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Part One:
Austin, 2007

Chapter One

I am untouchable. When I'm like this—just a shadow, just a ghost, just a whisper on the breeze—nothing can get close enough to drag me down. I feel invincible, which is why I find myself returning to this high over and over again. Feet tapping pavement, each a brief reconnection with the earth before I continue to fly. Even the wind can't keep up as my arms pump, as the sweat abandons my brow, as I find perfect stillness in the midst of so much motion. Somehow, while running, I manage to stop time. Silence. Solitude. Nothing can touch me here, and yet... lately I find myself wanting to be touched.

Kelly Phillips blinked and turned his head slightly. Part of him did so unwillingly because this meant breaking the spell. Then again, the figure he saw out of the corner of his eye summoned up another sort of magic. Jared was running beside him—or more accurately, somewhat behind him. The thick jaw that normally jutted to the side when he smiled was now clenched in concentration. Jared's fists were balled, his muscles tense as he tried to catch up, to overcome and pass before they reached the white finish line. Kelly almost laughed, but not mockingly. Even

with his face screwed up, his blue eyes bulging, and his brown hair in disarray, Jared was handsome.

But he would never win. Not like that, all tensed up and stomping the pavement. Why was Jared trying so hard? Running was akin to gliding across water, sliding between blades of air, letting the world fall behind and disappear. Kelly sighed. Time to come back down to earth. Keeping an eye on his friend, he slowed his pace, hating how heavy his legs felt as gravity took hold once more. Jared noticed the advantage and gave an extra burst of effort, but even then Kelly had to restrain himself lest he win the race.

Jared reached the white line first, leapt over it and spun around with an expression of exhilaration. "Yes!" he shouted, pumping a fist in the air. Then he bent over and placed hands on his knees, panting to catch his breath.

Kelly came to a much more controlled stop next to him, smiling as he too worked on refilling his lungs. "Not bad," he said.

"Not bad?" Jared looked up in disbelief. "I beat your sorry ass, didn't I?"

"This time," Kelly said. "Care for a rematch?"

Jared panicked. "No! Ha! No way. We've trained enough, don't you think?"

Kelly shrugged and glanced around at the empty track. Classes were over for the day, most students having wandered off to begin the weekend. The normally chaotic high school campus was now serene. With the oppressive heat of summer finally at an end, Kelly was happy to get his body sweating in a more enjoyable fashion.

"We're done here," Jared said. "I've got it nailed anyway. Right?"

Kelly eyed him. "You need to loosen up. Let your arms and legs do what comes naturally instead of trying to control them."

"What comes naturally to *you*," Jared said. After a pause, he added, "You let me win."

Kelly fought down a smile. "You would have pulverized anyone else on this track. That's what counts."

"Then I'm glad we're not competing." Jared grabbed the front of his shirt and started agitating the fabric back and forth to cool his chest.

This sent a whiff of sweaty air to Kelly's nose, one that must have been filled with pheromones, because it made him heady. "You're going to own this triathlon," he breathed. "There's no competition."

Jared raised an eyebrow. "Only because you opted out. Not that I'm complaining."

"I'm not much of a swimmer," Kelly said dismissively.

"Neither am I. I've got biking down. You're right that no one is faster than us, but I'm still worried about the swimming part."

Kelly scoffed. "How many times did you drag me to the pool this summer? I don't remember any lifeguards coming to your rescue. Despite your best efforts."

"You mean when I pretended to drown?"

"When you treaded water while shouting 'help' a few times. Very convincing."

Jared grinned. "Seemed smooth to me. It's not my fault she didn't take the bait."

Kelly didn't smile in return. The lifeguard had been a forty-something blonde woman with ridiculously big breasts. A poor man's Pamela Anderson. He was pretty sure Jared hadn't found her attractive and was only trying to be funny, but even the idea that he could be straight had made Kelly jealous. Still did. Of course Jared probably did like women. He certainly talked about them enough. Kelly knew his own fantasies were hopeless but that didn't dispel the increasing hunger inside of him.

"Wanna hit the showers?" he asked.

"Okay." Jared led the way back to the main school building. As he walked, he seemed lost in thought. They were entering the locker room before he spoke again. "There's this guy..."

This guy I like. Who I really really like. My best friend, actually. Kelly fantasized Jared saying these words. He kept quiet, just in case he'd turned psychic.

"He's on the swim team," Jared said instead. "Supposed to be good. William something-or-other."

"That's an unusual last name," Kelly replied.

Jared snapped his fingers. "Townson. William Townson. You know who I mean?"

