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## Chapter Two

When Kelly awoke the next morning, Jared's side of the bed was empty. This caused a jolt of fear, accompanied by nightmare images of their bodies getting tangled up during the night, Jared waking to find Kelly's arms around him. Then he heard the drone of television, the volume turned down low. Nothing had happened last night. For better or worse, everything was still the same.

Jared sat on the edge of the bed, watching the original *Terminator* movie. At the moment, a waitress with heavy-metal hair was locked in combat with an evil Arnold Schwarzenegger. Jared, having put on his jeans, watched all of this while chuckling under his breath.

"Laugh all you want," Kelly said, yawning and stretching. "It's a true story. I'm actually from the future. I was sent back to protect you because one day you'll save the human race. To do so, first you must win the triathlon."

Jared glanced back at him. "You seriously need to get a Blu-ray player up here. Nothing sucks worse than Sunday morning television."

"Feel free to buy me one for my birthday." Kelly sat up and watched the screen, waiting for his morning wood to go down. Once it had, he slipped on his jeans and went to use the restroom. When he returned, the television was off and Jared was putting on his shoes. "Leaving already?"

Jared nodded. "You've got church, don't you?"

"Yeah, but there's still time for a bowl of cereal."

“No thanks.”

Kelly blinked. Maybe something *had* gone wrong in the night. “You sure? We’ve got Count Chocula. Or Boo-Berry. Lady’s choice.”

“Definitely not. I’ve been drinking protein shakes in the morning. Part of my training.” Jared finished tying his laces and glanced up. “We still on for tomorrow? After school?”

“Totally,” Kelly said, relaxing a little. He walked Jared to the door, then strolled into the kitchen to gather his breakfast. He ate while sitting on the couch, watching his little brother play video games. Royal challenged him to a round of *Mortal Kombat* afterwards, which turned into a multi-hour marathon lasting through lunch. Kelly wasn’t pulling any punches, leaving his little brother sulking.

After one particularly bad beatdown, Royal paused the game and glowered at Kelly. “Aren’t you supposed to be at your gay-ass club?”

Kelly noticed the time, tossed the controller aside, and gently smacked his brother upside the head. “Don’t get lippy or the fighting will move from the screen to this floor.”

“I’m shaking,” Royal said sarcastically, smiling when Kelly failed to make him flinch with a faux punch.

His little brother wasn’t so little anymore. Not only was he growing at an alarming rate, but he’d be starting high school next year. During Kelly’s final two semesters, they would be passing each other in the hall. That was a sobering thought.

“Have fun playing with yourself,” Kelly said, hopping to his feet and heading upstairs.

After a thorough shower and half an hour in front of the mirror, Kelly felt as close to perfection as he ever did. Not that it would matter. There were guys he found attractive at most meetings, but for the last few months, Kelly had been practicing celibacy. Sacrificing the needs of his body added credence to the claims of his heart. Jared might not ever know it, but Kelly was proving his dedication to him, no matter how impossible the odds. How noble! How romantic!

How nauseating. Laughing at his reflection in the mirror, Kelly flicked off the light and headed downstairs. After saying goodbye to his father and kissing his mother on the cheek, he hopped in the car and started driving.

He really was going to church. That much wasn't a lie. There just wouldn't be a service when he got there. Kelly had first made the trek across town three years ago when he was thirteen. He had gone by foot, a grueling two-hour hike that concluded with him standing on the opposite side of the church parking lot, too scared to go inside. At the end of the meeting when everyone came outside, Kelly saw his first gay people in the wild, stunned by how normal they all looked. Even the two guys holding hands—a vision that made his heart flutter and confirmed what he already suspected: He was gay, and this was the life for him.

Two weeks later he returned, this time by bicycle. Working up the courage to enter hadn't been easy, but Kelly had done so. His reward was disappointment. The group leader, Phil, felt Kelly was too young. Apparently the "youth" part of a gay youth meeting didn't start until age fourteen. Kelly had waited outside in the parking lot, this time by the door, one of the older guys stopping to talk to him briefly. That had been thrilling, and was enough for Kelly to keep coming back sporadically, slowly getting to know the regulars and tagging along for coffee a few times, even if he was the only one who drank soda instead.

