

**The Mayor of Marathon**  
by Leslie Heiden

Caine always conceded that his parents had been a trifle uncreative, bestowing upon him a name that was simply the casual combination of his maternal and paternal last names. Caine Kruger was the result. A name, that for some reason found itself blissfully carried along the gentle conversation of passing women as well as the more disgruntled remarks of passing men. Controversial, Caine usually kept to himself. His proud back and shoulders revealing the extent to which his evenings were consumed with strengthening his body, toning each muscle carefully. It was no secret that Caine could rival any of the athletes at the school; he simply chose to refrain from sports—much to the dismay of coaches who hounded him every year. Join the swim team, football, track, volleyball, wrestling, or any other sport that he truly desired to partake in—Caine simply chose not to partake in any.

Always refusing the overt attempts at coercion as politely as he could muster. Although, even he, with his infinite patience, found himself slightly frustrated as George Bards, the high school football coach was the result of an insatiable curiosity to answer the door before the maid could get to the crystal knob. Caine had hoped that it was nothing more than another salesman looking to take a bite of his father's fortune, but it was Bards' gnarled face that greeted his own.

"Hello, Coach Bards," Caine greeted formally, extending a strong hand, wrapping around the fat digits of the small man who stood in front of him. Bards stood a hand span shorter than Caine's formidable six feet. A shining baldhead against dark skin, betraying his Hispanic background, shone with the sun high above Caine's house as it warmed the day.

Bards was frail, reaching retirement age, and spoke with a weakness that found itself embedded within the voices of men who denied the dignity of their age—not wanting to embrace their seniority in any capacity.

"Good afternoon, Kruger. I'm here to speak with you father," Bards stated simply, giving the younger man's hand a final squeeze before releasing it—a slight push that increased the distance between the two men.

Puzzled, Caine regarded his elder for a moment. "If you'll be kind enough to wait here one moment, I'll go and retrieve him from his study, Coach Bards. Can I offer you something to drink?" It was a formality that came completely involuntary to Caine's lips, the result of the Mayor's meticulous lessons in proper behavior in the Kruger home.

Bards responded with a slight dip of his head, "yeah, I'll take a beer if you have one."

Caine quickly fetched a bottle of the bitter liquid from the refrigerator, placing it against the welcoming palm of the elderly man, and ascended the stairs to the Mayor's study where he knew the old bastard would be lying in wait—carefully disguised as to pretend he was working. Caine was often accosted with the image of a vulture, standing on impossible feet, pecking at the raw pink tender flesh of a conquered carcass before entering the Mayor's chambers.

"Sir?" Caine inquired softly after a brief knocking resulted in a quick answer, the Mayor standing in the oak frame, looking expectedly at his older son.

"What is it Caine?"

Caine dipped his head under the gaze of the alpha male, and relayed the occurrence of an outsider who currently resided in the den. Carefully, as if stalking the visitor, the Mayor—Wallace Kruger, Mayor of Marathon City—slunk down the stairs, leaning heavy on the banister. Caine heard as the two men greeted each other—loud, fumbling grunts of recognition and appreciation as they clapped hairy hands together, both squeezing as tightly as humanly possible attempting greatest show of strength.

"Howerya hangin in there old man?" Caine's father asked, drawing upon the familiarity felt as a result of his father's time as star quarterback under Bards' watchful eye.

"Doin good, doin good," Bards said in response—also recognizing the familiarity, "I have something that I need to speak with you about, Wally."

Caine cringed from where he stood, still outside the mayor's study; Caine had only moved enough to allow the three hundred pound man to pass through the door and down the banister. Other than that, Caine still stood off to the side of the door as if

he wasn't sure if moving would be a response deemed appropriate by the mayor. When Bards and the Mayor slunk into the den, most likely to imbibe alcohol prior and during the matters that Bards needed to discuss—whatever they may be, Caine stole away, up into his room.

Caine's haven rested at the top of the house. His room, formerly the attic, was accessible only by a small set of stairs that were hidden in the ceiling on the second floor. He was grateful that his father had allowed such an indulgence, but somewhere, deep inside, Caine knew it was only because his father did not want to take the chance that someone of consequence would become privy to his son's room, revealing that his son was nothing more than the average teenager.

Because it was originally designed specifically for the storage of unwanted furniture and clothing, Caine's room was abnormally large and—for an attic—abnormally empty. Caine had a futon flat on the floor next to a small stereo and a footlocker. There was a set of weights tucked away in one corner, next to a square of the hardwood floor that he had sanded and reinforced for the jump rope that hung casually on the wall, not far from the weight set. Other than that, there was a lot of—what the mayor considered—"wasted" space. It probably would have been more reasonable for the mayor to tuck Caine away in one of the house's walk in closets, but he enjoyed the space. His clothes, the few that he chose to have were in a basket next to the foot locker—the maid, sometime during the day, crawling up there to place them in wait. Caine laughed softly. No matter how many times he told her that it was all right to leave them at the ladder—she consistently insisted upon bringing them up into his room. One must be grateful for small things, he mused as he worked his hand through his obsidian hair.

