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Chapter Three

School the next day was frustrating. William couldn't concentrate on his classes as each hour crawled by. Conversation with his friends in the hallways and at lunch revolved around topics that didn't matter to him. Who had broken up with whom, or who had been kicked off of various reality television programs last night. He wanted to ask questions about Kelly to see what else his friends knew—if anything—but it seemed prudent to hold his tongue. As far as they were concerned, he and Kelly were still enemies.

Was this the beginning of a crush? Or what being in love felt like? William had experienced neither, but surely being able to think of only one person was a symptom. Did he love Kelly? If so, that left little room for doubt about his own sexuality. This concern was still on his mind when William headed out to the parking lot after school. Funny that he had worked so hard to avoid meeting Kelly in this place. Now he could hardly wait, but he was equally apprehensive. Kelly didn't appear happy either. From the outside, anyone would assume they were meeting so they could attend a funeral.

Then Kelly smiled, and William found himself doing the same, remembering how much fun it had been yesterday when they had hung out in his room. That's all the afternoon had to be. They were going to run together. Kelly was dressed for the occasion, wearing a charcoal tank top and purple basketball shorts.

"We're really going to do this," William said. "No more excuses, right?"

Kelly smirked and unlocked the car. "Only one way to find out. I might drive you to the middle of nowhere and leave you there, eliminating the competition."

William opened the passenger-side door. "Anything to win that race, huh?"

"You know it!"

Once they were on the road, William found one of his legs bouncing up and down, but not out of nervousness. "I skipped my usual swimming routine this morning," he said. "I didn't even bike to school."

"Saving your strength?" Kelly asked.

"I slept late, that's all."

"And you forgot to set your alarm?"

William chuckled. "On purpose. Do you ever do that? Pretend you don't know what you're actually doing?"

"Sounds like you've mastered self-denial," Kelly murmured.

William coughed, not wanting to travel down that path. "I figured I deserved a break. I always rewarded myself in little ways when I was first starting out. I'd keep a candy bar in my backpack and only let myself have it if I did enough laps. Or for the bigger goals, I'd uh... order things off eBay."

"More Transformers?" Kelly asked.

"They aren't all from my childhood," William said with an embarrassed chuckle. "What about you? Do you collect anything?"

"Photographs," Kelly said, still focused on his driving.

"Oh. Like old photos you find places, or ones by professionals?"

"Both."

"Do you ever take your own?"

"Yes."

"Cool." William shifted uncomfortably. Kelly's responses were short. Maybe he was annoyed by people who talked too much. William tried being quiet to see if Kelly had something else he would rather discuss, but evidently he didn't, because they traveled to their destination in silence. The park was secluded. No

other cars filled the parking spaces. Kelly didn't seem in a hurry either. He turned off the engine but didn't move to leave the car.

"Nice." William leaned forward to get a better view of the green outside. When Kelly didn't respond, he added, "Very nice."

"It is," Kelly said, his voice a little husky. "Secluded too. It's just you and me out here."

William felt a jolt of panic. *That's* why they had driven so far?

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

Oh. Kelly was suggesting they pick up the conversation where it had left off yesterday. William laughed at his own presumptions, then grew serious, because he still wasn't ready to have that conversation. He'd rather run.

"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."

William was first out of the car, hopping from foot to foot in anticipation. "So how do you want to do this?" he asked. "Should we race or take turns or—"

"Just run," Kelly said. Then he took off toward the nearest path.

William laughed happily and raced to catch up, which was easy because Kelly wasn't so fast. A mowed field dotted with park benches gave way to woods when the path narrowed, forcing them together. William tried to match Kelly's rhythm, the sound of their feet beating along the pavement in perfect unison. His body warmed up, his muscles loosened, and while he still found the pavement jarring as his feet made contact, this wasn't so different from swimming. Heck, it was almost relaxing!

"Ready to start running?" Kelly asked.

"Huh?" William replied. "I thought we already were."

Kelly laughed. Then he nodded toward the distance. "See the light ahead? That's a clearing. I'll race you there. Give it everything you've got. Ready?"

"Ready."

"Go!"

William drew on all of his strength, letting muscle drive him forward. This didn't result in a satisfying burst of speed the way it would have in the water, but he already had a lead on Kelly. So much for all his bragging and boasting! Kelly wasn't any faster than—

A burst of air ruffled his clothes. William's eyes and mouth widened in surprise. Kelly was ahead of him, not by just a few steps or feet, but yards. William tried to run faster but was already maxed out. Kelly continued to pull ahead and disappeared around the trees ahead.

