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### Chapter Three

Everything was different now, and not in a way that Kelly had ever imagined. Jared didn't meet him at their lockers between classes. During lunch he didn't sit at their usual table. When their track teammates asked if he was sick, all Kelly could do was shrug. Maybe Jared had gone home just to avoid him. Maybe he would enroll in another school rather than let anyone think he was gay. Of course Kelly had imagined all of this going wrong before, but he'd always assumed that he'd be the one left on the outside, the one eating lunch in some lonely hallway to escape ridicule. Somehow this was worse. That Jared would willingly abandon their mutual friends just to avoid being near him...

The thought left Kelly thoroughly depressed until the end of sixth period. When the bell rang, he felt one more pang of hope. Nothing mattered more to Jared than winning the triathlon, and while he might have said this morning that he didn't need Kelly's help, his confidence rarely lasted. Half the task of coaching him had been keeping his ego upright and stumbling along. So Kelly felt nearly certain that Jared would be waiting for him at the track.

When Kelly arrived there, the empty arena matched the feeling in his chest. It was over. No more hope. No chance of reconciliation. His best friend was a homophobic coward. Jared could have let him down gently and taken Kelly's unwanted affection as a compliment. Instead he turned his back completely, all because someone loved him who he couldn't love back. Was that so wrong? Even if the feelings couldn't be reciprocated, didn't it feel good knowing someone out there cared?

Clenching his jaw, Kelly headed toward the track. He hadn't changed clothes, still wearing tight jeans and a light hoodie. Regardless, as soon as his feet crossed the white line and touched the rubbery track surface, he broke into a run. His shoes were heavy and his clothes restricting, but Kelly ran anyway. No more holding back. No more coaching. Just him and the wind, moving too fast for all those ugly events to keep up. Kelly ran until his clothes stuck to his skin, until sorrow released its hold and tumbled away into the distance. As he jogged to a stop, only one emotion remained.

Anger.

Fuck Jared! Damn right he wasn't going to be a part of Kelly's life anymore! This was a divorce, and Kelly was keeping the house and kids and car. He snorted at the thought and turned back toward the school. That's when he noticed a figure approaching. For one second, all the anger and determination caught in his throat. But it wasn't Jared. Of course it wasn't. William was back for more practice. Kelly's anger rose up again, eager for a target.

And yet, everything was different now. His friend had become his enemy, and his original enemy was nothing at all. What point was there in hating William? If anything, Kelly should be cheering him on instead. Not that he stood a chance. Or did he?

Giving in to curiosity, Kelly made a u-turn and headed back to the bleachers. By the time he sat, William had reached the track and begun practicing. Eventually he picked up the pace, gaining a respectable speed, but he still looked like a man out for a brisk jog. This continued for the next twenty minutes. Those impressive arms and legs were pumping with the patient rhythm of a swimmer, but William was more like a speeding bus than a Porsche. Too bad, because seeing Jared lose would have been revenge served piping hot with an extra portion of suffering.

"Any pointers?"

Kelly glanced up to find William standing in front of him. His chest was heaving, his normally blond hair closer to brown now that it was drenched in sweat. He wasn't glaring. Nor was he

smiling. The question didn't seem to be rhetorical, so Kelly decided to answer it. "Go home and watch YouTube."

"Funny," William said, shaking his head and starting to turn away.

"I mean it," Kelly said. "Search for videos of sprinters running in slow motion. They look like they're leaping over and over again. It's practically ballet. Do the same with distance runners. Notice how they move their arms and hold their bodies. Running isn't just practice. It's form."

William, hands on his hips, considered the words and nodded. "Okay. Thanks."

"No problem." Of course, a lot would have to change if William hoped to keep up with Jared. Even if Kelly decided to coach him, skills like these weren't learned overnight. William's only hope was to get a large lead during the swimming portion. "Shouldn't you be focusing on your strength? You don't want to fall behind."

"Swimming?" William asked. "I do that every morning. I'm not going to forget how."

Snarky! Kelly liked that. "Where do you practice? The school doesn't have a pool. Do you fill up one of those plastic kiddie pools to flail around in?"

"Something like that," William said, appearing amused. "There's a public pool down the road. They set aside certain hours for the school. Not in the morning though, which is when I like to swim, but the YMCA not far from here opens nice and early. Thanks for the pointers. I gotta get to work now."

"Wow," Kelly said. "When do you find time to sleep?"

