the locals thought it was cute or something, because everyone seemed happy to help them every time he opened his mouth. Josh had never been that good with strangers, so he would leave everything up to Stu and just try to stay out of the way.

So everything was going pretty smoothly, except that Josh got the feeling sometimes that Stu had some kind of issue with him. Nothing specific, and nothing hateful, just an occasional vague haze of disapproval, like the whole friendly, "Let's put it all behind us" spiel on the plane had been an act. In hindsight, the speech *had* seemed kind of rehearsed. Not that Josh cared what Stu thought of him... but every once in a while he'd look up to see that green-glass gaze on him. Then Stu would look away, his face kind of frowny. The first time it happened was their first night sharing a room together, when Josh had come out of the bathroom after his shower wearing just a towel. Stu had looked up from his book, made a disgusted sound, then rolled over to face the wall, propping up his book and ignoring Josh. "Sor-ry," Josh had muttered. "I'll change in the bathroom from now on."

"You do that."

Whatever. It would serve that repressed, snotty little ivy-league prick right if Josh left the towel in the bathroom next time and came out with everything on display and swinging. But he knew he'd get an earful from Margo if Stu whined about it to Amy, and they still had the rest of the trip to get through. So he'd be thoughtful and mature and not wave his junk in Stu's face every night.

The weird thing was, Stu was fine the rest of the time. Even friendly. He loaned Josh his copy of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* after he finished it halfway through the trip, and he was willing to hang out with the girls when Josh just needed some time to himself. So, after three days of watching Stu keep his shirt on at the beach, Josh decided that maybe he was just self-conscious about how skinny he was. It was kind of funny, really; Josh envied Stu his facial hair, and Stu apparently envied Josh his muscles.

Or maybe it really just was disapproval. In a club that night, a couple of French girls they were dancing with pulled off Josh's T-shirt. As one of them swung it over her head, Stu walked off the dance floor and went straight to the bar. Josh took his shirt back from the girl and put it on, then went to talk to Stu.

"What's wrong?" he shouted over the music.

"That was disgusting."

"They were just playing around." He caught the eye of the bartender. "*Un dos equis, por favor,*" he shouted. "Hey, pretty good, huh?"

Stu rolled his eyes. "Great. But don't you think you've had enough?"

"It's only my fifth beer."

"And your fourth shot."

Josh shrugged, then let out a huge belch. "You definitely haven't had enough." Stu had been drinking as much as the rest of them the first few days of the trip, but after a week, he'd started complaining that the drinking was getting boring. And he was only eighteen. The dude wouldn't know fun if it danced naked in front of him, wearing a sombrero and playing maracas.

A group of young, stocky Mexican men came over to stand in front of Josh and Stu. One of them, wearing a Hawaiian shirt, said something and jerked his head toward the exit.

"What's going on?" Josh asked. He looked over at the dance floor, where Margo and Amy were still tossing their hair and shaking their asses. "Are they kicking us out?"

"I don't think they work here."

"So what do they want?"

"He said the gay bar is down the street."

"Really." Josh thanked the bartender as he paid for the beer. "Ask him how he knows where the gay bar is." Josh said, throwing an arm over Stu's shoulder.

Stu pushed him away. "No."

Josh took a sip of beer, then licked the rim of the bottle suggestively, exchanging glares with the man who'd spoken. "Ask him what his favorite drink is—no, the name of his favorite bartender there."

"No! Stop it. And no more beer. You're drunk, and you're gonna get us in trouble." Stu reached for the bottle, but Josh kept it away from him.

"Ask him if he wants to suck my dick." Josh tipped the bottle back, taking a long swallow as he ran a hand down his throat to his chest and stomach.

"Would you just shut up, already? You're just making them madder."

"Tell them to fuck off."

Hawaiian Shirt smiled unpleasantly at Josh. "*Quieres fuck con migo, chica? Ese pinche gringo—*" was as far as he got before the bouncer stepped between Josh and the group of men. He said something to Hawaiian Shirt, who seemed to want to argue about it, but the bouncer spoke in smooth, calm tones and flexed the muscles that were very visible under his tight black T-shirt. After another long, angry look at Josh, Hawaiian Shirt walked away, his friends trailing behind him.

Stu shook his head. "Jesus." He shot Josh an angry glare. "We're supposed to be looking out for Amy and Margo, not pissing off the locals. Put down the beer. We're leaving, before you start an international incident. I'll go tell Amy and Margo."

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They walked back to the hotel, Stu looking around them warily, Josh swaying a little, and Margo and Amy's high heels clacking on the pavement. They'd just gotten to the gates of their hotel when Margo gasped. "Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh FUCK!"

"What?" Amy nearly tripped as Margo came to a dead stop.

"My camera. I left my camera in the bar."

"It's gone," Josh said.

“Fuck,” Margo moaned, putting her hand over her eyes. “I’m such an *idiot!* How could I have done that?”

“You were having fun dancing,” Stu said gently. “You just forgot. It could have happened to any of us.”

“I have to go back and look.” She turned and started walking back in the direction of the bar.

Josh could see that she wasn’t walking quite steadily. Her feet probably hurt from those shoes. Girls could be so stupid sometimes. “You and Amy go back to the hotel. I’ll go see if, by the smallest chance in the universe, someone turned it in.”

“Really?” Margo looked up at him, her face pale under the streetlight.

“Yeah. Maybe I’ll get another beer while I’m at it.”

“No.”

Josh turned to look at Stu. “Excuse you?”

“No more beer. We’ll both go look for the camera and then come straight back.”

“We?”

“Yeah. Do you even know how to ask about a lost camera?”

Josh scowled.

“All righty, then,” Stu said.

He and Josh watched the girls go into the lobby of the hotel, then they walked back to the bar.

“I really could have done this myself,” Josh grumbled.

“I didn’t think you should go alone.”

Josh looked Stu up and down pointedly, taking in all five feet six inches of him.

“I’m stronger than I look.”

“Whatever.”

At the bar, miracle of miracles, the bartender had Margo's camera. “Give him some money,” Stu muttered to Josh.

“I'm not going to buy back my sister's camera—”

“No, you're going to show your gratitude for the honesty of everyone who works in this bar. Now, pay the man.”

“How much?”

“What do you have?”

Josh pulled out his wallet. It was empty, so he turned slightly towards Stu, leaning into the bar, hoping no one would see him taking money out of the pouch he kept inside his shirt. “Twenty pesos.”

“Give it to him.”

“Can you ask him for some change, so—”

“Give it to him!”

Josh did. The bartender thanked him, and then they were on their way back to the hotel. “Well, now I'm completely out of money.”

“You can go to the ATM tomorrow.”

“Let's go now.”

“It's not a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Taking money out of an ATM in a foreign country in the middle of the night?”

“It's only...” Josh lifted his watch up to his face, trying to read the numbers. “One A.M.? That's pathetic. I thought we were on vacation.”

“We are. We can have fun without being loud, obnoxious Americans who stay up all night partying.”

Josh stopped, swaying a little as he looked at Stu. “How do you fit it all in?”

“Fit all what in?”

“The stick up your ass.”

Stu's face tightened. “Screw you. It's not enough that I have to babysit Amy and Margo, now I have to take shit from you even though I'm keeping you from falling on your ass?”

“No one asked you to. My ass is tough. It can take a fall or two.”

“Fine. Go wherever you want. Just give me Margo's camera. I'll take it back to the hotel.”

Josh hesitated, then handed over the camera. “I'll see you back there.”

“No, wait. Where are you going?”

“To the ATM, then maybe find another bar.”

Stu rolled his eyes. “I'll go with you.”

“You don't have to.”

“I know, you can take care of yourself. But you're drunk and you don't speak Spanish and if anything happened—”

“Dude, I'm six two and weigh one eighty. None of these Mayans are gonna jump me, they're all about four feet tall.”

“Wow, racist, much?”

“No, I'm serious. Even *you* look huge compared to some of the people around here, and you're little.” Josh reached out and patted Stu on the head. Stu ducked away from his hand. “Sorry about the stick comment, dude. I'm glad you came with on the trip. If it were just Margo and Amy, I think I'd have estrogen poisoning by now.”

Stu shook his head. “Yeah, okay. Let's go find an ATM and then get back to the hotel. I think there's a bank a couple blocks over.”

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Between them and the ATM was a group of Mexican teenagers, talking and laughing while Reggaeton blasted out a boom box. “Just smile and say ‘*Hola*,’” Stu instructed. “Or we could come back tomorrow.”

Before Josh could say anything, one of the girls broke off from the group and peered at them as they passed under a street lamp. “Stu?”

Stu’s eyebrows went up, and then he smiled. “*Hola, Esperanza. Que tal?*”

“You know her?” Josh asked.

“You *don’t* know her? She’s one of the maids at the hotel.” He stepped forward and took her hand, giving her a kiss on each cheek. “*Conoce a Josh? Es el ‘otro hermano’.*”

The girl smiled at Josh and then said something in Spanish that made Stu laugh. Josh lifted his hand and said, “*Hola*,” which just made the girl and her friends giggle. Then they turned away from Josh and started talking to Stu, whose every response made them giggle more.

Josh waited for a few seconds, then lost patience. “Can I get my money out now?” he asked Stu.

“Yeah, it’s okay. They’re okay.”

Stu kept chatting with the girls as Josh moved past the group to the ATM machine. That last beer was really starting to hit him, and it took him two tries to put his PIN in right. He got his cash, grabbed his card and the receipt, and shoved everything deep into the pocket of his pants, then headed back to where he’d left Stu.

The girls were still giggling and flirting with the foreigner, but even drunk, Josh could see that the boys in the group were looking distinctly pissed off. He walked up to the crowd of girls around Stu and spoke over their heads. “Okay, thanks, I’m done. Let’s go.”

Stu glared at him. “I’m having a conversation here, if you don’t mind.”

“I do mind, and I’m not the only one. You need to stop.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop talking to them.”

Stu scowled. “I’m just being friendly.”

“Not everyone here sees it like that.”

“I don’t think...” He looked past the girls, past Josh, to all the guys who were watching him. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah.”

“So say goodbye, and we’ll walk away.”

Stu said a few more words, and Josh heard at least one “*adios*” in there, so that was good, but right as they were finally leaving, someone in the group shouted, “*Gringos!*”

Josh wanted to keep walking, but Stu spun around and shouted something back, eyes flashing and his hands clenched into fists, and fuck, what was he thinking? He hadn’t shown that kind of fire in the bar when Hawaiian Shirt was being a dick. Maybe he didn’t want to look like a pussy in front of those girls, but seriously, didn’t he know he was little and skinny and he’d be paste on the concrete ten seconds into any fight?

So Josh stepped up next to Stu, and could this night get any worse, because Hawaiian Shirt guy and his friends pushed through the crowd of teenagers. “Jesus, what do these assholes want?” Josh asked, his shoulder bumping Stu’s.

“He asked what we are. Um, fags, or, um, here to rape their girlfriends.”

“Is there a third choice?”

Hawaiian Shirt pulled a metal rectangle out of his pocket, and flip, flip, flip, not a rectangle anymore, but a knife.

“That’s not what I meant,” Josh muttered. “Can you calm them down?”

“I doubt it.”

Stu was dealing with it surprisingly well, Josh thought. Like he was going to stand his ground and fight. Not at all what Josh would have expected. “Think we could make a run for it?” He asked quietly. “The hotel’s just three blocks away, right?”



“Yeah. You ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Then go!”

They turned and ran. Josh heard shouting in Spanish behind them, but he didn't look to see if they were being followed. If they were, if Stu wasn't fast enough, they'd have to turn and fight. But Josh saw Stu off to his right, flying down the street next to him, matching him nearly step for step, even with Josh having five inches on him.

They didn't slow down until they got to the front door of the hotel, where the guard eyed them suspiciously. “Everything is okay?” he asked.

Even though he was panting, Stu grinned. “Exercise. *Ejercicio*.” Josh grinned, too, and cast what he hoped was a casual glance down the street. No one had followed them.

The guard raised an eyebrow, but he let them in. They ran up the stairs to Margo and Amy's room, dropped off the camera, then went back to their own room, where they burst into adrenaline-and-relief-fuelled laughter.

“Oh, my God,” Stu said, sitting on his bed with his head in his hands, laughter leaking out of him in little hissing bursts.

“I can't believe you can run that fast,” Josh said when he'd caught his breath. He sank to the floor and leaned against the end of his bed, letting his head fall back onto it. “Thanks for not tripping.”

“You, too.” Stu threw himself back on his own bed. “I can't believe you're that coordinated when you're drunk.” He was still panting from the run.

“My body is a highly trained, um... tool.” Josh lifted his head and watched Stu's chest rise and fall with each breath he took.

“*You're a tool.*”

“No, *you're a tool!*”

Stu turned his head and grinned. Josh grinned back at him. Then he rolled onto his hands and knees and crawled over to Stu's bed, stopping when he put a hand on the covers.

Stu's grin faded as his eyes locked with Josh's. "What?"

"Nothing." Seriously, what the hell was he thinking? Or really, was he even thinking at all, having moved past tipsy to fully wasted? He stood up and stepped around Stu's bed in the excessively careful way drunk people move. "I have to whiz." He swayed his way into the bathroom, where he peed (sitting down for fear of losing his balance and making a mess), washed his hands and brushed his teeth. Then he stumbled back into the room and fell face-first onto his bed.

"Aren't you gonna take a shower?" Stu asked.

"No. Tomorrow."

"Okay. Can I use the bathroom then?"

"Go for it."

Josh lay on the bed not quite asleep as Stu bumped around in the bathroom. Something was digging into his thigh. He groaned and sat up, but he couldn't get his hand into his pocket while he was sitting, so he stood up, holding onto the wall for support so he could pull out... oh, right, his debit card and the cash from the ATM.

He lay the bills on the bed and wiped his hand over them, trying to flatten them out. There seemed to be a lot of them. Maybe he'd pushed the \$200 button instead of the \$100 button? Wait, no, it had been in pesos... whatever. He didn't want to carry that much cash on him in case his pocket got picked or they got mugged. But he didn't want to leave it anywhere obvious in the hotel room, like in his suitcase or in his underwear drawer.

He really needed to put the cash away in a safe place, but the room was starting to spin in slow, soothing circles. Josh's hands felt big and clumsy as he counted through the bills. Stu had long, narrow fingers, elegant, with just enough hair on the knuckles to keep from looking girly. In his mind's eye, Josh saw Stu gracefully pulling money out of his shirt pouch. Fine for Stu; he didn't sweat like

a pig. Josh knew it was safer to keep cash in the pouch, but everything in there always ended up kind of damp. Fuck it. He might as well put some bills into the pouch with his passport and a few more in his wallet, and maybe he'd think of a good hiding place for the rest of them in the morning. He lay back down on the bed and was asleep within seconds.

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Margo was so happy to get her camera back that she let Josh sleep in the next day and then brought him a pastry and a bottle of juice when he woke up, grouchy and hung over, at ten o'clock.

"So are you getting up or not?" She waved the pastry under his nose.

"Not." He rolled over and put the pillow over his head.

"Come on, you can sleep it off on the beach. We're just going to lie there and get skin cancer in between snorkeling."

He dragged himself into a sitting position, took the juice from her, and drank it down in a couple of gulps. He thought about going back to sleep, but he saw Stu watching him, looking pissy and judgmental, like he was a second away from telling Josh "I told you so" about his hangover. "Yeah, okay. Gimme five minutes."

Margo left, taking Stu with her. Josh scarfed down the pastry, used the bathroom, then pulled on his swim trunks. He didn't want to take his neck pouch since he'd be shirtless most of the time, but he didn't want to leave it in the room, either, since it held his passport and all his cash. Maybe he could find a place to hide it... Stu might trust the hotel maids, but Josh had more common sense. In the end, he unzipped the lining of his suitcase, stuck the pouch inside, then re-zipped it and put the suitcase back in the closet. The laptop and camera were under some clothes in a drawer—hardly a deterrent, but at least not right out in the open, begging to be stolen. Next time, they were definitely staying in a place that had room safes. He stuffed his wallet and room key into his pockets before grabbing a towel, slipping on his flip-flops, and leaving the room.

Josh was supposed to watch their stuff while the other three went snorkeling, but he ended up just looping the straps of the purses and Stu's backpack through

his arms so no one could steal them and went to sleep, the sun beating down on him. They woke him up a couple of hours later to go to lunch, laughing at the tan-line stripes on his right arm.

After lunch, they wandered around town for a couple of hours, picking up souvenirs since it was their last full day of the trip. "Aren't you getting anything?" Stu asked Josh.

"No, I got enough crap already."

"I mean for your parents. You should at least get something for your mom."

Wow, so Josh was a drunk *and* a crappy son? "I'm gonna get them some duty-free gin on the way back."

"They can get that anywhere. You should get them something local."

"I don't know what they'd like."

"They're your parents. They'll like anything you give them."

"Then they'll like a giant bottle of gin."

Stu shook his head and walked off, leaving Josh to trail behind him and the girls.

When they got back to the hotel, Josh found his credit card on the nightstand. "How'd that that get there?"

"Esperanza must have put it there when she was cleaning the room. It was under your bed last night."

"Esperanza?"

"The maid. The girl I was talking to last night near the ATM." Stu opened his suitcase and put a bag of dirty laundry into it.

"Well, crap." Josh put the card back in his wallet. "Why didn't you tell me I'd dropped it?"

"I thought you knew."

"You thought I left it under the bed on purpose?"

“I guess. I don’t know.” Stu looked at Josh as he pulled out his laptop and started a game. “Aren’t you going to pack?”

“I can do that tonight.”

“Yeah, when you’re falling over. That’ll be entertaining.”

Josh paused the game and looked up, scowling. “What’s your problem, anyway? I get that you’re some kind of prude who doesn’t wanna drink—”

“I’m not a—”

“—but why do you have to *constantly* ride my ass about it?” His hands tightened on the laptop. “Look, I’m drinking here because I can. Once we get back to the states, I won’t be able to drink legally for another year and a half. So please, just... step off. It’s only one more night, okay? God.”

Stu didn’t respond. He just stared at Josh, unblinking, his eyes more than ever like green glass, cold and sharp-edged. Then he turned away and went back to packing, not saying another word until he’d closed his suitcase. “Are you done with that?” he asked, pointing to the Harry Potter book that lay on the nightstand.

“Um...”

“If you’re not, you can take it with you, and just give it to Margo when you’re done. She can drop it at our house the next time she comes over.”

The offer *sounded* nice enough, but Josh felt like he was being criticized for playing games instead of reading. “Um. Okay, yeah, thanks. I’m only a couple chapters into it.”

“No problem.” Stu stood there for a moment, looking like he wanted to say something else. Whatever it was, Josh knew he wouldn’t like it, but better to just get it over with. He hit the pause button on his game. “Did you want something?”

Stu blew out a breath. “Just... I think you might have a drinking problem.”

“Oh, good god. I thought we were done with this conversation.”

“You’re getting wasted. Every. Night.”

“Yeah, it’s called ‘being on vacation’. I’m a big boy, I can make my own decisions about my life.”

“Yes, but—” Stu began, then stopped. Bit his lip. “No, okay, yeah, you’re right. It’s your life.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Do whatever you want.”

“I will. Not like I need your permission or anything.”

Stu narrowed his eyes but didn’t say anything more about it. He sat on his bed and opened the book he’d started reading after he’d finished the Harry Potter.

Josh hit “resume”, then died three times in as many minutes. He couldn’t concentrate at all, and his hands were sweating. Probably got too much sun on the beach. He went into the bathroom and splashed some cold water on his face. He felt a little better after that.

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For the next hour, the only sounds in the room were click of laptop keys and the occasional laugh from Stu as he read. Josh didn’t ask him what was so funny, though. He didn’t care. He probably wouldn’t find it funny, anyway; nerds had weird senses of humor.

He was just about to finally finish the level he’d been stuck on when the girls knocked on the door. Stu closed his book and let them in. Margo sat next to him on the bed and bumped his shoulder with hers. “You’re not even packed yet!” she said, gesturing to the room.

“It’s not gonna take that long,” Josh said, keeping his eyes on the screen.

“I hope not. Come on, shut that thing down and let’s go eat.”

“You’ve been eating like a pig this trip. You’re gonna get fat.”

“Bite me.” She waved her hand in front of his screen. “I can’t help it if the food’s fantastic here. So where do you guys want to go tonight?” She waved her hand in front of the screen again. Josh tried to slap it out of the way, but she was too quick. “Shut it down and let’s go.”

“One sec...”

“Josh doesn’t want to eat,” Stu offered, tossing his book on his bed. “He’s going to drink his dinner.”

“Ha-fucking-ha,” Josh said, saving his game and shutting the laptop. He put it back into the dresser drawer under some T-shirts.

“Shut up, Stu,” Amy said, then turned to Josh. “There’s a taqueria a few blocks away we haven’t tried yet.”

Josh shrugged. “Fine, whatever. Let’s go.”

“Are you going to wear that?” Margo wrinkled her nose.

