

**ELEMENT**

**Part 1**

**By**

**CM Doporto**

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**CM Doporto**

**Element**

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Thank you for your support.

For my husband,  
thank you for sharing your dream with me and helping me make my dream come true.  
You are the love of my life.

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## Chapter 1: New Beginnings

“Ladies and gentlemen we are approaching a storm and it’s going to be a little rough until we clear it.” The captain announced. “Please stay seated and turn off all electrical devices immediately. Thank you.”

Natalie looked out the small oval window. Raindrops smeared across it, dancing their way to the side. Lightning flashed and she shuddered. She hated flying when there was a storm. For a moment, she wished she would have taken the later flight, but she wanted to get back early since classes resumed tomorrow. She reminded herself that she had a great Spring Break in Chicago with her family and ending it with her cousin’s fairytale wedding made it all worth it.

A sudden jolt called her attention back to the situation at hand. The plane shook and rattled as it flew on the edge of thick, dark clouds. Within seconds, darkness consumed the plane and the day turned into night. Out in the blackness of the sky she saw powerful flashes of light stretching out like tentacles waiting for the plane to enter. She pulled the blanket closer to her, clutching it up against her chest, somehow hoping it would calm the drumming of her heart.

“What the —” she blurted out when the plane hit another patch of rough turbulence. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

A horrible rumble echoed through the plane as it wavered from side to side. Gasps and sighs along with people begging and pleading to God were heard throughout the plane. She swallowed hard, feeling the vitamins she took ten minutes ago ease their way up. Without warning, the plane dropped several feet. Her heart hit the bottom of her stomach. An alarm sounded and emergency instructions echoed through the overhead speakers. Gasping for air, she grabbed the arm rests and her body stiffened. Her eyes stayed fixed on the flashing red and white lights above her head. *Please God, don’t let me die! Please.*

“Natalie... Natalie, wake up. You’re having another nightmare.” Her college roommate, Lise, shook her several times before she finally awoke.

“What?” She sprung up in her bed. Sweat trickled down the sides of her forehead and she breathed heavily.

“You’re okay. It was just a nightmare.” Lise turned on a bedside lamp and then sat down next to her.

It took her a few seconds to realize that she had been dreaming. She wiped the sweat away and the pounding of her heart turned into a slow thud. She flopped back onto the bed and took a few deep breaths. "I don't know why I keep having these darn nightmares."

"I do." Lise replied.

Natalie looked at her. "You do?"

"Uh, yeah... because you said you nearly died on that plane. You're probably experiencing post stress or something like that."

Natalie swallowed hard. She couldn't be experiencing post-traumatic stress because only soldiers suffer from things like that, right? "No, I don't think so. I mean, it was horrible and scary but..."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Lise's green eyes softened.

"What is there to talk about?" Natalie sat up. She hadn't told anyone the full details about what she experienced on the plane, including her parents. She wasn't about to tell Lise either.

"Sometimes it's good to talk about horrible events. It can help you get over them." Lise played with the edge of her t-shirt, rolling it up.

"Thanks, but I'll be fine." She glanced over at the clock on the window ledge. "I guess we should start getting dressed."

Lise turned and looked at the clock. "Crap, I don't want to be late."

Natalie threw back the covers. "Neither do I. First impressions are everything."

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Lise kicked Natalie's foot under the table. "That guy keeps looking over here. He is way too cute."

Natalie adjusted her glasses and did a quick glance over to where the guy sat. "I think I know him."

She leaned in closer to Natalie. "You do? From where?"

"I went to high school with him." Natalie shot another quick glance to make sure.

"You did. How lucky can you be? Did you ever go out with him?" Lise whispered.

Natalie put her hand in front of her mouth, to muffle her words. "No. He had a girlfriend. I don't even think he knows who I am."

“Well, the guy sitting next to him is cute too.” Lise played with her hair, twirling it around her finger while glancing up occasionally at them.

She nudged Lise’s arm. “Quit staring. They know we're talking about them.”

Lise huffed and rolled her eyes, eventually turning her attention back to the front of the room. Ms. Thompson, the human resource representative for Kronberg Laboratories, spoke in a low monotone voice. After two hours of literally reading Power Point slides, she had half the room yawning, including Natalie.

The door opened and a middle aged man with salt and pepper hair sauntered into the conference room. Everyone sat up straight. It was as though he demanded everyone’s undivided attention without speaking a word.

“Mr. Hayle. I, uhhh, didn’t realize you were stopping by.” Ms. Thompson quickly perked up when she saw the sleek suited man. “Everyone, this is Mr. Russ Hayle, CEO & President of Hayle Industries and Kronberg Laboratories.”

The room erupted into a welcoming cheer. Natalie clapped her hands and stood up, like everyone else but something about him rubbed her the wrong way. Maybe it was the way he flaunted his arrogance like a proud king over his country. Prior to applying for the internship, she had done her research on this business tycoon. Although he impressed her with the empire he had built, Dr. Albin Kronberg, the scientist behind the natural supplement line, had her full attention. She couldn’t wait to meet him. Especially since she had been testing out some of his products and would be interning in his lab.

“Thank you. Thank you.” He held up one hand in the air, in a dictatorial manner. The clapping came to an abrupt stop. “I know everyone is getting great information from Ms. Thompson but I wanted to take the time and welcome each of you. This is the largest summer internship group we have hired since opening our doors.” He surveyed the room, meeting the eyes of several students. “We are expecting wonderful results from each of you in this program. While this is only a summer program, many of you will be offered an opportunity to continue working here while you pursue your college education. The rest of you may not. It all depends on your performance and I expect the best from each and every person whether you are an intern or an executive.”

Mr. Hayle continued with his elaborate and somewhat parental speech. She listened carefully, like a good student should. Even though he was an excellent speaker, he lacked in his



ability to be personable and it made her feel distant rather than welcomed. Regardless, this internship was an opportunity of a lifetime. She would learn everything she could while working there.

“As a way to welcome each of you, I am inviting you to the VIP grand opening of The Regal on Sixth Street tonight.” He pulled out a stack of cards and handed them to Ms. Thompson. “I hope to see everyone there. Good luck to each of you.” He gave a quick wave and walked out the door.

“OMG. He is uber cool. I can’t believe I’m actually interning here.” Lise wiggled in her seat, smiling.

“Me either.” Natalie watched Mr. Hayle walk out of the room.

“That should wrap up orientation. Does anyone have any questions?” Ms. Thompson asked, taking her reading glasses off. “No? I guess we are done. If you need anything, my contact information is listed in your folder. I’ll stay around for a while if you have any questions. The passes for the VIP party are here in front.” She laid the cards down on the table in front of her.

Before Natalie could even get out of her seat, Lise had already made her way to the front of the room collecting a few passes. Natalie placed her folder in her backpack and zipped it up and waited for Lise.

“I know where we’re going tonight.” Lise held up the passes in front of her.

Natalie shook her head and put her purse on her shoulder. “Hmmm, I don't know.”

“Oh, come on. Don't be a party pooper. ” Lise put her hands on her hips and pouted her lower lip.

“Excuse me.”

Natalie and Lise both turned their heads in the direction of the deep, raspy voice. Standing in front of them were the two guys from across the room. Both of them wore button down shirts and slacks that clung to their well-defined bodies. They looked like they had just finished a photo shoot for an ad in a magazine.

“Yes?” Lise smiled, her cheeks turning a slight rosy color.

Natalie tried to speak, but her voice caught low in her throat. Her heart raced and she swore it pumped so loud that everyone could hear it. *Say something. Anything.*

“Hello, I’m Ryan.” He stuck out his hand but she couldn’t move. Every muscle in her body tensed, including her eyes. They were fixed on him, like he had cast a spell upon her unknowingly.

“I’m Lise Turner.” She reached out her hand, nudging Natalie as she shook his hand.

“Nice to meet you Lise.” He gave her a friendly shake.

Lise turned to the other guy. “And you are?”

“I’m Sal Rodriguez. Nice to meet you.” He had short, dark hair and an olive skin tone that hinted he must be Hispanic. His style was slightly more rugged than his friend’s with a five o’clock shadow.

“Ryan? Ryan Garrett? Go Bullfrogs?” Natalie hesitated, not wanting to be wrong. If her instincts were correct, which they usually were, she knew who he was. He was the high school football star that every girl drooled over, including herself. *What was he doing there at UT Austin?* Last she had heard he went to TCU.

“Yeah, I thought I knew you from somewhere.” He held up his finger, pointing at her. “I’m sorry, I forgot your name.”

“Natalie. Natalie Vega.” She stuttered the words out, feeling like a complete idiot.

“Nice to meet ya.” His Texas drawl, coupled with his one dimpled smile, made her want to melt into the floor. He held his hand out again in front of her. She reached for his hand and the moment her skin touched his, a surge of energy penetrated her. A wave of dizziness flowed through her body. She stumbled backward trying to keep her balance.

“Hey, are you okay?” Ryan reached forward and caught her in his arms, before she fell back. When she felt the warmth of his embrace, everything went limp and she struggled to gain focus. A flush of heat flowed up her body, numbing her and seizing her breath. He scooped her up with little effort. Her face rested perfectly in the curve of his neck, allowing his manly scent to infiltrate her airways. It stirred up emotions she’d never felt before.

“Nat? Are you alright? Do I need to call 911?” Lise spat off a thousand questions. She tried to speak, but couldn’t get her throat to unclench. She shook her head.

She heard Sal take charge. “Come on everyone, give her some room. Can somebody get some cold water for her, please?”

Ryan lay her down gently on top of one of the tables in the conference room. He released his arms from around her, allowing his hand to slide up her back until he cradled her head in the palm of his hand. "Lay back for a moment. Just relax."

His voice touched a part of her that made her respond willingly and freely. "Okay." His light brown eyes caught her gaze and at that moment, something between them exchanged. It was a feeling, a relentless force, somehow bringing their souls close together. She took a few slow breaths, and with every inhalation she swore she could feel him, smell him, and literally taste him. She wondered if he felt that instant connection. By the look in his eyes, something deep within her told her he did.

"Is she okay?" Ms. Thompson interrupted their moment. When Ryan didn't respond, she turned to Natalie. "Are you okay?"

Natalie didn't answer. She couldn't seem to take her eyes off of him. It seemed like a full minute had passed before Ryan broke his gaze and turned to Ms. Thompson. "I don't know. I mean, I think she is."

She blinked a few times and gathered her senses. "Yeah... I'm okay. I got a little dizzy." She rubbed her forehead with her fingers. Then she realized the small audience gathered around them. She wanted to run out of the room, but knew that wouldn't be very smart. She struggled to get up. "I can sit up now."

"Are you sure?" He smoothed a few strands of hair away from her face.

Her heart wanted to say no, but her head told her to say yes. She wanted nothing more than to stay right there next to him. Feel the warmth of his embrace and remain within the security of his hands. Instead she responded, "Yeah."

He guided her up slowly.

"Do you need some water?" Sal handed her an icy cold water bottle.

"Thank you." She took the bottle from him, but had trouble opening it. Her hands felt like JELL-O along with everything else.

"Spoiler alert. She's fine." Sal turned around and urged the crowd to leave. Relief flowed over her. She didn't like to be the center of attention and by the size of the crowd, she had been.

"Here, allow me." Ryan took the water bottle from her hands and opened it with little effort. He handed it back to her.

"Thank you." She sipped the water slowly.

“Are you okay?” Lise took Natalie’s purse off her shoulder. Somehow she managed to keep it hanging to her side.

“I’m fine. I got dizzy for a second, that’s all.” She took another sip of water.

“Do you need us to call a doctor for you?” Ms. Thompson removed her cell phone from her belt clip.

“No. I’m fine... really, I am.” Natalie insisted.

“Okay. Take it easy. We will see you in two weeks. Let me know if anything changes. You have my number and email in your folder.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Natalie smiled at Ms. Thompson, giving her that extra reassurance. She smiled back and then walked away along with everyone else still watching.

