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Chapter Four

William was freaking out. After Lily had left, he returned upstairs and washed his face, just in case there was lipstick on it, which made him feel silly when he remembered Lily didn't wear any. He also washed off his cologne because romance was now the furthest thing from his mind. Then he noticed the time and rushed over to Kelly's house, getting lost repeatedly in his addled state. He was nearly an hour late when he finally arrived. Kelly's jaw was clenching when he opened the door, but he had gotten over it by the time they arrived at the YMCA.

Exercise was usually just what the doctor ordered, but the Y was a different place in the afternoon, especially on a Saturday. Families filled the main pool, splashing around and having a good time. That was fine. The problem was how many of them kept spilling over into the swimming lanes, especially when those lanes were already occupied by other swimmers. He and Kelly were forced to wait their turn, and even then William felt pressured not to remain in the water too long. Soon he gave up entirely, leading the way back to the locker room and getting dressed.

"Isn't there a hot tub?" Kelly asked. "We could try swimming in circles."

"They would have to be tight," William said. "Besides, the hot tub is probably stuffed too."

"A sauna?"

"I've never understood the appeal of sitting in a hot room and getting sweaty."

"We could hit the track."

William grimaced. "My feet are still sore. I think I'd rather go home and forget this day ever happened."

"Something wrong? Besides me making you miss out on your early morning routine. If I had known it would ruin your day..."

"It's not you," William said with a sigh. A couple of guys entered the locker room, making him yearn for privacy. He grabbed his duffel bag. "Let's go."

"Okay. You're the boss."

He couldn't shake the bad mood, maybe because he wasn't sure why exactly he was upset. Yesterday had felt so good—finally coming to terms with himself and having a nice evening with his brother. So he had thought. Now everything had returned to being complicated.

When they reached his car, William set his duffel bag on the trunk and spun around to face Kelly. "I did things. With a girl. That's why I was late."

Kelly's mouth dropped open. "But yesterday..." He raised his eyebrows and shook his head. "I thought we covered this already."

"I know."

"What did you do exactly?"

"I kissed a friend of mine. Sort of. Not on the lips. Um."

Kelly's eyebrows managed to climb even higher. "Then where?"

"Not *there*. Just on the neck. She kissed me a little too. And we took off our shirts."

Kelly exhaled and looked across the parking lot to the horizon. "Did you like it?"

"I don't know. I, uh, reacted."

"You got hard," Kelly said, eyes intense as they met his again.

"Yeah."

"I had a similar experience once, and as I already told you, I know plenty of other gay guys who have too. I don't know what you want from me. There isn't a test to prove one way or another what you are, but if you're more interested in men than—"

"Maybe I'm bisexual," William blurted out.

"Fine," Kelly said with a shrug. "Maybe you are. If so, what stopped you from going further with her?"

William was looking at the reason right now, but he wasn't about to admit that. "I started thinking of guys instead." There. That was close enough to the truth.

"Sounds to me like we've reached the same conclusion."

"I guess so," William mumbled.

"Are we going to do this again tomorrow?" Kelly's tone made clear that he was joking, but William answered seriously anyway.

"No. I'm gay."

"Congratulations. I'll buy you an ice cream."

"Should I tell everyone?" William asked. "I don't really want to."

"No ice cream then," Kelly said with a sigh. He leaned against the rear of the car. "Who you tell depends on a number of factors. How do you think your family will react?"

William thought of Errol and how upset their mother had been the first time she had caught him smoking pot. They had argued, and she even staged an intervention, but in the end she had accepted who he was and adjusted accordingly. Her love for him mattered more than a drug habit. Being gay wasn't the same thing as being a stoner, and his family wasn't religious. He couldn't imagine her having any real objections. His father's reaction was harder to predict, since William didn't feel as close to him, but he did know he was loved.

"They'll be okay. I think."

"All right. And your friends?"

William's cheeks began to burn. This didn't go unnoticed. "I don't know. Two of them are interested in me. Maybe more."

Kelly smirked. "Wow. Most guys would love to have that problem."

"Not me!"

"Keep that in mind the next time you start having doubts. Anyway, if they like you enough to want to be with you, I'm sure they'll be willing to accept you for who you are."

William walked a few paces from the car. Then he spun around. "I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings."