Kelly checked his memory, coming up with a foggy image of a scrawny guy with a mop of blond hair. "I think I had a class with him in seventh grade."

"Oh," Jared said. "Well anyway, people keep saying he's going to win the triathlon."

"Because he can dog paddle?" Kelly rolled his eyes. "All the distance, all the speed, happens during the cycling and track segments. Splashing around in water doesn't count for much."

"But that's how the race starts," Jared said. "What if he gets a big enough lead? They want us to do twelve laps."

"Twelve?" Kelly asked as he opened his locker. "Wow."

Jared nodded, leaning against the locker next to his. "Exactly. That's why I asked for your help. I'll need to make up for lost time in the final stretch."

"You'll overtake him on your bike." Kelly allowed his eyes to dart downward. "You've got strong legs."

"Thanks, but get this: During lunch, someone told me he bikes to school every single day."

Kelly stopped digging around in his locker and turned to face him. "William?"

"Yeah." Jared's face was surprisingly vulnerable, like a kid convinced he wasn't getting the toy he wanted for Christmas.

"Maybe William is fast in the water," Kelly said, "and maybe he likes riding his bike, but you *know* how hard running is. Remember when we first started out? How winded we'd get even over the shortest distance? Make it through the first segment of the triathlon and William will be a fish out of water. You'll breeze by him while he's floundering on the pavement."

Jared grinned. "I want that trophy so fucking bad!"

Kelly smiled back. "It's already yours."

Jared studied him a moment longer, slammed his fist against a locker, and nodded. "It's already mine!"

Kelly kept smiling, shaking his head as he slowly got undressed and Jared went to do the same. His happy expression soon faded as he listened to what took place behind him. The rustle of fabric as a shirt was pulled up. Shoes thumping on the floor as each was kicked off. The gentle plop of shorts hitting the ground. The sound of bare feet padding toward the showers.

Kelly followed a moment later but waited just long enough that the shower water was already running. He wouldn't look. Kelly never looked. Not even a peek. Just the thought of Jared naked—water streaming over the curves of his body—was enough to make the blood rush to Kelly's cock. So he didn't glance over at Jared or even let himself think. Kelly willed his mind to go numb and went about showering, not even acknowledging how his own hands felt when soaping up his body or rinsing out his short-cropped hair.

Kelly finished first and got dressed slowly, facing his locker and not responding to whatever joke Jared made when he returned from the showers. Only when he heard the metallic grind of jeans zipping up did he allow his shoulders to relax. Then he turned around.

"You all right?" Jared asked, pulling on a T-shirt. "You always seem so tense after a run. Maybe you need to jack off or something."

Kelly raised an eyebrow.

Jared leaned toward him, put an open palm next to his mouth, and stage-whispered, "Everybody does it!"

"Now I know why you take so long in the shower."

"Hey, I only do it in the safety of my bedroom. I even wait until my parents are asleep."

Kelly smirked. "How very considerate of you."

"I think so." Jared pulled on a fresh pair of socks. "So what's going on this weekend?"

There was no doubt they would spend it together. They had done so ever since Jared moved into town last year. Only recently had things become complicated. Now being with Jared was something he needed instead of wanted.

"It's family night," Kelly said. "Tomorrow... I don't know. Just hang out, maybe make a night of it. Want to crash at my place?"

Jared nodded curtly. "Cool."

"Cool," Kelly echoed, even though what he felt was closer to warmth. "Just promise me you don't 'relieve tension' once I've fallen asleep. If I roll over into a sticky puddle, you're sleeping on the floor from now on."

Jared laughed shamelessly and shook his head. If only he knew the truth: For the past month, Kelly had lain in bed with open eyes, staring into the dark and waiting for Jared to fall asleep first. His intentions were more innocent, or so he tried to convince himself. Kelly wasn't horny and seeking release. Maybe his infatuation had started with such thoughts, but now what he wanted from Jared was more than just physical. Although some emotions were best expressed that way. Kelly knew he was playing with fire. Getting caught could change everything. But if the stirring in his heart was anything to go by, tomorrow night he would risk it all again.

* * * * *

On Saturday afternoon, Kelly yawned his way through math homework. His parents sat to either side of him at the kitchen table, his mother flipping through a magazine, his father playing *Mario Party* on a Nintendo DS. All these diversions were infinitely more appealing than typing numbers into his cell phone's calculator, but Kelly was nearly finished. Then he'd be free to meet Jared and really start his weekend.

