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## Chapter Two

The world was still soft and gentle in the early hours of the day, untouched by the chaos of activity that would follow. William loved mornings, preferring to be up by five and out the door half an hour later. His parents and his brothers thought he was crazy, all of them preferring to sleep as late as possible. Most people seemed to agree with his family, which was just as well since it kept the mornings private. The world was a different place then—quieter, slower, and somehow fresher. The cool air hadn't been filled by the daily dose of exhaust fumes, the grass still wet from bathing in dew. William often left the house early enough that he could walk to school and enjoy it all.

Or ride his bike, which was what he decided to do today. With the triathlon coming up, he figured he might as well start training for all three legs of the race. And speaking of legs, his weren't happy with the additional exercise, so he pedaled slowly and coasted where possible. William cycled first to the YMCA. He no longer needed to show his annual pass to the woman behind the counter. Or wait his turn for a lane once he had changed into his Speedos, because as usual, he had the indoor pool all to himself. He didn't bother with a swim cap or goggles today, unconcerned with speed and preferring to reach a steady rhythm. Usually he counted each lap, making sure he reached his goal. Today he listened to his body, letting it tell him when it was finished. He reached that point and pushed himself beyond it, unwilling to leave the cool comfort of the water. Eventually he slowed to a wade. The sound of water churning continued, echoing off the

walls and ceiling of the pool area. William turned and saw that the lane next to his was occupied.

The body moving through liquid was slender, dark, and vaguely familiar. Or maybe William was getting paranoid, because Kelly couldn't be here. Right? He glanced over as he climbed out, spotting an older woman idly swimming in the main pool, but she looked unrelated to the guy in the lane. William turned a critical eye to the newcomer. His lower body was too high and his hand entry inefficient, but he had an acceptable grasp of the front crawl stroke. That he didn't know what to do with himself when ending each lane, stopping and turning around, confirmed his suspicions: This was an amateur. Either Kelly had a twin, or he was here.

William thought he saw a sly smile just before it disappeared into the water. Then Kelly was kicking toward him, quickly reaching the side of the pool where he waited. William made sure to focus on the face as Kelly pulled himself free, the amusement there transparent.

"Got any tips?" Kelly asked.

Now it made perfect sense. William had shown up in his territory, and Kelly had responded by doing the same. He didn't seem hostile, so William addressed the question, which allowed him to examine Kelly for anything that could be improved. His eyes traveled over a light frame, tight muscles, and flawless dark skin. The red swimsuit was still wet enough to cup a bulge, and it was this William focused on. Briefly. "Lose the swim trunks," he said.

"Skinny dipping?" Kelly's eyes flicked to where the old lady was still wading around. "Think she'll mind?"

William snorted. "I mean you should get a pair of these," he said, tugging at the waistband of his own swimsuit. "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, eyes still sparkling. "So I need to buy some underwear from the little boys' department instead."

“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.”

And speaking of water, William was purposely testing it by mentioning the triathlon. Kelly’s reaction was difficult to read as he turned to fetch his towel and dried himself. William finished doing the same, wrapping the towel around his waist and feeling more exposed than usual. He had been around plenty of other guys while wearing so little, but with Kelly, he somehow felt more naked. Maybe because of the way he was openly looking him over.

“Maybe I should do some heavy lifting too,” Kelly said, draping his towel over one shoulder. “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’s brow came together in confusion. “Not big on racing?”

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

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

William smiled, still unsure about the purpose of this visit, but an idea had occurred to him. Kelly was here to learn William’s techniques so he could pass them on to his friend. That would explain why he was being so personable. “We’d better get going,” he suggested. “School starts in fifteen minutes.”

They walked to the locker room in silence, ending up in separate rows. William continued to mull over his theory as he pulled on his jeans, wanting to discover if he was right. “How come you’re here instead of your friend? I got the impression you aren’t entering the triathlon.”

A pause preceded the answer. “I changed my mind.”

“Oh.” So *he* was entering now and was here for his own benefit, not Jared’s.

“Does that scare you?” Kelly asked, but his tones were teasing. “Is that the sound of your knees knocking together?”

William pulled his polo shirt over his head and smiled. “After what I saw today, I’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Harsh! But probably true.”

William slipped into his sandals. “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.” Kelly replied. “After school. Come and see.”

