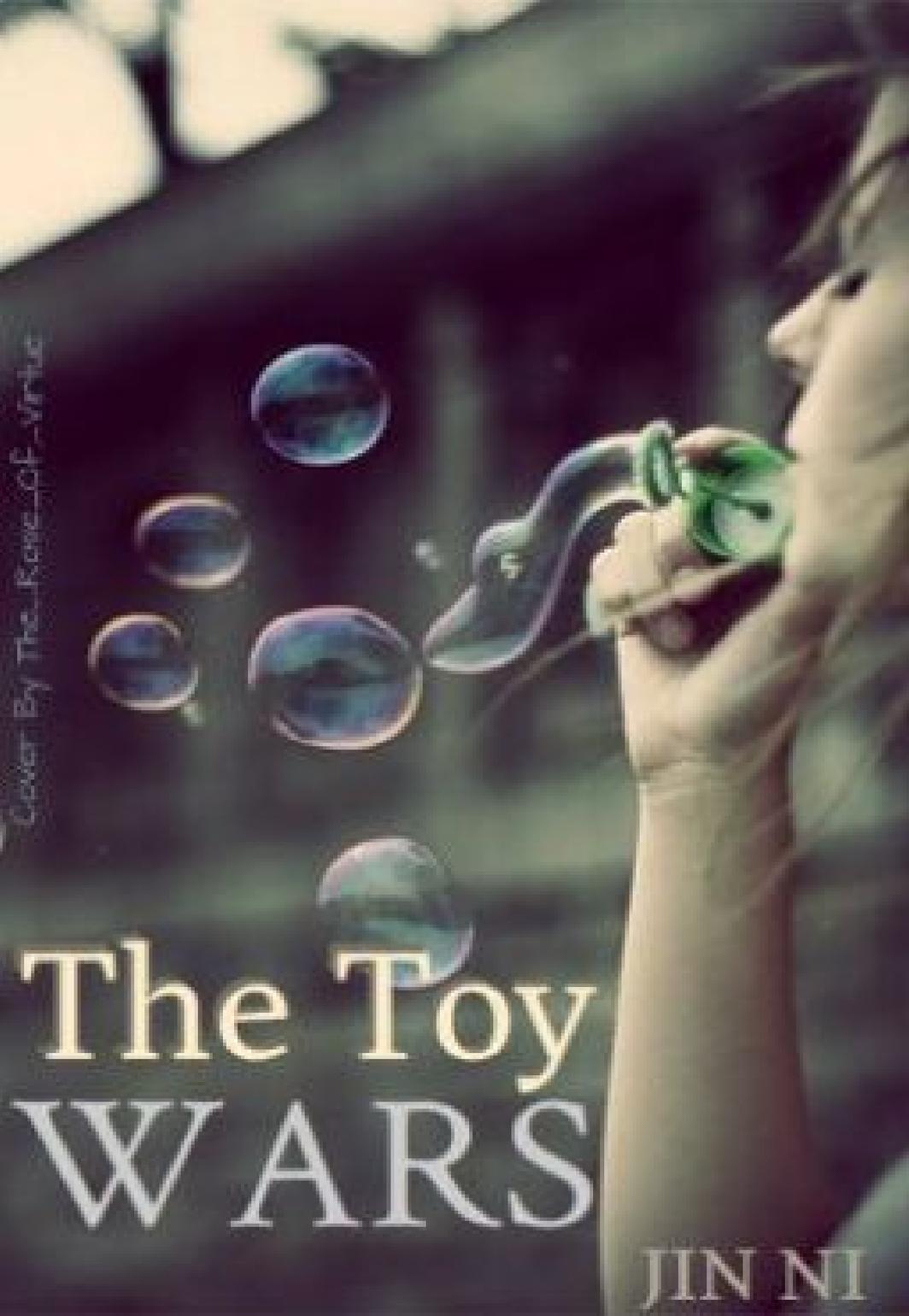


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The Toy WARS

JIN NI



The Toy Wars

Jin Ni

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Prologue

I remember when I first met him, just as vividly as the time I dyed my hair purple...and well, that didn't go down through Allie Krishna history that well.