Natalie’s heart beat rapidly and her mouth was dry as cotton, despite the cold water she continued to sip. Ryan stood right next to her, which made her feel even more nervous. What had gotten in to her? Why was she feeling this way about him? She took another sip of water and kept her head down. It really sucked feeling this way around guys. For once, she wished she could be more like Lise: outgoing, fun and not afraid to make friends.

“Are you okay now?” Ryan asked hesitantly, patting her shoulder.

“Yes... yes I am.” She nodded and then swiveled around until her legs dangled off the table.

“I hope you are, because I still want to go out tonight.” Lise reached down to pick up the VIP passes she dropped on the floor.

Sal reached down at the same time she did and they bumped heads.

“Owww.” Lise grabbed her head.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t see you reach down.” Sal rubbed the top of his head. His cheeks reddened.

“It’s okay.” Lise shook it off and gave him a big smile.

She turned to Natalie. “Come on. Everyone will be there.” Lise glanced over at Ryan and Sal. “Are you two planning on going?”

Ryan shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. What about y’all?”

Natalie peeked out from behind her glasses, trying to gauge his interest. Gathering her courage, she lifted her head. “Ummm... maybe.”

“Okay. Hopefully we will see ya’ll out there tonight.” He said with a smile and a wink.

Her mouth fell open. *Did Ryan Garrett just wink at me?* She couldn't say anything, so she nodded.

"See you guys later tonight." Lise jumped up and down on the balls of her feet. She held onto the passes like they were the winning ticket to the Texas lotto.

"See you later." Sal shot Lise a half-smile. Lise fluttered her long faux eye lashes at him. She was hooked. Natalie shook her head, wondering why her roommate fell for guys so easily.

The moment the guys left the room Lise screamed, "OMG, how lucky can we get? Those are the two hottest guys I have ever seen. They have to be from that spirit club, what are they called," Lise motioned with her hands.

"Texas Cowboys?" Natalie stood up slowly; making sure the dizziness had subsided. Still feeling a little woozy, she held onto the table, since her friend was too busy reminiscing about the hotties.

"Yeah, or maybe they're football players. Did you see the muscles on them?" Lise continued to rattle on about them. "Oh, sorry. Did you need help?" Lise held out her hand.

"No. I've got it."

"What happened?" Lise picked up Natalie's backpack and purse.

"I don't know. I got dizzy all of a sudden." Natalie tried to take her purse from Lise but she pushed Natalie's hand away.

"I got it. Let's get back to the dorm, grab a bite to eat, and get ready for tonight." They made their way out of the room.

"Maybe I should stay in and rest." Natalie walked close to Lise, just in case she got dizzy again.

"What? No. You're going out. You're not staying home another night."

Natalie let out a sigh. "Lise I really don't want to talk about this right now. I want to go and lie down for a while."

Lise's shoulders sank and her backpack along with her and Lise's purse slid off both her arms. "Oh, alright. Let's get you back to the dorm."

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Natalie sat up on her elbows when she heard the door open. She shielded her eyes with her hand when the light from the hallway shined onto her face.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you.” Lise shut the door softly.

“That's okay. I need to get up.” Natalie flipped her bedside lamp on. “What time is it anyways?”

“Seven, I think.” Lise flipped on the main light in the dorm room.

“Already?” She threw back the covers and sat on the side of her bed.

“Yeah, already. I did bring you something back from Texadelphia.” She sat down a brown paper bag on Natalie's desk.

“Thanks Lise. Why didn't you wake me up? I would have gone with you.”

“You were sleeping so good, I didn't want to bother you. So I went with Shannon and Macie.” She turned on the TV and then went to her closet and started going through her clothes.

“Oh good, you didn't have to eat alone.”

“So, do you think you feel like going out tonight?” She looked over her shoulder at Natalie, giving her a *please say yes* look.

“Oh, Lise, I don't think I'm up to it. Ask Shannon and Macie to go with you.”

Lise stomped her feet on the ground. “What? Come on Nat, you know I don't like going out to bars with our suite mates. They are so lame. Besides, you haven't been out since Spring break.”

“I'm sorry. I'm not ready to go out.” Natalie lay back down on her bed. She didn't want to admit that seeing her old high school crush had definitely stirred up some buried feelings.

“Not ready? What you need to do is forget about Tony and go have some fun for crying out loud. Our freshman year is ending.”

“I don't care, Lise.” Natalie grabbed her pillow and covered her head. Even though Lise was a great friend, she really didn't want to listen to her lecture about what she needed to do. She knew how to handle her split with Tony and she didn't need Lise telling her how to do it. More than anything she was afraid that if she went out she'd run into him or maybe even Ryan.

“Come on, Nat. You can't stop living your life because of him.” She tugged on the pillow, trying to uncover her face.

She shoved the pillow to the side of the bed and sat up. “I am living. He hasn't ruined my life.”

“Well, you haven’t been yourself since you broke up with him. All you do is workout, go to class, study and sleep.” Lise put her hands on her hips.

When Natalie tried to get up, she moved side to side blocking her. She sat on the edge of the bed waiting patiently for her to move. Lise continued to babble words of encouragement but she ignored her. Frustrated, she pushed Lise out of the way and got up from her bed.

“Where are you going?” Lise stumbled to the side.

Natalie didn’t answer. She walked over to her dresser and pulled out some shorts and a tank top. She changed her clothes and put on her running shoes. When she stood up, she caught her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was a stringy mess and she barely had any makeup on. She told herself she didn’t care, but decided to redo her ponytail anyway.

“I’ll be back later. I’m going to workout.” Natalie grabbed her gym bag and headed for the door.

“Wait. I ummmm... wanna go.” Lise stumbled around the room trying to find her running shoes.

She stopped and turned around. “Lise, you hate to workout. Besides, you have a great body.”

“Uhhh, no I don’t. I’ve gained at least ten pounds this semester. So I could really use your help.”

“If you say so.” Natalie raised her brows and shook her head. If only she could be as lucky as her blonde, green-eyed friend. Who happened to be naturally gifted with big boobs, a small waist and a firm butt that any girl would envy, despite her disillusionment of being overweight. The fact that Lise was almost a whole year older than her gave her a glimmer of hope.

Lise looked up from tying her shoe. “I think that class you’re taking is really making a difference. Have you checked out your legs lately?”

Natalie glanced down at her legs, flexing them and turning them from side to side. The definition in her quadriceps and calves had definitely changed. Either the working out or the supplements she had been taking was making a difference. Maybe both.

“Okay, let’s go.” Lise seemed overly enthusiastic.

They left the dorm room and walked down the hall. “I hope you can keep up with me.” Natalie let out a slight smile, looking over her shoulder. Lise trailed behind, dodging a slew of oncoming female students in the long corridor of the dorm.

By the time they made it to the common area, Lise's enthusiasm had dwindled away and a worried look formed on her face. "I've done Zumba before. I think I can keep up."

"If you say so." Natalie said holding the door open for her.

The moment they stepped outside, Lise's attention shifted. "OMG it's feels hotter out here than it did thirty minutes ago." She pulled up her hair and clipped it to the side.

Natalie wiped the sweat forming along her hairline on her forehead. "I can't imagine what this summer is going to be like." She led the way across the campus lawn.

"Brutal. That's what it will feel like. Hey, let's take the shuttle." Lise pointed to the bus stop.

"No, it's a short walk." Natalie kept going toward the gym.

"What? It's too hot to walk." Lise whined. Natalie turned around, grabbed her arm, and pulled her in the opposite direction. Poor Lise, she was always complaining and whining about something. Even though they were in central Texas, it was hard not to complain about the near hundred degree temperatures this late in the afternoon for the middle of May. No doubt, this would be a hot summer.

Lise rushed ahead of Natalie to get inside the gym. "Are you that eager to get started?" Natalie walked in behind her.

"No, I just wanted to feel this cold air." Lise stood underneath the air vent, spreading her arms out and allowing the cool air to blow down on her face.

"I hope you're not afraid to sweat." She passed by her.

Lise followed her to the free weights area. "Weights? Seriously?" She threw her hands up in the air.

"You can do whatever you want. Today, I'm lifting weights." Natalie sat her gym bag down in front of a bench and then picked up a twenty pound dumbbell. She did a few arm curls while Lise watched her.

"My God, look at your arms. What have you been taking?"

Natalie watched the bulge in her bicep enlarge with each rep she took. "Just the supplements and vitamins from Kronberg Labs, that's all."

"Are you sure there are no steroids in them?" Lise reached over and squeezed her arm.

She let out a slight laugh. "No. They are not drugs. It's only vitamins and protein along with some amino acids. Nothing else. Believe me, I wouldn't be taking them."



When she finished, Lise motioned for Natalie to give her the dumbbell. “Here, I’ll do a few.”

“Okay.” She handed Lise the weight.

“What the—,” Immediately her arm went down, nearly dropping the weight. “This is way too heavy.” She used both her hands to hold on to the weight before setting it down on the floor.

“Sorry, I thought you knew they were twenty pound weights.”

“No, I didn’t notice. I need something lighter.” Lise walked over to the rack of weights and tested out a few different weights before selecting the eight pound dumbbells. She began doing arm curls, in the same manner Natalie had done.

Natalie went over to the rack and picked up the fifteen pound weights. She walked over to a bench and kneeled down on one knee to do triceps kick-backs.

Lise did arm curls, right next to her. “You know Nat, you can’t keep going on like this...avoiding the pain. It’s not good for you. Besides, it’s been over four months now.”

“What? I’m not avoiding anything.” She did reps with her left arm. The fact was she hadn’t avoided the pain. She had cried and cried, and had even talked to her mom about what happened. Just because she hadn’t cried to Lise didn’t mean she avoided what happened. She didn’t wear her emotions on her sleeve or tell everyone her problems, like Lise did. Natalie preferred to be more private and only tell on a need to know basis.

“Then why don’t you want to go out?” Lise set the dumbbell down.

Natalie switched arms and began lifting the weight with her right arm. “I don’t care to meet any guys or get involved with anyone right now.” She had made a promise to herself not to get hurt again. Never would she let a guy deceive her like Tony did.

Lise turned away and sat down on another bench next to her. “Just because you’re going out doesn’t mean you have to hook up with anyone. Let’s go and have some fun.”

“I’m sorry, but you and I both know those guys will be there and you’re going to drag me with you so you can hang out with them. And I don’t want to.” She put the dumbbells back on the weight rack and walked over to the bench press.

Lise followed right behind her. “Oh come on, Nat. They’re nice guys and you already know Ryan.”

She ignored Lise, not saying a word. Even though Ryan was a nice guy, she couldn’t afford to get involved. She knew that something had sparked between them and if she ran into

him at the bar, chances were they would talk. Talking could lead to something more. She wouldn't get hurt again.

She picked up two twenty-five pound weights and placed one on each side of the bar and lay back on the bench. "Spot me, please?"

Lise moved in position behind her. She leaned over and said in a low voice, "You know, Ryan seems to be so much better than Tony. And definitely hotter than him."

Natalie's eye narrowed at Lise but she ignored her and kept doing her workout, not giving in to her pleading. She closed her eyes, trying to block out Lise's hounding voice.

"Oh no, please don't tell me they know each other."

She opened her eyes. "No, they don't. Ryan had already graduated when Tony enrolled our junior year."

"Okay, good." Lise didn't say anything for about half a minute and then started in again. "So let's go. Think about it. You, me, Ryan and Sal. It will be fun." Lise sang out.

Natalie pushed the weight up faster and faster until she couldn't handle it any longer. She shoved the bar back on the rack. "Just stop, Lise!" She jumped off the bench and walked off, not caring if she caused a scene. She held her head with her hands, pacing around in a circle.

Lise had no idea what she had gone through because she hadn't told her much. Only that they broke up and she never wanted to see him again. Little did she know that her high school sweetheart had turned into an arrogant, selfish, money flaunting, chic magnet playboy. The images of him lying in bed with two girls haunted her mind. How had he gone from this quiet, innocent, and charming boy with a swooning Italian accent to this player?

Natalie sat back down on the bench, keeping her face buried in her hands. She could feel the tears coming on and she squeezed her eyes tighter, trying to keep them from seeping out.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..." Lise put her hand on Natalie's shoulder.