William kept chugging along, feeling like a semi-truck that had challenged a Porsche to a race. When he reached the clearing, Kelly was sitting on a picnic table, casually inspecting his nails. What a show off!

"Holy shit," William said, leaning on the table for support as he tried to catch his breath. "You're like the Flash!"

"And you're like Aquaman," Kelly replied. "Out of your element."

William looked up, shook his head, and grinned. "Tomorrow. You and me at the YMCA. Then we'll see who's out of his element."

Kelly shrugged. "It's a deal, although not in the morning. I hate getting up early. After school?"

William 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."

"Agreed." A cloud passed over Kelly's features. "Frankly, I don't care who wins as long as it isn't Jared."

"Still pissed at him?"

"Yeah. Want to know why?"

William nodded.

Kelly scowled. "He said it was bad enough that I'm black without being gay too."

"He said that? 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. Wait, is that racist?"

"Probably, but I'm flattered and willing to forgive you. So it's the other thing you're worried about?"

William looked away. "Yeah."

He heard leaves being brushed off the table, and when he looked, Kelly was patting the cleared spot in invitation. "Come tell me about it."

William climbed onto the table, his feet on the bench. He hunched over to stare at them so he wouldn't have to make eye contact. "So you're gay."

"Yup."

"How did you know?"

For a moment, the only sound was bird song. "Around the time other guys were noticing girls, I starting noticing them noticing girls." Kelly said this as if it were a joke. How could he be so nonchalant? "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 distractedly, because he was feeling hopeful. He turned to Kelly. "So if you've looked at girls before, do you think it's normal that guys sometimes check out other guys?"

Kelly nodded. "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's tones were patient. "All of this is normal. Yes."

"Good." William breathed out in relief. "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." He made sure they were still alone. "Have you ever jacked off?"

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

"Oh." He filed that image away for later. "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, nudging William playfully. "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."

That wasn't welcome news. "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?"

Kelly appeared defensive. "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."

He had hoped Kelly would provide him with answers, but now William felt more confused than ever. If a wide variety of things turned people on, then how could he figure out if he had a problem or not?

"Returning to my original scenario," Kelly continued, "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?"

"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?"

He started to visualize this scenario, imagining a room without windows or doors. Perfect privacy. Then he pictured both models, but it was the guy who was more aggressive, lifting his shirt to reveal a muscled stomach, unbuttoning his jeans to show off the bulge. The poor female model was so ignored that she tossed herself in front of the competition, but it didn't matter. There was only one person William wanted to watch, and frankly, he wished he and the guy could be alone together. "Fuck."

"Which one?" Kelly asked.

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

"Is that so bad?"

Once again Kelly sounded amused. William rounded on him, but it wasn't fair to remain angry. Kelly didn't understand the implications. This was more than him worrying about what his parents would think. "I want to join the Coast Guard." His desire to do so wasn't just in the hopes of being cured. The Coast Guard had long since been his dream, one that he eventually decided could save him.

"So?" Kelly said. "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. Right." Kelly breathed out and considered this. "What about Don't Ask, Don't Tell? Doesn't that protect you?"

"Yeah, but only if I live a lie." William took to his feet, pacing back and forth, old worries finally being spoken aloud. "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 looked to Kelly disbelievingly. "What about you? What if gay people weren't allowed in the Olympics?"

"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?"

Kelly scowled at the ground, then looked up. "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."

"I am serious!" Kelly said, sounding more determined than ever. "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 gawped. "Would it be cheesy if I started applauding?"

Kelly's smile was subtle. "Normally, but considering that we're alone out here, go for it."

William clapped.

Kelly fanned himself as if flattered. Then he cocked his head. "So let's hear you say it. The big scary 'G' word. You're still tiptoeing around it."

"Okay," William said, feeling silly. "I'm gangsta!"

"No, you're definitely not." Kelly grew somber. "Come on. For real this time."

William looked away, his eyes landing on the path they had arrived on. Then an idea occurred to him. “Okay, but only if you can beat me in another race. First one to the car!”

