

**THE COMMON BOND**  
**A Novel by David-Matthew Barnes**

## ONE

They met like a car accident that could not be avoided. The physical smash took place within the sliver of a split second at a busy intersection in Chicago, blocks from the icy mouth of Lake Michigan.

Joey walked east towards the water with his head bent to the wind as he dodged the pockets of October morning air that boxed his numb ears. His lithe body was unusually tense, tightened by the guilt that he did not feel guilty for what had happened just hours ago, the unspeakable crime committed. He begged and waited for remorse but instead felt a slight intoxicating thrill of victory. It seemed like he would get away with it, after all.

Joey's eyes were to the ground, mesmerized by the frays in the laces of his blue and white scuffed Adidas. He shivered beneath his hooded sweatshirt, blinked the frosty air away and walked faster. He had a lot of homework to do, back at the dorm. But first, the post office and

then the pharmacy for tongue depressors. He had the urge to build, as he often did after something monumental happened in his life.

Albert was also on foot headed south to a fifth floor gym on Belmont. A red and black duffle bag was slung over his shoulder. Albert was a boxer so he was constantly tortured by an impulse to destroy something. He walked with an angry gait, tense shoulders, tight jaw. He rounded the corner, nearly clipped the edge of a brick building. He had a wild, intense look in his dark eyes – fiery even – as if he were determined to prove a point or take on a triple dare.

Then it happened.

Albert rammed into Joey’s left shoulder with his. The hit was hard; it would have been heard had the sound not been muted by the train above. Joey stumbled back, his hands instinctually reached out to empty air, grasped for something to break his fall. Albert moved on impulse, his hands were quick. He held Joey just above the elbow, steadied him.

At the moment of contact, the “L” train above them slammed on its brakes. The metallic scream reverberated, shot against the sides of the skyscrapers before it exploded into an echo of a thousand warnings. A shower of blue and orange sparks rained down from the wooden tracks and kissed the sidewalk.

They stood in front of a White Hen Pantry store of which morning commuters streamed in and out of in a dizzying display of neckties, briefcases, leather shoes and paper cups of coffee that spilled splashes of milky brown on hands, sleeves, concrete. Fast forward city motion seemed to circle and swirl around the two men who had just met, who stood almost completely still as if the collision had suspended them momentarily.

The connection between Joey and Albert was immediate and severe. Energy was ignited, electric and fierce. Their eyes met, locked. They could not look away.

Albert was loyal and Latin; a Puerto Rican with a bad attitude and delicious lips. He looked like the boxer that he was in a soft blue and wheat brown flannel jacket, black sweat pants and a pair of athletic shoes that threatened to break open at the soles with another step.

Joey was gangly and tender, with soft grace and a tempting naïveté. Girlish, even.

At once, Albert was fascinated by Joey's vulnerability; he figured Joey for a sensitive sissy type who was constantly waiting for someone to tell him what to do, feel. His boyish innocence allayed the swell of the rage that soaked Albert's blood like century-old tequila. The timid way that the tall kid lowered his pale eyes and lifted them back up again with flushed cheeks caused an arousing conflict in Albert. He wasn't sure if Joey were the perfect victim for an ass kicking or a new disciple capable of unflinching hero worship. And if there was one thing that Albert needed, it was to be worshipped.

Albert gave him a playful wink when he asked, "You all right, kid?"

"That scared me," Joey admitted in a voice that was as gentle as Albert had imagined it would be. The kid looked down, ashamed. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

Albert's hand moved up to his own face, caressed his chin and dark goatee, nervous and apologetic as if he were forgiving himself for something. It seemed like Joey was waiting for him to speak again, so he did. "It's a good thing I was here to catch you. Must got a lot on your mind."

Joey answered with a slight shrug, "I haven't slept all night."

"You a party animal?" Albert asked with a grin.

Joey responded quickly with, "No, I did something that needed to be done. It took longer than I expected." His expression widened a little. He leaned in towards Albert. "Your eye. It's black." He stepped back, cautious. "Did I do that to you?"

Albert laughed a little. “How could you?” he asked. “No offense, but you don’t look like no fighter.”

Joey’s eyebrows shot up. “Are *you* a fighter?”

