



something like
rain

Jay Bell

Did you buy this book? If so, thank you for putting food on our table! Making money as an independent artist isn't easy, so your support is greatly appreciated. Come give me a hug!

Did you pirate this book? If so, there are a couple of ways you can still help out. If you like the story, please take the time to leave a nice review somewhere, such as an online retail store (my preference), or on any blog or forum. Word of mouth is important for every book, so if you can recommend this book to friends with more cash to spare, that would be awesome too!

Something Like Rain © 2016 Jay Bell / Andreas Bell

ISBN: 978-1310978449

Published by Jay Bell at Smashwords

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

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.

Cover art by Andreas Bell: www.andreasbell.com

Something Like Rain

by Jay Bell

Part One:
Austin, 2007

Chapter One

I need you. It's as simple as that really. Before you answer, just listen, because I've got a lot to offer. I'm strong. These muscles aren't just for show! I'm sure they could be of use. I'm young, but I'm not without talent. I can swim. I've been training every day, and I can handle taking orders. I'm definitely loyal. I'm willing to do just about anything because I need the Coast Guard to fix me. I'm sorry if that sounds dramatic or vague, but if I told you the truth, you would never accept me. Please give me a chance. Please please please please...

William forced himself to stop so he could reread what he had written. About halfway through he flipped the pencil over, eraser poised to scrub out any words too damning. Not that it mattered much. Filling out this application was just an exercise. In reality he would apply online, and if all went well, meet with a Coast Guard recruiting agent, but a test run had seemed like a good idea. Now he was glad he had done so. The item he had gone overboard on simply read *Additional Interests*. Heck, it wasn't even a question, but William had made it one by using the neighboring blank space to plead his case, writing on the back of the paper when he ran out of room.

The scribbled words looked like they belonged to an emotional mess—exactly the impression he was trying to avoid. If he lost control of his tongue during the actual interview and started saying such things, he would never get a chance to fix himself. William nearly crumpled the application until he realized he still needed to study it, so instead he snapped the pencil in half and tossed it aside, the pieces clattering on the kitchen's linoleum floor. Then he felt bad, because the pencil was part of a set his grandmother had bought for him, his name embossed on each. What if she found it during her next visit and her feelings were hurt, thinking he didn't appreciate her gift? William scrambled to collect the two pencil halves, returning to his chair and lining up the jagged edges so he could put it back together. A little tape and it would be like new.

He sighed, letting the two pencil pieces fall to the kitchen table. This is exactly the sort of behavior he needed to correct. Why couldn't he be like the other guys at school? Strutting around, burping and farting, making lewd comments about any girl in the vicinity. They were masters at not caring, each one a monarch in his own mind. Kings without kingdoms. And William? He was a queen. He was pretty sure that was the right term, but then again, history was full of queens who were tough and strong. William was more like a damsel of the court, always blushing when the handsome knights rode by. Or maybe the stable boy, skin dark from working outside in the sun, clothing mere rags, taut muscles visible through holes in the fabric.

William felt a stirring in his shorts and fought against it. Hopeless! Absolutely hopeless. He worked hard to discipline himself, both academically and athletically, but this one area seemed beyond his control. He wouldn't give up though. He truly believed that the Coast Guard could make him into a man. In the meantime...

William grabbed a cookie from the plate his mother always kept full on the table, an ever-changing centerpiece of baked goods. Currently oatmeal raisin cookies were on offer. He shoved one into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. But of course it did nothing to satiate his true appetite. He went still, listening to make sure the house was empty. His parents had gone shopping for a new car, and his older brothers were unlikely to stop by their former home this early in the day.

The upstairs bathroom would be safest. William pushed away from the table, trying not to overthink. He wanted this. Sure, he'd feel bad afterwards, but the urge was too strong now, the blood rushing through his veins and to one area in particular. William took the stairs two at a time. Once in the bathroom, he flipped the light switch and locked the door. Then he approached the mirror, hips pressing against the counter. As always, he avoided looking at his own face. That would ruin the illusion. Instead he focused lower on his body, deluding himself into thinking he was seeing someone other than himself. The muscles were bigger than he

preferred, the skin too pale, but he couldn't afford to be picky. This was the only naked guy he was ever likely to see. In real life anyway. He might have ample opportunity in the shower room at school or at the YMCA, but he wasn't dumb enough to look. None of those guys would allow him to stare as long as he wanted, or do the things he yearned to do.