He took off, knowing he needed every advantage he could get, unfair or otherwise. He had a huge lead on Kelly. Enough that William worried he might not be playing along. Then, like last time, he felt the wind blow past him, Kelly seemingly carried along with it. William watched him pull ahead. The way his body moved was beautiful. He admired how shameless Kelly was, how he could be so emotional and yet somehow remain strong. If Kelly represented what it was like to be gay—well, William wouldn’t mind being more like him. Or being with him. He let his eyes move over Kelly’s body again, for once not trying to censor himself or quarantine his feelings. The tight ass, the sheen of sweat on his dark skin, the strong line of his jaw when Kelly looked back, eyes half-lidded in amusement... He was fucking hot, and fucking around with him would *be* hot. William would have laughed at the idea if he had any breath left. And if his blood wasn’t pounding to his heart, he was pretty sure where it would choose to flow. He still didn’t know what it meant to be in love, but it wasn’t difficult to imagine falling for someone like Kelly. Much easier than any girl he had met, so that settled it. William was gay, and for once, he felt pretty damn good about it.

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Remaining resolute wasn’t as easy away from Kelly’s confident presence, but William tried. After dinner with his mother (his father was working late again), William went up to his room, walking around and straightening things while coming to grips with how his life was going to change. He’d need to be prepared for hateful comments at school, but the tradeoff was that he could finally do what everyone else did. Find someone, fall in love, and have sex. He wanted that, badly, and not just because he was always horny these days. He felt like there was an entire world he had never been initiated into. Being intimate with someone, sharing private thoughts in a dimly lit room,

exchanging declarations of love, bodies close beneath the sheets—he hungered for that, and until now, it had never seemed possible.

There was a price to pay. He turned his attention to the vintage Coast Guard poster in his room, a sailor grinning and asking if William—or whomever—cared to join him. And he still wanted to. He didn't feel passionate about college or any other course of action. He wanted to get out there, fly in helicopters, and put his swimming skills to good use by helping others.

William swallowed, tasting guilt. Was he really going to turn his back on people who needed him, just because he wanted to hook up with another guy?

“Jesus, you're obsessed!” an unexpected voice declared.

William leapt into the air. When he landed on his feet again, he spun around, placing a hand on his chest when he saw it was just his brother. Not Spencer, with his chiseled chin and huge muscles. The comparatively scrawny guy in front of him had a permanent slouch and almost always wore a crooked smile and a day's worth of stubble.

“Did you drool on the carpet?” Errol asked. He was named after some old movie star. William had been luckier than his brothers when it came to his name, although his family always called him— “Willy, if I didn't know better, I'd say you're in love with that sailor.”

“Shut up,” William responded. “I was just—”

“Dreaming of the Coast Guard, I know.” Errol's grin widened. “Has your boner subsided yet?”

William shook his head and sighed. His middle brother lacked any sort of filter, which more often than not, ended up embarrassing those around him. Not Errol though. He seemed comfortable with any topic.

“You've got to broaden your horizons,” his brother said, flopping down on William's bed and putting his hands behind his head. “There's nothing wrong with the Coast Guard, but you don't need to be such a conformist. Have a little fun before you ship out or whatever.”

"I'm not a conformist," William said, eyeing the dirt on the bottom of his brother's shoes. Shoes that were currently wiggling over the comforter he had recently laundered, but complaining would only prove his point. "What about you? Still working hard to keep Austin weird?"

"You know it. Like the new shirt?"

The screen-printed illustration was of a pinup girl sucking on a lollipop while squirming against a giant eyeball, one of her long nude legs rubbing the violet iris. "It's freaky. And gross."

"Thanks!" his brother said, sitting up to look down at it proudly. "I've been going around to concert venues lately, asking to set up a booth. Everyone keeps shooting me down, but I'll find one eventually."

Determination ran in the family. Spencer had his career in the Marines, something that required plenty of drive. Errol had barely managed to finish high school because he was so focused on his art. He did though, relocating downtown and sharing a ridiculously small apartment with some other artist types so he could chase his dream. William, of course, was still determined to make the Coast Guard work. Somehow.

"How old are you?" Errol asked appraisingly.

"Seventeen. And you forgot my birthday."

"I'll draw you something," Errol said dismissively. "Anyway, you're old enough that you're probably smoking now. Know what I mean?"

William knew *exactly* what he meant. "I don't smoke."

Errol appeared confused. "Drink?"

"No! When I meet with a recruiter, I want to be able to look them in the eye and answer truthfully. Besides, they test for that stuff."

