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## Something Like Thunder

by Jay Bell

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### Prologue

When the past catches up with the present, returning from the realm of broken dreams and dented hopes, the best course of action is to roll over, expose the belly, and pray that it will be merciful. Or at least quick.

As the elevator doors slid closed behind Nathaniel Courtney, instinct told him he was trapped. And not in a good place, because the normally bright office in front of him was now dim, the overhead lights lowered, scented candles placed strategically around the room to turn the gloom into warmth. A bottle of wine attended the two crystal glasses next to it, and as Nathaniel searched the room for evidence of another living soul, he heard

soft music playing just loud enough to banish awkward silences while still allowing for murmured conversation.

Oh yes, this was hell. One of his own making.

After determining he was alone, Nathaniel sighed, turned around, and pressed the elevator button. The doors didn't open. He jabbed the button a few more times, despite knowing the gesture was hopeless. The software that ran the elevator could be remotely controlled. He had little doubt as to whom was chuckling from some distant location.

"It won't work," Nathaniel said, addressing a security camera in one corner. "If you have any love for me, you'll let me go right now, because this is going to kill me."

He swallowed and felt tightness in his throat. The camera lens remained impassive, the elevator unresponsive, so Nathaniel moved toward the two lounge couches that faced each other. How many business deals had he successfully negotiated here? Perhaps that's what convinced his boss, Marcello Maltese, that this was the right environment to negotiate this deal, albeit for a prize far more valuable than money. The sentiment was misplaced because the battle had been lost years ago.

Instead of sitting, Nathaniel picked up the wine bottle and read the label. Another dart pierced his chest when he saw the vintage. He turned to the camera briefly, hoping the pain showed on his face. Then he set down the bottle and considered the two wrapped gifts. The first was flat and hard. He lifted the small card in one corner and read:

*What was once thought lost can still be recovered. The past can be a gateway to the future. I do this for love, with love. -Marcello*

Nathaniel clenched his jaw and sat. He wasn't gentle as he tore away the wrapping paper. One swipe revealed glass, a black and white photo behind it. He stared, willing his pounding heart to stop racing—to go still as possible in the hope of tricking these feelings into thinking he was dead. Maybe then they would finally go away.

But no. With more care now, he pulled away the shreds of paper. The photo's backdrop was a high school running track.

Nathaniel was in the forefront, arms pumping as he ran. Next to him, leaning forward and so horizontal that he almost appeared to be flying, was someone he still thought of every day. A slender build with ropey muscles. Dark skin and shrewd eyes—at least that’s how Nathaniel chose to remember them. In the photo those eyes were joyful, surprisingly so, considering their owner was about to trip over a dog. The mutt’s face was just as gleeful as the runner’s, tongue hanging out one corner of his mouth as he cut across their path.

Nathaniel swallowed, his attention darting down to the mat board where in light pencil, the words *Before the Fall* were written. Somehow he didn’t think “fall” referred to the season, or even the inevitable collision with the ground. Next to this was a dash followed by a single letter. -K

Nathaniel felt like moaning in misery. Instead he grimaced and considered the other wrapped box, opening the gift tag only long enough to see who it was addressed to.

Kelly.

Nathaniel set the framed photo on the table and tossed the paper on top of it. Then he stood and walked around the room, extinguishing the candles. Kelly wouldn’t be happy to see them lit. He’d feel insulted that mood lighting and smooth jazz could be expected to undo what had been done. Forgiveness—if not already impossible—would take so much more than that.

Nathaniel killed the music. Then he went to the desk and called a technician who could open the elevator doors, no matter how rapidly Marcello’s fat fingers poked at the screen of his phone. Then Nathaniel waited. He sat, trying not to bite his nails. As time wore on, he began to pace. What was taking so long? He was eying the bottle of wine, wondering if he should get drunk, when he heard the elevator motor whirring. When the doors opened and a familiar figure stepped out, he stared for a moment before his need to escape returned. He leapt over the couch, an arm stretched out, reaching for freedom.

“Don’t let them close!” he shouted.

Brown eyes widened, taking him in. Nathaniel saw so much reflected in them. Apprehension, hurt, and perhaps worst of all, love. After all this time. Even though it was merely a flickering spark. Even though—like the light past the closing elevator doors—it was soon hidden again, Nathaniel had no doubt it was still there.

Fuck. That complicated everything, because now he had hope.

Nathaniel slammed into the elevator doors and felt like pounding his head against them. Too late. He had missed his chance, in more ways than one. Nathaniel jabbed at the button anyway, a growl escaping his lips. He couldn't deal with this—couldn't let himself believe even for a second that Marcello was right, that the past could be resurrected.

"Nice to see you too," Kelly said. "What's next? Are you going to try jumping out a window just to avoid me?"

Nathaniel sucked in air, using the precious substance to tell a lie. "I'm not avoiding you. I just don't like being trapped. I called a technician over an hour ago."

Kelly's eyes travelled over him briefly. They were soft, not hard and criticizing. "Marcello has someone waiting at the door. He probably sent the technician away already. So where is he? Hiding behind his desk, or can he control all of this from home?"

"From his phone." Nathaniel turned, pressing his back against the elevator doors to feel more steady. "I don't want to know what he's playing at."

"He probably thought this was the only way he could get us to talk." Kelly crossed his arms over his chest. Now those eyes turned hard, a sight so familiar Nathaniel nearly smiled. "I saw you at the gallery. Why did you run off?"

"I had an awkward conversation."

Kelly blinked. "That's it? That's why you didn't even say hello?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"What else is new?"

Fair enough. Nathaniel had kept plenty from Kelly—from just about everyone. He had good cause, wanting to protect Kelly, to

keep him safe, not just from his own clumsy attempt at love, but from life's cruelties as well. Nathaniel had a feeling that, before the night was over, they would be forced to face some of those ugly truths.

Nathaniel headed for one of the couches and sat, resting elbows on his knees, his face in the dark warmth of his palms. What now? He listened to Kelly's footsteps, the dress shoes clicking across the marble floor and pausing, no doubt taking in the strange scene as Nathaniel had upon first arriving. The silence grew thick. Then Kelly spoke. "I know about the prosthetics. You've been paying for them all this time."

Nathaniel let his hands fall away and looked up, and for one moment, allowed himself to feel happy that Kelly seemed to be doing so well. "Marcello told you?"

"I figured it out. I'd offer to pay you back, but I don't have any money. Maybe someday I can—"

"No," Nathaniel said. "I want to do this. For you. Please let me."

Kelly appeared confused. "Why? I know you promised I would never have to worry about it, but I don't hold you to that anymore. It made sense when you loved me, but not now."

A question. Despite being presented as a statement, Nathaniel recognized it for what it was. "That's not fair. Don't make me say it."

"Why not?" Kelly said. "Is that the cure? Does staying silent keep the feelings at bay?"

"No."

