

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part without permission. This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or events is purely coincidental.

Chapter Four

Jared seemed in high spirits. He wore a constant grin when Kelly spotted him at his locker between classes. During lunch he could barely stay seated, his voice loud. Jared always behaved that way when exceptionally happy. These good vibrations didn't extend to Kelly, who he steadfastly ignored. Trying to do the same, Kelly kept his focus on his cell phone screen while he ate, willing the world around him to disappear. He failed, of course, his fork jabbing the lunch tray harder when Jared mentioned how Martha planned to switch lunch periods just to be with him. Kelly already knew he wouldn't be able to handle that. Either he needed to find a different table, or he needed to change lunch periods. Hell, maybe he and Martha could go to the office together and offer to swap.

When he was finished eating, Kelly left the cafeteria early and headed to his locker. There he fetched the books he needed for the rest of the day so he wouldn't have to return between classes and see Jared again. This made his backpack tediously heavy, but he told himself it counted as weight training.

Once the school day ended, he waited by his car. When William showed up, Kelly tried viewing him without bias. No Jared, no bruised-and-battered heart, just him and another guy meeting for the first time. A plain white T-shirt hung off William's impressive chest, the fabric loose around the narrow waist. He wore shorts today, showing off muscles rounded and soft, unlike the tight and ropey legs of a runner. The pale skin and blond hair couldn't have been a starker contrast to Kelly's own, but they

shared the same slightly troubled expression. Kelly realized this first, forcing himself to smile. William soon did the same, his green eyes lighting up a moment before uncertainty returned. No doubt about it. The big talk would happen today.

After a standard greeting, they got in the car and headed to the park. Conversation floundered along the way. William mentioned how he'd skipped swimming to save his strength, and how he had even slept later than usual. Kelly's responses were polite but minimal, since he wanted to give William the chance to broach a more important subject. Or maybe Kelly was expected to raise the issue, since by the time they reached the park, the car interior had gone silent. Kelly parked, shut off the engine, and waited.

"Nice," William said, nodding through the windshield. In front of them, a paved path wound and disappeared into a thick forest. Away from human bustle, the birds here were confident, their song more robust. A pair of squirrels chased each other up a tree, and in the patches of unmaintained lawn, butterflies flitted around tufts of wildflowers. "Very nice."

"It is," Kelly said, unbuckling his seatbelt. "Secluded too. It's just you and me out here."

William's head whipped around to face him, the concern transparent.

"Easy now," Kelly said. "That wasn't a pickup line. I only mean we have privacy to talk."

William laughed. That was progress. Then he seemed to consider everything he needed to say and shook his head. "I knew you were all talk. About being so fast, I mean."

Kelly smirked. "Okay. If that's how it's going to be, let's go."

Once out of the car, his body tingled in anticipation. He needed this. To run again, not just physically but emotionally—to escape all the drama at school, all the knowing glances, or worse, the one person who now refused to look at him. Kelly knew he should be responsible and show William the right warm-up exercises, but screw it. The sun was peeking from between the

clouds, a light breeze tickling their skin, and a long empty path stretched out ahead.

“So how do you want to do this?” William asked. “Should we race or take turns or—”

“Just run,” Kelly said, hesitating no more.

He took off toward the path, forcing himself to start with a slow, controlled pace. William was at his side, having no trouble keeping up, even when Kelly picked up speed. The trees blew past them, the birdsong lost to the rhythmic sound of feet hitting the pavement and breath puffing from their lungs. Warmth filled every inch of Kelly’s body, a light sweat breaking out on his skin. Soon endorphins rushed through his blood. It felt so damn good. Like sex. Occasionally the path would grow narrow, or they would round a tight curve and William’s shoulder would nudge his. Usually, Kelly remained lost in his own little world while running, but these fleeting moments of contact reminded him he wasn’t alone. He was in motion, but this time someone else was there and keeping pace. So far.

“Ready to start running?” Kelly asked.

“I thought we were already,” William huffed.

“Ha!” Kelly replied. “See the light ahead? That’s a clearing. I’ll race you there. Give it everything you’ve got. Ready?”

William nodded. “Ready.”

“Go for it!” Kelly let William launch ahead a few paces. He wanted to measure just how fast William could go and was surprised by how well he carried his weight. The boy had determination. That was for sure. But he was no sprinter. Halfway to the clearing, Kelly finally followed his own rules and gave it his all. Within seconds he had passed William and left him behind. When he reached the clearing, he had enough time to turn and hop up on a picnic table, sitting there casually when William finally appeared from the trees. To his credit, he kept running all the way up to the table, even though the race had long since been lost.

