



SINK  
OR  
SWIM

Zoe Lynne

# Sink or Swim

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## *Chapter One*

“My son ain’t goin’ to no music camp, and that’s that. He’s goin’ to camp with boys who do boy things. I ain’t lettin’ him prance around like some—”

Jason cringed, waiting for his father to say the big F word, not the one that led to a mouth being washed out with soap or a lashing from the sisters at Catholic school. No, this F word was so much worse. Every time his pops talked about men who didn’t play sports or work on cars, *fairy* was the F word he used, and every time he said it, Jason’s mom tore into him like he’d broken a cardinal rule or something. That, amongst other things, led to his parents’ divorce.

From the shrieking coming from the phone, it sounded like his mom was putting a stop to what his father wanted to say. *Thank, God!*

Two days after his fifteenth birthday, Jason’s mom and dad had sat him down on the living room sofa—something they did when they wanted to scold him for something he’d done wrong, or yell at each other over the way the other raised him. Now, their arguments happened over the phone, and usually with Jason in earshot. Here they were, three months after the fact, and neither one of them had cooled their temper yet.

“He’s goin’ to the camp I picked out, and that’s final, Meredith. Ya don’t like it, call your lawyer.”

With a growl, his pops wrenched the phone away from his ear and hauled it over his head, ready to slam it into the driveway pavement, Jason suspected. But his dad didn’t do it. The man actually stopped and took a breath, then shoved the phone in the pocket of his jeans. He tapped his giant cowboy boot against the concrete. Jason tried not to watch.

“Son, get your bags in the truck. You’re goin’ to camp.”

“Yes, sir,” Jason muttered, hoisting his overstuffed backpack onto to his shoulder.

Jason did as his father told him without hesitation and without question. As soon as he closed the passenger door, his heart sank down in his chest. The real heartbreaker of the summer wasn’t missing music camp, not entirely. He hated not being able to see his three best friends for four weeks. Christy, Monica and Toby were his only friends... well, the only ones who mattered. Toby was probably his favorite out of the three. He looked

forward to seeing the guy more so than the girls. He actually spent hours thinking about Toby, wondering what the only other guy he could relate to was doing at any given minute. They would text back and forth all night, mostly talking about how much Jason's life sucked since D-day—the name given to the day his parents dropped the bombshell about their breaking up on him. Toby always did his best to make Jason laugh it all off, even if there wasn't anything funny about it.

“Son, this is for your own good,” old Jack Brewster said as he pulled onto the highway. The noise of his truck and the sound of his voice pulled Jason away from the din of his rampant thoughts. “You can be as mad as you wanna be, but when you finally bulk up and become a man, you'll look back on this day and say, ‘Pops, thanks for not lettin' me go to sissy camp’.”

Jason rolled his eyes. Had his father seen him, a lecture of riotous magnitude would've immediately ensued because *real* men didn't roll their eyes.

Keeping his stare on the passenger side window, Jason watched the cityscape of suburban Memphis fly by. Colorful neon signs blurred together. The mall's towering buildings disappeared into trees, and before Jason could beg his dad to turn the truck around, the city was gone—a backdrop to the saddest story of his life.

Twenty minutes later, they pulled off the interstate and onto a winding stretch of road, past McDonald's and past Cracker Barrel, past all the symbols of civilization and down into wooded area. Jason immediately checked his phone, and sure enough, the signal was down to nothing—nada, zero, zilch. He doubted he could even get a text from his best friends.

The woes of his father's wrath just became like... a million times worse.

“Whoa, boy, would you get a look at that water?” his dad howled. “Bet there's some good fishin' there.”

Curiosity got the best of Jason, and he swung his gaze from the window against his forehead to the windshield. Admittedly, the water was pretty. The sun shimmered along its rippling surface. The lake called to him. He wanted to strip off his jeans and t-shirt and dive right in.

“Hi there,” a squeaky voice called from the side window. “Y'all here for camp?”

*Helloooo, Mr. Obvious...*

The man standing outside his father's truck wore the kind of smile that motivated people to conquer monumental tasks, find the Holy Spirit, or join in celebration when moping in a corner sounded so much more appealing. It could've been genuine, but Jason seriously doubted the guy's sincerity. Or maybe he was one of those freaks of nature who stayed happy all the freakin' time.

"I'm Pastor Paul," the man said, offering Jack Brewster his hand.

The corners of his dad's thick, chestnut mustache pushed up into his round, rosy cheeks. Jason's cheeks had the same natural redness. It made him look like he was constantly blushing and embarrassed more times than he cared to count.

"I'm Jack Brewster. This here's my boy, Jason."

"Hi there, Jason."

Sarcastically, Jason raised his hand and gave a two finger wave before turning his stare back to his trusted window.

Through the glass, he spotted a boy who he swore would be his only friend here. The kid stood alone with a backpack a little rounder than his gut strapped to his back. From the side, the kid resembled an Easter egg. The striped, pastel blue and yellow polo shirt added to the effect. *Not flattering. Nope, not flattering. At. All.* It did absolutely nothing for his never-seen-the-sunlight complexion or the bright red freckles that matched his copper hair. Poor kid probably got picked on constantly. Jason could sympathize. He was too tall and too skinny and didn't have the first ounce of muscle. Maybe if he'd picked up a basketball instead of sitting down at the piano like his father had told him over and over again, he would've filled out better.

"Son, you go hop in that line," his dad said, pointing toward a long string of kids Jason knew he wouldn't fit in with. "I'm gonna be back on parent's day in three weeks, 'kay?"

"Yes, sir."

"I love you, son."

"Love you, too," Jason muttered, grabbing his backpack as he slid out of the truck.

With both hands locked around the straps of his backpack, he headed to the back of the line, feet dragging the gravel with each step he took. He could almost hear his

mom barking at him to pick his feet up when he walked, but that made him look ridiculous. His long legs had to lift pretty high to raise his clown feet all the way off the ground.

At the back of the line, the tubby redheaded kid kept his head down and only cut his eyes when Jason approached. Those eyes were the craziest shade of brown-green he'd ever seen, like moss or something, or the not-so-green found in his dad's camo hunting gear. The kid didn't say a word, but the girl in front of him spoke for the both of them.

"That's Greedy," she said, thumbing at the shy one.

"Don't call me that!" he said. His voice was surprisingly high-pitched for someone so big.

The girl smirked. "Why? That's your name, ain't it?"

Greedy lowered his head again, his stare strong enough to sear a hole into the earth. Red filled his pale cheeks. He already had both arms over his chest, but when she called him the name he obviously didn't like, he hugged himself tight.

"My name's Thomas," he mumbled so low Jason barely heard him. "Thomas Carroll."

"I'm Sam," she said, looking right past Thomas and straight at Jason. She had the same plastic smile Pastor Paul had. "What's your name?"

"Jason. Jason Brewster."

"Well, Brewster... if ya wanna hang out with the cool kids for the next four weeks, I'd stay away from Greedy here."

Jason didn't say a word.

## Chapter Two

*I wish they'd just stop calling me that.* God, even as a thought, Thomas's voice sounded so whiny. He shoved his backpack onto the bottom bunk and slid way in so he could hide in the farthest, darkest corner. The bunk above him made him feel closed in, which didn't work well with his borderline claustrophobia, and he might've considered climbing up there had the horrors from last year not kept him from ascending to the top.

