

Something Like Thunder © 2015 Jay Bell / Andreas Bell

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Chapter Three

Pine needles, most of them dark green bristles, some more vibrant where they had freshly burst forth in this new spring. The rest were brown, carpeting the ground, absorbing sound underfoot and preserving the silence. No roar of a distant highway, no airplanes buzzing overhead. The Hubbards had driven him four hours away from Houston and now, so detached from civilization, Nathaniel felt safer than he had in years. These woods were his sanctuary.

Behind him... that's where things became complicated. He glanced back, making sure Caesar was keeping up. Every time Nathaniel looked over his shoulder, Caesar flashed him a reassuring smile before quickly averting his eyes, usually down to the path. Awkward as hell, but still enough to whip Nathaniel's hormones into a frenzy because he found the guy adorable. If only he wasn't so difficult to penetrate.

Nathaniel allowed himself a covert smile at the double meaning as they continued their hike. This was Mr. Hubbard's idea. During the drive, his eyes kept shining at them in the rearview mirror, as if they were already off to a great start. Nathaniel tried not to disappoint, bringing up topic after topic. Conversation remained one-sided. Caesar occasionally offered a few quiet words or nodded to show he was listening, but no lighthearted banter resulted. Nathaniel had been his private tutor for a few weeks with little progress. When added to their time at the learning center together, he felt even more like a failure.

While helping to set up the tent, Mr. Hubbard had been encouraging when Nathaniel broached the subject.

"He's really quiet around me. I feel like I'm doing something wrong."

"Caesar? Quiet?" Mr. Hubbard had winked. "I noticed that too, and it is unusual for him. I think he just admires you."

"Really?"

"Sure! Why don't you two spend some time together, man to man." Mr. Hubbard then suggested the hike they were currently on, mentioning an old ghost town a few hours away from camp, and offered one more piece of advice. "Take him into your confidence. Pull the curtain aside and show him that you're human too. That'll help get you down from the pedestal he's put you on."

Nathaniel wasn't sure what to make of that. Was he supposed to open up about Dwight? Right now, that was the last thing he wanted to think or talk about. Escaping felt too good. Why sully this paradise by invoking his brother's spirit? Still, they had to talk about something. Nathaniel slowed, stepping off the path to walk beside Caesar.

"Miss your girlfriend yet?"

Caesar nodded.

"Spring break without you watching out for her. I hope she doesn't get into trouble."

Caesar managed a nervous chuckle.

"Seems like a good girl. I can tell she's crazy about you."

A smile that didn't reveal teeth.

Ugh, so boring! Nathaniel decided to stop being cautious. "So, have you guys fucked yet?"

Caesar's cheeks grew red and he smiled. More of a leering grin, really. A hint of swagger came into his step too. Promising.

"Well, well!" Nathaniel said. "Make with the details!"

"Like what?" Caesar said, not completely averse to the suggestion.

Like how big is your dick and what can you do with it? Nathaniel struggled to find a question that didn't center on Caesar. "Is she wild? Tame? Somewhere in between?"

Caesar thought about it, still grinning. "Sweet," he said eventually. "When we're just hanging out, she's got a wicked sense of humor, and she loves to tease me. Not in a sexual way. Uh... She's fun to be around. But in bed it's like she's vulnerable. Delicate."

"Huh," Nathaniel said. He would have preferred raunchy details, because now he was picturing Caesar being gentle and tender, calling on his emotions rather than his hormones.

"It's kind of a shame," Caesar said quickly. "Don't tell her I ever said this, because it would break her heart, but I wish she was the same Steph in bed. I'm always worried I'm going to hurt her. I don't mind being gentle. Occasionally though I just want to get nasty."

"Nasty?"

"Freaky," Caesar said.

Nathaniel wished he could casually adjust himself. His jeans were starting to feel tight. He wanted to ask what Caesar meant, but if his dick got any harder, there would be mounting evidence—literally—of how turned on he was getting.

"What about you?" Caesar asked.

