**The Exhibitionist Next Door**

by BPClavel

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 396: Noise Parade**

Packing his gear into a giant duffle bag took very little time, but the coaches required that each person have full responsibility for their own bag. If anyone ended up unable to play because of forgotten shoes or a missing mouthguard, the whole team would suffer.

During the team meeting, he learned that he would be starting, which he had been expecting. However, there was one small surprise in that regard. Recently, the coaches had conducted some timed sprints. Nate had improved so significantly that he had been placed on the kickoff team. He had attributed the improvement to Dale. Not only was she his inspiration to excel, but he had also learned how to be a better runner from watching her form as well as trying to keep up with her.

Given his defensive end ‘containment’ skills, he was assigned the lane at the far left. His assignment would be to run up the field two yards from the sideline and make absolutely certain that the player with the ball did not get outside of him. In other words, force the ball carrier to turn up field into his teammates effectively making the field narrower.

The videos were pretty interesting. The Bisons had a few unusual formations. From watching, Nate felt that he had gotten a pretty good idea of how to read the backfield so that he would know as early as possible if the play involved a run or a pass.

He and his teammates were all doing their best to concentrate, but that was difficult given the level of excitement. None of them had ever imagined at the beginning of the season that they might be playing in the championship game.

As Nate walked out to the parking lot where they were staging the parade, he saw Officer Kudrow and talked with him briefly. He had just learned that Mr. McRoberts had disbanded the cheerleaders. He was quite upset about it, particularly in terms of how unjust it was in Dale’s case.

To Nate it seemed as if all the police cars, fire engines and aid units in town were taking part in the parade. But that only made sense. They all had sirens, and it wasn’t called a ‘noise’ parade for nothing.

Nate also saw Mrs. Shepherd standing with a clipboard by the drill team float. He stopped and spoke with her briefly. He had very little to say given her comments related to how she assumed that he was a bad influence. From her he learned that with Miss Whitaker and Alexa both in jail, that she had been placed temporarily in charge of the drill team. She didn’t seem too happy about that, but it made complete sense to Nate. The drill team was lacking leadership, and the disbanding of the varsity cheerleaders had taken the number of cheerleaders under Mrs. Shepherd’s care down from eighteen to just six.

As Nate arrived at the flatbed trailer that was being used as the makeshift parade float for the football team, he sent Dale a text to try and find out if she would be at the parade or not. She didn’t reply right away, so he put his phone in his pocket and climbed up on the float.

As the parade made its way out of the school parking lot, horns blazing, Nate thought about how different this parade was from the one just a week earlier for the semifinal game. In addition to this week’s parade being bigger and noisier, it included a football player float, however, no cheerleader float like the earlier parade. In other words, the situation was exactly reversed.

After the first parade, there had been a lot of feedback received that townspeople had been expecting to see the football team and have a chance to show them their support. For that reason, the football team itself had been incorporated into the parade. So now they were in the parade, but the varsity cheerleaders were all absent. The six sophomore cheerleaders had not merited a float of their own so they had been stationed on the back end of the drill team float. Probably Mrs. Shepherd’s doing, he realized.

As the parade made its way through town, Nate kept an eye out for Dale. He thought that she would have a hard time staying away, but he also knew that she would not be wearing a uniform, potentially making her a little difficult to spot.

Finally, as the team float slowed at an intersection near the middle of town, he thought he saw a girl in dark clothing that looked to be fit enough to be Dale. Quite some distance behind the crowd along the curb, he saw two girls part way down a side street. They were both dressed in school color hoodies, black with white lettering that read ‘Prospect Track’ in block letters. He didn’t know where Dale might have gotten the hoodie, but given the height differences he was pretty sure that it was Dale and Michelle.

She looked like a forlorn outcast standing back in the shadows where she was unlikely to be recognized, her hood obscuring her hair and face . . . such a contrast to the exuberant cheerleader who had hopped off the float to greet him just one week prior.

Ward was nearby, so Nate pointed Dale out to him. Ward had spoken to him just as the parade was first getting underway about how upset he was about Mr. McRoberts’ decision regarding the cheerleaders and the injustice it represented to Dale.

“Our f\*\*king principal is a goddam waste of skin!” Ward said angrily as he hopped off the float to run over to Dale.

He was back in less than a minute, before the float had moved very far. “Yes, that’s her,” he told Nate. “And she’s f\*\*king crying. I feel so bad for her, but she insisted that I get back on the float. I’m so f\*\*king pissed. This is the last thing in the world that little angel deserves. She doesn’t want you to, Nate, but you should go to her. I’m sure she needs a hug.”

Nate had been resisting the urge to go and see her, but Ward’s mention of her crying and his suggestion that he go to her, was all it took. Nate hopped off and raced to where Dale was standing with Michelle, both of them trying to be as inconspicuous as possible in their hoodies.

As he ran up he tried to be upbeat saying, “I’m so glad you came.”

“Nate, get back on the float!” she said pointing.

“Oh, don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll be back on the float before it’s gone a block.”

“You need to stay with the team, honey,” she said. “Michelle’s keeping me company. I don’t know what Ward told you, but I’m fine.”

“He just said you were crying,” said Nate, reaching a hand up inside her hood and running a thumb lovingly across her moist cheek.

“I’m trying not to,” said Dale.

“Where did you get the track hoodie?” he asked.

“I’m on the team, Nate,” she said sounding quite upbeat. “Michelle told Coach Brand that I was interested. She says that he added my name to the master list. He even had a hoodie leftover from last year that was my size. He gave it to her for me. Cool, huh?”

“That is very nice,” said Nate smiling over at Michelle who had been eavesdropping on their entire conversation. That was essentially unavoidable. Given the noise, they had been forced to shout to be able to converse.

“Give me a kiss, and get back on the float, Buster . . . oops,” said Dale.

