

Something Like Thunder © 2015 Jay Bell / Andreas Bell

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## Chapter Two

Nathaniel lingered in front of the bathroom mirror and sighed. Sometimes he wished for a normal weekend—sleeping in and staying in bed, even after waking up. A quick excursion to the kitchen for a bowl of cereal before heading back to his room for a movie marathon. Some of Terry Gilliam’s films, starting with *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, since it made him believe fantasy could become reality.

Nathaniel exhaled and checked his watch. Time to tutor Little Lord Hubbard again. Over the past week, Caesar’s grades had remained steady, but as a good role model or whatever, Nathaniel was failing abysmally. Try as he might, he struggled to make any sort of personal connection with Caesar. The environment didn’t help. They always sat at the dining room table, Mrs. Hubbard appearing frequently to check on their progress. Nathaniel felt pressured, like they needed to remain on track or risk being reprimanded, so he didn’t even risk small talk.

He also tried to view Caesar as more than just a pupil, still bothered by Rebecca’s claim that he didn’t react to other guys the way he should. Yesterday, while Caesar was distracted with reading a paragraph out loud, Nathaniel had looked him over, noticing the jumble of homemade friendship bracelets he wore on one wrist. Who had given them to him? Had Caesar returned the favor, making and distributing his own? Or, like Nathaniel had done before Dwight gave him hell about it, maybe he had made the bracelets for himself, just because he thought they looked cool.

Nathaniel had been on the verge of asking about them when Mrs. Hubbard made another of her appearances.

Today wasn't likely to be any different, but he had a job to do. If he didn't get a move on, he'd be late. Nathaniel had grabbed his things and was heading for the front door when he heard shouting. At first he thought it was his parents. His father was a patient man until he wasn't. His mother felt deeply or nothing at all. When they butted heads, they did so loudly. Nathaniel always remained on the sidelines, but watching them go round and round about issues that didn't seem important to him was tedious. He was just about to step outside when he realized one of the voices was wrong. He recognized his mother, but shouting back at her...

Nathaniel spun around and raced toward the commotion. He found himself in the kitchen, where he saw his mother backed up against the counter, Dwight's finger thrusting at her repeatedly as the shouting continued. Nathaniel didn't think. He lurched forward, grabbed Dwight's shoulder, and pulled so hard his brother spun like a top before he caught himself. His handsome face was twisted with rage, an arm cocking instinctively before the flames flickered in his eyes. Dwight remembered that a witness was present. His arm lowered, but his fists remained balled.

"Everyone just calm down," Star pleaded.

"What's going on?" Nathaniel asked, chest heaving from adrenaline.

"Mom's pissed at me *because I got a job*," Dwight spat.

Star exhaled. "No, I'm angry because I found an account statement showing that your college fund is nearly depleted!"

"Which is why I got a job!"

"That money is supposed to be for your education!" She shook her head. "I told your father we shouldn't let you take a year off. I knew this would happen!"

"Oh really? Then why act so damn surprised?" Dwight turned and stepped into her personal space again. "I'm not a kid anymore. You can't tell me what to do!" He kept shouting, ranting that he didn't need a college degree to sell cars, and that he would

be the best salesman the dealership had ever seen. Nathaniel barely heard the words. Instead he focused on his mother's bewildered expression, like she had been cornered by a wild animal in her own home, and for a moment—just the tiniest fraction of time—her features betrayed fear. That's what set him off.

He grabbed Dwight's shoulder again, clamping down so hard it was sure to be painful, shouting his own furious words. "Leave her alone, you piece of shit!"

Dwight turned, knocking away his hand and gritting his teeth. The look he shot Nathaniel promised there would be hell to pay. But not now. Dwight grabbed his keys and stomped from the room. They listened as the front door opened and slammed shut. Then Star sighed, rubbing her temples as she took a seat at the table.

Nathaniel sat next to her. "Are you okay?"