"I'm sure they'll forgive you."

William wasn't so certain. "If you liked someone and then found out you could never be with him, how would that make you feel? Maybe they'll start hating me instead."

Kelly was quiet. Then his expression became defiant. "People like that aren't worth your time."

William continued to stare at him, his own problems forgotten. "You and Jared stopped being friends because he's a racist homophobe. Right? That was the only reason?"

Kelly tensed. "I had feelings for him. Don't ask me why. I'm just glad I wasn't stupid enough to let him know. And don't you dare tell him! Or anyone else!"

"I won't. I promise."

"Listen," Kelly said, his posture relaxing, "it's nice that you don't want to hurt anyone, but sometimes it can't be helped. I think your friends learning the truth now would be kindest in the long run. Besides, you're not choosing some other girl over them. You're not choosing anything. You're attracted to guys, and there's nothing anyone can do about it. If your friends possess any intelligence, they won't blame you for what you can't change."

William thought about it and nodded. He couldn't let things continue the way they were. "So I just tell everyone that I'm gay?"

"Up to you. It's not how I introduce myself. I let people get to know me, and when such subjects come up naturally, that's when it makes sense to be truthful. For me, anyway."

"But if Jared is homophobic and racist, then how did you end up being best friends?"

"He said something racist, but that doesn't *make* him racist exactly. He realized he was wrong and apologized. As for the gay thing, you've got me there. I purposely didn't tell him. I'm out to my family and friends, I've gone to a gay youth group for years, and I've had more boyfriends and lovers than most people my age, but when it came to him..." Kelly shook his head. "I was deluding myself. I wanted to be with him, even though in my

heart I knew he was straight and that I didn't have a chance, so I avoided the subject completely. I let myself dream we were both too scared to confess our feelings to each other. Basically I was stupid. Learn from my mistake. Tell your friends."

"But you telling Jared ended your friendship."

"Him being a douche is what ended our friendship. Girls are cooler about these things. Usually. I don't think you have anything to worry about. It's either that or you can keep making out with them. And more."

"She rubbed her boobs against me," William said with a frown.

For some reason this sent Kelly into a fit of laughter. His smile was nice. And contagious. No wonder he had so much experience in love. The thought made William feel intimidated, and as he watched Kelly try to get himself under control, he felt even more certain about what he wanted. Kelly was an amazing guy, and anyone—himself in particular—would be lucky to have him as their boyfriend.

"Do you still like him?" William asked. "Jared, I mean. Do you still have—"

"Of course not," Kelly spat, sobering up. "I don't feel anything for him at all."

William knew that wasn't true. Kelly still got angry when Jared's name was mentioned and was still dead set on him not winning the triathlon. Feelings definitely remained, but if they weren't romantic in nature, then maybe he stood a chance.

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William circled the dining room table, searching for any imperfection. The utensils were spotless and straight, the napkins carefully folded. Even the handle of each teacup was aligned horizontally with the edge of the cloth placemats. Small plates awaited each guest, a platter in the center stocked with cupcakes and petite sandwiches. Everything appeared flawless until he looked up and saw one big problem standing in the doorway.

"Mom!"

"I know you wanted the house to yourself," she said, moving forward to inspect the table.

He blocked her path. "I thought you and Dad were supposed to be out shopping today."

"That's what I thought too. Apparently he was called in to work this morning."

William briefly shared her irritation before he resumed being selfish. "You promised me—"

"I know, I know," Kate said, raising a hand. "I'll be taking a nap. I have a headache. You just enjoy yourself." She turned to leave but then hesitated. "I thought you were only having Lily over."

He shook his head. "Abby and Holly too."

"All three girls?" his mother said, sounding scandalized.

Did she think he was planning on having an orgy? "Mom!"

"I'll be in my room," she said, shaking her head.

She left, giving William just enough time to put a few more things on the table—including the kettle of water he had brought to a boil—before the doorbell rang. His friends' expressions were just as puzzled when he answered it, even more so once they were all seated at the table. "Thank you for coming," he said. Then he walked around the table, placing a tea bag in each cup before pouring steaming water over it. He smiled at his friends as he did this, greeting each of them one by one. Holly appeared giddy, Abby kept looking from him to the spread, and Lily refused to meet his eye.

