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Chapter Four

Nathaniel stood outside Rebecca's house, buzzing with energy. The last day of spring break was usually depressing, since it meant returning to school. The next hiatus wouldn't be until summer, and with college looming, the future seemed a very stressful place. Nathaniel now felt ready to take it on. His trip with the Hubbards—with Caesar—had refueled him. The family outings had been nice enough. Horseback riding, grilling huge meals in the afternoons, or taking a boat out on the lake—all of that had been great. But what Nathaniel loved most were the countless hours spent talking to Caesar.

His shy guy was long gone. They didn't have enough time or oxygen for all the words they wanted to share. No longer were they strangers. Nathaniel knew a lot about Caesar, even dumb stuff like his severe allergy, which made it impossible to have pets. Or his passion for wrestling—not just the sport but its history, everything except for the costumed variety on television. Or little embarrassing truths, like how prone he was to nightmares, Caesar shaking him awake more than once in the middle of the night. Nathaniel never minded. Back at home he woke up at least once an hour, checking the door to make sure it was still shut and doing a quick sweep of the room to ensure he was safe. He was used to a living nightmare, so mere dreams were easy. Nathaniel would make conversation to distract Caesar, waiting for him to calm down enough to sleep. What Nathaniel really wanted was to comfort him physically. Surely his arms could do a better job than his clumsy words.

Unfortunately, the one topic that came up most often was Steph. Caesar really cared for her. This knowledge didn't dampen Nathaniel's spirit. He had finally met a guy he liked, one he couldn't stop staring at. Nathaniel couldn't wait to share the news with Rebecca. She'd be thrilled for him!

When she opened the front door, her smile wasn't quite as broad as his. She accepted his hug, but instead of leading him upstairs to her bedroom as usual, she pulled the door behind her closed and walked to the cast iron furniture off to one side. She sat in a chair, placing her hands in her lap.

"Have a good time?" she asked.

"Yeah!" Nathaniel said, too excited to sit. "You wouldn't believe all the stuff we did, but honestly, the best part was Caesar. We really hit it off, and get this: He's bisexual!" Rebecca frowned. He pressed on anyway. "You wouldn't believe how nice he is. Sensitive too. I guess that's not so surprising, since it took him forever to stop being shy. Now he's really..."

Nathaniel trailed off. Rebecca had looked away and no longer seemed to be listening. Her mouth was set in a way normally reserved for when kids at school made fun of her.

"You okay?" he asked. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing happened!" Rebecca snapped. "That's what sucks! We had all those plans together, and you totally ditched me so you could run off with some guy you're crushing on. Now you show up here, and all you're doing is bragging about hooking up with him!"

"That's not what happened," Nathaniel said. "He's got a girlfriend. We're not together."

"Gee, too bad," Rebecca said sarcastically. "You could still show a little tact and not brag about how awesome your spring break was when mine totally sucked."

Nathaniel grimaced. "You're right." He angled one of the chairs to face her before sitting. "I'm being a dick. I'm sorry. But you know why I bailed on you. Even with all our plans, there was still a chance that Dwight—"

"I know," Rebecca said. Then she exhaled. "Part of me was happy knowing you were safe. The rest was bored out of my mind."

"That bad?"

"Worse. My mom got on this kick about how I'm going off to college soon, and decided we needed to spend quality time together. That meant visiting an arts and crafts fair at the public library. Or taking stupid square dancing lessons."

Nathaniel tried not to laugh. "Seriously?"

Rebecca's features tensed. "Yes!"

Nathaniel tried a more sympathetic tone. "I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you somehow, I swear."

"You're taking me on a date," Rebecca announced. "You don't have to put out, but I want dinner. And a movie. You're also taking me to the prom."

Nathaniel grinned. "It's a deal."

Rebecca eyed him a moment, then became more friendly. "The break wasn't a total bust. The acceptance letters were exciting. Who did you hear back from?"

"I don't know," he said. "I haven't been home yet."

"Really? You came to see me first?" Rebecca smiled. "Of course you only wanted to brag, but I'll still take it as a compliment."

"Your turn. Tell me everything you learned about square dancing. No, forget that. Just show me your new moves."

She shook her head, then invited him to her bedroom. There they lay on her bed and went through her acceptance letters one by one. They had made sure to apply to the same schools, hoping to enter college together. She didn't have a response from every school, but she did save the best letter for last.

"Oh, and here's one more," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "Some no-name school on the East Coast. What were they called? Ah, I remember! Yale."

Nathaniel's jaw dropped. Then he snatched the letter from her. After absorbing its contents he handed it back with more reverence. "Makes your decision easy."

"Not necessarily," Rebecca said with a casual shrug. "We'll see."

"What's there to see?" he asked incredulously.

Her freckled cheeks grew a little red. "If they accepted you too."

"No way," he said, shaking his head. He wasn't going to let her feelings for him ruin an opportunity like this. "You're going. There's no way in hell you're not."

"And what if I don't, *Dad*? What are you going to do? Ground me?"

"You're going," he said, ignoring her sarcasm. "I won't be the one to mess this up for you."

"Then you'd better get accepted too."

They talked over her news a little longer, Nathaniel's anticipation about his own results increasing until he couldn't wait anymore. After a kiss on the cheek, he headed home to see if he had any mail. The usual anxiety he felt when nearing his house was absent today, replaced by dreams of the future and a longing to see his mother. He found her in the living room, flipping through channels on the big screen TV. When she heard him, her head turned, surprise registering before joy. One hand pushed a button to silence the television as she stood. She only managed a few steps because Nathaniel got there first, hugging her and lifting her off her feet.