“Holy shit,” William panted, splaying hands on the table’s surface to support himself. “You’re like the Flash!”

“And you’re like Aquaman,” Kelly said. “Out of your element.”

William raised his head and grinned. “Tomorrow. You and me at the YMCA. Then we’ll see who’s out of his element.”

“It’s a deal,” Kelly said. “Although not in the morning. I hate getting up early. After school?”

William thought about it and nodded. “After school. Every day. We’ll keep switching back and forth, teaching each other our tricks. You show me yours, I’ll show you mine. That way we’re on even footing for the triathlon.”

Kelly nodded. “Agreed. Frankly, I don’t care who wins as long as it isn’t Jared.”

“Still pissed at him?”

“Yeah,” Kelly huffed, but not because he was out of breath. “Want to know why?”

William nodded.

“He said it was bad enough that I’m black without being gay too.”

“He said that?” William’s brow knotted up, the green eyes hardening. “What an asshole!”

“I know. As if I have a choice. I can’t change my skin color *or* who I love.”

“I wanted to talk to you about that.”

Kelly raised an eyebrow. “You want to be a black man?”

William laughed. “No, but for the record, I think it’s cool. That you’re black, I mean.” He looked worried. “Wait, is that racist?”

“Probably, but I’m flattered and willing to forgive you.” Kelly considered him. “So it’s the other thing you’re worried about?”

“Yeah,” William said, breaking eye contact.

Kelly brushed leaves off the table, clearing a spot. “Come tell me about it.”

William took a deep breath and hopped up next to him. With his feet on the bench, he rested his forearms on his legs, hunching over and staring at the grass below. “So you’re gay.”

“Yup,” Kelly said, even though it wasn’t a question.

“How did you know?”

Kelly thought about it. "Around the time other guys were noticing girls, I starting noticing them noticing girls." He chuckled to himself, then cleared his throat when he saw William frown. "It's all down to attraction. Put me in a room full of supermodels with guys on one side and girls on the other, and I know which direction I'll be looking."

"But have you ever looked at girls too?" William asked.

"Sure. I've done more than just look, because all of this is confusing. If you like vanilla ice cream but everyone else eats chocolate, eventually you're going to give chocolate a try. So, uh, which flavor do you like?"

"Strawberry," William said. He sat upright and turned to Kelly with an expression of hope. "So if you've looked at girls before, do you think it's normal that guys sometimes check out other guys?"

"Absolutely. Even if it's just to compare size in the locker room, or figure out how they stack up in other ways. But that's not the same as attraction."

"But it's normal," William pressed.

Kelly wasn't sure what he meant exactly, but he felt confident about his answer. "All of this is normal. Yes."

"Good." William exhaled. "I scope out a lot of guys in the hall. I don't during swim practice because that would be creepy, but I'm always looking around. I make myself look at girls too, and I know everything works in that regard."

"Wait, what?"

"You know." William glanced around the clearing to make sure they were alone. "Have you ever jacked off?"

"Once or twice," Kelly answered carefully before snorting. "Are you kidding me? I'm a pro! I'm probably nearing a world record by now."

"Oh. Well, I can jack off while looking at nude women. Everything works down there, if you know what I mean."

"A demonstration might help," Kelly said before nudging William to show he was teasing. "And for the record, the gay

youth group I go to has plenty of guys who lost their virginity to a girl but still identify as gay."

William's worry deepened. "But how can they sleep with a girl if they're really gay? How can they even get it up?"

Kelly shrugged. "Hormones are hormones. Tell anyone this and I'll kill you, but I once jacked off to Aladdin."

"The cartoon?" William asked.

"Yeah. I was thirteen and clueless, okay? Besides, Aladdin is kind of hot. But that doesn't mean I'm Disneysexual or whatever."

William laughed. "Yeah, but at least Aladdin is a guy."

"He's a two-dimensional drawing of a guy wearing parachute pants, a dopey vest, and a fez. My point is that when we're horny, all sorts of crazy things can turn us on."

William frowned and went back to contemplating the grass.

"Returning to my original scenario," Kelly said. "Say you're in a room with the hottest guy in the world on your left, and the hottest woman in the world on your right. Which direction are you going to be looking?"

"Is anyone watching me?" William asked.

