

By the Author

Mesmerized

Accidents Never Happen

ACCIDENTS NEVER HAPPEN

by

David-Matthew Barnes



A Division of Bold Strokes Books

2011

ALBERT

Albert was like a car accident that couldn't be avoided. He was a boxer, constantly tortured by an impulse to destroy something. He walked with an angry gait, tense shoulders, tight jaw. He moved with his head bent to the wind, dodging the pockets of dusk October air that pummeled his numb ears. He was heading south to a fifth-floor gym on Belmont, just blocks from the icy mouth of Lake Michigan. He had a tempestuous look in his dark eyes—fiery, even—determined to prove a point or take on a triple dare. He rounded a corner, nearly clipping the edge of a brick building.

Albert rammed into a stranger's left shoulder. The hit was hard; it would have been heard had the train not muted the sound. At the moment of contact, the "L" train above them slammed on its brakes. The metallic scream reverberated against the sides of the skyscrapers before exploding into an echo of a thousand warnings. A shower of blue and orange sparks rained down from the wooden tracks and kissed the sidewalk.

The stranger stumbled back, instinctually reaching out to empty air, grasping for something to break his fall. Albert's quick hands moved on impulse. He held the stranger just above the elbow, steadying him.

They stood in front of a 7-Eleven. Evening commuters streamed back and forth in a dizzying display of neckties, briefcases, leather shoes, and paper cups of coffee spilling splashes of milky brown on hands, sleeves, concrete. Fast-forward city motion circled and swirled around the two men, who were standing completely still, as if the collision had momentarily suspended them.

The connection between Albert and the stranger was immediate

and severe. Energy ignited; it was fierce and electric. Their eyes locked, and they couldn't look away.

∨

Albert was a Puerto Rican with a bad attitude and delicious lips. He was intimidating, even in a soft blue and wheat brown flannel jacket, black sweatpants, and a pair of athletic shoes threatening to break open at the soles with another step. A red and black duffel bag was slung over his shoulder.

The stranger was gangly and tender, with refined grace and a tempting naïveté. Girlish, even.

At once, Albert was fascinated by the stranger's vulnerability. He seemed like the sensitive sissy type, constantly waiting for someone to tell him what to do and feel. His boyish innocence allayed the swell of the rage that soaked Albert's blood like century-old tequila. The timid way the tall kid lowered his pale eyes to the ground, to the frays in the laces of his scuffed Adidas, before lifting his gaze up again with flushed cheeks, caused an arousing conflict in Albert. He wasn't sure if the stranger was perfect for an ass kicking, or a new disciple capable of unflinching hero worship.

And one thing Albert needed was to be worshipped.

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

"That scared me," the stranger admitted in a voice just as gentle as Albert had imagined it would be. The kid looked down again, shivering beneath his hooded sweatshirt, blinking the frosty air. "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 forgiving himself for something. It seemed like the stranger was waiting for him to speak again. "It's a good thing I was here to catch you. Must got a lot on your mind."

The kid answered with a slight shrug, "I haven't slept in a couple of days."

"You a party animal?" Albert asked, grinning.

The stranger responded, "No, but I did something I shouldn't have. I guess it took longer than I expected." His expression widened a little. He leaned in. "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.”

The kid’s eyebrows shot up. “Are you a fighter?”

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

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

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

It seemed evident the kid was gay. Yet Albert was intrigued by him because of the alluring sweetness he sensed in him. The way the kid looked at him, with an enamored fondness, gave Albert a buzz, making him feel like the vigilante he always imagined he would be. And the kid didn’t come off like he was looking for sex. He seemed lonely, even desperate, for a friend.

Albert had often pretended to have a definitive disdain for gay men. Said that he hated them, calling them fags and cocksuckers whenever they popped up on television, swearing he’d punch one in the face without a second thought if they came on to him, and telling his buddy Jackson once over shots of Stolli at a strip bar that he considered them weak and ridiculous.

They were freaks of nature.

But the truth was Albert was curious, and had been since the day of his father’s funeral. Only fifteen, he’d needed a place to cry. He found refuge in the basement laundry room of the apartment building where he’d 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 scared him, caused Albert to race back upstairs. He’d barricaded himself in the bathroom and beat off to a fantasy he hadn’t allowed himself to have since.