Our parents were best friends from way back when, and kind of decided we should meet. I was 5 and a few months and he was 6, and well, he liked to imagine he had to upper hand, all mighty and hoity-toity just because he was 6 months older than me.

It was like we had this instant mutual unsure-about-each-other kind of thing going on the moment we saw each other.

I hate to say it, but even as a kid, I was a loner, and that was before life got complicated. Thus, my mom and her friend's great try to get me a friend. I can say for a fact that it didn't work out in the beginning. The moment our parents left us to ourselves, it was awkward silence, and I remember everything about it, for some strange reason. It was a warm autumn day, and we were in my playroom, with sunlight streaming in from the windows, looking like a perfect mixture of the warm orange in a fire and honey, splayed all over the tiled floor. It wasn't yet a mess, like it is now, with clothes, and well, the average teen's bedroom. I

was dressed in this yellow sundress and had ponytails. Could my mom be any more stereotypical? Probably not. He was dressed in this polo and these American Eagle tan shorts. I was actually the brave one who tried to start a conversation, because I thought sitting in awkward silence for a few hours would've been...well...awkward. "Hi, my name's Allie. Do you wanna play? I got toys over there and stuff..." Don't comment on my awkwardness, I know that wasn't exactly a smooth greeting, but, well, I was never the social butterfly. More like social nut. Actually, you can even kick the social out of that. I never could string two words together and make them sound like something other than babble – especially with someone I've never really talked with before.

"No. Don't you have something more fun? Like Legos or something other than stupid Barbies?"

That just provoked me for some reason, although I did agree that the Barbies were kind of stupid. You can blame my mom for that though – she bought me everything girly imaginable. I guess she wanted me to have a different childhood than she had – where she had to play with her brother's leftover toys, since they didn't have enough money to buy a doll or something.

"My toys aren't stupid!"

He stuck his tongue out, and just sat there, refusing to say anything else.

“Fine, have it your way!”

I withdrew into a corner and just sat there, staring – at everything and everywhere – just not him. Maybe only ten minutes had passed before he sighed, and walked over to where I was. “I’m bored.” he said, not even apologizing for his previous behavior.

“What do you want me to do about it?” I was still kind of mad with him. I was only trying to be friendly and brave, and he put me down just like that. Alright, I’ll admit, maybe I DID overreact, and got mad kind of easily...but I was 5, okay? Cut me some slack. At that time, a rude guy seriously irked me. I was used to either getting the silent treatment or politeness, and if I was lucky, a friendly response. Never had someone tried to deliberately upset me. Well, I actually don’t know if he did that on purpose or if he was seriously just that belligerent. I think it was a little bit of both. “You’re supposed to be the host and a playmate. That’s what my mom said. And she says that I have to get along with you.” he plops down in front me, and his forehead wrinkles in a cute kind of way, as if not understanding why his mom wanted him to do that.

“Tell your mom I don’t want to get along with a rude boy.” I picked at the carpet, and tried to make shapes in it.

“I’m going to tell my mom you said that. Then she’ll never bring me back.” he stuck his tongue out

at me again, and headed toward the door.

Normally, I would've said bye or something along those lines, but the fact that he might tell his mom was very scary to me. If he told his mom, my mom would hear, and she would come in and start yelling at me. Nothing was scarier to me than a mad mom to me at that time. My mom's punishments were usually not fun to do. I had to have a really long lecture and guilt trip or she would sometimes slap me or hit me with a stick. After she did that, she would always say I couldn't tell anyone else, or bad things would happen. I didn't understand why she did that, but I still loved my mom very much, and never told anyone about it. . I got up and ran after him, grabbing onto his arm. "Wait, no! Please don't tell your mom, or else my mommy'll get bad." I bit my lips and tried to look as cute and puppy-like as possible. The puppy eyes almost always worked on my dad, anyway.