His mother laughed, then winced as he squeezed, so he set her down gently.

"Sorry," he said. "I forget my own strength."

"Maybe take it easy on those weights," Star said, placing a hand on one of his cheeks. "Look how much sun you got! And when's the last time you shaved? You look like Paul Bunyan."

"Rugged, isn't it?" Nathaniel rubbed the scruff. He hadn't grown a real beard, but he still felt proud.

"Sit down and tell me all about your trip," his mother said. "Oh, are you hungry? There's a cucumber salad in the fridge or—"

"Yuck."

“—or I can nuke you a chicken pot pie.”

“That sounds better.”

Half an hour later, Nathaniel was sitting at the kitchen table, a scraped clean cardboard pie tray in front of him. He had managed to eat and tell his mother the highlights of the trip at the same time, which is probably why she kept making faces. For once she didn't chastise his table manners, clearly happy to have him back.

“What's been going on here?” he asked.

His mother sighed, looking weary. “Your brother lost his job.”

Cold dread hit his stomach. “Already? What happened?”

“Dwight got into an argument with a client. You know his temper. He actually—” His mother pressed her lips together and shook her head. “He forced the customer from the car he was trying to sell and told him to leave if he didn't agree with the price.”

She wasn't doing the story justice. Nathaniel could visualize how it probably really happened. The customer was behind the wheel of a car—maybe on the showroom floor or out on the lot. In the process of trying to haggle down the price, he must have injured Dwight's ego, so his brother grabbed the man by the arm and yanked him out of the car and to the ground, no doubt swearing at the top of his lungs as he did so.

“It's still not clear if the customer is going to press charges,” Star continued. “I almost hope he does. I feel terrible for saying that, but maybe going to court is the wakeup call your brother needs.”

“Do you think he'll go to jail?” Nathaniel said.

“For something so small?” Her forehead crinkled with worry. “I hope not! Anyway, I'm glad you're home. It's been a nightmare around here lately. I need you by my side.” She reached across the table to take his hand.

Nathaniel's eyes met hers. “I'm here.”

“Good. Your father had to take an emergency trip to the Oklahoma City clinic. One of the managers there went AWOL, but not before disappearing with most of the schedule two narcotics. He's looking forward to seeing you. He'll be home later tonight.”

“Where’s Dwight?”

Star frowned. “Probably drunk somewhere. He brought around a new girl who smelled like a distillery. I found a bunch of empty bottles in his room too, so it looks like he’s got a new hobby. I told him if he’s so interested in binge drinking, that he should have gone to college.” The tension in her face disappeared. “Hey, speaking of which, you’ve got mail!”

Four envelopes. As soon as his mother set them on the table, Nathaniel grabbed them and stood, heading for the kitchen door.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“My room.”

“But I want to know what they say!” she called after him.

“I’ll show you later.” He hurried to the hallway before she could complain further. He couldn’t open them in front of her, mostly because she could read him like a book. The slightest hint of disappointment would have her trying to comfort him, which tended to make him feel worse. He needed to do this alone.

Once shut safely in his bedroom, he placed all four envelopes facedown on the bed. Then he picked up the first, opening it even after he saw it wasn’t from the college he was hoping for. Funny, because when he sent out the applications, he didn’t have a strong preference. He wanted to be out of state. Simple as that. Now everything had changed, and why?

Yale, or more accurately, the people who would be going there. Rebecca of course, but she would probably follow him to any college he chose. If not—as much as he really did like her—Nathaniel was accustomed to saying goodbye to friends. Only one person tipped the balance. Maybe he was still high from the carefree days of the camping trip, but he very much liked the idea of Caesar showing up at the same college a couple of years after him, a nervous freshman on a big scary campus. Never fear, because Nathaniel would be there to take him under his wing.

The fantasy filled his chest with yearning. Nathaniel flipped over the second letter. No luck. He opened it anyway, reading it carefully, like a birthday card, when all he really wanted to do was rip open the next present. Or in this case the next letter, which

he soon did, his disappointment tripling. He had been accepted. That was great. Just not to the right school.

He eyed the final letter, all of his hopes now resting on it. His pulse was racing as he used one finger to flip it over. Once his eyes focused on the return address, he sighed. Not Yale. Feeling dejected, he opened it, finding his fourth acceptance. Four out of four. Most people would be jumping with joy. Nathaniel just sat on his bed, reading through the letter. Then he made himself go through them all again, trying to imagine himself at each place. He even booted up his laptop, looking at the official websites. After half an hour, he went to Yale's website instead, unsuccessfully trying to discover if all admission invitations had been sent out.

He shut his laptop and gathered up the letters. His mother would want to hear the news. He wandered down the hall, passing the master bedroom, and heard the water running in the bathroom beyond. The door to the hallway was still open. He could see his mother standing in front of the mirror. She still had on her bra, thank goodness, and the jeans from earlier. College talk could wait. He was turning to go back to his room when something caught his eye. His mother was twisting at the waist, jutting one shoulder forward so she could see the back of her arm in the reflection.

He noticed the spots first, dark ovals the shape of flattened olives. Or fingerprints. As if someone had pressed the tips of each finger in a pad of ink, then touched her arm—or grabbed it, the way Dwight had grabbed his wrist, the muscles of his forearm flexing. Exactly like that. Nathaniel thought he could see lighter lines, showing where the fingers had squeezed, so he stepped forward for a closer look.