"That's what class is for." William winked. "See you around."

He turned and strolled back toward the school. Kelly watched him and shook his head. Nice guy, not that it would matter. He remained convinced that Jared had the advantage. Maybe not in the water, but he'd be lighter on the bike and thus faster. And when it came to running, there was only one person in school faster than Jared.

Oh.

He considered the idea. Why not? Just entering the triathlon would unnerve Jared enough to cause his defeat. Unless anger spurred him on like it had last time. Regardless, Kelly stood a very good chance. At least when it came to the running segment of the event. He hadn't ridden a bike since he'd gotten his driver's license, and when at a pool, he played around instead of doing laps. He'd have to start practicing right away. Or early tomorrow. Kelly watched the quickly receding figure in the distance and smiled.

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The morning remained dark in all but the easternmost sky, where an orange glow hinted of the day to come. Kelly stood outside the YMCA and shivered. Arriving here so early had seemed humorous, since it meant he might run into William. Fitting revenge for him encroaching on Kelly's territory. Now, glancing around the parking lot, Kelly realized he had no idea what William's car looked like, or if this was even the right YMCA, since Austin had more than one. With only forty minutes remaining until class started, he adjusted the backpack slung over one shoulder and went inside.

"Good morning!" said the woman behind the reception desk.

Kelly winced at her enthusiasm. How could anyone feel so cheerful this early in the morning? "Hi," he managed to respond.

The woman scrunched up her nose and smiled. "What can I do you for, hon?"

Ugh. "I want to swim."

"Great! Are you a member? No? Well, the good news is that your first time here is free. After that, the daily rate is eight dollars, so the membership pays for itself very quickly. If you enjoy yourself, I highly recommend it, but today we invite you to go exploring and see everything the YMCA has to offer."

So. Many. Words. Kelly took the pass the woman slid across the desk and considered asking if anyone else was at the pool today. Fearing this question would trigger more chipper conversation, instead he nodded cordially and headed deeper into the building. The signs made finding the locker room easy. Kelly

changed into his swim trunks, his feet cold on the tile floor as he hurried across it toward the connecting pool. Maybe he'd hit the hot tub instead. Assuming the YMCA had one.

He stumbled into the swimming area and paused, impressed by its size. Sky lights above allowed sun to filter in, or would have if it had fully risen. Fluorescent lights lining the walls compensated, illuminating the large pool. One half was open, a diving board off to one side. The other half was divided into lanes. Only two other people were in the water. An old lady—complete with bathing cap—waded around in the open side of the pool, while in the dedicated lanes, a body was churning through the water like the paddlewheel of a steamboat. He couldn't be sure if it was William or not, but the pale arms plunging in great arcs looked about right.

Kelly walked over to the lanes, abandoned his towel, and dived right in. He did his best to focus on getting his body moving and warm. Last night he'd taken his own advice and watched YouTube videos, studying swimming techniques. The front crawl seemed to be the best stroke for speed, so Kelly went with that one. Swimming lessons taken when he was a kid had taught him the basics, but he was seriously out of practice. He managed fairly well considering, except for when he reached the end of the lane. Professional swimmers turned around by flipping underwater and pushing off the wall. Or something like that. Kelly couldn't figure it out, so each time he felt his hand touch the wall, he would stop and turn around.

He found this frustrating, since he was used to picking up speed and not stopping until the race was won or he was exhausted. Here he was forced to stop just as he was getting started. After about ten laps down the lane and back, Kelly noticed a figure standing at the edge of the pool, watching him and drying off. William's baffled expression was priceless.

"Got any tips?" Kelly asked as he pulled himself out of the water.

William stared a second longer, then looked him up and down. "Lose the swim trunks."

“Skinny dipping?” Kelly glanced over to where the old lady was still wading around. “Think she’ll mind?”

William snorted and shook his head. “I mean you should get a pair of these.” He tugged at the waistband of the skimpy blue briefs he wore and let the elastic fabric slap against his skin. “Those trunks you’re wearing are like a parachute behind you, dragging you back. Did you feel the water pulling on them when you climbed out?”

Kelly nodded. “So I need to buy some underwear from the little boys department instead.”

William held up his hands. “Joke all you want. My scuba panties will give me the edge in the triathlon. If your friend shares your fashion sense, he’ll never keep up with me in the water.”

Kelly was torn between smiling at William’s wit and frowning at the mention of Jared. He opted to do neither and instead fetched his towel to dry off. When he turned around, William had his own towel wrapped around his waist, which still left his impressive upper body exposed.