"I'm down with freaky," Nathaniel said, pretending to misunderstand the question. "Nasty too."

Caesar chuckled. "No, I mean what's it like with your girlfriend?"

"I don't have one."

"Really? Oh. What type of girl do you like?"

Nathaniel sighed inwardly, his erection subsiding. Coming out sucked. He had no regrets about having done so originally, the feeling liberating. What no one had told him was how he would have to keep coming out over and over again. People couldn't tell just by looking at him, which meant he often found himself in situations like these where he needed to explain. There was always something to lose. Friendships were put at stake,

casual acquaintances could end before becoming more. Telling his boss at the learning center had been an intense experience that would be repeated at each new workplace. Maybe someday being gay would cost him his job. Maybe this one, because Mr. Hubbard didn't know. Nathaniel wouldn't let that stop him. He refused to let fear dictate who he was. That was the deal. No gray areas. No compromises.

"My type?" Nathaniel repeated. "Tall is good, as is a deep husky voice. That always drives me wild. A six-pack is cool too, since no matter how many sit-ups I do, mine never surfaces. I'm not big into facial hair, although a little scruff is okay."

Caesar continued to walk alongside him, appearing puzzled.

"I'm gay," Nathaniel said helpfully.

He held Caesar's gaze, refusing to show shame as he waited for judgment.

"You're gay?" Caesar repeated. "Seriously?"

"Yup."

"Wow. That's..." Caesar stared off into space before his eyes focused again. "That's really cool!"

Pine needles rustled underfoot as Nathaniel considered his words. "You think it's cool that I'm gay?"

"Yeah! I never would have guessed. Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No."

"Why not?" Caesar said. "I mean, just look at you!"

Without any convenient mirrors hanging on nearby trees, Nathaniel had only his memory to rely on. He had a strong brow, which Dwight insisted made him look like a Neanderthal. Aside from that, he didn't consider any of his features noteworthy. More than a few girls had shown interest in him, but he never took much comfort in that. What he really wondered is what guys thought of him.

"You think I'm hot or something?" Nathaniel asked, grinning to show the question was a joke.

To his delight, Caesar chose to answer him seriously. "You could have anyone you wanted. I'm sure of it."

Nathaniel wasn't convinced. "Maybe. Finding the right sort of guy isn't easy."

"Have you tried online?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

Nathaniel smirked. "Are you asking for details?"

Caesar grinned back at him. "Sure."

"Mind your own business." In truth, he didn't have an exciting story to share because half the guys didn't look anything like their profile pictures, and those who did were more interested in getting into his pants than talking to him. Occasionally Nathaniel was tempted, but ideally he wanted his first time to be with someone he actually liked.

Caesar looked disappointed, but he didn't retreat back into himself. "Do my parents know?"

"That I'm gay? Nope."

"Is it a secret?"

"Not really. My policy is when it comes up naturally, I'll talk about it. I don't see the need to broadcast it."

"That makes sense," Caesar said. "They'll be okay with it though. They're good people."

Nathaniel arched an eyebrow. "You'd be surprised how much hate can come from people convinced they are doing good. All those Bible thumpers telling me I'll burn in Hell? They think they're doing me a favor by trying to save my immortal soul. Are your parents religious?"

"Yeah," Caesar said. "We go to church every Sunday. They really are good people. All my siblings are adopted. You know that, right?"

The oldest girl was Asian, so Nathaniel had suspected as much. "What about you?"

"I'm their only biological child. For medical reasons. My parents didn't let that stop them. They take in a lot of foster kids. I can't count how many have come and gone."

"I'm sure they're good people," Nathaniel conceded. "They wouldn't have let me tag along if they weren't. With the gay issue though, it's hard to guess how anyone will react."

Caesar nodded. "I know."

Nathaniel was pretty sure he didn't, but he let it slide. "It gets lonely. Sometimes I wish more gay people were around. Maybe there are, but I can never tell who. I don't want to hang out in some anonymous chat room just to meet someone, you know?"

Caesar shrugged. "Whatever it takes. It's not like a grocery store or whatever is much more exciting."

