



THE BEST PART

Love Has No Boundaries



PENNY WILDER

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

THE BEST PART

By Penny Wilder

Introduction

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

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

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

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

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Photo Description

A super-hot man is stripping in what appears to be a kitchen. He has an extremely fit and tanned body, with a ripped six-pack and muscular thighs. He has tattoos outlining his torso and across his lower abs that trail down his pelvis into his nicely-packed pink Emporio Armani bikini briefs. He is pulling a pale pink sweater over his head.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Who are you and what have you done with my best friend? You think you know a guy and then, wham, it seems like I know nothing at all.

My previously shy and somewhat geeky best friend seems to have been hiding a few things from me. For example, pink underwear—what the hell? And when did he acquire that ripped body and those tats? And why is he undressing in my kitchen? And why, oh why, am I even noticing his body and feeling the overwhelming desire to touch his skin and trace that intricate pattern with my tongue? He’s a guy! And my best friend! How did this happen and what else has he been hiding from me? I can’t breathe...

Sincerely,

Wendy

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: accounting, performing arts, assistant coach, friends to lovers, gay for you, men in suits, tattoos, musical theater

Word count: 12,474

Dedication

As of August 1, 2013, same sex couples will have the right to legally marry in my home state of Minnesota. This story is dedicated to the members of the Minnesota House and Senate who voted yes. Thank you for voting for equality. I hope it spreads.

Acknowledgement

Special Thanks: to Kevin Murphy and Dan Studney who wrote the song “Mary Jane/Mary Lane” for the movie version of *Reefer Madness*, and inspired my chapter titles for this piece.

THE BEST PART

By Penny Wilder

CHAPTER ONE

Like a diesel train

Ben Green was a twenty-four-year-old accountant. He liked structure and order. He organized his socks into their own little cubbies. At six foot five, he felt too tall at most public gatherings. He had an uncooperative mop of sandy brown hair that fell down in his hazel eyes, a hooknose, and pale skin. He owned five suits, and wore a different one to work every day. He was a runner and kept himself in pretty good shape. He was usually calm and collected, but right now, you'd never know it because his suit was disheveled, collar open, tie hanging loose, sleeves rolled up, and hair sticking up like a haystack. He couldn't breathe, which was why he was hiding in the bathroom.

“Ben?”

Ben blamed Soraya. It was completely her fault that he was hiding in the bathroom having an asthma attack, panic attack, whatever.

Ben's best friend, who at some point turned into Tattooed Sex God, also known as Manny, was in Ben's kitchen, naked. No, almost naked. He was wearing bright pink underwear. And Ben hadn't been able to look away.

Pink. Hot P-I-N-K Emporio Armani sexy little bikini briefs. The briefs were tiny, by Ben's underwear standards, though in the few seconds that Ben gaped at them, he noticed that what was under them was by no means tiny.

Manny was borrowing some old tux of Jonathan's for a gig next weekend, and when Soraya dropped it off, he left her in the living room and snuck into the kitchen to try it on. Ben had just arrived home from work and happened to walk in from the garage just as Manny was getting naked. In his kitchen.

Manny gave him a muffled “Hey Ben” just as Ben turned the corner and practically bumped into Manny's pink underwear butt. Unprepared for this

scene, Ben started, and stared. Manny turned around as he was wrestling with pulling his sweater over his head, all the while giving Ben some kind of muffled explanation about borrowing Jonathan's tux. Ben gaped at his friend. Manny, in his head, was still a short skinny fourteen-year-old with acne and no muscle definition. Actual Manny, with his spiky black hair, wide brown eyes, olive skin, and muscled body had been distracting Ben for the past week. Seeing Manny in his underwear pretty much clinched the fact that he was attracted to his friend.

When Ben realized he was staring, he bolted. He ran out of the room while Manny was still pulling his sweater over his head. He ran because the minute he glimpsed those bright pink briefs and the ripped six-pack covered in tattoos, all the blood in his body rushed south. Ben was also pretty sure that he had gasped.

"Ben?" There was tapping on the bathroom door. "You okay? You've been in there awhile." Ben thought he had managed to pull himself together until he heard Manny's voice call out to him a second time. He stood up, but didn't move to open the door.

"Ben, hurry up you have to come see Manny in the tux. He looks fantastic!" Soraya called from the living room.

Ben rolled his eyes, and took a deep breath. He could do this. "Okay!" he hollered at Soraya. To Manny, he managed to say, "I'm fine, I'll be out in a minute." To his own ears, his voice sounded rough, and tense, but it was the closest to normal that he could manage at the moment.

"Sure." Ben heard Manny back off, and then he could hear their voices coming from the living room. He sank back down on the closed toilet in a daze.

Before last week, the last time Ben saw Manny was when they were fourteen. Before that they were inseparable. Fast friends since kindergarten, they'd sat next to each other on the bus on their first day of school, and that had been that. They'd only lived a few blocks away from each other, so Ben would hop off the school bus at Manny's stop, and the two of them would play

together till it was time for Ben to head home for dinner, or not, if he could manage it. Behind Manny's house was a small forest and a marshy pond, which provided hours of entertainment for two kids.

They went on like that, all the way to the beginning of their freshman year of high school. Until Manny's father, Sal Velazquez, had to transfer to Virginia to keep his job. After that, Manny and Ben did their best to keep in touch, mostly through e-mail, but for Ben, it wasn't the same. They grew up and grew apart, but, they both remembered how it used to be, which is why when Manny e-mailed to say that he'd accepted a position as the Gopher's new assistant football some-such-or-other coach, Ben offered him a place to crash without hesitation. After a week of putting Manny up and hanging out, Ben knew he was attracted to his old friend, and walking in on a half-dressed Manny in the kitchen had pretty much confirmed that. He hadn't had much luck with dating, but he'd never been with a guy. Until now, he'd never wanted to be. Why of all people did it have to be Manny, and what was he going to do?

A week ago, reuniting with Manny for the first time in ten years had been great, but not entirely uneventful. First, Manny's flight was late. Ben had been sitting on the bench near baggage claim four at MSP for almost an hour and a half when he finally got a text from Manny saying that the plane was at the gate, and he was just waiting to deplane. Ben shoved the file he'd been working on back into his laptop bag, and tossed his coffee cup in a nearby can. He sat back down, phone in hand. He figured he could get through at least a couple e-mails for work before Manny made it to baggage claim.

Fifteen minutes later, a crowd had gathered near baggage claim four. All of a sudden, someone in a pair of worn flip-flops and ragged jeans walked up and stood right in front of him. Ben wondered for a second what crazy asshole was wearing flip-flops in Minnesota in December. Then Ben looked up into familiar warm brown eyes, and grinned.

"Ben."

“Manny.” Ben stood up, and quickly realized that even now, he was the tall skinny one. Manny was still shorter than Ben by several inches, just as he’d been at fourteen, but the skinny geek with the glasses and the shaggy black hair that filled many of Ben’s childhood memories was gone. In his place, with Manny’s eyes and Manny’s smile, was some built and burly gym rat with short black hair, and a guitar case slung over his shoulder. Ben had seen Manny’s transformation in photos, and the few times they had video chatted on Skype or messenger, but in person, after ten years, it was a trip.