Natalie jerked her body forward, away from her hand. "Don't. Don't say anything. I need a minute."

She couldn't stop thinking about all she had done for Tony. Helping him fit in at school and learn the American way when he moved from Italy to the US. How they fell in love with one another and how she thought he was *the one*. Why did she agree to move to Austin and go to college with him? She should have listened to her parents. Just because his father decided to

open his winery in Austin didn't mean she had to follow him. How could she have been such a fool? She was smarter than that.

She wiped the tears from her eyes and looked at Lise. She sat hunched over, staring at the ground. Her puppy dog eyes and pouty lips said it all. "I'm sorry Lise—"

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to keep nagging. I didn't realize how bad he hurt you. We don't have to go out if you don't want to."

Natalie shook her head. "No, you're right. I can't stay a recluse forever. I have to get out and enjoy life." She wouldn't let Tony get the best of her. She had a life to live and she couldn't be scared all her life. There was only one thing she could do and that was to protect her heart.

Lise's pouty lips turned up in to a full smile. "Seriously?"

Natalie nodded. "Yeah, let's finish our workout and then get ready to go out."

Lise clapped her hands like a small child that had been promised a toy. "We're going to have so much fun tonight."

Natalie rolled her eyes and let out a small giggle. "You are the bubbliest person I know."

Lise shrugged her shoulders. "What can I say?"

"Thanks for making me feel better."

Lise wrapped her arm around Natalie's shoulders. "Anytime. That's what friends are for. In fact we're going to celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" She retracted her head back.

"New beginnings for you and me."

## Chapter 2: Undeniable Feelings

“Crap.” Natalie struggled to get her jeans up her thighs.

“What’s wrong?” Lise turned around with the curling iron dangling from her hand.

“My skinny jeans...they don’t fit me.” Natalie wiggled her way out of them. “I don’t understand. I’ve been working out like crazy. How could I have gained weight?”

“Nat, you’re not fat. Turn to the side.” She motioned with the curling iron. “You’re just really defined. You look great.”

Natalie’s shoulders slumped and she frowned. “I have nothing to wear. I guess I’m staying in tonight.”

“No you’re not.” Lise ran to her closet and scurried through the tightly packed clothes. “Here, try this on.” Leave it to Lise to find her something to wear. Natalie didn’t know how she managed to pack all the clothes in her hatchback car and drive across four states.

“What? I don’t want to wear a dress unless you are.” She took the sleeveless short red dress from Lise.

“Okay. I’ll wear a dress too. Besides, it’s hotter than hell outside.” Lise pulled out a short, bright blue dress with a big fabric belt hanging from it.

Natalie held the dress up to her. She didn’t have a body to fill it out but decided to try in on anyways.

“Let me see.” Lise stopped applying her makeup and turned around.

“Oh wow, you look hot. You should wear it.”

“Really?” Natalie walked over to the full-length mirror mounted on the door. She turned her body in every direction, not trusting Lise’s opinion.

Lise walked up behind her. “Trust me, you look great. Now, let’s remove these.” She reached over her head and took off her glasses.

“Wait. I ummm...” She tried to stop her from removing them then changed her mind. “I guess I’ll wear my contacts.”

“What if...” Lise grabbed a handful of Natalie’s long dark hair and pulled it to the side. Before Natalie could say no, she sat her down in a chair.

“What are you doing?” She didn’t want Lise to glam her up. She preferred a simple, natural look.

“I’m going to do your hair and makeup.” Lise fumbled through her cosmetic bag.

“What? I already did.”

“Come on. Let me do a few things. Please?” Lise begged.

“Alright, but if I don’t like it, I’m washing it off and brushing out the curls.” Natalie folded her arms across her chest.

“That’s what you say now. Wait until I’m done.” She rubbed a make-up brush in a compact and then stroked it across her cheek.

Thirty minutes later Lise took a step back and smiled. “I’m done.”

Natalie rolled her eyes. “I’m scared to look.”

“Oh come on.” She stepped away from the mirror.

Natalie couldn’t believe her eyes. What had Lise done to her? “Wow. I look so much older and...”

“Say it. It’s okay.” Lise mouthed the words.

“Pr- pretty.”

“Yes, pretty and smokin’ hot.” Lise fanned herself.

“I don’t know Lise. I might send the wrong message to guys.”

Lise furrowed her brow. “You don’t look like a slut, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Are you sure?” She leaned in closer to the mirror, studying her long thick eye lashes. She had no idea mascara could work wonders like this.

“Believe me, you don’t. When we get to the bar, I’ll make sure and point some out to you. Okay?”

Natalie giggled. “Okay. I’ll go out this one time, looking like your Barbie doll.”

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“Here, memorize the birth year. Everything else is the same.” Lise handed Natalie an identification card.

“What? Lise where did you get this? This is illegal.” She turned on the overhead light in Lise’s car to examine it.

“Relax. Can’t you have fun for one night?” Lise stared into the mirror on her visor, applying more lip gloss.

“Yes, but why do I need this? I can have fun without it.”

“Never mind.” She flipped up her visor. “If you don’t want to use it, don’t. I’m using mine.” She slid her fake ID into her wristlet and zipped it up. She opened the car door and got out, not waiting for Natalie.

“Lise, wait up.” Natalie tried to catch-up but struggled in the stacked heels she wore. She didn’t mean to upset Lise, but she also didn’t want to get in trouble. Carrying a fake ID was illegal and since she didn’t care much for drinking she didn’t see a need for one. Besides, most bars allowed eighteen year olds in.

Lise finally stopped to wait for her. “Sorry. I want us to have fun, that’s all.”

Natalie put her arm around Lise. “We will. I promise.”

“Alright.” Lise’s frown turned to a smile.

They made their way over to the old warehouse. When they approached the building they saw that the line to get in wrapped all the way around it.

Lise sighed. “Darn it. Now we have to wait out here in the heat and humidity. I’m gonna be all sweaty before I even start dancing.”

Natalie nodded. “Yeah... I know. I have an idea. Let’s go up to the front and see if these VIP passes have any pull.”

“That’s a great idea.” Lise led the way.

At the front of the building two large guys in black suits guarded the entrance door. They were checking IDs and letting people in from the long line that wrapped around the building. Natalie saw a few girls walk up and hand one of the security guards a card, like the one they had, and get in.

“Come on.” She pulled Lise by the arm, almost causing her to trip.

“Owww, you don’t have to put the death grip on me.” Lise pried Natalie’s hand off.

Natalie let go. “Sorry.”

“Good evening ladies.” The stoutly security guard greeted them.

“Hi.” Lise gave him a flirtatious smile and flipped her hair back.

Natalie flashed the VIP passes to him. “We have these.”

“Come on in.” He stepped aside.

“Thanks.” Lise winked at him. “Wow, we didn’t even have to use our ID’s.” Lise whispered into Natalie’s ear.

“I know.” She followed Lise into the newly renovated building. The bar had a vintage décor with exposed brick, aged paint, and rustic palm trees. Large canvas paintings hung throughout the bar showing a cultural flair of Little Havana. The rich muted colors gave it a tropical atmosphere that came alive with the beat of the fast Latin dance music.

“This place is different but very cool. Feels like I’m in Miami or somewhere like that.” Lise looked around.

“I know, it does.”

“Come on, let’s get a drink.” Lise pulled Natalie by the arm but she didn’t budge. “Wow, you really need to lighten up on the weights.”

“Hold on. I think that’s my Aunt Sharon with that group of people.” Natalie lifted up on her tiptoes to see over the crowd in front of her. When she heard the distinguishable laugh, she knew that had to be Sharon.

“Yep, that’s her alright. Come on.” They pushed through the crowd making their way over toward her.

Sharon, the complete opposite of Natalie’s mom, displayed a pretentious, outgoing, and an uncontainable zeal for life personality. She loved her aunt but felt sorry for her. After two failed marriages, she resorted to a single life and a devout commitment to her career as part owner of an advertising agency in Austin.

“Having fun?” Natalie asked, hugging her aunt from behind. Sharon had a rule to never call her Aunt in public. She thrived on portraying herself as a younger woman. Even at forty-six years old, she rocked a body of a woman in her late twenties. If there was a procedure for it, she’d either had it done or planned on having it done. Sharon’s view: if it’s loose, tighten it; if it sags, lift it; and even if it’s not broken, you might as well have it fixed the way you want it.

Sharon turned around. “Natalie... wow! Don’t you look gorgeous? Let me guess, did Lise do this to you?”

Natalie nodded. “Of course...you know Lise.”

“Great job, Lise. You need to make her up more often.”

“I know, right? By the way, I love your outfit.” Lise touched the sleeve of her animal print dress.

“Thank you. So what are you gals doing out here tonight?”

“We’re celebrating. We both got internships at Kronberg Laboratories.” Natalie smiled at Lise.

“You did? That’s wonderful. I wish you would’ve told me you applied. You know they’re clients of mine. I work closely with Lynn Pham in Marketing.”

“Seriously? I’m going to be working in Marketing. Isn’t she the head of the department or something?” Lise asked.

“Yes, she’s the director. I’m sure you’ll get to know her. Tell her you know me. I’ll also let her know the next time I see her.”

“Okay. I will. You know it never hurts to network.” Lise winked at Sharon.

“That’s right. You learn quickly. Come on. Let’s get us a drink.” Sharon urged them to follow her to the bar.

“Okay.” Lise immediately followed Sharon and Natalie tagged behind.

Natalie wondered if she should tell her aunt that she had been testing out some of their supplements but decided to keep it to herself for now. It probably wouldn’t make a difference to her anyway.

Sharon turned to Natalie and Lise. “What do you gals want?”

“Nothing, thanks.” Natalie replied.

“What? Oh come on, have a little fun. Besides, drinks are on me tonight.”

Lise chimed in. “Awesome, I’ll take a mojito.”

“Three mojitos please.” Sharon leaned over the bar trying to get the bartender’s attention.

The bartender walked over to them. “Sure. It’s an extra two bucks if you want it made with real limes or regular price for artificial mix.” He reached and took three glasses down from the overhead rack above him. “So what will it be?”

Sharon winced. “We’ll have the real stuff. Why is it extra for real limes?”

The bartender shrugged his shoulders while cleaning the glasses with a towel hanging from his waist. “Oh you know...shortage of crops or something like that.”

“Wow, this global warming is becoming more of a problem.” Natalie told Sharon.

Sharon waved it off like no big deal. She gave the bartender her credit card and kept her eyes fixed on him, watching his every move. “They always need some excuse to make more money.” Sharon slipped a few bucks into the bartender’s tip jar and winked.



The bartender smiled back at Sharon and wiggled his left finger that had a thick silver wedding band around it. “Thanks.”

Sharon pouted her lips. “Oh well.” She then turned to Natalie. “So, have you talked to your parents?”

“Yes, the other day. I told them I got the internship and that I planned on taking a few classes this summer and wouldn’t be coming home.”

“This works out great.” Sharon’s eyes lighted up. “I’m going to Europe for the summer and could use your help. Would you mind checking on my place? You can stay there when you want and so can Lise.”

“Sure. It will be a nice break away from the dorm.” Sharon had a rockin’ condo in downtown Austin that overlooked Lady Bird Lake. Besides the breath taking view, the condo had a modern décor with very high-end furniture, making it a lavish pad. Sharon, being a shopaholic, only bought the very best.

“Great. I appreciate it. You have the code, right?”

“Let me double check.” Natalie took her cell phone out from her wristlet.

“Please take care of it, okay?”

“Of course.” Natalie scrolled through her contacts until she came to her aunt’s number.

“By the way, you’re welcome to stay there tonight. I’ll be heading over to Chad’s place afterwards.” Sharon winked.

“I got it.” Natalie slid her phone back into her wristlet. “Who’s Chad?” She tried to recall the last guy she saw her aunt with. She never kept a guy around long enough for her to remember. Before Sharon answered, a guy with short spikey blond hair approached her from behind.

“Hey there sexy.” He leaned forward and whispered in her ear.

