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# STRÖTE BOYS



EVANGELINE ANDERSON

*How far would you dare to go...to win it all?*

Maverick Holms and Duke Warren share almost everything—a college soccer team, an apartment and the same extremely competitive nature. Thanks to that never-back-down spirit, they're about to share more than they bargained for.

The game is “gay chicken”. The rule: get as close as possible without kissing, and the one that pulls away first is the loser. The problem: neither of them likes to lose. It isn't long before the game becomes an excuse to touch and kiss in every possible forbidden way. And after they pose for a gay website to earn extra money, things really heat up.

Suddenly Duke is talking lifetime commitment, and Mav is backpedaling as hard as he can, not sure if he's ready to accept all his best friend is offering him. Or the truth about what he is.

Warning: Hot M/M sex inside. Do not open this book if you don't like the idea of two deliciously muscular best friends becoming lovers.

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# Str8te Boys

*Evangeline Anderson*

## Dedication

Dedicated to my loyal M/M readers. I get more e-mail from you than anyone else and I love you for it. Keep reading and I'll keep writing.

# Chapter One

“Dude, I need some green. They’re gonna fuckin’ kick us outta this joint if we don’t come across with the rent. And just because this is our last month here doesn’t mean I wanna spend it sleeping on the sidewalk.” Daniel Warren, aka “Duke” flopped down beside his roommate, Maverick Holms, on the beat-up black leather couch that faced the flat screen. He had short, spiky dark blond hair and a surfer-boy tan and his eyes reminded Mav of melted-chocolate brown. Despite his depressing words, he didn’t seem too concerned over the prospect of being kicked out of his apartment. But then, Duke never got too upset over anything. He had an easygoing personality which was good considering his size. Six foot four and all muscle—if he’d wanted to be a bad ass he could have pulled it off easily and it wouldn’t have been a pretty sight. So it was a good thing he was almost always in a relaxed mood.

“We would’ve had plenty of money to pay the rent if you hadn’t spent it all on ‘victory weed’,” growled Mav, wishing Duke wouldn’t take up so much of the couch. There would have been plenty of room on the beat-up leather sofa for two regular sized people but he and Duke were both big guys. Mav was about an inch taller and just as muscular but other than that he didn’t think he and Duke looked that much alike. In fact they were almost complete opposites since Mav had dark brown hair that just missed being black by a shade and pale blue eyes. He was also the more serious and quiet of the two. *Not that it takes much to be quieter than Duke*, he thought, shooting his roommate and best friend a look. *I’ve been through hurricanes that were less noisy and didn’t make as big a mess.*

“Ah, c’mon, Mav.” Duke punched his roommate in the bicep. “Had to have something to celebrate with—we won the finals! It’s our senior year and we finally pulled it off. Tell me that trophy didn’t look sweet when they handed it over.” He grabbed Mav in a headlock and started to wrestle playfully. “Admit it. Come on—admit it.”

“Cut it out, Duke.” Mav brushed halfheartedly at the muscular arms encircling his neck. But he had to agree that the victory his roommate was still excited about had been a satisfying win. Duke was the captain of the University of South Florida men’s soccer team and Mav was the goalie and they had finished their final season as champions. Being on the team was the way they’d met in the first place and before the end of their freshman semester they’d decided to room together.

At first it had been a rough transition living with a guy like Duke. Mav liked things neat and Duke was a total slob. Also, Mav liked to get his sleep and was serious about his schoolwork and Duke was a party waiting to happen who flew through his classes by the seat of his pants. The disgusting thing was how

easily he made good grades while Mav had to work for his. Then again, Duke was headed for business school after he earned his BA and Mav was looking to become a pharmacist. Organic chemistry was considerably harder than business models and graphs, Mav often reminded himself. Still, despite the differences in their personalities, or maybe because of them, they were best friends and he wasn't really mad at his roommate. But they *did* have to get the rent money from somewhere.

"I say we take your precious flat screen to the U-pawn and see how much we can get for it," he said, sitting up straighter and pretending not to notice that Duke's muscular arm was still around his shoulders. The casual touching was another thing he'd learned to get used to when it came to Duke—his roommate was a very affectionate guy.

"Are you nuts?" Duke gave him an incredulous look. "Mav, no way are we pawning the flat screen. What would we watch porn on if we did that?"

Mav shifted awkwardly on the couch. "You're the one who always wants to watch that shit instead of study." He remembered the last time they watched some of his roommate's extensive collection of X-rated titles together and the memory wasn't exactly...comfortable. In fact, just thinking about it made his face feel hot. But Duke didn't seem to notice his embarrassment.

"*Captain Dick and His Big Tits Cum Ship* just isn't the same without the flat screen. Neither is ESPN for that matter." His strong fingers dug into the base of Mav's neck in a seemingly unconscious massage as he talked and Mav made no move to get away from the intimate contact.

"You straight boys and your breeder porn." The new voice came from the only other seat in the living room of their apartment—a deep wicker chair with a red paisley beanbag cushion that Mav had inherited from his older sister when she'd decided to redecorate. Ethan Rames looked up from the brand new iPhone he was playing with and made a disgusted face. "All kinds of *pussy* here and *vagina* there...ugh! Don't know how you watch that shit."

"Hey, at least we're not watching guys do each other up the ass, gay boy." Duke said the words without malice, a grin on his all-American features showing that he was kidding.

It had surprised Mav at first that an alpha male jock like his roommate would have gay friends. He himself had come from a somewhat repressive background where "those people", as his mother called them, were almost never mentioned, let alone befriended. But Duke's own mom was divorced and had tons of gay shopping buddies so Duke was completely at ease, even around the out and proud Ethan and his partner, Evan. The two gay Es, he called them and the name had stuck around the USF campus where it seemed like Duke knew and liked everybody no matter what their sex, sexual orientation, religion, race or major.

"If you need money so badly, you and Maverick should do what Evan and I did," Ethan said, still playing with his new toy. He seemed to be having trouble programming the phone and was frowning in concentration at the tiny screen in front of him.

“And what’s that, Eeth? You and Ev making your own gay porn now? Suckin’ each other’s cocks for big bucks?” Duke grinned at Ethan and made a motion with the hand that wasn’t massaging Mav’s neck like he was bringing a thick shaft to his mouth.

“C’mon, Duke,” Mav said, frowning. He was surprised all over again at how easily his jock roommate talked about gay sex. At the beginning of their friendship it had made him really uncomfortable until he’d gotten used to it. Lately, however, he found the subject filled him with anxiety all over again for reasons he couldn’t define. He kept his disquiet to himself—mostly anyway. It wasn’t easy when Duke really started going. Like now.

“I mean, I always wonder,” Duke continued conversationally. “Which one of you pitches and which one catches. Who sucks and who swallows?”

“We both do, if you must know.” Ethan gave him a halfhearted glare. It was impossible to be mad at Duke because no matter how crass his question, it was always accompanied by a charming grin. “But Evan’s the top in our relationship, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“So then *he’s* riding *your* ass when you guys are making the gay porn?” Duke asked with mock seriousness. “Because it’s the same with me and Mav here. I get on him and ride him like the sweet little bitch he is and he loves every minute of it.”

“I told you, Duke—cut that shit out,” Mav growled, shrugging off his roommate’s massaging hand in sudden irritation. Why couldn’t his best friend ever leave him alone? Why did he always have to be saying such embarrassing, ridiculous things? Things that turned into pictures in Mav’s head he’d rather not be thinking about. It would be bad enough if they weren’t already sleeping together almost every night—well, not *sleeping* together but sleeping in the same bed, their bodies touching, their arms around each other...

“What?” Duke interrupted his train of thought. “Hey, Mav, you know I’m just kidding. And seriously, I really want to know how the gay Es are making their money. Haven’t you noticed all the sweet toys they have lately?” He nodded enviously at the GPS phone Ethan was holding.

“I *was* going to tell you until you started denigrating my sexual orientation.” Ethan put a chocolate brown hand to his hip and gave Duke a look.

Duke sighed. “You and your ’tude. You know I’m just kidding you, Eeth. So come on—give.”

“Well...” Ethan spoke slowly, his concentration still taken up by the new phone. “Have you seen those flyers on all the billboards around campus—the ones looking for male models?”

“Are you serious?” Mav was startled into asking. “I thought that modeling agency was the front for some kind of gay website.”

“And so it is, dear boy.” Ethan looked up from the phone’s screen and arched an eyebrow at him. “They’re looking for pretty boys willing to pose together so Ev and I went in and walked out a cool two grand richer. But the site photographer told me all the applicants he’s been getting are twinkies and he’s looking for something different.”



Mav frowned. “Twinks?”

“Effeminate gays with slender, swimmer’s physiques like Ev and myself,” Ethan elaborated. “He’s looking for some jocks now for a new site that’s going to be called *Str8te Boys*. Only spelled with an eight instead of an a. Very hip-hop.”

“*Str8te Boys*? Why the hell would anybody want to see two straight guys, uh, getting it on?” Duke demanded.

Ethan shrugged. “For the same reason you breeders like to look at lipstick lesbians having gay sex. I know you wouldn’t want to watch two diesel dykes rug munching each other, would you?”

Mav shivered. “Uh, that’d be a no.”

“There you go, then,” Ethan said. “You want to see pretty girls getting together instead. The same way some people—and not all of them are gay men, mind you, a lot of them are kinky little straight girls—like to see straight boys together.” He sighed. “And besides, there’s just something so hot about the idea of two pretty straight boys having their first time...touching each other...feeling their way...not really sure what they’re doing but willing to try just about anything...”

“Enough already.” Duke made a face and raised a hand to stop him. “So you’re saying they’re opening a new site just with straight guys as models?”

“Straight-looking boys because believe me, just because a guy looks like a straight on the outside doesn’t mean he can’t be a big old queen on the inside,” Ethan emphasized. “Straight-looking boys who don’t mind getting close to each other for a few pictures and a lot of ‘green’, as Duke so charmingly calls it.”

“How close?” Duke asked, frowning suspiciously. “Like, suck each other’s cocks close? ’Cause I don’t think Mav and I are up for that, Eeth. Even if we are about to be thrown out on our asses if we don’t make the rent.”

Ethan gave them a searching glance before shaking his head. “I didn’t think you would be, or I wouldn’t have mentioned it,” he murmured. “But no, as it happens, you can just do a few casual shots with your shirts off and still clean up. He’s looking more for the *suggestion* of sex than the actual act, I believe.”

“Suggestion of sex?” Mav frowned. “What the hell does that even mean?” Not that he was considering this, he told himself. But still...

Ethan sighed and put down his phone. “Tell you what, I’ll show you. Where’s your laptop, Duke? Or did you pawn it for drugs?”

“Hey, that victory weed was the only smoke I’ve had in the last six months,” Duke protested, frowning even as he got up to go get his laptop. “You know my body is a temple.”

“Yeah, but your mouth is an atheist,” Ethan shot back.

“Hey, good one.” Mav grinned and Ethan winked.

“The boy is hot. The boy is on *fire*.” Ethan licked his finger and pressed it to his ass while making a little *hiss* sound, as though he’d touched something hot.

“Yeah, yeah, we know you’re a flamer,” Duke growled, returning with the laptop. He handed it to Ethan. “So show us what you mean by a ‘suggestion of sex’, gay boy.”

“Fine.” Ethan’s slim brown fingers flew over the laptop keyboard for a few minutes and then he handed it to Duke. “Like that, *straight boy*.”

Duke looked at the image on the screen with a frown, as though expecting to see something that turned him off. After a moment, however, his face cleared and he looked up at Mav.

“Hey, roomie, come look.”

“Bring it here if you want me to look,” Mav countered. He didn’t want to move from the safety of the couch. Not because he was lazy—because the neck massage Duke had been giving him earlier had resulted in a distinct *problem*. His shorts were baggy enough to hide his semi-erect cock if he remained seated but if he stood... Mav clenched his jaw. It was better to stay sitting until the problem went away.

“All right, lazy ass.” Duke sauntered across the room and settled on the couch again, way too close for comfort. Not that Mav told him to back off—he never had in all their years of rooming together and it would look weird if he started now. Instead he looked down at the Toshiba screen.

He’d been expecting something kind of gross—like one of those *Hot, Hairy Holes* or *Bears and their Boys* sites you sometimes ran across on the Internet by accident while trolling for porn. But the pictures on the screen were surprisingly mild.

A montage of four photos grouped in a banner format ran along the top of the screen. As Ethan had said, both of the models in them were slender and effeminate and obviously gay. In one picture two guys were walking together, holding hands. In the next one they were horsing around—one of them had jumped on the other one’s back and was whispering in his ear. In the third both of them were shirtless and one of the guys was sitting between the other one’s legs, a faraway look in his eyes.

But it was the fourth picture that really captured Mav’s imagination. In it, one of the pretty gay boys was leaning back against a white frosted window with clear, pure light pouring in around him. His partner was cupping his cheek and they were staring into each other’s eyes soulfully. *Like they’re talking without saying a word*, Mav found himself thinking.

The caption beneath the pretty-boy banner read simply, *Imagine us, together*.

“Wow.” Duke blew out a breath that ticked Mav’s ear. “That’s... I don’t know if we could do that.”

Ethan snorted. “What are you talking about, Duke? The two of you are always all over each other—playing gay chicken and all that shit.”

“That’s right—gay chicken.” Duke nodded. “I play because I am the king and still reigning champion. Nobody can beat me, can they, Mav?” He turned to Mav with an irrepressible grin.

Mav groaned and glared at Ethan. “Don’t get him *started*.”

But it was too late. The website and any idea of earning money to make the rent was lost. Duke was off and running.

“Gay chicken, gay chicken...” He turned to face Mav on the couch, one arm around his neck and the other hand on Mav’s muscular thigh. “Come on, Mav, you know you want me.”

“Cut it out, Duke. I’m not in the mood,” Mav growled.

“Sure you are. You’re *always* in the mood.” Duke leaned closer, smiling tauntingly.

Mav frowned at his roommate. Any other guy would have backed off at the dangerous look in his eyes but he knew Duke didn’t back down for anyone. Neither did Mav as a general rule, even though he wished he could. But he couldn’t, because for some reason he was still hard—harder than ever in fact—and if he jumped off the couch now, his state of arousal would show. There was nothing to do but sit there and play the stupid game until his annoying best friend gave it up and moved on to other things.

“Gay chicken,” Duke whispered, leaning in. The idea was for two guys to get as close to kissing as they could. The one to pull away first was the loser. Duke always won because he was a fierce competitor where any sport was concerned—be it soccer, baseball, basketball, football, table tennis...or gay chicken.

“Come on, Duke, stop it,” Mav murmured as his roommate got closer and closer. He could see the little gold and green flecks in Duke’s chocolate brown eyes, could smell the faintly spicy aftershave he wore and under it, the warm scent of his skin.

“Can’t stop unless you give,” Duke murmured, moving in. “Gotta play to win, Mav. And you know I *always* win.”

Mav sighed, still looking deeply into his best friend’s eyes. For some reason it reminded him of the picture he’d seen on the website of the two guys looking at each other. “Yeah, you always have to win, *fag*,” he muttered, not sure if he was angry or...something else. By now his cock had gone from half-hard to full-alert status and he didn’t dare move. Or maybe he didn’t want to? It was all very confusing. He’d never let Duke’s mouth get this close to his own before. Always in the past he’d pulled away, turned his head, admitting that the game was getting to be too much for him, too intense. But this time he felt frozen in time and space, helpless to do anything but watch his best friend’s infuriatingly handsome face get closer.

Duke’s warm pink lips brushed his gently at first and then more firmly. He held the kiss for a long, breathless moment before pulling back a fraction of an inch. “Who’s a fag now?” His deep voice was low and intimate. “Do you give, roomie?”

Mav felt like someone had stuck a lighting rod down the front of his pants and sent a bolt of electricity straight through his cock. What the hell was wrong with him? Duke’s posturing and games had never affected him this way before. Well, not until recently, anyway. He thought again about jumping off the couch and running up to his room. But that would look weird and besides, his hard-on would be way too obvious, even if he moved fast. He was stuck, pinned to the couch.

“What are you gonna do if I don’t give?” he asked, hating the rough, breathless tone in his own voice.

“Maybe nothing. Maybe *this*.” Duke leaned forward again. This time when their mouths met Mav felt something warm and wet brush against the seam of his lips. *His tongue*, he realized, a shiver running through him. *Damn, he’s actually licking me!*

He opened his mouth to protest and suddenly Duke’s tongue was right there, probing delicately between his lips, forcing him to react.

Without knowing why he was doing it, Mav reached up and took a handful of his best friend’s spiky blond hair. Pulling Duke closer, he pressed his own tongue deep into the warm, luscious mouth covering his own. Duke tasted like cinnamon and beer and heat. He tasted delicious.

Then Duke was pulling away abruptly, pretending to spit and wipe his mouth. “Dude, you kissed me! You were actually frenching me or some shit!”

Mav frowned. “That’s what you get, asshole. Do you give?” he asked, trying to cover his own confusion. *What just happened? Did I kiss him? What the hell?*

Duke scowled. “Damn it, Mav. I never lose at gay chicken.”

“Maybe because I always let you win.” Mav held his best friend’s gaze with his own, refusing to look away.

“I think you better give, Duke. Unless you want to be getting a whole lot gayer than you ever have before.” Ethan’s dry voice pulled Mav back to the present. The other man was still sitting in the wicker chair, watching them. But for a moment Mav had completely forgotten there was anyone else in the room but him and his best friend.

“Huh?” Duke looked slightly confused, as if the kiss had caught him unawares too. Which it shouldn’t have since he’d initiated it, Mav thought half angrily.

“I said, I don’t think your boy Maverick is going to back down this time.” Ethan grinned. “So unless you want to bend over and let him fuck you to prove how extremely *ungay* you are, I think we have a new reigning champ of gay chicken. And on that note...” He stood and stuffed the iPhone in his pocket. “I think I better get going. Ev wants me to go to brunch with him and his mom. I’m *not* looking forward to it.” He made a face.

“Uh, sure. Okay.” Duke still sounded dazed but at least he’d stood up from the couch, putting some distance between himself and Mav. “See ya, Eeth. Thanks for comin’ by.”

“Talk to you later, straight boy.” Ethan gave them one last searching look before letting himself out of the apartment’s front door.

“Uh, well, I gotta go. Gotta...get something in my room.” Duke nodded vaguely in the direction of his bedroom.

“Sure. See ya.” Mav nodded, feeling a strange mixture of relief and disappointment that his annoying best friend was finally getting out of his personal space. But as Duke turned to go, something caught Mav’s eye. There was a definite bulge in the crotch of his roommate’s jeans.

Duke was hard too.

## Chapter Two

Maverick shifted in his bed and sighed. He squeezed his eyes shut and took a different grip on his cock. *Big, round, full tits. Tight pink nipples. Wet, hot pussy...* He rubbed harder but it wasn't happening—despite how achingly hard he'd been earlier sitting on the couch with Duke, now that he was in a position to do something about it, his cock was only at half-mast.

Frustrated, he opened his eyes and glared at the ceiling. Damn it, what was wrong with him? He'd been lying here for what felt like hours, trying to get off so he could get a good night's sleep. It was his usual routine because jerking off put him out like a light. It was better than a sleeping pill as far as Mav was concerned but tonight he just couldn't seem to manage it. He had an organic chem test tomorrow that was going to kick his ass if he didn't get some shuteye, but his usual library of mental images—most of them consisting of hot girls in little or no clothing—just wasn't working tonight. Instead he kept thinking about what had happened with Duke on the couch. That kiss—had it been a kiss? If not, what the hell was it? What was going on? Because this was definitely not the first weird incident that had taken place between them in the recent past. Even weirder than the way he and Duke shared a bed most nights which, to be honest, Mav had stopped thinking of as weird at all.