“Jesus,” Manny said, sizing him up, “You’re huge.” Ben ducked his head down, as if somehow that would shrink his lanky six-foot-five frame, and held out his hand for Manny to shake. Manny took his offered hand but gave him a look, and used his grasp on Ben’s hand to pull Ben into a tight one-armed hug. Ben grunted, as Manny squeezed him hard.

“You’re one to talk, look at you!” Ben smirked when Manny let go and stepped back. Manny looked great. Really great. Ben smiled. This was going to be just like old times.

“So... bags and stuff?” said Manny, gesturing behind him to the baggage claim.

Ben grabbed a luggage cart from the cart dispenser, and between them they wrestled Manny’s three bags and a box onto the cart. Manny said there was just one more bag, and then they were golden. They waited and waited, but it never came.

By the time Manny had filed a lost baggage claim, it was well past dinnertime and both men were starving. Of course the lost bag just happened to be the one holding Manny’s winter coat and boots, so Manny had to dig through his bags for a couple of layers and some shoes and socks before he could brave the December freeze that waited for them outside the door. Ben lent him his hat, scarf, and gloves, but even with taking the skyway to the parking ramp and a mad dash to Ben’s car, Manny was shaking, and his teeth were chattering.

“Sonofabitchpileofmonkeynuts!” Manny said as he shut the door to Ben’s car. “I forgot how freaking cold it gets here.”

“Wuss,” Ben teased, “It’s not even below zero today, just wait.” Manny groaned and shivered in response. Ben turned the heat up as high as it could go, grateful that his car would only take a few minutes to warm up. “So... do you want to grab something to eat?”

“Please. Anywhere, as long as it’s fast.”

“Well, I was thinking, there’s a 5-8 Club on the way to my place...”

“Oh man, I haven’t had a Lucy in ten years.” Manny paused. “Normally, I would tell you no, because as a trainer, that type of food is not on my nutrition plan. But...” He grinned. “Since I’m not actually back in charge of training anyone for another month, and I haven’t seen you in ten years, I am going to make an exception. Just this once.”

“Juicy Lucys” were, in Ben’s opinion, quite possibly the most delicious food on the planet. If you ate beef, anyway. Two burger patties pressed together and stuffed with American cheese on a bun along with fries, plus deep fried pickle chips with ranch dressing, and a Summit EPA to drink. What could be better?

They didn’t talk much until the food was devoured. They lingered over their beers, and made small talk about Manny’s new job. Ben felt on edge and he didn’t know why. Part of it was that they hadn’t seen each other in ten years, but there was something else.

“I get paid to whoop their asses. Drills, strength training, endurance. I get to tailor each of their workouts. Plus I’m officially an assistant coach, which is way better pay and title than I had at UVA.” Manny had only been a trainer assisting the Cavaliers with weight training during football season, and supplementing his income by working in the school fitness center the rest of the year. Assistant football strength and conditioning coach was perfect for Manny. Ben would never remember the title, but it would give Ben a perfect excuse to go to Gopher games again.

“It sounds great. I’m happy for you.” Ben really was, but there was a little twist of envy inside his chest as he said the words.

“So what about you? How are things in the world of Shtup, McCrappen, and Fishfingers?”

Ben snorted. He schooled his face to give his standard, *I’m fine and everything’s great* reply. Life as an accountant at Schulman, McCashin, & Frederickson was mind-numbingly dull, and Ben was starting to dread going to work every day. He looked down at his food basket and pushed his one remaining French fry around in the ketchup. He opened his mouth to respond, but Manny caught the pinched look on his face.

“Fuck, you hate it, don’t you?”

Ben blinked. He did hate it. He just hadn’t told anyone. He adopted this blank stoic face while at work, and when anyone talked to him about work. No reaction, no emotion. Bottled and buried. He knew for a fact that his stress level was through the roof, and he’d been sleeping like crap for the past year, which had to show, but if anyone had noticed, they hadn’t said anything.

“It’s awful,” he admitted. “I’m good at it, and the pay is great,” he paused for emphasis, “but it *sucks*.”

“What are you going to do?”

Ben shrugged. He really didn’t know what he was going to do in the long run, other than not stay there. “For now? Keep going, I guess.”

Manny rolled his eyes. “Ben. You double-majored, accounting and music, right?”

“I... Um, yeah. Yes. Music. I focused on vocal pedagogy and performance. But I had to take a job that paid well. My mom needed help with Ronnie’s tuition. I knew after my dad passed that there was no way I was going to get to use that degree. I just finished it because I was less than a year from graduation.” Ben didn’t want to talk about music. He hadn’t performed since he’d graduated, and that was that. His father had been in a coma for nearly two months after suffering from a cerebral hemorrhage that left him in a permanent

vegetative state. He'd simply stood up from the breakfast table one morning, and collapsed. They had held out hope for two months that he might wake up, but when test after test showed no improvement, Ben and his mother and Ben's baby sister, Ronnie, all knew he was never coming back to them. They decided to take him off of the machines after that. Manny had called Ben a lot during those months, and Ben would never forget that.

"How long before Ronnie's finished?"

"Two and a half years." In Ben's mind, it felt like an eternity.

"You still working with Soraya after hours? Any chance that might become full time?" Ben had written to Manny about Soraya shanghaiing him into helping with her books for her first professional show in Minneapolis, before Ben was even finished with school. It was a huge learning experience for Ben. His experience with Soraya had helped him land his job at the firm.

"Yes, and no, at least not right now. She's been able to scrape together enough investors to do one show a year, and this is the first year she's actually paying me for my time. She couldn't even afford that before." There was no way that Soraya's production company, S & J Productions, LLC could possibly afford a full-time bookkeeper and accountant. Not when she could barely pay herself anything anyway. "S & J made money on their last three shows, which is great, but Soraya's just beginning to build a reputation here. I swear, every show we do in this town, it's been like pulling teeth to get any recognition from the theater community. They look at Soraya, and they see a kid. I know she's twenty-seven and married, but she's tiny, and she looks like she's about sixteen. No matter what she does, some people have a hard time taking her seriously as a producer and director."

"So what show is she doing now?"

Ben grinned. "*Reefer Madness*. We've got about a week and a half left before previews, and then the official opening night is the following Friday. The cast is great." He launched into a rundown of the show and all of the work that they had been doing. Ben could tell that Manny was doing his best to look interested, but Ben knew that this had never been his thing. "Just a warning

too,” he said to Manny, “if I know Soraya, she’s already got plans to drag you to rehearsal and beg you to work concessions.”

“Hey, you’re putting me up, and I don’t start at the U until the end of J-term, so if you want to put me to work, I’m game.”

“Seriously?”

Manny nodded.

“I don’t know if we should tell Soraya that, you’ll end up as her slave for the next month. But thanks, I’ll keep it in mind for when I’m going crazy.”

“Sure. I could just be your slave.” Manny wagged his eyebrows suggestively, and Ben choked on his beer. He coughed.

“Don’t say things like that when I’m drinking, dude!” Ben chuckled, “You’re only allowed to offer indentured servitude to mess with me when it won’t waste good beer. That almost went up my nose! Gross!” He rubbed his nose for dramatic effect. Ben looked up and Manny had a strange look on his face. “What? What did I say?”