Sharon turned around and embraced the guy. “Hi. Don’t you look hot tonight?” She planted a big kiss on his lips and they exchanged more PDA than Natalie wanted to see. After several awkward seconds of heavy kissing and petting, she pulled away from him. “This is my niece, Natalie and her friend Lise. This is Chad.”

“Hello.” Natalie waved.

“Hi.” He nodded his head at both of them briefly.

Lise stepped forward and shook his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Chad smiled, showing his extra bright white teeth that made his green eyes sparkle. His smooth baby face hinted that he was at least fifteen years younger than Sharon. Knowing her taste, he had to be in his late twenties.

“Everyone’s sitting over there. We’re waiting for our drinks. Go ahead. I’ll be there in a minute. Do you want anything?” Sharon fixed his collar on his shirt and then ran her long hot pink fingernails down his chest.

“No, I got a beer.” He held up his bottle. “I’ll be waiting for you.” He arched his brow and winked at Sharon and then slapped her on the butt.

“Ouch.” She reached down and grabbed his rear end with both her hands and gave it a squeeze.

“See you girls later.” He gave a quick wave and then walked off.

Natalie nodded and Lise replied, “See you later.”

Sharon turned to both of them. “I haven’t told him that I’m going to Europe yet. I didn’t want you all to mention it.”

“Oh. No worries. I won’t say anything.” Natalie confirmed.

Lise made a motion across her lips with her fingers like they were zipped shut.

Sharon handed them their drinks and then held up her glass for a toast. “Here’s to a great summer.”

“To a great summer.” Natalie tipped her glass to Sharon’s and then to Lise’s.

She took a sip and when she lowered her glass she saw Ryan walking from the back of the room with Sal. She tried to tell Lise but the words hung in her throat. She managed to motion with her head and then coughed out, “They’re here.”

“OMG! They’re here?” Lise turned around and began checking herself, ensuring everything was in place. “Do I look okay? Do I have enough lip gloss on?” She smacked her lips together.

“Relax darling, you’re hot as they come.” Sharon winked at Lise.

Natalie nodded, not giving Lise much attention to her rambling questions. She knew they were going to run into them. Why did she listen to Lise? She should have stayed home. Then she remembered what Lise said; talking to Ryan didn’t mean she had to hook up with him.

Sharon’s eyes drifted over to where she had motioned to. “Aren’t they cute? Mmmm...check out those muscles.”

Natalie rolled her eyes. Why did Sharon have to hit on every guy she saw? She turned around and sat her drink down on the bar. The last thing she needed to do was to drop it or spill it on herself.

“Sorry. I can’t help myself.” Sharon ran her fingers through her short bleached out blonde hair. “At least they’re better looking than that no good ex-boyfriend of yours.”

That comment stirred something up inside of her. Hearing about Tony was the last thing she wanted, especially tonight. She refused to let her thoughts ruin her night or the rest of her life.

Ryan caught her gaze and he let out a big smile. Surely he wasn’t smiling at her? He kept his eyes fixed on her as he sauntered his way over to them. His cowboy swagger sent her body into full emotion overdrive. A flutter sensation swept across her body flooding her senses. Her heart froze but she managed to smile back.

“Wow, Sal’s smokin’ hot. Isn’t he?” Lise leaned over and whispered in her ear.

“What?” Natalie managed to break away from her daydreaming. That’s when reality hit. Why was she feeling this way? She had no business getting involved with anyone. Not now. She wanted to flee but before she knew it he was right in front of her.

“Glad y’all came. Have you been here long?” Ryan had one hand shoved into the pocket of his jeans. He wore a trendy western shirt with embroidery on the front of it and distressed leather cowboy boots.

She managed to choke out the words. “No, not long.”

“I almost didn’t recognize you without your glasses.”

Natalie felt her cheeks flush with heat. “Oh.” She diverted her attention to the zipper on her wristlet, tugging at it.

“I mean... you look good. Pr- pr- pretty.”

She looked up at him and smiled. She noticed the tips of his ears had turned a bright red. It was good to know she wasn’t the only one nervous. “Thanks. You look nice too.”

“How’s it going?” Sal gave Natalie a smile and then turned his attention to Lise. “Gee, you sure know how to make heads turn.” His gaze slid slowly over her from her head to her toes.

“Thanks. So do you.” Lise flipped her long blonde waves back and then took a sip of her drink. She held on to the tip of her straw with her teeth, biting it. Ryan greeted her but she barely noticed. Sal had her undivided attention.

Natalie took a few silent deep breaths, trying to calm her nerves. Her legs felt weak and she wanted to sit down.

“Hello. I’m Sharon Warren. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh sorry, this is my... Aunt Sharon.” Natalie stated purposefully.

Ryan and Sal shook Sharon’s hand and both said, “Nice to meet you.”

“I gotta go, Chad’s waiting on me. You kids have a good time now.” She winked at the guys.

“See you and thanks for the drink.” Lise held up her glass.

“Oh, don’t forget you can use my place tonight.” Sharon whispered to Natalie but said it loud enough for the guys to hear.

Natalie wanted to bury her face in her hands. She couldn’t believe Sharon said that. She didn’t know what to say so she blurted the first thing that came to mind. “She’s recently divorced.”

“Oh.” Ryan raised his eyebrows.

“Let me guess, she’s a cougar?” Sal asked with a grin.

Natalie busted out laughing and everyone else started laughing too. “Yeah, I guess you can say that.”

“God bless her.” Ryan shook his head then took a drink. He lowered his glass. “I’m sorry. Would you like something to drink?”

Natalie picked up her glass from the bar. “I have one, thanks.”

“How about we grab a seat? That booth’s empty over there.” Sal pointed to an area behind the bar.

“Sure.” Lise lead the way, practically running over to the quaint seating area. Along the back wall were several booth style chairs with overstuffed pillows and curtains draped in front of them. Dim lighting hung above a low table in front of the curved chair, giving it a romantic feel. Natalie knew this wasn’t a good idea, but took a seat next to Lise in the middle of the ‘u’ shaped seat. This allowed Ryan and Sal to sit next to them.

“So, I take it you’re feeling better?” Ryan set his drink down on the table.

“Yes. It was a dizzy spell, that’s all.” Natalie sat perched on the edge of the chair, struggling to keep calm and relaxed. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She took a sip of her drink and noticed her hand shaking. She put her drink down, hoping she wouldn’t knock it

over. She glanced over at Lise and Sal. They chatted back and forth like they had known each other for years. During times like this, she wished she had a little of Lise in her.

“Did you finish your freshman year?” Ryan tried to strike up a conversation with her.

“Yeah.” She nodded. She wanted to get to know him, but she was afraid. She couldn’t get hurt again. For some reason he made her feel nervous, which only made her more introverted. Not to mention, wearing the short dress didn’t help either. His leg practically touched her bare thigh.

Then she remembered something she learned in speech class. She took another sip of her drink and held onto the straw with her teeth. Inconspicuously, she took the straw from her mouth and held it in her hand. She fiddled and twisted the red plastic tube between her fingers, directing all her nervous energy to it. It brought a sense of relief to her, allowing her to relax.

She looked over at him. “What about you?”

“I just finished my second year. I took a year off and then decided to transfer to UT.” He twiddled his thumbs for a moment and then took another drink.

“I should have been a junior by now.” His voice was heavy.

“Oh... well at least you’re still in school.” Natalie wondered what happened. She could tell he wanted to talk more about it but held back. Her nervousness slowly dwindled away and she began to remember things about him from high school.

“I heard you got a scholarship to TCU to play football. I’m guessing that didn’t go well.” She also wanted to ask him about his high school girlfriend, Jennifer, but refrained.

Ryan looked up at her. His eyes drooped down and his bottom lip stuck out over his top lip.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have —” She wanted to kick herself for asking him that question.

“It’s okay.” He let out a slight smile.

Natalie whispered low under her breath, “I didn’t mean to...”

Ryan leaned forward. “I’m sorry, I can’t hear you. The music’s too loud.”

The straw fell from her hand. He was only inches away from her face. Her heart pounded and she broke out in a sweat. Why did he make her feel this way?

“Oh, nothing,” she muttered.

“What? I still can’t hear you.” He moved closer to her, brushing up against her. His scent engulfed her, hitting her like a tidal wave that she couldn’t stand up against. The smell of

sandalwood and ginger filled her airways. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, taking in every ounce of Ryan's virile smell. A tingle danced up her spine and her head whirled, causing her to lose focus. Something took over her. It was the same sensation she had earlier that day. Her body swayed back and forth causing her head to feel heavy and her body to feel light. She grabbed Ryan's leg for support.

"Whoa." She closed her eyes, trying to gain her sense of balance.

"Are you okay?" Ryan asked.

After half a minute or so her equilibrium stabilized and the dizziness went away. When she opened her eyes she saw that Ryan had his arm around her.

"Natalie, are you alright?" She heard the concern deep within his voice.

She nodded. Why did being in his arms make her feel so safe and secure? She noticed she still had her hand on his leg. She needed to let go but couldn't. Not because she thought she'd fall over but due to the uncontrollable attraction she felt for him.

Lise turned to her. "Nat, are you okay?"

She let go of his thigh, even though she didn't want to. "Yeah, I'm fine. It's been a stressful week. You know with finals and..."

"Are you sure you're okay? This is the second time you've done that today, at least in front of me." Ryan narrowed his eyes at her.

She had no idea why this kept happening to her. He couldn't be having this type of effect on her. What was wrong with her? She wasn't that weak. No guy could do this to her. It had to be something else.

"I started taking this new supplement a few weeks ago and I think it's giving me some weird side effects or something." Natalie searched her mind, trying to figure out the source of her dizziness.

Ryan didn't seem convinced. "Maybe you should call your doctor, and maybe you shouldn't drink."

"Yeah, maybe you're right." Natalie glanced at her nearly empty glass.

"Just take it easy." He patted her bare arm and then allowed his fingers to linger on her skin. It sent chills across her body. She didn't know how to respond to his touch and before she could say or do anything he moved his arm and rested it behind her on top of the seat.

“Are you drunk already?” Lise narrowed her eyes at her. She sounded irritated rather concerned about her well-being.

Natalie gasped. “No Lise. I’m sober. I got dizzy again, like I did earlier today. That’s all.”

Lise lurched back, placing her hand against her chest. “Sorry, my mistake. Do you want to leave or go outside?”

By the sound of Lise’s voice, Natalie knew she didn’t want to do either. “No, I’ll be okay.” Natalie snapped back.

A waitress appeared. “Can I get you guys anything to drink?”

Sal nodded at the waitress. “Yes, a couple of waters, two Cokes and —”

“I’ll have another mojito. And yes, I want the real stuff.” Lise handed the waitress her empty glass.

“Okay. I’ll be back.” The waitress scribbled down their order and walked off.

Lise turned to Sal. “Seriously? That’s what you guys are drinking? Soda?” Her eyes widened.

Sal let out a slight smirk. “Yeah, anything wrong with that?”

Lise sat back. “No.” It took her a few seconds before she turned to Sal and asked, “Is it okay that I ordered a mixed drink?”

Sal shrugged his shoulders. “Suit yourself.”

Natalie glanced over at Ryan’s drink. The entire time she thought he was drinking alcohol with his cola. What college guy doesn’t drink? Boy, did she misjudge him. No alcohol. Impressive.

She saw him glance down at her legs and then back up at her. “So, do you workout?”

Before Natalie could answer Lise jumped into the conversation. “Does she? That’s an understatement. That’s all she does is go to the gym.”

Ryan chuckled. “Well, there’s nothing wrong with that. It’s good to exercise. I can tell by the muscles in your legs that you can probably leg press me.” His eyes traveled up and down her body.

Natalie hesitated. “I don’t know about that but I’ve been working out really hard lately. I guess it’s paying off.”

“Maybe we could workout together. You could train me.”

Natalie snickered. “Are you sure? Me, train a football player?”

“Yeah, why not? I’m thinking you may be able to show me a few things.” Ryan smiled and then winked at her. It caused another surge of adrenaline to hit her blood stream. Why did everything he say or do drive her crazy?