Then his fourteenth birthday came and went, and Kelly brought along his birth certificate, just in case Phil tried booting him out again. But he didn't, and it made all the difference. Being gay started to feel normal. Guys loved guys, girls loved girls. Kelly had a chance to see that every week, and to experience relationships, dating, and all the complications and delights that came with them. Being gay was no longer abstract or lonely, which made Kelly happy. Mostly. Having a boyfriend again would be nice. One that lasted more than a few weeks anyway.

Kelly made a slight detour on his way to the church, pulling into a nearby neighborhood and parking on the side of the street. He glanced over at the one-story house, tapped his horn when he

saw that no one was standing behind the glass door, and started fiddling with his MP3 player. A few minutes later the passenger-side door opened, and a slight figure climbed inside, a whiff of men's cologne accompanying her.

Kelly inhaled. "Someone smells good today!"

Bonnie crinkled her nose at him. "Do you like it?"

"I do, but it's such a manly smell that I'm getting confused. I sort of feel like kissing you right now."

Bonnie raised a seductive eyebrow. "Maybe I'll let you!" She leaned over, but instead of going for his lips, she gave him a harmless peck on the cheek. She was laughing and about to pull away when she noticed the dashboard. "Is that supposed to be lit up?"

Kelly followed her gaze and swore. The gas light was on. So much for his parents paying for a fill-up. He dug out his wallet and found a limp and lonely five dollar bill. He held it up and shrugged helplessly, causing Bonnie to moan. "Why can't we be rich?" she cried. Lifting her rump, she yanked on the thick metal chain hanging off her jeans, bringing her own wallet into view. She managed to triple their income with ten bucks.

"I'll pay you back," Kelly promised.

"Don't worry about it," Bonnie said. "You've been giving me rides for how long now?"

Kelly whistled under his breath as they cruised out into the street. "We must be getting close to our one-year anniversary."

"Really?" Bonnie flipped down the visor and glanced in the mirror, brushing at the short-cropped hair she had dyed cranberry red a few weeks back. Already her dark roots were showing, but it looked cool. "We should do something special. Maybe a candlelight dinner followed by matching tattoos."

"I've been thinking about getting my lip pierced," Kelly said.

Bonnie brightened up. "Even better!"

"Of course such things require cash. Bank robbery?"

"Hmmm. You willing to change your name to Clyde?"

It took him a moment to get the joke, but he laughed once he did. "We could get jobs together somewhere."

“Or maybe a rich girl will be at group today. Someone who wants to shower me with gifts. And affection.”

“You never know,” Kelly said, pulling into a gas station.

As he stood at the pump, he considered how the most exciting part of each meeting was the time leading up to it. By now he knew all the regulars. Any guy he found attractive—and who liked him in return—had already been his boyfriend, or in a few rare examples, a casual hookup. The biggest problem so far was finding someone he had anything in common with. Being gay was only enough bond to get a relationship through the first few weeks. That’s why Kelly looked forward to each meeting, hoping someone new would turn his life upside down.

By the time he and Bonnie arrived, the meeting had already started. Everyone was seated in chairs lining the walls of the basement classroom, which made scanning for a new face easy. Zip. Nada. No new love this week.

“Mr. Phillips, Ms. Rivers, please take a seat,” Phil said with a country twang, which suited his appearance well, since he looked fresh from the county fair. The plaid shirt, the thick mustache, the brown hair with feathered bangs... He had an impressive physique too, leading to inevitable crushes among the group, but Kelly had never quite seen eye-to-eye with him. Not since that first meeting when he’d turned Kelly away. “We were just starting a discussion on unrequited love.”

Once they sat down, Bonnie leaned over and whispered, “What’s ‘unrequited’ mean?”

Kelly jogged his memory, unhappy when the answer came to him. He turned a miserable expression on Bonnie, enough for her to understand. “Oh,” she said. “Straight people.”

“That’s a good example,” Phil said, overhearing her, “and one of the most likely scenarios. Every day we are surrounded by heterosexual friends, coworkers, and peers. It’s only natural to develop feelings for someone you find attractive. But what happens when that person is straight?”

“Then you’re shit out of luck!” lisped Layne, a younger guy who was always playing for laughs.

“Language,” Phil said warningly, “but you’re right. A heterosexual person can’t reciprocate those feelings. No matter how much you love them, he or she can’t feel the same way in return. That’s what ‘unrequited’ means.”

“Are you sure?” Lisa asked. She was small and quiet, her voice barely a squeak. Bonnie once had a fleeting crush on her, until their first date together. Afterwards she said something about needing more fire. “Emotions aren’t sexual.”