Nathaniel snorted. "You're right. Maybe I just like being lonely." He wasn't sure what he meant by that, and he didn't really want to dwell on it because at the moment, his stomach was more demanding than his heart. "I'm hungry," he said, coming to a stop. "Let's eat here."

"The ghost town isn't far away," Caesar said.

"Then let's pick up the pace. You lead."

Once Caesar was ahead of him on the path, backpack bouncing on his shoulders, Nathaniel allowed himself a smile. It was nice to be accepted, although he'd have to watch himself now. If Caesar noticed any lingering gazes, he would know they weren't completely innocent. Maybe he would take it as a compliment, but Nathaniel was meant to be playing big brother, not would-be lover.

His stomach was grumbling by the time the trees thinned out, the shadows replaced by daylight that warmed their skin. At first he thought they had entered a natural clearing, but the land continued stretching outward, unhampered by anything but the skinniest of trees.

"Which way is the ghost town?" Nathaniel asked.

"We're already there." Caesar stopped, beaming at everything around them. "My dad and I discovered this place a few years back."

"Did you eat some magic mushrooms along the way? Because I don't see anything."

“Wait.” Caesar walked forward, kicking occasionally in the dried yellow grass. “In the summer it’s impossible to find much. I tried once and came back with an army of ticks. One even got on my— Here!”

Nathaniel joined him. Buried in the earth was a long rectangular stone. A brick. Its shortest edge touched another, and after brushing more dirt away, they found a third attached to it. “The foundation of a building,” he said, glancing upward at the seemingly empty field. “Are there more like this?”

“I counted around twenty last time,” Caesar said. “A few still have walls. Mostly ruined, but you can get a better idea. I’ll show you.”

His hunger forgotten, Nathaniel followed him around the edge of the field. Rounding a curve they found even more empty space.

“Dad thinks most of the land had been cleared for farming. That’s why there’s not much out there in the middle. Most of the houses are toward the woods. Hey, there they are!”

In the underbrush, just before the first row of trees, were crumbling walls barely higher than their shins. Only the front steps stood taller, three of them, leading to a doorway that no longer existed.

“It’s kind of sad.” Caesar stepped onto one of the stones, its edges rounded with age, the flat surface stained green with moss. “At one time, this house must have been new. Like brand new. Somebody probably stood right here, feeling proud of his new home, and thought it would last forever. Maybe he pictured his grandkids inheriting it. Their kids too. I bet he never imagined this ruin when he carried his bride across the threshold. Or maybe his husband.”

Nathaniel scoffed. “If you want to get progressive, maybe a woman built this house and carried *her man* over the threshold.”

Caesar didn’t seem to hear him, his eyes moving over the former interior of the house, which was now sunken earth filled with wet leaves. “Even the town didn’t survive,” he added eventually.

"Are you sure one was ever here?" Nathaniel asked. "It could have just been a farm."

Caesar nodded toward the field. "There was a church. And a graveyard. I'll show you."

Nathaniel followed him into the cleared land. They walked past enough half-buried foundations and toppled bricks to convince him this was more than just a farm. They reached the graveyard first, where the stones had been worn down by so much weather that only the occasional number or letter was visible. They hovered on the edges, unwilling to walk over any graves.

"Dad found one from the eighteen hundreds. He said he was going to check the county records and find out more about what had been here. Never did. I guess he's too busy."

"You should do it yourself," Nathaniel said.

"Maybe." Caesar turned away from the grave. "The church was right over here. See? If you follow what's left of the foundation, it makes a long rectangle. With it being so close to the graves, we figured that's what it must have been."

"You sure it wasn't a crematorium?" Nathaniel asked. He laughed at Caesar's worried expression, since they were standing in the middle of the space now. "Don't worry. I'm sure this is hallowed ground. Perfect place to eat lunch."

Caesar just stood there.

"And unless you open your backpack soon," Nathaniel added, "we'll have to call it dinner."

"Oh!" Caesar hurried to free his arms from the pack.

