

Something Like Thunder © 2015 Jay Bell / Andreas Bell

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Chapter Five

Fear's presence is impossible to ignore, a cold serpent slithering through the veins, reaching the heart and injecting it with venom. Oppression is more subtle—a heavy cloak that wraps around the body, weighing it down and restricting movement. Nathaniel knew brief respites from fear when he was at school or on the camping trip with the Hubbards, but in the back of his mind he dreaded the inevitable return home. Now he had escaped suffocating oppression and for the first time, the future was no longer a burden.

Only the essentials had been moved to the Hubbards' home, creating a sanctuary Dwight couldn't find. His mother alone had the address. Nathaniel still worried about her, but they saw each other often, usually for a dinner out. He even insisted on paying, when she would let him. Each time they met, he scrutinized her for any signs of abuse. He didn't find any. Except for deepening worry lines, she looked good. Maybe she had been telling the truth and his father rarely lost control, but that wasn't enough for Nathaniel to forgive him.

He tried his best to enjoy his good fortune. The letter from Yale had finally arrived, welcoming him to their campus. He and Rebecca had accepted without hesitation, giving them reason to celebrate today.

"You're so lucky," Rebecca said, strolling around his new room and examining everything. "You get to live with your boyfriend."

"He's not my boyfriend," Nathaniel said, "and having to flee from my psychotic brother hardly sounds like luck."

"Sorry," she said, picking up and looking at the few DVDs he had brought with him. Most of his things were still in his old room. "At least you've gone from somewhere terrible to a place you like. And where you really like someone."

"He's just my friend."

"Of course. Still..." She turned in his direction but continued looking around the room. "You know, now that everything is out in the open, I could ask my parents if you could come live with me. We don't have a spare bedroom, but we could put two twin beds in mine. Sort of like married couples did on old TV shows."

He remained silent, waiting for her to look at him. When she did, he shook his head.

"Can't blame you," she said. "I'd choose this place over mine any day. They've got a nice house." She nodded to the dumbbells sitting in one corner. "Although I'm surprised they don't have a dedicated gym somewhere on the fifth floor."

He laughed in response.

"You still feel like you need those?" she asked.

This made him more somber. "Nobody is going to hurt me again. Not if I can help it."

She considered him, then smiled. "So, where are you taking me for our big night out? Somewhere with tablecloths and wine glasses, I hope."

"I was thinking the mall."

"Oh."

"And uh... Do you mind if Caesar and Steph tag along?"

"Seriously?" When Rebecca saw he wasn't kidding, she scowled. "Is Yale accepting high school sophomores now, because I thought we were celebrating *our* major achievement."

"We are," Nathaniel said. "This way we'll have an audience we can brag to."

"Is this some weird plan to get into Caesar's pants? Because I know all about lost causes, and this sounds like—"

"He's my friend," Nathaniel repeated. "So are you. I want you guys to get to know each other. That's all."

"That's it? You swear?"

"Yes! I live with the guy. If I wanted to seduce him, I'd just wait until he's in the shower, get naked, and hop in with a washcloth and a hopeful expression."

He let her digest this mental image. A knock at the door soon followed, and as it turned out, Rebecca wasn't the only person anticipating romance.

"Oh!" Steph said when noticing Rebecca. "Is this a double date?"

"Sure is," Rebecca said, not missing a beat. She walked over and took Nathaniel's arm. "Ready to go, hon?"

He decided not to contradict her. At least she seemed happy again. They piled into Nathaniel's car, Rebecca sitting up front with him. That left the lovebirds in the backseat, but they didn't seem too cozy at the moment. Caesar was bobbing his head along with the music on the radio, Steph staring out the window at the traffic whizzing by. Strange that she would think they were on a double date. That suggested she didn't know he was gay. Did that mean Caesar didn't talk about him much? He wasn't surprised. When alone together, they probably had more interesting diversions keeping them occupied. So lucky!