Nate whispered an “I love you,” into her ear. Giving her a quick kiss, he left her there to go and catch up with the float that had moved a short distance down the street.

As he jogged back to the float, Nate wondered why Michelle had her hood up, making herself incognito just like Dale. He thought she might be hiding her pixie haircut, but that made little sense, everyone would see it sooner or later. Another possibility occurred to him. Just maybe she was trying to keep her association with Dale under wraps. He wondered if someone on the drill team might be able to report such information to Alexa in jail.

“It’s a crying shame, what’s going on here,” said Ward, extending him a hand to help him up. “Doing that to the Great Dale Jordan! It really pisses me off. McRoberts is such a F\*\*ktard.”

“You’re not the only one pissed off,” said Nate, shaking his head in disgust.

“And what is with Michelle Thompson standing there with her. That is so curious, right? Alexa would sometimes hang with Michelle on nights and weekends. What was really odd about that, was that she tried to keep me from knowing about it . . . as if I’d care. When the police asked me to list Alexa’s friends, I forgot to mention Michelle. How odd that she’s hiding back there in the shadows with Dale, don’t you think?”

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Nate was unsure about how to respond. “Yes, odd,” he finally said in agreement.

“Do you think I should mention her to the police, Nate?” asked Ward.

“If they asked you to list all of Alexa’s friends and you forgot one, then yes, you might want to tell them,” said Nate.

“Maybe I will,” said Ward, turning and wandering off along the float.

Nate tried to enjoy the rest of the parade, but that was pretty much impossible. He no longer had the search for Dale to occupy his mind, and Ward had put words to his thoughts. It really was a shame that “the Great Dale Jordan” had been reduced to someone hiding in a hoodie in the shadows at a Prospect High event . . . not being allowed to participate . . . not wanting to be seen.

Once the parade returned to the high school, the team had enough time for an early dinner. Nate raced home, hoping that Dale would be there.

He knocked on Dale’s front door. She answered quickly, “Don’t come in, Nate.” A moment later she opened the door, but just a crack, saying, “Hi! What’s up?”

“Somebody’s got secrets, doesn’t she?” said Nate, noticing her unusual behavior. But as soon as he said that his nose figured out what Dale was up to. She was baking cookies.

Not knowing that Nate was on to her, Dale tried to maintain her secret by stepping out onto the front porch, closing the door behind her.

“None of your business, Mr. Seventy-Nine,” she said.

Deciding to try and let her think that her secret was still safe, Nate took a step back saying, “I asked my mom to make a big pot of spaghetti, so I’m going to do some carb-loading. Want to come over and watch me eat? I’m sure there’ll be plenty, so you would be more than welcome to join me for dinner.”

“I’ll do that,” said Dale. “I’ll be over in five or ten.” With that she hopped up on her toes and gave him a little peck on the lips and then disappeared back inside.

Cookies for the football team, thought Nate as he walked home. Pretty good idea, actually! With cookies she could let everyone know that she was rooting for them, even if she wasn’t going to be allowed to actually root for them.

When Nate walked into the kitchen, his mom was just transferring the spaghetti to a large serving bowl.

“Thanks, mom,” he said. “The spaghetti smells great!”

“Just like you’ve always said that you like it, son. Your mother’s secret recipe . . . spaghetti with meatballs . . . straight from the Fannie Farmer cookbook!”

“Thanks,” he said again. “Hey, mom, Dale is coming over in a few minutes. I invited her over to have some spaghetti with me. Would you mind letting us eat alone? We have a couple of private things to talk about.”

“No problem, Nate,” she said. “I’m always happy to let you two have your space. I have some laundry to put away and a show I want to watch. I’ll just hang out in my bedroom so you can have complete privacy.”

“Thanks, mom,” said Nate. “You and dad are still coming to the game, right?”

“We wouldn’t miss it for the world,” said his mom. “We’re going to drive, and the Jordans are riding with us. “Just a few minutes ago, I was talking to Beth on the phone. Dale sure is going through a lot right now, isn’t she? The reason she called was to tell me that Dale wants to ride with us to the game. We’ll have a very full car, but her company will be nice.”

It was the first time that Nate had heard of that development. Other than breakfast and the trip to the cemetery, when Dale’s parents had been present, he had had so little time to actually talk to Dale. He knew that riding with the parents to a football game was not something that most teenagers would want to be seen doing. But Dale was a little different than ‘most teenagers.’

He decided that he was glad that she was riding with their parents. Typically she took the activity bus to away games. It would still be going, but presumably the varsity cheerleaders were not invited; although, he expected that she might be permitted to ride along if she forced the issue. He couldn’t picture anyone enforcing the cheerleader ban down to the point of keeping her off the bus; however, he knew that she was unlikely to want to be around drill team members.

But riding with the parents also meant that she would not be bumming a ride from any of the usual suspects, and the usual suspects might now include Michelle.

Michelle no longer seemed quite as evil as she had, but he still didn’t trust her. With Alexa out of circulation, he didn’t think she’d try anything mean; however, the idea of the two of them being alone together was still unsettling. It was clear that Michelle was still in love with Dale. He didn’t think that Dale would give in to any of her advances, but that wasn’t to say that he was convinced that Michelle wouldn’t try something. What it might be, he didn’t know, but the possibility seemed to be there.

After he had set the table, adding a pair of candlesticks for good measure, he heard a knock on the door. “Come in, Lover,” he called out, walking to the door to greet her.

“Hey, Mr. Seventy-Nine,” she said, striking one of her cheer poses. “Your personal cheerleader is here!”

“Great!” he said. “I was just about to light the candles for some romantic carb-loading.”

“Awesome! Don’t let me stop you.”

Nate lit the candles and dimmed the lights, and they sat down to big plates of spaghetti. He had served her a helping every bit as large as his, and he knew that she’d eat it. However, she wouldn’t go back for seconds and thirds as he knew he would.