"Okay," he said once he had sat. "Everyone help yourself. Enjoy."

Nobody moved. Only Holly reached for food, but Lily grabbed her wrist to stop her. "What's this about?" she demanded.

From her tone, she was still hurt.

William hoped today would put an end to such feelings. Yesterday he and Kelly had stood in the YMCA parking lot, talking for almost an hour about how the coming out process had gone for him and other people he knew. Kelly compared the

process to an adhesive bandage—best ripped off swiftly and without hesitation. William felt more tact was called for. “Aren’t you hungry?” he asked. “Please, have a—” Lily’s expression stopped him short. She had looked away, her features darkening. “Okay. Well. I asked you all here because there’s something I need to say.”

Holly perked up. “What?”

William shifted nervously. “It’s about me,” he said. “Who I really am. Um. Geez.”

“I told you so,” Abby murmured.

“Shut up!” Holly shot back.

“He’s gay,” Abby insisted, rolling her eyes at Holly, who shook her head adamantly in response.

“No, he isn’t! We’re here so he can tell us who he’s chosen.” Holly looked to him with transparent hope. “Right?”

William stared at her, any response caught in his throat. Then he looked to Lily, whose cheeks remained flushed, arms crossed as she glared at the table. This wasn’t going as smoothly as he had hoped.

“Abby is right,” he managed. “I’m gay.”

Holly scrunched up her nose. “Are you sure?”

Lily lifted her head, waiting for his answer.

“Yes,” William said. “Trust me, I’ve thought long and hard about this.”

“Could have fooled me,” Lily muttered.

Holly turned to her slowly. “What’s that supposed to mean? Did you guys—”

“No!” William said. Then he frowned. “Not exactly.”

“You knew I had a crush on him!” Holly shouted.

“It doesn’t matter,” Lily said, staring her down. “He’s not interested in any of us, so get over it!”

“I’m fine with this,” Abby interjected. “William, you’re very brave for telling us. I’m proud of you and accept you for who you are.”

“She read that online,” Lily said.

“So what?” Abby shot back. “At least I’m not clinging to false hope.”

“I still am,” Holly said. “Are you really *really* sure?”

“Yes!” William said, starting to lose his temper. “I know it’s an adjustment, but I thought part of you would be happy for me. If you really like me, then—”

“We do,” Lily said, voice strained. “And we are.”

The table was quiet.

“Thanks,” William said. He felt terrible. Holly had put on a smile but still seemed deflated, Lily’s expression was tight, and Abby... Well, she at least seemed okay with it all. “How did you know?” he asked her.

“You’re not like other guys,” she replied.

“That’s what I like most about him,” Holly said.

Abby ignored her. “At first we thought maybe you were just shy, but you’re the only guy in school not interested in our boobs, and if that wasn’t enough, you invited us over for a tea party.”

Holly giggled, covering her mouth. “With cupcakes. *Pink* cupcakes.”

“You’re girls,” William said defensively. “I thought you’d like them.”

“Great,” Abby said, “he’s gay, but he still manages to be a sexist pig.”

William stared. Maybe the stress had gotten to him, but he started laughing. To his relief, the girls joined in, even though Lily’s laughter seemed a little forced. They continued to tease him, finally enjoying the food and making it feel more like a celebration. Holly generously made fun of herself too. “I can’t believe I thought you invited us over to say who you chose.”

“To date?” William said. “Abby, of course.” He thought it was the safest answer, since she never really expressed much interest in him.

“No thanks,” she replied.

“You don’t want my body?”

“Nope. You’re hot, don’t get me wrong, but you’re too nice.”

“She likes the bad boys,” Holly explained.

"I have a leather jacket," William teased. "I can slick back my hair, roll a pack of cigarettes in my shirt sleeve."

"That's not her type," Holly said. "Tell him."

Abby covered her face with both hands, but through them she murmured. "Is your brother single?"

"Spencer?" He asked, but then he understood. "*Errol?* Yeah! I'll give you his phone number."

They spent the rest of the afternoon talking. He fielded the same questions he had asked Kelly so recently. When did you first realize? How can you be sure? There were a lot of mixed signals he needed to explain away too. Eventually the topic became more lighthearted; Holly quizzed him about what sort of guys he liked, and even more embarrassing, all three girls gave him advice about boys.