Their sleeping arrangements had just happened so naturally it hadn't seemed strange at the time, although he was aware of how odd it would look to an outsider. Not that anyone was ever going to find out. And if Mav didn't want anyone knowing about his and Duke's sleeping arrangements, he sure as *hell* didn't want them knowing about what else had happened between them recently.

Mav's mind shied away from that thought—that memory. *We were drunk that night. Well, Duke was, anyway. It doesn't count.*

Except if it didn't count, why couldn't he stop thinking about it? And why was his cock suddenly rock hard when it had been like a piece of week-old celery a minute ago? Mav closed his eyes again and stroked, trying not to think about it, trying not to remember, but somehow the memory came to him anyway...

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"Dude, are you watching that one *again*?" Duke's voice startled Mav, ruining his concentration on the scene playing out on the flat screen in front of him. He put down his beer and frowned at his roommate.

"I like it. So?"

“So it’s kinda gay, doncha think?” Duke grinned and plopped down beside him, close enough that his thigh rubbed against Mav’s.

“It’s a girl giving two guys blowjobs.” Mav gestured at the screen in irritation. He’d been really getting off on the DVD called *A Pole for Every Hole*, which was by far his favorite in his roommate’s extensive collection and he didn’t like being interrupted. “What’s gay about that?” he demanded.

“Well just *look* at them.” Duke gestured at the screen himself. “I mean, she’s sucking both of them off but like, at the same time. Their cocks are all rubbing together and shit while she licks them. You don’t think that’s gay?”

Mav hunched his shoulders. As a matter of fact, he’d been thinking the same thing. and watching the two cocks of the male actors a lot more than the large, naked and obviously fake breasts of the porn star that was blowing them. Having his personal thoughts spoken aloud by his best friend was unsettling.

“They probably just do that so they can get a good shot,” he muttered, taking a sip of the beer sitting on the end table beside him.

“Gimme some of that.” Duke held out his hand and Mav passed the silver can over. Duke took a long swig before passing it back. “Hey, man, I don’t care. Whatever gets you off. It’s really giving you some serious wood though, huh?” He cast a glance at Mav’s lap where the outline of his thick erection was visible through his sweatpants.

“None of your goddamn business,” Mav growled. He had the sudden urge to cover his cock with his hand but that would look like he was touching himself.

“Hey, Mav, we’re best buds. You can tell me.” Duke’s words were slightly slurred, his breath furred with scotch fumes. Maverick realized that the sip of beer wasn’t the first thing his roommate had had to drink that night and relaxed. Duke always got mouthy and a little crazy when he was buzzed so it was no wonder he felt free enough to remark on Mav’s hard-on.

“Okay, yeah, it turns me on. It’s my favorite DVD. Happy now?”

“Not as happy as you, ’pparently.” Duke was still slurring, obviously drunk. But his hand on Mav’s cock still caught Mav by surprise.

“What the hell, man?” he asked when he felt Duke’s big hand grip him through the loose sweatpants material.

“*Extreme* gay chicken.” Duke’s brown eyes gleamed in the light from the flat screen. “Ever heard of it, Mav? ’S like, both guys grab each other’s cocks and the first one to move their hand loses. Wanna play?”

Mav knew he should say no. His best friend was drunk and didn’t know what he was doing. Then again, knowing Duke, he would have done the same thing when he was dead-cold sober if the notion took him. He was fearless—which was what explained the fact that he wasn’t afraid to grab his best friend’s cock. A cock that was currently throbbing for release.

*God! Shouldn't do this...* "Fine." Knowing he would regret it later, Mav reached over and cupped the bulge in his friend's jean shorts. Duke was hard too.

"Is this too gay for you?" The slur was gone from Duke's deep voice, replaced by a low, sensual note Mav had only heard when his roommate was seducing some coed on the couch.

"Nah," he said, playing along. "Not too gay." The porn on the flat screen went on but he was blind to it now. All he could feel was the large, masculine hand cupping his erection. All he could see was his own hand returning the favor. His best friend's cock felt strange under his hand—strange, but not bad. Just different.

"How about this?" Duke's hand moved, stroking slowly from root to tip and back again through the gray sweatpants Mav was wearing.

Mav bit back a groan. He could feel everything through the thin material and God, did it ever feel good! *What the hell is going on here?* But whatever it was, it felt too incredible to stop.

"Nope," he managed to say and matched his roommate's hand action with a slow stroke of his own. He could feel Duke's cock throbbing under his palm but for some reason instead of repulsing him, the feeling intrigued him.

"How about this, then?" Without hesitation, Duke slid his hand up and his fingers were suddenly inside the waistband of the sweatpants. Deliberately, he brushed over the slippery head of Mav's shaft. "Is that too gay for you, roomie?" he asked softly, stroking over the broad, wet tip of Mav's cock.

"That's...that's a little gay, man," Mav managed to gasp. But at the same time he was working his hips, just a tiny bit, trying to get more of his best friend's hand in contact with his aching cock. Part of him wondered what had gotten into Duke. They'd been roommates for almost four years and he'd seen the other man smashed out of his head before, but Duke had never done anything this blatant, this sexual. Did this have something to do with the fact that they were graduating and parting ways soon? But another part of him didn't give a damn about the whys of what was happening. That part just wanted the delicious contact to go on and on and never end.

"But is it *too* gay is what I'm asking," Duke murmured, reaching further into Mav's sweats and wrapping his fingers around his thick, aching shaft. "Do you give?"

"I...I...no. I don't give," Mav gasped. By now he was actively thrusting into his friend's warm palm, almost unable to think because of the slow, hot pleasure that was starting in the base of his balls and working its way up.

"What would make you give, Mav? You know I always win." Duke's hand traveled even lower, cupping Mav's balls briefly with ticklish fingertips before grasping his cock again.

"I...I don't know," Mav groaned. The hand on his shaft felt so good he could barely string together a coherent sentence but inside his thoughts were going crazy.

God, what the hell? Is he actually going to jerk me off? Should I let him? Why does he want to?



The hot, forbidden feelings and his confused thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a knock on the door.

They sprang apart as though they'd been burned and Mav fumbled desperately for the remote while Duke went for the door.

"Coming! Who is it?" he bellowed as he grabbed the knob.

That wasn't all he was grabbing just a minute ago.

The thought got Mav moving. Within a matter of moments, he was up on his feet and flying up the stairs to seek sanctuary in his room. Once there, he ripped down his sweats, grabbed his cock and came in two short, sharp strokes. Damn, he was a mess. What had Duke done to him? And why?

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Mav sighed as he looked up at the dark ceiling above and remembered the interrupted session of mutual masturbation—or "extreme gay chicken", whichever you wanted to call it. He'd thought about asking Duke about it, but the next morning his roommate *had* complained about a massive hangover and had said he couldn't remember where he'd been or even how he'd gotten to bed the night before. So Mav had decided to leave it alone. After all, he could hardly go to Duke and say, "Hey, buddy, remember last night when you were grabbing my cock? What made you do that?" He could just see Duke's blank look and hear his, "Dude, what have you been smoking?" No, asking his roommate what the hell had happened between them that night was definitely out. They couldn't talk about it any more than they could talk about the weird kiss that had happened tonight.

Deep down inside, Mav knew he ought to be upset about it. About both the mutual jerk-off session and the strange but intense kiss he and Duke had shared that evening. If either of those things had happened with any other guy, Mav would have ripped the jerk's head off, no question about it. But with Duke, things were different.

Duke was his best friend, his go-to guy. Duke would take a bullet for him and Mav knew he would take one for his friend. They'd been together through so much—victory and defeat on the soccer team, breakups and makeups with girlfriends. And then there was that time Mav had been accused of cheating on his physics final—no one but Duke had believed him when he'd sworn he hadn't done it. When the real cheater had been caught, Duke had wanted to go kick his ass as payment for the emotional distress the whole incident had caused Mav. Of course, he hadn't put it that way. His exact words had been, "I'm gonna fuck 'im up for what he did to you, man. Gonna fuck 'im up bad." Mav had stopped him, but it was nice to know someone cared enough to want to get physical for him.

Except lately Duke had been getting physical *with* him. And what the hell was up with that?

As if right on cue, a short *rat-a-tat-tat* sounded at his door and Duke came in. “Hey, Mav, already in bed?” There was a quick slice of light from the open doorway before he shut the door. Without waiting for an answer, he threw himself on the mattress beside his friend and rolled over so he was looking down into Mav’s upturned face.

“You have no concept of personal space, you know that?” Mav asked without anger. If Duke was in the room with you, he wanted to be right up on you for some reason—that was just the way he was. It had bothered Mav for the entire first month they roomed together and then he’d made a conscious decision to get over it. It was just one of the things about Duke and there was so much to like, why should he let this one little thing get him down? Besides, it was kind of nice most of the time. Nice to have another warm body close to yours on the couch or even in the bed. Not that he could ever admit that out loud to anyone. Any more than he could admit to the fact that most nights Duke ended up in his bed or he ended up in Duke’s.

Mav hated to think what the rest of the soccer team would think if they knew that the captain and goalie of their team regularly spent the night lying all over each other like sleepy puppies. No doubt the word “faggot” would come up pretty quickly and then there would have to be a fight of some kind. Even though he was the biggest guy on the team, Mav didn’t like to throw down. Not unless he really had to.

“Hey, Mav, whatcha thinkin’?” Duke interrupted his train of thought and Mav looked up to see that his best friend was still staring down at him. It was hard to see in the darkness but he could make out the faint gleam of Duke’s deep brown eyes above him—way too close for comfort.

“Thinkin’ you should get out of my face,” he said gruffly, since he couldn’t very well tell the truth and say he’d been thinking it was nice to have someone in bed with him.

“Fine. I’m cold anyway.” Again without asking for an invitation, Duke crawled under the covers with him and snuggled close, putting his head on Mav’s shoulder. He was wearing only a pair of boxer shorts and his broad, muscular chest was warm against Mav’s arm and side.

“Duke...” Maverick was exasperated. He was still half-erect, having never achieved a release, and now his roommate’s big hard body pressed against his side ensured that he wasn’t going to be able to get back to business until Duke fell asleep. At least he’d had the presence of mind to pull his boxers back up when Duke had come in the room.

“Sorry, man, were you jerkin’ off?” Duke’s breath was warm against his neck.

Mav stiffened. “None of your business, roomie.”

“Hey, it’s no big deal, Mav. Everybody does it.”

“Duke...” Mav put an extra note of warning in his voice.

“Fine.” Duke sighed and let it drop. “We’re almost outta here, ya know?” His deep voice was soft and thoughtful in the darkness. “Not long before we walk.”

“Yeah.” Mav sighed too, his exasperation forgotten in the realization that soon he wouldn’t have his best friend to be exasperated about any more. The thought made him sad—much sadder than he would have expected. Like he was cutting out a part of his heart and leaving it behind.

“Ya know, I was thinkin’,” Duke continued. “I mean, I know you got accepted to pharm school up in Tallahassee and I’m s’posed to be goin’ to business school to get my MBA but wouldn’t it be great if I got accepted to Tallahassee too? I mean, we could keep rooming together, ya know?”

“It *would* be nice,” Mav acknowledged. “But Tallahassee isn’t Cornell. Isn’t that where you’re going?”

Duke shrugged. “Cornell is mostly my old man’s idea anyway. My mom doesn’t care—told me to go where I want and do whatever makes me happy.”

“Man, your mom is seriously cool,” Mav said in admiration. He wished his own parents were half as open-minded as his best friend’s mom.

“Yeah, I know. So whattaya think about what Ev said? About that website?” Duke changed the subject again, his warm breath puffing in Mav’s ear as he shifted his position in bed. “I mean, it sounds like an easy way to earn cash, right?”

“Well, yeah,” Mav said cautiously. “But it also seems like the kind of thing that could come back and bite you in the ass. Like what if in the future you have a job interview and the guy who’s hiring you has seen your pictures on a gay website?”

“Then he’s gotta be gay himself or else what is he doing lookin’ at that kinda shit in the first place?” Duke answered promptly. “Hell, he’d probably be *more* likely to hire you instead of less.”

“Well...” Mav could scarcely deny his friend’s logic on that point. “But what if your parents saw it?”

“It would give my old man a heart attack—no question. But that’s a good thing,” Duke said comfortably. “My mom would think it was hilarious and she’s the only one I care about. What about you?”

“Well, my dad would be upset and my mom would cry,” Mav said, thinking about it. “But I’m sure if I explained they’d get over it.”

“Explained...?”

“That I’m not really, uh, gay. You know.” Mav felt his cheeks heating up again as he remembered what had happened between him and Duke earlier. Man, it should be totally strange to be so close to the guy right now. Duke’s head was on his shoulder and one large, warm hand was splayed out on Mav’s chest, right between his nipples. In fact, he did feel a little weird—his cock was hard again and before Duke had gotten under the covers with him, it had been barely half-mast. What was going on?

Duke blew out a breath. “Well...I wish you’d think about it, man. I just, I know it’s my fault we’re behind on the rent and it’s not fair for me to ask you to help but I sure as hell can’t ask anybody else to do this. I mean, c’n you imagine what Enslow would say if I asked *him*?”

Mav snorted laughter. “Yeah. You better not do that.” Richard Enslow was one of the other guys on the USF soccer team—and he just happened to be extremely homophobic. Once when the gay Es had come to congratulate them after a winning match, Duke had actually had to throw a punch in order to keep him from going after them and bashing them. It hadn’t been a pretty sight and Mav was sure Enslow would be the first guy to yell “fag” if the team somehow found out about their unusual sleeping arrangements. Not that they ever would. Enslow was one of the few people who wasn’t welcome at their apartment.

“So whattaya say? Will you do it?” Duke’s deep voice was hopeful. “I mean, it looks really easy. Just a lot of holdin’ hands and staring deep into each other’s eyes. We could do that much for a few bucks, right?”

Hell, we were practically doing that much earlier, Mav thought uncomfortably. A helluva lot more than that, in fact. “Well, all right,” he said at last. “But no funny stuff.”

“Funny like when you kissed me earlier?” Duke’s voice was full of teasing and Mav knew his roommate was just kidding.

“Hey, I was just doing my best to beat you at gay chicken,” he said, refusing to rise to the bait, even though his heart rate had doubled when his best friend mentioned the weird kiss they’d shared. “And I think it’s clear I’m the new champion, too,” he added. As soon as the words were out of his mouth he knew he’d made a mistake. *Why did I say that? There’s no way Duke can pass up a challenge.* But it was too late.

Sure enough, Duke rolled up on his side and looked down at Mav again, his brown eyes gleaming in the darkness. “You challenging me to a rematch, roomie?” he asked softly.

“Depends,” Mav heard himself say. “Are you talking about a rematch from today...or from the other night?” He held his breath, wondering what Duke would say about that. Would he be confused and ask what Mav was talking about, or would he actually admit he’d been lucid that night, not drunk?

“Maybe...maybe both,” Duke said at last, after a long silence had passed. “You wanna play?”

“Maybe,” Mav echoed him. “What are the rules?” His cock was throbbing for release now, aching as it had been the other night when Duke had touched him. In fact, he was suddenly so hot he felt like he was going to burn a hole through the sheets. He didn’t dare ask himself why.

“I think we should up the risk factor,” Duke murmured in his ear. “Make it like...double dare extreme gay chicken or something like that. You know?”

“How do we do that?” Mav’s lips felt numb with excitement.

“Gotta get naked,” Duke decided after a moment of thought. “You wanna do it?”

“Sure, I guess.” Mav’s casual words belied the turmoil he felt inside. *God, shouldn’t be doing this!* But he was already skinning out of his boxers and Duke was doing the same beside him.

“Now what?” he asked, as soon as he was completely naked under the covers.

“Now...since you’re the champion and I’m the challenger I’ll start,” Duke decided. “I’m gonna touch you. If you give, I win, just like usual. ‘K?’”

“Uh-huh.” Mav’s heart was thundering in his ears and his cock was aching. He could feel the warm wetness of precome beading at the slit of his broad head and he could barely breathe he was so turned on. When was the last time he’d been so hot? He couldn’t remember ever feeling this way, feeling like he was going to explode if his friend didn’t touch him soon.

“Okay.” Duke shifted beside him and suddenly a warm hand was gripping his shaft under the covers. “Too gay for you, buddy?” Duke breathed.

“Huh-uh. Not really,” Mav managed to whisper. He was trying to hold still, trying not to thrust into his friend’s hand, but it was damn hard not to when every instinct in his body was shouting that he *had* to thrust, that he *needed* to come.

“How about if I do this...” Duke started a slow, sensual stroke along the hard ridge of his cock. “While I do this...” He leaned down and kissed Mav lightly on the mouth.

Mav parted his lips at once and Duke’s tongue was there, probing delicately, licking hungrily. He groaned, unable to help himself, as the warm pleasure of his friend’s hand on his cock became unbearable. Duke swallowed the soft sound eagerly and stroked harder, more urgently.

*God, can’t believe he’s kissing me while he jerks me off. If he doesn’t stop soon I’m gonna come!* Mav didn’t know if he wanted his friend to stop or not. But when Duke did stop, breaking the kiss and pulling back slightly as his hand ceased its delicious stroking, he felt a wash of disappointment.

“Too gay?” Duke panted the words. “Do you give, Mav?”

“No way—I don’t give,” Mav said emphatically. “There’s no way you can win, man. I’m not backing down.” He deliberately made his words challenging, wondering what Duke would think of next. He didn’t have to wonder for long.

“Neither am I,” Duke murmured in his ear. He shifted position again and this time he was above Mav, straddling him in the dark. “Spread your legs,” he commanded in a hoarse voice.

“What for, man?” For the first time Mav felt uneasy. After all, there were limits. He wasn’t going to let his roommate fuck him, no matter how hot and bothered he was.

“Not what you’re thinking,” Duke assured him. “C’mon, Mav, trust me. Just spread.”

Reluctantly, Mav did as his best friend asked, opening his legs even though it made him feel strangely vulnerable.

With a soft sigh, Duke arranged himself so that his thighs were inside Mav’s and then lowered himself slowly.

Mav took in a deep, hissing breath when he felt the heated shaft of his best friend’s cock settle flush against his own. “God...Duke!” he gasped.

Duke froze in position but his voice was low and taunting in Maverick’s ear. “That’s my cock rubbing against yours, roomie,” he murmured in Mav’s ear. “Too gay for you now? Do you give?”

“Never,” Mav groaned. He shifted position so that the shaft of his cock slid against Duke’s and they both moaned.

“God that feels good.” Duke’s voice in the darkness was ragged, as though he was fighting for control. Leaning down, he kissed Mav on the mouth, not a soft, exploring kiss like before, but a hard, demanding mouth fuck that made sweat bloom along Mav’s spine and his back arch with desire.

Growling low in his throat, he returned the kiss with interest, nipping hard at his best friend’s full lower lip and thrusting hard to rub their cocks together in a fierce, delicious rhythm. Duke joined him and soon they were bucking against each other, almost fighting their way toward orgasm.

“What if I make you come?” Duke panted the words in between savage kisses. “Would you give then?”

His words set off Mav’s own competitive streak. With a low growl, Mav wrapped his arms and legs around Duke’s hard, muscular body and flipped them so that he was the one on top.

“What if *I* make *you* come?” he demanded. “What about that, Duke?”

Duke’s only answer was a low moan as he writhed under Mav, bucking up to meet each fierce thrust as their cocks rode the rising tide of pleasure in unison.

Mav found himself enjoying the sensation of having his friend beneath him. Duke felt nothing like the soft, curvy cheerleaders he usually brought back to their apartment. Mav was so big and they were usually so small, he always felt like he had to worry about breaking them somehow. Had to restrain himself even in the heat of passion to be sure he didn’t hurt them.