"And did it ever stop hurting? All these years we've been apart, can you honestly say you avoided what you fear most? Because my heart has been aching since that night. No matter how far I go and how many other people I welcome into my life, there's always still a part of me that yearns for you. I've learned to live without you, Nathaniel, and I can keep on doing so. But I don't want to, and the pain is never going to go away. I'm guessing the same is true for you."

"Yeah," Nathaniel said, hating that this suffering was mutual. He'd never wanted that. Ever. "I love you, Kelly. I'm a piece of shit and I ruined everything, but I love you so much that I think it might be worth the pain."

"It doesn't have to hurt," Kelly said, taking a step closer. "Not all the time. I swear."

Kelly had been right about so much. Maybe he was right about this too. That heart of his was resilient, had been dragged across more than one battlefield. Maybe it was strong enough to forgive, to shrug off the damage that had been done. To give one more chance. If so...

Nathaniel stood, eager to bridge the distance between them.

Kelly gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head. "We need to talk."

Of course it wasn't that simple. So much time had passed between them, and Kelly was just as beautiful and sharp and everything wonderful that he'd been when they'd parted. Maybe even more so. Nathaniel sat back down. "There's someone else?"

Kelly laughed. "There's only you. You made it so I could run again, and believe me, I've been running long and hard. Whenever I look back, I see you're not there and I feel like I got away. But the truth is, you're inside me so deep that there's no escape. All this time I've been running, all I've been doing is carrying you with me. So no, there is no one else. I don't think there ever will be. But I'm finally ready to get to know the man I love. All of him."

"So what do I do?" Nathaniel asked.

"Talk to me." Kelly sat, gingerly at first, as if not to scare him away. Then he settled in and made himself comfortable. "Tell me everything."

"My past?" Nathaniel said, eyes darting briefly to the mess of wrapping paper on the table. He could see the partially obscured card, opened just enough to reveal the edge of Marcello's handwriting, one truncated phrase catching his eye. *-for love, with love.* "It's a long story."

Kelly's smile was subtle. "In case you've forgotten, we're both stuck here. It might help pass the time." His face grew more somber. "Please."

Nathaniel nodded. Then he began.

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**Part One**  
**Houston, 2004**

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**Chapter One**

*I'm on trial. The person I love most is demanding an explanation from me, but so often the truth can lead to heartbreak. Lying is immoral, but so is deliberately causing someone pain. Silence would be the best course of action, but some truths aren't so easily covered up. Although in retrospect, a little powder and base might have avoided all of this.*

"Is that a bruise? My God! How in the world did you get that?"

Nathaniel fixed his mom with a stare before letting loose a playful smile. "Paid cash for it. They had a sale on bruises at Walmart. I went there looking for a paper cut, but they were out of those. Stubbed toes were in stock, but you'd be surprised how expensive they are."

Star shook her head, grasped his chin, and turned his face toward the kitchen light. "Who would do this to my baby?" She winced as she considered the injury on his left cheek. "It's darkest in the middle. Did you get hit by a rock?"

Not a rock, a ring worn on a meaty fist, but Nathaniel didn't want her figuring that out. "It was a stupid misunderstanding. During lunch we were talking about snowball fights and how rare they are down here. I took an ice cube from my drink and tossed it

at a guy, making sure it was easy to dodge, but when he threw it back he wasn't so careful. Hurt like hell."

"An ice cube did this to you?" His mother pursed her lips. "Is that the truth?"

"If I was lying, I'd come up with something better than that." Given more time, maybe.

Star scrutinized him a little longer. "You're too old *and* too smart to start a food fight."

But she believed him. That's all that mattered. Already she was turning back to the steaming pots on the stove. "Maybe you could start packing my lunch," he said. "Equip me with more appropriate ammunition. Olives, cream pies, maybe a few bananas I can use as boomerangs."

"I'd rather you eat your food instead of throwing it. Speaking of which, could you set the table?"

The grin slid off of Nathaniel's face. "Sure."

He went to the cabinet and took out three plates. He could feel his mother watching him. When she spoke, he already knew what she would say.

"Four plates, honey. I want us to eat dinner together."

"I have to get to the learning center."

Star pulled the wooden spoon from the mashed potatoes, tapped it on the edge of the pot, and set it aside. Then she turned to him. "It's my cooking, isn't it?"

Nathaniel relaxed a little. "Your cooking is fine. Most of the time."

His mother swatted at him playfully, Nathaniel leaping backward. She grabbed the wooden spoon, wielding it like a rapier, and stepped forward to jab at him. He swiped at the makeshift weapon, both of them laughing as he wrested it from her. Then he handed it back.

"Save me some. I'll be starving when I get home."

Star put a hand on her hip and frowned. "Seriously? You can't go an hour later? I moved back three of my yoga classes just so we could have family dinners again. I even lost a few students."



"I have students of my own," Nathaniel said. "For some of these kids, having a tutor there every day can make the difference between passing and failing." Then, in more dramatic tones he added, "Won't someone think of the children?"

"It's my own child I'm thinking of." Star exhaled and looked toward the stove, as if no longer interested in preparing a meal. "Are you avoiding your father?"

As usual, her motherly instincts were right. Just slightly off target. Nathaniel's afterschool tutoring job was indeed his way of avoiding someone, but not his father. And certainly not his mother, who continued to express her concern.

"He mentioned that he hasn't seen you for weeks."

Nathaniel shrugged. "I'll make sure he sees me this weekend. I really gotta run."

"Okay. I love you."

He stepped forward for a hug. His mother was slight in his arms, her head barely reaching his chest. "I love you too."

Once Nathaniel was buckled in his car, the tension left his shoulders. As he drove, he slowly transitioned from being on constant alert to feeling like a normal human being. He put on the debut album by *Keane*, and as they sang about a place no one else knew about, Nathaniel hit the gas pedal and breezed by every other car on the road. By the time he reached a strip mall and parked, he felt wrapped in a protective cocoon. He shut off the car and the music along with it.

He practically bounded into the learning center, the interior just as uninspiring as the exterior. Worn desks lined the walls. On them sat equally exhausted computers. If not for the people, Nathaniel would dread coming here every day. He loved working with the kids, especially the younger ones. Some of his fellow tutors weren't bad either. One had even become his friend.

He scanned the room, searching for Rebecca, which wasn't difficult considering how tall she was. Six foot one—just an inch shorter than he was. Her build was lanky, but she carried herself upright. His first impression had been of a pole vaulter, not that she was athletic, as it turned out. She was smart though. Pretty

too. She didn't wear much makeup, and her medium-length ginger hair was worn loose, never styled. Rebecca was too practical to fuss with such things. Nathaniel had once overheard two students call her "horse face" behind her back, perhaps because of her long features. He liked her face. He could stare at it all day, especially when lit up, as it was now.

"The new software came in," she said, walking over to join him.

"For the tests?"

Rebecca nodded enthusiastically. "We've got graphs! And it pinpoints areas that need to be strengthened. I have no idea how accurate it is, but this might save some guesswork. Come see!"