"No. Better yet, you're invisible. No one can see you no matter what, and the guy and girl are both slowly getting undressed. Which one do you want to see get naked?"

William was silent for a moment. Then, under his breath, he swore.

He sounded miserable, like it was the worst news possible. Kelly remembered feeling overwhelmed when figuring out the truth, but also sort of excited, like an entire new world had opened up to him. Maybe William just needed to say it, to finally get it out in the open.

"Which one?" Kelly pressed.

"The guy," William snapped. "I'd want to watch the guy."

"Is that so bad?"

William glanced over at him, his glare intense, but as Kelly held his gaze, his features softened somewhat. "I want to join the Coast Guard," he mumbled.

"So? It's not like the idea of a gay sailor is anything new."

“That’s the Navy. I’d be a coastie, and it’s the idea of an openly gay sailor, coastie, soldier, or anything else that’s the problem.”

“Oh.” Kelly leaned back. “Right. What about Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell? Doesn’t that protect you?”

“Yeah, but only if I live a lie.” William hopped off the table and started pacing back and forth. “If I fall in love with some guy, or if someone catches us kissing, or if I even talk about it, I could get kicked out. I can’t exactly go four years without dating anyone. That would raise suspicion too, so I’ll have to get a girlfriend. That’s why I’ve tried a couple times to... You know. I need to figure out if I can do that, if my body will go along with me.”

“Or you could not enlist.”

William spun around. “What about you? What if gay people weren’t allowed in the Olympics?”

Kelly bit his lip and nodded. “Okay, that would suck. But I’m in a similar situation. How many openly gay athletes can you name? There aren’t a lot, and I worry about not finding a coach or a sponsor just because of who I am.”

“So what are you going to do?” William asked.

Kelly thought about it. “Fall in love with the most wonderful guy possible. If I’m going to risk my entire athletic career, he better be worth it.”

“Seriously,” William pressed.

“I am serious. I refuse to change who I am to please people who are bigoted and small minded. Why let them win? I’ve had to put up with this crap my entire life. I wish I could make you black, even just for one day, because that’s not something you can hide. I can’t mosey down the street and pretend to be white—everyone can see that I’m not. In fact, it’s the first thing most people notice. So I’m used to it. All I can do is wait for the world to get over it and start noticing the rest of me.”

William was standing perfectly still, an expression of awe on his face. “Would it be cheesy if I started applauding?”

“Normally,” Kelly said, “but considering that we’re alone out here, go for it.”

William grinned and clapped a few times. Kelly batted his eyelashes and pretended to fan himself, as if all the flattery was causing him to overheat.

“So let’s hear you say it,” Kelly said. “The big scary ‘G’ word. You’re still tiptoeing around it.”

“Okay,” William said. “I’m gangsta!”

“No,” Kelly responded. “You’re definitely not. Come on. For real this time.”

William glanced around, stopping when he noticed the path that had brought them here. “Okay,” he said, “but only if you can beat me in another race. First one to the car!”

He was already running, shamelessly stealing a head start. Kelly didn’t let this worry him. He remained seated, inspected his nails, and counted to ten under his breath. Then he hopped to his feet and took to the wind. He passed William at the halfway point. By the time he reached the car, the path behind him was empty. Kelly caught his breath and waited patiently. When William did appear, he was stumbling, the front of his shirt soaked in sweat.

“Well?” Kelly said as soon as he was near.

“I’m gay,” William moaned. “And I’m fucking exhausted.”

Kelly smiled. “I have that effect on a lot of people.”

* * * * *

“Most of my friends are girls,” William was saying. “I used to think it would keep anyone from getting suspicious. That’s not the only reason I’m friends with them, of course, but I figured people would think I was—”

“—a pimp?” Kelly interjected, signaling before turning left into William’s neighborhood. After their run, they had driven around aimlessly, talking about whatever came to mind, although William didn’t seem too eager to discuss his sexuality. Until now, that is.

“Yeah, maybe. Totally backfired since two of my friends have crushes on me, and even my mom is hounding me to choose.”

“So what are you going to do?” Kelly asked.

“Stop bathing,” William said. “I figure if I’m constantly surrounded by a cloud of stink, all my dating troubles will be over.”

Kelly nodded his approval. “Good plan. Is it this turn or the next?”

“This one,” William said.