Manny shook his head. “Nothing. I just spaced out for a minute. I think I’m gonna crash pretty soon. You about ready to head out?” They both reached for the check, but Manny stopped him. “Ben, you’re putting me up until I find a place, the least I can do is feed you.”

So Manny paid.

When they were back in the car, Manny sat back and said, “That was fucking awesome, dude. Maybe once a year when I am on a break from training, we can come here again.”

Ben smiled. “So are you going to take a break from training in August for the State Fair? They have deep-fried bacon on a stick, and deep-fried Oreos. What about turkey legs at the Renaissance Festival?”

Manny laughed. “I’m going to stay far away from deep-fried anything, especially if it’s on a stick. Training camp is that month anyway, but maybe I can manage a turkey leg. At least that has protein. Plus, it’s the RenFest. Remember when you got sick on the Viking ship?”

Ben groaned. He'd been eleven, and thanks to the swinging ship, had puked lemon ice all over his and Manny's shoes. "Yes, I do, thank you so much for bringing it up. Anyway, bacon on a stick has protein too, you know."

"Coca-Cola? Bad. Doughnuts? Bad. Fried bacon on a stick? Really bad." Manny smiled.

"Whatever, you're missing out on awesomeness."

They were both quiet the rest of way back to Ben's place, a three-bedroom townhome with a big balcony overlooking a park area with picnic tables, a playground, and a small forest. The balcony was nice in the summertime, Ben pointed out, and Manny said he'd be sure to look again sometime, when there wasn't two feet of snow on it.

After the brief tour was over, and Manny's stuff was all loaded into the guest room, Ben left Manny alone to unpack.

Around midnight Ben heard the soft strumming of a guitar coming from the guest room, now Manny's room. Manny had gotten pretty good. He listened for a minute, and then tapped lightly at the door, before sticking his head in. What he saw made him wince. It looked like a tornado had hit Ben's guest room. Manny's bags had basically exploded all over the room, their contents covering every surface. There were piles everywhere, and Manny's shoes were lying in the middle of the floor, along with the clothes he'd had on earlier. Ben bit his lip and gripped the door handle to stop himself from tidying up the room, or at least moving the shoes out of the way so no one tripped on them.

"Oh hey," said Manny, as he glanced at the clock. "I didn't realize it was so late. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"Nah, just heading to bed now. I just wanted to say it's good to hear you play. It's been a while."

"Thanks." Manny smiled shyly. "Shoot, I really didn't look at the time. Will your neighbors mind?"

“I’m not sure how much they can hear, but this guy,” he pointed at the unit to the left of them, “had a party last weekend and blasted techno music till two in the morning, so I really don’t think he can complain. Quiet hours are supposed to be after ten, so if we follow that for the most part, it’ll be fine. You were playing pretty softly anyway. So, you know my friend Jonathan?”

Manny nodded.

“Well he’s Soraya’s husband and one of the partners at Schulman. He sometimes plays with this group of guys on the weekend for weddings and stuff. I know they sometimes need a good guitarist. I can put in a word for you if you want.”

“What type of stuff do they do?”

“Standards mostly, I think. Sinatra, swing, they’re pretty decent.”

“Do you ever sing with them?”

Ben made a face. “They’ve asked.” He hadn’t said yes though. He was afraid that it would make it harder to get up and go to work every morning, not easier.

“Well I don’t know how available I’ll be once the semester starts, but for now I’ve got the time, so sure. As long as he knows I can only do it every once in a while.”

“I’m sure he won’t mind, most of the other guys are lawyers who sometimes have to put in extra hours on cases, so I think they end up rotating anyway.” Ben pulled the door closed as he backed out of the room.

“Hey, Ben?”

“Yeah?” Ben poked his head back in to look at Manny.

“In case I forgot to say it before, thanks for putting me up. You didn’t have to, and means a lot to me that you did, so thank you. Goodnight, Ben.”

“Night, Manny.”

Manny looked insanely great in the tux. Of course he did. Ben plastered what he hoped was a convincing smile on his face. Manny modeled the tux, doing the full spin for Ben and Soraya.

“Doesn’t he look great, Ben?” gushed Soraya.

Ben shrugged, and avoided looking Manny in the eye by focusing on his bow tie instead. “Looks better on him than it did on Jon.”

“Ben Green, you take that back!”

“Nope. He’s way cuter too.” At that, Soraya tossed a throw pillow off the sofa at him. Ben ducked and it glanced off the side of his head. He stuck out his tongue at her. Soraya stuck out her tongue in return and turned back to Manny. Manny gave both of them that look that most adults reserve for naughty children.

“Thank you so much for helping Jonathan out next weekend. I know he really appreciates it, and the guys are looking forward to meeting you. Oooh also, Manny, you should come with Ben to rehearsal sometime this week.” Then Soraya was talking Manny’s ear off about marketing, costumes, choreography, and the grueling rehearsal schedule for tech week. Ben blocked most of it out. He sat on the couch, nodded when it was appropriate to nod, and smiled when they looked over at him. He thought he was doing pretty well until Soraya asked him a question that actually required a verbal response. He tore his eyes away from the slight stubble he’d been staring at on Manny’s jaw, embarrassed. She and Manny were both looking at him expectantly, and he had no clue what she had said.

“Um. Sorry, I missed the question?”

Soraya rolled her eyes. “I said tomorrow is the sing-through with the orchestra. Can you swing by after work, and keep Manny company?”

“Oh. Sure.”

Soraya’s phone rang, and she went in the hallway to answer it. Manny was still watching Ben. “Hey, you okay? You zoned out on us there.”

Ben met Manny's eyes. His poker face sucked. He really didn't know what was showing in his eyes right now, but he was pretty sure that Manny could at least see that he was upset. Manny looked worried. "Sorry, long day at work. I just need to go for a run and work off the day."

"You want some company?"

Ben was sure that watching Manny run would be, in no way, relaxing. "Nah, I'm good, I'll be back in a little bit. I'll um, probably just grab a protein shake for dinner, so you can go ahead and make something for yourself." Manny looked surprised and a little disappointed. For the last week, Manny had made Ben dinner, actual edible, not from a box, *dinner*, and they had sat in the kitchen and talked for hours. Ben didn't look at Manny as he stood up, and just as he did, Soraya came back in from the hallway.

"Gotta run boys, they need me for costume fittings. Manny, thanks again." Soraya grabbed her purse and headed for the door. "I'll see you boys tomorrow." She gave Ben a raised eyebrow before she turned to exit, as if to say that she knew something was going on with him. Ben knew that meant he should expect to be grilled the next time they talked in private.

"Bye!" he and Manny chorused.

When the door closed, Ben headed up the stairs to change his clothes, eager to have some distance between him and Manny. He needed to clear his head. He knew he was acting weird, rude almost, but he couldn't cope. In his room, he tore off his clothes, threw on his gear, then rushed back downstairs, and out to the garage. He was still shoving his arms into his coat sleeves as he hopped in his car and drove to the gym as fast as he could go.