“So, Dale . . . your mom, wow!” he said after they were both a few bites in.

“Right!” agreed Dale.

“She pretty much freaked me out with the department store story. I mean, it’s a cool story, but it’s your mom for God’s sakes.”

“I know,” said Dale, shaking her head. “I guess she was a wild woman. But don’t forget that she got married at twenty-one, so the girl in that story was not all that much older than I am.”

“I know, but it was the masturbation stuff that was really freaky. I can’t imagine your mom doing that . . . not at any age,” said Nate.

“I’m not going to try.”

“Everything was pretty much like I could picture happening to you . . . until that point in the story,” said Nate.

Dale didn’t respond, just shaking her head.

“I’m having trouble forgetting that. I force myself to think about other things, and then a bit later I am thinking about it again,” said Nate. “I wish she wouldn’t have mentioned putting her heels up on the edge of the desk.”

“Let’s talk about something else . . . like how they knew I was going out nude. I mean . . . wow! And I thought I was so tricky. I thought I had them fooled,” said Dale. “Well, I guess the joke’s on me.”

“Yep,” said Nate laughing. “The sister knew, the parents knew, even the boy next door knew.”

“Thank God, he knew!” said Dale with a come hither smile.

“I’m sure glad I knew,” said Nate with a warm reassuring smile. After a bit of a pause, he continued, “You know what I have wanted to talk with you the most about today, Lover?”

Dale took a deep breath, looking into his eyes, she shook her head slowly.

“I’ve been concerned about you. I’ve wanted to find out how you are doing,” he said. “I mean, you and I have had a hell of a week. You especially have been bombarded. The pictures in ‘our park.’ The initial McRoberts’ meeting complete with Alexa insults; the now famous Maverick ride; our special time on the clubhouse roof; you letting me know that you were on the pill; the varsity cheerleaders being disbanded . . . it was already a long, long list, and then . . . this morning . . . all your mother’s revelations. I’m glad you made it to the noise parade, but there were tears on your cheeks inside that hoodie. How’s the love of my life doing . . . way down inside, where it counts?”

Dale looked into his eyes, seeing the depth of his love and concern. “You do care about me, don’t you?” she said.

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“More than I will ever be able to express with words,” he said tenderly. “I never thought that I would feel a connection like this with another human being, and yet, here I am. You’re everything to me.”

“I love you, Nate,” she said, reaching across the table and placing her hand on his. “It has been one hell of a week, that’s for sure.”

“So, how are you holding up?” he asked. “The incognito cheerleader in the hoodie was crying at the noise parade.”

“I’m holding up pretty well,” she said. “I’ve got you. Not all of those were sad girl tears.” Taking a deep breath, she continued. “The parade was loud.”

“I know,” said Nate. “My ears are still in pain.”

“Because of the noise, I couldn’t easily talk to Michelle, so my thoughts ended up running wild. I was feeling like an outcast, so I ended up trying to imagine what great-grandma Dale’s life was like. I thought about our similarities . . . but also our differences. I guess she and I march to the same drummer, a drummer different from the one that others march to. Like me she must have felt trapped in her clothes at times. I absolutely know how that feels . . . you probably don’t.”

“That’s true,” said Nate. “It feels quite natural to me to wear clothes. I’ve never wished that all my clothes were miles away.”

“That must be nice,” said Dale. “If my clothes are a mile away, I wish they were ten miles away. Truth be told, I often wish they didn’t even exist.”

“You’re so lovable!” said Nate. “I think we’d both be happy with a world in which everyone wore clothes . . . but you . . . and you never wore clothes! In fact, a world where you are prohibited from wearing clothes.”

“Find me that world, Lover!” said Dale.

“Still working on it,” said Nate. “Maybe it’s out there.”

Dale smiled and continued, “So maybe great-grandma Dale and I have a bit in common as outcasts, but the cheerleading ban is seemingly minor compared with what she must have faced. No one has talked about taking me in to determine if I need to have my uterus surgically removed. I also have not been taken to see a psychiatrist. I guess in our day and age, indecent exposure is considered a behavior problem not a health problem, neither physical nor mental. So, I guess I live in a much better time than did great-grandma Dale. I mean, I’m sure she never saw nor tried on a bikini in the twenties. I’m sure she would have been arrested had she worn something as small as my blue bikini.”

“I’m sure she would have,” said Nate. “Bikinis came about in her lifetime, but probably not until she was a senior citizen.”

“You know what else I ended up realizing?” said Dale. “I’ll have to read her biography to be sure, but it seems as if a lot of her problems might have happened because she didn’t have a Nate at her side. And my mother says she avoided real problems because she had my dad. Based on what my mom said, great-grandma Dale had all her problems with getting apprehended nude long before she got married to her first husband, Mr. Ballard. She said she was institutionalized in 1923 and 1924, but married for the first time in the late twenties.”

“So she was single and streaking?” said Nate.

“It would seem so,” said Dale. “I think it’s more dangerous that way. Maybe if she had been a Nudity Slave like me, she would have avoided many of her problems. Without you, I’d streak the game. Where would that land me?”

“Jail probably,” said Nate. “And in your case, they’d decide that it wasn’t a first offense. They’d end up believing Alexa’s story.”

“Even with you as my Nudity Master, I’m still having trouble keeping my mind off of streaking,” said Dale.

“We’ve been through this. Forget about it,” said Nate. “And you’re avoiding my question. We only have so much time. Let’s talk about how YOU are doing?”

"ME? Well, I certainly have my ups and downs," said Dale. "Up or down depending on what I allow myself think about. For the most part I'm doing pretty good. I get all bummed out when I think about not getting to help you guys win this evening, so I've been trying not to think about that."

"That's probably wise," said Nate really feeling for her plight.