"Of course." Another exasperated sigh. "This is my fault. I didn't raise him well or... I don't know how I got it so right with you but not him." She shook her head. "I was too young to be a mother."

"I'm glad you didn't wait," Nathaniel said, trying to interject some humor. "Otherwise I wouldn't be sitting here. It's not like Dwight and I were lined up inside you, just waiting our turn. It's all down to chance. Right?"

"In that case I don't have any regrets. I just wish I knew what he needed."

"Have you tried slapping him around?" Then, more carefully, he added, "Maybe this will be good. All he's done the past year is laze around the house. Now he's got a job. Maybe he'll get his own place too."

"That's not what I want for him," his mother said. "His independence, yes, but he needs more to fall back on than his good looks. Those won't last forever. I'm living proof."

"You're beautiful."

His mother put a hand over his and managed a smile. "You make me proud. You know that?"

"I'm glad," Nathaniel said, gently pulling away his hand. "I have to get going. If Dwight comes back, let Dad deal with him. Okay?"

His mother nodded distractedly. He watched her for a moment longer, wondering if he needed to fear for her, but he knew he didn't. As usual he would be the one to take the brunt of Dwight's anger. In this circumstance, he would do so willingly.

Nathaniel didn't feel quite so noble when he stepped outside. His car was tilted at an odd angle. Sure enough, when he walked around the vehicle, he spotted a flat tire. The timing was no coincidence. Revenge. Just a down payment. The rest would come later. Nathaniel flipped his internal switch, preferring to feel numb rather than sorry for himself. Then he went to the trunk and dug around for the jack. The spare tire was low on air when he got it out, but it would be enough to get him to the nearest auto repair shop. Once there, he called Mr. Hubbard, leaving a voicemail explaining he would be late. It took almost an hour for the tire to be fixed, Nathaniel remaining detached inside. Once the tire was repaired, he drove to Caesar's house.

Mrs. Hubbard opened the door. "We thought you decided not to show," she said.

"I had car trouble," Nathaniel replied. "I left a message with your husband."

"Todd is out of town." She pursed her lips before stepping aside so he could enter. "Caesar is upstairs with a friend. I'll get him for you."

"No," Nathaniel said quickly. "I don't want to trouble you. I'll run up myself."

"Oh. Very well."

Nathaniel hurried up the stairs before she could change her mind, wanting to avoid another awkward session at the dining room table. He found himself in an unfamiliar hallway with more options than he liked. He counted under his breath. Six doors! Of course he knew now that the Hubbards had quite a few kids, at least some of which were adopted. He stopped halfway down the

hall, unsure how to proceed. A boy with a pug nose and freckles appeared, halting in his tracks when spotting him.

“Carrie or Caesar?” he asked.

“Caesar,” Nathaniel said. “I’m his tutor.”

The boy snorted, jerked a thumb over his shoulder at a door, then walked on. A moment later, Nathaniel heard a toilet seat clanking against the tank. Weird kid, but helpful. Nathaniel went to the door at the end of the hall. He was raising his hand to knock when he heard voices inside. Loud ones. A girl giggled before responding to a question. The other voice sounded cocky. He barely recognized it as belonging to Caesar, who was normally so soft-spoken. Nathaniel glanced back to make sure he was still alone and pressed his ear to the door.

“—cutting yours next,” Caesar was saying. “I’m thinking a flat top. Or a mohawk! Or maybe we’ll buzz it all off completely.”

“That wasn’t the deal,” the female voice responded. “Now hold still or I’ll cut you.”

“By accident?”

“Nope!”

A flushing toilet from farther down the hall prompted Nathaniel to stand upright again. He cleared his throat to avoid appearing stealthy. Then he knocked. The voices grew quieter, whispering to each other. He heard footsteps before the door swung open. A girl with a head full of black corkscrews stood there. Her eyes were equally dark, but they shone with amusement as they looked him over.

“Are you the tutor?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Nathaniel said. “I’m running a little late.”

“Fine by me,” she said, gesturing him inside.