Close to two hours later, Ben staggered back into the house, exhausted and covered in sweat. He hated showering at the gym because the showerheads were all too short, but it sucked in the winter. He hung up his coat, kicked off his shoes and staggered up the stairs. Manny's door was closed, and Ben could hear him playing his guitar. He shed his clothes in a trail as he made his way to the shower. He'd done four extra miles, and he felt shaky. He let the hot water

run over his body and closed his eyes, too tired to think about anything. He knew he couldn't actually run from how he was feeling, but the not-thinking for a little bit was awesome. Ben guzzled a shake, and passed out not long after. He was extremely grateful for that.

CHAPTER TWO

Resistance like hot Velveeta

Rehearsals at The WAREHOUSE were, hands down, the best part of Ben's day. The theater was part of a converted cereal factory, and walking into the performance space was like walking into a giant brick cave. The space was a big box, complete with a balcony and flexible seating. Something about the musty smell (brick dust?) in the space relaxed him. He took a deep breath and punched the code for the door as he let the day float away. The lobby was nothing to write home about, too small and plain, but Soraya always decorated it and made it work for them. To Ben, it felt like home.

When Ben opened the door to the theater itself, he was hit with a wall of sound. That was the other thing he loved about the space. The sound was epic. The space was dark, aside from the lights on the stage. The cast was arranged in metal folding chairs, set center stage in a giant U-shape, with the band set up in front of them downstage right. The WAREHOUSE didn't have a traditional pit, and in *Reefer*, they'd eventually be housed on a platform in the upstage right corner.

The cast was on their feet, halfway through singing "Mary Jane/Mary Lane", when Ben paused at the top of the stairs to take in the sound. It would be even better with the mics and speakers added to balance everything. He descended quietly, wincing slightly with every step. Thanks to his extra-long run yesterday, everything hurt. He rounded the corner on the top flight, and saw Manny sitting by himself in the balcony. Instantly he was a bundle of nerves, but he'd come to the realization last night that running away wasn't going to accomplish anything. He just figured he'd try to act normal, and hope that Manny didn't catch on. When Ben stepped onto the balcony landing, Manny saw him and waved him over. Ben carefully navigated the glow-taped rows and settled in next to Manny.

"Hey," he whispered.

"Hi," Manny whispered back.

“What time did you get here?”

“Around four thirty. I figured out the bus.” Manny grinned. They both settled back in their seats, and the singing continued. The crazy thing was that sitting next to him in the dark, Ben felt hyperaware of Manny now. His smell, their shoulders brushing occasionally when they shifted, the way their legs were millimeters away from touching. Ben, who was still in his suit from work, reached up to loosen his tie. When they were on “Little Mary Sunshine”, Manny leaned over to whisper in Ben’s ear, and Ben shivered as Manny’s breath tickled his ear. “They’re really good,” he said. Ben sucked in a breath and bit his lip. He had to stop himself from tilting his head toward Manny’s. Ben nodded, but he couldn’t bring himself to look over at Manny.

During the last chorus of the song, someone sitting in the audience yelled, “Hold.” It was Meghan, the stage manager. She looked at her phone, and then back at the cast. “Take ten minutes, people.” As she spoke, one of her minions, some skinny pigtailed intern whose name Ben had forgotten, ran over and switched on the house lights. Ben blinked as his eyes adjusted.

There was an echoing response from the people on stage of, “Thank you, ten minutes!” At least half the musicians and a few cast members headed outside for a cigarette break. Some of the cast waved to Ben on their way up the stairs. He smiled and waved back.

Ben turned to Manny and said, “Come on, let’s go say hi.” They made their way down to the stage floor towards Soraya. Ben saw several of the people they passed, both men and women, check out Manny, looking back over their shoulders as they walked offstage. Soraya, who was in the midst of an animated conversation with her music director, Jake, waved the two of them over.

“Hey boys,” said Soraya, “So, what do you think?” She opened her arms to give both of them hugs.

Ben squeezed her back and said, “It sounds good.” Manny nodded in agreement.

“So you’re saying Cam is overacting?” she said in jest, loud enough that Cam could hear her.

“I heard that! Don’t make me come over there on my break, bitch!” shouted Cam sarcastically as he ambled toward them. Cam was playing the Lecturer in the show. He was great for the role, talented, and good-looking. The problem, in Ben’s opinion, was that he knew it. He swatted Soraya playfully with his empty water bottle, and turned to Ben and Manny “Hey Green,” he said to Ben, as he looked Manny up and down. “Who’s your friend?” Cam actually batted his eyelashes at Manny, and stuck out his hand. Ben wanted to slap his hands away, but Manny was already grasping Cameron’s hand and smiling. Ben looked around for help, but Soraya was back talking with Jake.

“Cam, meet Manny, Manny, meet Cam.”

“Hi,” said Manny. “Nice to meet you.” Ben noticed the way Cameron’s handshake lasted a few seconds longer, and he gave Manny’s hand a little extra touch before he pulled his hands away. Ben watched Manny’s expression carefully for signs of disgust or disapproval, but it remained impassive.

“So, how do you know Ben?”

“We grew up together. I just moved back to the cities for a job, and this guy,” Manny gestured to Ben, “agreed to put up with me until I can find my own place.”

“Manny’s the new assistant coach for the Gophers,” said Ben.

“A jock?” Cam asked. Manny looked a little amused by the comment, but nodded. To Ben’s dismay, Cam actually knew quite a bit about the Gophers, as a U alum, and apparently still followed their games. They began an animated discussion, which Ben had absolutely nothing to contribute to. About a minute in, while Manny was discussing his plans for winter training, Ben felt a tug on his elbow. He turned to find Soraya looking up at him.

“Hey, can I steal you for a minute?” she asked. Ben looked from Cameron to Manny. He didn’t really want to leave Manny alone with Cam, and Cam was definitely hitting on Manny, which made Ben’s guts twist up. Short of

declaring his own attraction to Manny right then and there, there was nothing he could do. He nodded and followed Soraya backstage. They walked back to the prop tables, and Soraya adjusted a couple pieces on the table before turning to face him. “Can I ask you a question?”

Ben nodded.

“Did something happen with Manny?”

“I...” Ben had no idea how to answer that. “No. Nothing happened.” Soraya raised her right eyebrow and stared him down. Ben threw up his hands. “Well, I saw him. In my kitchen, and now I can’t stop thinking about him.”

“You saw Manny in your kitchen, and now you can’t stop thinking about him?”

Ben took a deep breath. “He was in his underwear,” he whispered. He could feel his face starting to heat up.

“So?”

“I um...” Ben floundered. He gave Soraya a *you know exactly what I am talking about* look.

“Oh. Oh my God, you like him!” Soraya beamed. Ben nodded, and blushed. Soraya actually jumped up and down and did a little dance. “Oh my God, Ben that is awesome. I am so excited for you.”

“How am I supposed to be normal around him? Ever since I saw him it’s all I can think about.”

“That good, huh?” Soraya waggled her eyebrows, but stopped her teasing when she saw how red Ben’s face was.

“I’ve never felt like this. About anyone. He’s a guy, and he was my best friend, but I hardly know him anymore. To see him, after ten years, and bam! Just like that. I don’t even know if he’s like that.”

“Gay?”

Ben nodded. He ran his hand through his hair and rubbed his face. “Or even *if* he is, who knows if he would even consider me as anything other than a friend?”