He rolled his eyes but then kicked them out of the room so he could change. After he was dressed, he tucked his wallet into his back pocket, making sure to fasten the button to discourage pickpockets. When he reached for the door handle, he froze, realizing he didn’t have the money pouch he usually kept in his shirt. Hadn’t had it all day, in fact. He started going through the room, trying to remember where he’d left it. It wasn’t on the dresser or in any of the drawers. He pulled his suitcase out of the closet, but it wasn’t there, either, and he really started to panic until he remembered hiding it. Unzipping the lining of the suitcase, he blew out a relieved breath when he found it right where he’d left it. He slipped it over his head and dropped it inside his shirt, then pocketed the room key and left.

As he closed the door behind him, he heard Amy’s voice from around the corner. “No, listen,” she said, sounding annoyed. “He’s older than you. If he wants to get wasted every night, let him.”

“Oh, so you’re going to drag his carcass home if he passes out? Good luck with that. He weighs two hundred pounds.”

*One eighty*, Josh thought but didn’t say. And it wasn’t like he was fat anymore. If anything, Nick said he could stand to put on a few more pounds of muscle.

“Come on, Amy, he’s got a point.”

Hey, way to stand up for your brother, Margo. Josh scuffed his feet as he got close to give them some warning, pretending he hadn't heard anything when he joined them.

The taqueria was amazing, the food so good Josh wanted to move in there. Carne asada, black beans, grilled fish flavored with lime and chiles, shredded turkey, all served on little corn tortillas with six different salsas to choose from. Rice and refritos, and shots of clear, colorless tequila.

Stu asked the waiters so many questions about the food that the chef finally came out to talk to him. They gave him a standing ovation. He answered Stu's questions and then sent more things out from the kitchen, stuff that wasn't on the menu, plus a couple of free desserts. Then he set up some complicated flaming drinks for the girls. Stu was freaking out a little ("Are you sure your hair won't catch on fire?") but they managed to down them without any major catastrophes. By the time they left the restaurant, Josh, Margo, and Amy were pretty buzzed, and Stu had the chef's email address and the promise of some recipes.

"God, I'm so full. I need to work this meal off. Let's go dancing!" Margo sang, skipping to the side and twirling more gracefully than Josh would have thought possible, seeing how drunk she was.

"Let's dance!" Amy called out. "Put on your red shoes and dance the blues... bomp, bomp, bomp, let's dance!"

"Can you keep it down?" Stu said. "You're embarrassing me."

"We weren't embarrassing you in the restaurant," Amy said. "That guy liked us."

"Because he could practically see right down your shirt."

"Stuffy Stu," Josh mumbled, and the girls laughed.

Stu glared at him. "Look, all I'm saying is that you might attract unwanted attention."

"That's why you and Josh are here. To protect us. Ah declayah, the menfolk must protect us faintin' violets." Margo fell against Amy, laughing.



“Ooh! Ooh!” Amy straightened up. “I know where we can go where we won’t attract unwanted attention!”

“Do tell,” Margo said.

“That gay bar. Stu, where’s that gay bar?”

“There’s a gay bar here?” Margo’s voice rose to a squeak. “I *love* gay bars!”

“When have you ever been to a gay bar?” Josh asked his sister. Oops. As soon as he heard the words “gay bar”, he’d meant to keep his mouth shut, but the good food and tequila had loosened up every part of him, including his tongue, apparently.

“I went to one with my friend Carl and his boyfriend, thank you very much,” Margo said. “You got a problem with that, Mr. Macho Rugby Dude?”

Josh wondered if her eyes would pop out of her head and actually fall right onto the street if he told her he was gay. She probably wouldn’t believe him, and he didn’t feel like hashing it all out just then. But he could wipe that smirk off her face. “No problem at all. I’ve been to a gay bar once or twice myself.” Like for his nineteenth birthday, when Nick had bought him a lap dance from one of the men who danced onstage in their underwear, and afterwards, all the leather daddies had taken turns spanking him, copping feels in between slaps. He’d been so turned on by the end of it that Nick had barely gotten his hands on him in the back room before he came.

But he wasn’t about to give that much detail to his sister, especially with Amy and Stu there. And he didn’t want to think about Nick and how much things had changed between them. There were plenty of other guys out there.

“Let’s go, then!” Amy said, linking her arms with Margo and Josh. “Where is it?”

Josh raised an eyebrow at Stu. “Yeah, Stu, where’s the gay bar?”

“I don’t know. You were there,” Stu said, apparently thinking that Josh would back him up. “That a-hole in the Hawaiian shirt...”

“I just know what you *said* he said.”

Stu made a face. "Look, he probably just said that to be a dick, and there isn't really any gay bar around here."

But there was. The girls made Stu go back into the restaurant and ask the waiters, and he came back with a map drawn on a paper napkin. "I told them we wanted to go because you're lesbians," he said, his face bright red.

Amy shrugged. "Whatever works."

Like the night before, the girls danced while the boys hung out at the bar and watched them. Unlike that night, Josh kept Margo's camera in his pocket. Also unlike that night, no French girls made Josh take his shirt off. But an Italian man at the bar was practicing his English on Josh and Stu.

"You're American?" the man shouted over the music. "You look like a Greek!"

"My dad's Greek," Josh shouted back. "I mean, his family's originally from Greece."

"I can see it in your face." He smiled and lifted his glass.

Josh tapped his beer bottle against it and took a sip. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Stu staring down into his Coke. "You okay?"

"Yeah. It's just really loud in here."

"Yeah."

Someone bumped against Josh's hip—the Italian guy. The man grinned at Josh again but didn't move away. In fact, he stood there, hip to hip with Josh, watching him as he took another sip of his drink. Okay...

"Paolo." The man stuck out his hand.

Josh shook it. "Josh."

The man held onto it a little longer than necessary, and he didn't introduce himself to Stu. Josh finished his beer and raised his hand to get the bartender's attention. Paolo stopped him from paying.

"I'll buy it."

“Thanks.”

He was a lot older than Josh, maybe even in his thirties, but he was gorgeous, with dark curling hair and huge eyes. Josh was pretty sure he was being flirted with. When the beer came and he felt a hand on his ass, Josh became very sure. He tipped his head back and drank from the bottle, keeping his eyes on Paolo as he licked the rim.

Paolo's smile widened. “Would you be kind to show me where is the toilet?” He set his empty glass on the bar. “It's hard to see the way in this small light.”

“Sure.” Josh set down his beer in front of Stu and pulled the camera out of his pocket. “Here, hold this and watch my beer, I'll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” Stu asked.

“Bathroom.”

“I'll go with you.”

“You have to go now?”

“No, but I thought—”

“No, stay here, then. Watch my beer, and make sure Margo and Amy are okay. I'll be right back.” He pushed away from the bar before Stu could argue. When he got to the entrance to the bathrooms, he looked over his shoulder, relieved when he saw Stu still at the bar. Stu looked pretty pissed, but that was his own fault. If he'd loosen up and have beer or two, he'd be having fun like everyone else in the place.

Josh watched Stu get even more pissed when Paolo bumped into him, making him nearly spill his Coke. Paolo made a few apologetic gestures, his hands all over Stu, and Josh started to go back to the bar, to explain to Paolo that Stu was straight. But then Stu would find out that Josh was gay, and maybe that conversation would be better held somewhere else.

A second later, Josh relaxed as Paolo started to make his way across the dance floor towards the bathrooms. Josh hurried down the hall and into the Men's room, then waited, hoping he hadn't misunderstood the situation.

He hadn't. Paolo came through the bathroom door, grabbed Josh by the front of his shirt and dragged him into the nearest stall, then stuck his tongue right down Josh's throat. Eager hands grabbed Josh's ass, his legs and arms, palmed his cock, squeezed his biceps and shoulders, stroked his chest and pinched his nipples through his shirt. It was kind of weird, actually, like what tentacle porn might be like, if Josh had ever imagined being the object of tentacle porn. But then Paolo slowed down, his hands coming to rest on Josh's hips, and his mouth softened. Heat spread out through Josh's body as he started to get hard.

"You're so handsome," Paolo whispered against his lips. "I want to—what is it in English, 'blow job to you'?"

"Just 'blow you'," Josh corrected. "Or give someone a blow job. Either one." Oh, for fuck's sake, shut up, Josh told himself. This wasn't the time for an English lesson.

Paolo grinned. "So, 'I want to give you a blow job,' is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Good." Paolo pushed Josh back against the toilet tank while unzipping Josh's pants and tugging them down just far enough for access. Then he whipped his own dick out, sat on the toilet seat, and went at it.

The cold porcelain against Josh's ass was distracting, but Paolo knew what he was doing, and it was over in a few minutes, at least for Josh. When Paolo pulled off and stood up, Josh returned the favor, stroking Paolo's dick while Paolo clung to him, muttering into his ear in Italian. It was really kind of hot, way hotter than that octopus groping he'd done before. Josh started to get hard again. "Fuck, yeah, give it to me," he growled, thinking maybe he could go for seconds, but at that moment, Paolo jammed himself into Josh's hand, coming and biting down on Josh's shoulder to muffle his shout.

Another kiss, a smile, some cleaning up and rearranging of clothing, and then Josh was out the door, ignoring Margo and Amy who waved at him, trying to get him to come dance. He got back to the bar, picked up his beer, which was, thankfully, right where he left it, and drank it down, finishing it just as Paolo got back to the bar.

“Everything okay?” Stu asked. “You were in there a long time.”

“Yeah, fine. I can take over here, if you wanna go.”

“No, I’m good.”

Josh didn’t turn his head, but he could tell that Stu was looking at him; he could feel the suspicion and disapproval radiating from him. He held the bottle upside-down so that the last few drops of beer fell on his tongue, then he lifted it to get the bartender’s attention. “*Uno mas, por favor*. What?” he snapped, wheeling on Stu.

Stu looked around the club like a spy in a B-movie before grabbing Josh’s shirt and pulling him down to talk right into his ear. “Are you on drugs?”

“No! Jesus!” He pulled himself free and took a step back. The way Stu had gripped his shirt and breathed on his ear was too much like what Paolo had done in the bathroom, and even though he’d just come, even though Stu was speaking English, even though his accusation was ridiculous, it was still somehow a ginormous turn-on. Josh faced the bar and adjusted himself, trying to think about rugby and vaginas and cold showers, but Stu was right up on him again, his chest against Josh’s arm and his warm breath on Josh’s ear.

“You could get us all arrested.”

“I’m not on drugs! And get the fuck off me!” Before you find out something you don’t want to know, he didn’t add. He shoved Stu away with his shoulder and took another step back. The bartender set the beer in front of him, and Josh pulled out his wallet to pay, but... What the hell? How did he barely have enough left to pay for a beer? He’d spent a bit on dinner and all that tequila, but still... He handed money to the bartender and left the change on the bar. He’d have to transfer money from his shirt pouch to his wallet; not a great idea to do that out in public, but fuck it. He started to pull the pouch out, but Paolo came up behind him, moving to the music, pumping his hands in the air.

“You don’t dance?” he asked, shaking his hips and looking from Josh to Stu.

Stu jerked his chin at Josh. “He does.”

Paolo beamed. "Come dance with me, then." He tugged on Josh's wrist. Josh let himself be pulled onto the dance floor. Margo and Amy danced up to them, so Josh shouted introductions, trying to pretend like it was the most normal thing in the world to introduce your sister to the guy who'd just sucked you off in the bathroom. But Paolo was a gentleman, charming the girls and not saying a word about Josh, other than remarking on the resemblance between him and Margo.

Looking back at the bar, Josh could see Stu all by himself, and he felt a pang of annoyance or guilt or... something. Whatever it was, it made him leave the dance floor and go back to Stu. "Hey," he said, then drank some of his beer. "Come dance with us."

"I don't dance."

"Sure you do. It's not like anyone knows what they're doing out there."

"No, thanks."

"We can dance here, then." Josh took another sip, then put the bottle on the bar and lifted his arms, moving closer to Stu.

"Stop it!" Stu moved away, then looked around, obviously worried.

"Dude, it's a gay bar. They expect men to dance with each other."

"I told you, I don't dance. So just... go back to your *friend* there, before he starts hitting on our sisters."

"He's not interested in them."

"Oh, really?"

Josh turned around and saw Paolo dancing between the two girls. Josh could almost hear their laughter, even over the music. "It's harmless," he told Stu. "That's why straight girls come to gay bars, to dance with hot guys who aren't going to hit on them."

"You seem to know a lot about it."

"I have a few gay friends."

"Really."

“What, you don’t believe me?”

“No.”

Josh didn’t know why that should piss him off so very much, but it did. He grabbed his beer off the bar and drank the rest of it in a few gulps, then pulled the money pouch out of his shirt and opened it so he could buy another beer. Or maybe three. Fuck Stu and his endless Cokes.

But all he found, next to his passport, was one twenty peso bill. He dug through the rest of the pouch, but that was it. It was enough to buy him a few beers, but he would have sworn he’d had more money in there.

He must have stared at the pouch longer than he thought, because Stu said, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m missing some money.”

Stu blinked, frowning. “Did you leave it in the room?”

“Maybe. But I thought put more in here last night. After the ATM.”

“Maybe you put it somewhere else.”

“Maybe.”

He got another beer, then went through his wallet again. Nothing but receipts and ticket stubs from the buses and archeological sites they’d visited so far. He stashed the change from the beer in the wallet, then put it back in his pocket and buttoned the pocket to make sure the wallet stayed where it should be. Then he dropped the pouch back inside his shirt.

As he did so, he looked up at Paolo, who had moved away from the girls and was dancing with another man. His hands had been all over Josh... but Josh hadn’t been so far gone that he wouldn’t have noticed the *rripp!* of the Velcro closure on the pouch. In fact, the blowjob had been okay, but not spectacular. The only reason he’d come so fast was that he’d had to limit his jerk-off sessions to once a day, usually in the shower just before he went to bed. If he’d been at home, with a room to himself, he’d start the morning with a nice, leisurely wank to ease into the day, but he couldn’t do that with Stu snoring in the bed across the room. That morning wood didn’t just disappear. Sure, if he waited, his cock

would deflate, but it was like that erection lurked in the background for the rest of the day, waiting for some attention. Any blowjob was better than none at all, but Josh would have had to be a lot more turned on than he'd been not to notice that he was being robbed. Besides, he'd seen Paolo's wallet when he bought Josh a drink; it was full of bills, so he didn't need to rip off a college student.

"It's probably for the best."

Josh looked up at Stu. "What are you talking about?"

"That you left your money in the room. Now you won't drink so much that you'll be hung over tomorrow when we have to travel."

Josh went still, then he narrowed his eyes. "You."

"What?"

"You took it."

"What?" Stu pulled back, gaping at him. "No, I didn't touch it."

"Well, it's not here."

"*Well*, don't look at me! Maybe you spent it."

"No." Josh shook his head. "I had a crapload of cash when I went to bed last night, and I know I put it in the pouch, and now it's not there. I didn't buy anything today except lunch and dinner. So where is it?"

"How should I know?"

Josh gave Stu a long look, then he turned on his heel and headed towards the door. Stu ran after him and grabbed his arm, stopping him.

"Wait, where are you going?"

"To the ATM." He tried to pull his arm out of Stu's grip, but Stu held on. Well, hell; he really *was* stronger than he looked.

"What's the point in getting a bunch of money out now when we're leaving tomorrow?"

"Because I wanna get shit-faced *now*."



Josh put a little more effort into freeing himself and finally managed to shake Stu loose. “And no, I *don't* have a drinking problem,” he added. Then he tripped on his way out of the club, barely keeping himself from landing on the sidewalk. So much for dignity. He set off for the ATM, taking a couple of wrong turns before he found it and one more wrong turn on the way back. When he stumbled back into the club, he slapped a twenty peso bill on the bar. “*Tequila, por favor,*” he told the bartender, then shot a triumphant glare at Stu, who just shook his head and looked away.

Josh burned through that twenty, danced until his shirt was soaked with sweat, then spent another twenty on more tequila shots until his stomach rebelled and he had to make a very quick decision: the bathroom, which was on the far side of the crowded dance floor, or the door to the street, which was a few feet away.

The door won. Josh staggered out of the club and threw up in the gutter, then he sat on the curb, his head in his hands, trying to make the world stop swinging back and forth. He spit onto the street a few times, but he couldn't get the rotten taste out of his mouth, and he didn't want to go back inside to ask for water. They'd probably kick his ass for puking his guts out right in front of the club.

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting there before Margo put a hand on his shoulder.

“Do you feel better now?” She handed him a bottle of water.

“No.” He rinsed out his mouth and spat, then drank half of it in a few swallows.

“I shouldn't have made you come with.” She sat next to him, away from the vomit. “You haven't really had fun this whole trip.”

He shrugged. “It's been okay.”

“Do you get this drunk at school, too?”

“Sometimes.”

She petted his hair, and he rested his head against hers. “I know we're not that close,” she said after a pause. “But we could be, if you wanted. You're not a

bratty little kid anymore, and I'm not a bitchy teenage girl anymore. If you want to talk to me, you can. You can tell me anything, and I won't tell Mom and Dad if you ask me not to."

Josh's eyes stung as he sighed. "I'm an asshole."

"No, you're not. At least, not all the time."

"Thanks a lot."

"So do you want to talk?"

"Not really."

"Do you want to go back to the hotel and pack?"

"Yeah." He opened his eyes, but no one else was around except for a few people hanging around outside the entrance to the club, avoiding the puddle of vomit. "Where's Stu and Amy?"

"They're still inside. He was dancing with some girl when I left."

"Well, good for him." Josh's stomach twisted again, and he swallowed, hard.

"Are you okay?" Margo asked. "Do I need to get out of range?"

"Maybe." He stood up with a little help, then they made their way slowly back to the hotel. "I'm sorry I fucked up your last night here."

"It's okay. I'm getting kind of tired of loud, smoky clubs. I'm ready to go home."

"Me, too."

They made it back to the hotel without any more projectile incidents. Josh took a long shower, lying in the tub and letting the water fall on him. At some point, he heard the door to his room open. Probably Stu. Or maybe it was whoever came in and stole his money, going for a second round...

He really hoped it was just Stu because he wasn't in any shape to fight off burglars, but he left the water running and climbed carefully out of the tub, wrapping a towel around his hips. He looked around for some kind of weapon,

but all he could find was Stu's electric razor. He picked it up, crept to the door, then lifted the razor and swung open the door, shouting, "GAAHHH!!"

"AAAAH!" Stu jumped away from the closet, stumbled backwards, and fell against the wall. His head made a cracking sound when it hit. "Ow! What are you doing?"

"Sorry," Josh said, sagged with relief. "I thought you were a burglar."

"Ow." Stu pushed away from the wall and rubbed his head. Josh took a step forward, but Stu stopped him with a look. "Get away from me."

"Sorry. I was just trying to help."

"Why do you have my razor? Did you decide to steal *my* stuff because you think I stole your money?"

"No, I—never mind."

"Put it back then."

"Okay, god!" Josh put the razor back in the bathroom and shut off the shower, then dried himself off. "I don't want any of your stupid stuff anyway!" he shouted.

"Good!"

Josh wrapped the damp towel around himself again and went back into the room to get his clothes. Stu didn't look at him; he just dragged his suitcase out of the closet and threw it on his bed as Josh took his clothes into the bathroom to change.

When Josh came back out, Stu had packed up everything in the room that belonged to him. The stuff still on the dresser and nightstand was all Josh's, except for the Harry Potter book that Stu had loaned him.

"You'd better pack now, too," Stu told him.

"I will."

"There won't be time in the morning."

"I know! God, quit nagging!"

“Asshole,” Stu muttered.

“I know you are, but what am I?”

“Oh, real fucking mature.” Stu grabbed the book off the nightstand. “I’m taking this back.”

“Go right ahead. I’m too *fucking mature* to read kids’ books, anyway.”

“It’s not a—fine. Whatever.” He managed to fit the book into his suitcase, which he zipped shut and set against the wall. “Are you done with the bathroom?”

Josh fought the urge to be an even bigger dick by saying “no”. He kept his mouth shut and made a sweeping gesture towards the bathroom. Stu went in and shut the door with more force than necessary.

“Fuck.” Josh dragged his own suitcase out of the closet, then he took all of his things out of the dresser and the nightstand, shaking out his clothes and checking all the pockets, looking for the rest of the cash.

He examined every bit of his suitcase, even inside the lining, because he’d hidden the pouch there, but nothing turned up. There was no money in his toiletries bag or in his extra pair of shoes or in any of his socks, all the places that made sense to hide money in. Maybe someone really had broken into the room and taken it. But then why hadn’t they taken his laptop and camera, too?

When Stu came out of the bathroom after his shower, Josh confronted him. “It’s not here. So if you didn’t take it, then it must have been that maid. She saw me get money out of the ATM.”

“It wasn’t her.”

Josh went on like he hadn’t heard him. “But if it was her, then I don’t understand why she wouldn’t have taken the laptop, too, and—”

“Esperanza did not take your money!”