He entered a bedroom larger than the one belonging to his parents. A bed was to one side, beyond it a loveseat and cluttered coffee table. Except for a few windows in the vaulted ceiling, the only light came from the attached bathroom where—

Nathaniel stared. Caesar was standing in the doorway, framed by light. He was shirtless, his bronze skin in full view. His body was lean, his shoulders broad, the muscles wiry. His waist

narrowed as it disappeared into his jeans, the band of his underwear visible. His hair was currently down. On his left side it rested on his shoulder. On the other it had already been cut, but not drastically so. The length stopped just above his jaw line and appeared even shorter when Caesar brushed it behind one ear. He looked good. It wasn't a full nerd girl twirl, since he still had on his glasses, but Nathaniel liked those anyway. He hadn't minded the ponytail either, but he wasn't sad to see it go. So much for Rebecca's fight-or-flight theory, because Nathaniel had to force his eyes away.

"Should I go?" the girl asked. "I can finish cutting it some other day."

"No way!" Caesar said with a laugh. Then he looked a little more shy. "Nathaniel, this is my girlfriend, Steph. Steph, this is my Nathaniel. I mean my tutor. Nathaniel. Uh."

"You're such a dork," Steph said, rolling her eyes at Caesar. Then she cocked her head at Nathaniel, her long curls fluttering like a curtain. "I don't suppose you know how to cut hair."

Nathaniel smirked. "I'm not that kind of tutor."

Caesar looked panicked. "You said you knew how to do this!"

"I figured it couldn't be that hard," she shot back. "I was wrong."

Caesar's face fell. "Oh crap. I'm ruined!"

"Looks like she's on the right track," Nathaniel said, following Steph so they could consider him up close. "Turn around."

He stood off to one side, examining the jutting shoulder blades and the small of Caesar's back. Then he remembered the bathroom mirror, which probably revealed him doing all of this, and quickly focused on the hair instead. It really did look fine. "Just keep doing what you're doing."

"Think I should trim around the ears?" Steph asked.

"No. Leave it long. See how it looks when you've done the rest. Then we can decide."

He stepped back so she could get to work, happy for an excuse to stare at Caesar. He wished he could let his eyes wander wherever they wanted, but more than once, he saw Caesar's

reflection staring back at him. Nathaniel went to sit on the edge of the bed and glanced around the room. His impression of Caesar had always been of someone bookish and shy, but he saw no thick tomes or dusty stacks of fantasy novels. The room was little different than his own. Just as disorganized, although instead of movie posters on the wall, those here involved a video game, a bikini-clad model, and one of Eminem looking squinty and pouty. The television opposite the loveseat was nice. Widescreen, instead of the old 4:3 aspect ratio he had back home. Nathaniel had been saving up for a new TV. Maybe he should pull a Dwight and raid his college fund.

"You were right about the ears." Steph plopped down on the bed next to him.

Nathaniel looked to where Caesar had last been, but the door was mostly shut now, the sound of a shower running beyond.

"I've been trying to axe that ponytail for months," she continued. "I even had a dream about sneaking in here and cutting it off."

Nathaniel refrained from sharing his own opinion of Caesar's appearance. "How long have you guys been together?"

"A little over a year."

"Geez."

Steph eyed him. "Most people don't wince when I tell them that."

"I'm just surprised, that's all. None of my friends have made it more than a few months." He glanced over at her, trying to determine her age. "Are you a senior?"

"Oh, I like you!" Steph beamed at him. "I'm just a sophomore. What about you?"

"I'm a senior."

"Uh huh. And how long have you made it before?"

"In a relationship?" Nathaniel thought about junior high, when a girl he hadn't known had asked him out. They shared the same English class, but they never talked. He had said yes, because it had seemed the right thing to do. Then she started

calling his house, which was awkward, because he never knew what to say. That had only lasted— “Two weeks.”

“That’s it?” Steph looked surprised, then narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Oh I see. Now that I think about it, it’s obvious.”