Already his white canvas shorts were bulging outward, but William started with his polo shirt, hooking a hand beneath the mint green fabric and lifting slowly. Teasingly. He saw one hip and took a step back to examine the angled line diving into his underwear. Partially revealed too was his six-pack, which was only lightly defined instead of carved into the stomach like the guys he saw online. Maybe he should be looking at such images now, but somehow this felt more real. He lifted his shirt higher, still trying to pretend he was watching someone else strip. Plenty of girls at school commented on his chest, implying it was impressive. If only guys would notice instead. His arms were big too, his vision momentarily obscured as he pulled the shirt over his head. He tossed it aside, still keeping his gaze focused downward on his narrow waist.

As he worked on the button of his shorts, the rush of hormones made it easier to get lost in fantasy. He was standing behind a guy, arms wrapped around him, hands undressing him completely. The button popped open, the zipper came down. William slipped a thumb beneath the band of the underwear and slowly lowered them, gasping when his cock flopped out. He didn't know how he stacked up to other guys, especially since everyone appeared so huge in porn videos, but if a guy in real life presented him with this one, he wouldn't mind. He would do so many things with it. More than he could now.

William grabbed hold of himself and started pumping, thinking about how he would drop to his knees, or even roll over onto his stomach, offering himself, if he really were with another person. His thoughts became more abstract as he continued and the pressure built. He focused intently on the way each muscle twitched, his arm like the piston rod of a locomotive, cranking in

perfect rhythm, his pecs bouncing in response. He stood on his toes and leaned forward over the sink as he got closer, biting his lower lip and hissing like a steam engine. All aboard, because this train was about to depart! Right before it did, William raised his gaze, locking eyes with himself in the mirror, staring into the green irises and dilated pupils and seeing absolute certainty there. This is who he was. So what!

If only he could hold on to that state of mind, make this his new identity. He already knew how quickly it would slip away. Right now, in fact. His body tensed, pleasure coursing through his body like a tidal wave, the fleeting strength washed away after crashing against the shore.

Heavy breaths followed, each a little slower than the previous. He splayed his hands out on the cool marble counter, supporting himself. William risked one last look in the mirror, no longer liking what he saw there. This wasn't who he was meant to be. This had to be the last time. Right. How often had he said that already, only to break his own promise? No, he definitely needed help. After cleaning up his mess, he'd return downstairs to finish the application. The online version. Then he would submit it, taking his first step toward recovery.

* * * * *

William was stuffing swimming gear into his backpack when he heard a car honk. He ignored the noise at first, feeling frustrated. He had filled out the online application with great care, triple-checking each answer. When he'd finally found the nerve to click submit, he was rewarded with a vague error message. Naturally when he hit the back button, all his answers were lost. Didn't the world want him to get better? When pleading with the laptop didn't work, he decided not to try again just yet, opting instead to continue his training at the YMCA.

The honking continued as the garage door rumbled open. Curious, he went to investigate. When he opened the front door, his attention was forcibly drawn to a cherry red sports car. Polished lacquer reflected the autumn sun, intensifying the light and making it feel more like summer. The convertible top—which

was currently down—added to this illusion. William felt pulled forward as he pictured himself behind the wheel. That wasn't hard to do, considering how much he had in common with the man in the driver's seat. His father, Lewis, had a similar build, albeit with twenty-two more years of wear. This meant a slightly pronounced belly and skin that was perpetually baked from years of working on roofs. His hair was considerably darker than William's and currently windswept. The grin he wore was soon matched by his son.

The passenger-side door opened as William hurried forward. A slight woman stumbled out and tried to get her blonde hair back in order. His mother's cheeks were flushed. Probably from excitement. Or perhaps not, considering the way Kate looked back at the car and shook her head.

"This is too cool!" William said, walking around the vehicle to inspect it. "Is this a test drive or... Don't tell me! It's a late birthday present!"

"Absolutely not," his father said, stepping out of the vehicle. "Considering how many dents and dings your car has, it'll be a cold day in Hell before I ever let you drive this baby."

"So it's ours?" William asked, still overcome with disbelief. He couldn't remember his parents ever buying a car that wasn't used. They normally made such boring choices, like minivans or fuel-efficient sedans.

"She's all ours," Lewis confirmed.

"That's still up for debate!" Kate said sharply. "We really need to discuss—"

"The papers are already signed," his father said dismissively.