“I’ll warn you now. Be prepared. She’ll kill you, like she did me.” Lise smirked.

“I think I can handle it.” Ryan kept his eyes focused on Natalie.

Natalie ignored Lise’s comment. “Sure, anytime.” She had to look away before her face got any hotter.

The waitress came back with their drinks. “Two waters, two cokes and a mojito.”

Sal handed her a few bills folded up before anyone could offer to pay. “Keep the change.”

“Thanks,” the waitress said and then walked off.

“Thanks, Sal.” Lise took her drink and began slurping it down. Natalie took her ice water and downed it. The coldness numbed her mouth and the heat lifted from her cheeks.

“To answer your question from earlier, I did have an athletic scholarship but I lost it when I got injured.” Ryan rubbed the condensation on his glass with his thumb.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Are you okay?”

Ryan nodded. “Oh yeah, I’m fine now. I had to take a year off from school to have surgery and get my head back together. I decided that I would transfer and start fresh. It’s been the best decision I’ve made so far.”

“That’s good. So, you don’t play anymore?”

“Not too much. It’s not worth the risk. The doc said that I really messed up my ACL and if I hurt myself again I’d be on crutches forever or walking with a cane. That was enough for me to decide to hang up my cleats.”

Natalie felt bad for him. It must have been disappointing to have his dream destroyed. She remembered how happy he looked after winning a big game. “I’m sorry to hear that. I know it must suck.”

“Yeah, it did. I had to learn to move on and trust that there is something bigger in life planned for me.”

“I admire your passion for life. It kind of reminds me of something my grandmother always tells me.”

“What’s that?” Ryan gulped down half his drink.

“To never give up on your dreams or goals. If a door closes, another one always opens.”



“Exactly. But I have to admit it wasn’t easy and it took time and a leap of faith.”

“I can only imagine.” She glanced down at her glass, shaking the ice around.

“So, you still want to be friends with me even though you know I’m not a big football star any longer?”

Natalie winced. Did she seem that shallow? Then again, he really didn’t know her that well. “That doesn’t matter to me. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m sorry that happened to you but I ummm... like talking with you regardless.”

Ryan smiled and leaned in closer to her. “Thanks. I hope you’re being honest.”

For a split second Natalie wondered why he would say something like that to her. His eyes told her why. Fear plagued him, like it did her. She didn’t have to ask what happened to Jennifer. She knew she left him because of the injury.

“I’m not like other girls, Ryan. In fact, I really don’t even date. My last relationship was horrible.” Natalie sighed heavily. She noticed her hands weren’t shaking any longer. Finally, she was beginning to feel somewhat like herself around him.

“I’m sorry to hear that. So, you know what it feels like too.”

“Yes, I do.” Natalie looked back up at Ryan. She felt herself being drawn closer to him. She watched the movement of his lips. They looked so inviting, full and plump. He talked but she didn’t hear anything he said. At that moment, she heard an Italian accented voice speak.

“Is that you, Natalie? What are you doing here dressed like that...and wearing all that makeup?”

Natalie turned to see her worse nightmare, Tony. He stood in front of them with two girls hanging on each of his arms, dressed in his typical metrosexual attire. Looking at his dark brown hair, she knew he spent thirty minutes perfecting it into a perfect mold. A sick feeling formed in the pit of her stomach. She fought the urge to jump up out of her seat and attack him. She was better than that.

“It’s a public place. I can go wherever I choose,” Natalie replied confidently.

“You’re with him?” Tony pointed his index finger at Ryan and let out a smirk.

Natalie turned away to see Lise’s mouth fall open. She looked at Natalie and then back to Ryan.

Ryan took Natalie’s hand. “Yes, as a matter of fact, she is. Excuse us. We were just going to dance.” His stern voice had just enough sarcasm to send Tony the right message. When Ryan

stood up, he towered over Tony, not only in height but in physical size. Tony didn't back down. He laughed under his breath and shook his head.

Natalie didn't think twice. She immediately got up to follow Ryan. She turned her head in disgust as she passed by Tony. She heard him smirk but didn't turn around to acknowledge his high school behavior. When they stepped onto the dance floor Ryan swung her around to face him, pulling her body close to his. He held on to her hand while allowing his other hand to drop to her waist. Was he doing this to make Tony jealous or did he really want to dance with her? She suspected both.

"Thanks for saving me. I really appreciate it." Natalie's heart raced and she struggled to breathe. Every muscle in her body tensed, not allowing her to move. How come every time he touched her, he had this effect on her? What was it about him?

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'm guessing that's your ex."

Natalie nodded. "He's a total jerk."

"You don't have to tell me that twice." His eyes fixed on hers and it stirred something deep within her. "Natalie. Natalie."

"Uh huh," she muttered, gazing into his eyes. He had her into a total trance.

"Relax. You're too stiff. Do you know how to salsa dance?" Ryan took a step back.

"Oh, yeah. I'm sorry. I forgot the steps." She watched how his feet moved back and forth. His hips swayed from side to side and she had to concentrate to keep her focus.

"Just follow my lead." He pressed his body firmly against hers, directing her movements. It didn't take long for her to catch the rhythm of the beat. Lights flashed bright colors of red, blue and green all around them, bringing the dance floor to life. Every movement of Ryan's body against hers overwhelmed her.

"You're doing great," he said spinning her around. He held on to her hands and laced his fingers through hers. He lifted their arms, raising them above their heads and then pulled her closer to him. When he leaned over his breath warmed her cheek and she fought the temptation to kiss him. A deep need formed inside of her, striking every part of her body. Even those she didn't know existed.

She needed to control herself but couldn't seem to pull away. She had to stop while she was ahead. Something kept drawing her toward him; an uncontrollable and irrepressible force.

Forgetting all about the consequences of a broken heart, she ignored her own rules. The sweet sensation made it too good to walk away.

Ryan lowered their hands and guided her body to rock back and forth against his in a perfect medley. Her hair swirled around his face, capturing and locking his body to hers.

“Where’s all that air comin’ from?” Ryan whispered into her ear.

“I don’t know.” Natalie hadn’t noticed how windy it had become until he mentioned it. She didn’t care. She didn’t want this body rocking experience to stop.

“Damn, Natalie you are so…” His breath was ragged and warm against her ear.

It sent a shiver across her body and a strong gust of wind surrounded them. The more she tried to pull away, the stronger the air became. The wind seemed to interweave a blanket around them, binding them closer together. She looked up, trying to find the source of the air.

“Your body feels incredible.” His lips brushed against her earlobe, igniting every nerve ending in her body.

She couldn’t control herself any longer. She allowed her hands to roam across his chest, taking in every part of his muscular contours. “So does yours,” she breathed heavily.

Ryan took her hands in his and put them around his neck. Their eyes locked once again and she felt his heart pumping in tune with hers. Her lip quivered as she drew closer to his mouth. She could taste the salty beads of sweat that outlined his upper lip. She opened her mouth and felt a gust of wind move through her body. The weird sensation trickled down her veins to all her extremities leaving her feeling light and airy.

She ignored the light-as-a feather sensation and followed Ryan’s movements. Their lips locked and her body shivered with excitement. His lips were moist and hot. She kissed him deeply and passionately. In a matter of seconds, her body went limp and desire filled every part of her. She knew where she wanted this to go. Her mind told her to stop. Oh, but everything else told her not to. *What am I doing?* It took all of her strength to stop kissing him.

She pushed away. “I’m sorry Ryan. I can’t… I just can’t do this right now.”

“What?” He looked at her with confusion.

She covered her mouth and without saying a word she turned and ran off the dance floor.



### Chapter 3: A Leap of Faith

Staring into the mirror, Natalie watched the sweat collect on her temples. She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. Slowly, she reopened them. Her face burned with heat and chill bumps ran down her arms. She braced herself, holding onto the sides of the clear glass basin. When she reached for the faucet, her left hand vanished into thin air. Immediately, she looked at her right hand. She gasped and stumbled a few steps back, pressing up against the bathroom door. She could see through the flesh of her skin.

“What in the—” she held both hands in front of her face. Fear consumed every part of her and the walls seemed to be closing in, trapping her. Gradually, her arms withered away and her flesh evaporated into the air. Her body began to feel lighter and lighter until it completely disappeared. Even though she could not see her body she felt the space she occupied. Panic rose up through her causing her heart to beat rapidly.

“No...no... no! Somebody help me ... please!”

Natalie shot straight up from the bed. Her breathing was ragged and her head swayed back and forth. Her clothes clung to her body, drenched in sweat. She held up her hands in front of her. She sighed, “Oh thank God. What a horrible dream.” She examined the rest of her body, making sure everything was visible.

A sense of relief settled in and her heart relaxed. The sunlight shined brightly through the wall of windows in the guest bedroom of her aunt’s condo and she wondered how long she had slept. She rummaged through the Egyptian cotton sheets for her cell phone. Checking her phone, she saw that she had several missed calls and text messages from Lise and another number she didn’t recognize. Before she had a chance to read them her phone rang. Even though she didn’t feel like talking to Lise, she took the call.

“Hello.” Natalie cleared her throat a few times.

“Nat? Thank God you answered. Where are you? I’ve been calling and texting you all night. What happened to you?”

“Lise, calm down. I’m fine.”

“I’m sorry about last night. I don’t know what got into me. I didn’t mean to be so rude.”

“Forget about it.” Natalie shook her head. She had no idea why Lise had acted that way with her in front of Ryan and Sal. It seemed unlike her because she always showed concern for Natalie, eager to help with any problems.

“Where are you?”

“I stayed at Sharon’s last night.” Natalie ran her fingers through her matted hair, wondering how it got so messed up.

“Why did you leave? What happened? Ryan said you got upset and ran off the dance floor. I looked for you for over an hour.” Lise breathed heavily, like she was walking or running.

“I’m sorry, I had to go.” Natalie sighed. She heard Lise still breathing heavily. “What are you doing? Why are you breathing so hard?”

“I’m on the treadmill. Can you believe it?”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, come to find out Sal likes to exercise too. Enough about me, tell me what happened? Did Tony upset you that bad or did Ryan do something?”

Natalie didn’t feel like talking about what happened between her and Ryan. She needed to think through everything first before saying anything to Lise. “No, I’ll tell you about it later. I’m going to shower and then I’ll be back at the dorm.”

“Do you want me to come and pick you up?” She heard a couple of beeps in the background followed by Lise taking several deep breaths.

Natalie thought about it for a second. Even though she had on a t-shirt and shorts she found in one of Sharon’s dresser drawers, she would rather have her own clothes. “Sure. Can you bring me some clothes too? I really don’t want to go back to the dorm wearing the dress I had on last night. You know how that looks.”

“Yeah, unfortunately I do. I just finished exercising, so I’ll be there shortly. What unit does she live in again?”

“Unit 2405. Hey Lise, thanks.”

“Don’t worry about it. That’s what friends are for, remember?”

Natalie smiled. “I know, see you in a bit.”

She hung up her cell phone and set it down next to her. What happened last night? She had never reacted that way to a guy before, not even with Tony. Especially one she didn’t even know

that well. She always thought through her actions before reacting, considering all the consequences. There was something about being with him that made her lose complete control.

She slumped down into the bed and closed her eyes, recalling the feelings that overcame her when they were talking and dancing. She pulled up the covers over her mouth, hiding the smile and giggles she couldn't keep in. Ryan made her nervous but at the same time she found comfort in his arms. How could that be?

Carefully, she traced back through her mind and tried to remember what had happened. When she licked her dry and cracked lips, she tasted salt; the salt that once outlined Ryan's full lips. She touched them and recalled the passionate and intense kiss they shared. Shivers ran through her body from head to toe. Despite the incredible kiss they shared, a strike of pain to her heart told her she did the right thing by pulling away and running out the door.

Natalie tried to ignore that voice telling her not to get involved with him. For some reason she couldn't stop thinking about him. She knew she had to stop this from going any further. Getting hurt again was not an option. Besides, school took priority over everything and falling for Ryan would only mean one thing, disaster. However, she couldn't deny her feelings and wondered if Ryan felt the same thing too.