Nathaniel resisted a gulp. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. You’re a player, aren’t you?”

Nathaniel recovered enough to smile. “Busted.”

“Just don’t teach Caesar any of your moves.”

Nathaniel laughed nervously as the bedroom door opened. Mrs. Hubbard. Naturally. She looked at them both, then toward the bathroom.

“He’s taking a quick shower,” Steph explained. “We trimmed his hair.”

Mrs. Hubbard didn’t appear impressed. “He’s supposed to be studying.”

“I guess that’s my cue.” Steph shot him a ‘same shit, different day’ expression. “Have fun hitting the books.” She stood, grabbed her purse, and swept past Mrs. Hubbard, who ignored her.

“Would you rather wait downstairs?” she asked.

“Actually,” Nathaniel said, grasping for an excuse. “I thought we’d try studying in here. A familiar environment can be conducive to stronger focus. You know, fewer distractions, like siblings walking through the room.” Or overbearing mothers. This logic seemed to appease Mrs. Hubbard, who left him alone.

Nathaniel turned forward, listening as the water stopped, the last drops no doubt running down to Caesar’s pointed chin. Or down his neck, over that smooth chest, across his stomach and ending up at his— The shower curtain pulled back, the rings clattering along the pole, but the door wasn’t open enough to confirm his fantasies.

“It definitely feels better!” Caesar said. “I hated how it stuck to my back when wet.”

Nathaniel didn’t reply, feeling the words weren’t directed at him.

“Are you sure it isn’t too short?”



Again he stayed silent until Caesar's head popped out from the door. "She went home," he explained.

"Oh."

His glasses were off, completing his nerd girl twirl, but the new look was no major revelation. Nathaniel had noticed his eyes before, and found him just as attractive with the glasses on. Definitely a cute guy. Steph was a lucky girl.

"Uh," Caesar said. "I'll be right out."

The door slammed shut. Had Nathaniel been staring too long? He exhaled and tried to get himself into a professional mindset. Studying. Learning. Not toweling off a sopping-wet boy in his bedroom. When the bathroom door swung open, Caesar was dressed, this time with a shirt. The eyes behind the glasses darted in his direction and away again as he stood there awkwardly.

"What do you think?"

Nathaniel stood, like he just spotted his prom date coming down the stairs. What did he think? Impure thoughts, that's what! He tried to focus on Caesar's hair. Even wet, he could see the natural curl. Not like Steph's hair. Not even close, but now that his hair wasn't pulled back, Caesar's locks were free to proceed in gentle waves across each temple and ear. He liked it but wasn't dumb enough to say so. "It'll grow back."

Caesar looked crestfallen.

Nathaniel rolled his eyes. "I'm sure Steph will love it. Try parting it on one side, not the middle. Yeah, exactly. Now if beauty hour is finished, maybe we could get to work."

"Ugh." Caesar checked the mirror once more, making a face. "I was hoping we wouldn't have to. It's the weekend, you know."

Nathaniel exhaled. "Yeah, but the next time your mom walks in here..."

Caesar walked to the bedroom door and pushed the lock in the knob. "Oops!"

Nathaniel liked that. A lot. And why not? Maybe this was the sort of bonding Mr. Hubbard had been hoping for. He only wondered how they would fill the time. He glanced around for inspiration, noticing a framed photo of a sports team hanging on

the wall. He moved closer to examine it. About twenty guys were lined up in three rows, all of them wearing sky-blue singlets. He scanned each row until he found Caesar, who was sandwiched somewhere in the middle, his bulge hidden behind some guy's elbow. Too bad. Nathaniel turned around and asked the obvious.

"You're on the wrestling team?"

"Yup."

"You any good?"

Caesar raised his chin. "My mom keeps the trophies downstairs in the living room. She's even more proud of them than I am."