Kelly allowed himself to openly consider his physique as he dried off. “Maybe I should do some heavy lifting too. Is that how you move through the water so fast?”

William shook his head. “You have a better build for swimming than I do. Once I hit puberty, the weight started piling on. Because of that, I’m not so fast. Normally I don’t care. Endurance is more important to me.”

Kelly didn’t hide his puzzlement. “Not big on racing?”

“Not usually. I’m training to be in the Coast Guard.”

“You know they’ve got boats these days, right?” Kelly said. “You don’t have to swim everywhere.”

William smiled. “We’d better get going. School starts in fifteen minutes.”

Kelly followed him back into the changing room, glad their lockers were in different aisles since the dynamic was starting to remind him of Jared. Despite being two rows over, William continued their conversation.

"How come you're here instead of your friend? I got the impression you weren't entering the triathlon."

Kelly hesitated while pulling on his jeans. "I changed my mind."

"Oh."

"Does that scare you?" Kelly asked. "Is that the sound of your knees knocking together?"

"After what I saw today," William said, "I've got nothing to worry about."

"Harsh!" Kelly said, grinning to himself. "But probably true."

"Of course I haven't seen you running yet. I've heard there's no one faster. Then again, you were the one who told me that, so..."

"I'll be on the track this afternoon. After school. Come and see."

Kelly heard the sound of a locker slamming shut and a few footsteps, which paused briefly. "Yeah, okay. See you there." Then the footsteps resumed. A door squeaked open and closed again before the room went silent.

Kelly felt unsettled as he finished getting dressed. William seemed like a nice guy, but getting chummy with him neared treachery, even if he and Jared weren't speaking anymore. William was also back to being the competition. Maybe treating him as an enemy was too extreme, but Kelly didn't plan on being friends with him. Regardless, at least the end of the school day now promised more than just a lonely ride home.

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Of all the organs in the human body, the heart is by far the most treacherous. For centuries poets have claimed that love originates in the heart, radiating forth from this most special of places. But like most factories, the heart pumps out more than one product. Desire and desperation are two of its most popular exports, but most notorious of all—and perhaps the most damaging—is false hope.

Jared was back, and Kelly couldn't help but feel optimistic. Surely his friend had missed him during their day apart and had

used the time to reconsider his actions. A new morning, a fresh start. Jared stood at his locker, twirling the combination lock to reset it. When he turned and saw Kelly staring, he gave a quick upward nod before heading to class.

Okay. Not exactly an apology. But he hadn't avoided Kelly outright like before. Kelly waited impatiently through his first two classes, watching the clock intently like the final day before summer break. He and Jared always met between second and third period. Would they do so again? When the bell rang, Kelly practically sprinted down the hall to reach his locker first. Then he waited. Sure enough, Jared showed up just like he always did. He made eye contact with Kelly and even offered a greeting.

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Good," Kelly said. He struggled to find words, grasping for something to say as Jared opened his locker and began swapping books. Eventually he settled for the most recent gossip. "Did you hear that Felicia Sanders might be pregnant? Keep in mind how she's always fawning over that teacher's assistant. You know, the one with the big Elvis sideburns?"

Jared shut his locker door, gave a half-hearted smile, and walked away. Kelly stared after him a moment before sighing in resignation. Of course. Why would anything have changed overnight? Why bother hoping for a little compassion and understanding? Stupid treacherous heart.

Kelly spent the next class period wishing it would never end, because afterwards he would be heading to lunch. That meant half an hour sitting at the same table as Jared. He already knew what would happen. Jared would engage their friends in conversation, steadily ignoring Kelly or responding with the bare minimum. Kelly *could* sit elsewhere, but eating alone would be pathetic. He wouldn't let Jared win so easily, but he did take his sweet time walking to the cafeteria. After buying his food and sitting down with his tray, Kelly prepared himself for the worst... and had greatly underestimated what that would be.

Jared was already deep in conversation with one of their teammates from track. Just as Kelly had imagined. What he hadn't



expected were the guarded expressions—how every person seated there seemed to reevaluate him. They still greeted him, still responded to conversation he made, but somehow everyone felt distant.

Had Jared told them? Did they know now that Kelly was gay? Surely not, because that would implicate Jared. The one reason they were no longer friends was because Jared didn't want to be gay by association. Outing Kelly to the school would only spread more rumors about their relationship. Jared understood that, didn't he?