Errol chuckled. "My baby brother, the last honest guy on the planet."

William averted his eyes, which didn't go unnoticed.

"Don't tell me you've got a dark side?" Errol said. "What did you do? Take a free sample at the grocery store without asking permission first?"

"I killed a man." William said this with grim seriousness. "It was late at night and I was driving... It was an accident! But I needed, I still need—" He choked in air. "I need help hiding the body."

The amusement fled from Errol's features. When William couldn't maintain it any longer and cracked a smile, Errol flopped back on the bed, clutched at his sides, and cackled. "It's always the quiet ones," he said. "Come smoke with me. Sorry, come keep me company."

"Fine."

He followed his brother downstairs. They stopped to grab a couple of sodas from the refrigerator. Then they stepped out on the back patio. The neighborhood was old, the lighting minimal compared to modern subdivisions. William liked it since they could enjoy the natural dark of the night without having to suffer orange artificial light. And it meant not being seen by the neighbors, which was especially good now, since his brother had lit a joint.

William sidled away from him so he wouldn't accidentally inhale anything. "What are you doing home? You're not moving back in, are you?"

"Don't worry," Errol croaked before exhaling. "I don't want my old room back. The guy I live with has a girl over tonight, so I'm steering clear. It's his turn to use the bedroom."

"There's only one?"

"Yup!" Errol said. "You haven't seen the new place, huh? It's like Bert and Ernie in there, except platonic. Normally I would just hang out in the living room, but last time I made too much noise and my roommate kept thinking of me when he should have been trying harder to stay hard. Ha ha!"

William tried to remember if his brother's roommate was handsome or not. "Still, I figured you'd have something better to do on a Friday night."

"I could say the same to you. Where are all your ladies?"

William shrugged.

"Yeah, same here." The ember of Errol's joint glowed brighter. Then he exhaled. "The last one, she loved her cats more than me. Paige and her pussies. She was a good girl."

He said this longingly, once again making William feel like he was missing out.

"There's gotta be someone," Errol continued. "You and Spence both got Dad's muscles. Lucky bastards. That must turn heads at school."

"I did meet someone recently," William said carefully.

"Oh yeah?" Errol flicked the end of the joint, knocking the cherry loose to extinguish it. "So how come you're not hanging out with them now?"

William hesitated, noticing that his brother had kept the pronoun neutral. Did he know? If so, maybe he was capable of subtlety after all. "I'm not sure if the other person likes me that way."

"Then ask them out."

"I'm not sure if *I* like them that way."

Errol chuckled. "So? You won't know if you really like each other until you try. A date is like a job interview, except you'll both be in the hot seat. If it works out, awesome. You're hired. So is the other person. That's when the real work begins." His brother smirked. "You're going to love clocking in though. Trust me."

"So I just ask?"

"If you don't, it's called stalking. I remember being freaked out by dating when I was your age, but man, the worst that can happen is you'll get rejected. The idea of *that* freaked me out too. It's not a big deal though. Most people let you down easy."

The porch light switched on, and a second later, the glass door slid open. Their mother noticed Errol and became instantly joyful. "I thought I heard your voice! When did you get here?" Then she sniffed, eyes widening. "Errol!" she hissed. "The neighbors!"

"Relax. The old lady next door, Mrs. Higgins, she's on medicinal."

"She is not!" Kate chastised. "That's not even legal here! Although I do sometimes smell something strange from her yard."

"I'm tellin' ya!" Errol said, stepping forward. "Give me a hug."

"You stink," Kate said, but she was already hugging him tightly.

William rolled his eyes, long since used to seeing his brother get away with murder. If he tried the same thing—

"You aren't partaking, are you?" his mother said sternly, having similar thoughts.

"No," Errol answered for him. "He's hopelessly square, I swear."

"I'm not square!" William grumbled.

"It's okay, honey," his mother said. "How's that song go?"

"Mom," he said, hoping to stop her.

"It's cool to be square! I think that's it..."

William grimaced, hoping nobody at school would ever discover how lame his Friday nights were.

"Where's Dad?" Errol asked.

"Having drinks with coworkers."

"You should have gone," Errol said. "I could have babysat Willy."

"You suck," William replied.

"Does he still wet the bed?" his brother continued.

"I really hate you."