William turned to his mother and saw that her mouth was a hard flat line. Never a good sign. "You don't like it?" he asked.

"No!" she replied emphatically. "Maybe as a weekend rental, but the higher insurance rate, not to mention how much gas it will guzzle... Don't you think your parents are a little old to be seen in such a vehicle?"

"Yes," William said. "Better give it to me. You guys can have my old car."

His parents didn't laugh. Instead they stared each other down.

"It's pathetic," Kate snapped.

"It's what I want," Lewis shot back. "God forbid I do anything for myself!"

"We can't afford—"

"Why not! William isn't going to college. He'll graduate next year and—"

"He doesn't graduate until the year after. So nice to see that you're paying attention to your children's lives!"

"Guys!" William pleaded. "It's just a car! It's not worth fighting over."

His parents had been bickering nonstop lately. He wasn't used to seeing them argue, and they certainly weren't used to their son telling them to stop. The atmosphere grew thick. Then Kate shook her head and walked toward the front door. William looked to his father.

"It'll be fine," Lewis said.

"Maybe you should get something you both like," William suggested.

His father appeared wounded, as if he had been betrayed. Then he got back in the car and started the engine.

William approached the driver's side. "Are you returning it to the dealership?"

His father glowered. "No. I'm taking it out on the highway to see how fast this sucker can go." Without another word, he pulled out and drove away.

William stood there, looking down the street at a neighborhood that—while not poor—rarely had brand-new cars in any of the driveways, and never any so frivolous. As cool as the convertible was, he found himself agreeing with his mother. The car didn't match their family at all. Then again, maybe that's why his father liked it so much.

* * * * *

Girlfriends. William had a few. Not of the romantic variety, although he never corrected anyone for misinterpreting what they saw. His oldest brother, Spencer, had once been sent to pick him

up from school. When he pulled up to the curb, he found William surrounded by female friends, just as he always was. His brother had grinned and shook his head ruefully once William was in the passenger seat, shooting a few reappraising glances his way during the drive. "You've got it all figured out," Spencer had said. "When I was a freshman, all I did was hang out with my buddies, acting stupid and getting into trouble. What I should have done is spend more time with the ladies." Then he had punched William playfully on the arm, which hurt like hell because Spencer was a Marine.

Little had changed over the past few years. William had the same group of friends, and people kept making assumptions. This had helped him get through high school without ever having an intimate relationship, although pressure was mounting. Something about junior year had changed the dynamics of his friendships. Not that he hadn't experienced missteps previously, like when he had agreed to be Holly's boyfriend during their freshman year. That had resulted in hand-holding, late night phone calls, and one teary conversation when William had to explain that he didn't want to risk ruining their friendship. Holly did the crying while he did some fast talking, and in the end, he had successfully scared her off.

Temporarily, it would seem. Holly was currently holding on to his arm as they walked down the hall. On his other side were Lily and Abby, who were either shooting daggers at Holly or finding little excuses to touch his back, as if he needed guidance on the way to class. He tensed and wondered if he should follow in his brother's footsteps and find a group of guys to hang out with instead. That would be easier than pretending to have the flu to avoid the homecoming dance, a tactic that definitely hadn't been forgotten.

"Prom isn't until next semester," Abby was saying. "Why would you worry about a dress now?"

Holly gripped his arm tighter. "You've gotta plan ahead for such things. This is our last chance!"

"You don't even have a date," Lily said, always the practical one. "And there's still senior prom."

"Fine," Holly said, "I'm still planning ahead. I won't let *junior* prom be a disaster like Homecoming was. I want this dance to be magical!"

"Is this about losing your virginity?" Lily asked with a snort.

"No!" Holly insisted. Then she amended, "Maybe."

"You're ridiculous. Why wait for some stupid dance? Am I right?"

She jostled William, which made him tense up further. Oh yes, Lily was extremely practical, which is why she posed the greatest threat. Any other guy would be thrilled, but lately William ensured he was never alone with her. He really was hopeless. Holly was funny and energetic, Lily was athletic and clever, and Abby was thoughtful and artistic. Each was attractive, the variety of skin tones and hair colors leaving him spoiled for choice. Holly was just as blonde and pale as himself, Lily tan and tough despite her delicate name, and Abby's stylish clothes and Asian features were enchanting. He tried to imagine them as guys instead and quickly had to shove the thought aside.