He didn’t worry about hurting Duke. His friend was as big and muscular as he was. His body was hard as a rock and just as unyielding. Mav pounded himself against it and Duke was giving back just as good as he was getting. The kisses they were trading were rough and luscious, filled with biting and teeth clashing as they came together urgently. Duke could take this kind of treatment, Mav thought. He could take being spread and opened and fucked within an inch of his life. Mav would be able to ram into him as hard as he could without fear, could really let go and pound him and all his best friend would do was beg for more...

*God, what am I thinking?* Not gonna fuck him—that would be too much, too far.

But even as the thought crossed his brain, Maverick found himself losing control. Just that one quick mental image of shoving his cock into his best friend’s body had done him in. With a low groan, he thrust hard against Duke’s flat belly and felt his shaft pulse with heat as he came.

Duke was right behind him, flooding him with the molten heat of his own come as he gasped Mav’s name. He said some other things too that Mav didn’t quite catch, but that wasn’t surprising considering Mav was busy having the most intense orgasm of his life.

“Damn,” he gasped at last, when his pleasure had ebbed. He collapsed against Duke’s broad, heaving chest. *Can’t believe we just did that. Can’t believe we just rubbed off against each other.* He knew he

should feel awkward and weird around his roommate now, but to be honest, he was too tired. His lips were swollen from the fierce kisses they'd traded and the tension that had been building inside him all night was finally released. Not to mention the fact that his cock was completely spent.

"Damn is right," Duke groaned. "Guess we'll have to call that one a tie, huh?"

"Huh?" Mav asked sleepily. As always, an orgasm worked on him like a sleeping pill and despite the fact that the fresh come was gluing their lower bellies together, he was already half-asleep.

"Gay chicken. It's a tie," Duke murmured in his ear. "Hey, Mav?" His voice was slightly nervous now. "You think it's weird? What we just did?"

"Uh, maybe. Dunno. Can't we talk about it later?" It certainly was weird or at least, outside the realm of their experience as friends, but Mav was too tired to deal with it. Better to leave any discussion of what they had just done until later. Or better yet, not discuss it at all. After all, it wasn't like it was ever going to happen again. Was it?

"Okay. Later." Duke sounded relieved. "Uh, could you roll over, dude? You're kinda heavy."

"Hmm? Sure." Mav tried but his muscles didn't want to cooperate. His last conscious memory was of Duke rolling him over on his side and spooning behind him. And then a soft whisper in his ear.

"Night, Mav."

"Night," Mav tried to say but his mouth wouldn't move. Secure in his best friend's embrace, he drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter Three

The photo shoot wasn't nearly as bad as Mav had feared. He'd been imagining some shady porn set-up with an aging queen as a director—someone who would try to coerce him and Duke into doing a lot more than they wanted to. “Now just put his cock in your mouth for a minute—pretend you're licking him like an ice cream cone,” Mav had imagined the guy saying. “Come on—I thought you needed cash. We pay extra for the more explicit shots, you know.”

The crazy things he'd been imagining had made him hot and cold all over because he wasn't sure what to do or say in such a situation. Obviously he couldn't actually suck his friend's cock—it would be going much too far. But would it really be so bad if he *had* to? Duke was his best friend and he loved him—just as a friend, of course—but still, if somebody put a gun to his head and forced him to suck the guy off, it wouldn't be the end of the world. Would it?

That thought had caused another whole round of elaborate fantasies where the website photographer held a gun on himself and Duke and forced them to do all kinds of things...things Mav would have considered disgusting and unnatural with anyone else. But with Duke, well, they suddenly didn't seem so bad.

He'd gotten so worked up about the whole thing that he was almost disappointed to find the address Evan had given Duke when he called was in a neat, normal-looking strip mall not far off of campus. When they walked in, the photographer turned out to be a very normal-looking guy about their own age. Mav wasn't even sure he was gay.

“Let's see...Duke and Maverick, right?” he asked, consulting a clipboard with a long list of names. “Here to do a shoot for *Str8te Boys*?”

“Yeah.” Duke nodded and then frowned. “But no funny business—all right?”

“That's not what this website is about,” the photographer replied at once. “We do have a more gay-oriented site but I take it you two aren't here to pose for that?”

“No,” Mav said at the same time Duke said, “No way.”

“We're, uh, not gay,” Mav explained, wishing he could control the hot blush he felt spreading across his cheeks. “But we do need some money and we heard this was a pretty easy gig.”

The photographer frowned at them. “Well that depends. You two are certainly the type we're looking for—all American, jocks, hot and straight-looking—but you have to be willing to touch at least a little or there's no point in going any further.”



“Oh, we’re not like homophobic or anything,” Duke explained hastily. “I mean, we can touch and you know, kiss and everything. Just no really *gay* gay stuff. Like no sucking and fucking.”

The photographer raised one eyebrow. “Okay so you’ll touch each other above the belt?”

Mav and Duke nodded in unison.

“And kiss?”

They exchanged a quick glance and Mav saw that his roommate’s face was as red and hot as his own felt. “Sure,” he said at last, answering for both of them. After all, they’d already done it once—well, twice to be accurate—was it such a big deal to do it one more time to earn a little quick cash?

“Good, let’s begin,” the photographer said. “Take off your shirts and come with me.”

From there on out it was pretty much the same kind of thing they’d seen on the website Evan had showed them. The photographer took pictures of him and Duke holding hands and staring into each other’s eyes. There were some with them hugging and wrestling and a few of them kissing but nothing too passionate. It felt both strange and familiar to be holding his best friend and kissing him. Mav was surprised it didn’t make him more uncomfortable than it did.

Duke didn’t seem to be too bothered either. Usually when he was nervous he got loud—laughing, cracking jokes and just generally cutting up. But during the photo shoot he was mostly quiet and thoughtful, and during the pictures where they looked into each other’s eyes Mav thought he saw something he’d hardly ever seen in his best friend before. Some shy, secret stranger who was hiding behind Duke’s party-guy, college-jock façade, longing to come out and make Mav’s acquaintance.

It was nice, in a way. He loved Duke for being such a likeable guy but even more he liked his rarely seen quiet side—the side he’d noticed when his friend had spent a month feeding a stray kitten from an eyedropper because its mother had died and it was too young to be weaned. The side that volunteered in an after-school program for at-risk youth, teaching kids from broken homes and bad backgrounds the rudiments of soccer and telling them about the sports scholarships they could get that would make getting to college and having a real future possible. Mav had gone with him on more than one occasion and watched as he established a rapport with even the most skeptical young souls. Duke could always get them laughing and talking and excited about the game, even the troublemakers other volunteers had given up on.

Yes, Mav admitted to himself, he’d admired his best friend’s easy way with the kids and his gentle touch with the tiny, helpless kitten. And he’d caught himself wondering why Duke couldn’t be like that more of the time. He loved his friend, but sometimes the loud, drunk frat-guy routine got old—way old. Why couldn’t Duke let the gentle, caring side of himself out more often?

Suddenly Mav wondered what had gotten into him—was he actually wishing his roomie could be more *sensitive*? How freaking gay was that? *No gayer than kissing him while you rubbed off against him*, a little voice in his head spoke up. Mav pushed it away. He’d already decided not to think of or mention the episode from the night before ever again and since Duke hadn’t said anything about it, he was pretty sure

they could consider the incident dropped. Things happened in college. People got drunk or high and did stupid things—you should be allowed a certain number of mistakes, Mav told himself. He was just going to call last night a mistake and leave it at that. And if he and Duke never mentioned it again, there was no reason why it ought to affect their friendship.

Except it was already affecting their friendship. Why else were they so comfortable touching each other? So at ease holding hands? And when the photographer asked them to kiss, Mav didn't even hesitate. Without a word, he dug his fingers into the short, spiky blond hair at Duke's nape and brought him in for a long, breathless exploration where he mapped every part of his friend's mouth with his tongue. It felt natural to take the lead and Duke let him, winding his arms around Mav's neck and pulling him even closer as though he couldn't get enough. In fact, the photographer told them to stop and change to a different pose several times before they heard him—which kind of embarrassed Mav when the guy called them out about it. But he decided that was just because he and Duke were both intensely focused when it came to getting something right. Just like on the soccer field, they made a great team. And his unspoken reluctance to let go of his best friend and stop kissing him had nothing to do with it. Nothing at all.

Just before their own shoot was over, another pair of men came in. One was tall and lean with multiple piercings, including a tongue ring and eyebrow barbells, and short black hair. His companion was shorter and more normal looking with brown hair and eyes and he wore a colorful rainbow t-shirt that read, *I'm not gay but my boyfriend is.*

The photographer stopped and talked to them for a minute before coming back to Mav and Duke.

"Hey, guys, if you're not in too much of a hurry I'd really like to get a few more shots of you but I need to do these guys first. They have an appointment to get to. You mind waiting?"

Duke shrugged. "Got nothin' else to do today."

"Me either," Mav said. He'd taken his organic chem test earlier so the rest of his day was clear.

"Great." The photographer smiled and ushered them off to the side of the set. Mav watched intently as he arranged the two new subjects. He suddenly felt shy around his friend for some reason and hoped Duke wouldn't start talking about the kiss they had just shared—or the night before for that matter. But his roommate seemed as content as he was to let it drop. He stood silently beside Mav and watched as well as the two new men who'd come in were put in position. And there was certainly something to watch.

To Mav's mingled interest and discomfort, it appeared that the two new guys were posing for the gay website. The photographer had them get completely naked before posing and the positions he photographed them in were much more graphic than anything Mav and Duke had been asked to do.

Mav wanted to look away as the two men kissed and fondled each other but it was like a train wreck—he just couldn't. And it wasn't like he enjoyed gay porn either—that shit did nothing for him. It was just... *Just that I can imagine doing the same kinds of things with Duke*, he thought before he could stop himself.

“Dude, I can’t believe they’re doing that,” Duke murmured, breaking his train of thought. Duke’s brown eyes were glued to the scene in front of them where the shorter, brown-haired man was taking his partner’s cock deep into his mouth. In fact, Mav thought he might be deep-throating, a skill he’d only seen displayed by women before while watching his friend’s extensive porn collection.

“They’re, uh... Probably they do it all the time so it’s no big deal to earn money doing it,” Mav said, trying to sound nonchalant. “I mean, if you were really gay, that kind of thing would be like, something you did every day. Right?”

“Probably. You’re probably right.” Duke cleared his throat and Mav could see him looking at him from the corner of his eye. “So what do you think about it? Think you’d ever do it?”

Mav frowned. “What—suck another guy? I don’t know. Maybe—it would depend.” He didn’t say what it would depend on because he didn’t really know himself. On how much money he was offered? On who the guy was? He was too busy watching to think about it. The two men were getting into a different pose now and his attention was on them instead of what his friend was saying.

“Oh, man,” Duke almost whispered as the brown-haired man knelt on all fours and his taller partner crouched behind him. “Do you think they’re gonna fuck?”

Mav shrugged. “Don’t know.” He couldn’t take his eyes off of the two gay guys in front of him. What would it be like to do that with another guy? What would it be like to do it with Duke? *Shouldn’t be thinking that*, his mind whispered. But he couldn’t stop the images that formed in his brain. The idea of Duke under him, open to him, both of them naked and kissing, Duke writhing on the bed while Mav pounded into him...it was hard to let go of somehow.

“Wow,” Duke murmured as they watched the two men perform acts very like the ones Mav was imaging.

“Yeah. Wow is right. That looks like it should hurt but the, uh, one guy seems to be enjoying it,” Mav whispered back from the side of his mouth.

“How much would they have to pay to get us to do that, huh?” Duke nudged his arm jokingly.

“Depends,” Mav said again. “I guess I could see being the pitcher—if the money was right. But I don’t think I could be the catcher, ya know?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Duke looked uncomfortable. “Well, but I mean maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to be the catcher. It would depend on who was pitching. Like maybe...maybe if it was you...” He trailed off, going red in the face.

Mav stared at his friend, his interest in the show going on in front of him abruptly waning. “You saying you want me to fuck you, Duke? Is that it?” He was surprised at how instantly his friend’s words affected him. The idea had been intriguing enough but now that Duke had practically voiced what he had been thinking out loud, his cock was suddenly so hard he felt like he could fuck through solid concrete.

Duke cleared his throat. “No, man. That would be way too gay...wouldn’t it?”

"I guess." They were looking at each other now and Mav found he couldn't drag his gaze away from his best friend's deep brown eyes. "How would you feel about it?" he asked Duke, as the tension mounted between them. "Would you let me? Would you want me to? I mean—in a purely hypothetical situation, like if they paid us a million bucks or something?"

"I...uh..." Duke shook his head uncertainly as Mav leaned forward.

"Well?" Mav murmured. For a moment, all he could think of was kissing his best friend again. Of how soft Duke's lips were, how he gave himself completely when they kissed...

"I, uh, I gotta go... Just gonna get a drink of water." Duke bolted from the room, leaving Mav to stare after him and wonder what was going on.

He came back about ten minutes later with a sheepish look on his face. "Hey, I'm sorry, man. Don't know what hit me—maybe a stomach virus or something."

"Now you tell me—after I just spent half the day kissing you," Mav complained and then realized what he'd said. Not only had he become comfortable enough to kiss his best friend, he was joking about it. *And wanting to do it again—even when nobody's paying you*, the voice in his head whispered. "Uh, I mean, I hope you feel better," he ended lamely, hoping Duke wouldn't think he was strange.

But his best friend only shook his head. "Better already. Just needed some water. So, are they done?" He nodded at the set where the photographer appeared to be finishing up.

"I think so," Mav said, relieved that the heavy-duty gay action was over. It had been beyond weird to stand there with Duke and watch the two gay guys fuck each other, although he admitted to himself that it hadn't been as gross as he'd feared it would be. Mostly because he'd wondered what it would be like if he and Duke were doing exactly what he was watching.

"Good." Duke looked relieved and soon enough the two guys left and they were back on set.

*Here we go*, Mav thought. He was certain that now the photographer would ask them to try something gayer—something like what they'd just watched the other guys do. But to his mingled relief and disappointment, the photographer only wanted a few more hugging shots and then he sent them on their way.

They left the studio with enough money to pay the rent, but Mav also took away a lot of questions—not the least of them was what was going on between him and his roommate...

"So it wasn't so bad—right?" Duke's voice brought him out of his silent reverie and Mav realized he'd been thinking so hard he'd forgotten he was supposed to be pumping iron. They were working out in the USF men's gym, trying to burn off the tension the shoot had caused. Or at least Mav was—he just didn't know if he was doing it the right way because despite the hours of weightlifting, he was still tight as a wire. But he didn't want Duke to know that so he answered his friend's question nonchalantly.

“Nah, not so bad,” he answered, finishing another set of reps. “Hey, man, I’m beat. How about we head back soon?”

“Sure, all right.” Duke put down the barbells he’d been lifting and wiped his hands on a towel. “Just let me do one more set and I’ll meet you in the locker room. ’K?”

“Sure.” Mav put down his own weights and stretched before grabbing his towel. “See you there.”

The green tiled locker room was steamy and the communal shower was filled with guys who had just worked out. Mav picked a shower and twisted the nozzle to hot before getting under the spray. For some reason, he felt really self-conscious about showering naked with a bunch of other guys, although he never had before. Seeing all the naked male flesh surrounding him had him thinking of what he’d done with Duke the night before. Was he gay now? But if he was, wouldn’t the sight of all the hard, muscular bodies surrounding him turn him on?

Although he had never done so before, Mav looked around, staring deliberately at the other men showering around him. Nothing. He felt a small measure of relief. Surely if he really was gay the sight of so many naked men would have had him popping wood like nobody’s business. Instead it left him cold. *Guess I can just chalk up last night to another college mistake that will never be repeated*, he told himself, feeling a little better.

“Hey, Holms, you mind not staring at my dick?”

The familiar voice snapped Maverick out of the trance he’d somehow fallen into and he realized that his eyes had been wandering independently of his brain. The guy who had addressed him was Richard Enslow and he was soaping himself vigorously in a shower two down from Mav’s. Enslow had a shock of bright red hair that contrasted strangely with his dark tan skin and his naked body appeared to be one massive freckle fest—not that Mav wanted to see it.

Inwardly, he groaned. Of all the people he wanted to meet by accident Enslow was on the bottom of his list. Of course, he didn’t want to meet him on purpose either. In fact, he’d been hoping never to see the judgmental asshole ever again—except at the soccer team’s end-of-the-year party. There was no avoiding Enslow there because the entire team went, but it wasn’t for another week yet.

“Hey, Enslow,” he said halfheartedly. “Sorry, man, I was just spacing out, that’s all.”

“Or maybe he was just lookin’ ’cause he’s never seen anything that small before. Seriously, dude, you should invest in a microscope so your girlfriend can even find that thing.” Duke’s voice behind him made Mav jump.

“Damn it, Duke, don’t sneak up behind me like that,” he snapped as his roommate took the shower next to his.

“Yeah, like it’s anything new. I bet you faggots are sneaking up behind each other all the time,” Enslow sneered, returning Duke’s insult.

Mav felt his face turning red. In the past he would have let Enslow's insult roll off his back as easily as the hot water that was currently pounding him, but now...things were different somehow. *They're not that different*, he argued with himself. *After all, it's not like we sucked each other off or actually fucked or anything.* He had a sudden but vivid mental image of Duke on his knees in the shower, the steaming water making his muscular body gleam as he took Mav's cock deep into his mouth, just like the gay guy had sucked his lover at the photo shoot. How would it feel to have his best friend's lips wrapped around his shaft? To run his hands over Duke's sleek, wet hair and pump into his mouth until he came? And what would it be like to do the same for Duke? What would Duke's cock taste like, feel like as it slid between Mav's lips?

To his horror, he realized he was getting hard. Apparently seeing other naked guys in the shower didn't do it for him, but the idea of getting physical with his best friend made him all kinds of horny. What was wrong with him? How could he chalk this up to a college mistake if it kept happening?

Hurriedly, he twisted the shower knob to the off position and left the echoing, tiled area to grab his towel. No way was he going to walk around the locker room showing wood. What would the other guys think if he did that? They would think he was gay—that was what he would think. *Am I?* Mav asked himself again as he toweled off and got dressed in record time.

But no matter how many times he asked himself the question, he didn't have an answer.

## Chapter Four

“Hey, you ran out of there like your hair was on fire and your ass was catching. What’s the deal?” Duke was trying to act casual but Mav could see the concern in his big brown eyes.

“No deal. I was just done showering, that’s all,” he mumbled before going back to the books spread over their small kitchen table. He had a wicked finals schedule lined up for the next week and even though he had already been accepted into pharmacy school, he didn’t want to bomb out on his last few tests because he hadn’t studied.

“Well, okay, ’cause you just seemed kinda, I don’t know, freaked or somethin’.” Duke reached in the refrigerator and got out a gallon of milk.

“Why would I be freaked?” Mav had been asking himself that all the way home. Why had he bolted out of the guys’ locker room like that? Was it really so upsetting that he’d gotten hard thinking about getting a blowjob? Most guys would get wood over that, right? And a blowjob was a blowjob, no matter who gave it to you. Even if it was your best friend...your best *male* friend. Not that Duke had offered, but Mav was pretty sure his roommate *would* offer if there was some kind of challenge involved.

“I dunno. Maybe—”

“I guess I was just thinking about what we saw at the photo shoot today,” Mav cut him off. “You know, those two other guys?”

“Oh.” Duke took a big swallow of milk from the carton before saying a little too casually, “You mean the gay guys?”