“—my girlfriend—”

Kelly only heard a snippet of the conversation, but these two words were enough to make his head whip up as Jared continued speaking.

“—matching rings. We've been together for one whole day. Isn't that a little fast?”

“Maybe she moves fast in other ways too,” joked one of the guys.

“Who?” Kelly said. His voice came out terse and faint, but he was heard anyway. A number of heads turned in his direction, one of the guys snorting. They knew, all right.

“Martha Huffman,” Jared answered smugly.

“*Martha?*” Kelly repeated disbelievingly.

He wasn't totally surprised. Martha had left a note in Jared's locker at the beginning of the year. Jared had been interested, but also concerned about his reputation, since Martha wasn't exactly cool. She sported bright pink glasses, giggled when she was nervous—which was most of the time—and always wore a scarf, even in warm seasons. Despite being weird, she was cute in her own way. Regardless, Kelly had encouraged Jared to keep looking, hoping he would notice the person already at his side.

“She's got a nice body,” said the guy across from him. “Not that you would have noticed.”

“Oh, I've noticed,” Kelly said. “I just didn't think she was desperate enough to date Jared.”

The expressions at the table turned to surprise as they looked to Jared for a response. "Whatever," he said with a shrug. "You're just jealous."

Now all eyes returned to Kelly, but he didn't have a snappy comeback because it was true. He was jealous on so many levels that it made his head spin. He wanted to trade places with a nerdy girl in pink glasses. He wanted someone to leave a note in his locker declaring secret love for him. He wanted to be with Jared, or be with another guy, or be anything but single and the only gay person sitting at the table right now. Expressing any of this was impossible, so he just looked away. He tried his best to ignore the sniggering, or that the fried fat in his food was congealing as it turned cold. He tried to forget the entire world around him until the bell rang. Then he was on his feet, eager to flee.

Despair made a pass at him, but Kelly clenched his jaw, crossed his arms over his chest, and refused. The triathlon. Being the first across the finish line. Jared's miserable face when he realized he had lost. These thoughts kept Kelly afloat throughout the remainder of the day. He would have his revenge.

When the sixth period bell rang, Kelly yearned to hit the track and start running, but his teacher kept the class behind to dole out an assignment. Kelly seethed during the delay and was first out the door when they were finally granted permission to leave. He headed straight to the locker room, got dressed, and walked outside. Halfway to the track, he stopped.

Jared was there. Kelly had been prepared for this possibility and had decided that it wouldn't hold him back. But he hadn't expected to see a girl with pink glasses in the bleachers, one who clapped happily when Jared sprinted past her. Kelly watched for a moment, noticing how well Jared was doing, but mostly taking in the smile plastered on Martha's face. Did she have any idea how lucky she was? Probably, since Jared had steadfastly ignored her after getting her note. Now, all these months later, her wish had finally come true. That must be nice.

Sighing, Kelly turned and headed back to the locker room. Then he changed into his normal clothes. He was leaving when William appeared in the doorway.

“Hey! Sorry I’m late. Why do girls like to talk so much?”

Kelly just glanced at him, not wanting to hear about another happy heterosexual couple. Instead he moved forward, forcing William to step out of his way. This didn’t dissuade him from following Kelly down the hall.

“Aren’t you training today?” William asked. “Wait, don’t tell me you’re done already! You’re not *that* fast, are you?”

Kelly shook his head. “Not quite.”

“Then where are you going?”

Kelly considered his options. “I’m going to get in my car, find a really tall bridge, and drive off of it.”

“Awesome,” William said. “Mind if I tag along?”

Kelly glanced over at him. “You have a death wish?”

“Not really, but I was hoping you could give me a ride home on your way. I’ve been biking to school every day, and honestly, my legs are still sore from the run yesterday and everything else.”

“You need to take a break,” Kelly said. “Give your muscles time to heal and build up.” He glanced over at William. “Not that you need to get any bigger. You really want a ride?”

William adjusted the pack hanging off one shoulder. “If you don’t mind. There aren’t any bridges on the way to my house, so we should be okay.”

“I thought you had an after-school job.”

“I started a lawn mowing business when I was twelve. Most of my clients have moved away or now have kids old enough to do it themselves, but some still depend on me. I’m not busy every day, leaving my afternoons free to beg strangers for rides.”