Nathaniel shook his head ruefully as she led him toward one of the computers. He might like it here, but Rebecca loved it. He wasn't as fond of computers as she was, preferring to rely on direct interaction with each student. After enough enthusiastic nodding to convince Rebecca he was equally excited, he was free to start working. He sat down with a third-grader who despised math. She understood all the concepts correctly but abhorred doing the work, so Nathaniel focused on teaching her as many shortcuts as possible.

While he was doing so, he felt someone watching him. He glanced over at the next desk. A high school student, although Nathaniel couldn't remember if they went to the same school or not. The guy had bronze skin, dark hair pulled back into a pony tail, and thick framed glasses that appeared black at first glance but were actually dark red. Nathaniel gave a friendly upward nod in greeting before turning his attention back to tutoring.

Except he continued to feel that gaze. Every time Nathaniel checked again, the guy would quickly avert his eyes. He didn't seem to be doing anything but ignoring the computer in front of him. Rebecca must have noticed because she went to investigate.

"So I add the first column before the last one?"

Nathaniel shook his head to clear it and explained the trick once more. Halfway through, Rebecca offered to take over. "He wants to work with you," she said.

"Oh, okay." That wasn't so unusual. When students did well, they often sought out the same tutor during their next visit. Sure enough, when Nathaniel pulled up a chair, the guy revealed a paper they had worked on together. He held it clutched to his chest, like it was precious.

"Ninety-eight percent," he said, voice almost too faint to hear.

"Just ninety-eight?" Nathaniel teased. "Let me see that."

The guy licked his lips and held out the paper, the pages still warm from being pressed against his body. Nathaniel casually checked the name in one corner. Caesar Hubbard. Of course! How could he forget a name like that? Then he flipped through the pages until he spotted a circle of red ink around one word.

"We misspelled 'intellectual,'" Nathaniel said. He glanced up in time to see Caesar smile. "That's embarrassing. Remember when we ran the spell check?"

Caesar nodded. "You thought the computer was wrong."

"I figured it was recommending the British spelling or something. I guess you're here because you want a refund?"

Caesar's grin widened before he bashfully forced it away. "My parents said I'm supposed to work with you from now on."

"They must think I'm an intellectual," Nathaniel said with a wink.

Caesar's cheeks turned red. Then he broke eye contact, staring downward instead. Okay, so maybe it wasn't a great joke. Nathaniel considered him for a moment, the light sweat and the even lighter hairs barely visible on his upper lip. How old was he? Fifteen? Sixteen? He definitely wasn't a senior yet or Nathaniel would have noticed him before. "So what are we working on today?"

Caesar opened his backpack and pulled out a sophomore biology book. In a voice so quiet Nathaniel was forced to lean forward to hear, he rambled nervously about an upcoming test. For the next hour, Nathaniel helped him study for it, teaching him techniques to simplify memorization. Caesar hung on his every word but seemed to have few of his own, only speaking when Nathaniel asked direct questions. At the end of an hour, once

Caesar had demonstrated a thorough understanding of the scientific method, Nathaniel got him started on a computer test and moved to the next student. By the time he looked over again, Caesar was gone. A big red “completed” flashed on the computer screen. Nathaniel went to check the results.

Perfect score. Not bad! Nathaniel saved the information to Caesar’s profile. Then he turned his attention to the next student. By the time he was finished working and had stepped outside, the sun had gone down. He had mixed feelings about this. Not for the first time, he wished the learning center had longer hours. He stood facing the parking lot, trying to ignore any thoughts that caused his stomach to churn. When he felt a hand on his back, he flinched.

“Easy cowboy,” Rebecca said. Her fingers continued down his back, angling across to his hand. Once she had taken it, she loped toward her car, dragging him along. “Smoke a cigarette with me?”

“No thanks. You managed to get more?”

“Kind of.” Rebecca opened the passenger-side door and dug around. When she stood again, she was holding a blister pack.

“Is that nicotine gum?”

Rebecca sighed. “Desperate times. You know the freshman I used to buy cigarettes from who stole them from his mother? She quit smoking.”

“Good for her.”

“Bad for me. My parents have been on to me for years, so I finally ‘fessed up.”

“So they would buy you the next best thing.” Nathaniel shook his head. “If only you would use your powers for good and not evil.”

Rebecca smiled shamelessly before popping the gum in her mouth. Then she relaxed visibly, even though the effects couldn’t have kicked in yet. “That’s better. I thought I’d never make it through the day.”

“If it’s gum, why did you wait until you’re outside?”

“The ritual is important! That’s why you’re here. Smoking is a social activity.”

"You're ridiculous."

Rebecca shrugged. "Everyone should have a vice. You could do with one. It would make you more interesting."

"You think so?"

"Definitely. Any ideas?"

Nathaniel leaned next to her against the car. "Boys."

Rebecca breathed out, as if exhaling smoke. "Okay. What's your type?"

This gave him pause. "I don't really have one."

"You must. What sort of guy do you find yourself lusting after?"

Nathaniel shrugged.

"Seriously?" Rebecca narrowed her eyes. "Are you sure you're gay?"

"Last time I checked, yeah."

"But have you ever *done* anything with a guy?"

"Have you?" When she looked hurt, he hastened to add, "I'm just a lowly virgin. We both are."

"Yeah, but I figured you managed more than I have. A kiss or a little dry humping maybe."

Nathaniel laughed. "There *was* this one guy."

Rebecca smacked her gum more enthusiastically. "What happened?"

"This is back when I lived in California. My friend's parents both worked full-time. They had this porn video. Not like the stuff you see online. This was totally retro, like seventies. All the guys had mustaches, and trust me when I say you've never seen so much bush in your life. It's like they had afros downstairs instead of up."

"Ew!"

"Yeah, but the video got my friend all riled up. One day he suggested that we—" Nathaniel made a pumping motion with his fist.

Rebecca stopped chewing so her jaw could drop. "Together?"

"Yup."

"And did you?"

"Of course! The first time I didn't even let myself look at him, because I was worried it would give me away. The next time, I saw him checking me out. He even complimented me on... Uh, anyway. This went on for a while."

"Wow."

"Yeah," Nathaniel said, smiling at the memory. "That's not all."

"I'm going to need another piece of gum," Rebecca said. "Keep talking."

"Okay. Right before we moved, like the day before, I figured I didn't have anything to lose. I reached over and knocked his hand away. Then I grabbed his you-know-what, and started pumping like my life depended on it. When he did the same for me, I realized we could have been doing that all along."

Rebecca's cheeks were red, but she smiled. "Lucky!"

Nathaniel considered the pavement around his feet. "I guess. The next day wasn't so great. I'm used to moving every few years, but that one hurt."

"Oh. You liked him."

"A little." Nathaniel bit his bottom lip, then forced a smile. "Just a crush. No big deal. He never answered my emails, so I don't think it was mutual."

