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The Good Kind

I stared into the embers of the campfire, past orange-yellow flames that licked the sides of the fire pit. It had taken Ben half an hour to make the fire come to life again, and now he was crouched by the opening of the tent stuffing marshmallows into his mouth as he meticulously placed a row of graham crackers and chocolate on the stone edge of the fire pit.

"What are you doing?" Ben's girlfriend asked.

He had set her up inside the tent about ten minutes ago, having taken all the care to tuck her into a giant comforter like it was a cocoon. It had been their idea to go camping, and yet Carly had started complaining about cold and dirt and bugs as soon as we'd arrived on the campgrounds.

"I'm about to feast," Ben said.

I could just make out his grin through the shadows and the hungry way his eyes glanced toward his melting chocolate as he stuffed another marshmallow into his mouth.

He wasn't bothered that Carly had retreated to the tent early and demanded that he remove his chair from the entrance so she could have the perfect view of the fire. She was content now; she was warm. So he could eat merrily.

A soft snore interrupted the crackling of the fire to my right, and I glanced at Christian whose head slowly tilted forward.

I rolled my eyes to myself. My boyfriend could never stay awake; the same way that his twin brother could never seem to stop eating.

"Want me to make you a s'more, Carly?" Ben asked, peeking over his shoulder.

Carly wrinkled her nose and hugged the blanket tighter around her shoulders. "Ew gross, no."

Ben smiled but his chest deflated a bit. He looked at me. "Want me to make you a s'more, Ann?"

"Sure," I said, then thought about it and mumbled a "thanks" after enough time had already passed that a thank you was now irrelevant.

I carried my gaze away from his grin, but looked back again once he'd occupied himself with setting up another broken half of graham cracker and chocolate.

He was the one I'd met first, the day I spent more money on a pair of running shoes than I could have on a decent microwave for my apartment. I don't know what possessed me to buy the shoes other than that Ben had been the one who sold them to me.

I'd never experienced Roadrunner Sports before then and had walked into the store clinging to my old shoes like I was holding a dying cat. I'd hardly made it two steps inside before Ben had walked up with that same marshmallow-gorging smile, offering his assistance. To which I'd blinked and stammered for a second, dropping my eyes to the worn-down rubber soles of my Nikes.

"I uh...I just wanted another pair of these," I said, holding up my shoes. "I was told this was a good place to check out."

"Well you were told correctly. Can I see?"

He held out his hand, and I gave up my shoes. He examined them with a tilt to his head and a twitch to the end of his nose before smiling again and turning his green eyes back on me.

"Someone's been doing a lot of running."

I shrugged.

He pointed a finger at me. "You know, you don't look like much of a Nikes girl to me."

"I don't?"

"Nah." He took a step back and examined my feet, which for whatever reason made me feel completely vulnerable. I tucked my left foot back behind my ankle and hugged my torso.

"You seem more like a Brooks girl, or maybe Asics? What do you think?"

I didn't, was the honest answer. He could've told me to wear duckbills on my feet and I might have done it. I had given up the idea of new Nikes the moment he'd taken them from my hands. Instead, I'd allowed him to

measure, mold, and record my feet then spent half an hour listening to him talk about his experiences in track while he slipped pair after pair of 5S running shoes on my feet for me. And I'd just sat there like Cinderella with my heel in his hand and hadn't looked away from him once.

I might have taken my time bouncing back and forth between two different pairs of shoes, trying them on and taking them off, trying them back on and taking a jog around the store, one hundred percent conscious that he was watching me with each lap.

In the end, he had convinced me to get a pair of shoes I never thought I'd touch, and I'd walked out of the store with his phone number.

"Regular or Cookies and Cream?" he asked me now, breaking off a corner of a Cookies and Cream Hershey's bar to pop in his mouth.

"Regular," I said.

"Hey, Christian, you want one too?" He turned his head toward his sleeping twin and tapped Christian's shoe. "Chris."

I sighed silently to myself and put mental effort toward not gritting my teeth. "Fishy!"

Christian's head snapped up and the front legs of his chair came an inch off the ground for half a second. He looked at me with wide, glossy eyes, the rims of which were red with exhaustion.

"I wasn't sleeping."

I nodded toward Ben. "He called your name."

Ben picked a graham cracker that already had melted chocolate on it and held it out toward his brother. "Want it?"

Carly snorted from inside the tent. I glanced over at her under the boys' arms as Christian accepted the treat.

"Fishy?" she said.

"Remember that scene from *Finding Nemo*?" I said. "When the little girl picks up the bag that Nemo's in and thinks he's asleep?"

Ben laughed but Carly blinked at me without response. I didn't elaborate, though when I glanced back at the side of Christian's face I couldn't help but picture myself as that little girl for a moment, picking up a plastic bag with a sleeping fish called Christian in it and shouting, "Fishy, why are you sleeping? Wake up!" I think I'd have gotten the smallest bit

of pleasure out of shaking him around until he was awake enough to stay that way.

I didn't meet Christian until after Ben started dating Carly. Or, I should say, I hadn't noticed Christian until then. I'd seen him ghosting his way into the kitchen in the middle of the night if I was over watching a movie with Ben. Or sometimes I would pass by Christian's room and catch him shouting at his computer screen with headphones over his ears and a mic piece at his mouth. I myself had never been much into gaming, which was probably why I hadn't given him a second thought for a while, at least not until he started talking to me.

They were alike in a lot of ways, Ben and Christian. They had the same face, the same voice. They stole each other's clothes and listened to the same music. They both ran track, or at least had when they were in high school. They hated tomatoes, loved pickles, and had a bad habit of speaking to each other in a language only they knew.

It hadn't been hard, getting used to the idea of Christian over Ben, at least not until double dates started happening.