"But I'm starting to find myself focusing on one huge positive that could come from all this," said Dale. "For years I’ve led a very secretive existence . . . trying to hide the real me from everyone, from friends, from parents, from boyfriends like Jason. I was sure that the real me would find little or no acceptance from anyone. I hid the real me inside of loose-fitting clothing, not even daring to wear a low cut neckline. My cheerleader uniforms and my gymnastics leotards where my safe indulgence . . . safe because they are socially acceptable.”

“I can’t wait for gymnastics season,” said Nate.

“You’re so weird. You see me naked all the time, and I’m always doing cartwheels and handstands for you, nude even,” said Dale.

“Still,” said Nate. “I’m looking forward to your tight little body in a leotard.”

Dale just shook her head scowling.

"Well, in the last day or so, I've been realizing that maybe there will be some acceptance of the real me. I mean, the football players at lunch . . . no surprise there. Those guys will of course put up with a girl who enjoys nudity. But maybe others too. Girls as well as guys. I mean while I’m wearing clothes, of course. And now even my parents. I don't know if you know how much it has weighed on me to always be doing my best to act as if I'm someone other than myself."

"I know it's been hard," said Nate sympathetically.

"It has. This is a big part of me. I was just born this way, apparently," said Dale. "But in August you showed up. Suddenly there was someone in my life that I could be myself around. And I'm not talking about being nude around you. I just mean someone who I didn't have to always be guarded around. With others, I’ve always had to be scrutinizing my sentences in advance . . . before saying them. With you I could just talk."

"I absolutely love that you are comfortable around me," said Nate.

"Going forward I think I'll be comfortable around my parents and quite a few of the crowd at school," said Dale. "And again, I don't mean walking around naked. I mean, just being myself. I think it will be very relaxing to be able to talk without having to be so guarded . . . so careful about what comes out of my mouth. We'll have to see how things shake out, but I'm more optimistic about the future than I have ever been."

“I love that you are sounding so upbeat,” said Nate.

“I am optimistic,” said Dale. “But I’m a little scared, too.”

“Scared? What about, Lover?” he asked.

“I’m scared about what could happen. I mean, I absolutely have to be your Nudity Slave . . . now more than ever. I’m suddenly much less worried about what might happen if I get caught without my clothes,” she said. “I hope you are planning on keeping Slave Girl on a short leash . . . a very short leash. My relaxed attitude about what could go wrong, combined with guys knowing that I like being naked, combined with my optimism . . . well, that all could add up to one big recipe for disaster.”

“I hear you! So I need to keep you on a leash, do I?” said Nate laughing.

“Yes, please. Great-grandma Dale didn’t have anyone to provide that service, but I do,” said Dale.

“So, Slave Girl, what does this leash look like?” asked Nate.

“You mean a real leash?” asked Dale.

“I just want to know what you mean when you say, ‘leash,’ said Nate.

“Well, I was speaking figuratively. But a real leash? Like one attached to a collar? Like around my neck?” she asked holding her hand up to her neck as if she were trying to imagine it.

“Well, maybe,” said Nate. “You’re the one who brought up a leash. You said, ‘I hope you are planning on keeping Slave Girl on a short leash.’ I’m just trying to discuss a topic you raised.”

“But with my hands, I could undo the leash or the collar,” said Dale, thinking out loud.

“Not if you’re wearing handcuffs with your hands behind your back,” said Nate. “Or if the collar is welded on.”

“Would I be naked?” asked Dale, her eyes as big as saucers.

“I don’t know,” said Nate. “Would you be?”

“I guess I’d have to be,” said Dale.

“I guess you’d have to be,” agreed Nate, nodding.

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“Wow,” said Dale, her eyes still big. Nate could sense some heightened concern along with an elevated excitement level. “Nude, hands cuffed behind my back, and on a leash. Are you going to do that to me?”

“It wouldn’t fall within the terms of our current Nudity Slave agreement, but I think there might be something in that for both of us,” said Nate. “I frankly think you might enjoy that. Part of me thinks that you’d like to be tied up nude in public, even though I know it sounds a lot like what Alexa did to you. Or handcuffed to something again . . . like maybe the flagpole. Only this time with your feet held in place, so you couldn’t hide like you did that time when the school groundskeeper came.”

“You mentioned that . . . way back then,” said Dale. “Securing my feet.”

“I did,” said Nate. “I remember too. You were able to spin around the pole and sit down. There would be ways to keep you from being able to do that. Then it wouldn’t matter how far away your clothes were. It would be as if they didn’t exist. Nude, you can travel a mile to get dressed. But nude and handcuffed, and you can’t get to clothes that are ten feet away.”

“You’re scaring me again, Nate,” she said. “Don’t become a male Alexa.”

“Never a male Alexa,” he said. “A male Kelly, maybe. As you’ll recall, she is the one that coached me on how to treat you . . . and mistreat you . . . to get your motor running.”

Dale just stared at him, a look a fright in her eyes. “I thought you had forgotten Kelly,” she said quietly.

“Of course I haven’t forgotten Kelly,” said Nate with a diabolical smile.

Dale stared at Nate for an extended period of time. Nate could see the concern in her eyes. He loved that look, a layer of grave concern on top of unmistakable cravings. She obviously wanted it, but was frightened to be wanting something that might actually end up being dangerous.

“Maybe right now is not the best time to discuss this,” said Nate.

“Yes, maybe another time . . . or never,” said Dale breathing a sigh of relief.

“Okay,” said Nate agreeably. “But back to something you said a minute ago. I’m optimistic, too. I know we’ll be fine. I’ll be careful and you’ll obey. If you follow your Nudity Slave rules, all should be fine.”

“Okay,” said Dale sounding a bit noncommittal. “By the way, I’m riding with our parents. Even though my secrets are out, I guess my clothes must have to stay on. Do your parents know? I mean, what do they know?”

