

There is a delicate-looking plant native to North America called bleeding heart. When it blooms, its long, arching branches are covered with tiny heart-shaped flowers, each one with what looks like a drop of blood coming out the bottom — hence the name. It likes shade and doesn't much care for wind.

Unfortunately, we were getting a lot of wind that day. From the window overlooking the garden, I watched it blow furiously through the brightly colored flowers. Many of them had already lost their petals, but so far, the bleeding hearts were holding their own. I couldn't say the same for myself. I was feeling more and more lost by the second.

Suddenly, I was possessed with an irresistible urge to go out into the yard. I didn't know why. Maybe I hoped the storm's fury would blow me away — or at least blow away the storm raging inside me. I opened the back door and walked outside. The wind buffeted my body. The driving rain instantly soaked through my clothes. It poured down my face, the raindrops mixing with my tears. I didn't care. I just wanted to stop hurting.

I fell to my knees in the middle of the yard. I had never felt so alone. In the course of the last two weeks I had lost everyone important to me. There was no one I could turn to, no one left to talk to. I wanted to die.

Chapter 1

"This may be a 'play class', but don't expect any playing." Mr. Tatum cast an imperious eye over the room.

After two previous years in the class, I'd heard it all before. The drama teacher never changed a single word of his first day speech. I could practically mouth it along with him, but I didn't. I never did anything that was disrespectful or might get me in trouble. I was a "good kid".

"This is a serious drama class," he continued. "We'll be doing serious work, and I will expect great things from you. If anyone took this class hoping for an 'easy A', then raise your hand now. I'll have you transferred to another class."

As usual, no hands went up. All of us who took Mr. Tatum's drama class knew exactly what we were getting ourselves into. His reputation preceded him. Those who were serious about acting admired him for it. Everyone else thought he was a tyrant.

Personally, I adored him. Drama was my one escape. I did well enough in my other classes. In fact, I usually managed straight A's. Despite that — or maybe because of it — I didn't fit in. The group I hung out with was pretty popular, but somehow their popularity never rubbed off on me. I was just the hanger-on. No one ever noticed me. It wasn't like that in Drama, though. In that room, or on stage, I shone. I could break away from my humdrum life and become someone else. I could lose myself in a part and, for a while at least, forget who I really was. The drama crowd actually respected me. Not that I was friends with any of them or anything, but they respected me. That was enough.

"Excellent," Mr. Tatum said, preparing to go on with his rehearsed spiel. Just then, the door opened, and a head popped in.

"Yes?" Mr. Tatum snapped, somewhat annoyed at being interrupted.

The rest of the body came into view — and a nice body it was, I couldn't help but notice. I'd never seen him before so he must have been new. He was taller than I was, maybe close to six feet, and willowy thin. He had red-gold hair that seemed to stick up in every direction and elfin features. In fact, he looked amazingly like an elf — even to his incredibly green eyes. I wondered if they were colored contacts. Then I wondered why I cared. Why was I so intrigued by this guy?

"My name is Seth," he announced. "Seth Connelly. I'm transferring into this class. Here's the paperwork."

He handed the teacher a file and looked around the room. He carried himself with an air of confidence. Not arrogance exactly, but not far from it. His eyes met mine and lingered. I looked away first.

After Mr. Tatum had mulled over the file's contents, he grudgingly admitted, "It appears this is all in order. Why don't you find a seat, Mr. Connelly, and we can continue with the class."

The new boy scanned the room and caught me staring at him again. I quickly glanced away, but it was too late. The next thing I knew, he was sitting down at the desk next to me. There were empty desks all over the room, but he had to choose the one beside me. Mr. Tatum picked up where he'd left off. I could feel Seth's eyes on me, but I refused to look over at him.

"Hi," he said after a few seconds. He extended his hand. "I'm Seth."

I gaped at him a moment before sliding my hand into his. "Killian."

He held on a bit longer than seemed necessary, then smiled at me before turning back toward Mr. Tatum.

My head was swimming, and I suddenly felt warm all over. I wondered if I were coming down with something. I couldn't be attracted to Seth. He was a guy! I had to admit, though, I'd never felt like that before.