He sounded serious. William shut his locker, then headed for the exit. He hesitated at the door. Was this a trap? The fight the other students had longed to see? He honestly didn’t know, but the Coast Guard demanded more than just skill and endurance. William would regularly be faced with frightening situations and still be expected to perform his duties. He didn’t care about the drama surrounding the triathlon, but this could end up being practical training regardless. “Yeah, okay. See you there.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“They’re totally gay.”

William was walking down the hall after sixth period, girls on either side of him. For the first time, he wondered if this made him seem gay. It wasn’t a word he allowed himself to think often. He tried to keep it far from his mind so he wouldn’t spiral down another cycle of questioning who he really was. It didn’t matter either way because the Coast Guard was going to set him right. Regardless, he still found Holly’s words jarring. He had been telling them about his encounter in the morning and his plans after school when the subject took an unexpected—and uncomfortable—turn.

“Extremely gay,” Lily agreed. “Totally explains everything.”

“What?” William managed a chuckle. “Who?”

“Jared and Kelly,” Holly said.

“It’s just gossip,” Abby murmured. “Jared is dating Martha Huffman.”

“Really?” Lily replied. “I knew she had a thing for him but—”

"Then how do you explain it?" Holly interrupted.

"Explain what?" William said, not hiding his confusion. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Lily looked over at him. "The reason Kelly got all up in your face."

"He's gay," Holly clarified. "For Jared. Although I still think they both are."

William stared. "Kelly is gay? You're sure?"

"He admitted it to his entire team," Holly said matter-of-factly, but William turned to the others for confirmation.

Lily nodded.

Abby was less certain. "Kelly didn't deny it. That's what I was told."

William stopped walking, trying to make sense of it all. "Then why was Kelly at the YMCA this morning? And why is he now in the triathlon if he was so set on Jared winning?"

"No idea about the race," Holly said, "but Kelly was probably at the YMCA so he could see you naked. Did you take a shower together?"

"Together?" William spluttered. "No!"

"Just ignore her," Lily said. "She's full of depraved fantasies."

Holly didn't appear ashamed. In fact, her smile got bigger.

"Okay," William said. "Have fun gossiping. I'm going to train."

Three girls groaned in unison. "You're no fun!" Holly said.

"That's right," William replied. "So unless any of you want to run a few laps..."

This was enough to scare them away. Once they rounded a corner and were out of sight, William leaned against a row of lockers, mind racing. His friends loved to gossip. He had learned all sorts of sultry details about other people, thanks to their tales. They had a good instinct for what was true and what was bullshit. Very little they shared with him turned out to be false. Kelly was probably gay. William searched himself, trying to decide how this made him feel. Apprehensive? Excited?

Both? Yeah. That about summed it up. He found himself wanting to be around Kelly to confirm it and see if anything would happen, like a litmus test for his own sexuality. *If you turn blue when another gay person is around, then you're gay too!* The halls were empty now, which made it easy for him to move quickly. William left the building and entered into a gray day, clouds covering the sky, trees swaying in the wind.

He hurried toward the track and spotted someone running there. Jared was in the middle of a lap. On the bleachers, a girl with blonde hair and pink glasses clapped in appreciation. Martha Huffman. No freaking way! If his friends had been right about that detail, and clearly they were, then...

Where was Kelly? Still getting changed? The thought of being in the locker room with him again took on new meaning, almost seemed risqué. Part of him was scared and wanted to deny his curiosity. The rest just wanted. William made a beeline for the athletic building, entering a side door and walking down the hall. He reached the doorway to the locker rooms at the same time Kelly did from the other side. The angry expression had returned.

"Hey!" William tried. "Sorry I'm late. Why do girls like to talk so much?"

Kelly broke eye contact and pressed forward, forcing William to move aside. He was dressed in normal clothes, and unless he was planning a repeat of the other day, it meant he wouldn't be running.

"Aren't you training today?" William asked. Then, in an attempt to lighten the mood, he added. "Wait, don't tell me you're done already! You're not *that* fast, are you?"

Kelly kept walking. "Not quite."

"Then where are you going?"

"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?"

This worked. Kelly slowed. "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 running and everything else.”

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

“If you don’t mind. There aren’t any bridges on the way to my house, so we should be okay.”