Kelly allowed himself to feel amused. Was William always so chipper? If so, being around him could be nice. Kelly had promised himself not to get too friendly, but then again, he needed a new best friend. He had Bonnie, but she went to a different school. As they reached the car, he considered William over the top of it and felt less certain. Preferably his new friend

would be someone impossible for him to develop a crush on. Like a girl. He wasn't eager to experience another Jared. A cool breeze blew across the parking lot, so he pulled the light jacket he wore closer to his body.

William, still waiting by the passenger door, raised his eyebrows. "You all right?"

"Yeah," Kelly said, shaking his head. "I thought I forgot something, that's all."

He pushed the button on the keychain to unlock the car, and once buckled up, asked where William lived. He knew the area, and needed little prompting to get headed in the right direction. As they pulled into the neighborhood, lone drops of water splattered against the windshield, followed by a steady patter of rain.

William leaned forward in his seat to consider the sky. "Now I'm glad we bailed on training. Looks like a bad storm blowing in."

Kelly felt smug. "Anyone still out on the track is going to get soaked."

"For sure," William said. "I actually swung by there looking for you. Saw your friend Jared running like a mad man."

"He's not my friend," Kelly said. "Not anymore."

"Oh."

The car interior was silent until William pointed out his house. Kelly pulled into the driveway so William wouldn't have to get too wet. Maybe he was waiting for the rain to stop entirely, because after unbuckling his seatbelt, he didn't move. Eventually he shifted in his seat to face Kelly.

"I don't get it," he said.

"Get what?" Kelly asked.

"You and Jared. Last week you're ganging up on me in the hall, trying to get me to drop out of the race. Then you show up at the pool this morning, acting friendly. I figured maybe you were doing a little reconnaissance for Jared, but then it turns out that you're also in the triathlon and you guys aren't even friends any more. Is that why? Did he get pissed because you entered too?"

"I don't think he knows yet. But when he does find out, he's going to freak. And when I win..." Kelly made an evil face.

William shook his head. "You guys are intense. It's just a race. You know that, right?"

"Then why did you enter?"

"For fun!" William said in exasperation. "Now I feel like I'm caught up in some sort of sports mafia or something."

"I just really wanted him to win."

"And now?"

Kelly exhaled. "He doesn't like who I am. And I like him a little too much."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Do you want to come inside?"

Kelly glanced over. William's cheeks were red. Was he trying to be nice? Or prove that he wasn't like Jared? Surely he understood what Kelly had meant. Right?

"It's okay," Kelly said. "I should probably—"

"Really," William insisted. "We can hang out. It'll be fun."

Kelly wasn't sure of that, but it beat going home and moping around the house. He killed the engine, feeling apprehensive as he followed William up the walkway. He didn't know much about the guy, but he did seem nice. Kelly's aunt always said that God didn't take a dump without opening a window. Or something like that. Now he was entering the home of a person who had been his mortal enemy just last week. And it smelled like cookies.

Kelly wasn't particularly proud of his own house, since he had very little say in its appearance, and not a single dime of his went into its purchase. Regardless, he couldn't help but compare it to any other home he entered for the first time. His own had high ceilings, large open spaces, and an abundance of natural light. This house was smaller, the rooms stuffed with furniture and shelves filled with knickknacks. Curtains made of thin fabric covered each window, which would probably be cozy when holding back the glare of summer sun. On a rainy day like today, it made the house too dark for Kelly's liking. Despite being a little

cluttered, the home had a mellow vibe, much like William himself. And not at all like his mother.

“Willy! I didn’t expect you home so soon.” Mrs. Townson was tall and lanky, the same beanpole build that Kelly remembered William having when he was younger. Her hair was blonde, her smile bright as she rubbed her hands together self-consciously. Or maybe she had just applied lotion. Either way, the same nose as William’s sat above a broad smile. “And who’s this?”

“Kelly,” William said. “He’s a new friend of mine.”

“Oh, nice to meet you!” Mrs. Townson walked over and offered her hand, which was indeed soft and moist. Kelly could smell the fragrance from the lotion after they had shaken. Afterwards she hugged her son, who groaned like he was embarrassed but smiled over her shoulder. “Cookies and milk?” she asked.

“I would,” William replied, “but we’re going to hang out upstairs.”

“You’re a big boy now,” Mrs. Townson said, sending a wink in Kelly’s direction. “I think you can handle eating in your room. I’ll bring some up. Just try not to get crumbs all over the place.”

“No promises,” William said, gesturing with his head that Kelly should follow.