Grateful at that moment that he didn't have to drag the basket up the ladder himself, he pulled his dark blue T-shirt off of broad shoulder, unfastened his jeans, and after a moment, was standing at the head of the ladder, dressed only in his boxers.

"Caine! Come down here!"

He heard the mayor's voice echo up through his house, as if he were standing right behind Caine, yet the callous gentlemen was probably still in the den—a room lower than even the first floor. No matter how many times this exact situation presented itself, Caine always chastised himself for disregarding the fact that the Mayor required his presence before he slip into a quick slumber. Very rarely was he able to pull on the dark gray

sweatpants and actually drift off to sleep. The Mayor usually found some use for him before he had even managed to bury himself within the soft white sheets that he had purchased for himself. The Mayor, despite his genetic ties to several great southerners, despised any cloth made solely of cotton.

"Yes, Sir!" Caine called obediently and tore into the basket full of nicely folded T-Shirts and jeans. He pulled on a fresh blue T-Shirt that resembled the one that he had been wearing, and then pulled his jeans back on.

He was breathing slightly rougher than the usual when he met the Mayor and Bards in the den an impressive two or three minutes later. The Mayor, however still met his eyes with complete disdain, as if he should have appeared the moment he had beckoned. Caine felt guilty against the absurd expectations, dipping his head in recognition of his failure. "Yes, sir?" he asked, eyes glued to the oak floorboards.

"Why wont you play football for this man?" his father asked.

Caine remained silent; knowing completely that it was a rhetorical question.

"You will play football, will you not?" his father asked.

Caine dipped his head again, recognizing the tone in the Mayor's voice and the futility that would have been arguing, and responded, "yes, sir. If that is what you want, that is what I will do."

"See, Coach, he's a good kid. He knows when to obey his father. It was his mother's silly notion to let him decide what interested him—I was just trying to honor her memory...but every good kid plays football," the mayor's chest puffed up with pride, "I've always told him that. My son isn't a faggot." The Mayor reached out, his fist making contact with Caine's shoulder—the fatherly gesture not uncommon in the presence of men the Mayor wished to impress.

Caine felt the impact in his stomach. "Yes, sir," was all that he could think of to say. His face was never flinching.

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Plunging his hand into the warmth of the tousled sheets that lay crumpled and lonely next to him, it did not take Caine long to realize that his partner no longer shared the bed with him—a startling realization that wrenched him out of what had been a

very pleasant slumber. "Steve, what are you doing?" he called after a moment. He wondered why the bed next to him was not warmer. How long had his lover been up and about? "Steve?" Caine called again.

"Who is Steve, Caine?" the Mayor's voice permeated any remaining relaxation that coursed through his muscles. He froze, wondering where he was, then remembering the difficult yet deliberate trek back to the Mayor's house when the acceptable period of time for him to be away from the homestead had passed. After the realization that he would have to play such a barbaric sport, Caine went to his boyfriend's, Steve, apartment. He had collapsed onto his futon—without changing. Hell, he still felt his shoes clad tightly around his feet. Steel toe boots were not the most comfortable bed mate.

Absently, he ran his hand, palm down, across the side of the futon where Steve would have laid had he been there with Caine. Then the Mayor repeated his demand, followed by an all too common statement, "goddamned, boy, you'd think you were a damned faggot. Calling out to men in your sleep." Such a comment was usually followed by, and this occasion was no exception, a hearty laugh that drew up from the very guts of the Mayor—causing his whole body to tremble with his perceived humor. Caine didn't have to witness the man to know that he had leaned back in his chair, resting his hands—linked slightly—on his protruding stomach. The Mayor would laugh and laugh—relishing in the fact that his son, his boy, was far too straight to be a damned queer. Hell, Caine was even on the football team now. It was almost as if Caine could hear the Mayor's thoughts as he laughed, secure in his office, surrounded by his books, his chair, his desk, his city.

His city.

For the second time, Caine took a moment to feel where he would have lain with him. "I love you," he whispered, hoping that the space between them wouldn't prevent Steve from hearing him—or at least always feeling how much Caine loved him. Steve was the reason that Caine stayed in Marathon. Now, he was beginning to think that Steve wasn't even enough. How long was a man supposed to conceal their identity from their environment?

Caine felt the fury building up inside, the confines of his emotions snapping under the pressure of the anger he was feeling now. It burned across his chest, beginning in a deep pit he had long been sustaining with freshly suppressed emotions. He had

been in Marathon far too long and he had spent many nights, meditating, hoping he could find the strength to change his life's path.