Once at the mall, Rebecca continued the pretense of them being a couple, hanging off his arm or holding his hand. While dining at the food court, she even fed him some fries.

"How long have you two been together?" Steph asked, amused by this display.

"Just a few weeks," Rebecca said. "Honeymoon stage."

"That's the best." Steph sighed. "Maybe that's why Caesar and I keep breaking up, so we can experience it again."

"We only broke up once," Caesar replied.

Steph raised an eyebrow. "Twice."

Caesar looked exasperated. "We broke up during lunch and got back together before the school day was over. That doesn't count!"

“Yes, it does,” Steph said, but she was smiling. Then she addressed them again. “No relationship is perfect. Just remember that when the honeymoon is over.”

Nathaniel pretended to consider her words of wisdom when really he was distracted by the revelation that they had problems. Caesar had never mentioned that. Apparently they had weathered many issues, because Steph kept dishing out advice: Walk away and cool down when arguments get too heated. Don’t try to hurt the other person just because you feel hurt. Always be honest and open. Nathaniel listened with fascination, especially when she gave examples of previous tiffs.

“Let’s catch a movie,” Caesar said, eager for a change of topic.

“Sounds to me like you’re living one,” Nathaniel said.

The girls laughed. Caesar just blushed.

They went to the mall cinema, but the movie they wanted to see didn’t start for another half-hour, so they spent that time shopping. Or at least Rebecca and Steph did. Nathaniel and Caesar sat on a bench in the mall corridor, watching through a store window as their dates perused pop culture T-shirts and gothic jewelry.

“Your girlfriend is really pretty,” Caesar said, getting his revenge.

“Shut up. She’s had a crush on me since the first day we met. I love her, but it’s annoying at times.”

“You should be flattered.”

Nathaniel glanced over to see he was serious. “You really think she’s pretty?”

“Yeah! Totally.”

“You have good taste. Most guys ignore her. I don’t get why.”

Caesar shrugged. “They’re probably scared to admit what they like.”

“Maybe. You sure are open-minded.”

Caesar grinned. “I pride myself on it!”

Nathaniel looked around, spotting an Asian woman in her twenties. “What about her?”

“What?”

"You think she's pretty?"

"Yeah," Caesar said. "She's all right."

"And what about him?" Nathaniel nodded to a portly old grandpa. "Feel like sitting on his lap and telling him what you want for Christmas?"

"Blech!" Caesar stuck out his tongue. "He's *way* too young for me. I like them more mature than that. I wanna marry a mummy."

Nathaniel laughed, the warm feeling spreading through his chest. "And what about me? Am I the marrying type?"

Caesar's cheeks grew red, making Nathaniel confident of the answer. Until he was proven wrong.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" Nathaniel looked away. "Whatever. It was dumb question."

"There's a big difference between finding someone attractive and wanting to spend the rest of your life with them."

"I wasn't proposing to you," Nathaniel snapped. "It was a joke. Chill."

"I wish I knew you better."

That got his attention. "How?"

Caesar seemed a little wary, probably worried about offending him again. "Let's try an experiment, okay?"

"Sure."

"What's my favorite color?"

"Blue."

Caesar smiled. "And my favorite musician?"

Nathaniel grimaced. "Eminem."

"Don't hate," Caesar chided. "What's my middle name?"

He needed a full minute to answer that one but felt pleased when finding the answer. "Anthony. See? We know each other just fine."

Caesar shook his head. "I can't answer any of those questions. Whenever I ask you about yourself, you always change the subject."

Nathaniel shrugged. "Okay. Gray, Danny Elfman, Edward. Now you know the answers. Happy?"

“Those were just examples. It’s more... I wish you trusted me. That’s all.”

Nathaniel studied him. “Because I don’t want to talk about my fucked-up family? Think about one of the worst days of your life, one that was really shitty and embarrassing. The kind you just want to forget. Ask yourself how much you like telling other people about it.”