They were both curious about the contents, since Mrs. Hubbard had packed lunch for them. Inside was a blanket, which Caesar spread out on the ground, making a place to sit. Then he pulled out a few sandwiches, two slightly browned bananas, two cans of Coke, and some of her homemade brownies wrapped in aluminum foil.

They gobbled down the food, Nathaniel finishing first. Caesar was still chewing the second half of his sandwich and wearing a thoughtful expression. He swallowed a bite and took a swig from

his can. "What did you mean earlier, about my parents being good people for letting you come along?"

Nathaniel paused. Caesar was a quick learner, but he was no Sherlock Holmes. The information he was after had nothing to do with such a vague statement. "How much do you know?"

"About what?" Caesar said innocently.

"How much?" Nathaniel repeated.

Caesar shrugged and looked away. "I was surprised you were coming with us. Peter wasn't allowed to bring a friend, and I never was allowed before. Normally these trips are about 'the family spirit,' as my mom likes to say. So I was surprised, that's all."

Nathaniel continued to scrutinize him. "Did you ask your father?"

"Yeah. He just said it would be good for both of us, whatever that means."

"He's hoping I'll be a good role model to you," Nathaniel said. "Nothing more."

"Then why did you get so defensive about the question if you've got nothing to hide?"

Fuck. Okay, maybe he wasn't Sherlock, but he did have a touch of Columbo. "Don't worry about it."

Caesar wasn't discouraged. "Did it have something to do with your wrist being all bruised?"

Nathaniel snapped. "Just shut up, okay?"

The loudness of his voice carried through the clearing, birds pausing before continuing their chatter. Caesar looked away and resumed nibbling on his sandwich. He didn't make eye contact again. Nor did he try to make conversation.

Nathaniel sighed. "My brother and I don't get along."

Caesar's eyes met his and widened. "He did that to you?"

"We got into a fight." That kept things simple. Two brothers arguing until they started swinging wasn't hard to imagine. How he had sat still and let his brother slowly hurt him, not offering any real resistance—that would be difficult to explain. "We get on

each other's nerves a lot, so your dad thought me getting away would help cool things down."

"Oh," Caesar said. "Sorry."

"It's fine. I just don't want to talk about it. The point of being here is to leave it behind." Nathaniel flopped onto his back, considering the clouds until the sun came out from behind them and brightness forced him to close his eyes. "I like it here. Your dad was right. This is what I needed."

Caesar was silent, probably wondering how a person's wrist could be bruised so badly during an ordinary fight. Or perhaps he just wanted to respect Nathaniel's wishes. "Usually I hate these trips," he said eventually. "Especially the last few times. I'd rather be with my friends."

"Or Steph, I imagine."

"Yeah." The blanket rustled, the fabric beneath his back tugging a few times. When Caesar spoke again, his voice was lower, like he too had opted for a sun bath. "I'm glad you came along. Forget the family bond. I'd rather have fun."

"I'm glad you're glad," Nathaniel murmured.

Caesar laughed. "I'm glad you're glad that I'm glad."

Nathaniel's thoughts felt sluggish, his stomach full. "I'm having fun too."

The only response was a light breeze that rustled the grass around them. Then Nathaniel didn't hear much of anything, his thoughts abstract until he was no longer aware of them at all.

* * * * *

Something cold and wet splattered on his forehead, jerking him awake. The sky was gray now, just a hint of optimistic blue visible on the distant horizon. Caesar was sitting up, staring at him. Nathaniel expected him to look away, as he so often did. Not this time. Caesar watched him until a drop of rain struck his own cheek, causing him to flinch.

"I guess we should get going," Caesar said, wiping it away.

"How long was I asleep?" Nathaniel asked, head feeling light as he rose.

"An hour. Maybe more."

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

They didn’t have time to discuss it further because raindrops were coming faster now. Together they shook out the blanket, everything on it tumbling off. They stuffed the blanket messily into Caesar’s backpack, leaving little room for anything else.