When he looked up again, he found Rebecca studying his face.

"That bruise still looks nasty," she said.

"It'll fade."

"You need to tell someone."

"Rebecca..."

"I know, but I'm sure your mom will—"

"Becky!"

That shut her up. If there was one thing they both hated, it was cutesy abbreviated names. Especially since their parents were so fond of them. He and Rebecca only used them when the other person was seriously misbehaving.

"Staying silent is your choice, *Nate*, but you can't stop me from worrying."

"Fine."

"I want to kill the bastard."

"I know." He fixed her with a pleading expression, begging her to change the subject.

After a moment her features relaxed, but she continued to study his face. "How often do you shave?"

"Every other day."

"So if you stopped, you would end up with a full beard. Right?"

He allowed himself to look offended. "I'm not aging myself prematurely just to buy you cigarettes."

"Come on! Just think how rugged you'll look!"

"No way."

"Fine." Rebecca slumped. Then she perked up again. "Shoplifting is a vice. Ever give that a try?"

He playfully pushed her away. When she came back and wrapped an arm around his waist, Nathaniel put one around her shoulders. Then he hugged her and tried not to think of how, eventually, he would have to return home again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Meatloaf, green beans, and mashed potatoes. Nathaniel worked methodically on consuming massive portions, his mother sitting across from him with watchful eyes. She needn't have bothered. Cleaning his plate had never been an issue for him, but he knew she couldn't rest until certain he wouldn't starve.

"Want me to get your father?" she asked.

"I think I can manage on my own," Nathaniel said.

"We're having a family meal this week, even if it means tying each one of you to a chair."

Nathaniel managed a smile. "What's dad doing?"

"Watching one of his boring documentaries."

He kept his attention on the plate, his tone neutral when he asked, "Where's Dwight?"

Star exhaled. "You know your brother, always chasing after some girl."

"He's on a date?"

“If you can call it that. Did you know he broke up with Angela? I was shocked too. She was the sweetest girl. Pretty as can be. I thought for sure—”

Nathaniel tuned out the rest of her comments, his jaw feeling less stressed. Finally able to relax, he tackled his food with renewed gusto, finishing in record time.

“Want to watch TV with us?” Star asked, standing to take his plate.

Nathaniel hopped up and grabbed it before she could, taking it to the sink. “Watch TV? In your bedroom?”

“You’re not too old to cuddle up with your parents,” Star said, opening the dishwasher.

“When exactly will I be too old? Forty?”

“Nope. You’ll still be my baby.”

Nathaniel made a face. “I think I’ll pass. I need to burn off some of these carbs.”

After suffering a kiss on the cheek, he went to the back of the house. To the gym, as Dwight called it. Nathaniel wasn’t sure if a weightlifting bench, some yoga mats, and a treadmill qualified as a full-blown gym, but he wasn’t stupid enough to argue the point. He stripped down to his boxers, stopping in front of the mirror. He had a darker shade of his mother’s blonde hair, the bangs just long enough to frame hazel eyes like those of his father.

The height he inherited from his mother’s side, his grandfather in particular, since Nathaniel was a few inches taller than both his father and brother. He only wished he shared their build. Six months of lifting weights had not yielded the desired results. He had enough muscle to make his pecs bounce, his shoulders had grown meaty, and flexing his arms revealed nice curves that hadn’t been there a year ago. But it wasn’t enough. Dwight had played baseball his freshman year, had been a wide receiver on the football team sophomore year and a quarterback the next. The trophies in the room attested to how athletic he was, and on any other guy, his body would have been drool-worthy. That all those muscles belonged to Dwight gave Nathaniel nightmares. Literally.



No need to despair. A good body and the strength that came with it were within anyone's grasp. So claimed his favorite advertisement. He went to the side table and picked up a workout magazine. It flopped open in his hands, its bent spine leading to the page he so often stared at. The model wore nothing but simple red shorts, the bulge beneath a source of many fevered fantasies. Nathaniel rarely lingered on this detail since the body was sculpted perfection. The veiny arms were nice, as was the six-pack, which Nathaniel envied because he had yet to find his own. The chest intrigued him the most. It was wide and densely covered with muscle, reminding him of an ancient Roman breastplate. Surely that mighty chest could protect Nathaniel. Or be a pillow for him to rest his head against after he'd been rescued. He let his attention dart up to the face, the eyes watery and sensitive, as if understanding his pain. The guy looked like a hero. *His hero.*

Nathaniel let himself bask in the fantasy, his hormones kicking in. Deciding to channel them in the right direction, he bent back the spine of the magazine and propped it up on the table for extra motivation. Then Nathaniel headed to the weight bench and got to work. Every repetition brought him closer to his dream, the sting of sweat in his eyes and the salty taste on his tongue spurring him onward. He was on his back, hands clenching the barbell as he did a series of bench presses, when an upside-down face appeared above him.

And a handsome face it was. A strong jaw, a crooked smile, and deep blue eyes that gleamed beneath jet black hair. The expression was kind, but as usual, the intention was cruel.

"Working out, baby brother?" Dwight said. "Need someone to spot you?"

"No," Nathaniel said, trying to stay calm. Glancing over to see that Dwight had closed the door did little to soothe his nerves. "Just finishing up."

"You're looking a little shaky. Here." Dwight took hold of the barbell and suddenly the weight felt light as air, his brother not showing any sign of strain. "Slow and steady is the key. A lot of

guys thrust, like they want the weights to hit the ceiling. That's not how it's done. First you go down..."

Dwight relinquished control, the barbell growing heavy again, but his hands remained, keeping it steady.

"...and back up again. And down. That's it. Nice and smooth. You train as much muscle on the way back down, but only if you work to maintain control. You feel that burn?"

Nathaniel nodded, eyes locked on Dwight's, searching for any warning sign.

"Elbows at a ninety degree angle. Good. Back up... and down. Up. And down. Up and... *down!*"

Dwight's arms flexed as he pressed. Hard! Had Nathaniel not been braced for something like his, the barbell would have smashed into his chest, crushing his lungs. Instead, Nathaniel pushed back, arms shaking, tissue tearing.

"Mom asked me about that bruise on your face," Dwight said, his smile a grimace now. "Why would she do that?"

"I don't know," Nathaniel grunted. "I didn't say anything, I swear."

"You'd have to be pretty fucking stupid to, which is exactly why I'm worried." Dwight pushed down harder, the metal bar pressing against Nathaniel's neck, making it hard to breathe. "You sure you didn't say anything? How stupid are you, Nate? Huh? Tell me how stupid you are!"

"Not... stupid," Nathaniel managed to grunt. Gritting his teeth, he summoned his last reserves and shoved. The barbell moved. Just a few inches, but it took the pressure off his windpipe. Dwight's expression registered surprise. Then his face twisted up in rage, and Nathaniel felt like whimpering. He tried to remain strong—tried not to lose this small advantage—but Dwight leaned over, adding the weight of his body to the strength in his arms. The barbell came back down, cutting off Nathaniel's oxygen supply.