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Natalie packed her clothes into her duffle bag. "Are you sure you don't want to come home with me?"

Lise shook her head. "No, that's okay. I'm going to stay here and hang out."

"I'm sorry you can't go home." Natalie continued to gather her things, anxious to get on the road to see her family. She had two weeks off before summer classes and the start of her internship.

"It's okay. My mom is so busy with her job, traveling and stuff... it wouldn't be worth the flight or drive home." Lise, an only child with divorced parents, didn't have much family. She rarely talked to her father and hadn't seen him in years. Her mother worked constantly and made her social life a priority, kind of like Natalie's Aunt Sharon. The fourteen hour drive to Atlanta made going home for the weekend impossible and her mother had never visited Lise since she

started college. That made Natalie grateful for her family, even though they sometimes drove her crazy.

“I’ll be back next Wednesday. So you won’t be by yourself too long.”

Lise stood in front of the mirror, fixing her makeup. “Oh, you don’t have to worry about me. I can hang out with Macie, even though I don’t care to. Besides, I’m sure I’ll be hanging out with Sal, since he’s not going home either.”

Natalie looked at Lise through the mirror. “That’s why you don’t want to go home with me. Do yourself a favor and take this slow.”

“I know. Besides, he’s not that type of guy.” Her voice had a hint of disappointment.

Natalie narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“He actually didn’t want to have sex with me. Can you believe it?” Lise laughed, but Natalie could hear the bitterness and knew that it upset her. Lise tossed a make-up brush in her cosmetic bag and shrugged it off, like it was no big deal.

“That’s good. I mean... take your time, get to know him.” She wanted to tell her to wait because even when you think you know someone really well, you don’t.

“Maybe he’s gay?”

Natalie shook her head. “I don’t think so. I didn’t get that vibe.”

Lise started working on her hair, teasing it and pinning it to the side with bobby clips.

“Yeah, me either. However, I never had a guy turn me down.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t try so hard.” Natalie gathered her dirty clothes and stuffed them into her laundry bag.

“What?” Lise’s voice sounded irritated.

“What I’m trying to say is don’t be the aggressor. You’re the girl. Girls shouldn’t be trying to seduce guys for sex.” Natalie turned around, avoiding further eye contact with Lise. Talks likes this made her uncomfortable.

Lise started laughing. “Since when did you become my mother? Or Dr. Phil? Not to be rude or anything, but you’re no expert.”

Luckily, Natalie didn’t take offense to her comment. She preferred not being an expert on this subject. She sat down on the edge of her bed. “Sorry. I’m trying to prevent you from getting hurt, like I did.” She thought Tony was the right guy and hated that she gave herself to him.



“No offense Nat, but I’m tougher than you. Besides, sex is just sex. It’s no big deal. Not to mention, I can’t resist when it comes to Sal. He’s damn hot.” Lise turned back around to examine herself in the mirror. “Do you think he will continue to refuse me?”

Natalie shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know.” They definitely didn’t agree when it came to sex. She hated to think it, but one day Lise would get hurt and maybe then she’d have more respect for herself. Until then she would be Lise, always learning the hard way. “So, are you on your way to hang out with Sal?”

“Yep. We’re going to the movies.” Lise stopped teasing her hair. “Hey, why don’t you and Ryan go to the movies with us? We can go on a double date.”

“No. I told you. I’m not going out with Ryan. I can’t get involved with him.” Natalie gathered her things and double-checked to make sure she had everything.

“I don’t know why you keep ignoring his calls and text messages. The guy felt really bad about what happened on the dance floor. Which sounded like nothing, based on what both of you told me.”

Natalie picked up her cell phone. She saw that she had four text messages and two missed phone calls from him. She really wanted to talk to him but refused to give in to her desires. She would only get hurt again.

“He likes you a lot, Nat.”

“How do you know that?” She looked up from her phone.

“Oh, ummm...” Lise stuck her head in her closet.

“Lise, why do you keep interfering after I already told you I don’t want to go out with him? First, you gave him my number without asking me and now you’re trying to plan a double date for us. I still can’t believe you called and told him I was okay without asking me if I wanted him to know.” Natalie took a deep breath and pressed her lips together. She didn’t want to say anything she would later regret.

“I’m sorry. He was really worried about you and when I couldn’t find you or get a hold of you, he asked for your number so I gave it to him. Besides, Sal told me that Ryan said he couldn’t stop thinking about you.” Lise pulled her head out of the closet. “You’re not supposed to know that and neither am I. Ryan apparently told Sal in confidence.”

Natalie's heart rate automatically doubled. Was he really thinking about her the way she was thinking about him? Surely not. Giddiness swept across her. She fell back on her bed, holding the phone close to her chest. She glanced over at Lise. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. I don't know why you keep pretending you don't like him. I can see it all over your face."

Natalie covered her face with her pillow. A few seconds later she tossed the pillow to the side. "Is it that obvious?"

"Uh, yeah. I know that jerk really hurt you but Ryan seems like a good guy."

Natalie smirked. "They always do."

"You need to call him. Besides, he's freakin' hot too."

Natalie narrowed her eyes at Lise. She wouldn't put it past her to try and hit on Ryan.

"Don't worry, I already know what you're thinking and he's not my type. He's a little too country for me. Besides, I think fate brought you two together. I mean what a coincidence that you two ran into each other here?"

Natalie thought about what Lise said. Was it fate? Or another heartbreak waiting to happen? The phone rang, interrupting her thoughts. She glanced at the number on the screen. It took her a whole second to realize that number belonged to Ryan. A rush of adrenaline hit and her body tingled with excitement. Without thinking, she hit the answer key.

"Hello?" She quickly searched her mind for something to say. Her body tensed with fear and her head spun.

"He..llo, Natalie? It's me, Ryan. Ryan Garrett." Instantly, her body wilted at the sound of his rugged voice.

"Hi."

"Thanks for taking my call. I'm not trying to stalk you or anything. I...ummm...just ummm....wanted to apologize for any inappropriate behavior the other night. I don't know what got into me."

"It's okay. It's my fault, not yours." She searched for the right words but her mind was blank.

"No, it's not all your fault. I'm guilty too."

"I guess we are both to blame to a certain extent." Natalie noticed Lise looking at her.

"Who's that?" Lise whispered.

Natalie ignored her and kept her attention on Ryan.

“I didn’t mean to upset you to the point where you had to run off. I went after you but I couldn’t find you. That’s when I told Lise and Sal, and we all went looking for you. I’m not sure if she told you that. I asked for your number and she gave it to me. I hope you don’t mind.” Ryan cleared his throat.

“Yes, she told me. I’m sorry I ran out on you Ryan—”

“OMG! Are you talking to Ryan?” Lise blurted out.

Natalie covered the phone with her hand and motioned for Lise to go away. Lise held up her hands, waiting for an answer so Natalie nodded, confirming her question. Lise smiled and winked, and then went back to getting dressed.

“Sorry. What I’m trying to say is that I’ve got issues.” Natalie didn’t know how else to put it. He probably thought she was an immature girl that couldn’t even handle being kissed by a guy. She didn’t want to tell him the real reason. She barely knew him and even though he saw how Tony acted, he wouldn’t understand.

“We all do, Natalie. You’re not alone.” His voice, sincere and heavy all at the same time, told her he did understand.

For a moment she sensed a closeness being formed between them. She closed her eyes and kept silent. Her heart kept telling her to not be scared but her mind told her the opposite.

“Despite what happened, I’d like to see you again.”

Her eyes popped opened. Her heart leaped into her throat urging her to say yes. Her head continued to warn her otherwise. She promised herself she would not get involved with another guy for a long time. “I don’t think it’s a good time right now. I’m about to head home for the week.”

Ryan hesitated for a second. “Natalie, I know I will have regrets if I don’t tell you that... I can’t stop thinking about you. I know I felt something between us. Something I have never felt before and I think you felt it too.”

*OMG, he felt it too.* “I... I don’t know.”

Lise motioned to her with praying hands, mouthing the words, “Please.”

Natalie ignored her.

“Don’t deny what you’re feeling. I know you’re scared of getting hurt again. But you know what...so am I,” Ryan said with vigor.

The more she tried to discount her emotions, the need to be with him intensified. She took a deep breath and held it for a second. She wanted to say yes, but was afraid.

“Please go out with me. We can do something laid-back, like dinner and a movie. I really want to see you again. I... can’t stop thinking about you.”

She couldn’t resist the plea in his voice and all the emotions he stirred up in her. The words slid out of her mouth effortlessly. “Okay. How about when I get back?”

“You will?” His voice raised about five octaves. “Alright.” He chuckled slightly, apparently pleased with his tactics of persuading her.

Natalie smiled. “I’ll give you a call when I get back.”

“Sounds good. Be careful. Talk to ya soon.”

“Bye.” Natalie hung up the phone and let out a long and drawn out sigh. What did she just agree to do? Why wasn’t she following her own rules? She knew she was setting herself up for another broken heart.

“OMG, Nat. You have to be the most difficult date ever. Poor guy. He must really like you if he’s willing to work that hard.”

Natalie rolled her eyes at Lise. “I’m not difficult.”

Lise broke out in laughter and threw her arms up in the air. “Whatever.”

“I don’t like to jump into things without thinking through them first.” Natalie lashed back.

“Ouch.” Lise put her hand over her heart.

“Sorry, but it’s the truth.” Natalie got up and gathered her things.

“I really wish you would stay so we could double date. You can always leave tomorrow. Please?” Lise begged.

“No, I already told my parents I’m coming home today. I need to get going so I can get home by dinner time. I’m dying for a good home cooked meal.”

“You and me both.” Lise pouted and then picked up her laundry bag. “Come on, I’ll help you take your stuff to your car.”

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“Mom... Dad, I’m home.” Natalie came in through the back door from the garage. She set her bags down and walked into the kitchen area.

Her mom, Gloria, leaned over the stove cooking. “Mija. I’m so glad you’re home. I missed you.” Her mom rushed to her side and hugged her.

“It feels good to be home.” Natalie embraced her mom and returned a kiss on her cheek.

“So you’re doing okay? I’ve been worried about you.” Her mom stroked her hair. “I hate that you’re over there by yourself, trying to get over Tony. Maybe you should come home and go to school here.”

Natalie pulled back from her mom’s thin, bony arms. She didn’t feel like hearing her mom’s persistent nagging. Growing up in a typical middle-class Hispanic home meant close family ties. She loved her family but she also liked not living in the same town. At first, her parents didn’t want her to leave for college. Since her aunt lived in Austin and Tony and his dad were moving there, they agreed to let her leave.

“I’m fine, Mom. Did you highlight your hair?” She wanted to change the subject quickly.

“Yes. Do you like the blonde color they used? Does it make me look younger?” Her mom ran her fingers through her shoulder length hair.

“Now you sound like Aunt Sharon.”

Her mom gave her one of those stares.

“Sorry.” She had to think of how to take back what she said. “It does make you look younger and the blonde makes your brown eyes lighter too.” She knew her mom hated being compared to her sister. Even though her mom was only a few years younger than Sharon, she felt like Sharon was always competing with her.

“How is your Aunt Sharon? I haven’t talked to her in a few weeks.”

“She’s doing fine. In fact, she’s headed to Europe for the summer and asked me to stay at her place when I can.”

“Oh really, that will be good. It gives you a chance to get out of that small dorm room. Do you think she’s staying with one of her boyfriends?”

Natalie shrugged her shoulders. “When it comes to her, no telling.”

“Please be careful and take care of her place. She has really expensive furniture. So that means no parties!”

“I know, Mom. Besides, when have you known me to throw a party?”

Her mom smiled. “Never.”

“Exactly. So where’s everyone at?”

“Your dad isn’t home from work yet and your grandmother’s taking a nap—”

“Nat, you’re home.” Laura, Natalie’s little sister, came up from behind, hugging her. Natalie turned around and greeted her with open arms.