Albert’s words rang like a bell. “Yeah. Amateur boxer. Cruiserweight.”

Joey’s eyes filled with a deep admiration; a subconscious lust shifted the expression on Joey’s face from smile to desire. His tone changed. His words sounded more secretive, hushed, in an awkward attempt at flirting. Perhaps he was scared that the conversation would end too soon. “You should have someone look at that.”

Albert stared at Joey, blinked. *What the fuck is this kid doing to me?* Albert couldn’t define or deny the incredible sense of want that slinked through his body and shook the corners of his soul. He hadn’t felt this much passion in years. Not even on his wedding day.

It seemed evident in Joey’s effeminate nature that he was gay. He had thoughts about men. He fantasized about being touched by rough, calloused hands. He secretly pined over the guy he shared a dorm room with; watched him sleep and studied the curves of his thick penis through a peach-colored bath towel that always hung like a dare from his hip bones. Joey was frightened by the concept of labeling himself as gay because his identity was not important to him. This fear rose from his frequent wish that he had never existed.

Albert was not intrigued by Joey because he was a man. It was the sweetness in him that was alluring. The way that Joey looked at him with an enamored fondness gave Albert a buzz, made him feel like the vigilante he always imagined he would be. Besides, the kid didn’t come off like he was looking for sex. He seemed lonely for a friend. Desperate even.

Before that Wednesday morning, Albert had often pretended to have a definitive disdain for gay men. Said that he hated them. Called them fags and cock suckers whenever they popped

up on television. Swore he'd punch one in the face without a second thought if they came on to him. Told his buddy Jackson once over shots of Stoli at a strip bar that he considered them weak and ridiculous. They were freaks of nature.

But the truth was Albert was curious. He had been since the day of his father's funeral. He was fifteen and needed a place to cry. He found refuge in the basement laundry room in the apartment building that he had grown up in Humboldt Park. He tucked his tears away when his grief was interrupted by a basket-carrying neighbor boy who brushed against Albert in an attempt to squeeze by the narrow space between them and the machines. The sensation had caused Albert to race back upstairs, barricade himself in the bathroom and beat off to a fantasy he hadn't allowed himself to have since.

Albert returned the questions that lingered in Joey's eyes with the same invitation in his voice. "You hungry, kid? I'm starving, myself."

Joey's eyes shone hot with anticipation. "I would like that," he answered with a small nod. Thick strands of his toast brown hair fell across his sea water eyes as if he were playing half a game of peek-a-boo.

"C'mon." Albert moved and Joey followed, as Albert knew he would.

The two men walked in silence, shoulder to shoulder. At the next corner they waited for the street light to change. It was there that Albert saw a reflection of them in the dirty passenger window of an idle cab. It would be the only moment that Albert would be concerned about what others saw when they looked at them.

They were an odd pair. Giraffe-like Joey stood next to short, stocky Albert. Albert's gazed was locked on the image in the finger smudged glass but Joey's eyes were turned towards

Albert, studying the boxer's profile. He stared at Albert as if he were a present that was about to be opened.

The kid's nose was too thin and large, marred what could have been symmetrical beauty. He wasn't what most people would consider attractive. He was simple, average, the type of guy who was overlooked. His apparent weakness made him a likely target for ridicule and domination.

Albert looked at himself and was reminded that he was equally unattractive. His hair – dark and unruly – had started to recede near the edges of his temples. His nose had been busted twice. Neither time was a result of a fight in the ring but rather the wrath of his wife. Now, his bent nose brought attention to his face because it looked like it belonged to somebody else. He had a thick scar above his right brow; a souvenir from a neighborhood fight when he was twelve. His front teeth were crooked – they bent in towards each other - and he had a slight overbite. His features had a roughness to them that added to his street smart persona. Yet, his lips betrayed his image as they always looked like they begged to be kissed.

The street light changed and they both stepped off of the curb in unison.

*I'm old enough to be this kid's father,* Albert thought. And it was true. Albert had turned thirty-nine on his last birthday. Joey looked like the twenty-year-old that he was.

In spite of the years between them, Albert led Joey to a coffee shop on Belmont Avenue. They were seated in a booth in the front window. Joey stared through the open slats of dusty mini blinds to the world outside. Strangers passed by the neon pink and green OPEN sign that buzzed and flickered as if it were aware of the lives that were merging inside.