He did so, climbing the stairs and glancing at the family photos hanging on the wall. He saw a couple of older guys who looked like doppelgangers of William with slight variations. One had black hair instead of blond and wore the uniform of a Marine. Another shared William’s blond hair but sported a goatee, a woman standing at his side who bore no family resemblance. Finally he saw a full-blown family portrait, this one old enough that all three brothers were still little boys. In the photo, Mrs. Townson’s hair was shoulder-length instead of short, the man next to her sharing William’s build and the dark hair of the oldest boy.

“Coming?” William asked.

“Yeah, sorry,” Kelly said, hurrying to catch up.

William's room was a couple of doors down a hallway filled with plants and bookshelves. Unlike the rest of the house, things were more orderly here. A twin bed was pushed against one wall, above it a large vintage poster advertising the Coast Guard. In it a sailor seemed to be jerking a thumb at himself while wearing a shit-eating grin; above him in the sky, italic letters asked, *Going my way?*

Kelly glanced with little interest at a small entertainment center and a flat-screen television. The other walls were taken up by shelves and a dresser. The bed was made and everything seemed to have its rightful place, prompting Kelly to wonder if William kept things so tidy or if his mother took care of it while he was at school. As an experiment, Kelly removed his jacket and tossed it carelessly on the bed before continuing to survey the room. On top of the dresser were a number of medals and ribbons, all of them relating to swimming.

"Now I see why you invited me up here," Kelly teased. "You're trying to intimidate me."

"You're not far off," William replied. "Those are usually in a drawer, but when you came up to me last week..."

Kelly spun around, amused to see that William had picked up his jacket and was carefully folding it over the bed frame. "Seriously? I actually got to you?"

William shrugged. "A little. I put those out to remind me that you don't have a chance."

"We'll see." Kelly turned back around, noticing how many ribbons were for first place. "Would you say you're the best on your team?"

"Sometimes I win, sometimes I lose. I don't worry about it much. What about you?"

"I worry about it all the time," Kelly admitted. "I have a very competitive nature."

"I hadn't noticed."

There was a knock at the door. Kelly was closest, so he opened it. Mrs. Townson entered, smiling her appreciation as she carried in a tray. On it was a plateful of cookies and two glasses of milk.

"You're not lactose intolerant, are you?" she asked.

"No," Kelly said.

"Most people are to some extent," she said. "I read an article about it once and switched the family over to soy milk. You wouldn't believe the gas it gave us all!"

"Thanks, Mom," William said, his face turning red. "I'll bring the dishes down when we're done. No need to come back up here."

Mrs. Townson rolled her eyes and smiled at Kelly.

He smiled back, laughing after she'd shut the door. "My mom's the same way. If you ever come over to my place, it'll take her two minutes to show you a photo— Well, you'll have to see for yourself, but my point is that it's embarrassing. Moms love to humiliate their kids, I swear."

"I'm glad I'm not the only one," William said, walking over to take a cookie. "Help yourself."

Kelly nodded, more interested in further exploring William's room. He checked the bookshelf, which only held a few volumes, most of them common choices; the complete Harry Potter series, a dictionary that looked like it had never been opened, and some collected editions of Calvin and Hobbes. A selection of DVDs filled out this row and kept the books from toppling over.

The rest of the shelves were filled with the little souvenirs of life. And a large number of plastic animals. A rhino hung out with a gorilla, a rat, and a cheetah. This was a fairly normal gathering compared to the next shelf up, where a tyrannosaurus kept company with a giant spider, an even larger scorpion, and a surprisingly small pterodactyl. The models weren't at all realistic or in scale. In fact, they appeared to be nothing more than toys. Kelly grabbed a falcon and held it up, turning to William for an explanation.

"Oh," he said, as if embarrassed. "I've had those since forever. They're actually robots."

Kelly blinked. "You mean like Transformers?"



"Yeah," William said, joining him at the shelf. "But not like the crazy movie that came out earlier this year. These are from when we were little. Do you remember *Beast Wars*?"

Kelly shook his head. "I was into *Power Rangers*."

William grimaced as if this was distasteful. "I could never get into that show. *Beast Wars* was so much better. It was all CGI, which was rare at the time, and the plots were amazing."

Kelly took in how excited William was getting and smiled. "Wait, do you collect these?"

William made a face, like he was trying to be cool. "Nah, they're just sort of around. I've had them since I was a kid. Don't know what to do with them now."