Nathaniel nodded appreciatively, glancing at the photo once more. The school name confirmed they didn't go to the same one. Some of the guys on the team looked pretty tough. One even had facial hair. He tried to imagine Caesar on the mat, fighting to pin any of these opponents, and couldn't. Then again, the wiry muscles Nathaniel had seen earlier, and the confident way he had joked with Steph, implied he didn't know the true Caesar yet.

He moved to a narrow shelf full of DVDs, searching for more clues.

"Nice movie collection," he said. Once he started reading the spines, he wished he hadn't spoken so quickly. Most of them were action films. He didn't have anything against big budget explosions, but Caesar's collection was devoid of any that had defined the genre. No *Kill Bill*. No *The Bourne Identity*. Not even *Die Hard*. Most of the movies here were just a flash in the pan, pushed heavily by the studios but soon forgotten afterwards. He noticed *Independence Day* and tried not to wince. The collection wasn't completely hopeless though. He unshelved *North by Northwest* and held it up.

"You like old movies?"

Caesar shrugged. "Christmas present from Dad. It's his favorite. I've never actually seen it."

"Your dad has good taste. All of Hitchcock's stuff is excellent. Well, except for *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*. Or some of his wartime propaganda films, although *Lifeboat* starts out good."

Caesar stared at him blankly.

“Or not,” Nathaniel said, turning to place the movie on the shelf. Then he hesitated. He couldn’t think of anything else to do. Maybe a movie would help break the ice. Besides, the DVD was still shrink-wrapped, which seemed tragic. “We could watch it together. If you want.”

Caesar nodded. “Okay.”

Nathaniel dug a thumbnail along the case to break the seal, watching as Caesar bent over to turn on the DVD player. Once the disc was in the tray, they settled down on the couch, but Nathaniel didn’t feel comfortable. How could something as simple as sitting together feel so awkward? It didn’t help that he was so aware of Caesar’s every movement, like the way his leg bounced impatiently as the FBI warning flashed on the screen, or how one of his hands rested on the cushion between them, looking lonely all by itself. Maybe Caesar wished Steph was sitting there so she could hold it for him.

The movie finally started. Nathaniel immersed himself in a world before his time, paying attention occasionally to Hitchcock’s directing style, but mostly getting caught up in the plot. Caesar seemed to enjoy himself too, tensing up at the right moments. At first, anyway. The movie wasn’t exactly short, and as it neared the two-hour mark, Nathaniel could sense him getting restless. He realized then how boring he must seem. Maybe Caesar wasn’t actually shy. Perhaps he simply didn’t have anything to say to Nathaniel any more than he would to one of his teachers at school. All they did together was study. When Caesar asked to do something else, Nathaniel had suggested they watch his father’s favorite movie. Caesar probably saw him as another boring adult. So Nathaniel did something he usually abhorred and started talking during the film, sharing some of the more interesting trivia about the production, or some of the scandals that surrounded the stars. Some of this Caesar responded to. Other times he just nodded to show he was listening.

“When I lived in California, I made a list of filming locations and went to as many of them as possible.”

Caesar perked up. "What city did you live in?"

"San Diego at the time, but we move every few years."

Caesar sighed wistfully. "Must be nice. I've been here my whole life."

"At least you know who everyone is. I'm tired of feeling like a stranger."

Caesar thought about it. "I would definitely miss my friends." He looked over and made eye contact. "It must suck having to say goodbye each time."

"I try to minimize that by being antisocial." He laughed at himself. "I always have at least one friend or I'd go crazy, but there's no point in getting too attached."

"How long have you been here?" Caesar asked. "I mean, will you be moving again soon?"

"Why? Will you miss me?"

"Yeah." Caesar returned his attention to the screen. "I would."

The response sounded genuine. And a little too sentimental, because they didn't really know each other. Still, he couldn't help but find it endearing. "I don't know what's going to happen after I graduate. I guess that depends on whatever college accepts me. Maybe I'll stay local."

Now he was being sentimental. The plan had always been to move as far away as possible. College was his best chance to escape Dwight forever.

"I'm going to Yale," Caesar said.

Nathaniel raised an eyebrow. "Hard school to get into."