Their mother shook her head. "You're both silly. I'll let you have your fun. Oh, and honey—" She was addressing Errol. "—there's a batch of peanut butter raisin on the table. Just in case." She silently mouthed the word munchies.

"You're a baking machine! You should stop licking stamps at the post office and open up a bakery."

"But darling, if I quit my job, who would pay your rent?"

"Burn!" William declared. "Nice one, Mom!"

"Thanks, honey. Have a good night. I love you boys."

"We love you too," they droned.

"She's all right," Errol said when they were alone again.

"She's a different person when you're around."

"Only because she doesn't want you to be messed up like I am."

They returned inside, grabbed the promised cookies, and went back to William's room. There they flipped through channels, settling on none for long and talking over most of the shows. When the hour grew late, Errol rose, stretched, and headed for the door.

"I'm gonna crash on the couch," he said. He surveyed the room before leaving, attention settling on the Coast Guard poster again. "You're not square," he said, "because you don't try to be anything other than who you are. That's really cool. Most people your age aren't like that. Good night, baby bro."

"Good night," he said, feeling a surge of affection for his sibling. When he was alone again, this feeling was replaced by guilt because as far as his family and friends were concerned, they didn't know the real William at all.

* * * * *

William stood in front of the bathroom mirror. Not to relieve sexual frustration, although amorous thoughts *were* on his mind. Sort of. He had brushed his teeth, gargled with mouth wash, and shaved with the utmost care, not wanting a stray hair or bloody cut to detract from his appearance. He had even swabbed out his ears to make sure no unsightly wax was visible. He couldn't remember the last time he had primped like this, but now it seemed advisable. He didn't know if Kelly was interested in him, and William didn't really feel ready for anything to happen, but he figured he should be prepared in case he changed his mind.

He grabbed the bottle of cologne Spencer had sent him for his birthday and sprayed it on his bare chest, even though it would get washed off again as soon as they were in the pool. Still, for that initial five minutes when he and Kelly were together, he intended to smell good. Worrying about his outfit seemed equally pointless, since they wouldn't be wearing much. That thought

gave him pause. Maybe he should take care of business, just to prevent any embarrassing situations from popping up. Literally.

The doorbell rang, but he didn't react. The plan was for him to pick up Kelly at his place, so it was probably a Jehovah's Witness or a package delivery. He debated putting product in his hair, decided against it, and returned to his room to pick out a shirt. William found his bed occupied. Lily was reclined on it, her pose seductive. She laughed as if this was a joke and got to her feet.

"Surprise!" she said.

"Hey," he managed, tensing up as she hugged him. They often hugged in greeting, but normally he was wearing more than just a pair of jeans. "What are you doing here?"

"It's Saturday, I'm bored..." Lily pulled back, a hand sliding around to his chest. "We talked about hanging out alone. Remember?"

"Yeah!" William said. "It's just that I have plans."

"Oh." Lily frowned. "Starting when?"

"Three."

They both looked at the clock. He wished he had lied, because it was only half past one.

"I'll keep you company until then."

"Okay." He moved around her to the dresser, grabbing the first shirt he found and putting it on. It was pale blue and oversized, since his mother was convinced he was a giant, but at least he wasn't as naked now.

"It's been ages since I've been over," Lily said. "Your mom didn't recognize me at first."

"There's not much to do here. Maybe we should go somewhere else."

Lily shook her head. "I like it. My brother's room stinks. Yours is nice." She sat on the bed and patted the mattress next to her, reminding William of when Kelly had done the same with the picnic table, except he didn't feel as motivated to sit. Not wanting to be rude, he did so anyway. She started talking, first about the usual things, like what had been happening at school. Then the reminiscing began. Lily focused on memories they had made

together. She brought up the time they had all gone to the airport, wandered around the corridors and pretended they had a flight to catch, even running at one point and shouting "Excuse me! Out of the way! My gate is about to close!" Or the time Lily had first gotten her license, and Holly begged her to drive them to San Antonio because she wanted to see the River Walk. The trip took longer than any of them expected, so they had all broken curfew that night and gotten in trouble. Except for Abby, who had managed to sneak back in undetected.

William relaxed, laughing along with these stories and adding his own details. But he noticed how many of Lily's memories focused on him. He had bought her a necklace at the River Walk. At the airport they had pretended they were a husband and wife catching a flight to Hawaii. That she was interested in him wasn't a complete surprise, but now he was starting to wonder if she felt more. Did she love him?