“Mine are!” Layne declared.

“Lisa is right,” Phil said. “Loving someone doesn’t require being sexually attracted to them. But there is a difference between platonic love—which is what you have for your family and friends—and romantic love, which almost always involves sex. Unless you’ve been together as long as my husband and I have. Ha ha.” No one else in the room laughed, so Phil cleared his throat and continued. “How many of you have loved someone who didn’t reciprocate your feelings?”

Most of the hands in the room went up.

“I definitely did,” said a chubby guy named Scott. “My best friend. I didn’t know I was gay until I fell in love with him.”

That got Kelly’s attention. “What happened?”

Scott blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Did you tell him?” Bonnie asked, realizing the significance.

“Yup!” Scott’s face lit up. “All at once. I told him I was gay and got down on one knee. I know! But it just felt right. Then I told him that I was in love. With him.”

Kelly swallowed. “And then?”

Scott fanned himself dramatically. “He helped me to my feet and hugged me. I cried. It was totally embarrassing.”

Kelly’s jaw was already hanging open, so he used it to speak. “Are you guys together now?”

“Yes!” Scott said happily. “Oh! But not like that. He’s straight, but he’s been wonderfully supportive. He never lets anyone say anything bad about me. He’s a good friend. I couldn’t ask for more.”

Yes he could! Kelly slumped back in his seat, imagining the same scenario playing out with Jared and wondering if he could feel satisfied with friendship and nothing more.

“So anyway,” Phil said, taking control of the meeting again, “many of you have already experienced unrequited love, and I’m certain not all of you have had such a sympathetic response. Loving the wrong person can hurt, which is why you should avoid it at all costs. When you notice yourself becoming attracted to someone who isn’t gay, stop yourself before things go too far. Don’t feed into any sort of fantasy or false hope. You’re better off directing your attention and energy elsewhere.”

“If it were that easy,” Kelly said, “none of us would be here right now.”

Phil turned to him. “I beg your pardon?”

Kelly crossed his arms over his chest. “If we could choose who we love, none of us would be here. We’d all be chasing after the prom queen or whatever.”

This was met by an awkward silence, which Layne eventually broke, but for once he wasn’t kidding around. “I’m proud of who I am. I like being gay!”

“Me too, but wouldn’t you rather be able to date half the population? Aren’t you sick of your options being limited to this room?” Kelly glanced around in exasperation, seeing expressions both offended and—perhaps worse—assenting. “Whatever. I need some fresh air.”

He stood and kept his eyes down as he left the room. He heard someone following behind, which made him tense. As he stepped into daylight and turned around, he discovered it was Bonnie.

“You okay?” she asked. “That didn’t sound like you at all. Well, the attitude maybe, but do you really want a girlfriend?”

“No,” Kelly said, leaning against the church and looking skyward. “I like being gay. I can’t imagine myself any other way. But I want to walk into a mall or a grocery store, look at every guy there, and know that I could have any one of them.”

“Someone’s full of himself,” Bonnie teased, “but I know what you mean. Some of my straight gal pals have a new crush every

week. All those different guys they can choose from, and no matter how hopeless their chances, at least they're compatible at the most basic level. My female friends like guys, and most guys like girls. Simple as that. At least for them. Must be nice."

"Exactly," Kelly said. "I don't wish I was straight, but I do wish all guys were gay. Forget propagating the species. Could you imagine if everyone at your high school was a homo?"

"Absolutely," Bonnie said with a wistful sigh.

"Me too. I've thought about it a lot."

"And out of all those guys, who would you choose?"

Bonnie already knew the answer, but Kelly humored her. "Jared. I'd run right up to him and just... everything."

"Tell him!" Bonnie pleaded. "You've been talking about this for months, but you haven't done anything about it. Stop running in circles and find out, one way or the other."

"Yeah, I know," Kelly said.

"Did you see how happy Scott is?"

"I know," Kelly repeated. "God, that would be awesome! And sad. Ugh!"

"It'll be bittersweet," Bonnie said. "If you love Jared, he must be a nice guy, so I don't think he's going to freak. But you're also hot as hell, and if Jared was gay, he would have made a move by now."

Kelly looked her square in the eye. "You're just trying to cheer me up."

"Is it working?"

He thought about it and nodded. "Yes."

"Good. Now let's go back inside and make peace. You're not getting me kicked out of the one place where I—where both of us—actually have a chance of meeting someone."