They reached his next class, stopping outside the room. None of the girls shared this period with him, and yet Holly still held on to his arm. Lily and Abby weren't going anywhere either.

"Better get going before the bell rings," he prompted.

His friends seemed to size each other up. Then they grudgingly continued on their way. He breathed out in relief and turned to enter the classroom. Before he could, a familiar voice said his name. Lily was loping her way back toward him.

"Hey," she said, wearing a smile.

"Fancy seeing you here," he responded, trying to make light of the situation. Or did the banter come across as flirtatious?

Maybe so, because Lily's smile widened. "I need to tell you something."

"What?" William said, resisting the urge to swallow.

"I think Holly has a crush on you."

"Oh."

"Isn't that messed up? Or do you like her back?"

William struggled to find the right answer. He failed. "Uh..."

"I know that you two have a history," Lily continued. "Or at least, she already made her move and you shot her down. That was years ago though, so maybe your feelings have changed. Maybe you like her back now."

William wished that was true. "I don't want her to get hurt," he blurted out.

"So you don't?" Lily's smile was bright, her head bobbing optimistically. "Okay. Cool!"

"Cool?" he repeated, understanding but pretending not to.

"Yeah," she said with an easy shrug. "I like you. So I'm glad you don't like her. In that way."

"Oh." He clutched a textbook to his chest. "Um."

"Relax," Lily said with a laugh. "I'm not worried about prom or anything complicated like that. I just want to hang out and see what happens." She took in his expression, amusement fading. "Would that be such a bad thing?"

He looked her over, noticing again the athletic build and tan skin that came from playing baseball, her auburn hair stopping just short of shoulder length. She really was fun to be around, more easy-going than the other two. Her brown eyes often twinkled, like life was one big joke, and she never made a big deal of anything. She probably wouldn't even mind if he needed a little extra coaxing to get things going.

William found himself nodding. It was worth a shot, right?

"Yeah?" Lily said, the smile returning.

"Okay. Sure. Class is about to start." He inched toward the door, hoping a parting kiss wasn't expected. Lily seemed to have more to say. Her mouth even opened, but the voice that rang out definitely wasn't hers.

"William!"

He nearly snapped to attention, bewildered as someone nudged Lily out of the way and stepped into his personal space. Not that he minded much. He smelled the musky cologne at the same time he noticed dark skin and brown eyes that made him

react in a way that Lily's didn't. He was less fond of the clenching jaw and thick lips that were tight with indignation. Still, there was something attractive about the anger radiating off this person, since it was exactly the masculine sort of trait he found himself lacking. He even admired the scowl and angry words that followed.

"Do you know who I am?"

William searched his memory. The face was familiar, although it had been a little chubbier, the short-cropped hair in cornrows back then. He definitely knew this person, even though they had never really spoken or shared a class since junior high. "Kelly, right? Yeah. Kelly Phillips."

"Wrong! I'm the fastest guy in school. No one can outrun me. No one's ever come close!"

Okay. William looked around for some clue of what was going on and saw many leering faces. Lily appeared concerned, probably because of the excited whispering about a fight. William had never been in one, and he had no desire to change that. Then again, why was Kelly talking about being the fastest? That didn't sound like he wanted to fight. "Are you saying you want to race?"

"I'm saying there's no point!" Kelly raised himself up to be the same height as William, which didn't take much effort since he was only an inch or so shorter. "You'd never keep up with me. I thought no one could, but yesterday, Jared Holt beat me."

"Jared Holt," William repeated. Then it all fell into place. On the way to class, some guy had sauntered up to him and snidely implied that William would lose the upcoming triathlon. He hadn't understood the point of that or thought much about it since. "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—"

Kelly lunged forward. Or someone had pushed him. Either way, the situation was clearly escalating. William pressed his back to the wall, wishing the classroom door wasn't blocked by rows of curious onlookers. He eyed Kelly warily. The guy had a runner's

build, which meant he was a good deal lankier than William, but the muscles he did have were ropey and tight. He might be stronger than he looked, but that didn't really matter, because surely he was tougher. William assumed all black guys were. They had to be. The world wasn't as fair to people like Kelly, or as generous, which made William feel even weaker. This fight was lost even before it began.

Kelly was facing him again, teeth bared. "You might be good at swimming," he said, "but most of this race is on foot."

"I'll keep that in mind." William decided to bluff, to pretend he was anything but intimidated. He made himself stand up straight. "See you at the finish line."

