

STEADY  
FOR  
THIS

*Books by Nathanael Lessor*

Steady for This  
King of Nothing

STEADY  
FOR  
THIS



NATHANAEL LESSORE

HOT  
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BOOKS

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*For OGC*





# Inducing Me

My name is Shaun Thompson, but people call me Growls because I growl like a tiger before my rhymes.

*Yeah they call me Growls,*

*I'm like a tiger on the prowl.*

*King of jungles so you better take a bow.*

*King of concrete so you better say it loud.*

You best believe there's more where that came from. Man's got bars for days, like a prison or a vending machine, you feel me?

It's Monday morning so I'm in my form group. Can't lie, I'm one of the top thirty students in my class. But I've figured out how to stand out from the crowd and get Tanisha to notice me. The minute she clocks my rap skills, I know she'll be super on it.

I'm sat next to Shanks, my partner in grime, but the space next to him is empty, because only the cool kids sit at the back. Shanks is legit my OG. Swear down, he's had my back since day. His mum and my mum started chatting outside the gates when we were in primary school. Then Mrs Shanks sometimes took me to their house after school if my mum was working late, shout out receptionist jobs. The first time I went to his yard, I didn't wanna leave. Man had kitchen tiles and matching curtains on some interior-design wave, and his garden was a private one, not even for the whole block. What got me most though was when his mum said we were eating lamb for dinner, I thought it was gonna be in some kinda kebab shape, but this thing was on the bone. She called it lamb shanks for her little lamb, and that's how Shanks got his nickname, Little Lamb. But people at school mocked it when I called him that, so we changed it to Lamb Shanks (Shanks for short).

Me and Shanks, we been tight ever since. It wasn't too long after that when I decided that we should become a rap duo. He weren't super on it at first, but he saw the light. I told Shanks that people would sing our names from mountaintops, where milk flows like honey and goat farmers sing Christmas carols in the midwinter. I was gonna make enough money to get the real cereal, and not the one with the fake bumblebee that doesn't even have a name.

You could say Shanks' MC skills aren't levels with mine,



but he's mad smart. And wise, like one of those talking owls from a cartoon. He taught me that 'banoffee pie' is called that because it's a mix of 'banana' and 'toffee'. And last week he gave me good advice on how to finally make Tanisha my number one.

'If you put Vaseline on your eyelashes, it'll make them look longer,' he said. I guess it would have worked, except I used half a tub and the school sent me home because it looked like I had an eye infection. But none of that matters now. When I'm a famous rapper, I won't have to worry about getting girls to like me. They'll see that I've got loads of bars and money. Man, rappers are so lucky that they can buy anything they want and not worry about their mum saying 'no'.

'Yeah, but being rich and famous would make you lonely because you'd be living in a big house by yourself,' Shanks whispers to me while our form tutor takes the register, and I guess he has got a point. I think that's why they've got all those girls by the pool popping bottles, it means they've always got someone to talk to. Big mansions are always the first ones to get haunted too.

Imagine having all that money though. You could eat food with more than three ingredients all the time, buy clothes that fit you perfectly, and you wouldn't have to worry about turning everything off at the plug to save electricity. Shanks don't get it; I definitely seen him leaving

rooms without turning the light off. And I'm sure his mum doesn't have to count the prices of everything when she's shopping like it's a science test or something. The struggle is real out here, like when my Aunt Tina oils up her waist to put on skinny jeans.

The bell for first period goes and we head to English with Mr Rix. At the back of this class is where we write our sickest bars and practise freestyle battles. Sometimes Shanks spits his bars quieter when there's people about, but that's only because of copyright issues.

Can't lie, writing bars in English is one of my favourite things about this subject. But the best thing about this lesson isn't here yet. I'm waiting for her to arrive, and I'm concentrating hard on the door so I don't miss her.

'Growls, why you frowning like that?' Shanks asks. 'Did a moth get stuck in your ear again?'

'No, I ain't got a moth in my ear.' This guy has a vivid imagination – it was just your average beetle. He asks me if I have a spare pen but I can't respond. Tanisha just walked in and I'm bare distracted. She's parted her hair to the left today, and her eye make-up has those little wings on them. Shanks rolls his eyes but I don't care. Today's the day.

'Fam, you say that every day. The last time she actually talked to you, you got nervous and dropped your chicken bake on her shoe.' Shanks is a liar. He wasn't even there when it happened.