Kelly glanced back at the display. The carefully arranged figures were dust free. And they were numerous. More than most parents would buy their children of any one toy line. "You know," he said, "my kid brother is still young enough to appreciate these. I'd be happy to take them off your hands for you."

William's eyes went wide in panic. Then he realized he'd been caught and his shoulders slumped. "Don't tell anyone," he said. "It's my deepest darkest secret."

"I can only imagine the scandal this would cause at school," Kelly teased. "So show me how this one transforms."

William took it from him and happily demonstrated. "The falcon is actually female. I know what you're thinking, how can robots be male or female? I don't know either, but I think it's cool. In the show she's actually dating the white tiger over there. It's sort of romantic, especially what happens to them in season two."

Kelly raised an eyebrow and tried not to laugh. He failed.

"Don't judge," William said. "At least not blindly. We could check out some episodes together. It's not like there's anything else to do."

Kelly glanced over at the cookies and milk, at the toys, then at William himself, who sort of had that big-kid vibe. He found himself matching William's smile and nodded in agreement. Soon they were sitting side by side on the bed, watching computer-generated animals have serious conversations or do battle. The

show wasn't bad. Some poor writer had surely been hired by a toy company to come up with a reason why a bunch of robots would need to disguise themselves as animals, many of which were already extinct. And somehow the end result was compelling. Maybe a little campy at times, but he soon found himself concerned for the welfare of the characters.

"I can tell you like it," William said after the third episode. "Go on, admit it!"

"My expectations were low," Kelly said. "It's not exactly a Pixar movie."

"The animation was groundbreaking at the time," William insisted. "You at least liked the story, right?"

"Yeah," Kelly said. "I did."

William beamed. "If you want, we could watch a few together now and again. It doesn't take long to get through the series. And just wait until you get to a certain episode in the next season! You'll cry. Not that I did or anything. Um."

Kelly glanced over at him. Of course he wanted to do this again. William was easy to be around. And kind of cute, which was enough to make Kelly's smile fade. He wouldn't put himself through this. Kelly didn't want to start a new friendship because more likely than not, it would lead to unreciprocated feelings, and that hadn't been the worst of it. What hurt most was Jared rejecting Kelly as a person. Even if they couldn't be together, they could have at least remained friends. Maybe William wouldn't react the same way. Maybe he would. Either way, Kelly needed to know now, before things went too far.

"Did you get what I said earlier?" he blurted out. "When I said that I like Jared too much, did you get what I meant?"

The carefree light left William's eyes. "What did you mean?"

"I'm gay," Kelly said.

William searched his face, as if gauging how serious he was. Then he looked away. Maybe that's how straight guys dealt with what they didn't approve of. They simply turned their backs. So be it. He and William barely knew each other. The rejection still

hurt, but not as bad as it would have months or even years from now.

Kelly stood, grabbed his coat, and headed for the door.

“Wait!” William stood and put a hand on his shoulder. “You don’t have to go.”

Kelly spun around. “Don’t I?”

“Uh.” William glanced past him at the bedroom door. Then, in a quieter voice, he said, “It’s okay. What you said. I’m okay with it.”

“That I’m gay?” Kelly asked.

William winced at the volume of his voice, responding in a whisper. “Yes.”

“Then why are you—” Kelly lowered his voice. “Are your parents homophobic or something?”

“I don’t know,” William replied. His green eyes seemed to be pleading with Kelly, like he wanted him to fill in the blanks.

Kelly immediately jumped to one conclusion, but he didn’t have much faith in it, because he’d been so wrong when it came to Jared. “Look,” he said. “There’s one more thing I’d like to get out of the way, because it’ll make things easier on me. And don’t get all offended, because this doesn’t mean I’m hoping that you are, or that I’m even interested. But I’ve told you what I am. So now it’s your turn.”

William glanced at the bedroom door again. Then he moved his mouth without saying anything. Finally, he managed one short sentence. “I don’t know.”

Kelly stared at him. “You don’t know?”

William swallowed, eyes darting to the door. “This probably isn’t the best time.”

“Okay,” Kelly said quickly. “I get it. I think. Do you want to go for a drive?”

William shook his head. “Dinner will be ready soon.”

“Yeah, it is getting late,” Kelly said, unsure if he was being sent away. His head was spinning. Instinct told him he needed to retreat, that any more pressure now would be detrimental to... well, whatever. “Maybe we can get together tomorrow?”