Kelly sighed. "Show me a gay pride parade and I'll be right up front, waving a rainbow flag and twirling a glittering baton."

Bonnie slapped him on the ass on the way in. "Attaboy!"

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Chasing after Jared. Kelly had been doing so for months, except now the situation had become literal. Ahead of him on the



track, Jared sprinted, limbs stiff like a Barbie doll. Despite this, he was still fast. Kelly needed to exert little effort to keep up with him, but he was certain Jared had untapped potential.

“You need to relax,” he shouted.

“I’m running!” Jared shouted back. “Who the hell relaxes when they run?”

Kelly would have shrugged if he hadn’t been in motion. The runner’s high felt pretty good to him. Afterwards, all tension purged from his body, he always felt relaxed. Jared, on the other hand, seemed to get more knotted up the longer he ran. Time for a new strategy.

“None of this matters,” Kelly panted, catching up with him. “Right now we’re just practicing, right? So let it go.”

“Let it go?”

“Unclench your hands.”

Jared did so, making him at least appear less rigid.

“Good, now take a deep breath.”

Jared glanced over and laughed. They were already huffing and puffing, but he forced himself to breathe deeply, at least once. His limbs became somewhat more fluid.

“Now pretend you’ve already won,” Kelly coached. “The triathlon was yesterday. You totally nailed it. The trophy is at home, sitting in the middle of the dining room table, and it’s all your dad can talk about.”

Jared smiled.

“Right now you’re just running for fun,” Kelly continued. “And you feel so damn good about winning that you’re faster than ever. You’re unstoppable. Everyone knows it. Even me.”

Jared’s smile became a wild grin. Then he shot forward, not just in a short burst of speed, but in a long stride, his feet flinging behind him one after the other. Kelly stared in shock for a moment before he raced to catch up. And he struggled to do so. The finish line was just ten yards away, and Kelly wasn’t holding back anymore, but he was still behind. He gave his absolute best, and only managed to get shoulder to shoulder with Jared as the lap came to an end.

“Holy shit!” Kelly panted as they jogged to a stop.

“Holy fucking shit!” Jared amended. “Did you let me win that time?”

He shook his head, letting the surprise remain on his face.

Jared chuckled. “Looks like you’ve finally got some competition.”

“Good,” Kelly said, and meant it, because he knew he would push himself even harder—maybe become even faster—now that there was someone to outrun. “If you can do that next Friday, you’ll be done with all three events while everyone else is still climbing out of the pool.”

Jared appeared cocky before growing somber again. “I saw William today.”

Kelly shook his head in confusion. “Who?”

“The swimmer guy. People keep telling me he’s hot shit, so I had someone point him out. I figured I could intimidate him a little, so I went up to the guy and told him he was going to lose.”

“You said that?”

“Yeah. I got all up in his face. Said he didn’t have a chance, that it was hopeless.”

“Wow.” Kelly raised his eyebrows. “You’ve been watching too much fake wrestling on TV.”

“Maybe.”

“So what happened?”

“That’s the worst part,” Jared huffed. “The guy just smiled at me. It wasn’t even a sneer or whatever. He just smiled like I’d said ‘good morning’ or something friendly. The dude wasn’t shaken. Not at all. It’s like I didn’t even matter to him.”

Kelly clenched his jaw. “Where did you find him?”

“After lunch outside Biology. Why?”

“Because I want to see what we’re dealing with.”

Jared exhaled. “He’s big. Lots of muscle.”

“Which will only make him slower.”

“Or give him more power when he swims. Or bikes.”

"Maybe," Kelly said. "Don't worry about it. You keep running like you did just now, and you'll have the advantage. He'll never catch up with you."

"You think so?" Jared asked.

He looked so vulnerable that it made Kelly's heart melt.

"I promise."

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Kelly wandered down a hall stuffed with students, occasionally stopping to stretch up on his toes to get a better view. He was beginning to suspect he was wasting his time. The school had a lot of science classrooms, and tons of people were coming and going. He barely remembered what William looked like, and what Jared had described didn't mesh with the scrawny beanpole Kelly had once known. He made one more trip down the hall and was about to give up when he did a double-take.