*Get down, Greedy. You'll collapse the beds.* He could still hear Lucas—I'm the king of the camp—Foster teasingly yell from the ground. *Watch out, everybody. Lard ass is coming down.* The laughter following Lucas's catcalls still made Thomas cringe.

He rolled over and buried his face in his pillow, listening to shoes shuffle across the wood floor. Twelve boys would be crammed into this room for four weeks. Twelve boys who may or may not get along. At least five of them spent the entire summer last year tormenting Thomas, and they'd make sure all the new kids knew the drill too.

Between the wooden steps attached to the ladder at the end of the bed, he watched the kid he'd met in line—John, Jack, Jason or...something—climb onto the top bunk. It made sense for the new guy to be his bunkmate, since no one else ever wanted the dishonor.

"Hey, Newbie," Lucas yelled from three bunks down. "Be careful Greedy doesn't eat-cha in the middle of the night."

"Eat me?"

Thomas heard the confusion in the kid's voice, and so badly wanted to tell him Lucas was making jokes, that nothing would happen. Nothing to worry about. Thomas knew better. He knew if he opened his mouth they'd turn on him, and he couldn't handle that, not already being on the verge of tears.

The second, third and fourth days didn't get much better. He woke up to them cracking jokes about—usually something about how he ate in the mess hall or how he'd completely flubbed the obstacle course. Most of all, and most hurtful, they made fun of him for not swimming. They speculated that someone as big as him would sink to the

bottom, or that he didn't want to uncover his body. They dared him to try, and when he didn't, they called him chicken.

The first week of camp came to a close, and Thomas had begged almost every single day for the counselors to call his mom so he could go home. He wasn't cut out for camp. He didn't like playing in the dirt and all the outdoorsy crap. Time spent reading books and listening to Lady Gaga, now that was quality time. Here, he didn't dare pay homage to Gaga or Perry or Spears or any of his other favorite teenage idols. That would give the mean kids a whole new reason to pick on him. They'd call him gay—a fact he didn't hide or wasn't ashamed of, but a fact he didn't feel like being teased about. It was one thing to be the fat kid at camp, a-whole-freakin'-nother to be the gay kid.

“Why do you always sit back here?” the new guy asked.

When Thomas jerked his head, the sun nearly blinded him. The light haloed a tall, lanky frame, turning into a dark silhouette of skin and bones. Thomas hooded his eyes with a single flattened hand so he could see.

“Why do you wanna know?”

He watched as Jason sat down on the dirt beside him. Water clung to the kid's bare chest. Tiny droplets rolled down his skin. Thomas could only imagine what it felt like to be so free, flopping around in all that water, laughing and having fun.

“I'm not gonna make fun of you,” Jason said.

He pulled his mile long legs against his chest and hugged them tight. When he leaned his head forward, his soaking wet, brown, jaw-length hair covered his face so Thomas couldn't see him, more importantly, couldn't see his eyes. Thomas could always tell the mean ones by the look in their eyes.

“I can't swim,” Thomas finally admitted. “The water scares me.”

“Why?”

“I dunno.” Thomas shrugged. “Just does.”

Jason turned his head. Through the part in his long hair, Thomas caught a glimpse of his gray-blue eyes. They held warmth and kindness, and everything that made Thomas want to trust him.

“Maybe if you learned how to swim, then it wouldn't scare you anymore.”

“Maybe.” Thomas shrugged again.

They turned their stares out to the water where other campers swam and played, all cheerful and carefree because nobody bullied them. Those kids were rich and pretty, and had the best of everything, unlike Thomas, who couldn't get his dad to teach him how to swim, whose mom doted on his little sister and spent time with her.

"I'll teach you," Jason said, keeping his sights on the water.

The words surprised Thomas. No one ever offered to teach him anything. No one ever bothered. And here was this stranger, this kid who could've been part of the in-crowd if he wanted, offering to teach Thomas the one thing he'd ever wanted to learn. Why?

Thomas blinked his eyes a few times before opening his mouth. Unfortunately, when his jaw finally went slack and his lips parted, he wasn't sure what to say, so he immediately closed up shop again.

"This isn't a trick," Jason said.

"I didn't say—"

"You didn't have to. I'm just like you."

"Like me?" Thomas frowned.

"Yeah, I get picked on at school. I get picked on by my own dad." Jason rubbed his hand over his upper arm.

From where Thomas sat, it looked like the thought raised chill bumps along his skin. The fine brown hairs stood on end. Thomas did his best not to stare. He'd hate if some stranger stared at him like that, but he couldn't help it. His curiosity was totally piqued now.

"I have exactly three friends," Jason added after a long length of silence. "Christy, Miranda and... Toby."

Something changed about Jason's expression. He seemed happy, thoughtful. He smiled enough that Thomas noticed his dimples for the first time. They hugged his mouth and made that smile appear undeniably genuine, so perfect it was contagious, and Thomas couldn't help smiling, too.

"Toby's a nice guy?" he asked. "You like him?"

"Oh yeah. Totally. He's my best friend. We talk all the time."

The excitement in Jason's voice couldn't be denied. It was the same excitement Thomas had when he talked about his secret crush, the boy he talked to absolutely no one about for fear of appearing exactly the same way Jason looked and sounded right now. The only difference between them, Thomas knew exactly how he felt every time he thought of the boy who made his heart beat wildly. Jason, apparently, didn't.

“Are you gay?” Thomas finally asked.

Jason's mouth gaped. “Why would you ask that?”

“I don't know. I'm sorry. Please don't get mad. It's just... well, the way you looked when you talked about your friend.”

“I'm not gay,” Jason insisted.

“Okay. I'm sorry.”

Jason rose to his feet and immediately took a step to walk away. Thomas was being abandoned by the only friend he'd made. He'd apologized. Why was Jason leaving him? “Please don't go,” he yelled out before he could stop himself.

“I have to,” Jason said. He kept on walking.

### *Chapter Three*

Why would that kid say Jason was gay?

Did he look gay?

*Oh God, do I act gay?*

Exactly, what had Thomas seen when Jason had spoken of Toby? Was it his eyes or his mouth? Did he tense? Toby was just a friend. Jason didn't see him *that* way. He didn't see anybody *that* way. Maybe the other kids were right about Greedy. Maybe Greedy was a weirdo after all.

Or maybe Jason's dad was right about him.

Jason stomped all the way down to the edge of the lake where the girls were lying out in the sun, and most of the guys were playing basketball in the water. A hoop floated in the center of the lake. It buoyed when Lucas slammed the ball into the net. They laughed and high-fived, having the kind of fun Jason knew he should be having.

The thought made him turn around. Thomas still sat up on the hill, far away from the kids who bullied him, watching the fun rather than joining in. It was sad to see, and sadder still that Jason had fled from him so abruptly. He felt sorry for the kid, but...

"Jason," someone called out. He found Sam and her little sisterhood lying in a circle. They seemed to be watching the boys play in the water. She waved her arm in the air. "Come here."

He gave Thomas one last fleeting glance before jogging over to where the popular girls had been hanging out since the mess hall cleared right after lunch.

"Sit here." Sam patted the edge of her beach towel. Her thin body barely took up half the colorful, fuzzy fabric. "Why were ya hangin' out with Greedy?" she asked, face contorting as though the thought of being anywhere near the camp outcast turned her stomach.