“I get that,” Caesar conceded, “but—”

“I don’t talk much about myself because most of my life has consisted of shitty days.”

Caesar was quiet. “That bad?”

Nathaniel exhaled. “No. Not always. It just feels good pretending none of it ever happened. That’s where I’m at right now.”

“Okay,” Caesar said. “Sorry I mentioned it.”

“I’m not mad at you.”

“I know. It’s not a big deal.”

But it was, because Caesar was basically saying he didn’t know who Nathaniel was. Nathaniel wasn’t okay with that, but he didn’t know how to fix it without unleashing a horde of ugly demons.

“Here they come,” Caesar said.

Rebecca and Steph were walking toward them. Maybe they’d had their own uncomfortable conversation because they appeared tense. No one spoke much on the way into the theater or while waiting for the movie to start. Nathaniel was glad when the lights dimmed. Rebecca, seated on his left, seemed a little jittery. As far away from her as possible, Steph was seated on the opposite side of Caesar. Their friendship was already over, it seemed. He didn’t let this concern him. Instead, as the movie started, all he could think of was how close he felt to Caesar and how one-sided that connection had turned out to be. He didn’t know the solution, because even if he opened up about every terrible thing Dwight had done to him, that still wasn’t Nathaniel’s identity. He hated the idea of letting the abuse define his personality. There had to be more to him than that.

For now all he could do was casually shift his leg so it bumped against Caesar's. He left it there, neither of them reacting. Maybe Caesar didn't notice it over the car chases and explosions, but Nathaniel felt a little better knowing they were connected in this most superficial of ways.

Once the movie was over and they were in the parking lot heading toward the car, Steph pulled Caesar aside. They walked far enough away that they couldn't be heard, but they were obviously arguing. Nathaniel turned to Rebecca for an explanation.

She looked sheepish. "I sort of let it slip that you're gay."

"What? Why?"

"I didn't mean to! I saw a gay pride bracelet, and without thinking about it, I said I should buy it for you. That it might help you find a boyfriend."

Nathaniel glanced back toward the ongoing argument. "I don't see why Steph would care."

"Me neither. All I know is, we hit zero degrees Celsius in about two seconds flat."

When the happy couple returned, neither had much to say. It wasn't until Nathaniel had dropped off Rebecca and Steph that he got his answer.

"She felt like we were making fun of her," Caesar explained. "Like she was the butt of a joke. She was giving you guys all that relationship advice and—"

"Oh," Nathaniel said.

"Yeah. So that made her feel embarrassed."

Nathaniel slowed at a stoplight. "Seemed more angry to me."

"That too." Caesar picked at the fabric of the armrest. "I guess our legs were touching during the movie or something."

"Were they?" Nathaniel asked, his voice sounding a little high.

"No idea. She knows I like guys too, so I guess she felt threatened by it or whatever. I don't know. It's silly."

Nathaniel wouldn't agree with that. He'd preferred to think it was serious or had the potential to become so. But first, he'd have to find a way of showing Caesar who he really was.

* * * * *

The solution came to him a week later while he was helping Caesar with a social studies assignment. The book was open to a map of the United States, and when Nathaniel mentioned again that he'd lived in California, Caesar asked a question.

"Where else have you lived?"

Nathaniel went backward through his own life history, struggling to relate the locations to who he was. "Colorado was okay. Tons of roadkill, especially in the fall. Lots of deer and elk, which can be messy. Er..." Rather than explore that charming topic further, he moved on to the next state. And the next. "I've lived here too," he said, putting his finger in the middle of the map. "In Missouri."

Caesar squinted at where he was pointing. "Warrensburg?"

"Yeah. But only when I was really little."

"So you don't remember it much?"

"Not really, but I still go back there to see my grandparents."

Caesar perked up at this. "Really? Do you..."

"Get along with them?" Nathaniel laughed. "Yeah! I love them!"