Leaning against the wall next to a classroom door was a figure with strong arms and a meaty chest. The primary-green polo shirt detracted from the sex appeal, as did the khaki pants. He was dressed more like a teacher than a student. His face eventually lured Kelly's attention away from the impressive physique. Like a detective searching for a missing person, Kelly aged the image in his mind. Melt away some baby fat from the cheeks, add definition to the jaw and easy smile, thicken the eyebrows above the amused eyes, and make the nose just a little wider... Yup, this was their man. Their enemy.

Kelly reassessed the scene and felt somewhat disappointed. William had his back to the wall more than he was leaning against it. He held a book clutched over his stomach, like he needed to protect himself, but the only person interacting with him was a skinny girl with long red hair. William was nodding along with whatever she was saying and appeared to be slowly inching his way toward the classroom door.

Really? This was their competition? An overgrown boy who still got nervous when talking to girls? Kelly snorted and pushed past a few students to reach him. "William." Kelly said the name loud enough to make the girl turn to see who had spoken. Kelly

swiftly took her place, nudging her aside to stand directly in front of his prey. He stared hard into those green eyes... and didn't see any fight there. Just confusion, and perhaps a little concern.

"Uh," William said.

"Do you know who I am?" Kelly asked, arching one eyebrow.

"Kelly... Right?" William searched his face, brow furrowing. "Yeah. Kelly Phillips."

Okay. The question was meant to be rhetorical, which threw Kelly off, but he found a way of squeezing in his next line anyway. "Wrong. I'm the fastest guy in school. No one can outrun me. No one's ever come close."

William glanced around. Students were gathering, feeling the building pressure. Already the word "fight" was being hissed excitedly. Now the green eyes filled with worry. "Are you saying you want to race?"

"I'm saying there's no point," Kelly snapped. "You'd never keep up with me. I thought no one could, but yesterday, Jared Holt beat me."

"Jared Holt," William repeated. Then recognition dawned. "The guy from yesterday?"

"That's right. So when he came up to you and said you'd never win, you should have listened. Don't even bother showing up next week, because—"

Someone shoved Kelly from behind, probably hoping to trigger a fight. Kelly spun around, but there were too many leering faces to see who. When he turned back around, William was also eyeing the crowd uneasily, which was surprising because he really had a lot of muscle beneath that dopey polo. He could imagine William taking on the whole mob and coming out victorious. No wonder Jared was so intimidated!

"You might be good at swimming," Kelly said, "but most of this race is on foot."

William frowned. "I'll keep that in mind. See you at the finish line."

"I won't be there," Kelly said, "but Jared will. He'll be waiting for you." Glaring again for good measure, Kelly turned and

pushed his way out of the crowd. He glanced back once more when he reached the end of the hall. Most of the crowd was still swirling around William as he tried to explain what had happened. One thing was clear: William was upset. He'd be stewing over this encounter in the coming days, letting it eat away at his confidence. Hopefully, this would give Jared the advantage he needed.

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"Fuck."

One word, and hardly elegant, but it summed up the situation nicely. Kelly sat on the metal bleachers near the school's track. Jared was next to him, but he wouldn't sit. He stood, using the metal steps to give him extra height so he could see better. For the last twenty minutes, they had remained silent while watching William run. Circle after circle, lap after lap, William was running. The pace was controlled, the movements graceful. Like a swimmer. A lot could be done to improve his form, but two things were abundantly clear: William had endurance, and William had determination.

Kelly swallowed and tasted guilt. William wouldn't be here right now if not for the confrontation earlier. Jared wouldn't be freaking out either. Yesterday had been so positive. Now they were back to square one, and Kelly couldn't bring himself to tell Jared that this was all his fault.

"Fuck," Jared repeated.

"Would you stop saying that?" Kelly stood. "Staying here isn't going to help. Let's get out there and show him how it's really done!"

Jared didn't move. Instead his eyes followed William as he made another loop. He came to a stop just in front of the bleachers, grabbing a towel and a bottle of water. As William took a swig, his eyes briefly moved to where they were, then flicked away. After slinging the towel over one shoulder, he turned and walked away.

"Fuck," Jared whispered.

"Come on," Kelly said. "Enough freaking out. Show me what you did last time."

Jared was tense, but after some coaching from Kelly, he loosened up and hit his stride. Kelly caught up, matching his pace, surprised when he saw the scowl plastered on Jared's face. Anger seemed to be his motivation now. That was good. Kelly was the same way. Why sit around feeling miserable? Get up and actually do something! Burning in anger's inferno was always better than drowning in sorrow's dark sea. Jared pushed himself harder than ever, and once they were headed back toward the locker rooms, Kelly was no longer worried about William's performance on the track.