Jason shrugged. "I wasn't hanging out with him."

Really, what he meant by that was he felt sorry for the kid because no one else had anything to do with him. Everybody at the camp obviously shunned him. Jason

would've totally hated it if they'd done the same to him—kinda like the kids at school did.

“Well, don't be seen with him... unless you wanna join him. 'Kay?”

Jason nodded. Her advice would be taken without hesitation. Not because he didn't want to be a social leper like Thomas. That had nothing to do with it. After what Thomas had asked him, he had no intentions of going anywhere near the kid again, no matter how sorry he felt for him.

“Now, lie down, Jason. Stay with us for a little while.”

He stretched out along the beach towel, body so long his legs and arms hung off the edges. The grass tickled his bare feet. His elbows sunk against the soft soil. At least he wasn't so wide he couldn't put enough comfortable space between him and Sam. Oh, but *comfortable* didn't exactly describe how Jason felt.

What Thomas had asked him still nagged him. Now, hanging out with the girls instead of playing sports with the guys, he understood why people like his dad and Thomas would question his sexuality. He always hung out with girls—save for Toby, but Toby wasn't exactly manly either. Toby would rather get in costume and pretend to be someone else than toss a ball around a yard. He'd rather sing and dance than compete in sports. His voice lilted in all the wrong ways. He cared too much about clothes and appearances. He liked the same things the girls liked.

*Oh, God.*

“I gotta go,” Jason blurted. All talking ceased. The girls stared, long lashes batting as they blinked in his direction.

Before anyone could protest, he shoved up from the towel, and this time, he ran away from the other kids as fast as he could. Later, if anyone asked, he would say the sandwiches at lunch made him sick and he didn't want to hurl his brains out in front of everyone else. The sight would've been a total buzz kill, and they would probably believe him. Might even thank him for sparing them a live remake of the split-pea soup scene from *The Exorcist*.

By the time he got all the way back up to the cabins, he couldn't stop huffing and puffing and gasping for breath. Each breath burned hotter than the first. He couldn't get enough air, like hyperventilating, and there were no adults close by to help him.

Panic started to set in. He doubled over and gripped his knees, mouth wide as he struggled to suck wind. His face felt like it had caught fire. His lungs weren't filling fast enough. He was dying. Had to be.

*Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.*

"Stop trying to breathe for a minute." It was Thomas's voice at his ear, and presumably, Thomas's hand at his back. "Okay, one long, slow breath. Hold it. Then *slowly* let it go."

Despite his body not wanting to cooperate, Jason forced himself to do what Thomas told him. The thumping in his ears slowed way down. The breath he inhaled actually felt like it found his lungs. The trembling in his arms and legs started to fade.

"Now, do it again," Thomas coached.

Jason did.

"I used to have panic attacks all the time," Thomas offered. "They were really bad when I first got here and the bullying started. People don't bully me at school. I don't stick out enough for them to notice. Here though, I'm not a nameless face in a sea of over three-hundred other, more noticeable faces."

"Why—" deep breath "—do you—" another breath "—keep coming back?"

"My mom. I know she needs a break from being a mom sometimes. She raises me alone, and I know she wants to go do stuff with her friends. So four weeks out of every year, she doesn't have to be a mom."

"So let me get this right," Jason said, righting himself now that he could finally breathe. "You suffer through the bullying so your mom can have time with her friends?"

"Yeah." Thomas scuffed his shoe over the dirt, head down, watching little brown clouds kick up around his black sneakers.

"That's really cool. Like *really* cool."

Silence seeped into the air and strangled whatever life their conversation had. Neither boy dared to look the other in the eyes. Honestly, Jason admired Thomas for being so selfless. It seemed like the kid had a good heart, and Jason really wanted to be nice to him, but man was he a weirdo.

"What about your parents?" Thomas asked.

That was a subject saved for only Toby's ears. The situation at home didn't make for light-hearted, *let's get to know each other, can we be friends* type conversation. The days of his happy childhood were long gone now that attorneys and courtrooms were involved. And sometimes, talking about his mom and dad brought on the need to fight back tears. His mom and dad didn't know it, but Jason had heard them arguing over him more than once. Not about whose turn it was to get some quality time with him, but about whose turn it was to be the responsible adult. In all fairness, his mom got the brunt of it. It seemed like every time his dad had parental duty, he pawned Jason off on someone or somewhere else.

"I don't really talk about my parents," Jason finally said, hoping to let the subject die because crying in front of Thomas was totally *not* going to happen.

"Are they dead?" Thomas asked.

"No."

"Are they divorced?"

Jason's eyes bugged out. "Look, you have to stop pryin' like that. Stop blurtin' out everything on your mind, okay? People don't like it."

"People don't like *me*."

"Did you ever stop to think maybe it's because you blurt out every stinkin' thing on your mind?"

Thomas shrugged. "No. I thought it's because I'm fat."

"No. Fat's forgivable. Rude... not so much."

## Chapter Four

Hours had passed without Thomas even realizing it. The sky had turned a light shade of blue. The crickets and cicadas, and who knew what else, chirped and zinged from the forest surrounding the camp. Kids had already come in from the lake and were getting ready to head to the mess hall for dinner.

Thomas couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed so hard or so much. In fact, the laughter made his jaw ache. He liked Jason, a lot. The time they spent together that day wouldn't be something Thomas would easily forget. The unfortunate thing was as soon as the dinner announcement had been made, Thomas and Jason went their separate ways again. Jason went with Sam and Lucas. Thomas went alone. Jason sat at the head of the mess hall with the cool kids. Thomas sat at the back with Pastor Paul.

He spent the required hour pushing boil-in-bag mashed potatoes around on a plate. The sauce from the meatloaf turned them a disturbing shade of pink. Normally, camp food wasn't that bad. Tonight, Thomas's appetite just didn't agree with it. Tonight, Thomas wasn't Greedy at all.

The end of dinner came with the loud thunking of trays crashing together and sneakers squeaking against the linoleum. When Jason walked by, he kept his head straight and his eyes averted, and for the first time ever, one of the cool kids genuinely hurt his feelings.

Later that night, while everyone slept, Thomas lay in his bunk, staring up at the bottom rails, wondering why Jason had shunned him. Ultimately, he knew why. Jason fit in. Thomas didn't. But he thought they'd moved past that. Did the conversation earlier that day not mean anything? For whatever dumb reason, Thomas just *had* to know.

He popped up from the bottom bunk, expecting to find Jason sound asleep, but his new frenemy wasn't asleep at all. Didn't look like he'd counted the first sheep and wasn't trying to either.

"Hey," Thomas whispered.

Jason turned his wide, blue-eyed gaze on Thomas.

“Why did you sit with *them*?” Thomas thumbed over his shoulder to the collection of bunks where Lucas and all the other guys slept.

Jason sighed so hard his chest fell and the sound of air cut a slice right through the quiet and soft snores, not to mention that it made Thomas wish he’d never asked.

“Don’t answer then,” he said. “Just go back to sleep.”

“I wasn’t sleeping,” Jason loudly whispered. As soon as he pinched off the words, his eyes darted around the room, obviously looking to see if anyone had woken up and caught them talking. “Tomorrow. Please.”