“Hi Laura. Wow, you’ve really grown.” She placed her hand on top of her sister’s head, measuring her height against her chest.

“Yep, I’m wearing a size eight now.”

“Before long, you’ll be wearing my clothes.” Natalie sang out. “Which reminds me, I’ve got something for you.” She pointed to her bag.

Laura scurried over to one of Natalie’s bags and pulled out a package of gummy bears. “Oh, my favorite. Thanks, Nat.”

“You’re welcome.”

A door slammed shut and a tall and lean guy walked into the kitchen. “Man, I can smell the food all the way outside. I’m starving.”

“Ummm... a hello would be nice.” Natalie watched her brother lean over the stove, stealing a piece of chicken out of the pan.

Gabriel popped the chicken in his mouth and turned around. “Hey sis,” he said with a mouth full, “I didn’t even see you.”

“I see you haven’t forgotten how to ignore me.” Natalie put her hands on her hips.

He walked over to her and picked her up in a tight bear hug. He spun her around a few times.

Natalie squealed. “Put me down.”

“Dang, girl. What are you eating or should I say lifting?” He let her go and she took a step back to gain her balance. She gave him a brotherly punch on the forearm. “I’m not fat.”

He rubbed his arm. “Owww. I don’t mean you’re fat. I’m talkin’ about your muscles. How much are you lifting? You’ve got some power behind that fist of yours.”

Natalie snickered. “I don’t know. Maybe five to ten pounds more than I used to. I think it’s the vitamins and protein I’ve been taking.”

He reached over and squeezed her right bicep. “Just keep it up and you’ll have arms like mine.” He flexed his arms, showing off his lean muscles. “I’ve been working out too, ya know.”

Natalie rolled her eyes and shook her head. Although only fifteen, he was maturing fast and would pass her up before long.

“What vitamins are you taking?” Her mom turned around and looked her up and down thoroughly.

“The ones I volunteered to test out. They are from the pharmaceutical company I’m going to be interning at.”

“Oh. You didn’t tell me you volunteered to test out anything. When did you start taking them?”

“Back in January. I told you and you even asked me when we were in Chicago during spring break for Alicia’s wedding. Remember?”

Her mom’s brow furrowed. “I barely remember. I don’t know if I like you being a test patient for any drugs. There’s always some sort of side effects. You’ve heard the commercials that list all the possible dangers.”

“Mom, I’m not testing out any drugs. It’s only vitamins and protein drinks. You know me... I’m very cautious and I do my homework. I checked them out and they are perfectly safe. Not only do I get them for free but I get paid to take them too, which makes it even better.”

“Oh, all right. Just be careful. And your brother’s right. You will start looking like him if you keep lifting so much weight. Your shoulders are already getting broad. It can ruin your figure and you don’t want to look like those weightlifting women, do you?”

Natalie sighed. “Oh mom, please. Lifting weights is good for the body. You should try it.”

Her mom shook her head. “No thank you. I’ll just stick to power walking.”

“You’re lucky that you’re naturally thin.” Natalie saw her grandmother making her way slowly into the kitchen with her walker. For the past five years, her grandmother had been living with her family. Her father refused to put his mother in a nursing home when her health started to deteriorate and her memory began to fade.

“Abuelita, it’s so good to see you. Como estas?” Natalie spoke in half English and Spanish. Carefully, she embraced her grandmother’s frail body.

Her grandmother’s bony hands embraced Natalie’s face. Her lower lip quivered when she tried to speak. “Bien hija. Saliste de la escuela?”

“Si abuelita. I’m home for a week. I have to go back for summer school and work.”

Her grandmother smiled. “Asi es mi niña. Nunca cese con sus ambiciones.” Her grandmother had been an inspiration and a role model for her since she was little. She taught Natalie to not be satisfied with the ordinary things in life. She encouraged her to reach for the

stars and keep on reaching until you were living and watching your dreams unfold right in front of you.

Natalie smiled back. “Don’t worry Grandma, I won’t let you down.”

“Adonde esta su novio, Tony?”

Natalie’s heart dropped to her stomach. Why did she have to bring him up? Didn’t her mother tell her that they broke up? Her head dropped down to her chest. A lump formed in the back of her throat and tears filled her eyes.

Natalie’s mom quickly interjected. “Don’t you remember, Rosa? I told you they weren’t together anymore?”

Her grandmother squinted through her heavy lensed glasses as though trying to remember that conversation. “Ay, si. Lo siento mija.” She leaned forward and kissed the tears rolling down her cheek. “You will find love again. Don’t let your heart go cold.”

Natalie wiped the tears away. “I know Grandma, but it hurts.”

Her grandmother nodded. “Yo sè.” She reached up and tucked the strands of hair that hung in front of Natalie’s face behind her ear. “Have faith. God will send you the right boy.”

Natalie smiled. “I hope so.”

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Later that week, Natalie sat in her bedroom browsing through all of her high school yearbooks. They brought back so many memories, some good and some bad, thanks to Tony. She opened up her yearbook from her sophomore year and turned to the seniors. Her hand wavered for a second and then she thumbed through the pages until she found Ryan’s picture.

He looked almost the same except his face had matured. When she came across a full length picture of him she saw how his body had definitely filled out even more. She figured he had to be at least twenty or twenty-one; maybe twenty since he wasn’t drinking that night at the bar. However, they didn’t card anyone that night so she couldn’t be certain. She continued to flip through the pages until she came to Jennifer Shaw.

Jen, or that’s what everyone called her, was voted the ‘most’ everything. She was a gorgeous blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl with curves in all the right places. Natalie couldn’t compete with Jen. How was Ryan even interested in her?



Skimming through the book, she saw Ryan and Jen were in most of the pictures. Natalie wondered what she did to him that caused him so much pain. Besides leaving him when he got hurt, there had to be something more to the story. Natalie remembered seeing Jen constantly flirt with all the guys at school so her guess was easy. Jen had cheated on him. Just like Tony had cheated on her. It gave her a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Natalie got up and walked to the mirror hanging on her closet door. She stared at herself, combing through her long dark hair with her fingers. Her straight and limp hair clung to her head. She twirled the ends around her fingers. She liked the way Lise fixed her hair the other day and thought that maybe she should start curling her hair more often.

She removed her glasses and stared at herself. She liked the way she looked without them and Ryan had even made a comment too. Maybe she would wear her contacts instead of her glasses. She leaned forward to study her face. She was grateful she had a good complexion, hence the reason why she never bothered to wear much makeup. She didn't need to. However, she also liked the way Lise did her makeup. It made her pale blue eyes stand out and it did make her feel pretty.

She straightened out her old UT t-shirt and cotton shorts. She couldn't remember the last time she bought something new. Maybe she would go shopping and buy some new clothes, a curling iron, and new makeup. She had some money saved up and her mom did ask her earlier if she wanted to go shopping tomorrow. Shopping with her mom would be fun since her mom loved to buy clothes and accessorize. She didn't take after her mom or her Aunt Sharon and her mom's opinion would be helpful.

She gathered up her yearbooks and put them back on the bookshelf. Even though it was only 9:00 p.m., she wanted to catch up on her sleep. Going to summer school and working would be tough and she needed to start fresh. She flipped off the bedroom light and the second she crawled into bed, her cell phone chimed. Before she could get to the phone on her dresser, it chimed again. She saw that she had two messages; one from Lise and the other one from Ryan.

Instantly her heart began to race. Why did she get so excited and nervous every time she heard from him? She decided to read Lise's message first:

*Guess what? Ryan went home today. Call him.*

Natalie shook her head. Why was Lise so persistent?

She texted back:

*I'll think about it.*

She waited for a second and then went to Ryan's message:

*Just wanted to say hi.*

She texted back:

*Hey, how's it going?*

Immediately he responded:

*Good. I'm actually home. I had to come help my brother w/the ranch.*

She anxiously typed back:

*Really?*

He replied:

*Yes. Would you like to come over tomorrow?*

Her heart beat wildly. She wanted to see him but didn't want to seem desperate. She hesitated and then texted the following:

*I don't think I can. I'm going shopping tomorrow with my mom.*

A minute later he responded:

*How about a horse ride on Saturday?*

*A horse ride?* She hadn't ridden a horse in several years. In middle school, she rode all the time. More than likely, it would be at his ranch which meant his family would be there and that made her feel more relaxed.

She replied:

*Let me think about it. Won't it be hot?*

He texted back:

*Not if you get here around 10.*

He had a point and she wanted to see him. Then her head warned her again. The more she thought about it, she could hear her grandmother's voice from the other day. "Have faith. God will send the right guy." What if Ryan was that right guy? She had to take that leap of faith if she was ever going to find love again.

She sighed, praying she was making the right decision. She texted him:

*Okay, see you at 10.*



## Chapter 4: Feelings Unleashed

“Good morning, mija. You’re up early for a Saturday. Are you going somewhere?” Natalie’s dad, Richard, leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

Natalie swallowed a mouthful of cereal. “Morning dad. Yes, I’m... ummm... going horseback riding.”

“Oh, you are? Where at?” Her dad walked over and poured himself a cup of coffee.

Using her spoon, she pushed the squares of cereal down to the bottom of the bowl. She had nothing to hide from her dad and she respected their request of honoring the rules while being home. However, she didn’t feel like being asked a thousand questions. It wouldn’t help the apprehensiveness lurking in the back of her mind about her decision.

“She’s going to a boy’s house.” Her sister giggled as milk seeped out the sides of her mouth. “Oops.” She grabbed a napkin and cleaned her mouth.

“Thanks, Laura.” She gave her sister a less than friendly smile. “I’m headed over to Ryan Garrett’s house to go horseback riding.”

Natalie’s mom walked into the kitchen, catching the tail end of the conversation. “Garrett. That’s not the Garrett’s on FM 1886 is it?” She wore a robe and her hair wrapped up in a towel. She had that fresh fruity smell of apples and freesia that told Natalie she had just finished her morning beauty routine.

“Yes, Mom, it is.” She prepared herself for the interrogation.

“So how do you know their son? Isn’t he a few years older than you?” Her mother started the slew of questions.

“Yeah, he graduated two years before me.”

Her mom took a coffee cup out of the cabinet and poured herself a cup of the morning brew. “Doesn’t he go to college here? Oh wait a minute, I think I remember one of the neighbors telling me that he got hurt and lost his scholarship.” Her mom stirred her coffee slowly, squinting her eyes, as though trying to recall the gossip she heard.

Natalie waited for her mom to put the pieces together or continue asking her more questions. She looked over at her dad. His eyes narrowed and he rustled the newspaper in his hands. He had no problem tuning his wife out. She didn’t blame him because she wanted to do the same.

He snapped the newspaper closed. "Aside from school, how do you know Ryan?" He sipped on his coffee, blowing the steam away in between swallows. His blue-green eyes stayed fixed on her, waiting for her answer.

"He transferred this past year to UT. We ran into each other at Kronberg Laboratories, where we will both be interning this summer." For whatever reason, her dad's method of questioning didn't bother her, unlike her mom's. Probably because she thought and acted much like he did.

"Oh. Well, have a good time and be careful. It's been a while since you have ridden a horse."

"I know dad, I'll be—"

"Oh wow. What a coincidence that he ended up down in Austin with you. Maybe you two can ride home together. That would make me feel so much better knowing that you wouldn't be driving alone. I know you have a cell phone..." Natalie's mother continued to ramble.

"That's what Lise said." Natalie managed to get a few words in.

"That you could ride home together?" Her mom held the coffee cup with both hands.

"No, Mom," Natalie shook her head, "that it was a coincidence that we ran into each other in Austin." She bit her lower lip and held back any disrespectful remarks.

"Oh." It took a few seconds before her mom's eyes lit up. "So that's why you wanted to go shopping yesterday."

Natalie's dad smiled at her. She wanted to cover her face. Her mom always knew how to embarrass her. The clock in the living room struck 9:30. She sighed in relief. *Saved by the bell, thank God.*

"I better go. I don't want to be late." She shot up, causing the chair to skid across the tile floor. She fumbled to collect her breakfast dishes along with the milk and box of cereal.