“Just after we got back this morning, you left with your mom,” said Nate. “I decided to bring my parents up to speed. They were both home.”

“You told them everything?” asked Dale in astonishment.

“Not everything,” said Nate. “Nothing about your mom. I just thought that they needed to know that you have in fact gone nude in public . . . voluntarily, not only when you were forced. I pretty much told them that you like to have a little innocent fun in that way, and that I participate. I mean, it was awkward, but they had already figured out quite a bit . . . based on what they had heard, starting with hearing about the photos that Alexa showed everyone in the gym.”

Taking a deep breath, Dale said, “I guess that at this point you had to tell them.”

“I think so,” said Nate. “It will make the ride to the game a little easier, I hope. I mean, they were wondering, and this way you won’t have awkward questions. Well, I take that back . . . you might have some. Just make sure that your parents know that my mom and dad know that you enjoy nudity, but that they know nothing about anyone other than you.”

“What a tangled web we weave, right?” said Dale.

“If you’ve got a better idea, then I’m all ears, Lover,” said Nate.

After a moment to consider, Dale said, “No, I expect this is best. I’m sure that is what my mom would prefer. A naked girl is enough for your parents to come to terms with. An entire family with a history that includes hysteria and even mental institutions . . . yeah, we should keep that under wraps.”

“Yep, and your body . . . this evening it stays under wraps too, right? I need you to promise that there will be no streaking at the game,” said Nate.

“Okay,” said Dale unenthusiastically. “I guess that would be a bad idea.”

“Not because it would be a bad idea. We are not shifting back to relying on your often bad judgement. Because I say so, right?” said Nate solemnly.

“Yes, Mr. Nudity Master, Sir!” said Dale saluting. “Because you say so.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that,” said Nate. “And again, it’s nice to hear you sounding so upbeat.”

“One thing I’m not feeling very upbeat about is Michelle,” said Dale. “I was planning to talk to her about going to the game together, but then after what happened at the noise parade, I didn’t. I decided to just ride with our parents and focus on the game.”

“Did something happen?” asked Nate.

“No . . . nothing,” said Dale. “Well, I mean . . . I’m just not getting very strong vibes. She’s just a little cold, a little distant.”

“Missing Alexa, maybe,” said Nate.

“Always possible, I suppose,” said Dale. “I of course don’t know what it is exactly. I guess for a while I was on a bit of a high . . . so excited that we were talking and again doing things together. But now I think I’m seeing some of what you’ve been seeing. She says friendly things, and she talked to Coach Brand and got me the hoodie, and all . . . but something about her eyes . . . well, they don’t look as enthusiastic as her words seem.”

“Are you starting to agree with me that she might be lying?” asked Nate trying to conceal his glee over the fact that Dale seemed to suddenly be looking at Michelle a little bit critically.

“Lying? No, I don’t think that she is lying. At least I hope that she’s not. It’s just that I am realizing that maybe we can’t go back. I mean, it’s been so many years. I guess I was imagining that she and I might recapture the fun and innocence of our middle school era friendship. Suddenly at the noise parade, I started to realize that maybe that ship has sailed. Maybe we’ll be friends but . . .” said Dale, her voice trailing off.

“I want it to work out for you, Lover,” said Nate. “And yet it is refreshing to hear you talk like this. It’s okay to think with your heart, but you also need to use your head.”

“I guess that I am now realizing that my future is with you. I always knew that, of course. But now I’m realizing that Michelle and I might be able to be friends, but that even if we see each other and do things together . . . well . . . DJ and Nutshell . . . all that we had . . . all that we meant to one another . . . well, that’s probably going to remain a part of my past.”

Looking over at Dale, Nate saw how much effort it was taking her to say what she was saying. He saw real pain in her just slightly moist eyes. He got up and walked around the table. Kneeling next to her chair, he put his arms around her. She turned her face, resting it against his head, seeking solace in his warmth and compassion.

“I know how hard this is for you, Dale,” he said softly. “I know how much you’ve longed for the days of DJ and Nutshell to return. I used to have some concerns that Michelle might bury the hatchet and the two of you would build a future together, a Nate-free future. I’ve always wanted the best for you, but the selfish side of me didn’t want to think that your ideal future might be Nate-free.”

“Never a Nate-free future!” said Dale adamantly. “What kind of a future would that be?”

“Well, anyway, I’m glad that you seem to be looking at Michelle more objectively now,” he said. “And even though recapturing the innocent days of your youth might today seem unlikely, don’t give up on having a big girl friendship with Michelle. You don’t need a young girl to dance naked with, but you can probably enjoy being track teammates again, traveling to track meets and setting records together. I’m sure you can connect with Michelle. But it will probably be best if you go forward rather than trying to go back.”

Looking into her eyes, he saw a teary Dale nod. She said quietly, “Thanks, Nate. You were always the best kept secret of Prospect. Sometimes, you seem to be wise beyond your years. Why couldn’t I have found you sooner?”

“I wasn’t a part of your past,” said Nate. “But I’m a part of your future.”

“Not a part of my future . . . you ARE my future!” said Dale, twisting in her chair. She threw her arms around his head and hugged it tightly, smashing his face down into the bony area of her chest just below her neck. “I love you so,” she added, holding him against her while rubbing a cheek back and forth in his hair.

As she held him there, her cheek on his head, Nate thought about how much he loved his emotional girl. He didn’t like that she was hurting so, that she had cried so many times over the course of the last several days; however, he really liked that she shared her thoughts with him. He liked that she could confide in him. He knew that what she had just shared about Michelle was very painful, and yet she had wanted him to know her thoughts. And her upper arms were pressing her tits into his cheeks, one from each side. How great was that?