“I don’t know, but I am sure you will find out one way or the other. Sweetie, I’ve known you since college, and I’ve never seen you like this. I know that there probably isn’t much I can say to reassure you, but you are going to be just fine, and no matter what happens, Jonathan and I love you, and we’ll be there for you.”

Ben made a wry face. “How do you think Jonathan’s going to react to this?”

“What, this as in, you liking a boy?” Ben nodded, and Soraya laughed. “He’ll be fine with it. You know, we wondered if you might be gay or bi. You never really seemed that into anyone you were dating.”

Ben hadn’t been really, so there wasn’t much he could say about that. “What do I do?”

“You need to be a good friend, and it will all work out however it’s going to work out. If you need to tell him, tell him, but you need to be prepared for what might happen if you do.” Soraya paused, and looked down at the time on her phone. “I hate to say this, but we have to get back in there.”

CHAPTER THREE

Stirred up like beef chow mein

Ben worked on the ledger for *Reefer* for the rest of rehearsal. Both he and Manny sat in the main floor seating area, a few seats away from each other. Ben was focused on his work, and wasn't really paying attention to the sing-through. With about thirty minutes left in rehearsal, they stopped briefly because Keith, the actor playing the lead, had to leave to go do a radio interview to promote the show. Soraya instructed Jake to run through a solo number. As the keyboard began the intro to "Lonely Pew", she headed over to Ben. That was when Ben realized that he was being set up.

"Ben?" she said, tapping on top of the screen on his laptop.

"Don't touch my screen." He tried to sound grumpy.

"Ben. Keith had to leave. The cast hasn't had a chance to run 'Tell 'Em the Truth' yet with the pit." It *was* a setup. She was asking him, sneaky minx, in public, in front of Manny, where he couldn't say no without looking like a total jackass. "I was wondering, if you might be willing to sing Keith's part so the cast could run it?" Ben looked at her, trying to decide if it was worth it to argue at all. He looked over at Manny, who was watching the conversation and looked amused.

"Don't look at me. I sound like a tone-deaf Bob Dylan when I sing." Manny grinned.

"You knew he was leaving early," Ben accused.

Soraya nodded. "Of course. I hoped we'd get through everything, but we didn't. I know you know the songs..."

"You know them too."

"Benny, please?" She gave him her sad puppy look, which only worked because Ben knew she would keep making the face until he gave in.

Ben glared at her. He didn't answer, but shut down his laptop, and started to put his things away. As he finished, Maize, the girl playing Mary Lane, sang the last few notes of "Lonely Pew". He stood up and walked down onto the stage, then turned to look back at Soraya.

"One time."

"Fine. Everyone, can I have your attention for a moment? Ben has kindly agreed to sing Keith's part in 'Tell 'Em the Truth' so that we can run it. Thank you, Ben." Ben could see the glint in Soraya's eye. She was enjoying this far too much.

"Happy?" He growled, grabbing the binder Meghan held out to him.

"Fuck yes, I'm happy. Now all of you, sing it like you mean it! Jake? From the top, whenever you're ready." Soraya sat back in her chair, completely unperturbed. Which was just unfair, since she didn't have to stand up and sing on the fly in front of a bunch of professionals. Ben closed his eyes. He was too tall to actually play the role, but he knew the song. He listened as Jake gave a couple notes to the cast about crescendos, and stood with the cast as Jake counted them in and played the piano part.

He took his cue from the girl playing Mae, and let go. By the time he made it to the first chorus, he was enjoying the hell out of it. He knew that everyone was watching him because they were curious. Hell, some of them probably didn't even know he could sing in the first place. He listened to the cast and did his best to blend with them when he was supposed to. When they finished, several of the cast cheered and applauded him. He blushed and looked over to Manny where he sat in the front row. Manny's eyes were bright, and he clapped as he smiled back at Ben.

"Okay, great everyone. We have about fifteen minutes left. Jake, is there anything else you'd like to run before we stop for the night?"

"Yes, actually," Jake replied. "I'd like to run 'Mary Jane/Mary Lane' at least two more times. The ensemble and cameo lines were a little messy, and the band messed up two of the transitions. However, since we are down a Jimmy, Ben would you be willing to fill in again?"

Soraya looked at Ben. “Your call, hon. You agreed to one number. It’s up to you if you want to do more.”

Ben looked at Jake. “I guess if it’ll help, I can do it.”

Jake smiled, and nodded. “Okay then.”

Maize, stood up next to him as Jake gave the cast and band a few notes before they rehearsed the number. Ben was shifting his weight back and forth while he stared down at the music in the binder he was holding. Maize tapped him on the arm. “Hey, thank you,” she whispered. “I really wanted to work on this again, so thank you for filling in for Keith.”

“I feel a little weird,” Ben whispered back. “I’m too tall for Jimmy.”

Maize smiled. “You sound good, though. Just have fun.”

So he did. Their voices suited each other. By the time they got to Maize singing her first chorus, about halfway through the number, both he and Maize were feeding off of each other’s energy, their timing synced, and they nailed the belting. The second time through, Ben actually felt like he knew what he was doing. He’d forgotten how right he felt standing on the stage. When they finished, he closed the binder he was holding and handed it back to Megan. He felt a little dizzy.

“And that’s a wrap people! Great work, thank you everyone. Ben, thank you for filling in. What time is call tomorrow?”

“Call is at two for principles, and four for everyone else,” said Meghan.

“Thank you, Meghan! See you tomorrow everyone!” Soraya crossed the stage to Ben and stood with her hands on her hips, looking up at him. The house lights came on as the stage lights shut off. Everyone moved around them, packing up their gear and heading out. “Well?”

“Was that for them, or for me?”

“Both.”

Ben didn’t understand. “Why?”

“Them, because some of them needed a kick in their diva asses. They get lazy and forget that everyone who works here is fucking talented. You put them in their place.”

“And me?”

“Because you’ve forgotten how much you love it, and how goddamned good you are at it.”

“Jesus.”

“You’re welcome.” She leaned up on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. She reached into her bag. “Want to close up for me?” She dropped a massive chunk of keys into his hand. Theater, car, house, everything all hooked together.

“Won’t you need your keys to get home?”

“I’m just going over to The Loop to grab a drink with some of the cast. You can walk over when you’re done and give them back to me.”

“You’re the devil.”

“What? It’s a Friday night, and you could use some R and R. I’ll even buy you and Manny a drink as payment.”

Ben nodded. “Fine. You’re still seriously evil though.”

She paused to look over her shoulder as she started up the stairs. “Seriously awesome. You love me. Farewell darlings, see you in a few!”

After about two minutes, Ben and Manny were the only two people left in the theater. Manny was still sitting in the front row, where he’d been since the break. Ben came over to grab his bag off the seat next to Manny, and Manny reached out and grabbed his right wrist to stop him. “She’s right, you know,” he said, his eyes steady as he looked up at Ben.

The grip on his wrist didn’t hurt, but touching Manny was like having the breath knocked out of him. Or sticking a fork in an electrical socket. “I... you... about?”

“You are insanely goddamn good at it. Jesus, Ben.” Manny stood, but didn’t let go of Ben’s wrist. “You sing and it lights you up. I’ve known you half my life, and I don’t know if I’ve ever seen you so...”