Kelly raised an eyebrow. “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 remained silent, but gestured with his head that William should follow. As they left the school and strolled across the parking lot, William fell behind a few paces, trying to determine if Kelly was gay. He didn’t walk different, and he wasn’t really feminine. All Kelly seemed was miserable. They reached a silver car much nicer than his own. Kelly went to the driver’s side, William the other. So far he had seen Kelly angry and confrontational, then disarmingly friendly, and now completely despondent as he just stood there, not even unlocking the door. Maybe he was bipolar and hadn’t been joking about wanting to end his life.

“You all right?”

“Yeah.” Kelly shook his head, as if to clear it. “I thought I forgot something, that’s all. Hop in.” He squeezed a keychain and the doors unlocked.

Once William was inside and buckled up, he looked for further clues. A rainbow air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror, or a gay magazine in the backseat. All he found was a clean and neutral interior. Except for the container of gum in one of the cup holders, which only implied an aversion to bad breath.

“Where do you live?” Kelly asked, starting the car.

“Not far from here. I’ll be your GPS.” In a more mechanical voice, he intoned, “Please turn right and proceed to the next stop light.”

Kelly’s expression remained impassive. William wasn’t even sure he had been heard until his instructions were followed.

“Stay on this road for a few blocks. Then it’s another right.”

Still no response.

He leaned forward in his seat to gaze out the windshield. “Now I’m glad we bailed on training. Looks like a bad storm blowing in.”

Kelly snorted, reacting at last. “Anyone still out on the track is going to get soaked.”

“For sure. I actually swung by there looking for you. Saw your friend Jared running like a mad man.”

“He’s not my friend,” Kelly snapped. “Not anymore.”

“Oh.”

The first drops of rain splattered against the windshield, building into a steady rhythm. William didn’t try to make further conversation. He just provided the remaining directions until they pulled into the driveway of his house, Kelly still not speaking. The anger had fled his features again, replaced by misery.

William shook his head. “I don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

“You and Jared. At the beginning of the week, you’re ambushing 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?”

Kelly narrowed his eyes. “I don’t think he knows yet. But when he does find out, he’s going to freak. And when I win...” His grin was vicious.

William shook his head in exasperation. “You guys are intense. It’s just a race. You know that, right?”

Kelly turned to face him. “Then why did you enter?”



“For fun! Now I feel like I’m caught up in some sort of sports vendetta or something.”

Kelly frowned. “I just really wanted him to win.”

“And now?”

The rain drummed against the windshield, the wipers swiping at it mercilessly. Kelly’s attention remained focused ahead as he spoke. “He doesn’t like who I am. And I like him a little too much.”

“Oh.” There it was. Confirmation.

“Yeah.”

William felt dizzy. He had never imagined another guy confessing these feelings, or daring to share such information, especially with someone he barely knew. He felt like doing the same, but he wasn’t even sure it was true. If anyone could tell him, Kelly seemed the most qualified. He opened his mouth only to discover that he needed more time. “Do you want to come inside?”

Kelly glanced over in surprise. Then he shook his head. “It’s okay. I should probably—”

“Really,” William said, not wanting him to get away. “We can hang out. It’ll be fun.”

Kelly’s eyes searched his. Then he put the car in park and shut off the engine. William gave him an encouraging smile and led the way inside. Once they were in his room, maybe he could get Kelly talking about the situation with Jared and—

“Willy! I didn’t expect you home so soon.” Ugh! How could he forget? He loved his mother, but her timing wasn’t ideal. She brightened when noticing they had company. “And who’s this?”

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

“Oh, nice to meet you!” She offered Kelly her hand, appearing pleased. Kate was a sharp woman. She had asked her son to make friends with a bully, and here was someone new in their home. That wouldn’t be lost on her. “Cookies and milk?”

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

"You're a big boy now." His mother winked at Kelly. "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.

He climbed the stairs in a hurry, eager to get away. He reached the top and turned to find that Kelly was still at the halfway point. He had stopped to look at the family photos hanging on the wall. If William's mother saw, she'd probably start bragging about her other sons or who knew what else.

"Coming?" William prompted.

"Yeah, sorry." Kelly took the remaining stairs two at a time.

Once in his room, William found himself at a loss. With his mother returning soon with milk and cookies (so embarrassing!) he could hardly broach the subject he wanted to discuss. The *only* subject, leaving him unsure of what to say.