"So? I don't care what your mommy thinks." he sneered, and continued toward the door. Everything next happened in slow motion, like in those movies, when something dramatic or scary is about to happen. His hand reached for the door knob, and I remember going, "No-o-o-o-o-o," and diving for the door. I hit the door hard, and it made a slamming sound. My heart leapt into my mouth. The parents would come and check now, and ask if anything was wrong, and

my life would be over.

He just made a grunting noise, and looked at me with disgust. “What’s wrong with you?”

“No, you don’t understand! I don’t want my mommy to get mad...or else...or else...” My voice trailed off as I realized what I might’ve revealed if I hadn’t been careful.

“Okay, fine. I won’t tell.” He walked away from the door, and sat in the small chair by my nightstand. It was a few minutes before he said something again, and the gentle tone made me think something was up. “If I won’t tell, will you tell me why you’re so scared of your mom?”

I bit my lip and grasped the door handle harder. I don’t know whether it was because I was nervous or because I didn’t trust him. I’d never told anyone, adult, preschool classmates, anyone. And I certainly wasn’t willing to tell him yet. “No. My mom said I’m not supposed to tell.”

“I’ll go tell my mom what you said about me being rude then.”

I shook my head defiantly, and stayed by the door until his mom finally came in and told him it was time to go.

Just before he went, he whispered, “I won’t tell. But one day, you have to tell me why you’re so scared of your mom.”

I nodded and said, “My name is Ally.” Maybe I said it because I just wanted him to know my name, or maybe, I was hoping it could be the same of something. A smile flashed across his face. it was like a signal to me that he knew what I wanted, and he was willing to be my friend. “My name’s Tony.” With that, he was out the door.

And that was that – the start of everything to come.

Chapter One

It was that delicate time between day and night when the setting sun could get a peek at a few slivers of the moon and stars and all the delicate things that belonged in the dark that it could never touch. I glanced through the blinds, blowing the dust off a few of the white plastic flaps. My mom would be coming home soon, but it was my hope that my dad would arrive before that. With my heart pounding as I raced around my room, hiding my earbuds and my phone, smoothing out my tousled blankets and bedsheets, and stuffing all my laundry into the basket outside my door, I recalled my mom's words to me when she left a few days ago – "When I come home, I don't want to see a single thing out of place. Don't touch the stove, lock the doors, and never leave the garage door open. Make sure to do the laundry, and you have to turn the dial clockwise, not counterclockwise." I had admittedly slacked off during the last three days, savoring the freedom I had with my mom gone. I'd spent the first day cleaning up and doing all the easy tasks – watering the garden, tidying up my room and the adjoining guest room, and folding all my clothes and organizing my closet by season, just taking my

sweet time while blasting music at a volume that would have me going deaf at least ten years earlier than the rest of my friends.

The second day, I'd spent just hanging out with Tony and Ria, hitting the mall, and just wandering around, not really shopping, just looking through windows and browsing through shops while sales assistants tried to offer up items to us at 'discount' prices. That was a luxury to me – being able to spend a day out with my friends, since my mom often confined me to the house while she was home, believing that as a young teen, I should be spending my days inside studying or helping out at our family business rather than outside, being 'influenced by juvenile delinquents' and 'playing'.

Then yesterday, I'd collected all the laundry that had piled up and thrown them in the washer then listened to them being tossed about in the dryer as I lazily scrolled through my feeds and dashboards on Facebook and Tumblr. I had folded it all and sorted them the night before while watching a rerun of Harry Potter on ABC Family Movies.

As far as I knew, I'd done everything Mom had asked. But she had the memory of an elephant and the eye of a hawk – if something was off, she would notice it. I breezed through the rest of the house, stopping in the kitchen to throw away some bread crusts that

I had left out earlier that day while making myself lunch, stacking all the paper scraps and notebooks on my desk, wiping the history of my computer of anything that could seem suspicious or bad to my mom, and just double checking everything in general.

