

Something Like Summer © 2010 Jay Bell

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Cover art by Andreas Bell

Chapter Three

After suffering a week of plastic green seats and hyperactive freshmen, Ben decided to give up on the bus. The mechanics were holding Allison's car hostage for another ten days while parts were ordered, and Ben couldn't take the humiliation of being the only junior travelling by bus anymore. He was locking his bike up when Allison came running over from where her father had dropped her off.

"I found him!" she declared.

"Who?" Ben said as casually as possible, knowing damn well who she meant.

"Johnny Depp," Allison retorted. "Who do you think I mean? I tried calling you last night but it just rang and rang."

Ben made a mental note to verbally abuse his sister for ignoring call waiting. "So where is he?"

"Tied up in my basement and waiting for you," Allison said, licking her lips indecently. "You wish. I just saw him in passing after sixth period yesterday, so at least we know that he goes to this school."

Allison spotting Tim must have broken the curse, because Ben saw him that very day. To be fair, the renewed hope inspired Ben to take long detours down different hallways, but the strategy paid off. On the way to lunch he saw Tim leaning against a wall, talking to two other students.

Unfortunately they were two of the biggest assholes in school. Bryce Hunter was a huge jock who had been the size of an ox for as long as Ben could remember. He'd always looked like he was twenty-five, even in junior high. Next to him was Darryl Briscott, who was short and bordering on fat, but came from a very rich family, and that guaranteed his popularity.

Ben eyed them warily for a moment before turning his attention back to Tim, whose Adam's apple bobbed in amusement at something Bryce was saying. There had been days when Ben questioned his recent obsession, dismissing it as temporary

insanity induced by raging hormones. Crazy or not, seeing Tim again rekindled those stalker's flames. He was everything, absolutely everything, that Ben looked for in a guy. From the outside at least. His choice of company cast doubt on everything else.

"Timmy!" squealed a voice that would test even the patience of pigs. Krista Norman bounded directly in front of Ben on her way to 'Timmy.' Despite her unfortunate voice, she was one of the most popular girls and drop-dead gorgeous. She ran over and took Tim's hand in her petite little paws, and beamed up at him. Tim returned the million dollar smile, much to Ben's disgust.

"Hey, faggot!" These charming words were spoken by none other than Bryce Hunter himself, who had noticed Ben standing there and staring.

Any chance of resisting the oncoming blush was ruined when Krista added, "He really is, you know."

Ben risked a glare at Bryce and a sarcastic little wave to Krista as he walked away. Figuring there was nothing more to lose, he glanced at Tim one last time as he went. Tim appeared amused, returning Ben's funny little wave. The gesture was genuinely cute when he did it, which made Ben twice as angry.

Why couldn't people's insides match their outsides? The world would be such a wonderful place if the nicer someone was, the more beautiful they became. Jerks like Bryce and Darryl would be disgusting, pus-covered trolls, and everyone would see them for what they were. Tim, too, if these were the sort of people he chose to hang out with. Instead of the princely appearance, he would be ugly, hunched, and so wretched-looking that Ben never would have noticed him. Or if Ben had, he would have at least known right away that Tim wasn't worth all the emotions and fantasies that he had wasted on him.

* * * * *

Ben was having one of those days, a parade of unpleasant events that began in the morning. He was stuffing his backpack into his locker before heading to the gym when something wet splatted onto his neck. Ben turned around to find a spit wad

almost as big as his fist lying on the ground. The hallways were still full of kids, but Bryce's massive form was easy to pick out of the crowd, a satisfied leer painted across his face.

At least Tim wasn't with him, which was something of a small miracle. Allison having spotted him had indeed broken the curse. Over the past two weeks Ben had run into Tim at least twice a day. Each time Ben hastily averted his eyes and cursed the flush that came over his face. He hoped his red cheeks were mistaken as angry instead of bashful. After all, he had nothing to be embarrassed about, since Tim was clueless as to Ben's former crush on him.