"I don't eat breakfast," Joey said.

"Yeah, me neither," Albert agreed.

After ordering a club sandwich and a vanilla Coke with no ice, Joey toyed nervously with a straw wrapper, stole occasional glances at Albert. Across the table, Albert sat back with his arm draped over the top of the booth, pressed into the burgundy wine upholstery that was gouged as if it had been the victim of multiple stabbings. He waited for his basket of onion rings and a bottle of mustard. He took a couple of gulps of tongue-burning black coffee, cleared his throat and then looked at Joey.

“Why so nervous, kid?”

Joey’s bottom lip quivered as his mouth absorbed the deep hollow of Albert’s voice. He liked the sound of it. It was heavy, important, take charge. “I’m not.”

“Since I almost knocked ya out, I figure the least I can do is buy you breakfast – or lunch.”

Joey flashed a sudden smile. “That’s nice of you.”

Albert’s jaw tightened. “I’m not usually this nice.” It was a warning.

Joey looked up, expressionless. “No?”

“No. I don’t like people.”

Joey’s eyes fell again as he concentrated on twisting the straw wrapper around his index finger so tight that the tip started to turn purple. “I don’t either.” It was the first time that Joey had admitted his dislike for people. He suddenly spoke again. “That might surprise you since you probably think I’m some dumb kid, but I think most people are mother fucking assholes.” Joey laughed a little, amused by his own thoughts.

Albert leaned in then. The kid had caught him off guard by being unpredictable. And Albert liked that. A lot. “Oh yeah?” he urged. “Tell me more.”

Joey’s voice dropped to a whisper. “What do you want to know?”

Albert whispered too. "I don't care. I just like hearing ya talk."

Joey blushed a little. "Really?"

"Yeah. Tell me who ya hate the most."

Joey chewed on the right corner of his bottom lip and then answered, "The obvious choice is my mother."

Albert finished his cup of coffee and signaled to a lazy waitress for a refill. "Why do you hate your Mom? What'd she do to ya?" he asked.

Joey shrugged. "Absolutely nothing."

"What's so bad about that?"

The edges of Joey's pale colored eyes seemed to glow from the inside out with a sense of satisfaction. "She died."

"Shit. How?"

Joey looked out the window as if he were trying to find someone he knew in the passing crowd of the morning rush. Albert sensed that Joey always seemed to be searching for something familiar. What Albert didn't realize is that this constant state of want had crept into Joey's face at a young age and it wavered deep in his eyes like a permanent state of sorrow, an emotional birthmark. Albert watched Joey's mouth as the kid spoke. "My mother drove them off of the edge of a cliff. Her and my father."

A lick of fear touched the center of Albert's spine and shot a round of tension into his posture. "On purpose?" he asked. "She did it on purpose?"

"No," Joey said too casually. "I guess the brakes failed."

An element of truth danced in the heavy air between them. It slid out like an invisible string pulled from the half-smile that Joey was trying unsuccessfully to keep hidden. In that moment, Albert knew what Joey had done. And it scared him. But it thrilled him, too.

“Did you hate your Dad, too?” he asked.

Joey shook his head. “No. It wasn’t his fault.” He leaned forward and his voice dropped again. “He wasn’t supposed to be in the car.”

Albert breathed. “Where’d it happen?”

“In Maine. Where I’m from.” He looked at Albert then and said, “Portland.” He made the place sound like hell.

“Damn, when did this go down?”

The smile won the battle and cracked the sides of Joey’s face. “Last night,” he said.

The waitress appeared with a coffee pot. She splashed the cup, sighed and sauntered off.

“That’s rough,” Albert said.

Joey looked Albert in the eye. “No, it wasn’t.”

“How come you say that?”

“It was amazing. How fast she went. Right through the barricade. Down to the rocks and water. Then...*smash*.”

“Wait – you were there?”

Joey nodded and his eyes continued to flash with a fire. “I was glad she did it. I hated her.”

Albert was at a loss for words. He simply said, “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Joey said. “I hope my sister goes next. She’s a dumb bitch with a nasty habit and a crooked eye.”