Tanisha and her friends always sit near us at the back. This one time I pulled out a chair for her to sit down, but she just laughed and carried on walking. Swear down, this girl needs to chill. Shanks would've liked Tanisha sitting with us, he's always tryna get people to sit with us. But if it's not Tanisha, then I ain't interested. She's so popular her phone is always going off, but she don't care. She's so cool that sometimes she doesn't even check it, even though it could be an emergency. The only people that ever call *me* are Shanks and sometimes his mum to ask me if Shanks is at my yard. I wish Tanisha would call me though, that would give me life.

'Shanks, I ain't playing. I really think today's the day. What's the worst she could say?' I ask.

'That she won't go out with you because you have dry elbows, your ears stick out and sometimes after PE you smell like an onion.'

'OK, that would be kinda next if she said that. Bro, why you shooting down my confidence? You know I bruise easily, so be careful when you handle me.'

'Bruv, I ain't handling you in any way, stop being weird.' Now he's getting defensive. I'm telling you, this is how it always goes.

'It was a simile,' I explain.

'No, it wasn't – if anything it was a metaphor. A simile is when something is like something.'

‘So a simile is like a metaphor. Stop confusing me, bruv, you’re putting me off. I’m supposed to be talking to Tanisha.’

‘Why don’t you just use your bars to get her digits?’

I think he’s right. Spitting bars is one of the most romantic things an MC can do. And when she finally realises how talented I am, she won’t notice that I got four Subway stains on my shirt. OK, this is it. I do the breath test where I breathe into my hand and if it doesn’t make me light-headed, then I’m good to go. This is kinda exciting. I can’t believe I’m doing this. It’s like my mind won’t believe my brain.

Just as I’m about to make my move, Mr Rix starts the lesson. I know he’s a bit of neek, but Mr Rix is a decent teacher. He teaches us big words like ‘derelict’ and ‘invaluable’.

‘Settle down, everybody. Today I want to do a little articulation exercise. As you know, we’ll be looking at autobiographies this term.’ He wants us to write about robots? ‘The literal translation of autobiography is “history of the self”.’ Oh. Cool. I was half right – robots might wanna write about themselves too. ‘So before we start,’ Mr Rix says, ‘I want you each to tell me an interesting fact about yourself that you could mention in your autobiography.’

I look at Shanks. How is this guy gonna say ‘before we start’ and then ask us to do stuff? Fam, that *is* the start. I don’t go to football and say, ‘Before we start, I’m gonna bang in five goals.’

Ryan, some next guy who always has a dead trim, is the first to stand.

‘Well, I’m not sure if this counts, but my dad was in the circus, and when I was younger he taught me how to ride a unicycle. Sometimes I use it to go to the shop around the corner from my house.’ Well done, this guy knows how to ride half a bike.

Stephanie goes next. She would be pretty decent, but she switched on me once for no reason, just because I accidentally got chewing gum in both our eyebrows. I found it stuck under the desk, but it was watermelon flavour which is nasty. When I flicked it off my finger, some went in my face, and when I tried again with the rest, it went on hers too.

‘So, I can actually speak five different languages,’ she says. What’s the point? You only live in one country.

Everyone’s going around talking about moist things they’ve done, like meeting celebrities or swimming with dolphins or whatever. Dolphins are just bald sharks and celebrities are boring anyway; when I met Idris Elba outside Greggs, he kept running away saying, ‘I’m not Idris Elba, leave me alone, I don’t even look like him.’ Never meet your heroes, that’s all I’m sayin’.

It finally gets to my turn and I don’t know what to say. Maybe I could tell them about the time I met Idris Elba. Or the time I did over seven kick-ups. There’s too much

to choose from. But Tanisha is watching me, and I need to impress her. If I'm gonna do this dead task for Mr Rix, I might as well do some trademark acrobatic lyrics and get that love train rollin'.

'I can MC off the dome,' I say, standing up. I hear a couple people groan, but they groaned at Ludacris when he flew into the sun, and nothing stopped him achieving his dreams. Shanks is looking down at the floor, it's the head angle for optimum audio quality. Tanisha's not even watching me, she's on her phone. If my juicy hot bars don't impress her, I don't know what will. Mr Rix just looks confused.

It's now or never.