The sun had set during their drive, and as much as they were enjoying themselves, their stomachs rumbled with hunger. Kelly struggled to remember which house was the correct one until he spotted the cherry-red sports car in the driveway. It definitely stood out in this neighborhood. William didn’t live in a shack, but most of the houses in his subdivision were a little worn down. Money wasn’t tossed around carelessly here. Not usually.

“What’s your dad do for a living?”

“Roofing,” William said.

“Does that pay well?” Kelly asked, eyes still on the sports car as he parked.

“He does okay, but not well enough to afford that car. He and Mom have been arguing nonstop about it. That’s why he’s been working late, but of course that only causes them to bicker more. At least he’s home before dinner tonight. That’ll help.”

Kelly tried to imagine a roofer working after the sun had gone down. Maybe he wore one of those helmets with a light on them, like miners do. “So, swimming tomorrow?”

William nodded. “We’ll take my car. You’ve wasted enough gas on me. I’ll try to park next to yours. See that beat-up piece of junk?”

Farther along, parked parallel to the street, was a blue Ford Taurus. The car wasn’t a piece of junk by any means, but it did have signs of heavy wear. “That’s what I’ll look for tomorrow,” Kelly said.

“Cool. You know, you could probably come in for dinner. I’m sure Mom made enough.”

Kelly laughed. “I’m so hungry that I’d probably eat everything on the table. Besides, my mom promised me meatloaf.”

“Oh, okay.” William’s hand was on the door handle, but he didn’t open it. “Thanks for talking to me about everything. I feel... I don’t know.”

“Less lonely?”

William brightened. “Yeah. That’s it exactly.”

“As odd as it might sound,” Kelly said, “so do I.”

* * * * *

Martha. At the lunch table. Surrounded by guys like a geeky princess attended by loyal subjects. Of course it didn’t hurt that she was the only girl present. With no one to compete with, she seemed to be basking in the attention. Kelly had to admit he was impressed. Last week she’d been nothing more than a distant memory. Now she was Jared’s girlfriend, and in a way, Kelly’s replacement. So much accomplished in so little time. She certainly was cheerful. And talkative. Kelly had forgotten her hokey accent. Where was she from? Minnesota? Wisconsin? Regardless, like the rest of her, he found it sort of cute.

The more she talked, the more he realized she was nervous. Martha babbled non-stop, but not about topics anyone on the track team cared about. They were happy to stare at her, but everything she said was met with silence she seemed driven to fill. She started to flounder halfway through the meal, Jared incapable of bailing her out. So with a heavy sigh, Kelly started talking to her. Her relief was transparent, as was Jared’s discomfort. This only encouraged Kelly. By the end of the meal, he and Martha were practically old friends. “Kill them with kindness” wasn’t his usual strategy, but it brought him some pleasure now. Regardless, he headed straight to the office afterwards to talk about switching lunch periods.

The secretary insisted it wasn’t possible, which annoyed him because clearly it was. Just not for him. Maybe it was the color of his skin. Or maybe Martha had friends in high places, or had told a convincing sob story. Kelly decided he had enough to be angry about without adding this to the list. He would be able to switch next semester, which wasn’t so far away. Until then, he’d continue to pal around with Martha, just to watch Jared squirm.

His mood improved considerably when he met William after school. Every training session brought him one step closer to winning the triathlon—to hurting Jared back. Kelly enjoyed William’s company too. Everything was easy with him—no unwelcome complications or ill-timed crush. Kelly’s heart was still too busy sulking, and William wasn’t dropping any hints that he wanted more. At least, not until just a few days before the triathlon.

They were at the YMCA, sitting on the edge of the pool after a successful swim. Kelly practically felt high because he’d finally gotten the hang of flip turns, the maneuver swimmers used to change directions at the end of a pool lane. This saved a tremendous amount of time and would provide him an advantage in speed.

“Tomorrow’s the last day to train,” William said. He had his feet in the water and was leaning back on his elbows, stretching out his torso. This made him appear leaner than usual, although plenty of muscle remained on display.

Kelly averted his eyes, sitting cross-legged and draping a towel over his shoulders like a cape. “We should take tomorrow off. Make sure we’re well-rested for Saturday.”

William didn’t look convinced. “I’m still nowhere near as fast as you. In fact, I’m pretty sure you’ve learned more from me than I have from you.”

Kelly shrugged. “Blame the student, not the teacher. One more day won’t make much difference. Save your strength and load up on carbs.”

“Wow, free time after school. What will I do with myself?” After a pause, he added, “Maybe we should celebrate.”