Kelly slowly walked around the room to take it all in. William hadn't expected to have anyone over today, but he always kept his room tidy. Still, he felt exposed having a virtual stranger in his most private of spaces. Kelly wasn't shy about inspecting everything. He took off his jacket while doing so, tossing it on the bed. Then he moved to the dresser where William still had all of his ribbons and medals on display.

Rather than try to explain this, William picked up Kelly's jacket so he could fold it neatly. Touching the fabric felt personal, a whiff of alluring cologne coming from it when he shook the folds loose.

"Now I see why you invited me up here," Kelly said, running a finger over one of medals. "You're trying to intimidate me."

"You're not far off. Those are usually in a drawer, but when you came up to me in the hall..."

Kelly turned around. "Seriously? I actually got to you?"

William shrugged and draped the jacket over the bed's footboard. "A little. I put those out to remind me that you don't stand a chance."

"We'll see." Kelly returned his attention to the medals. "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. I have a very competitive nature."

William snorted. "I hadn't noticed."

"Staying competitive is important," Kelly said. "Nobody coasts their way into the Olympics. Drive is essential!"

"The Olympics? Is that your dream?"

"No." Kelly turned, a smirk on his face. "It's my future."

Kate showed up then with the promised snacks and managed to embarrass him despite being present only a minute or two. William was grateful regardless because his stomach was growling and her cookies were phenomenal. After taking one, Kelly resumed his inspection. William was proud of his medals, but the shelf Kelly turned to next caused the opposite reaction, especially when he picked up an action figure—Airazor, to be precise—and held it aloft. William *loved* his *Beast Wars* toys. Sure, he might have outgrown them years ago, but for the past decade they had been a part of his life, and he wasn't ready to say goodbye.

"I've had those since forever," he explained. "They're actually robots."

Kelly appeared puzzled. "You mean like Transformers?"

"Yeah," William said, moving closer to survey his collection. "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*."

"I could never get into that show. *Beast Wars* was so much better. It was all CGI, which was new at the time, and the plots were amazing." And his collection was awesome, the action figures representing all the important characters from the show, except for X-9 Ravage, which had only been released in Japan and commanded high prices on eBay. Maybe if he saved his money, he could splurge and finally complete the—

"Wait, do you collect these?" Kelly asked, sounding amused.

“Nah,” William said, playing it cool. “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 looked at the figures appraisingly. “You know, my kid brother is still young enough to appreciate these. I’d be happy to take them off your hands for you.”

William blanched... and stumbled right into a very obvious trap by doing so. He laughed at himself. “Don’t tell anyone,” he whispered theatrically. “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 was happy to comply, talking about the character as he did so, how Airazor and Tigatron had a really romantic story arc in the show. He considered mentioning that in the Japanese dub, they had decided to make Airazor a boy, changing the dynamic of their relationship to be homosexual. That might be a good segue. Then again, talking about toys was way more fun. In the course of his lecture, he discovered that Kelly had never even seen *Beast Wars*. Easily corrected. Soon they were both seated cross-legged on his bed, snacking on cookies while watching the two-episode premier. It didn’t hold his attention the way it usually did. He kept looking to Kelly, at the way he took small careful bites, as if determined not to allow a cookie crumb to fall.

“If you want,” William said once the episodes were over, “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 considered him, features tensing. “Did you get what I said earlier? When I told you that I like Jared too much, did you get what I meant?”

William’s smile faded. “What did you mean?”

“I’m gay,” Kelly said matter-of-factly.

How the hell did he do that? William couldn’t even say those words to himself. He didn’t dare! Doing so might make it permanent. Incurable. He wasn’t sure if he admired Kelly for

being strong, or pitied him for admitting defeat. The bed shifted as Kelly stood. He snatched his coat, body stiff as he moved toward the door.

“Wait!” William stood in panic and placed a hand on Kelly’s shoulder, noticing how strong and warm it felt. “You don’t have to go.”

Kelly turned, tone accusing. “Don’t I?”

“Uh.” He didn’t want his mother overhearing any of this, so he led by example and lowered his voice. “It’s okay. What you said. I’m okay with it.”

“That I’m gay?” Kelly asked, still just as loud.

William winced and responded in a whisper. “Yes.”

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

“I don’t know.”

Kelly faced him fully now, eyes searching his. “Look, 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.”