His mother noticed him and swiped a robe off a nearby hook to slip it on, which was odd, because Nathaniel had seen her in her bra plenty of times. He never thought much of it, and neither did she. Not normally. Now she was tying the robe closed and looking displeased.

"How about some privacy?" she said. "I'm trying to take a bath here."

"The door was open," Nathaniel said, his eyes still on the spot where he'd seen the bruises, even though it was covered now. "Your arm..."

Star's expression became neutral. Remarkably neutral, in the way most people appeared only when sleeping. "What?"

"Your arm," Nathaniel repeated. "What happened?"

Star studied him in silence, then sat on the edge of the tub, shutting off the tap and moving her hand through the water to stir it. Her answer came, but only after a lengthy pause. "Oh, you mean the bruises? Take a beginner at yoga, make her eight months pregnant, and then get an instructor dumb enough to show her the tree pose. The only thing I did right was keeping my balance when she grabbed me on the way down." Still his mother studied the water, weaving her hand along the currents she had created.

"Can I see?" he asked.

She finally looked up at him. "Stop being weird. So what's the news?"

"News?"

"Your colleges. Which ones accepted you?"

"All of them."

"All of them?" Star sat up straight, pulling her hand from the water. "My gosh! There's so much to discuss! Have you chosen one yet? Forget my bath. We've got your future to plan!"

"No," Nathaniel said, not matching her smile. "It's all right. Enjoy your bath. We can talk about it afterwards."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

Nathaniel couldn't be sure, but just before he turned and left the room, he thought he detected a hint of relief. Or maybe that's how he felt, because he needed time to think this through, to let his emotions come unhindered without having to hide them. Or emotion, singular, because at the moment his only dancing partner was fear. This tango had been going on for a long time, most recently while camping with the Hubbards. A little voice in

the back of his mind always wondered who would be his replacement. Who would fulfill the role of punching bag while he was away? Dwight's girlfriend of the week? What about those times when he was single? When Nathaniel was away at college, who would bear the brunt of so much rage?

His mother. Nathaniel had never wanted to believe it. Parents were authority figures, not to be messed with. Like striking a police officer, only the deranged would attempt such a thing. But those bruises on her arm, the silence before her answer, the way she had winced when Nathaniel had hugged her...

Blood became a drum in his ears, a steady beat that refused to cease. Anger. Dull disbelieving anger. Somehow he still functioned, some distant part of him conversing with his mother when she came to his room. Which campus was the most beautiful, which town would be the most fun to live in, where was he most likely to meet the right sort of guy? Playful discussions, the kind that made his mother feel like his best friend. He was beginning to fear they had a little too much in common. Eventually she went to start dinner. Nathaniel began to wait. At first in the living room, his ears tuned to the driveway, listening for the sound of a car's engine. When it came, the drums picked up the beat, but the person who entered was his father. Nathaniel greeted him, even managing a smile, then watched as his parents embraced, kissing affectionately. At least with his father home, she was safe. That's what he tried to tell himself, but he knew it didn't work that way. How often had Dwight found ways of hurting him, regardless of their parents being just one room over?

Waiting. During dinner. While watching a movie afterwards. In a silent living room once his parents had gone to sleep. He even went inside Dwight's room, a place forbidden to him. Nathaniel hadn't stepped foot in there for years. Doing so was to invoke wrath, but now Nathaniel welcomed conflict. He sat surrounded by clutter, his brother's room representative of his ugly insides. Unlike his handsome face, the wrinkled dirty laundry on the floor, the drywall with a hole punched through it, the dusty blinds

hanging askew over the window to obscure the daylight—all these things reflected who Dwight truly was. A fucked-up mess.

Nathaniel remained there, waiting, even stretching out on the bed and closing his eyes, tempting fate. But he didn't sleep. When he finally returned to his own room, he didn't find any respite from his violent fantasies or the ceaseless drumming in his ears. Is this how Dwight felt all the time? Is that what drove him to lash out so often? Had he somehow passed on this disease to Nathaniel?

When dawn came, he rose and showered, checking his brother's room once more. Empty. He ate breakfast and waited until the very last moment before leaving the house. His brother had to come home eventually. Then he would pay. School dragged on, Nathaniel barely aware of his surroundings, completely missing his teachers' lectures. Instead his mind entertained various nightmares. Maybe the camping trip with the Hubbards hadn't been the trigger that turned his mother into a victim. Maybe Dwight had been hurting her all this time, both her and Nathaniel keeping the same secret from each other.

When the school day ended, he didn't even consider driving to Caesar's house. A single desire pumped through his heart, compensating for his lack of sleep, his entire being fueled by hate. He returned home to find his brother's car in the driveway. The sound of the television led him to the living room. With their parents both at work, he knew it could only be one person. In his mind, he saw a flash of his mother arguing with Dwight, pleading with him to get his life together before his brother had grabbed her by the arms and shaken her, spittle flying from Dwight's mouth, tears from his mother's eyes.

Nathaniel strode into the living room, standing directly in front of the coffee table, blocking the view of the television. Dwight's eyes were bloodshot, like he'd been up all night drinking. Indeed, when he spoke, Nathaniel could smell stale alcohol.

"You've got five seconds to get the fuck out of this room."