For once his family wasn't a taboo subject. That's when the idea came to him: Why not visit his grandparents together? The timing was perfect too, since they were facing a three-day weekend. He asked Mr. Hubbard first, because he didn't want Caesar to get excited about the idea if he wouldn't be allowed.

"He's a little young to be taking a road trip," Mr. Hubbard said sternly, but a twinkle in his eye gave him away. "Then again, it *would* broaden his horizons. Besides, I know you'll keep him safe. We trust you."

These three simple words gnawed at Nathaniel during the drive to Missouri. They left shortly after breakfast, Caesar hyper and talkative over the next three hours. Only after they blew through Dallas and entered Oklahoma did his passenger settle down, leaning the seat back and closing his eyes. Nathaniel occasionally glanced over, catching little glimpses. Like the olive-toned skin of his bare forearm. Or the muscles of his neck and the

slightly agape mouth, his breathing heavy in sleep. Even the twist of denim between his legs, just in case morning wood revealed tantalizing details. Or road trip wood, Nathaniel supposed, but his wry smile soon faded.

We trust you.

Not just Mr. Hubbard. The “we” implied Mrs. Hubbard did too. She certainly checked up on them less. When he had begun tutoring Caesar, she often stuck her head into the room to see how they were doing. Even after he’d moved in, she tended to find excuses to look in on them. But not anymore. Nathaniel was an honorary member of the family. And what was he doing with that trust? Hell, what was he doing at all? He wanted to open himself to Caesar, to prove that they knew each other well, but not so their friendship could thrive. Nathaniel wanted much more than that. He harbored no delusions of Mr. Hubbard’s reaction if he learned the truth.

He tried to put these thoughts out of his mind as they drove. The only other option was to stop the car and turn around. After a pee break in Oklahoma City and a meal courtesy of the gas station microwave ovens, they pressed on, Caesar becoming less excited and more restless.

“Maybe we should have flown instead,” he complained as they crossed another state line.

“Warrensburg isn’t exactly near a major airport,” Nathaniel pointed out.

“So what does it have?”

He thought about the question, feeling confident of the answer. “Nothing.”

Caesar groaned dramatically. Then he perked up again. “Can I drive?”

“Do you know how?”

“No.”

Nathaniel glanced over at him quizzically.

“Relax,” Caesar said. “I’m in Driver’s Ed.”

“Gosh, that *is* comforting. Do you have your learner’s permit?”

"Nope. So can I drive?"

Nathaniel thought about it and shrugged. "Yeah, okay."

He heard a distant echo of *we trust you* as he pulled the car over, but the road ahead of them was clear and straight, empty of any challenging curves. Besides, the way Caesar was grinning as they passed each other in front of the hood already made the risk worth any consequences. That didn't mean Nathaniel would let down his guard. Once buckled up in each other's seats, he coached Caesar through every maneuver, the role of tutor and student familiar to them both as they pulled out onto the highway. Caesar was doing well. Until he got daring.

"Slow down," Nathaniel said, eyes on the speed gauge.

"I just want to hit eighty-eight miles per hour. Like in that one movie."

"*Back to the Future*," Nathaniel said automatically, "and I want you to slow down."

Caesar bit his lip, looking more amused as he pressed down on the pedal. The little arm reached eighty and kept going. Nathaniel didn't normally find speed intimidating, but the way Caesar constantly adjusted the wheel was making the car wobble back and forth. They were coming up on another vehicle too.

"Either brake," Nathaniel said, pressing himself against the seat, "or switch lanes. Now!"

The car weaved a few more times, the rear of a minivan filling much of the windshield. At the last possible moment, their car careened into the other lane and then back again, cutting off the minivan. An angry honk sounded at the same time that Nathaniel swore, censoring the f-bomb. He was sure Caesar heard it anyway, not that he seemed to care. Instead he was laughing, tears in his eyes.

"You almost killed us," Nathaniel said. "Scratch that. You *are* dead! Just as soon as you pull over."