Albert returned the questions lingering in the stranger’s eyes

with the same invitation in his voice. “You hungry, kid? I’m starvin’, myself.”

The kid’s eyes shone hot with anticipation. “I’d like that,” he answered with a small nod. Thick strands of his toast brown hair fell across his sea green eyes as if he were playing half a game of peek-a-boo.

“C’mon.” Albert moved and the kid followed. Albert knew that he would.

The two men walked in silence, shoulder to shoulder. At the next corner they waited for the light to change. Albert saw their reflection in the dirty passenger window of an idling cab.

They were an odd pair. The giraffe-like stranger stood next to short, stocky Albert. Albert’s gaze was locked on the image in the finger-smudged glass but the kid’s eyes were turned toward Albert, studying his profile. He stared at Albert, almost as if he were a present about to be opened on Christmas morning.

The kid’s nose was too thin and large, marring what would’ve been only an average face. He wasn’t what most people would consider attractive. He was simple, the type of guy who was overlooked. His apparent weakness made him a likely target for ridicule and domination.

Albert looked at his own reflection. 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, as most people supposed. It was his wife’s wrath that broke it. 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 toward each other—and he had a slight overbite. His features had a roughness to them, adding to his street-smart persona. Yet, his lips betrayed his image—they always looked like they were begging to be kissed.

The light changed and they stepped off 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. The stranger looked eighteen, maybe twenty at the oldest.

Albert led the kid to a coffee shop on Belmont Avenue. They were

seated in a booth in the front window. The kid stared through the open slats of dusty miniblinds to the world outside. Strangers passed by, intent on their destinations. The neon pink and green OPEN sign was buzzing and flickering, as if the lights were aware of the lives merging inside.

“I don’t usually eat dinner this early,” the kid said.

“Yeah, me neither,” Albert agreed.

After ordering a club sandwich and a vanilla Coke with no ice, the stranger nervously toyed with a straw wrapper, stealing occasional glances at Albert. Albert sat back with his arm draped over the top of the red upholstered booth, waiting 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 looked at the boy.

“Why so nervous, kid?”

His bottom lip quivered. “I’m not.”

“Since I almost knocked you out, I figure the least I can do is buy you dinner.”

The kid flashed a sudden smile. “It’s nice of you, thanks.”

Albert’s jaw tightened. “I’m not usually this nice,” he warned.

The boy looked up, expressionless. “No?”

“No. I don’t like people.”

The kid’s eyes fell again as he concentrated on twisting the straw wrapper around his index finger so tight the tip began to turn purple. “I don’t either,” he said. Albert wondered if this was the first time that the kid had admitted his dislike for people. “That might surprise you since you probably think I’m some dumb kid, but I think most people are motherfucking assholes.” The boy laughed a little, amused by his own thoughts.

Albert leaned in, caught off guard. The kid was unpredictable. Albert liked that.

A lot.

“Oh yeah?” he urged. “Tell me more.”

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

“I don’t care. I just like hearing ya talk,” Albert replied, also in a whisper.

He blushed a little. “Really?”

“Yeah. Tell me who ya hate the most.”

The kid chewed on the right corner of his bottom lip before answering, “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.

The boy shrugged. “She embarrassed me, I guess.”

“What’s so bad about that?”

The edges of the kid’s pale colored eyes dimmed from the inside out with a sense of remorse. “She died.”

“You’re embarrassed because she’s *dead*?”

The kid shook his head, looked out the window. Maybe he was trying to find someone he knew in the passing crowd of the evening rush. “My mother drove them off a cliff. My father was with her.”

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,” the kid said, maybe too casually. “I guess the brakes failed.”

An element of truth danced in the heavy air between them, like an invisible string pulled from the sudden tears the kid was trying to keep from falling. In that moment, Albert suspected what the kid had done. And it scared him. But it thrilled him, too.

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

The boy 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...Portland.” He said it like the place was hell.

“Damn, when did this go down?”

A few tears won the battle and spilled down the sides of the kid’s face. “Last night,” he said.

The waitress appeared with a coffee pot. She splashed more into Albert’s cup with a sigh before sauntering off again. “That’s rough,” Albert said.