Despite all of this, Jared's mood hadn't improved. He resisted any attempt at small talk and was still fuming as he got undressed, slamming the locker door shut as he stomped off to shower. Was this how he'd behave for the next week? They were getting dressed again when Jared finally spoke.

"You just had to open your big mouth, didn't you?"

Kelly's shoulders tensed. "What do you mean?"

"You think I don't know? Everyone is talking about it. Some even said there would be a fight after school."

Kelly stared into the shadow of his locker. "Obviously there wasn't."

"What the hell is wrong with you? Seriously!"

Kelly put on his shirt and shook his head. "I was doing the same thing you did. I thought we could psyche him out."

"Fine, but I don't need you fighting my battles for me. It's fucking embarrassing! You think you're my big brother or something?"

Kelly spun around, ready to retort, but Jared was wearing only his jeans. His chest was heaving, his wet hair plastered to one side of his forehead. Kelly lowered his eyes, but even the bare feet made him feel stupid things inside. "I was trying to help."

"Well, it was creepy. You don't wanna know some of the stuff people are saying about us now."

“Screw them!” Kelly said, raising his head. “Let them say whatever they want! I don’t care. We’ll be the ones laughing when you win next week.”

Jared studied him a moment before the strained expression faded. “You’re crazy, you know that?”

“Yup,” Kelly said. “I’m proud of it too.”

Jared chuckled as he put on his shirt, a smile on his face when it popped through the neck hole. Okay. Crisis averted. Kelly felt so buoyed by this, so certain that they could overcome anything together, that it seemed like the right time. He didn’t let himself overthink it. He simply let the words come unhindered.

“What if it was true?”

Jared sat down on a bench to pull on his socks. “What?”

“The things people are saying about us now. If it was true, would that really be so bad?”

Jared laughed. “You’re sick.”

“I’m serious,” Kelly responded.

Jared’s brow furrowed as he yanked on a shoe and tied the laces. Then he reached for the other, repeating the process. All of it seemed to take an eternity. Kelly’s mouth had gone dry. He couldn’t think of anything else to say. The truth was out. All he could do was wait for a response.

Once both shoes were tied, Jared stood and looked right at Kelly, his expression reassuring. “You’re not gay. Don’t worry about it.”

Kelly didn’t hide his puzzlement. “I’m not worried that I might be. I *know*.”

“No,” Jared said as if it were his decision to make. “Come on, man. It’s bad enough that you’re black.”

Kelly’s jaw dropped, his head feeling light. “That I’m black?” He raised his arm, looked at his flesh as if seeing himself for the first time. Of course he was black! His skin tone was so dark that it left no room for doubt. But what the hell did that have to do with anything?

“I don’t mean it like that,” Jared backpedaled. “I just figured that’s why you never have a girlfriend. Most people around here

are white, and you'd be surprised how many of them are racist. Just because a lot of girls won't give you a chance, doesn't mean you need to turn gay."

"That's what you think I'm doing?" Kelly asked incredulously. "You think I'm so desperate for a date that I decided—out of the blue—to start sucking dick? I don't see you going on a lot of dates, and you're not black. If your luck doesn't improve, do you honestly see yourself turning gay?"

"No!"

"Then why do you think it works that way for me?"

Jared chewed his lip. "I don't know. I don't understand any of this."

"Well you got one thing right," Kelly said, grabbing his backpack. "It is surprising who turns out to be racist. Especially when it's your best friend."

"Hey, wait!"

Kelly ignored him as he rushed out of the locker room. Once he was in his car, he slammed his fist against the steering wheel and screamed. How could he have been so naive? Why didn't he keep his mouth shut? Kelly gritted his teeth, started the car, and began the drive home, wishing he could tear his stupid heart from his chest and throw it out the window.

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A person who is racist is invariably ignorant, but a person who is ignorant is not always racist. Kelly's grandmother had first told him this when he was little. She had served as an ambassador in three different countries and believed strongly in the value of peace. As Kelly got older—and angrier—she often reminded him that not all people were beyond redemption. Change was possible, but it took patience and understanding.