“Fine. Whatever.”

Thomas climbed back down in his bunk and closed his eyes, but sleep never happened. He couldn’t stop picturing the way things had gone down between him and Jason since the new guy’s arrival at camp. He replayed every single interaction, even though he knew he didn’t do anything to push Jason to Lucas and the other guys, he couldn’t help thinking he did something wrong.

Would Jason still teach him how to swim?

As the sun came up on the horizon, Thomas eased out of the bed. He wanted to hit the showers and get dressed before anyone else even got out of their bed. When he finished, he took his normal spot on the hill down by the lake so he could watch the ripples in the water and the glow on the surface as the sun came up while he dreamed of the day he finally got up the nerve to dive in.

“I’m tired of being made fun of, too, Thomas,” a voice said from behind him—Jason’s voice. Thomas didn’t bother raising his head or looking over as Jason sat down beside him. “The kids at school make fun of me all the time. I’m too tall and too thin. I like theater. I like singing. I don’t understand sports, and I don’t care to. I make good grades, and I love my best friends. But I’m not what they want me to be, so they make fun of me. I thought... Well, I saw a chance to be popular here, and I took it. Is that so wrong?”

“No. I guess it isn’t.”

“So you understand?”

“No. Not really.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t,” Jason muttered.

Thomas swung his head around, glaring harder than he ever had before. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I just meant...” Jason shook his head, then nervously scrubbed at the nape of his neck. “Never mind.”

“You’re no better than me,” Thomas said.

“I know.”

“They’re not *really* gonna accept you.”

“I know.”

“So you’d better not get used to it.”

“I know.”

“Can you *please* say something else?”

Jason thought about it a moment, then casually said, “Why can’t you be this assertive with them?”

All the anger in Thomas left him in a rush, and he laughed, actually barked out a full-bellied laugh. Not because what Jason had said was so funny he couldn’t help it, but because all the tension in the conversation eased. And the laughter caught on. Jason chuckled so hard his shoulders shook like crazy. Everything felt exactly like it had yesterday before dinner. They were friends again...for now.

“I still want to teach you how to swim,” Jason said after the laughter died down.

Maybe they really could be friends.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” Thomas said. “You can teach me how to swim, but we can’t do it up by the camp. There’s a place back in the woods with a clearing to the lake and part of an old dock. We’ll go back there.”

“Why?”

“Because if they see me trying, they’ll make fun of me and I won’t want to try anymore.”

“Okay.”

The conversation died again. Both boys sat stark still, watching the sun come up over a lake they’d been staring at for more than an hour. Thomas’s mind raced with all the things he wanted to say and ask. He wanted to hear more about Toby, just so he could

witness that bright, happy smile of Jason's again, but he didn't want to be nosy—or rude—as Jason had called him.

The longer neither of them spoke, the more uncomfortable the silence became. That was a first for Thomas. Before meeting Jason, he could've spent hours alone and quiet, simply enjoying the water and the sound of nature. He'd also never been curious about another human being before. And now, he couldn't take it.

“Don't get mad at me,” he finally said.

Jason arched a brow. “For what?”

“Will you talk about Toby again?”

“Why?”

Thomas shrugged. “Because I like the way you look when you talk about him...”

“How exactly do I look?” Jason asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

Thomas opened his mouth to explain when he heard the weighty ring of the breakfast bell outside the mess hall doors resonate all the way down to the lake. He suddenly felt all awash in disappointment. The morning had come to an end too soon, and Thomas would find himself alone again, watching while Jason paraded around with the popular kids.

## Chapter Five

As Jason watched Thomas sulk and mope and drag his body to the back of the hall, he felt like crap for not standing by his new friend. They were all new friends—Lucas, Sam, the girls and guys whose names he hadn't learned, and Thomas. But Thomas was the only one he'd bothered to talk to on any kind of personal level. In some small way, didn't that earn Thomas more loyalty than the others? Oh, but this taste of being part of the in-crowd felt too good to let go of. Even as he sat there casually watching Thomas pick as his biscuit, Jason stayed with the wrong friends when he should've been with the right one.

Later that day, while everyone else went hiking, Jason noticed Thomas hadn't joined them. Thomas rarely joined the other campers. Jason got it. He really did, and before anyone had a chance to notice him missing, he ducked out from the back of the group and ventured off in the direction Thomas had pointed him that morning.

The trail led back through the trees, winding over small hills and through massive trunks. Jason wondered if he'd headed off in the wrong direction because the atmosphere grew darker and darker the farther the trail led away from the cabins. He felt like he'd wandered into the middle of oblivion, and just to confirm the assumption, he pulled his phone out of his pocket to check the little green bars. Sure enough, the signal was still nonexistent.

"Great," he muttered. "Hope a bear don't eat me."

The second corner he rounded swung him back around in what he felt pretty certain to be the direction of the lake. He heard the slow *whoop, whoop, whoop* of what sounded like rocks sinking into the water. A hint of hope immediately returned. If he did happen to find the lake, he could always swim back to the cabins. It might suck, but he wouldn't die in the woods.

As soon as the trees opened up, he saw Thomas sitting Indian-style on a piece of old dock. The thing didn't look sturdy enough to hold Thomas's weight, let alone both of them. Jason hesitated, keeping his feet on solid ground, but the moment the sole of his

shoe touched down, a twig broke and Thomas's head snapped back. He didn't look happy to see Jason, quite the opposite, actually.

"What do you want?" Thomas grumbled.

The disapproval in his tone discouraged Jason, and for a moment, he considered turning around and going back to the group. Thomas didn't want him to go, not genuinely, right? He might've pretended to be content to sit there alone, but some small part of him had to be happy to see Jason... right?

"I told you I'd teach you how to swim."

"So."

"You don't want me to now?"

An answer didn't immediately follow. It seemed as though Thomas spent a long time thinking about what he wanted to say, or maybe he was just silently staring for the sake of driving Jason crazy. Who knew? If he didn't say something soon, though, Jason was going to turn around and come back the way he'd come.

"You know what I want?"

"Huh?" the sound of Thomas's voice after all the silence startled him.

"I want you to stop lying to me and stop lying to yourself."

"But I—"

"You're either going to be my friend or not be my friend. Don't be nice to me when no one's looking, because honestly, it makes you look plastic."

Ah, there was the attitude Thomas seemed brave enough to *only* give Jason. Though, it was really cool to see such a passive guy stand up for himself.

Jason made it to the edge of the dock, right where solid ground met old, weathered wood. He didn't dare go any farther, not only for fear of failing construction, but fear of Thomas giving that verbal lashing a second go around. Jason knelt down, legs tucked beneath him so he could sit on his hard calves. It wasn't the most comfortable way to sit, but he dealt with it.

"I've never been called 'plastic' before."

"Well, you are."

"Not really."

Thomas gave him a doubtful look, doubtful enough to make Jason second guess himself. Obviously, Thomas could see straight through everything Jason didn't know he was hiding behind. The look unnerved him.

“Talk about Toby again,” Thomas said. His voice had lost the wistful lilt it'd had the first time he'd made the request. Now, his words sounded a lot like a dare.

“We met in the third grade.”