"That's why you're here," Caesar said.

True enough. This wasn't a social call. Mr. Hubbard was paying him good money to make sure his son got into the right college. Nathaniel returned his attention to the television and watched Cary Grant scramble over Mount Rushmore. When the film reached its epic conclusion and the credits started to roll, he grabbed the remote and shut it off. "That was a waste of time. On Monday we hit the books again."

Caesar looked chastised, but that was fine. Nathaniel had a role to play. Drooling over a sophomore and trying to imagine

what was beneath his wrestling uniform was the opposite of what he should be doing.

"I gotta run," Nathaniel said. "If you have any homework this weekend, make sure you get it done."

Starchy, but necessary. If Caesar wanted to have fun, he could spend time with his girlfriend. Nathaniel got up and left the room, wishing he had someone like that in his life. Someone he could always be himself around instead of having to pretend he was responsible or anything but fucked up. Then again, he kind of did.

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"So he's straight," Rebecca said, making sure she understood his story correctly. She was flipping through her CD collection, tossing those she no longer wanted on her bed so she could feed them to eBay.

"Yeah, he's straight," Nathaniel said. "His girlfriend was my first clue. That he's actually happy and outgoing around her confirms it."

Rebecca shrugged, her attention still on her task. "One less thing for you to worry about."

"Easy for you to say." Nathaniel said with a huff. "I was starting to like him. You have no idea how it feels to meet someone you like, only to find out you're not compatible on the most basic level."

Rebecca stopped sorting and looked at him pointedly. "Yeah, that must be rough."

"Oh. Sorry. It's just so frustrating."

Rebecca sighed, her shoulders relaxing. "I know. I'm sorry too. You finally noticed a guy, but he'll never notice you. Not in the same way. Why does love have to suck so bad?"

"I don't know, but you're right. I have bigger things to worry about. My mom and Dwight got into an argument today." He told her everything that had happened. Rebecca pushed aside the pile of CDs so she could sit on the bed and listen. He didn't have to explain the implications—she already knew what he had waiting for him at home.

"Sleepover time?" she asked when he was finished.

He nodded gratefully. On occasion, when the situation was dire enough, she would sneak him up to her bedroom late at night and out again in the morning. This only delayed the inevitable, but occasionally Dwight cooled down by the next day and returned to being just a jerk instead of a vicious monster.

“Spring break is coming up,” Rebecca said.

Nathaniel groaned. “Don’t remind me. At least I don’t have to worry about him when I’m at school.”

“But you said he got a job. Find out his hours. We’ll make plans for whenever he’s off work.” She hopped up and grabbed a notebook and pen, turning to a blank page. “Let’s come up with an idea for every single day. We can hit a bunch of museums in Houston or—”

“Road trip to Galveston?”

She nodded and scribbled it down. “What else?” When he remained silent, she looked up, seeing the relief on his face. “It sucks that you have to hide from your own brother, but we’re going to have fun.”

“You’re my best friend,” Nathaniel said. “Of all time.”

Rebecca smiled, her cheeks a little flushed. “Then let’s make this a spring break to remember!”

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Time was Nathaniel’s greatest weakness. No matter how often he promised himself to remain on guard or how much he prepared for the worst by working out each day, eventually his memory blurred at the edges, his instincts growing lukewarm. That’s when it would happen. His mind would be somewhere else—such as the old Savage Steve Holland movie he was watching at the moment. When his brother plopped down on the couch next to him, Nathaniel knew he should have gotten up before Dwight’s butt hit the cushion. But he didn’t, his intuition having failed him.

Dwight reached for the remote, flipping over to a football game. Nathaniel was pushing himself up to stand when his brother grabbed his wrist, squeezed, and yanked him back down.

He tried pulling away, but Dwight's grip was strong, ensuring he couldn't escape.

"Watch the game with me," he said, blue eyes flicking over to meet his. Then he smiled.