Almost. He was still able to wheeze air in, but already he was getting lightheaded. He didn't know how much longer he'd be able to hold out. As soon as his arms buckled, the full force of the

weight would crush him. Nathaniel saw stars and realized this might be the day he died.

Then the barbell rose and was ripped from his hands. As his vision cleared, he saw Dwight placing it back on the rack before he looked down at him again, those blue eyes calm and collected, as if nothing had happened. "If that leaves a mark, ask yourself again how stupid you are. Understand?"

He tried to respond, but the sound that came out was pathetic and unrecognizable. Dwight smiled, then turned and left the room.

Nathaniel sat up, panting to catch his breath, blood pounding in his ears. He stared at the image in the propped-up magazine, at the look of pure sympathy. Or maybe the expression was apologetic, because his hero had failed him. Nathaniel stood, picked up the magazine and tossed it aside. After forcing himself to calm down, he returned to the weight bench and lay his back flat against it. The guy in the magazine advertisement was no hero, nor would he ever come to his rescue. That left only one option.

Steeling himself, Nathaniel picked up the barbell and continued working out.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Rise and shine, honey."

Nathaniel blinked against the light and smacked his mouth a few times, tasting stale drool. His mother sat on the edge of the bed, a hand on his back. He scowled at her encouraging smile. "It's not a school day."

"No, but breakfast is almost ready. I want you in the dining room."

Breakfast? Since when did his customary bowl of cereal require waking him up? Then again, he did detect the faint aroma of bacon in the air. Or wafting from the apron his mother wore. This almost made him laugh. Normally she always dressed so stylishly, more than once being mistaken for his older sister. Recently she had watched some old black and white television show and fallen in love with how wholesome families appeared

back then. Now she struggled to recreate what she had seen, if only for one meal.

“I tried having a family dinner and failed,” she said, confirming his suspicions. “If I can’t get everyone at the table during the evening, it’ll have to be in the morning.”

“Do I have time for a shower?”

“Nope. I need you at the table. Now.”

He grunted his agreement, remaining stationary a few minutes after she had left. Then he sighed and dragged himself from bed. He pulled on the jeans he’d worn the day before and reached for the T-shirt before remembering that he’d used it to wipe up a sticky mess just before falling asleep.

“Nate!”

He rolled his eyes at his mother’s voice and stumbled out of the room. He felt more annoyed when he reached the table, because no one else was there. Dwight showed up a few minutes later looking bleary-eyed, dark hair sticking up. Their father came next, having long since awakened and dressed. His work was demanding enough that he was usually out of the house before Nathaniel rose. When he was home...

His father set a laptop on the corner of the table before he sat down. He gave both his sons a crinkle-eyed smile before he opened it and started clicking. Nathaniel considered him a moment longer, his attention briefly darting over to Dwight to compare them, since his father and brother looked like younger and older versions of each other. He could understand how his mother had found Heath so attractive when they met. The muscular build was slowly losing its firmness, but he was still handsome. Heath’s hair was brown rather than black, his eyes the same striking shade of blue, although they never appeared cruel. He didn’t possess the same demons that Dwight did. His only flaw was being a hopeless workaholic. Ironic, since providing treatment for addiction was his line of business. Maybe Heath needed to check into one of his own clinics.

Nathaniel smirked at the idea, but his smile faded when he saw Dwight staring at him with open irritation. Feeling rebellious,

Nathaniel glared and looked away. He felt a lot happier when his mother set a plate in front of him. Scrambled eggs, hash browns, and bacon. He reached for the bottle of ketchup and doused the food until his plate was mostly red. He glanced up to see his mother looking around the table with a bright smile, her dream coming true. Of course people on those old shows would never sit at the table while looking rumpled from bed, but she seemed happy enough.

“Dig in,” Star said. Then she raised her eyebrows. “Heath!”

His father blinked, then clicked a few more times before closing the laptop. “Looks delicious,” he said. He made a big show of inhaling through his nostrils directly over the plate. “Smells delicious!”

“Judging from the human vacuum over there,” Star nodded toward Nathaniel, who already had his mouth stuffed, “it tastes good too.”

He shrugged unapologetically, looking to the stove to see if there was more. The sound of utensils clinking against plates filled the room. After a few bites, Star set down her fork, still appearing pleased. “What’s everyone doing today? I thought maybe we could all go shopping or—”

“I need to pop into the office,” his father said.

“Work,” Nathaniel said when his mother looked at him.

“I’m staying home to watch the game,” Dwight said.

Star ignored him, still staring at Nathaniel. “What happened to your neck?”

He stopped chewing, a wave of cold panic crashing over him. Over the last few days he’d been careful to wear tight-necked T-shirts that didn’t reveal the mark the barbell had left. Only light bruising remained, which had already faded to yellow. The worst was the broken blood vessels, all in a neat red line across his upper chest and in full view at the moment, since Nathaniel hadn’t put on a shirt. He glanced over at Dwight, seeing the same angry expression from before.

“I keep telling him he needs a spotter,” his brother said.

“You did this while working out?” Star asked.

Nathaniel cleared his throat in an effort to make it feel less dry. "I pushed myself too hard."

Her mouth dropped open, one hand thumping the table. "You could have been seriously injured! Why didn't you say something?"

"Because I knew you would be upset!" Nathaniel shot back.

"Of course I'm upset," she replied. "You need to be careful!"

"I'm always willing to spot for you, baby brother." Dwight smiled at him. "You know that, right?"

Nathaniel gritted his teeth. "Thanks, but I'm fine. The weight slipped and I caught it, but not before it bumped me. It won't happen again."

"Heath," Star said, looking to her husband.

He glanced up. "Let your brother help you."

"I don't need—"

Heath raised an eyebrow. "It's that, or you don't work out at all."

Nathaniel clamped down on his anger. "Fine," he said. "I'll ask him for help next time. Or maybe you can help me, Mom. I've seen your yoga muscles."

Star appeared somewhat placated by this, but only just. "We should buy one of those resistance machines instead. You know, the kind that use elastic bands instead of weights? They must be safer."

Dwight snorted.

Nathaniel nearly joined him. "What we've got is fine."

His mother looked him over. "How much bigger do you plan on getting? If you were trying out for the football team or something I would understand. Wait, is there some guy you're trying to impress?"

"No," Nathaniel said with a nervous chuckle. "I don't have time for stuff like that." Then he realized that he should have said yes. His parents didn't care that he was gay. His father had gay coworkers, and back in California, his mother had more than one gay friend. Even Dwight hadn't cared when Nathaniel first came out, never needing a specific reason to hate him. So pretending he

was steadily building muscles in the hope of winning some imaginary guy would have been the most sensible excuse. Now his efforts to beef up had surely raised suspicion, and it wasn't his mother who concerned him.