“How do you know? She could have friends that she lets in, lets them steal stuff from the gringos—”

“She’s the owner’s niece. There’s no way in hell she’d let anyone steal from her uncle’s business. And she wouldn’t steal, either.” His eyebrows scrunched down like black caterpillars fighting. “Quit blaming this on other people. You’re the alcoholic who can’t even keep track of his own money. You probably put it somewhere and just forgot, because you were so wasted last night. You were passed out on the bed when I got out of the shower.”

“So you hid it to teach me a lesson? Got it. Now cough it up.”

“I don’t have it!”

And wow, Stu looked pretty pissed off, but Josh knew that the best defense was a great offense. “Did you think you could keep me from drinking so much if you took my cash?”

“Why would I do that? It’s your life and your health. If you want to throw it away, go ahead. I’m not your mother.”

“No, you’re not.” Josh ran a hand through his hair. “Look, you might as well just give it back. It’s not like you stopped me from drinking tonight.”

“I don’t have it, I told you. And I could care less how much you drink.”

“I could care less that you could care less.”

“Shut up. You’re drunk.” Stu climbed into his bed and lay down, facing the wall.

“Maybe you should try getting drunk. Maybe you’d have fun for once in your life.”

Stu sat up and faced Josh. “I have fun. And don’t need to be drunk to do it. And I don’t think letting some creepy old guy grab my ass is fun.”

Josh pushed his face close to Stu’s. “Like I said, maybe you should try it.”

Oops. That was maybe a little TMI. Josh thought about how to play it off, but Stu’s eyes went wide and the silence stretched on a little too long for him to turn it into a joke. And he was a little too drunk to lie when Stu came right out and asked, “Are you gay?”

He wasn't too drunk to miss the look of disgust on Stu's face, though. "Yeah, I'm gay. You got a problem with that?" The best defense was a great offense.

"No. Wait, yeah! We've been sharing a room this whole time!"

"So? What would've changed if you knew?"

Stu opened his mouth, then shut it, then said, "Maybe I would have changed clothes in the bathroom and not made things uncomfortable."

Josh goggled at him. "Uncomfortable? For who? I wasn't, uh..." Josh waved his hands around, looking for the word. "...*overcome* by lust from looking at your skinny legs. *Somehow* I managed to restrain myself from jumping you every night."

Stu didn't say anything, but an angry crimson flush spread up his neck.

Well, fuck. He shouldn't have said that. It was true, but just because something was true didn't mean you had to say it out loud. So what if Stu had skinny legs or pipe-stem arms? It made it easier to share the room with him, actually, since Josh liked big guys like himself, not little, petite, pretty-boys. And especially not straight ones who were ready to jump on the gay-panic train.

But yeah, it had still been a shitty thing to say. "Look," Josh began, working up an apology in his head, but Stu interrupted.

"No, screw you," Stu said. "I don't give a fuck what you think of me, because you're an asshole. It's a good thing this trip is almost over. I don't ever want to talk to you again once we get home. In fact, I don't want to talk to you anymore at all."

"I'd be happy to."

"What? That doesn't even make sense!"

"Well... Shut up!"

"You shut—never mind! I'm going to sleep. Don't talk to me, and don't wake me up."

"What if the hotel's on fire?"

Stu didn't answer. He flopped down on the bed, facing away from Josh, and yanked the sheet up over his head. He didn't say another word to Josh that night or during breakfast the next morning, or in the taxi to the airport, or at the gate while they waited for their flight.

Josh was glad for the quiet. He wasn't that hung over—a lot of the alcohol had wound up on the street instead of in his body—but he felt sick and miserable anyway. A couple of times he caught Stu looking at him, clearly seconds away from saying, "I told you so," but the words never actually came out. Good thing, too, because Josh might have pulled it together just long enough to punch Stu in the face. If he had to spend one second longer than necessary with that little prick, he'd probably kill him. So when he saw his parents at baggage claim, he wasn't just happy to see them, he was ecstatic, knowing that they would take him and Margo home, and that he'd never have to be in the same room with Stu Edelstein ever again. And this time, that thought made him very happy.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

When Amy Edelstein's wedding invitation came in the mail, Josh checked the "regrets" box on the RSVP card and sent it back, putting British postage stamps over the U.S. one on the envelope. It would've been nice to spend some time with his family, who would all be there—Margo was the Maid of Honor—but he couldn't take time off right at the start of his first professional season. And he didn't want to go all the way from North England to the West Coast of the U.S. just for a weekend. And anyway, it wasn't like he really knew Amy that well. He hadn't even seen her for more than five minutes since that trip to Mexico four years earlier.

Besides, if he went, Stu would bitch at him about drinking too much champagne and then possibly steal Josh's wallet. Thanks, but no thanks.

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Josh hadn't felt too bad about missing Amy's wedding because he'd honestly had the excuse of work. But Mr. Edelstein died right after Josh got home for vacation after his second year in the pro leagues, so there was no way he could get out of going to the funeral. Not that he was even going to try; his mom had the flu, so she told Josh he had to go to the funeral in her place, even though he hadn't really known Mr. Edelstein at all.

Margo had known him, though, and she was a mess, unable to stop crying those first couple of days. She cried as she left the house to go over to the Edelsteins' to do dishes or laundry or whatever needed doing, and she was still crying when she got home.

If Margo took Mr. Edelstein's death that hard, Josh didn't want to think how the actual family was handling it. It wasn't like Mr. Edelstein had been that sick, even. He'd gone into the hospital for what everyone thought would be some fairly routine heart surgery and never made it out of the operating room.

So, Josh shouldn't have been surprised to see Mrs. Edelstein's thousand-yard stare at the funeral, but he was. He stopped right in the doorway of the funeral home when he saw her, shocked at how slack and expressionless her face was. The friendly, funny woman who had played poker with his mom was gone, and



in her place was a still, pale, silent ghost. Up until that moment, Mr. Edelstein's death had been kind of abstract for Josh, but when Margo put a hand on his back, something broke in him as well. He shook his head. "God, she looks like shit."

The words just slipped out. He would have added, "I mean, of course she does, anyone who'd just lost their husband would look like that." In another second, he would have turned around to ask Margo to take him with her the next time she went over to the Edelsteins' so he could help out however he could, because, holy crap, he got it now.

But before he could qualify his statement, before he could turn around, a low, raspy male voice said, "You prick."

Josh spun around. Margo wasn't behind him, wasn't the one who had touched his back. It was Stu. Taller Stu, who barely had to tilt his head up to give Josh a look so venomous that Josh flinched. "Stu, I didn't—"

"*Fuck* you." Stu turned and walked over to his mother, sitting down next to her and putting his arm around her before shooting another glare in Josh's direction.

"Shit." Josh took a step forward, but there was a clear warning in Stu's red-rimmed eyes, and Josh stopped. He turned around and took a seat that he hoped would be out of Stu's line of sight. Margo sat down next to him, and their dad sat next to her. "Where have you been?" Josh whispered to her.

"I had to go get more Kleenex," she whispered back. "Stu said he wanted to talk to you. Did he find you?"

Josh hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah."

"What did he want?"

"He, um... He said to tell Mom to feel better soon."

"That was nice of him."

"Yeah."

After the funeral, he begged off going to the Edelsteins'. "You guys go, pass on my condolences. I'll look after Mom." Thankfully, Margo and his dad bought

it and dropped him at home. He spent the rest of the afternoon bringing his mom soup and orange juice and realizing that trying to never be in the same room as Stu wasn't good enough; he needed to work on never being on the same continent. Every time they met, it ended in disaster, and it just needed to stop.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

“Hey, Mom.” Josh rubbed his eyes with the hand that wasn’t holding his phone, then he rolled over to look at the clock. Four A.M.? *That* woke him up. “What’s wrong?”

“Why would you—oh, no, I forgot about the time difference. Did I wake you?”

“Yeah, that’s okay.” Next to him, Ian rolled over and threw an arm over Josh’s waist. “Why are you calling?”

“I was hoping you could come home for a visit.”

Josh closed his eyes. “You know I’ll be home when the season ends next month, right?”

“Yes, but, um...”

She paused, and that was kind of weird, because his mom was never at a loss for words. Josh pulled Ian’s arm off of his waist and sat up. The cool air coming through the windows wasn’t causing the chill that filled his body. “What’s wrong?”

His mom sighed. “You know my cold that wouldn’t go away? It turned out to be leukemia, and it’s not looking good. I need you to come home. As soon as you can.”

Oh, fuck. No.

Ian had woken up, and sat up as well. “What’s wrong?” he whispered.

Josh shook his head. “Okay, I’ll get there as soon as I can. I’ll get on a flight tomorrow—today, I mean.” He got out of bed and stumbled out of the bedroom, looking around the flat like he’d never seen it before, even though he’d been living there for three years.

“Thanks, Josh. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you until now. I thought I could beat it, and then we’d all laugh about it afterwards. But, not so much, I guess.”

“God, Mom...” Tears burned their way out of his eyes and rolled down his face. He wiped them away as he went into the bathroom, shutting the door and leaning against it.

“We’ll talk when you get here, okay? I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“You’re just—you have no concept—you don’t apologize to someone for waking them up when it’s to tell them you have cancer!” He wiped his eyes, but the tears kept coming.

She laughed, sounding more like herself. “There’s my boy. Travel safe, and I’ll see you when I see you.”

“Mom...”

“It’s okay, Josh. I just want the family to be together. Call me tomorrow when you know your plans.”

“God. Um... okay.”

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye.” The phone went silent, and he fought really hard not to throw it against the wall. Instead, he banged his head on the door behind him, softly, then harder and harder until Ian knocked on the door.

“Josh.”

Fuck. “One sec.” Josh ran some cold water in the sink and splashed it on his face, then dried himself off with a towel, but he still looked a mess. Well, he was going to have to tell Ian anyway. He opened the door.

Ian stood there in pajama bottoms, looking worried. “Tell me.”

“I’m pretty sure my mom’s dying of cancer.”

“Jesus!” His eyes went wide. “You didn’t know?”

“No, no one in my family tells me anything. I’m the *baby*, they don’t want to worry me. Or something. Yeah.” He laughed bleakly, then stepped past Ian and went down the hall to the dining room, where he kept his laptop. “I have to go home. Today. I hope I get there in time.” He sat down and switched it on.

Ian laid a hand on Josh's back and rubbed gently. "I'll go with you."

Josh shrugged off Ian's hand. "Why would you go with me?" He waited for the computer to boot up—god, it seemed to get slower every day—and as the seconds ticked by and his patience wore thinner and thinner, he realized that Ian had gone silent. Josh turned around to look at him, but it was too dark to make out his expression. "What?" he snapped.

"I just thought that you'd want someone there for emotional support."

"The rest of my family will be there." *Finally*, the computer finished booting up. Josh connected to the internet and pulled up a travel-booking site.

"Yes, but you might want someone there besides your family. And I'd like to meet your mum."

"No, that's okay. Really." Josh typed in the destination and departure date, hesitating over the return date. He scrolled back up to the top of the page and chose "one-way" instead of "round trip".

"Oh, my god." Ian pulled out one of the chairs and sat down. "Are you not out to your family?"

"I've never actually *told* them I'm gay, if that's what you mean." Okay, one-way flights to Portland, leaving that day...

"Well, then I can see how it would be rather a shock for them if you showed up with me."

The earliest he could do would probably be the one just after ten A.M. He clicked on it. "Yeah." He entered his credit card information and clicked "purchase". Okay, that was done. Now to pack, and shit, he'd have to call Simon on the way to the airport. Hopefully the team manager would understand why Josh was leaving in the middle of the playoffs and not fire him outright. He walked over to the closet and pulled out his suitcase.

"Josh."

"Hmm?" He turned to see Ian still in the dining room, standing next to the table.

“Are you going to tell them?”

“Tell them what?”

“That you’re gay.”

“Yeah. At least Mom. She deserves to know.”

Ian walked down the hall and followed Josh into the bedroom. “You should tell all of them.”

“They’re going to have a lot to deal with. They don’t need me dumping this on them as well.”

“You’re not *dumping* anything. And if anything, they’ll be happy to know you’re with someone, that you have someone to look after you.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not *with* anyone.”

“Uh, hello,” Ian said, gesturing to himself.

Josh glanced at him, then began throwing clothes into the suitcase. “What? It’s not like we’re dating or anything.”

There was a pause, then Ian said, “You’re kidding, right?”

“No, I’m not. Wait... you think we’re dating.” Josh stopped packing and looked at Ian, frowning at the hurt he saw on Ian’s face. “Why would you think that?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe being in a monogamous relationship with you for the past four months? Oh, my god,” Ian said, when Josh winced. “I haven’t been in a monogamous relationship for the past four months. How many other guys have you slept with?”

“None,” Josh said. “Um... Hand jobs aren’t the same as sleeping with someone, right?”

“Oh, my god.”

“I thought we were just having really good sex a few times a week! I didn’t know you thought it was something else.”

“Well, I did.”

“You never said anything.”

“I thought it was obvious.”

“Yeah, no, it wasn't.” Josh finished with the clothes from the dresser and moved to the bedroom closet.

“Are you really that oblivious?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Ian sighed. “All right then. I'll just come out and say it. I'd like to have a relationship with you. I'd like us to be boyfriends.”

“I really can't do this now.” He could wear a suit jacket on the plane so it wouldn't get wrinkled in his suitcase, then he'd have it in case he needed it for... Fuck. He dropped the suit on the bed and sat down next to it, his face in his hands.

Ian sat next to him. “See? You need someone with you. You'll be a wreck otherwise.”

“No.” Josh wiped his face and stood up. He slipped the suit pants off the hanger and put them into the suitcase, then hung the jacket up again. “I'll be fine. I don't need you to come with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“What will you tell your family about us?”

“Nothing.” When Ian just looked at him, Josh shrugged. “What, you want me to tell them there's this guy in England who really likes my blowjobs? I don't think so.” He zipped up the suitcase.

“Josh...”

“Look, we can talk about it when I get back. But you have to go now. I've... I have to get ready to leave.”

“Okay. I'm sorry about your mum.”

“Thanks.”

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Josh drove the rental car as fast as he could through the rain. He didn't stop to talk to Margo or his dad when he got home, he just ran right upstairs. His mom looked awful, too thin, with dark circles under her eyes, but her smile was the same. "Thanks for coming home, baby."

Josh sat in the chair next to her bed and burst into tears. "Why didn't you tell me sooner? I would have come home. I would have been here..."

"You have your own life, Josh! I didn't want you sitting around worrying, not being able to do anything. And you're here now. So let's have fun and not freak out, okay?"

"How can I not freak out? Jesus Christ." He wiped his eyes.

"Taking your mind off of it. Tell me what you've been doing. How's the club? Are they going to renew your contract? Are you still in that apartment with the tiny kitchen?"

"Every apartment in England has a tiny kitchen. And yes, I'm pretty sure I'll be signed for another season."

"But what about five years from now? Will you still be playing?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"How have you managed to keep all your teeth?"

He laughed a little. "I wear a mouth guard. Some of the guys on the team take the piss out of me for—"

"They beat the piss out of you? What?"

"No, it's just an expression. Um, they give me shit for it. But joking, like."

"My little boy has turned into a huge Brit." She shook her head, but she was smiling. "Are you seeing anyone?"

Josh looked at the ceiling, then at the bedspread. "I didn't think I was."

"What does that mean?"



“It means I was informed yesterday—no, today—that I’m in a relationship. Apparently.”

“What’s his name?”

“Oh. Um. Ian.” He let out a shuddering sigh. “I wasn’t sure you knew. About me.”

“I didn’t until just now.” She took his hand. “But I’d kind of guessed. You’ve never had a girlfriend or even talked about girls, not the way your sister talked about boys. Still does. Even as picky as she is, she’s had some boyfriends. And it’s not like girls wouldn’t like you. If you wanted, they’d probably be all over you.”

“Um.”

“What?”

“They kind of are anyway. Even more when I tell them I’m not interested.”

“Nothing a woman likes better than a challenge.” She smiled. “So have you ever really tried to date women? Maybe you’re bi.”

“I’m not.”

“It would make things so much easier—”

“Mom. I’m *not*.”

“Well.” She shrugged one shoulder. “I had to ask.” She settled back against the pillows. “So tell me about Ian.”

Josh shook his head. “Nothing to tell. Just a guy I, uh, hang out with sometimes.”

“Hang out with.”

“Um...”

“You’re being safe, right?”

“Of course! I’m not an idiot.”

“I didn’t say you were. Even though people your age *do* do some idiotic things sometimes. So. He thinks you and he are boyfriends, but you don’t?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing. I mean, he’s okay, but... I don’t really want to be in a relationship right now. I mean, if I get hurt or cut from the team, I’ll have to leave and come back here. So there’s no point in having anything serious with any of the guys I know over there.”

“Guys, multiple?”

“They’re just friends.”

“Hmm.” She raised an eyebrow, then said, “Okay, it sounds like Ian isn’t the one.”

“There’s no such thing as ‘the one’.”

“Oh, Josh, of course there is! Your father is my ‘one’.”

“Really? How’d you know?”

“I know it sounds stupid, but I just did. The only thing we had in common when we met was that we liked games, all sorts of video games and role-playing games—”

“Ew, no, TMI.”

“Not that kind of role-playing!” She hit him lightly on the shoulder. “You know, like Renaissance Fairs.”

“Big nerds, both of you.”

“You know it.” She grinned, and then looked more serious. “But there was just something between us from the first time we met, some connection. We make each other laugh. He understands the things I’m passionate about and is always there with support.”

“What about the things *he’s* passionate about?”

“Well... Your dad isn’t passionate about much. Except me.” She grinned again.

As much as Josh wanted to listen to his mom's voice, he really didn't want to hear those details, so he was thankful when she shifted the topic of conversation. "So what are you passionate about, besides rugby? What do you want out of life?"

"I don't know. I didn't think I'd need to decide so soon." Tears welled up again and he put his face in his hands. His mother stroked his hair.

"It's okay if you don't know. I mean, if you did, I'd love to hear it, but if you don't, that's okay, too. You're still young, you're still finding your way."

A few minutes later, his mother gave him a kiss and sent him out of the room, telling him that she needed to rest. When he got downstairs, he snapped at his dad and sister for not telling him, then he started crying again when they hugged him. "I can't stop," he said, taking a tissue from the box his sister offered him.

"No one expects you to," she said.

"It'd be nice not to fall apart in front of Mom, just make her feel worse."

"She understands."

Josh hoped that was true, but he was still determined to hold it together when he went upstairs the next day. As he approached his mother's room, he heard her laughing, and the sound lifted a huge weight off of his heart. It was a relief not to have to force a smile. He was about to knock on the door frame, but he stopped when he saw a stranger sitting on her bed. It was some guy with dark hair, wearing faded jeans and a set of those Buddhist beads around his wrist. The shirt he wore looked like he'd slept in it, and from the bit of his face that Josh could see, it looked like he hadn't shaved in a few days. Had a homeless person gotten into the house and wandered into his mother's room? Before he could say anything, she waved him in.

"Oh, Josh, you're awake! You remember Stu Edelstein."

Well, shit. Josh should have recognized that scruff of beard, but the width of the shoulders had thrown him off. Looked like scrawny little Stu had filled out since Mexico. "Yeah. What's he doing here?"

“He’s just leaving,” Stu said, jumping off the bed. “I’ll be back tomorrow,” he told Josh’s mom. He smiled at her, then walked over to Josh. “Hey, man.” He stuck out his hand. Josh stared at it but didn’t take it. “Okay, then.” Stu walked out of the room.

“No, you wait a minute—”

“Josh.” His mom held out her hand to him.

Josh looked between her and Stu, who had turned around and stood in the hallway. He turned away from Stu and went to his mother.

“Why was he here?”

“To spend some time with me, and he came all the way from Thailand, so be nice to him. Look, those are the postcards he’s been sending to cheer me up.”

“Oh, my god.” All his good intentions of keeping it together dropped away. “You told him? You told *him*, but you didn’t tell me, all this time? What the hell?” The last thing his mom needed was him shouting at her, so he took a deep breath, trying to dissolve the red haze of anger that had filled his head.

“I didn’t tell him, I told Terri, and she just told him I’d been under the weather. But he came right out and asked in one of his emails, and I couldn’t lie, so, yes, I told him. And then after I called you, I emailed him, and he started making arrangements to come back. It took him a little longer than it took you. He just got back this morning.”

“Why... was he emailing you?”

She sighed. “Okay, this might sound a little strange, but Stu and I have been pretty close, ever since his father died.”

A horrible thought struck Josh. “Oh, my god, are you having an *affair* with him?”

“With Stu?” His mother gaped at him for a moment before barking out a laugh. “Yes. Yes, that’s exactly right, I’m having an affair with my friend’s son, who’s even younger than my own, and it’s all taking place right under my husband’s nose. You’ve found me out.”

Josh went hot. "Okay, when you say it like that..."