“Shiny?” was Ben’s poor attempt at distracting Manny. He could feel his face flush, and his ears felt hot.

Manny smiled. “Happy,” he said softly. “Animated. You really love it, don’t you?” Ben returned Manny’s gaze and nodded. He didn’t trust himself to speak. Manny released his wrist, and stepped back. “If you love something, maybe you should find a way to do it more often, hmmm?”

“I...” They were right. Both of them. When he thought about singing, he missed it so much his chest hurt. “Maybe I should,” he conceded.

Manny grinned. “Come here, I’m proud of you,” he said, pulling Ben into a bear hug. He crushed Ben’s arms to his side and picked him up to hug him tighter. “I mean it,” he breathed into Ben’s shoulder as he lifted him, “that was incredible.” When Manny released him and stepped back, Ben had to quickly stoop to pick up his bag, which he used to cover the sudden bulge in his dress slacks. He looked up to find Manny watching him, his expression unreadable.

Then, as if someone had flipped a switch, Manny smiled and said, “So, what does closing up entail exactly?”

“We have to check all the rooms to see everyone’s out, make sure all the lights are off, and check that all three doors are locked.” Ben handed Manny the keys and grabbed the rest of his stuff.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pleasure mixed with pain

Aside from the fact that wandering through a theater with all of the lights off had given Ben all sorts of ideas about what he'd like to do in the dark empty theater, alone with Manny, the actual locking up part was pretty uneventful.

The Loop, which was just a short walk from the theater, was pretty well packed for a Friday night. The music was loud, not at impossible-to-talk levels, but you still had to talk pretty loudly to be heard. Ben spotted Soraya right off, sitting with some of the cast members at a booth near the back. About halfway to the table, Manny grabbed his shoulder to stop him. Ben turned his head and looked at his friend, startled, but Manny gave him a small smile and said, "Hey, what kind of beer do you want?"

"A Surly."

"Got it, be right back." Manny patted him once and was gone. Ben made his way over to the booth and plopped down on the U-shaped bench next to Soraya.

"Your keys, milady."

"Thank you, kind sir."

"So, is your Jonathan joining us tonight?"

"Nah. I texted him before, but he's going to have to go in to the office all this weekend to work on some kind of deposition, so he's at home."

"I don't know how you guys do it, I really don't."

"Hard work and sheer stubbornness. Plus I'm adorable, so that helps." Soraya grinned. "We just fit. I don't know any better way to explain it. That's what makes it worth dealing with our shit schedules, and all our other bullshit."

“You LURVE each other!” Maize interjected from the other side of the table. Soraya smiled at her.

Then Manny was there, with who else but Cameron trailing along behind him. Ben gritted his teeth. Cam was getting on his nerves, the jerkface. Manny set Ben’s beer down and to Ben’s surprise, slid into the seat next to Ben, leaving Cameron to grab the seat across from him. There were enough of them squeezed into the booth now that Ben’s thigh was pressed right against Manny’s. This was going to make for an interesting evening. *Fuck it*, he thought. He turned to Manny, said, “Hey, wanna drive us home?” and gulped his beer. Manny’s eyes widened, and then he grinned.

Ben was about halfway through his fourth beer when he realized that: one, he hadn’t had any dinner; two, he was a total lightweight; and three, Cameron Lennox was a giant turd.

Not that Cam had done anything other than talk to Manny, but yeah, GIANT turd. Ben was actually tipsy enough that he came pretty close to telling Cam this. Ben was also embarrassingly, a cuddly drunk, and right around the point where he started telling everyone, aside from Cam, how awesome they were, and alternating between hugging Soraya and Manny who were on either side of him, Manny caught on and ordered him a pizza off of the menu before the kitchen closed.

When the pizza came, Ben ate most of it while he finished off his fifth beer. He laid his head back against the seat, tummy full, and sleepy. It was a good thing that Manny had ordered the pizza, he thought. Manny was nice. “You’re nice,” he declared. Leaning sideways he nuzzled his head on Manny’s shoulder and closed his eyes for a minute.

When Ben opened his eyes he realized it had been longer than a minute. Several of the cast had taken off, and Soraya was wrestling her way around to the other side of the table, where Cam, who was still there, stood up so she could exit. He lifted his head from Manny’s shoulder and yawned.

“Hey Sleeping Beauty,” said Soraya.

Ben blinked. The world felt fuzzy. “You leaving?” he asked, yawning again.

“Yeah. Jonathan promised me waffles for breakfast if I made it home before one.”

“Mmmm waffles. Waffles are good.” He reached out to Soraya. “Hey. Soraya?”

“What Benny?” She leaned in past Manny to give him an awkward hug.

“Thank you for making me sing.”

“Welcome, baby.”

Soraya left. Manny turned to Ben. “Hey buddy, how’re you doing?”

Ben had to think about that for a minute. “Sleepy. Less drunk than I was.”

“You ready to go, or did you want to stay a little bit longer?”

“Go.”

“Okay buddy, let’s get you home.”

The temperature outside the bar had dropped at least fifteen degrees since they’d walked over to The Loop nearly three hours ago, and the wind chill had to be below zero. Within a minute of walking in the brutal cold, Ben was way closer to sober than he really wanted to be. They didn’t talk on their way back to Ben’s car. It was just too damn cold.

They were rushing by the time they rounded the block back to Ben’s car. Manny hit the button to open the doors and they piled in. They were both shivering.

“Heat please,” Ben chattered, as Manny started the car. “Brrrrr.”

“Fuck, you’re funny when you drink, you know that?” Manny turned up the heat full blast, and sat back to wait for the car to warm up. “You just say whatever you’re thinking. It’s a nice change.”

Ben blinked. “From what?” he asked.

“Sober Ben. You edit everything carefully before you say it out loud. I can’t tell what you’re thinking half the time.”

Ben’s snort turned into a giggle. “That’s a good thing, trust me. I think things that you shouldn’t know about.” God. That *was* out loud.

“I’m sure that’s true, but Ben, there are things that I haven’t told you about myself, because I wasn’t sure how you’d react.”

“What, like your tattoos?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your tattoos. S’okay. I saw them in the kitchen. They’re nice.” They were nice. Smooth ink over ripped olive skin. The largest design on Manny’s right side disappearing into tight pink briefs. Ben licked his lips.

Manny blinked, and paused. “I’ll tell you about my tattoos some other time. Well actually, there is one that you didn’t see that I’ll tell you about.” Ben looked at Manny. Manny was sitting with his hands clasped in his lap, his eyes focused on the top of the steering wheel. “One of my tats is a star with a pride rainbow inside of it.” He turned his head and looked directly into Ben’s eyes, searching Ben’s face for any type of reaction.

It took Ben a few seconds to remember what a pride rainbow *meant*. “Oh,” he said when it finally clicked in his somewhat addled brain. Manny was gay. Or at least he was pretty sure that was what Manny was hinting at.

“See, you’re doing it again. How am I supposed to interpret that?”

“What?”

“*Oh*. What does that mean?”

Ben wasn’t really sure how to answer, so he didn’t answer.

“Ben, I’m gay, and if it makes you uncomfortable, I can go to a hotel, until I find a place.”

“No.” Ben shook his head vehemently. “You don’t need to go to a hotel.”

“No?”