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

“How come you say that?”

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

“Wait—you were *there?*”

The kid nodded. His eyes continued to flash with a sad fire. “Even though I hated her, I really didn’t want it to happen.”

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

“Yeah,” the boy said. “My sister will probably go next. She’s been through...a lot...a lot of crazy shit.”

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

The kid 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?”

The boy grinned. “Anybody can. Everybody’s lonely.”

“Her name’s Bonnie and she’s a lowlife with a mean mouth.”

The kid 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 said, “It’s a’ight.”

“No...it’s just...” His voice trailed off.

“Spit it out, kid.”

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

Albert looked toward the pie case where the waitress leaned. “You don’t?”

The boy’s voice sounded choked. “No.”

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

“You’re not ugly.”

Albert wrapped his thick fingers through the handle of the coffee cup, and contemplated smashing it against the waitress’s skull. He loved to hit things, destroy them. It made him feel alive. He struggled constantly with the impulse to strike out, kill. “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,” the kid 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 sweatpants 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, allowing the blood to return to the tip. “I like your bruises.”

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

“Hey. Ya forgot my mustard,” Albert said. She gave him a sour look and sighed loudly, fetching one from behind the counter. Albert snatched the bottle from her, giving her a look that shooed her away.

The anticipation of the unknown made Albert high with a mind-racing thrill he feared was revealed in his eyes and the ridiculous smile he hoped didn’t betray him. Albert dipped each onion ring in a puddle of mustard and licked his greasy fingers clean. He watched as Joey took furtive bites of his club sandwich and delicate sips of his vanilla Coke. He dabbed at each corner of his mouth with a napkin after every bite, as if the crumbs around his lips were pieces of evidence that he didn’t want to leave behind.



An hour and ten minutes had passed since they first collided beneath the train tracks. 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. He did neither. He felt the black handle of the red duffel bag slipping down his shoulder. He pulled the bag up again and slid his hands into 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 just got off work. 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 mailbox."

"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. I mean, I do. Sometimes. The letter will answer her questions...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 like lifelong friends who shared a deep secret.

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

"You would do that?" Joey asked. "What about the gym? 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'd eat him up alive. They could spot a sissy from a mile away. "No. That place ain't good for you."

"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's this kid think he's going? "Hey," Albert said. "What are ya doin'? You leavin'?"

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 when he moved close to Albert. “I liked having dinner 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 other’s mouth. Albert felt his lungs aching from the cold and uncertainty. He felt a gnawing frustration turning into a desire to smash something. He glanced at the lamp post on the corner, taking in 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, surprising them both.

Joey smiled. He raised a hand and reached toward 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.”

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

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

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

Albert faced the lamp post, ready to strike. He was surprised to feel tears burning 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 since when I was a kid, ya know.”

“Maybe that’s it.” Joey moved closer to Albert. “Nobody’s been nice to me in a long time either.”

“No?”

Joey shook his head. “No.”

“I dare someone to fuck with you now.”

The boy’s face bloomed into a grin. “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 said, “Dare me.”

Joey shrugged and backed away from Albert, as if the moment were too intense. “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’.”

“Okay.”

“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 as they shifted and elbowed through the crowd heading the other way. “What do you want to do?”

Albert cracked his knuckles, switched his duffel 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 sounds sweet.”

“I told you I ain’t—”

“Maybe you 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 walking 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, gripping the edge of the envelope and holding 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. “I took the first plane home today,” he said. “And I’ll probably get caught for what happened.”

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

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

Albert smiled and breathed. “I know someplace warm we can go. We gotta walk, though. My van’s in the garage ’til tomorrow mornin’.”

They crossed another street, walking beneath the train tracks cutting through the city like a symmetrical forest, with a backdrop of wooden walls plastered with posters that announced the upcoming release of a CD by a female rap star.

“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 dinner.”

“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. 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. “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 the front pockets of his sweatshirt and blew into his palms. On impulse, Albert reached out and grabbed both of Joey’s hands. He pulled them toward him, holding 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. Albert didn’t let go. He tightened his grip on Joey’s hands, pulling on them so Joey had no choice but to step closer.

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