*'Yo, spitting bars out here, that's my big plan.*

*See you nod along, you a big fan.*

*Fan-tastic say it twice coz I cancan.*

*Getting hench, I'm a classic version of a roadman.*

*I know man, I know man well.*

*I know well . . . Wait . . . Emmanuel?'*

Damn, I dropped it. But even heart surgeons have bad days at the office, it ain't a big deal. Tanisha weren't even paying attention anyway. Two people start clapping, and Mr Rix looks even more confused than before.

He says, 'Thanks, Shaun, I think we'll leave it there.'

'Wait, sir, I can do better.' It can't end like this. I'm usually on point, but Tanisha was making me nervous. 'Mr Rix, if you drop a beat, I swear, like, I can stay on beat.' Some of

the class are grinning at each other. Mr Rix just says that we don't have time and we should move on. I guess the battle is lost, like the one at Waterloo station.

The rest of the lesson is calm. I start thinking about my autobiography, like, if Sherlock Homes can write one about his houses, I could do one that's way less boring. It would have to be a side hustle to my rap career, but imagine all the P that I would make.

When the lesson finishes and we start packing our books away, I see Shanks look past me, and his mouth is hanging open. I turn to see what he's looking at. OMG it's Tanisha, she's actually coming over. She must have noticed that I've started doing press-ups. Every now and then, I try to work out almost twice a week, coz it's important to exercise your triceratops, your lorax and your Lithuania. When you put the work in and come out looking like a snack, man can't be surprised when people wanna gobble-gobble. Shanks sits nearby, pretending to put stuff in his bag so that he doesn't interrupt us. True wingman out here.

'I liked your rap. Please tell me you were being ironic.' When she speaks it's like drill music to my ears. My days, she's so pretty.

'Ha. Ironic. I don't even know the meaning of the word,' I reply, which is true because I really don't. She's not saying anything. She just pulls out her phone and starts playing with her hair like she's waiting for me to say something. 'Yo,

is your head itchy? Because my mum's got this shampoo for dry or itchy scalps.' I know that because it's written on the bottle and I memorised it.

'What are you saying? That I got a dry scalp?' She stops playing with her hair and folds her arms.

'No, you were just touching your hair and I thought maybe it was itching. Like, don't worry or nothing, it's medicinal.' She picks up her handbag and dashes her phone inside, then she gives me a proper screw face and storms out. Like, legit what just happened? It was going so well. I look over at Shanks, who saw the whole thing, bare hurt.

'Shanks, I was just trying to help.'

'I know,' he sighs.

'Bruv, it was medicinal.'

'I know.'

I spend the rest of the day wishing I'll bump into Tanisha, so I can tell her that her hair ain't dry and that. It's beautiful, soft, and damp like when Shanks' mum cooks banana bread. But it's 3.30 p.m. and I'm losing hope. The bell's gone, and Shanks had to rush off. His mum took him bowling and it's not even his birthday.

Oh my days, I see her. She's almost on her way out the gates, and I have to run to catch up with her and her friends. One of them says something as I approach, and they all start laughing. Tanisha tells them to go wait for her at the bus



stop, and they walk off, linking their arms and rolling their eyes. I don't care that they laughed. Adrian, my big brother from the same mother, taught me that sticks and stones can break my bones but words can only leave emotional scars that others can't see. Tanisha is so pretty, even when she's angry. When her frown is intense and her mouth gets all pouty, it makes me tingle like Miles Morales' spider-sense.

'What do you want? Come to tell me more about my bad hair?'

'No, I come to tell you that your hair's really nice and your face is nice and I'm really sorry. I didn't want to upset you before.' I'm shaking a little bit, but that's just coz my street-dance training is on high alert, not because I'm nervous.

She rolls her eyes. 'Give me your phone.' Tanisha holds out her hand. I give it to her. She quickly taps numbers in and shoves the phone back at me. 'Don't make me regret that,' she says.

Hah, 'regret'. I don't fully know the meaning of that word either. She goes off towards the bus stop to join her friends. I run home to call Shanks and tell him what just happened. Don't ever doubt me, bruv, I got game. I got so many girls' numbers that if you line them up back-to-back it would be well confusing, even for a mathsmagician.



## 2

# They Call Me the Athlete Coz of My Athlete's Foot

We're doing PE off-site in Catford at one of those sports tracks with all the lines that you see on the Olympics. It's like a big stretched-out circle with grass in the middle. Mr Youssef has got us running 4,000 meters, which is pretty useless because in the real world you can just get the bus. I'm sweating like a Krispy Kreme and my thigh gap keeps rubbing together. Tanisha and her friends are way ahead, so me and Shanks are running behind everyone else so we can talk in private.