"Don't wait for them to make a move," Lily said. "Guys take forever to work up their courage."

"Just be sweet," Holly said. "And pretty. Or handsome, in your case."

"Try reading a freaking book," Abby said, shaking her head at her friend. "I hate a guy who doesn't have anything interesting to say."

William stopped blushing and started taking notes. Mentally, at least. By the time his friends left, he felt closer to them than ever. He was only worried about Lily, who didn't smile as much as she usually did. He was glad when she lagged behind, giving them privacy to talk without the others overhearing.

"I still don't understand what happened the other day," she said.

They stood in the driveway, her bicycle creating a barrier between them. It was the racing kind, which only made him like her more. They had ridden together many times. It wasn't hard to imagine why she thought they might be compatible.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's been confusing for me too."

"Okay." She squeezed the brakes absentmindedly, attention on the bike as she spoke. "I want you to know that I'm not like Holly. She likes you, but then she also falls in love with celebrities

who don't know she exists. The feelings I have for you, they aren't superficial."

William felt terrible. All he could do was keep apologizing. "I'm sorry I can't be what you—"

"I know," Lily said, raising her head. "I just needed to tell you that. For me. We're not meant to be together. I can accept that. You being gay doesn't change anything, and neither do my dumb feelings. We'll always be friends. I promise."

"Thanks," he said. He wanted to hug her but was worried that would only confuse matters more.

Lily nodded at him, swung a leg over her bicycle, a dejected smile tugging at one cheek. "I'll see you in school on Monday."

"Yeah," he said, throat tight. "See you then."

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William still felt overwhelmed by the experience when he sat down at the dinner table that night. On one hand, a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He just wished that he hadn't shifted that weight to his friends. He kept thinking of the brave face Lily had put on just before they parted. She would bounce back. Plenty of guys vied for her attention. He just hoped they would be good to her.

A sigh pulled him from these thoughts. He looked up to see that his mother hadn't touched her food either. Maybe she was waiting for him to start. He lifted his fork and jabbed at the salad, but she still didn't move.

"What's the point?" she said. "We might as well eat in front of the television."

He looked at the empty chair where his father should be. Lately he was never around. Maybe William should say something to him, because surely once he knew how unhappy his wife was, Lewis would make more of an effort.

"I like sitting here," William said. "It gives us a chance to talk."

"Is there something you would like to tell me?" The question felt loaded. It didn't take him long to guess why.

William's mouth went dry. "You spied on us."

"I overheard! It's hard not to when you and your friends get so loud."

"Sorry," he said, breaking eye contact. Then he raised his head high. "But not for being gay."

"Of course not!" His mother looked anguished. "Honey, all I want is for you to be happy!"

"Then you're okay with it?"

"No!" she placed a hand on her forehead, as if the headache from earlier still persisted. "I don't know. I'm worried about you. That boy... What was his name? Matthew Shepard?"

"Oh."

Her lips trembled. "I don't want anyone to hurt you!"

Then came the tears. William hadn't been prepared for them, but he rose and walked around the table. He made his mother stand so that he could hug her. This only seemed to make her more emotional. He fought back tears of his own, not understanding them at first. Then he realized what she was feeling because he shared the same sentiment. The last thing he had ever wanted was for his mother to get hurt. Now he felt like he'd been the one to do so.

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"Totally normal," Kelly said, doing stretches beside the track after school the next day. "Mothers—the good ones anyway—care most about your wellbeing. My mom was worried I wouldn't be able to get married, or that I'd be lonely without children in my life. I just had to explain that gay people can have those same things. There might be more legal hoops to jump through, but that's not going to stop me. Your mom loves you, so she's scared you're going to get gay bashed or whatever."

"That would explain why she gave me this," William said. He reached into his backpack and pulled out his keychain, which normally fit in his pocket, except now it had a large tube attached to it. If that weren't enough, the tube was inside a purple leather condom. That's how he thought of it, anyway.

"Is that pepper spray?" Kelly asked.

"Yup. It used to be hers. It might have fit okay in her purse, but now I'm forced to carry my backpack around. I feel ridiculous."