Nathaniel didn't budge, barely even heard him, because a whole drum circle was pounding in his head now. "I know about the bruises," he growled. "On Mom's arm. I saw them."

He stared straight into his brother's eyes and saw a flicker of recognition. Understanding. Something else was there too. What the hell was that? "You saw?"

"Stand up," Nathaniel said.

"Why?"

"Stand up!" Nathaniel noticed a glass of water on the table and picked it up. He needed all his willpower not to pitch it like a baseball. How satisfying it would be to see the glass shatter against Dwight's head! Instead he tossed the contents at his brother, the water splaying into his chin and soaking his T-shirt. That's all it took. The uneasy expression left Dwight's eyes, replaced by fire. The bull was ready to charge.

"You little shit!"

As Dwight stood, Nathaniel grabbed the edge of the coffee table and yanked, jerking it out of the way. His brother was reaching for him, hands still open. Didn't he know this was a fight? Nathaniel didn't hold back. He balled up a fist and swung, a lunge that struck the side of Dwight's neck. Those bloodshot eyes looked ready to spurt. Now it was a fight! Dwight snarled and attacked, fist curving toward his head. Nathaniel had no choice but to take the blow. He was good at handling pain, thanks to his brother. All that mattered was keeping his balance so he could retaliate. Dwight struck him in the cheek, rattling his skull, but Nathaniel barely blinked. He kept his eyes focused on his brother's position, put all the force he could muster into his arm, and swung. When his fist connected with his brother's head, it sounded like a thunder clap. To Dwight it must have been even louder, because Nathaniel got him right in the ear. He'd been hoping to strike his jaw but Dwight had pulled back and—

He was swaying! Dwight was still drunk or that punch really had been something. Nathaniel wasn't taking any chances. He swung with his left, then his right, striking two more blows. When Dwight stumbled backward, tripping over one corner of the coffee

table, Nathaniel popped him right in the mouth. His brother hit the floor, landing on his ass, his head bouncing off one of the sofa cushions and resting there, like he'd decided to watch TV sitting on the carpet.

He was down, but the drums were still beating in Nathaniel's head. Every instance of terror he had felt: the endless wondering of when the next attack would come, what form the abuse would take, if Dwight would push things far enough to kill him. His mother wincing when Nathaniel hugged her, or twisting to see the bruises on her arm. All these sickly visions, all those boiling emotions, were ready to erupt outward at last.

Nathaniel was on his knees. He didn't remember how he got there, but his brother's body was below him, that stupid handsome face sneering at him. But not for long. Nathaniel swung. Again and again and again. Nathaniel's vision became a blur, but he could still hear the smacking noises, feel something wet and hot on his knuckles, even registered the strangled animal noises his brother was making. A plea for mercy? A defiant roar? He didn't care. All that mattered were the memories flashing through his mind and the nightmares that haunted his future.

"Stooooop!"

The sound was like a wounded animal. A bleating lamb. Nathaniel blinked, his arms losing strength. Dwight's eyes were wide with fear. Nathaniel had never seen him afraid. His right eyebrow was cut open, blood trickling down his face. Another crimson river was pouring from his left nostril. His bottom lip was split. The rest of his skin looked pink, one of his eyes already puffing shut.

Nathaniel scurried backward, wanting to get away from this abomination. Then he stood, still staring at the sniffing, gasping mess that was his brother. He kept standing there, mostly because he wondered if Dwight was going to survive. As his breaths became less ragged, Nathaniel's anger clawed away at his brief concern.

"If you ever touch her again..." he began.

“I didn’t touch her!” Dwight spat, saliva and blood dribbling down his chin and staining his shirt. “She’s our mother!”

“I’m your brother, but that never stopped you.”

Dwight shook his head wearily. “I never touched her.”

“Then how’d she get those bruises?”

Dwight looked away, but not before Nathaniel saw the strange reaction again. His stomach sank. The question wasn’t how. The question was who. Dwight knew about their mother getting hurt, but if it wasn’t him—

“Dad.” Nathaniel whispered the word, feeling punched in the stomach.

Dwight laughed humorlessly. “They always sheltered you. God forbid their precious baby see the truth! I’m the one who had to deal with all their shit. I was what—six years old the first time I saw it?”

“Saw what?” Nathaniel said.

“Him slapping her around like a whore.” Dwight wiped at his mouth, wincing with pain and grimacing when he looked at his hand and saw blood. Then he glared up at Nathaniel, some of that fire returning. “Want a demonstration?”

Dwight slowly got to his feet. Then he staggered back and flopped down on the couch. “I’m going to kill you,” he said, on the verge of tears. “You might have got the drop on me, but I’m going to fucking kill you!”

Nathaniel watched him a moment longer, not doubting the truth of those words. Some mad part of him even considered getting there first. But he didn’t have it in him. That compassion would probably cost him his life. Dwight would heal, then find some way of killing Nathaniel. Who could he turn to for help? His father, who had some incomprehensible dark side? His mother, who was too weak to protect either of them? This house wasn’t safe. He couldn’t stay here.

Nathaniel turned and left the living room, patting his jeans pocket to make sure his car keys were there. As he reached the front door, his brother shouted after him, repeating the words that ensured Nathaniel would never return.

"I'm going to fucking kill you!"