Then, there was nothing left to do but curl up on the couch and anxiously toss about a cushion, my legs jittering about rapidly as if on a sugar and caffeine high. I wanted to bite my nails, like all girls do when they're nervous in books or movies, but I never understood how anybody could do that. Nails were as hard as iron, so it seemed a bit painful to chew them off.

The refrigerator hummed, and a few blocks of ice got dislodged in the freezer, and made a sound like giant dice being tossed. I could hear the faint sound of tires rolling on asphalt and a few cars going over the regular speed bumps in my community. And the clock in the living room, being ever so faithful to its job, continued to count the seconds.

Tick. One.

Tock. Two.

Tick. Three.

Tock. Four

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick.

And all the way up to sixty seconds, I was listening to the clock. And as another minute passed, I joined

the clock in its steady chant, though mine was rather nervous. I'm not sure how long I did that. But eventually I got up and ran upstairs, locked myself in my room and pulled out my phone from under my pillow, the earbuds still wrapped around it, the two white plastic pieces still warbling out lyrics. The screen lit up as I pressed the home button, and the notifications showed that I had a few text messages from Tony and something about feeding my dragon. I stuck one earbud in my left ear, wanting to be able to hear when someone came home.

**Hey, your mom comes home today, right?

Want me to come over?

Or is that going to make your mom angry?

Ria wants to know if she can come over too. **

And the latest: ** We're on our way. Don't keep us waiting – it's kind of cold out here tonight. **

I bit my upper lip. It was just like Tony to decide by himself that it was okay to come by. We'd known each other for about eight years now, but he still didn't know about my mother and her abuse. He'd asked a few times, but when I refused to answer, he dropped the topic. Sometimes, I'd have a day where everything was just...right, and I'd give him a few vague answers. "My mom is just hot-tempered." "My mom yells a lot." "Let's put it this way – when she gets angry, my mom can curse her way into detention faster than you can

say detention.” “So, my mom was talking about an employee at work, and she really knows how to insult someone.”

After the first few answers, Tony had stopped trying to pry for more details. But he'd still known me for so long that he could almost predict when I was feeling nervous about my mom, and he'd involuntarily come over, just show up on the doorstep, a black sports bag slung over his shoulder and a big smile on his face. I hated to tell him that sometimes after he left, it'd be worse than before he came. So I didn't tell him. I figured, if I was going to become red meat anyway, I might as well go to the butcher when a small smile on my face.

I finally typed back a simple reply. *Okay, thanks, I guess. Tell me when you get here.*

A few seconds later, a ping sounded in my ear, drowning out the music for a second. **We're coming around the corner. +, we're staying for dinner.**

I'm not cooking.

Ria. was his one word reply, and it took me a few seconds to figure out what he meant, but I smiled when I understood.

Ria, the other of my best friends, who sort of understood my situation (a little less clearly than Tony – so, almost not at all) wanted to be a chef, and she had plans to go to a culinary school, get a degree, work at

some fancy five-star in France. She was already taking a Home Ec class at school, and could do some basic cooking – mostly just spaghetti, mac and cheese, those kinds of things. But she could bake some great desserts – brownies, pumpkin pies, cookies, birthday cakes – sometimes she made enough that we might as well skip the actual meal.

*Ask her what she’s making tonight. *

Pie for your mom + something easy

Looking forward to the pie. What’s the meal?

Maybe a sandwich or something

It’s dinner.

No 1 ever said sandwiches couldn’t be for dinner

Fine then.

The doorbell rang a second later, and after that, another text appeared on her screen. I didn’t have to look at it to see what it was about. I hurried down the stairs and toward the door, and as soon as I unlocked it, my friends burst in.

“Are you doing some weird ritual in here? It’s dark,” Tony said as he peered into the house from the entryway.