Kelly grinned and shook his head. "She loves you. And come to think of it, that might save me some trouble. Think you can spray Jared with that stuff during the triathlon?"

"No way." William put it back. "My dad tried giving me a knife."

"Wow. I had no idea your family was so violent." Kelly started jogging in place, either to warm up or because he was eager to get moving. "How did he react besides that?"

"Kind of distant, but that's how he's been lately anyway. What about you? Do you worry about self-defense?"

"You think I'm going to let anyone punch this pretty face?"

William took the opportunity to stare. Kelly's face had been showing up in his life a lot lately. In his dreams, his fantasies, or on his computer screen when he'd done a search to find a photo of him.

"You're better off running," Kelly continued. "We had a guy talk to us about it in the gay youth group. He said that the best way to avoid getting hurt is to not stick around. I've got pride, but I don't want to end up in the hospital because of it. Why give some asshole the satisfaction? I say run and live to plot your revenge. Speaking of which, your parents might feel better if their son learned how to run."

"I can run!" William said in mock offense. "I'll prove it. Let's go!"

Kelly took off, zipping down the track. William was all too happy to chase after him.

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"What's the point of being gay if you're not getting any?"

This was the second question Errol asked after William had confided in him. His brother had shown up on Sunday night, kicked out by his roommate again. He was standing in the kitchen and cramming cookies into his mouth when William decided to tell him the truth. At this rate he would forever associate baked

goods with coming out. Errol hadn't been surprised in the slightest. The first question he had asked was, "Got a boyfriend?"

William had shaken his head, leading to the next line of inquiry, to which William responded. "Getting any what?"

"Trouser snake. Meat popsicle. Bone cigar. Pudding torpedo."

The list had gone on and on, William increasingly horrified until he broke down and started laughing. Then he had tried coming up with some of his own. "Party stick, beef thermometer, trouser trunk, baby bazooka." It only got worse when they started dredging up colorful terms for anal sex. All that really mattered was that his brother was cool and accepted him fully. Errol wasn't exactly wrong either. William had faced the most difficult part and told those nearest to him. Now he should reap the rewards, which meant actually *doing* something gay. Like going on a date. With a guy.

He spent most of the school day obsessing over how he could make this happen. Obviously he had to ask someone. He already knew who. Even if he had other options, William couldn't imagine doing any better than Kelly. That's what made it so intimidating. He was pretty sure Kelly was out of his league. Better looking, more experienced, and quicker. Not just in terms of running speed. Kelly was smart! He still wanted to try though. They met after school, as they had done for two weeks now, alternating between the high school track and the YMCA pool. Today's session was particularly good. Kelly finally got the hang of flip turns, which he had asked William to teach him. After this breakthrough, Kelly couldn't stop doing them, and William couldn't stop watching his lithe body twist and turn gracefully beneath the water. Kelly was grinning by the end of their session. They sat on the edge of the pool, letting their muscles relax after the long workout.

"He's done for," Kelly said, still appearing elated. "Jared can't do flip turns. I don't care how fast he swims. I've finally got him beat!"

William furrowed his brow, not liking how worked up Kelly got over Jared. He was determined though to focus on the positive

and show what he had to offer. He stretched out, feet in the water and towel off to one side, meaning his full body was on display. To his delight, he caught Kelly looking.

"Tomorrow's the last day to train," William said.

Kelly finished patting his head dry and let the towel settle over his shoulders. He was sitting cross-legged, but enough of his body remained in plain view too. "We should take tomorrow off. Make sure we're well-rested for Saturday."

The last thing he wanted was to spend time apart! "I'm still nowhere near as fast as you. In fact, I'm pretty sure you've learned more from me than I have from you."

"Blame the student, not the teacher." A smile played about Kelly's lips. "One more day won't make much difference. Save your strength and load up on carbs."

Then again, maybe this was the perfect opportunity. "Wow, free time after school. What will I do with myself?" Then, as casually as possible, he added, "Maybe we should celebrate."

"We haven't won yet."

"No, but we've been working hard. I figure we deserve some fun." William tore his eyes away from Kelly's body, not wanting to accidentally launch a pudding torpedo. "You know how to play pool?"

"You mean the non-swimming variety? No."

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

Kelly nodded. "Yeah, okay."