Hearing her retell their first weekend together that morning had caused him to realize just how far they had come in less than four months. He had spent so much time believing that it couldn’t happen because she was ‘out of his league.’ He had never really lost the feeling that she was out of his league. Of course she was out of his league . . . she was Dale Jordan. And yet he’d had a card to play . . . and he had played it. And here he was!

He had another card to play, one that he had been readying for some time, and right then he decided he would go ahead and play it . . . sometime that weekend. When everything had gone crazy on Thursday, he had decided to hold off. But suddenly hearing her say that Michelle was part of her past, and he was her future emboldened him. He didn’t really want to make her life all that much more difficult than it already was, but he decided that maybe the time was right.

“Thank you, Nate,” she said. She lifted up his head and gave him a kiss. She then stood up. Picking up his plate, she carried it into the kitchen and reloaded it with another helping of spaghetti. Bringing it back in and setting it on the table, she said, “Back in your seat, Mr. Seventy-Nine. You’re going to need endurance this evening. It’s a long game, now eat up.”

With that, he went back to eating and they managed to find a few cheery topics to discuss.

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 400: Dale’s Cookies**

A little later, Dale excused herself saying, “I’ve got to get back to my project. Even if you’ve figured out what I’m up to, don’t ruin it for me. Please let me have my surprise.”

“Everything you say and do is a surprise, Lover,” he said. “A wonderful surprise . . . for me anyway.”

An hour or so later, Nate was standing in the school parking lot. Most of the football team was there, and they were just standing around in small groups talking. The bus was scheduled to leave in fifteen minutes, so they were waiting for more players to arrive. Every minute or so another player would arrive and park.

Nate had been carefully watching the cars as they entered the parking lot as he knew that Dale was up to something. About ten minutes before the bus was supposed to depart, he saw the Jordan family car enter the parking lot and make its way to where the football players were all standing around.

No one else seemed to be paying much attention, but Nate watched the car approach and park nearby. As Dale climbed out of the passenger door, the other players started to take note.

Dale opened a back door and took a large flat box off of the back seat. She wasn’t dressed as a cheerleader. She was wearing black pants and the black Prospect Track hoodie she had worn at the noise parade.

"Hi guys," said Dale cheerfully. Walking deliberately toward one small group she said, "Number Forty-Four, Jimmy Franks, awesome Tight End." She handed him something that Nate was not able to get a look at. "You're very welcome Jimmy, kick some butt for me, all right?" Nate heard her reply to a mumbled thank you. She continued, "Number Sixty-Two, Chris Allen, lightning fast Wide Receiver."

Nate saw all the football players close ranks around Dale, and she disappeared from view. He could hear her continuing to call out names, numbers and positions, working from memory.

Nate walked over to say hello to Dale's mom, waiting behind the wheel of the car. As he approached, she rolled down the window.

"Hi, Nate," she said.

Nate glanced into the backseat of the car. He saw more boxes.

"Cookies, right?" asked Nate.

"Yep," said Dale's mom. "Dale was at a loss of what she might do so that the team would know that she was still behind them one thousand percent. And then, right after we got back from the cemetery, she decided to bake. It was a bit of a fire drill to get it all done this afternoon. We had to go shopping before we could get started. Fortunately, the store’s recycle bin was full of boxes to pick from."

Nate looked into the open boxes. He saw that they were waxed paper lined and were filled with oversize chocolate chip cookies, each one shaped like a football. White icing had been added for stripes and stitches, and each cookie featured a player’s jersey number.

A moment later Dale returned for another box. She smiled at him, tossing the empty box down by the back tire.

"Hi, Nate," she said with a smile before wading back into the crowd with another box, calling out, “Number Seventy-Four, handsome Mr. Felipe Fuentes, Defensive Tackle.”

"Did you help?" Nate asked her mother.

"Yes, but she shaped and decorated them all herself. I took charge of the oven. She wanted giant cookies, so only four would fit on a sheet. We had to always have multiple sheets in the oven, and I was baking while she was at the noise parade. My main job was to keep track of the various sheets to make sure no cookies burned.”

"How'd you do?" asked Nate.

"Pretty good," she said. "Some are a little more the color of a football than others.”

"The guys appreciate Dale so much," said Nate, starting to choke up a little. "I think these guys would do anything for her."

Mrs. Jordan reached her hand out the window and Nate took it. She squeezed his hand, looking into his eyes. "She's quite a girl, isn't she?” said her mother.

"Quite a girl!” echoed Nate nodding.

“Holding hands with my mom?” asked Dale returning for another box of cookies.

“Busted,” said Nate.

“Well, here’s yours,” she said. “Number Seventy-Nine, Nathan Miller, studly Defensive End!” Continuing in a whisper, she added, “Yours is the only one with hearts. Better eat that before anyone sees. You’ll get teased. I so hope you get teased!”

With that, she waded back into the crowd, calling out more names and numbers.

Nate looked down at his cookie. Little pink candy hearts were pressed into the white icing along the stripes and on top of his number. He felt someone clap him on the back. Turning, he saw that it was Ward.

“Hey, guys,” said Ward loudly. “Loverboy’s cookie is covered in pink hearts!”

Other players wandered over to get a look.

“She put you up to this, didn’t she?” asked Nate.

“Of course,” said Ward. “I’m a sucker for Dale. I’ll do her bidding any day of the week.”

“Let’s see the cookie,” said Cody.

Nate held it up so that everyone could see it and tease him. He didn’t mind if Dale’s wish came true.

“I’m so jealous,” said Ward. “You better keep your woman happy, Nate. I’d be lying to you if I said I didn’t want to steal her away from you.”

Nate had still not taken a bite when Dale returned for another box.

“Let me get a quick shot of you two and the cookie,” said Ward, pulling out his phone. After capturing a few images, he said, “I’ll sell one of those to Kenny for the yearbook. Poor kid, missed a big opportunity for a few fun photos.”

“Dang,” said Dale. “I didn’t think to tip him off.”