“We haven’t won yet.”

“No, but we’ve been working hard. I figure we deserve some fun.” William looked away, eyes on the water. “You know how to play pool?”

“You mean the non-swimming variety? No.”

“Me neither. We’d be on equal standing for once. Maybe afterwards we can get some of those carbs you mentioned.”

Kelly nodded. "Yeah, okay."

He didn't give it much thought after that, not until the next day after school. Instead of meeting at their cars like they usually did, William had suggested they meet directly at the pool hall. He'd texted Kelly with directions earlier in the day, along with the time. Six in the evening. That had taken him aback. Why not head there immediately after class and start playing? What point was there in going home for a few hours first? Kelly remained clueless until his mother raised the question he should have been considering.

"Is this a date?"

Kelly was in the kitchen, gnawing on a raw carrot when she asked. He froze, one cheek still bulging with carrot pulp.

Royal, who was sitting at the breakfast bar doing his homework, started laughing. "He's terrified!"

"I'm not," Kelly said after chewing a few more times and swallowing. "I just don't want William to get the wrong idea."

"Oh no!" Royal said. "He might think you're gay!" Then he started laughing harder.

"Hush," Laisha said, glaring him into silence. Then his mother turned a much more pleasant expression on Kelly. "You said William came to terms with himself, right?"

Kelly shrugged. "He doesn't talk about it much."

"Nevertheless, going out with another boy on a Friday night, one who just happens to be gay himself, is probably significant to him."

"You think so?" Kelly chomped the carrot again and chewed thoughtfully. "Should I cancel?"

Laisha looked down her nose at him. "I'm sure it took a lot of courage for William to ask you out. Find something nice to wear and show him a good time, even if you aren't interested."

"That means you've gotta kiss him," Royal said. He grabbed his homework and fled the room when their mother gave him the evil eye.

As soon as he was gone, Kelly turned to her. "Do I have to kiss him?"

"I didn't mean anything physical. You aren't a gigolo. But I do expect you to be a gentleman. Take his feelings into consideration while being true to yourself."

"All I've got to do is hang out with him and play pool?"

His mother smiled. "That's all."

"That's what I was going to do anyway."

"Yes, but now you won't make that 'I just pooped my pants' face when realizing you're on a date. Go get changed. Your shirt, I mean. Unless you really did have an accident."

"Ha ha," Kelly said.

He loitered around the kitchen and finished his carrot, just to prove she wasn't completely in charge of him. Then he went and did what she suggested. Once upstairs and buttoning up a purple dress shirt, he allowed himself to feel nervous. What if William was standing outside the pool hall, holding a bouquet of roses or something equally humiliating? As Kelly brushed his teeth, he considered an even worse scenario. What if he showed up and William was wearing a T-shirt and those ripped jeans that revealed his pale skin, or in a few places, tantalizing hints of what sort of underwear he had on. Hot, but not formal enough for a date. Then Kelly would be the one looking hopeful.

He drove to the pool hall wishing his mother hadn't opened her big mouth. Kelly probably would have gotten through the evening without suspecting a thing. Unless William tried to kiss him. Then Kelly would have to... what? He tried picturing it for a moment, surprised he hadn't done so already. Ever since Jared, he'd been clamping down on his feelings, even the sexual ones. Heart and hormones lead to hurt. That's what Kelly wanted to avoid, including tonight.

When he arrived at the pool hall, he knew his mother was right. William was waiting outside wearing a baby-blue dress shirt. His hair was gelled stylishly to one side, and he fidgeted while standing in place. The bouquet of roses was absent, thank goodness.

Kelly parked and got out of the car, greeting him like he always did. No hugs. No looking him over and praising his

appearance—even though he did look good. None of that. Just the briefest of smiles and a quick hello before Kelly led the way inside. Or would have, if William hadn't lunged for the door to open it for him. What did he intend to do next? Carry him over the threshold? Kelly thanked him anyway, noticing a hint of sandalwood when passing by him, a cologne he was sure William didn't normally wear.

"So," William said once they were both inside. "Where do we grab some balls?"

"I'm more interested in the poles," Kelly replied, hoping this banter wasn't supposed to be flirtation.

William strutted up to a counter, speaking to the man there while Kelly glanced around. The pool hall was just about what he'd pictured. Half a dozen pool tables on either side of the room, clusters of stools set against the wall, and an old jukebox in one corner. A bar filled the space toward the back, a wide chalkboard on the wall advertising drinks and food. Only the heavy clouds of cigarette smoke were absent, but Kelly was happy for them to remain in his imagination.