Albert nodded. "I got a wife that I wish would drive off a cliff."

Joey pulled back a little, leaned against the back of the booth. "You're married?"

"Is that such a shocker? You think an ugly fucker like me can't get a wife?"

Joey grinned. "Anybody can. Everybody's lonely."

"Her name's Bonnie and she's a lowlife with a mean mouth."

Joey shook his head, flustered. "I didn't mean it."

"Didn't mean what?"

"To act so surprised when you said you were married."

Albert sipped his coffee and then said, "It's alright."

Joey shook his head. "No...it's just..."

"Spit it out, kid."

His attention went to the straw wrapper, his finger. He avoided Albert's eyes when he spoke. "Well, I don't think you're ugly."

Albert looked towards the pie case where the waitress leaned. "You don't?"

Joey's voice sounded choked. "No."

Albert smiled. "Are ya fucking blind in one eye or both?"

"You're not ugly."

Albert looked at him then. He wrapped his thick fingers through the handle of the coffee cup and contemplated smashing it against the waitresses' skull. But only for a second. "That's good of you to say."

"I feel embarrassed."

Albert smiled. "Because of your folks being...killed? You shouldn't. I've heard of some crazy situations before. Been in a few of them myself."

“That’s not what I meant,” Joey said. “I don’t know your name. What you do.”

“My name’s Albert. And I already told you, I’m a boxer.”

“Albert,” the kid repeated. His voice caused the head of Albert’s cock to throb a little and Albert didn’t know why. Under the table he smashed his rising dick down with the base of his palm. He pressed hard against the front of his black sweat pants like he was shoving a bad dog away from the table, to keep it from begging.

“Yeah,” he said, feeling his face infuse with heat. “I’m Albert.”

The kid smiled and said, “I’m Joey.” He unraveled the straw wrapper from his finger, allowed the blood to return to the tip. “I like your bruises.”

The waitress arrived and half-dropped their plates in front of them and spilled a couple of onion rings on the table.

“Hey. Ya forgot my mustard,” Albert cautioned. It seemed like a half an hour before she returned. Albert snatched the bottle from her, shot her a look and then shooed her away.

Joey and Albert passed nervous smiles back and forth while they ate in silence and occasionally glanced at each other. The anticipation of the unknown made them high with a mind racing thrill that they both feared was revealed in their eyes and the ridiculous smiles that they hoped did not betray them. Albert dipped each onion ring in a puddle of mustard and then licked his greasy fingers clean. Joey took furtive bites of his club sandwich and sips of his vanilla Coke. He dabbed at each corner of his mouth with a napkin after every bite.

An hour and ten minutes had passed since they had first collided beneath the train tracks. Now, they stood outside of the coffee shop on Belmont unsure of what to do with their nervous hands. Joey shivered from the cold and Albert felt the impulse to offer his jacket or put an arm

around him to warm him up. Instead, he did neither. He felt the black handle of the red duffel bag slip down his shoulder. He pulled the bag up again and put his hands back in the pockets of his flannel jacket.

Joey's teeth chattered when he asked, "What were you doing before we ran into each other?"

Albert shrugged. "I took the day off. I was going up to the gym for a workout."

"To box?"

"No. I'm training right now. No more fights for a few weeks."

"Wow," Joey said. "I'd love to see you box sometime."

Albert nodded. "Yeah...maybe."

"Are you going there now?"

"Don't know." Albert breathed deep. "What 'bout you?"

Joey pulled an envelope out of his back pocket. It was smashed a little and the handwriting on it was messy. He held it out as if it were an offering of some type to Albert. "I have to find a mail box."

"Got a bill to pay?"

Joey shook his head, put the envelope away. "No. A letter home. To my sister."

"I thought you didn't like her."

"I don't. The letter will destroy her...I hope."

"There's a post office not far from here," Albert said with a quick jerk of his head.

Joey nodded. "I was trying to find it when I met you. I guess I got lost."

They both grinned as if a secret was brewing between them.

Albert stepped forward. He spoke and his breath fell onto Joey's mouth. He licked his lips as if he tasted a new flavor. "I could take you there if ya want."

"You would do that?" Joey asked. "What about the gym?"

"What about it?"

"I could go with you. Watch you train."