Simple as that? Kelly had pulled one foot close to examine a toenail. William had just asked him on a date, and Kelly had accepted without even thinking about it. Or reacting much. William supposed he already had lots of experience with such things and probably got asked out all the time. He tried to play it cool by not verbalizing all the questions he had. What should he wear? What would Kelly wear? Who was the top in this scenario? Please let it be Kelly! Were they going to kiss? Should they now?

"Do you know a place?" Kelly asked.

"No," William said. "I'll look one up and text you the info."

“Cool,” Kelly said.

“Cool,” William repeated, even though he felt anything but. This was way too exciting. He was going on a date!

* * * * *

As soon as William was home from school the next day, he took a shower, scrubbing every inch of his body and laughing, because he was pretty sure Kelly wouldn't be performing an inspection. No way would they hook up on the first date. Right? Would they? He started scrubbing twice as hard. Once finished showering and drying off, he put on the only suit he owned, which he had worn once before. To his aunt's funeral. With that cheerful thought in mind, he decided he was being an idiot and opted instead for a more casual approach. A pair of jeans, a light blue dress shirt, and some of that cologne that had driven Lily wild. He chuckled over the memory and was still smiling as he went downstairs.

He was digging around in his parents' bathroom for dental floss when he heard a car pull into the garage. His mother probably, since she often got off work around now. He walked to the dining room to see that he was right. Kate entered and set her purse on the table, hair a little unruly like it had been a particularly hard day.

“Do you know where the floss is?” he asked.

“The drawer closest to the medicine cabinet,” she replied.

He went to fetch it and intended to take it upstairs to his own bathroom so he could brush his teeth afterwards. Then he saw his mother sitting in the dining room, elbows on the table, a hand pressed to either side of her face.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I'm fine, honey.” No smile, just exhaustion.

“Should I get you something to drink? Coffee? Or something sweet? My mom makes the best cookies.”

His attempt at humor didn't cheer her up. Instead she said, “We need to talk.”

“Okay.” He moved closer to the table.

His mother looked him over. "Very sharp. Do you have plans?"

"I'm going out," he said, unable to suppress a goofy smile.

"Oh. Okay. You go have fun. We can talk some other time."

William's smile faded. He sat down at the table, attention not leaving her face. "What's going on?" he said. "Tell me. Please."

Kate grabbed her purse and dug inside it with a trembling hand. He didn't know what she was searching for. Tissues maybe, because she started crying, shoving the purse away in frustration. William was on his feet in an instant, rushing to her side. He tried to hug her, which was awkward because she was still sitting down. Then he hurried to the kitchen and grabbed a few paper towels. Not ideal, but he didn't want to go farther into the house where he couldn't keep an eye on her.

"Thank you," she said when he offered them. She blew her nose, head shaking back and forth. "I hope you won't be angry at me."

"Why would I be?"

"Please. Sit down."

William did as she asked, apprehension making his skin prickle. "What's going on?"

"As I'm sure you're aware, your father and I haven't been getting along lately. We've tried to keep as much from you as possible, and I'm sorry if you've overheard anything or if we've made you feel uncomfortable by—"

"Mom!" he pleaded, wanting her to get to the point.

"Your father and I might be taking a break."

"Like a divorce?" he said, sounding panicked even to his own ears.

"I don't know. We have a lot of issues to figure out and—"

"Because he bought that stupid car? Is it really worth ruining everything just because you hate it?"

Kate's mouth became tight. "There are more issues than just the car. I only want you to be prepared in case he and I can't find a way to resolve our problems."

"I'll talk to him," William promised. "I'll make him sell it."

"Thank you, honey, but this is between me and your father. He and I need to work on this."

"What about a marriage counselor?"

His mother nodded. "That's what we'll do. I didn't mean to upset you, but I feel you're old enough to handle the truth. I didn't like how my own parents' divorce came as a surprise. That made it harder for me."

"But you're just talking about separation."

"Yes."

"Does that mean he won't live with us anymore?"

Kate clenched the paper towel in her hand. "Yes, and if that happens, I need you to think about who you want to live with. We won't decide for you."