William nodded. When he spoke again, he no longer sounded like he was choking on his own words. "When do I get to see you run? I'm starting to think you're all talk."

"I'll prove I'm not. After school. Tomorrow." He thought briefly of a happy face behind pink glasses. "Let's go somewhere else. I'm sick of the track. I know a good park with jogging paths. Meet me by my car?"

"Yeah," William said. "Okay."

They eyed each other for an awkward moment. Then William insisted on seeing him out. They were on the front walkway, struggling to find parting words, when a cherry-red sports car roared into the driveway, music blaring. The windows were up, so Kelly couldn't make out what song it was, but the beat sounded contemporary. The man who stepped out of the car wasn't quite so fresh. Kelly recognized him from the family portrait, except now his hair was thinning, his features lined. He had a nice build though, and a friendly smile when he pumped Kelly's hand.

William seemed a little embarrassed. "Dad, this is Kelly. Kelly, this is my dad."

"Hey man, how's it going?" Mr. Townson said. "What do you think of the car?"

"Very sexy," Kelly said. "Is it new?"

"Just got it last week," Mr. Townson grinned. "Not sure what the point is, because now I'm working overtime every night."

"Then you should let me have it," William said.

Mr. Townson feinted like he was boxing with his son and laughed. "Not a chance. You staying for dinner, Kelly?"

"No, I better get home."

"Maybe next time." Mr. Townson threw an arm around William's shoulders and dragged him toward the house, in his wake a whiff of cologne that smelled more fruity than musky.

Kelly watched them go for a second before he got in his car. William's parents seemed really nice. Not at all starchy or conservative. If William was gay, why would he worry about his parents not accepting him? Or maybe that's not what he was

trying to tell Kelly at all. Either way, he wouldn't find out until after school tomorrow.

\* \* \* \* \*

"He's gay," Bonnie said firmly.

When she noticed that Kelly still had his doubts, she crossed her arms and leaned against his car, despite it still being slick from the recent rain. After leaving William's house, he had driven straight over to her place, sending only a quick text that simply read *CALAMITY*, their code word for a dramatic emergency. She had met him in the driveway so they could have privacy, because when it came to Bonnie's sister, not only did the walls have ears, but the ceilings and floors did too.

"He could just be questioning," Kelly said.

Bonnie smirked. "He needs to be answering, because it's obvious. It reminds me of all those closeted celebrities who, when asked about their sexuality, respond with 'I want to keep my personal life private.' Straight people *never* say things like that. Or at least they have no problem admitting they like the opposite sex, even if they don't want the world to know who they're dating. So when someone gets all coy about their sexuality, it's a total giveaway."

Kelly studied his shoes and nodded. "Yeah, probably. Unless he felt sorry for me and was trying to make me feel less alienated."

"No," Bonnie said.

"He *is* really nice. Ridiculously so."

"Maybe, but no. You said you felt like he wanted to talk about it. If he was pretending, what would there be to say?"

Kelly raised his head, considered all the evidence once more, and finally gave in. "Okay. You're right. He's gay."

Bonnie peered at him. "Then why don't you sound happier? From what you described, he sounds hot. I'd love to date some sexy swimmer chick."

"Finding a pretty face has never been the issue," Kelly said. "If that's all I wanted, I would have shacked up with someone in group by now. I need a guy I can connect with on a deeper level."

"Like Jared," Bonnie said, her tones sympathetic.

"Yes," Kelly said. "Someone like that. Except reciprocated."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pushed you to—"

"No, you were right. The guy is a dick. It's good I found out now instead of later. I just wish I could erase him from my mind because he's in there way too deep." Kelly pressed his back against the car, feeling water slowly soak into his shirt and chill his skin. "You're right that I should be excited. William is hot. He's sweet. He's motivated. All things that I look for in a guy."

"Plus he's got an awesome Transformers collection," Bonnie said.

Kelly snorted. "Right. I just feel like the timing is off. If I had met him before I really started falling for Jared. Or maybe a year from now when I'll finally be over him—"

"It won't take that long," Bonnie said. "Trust me. You just need to keep your distance from Jared and let William get closer. Mother Nature will take care of the rest. She knows how to make you gay boys dance."

"Maybe you're right," Kelly said. "But I'm not done with Jared. Not yet."

"Your plan for revenge. How could I forget?" Bonnie shook her head. "Let it go."

"Nope," Kelly said. "I hurt him back first. *Then* I move on."

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