Mav nodded. “Uh-huh. It made me think of something I saw online the other day on this website. It was, uh, I double dare you dot com or something like that. Anyway, it was these two guys—totally straight guys though—and they were doing this weird kind of sex dare thing.” He was watching Duke carefully from the corner of his eye as he spoke, trying to gauge his reaction.

“Oh yeah?” Duke began to look interested. “So what was it?”

Mav closed the book he’d been studying and frowned. “Well, it was kind of like gay chicken but not exactly.”

“How not exactly?” Duke was definitely interested now. He put the milk back and sat at the table across from Mav, listening intently.

“Well, like, they were lying on a bed kind of, uh, head-to-foot.” Mav made a gesture with one hand, trying to find the right way to describe the made-up scenario. He didn’t want to be *too* obvious. But it was clear he didn’t have to worry about Duke getting the point.

“What, like they were gonna sixty-nine or something?” he asked, a little too eagerly.

Mav nodded. “Uh-huh. And the idea was for each of them to see how close they could get to the other one’s crotch without being grossed out. I mean, they were fully dressed and everything...”

“Oh, yeah. Of course.” Duke nodded. “So which one of them won?”

“Well...” Mav paused as if trying to think. “I think that part was a tie so they had to do an elimination round. Only they called it an underwear round because they took off their jeans.”

“They did, huh?” Duke’s eyes were half-lidded now, an entirely different kind of interest filling their chocolate brown depths. “What happened then?”

“I think one of them ended up putting his mouth on the other guy’s boxers and that was the guy who won.” Mav made his voice casual, as though it didn’t matter one way or another to him who had won the contest. The strange thing was, he was kind of getting turned on by his own lie. He could imagine the two contestants lying on a bed together, head-to-foot with their mouths getting closer and closer to each other’s hard shafts. Only in his fantasy it wasn’t two anonymous contestants, it was him and Duke.

*Why are you doing this? What are you trying to prove?* he asked himself, but he didn’t have an answer. Just as he didn’t have an answer for why it had become so easy to kiss and touch his best friend in a much more than friendly way lately. He supposed he could analyze the last few days and find out what was going on but the thought made him uncomfortable. Better just to go with the flow. So instead of thinking, he kept talking, hearing his mouth say things that seemed to have bypassed his brain entirely.

“Anyway,” he said, looking back down at his closed books, “When I saw it, I had to laugh because these guys thought they were such hot shit. Like what they were doing was such a big deal, ya know?”

Duke nodded. “Yeah, so you put your face near some guy’s boxers. So what? That’s not such a big deal.”

“Exactly.” Mav looked down as he talked, not quite daring to look Duke in the eye. “So I was thinking *anybody* could do that. I mean, the really hard thing would be to do it with no boxers in the way. Like instead of an underwear round, a nude round. Now *that* would be like the ultimate gay chicken. Not that anybody would play it.”

“Why not?” Duke frowned a little.

Mav saw that his friend was watching him closely. Almost as closely as Mav was watching Duke. He had a feeling that they both wanted the same thing but neither one could admit it. Instead, they had to dare each other into it. *Into what, exactly?* he asked himself, but he didn’t really want to know the answer.

“Why not? Well, because it would be way too gay and freaky, I guess.” Mav shrugged casually. “Like even *you* would be too freaked out to try it.”



“Oh, yeah? Try me.” There was a gleam of competition in Duke’s brown eyes and something else as well. Lust? Love? Mav didn’t know and didn’t want to know. All he needed to know at the moment was that his cock was rock hard and he was betting Duke’s was too.

“So you think you could do it?” he asked casually, giving Duke a challenging look. “Think you could stand to have your face that close to another guy’s cock without freaking out?”

“I know I could.” Duke raised an eyebrow. “The question is, could you?”

Mav leaned forward, looking his best friend in the eye. “I’m not afraid.”

“Well neither am I.” Duke stood, crossing his arms over his chest. “There’s only one way to settle this, Mav.”

“Just remember that I’m the reigning champion of gay chicken—since our last match was a draw.” Just thinking of the “last match” made Mav feel hot all over.

“Yeah? Well you’re goin’ down tonight, buddy.” Duke grinned at him.

*Going down in more ways than one*, Mav couldn’t help thinking. He got up from the table slowly. His cock was so hard it hurt, throbbing behind the zipper of his jeans for release. Nodding in the direction of his bedroom, he said, “Let’s go.”

It didn’t take long for both of them to strip and get in bed, lying on their sides facing each other in a sixty-nine position. But by some kind of silent mutual consent neither one of them did anything yet. It was enough for Mav for a moment to be so close to another guy’s cock. *No, Duke’s cock*, he reminded himself. It felt weird but not bad. Duke was long and thick and Mav could almost feel the heat of his best friend’s skin radiating against his face. He wondered what Duke was thinking as he looked at Mav’s cock for the first time. Did he like it? Hate it? What? He wished he could ask but that would be well outside the lines of what they were supposed to be doing here. This was supposed to be a dare—not, well, anything else.

They were quiet for a moment, just breathing and being close. As always, Mav liked the touch of his friend’s skin against his own. He was also finding he liked Duke’s scent—a warm, musky aroma that was completely masculine and completely attractive at the same time, at least to him. He wasn’t sure quite how to start so he was relieved when Duke broke the silence.

“Well, you up for this?” The words that were no doubt meant to be taunting came out more as a question. Mav wondered why his friend even felt like he had to ask. It was obvious that he was “up” for what they were about to do. He was hard as a rock, his cock pulsing right in Duke’s face. Of course, Duke was pretty amazingly hard himself.

“Hell, yeah.” He tried to make his tone nonchalant but that was difficult to do under the circumstances. “How do we start?” he added, since Duke seemed to be better at orchestrating this kind of think than he was.

“Take it easy.” Duke’s voice was soft and thoughtful. “One dare at a time. No need to rush it—we’ll know when one of us wins.”

"Sounds good," Mav murmured. He had the feeling this was something Duke wanted to draw out, to savor and he was surprised to realize he felt the same.

"Okay, then." Duke shifted so that his face was a little closer to Mav's naked cock. His warm breath blew over Mav's heated shaft as he talked, giving Mav a shiver of pleasure. Suddenly, he felt like he was going to explode.

"Touch me." The words were forced out of him by the fierce need he felt growing in the base of his balls. It was one thing to take things slowly but they had to get started somehow and he was aching to feel his best friend's hands and mouth on his throbbing cock. Then he realized what he'd said and hastily rephrased. "Uh, I mean, I dare you to touch me."

"No problem." Duke's voice was low and sensual. Reaching up, he palmed Mav's aching shaft carefully and stroked it from root to tip.

"God!" Mav's hips bucked forward involuntarily with the pleasure of his friend's hand and he couldn't quite suppress the groan that rose to his lips.

"Feels good?" Duke asked softly, stroking him again.

"You know it does," Mav almost gasped as his friend continued the long, lazy caress. "Dare me to touch you too?" he asked, wanting to see how Duke would react to being touched the same way he was being touched.

"Yeah." Duke's voice trembled a little. Mav reached for the thick shaft before him, grasping it a little awkwardly since he and Duke were basically upside down to each other. The low groan he heard from his friend told him that no matter how awkward his grip felt, it was great for Duke.

"Feels good?" he asked, throwing the question back at his friend.

"Mmm hmm." Duke stroked him some more before really replying. "Ya know, Mav, you've got a lot of precome happenin' down here." He thumbed the head of Mav's cock, spreading the sticky liquid over his shaft as if to prove his point.

Mav gasped and thrust into his friend's warm hand. "Yeah? So?" he managed to ask as Duke stroked his cock firmly but gently.

"So." Duke thumbed the sensitive head again. "You dare me to taste it?"

The soft question made Mav feel like every muscle in his body had clenched at once. But he tried to sound casual when he answered. "Sure—if you think you're up to it."

Duke didn't answer. Instead, he put out his tongue and lapped gently at the broad, weeping head of Mav's shaft. It was all Mav could do to keep from reaching down, grabbing his best friend's hair and shoving his entire aching cock deep into Duke's mouth. Only one thing stopped him—if he did such a thing he would be admitting that what he really wanted wasn't to win a dare but to watch his best friend blow him. The cobweb thin excuse of their dare would shred completely and if it did, Mav would have to face some hard questions. Such as why he was doing this in the first place and what it said about his true

orientation. So instead of following his instincts, he held back and just watched between their bodies as Duke continued to lap gently at the head of his cock.

“What does it taste like?” he couldn’t help asking. He wasn’t one of those guys who had ever tasted their own come—or anybody’s come for that matter—but Duke seemed to be enjoying it from the way he was licking like it was his favorite flavor ice cream cone.

Duke stopped for a moment to answer him. “Not bad. Salty. A little bitter.” He looked at Mav uncertainly. “Should I dare you to try mine?”

Did he want to suck his best friend’s cock? Because that was surely where this was leading. Little by little and slowly but surely they were getting there. Mav barely even had to think about it.

“Yeah.” He brought the broad head of Duke’s thick shaft to his lips and swiped his tongue over the pearls of precome that had beaded there. Feeling Duke shiver and hearing him gasp his name made him hot enough to do it again and then again. Duke tasted even better than he smelled, like a warm, salty tide on Maverick’s tongue, pushing him to want more, to do more. Apparently his best friend felt the same way.

“God, Mav,” he gasped, bucking in Mav’s hand. “I think...think we’re gonna have to go further or this is gonna be another tie.”

“Can’t have that.” Mav stopped licking for a moment and looked at his friend. “What now then?”

“Since we’re both willing to lick, we’ll have to go to the next level. Sucking.” Duke stroked Mav’s cock as he spoke, his voice hoarse with desire. “I’m gonna put the head of your cock in my mouth and suck it, roomie. You can do the same if you dare.”

“What if...what if I do?” Mav asked, laying a soft, sensual kiss on the tip of his best friend’s cock. “What if I’m not about to let you win?”

“Then I’ll take more of your cock in my mouth,” Duke said softly. “You do the same—if you dare. Whoever goes the furthest wins. But I warn you, buddy...” He stroked Mav’s shaft slowly as he spoke. “I’ll suck you down to the root if I have to. There’s no way I’m gonna lose.”

“We’ll see.” Mav lapped the head of his friend’s cock again. “Because I might be willing to do the same.”

Duke didn’t answer in words. Instead, he opened his mouth and sucked the plum-shaped head of Mav’s cock into his hot mouth. Mav gasped and bucked his hips, unable to help himself. Two more inches of his shaft slid between Duke’s lips but his friend didn’t seem to mind. He angled his head and took even more, sucking Mav down to the root just as he had promised.

Mav felt like he couldn’t look away. He’d had blowjobs before but nothing like this. Nothing as hot and sensual as watching his best friend, the person he cared most about in the world, going down on him, sucking his cock deeper and deeper into his mouth, taking everything he had to give and asking for more. He knew he was supposed to be sucking Duke at the same time, but he felt mesmerized by the sight of Duke swallowing him down, working him with his mouth, trying to make him come.

*God, do I want to let him do that, make me come? And do I want to make him come?* Again, he barely had to think about it. The idea of sucking any other guy left him cold—he never would have even considered it. But this was Duke, his roommate for the past four years, his best friend in the world. The guy he cared for more than anyone else and he wanted to give Duke the same pleasure Duke was giving him.

Lowering his head, Mav took the broad, plum-shaped head of his best friend's cock slowly into his mouth. Duke was sucking him in a steady rhythm now but he faltered at the sudden pleasure, letting a low groan escape though his mouth was still more than half-full of Maverick's shaft. Mav moaned softly himself, caught up in the cycle of pleasure and need that had grown between them. Duke tasted good—salty and hot and his cock seemed to be a perfect fit for Mav's mouth. He'd been prepared for some awkwardness—after all, he'd never sucked cock before and never expected to want to for that matter. What he hadn't anticipated was the sheer rightness, the feeling of deep connection he got with Duke when he sucked him and felt his own shaft being sucked by Duke in turn.

Just as he was truly getting lost in the moment, he felt the incredibly pleasurable sensation stop. Looking down, he saw that Duke was watching him, his brown eyes heavy-lidded with pleasure. Mav put on a show, deliberately sucking Duke as deep as he could before letting his cock slide slowly out of his mouth.

"What?" His voice was hoarse and his lips felt swollen from sucking. "Why did we stop?" He had some kind of idea that they were taking things too far but it didn't seem to matter anymore. Right now he didn't care about the consequences of what they were doing, he just wanted to know why his best friend had put an end to the most intense pleasure he'd ever felt.

Duke licked his lips, which looked swollen and red and kissable, at least to Mav, and cleared his throat. "Our dare. Or bet or whatever you call it. Ultimate gay chicken."

"Yeah?" Mav was fuzzy-headed with pleasure. Dimly he recalled that he had been studying before Duke had come in and had intended to study most of the night. Instead he was in bed with his best friend, doing much more than friendly things. How had it happened? He didn't know and at the moment he didn't care. He just knew his balls ached with the need to come and he didn't know why they had stopped.

"Well..." Duke cleared his throat again. "I mean, how are we gonna know the winner?"

"The winner?" Mav was confused.

"Yeah, the winner." Duke spoke patiently, as if it was of utmost importance. "I mean, we've proved we're both willing to get close, we're both willing to taste. And now we're both willing to suck." He thrust his hips forward an inch and Mav lapped at the head of his cock almost reflexively. For a moment it occurred to him that he ought to be concerned at how easy licking another man's cock—even if that man was Duke—had become for him, but he pushed the unpleasant thought away and concentrated on what was really important—easing the tight ache in his balls.

“Yeah, we’re both willing to suck,” he growled, beginning to get annoyed with Duke for his strict adherence to the rules of the game they were supposedly playing. “So what?”

“So...” Duke looked him in the eye. “So in order to win this thing, I think I’m gonna have to suck you until I make you come.”

“Like...come in your mouth?” Mav felt uncertain at that. Of course, that was what he’d been dying to do earlier but now that Duke had actually said it out loud, he didn’t know if he could go through with it. Could he let himself come in another man’s mouth? And could he really return the favor and suck Duke until he came as well?

Apparently Duke had no problem with the concept. “Yeah,” he murmured, stroking Mav’s cock firmly but gently. “Yeah, Mav, I want you to come in my mouth.” Then he seemed to realize exactly what he’d said because his face got red and he added, “I mean, I’m gonna suck you so hard you have no choice but to come and then I’ll be the reigning supreme champion of ultimate gay chicken.”

Mav suddenly made a decision. “You wish,” he said, pulling his friend closer. “There’s no way you’re going to beat me. I’ll make you come and swallow you down to the last drop. In fact, the first one to make the other guy come wins.”

“What does he win?”

Duke’s words surprised him—they had never set any kind of prize or penalty on their dares before. Of course, the dares had only recently gotten so personal. So...sexual. “Uh...what do you think?” he asked. From the gleam in his brown eyes, Duke already had something in mind. But even though Mav had an idea that his best friend was up to something, the next words out of Duke’s mouth were still a shock.

“The winner gets to fuck the loser.” He looked at Mav with a mixture of uncertainty and desire. “What do you say, roomie? You up for those odds?”

“Uh...” Mav had to think about it for a moment. He supposed he should have seen this coming from the very first time his best friend grabbed his cock. Or maybe even before then, when Duke sat too close to him, touched him too much, started sharing his bed. But somehow the idea of one of them fucking the other still blindsided him. After all, you didn’t fuck other guys—not even your best friend. Of course most people would say you shouldn’t kiss and stroke and suck your best friend’s cock either and Mav had done all of those things in the past couple of days and enjoyed all of it immensely.

*Is this what I want?* He tried to picture himself giving it up for Duke and found he couldn’t...not quite. He supposed Duke would go easy on him—the same way he would go easy on his best friend if he won their dare. But still...to actually spread his legs and let another guy enter him, invade his body, fill him and fuck him and come in him...it was hard to see doing that, no matter who the other guy was.

But then he tried to imagine himself fucking Duke and suddenly the “no” that was about to come out of his mouth was turned into a “yes”, or at least a “maybe”. He could see his best friend naked on the bed, his legs spread as he offered himself to Mav, offered his warm, muscular body to take, to fuck. The idea

was appealing—hell, more than appealing—hot. He wanted that, he realized. Wanted to take his best friend that way, wanted to be close to Duke on a level he'd never even imagined before.

"You're on." The words were barely out of his mouth before Duke was sucking Mav again, taking him deep down his throat, lapping and swirling his tongue around the shaft of Mav's cock in a way that seemed designed to drive him totally insane. The pleasure was so intense Mav almost couldn't respond in turn but he knew if he didn't, he risked ruining the scenario they were supposedly playing out. Taking a deep breath, he leaned down and took as much of his best friend's cock into his mouth as he could.

He wished he had time to savor Duke's delicious taste, wished he could take his time and pleasure his best friend the way he wanted to but there was no way he could do that now—not when they were supposed to be having a race. Instead, he concentrated on sucking the full length of Duke's shaft down his throat and lapping the head right below the crown, which was an especially sensitive spot on his own cock. Apparently it was for Duke too because his friend moaned and thrust forward, his hips moving rhythmically in time with Mav's sucking. In fact, both of them were moving, thrusting with complete abandon as they sucked each other to the edge...and beyond.

*What am I gonna do if he wins? Can't let him win.* Mav couldn't say exactly why he felt so strongly about it, only that he did. Maybe because in the back of his mind, fucking another guy wasn't nearly as bad as allowing another guy to fuck you. Fucking another guy was just getting your rocks off, shooting your load. But letting another guy fuck you, well, that was undeniably gay. And despite what they were currently doing, he wasn't ready to call himself that. Hell, he might *never* be ready or willing to call himself that. So he sucked frantically and all the time concentrated on holding back, keeping his come in his cock where it belonged and out of Duke's mouth. Still, the pleasurable ache in his balls was building and building with every passing second and he didn't know how much longer he could hold back.

Apparently Duke was having the same problem and controlling it with considerably less success. Just as Mav was sure he couldn't hold off for one more second, he felt the vibration as Duke groaned with his mouth still wrapped around Mav's cock. And then his own mouth was filled with a salty, hot fluid that he understood after one dazed moment was his best friend's come.

Lapping hurriedly, trying to keep up, Mav swallowed as much as he could, sucking the spurting shaft that still pressed between his lips, prolonging the pleasure for Duke as long as he could. He could hear Duke moaning as he came and he reveled in the sensation of pushing his best friend so far, of making him come so hard.

And then, finally, it was over. Duke pulled out from between Mav's lips and drew away from his cock at the same time. They lay there, panting on the bed, and Mav felt like his balls were going to explode. Never in all the time he'd been dating had he wanted anyone as badly as he wanted his best friend. But now that the pressure in Duke's balls had been relieved, he wondered if his best friend was up to making good on their dare.

“Duke?” He spoke his friend’s name quietly and uncertainly, watching as Duke disengaged himself from the sixty-nine position and joined him at the head of the bed.

Duke didn’t answer in words. The first thing he did was wrap his arms around Mav and pull him in close for a long, lingering kiss. It occurred to Mav that his friend was searching for traces of himself, wanting to taste his come in Mav’s mouth and he obligingly kissed Duke back, twining their tongues together for what felt like hours though it was probably only minutes. The long, sensual kiss only made his balls ache more and the shaft of his cock throb with need. God, how much longer could his friend keep him in suspense? But the suspense didn’t last forever.

“Well...” Duke pulled back at last, breaking the kiss and looking Mav in the eye. “Looks like I lost the dare, Mav. I guess you’re gonna have to fuck me.”

## Chapter Five

“Are you sure, man? I mean, if you want to change your mind...” Mav still felt like his cock was about to explode but this was a big step. If Duke decided he’d rather give him a handjob or just finish the blowjob to make Mav come, he’d understand. But his best friend was already shaking his head at the suggestion.