William felt lost. He had assumed his parents would always be together, that he would never be faced with a choice like this. In his heart, he knew he wanted to stay with his mother, but the idea of his father being alone and incapable of taking care of himself... Kate did everything. The cooking, the cleaning, and keeping everyone on schedule. She wasn't only a housewife. She had worked full time at the post office for as long as William could remember. Maybe that was why she was sick of his father, because he wasn't pulling his weight.

"I'll help out around the house," William said. "Just tell me what to do. Don't give up on Dad yet. Okay?"

His mother managed a smile. "What I want you to do is to go out and have fun. I'm sorry I burdened you with all of this."

"You need to have fun too," he said. "When's the last time you and Dad went on vacation? I'm old enough now to be on my own. You guys could take a trip together, figure everything out and—"

"Nothing has been decided yet," Kate said patiently. "You're very sweet to care so much. I love you."

He reached across the table to place a hand over hers. "I love you too."

Normally this was enough to make her smile, but as William rose and left the room, she didn't seem to notice him go. Regardless, he still felt bad for doing so.

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Trying not to think about something usually leads to thinking about trying to not think of that thing. Errol had gone through a Buddhist phase when he first entered high school and had sung the praises of meditation to William, instructing him on how to achieve a higher state of consciousness. "Clear your mind. Think about nothing. Like... don't think at all." William had tried his best, but his thoughts never went completely silent. The closest he could get was thinking really hard about not wanting to think. "Your mind is too young, too undisciplined," Errol had said back then. The most insubordinate guy in the world accusing him of being undisciplined!

Age had nothing to do with it. William still couldn't clear his mind like that. He had gotten pretty good at denial, but his thoughts and emotions still came unbidden. He tried anyway as his date with Kelly began. They met at the pool hall, and even though Kelly looked handsome and smelled good and felt warm when standing next to him at the billiards table, William's mind kept returning to his mother. For a short period, he did manage to have fun and put on a good show for Kelly, but then it all came rushing back: his mother sitting at the table, hands trembling, face crumpled in anguish as she tried to hold back tears. How could he enjoy himself when she was in so much pain?

"You okay?" Kelly asked. He had left to use the restroom. William, guard still down and turmoil in plain sight, hadn't noticed his return. He pushed away his sad feelings when he saw the concern on Kelly's face. He cared! That was a thrill of its own, and it certainly didn't hurt that he looked so fine. They had spent hours together nearly naked at the YMCA, but for some reason, seeing him in a purple dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up over his dark skin—well, it sure made forgetting his problems easier!

William smiled and suggested they grab a bite to eat. He focused on being on his first date. With a guy! If things continued to go well tonight he might even have a boyfriend! Such a simple word, but it sounded magical. He couldn't help wondering if it held as much significance for Kelly. He did seem to be enjoying

himself, even though a booth at Burger King was far from luxurious. No doubt he had been on better dates.

"How many boyfriends have you had?" William asked, dragging french fries through ketchup.

"Oh." Kelly lifted the bun of his fish sandwich and peered at it critically. "I'm not sure. Do you want me to count?"

"Yes."

Kelly laughed. "It's hard to say. Some guys you date for a few days before you figure out it was a bad idea. Do they count?"

"I want a complete list," William said. "Names, ages, and photos. Everything."

Kelly smirked. Then he bit into his sandwich, face thoughtful as he chewed. "Seventy-three," he said after he had swallowed. "Not counting one-night stands."

William didn't hide his abhorrence. "Seventy-three?"

"It was a joke! Wow, you must really think I'm a slut!"

"I do now!"

They laughed and consumed a few more bites.

"More like seven," Kelly said. "And only one of them felt serious. Maybe because he was my first."

"First boyfriend?"

"Yes, and just about everything else."

"Tell me about him," William said, cramming more fries in his mouth.

"His name was José, but his parents were Italian. I guess they just liked the name. He had dark hair and skin, so everyone assumed he was Mexican. I used to tease him about it." Kelly's smile was soft. "He was a year older than me, but also inexperienced. I'm not sure what else to say. Our time together was fun. And sweet. I liked him a lot."

"Were you in love?" William asked, jealously making a stab at him.

Kelly exhaled. "I was fourteen years old, he was fifteen. It felt like love at the time, but we didn't have anything in common. I'm pretty sure I was more in love with the idea of being in love."

"Huh?"