* * * * *

Nathaniel stood in front of an elegant front door, the dark wood polished, gold metal framing the delicate windows. He touched the brass knocker with a finger crusted with maroon smears and felt bewildered by the contrast between two worlds. He had just come from Hell, and here was a place tranquil and perfect. The stillness of the neighborhood, the manicured lawns all around him, were almost upsetting in their serenity. He wanted to disappear into this world, but felt forever marked by what he'd been through. Damned.

He missed the anger. Without it he was left shaken. Could it be true? Had his father been abusing his mother all these years? On the drive over, he tried to convince himself his brother was lying, that all of this was calculated to hurt him. Dwight had never relied on mind games before. His abuse was always physical. This wasn't his style, nor was how he had looked away, like he too was eager to deny. To flip the switch.

Nathaniel tried to do the same and couldn't. Not yet. The pain was too fresh. He needed a safe place where he could calm down. He needed protection. Who could he turn to? Rebecca, of course. Or even Caesar, but neither could give him the sort of help he needed. Nathaniel grasped the knocker and used it. Three short raps. The door swung open half a minute later, Caesar grinning at him.

"Why didn't you use the doorbell?"

Nathaniel swallowed against the lump in his throat. "I need to talk to your father."

"What? Why?"

Caesar looked him over and noticed his hands, gawking a moment before taking a few steps back. The door was still open, so Nathaniel made this an invitation. When he shut the door behind him and turned around, Caesar's eyes were wide.

"Are you okay?"

"Your dad," Nathaniel said. "Go get him. Please."

After more hesitation, Caesar spun around and went down the hall. When he returned, he was behind his father. Mr. Hubbard walked right up to him, his voice gentle.

“Let me see.”

Nathaniel held up his hands. He’d noticed when gripping the steering wheel that some of his knuckles were cut open. All of them had begun to swell. Mr. Hubbard examined them, then turned to his son.

“Why don’t you go to the kitchen and make us some coffee?”

“How?” Caesar said. Then to Nathaniel, “Do you even drink coffee? Are you okay?”

“Now,” Mr. Hubbard said. Caesar loitered a moment longer. Then he slinked away. “Care to join me in my office?”

Nathaniel nodded, then followed Mr. Hubbard to the place where they always talked. Once the door was shut and they were seated, Mr. Hubbard offered him a sympathetic expression. “Looks like your brother pushed you too far this time.”

Nathaniel tried to respond, but his voice only squeaked. After composing himself, the story came pouring out. All of it, even the ugliest, most shameful details that he hadn’t dealt with yet.

“I don’t know what do to,” Nathaniel finished. “I ruined everything.”

Mr. Hubbard cleared his throat. “No reasonable person could blame you for what happened.” They were interrupted by a knock on the door. Mr. Hubbard went to answer it. A hushed conversation followed, and when Mr. Hubbard returned, he was carrying two steaming mugs. “Do you drink coffee?”

Nathaniel shook his head.

Mr. Hubbard set one of the mugs in front of him, then leaned against the desk. “Now’s a good time to start. Coffee is one of life’s little miracles. It gives you energy when you’re tired, warms you when you’re cold, and gives you something to hide behind when life keeps throwing shit your way.”

Nathaniel glanced up and managed something close to a smile. He’d never heard Mr. Hubbard curse before. Picking up the

mug, he took a small sip, wincing at the bitter taste. "Got any milk?" he asked. "Or sugar?"

Mr. Hubbard shook his head. "Always drink it black. Anything else shows a lack of commitment. You'll grow accustomed to the taste. You'll even learn to savor it. Sort of like marriage, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. Begin with coffee. You can figure out the mysteries of matrimony some other day."

Nathaniel took in the sparkling eyes, the friendly expression. "I wish you were my father. I never talk to my own. Not like this. Maybe if I did, I would have seen the truth. I thought he was a good person. I should have paid attention. For my mother. I should have known better."

Mr. Hubbard sighed. "You couldn't have. Parents have an unfair advantage. Our children can't hide anything from us, but we're exceptionally adept at keeping the truth from them. Usually with the intent to protect. There are exceptions though. Your parents didn't know about Dwight abusing you. That's about to change."

Nathaniel shook his head. "Dwight will tell them he got in a bar fight or something."

"No," Mr. Hubbard said. "They're going to hear the truth from me." He held up a hand when Nathaniel tried to protest. "They'll need a reason why you're staying here from now on."

Nathaniel stared. "What do you mean?"

"You said you feel like your home is no longer safe. I agree. Not until matters with your brother are resolved. Until then, I'd like you to stay here. It's up to you, of course, but we have a spare bedroom no one is using and—"

"Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. But I would need to talk to your parents first. About everything."

This kept his optimism in check. He wasn't escaping his problems, but at least he wouldn't have to face them alone. "Okay."

"Good." Mr. Hubbard lifted his mug of coffee, holding it up until Nathaniel did the same. "Here's to happier times."

* * * * *

Caesar was on his feet the second Nathaniel entered the dining room, like a new father waiting outside the maternity ward. Nathaniel almost expected him to ask if it was a boy or a girl.

"Is everything okay?" Caesar said. "Are you all right?"

"Everything's fine," he replied, not knowing if it was true. Elsewhere in the house, Mr. Hubbard was trying to call Nathaniel's parents. He had been given the option of staying in the office but had mumbled some excuse about an important test they needed to study for. In reality, he couldn't handle speaking to his parents yet.

Caesar's attention was on his hands. "Does it hurt?"

Nathaniel held them up, flexing his fingers, tearing the skin a little around the most damaged knuckles. "I've had worse."