"This is our table over here," William said, carrying a tray of billiard balls to the front. "We're right by the window."

"Where everyone outside can see how bad we suck," Kelly said.

William chuckled. "Then let's hope we don't draw a crowd. Can I buy you a drink?"

Oh boy. "Sure. How about a glass of champagne?"

"No problem," William said, hurrying away.

Kelly watched him go, eyes travelling over his body. Normally he didn't allow himself this freedom, which was surprising. Had they been strangers passing each other at the mall, Kelly would have mentally counted to three and turned around, just for one more peek. Of course he checked out a lot of guys. Yes, William was attractive, but that didn't count for much. The smile that accompanied William on his return... that gave Kelly pause. He tore his eyes away, noticing the two champagne glasses he was holding.

"Don't get too excited," William said. "Ginger ale, but it's got bubbles and is just about the right color."

"Close enough." Kelly smiled in appreciation as he took one. The glass was halfway to his lips when William stopped him with words.

"We need to say a toast!"

"Oh. Right." Kelly braced himself for something romantic. To the first day of the rest of our lives, or something nauseating like that.

"May the best man win," William said with a gleam in his eye.

"You mean me, right?"

William shook his head. "Not necessarily."

Kelly nodded appreciatively, feeling more at ease. "Challenge accepted."

They clinked glasses, then sipped their ginger ale as if it were delicate and rare.

"Nice vintage," William said.

Kelly swayed a little. "I feel tipsy already!"

They set their glasses on a nearby table and tried to figure out how to play pool. They didn't even know how to properly arrange the balls in the triangle, so they scoped out other tables. When this didn't help, Kelly insisted on putting them in rainbow order.

"Gay billiards!" he declared a little too loudly.

He expected William to flinch self-consciously. Instead he just grinned and grabbed a pool cue. Not familiar with the rules, they took turns trying to shoot balls into pockets, which was challenging enough. A few rounds later, William was clearly getting the hang of it while Kelly still struggled. After watching William pocket three balls in a row, he glanced around, searching for anything to rescue him.

"Hey, they have a dart board over there," he said. "My brother has one in his room. We should try playing that instead. It'll be less humiliating."

"But I'm having so much fun!" William said, leaning over the table to take another shot. This time the cue ball didn't connect with anything. "Or not. How old is your brother?"

“Royal? He’s thirteen.”

“Lucky,” William said, looking wistful. “I’ve always wanted a little brother.”

“And I’ve always wanted to be an only child. So, darts?”

William shook his head. “I’m hungry. Aren’t you?”

“Now that you mention it. Let me use the restroom and we’ll go. Champagne always runs right through me.”

William laughed, plopping down on one of the stools and looking happy. As Kelly returned, William’s expression couldn’t have been more different. He was staring at the pool table unseeing, his features troubled. Just as they had been when Kelly pulled into the parking lot. Did he still struggle with his sexuality? Kelly stopped and watched him for a moment. The crinkles on William’s brow deepened. He even shook his head slightly.

“You okay?” Kelly asked when he was close again.

“Yeah!” William said, his face lighting up. If their little date was the problem, he sure didn’t show it when they were together. “How about a nice steak dinner to go along with that champagne?”

“Burger King?” Kelly suggested.

“Sounds perfect.”

And not at all romantic. Once they were seated on plastic benches, a deep fat fryer beeping in the background, Kelly felt even more relaxed. A fast-food joint was the kind of place you went to with a friend. So far William hadn’t tried holding his hand, or found any excuse for them to touch. Maybe his mother was wrong. Maybe this wasn’t a date after all.

“I still think we should have gotten extra fries,” William said, nearly finished with inhaling his meal. “You said we needed to stock up on carbs.”

“Yeah, but if we eat anymore grease, our hearts will be too clogged to run.”

“All that fat will make us float better,” William tried. “That’ll help in the pool.”

Kelly shook his head. "I keep telling you, the swimming portion of the race doesn't matter. The run at the end will determine who wins."

William leaned back. "Then why did you spend so much time with me at the pool?"

"Because—" The answer caught in Kelly's throat. Sure it was good to learn how to flip turn and to refresh his swimming skills, but hanging out with William was fun too. Kelly liked that they were both driven, William pushing himself just as hard in the water as Kelly did on land. Most of all, he simply enjoyed spending time with the guy sitting across from him.