That was the deal with his parents. Get good grades and he was free to do whatever he wished. No curfews, no tedious rules—just one responsibility that he was expected to uphold. The same work ethic was shared by his parents.

Doug the plumber and Laisha the bankruptcy lawyer. An odd combination, but his parents shared one thing in common: Both worked their asses off. They did so with the weekend in mind. Every Friday evening, their cell phones were turned off and remained that way until Monday morning, regardless of emergencies. His mother had an assistant to deal with such occurrences, and his father usually had a reliable apprentice or two. The focus of the weekend was spending time together.

This began with a night out on Fridays. Kelly and his younger brother Royal weren't obligated to join in, but with their parents in high spirits and feeling generous, neither liked to miss out. Last night had been okay. They went to the cinema and watched Captain Jack Sparrow swagger around the screen, but all Kelly could think about was how much Jared gushed about the movie when he had seen it during the summer. He had gone with a neighbor girl, referring to her as a date before they actually went. Afterwards Jared had only talked about the movie, never mentioning the girl. Kelly had felt relieved by that. Encouraged even.

"Your aunt called," Laisha said. "She wants to know what you want for your birthday."

"Money," Kelly answered immediately, not taking his eyes off his homework.

"You haven't given us many ideas either," his mother continued. "I miss those lists you'd make when you were little. Always in alphabetical order."

"I can still do that," Kelly replied. He thought a moment and glanced up. "Cash. Followed by gold, money, stocks, and wealth."

"Why do you need so much money?" his father asked.

"I plan on blowing most of it on horse races. The rest will go to booze and rent boys."

Doug paused his game and raised an eyebrow. "Rent boys?"

"Male prostitutes," Laisha said, "and before you panic, he's kidding."

"I sure hope so," Doug replied. "Gay or not, our boy is too handsome to pay for it."

Kelly shook his head. "Awkward. Thank you, but seriously... Awkward."

"Then tell us what you want," his mother said.

"I'm saving up for a new camera lens. I need to buy it myself, since there are complicated technical details and compatibility issues to keep in mind."

"Then maybe we'll take you shopping for one," Laisha said.

"Or how about a nice disposable camera?" his father suggested. "You use them once and drop them off at the drugstore. No fuss, no muss."

Kelly ignored him and addressed his mother. "Telephoto lenses are expensive, but maybe we could combine my birthday and Christmas presents into one."

"You won't be sad, having nothing to open on one of those holidays?"

"Absolutely not," Kelly said. "This lens is all I need. Seriously!"

Laisha nodded to his homework. "You just keep working hard and we'll see."

Kelly grinned at her and returned his attention to the task at hand. He felt doubly motivated now. An awesome birthday to look forward to at the end of the month, and—after a few more equations—a weekend spent with Jared. The second he was finished, he slammed the book shut, grabbed his phone, and sent a quick text message to his friend. He sat waiting for a response, watching his father lose himself in the latest *Super Mario* game.

"I don't get it," Kelly said. "You work as a plumber all week. Why do you want to play one on the weekend?"

"Mario isn't just a plumber," his father said, continuing to hammer buttons. "He's practically the patron saint of this family."

"Speaking of false religions," Kelly said, "I'm going to 'church' tomorrow. Jared is spending the night, so play along, okay?"

Laisha shook her head disapprovingly. "He's your best friend. You should tell him the truth."

"That I'm gay? You have no idea how wrong that could go."

"And yet you came out to us," his mother continued. "We could have kicked you out or taken you to some quack of a doctor. So much could have gone wrong, but you were brave and did the right thing anyway."

Kelly sighed. "Because I know you guys love me. The worst that happened is Dad couldn't stop laughing."

"I kept picturing when you were eight years old and dressed in drag for Halloween," Doug said. "I thought there would be more of that."

"It wasn't drag," Laisha said. "He wanted to be a nurse!"

"In a wig," Kelly admitted sheepishly. "I could have been a male nurse, but no. I insisted on wearing nail polish too."

"And lipstick." His father fought down a smile. "So many people that night complimented me on my pretty daughter. I felt oddly proud. In fact, I haven't felt as proud of you since. Maybe Nurse Kelly should make a comeback." When his wife glared at him, he quickly returned his attention to his game.

"Anyway," Kelly said, "I knew you guys would have my back. Jared doesn't share that obligation, and school is miserable enough without broadcasting my personal life."

"Eventually he's going to notice," Laisha said. "Or someone else will when they see you together. Lately it's hard to miss."