“No way, Mav. You know I never welch on a bet or a dare. You won fair and square so I’m willing to take what’s coming to me. Or in me.” He gave Mav a smile as he made the joke but his words reminded Mav of something.

“I, uh, I don’t think I have any condoms. Do you?”

Duke frowned. “No, sorry. I guess I shoulda thought of that.”

“Damn.” Mav frowned. “We, uh, better not do this without one.”

“Probably not,” Duke agreed. Then he sighed and shook his head. “I don’t want to do it like this anyway.”

“What?” Mav looked at him in confusion. “I thought you *did* want to do it. You were just saying you never welch on a bet.” He was surprised at how disappointed he was. He’d been all set to run to the store and grab a box of Trojans and get right back to collecting on their dare and now it looked like Duke was getting cold feet. Not that Mav blamed him but still, he’d just said he was still up for it.

“No, you’re not gettin’ me.” Duke sat up in bed and ran a hand through his dark blond hair. “It’s not that I don’t want you to fuck me. I *do*.” He looked at Mav with an intensity that was almost scary. “I’ve wanted to feel you inside me for a long time, Mav.”

“I...really?” Mav wasn’t sure how to take such an admission. Had Duke honestly been thinking about this, about letting Mav fuck him, for that long? Longer than the last few days in which their friendship had suddenly and inexplicably taken a sexual turn?

“Really.” Duke nodded. “But not like this. Not as a bet or a dare or something we do after hitting the bars because we’re both so shitfaced we can’t see straight.” He turned to Mav, who was sitting up in bed as well now. “I want you to fuck me because you want to, Mav,” he said softly. “Because you love me.”

Mav opened his mouth and closed it again. He had absolutely no idea what to say to this. No idea at all.

“Do you, Mav?” Duke’s face was pale but set, as though he had to know the answer to the question. “Do you love me?”



"I...of course I love you, man." Mav laughed uneasily. "I mean, you're my best friend."

"No." Duke shook his head. "Not like that. Not the kind of love you have for your teammate or your friend. I'm talkin' about romantic love—like spend-the-rest-of-your- life-together love."

"Well, what do you want me to say? What do you want me to do?" Mav felt put on the defensive. "Want me to start sending you a dozen roses and a Hallmark card on Valentine's Day or something?"

Duke laughed. "Hell no. What would I do with a dozen roses? No, I don't need you to start treating me like one of those cheerleaders you're always dating."

"What *do* you need me to do then?" Mav asked, feeling exasperated.

"Move in with me to start with."

"Move in with you? What are you talking about? We're already roommates." Now Mav knew his friend had lost it.

"Not for much longer though," Duke pointed out. "But I'm not talking about here—I'm talking about in Tallahassee. Remember I was sayin' how nice it would be if we could room together there too? Well, I was kinda feeling you out about it then but actually I've already rented an apartment right by the campus there."

"You did?" Mav felt broadsided by the news that his best friend was already planning their life together.

"Uh-huh." Duke nodded. "And, uh, confession time. That was what I spent my half of our rent money on—not weed. I'm sorry I lied about it. I just...didn't want you to be freaked if I told you too suddenly."

"But...what about Cornell?" Mav asked.

Duke made a face. "Screw Cornell. I told you, none of that matters to me. What matters is staying together—keeping you in my life. And you should see the place I found us, Mav. I mean, it's great. Huge living room, big kitchen, fireplace. And the rent is fifty less a month. The only thing is, there's only one bedroom. But I figured since we already sleep together most of the time anyway..." He shrugged. "So tell me, what do you think?"

He looked at Mav eagerly and a little uncertainly, an expression that seemed to go straight to Mav's heart and squeeze it like a fist. Damn, was his best friend really serious? He wanted them to live together again, only this time as more than roommates? More than best friends? As lovers? He wasn't sure how to feel about that. Wasn't sure at all.

Duke seemed to take his silence for assent because he was already talking again. "Nobody knows us up there yet so we can start all over again. We don't have to be dumb jocks—don't have to worry about what people will say. We can be like Ethan and Evan."

"What—like the two gay Es? Like a...a couple?" Mav asked incredulously.

"Sure." Duke nodded at once. "If you want to." He looked suddenly uncertain again. "I mean I wouldn't have had the nerve to ask you, even after everything that's been, uh, goin' on with us lately. But

you were the one that came up with the idea of doing sixty-nine. I figured if you weren't into it—into us—you wouldn't have started that."

"I guess so." Mav frowned. He *had* instigated their latest sexual venture in a way but it wasn't like he'd said, "Hey, let's go suck each other off." They had been doing a dare which wasn't the same thing in his estimation at all.

"You don't know what a relief it is to finally say this to you." Duke sighed, sounding genuinely relieved. "I mean, I've wanted to tell you how I feel for months—years. But here at USF I feel so stuck. Like I'm this stupid jock, this party guy who has to always be chasing chicks." He shook his head. "I'm so glad I never have to be that guy again. Everything's gonna be different when we get to Tallahassee. Everything's gonna be better."

It occurred to Mav that his best friend was sounding more and more like the Duke who had nursed the abandoned kitten and volunteered with underprivileged children and less and less like the Duke who got wasted at kegger parties and supposedly spent their rent money on weed. It was exactly what he'd been wishing for earlier and yet, somehow hearing Duke talk this way was making him increasingly uncomfortable. He needed time to think about everything his best friend was saying. Needed time to clear his head. Most of all he needed to get away and be alone for a while.

"Uh..." He thought hard, grasping for any excuse to get away. "You know, I better go get those condoms before the drugstore closes," he said at last, glad something had come to mind. "I mean if you still want to..."

Duke's warm brown eyes were suddenly half-lidded again. "Of course I want to. Want you to fuck me, Mav. So what are you waiting for?"

"Nothing. I'm going right now." Mav scrambled out of bed and reached for his clothes, feeling like an animal just barely escaping a trap. He had to get out of here *now*. There would be time to talk about all the crazy things Duke had been saying later. Right now he just needed to get out and think.

"You want me to come with you?" Duke started to get out of bed too but Mav shook his head almost frantically.

"No! I mean, you just, uh, stay here and get ready for me," he said lamely.

"All right, I'll do that." Duke settled back in the bed, his eyes filled with lust again. Reaching down, he fisted his shaft and began to stroke with a long, slow motion. "Don't be long."

"I won't," Mav promised, hoping he didn't sound as freaked as he felt. Then bolted out the door.

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The cool fluorescent lights of the Rite Aid were soothing as was the meaningless hum of Muzak playing in the background. Mav had gone to the nearest pharmacy out of habit. It was the one right across

from campus he and Duke always used mainly because they had good prices on beer and you didn't have to drive to get there. He didn't actually have any idea of buying condoms, he just couldn't think of anyplace else to go and since the pharmacy was already fixed in his mind as his destination, that was where he wound up.

He walked up and down the aisles, looking at the rows of medications and impulse-buy merchandise without seeing any of it. What was happening to him and Duke? Had they both gone crazy in the past few days? And what was up with Duke wanting them to be a gay couple like the two gay Es? Mav wasn't gay. *Oh yeah?* whispered a little voice in his head. *If you're not gay what were you doing just a few minutes ago sucking your best friend's cock and swallowing his come?* Yes, but that was a one-time deal—just a dare they were doing, Mav argued to himself. And just because he'd sucked one guy's cock didn't make him gay. After all, he'd banged plenty of cheerleaders in his day—more than enough to prove his orientation. *But which did you enjoy more?* the little voice persisted. *Can you name a single sexual encounter with a girl that made you as hot and bothered as the suck session you just had with Duke?*

"I can't believe this," Mav muttered aloud, running a hand distractedly through his hair. What was wrong with him? Was he going crazy?

"Can't believe what? How gay you are?"

The voice was speaking his thoughts but coming from outside his head. Now Mav *knew* he was going crazy. He whirled around to see if his guilty conscience had suddenly grown a body to go with its mouthy, opinionated voice and saw Richard Enslow standing behind him with an ugly smirk on his freckled face.

"What the hell are you talking about, Enslow?" he demanded, glaring at the other man.

"Talking about you and your little fuck buddy, Duke. I just figured you were here because you ran out of rubbers to fuck each other with." He nodded at the shelf behind Mav which just happened to be filled with an array of condoms. "Isn't that right?"

For a minute, Mav felt like the other man could see right inside his head and the thought left him cold. Then he got hold of himself. Enslow wasn't a mind reader and he wasn't making an accusation. He was just being a dick, as always. "You're not funny, Enslow, and I'm not in the mood," he growled. "Now get out of my face. Seeing you twice in one day is two times too many."

"I'm not trying to be funny." Enslow stepped forward aggressively. "I'm talking about facts, Holms. Cold, hard facts." His smirk returned. "Guess what I saw online today? Right before I came here, in fact?"

"What?" Mav felt a cold chill run down his spine but he tried to tell himself he was crazy. After all, there was no way the Str8te Boys website could get the pictures of him and Duke up so quickly, was there? And what would Enslow be doing looking at a site like that anyway?"

"It was a little something my girlfriend showed me." Enslow's smirk had returned. "A site about gay guys—she likes that kind of shit. Don't ask me why because I think it's sick." He made a face. "But

anyway, she was looking at this site and guess who she happened to see? You and your faggot roommate lover, Duke. And you were all over each other.”

Mav felt a wash of pure terror. When he had Duke had posed for the Str8te Boys pictures, the idea of anyone he actually knew seeing them had seemed completely academic. And now here it was, not even eight hours after the shoot, and someone he knew—someone he knew that would be happy to tell everyone else he knew—had seen them and drawn the obvious conclusion. That he and Duke were gay, that they were a couple, just like the two gay Es.

“Look, man, I know how that looked but it’s not that way,” he said, thinking frantically that he had to do damage control before anyone else found out. And they *would* find out, he was sure. Enslow was probably just itching to throw him under the bus and tell the entire USF men’s soccer team. By the time the end-of-the-year party rolled around next week they would be spray painting “faggot” in big pink letters across their apartment door. “I’m telling you, it’s not what it looked like,” Mav said again, desperate for the other man to believe him.

“It *looked* like you two are fags.” Enslow frowned skeptically. “No wonder Duke tried to kick my ass when I took a swing at those two little faggot friends of his—‘the two gay Es’. It’s because you guys are just like them.”

“No, we’re not!” Mav nearly shouted. “We’re not fucking gay, man,” he continued, lowering his voice and looking Enslow in the eye. “Those pictures—that shit we did—it was just to get money to pay the rent. It didn’t mean anything—we just needed some green because we were about to be kicked out on our asses.” He groped hastily, looking for something else to say, some way to explain himself. “I mean, you could take pictures hugging your dog but that doesn’t mean you’re into bestiality, you know?”

“I don’t know, man. You two were doing a lot more than hugging.” Enslow still sounded skeptical.

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Mav made a face. “It was fucking disgusting but what can you do? The gig paid like two thousand dollars and we needed the money. It’s not like we would have done it for any other reason. Like I said, it didn’t mean anything at all.”

“It didn’t, huh?”

A new voice from his left almost made Mav jump out of his skin. A new and very *familiar* voice. With a sinking feeling he turned to see Duke standing behind him in the aisle.

“Duke, hey, what are you doing here?” He tried to sound casual, as though he was really surprised to see his friend.

“Yeah, what are you doin’ here, Duke? Forgot to tell Maverick here what kind of condoms are your favorite?” Enslow had that annoying smirk on his face again but Duke ignored him.

“I guess you’d like me to say that I was all ready to bone some hot chick and I realized I’m fresh out of condoms,” he said, glaring at Mav. “That would make you look good in front of Enslow, here, wouldn’t it?”

“Look, Duke—” Mav started but his friend held up a hand.

“Save it. I came because you forgot your wallet. So here.” He shoved Mav’s brown leather wallet into his hands and headed for the door.

“Better run and catch him—sounds like you two are having a *lover’s quarrel*.” Enslow let one hand droop limply. “Oh dear, oh dear, whatever shall we do?”

Mav stuck a finger in his face. “Shut the fuck up, Enslow. Don’t talk about things you don’t understand.”

“What, like fucking another guy? You’re right—I don’t understand how you and Duke could—” Enslow began but he was talking to empty air. Mav was already out of the pharmacy, running to catch his friend.

“Hey, Duke, wait up!” He put a hand on Duke’s broad shoulder only to have it shrugged off.

“Leave me alone.” Duke was walking fast, his long strides eating up the ground.

“Duke, c’mon, don’t be like that!”

“Like what? Gay? A faggot?” Duke whirled to face him, his brown eyes filled with anger and hurt. “I heard every word you said to Enslow in there, Mav. I know what you think of me—of us. Only there is no us, is there, Mav? There never was. We’re just two straight guys who did a few gay pictures to pay the rent. Of course it was *fucking disgusting* but at least it didn’t mean anything, right?”

“Aw, man...” Mav didn’t know what to say, what to do. Of course, he hadn’t meant all the shit he’d told Enslow but how could he convince Duke of that? “Look,” he began, “I was just trying to—”

“Tryin’ to what? Deny everything we did the past few days? Forget you ever felt anything but friendship for me? Or did you even feel that?”

“Of course I did—I do,” Mav yelled, balling up his fists in frustration. “You’re my best friend, Duke. We just got...I don’t know, carried away a little in the past few days. But that’s no reason to scrap the whole friendship.”

“Oh, I get it. So you wanna just go back to the way things were before. We can be roommates and best buds and go on double dates with empty-headed bimbo cheerleaders and be completely hetero to the outside world,” Duke snarled.

“I didn’t say that—” Mav began.

“Yeah, best friends and that’s all,” Duke cut him off. “But what about at night when you’re cold and lonely—is it okay for me to come sleep in the same bed with you then? Or what about if you’re horny and want a handjob or a blowjob—you want me to take care of that too? I guess that’s okay as long as we don’t ever talk about it and none of the rest of the team finds out. As long as nobody suspects we’re gay. Is that it, Mav?”

“Duke, man, come on...”

“No!” Duke shook his head, his brown eyes suspiciously bright. “No, man, now that I know how you really feel I’ve got nothing else to say to you. I just...I can’t believe I ever thought I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you. This whole time, the last four years, have been a complete waste. A total lie.”

He turned, his shoulders stiff with anger and tension, and walked away, leaving Mav to wonder what the hell had just happened and how his life had suddenly turned to shit.

## Chapter Six

“Come on, Ethan, open up. I know he’s in there—I just want to talk to him.” Mav pounded on the door to the two gay Es’ apartment, demanding entry. It had been nearly a week since his fight with Duke and he hadn’t seen him since. Mav had gone to a local college bar to try and drown his sorrows after their confrontation and when he’d gotten back to his apartment in the wee hours of the morning his roommate had moved out lock, stock and barrel. The flat screen TV was gone, Duke’s clothes were missing and his bed stripped bare, even the hangers were gone from his closet. Mav had wandered the half-empty apartment that had been the scene of so many study sessions and parties and late-night cuddles in either his bed or Duke’s and felt like it was his heart Duke had cleaned out and left empty instead.

He’d heard through the grapevine that Duke had put his stuff in storage and was staying with the two gay Es, but he didn’t go over there immediately. Instead, he’d decided to give Duke time to cool off and come home on his own, which he surely would after he realized that this was all just a stupid misunderstanding.

It wasn’t like Mav didn’t care about him or want to be with him. And it wasn’t like they couldn’t fool around a little after the lights were down and nobody else was around. After all, where was the harm in a few blowjobs and handjobs? It was all no big deal, Mav had decided. But you couldn’t go around letting what you did after hours when it was dark and quiet and you’d had a little too much beer define the rest of your life.

Just because he liked the taste of Duke’s lips against him, liked the feel of Duke’s hand and mouth on his cock, didn’t make him gay. Not by a long shot. He just liked being close to his buddy. What he couldn’t understand was why Duke had to make such a big deal out of it. Why couldn’t they just keep being roommates and friends with a few fringe benefits? Why did they have to announce to the whole world that they liked sleeping in the same bed and occasionally sucking each other off?

All these thoughts had been running around in his head the entire week, making it nearly impossible to think of anything else. He’d done pretty poorly on most of his tests, making him glad he was already accepted to pharmacy school. If he hadn’t been, he would have been in deep shit considering what the final exam scores did to his GPA.

But now he was done thinking and done waiting for Duke to come around and come home. It was their last night on campus. All of his stuff was already bagged and tagged and loaded on a moving truck he would be driving to Tallahassee tomorrow. Mav couldn’t help thinking that there was plenty of room in the

truck for more. If he and Duke hadn't had their stupid fight, his roommate's possessions could be there too, waiting for the trip to their new apartment and new life. Of course, he wasn't sure how that new life would have gone with Duke insisting they should be out and proud instead of just keeping things under wraps, but he was sure they could have worked that out somehow. But now they weren't working anything out. Instead he was going to be driving alone and looking for a place on his own instead of sharing the apartment Duke had picked out for them, wherever it was. He'd settle down and go to pharmacy school and probably marry some girl his mom would approve of and never see Duke again.

Only Mav wasn't willing to do that. Not at least without seeing his former roommate and ex-best friend at least one more time. Tonight was the end-of-the-year party for the soccer team—the last end-of-the-year party he would ever attend and he didn't want to be there without Duke. Didn't want to leave without looking into Duke's brown eyes once more and hearing his voice one last time. Just the thought of never seeing the man who had meant so much to him for the past four years tied Mav's stomach in knots and brought a lump to his throat. He didn't want things to end this way. Somewhere deep inside him a tiny voice whispered that he didn't want things to end at all. That he wanted to take Duke with him to Tallahassee and live together as more than roommates, just as his friend had wanted. But that was a crazy idea and Mav knew it. He pushed the little voice to one side and concentrated on what was important—seeing Duke one more time and making things right between them before it was too late.

"Ethan!" he bellowed, pounding on the apartment door again. "Open up! I mean it, man."

Finally the front door was unlatched, but it wasn't Ethan's chocolate brown complexion that greeted him but the tanned, blond visage of his partner, Evan. He was much less obvious about his sexuality than Ethan, without all the effeminate mannerisms, which made Mav a whole lot more comfortable around him. Most of the time he thought that Evan just seemed like a regular guy.

"Come on in, Mav," he said mildly, stepping to one side. "Duke's not here right now but you're welcome to wait until he gets back."

"And when will that be?" Mav asked, barging in angrily and throwing himself on the soft brown leather couch in the living room. He wondered if this was where Duke had been spending his nights and wished he dared to bend over and sniff the leather to see if he could pick up a trace of his friend's spicy scent.

Evan shrugged. "Don't know. I don't have any idea where he went so you might be waiting a while."

"That's fine, I'm not moving 'til I see him," Mav grumbled, sinking lower in the couch.

Evan grinned. "Well, seeing that you're going to be here a while, how about something to drink? Beer, water with lemon or white wine?"

Mav sighed, disarmed by the other man's good manners. "I'll take the water, thanks." He didn't want to be in the least bit inebriated when he talked to Duke. He had things to say to the stupid sonofabitch and he wanted everything to come out perfectly.



Evan disappeared into the kitchen for a minute and came back with a cold glass filled with ice cubes and water with a twist of lemon on top. “Here you go. Looks like you could use it.”

“Thanks.” Mav took the glass and drained it in a few long swallows. Then he sighed and sank deeper into the couch. “That hit the spot. I was parched.”

“Yeah.” Evan settled onto a matching brown leather chair across from him. “Being miserable is thirsty work.”

“What do you mean? What makes you think I’m miserable?” Mav demanded.