Albert shook his head. There was no way he could explain a kid like Joey to the guys at the gym. They would eat him up alive. They could spot a sissy at a distance. "No. That place ain't good for you."

Joey's eyes lowered. "Maybe some other time, then."

Albert shrugged. "Yeah, a'ight."

"I bet you're an amazing fighter."

The kid made Albert smile again even though he didn't want to. Albert nodded and even blushed a little. "Yeah...I am."

Joey started to turn away. "Well...it was nice meeting you."

*What the fuck? Where was the kid going?* "Hey," Albert said. "What are ya doing? You leaving?"

Joey took another step farther away. "I'm sorry. You're angry."

Albert looked deep into Joey's eyes. "Maybe I wanna take you to the post office," he said, almost shouting to be heard over the sound of a city bus passing by.

Joey didn't look away. "I don't want to bother you. You've been nice to me."

Albert was firm. "I already told you – I'm not usually this nice."

Joey's mouth trembled a little. "I liked having breakfast or lunch with you."

"Then why do you wanna leave?"

“You need to train.”

Albert leaned in. “How do you know what I need?”

They both fell silent, inhaled the warm mists exhaled from each others mouth. Albert felt his lungs ache from the cold, the uncertainty. He felt a gnawing frustration that was turning into a desire to smash something. He glanced at the lamp post on the corner and his eyes darted all over the chipped black paint. The knuckle bone of his right index finger twitched. If Joey left he knew he would hit the post as hard as he could.

“Kid, I’m messed up,” he said suddenly and it surprised them both.

Joey smiled. He raised a hand and reached towards Albert on instinct, to touch him.

Quick, Joey pulled his hand back, lowered it. “No, you’re not.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fucked up. And I don’t know what we’re doing here.”

“There’s nothing wrong with - .”

“Yeah, there is.”

Joey looked away, across the street to a video store. He bit his lip, looked nervous. “We can walk away. You go one way and I’ll go - .”

“No.” Albert was firm. “No, that ain’t happening, kid.”

Joey shook off a sharp shiver. “I’m not sure what you want from me, Albert.”

Albert turned away from Joey as if he were embarrassed about something. He faced the lamp post, ready to strike. “You got me messed up in the head or something.”

“Why?” Joey said to the back of his head. “What did I do?”

Albert was surprised to feel tears burn the edges of both eyes. “Why do you hafta be so nice to me?”

Joey’s voice sounded thick with concern. “Nobody’s nice to you?”

Albert put his knuckles under his chin and popped his neck to the right. His bones made a crunching sound and his shoulders relaxed a little. “Not even when I was a kid, ya know.”

“Maybe that’s it.” Joey moved closer to Albert’s back. They both faced the street, the video store and beyond that the entrance to a train station. A man in a trench coat and business suit walked by Joey, bumped into him without a word of apology. Fortunately, Albert didn’t see it happen.

Joey looked in the direction that the man walked. “Nobody’s ever been nice to me either,” he said as if he had realized this for the first time.

“No?”

Joey shook his head, felt his jaw tighten. “No.”

“I dare someone to fuck with you now.”

“Why? What are you going to do?”

“I’ll take ‘em out.”

Joey lowered his tone, as if his words were meant only for himself. “I wish you would.”

Albert turned to him. His mouth looked hungry when said, “Dare me.”

Joey shrugged and backed away from Albert, the moment. “We’re not doing anything wrong. Just hanging out, I guess.”

Albert nodded. “Yeah, just two buddies hanging out.”

“New friends.”

“That’s right. That’s right.”

“Why do you look so - ?”

Albert’s eyebrow shot up; the one with the scar in the shape of a half moon above it. “So what?”

“You seem upset,” Joey said.

“I just – I don’t want ya to - .”

“Go on. Say it.”

“I ain’t a fag or nothin’.”

“So.”

“You just...you need to know that, a’ight.”

Joey shrugged. “You said you were married.”

“Yeah, but she don’t love me.”

Joey looked into Albert’s eyes. “She should.”

“I’m glad she don’t.”

They started to walk. Albert lowered his voice, worried that some of the people in suits and ties would hear him. “You a queer, Joey? I mean, you can tell me if ya are, ya know.”

“Does it really matter?” Joey asked.