“I’ve been in my room.”

“When’s your mom coming home?” Ria asked a second later, once she had located the lights. We were suddenly bathed in light, and I closed the door,

making sure to lock it.

“I don’t know exactly when. I know she’s taking a taxi home though.”

“Call her. Then I’ll know what I have time to make for dinner.” In my mind, I was deliberating whether I should or not. I was afraid that if I called now, she would hear my voice and suddenly get mad, maybe because my tone of voice was too shrill or I sounded strange, or maybe she was just in a bad mood after her travels. My mom was never exactly one of those people who could get off a plane and feel sort of happy to be on ground, to at least be going somewhere. She was the other category – the ones who couldn’t sleep on airplanes, not because of excitement, but because they missed their beds, and she always suggested that I go to sleep, always saying that I looked tired. She was the kind of who was excited the day before the trip, but on the actual day, she was stressed and angry and was always in a hurry, even though the plane was not scheduled to leave until the next hour. She was a traveler who wanted to hurry to the destination rather than enjoy the trip inbetween. But then again, most adults were – whether it was business or leisure. Enjoying one of the greatest feats of man – cruising in the air with the birds, watching spectacular sunsets and pink clouds – just wasn’t for them.

“Just start making it. It’ll be soon.”

Ria studied my face and nodded. One of the things about her that I loved was that she was a noticer. She saw things, studied them, and understood. She was a bit dense sometimes, and really talkative (but not necessarily an entertaining kind, sometimes), but no one could feel bad about themselves with her. We headed separate ways once we got to the living room – Ria to the kitchen, and Tony and I to my room.

“It’s clean for once,” he said, once he stepped into my room.

“It’s always cleaner than yours, at least,”

I flopped onto my bed while Tony sprawled out on the large plush teddy bear that stared at me from the opposite wall. A tag was still on its ear, from when my dad had bought it for me a few years ago. It was a little faded now, but the giant 54 INCHES, boasting of the height of the plushie, was still visible. We sat in a comfortable silence, and I reached for my earbuds, this time ready to put both in, since Tony would tell me when anybody came home. Before I plugged the left one in, however, he stopped me.

“So, a man came to my house today.” I waited for him to continue. Tony always took his time when telling his stories, since he was always gathering details and thoughts together as he talked. “I was out on the driveway, about to go out for a bike ride around the community, and he just walked up to the door and

rang the bell. So, I asked him why he was there, and he told me that he was looking for my mom.” He paused again. “But it was one of those days where my mom goes to one of her sessions, and I told him that my mom wasn’t home. And he left me a number and left.”

I finally spoke up – his story was over. “Didn’t you ask him about who he was?”

“He wouldn’t tell me.”

“But I told my mom when she got home, and she didn’t care.”

“Maybe it was just a salesman who something. You know, those door to door kinds.”

“He knew my mom’s name.”

“Could your mom have gotten...?” I trailed off. The question was difficult to ask. Six years ago, Tony’s father had committed suicide. His mom and he had been out, doing back-to-school shopping, and before they left, his father was still sleeping, so they left him alone. But the night before, one of those nights when my mom had been in a good mood and I was allowed out to friends’ houses, I had gone to his for dinner. His father was a soft-spoken man, but he was a joker and an artist. We’d laugh over his exaggeration of a co-worker at his law firm, and we’d watch him complain mockingly about texting acronyms. “How do I know that someone’s not just flipping me off? Someone could say LOL to my face, and I would think

they were laughing, but really, they're saying Loser, Oh Loser or something."

And Tony, just to irk him, said, "LOL."

And we all laughed, all four of us, and his mother was smiling, and I nearly spit my apple juice out, and Tony had doubled over clutching his stomach, and his brown bangs had some almost touched the red sauce on his plate. And his dad was chuckling, while asking for more pasta. The strangest thing for all of us – Tony, his mother, and me, when I finally got a phone call from him, his voice full of raw pain and tears – was that he had been okay the night before. Except he really hadn't been. We had all sat there and laughed and thought he was okay and that perhaps we could've done something, but we never even realized that he was anything but okay.