Before he could respond, the phone chimed. Kelly grabbed it and read the text message.

what are we doing

Kelly searched for a good idea but came up empty, so he went with the default. *The mall?*

on my way

Kelly pocketed the phone. As he stood, he saw his mother's worried expression. "There's nothing to tell. We're just friends."

Laisha considered him. "When I was in college, your father kept saying the same thing. He'd show up at my dorm room day after day with a bouquet of flowers, and he'd always say—"

"Flowers for my best friend," Doug said. "You looked terrified each time. Somehow it worked though."

“Yes, but all you needed to do was tell me the truth. Instead of flowers, I wanted to hear how you really felt about me.”

His father appeared puzzled. “But you liked the flowers, didn’t you?”

“Not as much as I liked you showing up. And I wasn’t terrified. I was excited. And nervous.”

Kelly watched his mother’s eyes shine at the memory. A little persistence and a bunch of flowers. If only it could be that easy for him, strolling up to Jared and thrusting out a bouquet of roses that communicated everything he felt. Or better yet, forget the flowers. Kelly would rather speak those three magical words. What a way to come out! No careful explanations, no awkward questions afterwards. Just the truth, spoken aloud, carrying countless implications in so few syllables.

I love you.

* * * * *

Jared was easily entertained. Kelly couldn’t remember ever seeing him yawn, even near bedtime. Thank goodness, because this was their third trip to the mall this month and November was still young. They strolled through stores long-familiar to them both, eyes scanning inventory that hadn’t changed since their last visit. Neither was looking to buy, so they mostly just talked.

“I can’t believe you brought that thing along,” Jared said.

“Why?” Kelly asked, reaching for the camera that hung around his neck.

“It’s so nerdy.”

“The camera is awesome.” Kelly lifted it to his face and clicked the shutter. On the display screen flashed an image of Jared looking annoyed. He’d add it to the collection. Kelly lowered the camera slightly and glanced around for inspiration. “Grab that dress and hold it up.”

Jared appeared puzzled before taking a dress off the rack. He held it away from him, looking like a bullfighter wielding a black flag covered in sequins.

“Hold it *against* you,” Kelly said.

"You're crazy!" Jared guffawed, but did what he was told. "You're not going to take a photo, are you?"

Contrary to his words, Jared was clearly amused by the idea. He even flipped the hanger over so it couldn't be seen, holding the dress fabric right up to his neck. Like Kelly, he had a runner's build, meaning he was lithe enough that the dress might actually fit him.

"Looking good," Kelly said as he snapped a few photos. "I think we might have found this season's top model!"

Jared jutted out his hip to appear more feminine. After a couple more photos, he reached for the camera. "Your turn."

"Not a chance," Kelly said, taking a step back. "My drag days are firmly behind me."

Jared snorted. "Just as well. You know you can't compete."

"You're probably right."

One of the salesclerks gave them the evil eye, so they put the dress back, left the store, and headed out to the mall corridor. Kelly flipped through preview images on the camera as they walked. One was a close-up of Jared's face, and for once he didn't look annoyed. Damn that smile was gorgeous!

"Stop messing with that thing," Jared hissed.

Kelly glanced up at him, then followed his gaze to a group of girls coming toward them. Not wanting to embarrass his friend, he slung the camera around to his side where it stood out less. Jared started strutting just as the girls were passing, his head turning to follow them. Then he pretended an invisible force was dragging him backward, like a hooked fish. After hopping on one foot a couple of times, he winked and resumed walking normally.

The girls giggled. Kelly turned away from them with a grimace. Nothing confused him more than the fairer sex. Did their giggles mean they thought Jared was stupid? Were they mocking him? Or, like Kelly, perhaps they found his antics more adorable than embarrassing.

"You've got to work on your moves," Kelly said once the girls were out of earshot.

"They liked me," Jared said, oozing confidence. "Besides, I didn't see you trying."

"I let the ladies come to me." Kelly instantly hated himself for pretending. He should be brave like his mother kept insisting he was. Besides, what did he have to gain by playing straight? If Jared was interested in him, this little charade would send the wrong signal. Coming out would be more strategic. That way Jared could do the same and they could finally admit the truth to each other.

Yeah, right. Kelly sighed. He already knew the truth. Jared was straight. There wasn't a chance in hell they could be together, but in the meantime, at least he could pretend. As long as he never gave Jared an opportunity to shoot him down, Kelly could keep dancing with his own delusions.

"Sorry, man," Jared said, mistaking the reason for his exasperation. "I was only kidding. Besides, who am I to talk? When's the last time I got any action?"