They crossed the street. The post office was a few yards away.

“It’s cold, Albert.”

Their eyes met, spoke as they shifted and elbowed through the crowd that they walked against. “I know.”

“What do you want to do?”

Albert cracked his knuckles, switched his duffle bag to the opposite shoulder. “I don’t know. Hang out. Spend some time together.”

“Why?”

Albert’s smile vanished. “Who the fuck knows? Maybe I think you’re an okay guy.”

“That doesn’t sound crazy.”

“No?”

“No, it sounds sweet.”

“I told you I ain’t - .”

“Maybe we just need a friend, Albert.”

“Don’t have lots of those. Had some back in the day, but I punched most of ‘em out.”

They started to walk again. “Are you planning to hit me?”

“No...No, I wouldn’t do that to you, Joey.”

“You could kick my ass without even trying very hard.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t hit ya though.” Albert looked at him and said, “It seems to me like you’ve been hit before.”

Joey stopped outside of the crowded post office. “You know something,” he said, with a grip on the edge of the envelope as he held it over the hungry blue metal mouth of a mailbox. “I started hitting back last night.”

Albert seemed impressed. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” Joey said. “And I’m not so sure if I can stop.” Joey glanced down at the thin crust of beach sand that still licked the sides of his shoes. Evidence from Maine. “I took the first plane home this morning,” he said. “And I’ll probably get caught for what I’ve done.”

Albert’s jaw tightened. “Not if I can help it,” he said.

Once the letter was out of his possession, Joey seemed to be liberated. His eyes flashed with a contagious excitement when he turned to Albert and asked, “What do you want to do, now? The city belongs to you and me.”

Albert smiled and breathed. “You make it sound like we can do anything we want.”

Joey’s eyes fell to Albert’s mouth with wanting. “Can’t we?” he asked.

“With you...it feels like it,” Albert said.

They crossed another street, walked beneath the train tracks that cut through the city like a river of timber. They moved against a backdrop of wooden walls plastered with posters that announced the upcoming release of a CD by a female rap star.

“Do you have a plan?” Joey asked.

“Yeah, I got a plan.”

“Tell me what it is before we freeze to death.”

“I know some place warm we can be. We gotta walk though. My van’s in the garage ‘til tomorrow mornin’.”

“Where to then?”

“Canada,” Albert said.

Joey stopped in his footsteps. “Are you serious?”

“You’d go wit’ me?”

Joey grinned. “I would.”

“Shit, I wish I had the money.”

Joey reached for his wallet in his back pocket. “I have thirty dollars to my name.”

“Then you a helluva lot richer than me. I spent all my money on lunch.”

“Why Canada?”

“First place that popped in my head, ya know.”

“Is that true?”

Albert looked away, smiling again. It seemed like Joey already knew him better than anybody else. “No...” Albert suddenly seemed shy. “I’ve always wanted to see the gardens.”

“What gardens?”

“They’re in a place called Vancouver.”

“I know where it is.”

“Oh yeah?”

“On the other side of the continent.”

“I like gardens.”

“Why do you look so embarrassed?”

Albert looked away. “I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

“You think it’s dumb?” he asked.

Joey shot him a look. “Are we talking vegetable gardens or flowers?”

Albert’s smile faded. “I like flowers, a’ight.”

“More than boxing?”

Albert shook his head. “No, man, it’s different.”

“You’re lucky,” Joey said. “I haven’t found anything to like yet.”

Albert’s smile returned. “Yeah, well, you’re still young.”

“So it gets better than this?”

Albert shrugged. “That depends.”

“On how well you fight?”

“No,” Albert said. He suddenly stopped. Joey did the same. “Everything depends on who you’re with.”

“Then I’m out of luck,” Joey said. “I’m not with anybody.” He pulled his hands out of his pockets and blew his warm breath into his palms. On impulse, Albert reached out and grabbed both of Joey’s hands. He pulled them towards him, held them right beneath his face. His head

bent forward a little and he breathed onto Joey's skin. Joey winced as if he had been burned but Albert didn't let go. He tightened his grip on Joey's hands, pulled on them so that Joey had no choice but to step closer to him.

“You're wrong, kid” Albert said. “You're wit' me now.”