"Come upstairs. I have stuff I can put on them."

"It's fine."

"Seriously. Come on."

Nathaniel followed Caesar up the stairs, wondering how to deal with his inevitable questions. He didn't want Caesar to know about his home life. Not that he didn't trust him or feel like he couldn't be open. Caesar looked up to him, which made Nathaniel feel good about himself. Proud, although he probably didn't deserve it. He didn't want to ruin that by revealing he'd been a beaten dog for most of his life, only standing up to his brother when trying to protect his mother. Even that he had gotten wrong.

"In here," Caesar said, leading him through his bedroom to the private bathroom. From under the counter he pulled out a large red case with a white cross on the front. This was no average first-aid kit with the bare necessities, rather it was a suitcase loaded with multiple kinds of gauzes and bandages, ointments and sprays. Nathaniel had trouble recognizing most of it, but Caesar seemed delighted, sifting through different items and examining some before setting them aside or putting them back in their designated places.

Nathaniel eyed the metal implements. "You aren't planning on giving me stitches, are you?"

“Do you think you need them?” Caesar asked. “I can’t sew you up, but I’ve got some butterfly bandages. Um... Mind if I take a look?”

Nathaniel leaned against the bathroom counter and held out his hands. Caesar bent over to see, but he didn’t touch them. Then he gave his diagnosis. “The dried blood probably makes it look worse. Let’s get them cleaned up. I have a spray—”

“No,” Nathaniel said, anticipating the sting. “Soap and water is fine.”

He washed his hands in the sink before Caesar could protest. This stung too, but he made sure not to show it. Shutting off the tap, he flung the water off his hands and held them up. “All better. See?”

Caesar shook his head. “Antibiotic cream will help everything heal faster.”

Nathaniel eyed him. “You’re really into this, aren’t you?”

“Yup.” Caesar’s smile was subtle as he opened a tube. “I told you about my paramedic, didn’t I?”

“You started to.”

Caesar reached out, placing a hand beneath one of Nathaniel’s to support it. The physical contact made him feel hungry. His world had always included pain, but now he was reminded of a different sort of touch.

“I was a kid,” Caesar said, gently applying ointment. “My grandma was taking care of me when she had a stroke. It was just me and her at the time, so of course I freaked out, but at least I remembered to call 911. When the ambulance came, there was this paramedic...” Caesar shook his head. “I was worried about my grandma. Don’t get me wrong. I wasn’t lusting after some dude while she was potentially taking her final breath. The attraction wasn’t sexual at all. Not at that point. Instead this guy was like a mythical hero, you know? Like he strolled out of some mysterious fog at the darkest moment of my life to save me. Or my grandma. But me too, since if she had died then... Like I said, I was just a kid, and we were all alone. That would have messed me up pretty bad, so in that way, he became my hero.”

Nathaniel felt a pang of jealousy. Partly because his own hero had always failed to show. And also because being someone else's hero must feel good. "So you wanted to be like him?"

Caesar shrugged. "Sounds dumb, I know. When I hit a certain age, I started wishing I could be *with* him instead. I never saw the guy again, but in a way, he also helped me figure out my sexuality. Funny how that works. He probably doesn't even remember me. To him it was just another work day. For me, it was life-changing."

Caesar continued smoothing in the cream, using a circular motion. If the skin beneath his touch wasn't so damaged, the experience would have been pleasurable. Even so, Nathaniel's body was beginning to react. "I think that's enough."

"Okay. A few of your knuckles will need bandages. You don't want them getting infected."

"Fine." He watched as Caesar dug through his kit again. "I'm guessing you're not going to Yale to become a paramedic. A doctor?"

Caesar didn't answer. Instead he peeled the paper off an adhesive bandage and asked a question of his own. "What happened?"

Nathaniel wanted to snap at him—tell him to mind his own business. Considering he was carefully tending to his wounds, Nathaniel decided instead to give back. Just a little. "I got in a fight with my brother."

Caesar looked up, searching his face for any damage. Or maybe for faded signs of the bruise he'd had when they'd first met. "Does that happen a lot?"

"We've never really gotten along."

Caesar was quiet while finishing his work. When he was done, he asked, "My dad is going to help you, right?"

"He's trying."

Caesar nodded. "Good."

Nathaniel shifted, uncomfortable with the topic. "What should we do now?"

"You mean for fun?" Caesar chewed his bottom lip. "Wanna watch a movie?"

"Yes. Please." Movies were the perfect medicine. No matter how bad the day, once at home and in the safety of his room, Nathaniel could lose himself in another character's life. An hour and a half of being a spy or a treasure hunter or even a starship pilot. Each had their problems, but none were as grounded in reality as his own. Trying to figure out how Godzilla could be defeated was infinitely more appealing than trying to find new ways of avoiding Dwight. Nathaniel loved losing himself in stories, and he found movies the most immersive form.

"What should we watch?" Caesar asked, leading the way back to his room.

Nathaniel flopped down on the couch. "You pick one."

"Oh." Caesar considered his DVD collection, touching one occasionally before turning around to look at him. Then he would second-guess himself and continue his search.

"There's no wrong answer," Nathaniel grumped after minutes of this. "This isn't one of our study sessions."

"Yeah, I know. Hold on. Uh... Have you seen *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*?"

"Clint Eastwood, right?"

"The cowboy?" Caesar asked, looking puzzled.

"The director, and no, I haven't seen it. Let's give it a spin."