“Let’s just go,” Nathaniel said, glaring up at the clouds.

“It’s a church!” Caesar insisted, crouching to pick up the litter.

The gods had a funny way of thanking him, because as soon as he was finished, the skies really opened up. Rain pummeled Nathaniel as he broke into a sprint, Caesar soon catching up and running alongside him. They were heading for the nearest line of trees, which wasn’t near at all. Nathaniel wished at least one building in this old town had survived, because they were getting seriously soaked. By the time they reached the trees, their clothes clung to their bodies. Caesar laughed, wet hair framing his face. Nathaniel grimaced, pulling at his T-shirt until it let go of his skin. At least the trees provided some shelter. Water still broke through, but it was better than nothing. Hopefully the storm would blow away so they could dry out on the way back to the campsite.

First they needed to find the path. Caesar seemed to know where to go. As they slowly picked their way over brambles and small bushes, Caesar stopped to get his bearings. He took off his glasses and wiped at them with his wet shirt, which didn’t do much except move the water around. When he put them back on, they began to fog up.

“Damn it,” he muttered, removing them again. “I hate these things! I’m getting contacts.”

“I like your glasses,” Nathaniel said.

“I like being able to see. I’ll get contacts and pop the lenses out of these so I can still wear them. Happy?”

“Thrilled.”

“Good.” Caesar folded up the glasses and shoved them in his back pocket. “You’d better lead the way. The path should be right over there.”

He was right. Soon they were on the path again, which made travelling easier but exposed them to more rain—just a drizzle now, but enough to ensure they wouldn't dry out. After the better part of an hour, the clouds finally parted. The sun was too low in the sky to provide heat, but exertion helped. Half an hour later, Nathaniel was feeling warm. Odd then that Caesar was shivering visibly. All the weight and muscle Nathaniel had put on over the last year might be useless against Dwight, but apparently it protected him against the cold.

"You okay?" Nathaniel asked, bringing them to a halt.

Caesar nodded, putting on his glasses again. This time they didn't fog up. "I'm okay."

"Try saying that without your teeth chattering."

Caesar ignored him, glancing around. "Does this look familiar to you?"

"A bunch of pine trees, a few squirrels, and the occasional armadillo? Yup."

"Seriously," Caesar said. "What about the big rock where I stopped to tie my shoes? Remember? We should have passed that by now. Do you remember seeing it?"

"No." Nathaniel looked farther down the path, just in case it was there waiting for them.

"I would have seen that, even with my glasses off." Caesar stopped shivering long enough to scan their surroundings. "Maybe this is the wrong path."

"There's more than one?"

"Yeah."

"How many?"

"I'm not sure," Caesar said, giving up and turning to him. "I wish we hadn't left our phones behind."

"There's no reception out here," Nathaniel reminded him. "I don't know about you, but I don't feel like backtracking for more than an hour. This path has to end up somewhere, right?"

"I guess so."

Nathaniel led by example, setting off down the path again. After what felt like another half hour, he stopped. The sky above

was growing dark, the path they were walking becoming thinner, as if less traversed. He was starting to wonder if this path didn't lead *to* somewhere, but *away* from somewhere instead.

He turned to find Caesar hugging himself, his normally olive skin a paler shade than normal. "You're still wet!"

"A little. This shirt is made from sponge or something crazy. Maybe I should take it off."

"Do it." Nathaniel unshouldered the backpack, shoving the trash to one side so he could pull out the blanket. "Here." He stepped forward, wrapping Caesar's bare torso in the light material. That would probably be enough, but he gave into temptation, pulling Caesar close and putting arms around him. "Just warming you up," he said.

"Thanks," Caesar responded.

Nathaniel breathed in, as if concerned by their situation. He was, but he also yearned to inhale the scent of Caesar's skin. At the moment it smelled like rain water with a hint of sweat, a combination he didn't mind at all.

"What are we going to do?" Caesar murmured. "I don't think this is the right way."