"I won't be there, but Jared will. He'll be waiting for you."

Brown eyes remained fixed on his, intense with anger. Then Kelly spun around and shoved his way through the crowd. William watched him go, heart pounding. The crowd surged forward, buzzing with questions.

Lily was the first to reach him. She placed a hand on his arm. "What was that all about?"

"I don't know," William said.

"Do you know him?" she pressed.

He shook his head. "Not really."

"Where's the fight going to be?" someone asked.

"And when?" someone else shouted.

"There's not going to be a fight!" William said, the panic evident in his voice.

Someone near him laughed. "Of course there will be! After school. In the east parking lot. That's where they always are."

"Fight!" someone else yelled in excitement.

This started chanting, the word repeated over and over again until a new voice cut through the air with practiced authority.

"There won't be a fight." Mr. Miller, his physics teacher, had come to investigate. "Not unless someone wants to be suspended and repeat the school year. Mr. Townson? Do you want to be suspended?"

“He didn’t do anything wrong,” Lily said. “Some guy was picking on him.”

William felt a surge of gratitude toward her, but he just wanted this all to be over. “You better get going,” he whispered.

“Sage advice,” Mr. Miller said, addressing the remaining spectators. “Everyone report to class. *Now.*”

William kept his head down as he slunk into the room. When he took his seat, his stomach churned with nerves. His car was currently in the east parking lot. He’d have to go there at the end of the day—the same location where the promised fight was to take place. Not that Kelly had challenged him directly, but maybe that’s how these things worked. Maybe he was expected to know where to be and when. William sat perfectly still during the remainder of the class, trying to find a solution. What he really wanted was to call in the Marines, or at least his brother, to give him a ride home. Mostly he just struggled with the injustice of it all. A mere half an hour ago, he had felt safe. Now, despite not having done anything wrong, he was in danger. He could either fight or run. As the bell rang and he rose from his desk, William already knew which option he would choose.

* * * * *

Sweaty palms gripped the steering wheel of a blue Ford Taurus, the driver tense as it slowly and silently coasted free of the school parking lot. William expected alarms to sound as he pulled into the street. Instead he heard an engine roar as a car zipped around him impatiently. William exhaled and eased his foot down on the gas pedal. He had made it. So far. Leaving school an hour early—skipping sixth period—would have serious repercussions. He glanced over at the phone resting in the center console, waiting for the call that demanded to know where he had gone. He reached home without this happening, and as he parked in the driveway, decided that he had made the right decision.

Angry school administrators? Disappointed parents? Piece of cake compared to slugging it out in the parking lot after school. William would park in the north lot tomorrow, or maybe he’d start taking the bus. Safety in numbers. For now he just wanted to

get inside, stress-eat some cookies, and maybe watch an episode of—

He opened the front door and froze, one foot already inside. Directly ahead of him, in the space where the living room blended into the kitchen, was an older version of himself with darker features and freshly mussed hair. His father appeared to have just awakened from a nap.

“You’re home early,” Lewis said accusingly.

“So are you,” William responded.

“When did you get here?”

“Just now,” he said, puzzled by the question. Wasn’t that obvious? He considered his father’s hair again. “Ugh. You and Mom aren’t...”

“No, she’s still at work.” Lewis was the first to relax, gesturing for him to enter. “Shut the door.”

William did as he was told, hoping that his father wouldn’t ask any more questions. After all, it was his mother who paid attention to things like grades, or made sure he went to the dentist twice a year. His father was only called upon when William or his brothers got too out of control.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?”

William winced as he made his way to the kitchen cabinets for a drinking glass. He didn’t respond until his back was to his father. “There was a situation.”

“Bomb threat?” Lewis asked. “Because it sure as hell isn’t a snow day!”

“Not exactly.”

Lewis sighed. “You skipped school.”

“I have a good reason!” William turned around, hoping to plead his case. “This guy came up to me in the hall and tried to pick a fight. We were supposed to meet after school—or at least everyone acted like... Basically it was either get in trouble for skipping sixth period or get in trouble for fighting. Which would you prefer?”

Lewis leaned against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. “Someone is giving you a hard time?”

“Yes!”

“Is he bigger than you?”

“Not really,” William said, squirming a little. “He looks pretty tough though.”

“But you stood a chance.”

William nodded grudgingly. “I guess.”

“Then you should have held your ground.”