Nathaniel wasn't into the movie at first. His knuckles were starting to ache, and his back and neck were still tense from the fight. He found himself more interested in the person sitting next to him. Nathaniel kept his head forward but stole glances at Caesar from the corner of his eye. One of the hands that had so recently been touching his was resting on Caesar's leg. Nathaniel thought about placing his own hand over it, consequences be damned, but he found himself paralyzed.

Then the movie picked up pace, and Nathaniel was swept up into the strange world of Savannah, Georgia, where every resident seemed to hide a dark secret behind a façade of manners and

etiquette. By the time the credits rolled, Nathaniel was spellbound.

“That was fucking excellent!” he said.

Caesar relaxed, as if relieved by his verdict. “I caught the second half on cable one night. It totally resonated with me.”

In what way? Did he relate to the bumbling journalist, who found himself in a world of unspoken rules? Or the drag queen, who despite all her bravado, seemed strangely vulnerable? Or maybe the male escort, who was fought over by men and women alike? Nathaniel could ask, but felt he should already know. He wanted a connection with Caesar that transcended words.

“Of course the parts about voodoo freak me out,” Caesar continued, “so I never watch it alone.”

Nathaniel made a face. “It’s not exactly a horror movie.”

“Yeah, but it is kind of a ghost story.”

Nathaniel shoved him playfully. “You’re a wimp, you know that?”

Caesar grinned. “Hey, we can’t all be bruisers.”

“Bruisers?”

“You know. A fighter.”

“You think that’s what I am?”

Caesar nodded toward his hands. “I’d say you’re pretty tough, yeah.”

Nathaniel didn’t feel that way. Not normally. Then again, he had just recently beaten the crap out of the biggest monster in his life. If only he hadn’t been replaced by another. “You’re the wrestler,” Nathaniel said. “You could probably take me in a fight.”

Caesar perked up. “You really think so?”

Nathaniel snorted. “No.”

“Sounds like a challenge to me!”

Nathaniel jerked a thumb at the floor. “Let’s go!”

Before they could get tangled up, there was a knock at the door. Caesar opened it to find Mr. Hubbard standing there. “Nathaniel. A moment, please.”

“Saved by the bell,” Nathaniel said playfully, even though his stomach was twisting up. He followed Mr. Hubbard down the hall, entering a bedroom on the left. The walls were blank, the bed and mattress bare.

Mr. Hubbard shut the door. “I spoke with your mother just now.”

Nathaniel swallowed. “What’d she say?”

“She would like to meet with you after school tomorrow. To talk things over.”

“Just her?”

Mr. Hubbard nodded. “I made sure of that. If you want me to go with you...”

“No.” Without his father or Dwight there, Nathaniel had nothing to fear. “Thanks.”

“In the meantime, you’re welcome to stay the night. We can get this room ready for you and—”

“No need,” Nathaniel said quickly. “I don’t want to make more trouble for you than I already have. I can crash in Caesar’s room tonight. If you think he won’t mind.”

Mr. Hubbard smiled. “I’m sure he’ll be thrilled by the idea. But I wanted to show you this room, because you’re welcome to it. I want you to know you have options. You have a safe place to stay for as long as you need.”

Nathaniel appreciated that, but he had bigger concerns. “What about my mother? I know it’s asking a lot, but when we talk tomorrow, I’d like to offer her a safe place too.”

Mr. Hubbard became very still. “You would need to discuss that with her first.”

“But can I make her the same offer?” Nathaniel knew he was asking a lot, but he needed to know.

Mr. Hubbard exhaled. “You really need to speak with her. She was very defensive about your father.”

That was impossible, or at the very least, a misunderstanding. His mother was probably uncomfortable discussing such things with a stranger.

“Regardless,” Mr. Hubbard said, “we’ll do what we can to help you both.”

Nathaniel felt so emotional that he had to steel himself to keep from crying. “Thank you,” he managed.

Mr. Hubbard clapped him on the shoulder. “Now, go have fun. Just don’t forget that this is a school night.”

Nathaniel nodded, headed back down the hall, and swept into Caesar’s room. “The good news is that our camping trip has been extended by one night. The bad news is that you have to sleep on the couch. Your bed is mine.”

Caesar looked him up and down. Then he smiled. “Wanna wrestle for it?”

* * * * *

Nathaniel stood by the entrance of the high school, feeling like a little kid waiting to be picked up by his parents. When his mother’s car arrived, he peered at it until certain she was alone. Then he hurried to meet her. She stepped out of the car, trying to look him over, but he didn’t give her a chance as he squeezed her close in a hug.

“I’m so sorry,” she was whispering.

Nathaniel felt like apologizing also, if only to put this whole ordeal behind them. But he couldn’t. Not until he got answers.

“Have you eaten?” his mother asked once they finished embracing. “Hop in. We’ll grab a bite to eat.”

“I have my own car,” he reminded her.

“I don’t care.” Her smile was gentle. “I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

She drove them to his favorite bar and grill. Not that he ever drank when there, but they made the best burgers. When he held open the door for her, his mother noticed his hands and gasped.

The bandages were fresh. Caesar had insisted on changing them this morning, applying fresh antibiotic cream and still behaving as if the injuries were life-threatening. He had even backed out of the promised wrestling match, too concerned about Nathaniel hurting his hands further. Nathaniel’s only concern was his own self-control, but the night had been good anyway, not

ending until nearly three in the morning. When they became too tired to talk or watch TV, Nathaniel had taken the couch, despite Caesar's insistence that the bed was big enough for two. He was right. It's just that Nathaniel knew he wouldn't find sleep there.