The fun-filled day continued in gym class. Leon was having his wisdom teeth removed, which meant at least a week of misery without his company. Worst of all, they were playing baseball, a sport very difficult to go unnoticed in. His first time at bat, Ben cussed loudly after his third strike. This infuriated the coach, the bald one with the twisted nose, who commanded that Ben run the two-mile trail through the woods that nestled against the school. At least this was an escape of sorts. Ben slowed to a walk as soon as he was hidden behind the trees and wondered if he could get away with self-inflicting this "punishment" until Leon came back. He would rather run alone every day than play baseball.

Then there was a substitute teacher in Spanish, which of course meant that the entire class was misbehaving. Ben usually enjoyed that, but one of the boys asked the teacher how to say "faggot" in Spanish. For whatever incomprehensible reason, the substitute decided to answer this question, and "*mariposa*" was happily parroted throughout the remainder of the class, with a number of pointed looks in Ben's direction.

Lunch should have brought a welcome break from the day's hardships, but Ben was greeted with Allison's announcement that she and Ronnie were now boyfriend and girlfriend. Ben callously responded to this news by saying, "That's retarded. You haven't even been on a date yet."

The look of hurt on Allison's face made him regret his words. Ben *was* happy for her. Mostly. Ronnie was a nice guy. Dates,

romance, and possibly hot kinky sex were sure to follow in due course. That's what rubbed Ben the wrong way. This was Allison's fourth boyfriend since they had been in high school. In the past three years, Ben hadn't had so much as a mildly flirtatious encounter. The ease in which she found someone stirred the green-eyed monster inside of him.

What could he do, though? He wasn't old enough to get into a gay bar, and the local newspaper's personal ads were almost strictly heterosexual, except for a few placed by men older than his father. Even Ben's meager sex life had been cut off when he came out of the closet, a decision that he was beginning to regret. An unreciprocated blow job at this point sounded as meaningful as marriage.

The rest of their meal was accompanied by awkward silence. Ben knew he would have to make amends later, but he was in too foul a mood to back-peddle or smooth things over at the moment. The rest of the school day passed without incident, but the grumbling thunderstorm outside helped to fuel his sullenness until the last period was over.

The rain had at least stopped by the time he was buckling on his Rollerblades. Allison's car had made it out of the shop for two whole days before breaking down again. Ben had abandoned his bike and decided to start using the inline skates he had begged for and received last Christmas. He wasn't very good yet, but he managed to do everything but stop gracefully. A meandering bike path that wasn't used much was his choice of route today. The detour would take him longer to get home, but it would also help him avoid other students. He just wanted to make it home to the comfort of mindless TV and the leftover cookie bars his mom had baked the night before.

Trees became a blur as Ben skated faster than he usually dared. He was finally getting the hang of these things! The woods gave way to a manmade channel clear of foliage. Here the ground dipped low and then high again, winding like an empty river through the woods. Ben always wondered what purpose it served, until one hurricane season when it rained nonstop for two weeks.

The ditch took the excess rain water and moved it safely away to somewhere less civilized. That was the only year he had seen the ditch full of water. Otherwise it remained a dry but green miniature valley.

Ben was beginning to feel better as he zipped along the path that ran along the ditch. That's when he saw Tim. He was further along, wearing his usual jogging outfit except this time with the addition of a backpack. Obviously he had decided to jog home rather than taking his Richie Rich sports car. Instead of the usual wave of hormones Ben experienced whenever he saw Tim, this time he felt only irritation. He didn't want to be reminded of the things he couldn't have. He wanted solitude.

"Get the fuck off my path," Ben muttered under his breath as he thrust with his legs and increased his velocity. He felt like a bullet shot from a gun, and right now he wanted nothing more than to barrel into Tim and knock him aside without even so much as a backwards glance. Why the hell not? He was sick of being the victim of everyone else's barbs and lunacy. Why not strike back? He wouldn't knock Tim over, but he could at least give him a scare by cutting directly in front of him, maybe jostling him a little bit in the process.