The memory of that day rushed to the front of Jason's brain. A few bigger boys had Jason pinned against a tree. Back then, he was still a tiny boy with boney legs and boney arms. His mother insisted on dressing him in the worst outfits—plaid button downs tucked into tight jeans that only went down as far as his ankles. His shoes were off-brand and socks bright white until it was time to go to the playground. Had he worn glasses, he would've been ruined.

They'd said such horrible things about him, called him names and shoved him until they were all hidden from anyone who might've cared. Tears had rolled down his dusty cheeks. He'd wanted so badly to hid until the end of the school day so no one else would mess with him. Then, along came Toby. An amazing friendship had grown from a very bad situation.

“I was totally about to get my butt kicked all over the playground,” Jason said after taking a deep breath. “Toby saved me. He was bigger than me back then and I think he intimidated the bullies. We've pretty much been inseparable since then.”

“What about dating? Do you guys take your dates out together?”

“We don't really date. There's two girls that hang out with us, but we're all just friends.”

“Mhm.” That sounded very accusatory.

“What?”

“I wish you could see yourself when you talk about him. Then maybe...”

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe you'd finally admit the way you feel.”

THAT night, Jason lay in his bunk, counting the imperfections in the ceiling above, drawing patterns because his mind stayed too busy to sleep. He couldn't stop

thinking about what Thomas kept saying to him about Toby. What had he seen in Jason's eyes? What made he believe Jason had a thing for Toby?

Better yet, had anyone else seen it?

As soon as Jason felt certain all the other campers had fallen asleep, he snuck to the back of the cabin and hid away in the bathroom. A bare bulb blasted yellow light throughout the room. He feared it seeped from under the closed door, and he waited to hear the rustling of sheets and the squeaking of mattresses, the shuffling of feet and the squeaking of door hinges. Thankfully, the room stayed as quiet as it had been when he'd snuck back there.

Looking in the mirror, he whispered, "Toby."

Nothing.

Not even a smile.

"Toby," he said again, and this time he pictured the day he'd told Toby and the girls he wouldn't be joining them at camp. They all wore the same disappointed expressions, but only Jason had actually cried. So he took himself back to camp the year before and the performances they'd all prepared for—including a duet with only Jason and Toby, where Toby played the piano and sang the harmony parts. They'd had so much fun and had sounded so amazing together, and that's when Jason finally saw what Thomas had been talking about. His lips curled of their own doing. The smile filled his eyes. They glowed so bright for a moment, but as soon as Jason realized what he saw, the glow turned watery.

He sunk down against the wall until his butt hit the hard floor. The tile felt so cold against the thin fabric of his sleep pants. It sent chills down his arms and spine. He hugged his long legs against his chest and buried his head against his knees.

The door opening beside him hadn't made a sound as far as Jason knew. He felt something warm beside him, then a soft arm wrapped around him. Next thing he knew, someone was pulling him sideways and his head found a shoulder. That's when Jason finally burst into tears.

Thankfully, Thomas didn't say a word about the state Jason had been found in, and he didn't ask what led up to him sitting in the floor.

“It’s true,” Jason mumbled through his tears. “I didn’t want to believe it, but it’s true. It’s really true.”

Thomas didn’t say anything.

Jason raised his head and his watery gaze met Thomas’s warm stare. He couldn’t say what either of them saw, or what made them react to each other the way they did. It happened, and all the praying in the world wouldn’t undo it. Thomas leaned in first. Jason followed. His tear-soaked lips found Thomas’s mouth, and neither boy bothered to pull back. Jason closed his eyes, and he immediately, without thought, pictured Toby sitting beside him, kissing him. The hand he felt on his thigh also belonged to Toby. Everything was okay then, because he was finally making out with his best friend—something he’d never realized he’d wanted so badly.

## *Chapter Six*

Another week had passed, and Thomas hadn't seen Jason anywhere, not even in his bunk at night. He'd tried not to ask about him, thinking that night in the bathroom had pushed Jason over the edge and he just couldn't stay around anymore. Thomas wanted to ask the counselors about him, but it was better he didn't. Instead, he religiously went to the dock, hoping one morning things would change and Jason would join him again.

Parents' day came. Thomas couldn't believe two weeks of camp had already passed. Before meeting Jason, those days would've painfully dragged on while Thomas moped and tried his best not to find himself in Lucas's crosshairs.

Thomas sat on the dock with his bare feet tucked safely beneath his body. They tingled from his weight cutting off the circulation, but at least he felt safe. The water couldn't get him, but most importantly, the bullies couldn't get him.

Twigs breaking behind him made him swing around, and he would've sworn he'd seen a ghost. The boy was skin and bones, and the whitest Thomas had ever seen him. Jason's eyes were puffy, like he'd spent the last week crying.

"I missed you," Jason said, voice scratchy and raw.

"Where did you go?"

"There's a sick bed in the counselor's cabin. Did you know that?"

Of course he knew that. The first summer Thomas had come to this camp at the beginning of junior high, he'd spent three days in that room after Lucas and his friends had coined the nickname Greedy for him. It had been most miserable experience of his life.

"Why did you go there?" Thomas asked. "Because of what we did in the bathroom?"

"No," Jason immediately said. "It was... well, I... learning that you were right about Toby. Knowing I can't tell my dad or mom. Wondering if Toby's... you know..."

"Gay?"

"Yeah."

“You can always ask.”

“Nah.” Jason shook his head. “I can’t. I couldn’t. I…”

“Are you afraid he’s not and he’ll freak out?”

Jason nodded.

Thomas sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

Thomas watched as Jason bent over and peeled off his shoes and socks. His shorts hung down to his knees. Light brown hairs made his legs look fuzzy when it caught the sun just right. It matched the halo of light brown hair hanging loosely around Jason’s face. Jason ventured onto the dock but sat a lot closer to the edge than Thomas would’ve been comfortable with. His new friend sat down and dipped his toes in the water. Immediately, Thomas’s heart started beating wildly.

“Take your shoes off,” Jason said.

“Why?”

“So you can dip your feet in the water too.”

“I don’t wanna.”

Jason gave Thomas the most pleading look. One like he’d last seen a week ago in the bathroom floor when Jason had broken down in his arms.

“I can’t,” Thomas said, voice quivering enough to embarrass him.

“If you keep telling yourself you can’t, you’ll never swim.”

“What if I fall, Jason? I’ll drown.”

“I’ll save you.”

“Jason—” Thomas frowned, fidgeting his fingers in his lap “—I’m too heavy. You won’t be able to keep me from drowning.”

“Over half the human body is made of water, Thomas. You’ll float.”

“Is that true?”

“Haven’t you taken biology?”

“Yeah, but I suck at science… and math… and PE… and—”

“I get the point,” Jason said flatly, “but I’m not asking you to dive in. I’m asking you to stick your feet in the water, just to feel it. Once you feel it, you’ll want to, I promise.”

Yeah, Thomas seriously doubted that.

With a grumble of protest, he untucked his legs from beneath his body, then he rolled his jeans up to the calves. His bare white legs were almost blinding. The bright red hairs that matched the mop on his head were mini-beacons aiming attention at his very Irish DNA. The copper freckles dotting his skin were just as abundant.

Right now, he totally freakin' hated his DNA.

He bent forward, spread his arm down his legs, and stretched his finger for the laces of his dusty shoes. Hesitating, moving as slowly as possible without being too obvious, bought his feet a little more time on dry land.