“What?”

“People are bastards,” Lewis said with a shrug. “You can’t let them walk all over you. This other guy is probably feeling pretty good about himself right now. He’s got someone bigger than him scared and on the run. You really think it’s going to end there? Whatever his issue is, he’s going to keep coming back, keep pushing you until you stand up for yourself.”

William shook his head. “This isn’t a stupid TV show. He’s not going to back down just because I stand up to him. He’ll just end up hitting me.”

“And you’ll hit him back. It’ll hurt him just as much as it hurts you. No matter if you win or lose, I promise you he’ll find an easier target next time. Or you can keep being that easy target. Either way, this won’t end until you man up.”

Man up. If only it were that easy. He watched his father grab an apple and noticed how small it looked in his gnarled hands, how his strong jaw flexed as he took a bite and chewed. Guys like him, Spencer, even Kelly—they had it easy. They understood how to play this game.

“You know what your brother would do,” Lewis said as if reading his mind.

No need to ask which one he meant. Spencer the Marine. “He’d get the guy in a headlock,” William answered, “hold him there, and tell him he didn’t want to fight.”

Lewis barked laughter. “Exactly! How’d you know?”

“Because he did the same thing to me whenever I talked back to him.” William smiled at the memory. His brother had been gentle most of the time.

"We saved so much money on babysitters, you have no idea. Spencer is a born leader." Lewis gestured at him with the apple. "You are too. You just have to believe in yourself."

And get punched around by some angry guy at school. William still didn't like the idea, so he tried changing the subject. "Why are you home already?"

"Don't concern yourself with my business."

"I'm just surprised. You always work late these days."

Lewis studied him. "I won't tell Mom if you don't."

William perked up. "Really?"

"Sure. If the school calls, I'll tell them I picked you up for—I don't know—a doctor's appointment. But you need to take care of this bully situation. Understood?"

William swallowed, and although it was a promise he didn't want to make, he nodded. "Okay."

* * * * *

William paced his bedroom, unable to enjoy his free time. Instead he thought of Kelly, trying to work up the courage to drive back to school. If he went now, *right now*, he would get there in time to fight. But would Kelly be waiting for him, or that Jared guy, or maybe even both? That made him stop in his tracks. What his father had said made sense. William needed to prove he wasn't an easy target, but if that meant getting beat up by two guys at once...

He clenched his jaw, wondering what he had done to deserve this. Entered a triathlon? Fun had been his only motivation. And to keep busy. His lawn-mowing business didn't occupy as much of his time as it used to, which wasn't good for his mental well-being. The busier he kept himself, the less he worried about other issues, such as girls who wanted more from him or what he wanted from guys. Not having time for either was a good excuse and a helpful distraction. Except now, entering into a simple race had made him a target. Why? Were all the other entrants facing similar scare tactics? Perhaps that's all this was, a couple of guys trying to frighten away the competition.

William blinked. Maybe there was another way to prove he wasn't a pushover. He went to the dresser, stripped off his clothes and put on an old T-shirt and athletic shorts. They wanted to keep him from competing? Both Kelly and Jared had bragged about how fast they could run. A triathlon wasn't about speed. Endurance was key, and William had been training tirelessly to make sure he had plenty of that. He flung open a drawer full of letters and knickknacks he had kept over the years. This included a number of medals and ribbons. William might not swagger around the school picking fights, but he was still an accomplished athlete. He gathered these up, spreading them on the dresser's top. Then he grabbed his phone and texted Holly, who prided herself on knowing everything about everyone. Being friends with a hopeless gossip could be useful at times.

Kelly and Jared, he texted. I think they might be on the cross country team. Ever heard of them?

He had to wait longer than usual, picturing Holly covertly poking at her phone while in class.

Yup! You fight Kelly after school, right? In the parking lot?

William grimaced. News sure traveled fast.

I won't be in the parking lot. I'll be on the track. Can you give one of them the message?

Okay. I'm scared!

Don't be.

That sure made him appear confident! If only he could face this conflict using text messages instead of fists. Still, his plan wasn't bad. It might even work. William left his room, grabbing a towel and a bottle of water before he went to his car. He cranked up the music on his car stereo to maintain the illusion of confidence during the drive back to school. Parking in the east lot as he always did, he marched across the campus, ignoring the bell and the students who poured out of the buildings. When he reached his destination, he put the towel and bottle on the bleachers, then did the minimum stretching exercises before heading to the track. He wanted to be in motion before the first people showed up. William managed to run a full lap before

anyone did. Holly, Lily, and Abby. Other students were with them, no doubt having heard the news. Jared and Kelly didn't arrive until his second lap. Kelly sat in the bleachers. Jared remained standing. William ignored them and focused on running. Another lap. And another.