Ben grinned with wicked determination as he neared, but at the last moment he began to panic. There simply wasn't enough room on the path to pass by safely, at least not at this speed. Maybe a skilled skater could have done it, but Ben was still too green. He was more likely to veer off the path and injure himself. Tim was less than ten feet away when Ben decided to abandon his reckless course of action. He tilted his left foot to brake, before realizing that the brake was on the other skate. In his panic he tried to turn, but his left foot was still tilted, causing Ben to trip over his own leg. He was airborne for the briefest of moments before slamming into Tim, knocking the jogger off the path and into the ditch.

Impacting with Tim had mostly halted Ben's flight through the air. He landed with a thud on the grass next to the paved path, shaken but otherwise unscathed. From the gasp of pain and long

string of cursing, it was clear that this wasn't the case for his victim. Ben pushed himself to his knees and looked over the ditch's edge. Tim was sitting up, supporting one leg in the air. He lowered it tentatively to the ground. As soon as the foot touched grass, Tim hollered hoarsely and lifted it back up again.

"Oh, god! I'm sorry. I'm sorry!" Ben sputtered as he stood and slid down into the ravine.

Tim's face struggled with a mixture of confusion and anger. "What the hell happened?"

"I don't-- I'm just a klutz." Ben had reached Tim's side and stretched out his arms as if he intended to pick Tim up before he realized how unrealistic this was. "Is your leg broken?"

"Leg's fine," Tim answered, turning his attention back to the bloody limb that looked anything but okay. "My ankle, maybe not."

Ben dropped to his knees to get a better look. The ankle might have been a little swollen, but the flesh torn away from the shin was worrying. There wasn't any sign of exposed bone, thank god, but it was bleeding way too much.

Ben couldn't take his eye from the injury. "We have to get you to a doctor. Can you walk?"

Tim lowered his leg a second time, managing this time to only hiss in pain instead of screaming. "You're going to have to help me," he said.

"Wait." Ben unsnapped the straps on his skates and started digging through his backpack for his shoes. The five most awkward minutes of his life followed as he struggled to get them on and tied, Tim watching him silently the entire time. "Right," Ben said as the final lace was tied. "How do we do this?"

Tim craned his neck around to examine the steep slope they would have to ascend before they could get him to his feet. "You pull me up there, I guess."

"Pull you how?" Ben asked, suddenly feeling even smaller than he usually did.

"Just grab me under the arms and pull. I'll try to help as much as I can."

Ben got into position behind Tim. There was a very silly moment where he stood and stared. Both of Tim's arms were raised to his sides, as if he were going to start flapping them in an effort to take flight. Ben felt like asking if he really had permission to touch him, before he remembered the seriousness of the situation. He hooked his arms underneath Tim's armpits and pulled. He only managed to heave the victim of his idiotic actions half a foot, but on the next attempt Tim kicked with his good leg, bringing the movement to a little more than a foot. They proceeded in this manner until they were both on level ground again.

Ben was breathing hard from the exertion, Tim most likely from the pain. After a moment of rest they tackled the job of getting Tim upright. They managed after a brief struggle, with Tim putting pressure on the injured leg twice more out of habit. Soon enough he was stooped but standing, with one arm over Ben's shoulders. They tried a few experimental hopping-steps and made it to the sidewalk.

"I guess we make it to the nearest house and have them drive me home," Tim said.

"Your house is really close if we cut through the trees there," Ben said without thinking. His right arm was around Tim's torso, and he could feel the muscles tense in reaction. How could he have been so stupid? Not only had he revealed himself as being an insane psychopath who physically lashed out at boys he liked, but he had followed it up with confirmation that he was a stalker to boot.

"Let's go then," Tim muttered a moment later, choosing not to question how a stranger would know where he lived.

The effort of holding Tim up was a welcome distraction, both to the self-deprecating thoughts going through Ben's head and the excitement of being so intimately close to him. Now was not the time or the place to get aroused over physical contact, and Ben was determined to end the day with only two strikes against his sanity instead of three.