“Don’t worry,” said Ward. “I’ve got your back. Let me get another photo . . . one of you with a box of your masterpieces, Dale.”

“Sure,” said Dale, posing with a box of cookies, before returning to handing them out.

Nate had studied the cookies in that box and had noticed that Dale had even made cookies for the coaches and the ball and water boys.

After the cookies were all handed out, the coaches started to herd everyone onto the bus. Nate watched as Dale circulated quickly, giving hugs and words of encouragement to all as time allowed.

As Nate made his way up the stairs and down the aisle he caught snippets of conversations about Dale and her cookies,
“Wow, she makes good cookies.”
“You mean, she’s got nice cookies! Size B, I’m guessing.”
“B for Beauteous!”
“I’d put up with all the rest if I could munch on her cookies every day.”
“Who cares what a girl looks like if she can bake like Dale!”
“She called me a hunk.”
“She is so tasty.”
“Thank God for Alexa. I never thought I’d get to see her cookies bare.”
“Bare and bald! Wow!”

Nate looked back as the bus pulled out of the parking lot. Dale was standing by her car waving.

“She didn’t do a cheer for us,” said Ward. “A topless cheer would have been so nice.”

“I guess she’s following the rules of the cheer ban to the letter,” said Nate ignoring the ‘topless’ comment. “But even if she can’t cheer, she’s behind us all the way.”

“Don’t I know that, you lucky bastard,” said Ward. “Everyone’s talking about her cookies. What a big hit! Did you know she was baking cookies?”

“She tried to keep it a secret, but I kind of figured it out,” said Nate as Ward sat down by him.

Nate was surprised that Ward had taken the seat next to him. He had grown to like Ward. He expected that at the start of the year Ward had not even known his name. Ward was one of the most popular guys at school. Being tall, dark and handsome, he seemed to make all the girls go weak in the knees. He was also the bad boy that all parents hoped would stay away from their daughters. And with the exception of Dale, he seemed as if he could take his pick.

A few minutes into the bus ride, Ward had gotten bored with him and moved to the back where Jason and his other good friends were. Nate didn’t care. He knew that Ward’s departure was at least in part due to the evasive answers he had been giving him. Ward was fascinated by Dale, so he didn’t blame him for being so nosey, but he didn’t have to answer his questions either.

Once suited up and on the field, Nate started searching the large crowd for Dale. The game was being played on neutral territory so that neither team would have a home field advantage. The stadium was located on a college campus seventy miles from Prospect. The Benton Bisons had a similarly long drive.

The stadium was the largest Nate had ever played in, large grandstands on both sides of the field. Given the size of the stadium and the distance from both Prospect and Benton, it looked as if there would still be empty seats. Given that it was the state championship, Nate had not been expecting that.

He still had not caught sight of Dale as they completed their warmup exercises and headed for the sidelines. However, noticing their parents seated half a dozen rows up in the stands, he went to a spot just below the railing and called up to Mrs. Jordan. Once he had gotten her attention, she came down to the railing and leaned over.

“Where’s Dale?” he shouted up to her.

“She was with us coming into the stadium, but then the reporters caught sight of us. She ran off. We haven’t seen her since,” said Mrs. Jordan.

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 401: Football Game**

Just then, Nate felt someone jump up onto his back. “My turn for a piggy back ride,” said Dale, hugging him tightly.

Nate turned his head and looked into her eyes. She was trying to put on a brave face, but her eyes were red as if she had been crying. Her hood was up; she was obviously trying to fly under the radar.

“How are you doing?” he asked, setting her down so that he could turn and see her face better.

“It’s killing me, Nate,” she said, looking up into his eyes. “The state championship, and I have to keep to the shadows. Everyone who recognizes me seems to just stare. I need to find a hole to crawl into.”

“It’s so unfair,” said Nate compassionately. “Don’t you have anyone to sit with?”

“I don’t know, Nate. I doubt anyone wants to be seen with me. Carly’s over there,” she said pointing. “She’d be nice to be around, but I don’t really know her other friends very well. Besides, I’m kind of feeling like being all by myself.” Brightening up she continued, “But I’m cheering for you. To the G to the O, yell Go, Go . . . all that. In my heart I’m happy because I’m in love, and I’m cheering for my favorite football player, number Seventy-Nine, Nathan Miller! But you’ll have to trust me on that. I can’t look like I’m actually cheering. God forbid Prospect High looked like a normal school right now . . . one with cheerleaders and all.”

“God forbid,” agreed Nate. “But I’m feeling the vibes. You’re giving off a lot of energy . . . at least on wave lengths I pick up. I’ll be doing my best because I have you rooting for me.”

“Thanks, Nate,” she said, but then switching gears, she asked, “Did the guys like the cookies?”

“The cookies went over huge!” said Nate. “This ‘no cheerleaders’ thing is weighing on everyone, but your attitude seemed to put the guys at ease. The cookies were a big win . . . boosting morale.”

“Nate, I meant did the guys like how they tasted?” she said with a wink.

“Sure you did,” he said sarcastically, returning the wink. “I’m on to you. But the cookies did a lot more than just warm hearts. I know I enjoyed mine . . . and they were good energy food. If we win, it will probably be the cookies that put it over the top.”

“What do you mean ‘IF’, Buster . . . oops. Darn it,” said Dale. “Maybe your new nickname is going to have to be Buster-oops.”

“Nate, Dale,” they heard a voice off to Nate’s left calling to them. Turning, Nate saw Kenny with his large lens trained on them. “Hey Dale, how about giving Nate a big sloppy kiss for the yearbook?” he added.

“Not now, Kenny. I don’t look so good,” said Dale politely, turning her head away.

“I’m sorry, Dale,” said Kenny walking up. “I’m sure it’s going to be a tough game for you.”