Already he was feeling the pain. As intensely as he exercised when he swam, he knew the water provided a softer environment and minimal impact. Here William's feet collided with a hard surface every step, the vibrations jarring the muscles and bones in his legs. He focused on maintaining a steady rhythm as long as he could. Already many of his peers had gotten bored and wandered away. Kelly and Jared remained stationary. They didn't rush out to meet him, or try to tackle him to stop him from running. In fact, when he risked a few sly glances in their direction, he saw Jared looking distraught. Kelly, on the other hand, remained disarmingly cool, his narrowed eyes tracking William's progress. He didn't seem braced for action. There wouldn't be a fight today. The spectators had decided as much too, everyone except William's friends having left.

Time to prove he wasn't an easy target. William slowed to a walk, then headed directly to the bleachers where he had left his things. Kelly was standing now. Despite how nervous this made William, he did his best not to acknowledge either guy, pretending they were of no consequence. He drank from his bottle, looking their way only once to make sure they wouldn't attack. Jared was frowning, Kelly glaring, but they hadn't moved. William threw the towel over his shoulder, then walked away, joining his friends.

Lily was the first to speak. "What exactly just happened?"

William shrugged. "I guess they weren't in the mood for a fight."

"Who can blame them?" Holly said, taking his arm. She pulled away as if burned. "Ew! You're soaking wet!"

"Gosh, I wonder why," Abby murmured. Then she added, "I'm glad there wasn't a fight."

"I wouldn't have minded seeing them get their asses kicked," Lily said, "but that was an impressive display."

"Super cool!" Holly agreed.

Abby nodded. "I don't think they'll mess with you again."

William would have sighed in relief if he hadn't been panting. Hopefully his friend was right and this whole mess was finally over.

* * * * *

William reclined in his bed, watching the television across the room. Currently he was tuned to Cartoon Network. After his demonstration at the track, he had taken a shower, which was pointless since a client needed her yard raked and bagged. He hurried to finish the job in the dwindling sunlight, and by the time he made it home for dinner, he was seriously exhausted. Now sleep was calling to him as he stared almost unseeing at the bizarre programs of *Adult Swim*. He was too tired to think, the events of the day forgotten. At least until his mother knocked on the door, entered the room, and brought it all up again.

"Your father told me what happened," Kate said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

William felt betrayed. His father had promised to keep it a secret! Kind of. William lifted the remote to mute the television and didn't say anything.

"I'm so sorry you were bullied," his mother continued.

Okay. So far she didn't seem angry that he had skipped class. Maybe his father had kept that part quiet. "It wasn't so bad," he said. "It's not like I got hurt."

Kate pursed her lips together. "Your father also shared the advice he gave you. If you believe fighting with this boy will help matters, think again!" She shook her head. "I don't know what's gotten into him lately. First that stupid car—"

"It is kind of cool," William said. "I'd love to have one like it. Dad probably felt the same way when he was my age. Now he can actually afford it."

“That’s debatable, and what you’re describing is called a midlife crisis, which is nothing to be proud of. Or act upon. You let us worry about that. Tell me what happened at school.”

“Nothing,” William said. “Just an argument, really. It’s not a big deal.”

His mother didn’t seem convinced. She always saw right through him. “Have you tried making friends with this boy?”

Was she serious? Probably. Kate was a kind person and had tried to instill that virtue in him too. The older he got, the harder this became, because the world wasn’t always nice in return. Still, she managed somehow. He liked the idea of making friends with his enemies more than punching and getting hit in return. “How?”

“Try talking to him once things have calmed down. It sounds to me like you two had a misunderstanding.”

“I don’t think there’s any reasoning with him. Believe me, this guy is disturbed.”

His mother patted his hand. “More often than not, people like him have their own issues. He could probably use a friend. Show him what a good person you are, and I’m sure everything will be okay.”

William adored her optimism. Not that it mattered. The situation had mostly blown over, but his mother still appeared concerned, so he said, “I’ll try.”