Jesus, what a question! He looked to the bedroom door, worried it would open or maybe hoping it would, so he didn’t have to answer. He thought about saying yes, then decided to say no, but he couldn’t quite manage either. “I don’t know.”

Kelly’s brow knitted up. “You don’t know?”

William’s mouth went dry. He looked at the door again, deciding it could be an excuse after all. “This probably isn’t the best time.”

“Okay. I get it. I think.” Kelly’s hand rubbed at his chin and mouth as he searched for a solution. “Do you want to go for a drive?”

“Dinner will be ready soon.”

Kelly peered at him, clearly unsure of what to think. “Yeah, it is getting late. Maybe we can get together tomorrow?”

William nodded, then he tried to dispel some of the tension. "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." Kelly seemed to reconsider. "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 stared at each other, conversation having dried up. Not for the first time, William wished he was normal, that this was just a guy friend who had come over to watch cartoons and pig out. That part had been so carefree and fun. Why couldn't the rest of his life be too?

"Walk me to my car?" Kelly said with a hint of mischief.

"Oh!" William said. "Uh..."

Kelly rolled his eyes. "It was a joke. I know the way. See you tomorrow."

"No, I'll walk you out!"

"You really don't need to."

"It's polite," William said. He slipped around Kelly to the bedroom door, bowing as he opened it, as if he were royalty.

Kelly chuckled appreciatively, and when they reached the front door, waited for William to open it too.

"My liege," William declared dramatically.

They were both smiling as they stood at the spot where walkway met driveway, the storm having blown away. Before they could say goodbye, they heard the sound of base thumping. William recognized it instantly. It was the song his father had cranked up when taking him for a ride in the new car. The same song he was always playing, and one Holly and Abby both loved too: *The Sweet Escape* by Gwen Stefani. Admittedly, it was a fun tune, but a burly construction worker in his forties listening to it? At least the windows were up and the roof closed. The car roared into the driveway. His father sprang out a second after the engine shut off.

"Hey guys!" Lewis said. "How's it hanging?"

William braced for even worse—his father offering a high-five or a fist bump. Thank goodness then that Kelly initiated a formal handshake.

“Dad, this is Kelly.” William said, making the introductions. “Kelly, this is my dad.”

“Hey man, how’s it going?” Lewis said, grinning proudly. “What do you think of the car?”

“Very sexy,” Kelly replied generously. “Is it new?”

“Just got it last week! Not sure what the point is, because now I’m working overtime every night.”

“Then you should let me have it,” William tried.

“Not a chance.” His father hopped from foot to foot, pretending to box with him. Maybe this wasn’t a midlife crisis but a new habit. William squinted, looking for signs of white powder around the nostrils as his father continued speaking. “You staying for dinner, Kelly?”

William felt a surge of panic. What if Kelly was just as unabashedly gay around his parents? The offer was declined, and William found himself being pulled toward the house, his father having wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“What’s gotten into you lately?” William laughed, sparing one glance back to see Kelly pulling out of the driveway.

“I’m happy,” Lewis responded.

“Because of the new car?”

“Because of everything.” His father released him to open the door. “Life begins at forty. Just you wait and see!”

His upbeat mood was contagious, although Kate didn’t seem as pleased when her husband kissed her. In fact, she appeared hurt.

William didn’t understand this or anything about their relationship lately. “Do you need help?” he asked, crouching to peer through the oven window at sizzling cheese and noodles that were browning around the edges. “Lasagna!” he cried happily. “You’re the best!”

This seemed to cheer his mother up. He made it his goal to keep the vibes positive during dinner. He asked his parents

questions, stoking conversation, and soon they were both telling a story about how William had gotten lost at a shopping mall when he was young and had been found an hour later, sleeping in one of the racks of clothes. Everything felt fine again.

Externally.

Later in the evening, when the house grew quiet, William found himself unable to sleep. He had stripped down to his underwear and kicked off the sheets, but he still felt hot, like he was coming down with a fever. His mind kept returning to Kelly and the different guises he wore. Aggressive athlete, rejected friend, lonely outsider, and rarest of all, happy homosexual. William wondered if that's what being gay was like. Conflict with very little payoff. There had to be other benefits. He wondered if Kelly had ever been with another man, or was sleeping next to one now. William grabbed his extra pillow and clutched it to his chest. As he drifted off, he pretended it was another person. Man or woman. Kelly or Lily. Temptation or salvation.

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