I tore my eyes away from him and focused them on Mr. Tatum, but they seemed to have developed a mind of their own. They kept finding their way back to Seth. I hoped like crazy that no one in the class noticed my sudden obsession.

Finally, the bell rang. I scooped up my books and headed for the door with my head down.

"Killian! Wait!" I heard Seth call.

I waited just outside the door for him to catch up, but I didn't turn around.

"Hey." He came alongside me.

"Hey." What can I say? I'm a brilliant conversationalist. I started walking again.

"So look, I'm new here, and I'm still getting lost. Think you could show me how to find my locker?"

"Yeah, sure," I mumbled, still not looking at him. "Where is it?"

He gave me his locker number, and I led the way, neither of us speaking a word. I felt Seth studying me as we went. I thought I should say something to break the silence, but my brain seemed to have stopped functioning. I couldn't come up with anything that didn't sound stupid or dorky. The tension grew until finally he spoke up again.

"Killian. That's a different name. I don't think I've ever heard it before."

"It's Irish. My grandfather was from Ireland. He named me."

"Are you close to your grandfather?" Something in his voice made me look up at him for the first time since we'd left the classroom. He had a sense of sadness and loss about him that made me wonder where the question came from.

"No. He died when I was four. I don't really remember him."

I saw disappointment in his eyes. They were so expressive, every emotion laid bare as if you were looking directly into his soul.

"Why did you ask if we were close?"

"No reason. Just wondering." He glanced away, then looked back at me again. "I'm not close to my grandfather. I'm not close to most of my family these days."

I regarded him curiously. I'd been brought up with Southern manners, however, and it would have been a breach of etiquette to ask him to explain further.

He read the question in my eyes anyway. "Killian, I'm gay."

I stopped dead in my tracks.

"I think I can find it from here. Thanks, man. See ya around."

I watched him walk away, his shoulder slumped and head down. I'm not sure how long I stood rooted to the spot, maybe just a few seconds, maybe minutes. I was lost in thought and didn't care. The stream of people flowed around me, but I didn't notice any of them.

Suddenly someone grabbed me around the neck and put me in a headlock. "What are you doing, Space Boy? Waiting for your people to come back and get you?"

Asher Davis was one of my so-called friends. We'd grown up next door to each other and had been hanging out together forever, along with a couple of other guys from the neighborhood. Even so, living in close proximity was about all we had in common. When we were younger that wasn't as obvious, but as we got older and the other guys all became interested in sports, I was drawn

more to books and drama. Although it would have made sense for me to find a new group of friends, that prospect terrified me.

"Get off me, Asher," I snapped.

"Whoa, dude!" He let go and stepped back. I didn't usually stick up for myself. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I gotta get home."

"Well, if you're in such a rush, why were you just standing there?"

"It's nothing. I've got to go." I started off down the hall.

Asher hurried to keep up with me. "Dude! Kill! Man, what's up?" When I didn't answer he added, "The gang's getting together tonight to hang out, maybe catch a movie. You wanna go?"

"No thanks."

By then we'd reached the door to the student parking lot. My dad had given me one of the new Volkswagen Bugs for my sixteenth birthday. Perhaps he thought it would make me popular. If so, he was destined to be disappointed yet again.

I headed for my car, Asher still on my heels. Just then, Zachary Phillips intercepted us. Zack was another of the guys in our circle of friends. He was closer to my height, but in much better shape. He wasn't my favorite person in the world, even though we hung out a lot. He had a bit of a mean streak, something I definitely wasn't in the mood for at the moment.

"Hey, Zack," Asher called out.

"Hey, Asher. Hey, Killian." Zack watched me with narrowed eyes as I started to unlock my car. "Didn't I see you with that new kid right after the bell?"

I looked up, dropping my keys in the process. As I bent down to pick them up, I answered, "Yeah, his name's Seth."

"I know," Zack sneered. "He's in my second-period class. We all had to share five things about ourselves. You know what his were?"

I had the door open by then but didn't get in. I was frozen where I stood.

"What?" Asher asked.

"The first few were just stupid stuff — something about being from Baltimore and his parents being split up — but number five..." Zack paused dramatically. "...number five was a doozy. He's a faggot."