"No, I'm sorry, I shouldn't make fun. You've had a lot to deal with in the past twenty-four hours." *He'd* had a lot to deal with? Oh, did *that* make Josh feel guilty, so he silently swore to shut up and listen to his mother. "What happened was, Terri was so out of it the first few days after Steve died, and Stu just sort of picked me to vent to, so I let him. He needed to get it all out. And then he just kept on venting to me, even after Terri got past the worst of it. I guess he felt like he didn't want to burden her with his problems. It's the same reason I didn't want to tell you until I had to. You're my son, my baby, and I'm still trying to protect you, even though you're twenty-five and can lift a house."

She squeezed his hand, and Josh felt a little better... until she said, "I noticed some tension between you and Stu just now. What's that about?"

He shook his head. "Just... he's kind of a jerk."

"No, he's not. He's a sweet boy."

"To you, maybe."

"Well, you should try talking to him. He's really very nice, and he's got lots of interesting stories about Thailand."

"Yeah, I bet he does."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"Josh! He's there for work, not for some sleazy sex tour."

"Yeah, okay."

She rolled her eyes. "Just talk to him. Ask him about what he's been doing. I think you'll see what he's really like."

She changed the subject, asking about Josh's club and his friends on the team, and they talked until she got tired and sent him away again.

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Josh spent mornings and afternoons with his mother so that Margo and their dad could be with her in the evenings. When his dad got home, Josh would go out for a run or downstairs to lift weights. Margo would usually arrive by the time he'd finished. If Stu was coming to visit, it wasn't when Josh was around. On his fifth day home, his mom seemed much more tired than the day before. "I can go if you like," he offered, his chest tight, as the hospice nurse slipped out of the room.

"No, stay for a while," she said, holding out her hand. He took it. "You know, I don't mind that you're gay. I just wish I would have been around longer to enjoy it. Except you don't really seem like the kind of gay boy who will go shoe shopping or watch Barbra Streisand movies with his mother."

"Nope. Sorry."

"You know that all I've ever wanted for you and Margo is to find someone you love and who loves you, who will look after you."

Damn it, no crying. Not now. "Yeah, we know."

"I think you'd make a wonderful father, though."

"I don't know about that..."

"Yes, you would. So think about it, okay? You can always adopt, or hire a surrogate, or who knows what science will come up with in another few years."

"Yeah."

She drifted off to sleep, so Josh didn't say anything, just kept holding her hand while she slept. Margo came by around noon and they all had lunch together when their mom woke up, then Josh left when she fell asleep again. Their dad took over from Margo late afternoon, but he came downstairs an hour later.

"She just slipped away," he told them, his voice muffled with tears. "She woke up for a little while and smiled at me, then went back to sleep, and then she was gone."

The funeral was set for two days later. Josh ironed the suit pants and a dress shirt he'd brought.

“Let me do that,” Amy offered. She’d been practically living at the house, cooking for them, cleaning up, and fielding phone calls.

“No, you sit,” Josh said, eyeing her large belly. “Keep that thing away from me.”

She laughed. “You’re funny.”

“I’m completely serious. Pregnant women scare me.”

“Spoken like a true man.”

“When are you due?”

“Four days ago.”

“Jesus.” He looked up from the ironing board. “Seriously, get away from me.”

“You’re scared of this?” She grinned, wiggling her belly at him. “Scared of a little baby that could come shooting out any second? Don’t piss me off, Josh, or I’ll aim it right at you.”

“Like one of those egg ladies, only much, much more horrifying.”

“It’s just a baby! Seriously...” She rolled her eyes but laughed, too. “You’re so much more fun than you were when we went to Mexico, except for the time you were dancing in that bar without your shirt. I don’t know why Stu doesn’t see it.”

Josh bent his head over the ironing board again. “What do you mean?”

“Every time I mention you, he just gets annoyed. Like he doesn’t know you’re fun to be around.”

“Yeah, well. Maybe your idea of fun and his don’t exactly line up.” Josh continued to iron. He couldn’t care less what Stu thought of him. Tight-assed little prude.

Josh distracted himself from his grief by focusing on how annoying Stu Edelstein was. But at the funeral, he saw Stu in his dark suit and remembered what had happened the last time he’d seen him wearing it. The awful thing Josh had said about Mrs. Edelstein, even though he hadn’t meant it like it had come

out. Stu overhearing it. No wonder Stu thought Josh was a dick. Josh wouldn't have been surprised if Stu had come up to him and said, "Now it's your father who looks like shit," but of course, he didn't. Stu was a sweet boy, his mother had said. A sweet boy everyone trusted with the truth, who sent postcards to a dying woman while her son carried on with his own life, oblivious, a continent and an ocean between him and his family.

Anger and hurt burned inside him as he stared at the coffin. *So* not the time for this, but he couldn't stop thinking about it. It felt better to be angry than to be so sad that he just wanted to lie on the ground and sob. He dug a tissue out of his pocket and wiped his eyes. As he did so, he saw Stu watching him, saw the pity on Stu's face, and god, why couldn't Stu just leave? Get the hell out of his life, out of his family's life, and leave him the fuck alone.

Stu did stay out of Josh's way—at the cemetery, and later, at the Dimitriou's house. Josh didn't see the Edelsteins leave, and when Margo told him a few days later that Stu had returned to Thailand, Josh felt a relief so strong he had to sit down. And how weird was that? It was almost like he was afraid of Stu, which was too far past ridiculous. Yeah, Stu wasn't a slender little twig anymore, but he wasn't nearly as physically intimidating as the guys Josh saw on the field every day. After turning it over in his head for a couple of days, Josh decided that he wasn't afraid *of* Stu, he was afraid *for* Stu, afraid he'd slam a fist into that angular jaw the next time Stu opened his jerk mouth.

When he got back to England he had a talk with Ian. "I'm not ready to settle down with one person right now."

Ian sniffed. "That usually means there's someone else you want to fuck."

"No, that's not—"

"Do I know him?"

"There isn't anyone else," Josh ground out. "I'm just not ready for a relationship. With anyone."

"All right, keep telling yourself that. And one day you won't have anyone. Maybe your Mr. Right was right here in front of you the whole time, but you just couldn't see him."



“That’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

Ian stormed off in a huff. Josh went down to the pub and had Guinness after Guinness until closing time.

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## CHAPTER SIX

“You’re really beautiful. How are we even related?” Josh looked at Margo’s reflection in the mirror. The veil contrasted with her dark hair, and she looked luminous.

“You’re not such a bad looking guy,” Margo said, and then her smile fell away.

“What’s wrong?”

She looked away, then turned away from the mirror to look him in the eyes. “God, I don’t want to do this, I know I’m worried about nothing, but... better to get it out of the way before the wedding.”

“This sounds bad. Do you want me to go get Sean?”

“No, I need to talk to you.”

“Me?” Josh shook his head. “Yeah, sure, whatever you want.”

“I’m going to ask you something, and I want you to answer me honestly, no jokes. Okay? For once?”

“Okay...”

“Are you gay?”

“Yes. Didn’t Mom tell you?”

“No. You told her?”

“Yeah.”

“But not us?”

“No. I had to... I figured I’d let you and Dad know later, when it was convenient, but... I couldn’t wait. With her.”

“Yeah, okay, I can see that.” She nodded but still looked pensive.

“Was that it?”

“No.” She fixed him with a look. “Are you in love with Sean?”

“With *Sean*?” He laughed, surprised. “No! God. I’m a little in lust with him, because, come on, he’s totally hot and I’m not blind.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “Wait, so you think just because I’m gay that I have no self-control and I’ll throw myself on any cute guy I see, including my sister’s fiancé?”

“No.”

“You do. You totally do.” He shook his head. “Nice. You think I would try something.”

“No, I don’t.” She sighed. “But you do kind of flirt with each other.”

“As a joke! You know that, right? I mean, if there was something between us, we wouldn’t act like that right in front of you. We would have the decency and respect to do it behind your back.”

“Thanks, good to know.” But she smiled.

Josh grinned at her. “He’s a good guy. And I’m really impressed that a straight guy is comfortable enough to joke around like that.”

Her smile faltered. “He’s bi.”

“Oh. Huh.” Just for a second, he felt a spark of regret that he hadn’t met Sean first, because he totally would have hit that. But it wouldn’t have gone any further than that. Sean was a good guy, but Josh wasn’t in love with him and never would be, so the spark didn’t last longer than that second. “Well, whatever. That still doesn’t change the fact that he’ll be your husband in twenty minutes. You can trust me not to try anything.” He frowned. “Or do you not trust *him*?”

“I trust him. He tells me everything. He can’t shut up, actually.” Her smile returned, the smile of the goofily-in-love bride, and Josh felt the tension in his chest ease. “He said the same thing as you, that you two are just joking around, and I know he’s telling the truth, just like I know you’re telling the truth.”

“See? So everything’s okay.”

“He also said if he’d met you first, that he would have ‘totally hit that’. His words.”

Josh grinned. “Awesome.”

“Not awesome!” She shoved at his shoulder. “God! I always kind of sneered at girls who were afraid their sisters would steal their boyfriends. I never thought I’d have worry about my *brother*.”

“You don’t have to worry about your brother. It’s just nice to know that I can still turn heads at my age.” He preened dramatically.

“Yeah, twenty-seven is *so old*.”

“So we’re good? No worries on my account?”

“No. I just needed to air it all out, I guess.”

“Okay. And this wasn’t some roundabout way of suggesting a three-way, was it?”

“Ew! No! Josh—”

“Kidding! I’m kidding! Believe me, I’m just as grossed out as you.”

“You’re so weird sometimes.”

“Not sometimes. All the time.”

“True.” Then her expression turned serious again. “So then what were you two talking about at the dinner last night? You were off away from everyone, and it looked really intense.”

“Oh. Yeah, that. Sean has this idea to put together a rugby training camp for some of his patients, kids who are obese. We were talking about exercises and drills and training, and it just brought back a lot of memories from when I started.” Josh sighed. “My whole life changed, just took a one eighty after I started playing.” He hesitated, then said, “I didn’t know I was gay until the captain of our team, um, helped me celebrate my eighteenth birthday.”

“Wait, Nick? Nick was gay?”

“Still is, as far as I know. I haven’t talked to him in years.”

“Wow. I had no idea. I had a huge crush on him, you know.”

“Yeah. You seem to like those dark, handsome types.”

“So do you, apparently, since you think Sean is so hot.”

“Great minds think alike.”

“Amy thinks he looks like Stu.”

Josh’s heart skipped a beat. “What? Sean? He looks nothing like Stu!”

“Yeah, actually, he kind of does. Amy was making fun of me, telling me that I didn’t need to go to Seattle to find a husband when her brother was available.” She pushed a bobby pin more firmly into her hair. “Of course, he’s not available anymore.”

Josh’s heart gave another jolt, and he went hot all over. He even felt a little nauseated. “Stu’s married?” Something at lunch must have been off. He hoped to god he wouldn’t be sick in the middle of the wedding.

“No, but he’s here with his girlfriend, so they must be pretty serious.”

“He brought his girlfriend to your wedding? Do you even know her?” He could be outraged on his sister’s behalf. Brothers were allowed to do that.

“No, but it’s customary to send out invitations addressed to the person ‘and guest’.”

“It’s still pretty rude.”

Margo stared at him. “No, it’s not. It’s perfectly normal. In fact, it’s a nice way to introduce her to everyone, because the pressure’s off. No one’s going to be looking at her, because they’ll all be looking at the girl in the big, white, poofy dress.”

He tried to return her smile, but he still felt off, and she must have seen it.

“Are you feeling okay? You look kind of pale.”

“I’m okay, I just need to get something to drink.”

Her brows drew together. “You’re not going to get drunk and cause a scene, are you? I still remember that huge pool of vomit in Mexico.”

“No, I just need some water. Are you okay here? Do you want me to send Amy back?”

Just then, the door swung open and Amy stuck her head into the room. “Sorry, sorry, Emma had a TBE and—”

“A TBE?” Josh asked.

“Total bowel evacuation.”

“Eww!”

“Hey, you asked. Anyway, Mark was changing her and he ran out of baby wipes. It was like that scene from Pulp Fiction where he shoots that guy in the car, only imagine that it’s poo instead of blood.”

“EWW!” Josh and Margo both shuddered.

“Yeah. So I was directing the process, staying out of the way so I didn’t get any on the dress, which really is gorgeous, thank you,” she said to Margo, “and it just took longer than usual.”

Margo made a face. “I think I’ve changed my mind about wanting kids.”

“I really might be sick now,” Josh added.

“Oh, grow up, you wusses,” Amy snapped at them. “It’s just baby poo. And you weren’t even there.”

“Thank god for that.” Josh shook his head and slipped out of the room before Amy could mock him again.

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A few minutes later, walking down the aisle to the Beach Boys, he saw Stu leaning over to talk to a woman with long, dark hair. Stu’s hair was shorter than the last time Josh had seen it, but it still fell over the back of his collar, and Josh fought an urge to rub his hand over his own closely cropped hair. As he approached their row, he made sure to keep looking directly forward. The rabbi smiled at him, probably thinking he had stage fright, which didn’t make any sense; it wasn’t *his* wedding. He took his place and looked out at the guests. His eyes flicked over Stu and the girl next to him, who was one of the most beautiful women Josh had ever seen. The dark hair he’d seen from the back framed high cheekbones, huge eyes, and a full mouth, all set in skin the color of espresso. She

looked so happy to be there, smiling as she leaned towards Stu and said something that made him laugh. Then her eyes fell on Josh, and she beamed at him. Realizing he was staring, Josh looked away from her, fixing his gaze on the wedding party that was making its way up the aisle.

He held onto one of the poles that supported the chuppah, while two bridesmaids and Sean's nephew held the other three poles. Josh watched Margo throughout the ceremony, keeping his eyes on her until the world narrowed to her, Sean, and the rabbi. Words, prayers, vows floated past him like smoke, and then there was a *crunch!* when Sean stepped on the wineglass. The noise broke through Josh's trance, and he cheered along with the rest of the guests.

He cheered again during the reception when Mrs. Edelstein caught the bouquet after Amy and Stu made her join the other single women. "It's for *young* single women, not grandmothers," she'd complained, but she'd looked pleased when it fell right into her hands.

"Go on, get up there." Josh's dad prodded Josh's shoulder as Sean peeled the garter off of Margo's leg.

"Ew, no, I'm not catching a garter that was inches away from my sister's lady-parts."

Rolling his eyes, his dad shook his head, then turned to Amy, who was pushing Stu towards the group of single men.

"See what you can do about Josh, too."

"I'm not—"

"Yes, you are," Amy told Josh firmly. "You, too," she said to Stu. "You don't have to catch it, but get up there and look happy so that Margo and your dad and our mom know you're having fun."

"For God's sake, Amy—" Stu began, but Amy caught his earlobe between her thumb and index finger and squeezed. "Ow, ow, fu—uh, ow, stop! All right, fine, I'm going!"

Amy whirled on Josh, but he put his hands up, surrendering. "I'm going, I'm going." He saw Stu's girlfriend with her hands over her mouth, her shoulders shaking like she was trying hold in her laughter.

Josh shuffled up to the back of the group, Stu following him closely enough to make the hair stand up on Josh's neck. "You should go up to the front," he told Stu, stepping to the side.

"Why don't *you* go up to the front?" Stu asked.

"Because I don't have a gorgeous girlfriend waiting for me to catch the damn thing."

Stu raised an eyebrow, turned to wave at the aforementioned girlfriend, then turned back to Josh, who pointed towards the front of the group again, but Stu waved him off. "I'm good."

Jerk, Josh thought.

Sean's toss fell mercifully short of where Josh was standing, but he noticed that Stu didn't lunge for the scrap of satin and lace either. Sean's brother caught it, which Josh took as his cue to walk away.

After the bride and groom made their exit under a shower of birdseed, the guests started to drift out, even though the reception was scheduled to run for another hour. Josh wandered around, accepting congratulations on behalf of Margo, and eventually found himself at the bar. An older man who was there ahead of him ordered two vodka-and-tonics, then looked at Josh appraisingly. "You're the brother of the bride."

"Yes." He stuck out his hand. "Josh Dimitriou."

"Calvin Mortenson. A friend of Sean's parents from Seattle."

"Nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

Josh eyed the two drinks the bartender set on the bar in front of the man, but managed to keep himself from saying anything insulting. If people wanted to get



drunk at his sister's wedding, he wasn't going to stop them. Hell, *he* was planning to get nicely buzzed before the evening was over.

"They're not both for me, in case you were wondering," Calvin said, his lips twisting.

"Um..." Any response Josh could give would come out badly.

"Get your drink and then come meet my partner." Calvin picked up the drinks and walked over to a table where some of the parental generation were sitting, not giving Josh a chance to decline gracefully.

Josh shrugged. "What the hell. Another vodka and tonic," he told the bartender.

"Yes, *sir*." The bartender kind of smirked at him. Josh went red, but fuck it. He wasn't going to be intimidated about his choice of drink just then, no matter how cute the bartender was. If Josh wanted a white wine spritzer or even a fucking Cosmo, he'd order it.

He got his drink and thought about going off to a quiet corner, but Calvin waved him over. When he got there, he endured hugs from Sean's parents, who then went to mingle, so he took one of the empty chairs.

"Josh, is it?" Calvin said.

"Yes."

"This is my partner, Eric Delacroix."

Eric took one hand off his cane to shake hands with Josh. Josh thought he should make some conversation, polite small talk, but at that moment he saw Stu and his girlfriend out on the dance floor, moving together to some old song. They made a beautiful couple, and Josh's stomach turned over again. He'd barely eaten anything at the reception because of the earlier nausea he'd felt, so he probably shouldn't be drinking at all. But maybe the tonic would settle his stomach a little. He turned away from the dance floor and sipped his drink.

"Are you married, Josh?"

"No."

“Then I expect you’ll soon get nudged towards the altar.”

“Well...” Was he really going to come out to strangers before his own father? Yeah, he was. *These* strangers would get it. “No, I probably won’t, since I’m gay.”

Calvin turned to Eric with a smile. Eric sighed, dug into the pocket of his trousers, and handed him a coin. “We never bet for more than a nickel,” Eric explained.

“You bet on whether I was gay or not?” Josh looked from one man to the other, not sure if he should be offended.

“Not the most appropriate behavior, we know. And we’re sorry.” But Calvin didn’t look too sorry as he held the nickel up in front of Eric’s face before putting it in his own pocket.

Josh shook his head. “It’s okay. But I actually haven’t told my dad yet, so if you could not pass that around, I’d appreciate it,” Josh added. “I don’t want to overshadow Margo’s big day. She’ll beat the crap out of me if I do.”

“Wouldn’t want to upset the bride,” Eric said, smiling. “I really thought Calvin was wrong this time. Usually big, strapping, gay lads go the bear route, but you’re too clean-shaven to fall into that category.”

“I’m not a category,” Josh said, frowning, but Calvin shook his head.

“No, Josh, what Eric is trying and failing, oh, so badly, to say is, things are very different from when we were your age. Without distinct categories like twinks or bears, it’s sometimes hard to know if a man is gay or not. Right?”

Eric looked at Calvin and said, “Yes, thanks for telling me what I meant.” But he took Calvin’s hand and squeezed it.

“Anytime,” Calvin replied with a smile. He turned back to Josh. “And even when we can’t tell just by looking, it’s not unusual these days for a man to either come right out and say he is, as you did, or, if he’s straight, to say so without taking any offense at the question. It’s such a different world now.”

“I guess I don’t think about it much.”

"It's nice that you don't have to," Calvin said.

"You kids today have it so easy," Eric added. "Why, when I was young, I had to walk five miles in the snow to get to the nearest glory hole."

Josh snorted out a laugh.

"But seriously," Eric continued, "sometimes it's hard to believe how much the world has changed in forty years. I remember things like the hankie code, and how finely tuned our gaydar had to be in order to not pick up the wrong man."

Calvin nodded. "There were certain 'tells' we all had that just aren't there anymore. These days I can't tell the difference between straight and gay theater queens, and don't get me started on metrosexuals. It's really very confusing for gay men of a certain age."

"So how'd you know, then? About me?"

"I didn't. We like to bet on the sexuality of every attractive man we're not sure about. This time, I happened to be right." Calvin lifted his glass in a toast to Eric, who subtly flipped him off.

"How often are you right?"

Calvin turned to Eric. "What would you say, between the two of us? Seventy-five percent of the time?"

Eric nodded. "More if the man's over fifty, less if he's under forty. But yes, that's probably the average."

Josh tipped back the rest of his drink. "Why does it matter, though, if the guy's gay or straight?" he asked. "I thought the point of the gay rights movement was to make that unimportant."

Calvin sipped his drink and then nodded. "Oh, no, absolutely, sexuality shouldn't matter."

"Unless you're trying to get laid," Eric said.

"Yeah, there is that," Josh agreed.

"My point is that we've made gains, but there have been losses, too. You young 'uns—whipper-snappers—" Calvin said with a grin, "no longer need the

people-reading skills that we had to have for survival. For example..." He took another sip of his drink and then used it to point at the bar. "You either had no idea that our adorable bartender was checking you out, or you don't care."