"Then I better keep driving." Caesar glanced over, acting confused by the anger that greeted him. "What? I remembered to signal!"

Nathaniel scowled. Once Caesar's attention was back on the road, he allowed himself a covert smile. "Take the next exit."

"Are we there already?"

"No, but I have to take a piss. And check to see if I shit myself."

Caesar went into another fit of laughter. Nathaniel reached over to stabilize the wheel until he calmed down. He remained on edge as they left the highway, Caesar bringing them to a gas station full of more obstacles. Somehow he managed to park without taking out one of the gas pumps and blowing them all to kingdom come.

"How'd I do?" Caesar asked.

Nathaniel answered him with a glare and a swat to the back of the head.

Thankfully, the rest of the journey wasn't so eventful. They reached their destination a few hours past dinnertime, their stomachs grumbling, but Nathaniel knew his grandparents would have food waiting for them. They owned a home on the edge of town, meaning Caesar would have to wait to see glorious downtown Warrensburg. For now they were both eager to escape from the car. His grandparents lived at the end of a cul-de-sac, their house nestled up against undeveloped land—woods that Nathaniel had memories of playing in as a child. The home was ranch style, the windows lit by a warmth that welcomed them inside.

The door was open before he could knock. His grandmother, of course. She resembled her daughter—his mother—although her hair was gray instead of golden and always worn in a bob. She squeezed him tightly while squealing with joy. Then she moved to do the same to Caesar, despite never having met him before.

"Come in, come in!" she said, ushering them inside. "I thought you'd never get here! I was about to send out a search party. What time did you leave?"

"After breakfast," Nathaniel answered.

"On the phone you said you were leaving early!"

"That is early!" Nathaniel retorted.

"Teenagers," his grandmother said playfully. "Introduce me to your friend."

Before he could, his grandfather appeared in the entryway. Nathaniel had inherited a lot from him physically. They shared the same large build and tall height. The strong brow too. Star insisted their blond hair came from him as well, although he had been white-haired and balding for as long as Nathaniel could remember. Hopefully he hadn't inherited that genetic tendency.

"Good of you to come," his grandfather said, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "I didn't think we'd see you again until Christmas."

"I didn't want to wait," Nathaniel said. "You guys are ancient. Who knows if you'll still be around in December?" His grandmother giggled, sounding like his mother and making him feel homesick. "Granny, Gramps, this is my friend Caesar. Caesar, this is Joe and Laura."

"Or Granny and Gramps, if you prefer," Laura said. "Now come to the kitchen. You must be starving!"

"Let them eat in the living room," Joe said. "They'll be more comfortable there."

Laura rolled her eyes. "There's a game on."

"I don't mind," Nathaniel said. "You've already eaten, right?"

"That's right," Joe said before his wife could answer.

After declining offers of help, she went into the kitchen while his grandfather led them into a large living room. The house had been designed at a time when stylish walls were plastered with flat misshapen stones. Exposed dark brown beams graced the ceiling. Nathaniel didn't know when the house was built or what people had been smoking back then, but he found it sort of appealing. The sunken floor and chocolate-colored carpet in the living room gave the room a cozy feel, partly due to the soft glow of the lamps. He plopped down happily on the couch, Caesar doing the same next to him.

His grandfather settled into his favorite chair, one eye on the widescreen television where a poker game was in progress. "So why are you here?" he asked. "Money? On the run from the law?"

"Chasing down my past," Nathaniel said.

"Oh? Why's that?"

To impress the guy next to me. But that would be too awkward a confession. "Homework assignment. Caesar has to write a biography of someone he knows, and since I'm his tutor, we figured that would be easiest."

"What's this I hear?" his grandmother asked as she entered the room.

"Nate's going to be famous," Joe said. "Caesar is writing a book about him. They've already got a six-figure deal with a major publisher."

"Exactly," Nathaniel said. "No, it's just a school paper about where I come from. Figured it was a good excuse to see you guys."