They shuffled through the brief width of woods until they reached a wooden privacy fence, the only thing that stood between them and the civilized suburbs beyond. A glance left and right confirmed that any neighboring houses had the same barrier installed against the wilderness outside.

"Fuck," Tim swore. "How much further would it be if this fence wasn't here?"

"Half a block," Ben said, looking away to hide his embarrassment.

"Support me," Tim said after hopping one step closer to the fence and reaching out to grab the top of it.

Ben thought he intended to climb over, but grabbed on tighter to his torso when Tim began to pull instead. He almost toppled backwards when the plank gave way to Tim's efforts and came loose, swinging to the side as it fell. This process was repeated for a second time, and then a third, creating just enough of a gap for them to squeeze through.

Tim went first, holding on to the top of the fence for support once Ben let go of him. He stumbled on his way through and landed on his ankle, screaming as he righted himself. Ben hurried through to assist him, feeling that the owners of the house would hear the commotion in their backyard and come to help. As they made it halfway across the lawn, they could see through the sliding glass door that the house was empty, having not been sold yet. At least they wouldn't have to explain the vandalism.

They made it through the gate to the front yard, not encountering another living soul as they made their way down the sidewalk. That was the funny thing about the suburbs. So much trouble went into a neighborhood looking as presentable as possible, but rarely was anyone there to appreciate it. Hire a boy to cut the grass and pull up to the mailbox before parking in the garage. Ben wondered if most of his neighbors had ever set foot on their own lawn. No, the suburbs were all prettied up and left to sit alone, like a beauty queen awaiting an audience that would never come.

Ben tried to smooth over his earlier revelations by feigning ignorance as they reached Tim's house. "Which one is yours?" he asked.

"You tell me," Tim said smartly as they turned to hobble past his car.

"Is anyone home?" Ben asked, partly out of concern but mostly to change topics.

"No."

"Then shouldn't we drive straight to the hospital?"

"I just need to take my weight off it," Tim said irritably as the reached the front door, which was unlocked.

They stepped into cool, dark air conditioning. The curtains in the house were mostly closed to help keep the Texas heat at bay. Tim flipped a few light switches and led them to the living room, which was tastefully decorated but very, very unwelcoming. The room had the soulless presence of a model home. Sure, it looked nice, but it was obvious that no real living went on there.

They reached a pale, peach-colored couch that Tim eased onto. As he settled onto the piece of furniture that was probably being used for the first time, he sighed contentedly.

"There's a first-aid kit in the bathroom," he said. "Bring me a wet washcloth. A towel, too."

"Where is it?" Ben asked.

"I'm surprised you don't know already. It's right down the hall on the left."

Ben hurried out of the room, mentally chastising himself for triggering a series of events that would haunt him for his final years of high school. He found the bathroom, a simple affair reserved for guests, and collected the items that were requested.

"Are you sure we shouldn't go to the hospital? Or a doctor at least?" he said as he reentered the living room.

"No need." Tim took the washcloth and began patting at the crust of dried blood on his leg. "Same thing happened to me freshman year. I still have a brace upstairs and everything. It's not a big deal. A couple of days with that on and I'll be fine again."

Ben had to admit that the leg was looking better now that much of the blood had been cleaned up. Once bandaged it probably wouldn't need medical attention. The ankle was a different story, swollen on each side like a chipmunk's cheeks and turning a dark, unhealthy color.

"It's just--"

"Thanks for helping me get home," Tim interrupted. The finality in his voice was clear; Ben was expected to leave. He turned to do so, spluttering more clumsy apologies as he went. He stopped and turned at the door. "Are you sure you are going to be all right? When do your parents get back?"

"In about two weeks." Tim grimaced as he wrapped the cloth bandage around his shin. "They're in Switzerland."

Ben swallowed, but it failed to flush away the guilty taste in his mouth as he left the house and began his walk home.

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