He focused on his food, refusing to look up from the plate. When he finally did, his fears were confirmed. Dwight was considering him with fresh malice. *You want to challenge me?* his expression seemed to say. *You think you can be the bigger man?*

Nathaniel hid any reaction, making polite conversation with his parents and declining the offer of more food, even though he would have gladly eaten more. Maybe going without would be enough to quell Dwight's suspicions. Probably not.

Nathaniel was first to leave the table, heading down the hall to take a shower and listening for the easily-picked lock to pop, for the knob of the bathroom door to turn. Dwight had never attacked him there before, but he wasn't exactly predictable. Once Nathaniel was dressed, he drove to the learning center. It wasn't open yet, so he sat in his car and allowed himself to feel all the emotions that Dwight was so good at stirring up. Then he flipped an inner switch to silence the fear and anxiety. By the time he saw the manager unlocking the door, he felt normal again. At least as normal as he ever did. He watched the clock on the dashboard, waiting until he was due to begin work before he went inside.

Working on Saturdays was always the least fun. Nathaniel might be glad to get away from home, but most of the learning center students hated having to do school work on the weekend. Saturdays tended to draw a different crowd, many coming in only on this day. This made effective tutoring more difficult, but Nathaniel was up for the challenge. He soon saw one familiar face. Caesar was quietly sitting at a computer, waiting to be noticed, still bashful even though they had worked together all week.

Nathaniel went to join him, asking for a status update. "Geometry test," he said.

"Ninety-seven percent," Caesar mumbled.

Nathaniel nodded as he pulled up a chair and sat next to him. "Spanish quiz?"

"I got an eighty-nine."

"Not bad considering I've never been good at foreign languages. My friend Rebecca, she's practically fluent. You should work with her next time you have a language test coming up."

Caesar didn't say anything. He seemed... uncomfortable? Then he turned, his chair creaking as he looked toward the front door. An older man who shared Caesar's bronze skin tone stood there talking with the manager. His hair was graying at the temples, his mustache the color of cigarette ash, the polo shirt and slacks not quite casual enough for a Saturday morning. Nathaniel was instantly reminded of his own father. Both men had a middle-management sort of vibe. At the moment, the older man appeared none too pleased as he listened to what the manager had to say. Then both adults turned in their direction. Nathaniel quickly focused on the computer, catching Caesar's eye along the way.

"What's that all about?"

Caesar sighed. "I didn't do so well on the biology test."

"You had that material down!" Nathaniel said, not hiding his surprise. "You aced the practice test!"

"I got distracted."

Nathaniel glanced over at him. "How?"

A shrug was the only response.

Nathaniel made sure his tone was neutral. "I'm on your side here. I'm just trying to figure out what went wrong."

Caesar took a deep breath. "I had something on my mind. Something I couldn't stop thinking about. I knew I was supposed to be focusing on the test, so I tried clearing my mind, but that made it worse somehow."

"Because you started thinking about not thinking about that thing you weren't supposed to be thinking about."

Caesar's eyebrows rose in surprise. Then he flashed a bashful smile. "Exactly."

Nathaniel nodded his understanding. "Look, next time that happens, just stop what you're doing and allow yourself to think



about whatever is distracting you. That will help get it out of your system.”

“Does that work?”

Nathaniel thought about all the times he’d sat in his car before work or school, thinking about Dwight, entertaining each fear so it became easier to push away. “Just remember that the worst rarely comes to pass. Whatever is most likely to happen, it’s got to be better than that. Right?”

Caesar considered him, the eyes behind the red-framed glasses a curious golden hue. Then he turned to look toward the front door again. Nathaniel did the same. The older man was gone, but the manager was flustered. Nathaniel would probably hear about it later. Many parents blamed the tutors when their students’ grades weren’t high enough. Nathaniel didn’t let it get to him. All he could do was try his best. With that in mind, he helped Caesar get a head start on the coming week, then set him up with one of the computerized programs. Nathaniel moved on to his next pupil. And the next and the next, the hours melting away until it was time for his half-hour lunch break.

He left the building, intending to walk down to the sandwich joint. He only made it a few yards before a car pulled up next to the sidewalk and parked. The black SUV reflected a distorted version of himself in the freshly polished surface. Then the passenger door opened and Caesar slid out wearing a miserable expression. From around the front of the car appeared the stern businessman who had exchanged tense words with the learning center’s manager. Except now he was smiling and extending a hand.

“Todd Hubbard. Nice to meet you. I’m Caesar’s father.”

“Nathaniel Courtney,” he replied, taking the hand and feeling uncertain as his arm was pumped up and down. “Mr. Hubbard, if this is about the biology test—”

“It’s about *all* of Caesar’s grades, and please, call me Todd.”

“Okay,” Nathaniel said, wondering if he was supposed to repeat the name. The eyes fixed on him were still shining, which was confusing. “What can I do for you?”

“More of what you’ve been doing. Caesar’s grades started slipping over the previous year, but in the last two weeks, they’re on the uptick again.” Mr. Hubbard winked. “He says you’re to blame for this.”

Nathaniel glanced at Caesar, who had his hands in his pockets, his shoulders slumped as he stared at the sidewalk. This had to be embarrassing. They were practically the same age and here was his father, talking to Nathaniel like he was a school teacher or something. “He’s been doing all the work. I’m just a study buddy. Human flash cards.”

“There’s more to it than that.” Todd glanced toward the learning center and lowered his voice. “I was disappointed to learn that extra hours aren’t an option. I could understand if it was a scheduling issue, but apparently it’s company policy.”

Ah. Now it made sense. Occasionally parents requested one-on-one tutoring, but for legal reasons, any learning had to be done in the center itself. “Not up to me,” Nathaniel said. “I’ll try to spend more time working with Caesar when he’s here.”

Todd nodded. “From what I saw, there are more pupils than tutors. I imagine your time will always be divided. That must be frustrating.”

“Dad,” Caesar said pleadingly.

His father ignored him. “If you don’t mind me asking, how much do you earn an hour?”

“Dad!” Caesar stared at him in disbelief. Then he groaned and rolled his eyes when Mr. Hubbard took a business card out of his pocket and handed it to Nathaniel.

“I’m offering you a job. The same hours but more pay. Think about it and give me a call.”

Nathaniel stared at the card before realizing he was expected to respond. He raised his head and nodded, figuring that was vague enough for now. Caesar shot him an apologetic expression, then nudged his father back toward the car. After the SUV had pulled away, Nathaniel looked down at the business card again and laughed. Wait until Rebecca heard about this!

\* \* \* \* \*

"You've been head-hunted!"

Nathaniel held back a smile. "Not exactly."

"By a talent scout!" Rebecca continued unabashed.

"Not exactly." Nathaniel plopped down on the bed next to her. He had paced excitedly while telling his story, chuckling on more than one occasion. Now he felt embarrassed by the whole thing. "It's simply another parent who thinks he can pay for perfect grades."