"Or maybe young Josh here has a loving partner somewhere that he needs to get back to," Eric said, raising his eyebrows at Calvin.

"No, I don't. He was checking me out?" Josh twisted in his chair to look at the bartender again.

"Yes. So either Mr. Adorable has exceptional gaydar, or he doesn't worry about flirting with straight boys." Calvin shook his head. "Different world, indeed." He took another sip of his drink. "How about you get us two more of these, hm? And take your time with it."

"Um. Yeah, okay. Thanks." He grinned at the two men, and then he got up and walked (casually, he hoped) back to the bar.

The bartender smirked at him again, but this time Josh recognized it as the compliment it was. "What can I get for you, sir?"

"Two more vodka-and-tonics for the gentlemen over there."

"Very good, sir. And for yourself?"

"How about your phone number?"

The smirk got smirkier. "I'm in a relationship."

"Oh." Well, fuck Calvin and his damn gaydar. "Sorry, of course you are. I, um... I'll just take a Guinness, then."

The bartender popped the cap off the beer and set it down in front of Josh before he started on the vodka-and-tonics. "I'm Justin."

"Oh, um. Josh. Nice to meet you."

Justin didn't offer his hand. Probably a food-safety thing, or at least Josh hoped he wasn't so repulsive that he didn't even merit a handshake. "My boyfriend's name is Zach, and I would never cheat on him."

"No, of course not." What an idiot he'd been to believe Calvin. He couldn't snap at an old man, so he decided to let the beer take the edge off the rejection.

Justin looked up at Josh from under his eyelashes. "However..."

Josh froze with the bottle halfway to his mouth.

"Zach and I occasionally extend invitations for friends to join us in... activities."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. As long as those friends understand that Zach and I are a couple and that the activities are just casual fun for all. And safe." He tilted his head. "Would you like to make some new friends, Josh?"

Josh nodded. "Very much. I'm only in town for a week for the wedding, but might be able to get away for an hour or two of... activities."

Justin smiled and pulled a business card out of his vest pocket. "Call me. I know Zach will be *very* happy to meet you."

The card was just a regular business card with Justin's name and phone number on it. Josh put it into his jacket pocket. "And I'm sure I'll be very happy to meet Zach, too, especially if he's anything like you."

"He's really not." Justin set the two drinks on the bar. "But variety's the spice of life, and all that. Have you ever been tied up?"

Josh nearly spit out the beer. He swallowed, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and coughed out a laugh. "No. I guess I've been missing out."

"Oh, you *so* have."

"Will I get a safe word?"

"Absolutely. Safe, sane, and consensual all the way." Justin's eyes moved down Josh's body. "We're going to have some fun with *you*."

Josh laughed, even though he was getting a little turned on. He put his elbows on the bar and leaned forward so he could talk to Justin without being heard, and also so he could hide the way his dick was beginning to perk up. "Give me a preview."

"Well," Justin said, his eyes lighting up, but before he could say anything else, the cozy atmosphere was broken by a low, angry voice.

“What. Are you doing?”

Josh turned around to see Stu staring at him with narrowed eyes. The gorgeous girlfriend was gripping his arm, whispering something to him and gesturing towards the dance floor. Stu just stood there, glaring daggers at Josh.

“Can I help you?” Josh asked.

“I can’t *believe* you,” Stu said in that same angry tone. “You’re picking up guys at your sister’s wedding? Do you not have—” He jerked his arm free from his girlfriend’s grasp to gesture angrily, seeming to search for the words. “—any decency at all? Any respect for your family?”

Josh stared at him for a second and then sneered, “Piss off,” and turned back to face Justin, hoping to pick up where they’d left off.

“Hey, I’m talking to you!” Stu snapped.

“So?” Josh spun around to face him. “I don’t have anything to say to you, so—”

“Of course you don’t. So goddamn selfish, doing whatever you want, whenever you want. Don’t you *ever* think of anyone else’s feelings?”

Oh, no he didn’t. That little prick did *not* just bring up Josh’s mom.

Josh knew he should have called his parents more often, should have visited more often. Maybe if he’d been a better son, his mom would have trusted him more and would have told him about the cancer earlier. Maybe there would have been something he could have done.

He knew he’d been a crap son. But he didn’t need Stu Edelstein to tell him that.

Josh pushed away from the bar and stepped up to Stu, right into his personal space. He hoped the five inches and fifty pounds he had on Stu would intimidate, but disappointingly, Stu didn’t move. So Josh said, quietly but distinctly, “Go. *Fuck*. Yourself.” And then he gave Stu a little jab on the chest with both hands, his fingers outstretched and stiff. Just a jab, not a shove, and in fact, Stu didn’t move. Maybe he was a little more solid than he looked.

And maybe Josh didn't have a whole fifty pounds on him because when Stu gave Josh a shove, a real shove, it had enough force behind it that Josh had to take a step back to keep his balance. Which was fine. Great, even. If Stu wanted to start a Real-Shove club, Josh would be happy to join.

This time, Josh put his legs into it, and Stu went down on his ass. The girlfriend shrieked and ran over to him, but Stu was up on his feet in a second, his lips curled in a snarl, and he charged at Josh.

Josh almost laughed, because seriously? Stu topped out at about five foot nine, couldn't weigh more than one fifty, and was heading into a scrum with a professional rugby player. Josh caught him easily, and was going to wind his arm through Stu's to hold him still until he'd calmed the fuck down—or to slap him if he didn't—but Stu did some squirmy thing, and Josh was left holding air.

Then *ow!* His head snapped to the side as something slammed into his jaw and he saw stars. He swung his own fist in a wide roundhouse, hoping to get a piece of Stu, but *ow!* In the shoulder this time, and *motherfucker*, it was like his arm was being zapped with electricity.

Fuck this shit. He reached for Stu, or tried to, but his arm wouldn't cooperate. He couldn't lift it, couldn't move his fingers. "What the fuck?" Panic amped his annoyance up to rage, so he charged at Stu, who crouched like he was going to duck under Josh's arm. That might have worked if Josh wanted to grab him, but Josh went low, knocking Stu's legs out from under him. Stu landed with a thud. They wrestled on the floor for a few seconds, Josh trying to grab Stu with his good hand. Something cracked across his shin, but he ignored it. Finally, he managed to throw himself on top of Stu, his good arm against Stu's throat.

"Get off me!" Stu hissed, trying to pull Josh's arm away, but Josh had his weight behind it and couldn't be moved.

"What the fuck did you do to my arm, asshole? It better not be permanent, or I'm gonna rip your fucking head off!" He put more weight on Stu's throat, so that Stu couldn't even hiss anymore. Stu's eyes went wide, panicked.

Josh froze, and in that motionless second, he heard the screams and yells that had been going on around them. Then hands were on him, grabbing him, pulling him off Stu. He didn't resist.

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“Are you two insane?” Amy yelled.

“Is that a rhetorical question?” Josh mumbled, holding an ice pack to his jaw. Stu glanced at him, keeping his own ice pack pressed to his throat.

“Shut up,” Amy snapped. “Jesus Christ, Josh, you're twice his size, you could have killed him!”

“Hey,” Stu croaked. “I'm not that much smaller—”

Amy wheeled on him. “And *you*, Mr. Violence-Is-Not-The-Answer, We-Must-Respect-All-Living-Creatures, what the *hell* is going through that pea brain of yours?”

Stu didn't answer.

Josh looked past him to what was left of the reception: Stu's girlfriend, Amy's husband and baby daughter, Sean's parents, Calvin and Eric, Mrs. Edelstein, and Josh's dad. The DJ and bartender were packing up. One of the servers was cleaning up broken glass and spilled wine.

Amy threw up her hands and stalked away. Stu jumped up and walked over to his girlfriend. Josh leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. His arm tingled, the feeling coming back into it, and he could move his fingers again. He wiggled them until he heard an “ahem” sound in front of him. He opened his eyes and saw Justin the bartender.

“So, yeah...” Justin began, not meeting Josh's eyes. “I'm going to need that card back.”

Well, fuck. “This isn't me,” Josh said as he pulled the card out of his pocket. “Would you believe this is the first fight I've ever been in?”

Justin took the card without saying anything, then, after a few seconds, he sighed. “Actually, yes. That guy basically beat the crap out of you.” He hesitated



a few more seconds, and then he handed the card back to Josh. "Okay, keep it. For the *next* time you're in town."

"Thanks." Josh stared down at his dress shoes. They'd gotten scuffed up during the fight.

"Maybe by then, you'll have your head together."

"Yeah." God, how embarrassing.

"Can I make a suggestion, though?"

"Sure."

"Before you come see us, work out whatever issues you have with that guy."

Josh looked up. "I don't have any issues with him. I hate him, he hates me, it all works out just fine."

"Tell that to that bottle of Merlot." Justin's lips quirked. "You should ice your leg, too. You really slammed it against the bar."

"Yeah, thanks."

Justin left. Josh put the card back in his pocket and looked over at the remaining guests. Stu's girlfriend was touching his throat with her fingertips while Stu talked to his mother. Amy hugged her daughter tightly while her husband massaged her shoulders. Josh's dad was talking to Sean's parents, looking like he was apologizing.

"We didn't know we'd get dinner *and* a show." Calvin sat on the chair that Stu had vacated and patted Josh's knee.

"Yeah, sorry..."

"What happened? One minute, you were chatting up the cute bartender, the next, you were trying to throttle that kid."

"He's not a kid, he's only a year younger than I am. Not even a year. And he started it."

"You pushed him first."

"He ran his mouth first."

Calvin raised an eyebrow. "Sticks and stones."

Josh scowled. "It was a little more than that."

"If you say so." He tilted his head. "So you must know that young man fairly well."

"Not really. Our sisters are best friends, so I've had to put up with him over the years."

"He's here with that beautiful young lady."

"Yeah."

"But he didn't like you talking to the bartender."

"Yeah." Josh blinked and then shook his head. "No, he's not gay. He's got a girlfriend, for fuck's sake."

"So then he shouldn't have a problem with you talking to other men."

"He didn't... he thought... Look, that wasn't it. He just brought up some, some personal stuff from the past, and it pissed me off. I should've let it go."

"Or dive in deeper."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, maybe you should figure out why his words made you so angry. And also figure out why your talking to the bartender made *him* so angry."

"I know why. Because he thinks I'm a selfish prick, which is true. Also, because he's a prissy little asshat who doesn't like to see anyone else having fun." Josh heard the whiny tone in his voice, but he was too wiped out to really care.

"I don't think either of those is true." Calvin handed him a napkin with some writing on it. "Here. If you ever feel like talking, give us a call or email. Just don't text. We're too old for that."

"Huh. I must be doing something right. This is the second threesome I've been invited to today."

“Oh, I wish!” Calvin laughed. “But I don’t think Eric or I could keep up with you at our ages. Although I’ll tell him that the offer is on the table.” He clapped a hand on Josh’s shoulder and then used it to help get to his feet. “Work on your gaydar, or if you don’t like that term, then work on being a little more perceptive. All sorts of opportunities might be hiding in plain sight.”

Josh shook his head. “I don’t know what you mean. I just don’t see these things that are so obvious to you.”

“You will.” They shook hands and then Calvin walked back to Eric, who waited by the door, leaning on his cane. Josh tucked the napkin in the same pocket as Justin’s card, and then looked up into his dad’s stormy face.

His dad shook his head for a few long seconds, his brows knitted together, then looked around the room despairingly. “Is this what rugby’s taught you? To be a thoughtless, brawling idiot?”

Wow. That hurt more than Stu’s fist slamming into his jaw. “No.” He glared at his dad. “I’ve never been in a fight before.”

But his dad didn’t seem to be listening. “We never should have let you go over there. I should have pushed you harder to get a real job, something normal and stable, where you wouldn’t be hanging out with hooligans every day—”

“That’s not fair—”

“—but your mom insisted.” He ran his hands through his hair and shook his head again. “She said you should be allowed to try, to give it your best shot. Those first two years before you had a contract, when you couldn’t work legally in England? I thought if you couldn’t earn a living, you’d have no choice but to come back. But your mom sent you money every month until you could make it on your own.”

Josh went still. “I thought that was from both of you.”

“No. I didn’t even know she’d done it until later. I figured you were working illegally. She told me after your first season, when your contract was renewed.”

“Wow.” Josh’s head swam with the information. “I had no idea. Thanks so much for the support,” he said sarcastically.

“It turns out I was right to worry, if this is how you’ve turned out. A thug.”

“If you think this is helping—”

“You were *fighting*! We certainly didn’t bring you up to behave like that.”

“Excuse me?”

Josh and his dad both turned to look at Mrs. Edelstein, who had approached, unnoticed by either of them until she spoke. “Terri, this isn’t a good time,” Josh’s dad began, but Mrs. Edelstein cut him off.

“Are you implying that Stu *was* brought up to behave like that?”

Josh’s dad ran his hands through his hair again. “No, of course not. You and Steve did your best—”

“Did our *best*?”

Josh thought about telling his dad to stop before he dug himself in deeper, but the part of him that dealt with self-preservation told him to shut up and let someone else get yelled at for a while.

“No, I meant... dammit.” Josh’s dad shook his head. “Look, Anne and I did our best with Josh, but apparently we failed along the line somewhere. I’m not blaming you for what happened today. I’m not blaming Stu, either. I saw who started it.” He turned to glare at Josh again.

Josh closed his eyes again. Maybe this was all a really bad dream and he’d wake up in his room at home, with the wedding still hours off. If that were the case, now would be a good time to wake up. Or now. Any second now.

But no such luck. He opened his eyes when he heard Stu’s voice.

“Mom. I’m going to take Linnea home.”

Mrs. Edelstein’s expression didn’t soften one bit, which surprised Josh. After all, her only son had been the unfortunate victim of Josh’s rugby-enhanced thuggery. “I think that would be best.”

“I’ll go get your coat.”

“No, you take her home, and when you get there, you can spend some time apologizing to her for, for...” She waved her hands around the room. “For whatever you want to call this.”

“How will you get home?”

“I’ll get Amy and Mark to drop me off.”

“All right. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me!” she snapped. “Apologize to Josh! Look at the bruise on his face!”

Stu went red. Josh could tell he didn’t want to say even one word to him, let alone apologize.

Before Stu could say anything, Josh’s dad butted in again. “Stu shouldn’t apologize, it wasn’t his fault.”

“*I’m* sorry,” Josh said, standing up. He looked right at Stu, ignoring his dad and Mrs. Edelstein and everyone else who was staring at them. “I shouldn’t have pushed you. Amy’s right, I could really have hurt you.”

“No, you couldn’t have,” Stu said, narrowing his eyes. “I’ve studied Krav Maga and Jeet Kune Do. I was winning that fight until you knocked me down.”

A pulse started to throb in Josh’s head. “I’m trying to apologize, you ungrateful little shit—”

“Well, you’re doing a fucking bad job at it!” Stu yelled.

Josh’s hands tightened into fists, but his dad stepped between them.

“Knock it off, both of you!” he shouted. “Jesus, Josh, what the hell is wrong with you?” His eyes went wide. “Oh, my god, you’re on *steroids*, aren’t you? You have ‘roid rage’!”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Josh rolled his eyes. “I’m not on steroids. Can’t a man want to take out the trash without being on steroids?”

Stu’s lip curled and he took a step towards Josh, but Mrs. Edelstein grabbed his arm and pulled him away. “Go home, now,” she told her son in warning

tones. Stu shot Josh another angry look, but he left the ballroom, Linnea hurrying after him.

“Thanks,” Josh said to Mrs. Edelstein.

“What for? I’m just as angry at you as I am at him.” She shook her head. “Seriously, what’s going on with you? I thought enough time had passed since your little spat in Mexico that you could get along again. But it’s worse than ever.” She looked hard at Josh. “Well? Any explanation?”

“No.”

“There’s got to be a reason you can’t even be in the same room without tearing each other’s heads off.”

“Ask him. He’s the one who’s—” Constantly riding my ass, he was about to say, but he couldn’t, not to Stu’s own mother.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Fine, don’t tell me. I *will* ask him, though, believe me. How’s your face?” she asked, the change of subject throwing Josh off a little.

“I’ve had a lot worse. This is a mosquito bite compared to what I get during the season.”

“Yes, but you don’t expect to get it at a wedding reception. Will you be okay?”

“Yeah. Really, it’s nothing.”

She smiled ruefully. “Well, I think we’ve overstayed our welcome. Thanks for having us, Alan, and I understand completely if you never want to see us again.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Josh’s dad gave Mrs. Edelstein a hug and then did the same to Amy, who had come up to stand nearby. “We’ve all known each other too long to let our sons’ fu—um, mess everything up,” he said with an apologetic glance at Amy’s baby.

Amy laughed. “Almost had to put a quarter in the swear jar.” She turned to Josh and lowered her voice as Josh’s dad made googly eyes at the baby. “Look, I know I’m Stu’s sister, but until Margo gets back from the honeymoon, if you want someone to talk to, just call me. I saw what happened, too, and you’re right, Stu’s always had issues with you. Everyone else, he’s perfectly calm, but you get under his skin. He probably doesn’t even know why.”

“It’s okay. I’m over it.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it.”

“I know you do. I hope you’re both over it.” She gave him a hug. “Seriously, text me.” She handed him her card.

“Everyone wants me to call them,” he mused. “This is the third number I’ve gotten today.”

“Everyone knows you’re a fucking mess and they all want to help.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“You’re welcome.”

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The drive home was grim, as were the next few days. Josh overheard his dad on the phone two days after the wedding saying how disappointed he was in himself, how he must have made some terrible mistake in Josh’s upbringing. Guilt rushed into the space in Josh that anger had carved out, and he couldn’t face his dad anymore, at least not then. He ended up changing his return flight and going back to England three days early.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

Josh's phone rang as he was getting ready for bed. "What's wrong?" he asked as soon as he hit the talk button.

"Why do you think something's wrong?" Margo asked in return, her voice sounding as clear as if she were in the next room and not five thousand miles away.

"Because if you were just saying hi, you'd email me, not call."

"Okay, fine. Nothing's wrong, I just have some news. First off, Sean and I are pregnant."

"Wow. Really?"

"Yes, but it's still early, so we're not telling everyone yet. And that includes Dad, so keep it to yourself for another month."

"But you've only been married..." He tried to do the math in his head.

"A year and four months. But I'll be thirty-one in two weeks, so I figured we'd better get this party started."

"Wow. Um. Congratulations."

"Yes, *thank you*, that's the correct response. The other thing I have to tell you is that Dad's been seeing someone."

"*What?*"

"I know. Way to trump my pregnancy news, right?"

"Who's he seeing?"

"He won't tell me. He just says she's very nice and he doesn't want to say anything else yet because maybe nothing will come of it." She hesitated.

"But?"

"But maybe something will come of it. I think he might even want to get married again."

"Really?"



“Yes. He and mom were married for thirty years. He liked being married.”

Josh nodded, even though he knew Margo couldn't see him do it. “That'd be okay. Better than being lonely.”

“Yes.”

“But?”

“But what if he's dating some twenty-two-year-old blonde bimbo?”

“Do you really think he is?”

“No. But I'm going to worry until I find out.”

“Don't worry. I don't think he'd date someone like that, not seriously, anyway.”

“If it's *not* someone like that, then why won't he tell us?”

“Just what he said, maybe nothing will happen. Huh.” An idea sparked in Josh's head.

“What?”

“What if it's someone *we* really like, and then it doesn't work out? He'd feel bad disappointing us.”

“Hmm. I hadn't thought of that.”

“Well, think about it, and don't worry yet.”

“Have you talked to him since the wedding?”

Josh sighed. “No. We've emailed.”

“Did he apologize for calling you a thug?”

“Yeah. How'd you know?”

“I told him to. It wasn't like you ruined the wedding, we'd already left. And Amy told me that Stu threw the first punch.”

“Yeah, well. I shouldn't have pushed him.” He was getting worked up again just thinking about it. Which, no, that had to stop. He had to calm down so he could get some sleep before the next day's match.

“Anyway, I hope things are settling out between you two.”

“Me and Stu?”

“No, you and Dad. I’ve pretty much given up hope that you and Stu will ever be friends.”

“Only pretty much?”

“Ha.”

“Thanks for bullying dad into apologizing. I felt like crap for a long time, but I think he did, too. Maybe we’ll be talking again by the time he decides to reveal the mystery woman.”

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Josh knew that he was (mostly) forgiven when his dad came all the way to England to see him play. “I really didn’t know,” his dad said after their third straight victory. “You’ve got a gift.”

“That’s our Sherm,” said one of the players, shoulder-checking Josh as he walked by.

“Sherm?”

“Sherman tank,” Josh explained as he dried himself off. “Made in America.”

“They like you.”

“Yeah.” He tossed the towel on the floor and started to dress.

His dad glanced at the other players. “Do they know,” he said in a low voice. “About...?”

“About?”

“That you’re...”

“That I’m gay? Yeah.”