Nathaniel felt sorry for any girl taken in by the perfect white teeth, the strong nose, and the eyes that danced with joyful glee. How many girls had been lured in by that handsome face, and how many had walked away damaged by the experience? Nathaniel tried jerking away, but Dwight's jaw clenched and his expression grew dark.

Nathaniel stopped struggling. He attempted to relax, to pretend that none of this really bothered him. He even tried flipping the switch to kill his emotions. Dwight still gripped his wrist, making Nathaniel want to recoil in fear, but he distanced himself from the situation as much as possible while staring at the television. The increasing pressure on his wrist made this impossible. Like a python squeezing its prey to death, Dwight's grip grew tighter and tighter. For half an hour they sat together, but Dwight never stopped. His own hand must have been aching from effort. Nathaniel—brow sweating now—looked out of the corner of his eye to see Dwight's forearm flexing, his knuckles white. Nathaniel's hand had lost sensation, the circulation cut off. Not his wrist though. That seared with maddening pain, the bones seeming to be on the verge of cracking and splintering. Then the garage door rumbled, signaling their parents' return. Dwight didn't let go until the door connecting to the kitchen swung open. Then he released Nathaniel, casually wiping the sweat of his palm on the couch. When their mother called for help unloading the groceries, he reached for the remote, turning up the sound a few notches.

Nathaniel stared at him, heart pounding. Then he rose to help his mother. His hand tingled painfully as sensation returned, his wrist burning, but he ignored this pain as best he could and carried in plastic bags filled with food. Once this chore was done, he went to his room, shut and locked the door, then curled up on his bed. Rebecca's plan wouldn't work. Any second that Nathaniel

was at home meant being at risk. He needed more than an after-school job or a day at the museum. Karate lessons? A knife? A gun?

Help. That's what he needed most. Perhaps that's why the next day, when his wrist had turned dark red and purple, he left it in plain view. His mother didn't notice at the breakfast table because she was running late for an appointment. His father had already left for work. Dwight was still in bed. If anyone noticed at school, they didn't say anything. Just Rebecca, who only needed confirmation of her suspicions. She shook her head in frustration, knowing he wouldn't listen to her advice. One other person noticed, but after school. Science books were spread out over the dining room table and Nathaniel was trying his best to explain chromosomal inheritance when Caesar interrupted him.

"What happened to your wrist?"

Nathaniel looked up from the books in time to see Mrs. Hubbard in the doorway. She had heard Caesar and was moving toward the table to investigate. For some reason Nathaniel didn't want her to see it, so he quickly slid his arm under the table.

"Tennis injury," he mumbled, which was a ridiculous claim, but he hadn't prepared a good excuse.

Caesar was confused. "You play tennis?"

"Let's focus on studying," Nathaniel said. "You have a test tomorrow."

Caesar appeared slighted, his eyes returning to one of the open books. Mrs. Hubbard's curiosity must have been appeased because she turned and left the room. Close call. Tomorrow he would start wearing long-sleeve shirts until the bruises faded. He thought that was the end of the subject, but when he and Caesar were wrapping up, Mr. Hubbard strolled into the room.

"Nathaniel!" he said with an easy smile. "How nice to see you. Join me in my office, won't you?"

Nathaniel nodded, gathered up his things, and followed Mr. Hubbard down the hall.

"Take a seat," he said once they were in his office. Mr. Hubbard remained by the door long enough to close it. Then



instead of walking around his desk, he leaned against the edge, looking down at Nathaniel. Or more accurately, at his wrist. "More horsing around?"

Mrs. Hubbard must have reported what she'd seen, which also implied that her husband had asked her to be on the lookout for such things. Mr. Hubbard knew. He had to, so Nathaniel nodded in confirmation.