"Just tell them no refunds," Rebecca said, pulling up her legs and resting her head on her knees. "Money is money."

"You think I should do it?"

"Normally I'd be selfish and say no, but of course Caesar changes everything."

Nathaniel furrowed his brow. "He does?"

Rebecca mirrored his confusion. "You don't think he's cute?"

"I don't know. I guess I haven't thought about it."

She scrutinized him before coming up with an explanation. "Maybe you need him to do a nerd girl twirl."

Nathaniel laughed. "A what?"

"Nerd girl twirl. That's what I call it anyway. You know how on TV shows or movies, they'll have a nerdy girl nobody likes? Eventually she takes off her glasses and shakes out her hair, usually while twirling around dramatically. Then everyone sees she's pretty, suddenly making her worthy of attention. It's totally sexist." Rebecca bit her lip. "Except if it was a guy instead of a girl, I'd be okay with it. Call me a hypocrite, I don't care. Could you imagine Caesar with his hair down? Or ripping off his glasses, followed by his shirt?"

She giggled shamelessly. Nathaniel smiled in response, but felt distracted by the visual image. He hadn't considered Caesar in that way before and couldn't imagine what sort of body he would have. Nor could he imagine someone so shy and reserved being comfortable with nudity.

"So you think I should take the job?"

Rebecca tilted her head back and forth as she considered the question. "I like that we work together, but it's not like we have much time to interact while there. So... maybe?"

"Maybe it is," Nathaniel said. "I'm sick of thinking about it. Movie time?"

"Definitely."

Rebecca got up to put a DVD in the player, Nathaniel rising to help her pick one. Then they settled back on the bed, their arms and legs pressed against each other. Not long into the film, Rebecca took his hand, which he was fine with. They might both be perpetually single, but at least they had each other. The physical closeness gave him comfort, as did the environment. Rebecca's room was smaller than his own, the walls covered in posters of her favorite eighties bands and movies. The bedspread was pink and Strawberry Shortcake-themed. One of their thrift store finds. He often teased her for being nostalgic about a decade she may have been born in, but definitely didn't remember. He liked her passion anyway, and how she decorated the room. He felt safe here. Able to relax. No creepy older brother. Just Rebecca's parents and little sister, none of whom ever disturbed them.

"You're going to love this one," Rebecca said. "Wait till you see how many baby-faced celebrities are in it. Talk about humble beginnings."

He turned his attention to the screen and soon felt less relaxed. The film quality appeared more seventies than eighties, a low-budget high school movie. Young actors gave stiff performances, many of them big names who now probably hoped this film would remain forgotten. He pretended to laugh along with Rebecca at certain points, but the subject matter made him uncomfortable. A geeky guy got bullied until the day he enlisted the help of a gentle giant. His own personal hero. The fantasy was nice, but the lofty tone of the movie only made his own life seem that much darker.

His palms were sweaty by the time the credits rolled. Rebecca released his hand so she could wipe her own on the bedspread.

"Movie get you all hot and bothered? Who do you like better, Clifford or Linderman?"

"Huh?"

"Who do you think is cuter?"

He shrugged.

"Neither of them? Just think how manly Adam Baldwin grows up to be!" She shook her head, as if he were hopeless. "At least tell me you found Matt Dillon attractive. I know he's a jerk in this, but come on!"

"I love him in *Drugstore Cowboy*," Nathaniel replied.

"But in this movie, no one caught your eye?"

"You and Joan Cusack sort of look alike. I've never noticed that before."

"That's not what I mean." Rebecca got up to eject the DVD and put it back in the case. She kept her head down, seeming to stare at the cover. When she looked back up, her expression was vulnerable. "You don't notice guys very much, so maybe..." She exhaled and turned off the television. After more hesitation, she returned to the bed and sat cross-legged, facing him but keeping her attention on the comforter, where a little girl harvested strawberries with her pink kitten. The image seemed too innocent to belong to the modern era, making him long for a time he wasn't sure ever really existed. "I was reading online about how most guys mess around with other guys, especially when they're younger. Hormones or something, but I guess it can be confusing to them. Like they might think they're gay—"

"Rebecca," he interrupted. "Trust me, I know what I want."

She looked up, her eyes searching. "Maybe you don't. Maybe you just need to try something different. Then you could decide for sure."

He finally understood what she was attempting to say, but tried his hardest to pretend he didn't. Acknowledging the truth would only ruin their friendship, make the closeness they enjoyed feel awkward instead of endearing. She had feelings for him. That wasn't a complete secret, but he never dwelled on it because for

him it was impossible. It would never happen. He thought she understood that.

"Maybe something's wrong with me," he said, standing to put distance between them. "You're right. I don't notice guys. At least not very much." His former magazine hero was the exception, but most of that had been about wanting to be saved. "Maybe it's all this stuff with my brother. If I'm not busy with work or school, I'm waiting for the next bad thing to happen."

"Hypervigilance," Rebecca said with a sigh.

"What?"

"It's a condition the body goes into when threatened. A sort of non-stop fight-or-flight reaction. Your body is in a constant state of hyperarousal. And no, that's not as sexy as it sounds. This has an effect on your mind too. You're unable to focus on more normal things, like who you find attractive, because your system is constantly on alert for the next time Dwight jumps you."

He looked back at her. "I don't notice guys often, but I never notice girls. If I did, you'd be my type. You're pretty, but it's your brain that really makes you sexy. If I could find a guy as smart as you, I'd be all over him."

Rebecca didn't swoon. Instead she seemed frustrated, which he supposed he could understand. "It would be nice if you weren't the only guy in the world who felt that way."

"There's someone out there for you," he said. "Wait and see."

She didn't look convinced. Maybe that's why she changed the subject. "You can't keep going on this way. Diminished sex drive, strain to your heart... You'll probably start losing your hair next. Bald at seventeen. How would you like that?"

"Are you serious?"

"Not about the hair loss. But I'm totally serious about Dwight. Tell your parents or lure him out into the street at night so I can run him over. And then back over him. Then I'll run over him again."

Nathaniel smiled at the idea, but his expression became more reserved. She was right. Something had to change. And soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nathaniel stood in front of a large two-story house in a neighborhood that could best be described as affluent. He considered his own parents to be well-off; the homes they had owned over the years often had an extra room or two that wasn't needed as a bedroom. He thought that seemed grand enough, so as he peeked through the etched glass window on one side of the door, he tried to imagine why any single family would need so much space.

Mr. Hubbard must be upper-management, not middle. The business card hadn't provided any clues as to his position. It just listed a company name, a stylish logo, a phone number, and the name "Todd Hubbard" emblazoned in gold letters. Nathaniel had called to say he was interested in the offer. Mr. Hubbard had then jokingly suggested that Nathaniel come in for a job interview. At least he thought it was a joke. Mr. Hubbard had chuckled, but maybe he wasn't fooling around. Unsure of what to expect, he steeled himself and rang the bell. The door swung open, and an older woman with a shrewd face looked him over before smiling. "You must be Nathaniel," she said, stepping aside so he could enter. She offered her hand, but not her name. "I'm Caesar's mother."