"I don't know," Nathaniel replied, forcing himself to focus on the matter at hand. What choice was there besides turning around? No other paths had crossed this one. They could only backtrack to the open field, find the original path, and go from there. Reaching the ghost town originally had taken hours. That, added to how long they traveled in the wrong direction, meant they would be walking in the dark long before they got back to camp, increasing their chances of becoming lost again. Surely if they kept walking, they would reach a river or— "Hold still," he said. "Listen."

Caesar forced himself to stop shivering. Nathaniel held his breath. There! Off in the distance! Maybe it was just wishful thinking, but it sounded like tires cruising along a gravel road.

"Did you hear that?" Nathaniel asked.

"Maybe," Caesar said.

Nathaniel released him and stepped back. "Either you heard it or you didn't."

"I don't know. Over there, maybe?" Caesar nodded in the direction Nathaniel thought he had heard a vehicle.

That was all the confirmation he needed. They would have to leave the path, but it was worth the risk. "Keep the blanket around you and pay attention to where we're going in case we need to backtrack."

"Maybe we should do that now," Caesar said.

"Ten minutes. If we don't find anything, we'll turn back.

Caesar didn't seem convinced, but he nodded. Nathaniel led the way, moving as fast he could now that he was on a time limit. He kept checking his watch, not saying anything when they reached the ten minute mark. He pushed it another five, about to admit defeat when he noticed a crushed beer can on the ground. He glanced upward, the dwindling light slightly brighter just ahead. After pushing past a few more trees, they stumbled out onto a road.

This road wasn't built for high traffic, so he wasn't worried about them getting run over. No pavement or painted lines. Just flattened beige dirt and a bunch of small stones. They celebrated regardless, Nathaniel whooping and jumping around while Caesar grinned at him.

"Okay," Nathaniel said once he calmed down. "Which way to the campsite?"

"Forget that," Caesar said. "Take me to the nearest hotel. I want a hot shower!"

Nathaniel filed away that fantasy for later. He considered the setting sun, determined that direction was west, and admitted to himself that knowing the cardinal direction didn't help one bit. Then again, they were walking toward the sun earlier in the day, so heading away from the sunset might make sense. Without mentioning his flimsy reasoning, Nathaniel led them down the road, hoping with each curve that they would see some encouraging sign. They didn't. Just more trees and dirt. Hope was beginning to ebb when the road behind them lit up. A car!

Or an old pickup truck, as it turned out. Nathaniel stepped in front of Caesar, waving it down. The vehicle wasn't travelling fast, so the driver didn't have to slow much to stop. Nathaniel went around to the window, seeing a face tanned by a lifetime spent in the sun. Old gray eyes looked over both of them. Then the man spat off to the side with practiced skill.

"You boys look like you've survived a shipwreck, which is odd, because we're a long way from the sea."

"We were just—" Caesar began.

"Looking for the campsite when you got lost?" The old man seemed amused. "You ain't the first, you won't be the last. Hop in."

* * * * *

"I can't believe he knew the name of the ghost town and everything!" Caesar raved. If the tent was taller, he'd probably be pacing back and forth. As it was, he stood on his knees, his gestures animated. "Warton. What a name!"

"Like the town had been a wart on Texas," Nathaniel said with a smile.

"Until it was burned off."

Caesar wasn't just being poetic. From the old man who had given them a ride, they had learned that Warton's population had dwindled to almost nothing before a fire spread across the town, reducing the remainder to ash. The old man had also told them his grandfather had lived and farmed there, so while the town might not have survived, its descendants still formed its legacy.

Once the old man dropped them off at the campsite, and Caesar was showered and dressed in dry clothing, he told their story to his family, making it sound like some grand adventure. In truth they had only stumbled around in the woods for a few hours, soaking wet, but his enthusiasm was contagious. Best of all, the ice was broken between them. Whether the experience itself or Nathaniel's openness had done the job, he wasn't sure. Regardless, he was in Caesar's inner circle now. No more clamming up. No more averted gazes.

“What now?” Caesar asked, glancing around the tent. They had their own, and aside from a couple of sleeping bags, an electric lamp, and privacy, they didn’t have much to work with.