Kelly had very little of either. He always feared Jared would reject him for being gay, but what hurt most was that one twisted little sentence. *It's bad enough that you're black.*

As the night wore on and Kelly's rage began to weaken, he tried to disarm the phrase, clip a few wires to make it less explosive. *Isn't it hard enough being black? Or maybe: Don't you*



*already face enough prejudice as a black man?* But those were questions, requests for information as to how Kelly felt about who he was. Ignorance rather than racism. Jared had uttered a statement. A judgment. *It's bad enough that you're black.*

What little sleep Kelly found that night was fraught with nightmares. In each he faced a new conflict. Fist-fighting William in the hall, being chased around the track by the leering faces from his high school, Jared yelling at him—his words complete gibberish but the emotions behind them unmistakable. When the alarm clock buzzed, Kelly welcomed it for once, despite still feeling exhausted.

He spent longer in the shower than usual, trying to decide what to do. Play sick? Skip school? He sighed and pressed his forehead against the tile. He needed to hear what Jared had to say. They were best friends, after all. Or had been. Maybe they could get through this. At the kitchen table, Royal begged him for a ride so he wouldn't have to take the bus. Normally Kelly teased him and said no, but today he wished he could bring his little brother to school and cling to him like a teddy bear. For so long, seeing Jared had been the highlight of every day. Now that prospect filled him with dread.

Once he'd dropped Royal off, Kelly drove to school and parked in one of the spots farthest from the building, just like he and Jared always had. This allowed them to get the same spots almost every day, or at the very least, park next to each other. Kelly stayed in the car, tensing up when from the corner of his eye he saw a vehicle pull up next to his. He kept his attention forward until he heard a tapping on the glass.

He glanced over, Jared's face apologetic. That was a start. Kelly's heart shoved anger aside so love could take the lead. Sighing, he opened the door and got out of the car.

"I'm not racist," Jared said. "I totally fucked up what I was trying to say."

Kelly crossed his arms over his chest. "Then try again."

Jared looked wide-eyed to the horizon for a moment. "I honestly thought girls weren't giving you a chance because of the

color of your skin. I don't care that you're black. Wait, African-American."

"Black is fine," Kelly said. "It's not like I call you a whatever-the-hell-you-are American."

"Half-Polish, half-German. Oh, plus a little French and Irish."

"Right," Kelly said. "I've got Spanish blood on my great-grandfather's side, so I'm more than just African, and I'm more than just the color of my skin."

"I know," Jared said. "If it mattered to me, I wouldn't be your friend."

"Just because you're friends with a black person, doesn't mean you can't be racist."

"I don't care what color you are!" Jared insisted. "I was trying to say that other people do, and that sucks. I'm sorry."

Kelly considered him for a moment. "Okay."

"Okay?" Jared looked relieved. "Good."

Now they could walk together into the school. They'd take the main hall to their lockers, which were side by side. They had talked a freshman into trading lockers at the beginning of the year, just so they could have a few more minutes together between classes. They would meet for lunch like they always did and no doubt laugh about the whole dumb misunderstanding. After school, they would focus on the triathlon again. Everything would be perfect, just as long as Kelly didn't push his luck.

The silence in the air was thick. Neither of them had moved, both sensing that the next move was Kelly's. All he need do was keep quiet. Just this once... and any other time his heart started feeling funny. Like now.

Kelly took a deep breath. "What about the other thing?"

Jared looked pained. "Just drop it, okay?"

"No," Kelly said, keeping his tone neutral. "I know that there can't be an *us*. Not like that. But I need you to be okay with it."

Jared looked away.

"I'm gay," Kelly said. "You're straight, I get it. That's cool. I'll respect that, but I need you to respect me."

Now Jared was glancing around, as if worried they would be overheard. When he saw they were alone, he looked to Kelly again. "Are you going to tell everyone?"

Kelly shrugged. "I'm not going to keep it a secret."

"Yeah, but people are already saying things about us."

"So what? Tell them that they're wrong. I'll tell them too."

Jared licked his lips. "But they're not wrong about you."

"No, they aren't." Kelly was apprehensive about where the conversation was heading. He struggled to find some reassuring words, but his mind was filling with a very specific fear, one that Jared verbalized.

"Maybe we should keep our distance. You know, just until the rumors blow over. I don't want anyone getting the wrong idea about me."

"What about the triathlon?" Kelly said. "Our training plans?"

"I think I've got what I need." Jared took a couple steps backward. "I'll be okay without you."

Kelly watched him turn and walk away. Under his breath, in a voice so weak he barely recognized it as his own, he said, "I wish I could say the same."

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