“And they don’t have a problem with... this?” He gestured around the locker room.

“Some of them do. Most of them aren’t scared little homophobic twa—uh, jerks, like they would be in the States. That’s another reason I like playing here. Sid, that guy that just went by? When he found out, he said, and I quote, ‘Rubgy teams are like boy bands. At least one bloke’s got to be gay.’ Total non-issue for him.”

“I’m glad you’re happy.”

Josh stopped halfway through buttoning his shirt. He looked up at his dad. “Thanks. I am. I hope you are, too.”

His dad didn’t say anything; he just pulled Josh into a hug. Josh’s eyes stung with tears until he heard one of his teammates shout, “Get a room, you two!”

He tightened his arms around his dad for a second, then let him go and wiped his eyes, laughing. “Oi, this is my da’, come all the way from the States just to see me play, so shut it, ya wanker,” he shouted in his best North England accent. When the team gave him a cheer, his dad laughed, too.

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“It don’t look good.”

Josh winced as Simon pressed on his knee. “It might just be a sprain.”

“Might be.”

But Josh knew that it wasn’t just a sprain. He’d heard the pop, felt his leg bend at a really bad angle when he hit the ground. He was just glad it hadn’t happened the previous season when his dad had been visiting.

The MRI confirmed Josh’s suspicion. “Torn ACL,” the team physician said. “They can repair it with surgery, but then it’s months of physical therapy and even with that, you may never be one hundred percent again.”

After the physician left the room, Simon pulled out his phone. “I’ll see when they can schedule the surgery. The sooner they can repair it, the sooner we can get you back on the line.”

“No.” Josh shook his head. He’d never looked forward to the day his career would be over, but somehow it wasn’t nearly as scary as he’d thought it would

be. Maybe he was ready for a change. "It's been a good run, literally. But I'll be thirty this year. We knew I was going to retire at the end of this season or the next one."

"And we'd also talked about you staying on as a coach. I can call the club right now, get the talks started—"

"Simon."

Simon sighed. "So you'll go home, then?"

"Yeah. It's time."

"Well." Simon nodded, clapping a hand on Josh's shoulder. "You'll be missed, son, and badly."

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Josh had the surgery and spent the first few days of his recovery making arrangements to return to Portland. "You can stay with us until you find a place," Margo told him. "In fact, you can earn your keep by babysitting."

"I don't know anything about kids."

"Well, here's your chance to learn."

When he was able to get around without crutches, he started packing up his flat and quickly became overwhelmed by how much crap one man could accumulate in eight years. One desk drawer was filled with photos from back before his phone had a camera. There was one of him standing next to a blond man in a pub. Jeremy? Jack? No, Ian! Josh hadn't thought of him in years, but he remembered now that Ian had met some German guy and moved to Munich after he and Josh stopped sleeping together.

At the bottom of the drawer were even older photos, including some from that trip to Mexico. Josh, Margo and Amy looked incredibly young as they made faces at the camera, which meant that Stu must have taken the picture. He found more photos of the three of them. Had Stu always been behind the camera? No—there was one of him and Stu at a restaurant, with Josh looking excited over his food, and Stu... Stu looking at Josh and smiling, his eyes crinkling at edges, mouth open like he was laughing. He'd really been a good-looking kid, with

those eyelashes and cheekbones and that ever-present five o'clock shadow, even at eighteen.

Josh sighed. What the hell had happened? Could they have been friends if Stu hadn't been so pissy, so judgmental... oh, yeah, about Josh getting completely wasted every night. God, if he were there now, he wouldn't be able to stand himself. And then Stu nicking his money to keep him from going overboard yet again... What a mess it had all been.

Josh gathered up the photos and threw them into a box. No point in dwelling on the past. Learn from it, and move on.

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Margo met him at the airport, her son on her hip. "Danny, you remember your Uncle Josh, the big, strong rugby player who's terrified of tiny babies."

"I'm not terrified. I have a normal, healthy amount of fear when it comes to babies. Hey, buddy." Josh reached out one hand to Danny. Danny grabbed his finger and pulled it towards his mouth. "No, you don't want to do that, kid," Josh told him, keeping his finger away from Danny's mouth. "You can only get so clean in airplane bathrooms."

"Ew," Margo said. "I'm glad you're home." She gave him a hug with the arm that wasn't holding onto Danny.

He hugged her back. "Me, too."

They found the right baggage claim carousel and Margo let Josh hold Danny. "And I'm sorry I'm making you ride in a car for a few more hours after you just got off a transatlantic flight, but I'm happy you finally get to come to the beach with us."

"Oh, boy."

"Shut up, you'll like it. It'll be relaxing. Um, maybe."

"Why 'maybe'?" He made faces at Danny, trying to get him to laugh.

"Because Amy invited her family this time, too."

Josh looked at her. "And by family, you don't mean her husband and kids."

“No.”

Josh felt his heart rate kick up and breathed out slowly to lower it. “It’s fine. It’ll be fine.”

“Really? You’re not going to get in another fight?”

“Nah, I’m too old for that shit.”

“Language!” Margo scolded. “Baby in the house.”

“Aw, cra—uh, crud. Better?”

“Yes. So you’re really okay with him?”

“Danny?” Josh frowned at the baby, who was drooling, but otherwise seemed likeable enough.

“Stu!”

“Oh, right. Do I have to talk to him?”

“Maybe.”

“Yeah, fine, whatever. You should ask if he’s okay with *me*.”

“Amy said he will be.”

“Then okay.”

“Mm-hmm,” Margo murmured, taking Danny back when Josh’s suitcase showed up.

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Amy reached up and rubbed his hair when she saw him. “Aren’t you ever going to grow it out? You know, down to your shoulders. You could pose for romance novel covers.”

“Hey, yeah, great idea. I will need to find some kind of work, now that I’m retired.”

“That’s so weird, to retire from a career at twenty-nine. You’re really not going to play anymore?”

“Not professionally. My knee’s shot.”

“So do you know what you’ll do now?”

“No. Maybe see if I can land a coaching gig somewhere. Except rugby’s not that popular this side of the pond.”

“It’s really too bad. About your knee, I mean.”

“Eh, it happens. I would’ve retired the next year or so anyway. Getting old.”

“Shut up, I’m even older than you, and I don’t need the reminder.” But she smiled at him. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re back. We all are.”

“*All* the Edelsteins?”

Her smile went crooked. “He promised not to hit you, no matter how much of a douchebag you’re being.”

“Wow.” Josh shook his head. “He’s still a complete—”

“No, I was paraphrasing. He’s much better than he used to be. And anyway, isn’t the feeling mutual?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Look, it’s only for a few days.”

Josh nodded. “Thank god for that.”

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But Josh’s dad wrecked that plan the first night. “I wanted to have dinner with just you kids tonight, because I have something to tell you.”

Josh and Margo exchanged glances but didn’t say anything, even though Josh could practically see the words, “This is it!” in glowing neon letters over Margo’s head.

“You know I’ve been seeing someone,” their dad said, “and it’s been going well, and we decided the time was right to tell you about it.” He smiled tightly at them.

“Dad, it’s okay,” Margo said. “You know we just want you to be happy.”

“Thanks. I hope you still feel that way—you’ll *both* feel that way—when I tell you that I’ve been seeing Terri. We’re going to move in together.”

“That’s great news, Alan,” Sean said and punched him lightly on the arm. “Seriously great.”

Margo blinked. “Wow.” She huffed out a laugh and then smiled. “You really had us worried for a while. We thought maybe it was some twenty-two-year-old. But Terri—that’s a relief. I mean, more than a relief. That’s good. She’s great.”

“Sorry, who’s Terri?” Josh asked.

“Terri Edelstein,” his dad replied. “We started talking after you and Stu tried to tear—um...” He glanced at Margo. “After you two got into that scuffle.”

“At the reception, I know,” Margo said. “Amy told me all about it.”

“Well. Okay.” Their dad cleared his throat. “Anyway, I took her out to dinner to apologize, then she took me out to dinner to apologize, and well, nearly three years later, here we are. So you and Stu will just have to learn to tolerate each other,” he said to Josh. “Can you do that for us?”

“Oh.” Josh’s head swam with the news. On one hand, it meant he’d probably be seeing a lot more of Stu. On the other hand, Terri Edelstein really *was* great. He couldn’t have chosen anyone better for his dad. “Yeah, of course. I’m happy for you both. That stuff with Stu, that was years ago. And I promise, no matter how much of a jerk he is, I’ll ignore it.”

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“You know Stu’s not a jerk, right?” Margo asked as they sat on the sofa in Josh’s hotel room, watching the sun drop into the ocean while she fed Danny.

“Jerkness is in the eye of the beholder,” Josh intoned.

Margo grinned, but she shook her head. “You’re the only one who doesn’t like him. He’s really a great guy. He babysits for us and volunteers at the animal shelter. And he works for CARE. You know, trying to eradicate global poverty, that kind of thing.”

Josh frowned as his face heated. “I didn’t know that.”



“Yeah, he’s worked for them for years. That’s what he was doing in Thailand, but after his dad died, he asked to be transferred back to Portland so he’d be closer to home.”

“So I’m the jerk, is that what you’re telling me?”

“No. Don’t jump down my throat. I’m just saying, give the guy an extra chance, okay, before you blow up at him? You two got off on the wrong track somewhere. And now that Dad and Terri are serious, you and Stu really have to learn to get along. We’re not going to be one of those families where the siblings hate each other.”

“He’s not my sibling.”

“Yeah, no, he kind of is, now. So do whatever you have to to make it work. Maybe we could have a code word or some kind of signal if he’s starting to piss you off.”

“Like I pretend I’m strangling myself?”

“Yeah, something like that. Only maybe a little more subtle.”

Josh rubbed a finger over Danny’s head. “Do you think Terri—that’s weird to call her that, when she’s been Mrs. Edelstein in my head for so long.”

“I know. She asked me to start calling her Terri a few years ago, but it’s still weird.”

“So do you think she gave Amy and Stu the same talk Dad gave us tonight?”

“Yes.”

“How do you think they took it?”

“Same as us, probably. Amy’s probably thrilled, and Stu’s probably strangling himself.”

“I can do this, you know. Not be a dick.”

“I hope so because tomorrow is the first day of the rest of our lives as one big, happy family.”

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Of course, Josh woke up at three in the morning due to jet lag. He lay awake for an hour, trying to find a comfortable position, but at four A.M., he gave up. He got out of bed and put on his warm-ups, then dropped his keys in one pocket of the jacket, his phone in the other, grabbed a bottle of water, and went out.

He walked along the road until he found a set of steps leading down to the beach. Streetlights cast just enough light for him to avoid the boulders piled up to protect the closest houses from storm swells. He walked down the beach, keeping to the wet sand and taking off his shoes when he came to streams emptying into the ocean that were too wide to jump across. He kept walking until the sky started to pink up. Then he did some stretches and crunches and a couple of yoga poses that the physical therapist recommended.

When it was light enough to see the water, he started back up the beach. The tide was coming in, and walking in dry sand meant it was taking him longer to get back. After he'd been walking for an hour, he thought he'd found the steps he'd come down, except that none of the hotels up on the street looked familiar. He pulled out his room key, which was an actual key attached to a plastic tag, but the tag only had the room number, not the name of the hotel, which apparently he had completely forgotten. He'd fallen asleep on the drive out to the ocean after Margo picked him up at the airport, and he hadn't paid attention when they'd come back from dinner the night before.

Not like he was in any real hurry to get back, although at some point he'd have to have a slash, and he didn't see any public restrooms nearby. How severe were the laws against public urination in Oregon? He lay down on the cool sand and listened to the waves rushing onto the beach while he thought about his options. He looked at his phone: six A.M. He couldn't call anyone this early. He stuffed the phone back into his pocket and closed his eyes. He'd wait a little longer and then go wandering through the parking lots of the hotels to see if he could find Margo's car, because he remembered what that looked like—a silvery-green Prius with a Baby on Board sign stuck to the side window. Would anyone call the cops on him if they saw him skulking around in parking lots? If they did, at least the police could help him find his hotel. If he really couldn't find his way back, he'd wait until seven thirty and then call. It would mean admitting he was

an idiot who didn't pay the slightest bit of attention to his surroundings, but it was better than wandering the beach forever, which was what he probably would have done in that situation when he was younger.

He closed his eyes, and lulled by the sound of the waves, he fell asleep. He was woken by a jingling noise and something cold and wet on his cheek. His eyes flew open, and he got to his feet, startling the dog that had been sniffing at him. "Sorry, pup, you scared me," he said, brushing the sand off his clothes. He held out his hand to the dog. "It's okay. I won't bite if you won't."

The dog stepped forward to sniff at Josh's hand. It was some kind of black lab mix, with short ears that pricked up when someone whistled sharply. It ran off towards the whistle, its tail wagging and tongue hanging out.

"Sorry about that!"

"No problem," he shouted back, squinting against the sun, trying to see who had yelled.

A man in shorts and a hoodie jogged towards him, the dog dancing around him. "Are you okay?"

"Yep. Fine. I was just resting my eyes." Josh tried to move so the man wouldn't be so backlit by the sun

The man slowed down, then stopped about ten feet away and pulled off his hood. "Hey, Josh."

"Stu?"

"Yes." He didn't offer any other kind of greeting.

"Oh. Hi." Way to make an impression, sleeping on the beach like a vagrant. "Is that your dog?"

"Yes, this is Blanket."

"Oookay." He held out his hand again, and the dog wandered over to him.

"My niece named him."

"Emma?"

“Yes.” Stu’s face relaxed little.

Josh turned away from Stu to pet Blanket, who was sniffing around his ankles. “Hey, buddy.” Josh petted the dog for a few seconds before it rolled onto its back, clearly asking for a belly rub. “Oh, look at that. A vicious killer, that’s what you are,” Josh murmured, petting the dog’s stomach.

“Yeah, he’s a terror.”

Josh looked up to see Stu smiling fondly at the dog. He looked back down at the dog, who lay with its paws in the air, clearly in ecstasy.

“Why were you lying on the beach? I thought you were a dead body.”

“Uh, yeah. I woke up a couple hours ago—jet lag—so I walked for a while and then lay down and just fell asleep.”

“Why didn’t you just go back to your room?”

Josh sighed. Time to man up and tell the truth. “I can’t remember where it is. I mean, I don’t know which hotel we’re at. I didn’t pay attention last night when we got in, and it was dark this morning when I went out.”

There was a long pause, so long that Josh gave in and looked up at Stu, who just stood there, looking at him suspiciously. “How much did—no, never mind. We’re staying at the Surfside, and it’s back towards town. I can take you.”

“Thanks. I guess I was more out of it than I thought when we got here yesterday. I completely zoned out.”

“Sure.” Stu clicked his tongue at the dog, who jumped up and ran to him. “Come on, let’s get back. My mom’s making waffles.”

They walked in silence back to the hotel, taking turns throwing a soggy tennis ball for Blanket. Josh tried to think of something to talk about, but everything he came up with sounded inane. Stu didn’t seem to be interested in conversation, anyway; the few times that Josh risked looking over at him, his face was set in a frown. Or maybe it was a pout.

He had to have known Josh was coming to the beach... or did Amy not even bother to tell him? Did she really think the ripping-off-the-Band-Aid method of

Stu and Josh meeting again would be better than easing him into the idea? Not that it really mattered. Josh would take whatever Stu threw at him, and he'd be polite about it. He'd be a perfect gentleman for the rest of the trip. It was the least he could do to show Terri and his dad that he was glad they were together.

Breakfast was uneventful, except that Terri really did make the best waffles Josh had ever had. They almost made up for the shock of hearing that his dad was going to sell the house. "We've decided that if we're going to start this new thing, we have to really start it new."

"We wanted to tell you first, before we put the houses on the market, though," Terri added.

Amy nodded. "Do you know where you'll live?"

"We're looking at lofts downtown, actually. That would be closer to both of our jobs, and we don't need yards anymore, now that you kids are all grown up. But..." She scrunched up her nose. "...that means we won't have a lot of room, so whatever you kids still have in the house, you'll have to move it out."

"Same for you Margo and Josh," their dad said. "But Josh, now that you're living in this country again, that shouldn't be too hard. And since you're between jobs, if your knee can handle it, we're hoping you'll be able to help us with the majority of the packing and throwing out."

"So the waffles were a bribe?" Josh asked, raising his eyebrows at Terri, who raised her own back at him.

"I don't know. Did they work?"

"Oh, hell yeah. I'll *build* you a new place if you promise you'll make them again."

"Note to headquarters." Terri pretended to be talking into her lapel. "Boy can be bribed with waffles."

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After breakfast, Margo ran to the store. "I forgot something we need for dinner tonight," she said, handing Danny off to Sean.

“So this straight thing’s working out for you, huh?” Josh asked him, letting Danny play with his fingers.

Sean grinned at him. “I’m still bi, you fu—uh, you eff-head. Da—I mean, darn it, it’s hard to clean up your language when you become a parent.” He stroked his finger over Danny’s wisp of dark hair. “Do you think you’ll have kids?”

“No, because *I’m* not confused about my sexuality.”

“Oh, *that’s* how it’s gonna be?” Sean raised his eyebrows. “Okay, then, F-U-C-K-Y-O-U, you A-S-S-H-O-L-E.”

Josh smiled sweetly. “I’ll see your F-U-C-K-Y-O-U and raise you a S-U-C-K-M-Y—”

“Boys! Language!”

Josh jumped guiltily. “Sorry, Mrs.—Terri.”

She laughed. “Oh, your face. I’m kidding! For now, anyway.” She tickled Danny, who squealed. “Once he starts reading, you’ll have to stop that, too.”

“Good luck with that, Sean” Josh said, smirking.

Sean flipped him the bird, blocking it from Danny’s view. “Just wait until it’s your kid,” Terri warned, smiling.

“I don’t think I’ll be having kids.”

“Why not?”

“Um... because I’m gay? Did you not all get the memo?”

“Yes, but it’s different than it used to be.” She smiled encouragingly. “There’s adoption, there’s artificial insemination, surrogacy...”

“You’re up-to-date on all of this.”

“Yes, well.” She shrugged a little. “The topic’s come up in conversation before.”

“Really?” Josh sat up straighter. “You have gay friends who have kids?”

“Something like that.” She patted his arm. “Come on, enough sitting around like slugs. Let’s go down to the beach while it’s still sunny! I’ve got sunscreen for everyone.”

“Your fault for stuffing us full of waffles,” Sean said, mockpouting, but he stood up and swung Danny onto one hip. “I’ll get our stuff and meet you down there.”

“I’ll go get Stu and make him come with. He can’t stay holed up in his room working the whole weekend. Pull the door shut when you leave, okay?” She left, and Josh was about to follow her when Sean stopped him.

“Hey, you still interested in that job I emailed you about?”

“The coaching? Yeah, sure.” Josh brightened. “I thought the program was dead, though.”

“It was, but then my coach decided to finally drag his as—uh, his bottom home. So now we’re set again. You’ll need to fill out paperwork, let the school district do a background check, but then we’ll be good to start.”

“Hey, thanks, man. I was hoping to get something where I’d run around for a few hours a day. I can already feel myself getting a roll.” He pinched at his waist through his jacket.

Sean snorted. “Yeah, right. You’re anorexic.”

A thought occurred to Josh. “The background check... Are they going to have a problem with me being gay?”

Sean frowned. “Why would they?”

“Just... People sometimes get a little crazy when it comes to their kids.”

“This is Portland, dude, not Tennessee. That shit’s not gonna fly around here.” He shook his head. “Besides, you’re an amazing guy, and the only reason they wouldn’t want you working with their kids is if they’re fucking morons. So don’t worry about it. I got your back on this. Okay?”

Sean looked hard at Josh, and for a second, Josh couldn’t speak. He’d had other people back him up before—Simon, who convinced the club to take a

chance on a young American who had started playing only six years earlier. Sid, who'd told the rest of the players to grow up and grow a pair when Josh had come out to them. A family who had always supported him (well, almost always). And now Sean was part of that family, and it shouldn't have surprised Josh that Sean would help him out, so it must have been jet lag that was making him stupidly emotional.

"Okay. And hey..." Josh didn't want to say it, but he had to. "I would really like to be drunk to have this conversation with you, but since I don't drink anymore, I'm just gonna put it out there." He looked out the window at the beach. "I'm really glad you married Margo. I should have told you when you got engaged, but I never got around to it. So I'm telling you now. You're, um. You're like the brother I never had," he said in a rush. God, emotions were so much harder to do while sober.

"Thanks, man." Out of the corner of Josh's eye, Sean rocked from foot to foot, lightly bouncing Danny on his hip, that baby-holding dance that all parents learn. "I *have* brothers, but you're right up there with 'em."

"Thanks."

"Do we have to hug now?"

Josh laughed. "No."

As they left the room, Josh pulling the door shut behind him, Sean said, "It's too bad you never bonded with Stu the way Margo did with Amy. They're like sisters, and he could have been that brother for you all these years."