“What now?” Nathaniel repeated with an incredulous twist. “You’re ready for the next adventure already?”

Caesar grinned at him. “Sure!”

“I’m ready to sleep,” Nathaniel said. “It’s late.”

Caesar groaned, as if disappointed. Then he stripped off his shirt, tossing it casually aside before reaching for his jeans. “What about tomorrow?”

Nathaniel forced himself to focus on unzipping his sleeping bag. “Up to you. Maybe we’ll go back to Warton. But at night, this time. We’ll hang out in the graveyard, light some candles, spill some blood. Then we’ll see if any ghosts want to share their secrets with us.”

“Dude,” Caesar said. “You’re freaking me out. Seriously.”

Nathaniel smirked. “Don’t like ghost stories?”

“Nope.”

He looked over to find Caesar already in his sleeping bag, his jeans a crumpled pile next to him. He didn’t see any underwear, but that still seemed awfully undressed for a chilly spring night. Nathaniel left his clothes on and reached to turn off the lamp. A few minutes later, he started sweating. Whatever material these bags were made of, they were hardcore. He squirmed out of his to shed some clothes.

“What are you doing?” Caesar whispered.

“Getting naked.”

“These sleeping bags are hot, huh?”

“Yeah.”

The silence was thick with sexual tension, even if it was one-sided. Stripping down to his underwear this close to Caesar felt erotic. Nathaniel started to hurry, becoming aroused and wishing he had taken care of business in the communal shower room earlier. Maybe he could wait until Caesar fell asleep or—

“Hey.”

Nathaniel made sure he was back in his sleeping bag before he answered. "What?"

"You're not alone."

Nathaniel scrunched up his face in confusion, despite his expression being invisible in the dark. "Huh?"

"What you said earlier, about being gay. You're not alone."

Pep talk. That was sweet, but he didn't need it. "Okay," Nathaniel replied, rolling over and getting comfortable. His eyes shot open soon after. Was Caesar simply trying to cheer him up? Or was there more to it? "I know there are other gay people," he whispered. "I told you, I've been on dates and stuff."

A long pause. Had Caesar fallen asleep? No. "There was this guy I met once. Well, I didn't *meet* him. I called an ambulance because my grandma was having a stroke and he picked me up— Not like that! I don't mean he flirted with me. Ugh, I'm telling it all wrong."

Nathaniel tried not to laugh. "You met a paramedic once, and he turned out to be gay. Unless you've got his email address for me, I don't see your point."

"That's not what I was trying to say."

Caesar sounded hurt, so Nathaniel made sure his voice was softer when he spoke. "Try again."

"He was beautiful," Caesar said hurriedly. "Even though he was only in my life a few minutes, I never stopped thinking about him."

A guy calling another guy beautiful... That didn't happen often. Any guy could tell if another was hot and might mention that in conversation. *Johnny Depp sure is a good-looking motherfucker. Guy probably gets all the girls!* Banter like that didn't raise red flags. But a gentle word like 'beautiful,' was something different. Still, Nathaniel didn't leap to any conclusions, despite being tempted.

"There's a difference between admiring a guy and finding him attractive."

"Sometimes it's both."

"But you and Steph..."

“I love her,” Caesar said. “I’m into girls. Especially her. But I’ve always noticed guys too. I used to think I lacked a filter or just hadn’t made up my mind about who I am. But I don’t wonder anymore. Like I said... Sometimes it’s both.”

Bisexual? Nathaniel felt like sighing and groaning at the same time. Over the past few weeks, he had wished more than once that they were compatible, that Caesar was gay. He should have been more specific because he got his wish. He and Caesar *could* be together. Except Caesar already had someone he loved. The revelation was bittersweet. Mostly bitter though.

“Nathaniel?” Caesar said.

“Hm?” he managed.

“I’m really glad we met.”

Nathaniel kept his expression neutral. When he remembered he couldn’t be seen, he allowed the pain to show. “Yeah. Me too.”

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