"Nice to meet you," he said. "And there's the man of the hour," he added, when Caesar tromped down the stairs.

"Hey." Caesar still looked embarrassed by all of this.

Nathaniel offered a sympathetic expression. "Should we get started?"

"Actually," Mrs. Hubbard said, "I believe my husband wanted to speak with you first. He's in his office. This way, please."

Caesar shrugged helplessly, but didn't follow. Nathaniel felt stiff-legged as Mrs. Hubbard led him down a hall. This *had* to be a job interview. He should have brought his résumé! Not that he had one, but now he wished he did. Instead he was woefully unprepared.

Mrs. Hubbard knocked on a closed door. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No," he answered. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Well, I'll leave you to it. Good luck!"

She pushed the door open, then turned and headed back down the hall. Nathaniel took a deep breath and stepped into the room, only getting a brief impression of his surroundings: bookcases and office furniture made of dark wood, mounted antlers behind a large desk, framed degrees, and a fishing trophy. He tore his eyes away from all of this and focused on Mr. Hubbard, who had stood and walked around his desk to greet him.

"So good of you to come!" he said as they shook hands. "Please, have a seat."

Nathaniel nodded numbly and sat. Then he flipped that inner switch, the one he always used when emotions became a hindrance, when he needed to forget about Dwight for a while. Now was not the time to be nervous. In fact, he could imagine Mr. Hubbard responding well to a little reckless confidence.

"It's nice to see you again," Nathaniel said. "You have a very nice home, but I was under the impression that Caesar needed study help. Not you."

Mr. Hubbard raised his eyebrows. Then he laughed, that same amused chuckle that had followed his mention of a job interview. "I was hoping we could get to know each other better. Then I'll set you loose on the boy."

"Sure," Nathaniel said easily. "What would you like to know?"

"Are you from around here? I thought I heard a Midwestern accent."

"Is there such a thing?"

"Well, I haven't heard a single 'y'all' out of you. Of course I don't say it now, but that was a habit I broke for the sake of my business. I try to make sure my family doesn't say it either." Mr. Hubbard sniffed and leaned back. "I'm pretty sure I heard a 'ta' instead of a 'to' when we talked on the phone. I'm going *ta* the store..."

"...*fur* some eggs and bacon." Nathaniel grinned. "Blame my parents. My mom is from Missouri, my dad from Kansas. I



haven't lived either place, but listening to them while growing up must have corrupted me. Worried I'll pass that along to Caesar?"

"Not at all," Mr. Hubbard said, smiling at his humor. "So you're a Texan?"

Nathaniel shook his head. "Born in Kansas City, but I spent most of my life on the West Coast. California feels the most like home, although we tend to move every few years."

"How do you like it here?"

"It's nice," he said. "I miss the beaches. And the ocean."

"The Gulf of Mexico doesn't count?"

Nathaniel grinned. "It's not quite the same. That's all right. I was never any good at surfing."

"Do you play any sports?"

"Nope."

Mr. Hubbard's attention darted down to his body, but not with much interest. "You must stay active."

"I try."

"You like fishing?"

Nathaniel's eyes went to the large fish mounted on the wall. "I'm going to say yes, but only because I want this job."

Mr. Hubbard chuckled again. "The job is yours. I'm impressed with your work ethic. The manager at the learning center had nothing but praise for you. Are you saving up for anything in particular? A college fund, perhaps?"

"I'm lucky enough to already have one, thanks to my parents, but I'm hoping to get into a good law school, so—"

Mr. Hubbard appeared impressed. "Any school in particular?"

Nathaniel shook his head. "I haven't decided yet."

"I was hoping you'd say Yale."

"They've got my application."

"Do they?" Mr. Hubbard beamed at him. "I graduated from there in—well, no sense in giving away my age. Sorry, I interrupted you."

"I started tutoring because I thought it would look good on my application."

“So would a glowing reference. I have contacts at quite a few law schools. Including Yale. I’m sure I could help you.”

Nathaniel opened and closed his mouth, but it took a few tries before a sound came out. “Seriously?”

“It’s certainly possible.” Mr. Hubbard leaned forward. “Listen, the reason I’m giving you the third degree is because I’m looking for more than just a tutor for my son. My business demands a lot from me, especially time. Occasionally I have to travel, and when I’m in Houston, I put in long hours. I’m providing for my family, but I’m concerned that Caesar doesn’t always get the guidance he needs. Even when I’m home, I worry he might not turn to me if he needed advice about girls or such things. I expect him to provide that guidance for the other kids living here, to be a big brother, but he doesn’t take much interest in that role. Then it occurred to me that maybe he needs his own role model.”

Nathaniel took a deep breath. “I’m not sure I’m qualified.”

Mr. Hubbard waved a hand dismissively. “You’re humble, and that’s admirable. I understand it’s a lot to take on. I probably should have let things develop naturally, but I’ve always believed in being upfront. Just go about your tutoring duties as you normally would, but also don’t hesitate to reach out to him on a more personal level.”

“Okay,” Nathaniel said.

“I’ll stop yammering and let you get to work.” Mr. Hubbard stood. Nathaniel did the same. “One more thing. Is that a bruise on your cheek?”

Nathaniel felt like groaning. The bruise had faded to an ugly yellow and wasn’t nearly as visible now. He had hoped it would go unnoticed. “Yeah.”

“Get into a fight?”

“Not really,” he said.

“An accident?”

Nathaniel meant to nod, which would have dismissed the subject, but instead he found himself shaking his head. Maybe because Mr. Hubbard didn’t know his parents and wasn’t associated with the school. He didn’t have the power to make him

see a counselor or anything like that. He was, in effect, a stranger. Somehow that made it easier to be honest. Besides, he seemed genuinely concerned.

“Do you feel comfortable telling me what happened?”

Nathaniel considered his answer carefully before he said it aloud. “I have a brother who gets a little rough sometimes.”

“Rough?”

“Yeah,” Nathaniel said, trying to sound casual. “We horse around. It’s no big deal. That’s just how he is.”

Mr. Hubbard didn’t appear reassured, the concern in his features deepening. “I like to think we have an open house. If you ever need to come by, even if Caesar isn’t here—even if *I’m* not here, please don’t hesitate. Or if there’s someone you want me to talk to on your behalf—”

“Thank you,” Nathaniel said, cutting him off before the offer could turn into a question. “I’ll keep that in mind. I think Caesar has some vocabulary he needs help with.”

“Of course.” Mr. Hubbard offered his hand again. “He should be in the dining room. If you don’t find him there, just keep looking until you do. As I said—open house.”

Nathaniel nodded his appreciation and left the room. Once he was in the hallway, he glanced back, a strange feeling overcoming him, one so alien he needed a moment to recognize it for what it was.

Hope.

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