“Well just look at you.” Evan made a sweeping motion that indicated the way Mav was slouched despondently on the couch. “Anyone could tell. You don’t have to be a psych major to see that you’re hurting. Look, Maverick.” He shifted in the chair so he was facing Mav head-on. “I’ve been where you are. I know what you’re going through because I went through the same thing myself with my first boyfriend in high school.”

“What are you talking about?” Mav scowled. “What exactly do you think I’m going through?”

“Just listen.” Evan steepled his fingers and leaned forward. “Back in high school I was one of the cool kids—the jocks. I was on the football team, I dated the cheerleaders, went to all the pep rallies and when somebody made a faggot joke, I laughed louder than anybody. But there was something missing. And in my senior year I found out what it was—or should I say *who* it was.”

“Yeah?” Mav was intrigued despite himself. Not that he wanted to let Evan know that. But still, it would be rude not to at least pretend to be interested in the guy’s story.

“Yeah,” Evan said. “His name was Jamie and he was in my fifth period drama class. We all had to take an elective and I thought drama would be an easy A. I got paired up with Jamie as an acting partner and we just...clicked. I can’t explain it any better than that. But there was a problem.”

“Yeah?” Mav said again. He leaned forward a little on the couch, drinking in what Evan was saying. “What?”

“Jamie was gay.” Evan sighed. “And he wasn’t low key about it either. He was extremely flamboyant—what you might call a flamer. But I fell for him anyway. And then I broke his heart.”

“What? How’d you do that?”

“He wanted to be up front about how we felt about each other. Wanted to go to the prom together.” Evan shrugged sadly. “But I didn’t have the courage. We fought about it and I wound up taking one of the girls that had been on the homecoming court instead. Jamie refused to see me again after that. He said if I wouldn’t see him in public he wouldn’t see me in private.” He sighed. “It tore me up inside but there was nothing I could do. I spent the rest of my senior year vowing that the next time I fell for someone I’d give it my all. And then my first semester at USF I met Ethan.”

“So let me get this straight—I mean right,” Mav said. “You weren’t gay until you started college?”

"No, I was gay, I just wouldn't *admit* I was gay," Evan corrected him. "And believe me, it wasn't easy but I didn't want to keep on lying to myself and everybody else. It was too late for Jamie and me but I was determined not to lose Ethan the same way."

Mav ran a hand through his hair. "So I guess you think it's the same kind of deal between Duke and me?"

Evan smiled gently. "I *know* it's the same kind of deal. And I don't want to see you throw away something special and important to you because you're worried about what other people think."

"And what makes you think I'm so worried about what other people think?"

"Because," Evan said "I know what happened between you and Duke."

"You and the whole rest of the campus," Mav said tiredly. "Everybody's probably seen that damn website by now. I'm sure Enslow couldn't wait to spread the word."

"Actually, your pictures were taken off the Str8te Boys website." Evan nodded when Mav shot him an incredulous look. "Oh yes, Duke went there the day after you two had the fight and paid to have them taken down."

"But...but we signed contracts. They wouldn't just..." Mav shook his head.

"The owner is a personal friend of mine," Evan said coolly. "I called and explained to him what had happened and he agreed to take them down. He said he had no idea that you two weren't publicly out yet when you took them and as long as Duke refunded the money he'd get rid of them."

"What do you mean, 'publicly out'?" Mav growled. "Why would we be out at all? We're *not* gay."

"Mmm hmm." Evan raised one blond eyebrow at him. "And how's the water in that river this time of year?"

"Fuck you." Mav set his glass down on the end table beside him hard enough to make the ice cubes rattle. "Look, I'll admit we did...some stuff. I'll even admit I enjoyed it. But that doesn't make Duke and me gay."

"Well, if committing homosexual acts with a homosexual man doesn't make you gay, then I don't know what does." Evan's voice was bland.

"What? Duke's not a homo. He's just..." Duke shrugged. "I don't know. Confused."

"No." Evan shook his head. "His feelings for you are the one thing Duke has never been confused about. Don't you know he's been in love with you for the last four years, Maverick?"

"He...he's *what*?" Mav could hardly believe his ears. "You're kidding."

"I'm serious as a heart attack." Evan's green eyes flashed angrily. "He made Ethan and I swear not to tell anyone, to keep his secret, but he's been eating his heart out over you for ages. Then when you finally started to reciprocate, he was over the moon. Started making all these plans for you two to move in together in Tallahassee, to be a real couple, not just roommates..." He shrugged. "I told him he was moving too fast,

that he was going to freak you out, but he wouldn't listen. And now he's so despondent I don't have the heart to say 'I told you so'."

"Duke's really that upset? Over me?" Mav felt something catch in his chest. Had his best friend really been in love with him all this time? It would certainly explain the way Duke always wanted to be near him, touching him. And the way he had started sleeping in Mav's bed at night and let it be known that Mav was welcome in his.

He could still remember the first time he'd taken his roommate up on that unspoken offer. It had been the middle of their sophomore year and he and Duke had been living together for a while and having a great time. Duke had crashed a few times on his bed—mostly when they'd both had too much to drink—but Mav had never returned the favor. But that night Mav's mom had called to let him know that Jonesy, the dog he'd had since he was in fifth grade, had finally been called to the big doghouse in the sky after chasing the wrong car. The news left him feeling like shit and he'd gone to Duke's room almost without thinking about it. His roommate was lying on his bed reading a textbook but he'd put it down when he caught a look at Mav's face.

"Hey, man, you look like shit. What the hell happened?" Duke had asked mildly, scooting over to make room for him.

Mav had shrugged. "My mom just called. My, uh, dog died. It's stupid, I know but I'd had him since I was a little kid. I mean, he was getting really old but I guess I just never thought—"

"Hey, no way, man. It's not stupid. Dogs are great—like friends. It hurts when you lose a pet you've had a long time. Hurts like shit."

"Uh huh." Still Mav had hovered, standing right beside the bed, uncertain of what to do.

"C'mere, Mav." Duke had patted the spot beside him invitingly. "Take a load off. It's okay."

Mav had sunk gratefully onto the bed and into his friend's arms. Duke's chest had been warm and strong under his cheek and Duke had been nice enough not to say anything when a few hot tears slipped from under Mav's lashes and wet his t-shirt. Instead, he'd hugged Mav hard and made him feel better without saying a word.

They hadn't talked about it but after that, they'd spent more time sleeping together than apart. Mav had never felt so lonely as in the past week when he didn't have Duke's warm, muscular body beside him in the dark. He supposed he could see why Evan thought he was miserable—it was because he *was* miserable. More miserable than he could ever remember being in his whole sorry life. And all because Duke was gone. Could he really chalk those feelings up to losing someone who was just a friend?

Then something Evan had said hit him for the first time. "Wait a minute, are you telling me that Duke really is gay? That he's been in love with me and acting straight this whole time when he's actually like you and Ethan?" he asked, looking at the man across from him for confirmation.

Evan nodded without speaking.

“So all those cheerleaders he took out, all the times we double dated, every time he acted like some kind of idiot at a kegger, hitting on girls and shit, every time he watched porn with me, the way he pretended to get sick at our photo shoot for Str8te Boys—you’re telling me that was all an act?”

“Not an act, exactly.” Evan looked thoughtful. “I believe for awhile Duke really did try to get away from his true orientation. He wanted to be normal—to fit in with everyone else and that meant acting like everyone else. But deep down he couldn’t deny himself—anymore than he could deny his love for you. That was why he was so happy when it looked like you were finally coming around. Because he could stop denying what he was and what he felt and just be real for a change.”

Dimly, Mav remembered Duke saying how glad he was that he didn’t have to act like a dumb jock anymore. Finally he understood. The real Duke was the one that nursed kittens back to health and worked with poor kids. The obnoxious party guy who never thought about anything but beer, pussy, weed and porn was an illusion. A pretty good one—one that had fooled him for the last four years—but an illusion all the same.

“I don’t know what to say,” he said at last. “I mean—he’s been lying to me for the past four years.”

“Yeah, but I’d been lying to myself for a hell of a lot longer than that.”

Duke’s voice behind him nearly made Mav jump out of his skin.

“You’ve gotta stop doing that, man,” he said, turning around in the couch and looking up to meet his ex-best friend’s eyes. “Seriously. You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“Sorry. And I’m sorry I lied to you, Mav.” Duke shrugged. “I didn’t mean to. I was just...in denial about what I was for so long and it was easier to just pretend. I shouldn’t have done that—shoulda told you what I was right away but back when I first met you I was trying so hard not to be that person. And then it was too late.”

“Too late? What do you mean?” Mav asked. “You think I would’ve stopped being your friend if you came out?”

“If it was just telling you I was gay, I woulda done it.” Duke looked at him earnestly. “But, Mav, by that time we were already roommates and I was...well, I was already in love with you.”

“Are you still?” Mav stood and walked around the couch to be closer to his friend. “Still in love with me?”

Duke frowned unhappily. “I wish I wasn’t. God knows I wish I wasn’t. But, yeah. I can’t help myself, Mav. Sorry.”

“No, don’t apologize.” Mav took a step closer, feeling like he was being pulled by a magnet. After an entire week of not seeing Duke he felt starved for the other man’s company. It was like he’d been in withdrawal and suddenly he’d gotten a hit of what he needed most in the world. “I came over here to see you one last time. I just...I couldn’t leave without saying goodbye.”

Duke looked down. “Goodbye then, Mav. I hope you have a great time in Tallahassee.” He turned and started to walk away and Mav felt his heart sink. Could Duke really walk away just like that, so easily?

*Stop him!* screamed a voice in his head. *Find some excuse to get him out of here and back to the apartment. Do something—don’t just let him go!*

“I, uh, wait,” he said, feeling like an idiot. “You, uh, you left some of your stuff at our place. I need you to come get it so I can finish packing.”

Duke sighed and turned around. “Look, Mav, I’m pretty sure I got everything important when I left so if you could just—”

“No, you missed some stuff and I don’t want to just leave it lying around when I go. Come on, man. It’ll only take a minute.” Inside he was as tense as a knotted fist. He wasn’t quite sure what he was going to do once he got Duke back to their apartment, he just knew that it was important to get him there.

At last, to his relief, Duke nodded. “All right. If it’s only for a minute...” He looked at Evan. “Tell Ethan I’ll see him later, okay?”

Evan nodded. “Sure. Take it easy.” He looked at Mav. “Remember what I told you,” he said and then left the room before Mav could say anything in reply.

“Well, he’s a cryptic guy, isn’t he?” he muttered to Duke. “Come on, let’s get out of here.” He was halfway afraid that Duke would change his mind but to his relief, his friend shrugged and followed him out the door.

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“Okay, here I am. Now show me what I forgot.” Duke stood in the mostly bare living room and turned in a circle, as though looking for his missing possessions.

Mav hadn’t had any idea what he was going to do once he got his old roommate back to the apartment and he was still drawing a blank. He’d lied to get Duke back here but for what purpose? What was the point? Had he thought that once he got his old friend back on familiar ground Duke would magically forgive him and agree to go back to the way things were before? What was wrong with him? What was he supposed to do?

*Keep him in your life. Convince him to stay,* that same little voice that had urged him to get Duke to come back to the apartment with him whispered in his brain. Mav agreed with it one hundred percent. Seeing Duke now, in the familiar surroundings of their apartment, brought home to him exactly how much he’d missed his best friend. The last week without Duke had been painful—heartbreaking. Was he really willing to go through that pain again, not only for a week but for the rest of his life, just because he didn’t want to admit what he was?

*So what am I?* The answer came back almost immediately. *I'm in love with Duke. Does that make me gay or what?* Mav didn't know, but he did know he didn't want to risk losing the most important person in his life over a label. But how could he tell Duke that? After what he'd put Duke through would he believe it?

"Well?" Duke was looking at him with a mixture of exasperation and annoyance and Mav realized he'd been standing there silent for the past few seconds, just thinking.

"What did I forget?"

Suddenly Mav's body went into action independently of his brain. He'd thought enough and now he was ready to act. "You forgot this," he said roughly. Grabbing Duke, he pulled him into a tight embrace and pressed his lips against his friend's. *God, what am I doing? Should I be doing this?* He didn't know. He only knew that it felt right and he wasn't about to stop doing it until he had his fill.

Duke fought the kiss for a moment and then seemed to change his mind. Melting against Mav, he began to give as good as he was getting. Opening his mouth, he invited Mav inside and Mav wasn't hesitant at all in taking him up on the invitation. God, it felt so good, so *right*. Duke's mouth under his was just like he remembered it. Mav wanted to drink him from the lips down, to explore every inch of him, to stake a claim that would never fade.

"Wait a minute!" Duke broke away suddenly. "Stop, Mav, we can't do this!"

"Why not? You saying you don't want to? 'Cause if you say that you're lying." Mav looked challengingly into his best friend's eyes. "You want it as much as I do. I could feel it in the way you kissed me."

"Just because we want it doesn't mean we should do it. Do you know how much what you said hurt me, Mav? Do you have any idea how hard it's been for me to stay away from you?" Duke ran a hand through his spiky blond hair. "I'm tryin' to fall out of love with you and it's harder than hell. I can't just start up again because you want one last fuck."

"What do you mean one last fuck? We never got to the first fuck," Mav pointed out. "Which reminds me—you owe me one, roomie. I never got to collect on our dare the other night."

"What, are you kidding me?" Duke gave him an incredulous look. "You really expect me to do this with you just because I lost a dare?"

"It's as good a reason as any, isn't it?" Mav raised his eyebrows. "If you need a reason, that is. Besides that you *want* me to fuck you, don't you, Duke? You want me inside you as much as I want to be there."

"You sonofabitch," Duke growled and for a minute Mav was sure he was going to punch him. Instead, Duke reached for him and pulled him close again. "Goddamn you," he whispered fiercely and kissed Mav hard on the mouth again. "Why can't you just leave me alone?"

“Why would I want to do that when I...” It was on the tip of Mav’s tongue to say *when I love you* but somehow the words wouldn’t come out. They were true—he realized that now. Being without Duke for a whole week had taught him that. He needed the man he was kissing, needed him as more than a best friend, more than a roommate. He needed Duke as a lover, as someone he could count on to be there for the rest of his life. Forever. But if he said that now, when they were about to have sex—at least Mav *hoped* they were about to have sex—would Duke really believe it? Mav wanted it to mean something when he said it. He wanted his lover to know that he felt the words with his whole heart when he said them. So instead he said, “When I want you so much it’s driving me crazy.”

“Maybe you’re getting a taste of your own medicine. You’ve been driving me crazy for the last *four years*.” Duke kissed the side of his neck, sucking fiercely as though he wanted to leave a mark. Mav groaned and gripped his lover’s hips, grinding their cocks together. It was happening, it was finally happening—he and Duke were going to fuck and he couldn’t think of anything else in the world that he wanted more.

He steered Duke toward the bedroom, glad that he’d left his bed set up until the last moment. He hadn’t wanted to sleep on the floor his last night at USF. But he knew that the lack of a bed wouldn’t have stopped him. Even if there had been nothing but a bare wooden floor to do it on, he wouldn’t have cared. The driving force to be inside Duke, to claim him, was eating Mav alive. He felt like he couldn’t rest until he buried his cock deep in Duke’s unresisting body and fucked him hard.

“Mav...Mav, wait,” Duke murmured breathlessly as Mav backed him up until the backs of his knees hit the mattress.

“I’m done waiting. Want you *now*.” Mav barely recognized the possessive growl coming out of his own throat. He’d never felt like this before, never wanted anyone as badly as he wanted Duke.

“God, okay. All right.” Duke gave in, pulling Mav with him as they tumbled to the bed. For a moment, Mav was content to grind against his lover, feeling the friction of his own steel-hard shaft against Duke’s. But soon he wanted more—much more.

“Off.” Reaching up, he began dragging Duke’s t-shirt over his head. “Want you naked, *now*.”

“You too, then.” Duke kissed him hard and worked to get Mav’s shirt off as well. They wound up struggling together, cocks rubbing against each other in a frenzy of friction through Duke’s shorts and Mav’s jeans. Finally they were both bare-chested, but it still wasn’t enough.

“Pants too.” Mav was already dragging at the shorts his lover was wearing, pulling them down past Duke’s knees and freeing his thick cock. There were already pearls of precome beading at the tip and the shaft itself was a dark, needy red. Just the sight made Mav’s mouth water.

“Mav, you don’t have to—” Duke’s protest ended in a moan as Mav swallowed him whole, taking as much of his lover’s shaft down his throat as he could and sucking hard. God, Duke tasted delicious, salty and real in a way all the fantasies Mav had conjured to jerk-off to while Duke was gone weren’t. He

couldn't believe how badly he wanted to do this. Couldn't understand why everything in the entire universe had narrowed down to this—sucking Duke's cock.

"Mav, you gotta stop! It's too much, I'm gonna...gonna..." Duke's shaft pulsed in his mouth, giving a warning Duke seemed to be unable to vocalize. Mav felt a rush of anticipation. When Duke twined his fingers in Mav's hair, trying to pull him off, he only sucked more aggressively. If Duke was going to come he was going to be there to swallow every last drop.

There was a low, inarticulate moan from the man beneath him and then it seemed as if Duke finally just gave in. The fingers that had been seeking to push Mav away were abruptly pulling him forward instead. Duke pumped his hips twice in a rhythm of desperation and then hot, salty jets of come were hitting the back of Mav's throat. He swallowed hungrily, taking his lover's pulsing cock deep in his mouth and milking Duke eagerly for more.

At last Duke's cock lost its urgent rigidity and began to go soft between his lips. With a last, loving suck, Mav pulled away and looked up to meet his lover's eyes.

Duke was looking at him like he'd never seen him before. "God, Mav, that was...amazing. But I don't understand why—"

"You don't have to understand anything." Mav sat up and gave him a long, lingering kiss, sharing Duke's taste with him and drawing a low groan from his throat. "Anything except how bad I want to be inside you right now."

Duke looked worried. "I want you inside me too. But, Mav, this is gonna make it so much harder to say goodbye. Don't you care about that?"

"Who said anything about saying goodbye?" Mav kissed him again, harder this time. He felt like his cock was going to explode if he didn't get into his lover's body soon. "Thought you were going to come to Tallahassee with me."

"Yeah, well that was before."

"Forget before. And forget after." Mav pressed him back onto the mattress so that he was lying on top of his best friend. "They don't concern us. The only thing that matters is right now. And right now I need to fill you up with my cock." He saw Duke's brown eyes blaze with heat at his blatantly sexual words.

"All right." Duke spread his thighs, welcoming Mav in. "Fine then. You have lube and a condom? 'Cause I don't care how much we both want it, there's no way I'm letting you do me dry, Mav."

"Got the lube right here." Mav slipped a tube he'd been saving from between the mattress and the box springs. He'd bought it a few weeks ago, just when things between him and Duke had started to heat up. Of course, he hadn't allowed himself to think about why he was buying it or the eventual use he hoped to put it to, but now that he had it in his hand with Duke under him, he could admit that this was what he had been hoping for all along.

"Good." Duke nodded when he saw the lube. "And the condom?"



Inwardly, Mav cursed. He'd never bought any the fateful night he went to the drugstore and he hadn't gotten any since. "Don't you have one?" he asked Duke but his lover shook his head.

"Sorry, I wasn't expecting to get lucky. Especially not with you. Well, I guess..."

"Wait." Mav held up a hand. "Tell me something. All those dates you've gone out on since I've known you, with all those different girls. You ever did anything with any of them?"

Duke's cheeks got red. "Made out some. Couldn't stand to go any further. It just felt wrong, especially when I was in love with you."

"What about guys?" Mav asked.

Duke shook his head. "I told you, I've been fuckin' head over heels for you for the past four years. I didn't want anyone else."