The first one had been kayaking—again another one of Ben and Carly's ideas. The twins had agreed to a race where the losers were required to buy the winners ice cream. Ben and Carly had taken off the moment their kayak hit the water and yet Carly had never laid a finger on her paddle; whereas, Christian and I had fought our way down the river in hopeless zigzags and an out of sync rhythm. We were supposed to paddle upstream, around the bridge and back, but we'd given up when the speck of Ben paddling his and Carly's kayak was already heading back toward us. After that we'd just turned our kayak around and floated back to the shore in silence.

"Anybody know any scary stories?" Ben asked, grinning through the shadows again.

"Never," Carly said.

Christian mumbled something unintelligible.

I stared back into the fire and breathed in the scent of ash. "Once there was a girl who was watching the news and saw a story about a serial killing clown that had escaped from jail."

Carly moaned. "A clown?"

Ben's smile widened as he hunched over his knees. "Shhh."

"The news story scared the girl because the serial killer was thought to be lurking around the area she lived in, so she locked all her doors and got her dog to follow her up to her room. She went to bed, but in the middle of the night she woke up to a dripping noise. She reached her hand down to make sure her dog was still there, and it licked her fingers so she went back to sleep. An hour later, she woke up again to the same dripping noise. She reached down and the dog licked her hand. An hour later she woke up again, and this time she decided she'd go see where the noise was coming from.

"So, she walked down the hall until she got to the bathroom where the dripping noise was louder. She turned on the light and pulled back the shower curtain in front of the tub and found her dog hung up by its tail with its throat slashed and dripping blood into the tub. She ran back to her room, and when she turned on the light, there was a clown shoe by her bed."

"Awesome," Ben said.

"No, it's not!" Carly yanked the blanket over her head, eyes darting around the tree line past the campfire. "A clown *and* dead dogs? That's disgusting! Why would you tell a story like that?"

"It's not real, Carly," I said.

Ben crawled into the tent and sat by Carly's side, slipping into her cocoon with her. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close then kissed her cheek. My lips pinched together in the corner.

"It's just a story. I won't let any creepy clowns get you."

Carly furrowed her brow and poked out her bottom lip. "You better not."

Ben laughed.

My eyes drifted to Christian. He'd fallen asleep again.

I'd cried the day Ben informed me he had a girlfriend. He had asked me if I wanted to go out for lunch and hadn't said a word about it until we were halfway through our meal and my mouth was full of pad Thai noodles.

"Can I tell you something without you completely hating me?" he'd asked, hands folded in his lap, eyes watching me with an unblinking emerald stare.

I'd taken my time swallowing before I responded. "What?"

His gaze wandered off to the corner of the table, and he pushed his plate farther away from him without looking at it. "I...have a girlfriend now. It happened just yesterday. It was really sudden and unexpected, but I wanted to tell you right away."

He reached up and flicked a grain of salt off the table. I continued to watch his face. The flavor of pad Thai that was coating the back of my tongue started to taste suspiciously like sour pickles.

"I know I probably led you on, but I want you to know it wasn't intentional." He looked up at me. "I did like you before, and I think you're a cool person, and I'd love to keep being your friend."

The corner of my mouth tipped down at the slightest angle, but that was all I allowed it to do. "What's her name?"

"Carly."

I nodded. I wanted to ask him what was great about her that had never been great about me, but when I opened my mouth the words, "That's cool," came out instead.

He frowned then—for the first time I could ever remember him frowning. "You know...Christian likes you. I think you guys have a lot in common—"

I stood up faster than I could remember telling myself to. "Could you ask them for the check? I have to pee."

He nodded, and I walked away.

It had taken me a good fifteen minutes to build up the courage to leave the bathroom, and when I had, the bill had already been paid and my leftover noodles already packed away in a to-go box. Ben had walked with me to my car and opened the door for me, then closed the door behind me once I'd slid inside.

Even as I stared into the campfire now, I couldn't remember if we'd said anything else to each other that day, and I don't think we spoke for the following week either. But eventually, I guess I decided severing Ben's life

from mine would be harder than having it attached, so I “casually” ran into him again at his job and pretended I wasn’t mad.

He hadn’t mentioned anything about Christian then, but as the time passed and I got over Carly’s presence, the idea began to sink in.

I liked to tell myself it was because of the one time that Christian had timidly asked me if I wanted to go on a run with him when I was sitting on the loveseat by myself while Carly and Ben cuddled on the couch watching Netflix. But in reality, I knew I’d bought into the initiation of Ben’s idea, not my own. I probably would have worn a pair of duckbills on my feet if he had suggested it. After all, here I was sitting next to his sleeping twin while Ben once again snuggled with Carly, this time in a tent, munching on s’mores and marshmallows.

I stuffed my arms over my chest and exhaled through my nose, squinting as deep into the fire as I possibly could.

“Are you cold?”

I blinked away the burn that had crossed my eyes and glanced at Christian, who was looking back at me. I shook my head and stubbornly tightened my arms around myself.

“I’m fine.”

A moment of silence weaved its way through the smoke above the fire, and then there was a shift beside me. I peeked to the side. Christian was standing now, and for a second it surprised me because I had forgotten how tall he was.

I watched him shed his jacket and drape it around my shoulders. Neither of us said anything, but he scooted his chair closer to mine and made himself comfortable in it. It didn’t take him long to fall asleep again, but I minded it less this time when his head dropped onto my shoulder.

I glanced to the side of the fire where the s’more Ben was supposed to make for me was now being inspected by an army of ants.

I hadn’t really wanted it anyway.

I settled myself more comfortably in my chair, careful not to wake Christian with my movement. We didn’t snuggle. We didn’t talk. But he was there, and that was now more than I could say for his brother.