Mr. Hubbard exhaled. "I have two brothers. I was the youngest, the lowest in the pecking order. My oldest brother treated me like a slave. My mother was always working, struggling to raise us on her own, which meant she wasn't around much. So my older brother would make me fetch drinks for him or make sandwiches. Sometimes he would do worse. We had a cat, and one time he dumped out the litter box on the carpet right in front of me, and said that if I didn't clean it up, Mom would put Ginger to sleep. He wasn't the nicest guy. Occasionally I would get fed up with him, and a few times we got into physical altercations. Scratches, bumps, and bruises were part of that." Mr. Hubbard nodded at Nathaniel's wrist. "But not like this. You know what that looks like to me?"

"What?" Nathaniel asked, his throat raw.

"Abuse."

All of Nathaniel's excuses rose to the surface—that brothers play rough with each other, or that his own clumsiness was to blame, or even that he bruised easily. But he was tired of hiding the truth. He needed to tell someone, just one adult, to see if they had a magic solution, a useful course of action he hadn't thought of himself. "I don't know why he hates me. Most of the time I'm just minding my own business when it happens."

Mr. Hubbard frowned. "Do your parents know?"

Nathaniel shook his head. "I don't think so."

"It's hard to miss a bruised cheek."

"I'm a pretty good liar."

Mr. Hubbard studied him a moment. "My mom had an awful lot on her plate. That's why I never told her what was going on. My situation wasn't as severe as yours appears to be. Most

siblings torment each other to some extent, but what you're going through is far outside the norm. It needs to stop."

"It wasn't always this bad," Nathaniel said. "When we were younger, I would tell on him. Back then it was just friction burns or noogies. I would tell and he would be punished. I have good parents. I really do. But then Dwight started retaliating. One of my favorite toys might go missing, or once when I had a bunch of tacks in my backpack for a school presentation, he must have opened the box and dumped them out, because the next time I reached in—" Nathaniel's fingers twitched at the memory. "There was never any proof, but these things always happened after I got him in trouble with our parents. So I stopped telling them."

Mr. Hubbard's expression was sympathetic. "Sounds to me that matters have escalated beyond a missing toy or a mean-spirited prank."

"I guess so."

"I would be happy to talk to your parents with you. Or even on your behalf."

Nathaniel shook his head. "What are they going to do? Ground him? Kick him out of the house? Neither of those things will stop him from getting back at me. He'll find a way, believe me, and when he does it'll be far worse than what I go through now."

"Then perhaps we should contact the police."

Nathaniel's head whipped up. "No! Think about my mother! One of her sons putting the other in jail? That would kill her. How long would they hold him anyway? Eventually he'll be free to get back at me. I just need to stay out of his way. Soon it'll all be okay. Dwight was supposed to go to college last year. I thought I'd be free of him then. Doesn't matter because when I graduate, I'm *definitely* going to college. Somewhere far away. Dwight hates me, but not enough to travel across state lines just to punch me around."

Mr. Hubbard's brow was furrowed. "I don't feel comfortable with this. I really think we should talk to someone."

"I'll deny everything," Nathaniel threatened. "I'm sorry, but I will."

Mr. Hubbard considered this. Then he rubbed his mouth and mustache, stood to walk around his desk, and took a seat. Once there, he seemed lost in thought.

Nathaniel watched him, heart pounding, hoping that he hadn't made a major mistake. "I just need to avoid him. This job you gave me already helps. The less time I'm home, the better. Dwight got a job recently too. Everything will be fine. Honestly."

Mr. Hubbard nodded reluctantly. "I'll respect your wishes. I hope you know that you can always turn to me if you need help."

"I know that now," Nathaniel said. "Thank you."

Mr. Hubbard nodded again, still not looking pleased. Eventually he sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Spring break is coming up. We're taking a family trip. Camping, if this good weather continues. If not, there's always the cabin. Why don't you come with us? Give yourself a break by getting away. Besides, I enjoy your company. I know Caesar does too."

Nathaniel wasn't sure about that last bit, but the offer had his chest feeling tight, his eyes a little teary. He blinked, hoping Mr. Hubbard hadn't noticed. Then, not trusting his own voice, he simply nodded. Nathaniel had always wanted help. He just never expected to get it.

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