Kelly considered him. “Unlike you, I didn’t struggle with my sexuality. I figured out early on who I was and what I wanted. Waiting until I was old enough to *get* what I wanted—that was my challenge. I had plenty of years to dream about being with another guy. Not just sexually. A lot of romantic fairytales played through my mind. When I finally found someone who wanted me back, that’s all I needed. I didn’t worry about what else we might have in common.”

“So what happened?”

“José got a driver’s license, and with it a lot more freedom. He met someone online he liked better. A new guy at the gay youth group had caught my eye, so José and I agreed to explore our options. I remember feeling like that was a very mature decision, when in retrospect, we were both just horny and looking to sleep around. What about you?”

William blinked. “I want more than just that!”

Kelly laughed. “No, I mean have you been in any relationships?”

“Remember my friend who rubbed her boobs on me? That’s as far as I’ve gotten.”

“Seriously? Wow!”

Kelly’s smile was difficult to interpret. Was this a good thing? Did being a virgin make him somehow more appealing? William had heard other guys treat a girl’s virginity like it was a prize, preferring that anyone they date begin as one. For guys, being a virgin was considered shameful. Funny how that worked.

As for being in love with the idea of love, he felt they had enough in common for it not to be that. He and Kelly were both athletic and driven. Kelly cared about competing more, but William enjoyed it too. As they were finishing their meals, they talked about the triathlon again, but for once Jared’s name wasn’t mentioned. This made William happier than it probably should have.

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

"I'd rather go back to swimming in the mornings. I have the most energy then." Concerned about pushing him away, William added, "Unless you want to keep practicing. Then I guess I could wait until the afternoon."

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

"Everything ends eventually." He swallowed, the words having more significance than he intended, the conversation with his mother haunting him once more.

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

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

Kelly studied his face. "Is something wrong?"

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

"It won't. Tell me."

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

"What? Why?"

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

Kelly's mouth fell open. "She said that?"

"Kind of. She said they might take a break. Then she asked who I'd want to live with. I couldn't answer. How am I supposed to? I love them both." William struggled to collect his scattered thoughts. "They just need a break from everything else, not each other. I told them to take a trip together. I don't remember the last time we had a family vacation, and now I'm old enough to stay home. They just need to reconnect."

Kelly nodded. "Probably. All couples argue."

"Exactly." He frowned, scowling at the empty wrappers on their table. "I'm having a talk with my dad this weekend. No

stupid car is worth ruining a marriage over.” He wasn’t going to let his father’s mid-life crisis destroy their family. William’s mother was probably too nice to say what needed to be said, but he wouldn’t hesitate. Not anymore. She needed him. “I should get home. To be honest with you, I feel a little guilty having fun when I know my mom is so upset.”

“Okay,” Kelly said. “I understand completely.”

They left the smell of fried grease behind, returning to the billiard hall where William’s car was parked. As they drove, he alternated between troubled thoughts and longing glances at Kelly. Their date was ruined, but he couldn’t feel sorry for himself when a marriage had been too.

“You’ll be okay,” Kelly said. They were standing in front of the car, about to say goodbye. “No matter what happens, your parents love you. That won’t change. Even if they split up—and they might not—you’ll still be the bridge that connects them. You’ll still be a family.”

He was right. Family wasn’t defined by everyone living under the same roof. His brothers had moved out, but they were still family. If his parents couldn’t live together—that would hurt, but he would still love them both, and he was certain they would keep loving him. As for the guy who had given him hope... William threw his arms around Kelly, pulling him close. He touched his nose to Kelly’s neck, smelling his skin, before pressing his lips there. Then he squeezed tighter, emotion rising in his chest.

“Thanks,” William rasped, taking a step back to look him in the eye. “For everything.”

“Yeah.” Kelly seemed a little taken aback. Was he moving too fast?

“Okay.” William wanted a real kiss, but maybe that was best saved for a happier occasion. “See you at the race tomorrow.”

Kelly nodded. “See you there.”

William walked to his car, opened the door, and glanced back at Kelly, heart thudding in his chest. One story might be coming to an end, but another had just begun.

That's it for sample chapters. William is right about the story just beginning! This is one long tale, and it takes all sorts of romantic twists and turns. Find out what happens by visit your favorite retailer below!

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