"Well, be sure to thank your teacher for me." Laura grabbed two of the TV trays from the corner and set them up. That was another childhood memory, since there was always something on television they wanted to see. Perhaps that's where his passion for cinematography came from. Regardless, most meals he remembered eating here were served on wooden trays in front of the TV. After refusing another offer of help, she returned first with drinks, then made another trip for two plates of potato salad and fried chicken that had cooled to room temperature.

"So what do you boys have planned?" she asked when finally able to sit.

"I figured we'd wander around town tomorrow," Nathaniel said. "See what memories I can dig up."

"I'll be surprised if you remember anything," Laura said. "You were so little when your family moved the first time. It nearly broke my heart."

"We always came back to visit though. This is the closest thing I have to a hometown."

"It *is* your hometown," Joe said. "You were practically born here."

"Does Warrensburg have its own hospital?" Caesar asked.

"Yeah," Nathaniel said with a chuckle. "It's not *that* small."

“Warrensburg has its own university too,” his grandmother said. “Have you decided yet? Is that why you’re really here, to visit the campus?”

His grandfather chuckled. “Careful! She’ll put sugar in your gas tank just to keep you from leaving again.”

“I was accepted into Yale,” Nathaniel said.

“Oh, I see. Well...” She sounded so disappointed that they all laughed.

“Most people would break out the champagne,” Nathaniel teased. “Not look sad.”

Joe twisted around in his chair and smiled. “You boys want a beer?”

“Yeah!” Caesar said.

“No,” Nathaniel said firmly.

More small talk followed, Laura grilling Caesar about who his parents were and what they did for a living. Little details that mattered to adults, for some reason. Bowls of ice cream followed the chicken and potato salad, and as the night wore down, they were shown to their room. Singular. And this time there wasn’t a couch for Nathaniel to crash on unless he returned to the living room, which he wasn’t willing to do. He didn’t even offer to take the floor. If Caesar had any complaints, he’d have to voice them. Nathaniel was setting himself up for a restless night, but he could always nip off to the bathroom for a quick—

“They’re really nice,” Caesar said, sitting on one corner of the bed.

“Yeah.”

“I’m surprised you don’t live with them since... You know.”

“I love my mom,” Nathaniel said quickly. “I never wanted to get away from her. Just my brother.” And his dad, but that was recent.

Caesar waited, maybe thinking they drove all this way just so Nathaniel could tell him everything. But that wasn’t the deal. Nathaniel unpacked his stuff, ignoring the silence. Eventually, Caesar chose to fill it.

“Do they know about you?”

"That I'm gay? Yeah."

"How'd they take it?"

"Granny had lots of questions. Gramps gets uncomfortable when the subject comes up, but he doesn't treat me any different. Aside from no longer asking if I have a girlfriend. Why? You thinking of telling your parents?"

"No," Caesar said. "I just wondered if they think I'm your boyfriend."

His expression was innocent when Nathaniel turned around. With a hint of mischief. "Keep dreaming," Nathaniel said, tossing a pair of socks at him.

Caesar caught them and threatened to throw them back. Before he could, there was a knock at the door. His grandmother opened it, but only a crack. "Can I come in?"

Geez, maybe she really did think he and Caesar were a couple. "Get on in here," Nathaniel said.

Laura entered the room carrying two large photo albums. "I thought these would assist with your paper," she said to Caesar. "Always helps to have a visual aid. Anything you want to take back with you, we can get copies made of. Nathaniel isn't in all the photos but—"

"This is great!" Caesar said, standing to relieve her of the albums. "I can't wait to go through them!"

And he didn't. As soon as Laura shut the door behind her, Caesar flopped stomach-first on the bed and opened one of the albums.

"Hold up," Nathaniel said, plopping down beside him. "I need to check for embarrassing photos first."

"No way!" Caesar said, yanking away the album. He returned it front and center when he saw Nathaniel wasn't serious. "Who's this?"