"You're quiet," his mother said as they waited to be seated.

"There's a lot on my mind," he said, feeling guilty for not considering more important matters. "We need to talk."

"First we eat." They followed the hostess to a booth, Nathaniel frustrated by the typical restaurant rituals but happy when their food finally came and the waiter left them alone. His mother seemed more concerned with making sure he ate than with discussing anything, but for once he understood. She appeared gaunt. Star was normally so pretty and vibrant, but now... Maybe knowing the truth made the difference. Nathaniel felt like reaching across to tug up her shirt sleeve, wanting to see if the bruises were still there or if any new ones had been added.

They ate mostly in silence, their worry for each other deepening. Then Star pushed away her unfinished food and sighed. "Your brother needed stitches."

"Awesome."

Her eyes searched his features. "You're a good boy. Or man, I should say. You've always been a good person, so I know in my heart that you have a reason for what you did. Talk to me. I need to hear your side of the story."

"What did Dwight say?"

"It doesn't matter. Tell me what happened."

"The same that's always happened. What would have kept happening, if I didn't do something to stop it." Nathaniel struggled to sum up years worth of fear and pain. "This has been going on a long time."

"How long?"

"Since I was a kid."

Star's expression was pure anguish. "When you got that bruise on your cheek, I *knew* something was wrong. I thought maybe—"

"That Dad was hitting me? Like he does you?"

His mother's cheeks were pale. "Your father never hit me. Not like that. He might lose his temper on occasion..." She shook her head. "I thought maybe kids at school were giving you a hard time. Because of who you are. But—"

"It's Dwight," Nathaniel said. "It's always been Dwight, and as far as I can tell, he doesn't need a reason for hating me. Or for hitting me."

"He's your brother!"

The way she said this sounded like a desperate plea for the world to make sense again. Nathaniel could sympathize. Over the years, he'd observed other pairs of siblings, and while not always on the friendliest of terms, their relationships weren't nearly as screwed up. Or as violent. So he tried to explain how it had all begun, how bullying had escalated into constant abuse. By the time he was finished, her hands were trembling as she wiped away tears.

"Why didn't you say anything?" she asked. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"What would you have done? Grounded him? It never made a difference. He always found some new way of making me suffer."

"Had we known, we wouldn't have let it go on like this."

Nathaniel crossed his arms over his chest. "You know now. What are you going to do about it?"

His mother turned away to blow her nose. When finished, she still looked shaken. "He has to go. He's old enough that he should be out of the house. He'll get his own place and—"

"—show up at the house one day when you're not there or wait until a family get-together before pulling me aside to choke me or some other nightmare he's cooked up. You can't do anything. No one can. The only solution is for me to leave. That's the only option. For both of us."

"Nate." His mother looked at him like he was being silly.

"What? Are you seriously going to feel sorry for me when the same thing is happening to you? They're monsters! Both of them."

"Dwight has always had emotional problems, but your father... You know how hard he works for the family, and on

occasion, *very rare* occasions, he crosses a line. Each time he does, I make sure to let him know how displeased I am. How unacceptable that is."

"Which stops him from doing it again?" Nathaniel leaned forward, his voice cracking. "We can escape. Together. The Hubbards are willing to take in both of us. I talked to them about it. We don't have to live like this anymore. No more fear. No more pain."

His mother smiled at him, as if he was being sweet, like he had just recited a poem he'd written as a Mother's Day present. "I love you, honey. But I'm not living in fear. Or pain. Your father and I love and respect each other. We failed you. I see that now. We should have realized sooner that something was wrong, but we will fix this."

"*He hits you,*" Nathaniel stressed, the words making his heart ache.

"He doesn't hit me," Star said in hushed tones, glancing around the restaurant. "He might grab me too hard or—"

"Slap you around? That's what Dwight said he saw. When he was a kid." Nathaniel clenched his jaw a few times. "I always wondered what made him so messed up. Maybe that's the reason."

"I don't know what he thought he saw," Star said, "but he was mistaken."

"Bruises don't lie. Whatever Dad does to you, it's wrong."

His mother stared at the table, lost in thought.

"Please," Nathaniel pleaded. "Please come with me! We'll get away from them both."

She remained silent a little longer. When she looked up again, she seemed determined. "Every family goes through rough patches. This is ours, and I *will* get us through it. But until we can get things sorted out, if you feel safer staying with the Hubbards, then that's what you should do. For now."

"I don't care about me. I care about you!"

“Then you need to trust me. I’m fine. Your father isn’t a monster. He’s human and he loves you very much. He’s worried sick about you right now.”

Nathaniel grunted and looked away. He didn’t want to hear it.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with your brother, but it isn’t your fault. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’m to blame.”

“That’s not what I said.”

Star placed a hand on his arm so he would look at her. “Just don’t blame yourself. Please. And think about coming home. I still want to see you every day. Okay?”

“Yeah,” Nathaniel said, unsure how that would work. “But I don’t want to see them again. Ever.”

Star took a deep breath. “We’re going to get through this.”

All he cared about was escaping from his father and his brother. With her. “The offer still stands,” he said. “If things get too bad, I know some good people who are willing to help you. Don’t forget that. Promise me you’ll ask for help.”

His mother managed a small smile and nodded. “I promise.”

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