His words cut through the warm comfort Josh had been feeling as a result of the waffles and Sean's kind words. "Yeah, no. That's just..." He kept his eyes forward, walking ahead of Sean. Just *what*? What *was* it about Stu that made it impossible to be friends with him?

"Yeah, I know," Sean said. "It's weird, though. You two should get along. Everyone likes you both, you're fine separately, but together, it's like oil and vinegar. Cats and dogs."



“...living together, mass hysteria. Yeah, Stu and me being friends would be a sign of the Apocalypse.”

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Back in his room, Josh changed out of his warm-ups and into shorts and a T-shirt. It was so nice to be somewhere that actually got warm and sunny in the summer. Margo had warned him that there might be cold winds, but there weren't any that day, apparently. He filled up his water bottle and put it in a plastic bag with his keys and phone. Then he slipped on a pair of flip-flops and started out the door, sunglasses in hand, but turned back to grab a rugby ball out of his suitcase. Maybe Sean would want to toss it around on the beach a little.

When he got down to the beach, everyone was already there except for Sean and Danny and Margo, who was still at the store. Stu was reading a book, and Blanket was lying on a towel at Stu's feet. Stu looked up at Josh, gave a half-hearted wave, and then went back to his book.

Whatever, Josh thought. But Blanket thumped his tail on the sand, and his whole body wriggled as he looked at Josh. “All right, buddy.” Josh sat next to him. Within seconds, Blanket was on his back, snuffling as Josh rubbed his belly. “Some mean dog you got here,” Josh told Stu. He thought he saw Stu's lips twitch, but he wasn't sure.

Sean got there a few minutes later and set Danny next to Emma on the towel shaded by a beach umbrella. “All right, men,” he announced. “It is time!”

“Oh, here we go,” Mark muttered.

“Time for what?” Josh asked.

“Time to brave Poseidon's icy wrath!”

“Um...”

Stu shut his book, dropping it onto the towel as he stood up. “We're going into the water.”

“Oh.”

“To the waves, bold adventurers!” Sean pulled off his shirt and pounded on his chest with one fist. “Are we not men?”

“We are Devo,” Josh and Stu said simultaneously. They looked at each other, and then Stu snorted and looked away.

“Come on,” Mark said, nudging Josh’s shoulder. “He’ll bug the crap out of you until you go in. You’ll be ready to throw yourself in just so you won’t have to hear him anymore.”

Josh stood. “How cold is it?”

Stu grinned at him, a little evilly, Josh thought. “It varies from year to year, but it’s usually pretty painful.”

“That’s why we run in, duck under once, then come right back out. Before our nuts freeze off,” Mark added in a quieter tone, shooting a look at Terri, who didn’t seem to notice. He pulled off his T-shirt and jogged towards the water.

Stu turned away and unbuttoned his shirt, then pulled it off and dropped it on his book. “Come on, boy!” he said to Blanket, and the two of them ran towards the surf, Sean chasing them and whooping.

Josh watched Stu go, blinking at the surprisingly broad shoulders that tapered to narrow hips. With some effort, he turned back to Amy. “Why do they do this?” he asked her as he pulled off his T-shirt.

She didn’t look up from her e-reader. “It’s their thing. Just look at what you’ve been missing all these years, not being here,” she said in a monotone. “Have fun, see you in thirty seconds.”

He dropped his sunglasses into the plastic bag. “I’m not really dressed for it,” Josh said. Amy did look up then, raising one eyebrow. Her eyes dropped down his body, and Josh held his hands in front of his groin, as if her gaze were literally sharp. “They’re just shorts, not swim trunks.”

“You didn’t bring swim trunks to the beach, why?”

“Because I don’t own any. I have a Speedo, and Margo told me they’re illegal in this country.”

“They would be on *you*.”

“Amy, you’re embarrassing him.”

Amy smirked at her mother but said to Josh, “Margo just didn’t want her hunky little brother being perved on by her best friend. You run and play, now, and I promise to pretend I’m not judging a wet-shorts-contest when you come out.”

“Amy!” Terri frowned at her daughter. “Really inappropriate!”

Josh grinned. “I can be more inappropriate than that.” He waggled his hips at Amy. “Look all you want, baby. Ain’t gonna find a better three inches anywhere.”

Amy’s laughter and Terri’s groan followed him as he walked to the water. He would have liked to run, like the other guys had; he *had* to start running again to burn off the fat that was starting to settle around his waist. But he needed to find a physical therapist to check him out, to let him know when he could put that much stress on his knee, and he had to find one who would see him without insurance, and how much would that set him back?

He dipped his foot into the water, and *fuck*, that *was* cold. But he was a man, so he waded in up to his knees. It wasn’t like he couldn’t afford to pay for a PT; he had a nice sum of money set aside, but until he got some regular work, he’d have to be careful with it, not waste it on—

“HI-YAAAHH!” Sean launched himself at Josh and knocked him into the water. Josh let out what he hoped was a *manly* shriek as the cold water covered his body.

“You dick!” he shouted at Sean. “That’s fucking freezing!” Then he grabbed him, picking him up and dumping him in the surf.

“We are men!” Sean shouted when he popped up, spitting out salt water and beating his chest some more.

“You’re insane!” Josh hopped through the waves back to shore. “How do you stand it?”

“He’s insane!” Mark shouted. Sean tackled Stu, who laughed. Blanket splashed through the shallow waves, barking at them.

“Call me a wuss, but I’m done,” Josh told them.

“I’m done, too,” Stu said, following Josh out of the water.

“Me, too,” Mark said. “Epic shrinkage. I hope Amy’s not expecting anything tonight.”

“I didn’t hear that,” Stu said, picking up his pace a little.

“Party poopers!” Sean shouted from the waves. He stood there for a moment and then started to follow them, but Mark spun around and dove at Sean, knocking him back into the water. He came up sputtering. Mark jumped on his back, pumping his fist in the air.

“I am King of men!” Mark shouted. Sean shook him off into the water, laughing and diving after him.

Josh walked up the beach backwards, shivering, but grinning at them. They looked like seal pups splashing around in the water, their hair plastered to their heads. He turned around and waved at Amy, who was leaning down between Emma and Danny, pointing out the crazy antics their daddies were getting into.

“You okay?” Stu asked as they made their way back to their group.

“Yeah, it was just a little cold water.”

“No, I mean your knee. That’s how you hurt it in the first place, right?”

“No. I mean, yeah, from a tackle, but not like that. I mean, Sean weighs, what, one fifty? And he knocked me into the water, not onto the ground. It’s fine.” But he flexed his knee before sinking down onto his towel.

“Did you hurt yourself?” Terri asked him.

“No. It’s just the first time I’ve gone down since I tore it.”

“Sean should be more careful.”

“Nah, he’s okay. It’s actually a relief to know I can get tackled without getting hurt.”

“Yeah, sure. Men,” she added under her breath, shaking her head.

Blanket shook the water off himself, making his dad, Terri, and Amy squeal, then settled down again on Stu’s towel. Stu stood in the sand next to it, running his hands down his head to squeeze some of the water out of his hair.

Josh stared at him, at the water that ran in trickles down flat planes of muscle. The hair on his chest narrowed to a trail over hard abs, and then it disappeared into the waistband of board shorts that hung low on his hips. Stu wasn’t built like a rugby player, he wasn’t a slab of beef, but he wasn’t the skinny kid that Josh saw in his memory every time he thought about him. Josh remembered stick-like legs and scrawny arms in Mexico—god, had that really been ten years ago? The calves visible beneath the board shorts weren’t stick-like anymore. The pipestem arms had given way to biceps and deltoids.

As Josh continued to stare, unable to look away, he remembered that dark suit that Stu had worn at funerals and weddings. At the time, Josh had figured it was just well-cut, with padding in the shoulders, but no, Stu had just grown up and filled out. The boy of Josh’s memory was gone. Standing in front of him, arms raised and muscles on display like some pin-up calendar photo, was a man. And if Josh had been seeing him for the first time, without their history, his mouth would be watering.

In fact, his mouth *was* watering. Over Stu Fucking Edelstein. Swallowing, he reached into his bag for his phone, then checked his non-existent text messages as he lay on his stomach in order to hide the embarrassing reaction his body was having.

A few minutes later, Sean and Mark came staggering back, dripping cold water. “Hey, you brought a ball.”

“Yeah.” Josh threw his phone into the bag and sat up, thankful for the distraction. “I know how you like to play with balls.”

Sean grinned. “Ah, but you’re the one who does it professionally.”

“Well, I did.” Josh got up and picked up the ball. “I can’t run, sorry, but I thought we could toss it around.” He looked at the rest of the group. “Anyone else? Mark, Stu?”

“Just the boys?” Amy asked. “Sexist, much?”

“Not at all. You’re welcome to join,” Josh told her, but she shook her head.

“No, I just wanted to hassle you. Besides, Emma needs to go potty. We’ll be back in a few.”

“I’m in,” Mark said. “I’ll go long.”

“You don’t ‘go long’ in Rugby.”

“We’re not actually playing. You’re allowed to throw it overhand.”

“It feels weird,” Josh grumbled, but he lifted the ball behind his head and threw it like a football. It wobbled through the air instead of spiraling, and Mark had to move in closer to catch it.

“Come on, Stu,” Sean said, nudging Stu with his foot.

“I’m good, thanks.” Stu put on sunglasses and picked up his book again. He scratched Blanket’s head with the toes of one foot.

Josh, Sean and Mark tossed the ball around for a while, Sean and Mark running for it, then throwing it back to Josh, who didn’t move much. Eventually Josh’s shorts dried out most of the way. The sun beat down on him—stronger than it ever was in England, although not as bad as in Spain or Greece—and he thought about putting on some sunscreen.

He threw the ball to Mark, then made a time-out sign with his hands and turned to ask Terri if he could use some of hers, but he stopped when he saw Stu looking at him. His eyes were hidden behind sunglasses but his lips were pressed together in a tight, disapproving line, just like they had been in Mexico.

Annoyance, disappointment, and shame washed over Josh before he could work up any anger. What the fuck had he done wrong now? Yeah, he’d put on a few pounds since his injury, and yeah, no one else was wearing shorts that short. But goddammit, if his presence on the beach was that offensive, Stu could just fucking look somewhere else.

Josh grabbed up his T-shirt and put it on, pulling it down over his burgeoning love-handles. He thought about going back up to his room, but he'd been enjoying the beach up to that point. "Terri, could I use some of that sunscreen?"

"Absolutely." She dug in her bag and tossed it to him.

"Do you need me to help you put it on?" Sean asked with a faux-leer.

His words and tone took away some of the sting of Stu's look. "Thanks, but I'll skip the hard-to-reach places for now."

He threw the ball back and forth with Sean and Mark until Margo came down to the beach. "Everyone ready for lunch?"

"We just ate breakfast," Mark said, flipping the ball back to Josh.

"What's your point?" Margo asked.

"Every time," their dad said, shaking his head. "I put on at least two pounds every time I come to the beach."

"Next time you can get up and play with us, instead of sitting on your a—uh..." Josh caught himself when his dad raised his eyebrows and pointed at Danny.

"Stu, how do you manage to stay so trim on these trips?"

Stu lowered his sunglasses and smiled at Josh's dad. "I try to limit my meals to the stuff Amy makes. She's not as good a cook as Margo."

"Hey!" Terri scolded, poking him in the shoulder.

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They all trudged up to Amy and Mark's room for sandwiches, then lazed around the rest of the day, wandering between beach and rooms. Josh, still feeling the effects of the time change, fell asleep on the beach around three P.M. He wasn't really hungry when it was time for dinner, but he ate a little, because otherwise he knew his stomach would be growling at midnight.

He also ate because Margo and Sean had cooked. And despite what he'd said on the beach, Stu was chowing down, going into raptures with the first bite of each dish.

“Oh, my god, Margo, so good!” Stu said with his mouth full. He closed his eyes and moaned as he chewed. Josh shifted in his chair, keeping his own eyes on his plate.

After dinner, he found out why Stu had been so happy with the meal: Margo and Sean had made all his favorites for his birthday. Margo brought out a cake with a forest of lit candles on it and everyone sang “Happy Birthday”. “That’s what I had to run out for,” Margo said. “I can’t *believe* I left them at home.”

“You didn’t have to have them at all. It’s getting to be a fire hazard,” Stu said, smiling at her. “But thanks.”

“Make a wish, already,” Terri said.

Stu looked down at the candles like he was putting a lot of thought into it. Then he looked up, his eyes meeting Josh’s for a couple of seconds before he leaned over and blew out the candles.

“No, thanks,” Josh said, waving away the slice of cake that Margo offered him. It looked good and smelled *really* good, but—

“Is it because it’s *my* birthday cake?” Stu asked. The room fell quiet.

Way to make me look like the bad guy, Josh thought as his face heated up. “No! God, how petty do you think I am?” And way to bully the birthday boy. “I just... I have to start watching my calories, is all, now that I’m not playing.”

The tension in the room eased. “Oh, come on.” Sean took the plate and waved it in front of his face. “It’s wafer-thin.”

Josh sighed. “Okay, I’ll have some. Half of that. Thanks.” Sean slid half the slice onto another plate and handed it to Josh. “Happy?” Josh asked Stu, holding up the plate.

“Yeah, actually. And sorry I said that. It just slipped out. Um...” Stu poked at the cake with his fork. “Yeah. I didn’t mean... sorry.”

Wow. “Um. Okay. No problem.” He took a bite of cake so he wouldn’t have to talk anymore. Stu finished his own piece and had seconds, and Josh hated him a little as he thought about the flat abs under Stu’s shirt.



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The next day, Stu left at noon. "I've got to do some stuff at home before work tomorrow."

"All right." Terri gave him a kiss. "Will you be able to help me pack up the house, or will I have to impose on Josh for the whole thing?"

Stu looked sideways at Josh, then back at his mother. "I'll come over every night after work until you're set. But you have to feed me."

"I think I can manage that," she said, smiling. Josh's dad, Amy, and Margo gave him hugs, and Sean and Mark did the one-handed bro hug with him. Then they all turned to Josh.

"Have a safe drive back," Josh said. He stuck out his hand, and after a second, Stu shook it. His hand was warm, strong, and bigger than Josh had expected, so it fit neatly into Josh's hand without getting swallowed up. The last time they'd touched, Stu had punched Josh, and Josh had practically strangled Stu.

"Thanks. See you tomorrow." Stu jerked his hand out of Josh's grip after the shortest handshake in the history of the world. He turned away from Josh, opening the car door for Blanket to jump inside, then climbed in and drove off with a wave.

Josh turned around to see Terri frowning at him, her eyebrows drawn together with a line between them. He wanted to defend himself, to say, "It's not my fault this time!" but he couldn't say that to Stu's mother. She'd always take her son's side, which was only right. But Josh still felt the unfairness of it.

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The rest of them stayed another night at the beach and went home on Monday. Josh and his dad helped Terri clean out her garage that afternoon, and Josh felt he'd earned enough points with her that she'd be on his side if Stu decided to throw anything at him that evening.

Stu showed up in time for dinner, which he spent being pleasant and jokey with Josh's dad and Terri and monosyllabic with Josh. After dinner, his dad went with Terri into her office to look at real estate sites, leaving Josh and Stu with a

stack of cardboard boxes to tape up and fill with books from the downstairs bookshelves.

Josh and Stu went downstairs and assembled the boxes in silence, handing the tape dispenser back and forth, until Stu hissed out a breath. "Goddammit."

"What?" Josh wheeled on him, his hands in fists. "I swear, I've been trying to do everything right and not be rude or trample your feelings or whatever, but if you're going to complain about the way I fucking tape boxes together, I'll—"

"No." Stu shook his head. "It's not you." He closed his eyes, wincing, then opened them again. "I wanted to talk to you about this at the beach, but there were too many other people around, and I know this is going to just... it's going to make you uncomfortable, but I'm going to say it anyway, and you'll freak out, but then it will be out in the open so we can start getting past it."

"What... do you need to get out in the open? Why am I gonna freak out?"

Stu exhaled again. "Why don't we go upstairs and get a drink and then sit down and talk?"

"I don't drink anymore. And I'm fine with standing."

"Um. Okay, then." Stu looked down at the boxes. "After we got into that fight at Margo's reception, I decided to see a therapist for the anger issues that I obviously had. I'd never hit anyone in anger before, and I wanted to make sure I'd never do it again, even though no one's ever made me as mad as you did that day."

"Why *were* you so mad at me?"

"I'm getting to that," he said rather sharply, then looked embarrassed. "Sorry. It's still... Anyway, during those therapy sessions, a lot of stuff came up, and I, uh, saw a pattern in the way I've behaved around you all these years. But that's my fault, not yours. You were just a kid."

"What do you mean? I was twenty-seven. Hardly a kid."

"No, I don't mean the fight, I mean when you kissed me when we were looking for the afikomen. The first time we ever met."

Josh opened his mouth, then closed it.

Stu frowned. "Don't you remember doing that? You were a little drunk—"

"I remember it. But what does that have to do with anything?"

"Yeah... This is the uncomfortable part." Stu smiled, but it looked forced. "It was just a stupid teenaged kiss, right? It didn't mean anything."

It had been Josh's first kiss. And it had meant something to him—that he was a clumsy, idiot loser. "You freaked out about it."

"At the time, yeah. But then I started obsessing about it. About you. It's why I was so awful to you in Mexico. Some part of me thought..." He took a deep breath and blew it out. "Some part of me thought that you might kiss me again when you were drunk, but you never did, no matter how wasted you got, so it made me madder and madder, even though I had no idea why."

Josh had almost kissed him that night after they'd raced back to the hotel. Stu had been happy. Laughing. Beautiful. Josh had been about to kiss him again and had stopped himself just in time, because Stu wasn't—

"You're not gay." Josh said it like a statement, but the question hung over both of them.

"No," Stu said, and Josh's mind went blank, except for a dull, buzzing anger. He needed to leave right now, just walk away, because really, what was the point of this conversation?

"Okay, then. Great talk." Josh pushed away from the wall he'd been leaning against, took a step toward the stairs, but Stu stepped in front of him.

"No, wait. I need to get this all out."

Josh folded his arms over his chest. "Go on, then."

"Okay, look, like I said, it wasn't your fault. But I was confused for a long time. I even thought that I might be bi, but most men just don't interest me like that."

"Most?"

“Well...” Stu’s eyes glazed over for a moment. “There was that guy from Suriname, but he was so gorgeous that no one on our trek could keep their hands off him.” His lips curved up, his cheeks went pink, and that was absolutely *not* a greasy, grinding, talon of jealousy clawing its way through Josh’s gut.

“So you’re just a *little* bi.” Oops. He hadn’t meant it to sound quite as bitter as that.

Stu narrowed his eyes at Josh. “I’m trying to explain, so don’t—never mind. Like I said, guys never really did anything for me. But after a few relationships, I realized that girls didn’t, either.” He shrugged. “So maybe I’m just... asexual or something, because the only person I ever really get worked up about is you, and that’s...” He shook his head. “That doesn’t come out in a healthy way at all. I’ve been angry at you for years, apparently, because of this stupid, juvenile... *thing*, which I know is pointless and really kind of masochistic, because you barely tolerate me and you don’t find me the least bit attractive. I’ve been an idiot, looking for the worst in you, pitching a fit at the reception when you were flirting with that bartender, because of my issues. *My* issues.” He laughed. “I mean, all that time I spent in the East trying to find enlightenment, trying to understand the universe, and I couldn’t even understand myself and what was right in front of me.”

Josh couldn’t believe the words that were coming out of Stu’s mouth. It had to be a joke, some kind of prank, but—

“I thought I’d be over it by now,” Stu continued, “but, um. I guess I’m still working on it. I know I’ve made it hard for us to get along like rational human beings. But one of these days I *will* get past it, and then someday we’ll be able to laugh about it. So. Okay.” He let out a breath. “Let’s pack up these books, shall we?” He turned to the bookcase and started pulling out books.

“Wait!” Josh shot a hand out onto the bookshelf in front of Stu’s face. “No, you can’t just... drop a bomb on me like that then pretend like nothing happened!”

Stu dropped the books into a box and turned to face Josh. “Look, I said I was sorry.”

“No, no, actually, you *didn't* say you were sorry. You said you had issues.”

“Oh, for fuck's sake. I'm *sorry*. Is that better?” Stu glared at him.

“No.” Josh took his hand off the books but moved closer to Stu. “You're not over it? You still... you're still, what, hung up on me?”

Stu rolled his eyes. “Yeah. A little. Fine. Is that what you wanted to hear? I was doing okay until I saw you at the beach. You're incredibly hot, but I manage to keep from jumping you because I kept telling myself that you're kind of a dick.” His face got a pinched look. “Except you're not. I thought you were, I pissed you off so that you would be, but you're... *okay*. I know you don't want to hear that stupid little Stu Edelstein, the prude with skinny legs, still has a crush on you, so can we be done now?” He spun back to face the bookcase. “Oh, look, my Harry Potter books.” He pulled one of them off the shelf and looked at it. “I haven't read them for—hey!” The book fell to the floor as Josh grabbed his wrist. “Let go.” Stu pulled at his wrist, but Josh held on. Stu glared at him, his eyes dark under angry brows. “Let go, now, or I'll *make* you let go,” he said in a low, dangerous tone.