The black-and-white photo was of two thin people in formal clothing. "I don't know. My great-grandparents maybe."

"Oh."

Caesar kept turning pages, giving each photo a few seconds of attention before continuing. Nathaniel stopped him at a photo of

his mother when she was just a kid, sitting between her parents on the couch—his grandparents, who looked younger than he had ever seen them.

“Only child?” Caesar asked.

“Yeah. Lucky her.”

As Caesar turned the pages, she slowly aged before their eyes, finally becoming a teenager, the innocent smile replaced by a self-assured grin.

“Is that your dad?” Caesar asked, tapping a photo.

Nathaniel craned his neck to see. The guy next to Star had dark hair, the sides buzzed short, giving him a sort of mohawk. He wore an old army jacket along with a cool expression, his hands shoved into his jeans. “Does that look like my dad?” he asked incredulously.

“I don’t know,” Caesar said defensively. “I’ve never met him before.”

“Oh. Right.”

“He sort of looks like you.”

Nathaniel scoffed. “No, he doesn’t!”

“You’ve got a similar nose.” Caesar brought his face closer to the page. “Same lips too. He’s kind of cute!”

Nathaniel looked again, not agreeing. “He looks weird. But no, that’s definitely not my dad.”

As Caesar turned the pages, Nathaniel tried to name what relatives he could and to come up with interesting stories for those he remembered. Only on the last page of the album did Nathaniel finally appear, still a toddler, his mother stooping over him and holding onto his hands so he could remain standing.

“She looks so young,” Caesar said.

Nathaniel smiled. “She always has.”

“She’s a hottie too!”

Nathaniel gave him a look. “You’ve got issues.”

“Hey, it’s not my mom. She’s a total MI—”

“Don’t even say it!”

Nathaniel grabbed the book to shut it. He pushed it aside and reached for the other, this one covering more familiar territory. A

family photo, his young father looking so much like Dwight that Nathaniel felt uneasy. As for his brother, in the photo Dwight was still chubby-cheeked and anything but intimidating. His family must have moved away by this point, because most photos had Christmas decorations in the background, the season when they returned to Warrensburg for visits. That made for good conversation, since his holidays were full of happy memories. They found a few summer photos too, one of Nathaniel skinny and sunburned, sitting with his legs dangling in the pool. That sunburn—and how Dwight had delighted in it—brought back bad memories, making him eager for Caesar to turn the page. He did so and stared at a shirtless photo of Dwight, his brother's smile just as bright as the sun beaming down on him.

"That's him?" Caesar asked.

"Yeah."

At least he had the decency not to mention how hot he was. Caesar wordlessly flipped through the remaining pages, probably wondering how Nathaniel could turn his back on all those smiling faces. He felt guilty by the time they shut the photo album, but soon forgot those feelings when Caesar grinned at him.

"That was cool!" he said.

Nathaniel searched his eyes. Were they good now? Is that all Caesar needed to feel close? "I'm surprised it didn't bore you to death."

"Nope!" Caesar yawned. "Maybe we should crash though. It's late."

"Yeah, you don't want to be tired for our big day tomorrow."

Caesar looked interested. "Really?"

Nathaniel laughed. "No. Not really. Lower your expectations. Trust me."

Caesar went to the bathroom to brush his teeth. Nathaniel did the same once he was back. When he returned from the bathroom, Caesar was already in bed, his glasses on the nightstand, his eyes closed. Nathaniel stood in the doorway and watched him for a while. Then he flipped off the light, stripped off his T-shirt, and let his jeans drop before stepping out of them. He slipped between

the sheets, remaining on his side of the bed. Eventually though, he slid one hand across, leaving it splayed in the center of the mattress like an open invitation.

That's it when it comes to free chapters. Will Caesar and Nathaniel ever hit it off? Will Kelly forgive our noble protagonist? Only one way to find out!

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