Mav felt the warm bloom of desire in his chest. Duke had wanted him so badly he'd rather go without than be with someone else. He was beginning to understand because he wanted Duke the same way. But he still needed to ask about what had happened before they met and became roommates. "All right," he said. "And before that? Before college. Ever get fucked?"

This time Duke really blushed. "Once. By a guy in my gym class in high school. But we were safe."

"Okay, then." Mav felt something in his chest loosen. He leaned closer, looking into his best friend's eyes. "You're clean and so am I—I've never done it once without protection. But if there was ever a time to ditch the condoms it's now. I want you, Duke." He kissed his lover demandingly on the mouth. "Want to be inside you. Want to come inside you. And I don't want anything between us."

"God..." For a moment Duke looked conflicted. "I swore I wouldn't do this, man. Swore I'd never go bareback until I found the guy I wanted to be with forever."

"Well, you found him." Mav kissed his cheek and whispered in his ear. "I'm here, Duke. So open up for me and let me in."

With a low moan, Duke did as he asked. Mav could barely believe the trust his friend was showing as Duke spread his legs even wider, opening himself for Mav's invasion. *God, love him so much!* His heart swelled and his hands shook as he uncapped the lube and squeezed some onto his fingers.

Duke gasped and jerked when Mav pressed forward, opening the tight entrance to his body, spreading the lube liberally where it was most needed.

"You all right?" Mav looked at him with concern.

Duke nodded shakily. "It's just...just cold. And it's been over four years since the one and only time I ever did this before. Go easy on me, Mav. Okay?"

"Sure." Leaning over his friend, Mav kissed him again, a long, slow, seductive kiss this time as he worked his fingers deeper and deeper into Duke's tight entrance. The other man moaned and shifted under him but this time it was a moan of pleasure and Mav could feel him opening up.

“Ready?” he whispered, breaking the kiss at last to look into Duke’s eyes. He sincerely hoped Duke was going to say yes. His cock was so hard it was about to break off.

“Mmm hmm. I think so. As long as you go slow.”

“As slow as you want,” Mav promised. With sudden inspiration, he reached up to the head of the bed and grabbed a pillow, which he stuffed under Duke’s hips. “Better angle this way,” he explained. “And we can see what we’re doing.”

“We sure can.” Duke watched, his brown eyes wide, as Mav spread a thin layer of lube over his own cock and positioned himself at Duke’s entrance. “God, Mav, can’t believe we’re doing this. You have no idea how often I thought about what it would be like. Imagined having you inside me.”

His words enflamed Mav almost beyond control. Every instinct he had was screaming that he had to do this now, that he needed to ram his cock balls deep into his friend’s body and take Duke long and hard. But somehow he managed to hold back.

“You won’t have to imagine any more,” he whispered breathlessly. And then with a long, slow thrust, he breached his lover’s entrance and pushed into Duke’s unresisting body.

“God!” Duke squeezed his eyes shut, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

Mav stopped moving at once and looked at him with concern. “You okay?” He was buried to the hilt in Duke’s body and it felt like a hot velvet fist was gripping his naked cock. It was torture to hold still but he didn’t want to hurt the man he loved.

“Fine. I’m fine.” Duke spoke through gritted teeth. “Just need...to get used to it. You’re hung like a fuckin’ horse, Mav.”

“Gee, thanks.” Mav laughed and then Duke joined him. The brief moment of humor seemed to loosen some of the tension between them because Duke’s hands unclenched and he sighed softly.

“Better now,” he said, shifting his hips slightly under Mav. “You can go on now if you want to.”

Mav had never wanted anything more in his entire life. “Let me know if I’m hurting you,” he said sternly, cupping Duke’s cheek in one hand. “Don’t wanna hurt you. Just want to make you feel good.”

“I’d say you’re already doin’ a great job. After that blowjob you gave me I thought I’d never be able to get wood again. But here I am, half-hard already.” Duke nodded down between their legs and Mav saw he was right. Duke’s thick shaft was already nodding toward half-mast above where they were joined together.

“Good, then making you feel good just got a lot easier.” Mav kissed Duke demandingly as he fisted his lover’s cock. “Gonna move now, Duke. Try to keep up.”

Duke opened his mouth, presumably to answer, but all that came out was a moan. That was because Mav had pulled almost all the way out and thrust back in, stretching him to the limit and pumping his cock at the same time.

"That's right," Mav told him as he did it again and then again. "Keep up, Duke. Come on. Want you right there with me when I shoot. When I fill you up with my come."

Duke's eyes blazed. "Harder then," he rasped, jerking his hips as Mav thrust into him. "Thought you were gonna fuck me, Mav. Do it right."

Mav had no words for a reply. Instead, he used his body to answer his lover's challenge. With a snarl, he pulled out again and pushed forward, ramming his shaft into Duke's body, filling him hard, pounding into the man he loved. A wordless shout was his reward. Duke gripped handfuls of the cover on either side of him and pressed up to meet him, giving himself completely, opening himself so Mav could fuck him as hard and as long as he wanted to. As he needed to.

*God, feels incredible! So hot, so tight!* Mav felt like the top of his head might explode. He'd never made love like this. Never felt so free to let go and give in to his own emotions, his own needs. But something told him that Duke could take it. He was no frail, waifish girl that had to be handled with care. The body under Mav's was as muscular and strong as his own. Duke could take all his pent-up emotions, his lust, his desperation to come deep and hard. More than that, he *wanted* to take them. Mav could tell by the way he bucked his hips, daring Mav wordlessly to fuck him harder, to take him higher. It was like they were fighting toward orgasm and the trip was made a hundred times better because they were together.

Mav felt the pressure building in his balls and knew he couldn't hold out much longer. It simply felt too good—the tight grip of Duke's body around his shaft along with the knowledge that it was his best friend that he was fucking was too much. He fisted Duke's now completely hard and throbbing shaft faster, wanting to take his lover with him when he went over the edge.

"Duke," he gasped. "Gonna...can't hold out. Have to..."

"Me too. God, Mav. Do it. *Fill me up.*"

It was like Duke's words snapped something inside him. Mav groaned as the orgasm took him, building in a rush from the base of his balls and erupting from the tip of his cock. As he came, he felt Duke's shaft pulse in his fist and the warm wetness of Duke's come on his fingers.

"Yes!" he moaned in Duke's ear. "God, yes. Come with me, Duke. Want you to. Love you so much..."

"Love you too." But Duke's voice was low and strained and when Mav looked in his lover's eyes, he saw pain as deep and wide as the ocean haunting his lover's face.

"Duke, man, what is it?" he murmured, coming down from his high with a thump. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, I just..." Duke shook his head and pushed at Mav's chest.

Mav took the silent hint and pulled back, withdrawing reluctantly from his friend's body. "Is everything okay?" he asked when they were lying side by side in the bed.

"Fine." Duke nodded stiffly. "I just...I have to go."

"Go? Wait a minute. What are you talking about? You can't go yet. We just—"

"I know what we just did and we shouldn't have done it. That's why I have to go." Duke was already up and struggling into his clothes. Mav watched him with concern. What was wrong with his friend? Why hadn't the incredible sex they'd just had made everything better?

"Where are you going?" he demanded, as Duke pulled his shirt over his head and buttoned his shorts.

"I dunno." Duke shrugged dejectedly. "Back to Evan and Ethan's place I guess. I just...I need to go now. Okay?"

"Okay, I guess." Mav sat up and reached for his own shirt now. It occurred to him that Duke wasn't just talking about leaving just for the night. He was about to walk out of Mav's life forever if Mav didn't do something. *He still doesn't believe me. He thinks I only said what I said because we were in the middle of fucking.* How could he make his best friend and lover believe him? How could he make him understand that Mav wanted to be with him forever? "Duke, wait." He reached up and grabbed Duke's hand but Duke shook him off.

"I really need to go, Mav. This is already messing with my head. I hope...hope you have a great time in Tallahassee." Duke's voice nearly broke on the last word and Mav felt his heart thump painfully in his chest.

"Duke, please. I meant what I said."

"When?" Duke's eyes flashed. "When you were saying you loved me just now or a week ago when you told Enslow that what we did didn't mean anything to you?"

"Duke, man..." Mav was out of words. He'd hurt Duke too badly, he realized with a sick feeling in his stomach. There was no way Duke was going to believe he really wanted them to be together unless he could take away that pain and make him see that Mav was for real. But how could he do that? Suddenly he had an idea. "Duke," he said, standing and reaching for his jeans. "Look, at least tell me you'll be at the end-of-the-year team party tonight. At least promise me that."

Duke looked surprised. "You're going to that? I figured you'd avoid it like the plague after Enslow found out about the pictures. I had them taken down, by the way."

"I know," Mav said quietly. "Evan told me. You didn't have to do that, you know. Where did you get the money to do it?"

"I borrowed some here and there." Duke shrugged. "I didn't want you to have to deal with it—the whole having-our-pictures-on-a-gay-website thing. Thought it would be better to just try and forget it ever happened." He frowned at Mav. "But you know there's no way Enslow has forgotten. You go to that party tonight and he's gonna light into you for sure."

"Yeah, I know," Mav murmured. "But I don't care. The only thing that matters to me is that you come with me. Will you?"

Duke sighed. "Well, yeah, if you really want me to. I guess it would be a shame to pass on our last end-of-the-year team party, especially since I'm the captain and you're the goalie."

Mav grinned. “True. How can we brag to the lowerclassmen about our amazing victory if we’re not there?”

“As long as you’re prepared to talk about more than the championship.” Duke looked at him seriously. “I really can’t take another scene like that one in the drugstore the other night with Enslow though, Mav. I’m not ashamed of what we did even if you are.”

“I’m sorry about that.” Mav shook his head. “More sorry than I can say, Duke. But just...promise you’ll come with me tonight and I’ll try to make it up to you.”

“Okay.” Duke nodded. “Let me go grab a shower and I’ll meet you back here at eight. Then we can go together. Is that good?”

“More than good.” Mav had the urge to pull him close and kiss him again but he had a feeling that Duke wasn’t up for that right now. If he wanted to kiss his best friend and lover again he would have to earn the privilege by healing the hurt he’d caused Duke. He just hoped he was up to the task.

## Chapter Seven

“Okay, you ready to do this?” Mav looked at his friend, watching Duke carefully to see what kind of mood he was in. Ever since leaving campus Duke had been quiet and withdrawn, making Mav worry that he would change his mind about going to the party at the last second.

“Yeah, I guess.” Duke sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Might as well get it over with.”

“Get it over with? What are you talking about? We’re gonna have a blast. Why else would they pick the Bull Pen to host it? You know what a wild place this is.” Mav gestured to the college sports bar they were standing outside of. Strings of chili pepper lights in green and gold, the official USF colors, crisscrossed the ceiling and from the sounds floating out into the warm Florida night, the party was already well underway.

“Yeah, it’s wild all right.” Duke sounded completely unenthusiastic. “And it’s gonna get a whole lot wilder once Enslow tells the rest of the team what he saw on the Str8te Boys site—if he hasn’t already.”

“Aw, most of the guys on the team know Enslow’s full of it,” Mav said with more bravado than he felt. “Don’t sweat it, man. Let’s just go try to have fun on our last night.”

“Sure. Right.” Duke nodded but he looked like he was going to a funeral, not a party.

Mav frowned. “Hey, do you mind telling me what’s wrong? The Duke I know loves this kind of thing—or was that just part of your ‘straight guy’ act?”

Duke scowled at him. “That wasn’t all an act, Mav. I like to party. I just don’t like getting shitfaced constantly.”

“Oh yeah, then why do you do it all the time?” Mav demanded. “You can pound half a keg in no time flat—I’ve seen you do it.”

“I’m always drunk at parties so I can stop thinking about you hitting on whatever girl you’re with, okay?” Duke yelled. “It drives me crazy, thinkin’ about you with somebody else. Kissing somebody else. Fucking somebody else. Damn it...” He glared at Mav. “Why are you even here with me at all? You shoulda brought a date—some hot little blonde bimbo to prove you weren’t the least bit gay no matter what Enslow decides to say when he shoots off his mouth.”

“I did bring a date.” Mav grabbed his hand and entwined their fingers firmly. “You. Now are you coming or not?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Duke looked down at their entwined fingers doubtfully. “I mean, there’s no way we’re really gonna walk into the Bull Pen like this.”

“Sure as hell are.” Mav lifted his chin. “If this is the only way to prove to you that I’m serious about us, to prove I meant what I said while we were...making love, then this is what I’m going to do.”

“Mav...” Duke looked at him seriously. “You don’t have to. Really, you don’t.”

“But I want to. Come on.” Mav squared his shoulders and pulled his best friend and lover into the noisy sports bar.

Inside it was packed with USF students doing shooters and eating the twenty-cent hot wings that were the usual Friday night special. Something loud was blaring from the speakers and flat screen televisions covered every square inch of the walls, broadcasting different sporting events. It wasn’t hard to find the rest of the USF men’s soccer team—they were sitting under a particularly huge flat screen that was replaying the championship they’d won earlier that season.

“Woo-hoo! Here they are, guys—our fearless leaders!” The voice belonged to Mugsy, a junior who was going to be the team’s goalie the next year.

“Hey, Mugsy. Hi, guys.” Mav raised his voice over the noise of the bar as he towed Duke forward. He was wondering what the other guys on the team would say when they saw him and Duke holding hands, but most of them appeared to be too distracted watching the championship game to notice.

“Hey, Mav, Duke. Sit anywhere you can find a seat.” Mugsy either didn’t notice their linked hands or was too drunk to put two and two together. He gestured at the three scarred wooden tables that had been pushed together and then went back to his own seat, weaving a little as he walked.

Mav checked out the seating arrangements and saw only two empty chairs together—right beside Enslow. He had a sudden flash of Enslow saying, *No wonder Duke tried to kick my ass when I took a swing at those two little faggot friends of his—“the two gay Es”. It’s because you guys are just like them.* If they wanted to avoid a confrontation, this was probably the worst place they could sit. Mav lifted his chin, *Well maybe I don’t want to avoid a confrontation.* He started forward to the two chairs only to feel a jerk on his hand.

“Mav, don’t.” Duke was frowning and shaking his head, casting meaningful looks at Enslow’s narrow back.

“Why not?” Mav demanded.

“You know why not. Come on, let’s just leave.” Duke was almost pleading now.

“Why the hell would we leave? The party just started.” Mav frowned at him. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were ashamed of us.”

“Oh, that’s rich coming from you, man. And since when are we ‘us’?” Duke hissed.

“Since I fucked your brains out two hours ago!” Mav didn’t really mean to yell but his voice came out louder than he’d intended. A *lot* louder.

There was a sudden dead silence in the area all around the soccer team. Heads turned to look in their direction and the championship game babbled on with no one paying any attention to it. Mav saw himself

block a goal from the opposite team on the flat screen TV in front of the wooden tables. On screen, the crowd went wild, shouting and waving huge foam fingers that were green with gold lettering. But no one was shouting here and now. Mav realized the entire team was staring at him and Duke as though looking for some kind of an explanation. Puzzled glances were being thrown at their linked hands and Enslow was nudging the guy next to him, apparently saying something along the lines of “I told you so.”

“Hey, man. What’s going on?” Mugsy mumbled. “Am I seein’ what I think I’m seein’?” He focused owlishly on their hands. “It looks like you two are holdin’ hands.”

“We *are* holding hands. We—Duke and I—are together.” Mav held up their linked hands as proof.

“Dude, wait a minute.” Gordon, the team’s striker, stared at them. “Did you just say what I thought you said?”

“If what you thought he said is that he and Duke are gay faggot fuck buddies, then, yeah, you heard him right.” Enslow stood and pointed at Mav and Duke. “I told you guys. Nobody would listen to me but I told you—those two are a hell of a lot more than roommates.”

“So what if we are?” Mav dropped Duke’s hand and stepped forward aggressively. “You have a problem with that, Enslow? Does anybody have a problem with that?” he asked, raising his voice and looking around at the faces of their other teammates.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence in which nobody said anything at all, not even Enslow. Then Duke was tugging at his arm, pulling him away from the rest of the team.

“Mav,” he murmured. “Don’t do this. Don’t push it—you’re just makin’ everyone feel weird.”

“So?” Mav looked back at the team, some of whom were still staring at him and Duke and some of whom were concentrating a little too hard on the game still playing on the flat screen in front of them. “I don’t care who knows. I’ll tell anybody we’re together as long as it convinces you to stay with me.”

“Will you tell your parents? The people you meet in pharmacy school in Tallahassee?” Duke asked in a low voice, searching Mav’s eyes with his own. “Because those are the people that matter. These guys are great but we’re leaving tomorrow and we’ll probably never see most of them again. It’s the future that matters, Mav. Not the past.”

Mav stared at him. “We. You said we. *We’re* leaving tomorrow. Does that mean...?”

“Yeah.” Duke grinned at him. “I’m comin’ with you to Tallahassee. Can’t lose the deposit I put down on that great apartment—especially considering what we had to do to make rent after I spent it.”

Mav had no words. His friend, his lover, the person that mattered most in the world to him was going to be part of his life forever. Duke wasn’t going to walk away—Mav wasn’t going to lose him. A stone that had been sitting on his chest rolled away and his heart felt like it was going to burst.

Suddenly, he didn’t care that they were in public or that the rest of the team was watching. He grabbed Duke and pulled him in close for a passionate kiss. “Love you,” he murmured in his lover’s ear when they came up for air. “Love you so damn much, Duke.”



“Love you too, Mav. I have since the minute I saw you.” Duke was grinning from ear to ear and Mav knew he had finally done something right.

“Hey you two, get a room or something.” The voice belonged to Patel, one of the team’s best midfielders and it startled Mav into remembering they were still in public. He pulled away from Duke a little, though he kept his arm around his lover’s waist, and turned to face his teammates.

“We are getting a room—an apartment anyway. In Tallahassee, together,” Duke said, still grinning.

“Now *there’s* a big surprise,” Enslow muttered. “See, I told you guys they were fags.”

“So what if they are?” Patel shrugged. “You’re an asshole, Enslow. Everybody knows you’re just jealous because Duke got made team captain instead of you.”

There were murmurs of agreement and Mav was amazed to see that most of the team seemed to want to ignore or downplay what had just happened between him and Duke. He’d been prepared to cause a scene—maybe even one that ended in violence—when he let it be known that he and Duke were together. What he hadn’t expected was acceptance.

“So that’s it?” He looked around at his teammates, most of whom had gone back to the game and their beer and hot wings. “You guys don’t even care?”

“Look, Mav, what do you want us to say?” Gordon shrugged his bony shoulders. “It’s not like we didn’t already suspect you guys. I mean, you’ve been living together for four years, you have lots of gay friends, and you’re always all over each other. What were we supposed to think?”

“Uh...” Mav was at a loss for words but Enslow wasn’t.

“Fucking faggots. I’m outta here.” He got up and threw the rest of the team a dirty look as he left.

“Good riddance,” Patel muttered.

“Yeah, guy’s a downer, anyway. Hey, Mav, how ’bout you buy a round for the team seein’ as how you two are passing the torch tonight?” Mugsy grinned at him.

“Sure, I guess.” Mav sat, pulling Duke down beside him, and raised his hand at a passing waitress. “This one’s on me,” he said, giving Duke’s hand a squeeze. “Me and my boyfriend.”

Duke shook his head with a smile. “Hey, dude, don’t look at me. I’m broke after getting those pics pulled off the Internet.”

“Too bad.” Mav smiled back at him and dropped his voice to an intimate whisper. “I guess we’ll have to find a new way to earn money from now on. Because we can’t pose for Str8te Boys anymore.”

Duke frowned. “Why not? I thought you didn’t care who knew anymore?”

“I don’t.” Mav grinned at him. “But we’re not straight.”