Maybe he meant it to sound like a threat, but the growl in his voice made Josh's whole body vibrate. He pinned Stu's wrist back against the bookshelves and then leaned against him, pressing Stu's body into the bookshelves as well.

Stu's chest pushed against Josh's as he took a deep breath. “If you don't let me go in the next three seconds, I'm going to—”

With his free hand, Josh grabbed Stu's hair with the finesse of a caveman, grabbed and held on as he kissed him. He had three seconds to lick Stu's lips open, to taste the inside of his mouth, to enjoy the scrape of Stu's five o'clock shadow against his own, to slide one leg in between Stu's and feel his heat before Stu used Krav Maga or Jeet Kune Do or whatever to break Josh's hold on him, punch a hole through his chest, rip out his spine, and shove it down his throat.

Any second now, Stu would bring his knee up and wipe out Josh's balls, then slam a fist into his face just like before. Josh knew it was coming, had to be coming, but he couldn't stop kissing him. He couldn't stop sucking on Stu's tongue or pushing his ass back into Stu's hands.

He did stop when Stu moaned into his mouth, when he remembered that he was bigger and stronger than Stu, and maybe the reason Stu hadn't punched him yet was because he couldn't move, because Josh had trapped him between the bookshelves and his heavy body. Josh pulled back, opened his mouth to apologize as Stu stepped around him and then gasped when Stu shoved him back against the bookshelves and started sucking on his neck.

His head spun as Stu pushed harder against him, knocking books off shelves as he grabbed at Josh's shoulders and head.

"If you're fucking with me..." Stu muttered against his throat.

The scents of rosemary and mint floated up from Stu's hair, and Josh ran his hand through it. It was finer than he'd thought it would be, and whoa, when had he ever thought about Stu's hair?

Josh opened his eyes and looked at Stu, who'd been the source of so much irritation for so many years. Stu, with his stupid, gorgeous face, his stupid ripped body, his stupid kindness and humor and whatever else he had that everyone who wasn't Josh liked about him. And especially those stupid green-glass eyes, currently hidden behind closed eyelids.

And that's when Josh realized that he'd been an idiot for years, too. When Stu hadn't been in front of him, angry and snappish, he'd been in the back of Josh's mind, keeping him from becoming seriously interested in any other men by being shiny and tantalizing while still wildly out of reach.

No longer out of reach. If Stu were any closer, he'd be inside Josh's skin.

"I'm not fucking with you." He caught Stu's head and leaned down to kiss him again when footsteps pounded down the stairs.

"What's going on down here?" his dad shouted. "If you two are fighting again—Josh! You let go of him right now!"

Josh jerked his hands away from Stu, but Stu still leaned into him, his arms around him. "Um..."

"Alan, we're not—"

“Oh.” Comprehension spread across Alan’s face. “Oh, my god.” He cleared his throat. “I’ll... just be upstairs. If you need me. I mean, not that you would need me for... Okay, then.” And he fled back upstairs.

“Well, I think that wins for Most Awkward Family Moment,” Josh muttered.

“You can touch me again,” Stu said. “Although I’m not sure why you want to.”

Josh put his arms around him again. “Because I’ve been an idiot, too. And I wouldn’t have known, if you hadn’t gone first.” He bit his lip. If Stu had the balls to admit his crush on Josh, Josh had to at least try to find the words.

“When I met you, you were everything I wasn’t—cute and smart and outgoing, and I was a big, boring lump.” Stu frowned and opened his mouth, but Josh went on. “I don’t know why I kissed you except... I had to. I just remember that I had to. So I did, and it was just like everything I did at that age—bumbling and clumsy and a failure. And of course you pushed me away, because what cute, smart, straight boy wouldn’t?”

Stu seemed to understand that Josh needed to get it all out, too, because he didn’t interrupt.

“So,” Josh continued, “I guess I put a chip on my shoulder when it came to you. If I could convince myself you were an ass, then that would mean I dodged a bullet. And whenever you *were* an ass, that just cemented that chip more firmly in place.” He stroked a hand over Stu’s hair. “I wrapped myself up in a nice little... cocoon of anger whenever I had to be around you. It kept me safe. It kept me from trying to kiss you again.”

Stu laughed a little. “Thank god. I thought I was masochistic or something, to have a thing for someone who hated me so much.”

“Maybe you could tell I didn’t hate you, subconsciously. But I’ve got to tell you, I’ve thought of you as an ass for so long that it still hasn’t really sunk in that you aren’t.”

“Same here.”

“Thanks.” Josh smirked, but his humor faded when he said, “I really did hate you at Margo’s reception. You were there with your girlfriend, flaunting your heterosexuality, which pissed me off, and then you said I’d treated my mother like crap. But you were right. That’s why I got so mad.”

Stu pushed away from Josh and stepped out of his arms, far enough away so he could look at him. “What? When did I say *that*?”

“Just before the fight. You told me I was selfish, that I never think of anyone else. You were right. I should have called Mom more. And come home more.”

“Oh, my god, no.” Stu shook his head. “That wasn’t about your mom; she was so proud of you. She sent everyone articles about your team. That was me being a dick. I called you selfish because you weren’t paying attention to *me*. God, I didn’t even know what was coming out of my mouth.”

“Oh. Oh.” The weight of guilt that Josh had been carrying around dropped away, although some of it had disappeared when his dad told him about the money his mom had sent him. “But you were there with your girlfriend. Who was gorgeous.”

“Who I ignored once you started flirting with the bartender.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah.”

“So what do we do now?”

Stu didn’t answer, but he looked down at Josh’s mouth.

“Works for me,” Josh said, tumbling Stu to the ground so he could stretch out on top of him and kiss him some more.

“Ow!”

“Sorry!” Josh rolled off him. “I didn’t mean to crush you.”

“It’s not that. I’m lying on a book.” Stu rolled off the book and onto Josh as footsteps came pounding down the stairs again.

“Stu, are you okay? I heard you say ‘ow’. What’s going—oh!” Terri’s eyes went wide. “Alan said—but I didn’t think you’d ever—ah.” She shut her mouth



with a snap, then smiled overly brightly. "I'll just leave you to those books." She started back up the stairs, then came back down. "Do you need condoms? Because Alan and I—"

"Oh, my god, no, Mom, please do *not* say anything else."

"No, sweetie, we're not using them—"

"La la la la, I'm not hearing this!" Stu said, sitting up and plugging his ears.

"No, I mean, we don't *need* to use them, because..." She shook her head.

"No, what I meant was, we want you two to be safe."

"LA, LA, LA, LA—"

"We'll be safe, Terri, we promise."

"Okay, Josh. I'm counting on you, since you have more experience with this sort of thing."

If Josh could have plugged his ears and joined Stu in his chorus of "la la las", he would have, but thankfully Terri said, "Okay, way past time for me to not be here," and ran up the stairs.

"Is she gone?" Stu unplugged his ears.

"Yes."

"Can you Obliviate me?"

"What's that?" Josh grinned and pulled Stu on top of him. "Is it something kinky? Because—"

"No, it's a Harry Potter thing. Why don't you know that?"

"Because I'm not a nerd."

"Bite me," Stu said, but he smiled when he said it. "I remember loaning you *Prisoner of Azkaban* in Mexico, and then I got pissed off at you when you accused me of stealing your money and I took it back." He winced. "Stu behaving badly. Did you ever finish it?"

"No. And I didn't read any of the other books because you liked them, and I thought you were a jerk."

“I was a jerk.”

“No. Well, okay, maybe a little. But not more than me.”

“Well, I can't be with a man who hasn't read Harry Potter. So, you can borrow them. Starting with PoA, unless you want to start from the beginning.” He found it on the floor, among the books that they'd knocked off the shelves. “There, next to you,” he said to Josh.

Josh sat up, guiding Stu to sit on the floor between his legs, and picked up the book, which had something sticking out of its pages. When he flipped it open, he found a twenty peso bill. No, there were seven twenty peso bills. “Well, fuck me sideways.”

Stu blinked at the money. “Holy crap. *That's* where you put it?”

“How did I...” Josh closed his eyes and tried to go back to that night. “I remember thinking I should hide it somewhere, and it was all folded up from being in my pocket. I must have thought that putting them in the book would flatten them out.” He opened his eyes and looked at Stu. “You haven't opened that book in ten years?”

“No. I didn't have time to re-read them like I'd done before college. And... that one reminded me of you. A big, macho nineteen-year-old who didn't have time for kids' books.”

“Yeah, I was a jerk.” Josh closed the book with the money still between the pages, then crawled over Stu again, nuzzling against his neck. Stu's arms went around him, but not as tight as before. He reached down and ran a hand up Stu's thigh. “I can't believe it's been there all this time. I really thought you took it.”

“I told you I didn't,” Stu said sharply.

Josh looked at him. “I know, but—”

“What the hell?” Stu pushed off of Josh and stood up. “I'm not a liar. I wish I *had* taken it to stop you from drinking yourself sick, but I would have told you if I did.” He kicked a cardboard box out of the way and started towards the stairs. “I'm done for tonight. I have to get up for work tomorrow, so I'll see you later, okay?”

“Wait, what just happened?” Josh jumped up and went after him. “Why are you so mad?”

Stu stopped halfway up the stairs and shook his head, frowning down at Josh. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I should have known we couldn’t just go from being at each other’s throats to being... whatever this was just now.”

The past tense scared Josh almost as much as the resigned look on Stu’s face. “No, come on, don’t leave.” Panic raced through him. It was ridiculous, but Josh had the feeling that if Stu made it to the top of the stairs while he was still angry, a wall would come down between them again, the same one they’d been hitting their heads against for ten years. He had to say something to make it right, but his mind was racing in neutral and not getting anywhere. “I’m sorry if I said something wrong—”

“You think I’m a liar.” Stu turned around and took one step down the stairs.

“No, I *thought* you were. That was me being an idiot. Remember, when we were idiots? We’re not doing that anymore, right?” His heart thudded as Stu took a really long time to answer. But eventually the tension went out of Stu’s shoulders.

“Yeah. Fuck.” He shook his head. “It’s going to take a while to break old habits.”

Josh let out a relieved breath. “Tell me about it.”

“Do you really think this has any chance of working?” Stu asked, gesturing between them.

“After everything we just said, after that kiss, you think it doesn’t?” Josh countered. Stu still looked unsure, so Josh climbed the stairs, tugging Stu down to sit on a step. Josh moved up and kissed him, then pushed him gently onto his back as he trailed his mouth down Stu’s chest and stomach.

“We can’t do this here,” Stu said, but the words came out breathy, and when Josh moved lower, his hips rocked up. “Seriously, my mom or your dad—”

“There’s no way either of them are coming down those stairs again, not until we both come up, fully dressed.” He flicked open the top button on Stu’s jeans.

“Josh...”

“We’ll be fine, as long as we don’t make too much noise.”

“Yeah, okay.” Stu’s whole body went slack. Too slack, so Josh undid another button and licked under the waistband of Stu’s boxers.

“Oh, fuck!” His hips came up off the stairs again.

“That’s more like it.” Josh undid the rest of the buttons and tugged Stu’s jeans down, then shoved his shirt up and licked across his stomach.

Stu’s hips jerked and he clawed at the stairs when Josh reached into his boxers and wrapped a hand around his dick. “Wait, wait...” His chest rose and fell as he clenched his teeth.

“What’s wrong?” Josh asked.

“Nothing, I just...” He shook his head.

“Do you want to stop?” And kick me in the guts while you’re at it, he thought but didn’t say.

“No. But I don’t want you to have these great expectations and then... be disappointed.”

Stu Edelstein, always so sure of himself, backing down? Josh didn’t like that at all. “Haven’t you heard the expression, ‘Any blow job’s a good blow job’?”

“Yes, but—”

He grinned. “Then shut up, and let me do my *job*.”

Stu exhaled. “Okay.” He dropped his head back and lay spread out on the stairs like a sacrificial virgin. Normally, Josh wasn’t one for drama—or virgins—but Stu seemed more resigned than scared. Like maybe the blow jobs he’d had in the past *hadn’t* been good.

That thought made Josh start to feel some performance anxiety. What if they had no sexual chemistry? That kiss had taken his head off, but if that’s as far as they would get, would they be able to become friends? Or would they go back to taking swipes at each other, only meaner and sharper because sex made everything more complicated?

Maybe it would help if he stopped fucking *thinking* about it and just *did* it. They were on their way to being mature adults; they could deal with the fallout if and when it happened. He leaned down and rubbed his face against the fur on Stu's stomach, back and forth, then dipping his nose into Stu's pubes and taking a deep breath. He kept his hand loose around Stu's dick, waiting until he felt it swell and Stu started breathing louder.

“Josh—” he said in a shaky voice.

“Yeah, just like that.” He started moving his hand, up and down, a little bit at a time, then bent and licked at the dick that was firming up nicely. He sucked it into his mouth, earning a broken whine from Stu. He kept mouth and hand slow, but Stu's hips were starting to rock, and Josh hummed when Stu's hands landed on his head.

His own dick was trapped in his pants, so he pulled off just long enough to get them open and one hand on himself. Then he went back down on Stu, whose hips snapped up, forcing his dick into Josh's throat, which, okay, yeah, now he was giving Josh something to work with. Josh stroked him with his mouth, thinking that he could keep everything moving at a nice, even pace, show Stu he had some skill in this area, but when he looked up, Stu was staring down at him, his mouth open, his eyes wild. Josh might have still been able to handle that look, but Stu's fingers tightened in Josh's hair and his hips jerked up again, and Josh was lost.

He moved his head up and down, sucking hard, working his own dick with his left hand, his heart pounding in his ears, the sound mixing with Stu's moans. Stu was rocking into his mouth, then suddenly the hands in his hair were pulling him away.

“Stop, Josh, I'm gonna—”

Josh launched himself up the stairs to lie half-on Stu, grabbing both of their dicks in one hand and kissing the words and breath out of Stu's mouth. Stu threw his leg over Josh's, dug his fingers into Josh's ass, thrusting into his hand a few more times before his body tightened. Then he was bucking against Josh, wailing

into Josh's mouth. His come shot up between them and over Josh's hand, and the hot wetness of it sent Josh over the same edge a few seconds later.

"Fuck," Stu panted.

"Yeah," Josh agreed. He pushed his hips forward, squeezing his hand to get the last drops out, and Stu's eyes rolled back in his head.

"Aaaah, you're gonna kill me," he moaned, his head falling back again onto the stairs. But he didn't look like a sacrificial virgin anymore. He looked like a fucked-out, debauched wreck, and Josh's entire being flooded with satisfaction. It was *his* come on Stu's stomach, *his* saliva on Stu's dick, *his* stubble that had left beard-burn on Stu's face.

Josh kissed him again. "I don't think you qualify for asexual." Then he pulled his hand away and wiped it on his underwear as he dragged himself into a sitting position.

Stu laughed weakly. "What did you do to me?"

Josh blinked at him. "Uh, that's called a blow job." He frowned. "I thought you said you'd been with guys."

"I have been." He propped himself up on his elbows.

"Did they all suck at giving head? Um, so to speak?"

"No. They were great. But..." Stu shook his head. "It was never like that. I've always felt like I was outside looking at a porno or something like that. Never... a part of what was going on. Linnea said I was afraid of intimacy. That I couldn't let down my walls enough to really trust anyone else."

"Linnea. She was the one at Margo's wedding."

"Yeah."

"She's a moron."

"No. She was smart enough to cut me loose after that fight. I think she figured it out, way before I did."

Josh stood up, carefully. "You're drenched. Stay there, I'll bring something to clean you off." He made his way down the stairs to the bathroom, where he found

a washcloth. He wiped himself off, rinsed it out, and brought it back to Stu, who used it to clean himself, a vague little smile on his face. Josh had never seen him so relaxed. It unnerved him.

“Was that just something you needed to get out of your system, so you could be done with all this?” He’d meant to sound casual, but his tone edged into needy.

Stu looked at him. “Do *you* think we’re done?”

Josh opened his mouth to joke the question away, but something stopped him. Maybe it was the way Stu was looking at him, completely open, no judgment. Time for Josh to be open, too. “*I’m* not done. Not by a long shot.”

Stu smiled. “Me, either.”

A little thrill of happiness ran up Josh’s spine. “What are we going to tell everyone?”

“I don’t think we’ll have to tell them anything.” Stu got to his feet and pulled up his jeans, then buttoned them before taking the washcloth off back to the bathroom.

“But your mom and my dad will pitch a fit.” Josh called after him. “And Margo and Amy are going to freak out for sure.”

Stu came back, he stepped right up to Josh and pulled him into an embrace. “No, they won’t. They’re not as big of idiots as we are. They’ve probably known for years.”

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## EPILOGUE

“Where’d you learn to dance, anyway?” Josh asked as Stu led him into some kind of turn.

“When I was in Japan. Ballroom dancing is huge over there.” Stu hummed along with the music for a while, then said, “You look very handsome in that tux.”

“Thanks. So do you. But you told me that back at the hotel.”

“Yes, but what I didn’t tell you, because we were running late, is that it makes me want to rip it off you and fuck you against the wall with those pants down around your dress shoes.”

Josh shuddered. “Jesus, Stu. Don’t say that here—”

“Prude.”

Josh snorted. “You’re never gonna let me forget that, are you?”

“No.” Stu looked up at him, smiling wryly. “And don’t let me forget what I was like back then, either.”

“I’d like to forget *all* of that—”

“—but then we’ll be—”

“Dooooomed to repeat it,” Josh said along with Stu. “Yeah, I know. But for the record, I’m not being a prude. I just don’t think it would be polite to get a full, raging hard-on in the middle of the dance floor.” He nudged his swelling dick against Stu’s thigh.

“Did someone say raging hard-on?” Eric grinned at them. He couldn’t move much due to his hip, so he and Calvin swayed in the middle of the dance floor as other couples orbited them. Josh hadn’t realized they’d moved within earshot of the grooms. He stepped out of Stu’s arms and took his hand instead.

“What did you think of the ceremony?” Calvin asked.

“It was nice,” Josh replied.

“Liar.” Stu smirked. “I saw you wiping away a tear.”



“Yeah, all right, I cried a little. So did you.”

“Yeah, but at least I have the balls to admit it.” He smiled at Calvin and Eric. “It’s always wonderful to see two people in love get married. And it’s great that you get to tie the knot legally in your home state. Congratulations.”

“Thank you. I never thought I’d live to see the day,” Calvin said. “Congratulations seem to be in order for you two as well. I take it you’ve worked out your issues? Did you ever find the root of the problem?”

Stu and Josh exchanged a look, then they both said, “Him,” as they pointed at each other.

Calvin laughed. “Well, good. If it’s too easy, it’s not worth doing. How long has it been now?”

“Just hit the four-month mark last week.” Josh squeezed Stu’s hand. Stu squeezed back.

“Any wedding plans in the works?”

“It’s not legal in Oregon,” Stu said.

“But it will be someday.”

“We’re thinking about it,” Josh said.

Stu looked at him. “We are?”

“Um...”

“It looks like you still have a few things to work on,” Calvin said.

“Tell me about it,” Stu muttered theatrically. Then he asked, “How about you? You’ve been married...” He looked at his watch. “...almost three hours now. Do you think it’ll last?” He grinned at the two men.

Calvin looked thoughtful. “Well, we’ve only been together for forty-one years. We might need a bit more time to work out all the kinks.”

“Or work *in* all the kinks.” Stu and Josh must have looked confused, because Eric explained, “I have quite the collection of vintage leather porn.”

“Ah.” Josh nodded. “Calvin’s a lucky guy.”

“We both are.” Smiling, Eric leaned in to kiss Calvin. Other couples came up to offer their congratulations, so Stu and Josh moved away.

“Do you think we’ll ever have what they have?” Stu asked, pulling Josh close again.

“A collection of vintage leather porn?”

“Yes, that’s *exactly* what I meant.” He snickered into Josh’s neck.

“Then, yes.” Josh looked at him. “You already have my collection of vintage leather porn, and you always will.”

Stu’s eyes went wide. “Oh.” He smiled at Josh. “Well. You have mine, too.”

Over the previous four months, Josh had learned that green glass could glow with warmth. He didn’t think he’d ever get tired of it. “And if we ever act like idiots again,” he told Stu, nuzzling his hair, “we’ll do it together.”

**THE END**

## **Author Bio**

*B. Snow found her way into the magical world of writing by way of fanfiction, and original characters began banging on her brain several years ago. If she can conquer her chronic procrastinitus, she may get that banging written down someday. In the meantime, you can read her short stories in Cross Bones from Dreamspinner Press and in Dorm Porn 2 from Alyson Books.*

*Originally from the west coast, B. Snow and her husband now live in the Atlanta area, sharing a house with two very bad cats who are just lucky they're so cute.*

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