"What?" Asher gasped. "He actually said that?"

"Yeah, man. A real live fairy," Zack laughed. "Well, he said gay, but you know."

"Who's a fairy? Killian?" another voice cut in. I looked up to see Jesse O'Donnell walking toward us.

The other guys laughed. Jesse was the fourth member of our little group. He wasn't the brightest bulb on the tree. He was also something of a bully, which probably explained why he and Zack were practically joined at the hip. You rarely found one without the other being somewhere nearby. Jesse towered over the rest of us, all gangly arms and legs. Most of the time he was a huge klutz, but on the basketball court, he was a genius.

Zack answered him. "No, at least I don't think so. But hey, you're being awful quiet there, man." He eyed me again.

I shrugged and started getting in my car.

"So who's a fairy?" Jesse asked again.

"This new kid who just transferred here. His name's Seth," Zack told him.

"No way! How do you know? Did he hit on you?"

"No! He better not, unless he wants to end up a dead fairy," Zack quipped, and they all laughed again.

"He seemed nice to me," I said before I had time to think.

As one, they all turned to stare at me.

"Don't tell us you're a fag, too, Killian." Zack got a nasty gleam in his eye. It seemed as if Zack was always looking for a target. Being one of his so-called friends didn't necessarily ensure you wouldn't become his latest mark.

"I didn't say that. I just said I thought he seemed nice. Why does that make me gay?"

"Because he is, Killian." Zack sounded as if he were speaking to a particularly slow child. "You don't hang out with fags unless you're a fag, too."

“Bullshit! Hanging out with you idiots doesn’t make me a moron.” I slammed the door angrily, started the car, and drove off, leaving them staring after me with their mouths gaping. I had no clue where my reaction had come from. I never did things like that.

I pondered my response all the way home. Thoughts were flying through my mind like bullets and they seemed just as hard to grasp. When I arrived, I decided at the last minute not to stop. I wasn’t ready to face my parents. I was still tense and confused from the strange scene in the parking lot. Driving around sometimes helped me think.

Eventually, I found myself on the bridge into Ocean City, so I decided to walk on the beach. Since we were having unseasonably cool weather for September in Maryland, I didn’t expect too many people to be there. I was right. There were only a few cars in the lot, and those were bunched up close to the boardwalk. I parked by the beach, fed the meter, slipped off my shoes, and stepped out onto the sand.

I walked along the edge of the ocean, the waves lapping at my feet. I’d gone pretty far up the beach when I was surprised to hear someone call my name. I turned and caught my breath. Seth was jogging toward me. He had changed out of the jeans and polo shirt he’d worn to school and was now dressed in running shorts and a T-shirt emblazoned with a popular children’s cartoon character.

“Hi, Killian,” he greeted me, only slightly out of breath.

“Hi,” I said, looking at my feet.

“What are you doing here?”

“I just needed to get out so I thought I’d take a walk. The beach always calms me.”

“I live here,” he told me as if I’d asked. “Well, up the beach a ways. My dad has a house here. I like to jog by the ocean. It calms me, too.” When I didn’t say anything he continued, “Look, if you don’t want to talk to me, I’ll understand. I mean I know I probably freaked you out when I said I was gay, but I hate lying. I did that long enough. It’s better to get things out in the open right away. That’s why I told you.”

I still didn’t say anything.

He seemed to have a real need to fill in the silence so he went on. “I mean, I’m used to everybody hating me. My own mother hates me so why shouldn’t you—”

“I don’t hate you,” I interrupted.

He stared at me in surprise for a few seconds. “You don’t?”

“No. I don’t even know you. Why would I hate you?”

“Because I’m gay.”

“That’s not a reason to hate somebody.”

“Everyone else seems to think so.”

“I’ve never been one to go with the crowd,” I said a little bitterly.

“I sensed that about you. That’s why I sat next to you.”

We stood there for a minute without speaking, then he asked, “Want to go grab a bite to eat and we can talk?”

I thought for a few seconds, then shrugged. “Sure, why not?”

We headed up to the boardwalk and found a pizza joint. After placing our order, we sat down at a table to wait for someone to call our number.