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“Well, it’s been a month now in the new place. Whaddaya think, Mav? You like it?” Duke turned over in the big king-sized bed they’d bought to go in their single bedroom apartment to look at his lover.

“It’s great,” Mav said, really meaning it. It really was, too. All the amenities were wonderful and there was even a pool in the complex. Of course, they were never going to use the fireplace since they lived in Florida but it was nice to have one anyway. He turned over to face his lover and leaned forward to brush a kiss onto Duke’s lips. “You were right,” he whispered.

“About the apartment? I know.” Duke smiled smugly. “It’s fan-fuckin’-tabulous if I say so myself.”

“No, not just about the apartment. About everything. About us.” Mav cupped his cheek in one hand and stared into his lover’s eyes. “We belong together. And as a hell of a lot more than roommates.”

“Have to agree with you there, Mav.” Duke grinned and kissed him. “Damn, it’s good to be able to do that without playing a game of gay chicken first.”

“You and your fucking gay chicken.” Mav laughed. “You got me there, man. Both of us are so competitive we’ll do anything on a dare. Even fuck.”

“Mmm.” Duke kissed him again, more aggressively this time. “That sounds kinda like an invitation to me, Mav.”

“Maybe it is.” Mav scooted closer so that their bodies were pressed against each other. In the month they’d been together officially he’d done things with Duke he never would have believed possible. Including playing the catcher to his lover’s pitcher. It had been a strange experience but not a bad one, getting fucked. Duke had been really slow and gentle, taking it easy until Mav had begged him for more. “I want you,” he whispered roughly, caressing Duke’s cheek. “And I don’t care who’s on top—just want to be close to you.”

Duke sighed happily. “You know, there were times in the past four years when I almost gave up—thought I’d never hear you say that, Mav.”

“What? That I want to be close to you? Or that I want to make love to you?”

“Either one.” Duke smiled.

Mav smiled back and then got serious. “You know, sometimes I feel like we wasted all that time when we could have been together. I’m sorry you practically had to knock me over the head with a brick to get me to see what we could be to each other.”

“No, Mav, that’s okay. And it wasn’t wasted time. I’d never consider any time I spent with you wasted,” Duke murmured.

“Especially time doing *this*.” Mav grabbed him suddenly and rolled them both over so he was straddling his lover’s thighs. “So what do you say, roomie? Are you up for it?”

Duke’s brown eyes were half-lidded with lust. “I’m always up for you, Mav.” He pulled Mav down and kissed him again. As their lips met, Mav had time to reflect that he was one lucky sonofabitch—his

best friend was his lover and lifetime companion and he couldn't have been happier, not even if he was still one of the straight boys.

## About the Author

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*Choose your weapons.*

## ePistols at Dawn

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Jae-sun Fields is pissed. Someone has taken the seminal coming-out, coming-of-age novel *Doorways* and satirized it. He's determined to use his Internet skills and his job as a tabloid reporter to out the author as the fraud and no-talent hack he's sure she is.

Kelly Kendall likes his anonymity and, except for his houseboy, factotum and all-around slut, Will, he craves solitude. There's also that crippling case of OCD that makes it virtually impossible for him to leave the house. He's hidden his authorship of *Doorways* behind layers of secrets and several years' worth of lies—until he loses a bet.

Satirizing his own work, as far as he can see, is his own damned prerogative. Except now he has an online stalker, one who always seems several steps ahead of him in their online duel for information.

A chance meeting reveals more than hidden identities—it exposes a mutual magnetic attraction that can't be denied. And pushes the stakes that much higher, into a zone that could get way too personal...

*Warning: This book contains large Korean men; Will, the houseboy, factotum, and all-around slut; hot sexy manlove including oral sex, and serious ass play. (Jae's note to self: OCD + socks + mouth = BAD.)*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for ePistols at Dawn:*

Kelly stood looking at the clock tower. Jae broke the silence. "Originally, I thought maybe we could go to the observatory."

"Oh, that would be—"

"We don't have to." Jae took his hand. "I don't want you to feel like you have to, I don't know, gird your loins to come and see me. I don't want you to dread coming up here."

Kelly quirked a small smile that was genuine and dazzling and then whispered, "I think it far more likely I'm going to dread going home."

"Yeah?" Jae used his remote, but instead of entering the car Kelly leaned against the door and smiled up at him in invitation.

"You make me feel like a doll," Kelly said on a breath, his eyes on Jae's. For all Jae had been thinking about Kelly's eyes, he found things in them he hadn't noticed before, tiny gold and orange flecks inside the hazel irises and coal-colored rings around them. Long, dusky eyelashes caused smudgy shadows when they swept down, either to blink or to hide his thoughts. Kelly lowered them right then and a delicate flush stained his cheeks.

"Do I stand too close?" Jae asked. "Loom too much?"

“No.” Kelly swallowed, and his Adam’s apple bobbed. The first pleasant rush of arousal flooded Jae’s body. For once he didn’t want to act on it immediately. He didn’t want to shatter the delicacy of the moment.

“I can think of someplace to go. Someplace quiet.”

Kelly smiled. Jae could see what he thought. He thought Jae was suggesting someplace where they could act on what Jae was sure they both wanted.

“All right,” Kelly murmured with an expression that defined surrender. Jae opened the door for him and helped him in, sliding a hand down his arm and around to help him buckle up in a gesture that became an excuse for brushing touches on skin that rippled and got gooseflesh with anticipation. Kelly made the most of the opportunity to touch him back.

“I have just the place.” Jae closed the door and walked around the back of the car. While Jae drove, Kelly kneaded his shoulder. Jae had placed his coat in the back of the car. With only the thin fabric of a black T-shirt between his skin and Kelly’s fingertips, he felt the warmth of the man’s hand as it caressed him. He pulled into the parking lot of the Kyoto Grand Hotel, and to his surprise, Kelly asked no questions, just allowed himself to be led.

It was as if Kelly didn’t look at anything but him. That unnerving and frank gaze was serene as he waited for Jae to tell him—to show him—what was going to happen. There was a waiting stillness in him that Jae was willing to attribute to wisdom, to age, to tranquility, to fear. To anything, really, but indifference. When Jae put his hand on the small of Kelly’s back and led him from the elevator out into the garden, he felt the heat coming off Kelly in waves. *Not indifference then, far from it. Submission.*

Jae had a moment’s regret that he hadn’t taken Kelly straight home to his apartment.

“Wow,” Kelly breathed.

“Yeah.” Jae began down a path rich with mounds of blooming pink azaleas and sprays of ornamental grasses, dotted by bonsai trees. They walked slowly, savoring the scents of late summer flowers and soil and water, which fell in sheets from a waterfall and collected in placid pools.

“Oh, good, *good* place.” Kelly seemed to examine each and every plant and rock eagerly as he passed the large chunks of rosy-colored stone imported from Japan. Beds of sand had been meticulously combed into swirls and patterns, like south sea island tattoos, evocative representations of the ocean. “You could hardly believe anything like this existed if you were simply down on the street looking up.”

“I come here when I need to think.” Jae didn’t mention that he’d come here once or twice to think about *Windows*, and how to draw out the writer and expose what he’d thought was the woman who’d mishandled his sacred text.

“It’s wonderful.” Kelly let him lead the way. “I like to garden. At home, I have a kind of gazebo in the middle of mine, where I like to sit. I’ve found over the years that it’s important to me.”

“You garden?” Jae couldn’t equate the act of gardening with the seeming grab bag of phobias that manifested themselves in Kelly. “Isn’t that kind of...”

“Dirty? Messy?” Kelly laughed. “I had a friend growing up whose mother had a crippling case of OCD. She had to bleach anything, and I mean even my friend, before she could touch it. It was actually kind of sad. But for some inexplicable reason she used to eat at fast food restaurants whenever I went to visit.” Kelly shook his head. “It was as if whatever made her phobic about germs hadn’t quite presented itself logically and said, *here, germs are everywhere*. She would go for miles to avoid touching a child’s toy, but drove through a chain restaurant for lunch without giving it a second thought.”

“So what you’re saying is it makes no sense?”

“Yup.”

“How do you stand it?”

“The very fact that it makes no sense *is* how I stand it,” Kelly explained. “It’s like...being allergic to something, only you don’t know what it is...or maybe it changes every day. You go through all the motions, and you think, well, crap. Here we go again.”

“You’re very well adjusted for—”

Kelly barked a laugh. “For someone who is so obviously *not*.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Jae said, taking Kelly’s hand and leading him along the path beside the sand ocean.

“It’s all right. Sometimes I feel so old. I didn’t always have this, but it didn’t happen overnight. The panic attacks came on gradually, and at first...well. I don’t want to talk about that. I just got some help dealing with the physical manifestations and worked on trying not to avoid or anticipate the events.”

“That’s almost...heroic.” Jae stopped him. “I doubt if I could be that sanguine about it.”

Pain flickered briefly in Kelly’s eyes and Jae wondered if he’d accidentally said something wrong. It was there and gone so quickly he might have believed he’d imagined it if Kelly hadn’t tightened his grip on Jae’s hand.

“That’s the joke. Everything extraordinary that I’ve ever done has occurred entirely in my head.”

Jae touched the back of one of his fingers to Kelly’s cheek. “Surely not everything.”

“Well—” A loud cough from someone on the path nearby caused Kelly to begin moving again, and Jae was sorry Kelly never finished his thought. They spent the rest of the early afternoon sitting in the rooftop garden, and then they wandered over to the section of Little Tokyo where they explored the shops and found another Japanese garden next to a community center. They walked around that for a while. Kelly sat on a stone bench near a lotus pool. Jae joined him there, enjoying a lengthy companionable silence.

Eventually Jae’s stomach rumbled loudly and they both laughed.

“Hungry?” Kelly watched schools of tiny fish darting back and forth in the water.

“I am.” Jae sighed, getting up.



“What a spectacular place to spend time, thank you so very much.”

“It wasn’t the most exciting afternoon.” Jae took his hand again and began to lead him back the way they’d come. “I’ve been known to show a date a better time.”

“Different,” said Kelly. “But I doubt better.”

“Thank you.”

Kelly turned to him, looking up. He had to shade his eyes as the afternoon sun slanted over them. “Well. Not if you didn’t think so. It might have been less than exciting for you. I’ve been known to bore more outgoing people to death.”

“I don’t ever think I could find you boring. You take such interest in things. It’s fun to watch.”

Kelly smiled as Jae led him back to the car. In the dark and isolated cool of the parking garage, Jae pulled Kelly in and kissed him, smoothing down the crisp white fabric covering the smaller man’s torso. He didn’t stop until his hands cupped each of Kelly’s tight ass cheeks. He lifted Kelly up to his toes in an incendiary embrace, from which they eventually broke apart, dazed and panting.

“It’s official, I will *never* find you boring,” Jae stated shakily, taking Kelly’s hand. To his surprise, he felt a sharp tug of resistance. He turned. “What?”

“I don’t know.” Kelly glanced back the way they came.

“Problem?”

“Kind of.”

“Can you tell me?” Jae put his hand on Kelly’s shoulder, experiencing a protective surge somewhere in his chest, which felt tight and expansive all at once.

“I just...” Kelly’s eyes rose to meet his. “I wanted to freeze that. Get it right here.” He fisted the front of his shirt. “So I would never lose it.”

“Kelly...”

Kelly began moving toward the car again, catching Jae’s hand as he went. He shot Jae a smile over his shoulder that was at once sweet and sheepish. “I wanted to hang on to that a little longer, is all.”

*The road back to bestsellerdom can be deadly.*

## Somebody Killed His Editor

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### *Holmes & Moriarity, Book 1*

Thanks to an elderly spinster sleuth and her ingenious cat, Christopher Holmes has enjoyed a celebrated career as a bestselling mystery writer. Until now. Sales are down and his new editor is allergic to geriatric gumshoes.

On the advice of his agent, he reinvents his fortyish, frumpy, recently dumped self into the sleek, sexy image of a literary lion, and heads for a Northern California writers conference to try and resurrect his career. A career nearly as dead as the body he stumbles over in the woods.

In a weirdly déjà vu replay of one of his own novels, he finds himself stranded in an isolated lodge full of frightened women—and not a lawman in sight. Except for J.X. Moriarity, former cop and bestselling novelist. The man with whom he shared a one-night stand—okay, maybe three—long ago. The man who wants to arrest him for murder.

A ruthless, stalking killer, or a hot, handsome ex-lover. Which poses the greater danger? It's elementary, my dear Holmes!

*Warning: This book contains a washed-out bridge, an isolated hunting lodge, desperate writers, guilty secrets, a killer on the loose, and one very hot ex-cop who wants his former lover in handcuffs—for all the wrong reasons!*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Somebody Killed His Editor:*

Someone was howling—a thin, breathless cry that was, in fact, more breath than cry.

Me.

Far from splitting the night, my bleat barely carried three feet, so I had no trouble hearing my attacker's exasperated, "*What. The. Fuck?*"

I knew that voice.

I bit off the rest of my screech and sat up, wincing as pain shot up my spine. I was sitting in a puddle, ice-cold water soaking through my trousers. The last time I remembered being decked had been a playground rumble at Our Holy Mother. I'd been thirteen. My bounce had been better back then. Now I felt like I'd wrenched every muscle in my already worn-out body. And my back...I'd be lucky if I wasn't crippled for a month. I wiped the mud off my face.

"I am *so* going to sue your ass," I spluttered.

"Well, what the *hell* are you doing out here?" J.X. demanded.

No apology seemed forthcoming. Also, I couldn't help noticing, neither was help from the lodge. Were we too far away to be heard? Not a happy thought.

"What do you think I'm doing? I'm going to my cabin."

"Crawling on your hands and knees?"

"I wasn't *on* my hands and knees till you knocked me down."

"You sure as hell were skulking in the bushes."

"I heard something—you—and I was making sure it was safe."

He continued to stare down at me. I wished I could see his face. His motionless outline caused my scalp to prickle. Then he reached down a hand.

His hand was warm on my chilled one. Again I was aware of his wiry strength. He wasn't much taller than me, but he was in a hell of a lot better shape. He pulled me to my feet and dropped my hand.

"What are *you* doing out here?" I asked, uneasily rubbing the twinging small of my back.

"Grabbing a log for my fireplace." He reached past me and picked up a nice stout sawed-off limb. "It's going to be a cold night." He picked up another log. "Here's one for you."

"Thanks." I stepped out of range, trying not to be too obvious about it. Not that I didn't appreciate the gesture, but there was something unconvincing in his manner. What had he been looking for out here?

J.X. still held out the log. I took it gingerly.

"I'll see you to your cabin."

I followed him down the dirt path that cut across the open field toward the cabins. The sodden clouds had parted and a lackluster moon gilded everything in unnatural light. In the absence of the rain and wind, the stillness seemed uncanny.

Mostly to fill the uncomfortable silence between myself and J.X., I said, "There's something eerie about the stillness."

"It's the eye of the storm."

"You mean there's more rain on the way?"

"Oh yeah. We're a couple of hours away from another downpour."

"Great."

"Which is your cabin?"

"That one—with the lights on."

He said sharply, "Did you leave the light on?"

"Yes." I cast a quick glance at his silvered profile. "Why? You don't really think I'm in any danger, do you?"

"No."

"You could try to sound a little more convincing."

What he sounded was irritable. “You had to go around telling everyone Peaches had been murdered, didn’t you?”

“That’s it.” I stopped walking. The glassware rattled to a halt with me. “We need to have this out here and now.” I was talking to his back. “*Hey.*”

He kept walking. I had to trot to catch up—which irritated me further.

“Listen,” I said, “I did not tell anyone *anything*. Peaches was everybody’s candidate for unnatural selection. From the minute I said I found her in the woods, people were speculating about how she died.”

“And you encouraged their speculation.”

“I didn’t. I didn’t say anything one way or the other. I didn’t *know* anything one way or the other. I still don’t.”

J.X. stopped walking. His voice was low. “We both know she was killed.”

I swallowed hard. “Are you sure?”

He nodded.

“Did you tell the sheriffs?”

“Yep.”

He started walking again. After a few seconds of thought, I tagged after.

As we reached my cabin, he asked, “You want me to take a look inside?”

I hesitated. If he was a homicidal maniac, this was his big chance. No one had seen us walk out here together. Certainly no one had responded to my shouts.

On the other hand, what if the homicidal maniac was hiding under my bed? I didn’t feel up to dealing with it on my own.

I unlocked the door and pushed it open. The first sight to meet our gaze was my brand-new silk jockstrap lying on the floor next to the bed. Scarlet silk. I mean...

“I had no idea,” J.X. murmured.

“You still don’t.”

He laughed and I was abruptly reminded that this was not the first time he had been in my bedroom. I remembered some other things too—things I’d thought I’d forgotten: the smoky, sweet taste of his mouth, his husky laugh, his strength—and his gentleness. You don’t expect gentleness from a twenty-five-year-old macho cop, but he had been...tender. Energetic, but tender.

I had handed him the drinks tray while I unlocked the door, now I watched him set the tray of gin and tonic water on the table by the wall. I opened my mouth to ask if he was married—but there is no way to ask that it doesn’t sound like you have a personal stake in the answer. It’s like asking a man if he’s gay—which would have been my second question.

And while I had no personal interest in J.X. Moriarity, hearing him confirm tonight that he was straight would have felt like the very last straw.

So I watched him open the closet and push my few clothes aside. He stepped into the bathroom and shoved the shower curtain back.

I squatted down and looked under the bed. "All clear."

His expression told me that I was not taking this seriously enough.

He examined the window casings while I went to rinse my muddy glass out in the bathroom.

I sat on the bed and unscrewed the bottlecap. "Would you like a nightcap? I think there's a plastic cup in the bathroom. Or you can use the coffee pot to drink from."

He studied me.

"Look, Kit, I realize it's none of my business, but go easy on that stuff. You need to keep your wits about you."

"I'm never wittier than when I've had a few drinks," I informed him in my best Elsa Lancaster imitation. Not that he would have a clue who Elsa Lancaster was, she was well before his time. Well before mine, too, now that I thought about it, but the evening had aged me.

J.X. sighed. "I know you've had a rough day. But this is for real. If someone really wanted into this cabin, it wouldn't be hard to get inside."

"I'll sleep with one eye open."

"Better yet, sleep with that chair propped beneath the door handle."

Great minds.

"Okay." I held up the bottle. "Sure you won't have one for the road?"

He shook his head. "I need to sleep. I'm dead."

"Unfortunate choice of words." I poured gin in the glass. Studied the still bubbly tonic water. That bottle needed to be opened in the bathroom over the sink to minimize loss of vital fluids. "Sleep tight. Don't let the bed bugs bite."

J.X. opened the cabin door. He hesitated. "Steven can be a real asshole."

"There it is again, the keen eye of the master detective."

His mouth tightened. "Don't forget to lock this door."

I rose, went to the door. He stepped out and I closed the door, sliding the bolt home. I leaned against it and closed my eyes.

"What is the matter with you?" I whispered.

Then I nearly jumped out of my skin as someone banged on the door. I backed away and called, "Who is it?"

"Me." The muffled voice was male.

Heart thudding, I got out, "Me who?"

"Kit!"

I recognized the exasperation. I unbolted the door and opened it.

J.X., looking unexpectedly self-conscious, pointed to a few cabins down and said, “Look, if something does...happen. I’m right over there. Cabin six.”

“Within screaming distance,” I observed.

“Uh...yeah.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’ll try not to take advantage of the situation. I know you need your beauty rest.”

He gave a funny laugh, shook his head and turned away.

“J.X.?” I said.

He stopped. I fastened my hand on the damp collar of his leather jacket and drew him through the doorway and back into the cabin. With my free hand I gave the door a shove. It snicked shut. J.X. reached back and locked it.



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