With his shoes carefully tucked away at the edge of the dock, Thomas gave Jason a worrisome look and inched down closer to the water. He tried not to let it bother him. He tried to be brave in the face of his fears, but the moment the backs of his heels no longer had something solid to hold him up, he started to panic.

"I can't do this. I can't," Thomas said, fingers gripping at the dock's weathered, wooden floor. Panic started setting in.

"Yes, you can." Jason laid a hand over Thomas's. Then he curled his fingers and held on tight. "I'm right here, Thomas. You can do it."

Despite his fluttering heart and the absolute fear he felt, Thomas moved up farther. He didn't let go of Jason's hand. As the cool of the water reached up to caress his bare skin, he tightened his hold. Jason quietly coached him, and before he knew it, Thomas's feet had dipped in to the ankles.

His eyes widened and a huge grin spread his lips. He looked down at the ripples, then looked back up at his new best friend. "I did it. I really did it."

"Yeah." Jason softly laughed. "You did."

They spent the hours until parents' day began, sitting on the dock with their feet in the water. Thomas didn't let go of Jason's hand, and Jason didn't loosen his hold. They talked and laughed, and Jason felt like he had a true friend.

The time came for them to return to camp. They walked through the woods, laughing and talking, and enjoying each other's company. As soon as they reached the opening in the woods and the laughter of twenty-four other kids filled the air, Thomas froze.

“Look, Greedy finally made a friend,” Lucas teased.

“Jack Sprat could eat no fat. His boyfriend could eat no lean,” one of the girls sang out. Laughter followed, swirling and sucking away all the air in the world.

Lucas said something else, but the rapid thumping in Thomas’s eardrums and the burn in his throat made all sound outside his body non-existent. Then he saw Jason lunge, and his new friend connected with Lucas. Both boys tumbled back and rolled across the dirt. Fists flew. Legs locked. Kicks. Punches. Girls screamed. Guys cheered. Thomas did his best to sink away from the crowd before the fight turned on him. It was cowardly, yes, but bravery had never been a strength of his.

“What’s going on here?” Pastor Paul yelled out.

Anyone not involved in the fight disappeared as fast as they could. No one wanted *that* kind of trouble, especially on parents’ day.

“We’re just havin’ a little fun,” Lucas said.

Jason snorted.

All eyes turned his way.

“Do you disagree?” Pastor Paul asked Jason.

Thomas silently prayed Jason didn’t answer the question the way Thomas expected him to. If Jason narked on Lucas, half the camp would gang up on him and make the next two weeks of his life a living hell. Though honestly, if anyone could handle Lucas’s bullying, Thomas felt like Jason could.

“Everything’s fine,” Jason muttered.

Lucas smirked.

Pastor Paul looked like he didn’t believe either of them.

“Go get cleaned up. Your parents will be here in an hour.”

## *Chapter Seven*

While Jason spent time acting as a wall of protection between his mother and father, he kept his eyes on Thomas who stayed down by the lake. He'd said his mom wouldn't be here, said she always spent the summer at a beach house in Florida. It sucked seeing him all alone.

"Have ya made any friends, son?" Jack Brewster asked.

"Yeah. One," Jason said flatly.

"Just one?" his mother asked. "You have such a wonderful personality. How is it you only made one friend?"

"Cause he's shy, Meredith. Ya raised a Nancy boy."

"I raised a kind, caring young man, Jack."

With a groan, Jason leaned his elbows on the top of the picnic table and covered both ears. His palms didn't drown out all their bickering, but it muffled the sounds of their voices enough that he could replace their arguing with much kinder words. Every fabricated phrase spoke of their pride and love for their son. At least Thomas didn't have to endure the hell Jason did. Jason would almost take one absentee parent over two who couldn't get along.

Without saying a word, he stood from the table and crossed the campground, over to the lake where his temporary best friend sat staring out at the water.

"Tired of your mom and dad already?" Thomas asked.

"Yeah. Mom, I can handle. Dad makes us all miserable."

"At least you got one."

"Want him?"

Thomas laughed. The sound surprised Jason, just like it did the first time and continued to do no matter how often he heard it. The thing that surprised him was how hearty and happy they sounded. Thomas didn't come off as genuinely happy, until he laughed.

The roar of engines made Jason look back. Parents were starting to leave. His father's huge pickup truck was nowhere to be seen. Not that Jason cared much. Whether or not his father said goodbye to him really didn't matter. His mom on the other hand...

"I didn't want to leave without telling you goodbye," she said.

The sound of her voice made him whip his head around the other way. He smiled up at her. She was his hero. He was a momma's boy in every sense of the word. Seeing her made him jump to his feet, and he gave her the tightest hug.

"I'm sorry," he said, apologizing for bailing on her, apologizing for his dad being such a jerk, apologizing for not being a better son.

"You shouldn't be the one apologizing," she said, then kissed his forehead. She released him but kept him close. "Is this your new friend?"

Thomas stood and wiped his hands on the thighs of his jeans. He wore the kind of smile that turned his pale, freckled cheeks bright rosy. He still looked like happy-go-lucky Thomas.

He offered Jason's mom a hand. "Hi, I'm Thomas. Thomas Carroll."

"Hello, Thomas Carroll," Jason's mom said, shaking his hand. "I'm Meredith, but Jason's friends all call me Momma Mere."

"Momma Mere." That chubby-cheeked grin of Thomas's widened. "I like it."

"Maybe we'll see you after camp ends."

"Maybe."

"Well, I need to get going." She turned and hugged Jason one last time, kissed his forehead, and said, "I love you, sweetheart."

"I love you too, Mom."

Both boys watched as Jason's mother left the camp. She didn't stay for lunch and activities like some of the other parents did, but now that she was a single parent, she spent most of her time working two part-time jobs. Jason's favorite of the two was her job at Barnes and Noble. She always brought home books about theatre and music. She encouraged his dreams, rather than trying to change them.

"I like her," Thomas said.

"Yeah, me too."

THE next morning, Jason woke up earlier than Thomas did, earlier than all the other campers for that matter. He climbed down from his bed and hurriedly changed into his swimsuit and a t-shirt, then went back to the bunks as quietly as he could so he didn't wake anyone up. He sat down on the bottom bed, then gave the mattress a solid jostle. Thomas grumbled.

"C'mon, Sleeping Beauty," Jason whispered. "Get up and get your suit on. We're going swimming."

Thomas peeled back one lid. Skepticism beamed from the one groggy eyeball. "We're doing what?"

"Swimming. At least, we're going to try."

"How about we don't and say we did?"

"Get up, Thomas Carroll. Get out of that bed, right now."

More grumbles followed. The blankets slammed down over Thomas's head. The lumps beneath them shifted and rolled, like Thomas had turned back to the wall again and would absolutely *not* be coming out for anyone. Well, Jason could fix that *real* fast.

He curled both fists in the edge of the blanket and jerked so quick if Thomas felt the fabric moving, he wouldn't have time to grab it before it was long gone.

"Hey," Thomas shouted. His uncovered body curled in a fetal ball. He had on nothing but a pair of plaid boxers and a plain white tee. Every inch of his snowy flesh turned rosy red. "Gimme that back."

"No. Now be quiet before you wake everyone up."

Thomas glared.

Jason grinned wider.