Kelly grinned. "When your cousin tried to kiss you."

Jared winced. "Don't remind me."

They both laughed, but as they kept walking, Kelly glanced over at Jared and wondered why his friend was always single. Sure he had sort of a big nose and his forehead was often a battleground for acne, but past these imperfections, he was downright fine. If the ladies couldn't see that, it was their loss.

"Hey, we never go in there," Jared said, bumping against Kelly and forcing him to enter a store.

A moment later Kelly found himself surrounded by princesses, pirates, and animals wearing human expressions. Disneyland had come to Texas, or at least its gift shop had. He followed Jared, who picked up various items and made snarky comments. Kelly barely heard his words, amazed by the sheer amount of corporate propaganda stuffed into such a small space. He lifted his camera and took a few photos, feeling like a tourist at the actual theme park. When they circled back around to the entrance, a pile of stuffed animals caught his eye.

Eeyore—the eternally depressed donkey from the Winnie-the-Pooh books. As a child, Kelly had always liked him best. Unlike the other maniacally grinning characters in children’s stories, Eeyore seemed much more honest. With his big fat back turned away from the world, he seemed to say, “Prepare yourself, kid. Life sure can suck sometimes.” Here the message was loud and clear. Eeyore the stuffed animal wasn’t even allowed his individuality anymore, set among countless plush clones of himself. Adding insult to injury was the sign above him advertising seventy percent off the normal price.

“We don’t want him anymore,” Kelly said, peering through the camera’s viewfinder. “Take the miserable ass home with you.” He snapped a couple photos and was steadying himself to take another when a concerned face filled the lens.

An older man stood between them and the display, an open palm raised as if he were a celebrity trying to fend off paparazzi. “I’m sorry, but we don’t allow photos.”

Kelly lowered the camera. “Why not?”

“Company policy,” the man said, hand still poised in the air.

“It’s just a bunch of stuffed animals,” Jared replied.

“No,” the man corrected, “it’s company property.”

“What if I bought one?” Kelly asked. “Then it would be *my* property and I could take photos of it all I wanted.”

The man hesitated. “That’s correct.”

“So then why does it matter?” Kelly pressed. “If people can take photos of them at home, it’s not like there’s some big secret worth protecting. You can probably find hundreds of photos of these things on eBay right now.”

The man dropped his hand and glanced around helplessly. Then another idea must have occurred to him, because he stood up straight and sniffed. “You can’t take photos of the store,” he said. “Company policy.”

Kelly snorted. “Trying to stop your competitors from stealing your amazing marketing secrets?”

“Like putting sale items by the entrance,” Jared said. “To lure in customers.”

“Or how the cartoons playing at the back of the store get kids in the rest of the way, dragging their parents along with them.”

“Or the impulse items near the cash register,” Jared said.

Kelly nudged him playfully. “Gosh, no one has ever thought of that before!”

The man glanced between them, his face turning red. Finally he sputtered, “Do I need to call security?”

“Don’t bother,” Kelly said. “We were just leaving.”

Before they went, he took one more photo, this time of the man’s blood-flushed face.

“I had no idea how much fun that camera could be,” Jared said as they continued walking down the mall corridor. “It’s annoying when you point it at me, but I never realized it would piss other people off. Let me try!”

“No way,” Kelly said. “It’s expensive. Besides, that guy was a big enough asshole to actually call security. Let’s go before they show up and make me delete my photos.”

They arrived safely at the car without incident, which was almost disappointing. Then they grabbed some fast food from a drive-through and cruised around Austin as the sun set, not having a destination in mind and not caring. Being free was enough. No parents, no school. No rules except for traffic laws, and Kelly broke most of those at one point or another. As long as the car was in motion, they were free. Jared was DJ, choosing songs from the MP3 player connected to the car stereo. Occasionally, when some random thought occurred to him, he would turn it down and they would talk.

In other words, the perfect night. On Monday when he was back at school, other people would no doubt brag about a big weekend party or whatever. Kelly would simply say that he and Jared drove around, but that didn’t communicate just how amazing a time this was. Hanging out together felt good. Simple as that. From the frequent grins Jared flashed him, he felt the same way.

So maybe there was no chance of them getting physical, but surely this was the reason Jared was single. No girl could offer

him companionship like Kelly could. Aside from sexual frustration, Jared probably didn't feel he was missing much of anything. Kelly sure didn't. Sex together would be awesome, but they already had everything else.