'What you gonna message her?' Shanks is grilling me like a baked potato while he runs alongside me.

'Chill, bruh. They don't call me Cassava for nothing.' I guess that's half-true.

'Growls, cassava's a root. I think you mean Casanova.'

‘I think I mean supernova, because that’s what I am.’

‘Whatever. It’s just that the last date you went on didn’t really work out that well. Remember Nadia?’ Why’s he got to bring that up? Nadia was peak. We went on one date and she never spoke to me again.

‘That’s because you sneezed on her.’

‘I sneezed *near* her.’

‘OK fine, but you got some on her and your nose was bleeding.’

‘My nose was only bleeding because that stupid football hit me in the face.’

‘You kicked that ball into your own face.’

‘Bruv, you know I wasn’t wearing the right shoes. And who pumps a football up that much? The thing was rock solid.’ Swear down, that football was a weapon of match destruction. I still don’t get why Nadia was so upset.

‘Come on, you were trying to impress her and it flopped.’

You know what? This guy is stressing me out. Why we talking about Nadia when I’m trying to think of what to message Tanisha? ‘Bro, you don’t know what’s in my heart,’ I tell him. ‘And why you bringing up old wounds right now? You know I got postal dramatic stress disorder.’ We carry on running in silence for a bit.

‘Aite, I’m sorry, I won’t bring her up any more.’ Shanks tries to put his arm around me, but I run sideways a little bit so he can’t reach. I’m not ready to be touched. Mr Youssef

notices us way behind everyone else so he shouts at us to pick up the pace. He doesn't know that me and Shanks are already supreme athletes and we don't wanna make those other pedestrians in our class look bad.

'What do you think I should do with Tanisha then?' I have to ask him because no one else in our year knows me the way he does, or ever really talks to us on a level. I would go to Adrian, but last time I asked him to help me find a girl, he just held up a mirror. Shanks isn't on that wave like I am, but I don't mind because I'm my best self when I'm with him, he's the perfect hypeman. You know what, he really *is* the perfect hypeman, and that gives me an idea.

'Shanks?'

'Yeah, fam.'

'What if I link Tanisha and you come with?' Why didn't I think of it before? With Shanks there, he can talk me up, and we always have fun together. Maybe Tanisha will see that and get gassed and she'll join in the bants. He thinks about it for a sec and says that I'm less likely to injure myself if he comes with. We're in.

Mr Youssef tells us to hurry up again, we've fallen way behind now. Shanks is such a neek, he starts running faster and faster, but I'm at optimal capacity. When you're a Scorpio like me, we have explosive speed but less stamina. Shanks has already started overtaking people. He's killing it.

By the time I get to my last lap, everyone else is finished and they're all lying there out of breath. You see me, yeah, I was smart and I conserved all my energy till the end. I kick my legs into overdrive and I'm proper sprinting now. Literally, I'm running so fast I must be a blur. I think Mr Youssef is calling at me to hurry. I can't hear him though, because that old man on the lawnmower is overtaking me.

When I cross the finish line, most people have already gone to the changing rooms. Shanks is waiting for me, even though he finished third out of everyone, which is kinda sick when you think that we were behind for so long. He says he had time to sit down and catch his breath while I was on my final lap.

'So you saw my final lap?' I ask him. 'Be real, how insanely fast was I going?'

'I think I saw a butterfly land on you.'

Me and Shanks are in the changing rooms at school. We didn't change in Catford, because we ran out of time. Apparently someone made us late and we had to get back. It's calm because we don't really like using the changing rooms when they're too packed anyway. Man get too rowdy, and I have to suck my belly in when I'm changing T-shirts. I type a message to Tanisha asking her to go cinema, and spend the rest of the day avoiding her in case she doesn't reply.

\* \* \*

Why she airing me like a cupboard? We're in geography class the next day, and I can see her see me. I guess the vibe ain't right, geography is dead, fam. Our teacher won't even teach us real geography stuff, like where to find the lost city of Atlanta, or where the wild things are. Maybe she's not talking to me coz people were mocking it when I said that a stalactite is when two stalacs are best friends.

Shanks notices that I keep checking my phone and looking over, so I just lock and keep it in my pocket.