Caine sat up, steeling himself against the bubbling emotions, trying to find the strength to make it through this test as he had so many before. He strove to see what it is that he had left to learn about being the son of a pompous asshole who was a flaming homophobe—and in turn a man who inadvertently hated and alienated his own son. He allowed his mind to blank, hoping the predator would not become aware of the vulnerability that Caine felt when meditating.

Despite how low it was muttered, Caine heard the Mayor's final sentiment on the issue over his own prayer, "my son, a fucking faggot," followed by another stream of rumbling laughter. Caine laughed as well, wondering how a father could simply be so bluntly oblivious.

Caine was vaguely aware that he had risen to his feet, descending the stairs, and then he found himself in the confines of the Mayor's private sanctuary. It was an unmistakable feeling that rose in his chest, perspiration breaking across his forehead and down the back of his neck. His pulse quickened as he stood there, heart thundering in his ears, looking at the back of his father's baldhead. He couldn't quite claim his own thoughts and concentrated on trying to calm his body and bring him back to himself. Yet, Caine had no control over his own motions, as if the harmony he had strove to achieve through meditation and exercise between the physical and the mental were gone and both existing on their own. Caine was consumed with the resentment coursing through his body, making the thin layer of skin—hiding so much beneath it—tremble slightly with the emotion and the effort of the simple motion of walking.

Caine wondered, with a sort of detached curiosity, if it was something similar to what suffocation would feel like—the lump growing in his throat, the pressure building in his chest. There was a significant part of him that felt the only available course of action would be to ball up his fists, stomp his feet and scream and cry with all the nervous energy that was building up inside of him. Instead, he simply scrutinized the back of the Mayor's head.

Caine had never actually been in the room before—the mayor's dictate declared the confines of this space as his own and only his—but he knew his way around. Growing up in the house, piecing

together the layout from his father's conversations over the years, and basic intuition—he knew his was around.

Maneuvering around the large oak desk, pausing briefly to take in the mess of papers cluttering the desktop, pens and pencils interspersed, with a simple stapler and pencil sharpener resting at one corner. Caine found himself surprised as he had always been under the impression that this room sported its own desktop computer, but in the absence of one, he reassessed his assumptions, placing his father's laptop on the desk from time to time. Against the wall—anyone sitting at the desk would be facing it—there was a rather ominous bookcase spanning from wall to wall. Mostly law books, with a spattering of choice family photos. He was mildly upset by the one of his mother, smiling knowingly at him, almost as if she was more than aware of why he was in the room. Caine vaguely wondered if she had considered it herself prior to ending her own life nearly two years earlier. Her suicide gave the Mayor the final sympathy vote he needed to claim Marathon City as his own.

In the far corner of the bookcase, a clear glass box held a shining pistol. It seemed to beckon him, as he knew that the Mayor was the sort of man to keep a loaded gun easily within his reach at all times. Caine drifted over to where it was, wondering why the Mayor had not yet sensed his presence in the room.

The cold metal against the flesh of his hand startled him. He wasn't sure if it was the fact that the gun was cold or the fact that his skin was unnaturally heated. His hand shook around the barrel as he held it, turned towards himself. Slick with a thin layer of icy sweat, he repositioned the gun in his hand, extending it out in front of him.

It was that moment when the Mayor, chose to turn around in his chair, not a little surprised to find himself in the company of his son—let alone, his son holding a gun that had suddenly been turned on him. The cloud that passed across his face, brightening his eyes slightly, easily expressed the disheveled nature that his insides immediately took on. "What are you doing, Caine?" his father asked, his voice uncharacteristically shaking.

"You can't make me do anything now." Caine murmured. He took a moment and adjusted his aim so that the sight on the handgun pointed directly at the cold heart in front of him. "Maybe this life was to learn that wickedness does exist."

"What are you talking about, Caine?" the Mayor said.

It hit him then, rocking him so hard that he wondered for a moment if someone had hit him from behind, before he realized that it had been nothing more than his own consciousness rocking his existence, appalled by the decision he was about to make, his finger still squeezing the trigger lightly. He looked at the Mayor then, saw him as his father once again, and, most importantly, and saw him as a human.

A human; a life.

Looking at the fear in his father's eyes, Caine understood the frailty of the man before him. The fear and the humanity permeating through the being he believed to be evil—when, in fact it was Caine, at this moment, embracing sin—but he still had a choice. "I am sorry, Father," Caine said, lowering the gun and then walking over to place it back in the safe once again—his anger quickly fading as he came to a realization.

"What are you talking about Caine?" his father asked again, more stupidly this time.

"One has to be willing to give up what they love in order to make the right decision for themselves," Caine said to no one in particular.

Leaving his father, trembling near tears, he left his father's home for the last time. Caine, feeling the warmth of life's harmony radiate throughout his body, he walked slowly to the border where Marathon City and Worth County met. He had been there several times in the past, wondering what lay beyond Worth and then beyond that and then beyond that.

He stepped across the line, determined to find out.