“It doesn’t bother me.”

“You’re sure? ’Cause you seem freaked out.”

“I’m sure.” He was freaking out, but not because Manny was gay, but because the way he felt about Manny meant that he probably was gay too, and *how did he tell Manny without telling him that he couldn’t stop thinking about him?* “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“It took me being in the closet for all of college, and one completely screwed-up relationship with a former teammate to realize that I didn’t want to lie about it anymore. I got the star tattoo when I was eighteen, but I only added the rainbow inside about a year ago. That’s when I told my family, and started telling everyone. With you, I hadn’t seen you in so long, I didn’t know how to start. I guess I was just waiting to tell you in person.”

They were both quiet for a few moments. Ben’s mind was racing, trying to figure out what this could mean for them. “Manny?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you told me.”

Manny smiled, his dark eyes bright as he reached out and patted Ben’s mitten with his gloved hand. “I’m glad too. Should we head home?” Manny pulled out of the parking spot and navigated through the icy, mostly empty streets of Minneapolis, and back to the highway. As he pulled onto the interstate, he said, “So, Cam asked me out.”

Damn. Fucking Cameron Lennox. Sticking his stupid button nose, and his slick hair, and his unnaturally long eyelashes where they didn’t belong.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I wouldn’t mind grabbing a drink sometime. He gave me his number, so I guess it’s up to me now.”

“Oh.”

“I swear Ben, if I live with you long enough, I am going to break you of that habit. I fucking mean it. I’ll just keep asking questions till you say what you really think.”

Ben groaned “Sorry.”

“Don’t *sorry* me, mister. Starting now, until we get home, I want you to think about what you actually wanted to say, instead of *Oh*. Then we’re going to go in the kitchen, I’m going to get you some water and some aspirin, and you’re going to tell me. Got it?”

“Fuck.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Touch me and kill my pain

As instructed, Ben was silent for the rest of the ride home. He was thinking so hard that he didn't even realize that they were home until Manny opened his passenger door and shook his shoulder. "C'mon Ben, we're home." He handed Manny his bag, and managed to make it from the garage to the kitchen. He removed all his winter gear and plopped down on one of the bar chairs at the kitchen island. Manny was right behind him. He poured Ben a glass of water, and then turned to the cupboards. "I think tea sounds good right now, don't you?"

Ben took a big gulp of his water, and nodded. "Sleepytime, please."

Manny grabbed Sleepytime for Ben, and a red chai for himself. He set the teakettle on the stove, and then leaned across the island so that they were face to face. This felt familiar. Then Ben remembered.

"Your mom used to make us tea."

Manny smiled. "And cookies, yeah. She still does when I visit." He studied Ben. "How are you feeling? You were pretty far gone for a while there."

Ben blushed. "The cold sobered me up. I'm almost back to normal. Thank you for taking care of me."

"Anytime."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Your parents, were they okay when you told them about you?"

"There was a lot of lapsed-Catholic guilt, mostly about not having kids, but once they got past that and the initial shock wore off, they were fine. It helped that my sister Gina gave birth to twins about a month after I told them. Now when I call, my mother demands to know if I have met a nice young man yet."

“You could always adopt, or use in vitro.”

“I know, but I don’t want to give her any ideas. Otherwise it will be all I ever hear about. The *we want what’s best for you* and the *we want you to be happy in only the way that a committed relationship can make you happy* lectures of guilt are bad enough.” Manny rolled his eyes. “So, you gonna tell me what you were thinking before?”

“I...” Ben turned bright red. The teakettle whistled, and Manny signaled for him to wait for a second while he filled the cups and placed them on the island. He gave a gesture for Ben to continue. “I was thinking that Cam is kind of a dick.” He winced, not sure what reaction Manny was going to have to his comment.

“A dick huh?” Manny grinned and poked Ben in the shoulder. “Well if I do decide to go for a drink with him, and he does turn out to be a dick, you can say I told you so.”

“Or, you could just go have a drink with someone who’s not a dick.”

“Ben, after spending years of my life lusting after unavailable men, and hiding in the closet, the idea of going out in public to have a drink, with someone who is interested in me, even with someone who might be a dick, is refreshing.”

Ben stopped himself from saying *Oh*, out loud again. Instead he actually asked the question that he knew he had no right to ask, but knew that he was just shy enough of sober to get away with asking. “How long?” he blurted.

“How long what?”

“How long have you been lusting after unavailable men?”

Manny looked startled. “Ben, I don’t think...”

“Look, you brought it up. What does that even mean anyway? Unavailable men. Like married?”

“No, not married, thank God.”

Ben blinked. “Well, what then?”

“I shouldn’t have said anything. Just drop it all right?” Ben was watching Manny shrink in on himself. He tightened his muscled arms and curled himself over the counter. He wouldn’t look up. Ben stared at the short black hair on top of Manny’s head, appalled. He had known it was none of his business, but he hadn’t expected the question to hurt. He reached his hand across the counter and laid it on top of Manny’s clenched hands.

“Manny, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...” Ben floundered. “I’m sorry.”

Manny shook his head. “You couldn’t know.”

They were both silent for a moment.

Then Manny took a deep breath and continued, “I’m afraid of what you’ll think if I answer. Ben, if I answer, I need you to know one thing. If you hear what I have to say, and you want me to leave, I will leave.” Ben tried to interrupt him, but Manny waved his hand to shush him. “Let me finish, this is hard for me to say to you.”

“You don’t have to...”

“When I was thirteen, I had this monster crush on my best friend. Who was a guy, and unavailable.”

God, if there was ever a time to respond to something somebody said with an *Oh*, that was it. *Oh shit. Oh holy shit.* “You liked me?” Ben whispered.

Manny walked around to the side of the island where Ben was sitting and pulled out the other stool. He moved slowly and carefully as if he wasn’t sure how Ben would react. “Yeah,” he replied.

“But...”

“But what?”

“But I wasn’t. Unavailable, I mean.”

“What?”

“I wasn’t unavailable. Not to you. At least I don’t think I was. I just didn’t know that I was. Available, I mean. It kind of took me a long time to figure it out.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you’re... that you like...”

Ben nodded. “Um. Gay or bi? I think so. I mean I haven’t actually been with a man, but I’m sure. I know I had no fucking clue at thirteen, but maybe if you had told me about you, or stuck your tongue down my throat, I think I would have figured it out.”

Manny was staring at Ben, his mouth open and his dark eyes wide as he leaned forward on his stool. Then Manny growled, “And now?” He leaned even closer in to Ben. “What would happen if I did that to you now?”

Ben still didn’t have the words to say that he’d been drawn to Manny since he got off the plane, that he liked him, and that he was attracted to Manny more than he’d ever been attracted to anybody, so instead, he kissed him. He leaned forward on his stool and practically fell into Manny’s lap as their lips slammed together. Fuck. Manny jumped a little when Ben’s lips fell onto his, but then he reached up and took Ben’s head in both his hands and kissed the hell out of him.