Eventually, Thomas gave in and did as Jason had told him, and before too long, they were heading back through the woods and to the rickety dock hidden in the trees beside the lake. He had no plans of pushing Thomas to actually get in the water. Jason just wanted the kid to get out of bed and give it a try.

"I'm not doing it," Thomas said, standing at the junction of weathered wood and muddy earth. "I'm not getting in the water."

"C'mon, Thomas. At least the feet. You've done that once already."

Thomas hugged himself, gripping his elbows so tight his white skin turned a paler shade of snowy. His red t-shirt bunched at his gut. His scrutinizing gaze shifted from Jason to the lake and back again, as if he was actually considering giving it a try.

“I’ll keep my promise,” Jason said.

Thomas frowned. “What promise?”

“To not let anything happen to you.”

“Oh. *That* promise.” Thomas swept his gaze back and forth again before carefully padding out to the dock. He sat down and hung his legs over the edge, slightly swinging feet pushing ripples through the lake’s surface.

Jason grinned, stepping up to the edge. “I’m getting in,” he said and he peeled off his tee then dropped it behind where Thomas sat.

Thomas’s locked a death grip on Jason’s hand before he had a chance to jump down in the water. He tightened his hold so much it hurt. Jason didn’t exactly understand why Thomas was so scared for him.

“Thomas, let go.”

Chewing on his bottom lip, Thomas finally released Jason’s hand, but he didn’t look too happy about it. In fact, he looked kinda scared. He knotted both hands together and tucked them down between his legs, probably so Jason wouldn’t see him fidgeting. Of everyone there, Jason wouldn’t judge him. Jason just wanted to help him.

With as much care as he could muster, Jason stepped to the very edge of the dock. The wood groaned in protest. He swore he felt the thing shift. Thomas didn’t seem to notice, and if anyone was going to freak out about the dock collapsing, it would be him. Jason kept the worry to himself so he didn’t scare Thomas out of being so close to the edge. Jason steepled both arms over his head, closed his eyes and held his breath.

His body speared straight through the cool water, through the little debris and floating critters found in natural lakes. He didn’t want to think about what all was floating around him. If he did, he wouldn’t be able to do this for Thomas. His head popped up, and Thomas stared with wild eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Jason asked.

“You were under for so long. How did you breathe?”

“You don’t. You hold your breath.”

“For that long?” Thomas wore the most incredulous expression.

Jason only laughed. He slowly waved his arms beneath the surface of the water, feet kicking in rhythm. He noticed Thomas watching him, analyzing what he was doing.

“It’s called treading water.” Jason answered the question Thomas had yet to ask. “It lets you kinda hang out with your head above the surface and you don’t get tired.”

“How do you not get tired?”

“It doesn’t use much energy, not like actually swimming does.”

“You know a lot about this stuff, huh?”

“Mom said I was swimming before I could walk. I grew up with a pool in the back yard. Summers were spent with the adults grilling and hanging out while the kids played in the pool, but that was before the divorce, before I got to high school. Mom and dad seemed to actually like each other back then.”

“I’m sorry, Jason.”

“It’s no big deal.”

When they finally stopped talking, the world came to a screeching halt. The disaster Jason had forecasted the first day Thomas had taken him out to the woods slowly unfolded in front of him, and there was nothing he could do to stop it until it was too late.

His brain processed the splashed water first, then the fact he no longer saw Thomas second. Sharp, jagged pieces of wood poked out from where the dock used to be. It’d collapsed and dumped Thomas into the lake. Thomas—the boy who couldn’t swim, the boy who’d been terrified of water.

Thomas—Jason’s only real friend here.

Jason did his best not to panic as he plunged deep down into the water. He found Thomas kicking and wildly slinging his arms, fighting to climb back to the surface. His face with ballooned and his mouth pinched shut, eyes clenched just as tightly. Jason hooked an arm around Thomas’s waist and did his best to swim. Thomas was too heavy and fighting way too much. If he didn’t stop, Jason knew he would drown. That couldn’t happen.

He grabbed Thomas’s wrists and gave them a hard jerk. Thomas stopped squirming and through the murky lake water, looked Jason right in the eyes. Jason nodded toward his own feet, showing Thomas the flutter kick. Thomas began to do the

same thing, and within seconds, they were pushing back toward the light. Their heads breached the surface at the same time, and they simultaneously hauled in deep, gasping breaths.

“You okay?” Jason asked.

Thomas shook his head wildly.

“Are you dead?”

“No. Duh.”

“Then I would say you’re okay.”

Thomas rolled his eyes.

Jason took stock of the water’s edge. Where they were, he couldn’t find a safe place to climb out. The busted dock left behind a lot of debris. Next to that were trees with no opening. Too many places to get hurt.

“My back burns,” Thomas said.

“You probably cut it falling in.” He looked back at Thomas. “We’re going to have to swim back to camp. There’s nowhere to climb out of the water here.”

“I can’t.”

“Thomas, we can’t stay here all day and hope someone finds us. You can do this. Just... do what I do. You’ll be fine.”

“Jason, I can’t. I can’t.” Panic began to brew in Thomas’s big green-brown eyes again. Please don’t let go of me.”

“I won’t, but if you don’t try to swim, we’ll both drown.”

Something changed in Thomas right then. Jason couldn’t be sure of what it was, but he swore he saw a bit of determination in Thomas’s eyes. It looked like Thomas made up his mind that he wouldn’t let them die.

## *Chapter Eight*

Thomas huddled under a beach towel while one of the counselors debrided his back. The injury Jason had told him probably was just a cut had turned out to be a very long, very deep wound with splinters thrown in just to make Thomas a little more miserable. Jason refused to leave his side. Thomas held Jason's hand with tenacity as the little wooden slivers were picked out of his skin. Each sharp pain elicited a hiss and made him squeeze Jason's hand so much tighter.

When they'd swum up to the shore, counselors had come running. Apparently, they'd been gone from camp a few hours and missed breakfast, and the adults had actually paid enough attention to know Thomas didn't swim. So when they'd seen his head poking out the water, everyone panicked. Not Thomas. By the time they made it back, he'd found a fondness for swimming, even imagined it being pretty great if he didn't have a huge cut down the center of his back.

Both boys told the story of what had happened out at the old dock hidden in the woods. Jason didn't nearly give himself the credit Thomas thought he deserved. By the time Thomas finished telling the story, Jason was a hero, and the people who normally surrounded Lucas were fawning over the new kid. Thomas quietly let them all push him aside like he didn't matter. He didn't mind it so much. Jason deserved the glory.

"Jason, you need to wait in the counselors' cabin until your folks get here," Pastor Paul said. "We'll bring you something to eat, okay?"

"Why are my parents coming?" Jason asked.

"Whenever there's an incident, we make it a rule to call."

"Can I wait with him?" Thomas asked.

All patched up, Thomas pulled a fresh camp t-shirt over his head, and Jason had been given one to match. They were led into the great room where two couches waited in front of a big screen TV. Pastor Paul handed Jason the remote, then thumbed over his shoulder to the kitchen, saying there was food and drinks in there if they wanted. Thomas very much wanted.

Jason sat down and flipped through the channels while Thomas scored a bag of Doritos and two canned sodas. He took the seat beside Jason and passed the snacks over. Neither boy spoke about what happened in the lake. Despite being terrified after the dock collapsed, Thomas wanted to try swimming again. If being scared didn't keep him out of the lake then, it surely wouldn't do it now. Thomas had conquered his biggest fear... thanks to Jason.