"That weird place with the go-karts," she said. "Remember? They had a few waterslides off to one side."

William groaned. "How can I forget? You guys dared me to go down one, but none of us had a swimsuit, so I—"

"Stripped down to your underwear." Lily was sitting upright, her legs crossed beneath her as she smiled.

"Hey, I had boxers on! I just didn't expect them to be so heavy when they got wet."

"The whole world saw your left ass cheek!"

William laughed but noticed he was alone.

Lily's teeth were hidden behind her lips now. "Do you think I'm pretty?"

"Yeah!" he said. And she was. Of his three female friends, she had the most boyfriends, although none seemed to last for long.

"It's crazy how handsome you've gotten," she said. "When I first met you..." She shook her head, as if it didn't matter. "You deserve to be with someone who cares about you."

She leaned forward, reaching out a hand. His first instinct was to pull away. Then he thought of drowning people, a capsized boat, and a helicopter hovering over it all, except no one leapt

from it. No rescue swimmer was there to help them. Instead he was at a seedy gay bar, sitting on one of the stools and drinking, ignoring the hungry stares of guys in leather chaps. Is that really what he wanted?

He could at least try. If not for those drowning victims, then for Lily, because rejecting her would also mean hurting her. He cared too much to do that. Not in the way that she wanted but enough to try.

Just as their lips were about to meet, William turned his head. This didn't stop her. She began kissing his neck, rubbing her hands over his body. That felt good, although her fingers were more dainty than he preferred. His neck was getting awfully wet too, so he pulled away and laughed nervously.

Lily looked at him like he was being sweet. Then she stripped off her shirt. William stared. Part of him was curious. He had seen his mother in a bra, but this was different. Lily had a nice body, her muscles toned but feminine. He definitely found her more attractive than he did most girls. She didn't wear a lot of makeup. She didn't need to, her lips naturally pink against her dark skin, the light sprinkling of freckles across her nose making him long for lazy summer days. What guy wouldn't find her attractive?

"What's fair is fair," Lily prompted.

She nodded at his shirt. Okay. No big deal. He stripped it off, feeling a little thrilled. This was getting crazy! Then Lily scooted closer, one of her breasts pressing against him, the fabric of her bra itchy. She made another attempt to kiss him. Worried he would mess it up, he avoided her lips again and kissed her shoulder, then her neck. Her skin smelled like soap and sunshine. The breast pressed against his arm started rubbing back and forth. Then she grabbed his hand and moved it to the bra strap on her shoulder.

He pulled it down, wondering if the contents would cause him to catch fire, if he would become boob-obsessed like other guys. Part of him was mildly curious, but— He gasped as a hand slid up his thigh. His body reacted, hungry as ever. The caress of someone else's hand instead of his own... Wouldn't that feel good on his

cock? Wouldn't her mouth feel even better? He was hard now and could practically see himself churning through the water to save those victims, a victorious grin plastered on his face. He could do this! Except one of the heads bobbing in the water sure looked familiar, as did the self-assured smirk.

Kelly.

William jerked away, Lily's hand sliding off his bulge. "I don't want to rush things," he stammered. "I really should get going."

Lily appeared confused. Then she looked at the clock. William did the same. Time had flown by because it was nearly three.

"You can't cancel your plans?" she asked.

"They're important. Sorry."

Lily nibbled her lip. "Can we meet afterwards?"

"I'm not sure how late I'll be."

"Tomorrow?"

"Uhhh."

Lily stared at him. Then she gave a barely perceptible shake of the head, which continued as she grabbed her shirt to put it on.

"Sorry!" he said. "It's just..." He faltered, unable to find a good excuse.

"It's fine," she said tersely. "Give me a call if you ever have time for me. Or don't. Whatever."

"Lily!" he said, standing to follow her out of the room. He ended up chasing her all the way to the driveway. "I'm sorry! I'm going through some weird stuff right now and it's not you. I know how that sounds, but it's true."

Lily spun around, car keys in hand. "Then tell me what's going on! Explain it to me!"

"I..." William choked. "I will. Just not right now."

She exhaled. "Fine. You know where to find me."

William watched her get in her car, pull out, and drive away. Then he sighed and trudged back inside. His father was in the entryway, wearing a knowing expression. He clapped William on the shoulder and chuckled, like his son had finally grown up and become a man, when in truth, he felt more like a lost little boy than ever.

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