“I’ll survive,” she said. “And I’m sorry if that didn’t sound very nice. It’s been an emotional day, and a few minutes ago I broke down and messed up my eye makeup again. I don’t know why I don’t just give up on makeup entirely.”

“I understand,” said Kenny sympathetically. “You’ve got it rough.”

“Kenny, will you do me a favor?” asked Dale. “When you are selecting photos for the yearbook, will you pick just photos of the girl I used to be . . . not the girl I have become? That’s how I want people to remember me.”

“Oh, Dale,” said Nate. “You’re still the same girl.”

“The same wonderful girl!” added Kenny.

“Still,” said Dale. “Just pictures from when I was a cheerleader, please.”

Changing the subject, Nate said, “Kenny, you missed some good photo ops back at school. Dale made cookies and passed them out to the players. They won’t be as good as if they were yours, but Ward took some photos. You should be able to get a few from him."

“Ward?” said Kenny. “He can take photos?”

“Give the guy a break,” said Nate. “The guy’s good at everything. That’s why he’s the quarterback.”

Glancing at Dale he saw a look of displeasure on her face. She started to say something but then bit her tongue.

“Are you guys going to win?” asked Kenny.

“Yep!” said Nate. “We lost to these guys during the regular season, so now it’s our turn.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” said Dale, hopping up on her toes to kiss him. She whispered into this ear, “To the G to the O, yell Go, Go.”

“What was that?” asked Kenny.

“Just a cheer,” said Nate. “But don’t tell McRoberts. Is he here?”

“He’s with a group of teachers over there,” said Kenny pointing.

“Well, you need to get to the bench,” said Dale, steering Nate in the direction of the field. “And I need to disappear.”

Dale gave Nate a quick kiss and then darted off through the crowd, calling back, “Bye, Kenny.”

Nate tried to follow her with his eyes, but given her height, she was gone. He looked back over his shoulder and his eyes met Kenny’s. They both shrugged, but then Nate continued on to the bench. The referees and the team captains were out in the middle of the field for the coin toss.

Prospect won the toss. Instead of choosing to receive the kickoff, Ward chose which goal they would defend. That would give them the wind at their backs for the second and crucial final quarter of the game. Fortunately the field was bare and dry, but there was a steady icy wind blowing from the west.

Based on his new kickoff team assignment, Nate lined up for the first play of the game. The kick off went high, hanging in the air, as Nate sprinted up the field. The Benton player called for a fair catch, giving the Bisons the ball on their own thirty-five.

Through a relentless series of short yardage runs up the middle, the Bisons were able to achieve first down after first down. The defensive line, Nate and Felipe included, was being hammered. They were not looking too good as the opposing team marched steadily down the field for a touchdown. A successful field goal put them up seven to zero.

Just before the end of the first quarter, a much needed pass completion nearly resulted in a touchdown. The long yardage play put the Mavericks in first and goal position. On third down, Jason took a handoff from Ward and scored easily through a hole the center managed to open up. Unfortunately, a missed field goal meant that the quarter ended seven to six.

During the break between quarters, while the referees moved the ball, Ward asked Nate, “Do you know where Dale is?”

“Nope,” said Nate scanning the crowd. “In the stands somewhere I presume, but I haven’t been able to find her.”

“Right there,” said Ward pointing.

Looking where he was indicating, Nate finally saw her. The upper corners of the grandstands were all but empty, but there was a lone spectator in dark clothing way up in one of the corners. Studying the lone spectator, he recognized the white lettering on the front of her hoodie. She had her hood up and looked to have her hands buried deep in her pockets for warmth.

It made him sad to see her sitting there all alone like that. It was probably a new experience for her to just watch a game from that vantage point. Thinking back he realized that she had been a cheerleader every year. Watching a game from the grandstands might be a new experience for her. He realized that she might have decided to sit up high to give her an overview of the field, but staying hidden seemed as if it had to be her primary motivation. He wondered what she was thinking, and if she was crying.

Ward’s words from the noise parade came back to him, “It’s a crying shame, what’s going on here . . . doing that to the Great Dale Jordan!”

Nate looked back at Ward who had also been looking up at Dale. “This is just f\*\*ked up!” said Ward before turning and running back out onto the field for the start of the second quarter.

Nate tried to watch the game, but at the end of each play, he was unable to keep himself from glancing up at the lone demoted cheerleader discreetly watching the game from such a high vantage point.

The second quarter did not go very well for the Mavericks. The opposing team scored both a touchdown and a three point field goal. Prospect was unable to answer with any points of their own. The teams headed in for half-time with Benton up seventeen to six. Before going in to the locker room Nate again looked up into the grandstand. Dale had disappeared. He wondered where she might have gone, but he couldn’t stand there and search the crowd for her. He had to get into the locker room.

The locker room was relatively quiet as he entered. Everyone was realizing how depressing it would be to live with having made it to the finals only to lose there. Just making the finals had been quite an accomplishment, but it no longer seemed that way with them down eleven points at the half.

Head Coach Neal got their attention and they all listened attentively as he critiqued some of what he had seen on the field. He also gave certain individuals things that he wanted them to concentrate on during the second half. From there he rolled into one of his canned inspirational talks. They had all heard his pre-game and half-time attempts to motivate them so many times that to Nate it seemed to be falling flat.

Suddenly Ward stood up saying, “Coach Neal, with all due respect, this isn’t going to get the job done. We’ve got a f\*\*king game to win . . . excuse the French. But . . . sorry . . . may I take over?”

Nate saw the look of surprise on Coach Neal’s face as he looked around at a room full of glum players.

“By all means, Ward. Something’s got to be done, just go easy on the F-bombs,” said Coach Neal, stepping back sitting down.

Ward took his helmet and looked as if he were going to throw it hard against some lockers to get everyone’s attention. Instead he stopped himself and calmly set it on the bench where he had been sitting.