"Go on," William said, as if he could read his mind. "Say it."

"Say what?"

"Swimming is important too. The *most* important."

Kelly's muscles unclenched. "Yeah yeah. Okay. Just go easy on me tomorrow."

"Nope." William grabbed his drink and sucked on the straw, eyes twinkling as he watched Kelly make a face.

"So what happens once it's all over?" Kelly asked. "Are you going to keep running with me every other day?"

William grimaced. "I'd rather go back to swimming in the mornings. I have the most energy then. Unless you want to keep practicing. Then I guess I could wait until the afternoon."

"No," Kelly said. "The Olympics aren't looking for swimmers. Well, they are, but that's not how I'm hoping to get there. So I guess we're done training together."

"Everything ends eventually," William said in lofty enough tones, but then that troubled expression returned.

"Of course, there are plenty more episodes of *Battle Beasts* for you to show me."

"*Beast Wars*," William said distractedly. Then he looked up. "I still want to hang out with you. A lot. Every day."

Kelly considered him a moment. "Is something wrong?"

William sighed. "Sorry. I promised myself I wouldn't let it ruin our night."

"It won't," Kelly said, not knowing if that was true. "Tell me."

"My mom," William said. "After school she sat me down at the kitchen table. She said she needed to talk, but then she just started crying."

"What? Why?"

William clenched his jaw a few times. "She's been arguing with my dad a lot. I don't know why. They always bickered, but lately it's gotten really bad. Bad enough that she's thinking of leaving him."

"She said that?"

"Kind of. She said they might take a break. Then she asked who I'd want to live with." William's face became strained. "I couldn't answer. How am I supposed to? I love both of them."

Kelly didn't know what to say. He tried to imagine his parents asking him the same question and knew he wouldn't be able to choose. Maybe he would go with one of his parents, and Royal with the other. That would be the only fair solution, but William's brothers were older and already out on their own, so that wasn't a possibility for his family.

"They just need a break from everything else," William said, "not each other. I told them to take a trip together. I don't remember the last time we had a family vacation, and now I'm old enough to stay home. They just need to reconnect."

"Probably," Kelly said. "All couples argue."

"Exactly." William scowled. "I'm having a talk with my dad this weekend. No stupid car is worth ruining a marriage over."

Kelly suspected there was more to it than that. He thought again of a roofer working late, in the dark, and how unlikely that was. Or of the cologne that had smelled more like perfume. Maybe Mr. Townson had paperwork to finish in the evenings, or a client he needed to meet with. But most likely, another sort of rendezvous was taking place, and Mrs. Townson probably knew that.

William sighed again. "I should get home. To be honest with you, I feel a little guilty having fun when I know my mom is so upset."

"Okay," Kelly said. "I understand completely."

He drove them back to the pool hall, where William's car was still parked. He pulled up beside it, turned off the engine, and got out of the car. William was quiet—had been during the entire drive. Maybe a goodbye kiss would cheer him up, especially since it would be his first. Then again, what sort of memory would that be? With the possibility of his parents' divorce looming on the horizon, surely this wasn't the best time for a blossoming romance. The timing wasn't right. For either of them.

"You'll be okay," Kelly said, walking around to the front of the car to meet William. "No matter what happens, your parents love you. That won't change. Even if they split up—and they might not—you'll still be the bridge that connects them. You'll still be a family."

William stared a moment before throwing arms around him. Kelly stumbled under his weight, having to hug him back just to keep himself upright. Then William eased up a little, his nose and mouth pressing against Kelly's neck, but not in a kiss.

And it felt good. He was warm and strong and anything but reserved. Their bodies were touching in so many places, and for a brief second, William pulled Kelly even closer before letting go and stepping back.

"Thanks," he said. "For everything."

"Yeah," was all Kelly managed to say in response.

"Okay." William bit his lip and nodded once. "See you at the race tomorrow."

"See you there," Kelly said. He turned as William walked past him, watching him get into his car. Just before his head disappeared inside, William glanced over at him and flashed a vulnerable smile. Then Kelly got into his own car and sat there thinking, long after William had driven away.

That's it for the free chapters, but the story certainly isn't over for Kelly. He'll have to dodge a broken heart or two if he wants to make it to his happy ending, but the kid is nothing if not determined!

Click to buy:

Amazon

Barnes & Noble

iTunes

Google Play