“That’s my boy. Man! You aren’t a boy anymore.” This didn’t stop her from leaning over to kiss his forehead. She looked back when leaving the room, eyes shining with affection before she shut the door, William already determined not to disappoint her.

* * * * *

William woke up with a severe case of leg pain and couldn’t have felt happier. For the past year, he had been pushing himself physically, and while that had been grueling at first, his muscles had eventually adjusted. Occasionally he got a little sore, but this was more like the first week of swimming every morning. Running had targeted muscles that he hadn’t worked as hard. After his standard four-egg omelet for breakfast, he headed to the

YMCA. Swimming laps helped work loose the kinks in his muscles and chased away most of the pain. He still felt a mild burn when rising from his desk at the end of every class, but he took this as an invitation—a challenge—to return to the track after school and push himself further.

That's exactly what he did. Part of him worried that Kelly and Jared would be looking for him there, perhaps with a strategy in mind this time. Then again, nobody at school was talking about yesterday. Not only did news travel fast, but it also grew stale quickly. William's little confrontation was no longer of interest. After sixth period, he found himself trapped in a conversation with Holly when all he wanted was to focus on moving his body. Eventually he made a polite excuse, went to the locker room, and changed into running clothes. William was walking to the track when he noticed Kelly approaching from the opposite direction.

Even from a distance, William could see he was bristling with anger. His posture was wide, fists balled. Kelly stomped across the grass like he was heading for a duel. William started to tense. Then he noticed Kelly's eyes. They were watery. Red. Had he been crying? Hard to imagine, considering how twisted up his expression was. He definitely looked pissed. Even odder was how soaked his clothes were. Kelly's burgundy dress shirt was wet and clung to his body. Sweat dripped down the side of his face and sparkled in his hair. The tan pants weren't ideal for running either, nor were the fashionable shoes. Maybe he wasn't on the track team after all. Otherwise he would have worn more appropriate clothing before running, and William was sure that's what he'd been doing, because his chest was still heaving.

As they passed each other, Kelly eyed him briefly, continuing his march forward. William turned around to watch him, puzzled but also relieved. Kelly clearly had his own problems, and they no longer seemed to involve William.

Not needing to prove a point today, William took his time stretching and allowed himself a slower pace. His sore legs protested, but once they had warmed up, the pain wasn't so bad. On his third lap he was surprised to see that Kelly had returned.

He was seated in the bleachers, watching him run, but he was no longer glaring. William might not enjoy conflict or fighting, but that didn't mean he wasn't competitive. With an audience present, he picked up the pace, trying to show that he could run just as well as he could swim. Except that wasn't true. Once again his body felt too heavy, bogged down by gravity. His feet were really starting to hurt! He stopped before he injured himself and tried to catch his breath. When he glanced over at the bleachers, Kelly was in the same place, except no longer watching. Instead he was leaning forward, elbows on his knees as he stared at his feet. Okay, so he wasn't impressed. Or maybe Kelly was just *depressed*. He thought of his mother's words and wondered if she was right. Maybe he just needed someone to talk to. Only one way to find out.

William walked over to the bleachers, choosing a question he hoped would lead to conversation. "Any pointers?"

Kelly looked up in surprise. Then those brown eyes traveled over him briefly. "Go home and watch YouTube."

So much for his mother's theory. "Funny," William said. He clenched his jaw and pivoted, intending to walk away, but the earnest tone in Kelly's voice stopped him.

"I mean it! 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 stared, not having expected to get such useful advice. Or for running to be described as if it were art. "Okay," he managed. "Thanks."

"No problem." Kelly's eyes darted over him again, reassessing. "Shouldn't you be focusing on your strength? You don't want to fall behind."

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

One corner of Kelly's mouth tugged upward. "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." Guy banter! This was progress, but also unfamiliar territory, so he started rambling. "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. Um... Thanks for the pointers. I gotta get to work now."

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

"That's what class is for." William winked, surprising even himself. "See you around."

He turned and strolled back toward the school, feeling a bounce in his step. The encounter had felt good. Worryingly good? No, of course not. He simply felt proud of himself for making peace. That's all. Nothing more to it. Still, as he headed toward the locker room, he couldn't help whistling a happy tune.

Continue to chapter two by [clicking here](#), or buy from:

[Amazon \(paperback and Kindle\)](#)

[iTunes \(iBooks\)](#)

[Google Play](#)

[Barnes & Noble \(Nook\)](#)

[Smashwords](#)