Oh. Kissing Manny was perfection. Kissing had never felt like this before. Ben wanted to touch him everywhere at once. He brought his hands up Manny’s sides to trace over Manny’s chiseled abs. He moaned, and Manny stood up from the stool and brought their hips together. They both gasped. Manny’s length was pressing into his thigh, and Ben’s was pressing into Manny’s belly. He broke the kiss, and pulled back to look at Manny. They were both breathing hard. Manny’s hand stayed lodged in Ben’s sandy hair. Manny’s eyes were wide, and Ben saw a hint of fear there. He reached out and cupped Manny’s jaw and caressed the skin on his face and neck. Manny’s eyes closed and he shivered.

“Ben,” he whispered.

“I’ve never done this with a man before,” Ben murmured, leaning in and pressing his lips to Manny’s jaw line. “But I want to with you. Can’t stop thinking about you.”

“Never stopped thinking of you. Just thought I’d never have this. Ben...” Manny groaned as Ben nipped at a spot behind his ear, “If this is just fooling

around for you, you need to stop now. I've thought about this for ten years, and if you don't mean it, then I don't want to do this."

Ben pulled back to look at his friend. "I mean it. I do. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I have never felt this way before."

Manny looked into his eyes but didn't answer. Manny just pounced. Ben found himself pinned up against the island countertop as Manny took control. He kissed Ben and pressed against him. They kissed until Ben felt like his legs couldn't hold him up anymore, and then, as Ben sunk to the floor, still kissing Manny and pulling him down by his shirt, Manny started to explore. He untucked Ben's shirt, unbuttoned it, and pulled off his tie. Ben ran his hands under Manny's shirt over his muscled stomach and up his back to his shoulder blades, as Manny sucked on his neck and rubbed his nipples into hard nubs under his undershirt. Manny kissed him again, sealing their mouths together. As he continued their kiss, he reached down to grab Ben's ass. Manny ground against him in a steady rhythm. Ben moaned, and his movements became jerkier and more frantic, as he pressed his length against Manny's. He pulled Manny down on top of him, as Manny tried frantically to undress them both enough to release their cocks. When he finally did, Manny reached up to kiss Ben hard before wrapping his fist around both of their silken shafts. The combination of the heat, the smoothness of being pressed together, and the rough grasp of Manny's hand, was like nothing he'd ever felt before. With just a few strokes of Manny's fist, they both came hard and shaking, their cries of relief echoing in the quiet kitchen.

EPILOGUE

Loved by...

The best part, Ben realized, was watching Manny sleep. Manny still had the same look on his face that he'd had when he slept as a child. So beautiful and so peaceful. He always slept on his stomach, covers kicked off, his bare ass proudly displaying a rainbow star on the side of his left cheek. Ben had spent hours kissing that star. It was his favorite of all of Manny's tattoos, and that was saying something, because Ben loved them all.

Manny never left to find his own place. He had moved into Ben's room after that night in December and never left. They'd had to work on the moving in part a bit. After a few rather heated discussions, Ben had gotten Manny to agree not to leave his shoes in the middle of the floor, and Manny had drawn the line at organizing his socks into cubbies. His drawers were a jumbled mess in Ben's opinion, but in spite of their completely opposite philosophies of organization, they got along fine. Now, almost a year and a half later, Ben could hardly believe how much his life had changed.

The alarm blared, interrupting Ben's reverie and eliciting a groan from Manny, who rolled over and watched as Ben leaned over to shut off the alarm.

"Hey," said a very groggy Manny.

"Hey," whispered Ben as he leaned over to press a soft kiss to his lover's lips. Boyfriend. That had been strange to say at first. They quickly figured out that rather than telling everyone they knew, they simply held hands whenever they were out together, and let people draw their own conclusions.

"How much time do we have?" Manny murmured, as he pressed his body against Ben's, his morning wood pressing into Ben's hip. Ben grinned, and turned his head to find Manny's lips again.

"Enough. If we hurry."

They were only fifteen minutes late to help the band set up for the wedding reception, and that was Manny's fault, because Ben ended up with come in his hair, so they'd had to shower, which led to another round of sex in the shower, with Ben bent over and Manny pounding into him till they were both sated and completely out of hot water.

One of the other things that had changed in the last seventeen months was that Manny had made him sing. The first time that Jonathan's band was short a singer, Manny volunteered him, made him do it, and he'd been helping out ever since. Today both of them were filling in, Manny on guitar and Ben on vocals. Ben loved it. Being able to perform even occasionally had made such a difference for Ben. He hadn't admitted that it was something he needed, but Manny had understood. Manny knew him better than he knew himself. Getting to see Manny all day in a tux a couple times a month didn't hurt either.

The reception was for Maize and her new husband, Vince, both actors, so the hall was full of friends and acquaintances that Ben knew from all his work with Soraya. As Ben sang and the band performed, the guests had a blast dancing to the old songs. On their second set break, Ben noticed two other familiar faces in the crowd. He made his way over to them.

"Mom, Ronnie, what are you doing here?" He hugged them both, but looked at them suspiciously. They both looked guilty. What was going on?

"Soraya called us, dear." His mother replied, as if that explained everything. Right on cue, Soraya walked out of the crowd, and right up to Ben's mother. She let out a little squeal and hugged both of them.

"I'm so glad you guys could make it!" She crowed. "Ben, why don't you go get these two lovely ladies a drink?"

Ben raised his eyebrow at her, but wandered over to the bar across the dance floor to do just that, when he heard a familiar voice on the microphone.

"Uh. Hi everyone, could I have your attention for a few minutes? I asked the bride and groom for permission to say a few words." Manny was standing on the empty stage, a microphone in his hand. "First of all, I want to say congratulations to Maize and Vince. Maize I have known since I moved back

to Minnesota about a year and a half ago, and I am thrilled to be here today and honored that she and Vince asked us to perform at their wedding. Maize and Vince, may you have a lifetime of happiness. I'm here, well I'm sure all of you heard the news that Governor Dayton signed a bill into law this Tuesday that will allow same-sex couples the right to marry in the state of Minnesota, starting on August first of this year. In light of this news, I have a question I need to ask someone who is very important to me. Ben, could you come up here please?"

Ben had been standing stock still at the bar since Manny had begun speaking. All eyes were on him as he crossed up to the stage. Manny reached into his pocket, pulled out a small box, and knelt on the edge of the stage. With the height of the platform, Manny's head came up to Ben's shoulder. There were gasps from the crowd. He set the box down and reached for Ben's hand. Ben stared into those warm brown eyes and gripped Manny's hand like it was the only thing holding him up. "Ben Green, I have known you for most of my life, and I would willingly spend the rest of my days at your side, married or not. I love you with all my heart, and I had to ask now that I can, will you marry me?"

He let go of Ben's hand and reached for the box and handed it to Ben. Inside were two wide, simple platinum bands. Ben's eyes filled with tears as he looked at them. He looked up at Manny, threw himself into Manny's arms, and said one word.

"Yes."

THE END

Author Bio

Penny Wilder is an avid reader and sometimes reviewer of romance and erotic novels. She lives near Minneapolis, Minnesota with her amazingly supportive husband and three cats. She works for a nonprofit by day, and by night, in addition to reading way too many e-books, moonlights as a blogger, artist, illustrator, and also sometimes as a business manager for a fledgling theater company. She has spent a good deal of her life working in theater, either onstage as a performer, or backstage doing just about every job imaginable. Her love of writing dates back almost as far as her love of reading.

Contact & Media Info

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