The contents of the gas tank dwindled to fumes as the night wore on. Neither of them had cash for a refill, so they drove back to Kelly's house. Hopefully one of his parents would take the car out on an errand in the morning and fill it up again. Otherwise he'd be pushing it anywhere he wanted to go.

Once upstairs in Kelly's room, they watched TV, the queen-sized bed doubling as a couch. After catching the second half of an instantly forgettable action movie, they shut it off. Jared flopped onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. Kelly sat cross-legged and watched him, resisting the urge to grab his camera. The sole illumination came from the off-white Christmas lights he'd hung in one corner. The shadows cast across Jared's face made him appear much more introspective than usual, but when he spoke, his words didn't suit the moody scene.

"I wish I was the fastest man alive."

Kelly chuckled. "Why?"

"Because I need to win that race."

"The triathlon?" Kelly shook his head. "Why are you so obsessed with it?"

Jared rolled over to face him. "Because winning a bunch of ribbons and medals isn't enough."

Kelly glanced over at his underwear drawer, where he'd carelessly stashed his own awards—all of them first place except for the events he'd allowed Jared to win. Both he and Jared were competitive, a trait that drew them together. Kelly worried it could also tear them apart. Lately Jared's enthusiasm had begun to fade. The one time Kelly asked why, Jared simply shook his head. All that changed once the triathlon had been announced and Jared found his competitive fire once again. But only after making sure Kelly wouldn't be entering.

"Do you resent me?" Kelly asked. "I know I win a lot of events, but I didn't want—"

"It's got nothing to do with that," Jared said. "Yeah, I wish I was as fast as you, but even if I'd placed first in every event last year, it still wouldn't have made a difference."

Kelly's brow came together. "Made a difference how?"

"To my dad. I thought he'd be impressed, but when I tossed those medals on the table, he just nodded and said 'good job'. Then he started talking about Steven again."

"Your brother." Kelly nodded his understanding. Steven was two years older, currently at the University of Texas on a football scholarship and playing for the Longhorns as a wide receiver.

"I'm so sick of living in his shadow," Jared said. "I'm not strong enough for football, and my hand-eye coordination sucks, but I can haul ass. I could leave my brother in the dust, not that it matters to my dad. It's all Steven and his stupid pigskin. Especially now, with big-league scouts chasing after him."

Kelly's eyes went wide. "Seriously?"

Jared nodded. "Yup. Two more years and he'll probably be in the fucking NFL. But before that happens, just once, I'd like to get my dad's attention. Have you seen the trophy?"

Kelly had, because three weeks ago, Jared had dragged him to the front of the school to bear witness. There, in one of the glass cases, was the trophy. Coach Watson was campaigning to get the school behind an official triathlon club, even pushing the sport as a potential elective. Desperate to get as many students signed up for the race as possible, he'd chosen a trophy that was an ornate disaster. Three pillars rose up from a bronze plate, forming a pedestal, and on this sat some ungodly version of the Holy Grail—a golden cup complete with looping handles and three fake rubies.

"Exactly," Jared said, misinterpreting Kelly's look of abhorrence as one of awe. "Just imagine me slapping that thing down on the dinner table. It'll blow Dad's mind."

Few trophies, if any, could compare with getting headhunted by an NFL scout, but Kelly didn't have the heart to tell Jared that. "I'm sure your dad is proud of you already," he said. "He'd be crazy not to be."

“Maybe,” Jared said, rolling onto his back again. “He’ll be way more proud if I bring home that trophy.”

“And you will,” Kelly promised him. “On Monday, it’s back to training.”

They mapped out a rough plan of areas to strengthen. By the time they were too tired to discuss it anymore, Jared was smiling again. After taking turns in the bathroom, they stripped down to their underwear, just as they always did. Once under the sheets and the room was dark, they went to sleep. One of them did, anyway. Kelly remained awake, listening to the sound of Jared’s breathing. When enough time had passed—more than an hour according to the red digits on the nightstand—and when he felt certain that Jared was deep asleep, Kelly shifted in bed.

To an outsider, he hoped this sudden movement appeared careless and impulsive, maybe a reaction to a dream, resulting in his arm pressing along Jared’s side and one knee nestling against Jared’s leg. Kelly remained rigid, terrified as always that the body contact would wake his friend. When it didn’t, he allowed himself to exhale and relax, basking in how warm their skin became where it touched. Unable to resist any longer, he moved once more, resting an open hand on Jared’s back. This was all Kelly ever allowed himself, and frankly, it already seemed too much. But he liked it. Only in sleep could Jared be his unknowing lover, providing him with comfort impossible in the waking world.

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