He was about to open his mouth and tell Jason thank you for everything he'd done, when he heard the whining of metal hinges and felt the warmth of the sun on his cheek. The side door opened, and in rushed Jason's mother. She pulled him into a hug and kissed all over his face, thanking God the entire time that her little boy was safe. Thomas sorta wished his mother could've been there to do the same.

"That's ma boy!" Jason's father proudly called from the same doorway. He held out both arms, wearing a grin just as wide. "My son's a hero!"

Thomas caught Jason and his mother both rolling their eyes.

"I didn't do anything," Jason said. "Thomas—"

"Would've drowned had Jason not been there," Thomas interrupted.

Jason frowned.

Thomas nodded, giving Jason a *go ahead and finish the story* look.

"See, we just had to get you away from that fairy camp, son," Jason's father said.

If human eyes could've blazed red, Jason's would've been on fire. Thomas had never seen such a P.O.'ed expression on anyone in his life. His nostrils flared and his lips peeled back, exposing clenched teeth. Thomas didn't know what Jason was about to do, but judging by the sudden tension in his shoulders, he imagined it would be something to leave an impression on everyone for the rest of their lives.

"I'm gay!" Jason all but growled.

Crickets.

Jason's mom's eyes widened. His dad's mouth gaped. Even Thomas had to admit a little shock. No one could've seen that one coming.

"Come again," his dad said.

"I'm gay," Jason repeated as clearly as he'd said it the first time.

"Ain't no son of mine gonna be gay."

“Then I don’t have to be your son.” Jason looked at his mother. She gave him nod. “I have bullies at school. I don’t need them at home, too, so I’m going to go live with Mom.”

“You see what you did to him?” Jason’s father turned his anger on Jason’s mom. Thomas just wanted to run for the hills, but he couldn’t abandon his friend at a time like this. “You turned my kid into a ho—”

“I would stop right there,” Thomas said, standing up from his spot on the couch. This might not have been his fight, but he’d heard enough already. “Name calling isn’t going to change anything. You should be proud of the fact your son saved a life and forget all the other crap. He deserves as much.”

“Don’t worry, Thomas,” Jason’s mom said, “one parent is very, very proud of him. The other is free to hit the road now.”

Jason’s father tugged his big cowboy hat down on his head, spun on his boots, and headed for the door. Thomas felt as triumphant as he had when he’d stepped out of the lake still alive. But one look at Jason’s saddened face and all that victory was ripped right out of him.

“Is it okay if I’m gay?” Jason asked his mother, voice trembling enough for Thomas to know he was trying hard not to cry.

“Baby, you can be whatever your little heart desires. You’re my son and nothing’s gonna change that. Ya hear me?”

God, now Thomas wanted to cry.

Today would go down in Thomas’s memories as one of the greatest days of his life. Sure, it had started out rough, turned downright terrifying, but everything ended just right. Jason didn’t have any more secrets to keep. Thomas wasn’t afraid of the lake. Tomorrow, he thought he might even try the swimming thing again, then maybe again the next day. Victory belonged to both of them.

## *Chapter Nine*

Exactly three hours after Jason and Toby had both come home from their respective camps—long enough to have family time without being rude—Jason had rushed over to Toby’s house. They lived in the same neighborhood, so a quick bike ride had him on Toby’s front doorstep in less than fifteen minutes.

“Can you take a walk?” Jason asked.

“Sure.”

Toby stepped outside and joined Jason’s side. Nothing was different in the way they walked together. They were close enough one wrong step had on many occasions, and would on many more, have them bumping right into each other. Close enough, Jason became very aware of each breath Toby took. They were shallow, nervous little breaths. Jason had never noticed them before.

“I have something to tell you,” Jason said.

“Me too. You go first.”

“I met this guy at camp,” Jason said. Toby’s face flushed. His expression deadpanned, and though he tried to recover, it didn’t work. “He made me realize something about myself.”

“Yeah?” Toby sounded so scared.

“Yeah, I um... I’m gay.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but that’s not all of it.”

“So... what’s the rest?”

Swallowing so hard his ears popped, Jason shifted from one foot to the next. He’d had this whole epic speech planned out, not knowing if Toby felt the same way he did. When the time came to finally say all those well-thought-out words, Jason had a hard time making his tongue cooperate.

“Jason?”

“I’m in love with you,” he blurted. As soon as he realized that had been his voice *really* saying what was on his mind, he clamped both hands over his mouth. His eyes widened as he silently prayed for the best.

“For real?”

Jason nodded.

The corner of Toby’s mouth cocked up. A wistful gleam filled his beautiful blue eyes. No one on the planet had ever been as drop dead gorgeous as Toby, not even Lucas. Thank God Jason finally knew what his attraction to his best friend was all about.

“Is that all you’re gonna say?” Jason asked, still hanging on to hope.

“I didn’t know you were... I mean... I...” Toby sighed. “Jason, I was coming here to tell you, um... Well, um... This—”

Two lips planted against Jason’s: two soft, warm, wonderful lips. Jason froze. His breath hitched and his eyes widened. He stared at Toby’s face, at two lids that hid Toby’s blue stare. Red blossomed all over his face. They were kissing. Actually. Freaking. Kissing. *Oh, God.*

When the reality of what was happening finally hit him and Jason got over his freakout, he let himself enjoy the feeling of having his secret crush’s mouth against his.

It was the kind of kiss people talked about wanting but few ever experienced, the kind of kiss that came with an explosion of color and the feeling of floating, the kind of kiss people remembered for lifetimes. Jason closed his eyes and opened his mouth, letting Toby slip his tongue in as much as he wanted. Jason couldn’t believe this was really happening, that he’d finally figured out why Toby meant so much to him, that those feelings were mutual and they were acting on them. He said a silent thank-you to Thomas for making him realize how he felt, for making him see the truth in him and helping him embrace it. It appeared as though Thomas had been the one to teach Jason how to swim. Not the other way around.

The kiss broke with Toby slowly pulling back. His lids fluttered open. His glistening lips stretched into a smile. “Wow,” he said, voice raspy. “I didn’t expect it to be like that.”

“I... I... I...” Words were *sooooo* not Jason’s friend right now.

“That wasn’t too much, was it?”

Jason shook his head. “I didn’t know...”

“Had we not been separated this summer, I don’t think I would’ve figured it out either.”

“No kidding?”

“Nope. No kidding.” Toby ran his fingers through his chestnut-colored hair. He had that whole One Direction hairstyle happening. So much different than he’d gone to camp with.

Jason rubbed at the nape of his neck. Heat filled his cheeks. “Guess I owe my dad a thanks for this. Could you imagine Jack Brewster’s face? ‘Dad, you sending me away to a different camp made me and Toby fall in love’.”

Both boys fell into hysterics. Big Jack would’ve had a heart attack.

When the laughter died and they composed themselves, Toby reached for Jason’s hand, and Jason let him take it. Their fingers intertwined. “Does this mean I’m your, um... boyfriend?” Jason asked.

“I don’t know.” Toby shrugged. “You wanna be?”

Jason nodded emphatically.

Toby laughed.

Jason stopped the laughter with another stolen kiss.

*The End*