“So,” he began after an awkward silence. “Did you grow up here?”

“Yeah. I guess you could say I’m a native. My dad is State attorney for the county.”

Seth’s eyes grew wide. “Really? Wow. What’s that like?”

I made a face. “Not that great.”

“How come?”

“It’s a lot of expectation. My dad always says that everything I do reflects on him, so I have to be perfect.”

“Nobody’s perfect.”

I snorted. “Tell him that. I’m just one big disappointment to him. He was like this god in high school. He was the president of his class, the star of his football team, perfect grades, perfect looks, and apparently he had every girl in school drooling over him. Me? I couldn’t catch a ball if you held a gun to my head, I look like a geek, and girls don’t even know I exist.”

“You look like a geek?”

I flicked the lens of my glasses. “I’m five foot seven, and I barely weigh a hundred and twenty pounds. I’m not exactly a Greek god.”

"No, you said you were Irish, remember?"

I blinked a moment before he broke into a grin. I realized he was joking and chuckled.

"What about your mom?" he asked.

"What about her?"

"What does she think?"

I shrugged. "She thinks whatever Dad tells her to think. He's kind of old-fashioned, like the man is the head of the house and all that. I guess I got my shyness from her. She has a way of melting into the background, almost like a chameleon. No one ever remembers meeting her. The only time she seems at all animated is when my father is around. It's almost as if she worships the ground he walks on."

He shrugged. "At least she doesn't hate you."

I frowned, remembering his comment earlier on the beach when he'd said his mom hated him. I wanted to ask him why, but once again, my Southern upbringing stopped me.

"Go ahead and ask," he said.

"Ask what?"

"You want to know why my mom hates me. It's okay. You can ask."

"Um. Okay. Why does she hate you?"

"Because I'm gay."

I didn't know what to say to that, so we sat in silence again until the girl behind the counter called our number. I leapt from the booth to pick up the pizza.

We made small talk while we ate. I filled him in on his teachers at school and what was good in the cafeteria — not much. After we had finished, I took a deep breath and asked the question that had been plaguing me from the beginning. "So when did you know you were gay, and how did you know it?"

He paused for a moment, looking me in the eyes so intently I had to drop my gaze. "It's kind of a long story, but I guess I knew for quite a while before I admitted it to myself. I figured it out for sure when I was twelve, but for the next few years I tried really hard to be straight. See, my dad left when I was twelve, and I always thought it was because he realized I was gay. Then, a few months ago, one of my friends told me he was gay and that he wanted to date me. I liked him so I said yes and we started going out. When my mom found out, she freaked. That's when I discovered that my dad is gay, too, and that's the real reason he left my mom. So she threw me out. I didn't have anywhere to go. If my dad hadn't taken me in, I'd be homeless."

I sat staring at him, my chin, I'm sure, hanging somewhere around my ankles. I'd never realized how sheltered I was in my little Eastern Shore town.

"So, anyway," he went on. "How did I know? Hmm. I just knew. I can't explain it really. I mean, beyond the obvious, my attraction to guys over girls. I can tell with other people, too, you know." A big grin started spreading across his face. "It's called *gaydar*."

"Oh, really?" I suddenly felt a little nervous. I wasn't sure why. I mean, I wasn't gay, so what did I have to worry about? Sure, I'd never dated girls, never even been interested in them if I was honest with myself, but I'd never been interested in guys, either. Had I? Doesn't everybody take peeks in the locker room? All I felt toward Asher, Jesse, and Zack was friendship. Right?

Thoughts of wrestling with Asher flashed through my mind, of enjoying the closeness of his body, of trying to hide my erection. I shook my head to clear the images and hoped I wasn't blushing.

He was still smiling.

"Why are you smiling?" I asked testily.

Seth laughed. "I dunno. It's better than crying."

I glanced down at my watch and gasped. "Whoa, I'm late. I gotta go or I'm gonna get my ass kicked." I pulled out my wallet and threw some money on the table, enough to cover my part of the bill. I jumped up, then paused. "Bye, Seth. See you in school tomorrow. I...I had fun."

"Me too. See ya, Killer!"

I started walking away but stopped in the doorway and smiled back at him. *Killer*...I liked it!