That fact struck Mrs. Carlton – his mother - especially hard. That her own husband didn't tell her that he was going through hard times. And that she herself hadn't noticed. And because of that, they found him, on a hot afternoon in August - and it was a dead silent day, even the cicadas had stopped chirping – slumped over the bathtub, his right wrist slit, and the water, the water was so cold, just as cold as his body. And the water and floor was red – not a deep red, but not bright like ketchup either. Just a sickening color, like V8, and just a little thicker.

I had never seen the scene in person. There had been a column in the local newspaper – not the headline, but there was a full page of it. Somewhere in the beginning – page 8 or 9 or 10, the page closest to the obituaries. And the picture of the scene had been in full color, which was unusual for a page in the newspaper that was past the cover page or before the ads page.

The story, in cold, black font on grimy printed paper. Being only 8, I didn't understand the article. But I heard my parents talking, and when I asked my dad, he tried his best to explain it to me. But it sounded so cold. So formal. It didn't sound like he was talking about a friend. *“Mr. Carlton was an important person in his law firm, Liberty Justice Co., and he had won many cases for his clients. He had been currently in the middle of an important case, but the difference of this case from others was that he was actually having an affair with the client. His co-workers had seen the two go out to dinner, and she had invited him over to her house often. The rest, as they say, is history. The police say that was what drove him to commit suicide – he couldn't take his guilt anymore, and it always bothered him to come home to his wife and son and know that he wasn't being faithful to them.”* Then there was a picture of Tony and his mother, standing in front of the house, not smiling, but not crying. Just

stiff, like statues. But I always thought that if you looked just a little closer, you could see the weariness and sadness all held within their eyes.

And ever since then, his mother had sunk into a deep depression. She got up every day to make food for him, do a little laundry, but she hardly ate herself, only swallowing enough to keep herself alive, alive for Tony. She spent most of the day in her bedroom, staring at the ceiling, or tossing around with tears streaming down her cheek. Sometimes she would turn on the TV and stare at the colorful people with happier lives talk and laugh. Then she might shuffle to the bathroom, and peek out of her room, checking to see if Tony was there. If he wasn't, she'd just go back to bed. If he was, she would ask some basic questions in a dull voice. How was school, was he hungry, did he change his clothes, was Allie having a good time.

Occasionally, she would go to a therapist. But more often than not, she skipped the sessions and spent the day wallowing in bed. My mom had long since given up trying to coax her out of bed and into her car so they could go to a therapist.

Sometimes I wonder if it was the fact that her husband was dead, or the fact that he had been cheating on her before his death that had broken her. Maybe it was both, and maybe it was the fact that before he had left her physically, he had already stopped loving

her.

“No. My mom’s not...it’s just not...” he trailed off as well, and I knew what he meant. For a moment, he looked so sad, and so tired, and it was like that newspaper was in front of me again, and I was looking at a nine year old Tony, who had shaggy brown hair instead of his combed bangs that ran to the left and the straight pieces that were left. Before I could get up, however, he raised his eyebrows at me and gave me a small half-grin. “I don’t need your pity. We’re not four anymore, Al.”

“Who ever said anything about you?”

We locked gazes and a silent agreement passed between us to not talk about those kinds of things tonight. There would be a proper time for that, and there would still yet be more hugs and comforting words.

A car door slammed shut in front of the house.

It wasn’t casual.

I shot another look at Tony and I didn’t have to say anything. He knew, just like he knew everything else about me at that moment. Those eyes, opened wider than usual in fright, and my trembling fingers that pulled out the right earbud and turned off the music as I shoved my phone under pillow again. And that my strides to the window was shaky, not because of excitement, but because of a current of nervousness

and fear.

My mother had come home.