*Swear down, Tanisha owes me an apology,  
We found ourselves in geography, it's not for me,  
You can ghost but I'm a gangsta living and I been studying  
G-ology.*

Those bars were tighter than two stalacs, a bit like me and Shanks when we share a milkshake.

The bell goes and I wanna go chat to her, but my heart is beating too fast like drum and bass, and for some reason my legs won't move; maybe I been sitting down for too long and I got peas and noodles in my legs.

Shanks tries to encourage me, but the moment's gone.

Or is it?

As we're walking out, I can see a pen on the table where she was sitting. She's one of those people who writes stuff down in class. I tell Shanks not to wait for me before next lesson.

OK, there's Tanisha and I have her pen. I don't need to be

nervous, what if the inventor of paracetamol was nervous? He would have never invented Paris. This is a pressurised situation, a bit like when you go to the optician and they test your spelling. I'm telling you it's a hoax, the words they make you spell are always made up.

'Yo, Tanisha.' Why are her friends always laughing? My leg was numb when I stood up, but I styled it out by pretending to tie my shoelace. Bare people tie their shoes lying down on the floor, it ain't that deep. 'I got your pen, I thought you might need it.' I climb back onto my feet like I normally stand because balance game strong now. She tells her friends that she'll link up with them later.

'That's not my pen,' she says, and then she sighs.

'So did you get my message?' I ask. The trick is not to look desperate.

'I did, but you know what it's like. I've been so busy, getting my nails done and my eyebrows threaded and making content and that.'

'Yeah, I seen how many followers you got on IG, you must be really busy trying to keep up with them. I'm busy too though, hustling and being a G on road and that.'

'You think I got a lot of followers?'' She smiles and looks at the floor. 'Because I wasn't sure if it's enough. I wanna be an influencer.' OMG she's responding to me like we're equals. I can't gas her up too much.

'Are you kidding? You've got bare followers, you're gonna

go far in life.' I can't help it, she's life goals. 'One day I'm gonna have as many as you, and have this huge squad, and they'll respect my gangsta vibe because I'll have enough money to buy them all ice cream. Every. Single. One of them.' Tanisha's pulled out her phone and is literally on the gram right now, admiring her own selfies. I rate that. 'I just need to get on your level of socials,' I tell her. Me and Shanks only have fifty followers when we combine. Most of mine are family members, but Imma unfollow them when I make it big. Too much dead weight. Most people at school don't follow us back, which I get because me and Shanks are before our time like jetlag or an analogue watch.

Tanisha looks up and nods slowly. 'OK, let's go out, one time, and just see how it goes. I don't know what I'm thinking,' she says. We quickly make plans to meet at Peckham cinema on Saturday, and then I literally run away before she can change her mind. As I'm sprinting down the corridor, I can tell that my road energy sealed the deal (I don't know why seals are so good at deals) and the first thing I do is find Shanks.


'We're in,' I tell him.

'We're in what?'

I tell him about my chat with Tanisha, and how I was so gangsta that she just crumbled at the knees and asked me out.

Back at mine, I'm trying on different outfits to wear for my date on Saturday. Shanks came over after school because





he likes being my stylist. Mum is in the kitchen on the phone looking stressed. Shanks gives her a quick wave, but my trick is to avoid direct contact when she's on one. I hear her moaning about the cost of living and having to cut back, which is peak because we already been making cutbacks. Our toothpaste got one of those clips you put on food packets to keep them fresh – we use it to squeeze all the last drops out. And last time I asked her for one-fiddy for trainers, she gave me 50p for materials to start building my own pair.

Adrian is here too, I can hear music from his room. He's a little bit hench, like a semi-pro badminton player or an under-sixteens footballer. When we pass him in the corridor, he's wearing a loose tank top and sliders, looking like an uncle in a car park on a hot day.

Me and Shanks spend the rest of the afternoon in my room trying on clothes for my date with Tanisha. I got this one T-shirt with bare holes that I can pretend are on purpose, but one of the holes is right over my nipple and I don't want babies to get the wrong idea. My other favourite T-shirt is a plain blue one, but it's got a grease stain on the chest that never comes off. I can wear it if I keep my arms folded the whole time, but that means I can't do normal things like tie my laces, or high-five people on escalators, or pick lavender or whatever. In the end, we do what we always do, which is that Shanks will lend me a top and I have to give it back later.