"Don't worry about it. I'll clean up later." Her mom motioned for her to set them back down.

"Thanks, Mom." Regardless of her mom's constant questioning and nagging, she appreciated how considerate and caring she could be.

She kissed her dad bye and walked over to her mom. "Aside from my date today, I really did need some new clothes that fit."

“And new makeup and curling iron too? By the way, mija, you look beautiful. He’ll be impressed.” Her mom hugged her and fixed her hair, ensuring the waves fell to the front of her face. Natalie smiled and wondered if she did this for herself or to impress him? Maybe it was a little of both.

“And she’s not wearing her glasses.” Laura chimed in.

Her dad spoke up. “I noticed that.”

“I thought it would be wise to wear my contacts instead.” She tried to justify why she didn’t wear them.

“I also took her picture this morning with her phone. Let me show you.” Laura rushed over to her side and tried to grab Natalie’s phone from her hand.

Natalie raised her hand out of Laura’s reach. She shook her head and motioned for her sister to be quiet. She didn’t like to boast or seek attention by taking pictures of herself. In fact, she only allowed her sister to take the pic so she would stop hounding her.

“I’ll let you show them later. I need to leave.” Natalie winked at her sister.

“Promise?”

“Yes. I promise.” She slid her phone into her back pocket and took her keys from the bar. “I’ll be back later.”

“Be careful.” Her dad reminded her, waving from the table.

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Natalie crossed under the wrought iron metal sign that said ‘Garrett Ranch’ and drove up the gravel road. She had passed his family’s ranch a million times growing up and never once did she ever think she would be asked to visit. Flutters circled around in her stomach and she prayed she wouldn’t later regret eating this morning. She told herself she had nothing to be nervous about but the butterflies didn’t stop.

Hidden behind tall bushes and stout oak and pecan trees was the large white ranch-style house trimmed with evergreen shutters and a large wraparound porch. It overlooked acres of farmland with barns spread out here and there. Red and pink petunias outlined the pavestone walkway leading from the road to the house. She pulled her car up the driveway and parked

behind a black pickup truck. Next to it, her Mazda looked like a toy car. The tires were almost the same size as her little silver car.

She walked up the stairs to the front porch and rang the doorbell. She fiddled with her keys, waiting patiently for someone to answer. When no one came to the door, she decided to walk around back. She looked around but didn't see Ryan or anyone else. She waited awhile and then pulled out her cell phone and dialed his number. It went straight to voice mail.

"Darn," she muttered under her breath. She hit the end call button and slid the phone back into her pocket. The thought of leaving crossed her mind. When she turned to walk back to her car she saw out of the corner of her eye someone coming out of a nearby barn. She lifted her sunglasses and placed them on top of her head to get a better view of the guy wearing a cowboy hat, plaid button down shirt, and faded blue jeans walking in her direction. A surge of adrenaline hit her veins and immediately she knew it was Ryan.

He glanced up, holding his cell phone in his hand. Natalie pressed her lips firmly together, trying to keep from smiling. Happiness flowed through her, making it difficult. He waved his arms in the air and gave a big Texas smile. She gave a small wave back.

"Good mornin'." He adjusted his cowboy hat.

"Hi. Thanks for inviting me. I rang the doorbell, but no one answered." Natalie glanced back at the house, wondering if anyone had come to the door after all.

"Sorry. I forgot to tell ya that my parents and sister are out of town. They went to buy a steer. It's just me and my brother ... and his family. They live in the house out back." Ryan pointed behind him with his thumb.

"Oh. Okay." Even though he wore a cowboy hat, she noticed how light his brown eyes looked in the bright sunlight. They had streaks of gold that glistened when the light hit them the right way.

"Let's go inside for a minute, if ya don't mind. I wanna grab a few bottles of water before we head out."

Natalie nodded, trying to keep her focus on the conversation. For some reason, she couldn't stop checking him out. "Sure."

She walked by his side, to the house, when a strong breeze swept down and knocked his hat off his head. He tried to catch his hat but ended up stumbling forward. She reached up, catching his hat before it blew away.

“Good catch.”

She handed him his hat, completely surprised that she caught it too. “A lucky catch I guess.”

Another gust of wind blew, surrounding her in a chamber of bergamot and sandalwood. It traveled up her nose and through her body, melting everything along the way. Why did his smell intoxicate her to the point of bringing her down to her knees? Another wave of dizziness hit her like a brick wall. Her head throbbed and pulsated causing an incessant panic to rise in her heart. She stopped and held her hands out to the side of her body. “Whoa... not again.”

“Hey, are you okay?” Ryan put his arm around her.

“Yeah, sorry.” She held a hand up to her head, willing herself to take control of the situation. Within seconds the dizziness faded away.

He removed his arm but stayed close by her. “Have you called your doctor yet?”

She inhaled deeply and let out a long breath. She lowered her hand and glanced at him. “No. To be honest, I forgot about it. I haven’t had any more dizzy spells since last week, so it didn’t cross my mind. I guess I’ll call Monday.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea to go ridin’? I mean, we don’t have to go if you don’t feel well.”

Natalie thought about what he said. Despite the dizzy spell, she wanted to spend time with him and get to know him. “Let’s go inside for a while and see how I feel.”

“Okay.” He led her inside the house.

The old wooden floors creaked, indicating years of passing feet, shuffling in and out of the country-style home. She followed him into an airy and brightly sunlit room, filled with pictures on every wall. They all told a story of how his family had grown over the years. She noticed a few pictures of him and Sal when they were young.

“Are you and Sal related?”

“Yes, we are cousins. Our moms are sisters. I guess I forgot to mention that to you.”

“I actually see a resemblance between you two.” She pointed to one of the pictures on the wall. Then she looked at a family portrait. “Are these your parents?”

“Yes, that’s my mom, dad, my brother Lance and my sister, Ellen.”

“So, are you like half Mexican? I mean, not that it matters.” She hoped the question didn’t sound rude.



“Yeah, I am. My mom’s Mexican and my dad is White.” Ryan removed his hat and set it on a nearby end table. He pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. That explained his tawny skin tone and sandy brown hair and brown eyes.

“Me too! How wild is that? My mom is White and my dad is Mexican. Vega... obviously.”

“That is wild. I guess you get your blue eyes from your mom?” Ryan walked up behind her. She could still smell his manly scent, swirling around her and latching on to her.

“Actually, I get my eyes and hair from my dad. Spanish blood... descendants or something. My mom has light brown hair and brown eyes, kind of like you.” She had to take a few silent breaths to clear her airway from his intoxicating aroma that filled the room.

“That’s cool.”

Natalie glanced back him. “You look like both your mom and dad. Except you have more of a golden color to you.”

Ryan rubbed his forearm. “That’s from all the sun I get from being outside.”

“I guess I should get more sun.” She held out her arm in front of her, noticing how light she looked compared to him.

“Well, you have a nice olive skin color. But if you want more sun, it’ll be nice and sunny today, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

A picture of Ryan with some of his friends caught her attention. She walked over to it and picked it up. “Are these your college friends?”

“Yes, from TCU.” He reached forward took the picture from her hand. By the way his eyes narrowed and the twitch in his mouth she knew it stirred up some memories. When he went to set it down a picture fell out from behind, landing on the wooden floor.

Natalie bent down and picked it up. Elegant handwriting embossed the back of it and when she turned it over she saw Jen, posing in a field of bluebonnets. She quickly lowered the picture, pretending not to notice.

“Here, I’ll put that back.” Ryan stuck out his hand, reaching for the picture. She held out the picture and when he saw Jen in the photo, his hand stopped. “What’s that doin’ in here?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged her shoulders, not knowing how to respond.

His body tensed and his jaw protruded as though he wanted to rip it apart with his teeth. He took the photo from Natalie's hand. "I thought I burned everything from her. I bet my mom found this and stuck it behind the other picture."

"My mom always does stuff like that too. She never throws anything away." Natalie tried to sympathize and put him at ease.

He let out a slight smirk. "That's my mom too." He started to rip the picture in half but Natalie placed her hand on top of his, stopping him.

"You don't have to do that because I'm here."

He looked up at her, not saying a word. He released his death grip from the picture and she eased the photo from his hand. She turned the picture frame over and put Jen's photo behind the other one.

"It will be here if you want to tear or burn it after I leave." Gently she placed the picture frame back on the shelf.

Ryan's eyes softened and his body relaxed. "You are the most admirable gal I have ever met. Most gals are jealous of the ex."

Natalie smiled and shook her head. "I'm not like other girls and I'm sure you've met others who are more admirable, pretty, and outgoing than I am."

"No, I haven't." Ryan reached down and took her hand in his. Her heart skipped a beat. The warmth of his touch felt good against her skin. She folded her fingers over his firm, thick hands and held on.

"Let's sit down." He led her over to the couch and she followed willingly.

He let go of her hand and rested his arms on the top of his legs. He leaned forward and brought his hands together, twiddling his thumbs. She remained silent, allowing him time to gather his thoughts.

He kept his eyes focused on his hands. "Natalie, you are like no one I've ever met before. Maybe that's why I'm so attracted to you."

Her body flushed with heat. She sat perched on the edge of the couch, unable to relax. The adrenaline pumping through her veins told her to run, to flee and never come back. Her heart told her to stay put. Her hands gripped the edge of the tapestry-covered sofa, holding on for dear life. Did she really want to have this talk with him?

She sensed him looking at her but couldn't make eye contact. "You are so beautiful but it's more than your beauty that attracts me. It's your personality and the way you act. It's everything that makes you who you are."

Natalie sat frozen, unable to respond. Every word he spoke was everything she wanted and needed to hear. Her head reminded her that she had heard those words before. All of them had been lies that crushed her into a pit of agony. She would never fall for words like those again. She had to be smarter than that.

She took a deep breath. "Ryan, I'm flattered by your words but..." She turned her body in his direction and looked up at him. "I don't think I..." Her eyes caught his gaze and her breath caught in her throat. Why did he make her forget about everything she promised not to do? This uncontrollable attraction was more than she could handle. She would not surrender to it. She didn't want to take the chance of getting hurt again. The battle between her head and heart overwhelmed her. Then she heard that voice; her grandmother's voice, reminding her to have faith. Isn't that why she agreed to the date in the first place?

"I'm sorry, did I say something wrong?" His eyes cried out and she knew he searched for the right words he longed to hear from her.

*Oh my God, why can't I resist him?* She turned away, trying to fight the feelings taking over her heart. Why was this so hard? No one had ever made her feel this way before. She couldn't explain the connection or the relentless force that drove her soul straight to his.

She looked back at Ryan. The calling of his lips and the hunger in his eyes made it easy to break her rules. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that... I'm scared. I'm so scared of getting hurt again."

He leaned in closer to her. "I'm scared too. We've both been hurt before and I don't think either of us can handle going through that again. All I know is that there is somethin' about you that drives me..." he breathed out slowly through his nose, "crazy."

Not only could he not resist her either but he had the same fears as she did. One thing was for certain, he would have to earn her trust and that would take time. She would take the time and get to know him. She peered into his eyes. "So, I drive you crazy?"

He cracked a smile. "I don't mean crazy, like that. I mean that I can't stop thinkin' about you and the way you make me feel."

She pressed her lips together, contemplating if she should open up to him. He had definitely shown his vulnerability. She figured now it was her turn. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I can't deny that there is something about the way you make me feel too." Her hand drew to his arm. "It's like... magnetic."

His eyes lit up and he took her hands in his. "Then you do feel what I feel?"

A hum of energy encircled them. She looked down and saw how his hands cradled hers in the shape of a heart. His voice touched a part of her that made her want to surrender everything to him. It overwhelmed her and she struggled to contain her emotions.

She stared directly into his eyes. "Yes, I do and it's amazing. Just please don't hurt me."

"I understand, Natalie. The last thing I want is for you to get hurt and I don't want you to hurt me either."

"I promise I won't... but let's take this slow. Get to know each other, okay?" She surrendered, laying all her emotions on the table.

"Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you guys." A pregnant lady walked in holding a small boy's hand.

Ryan let go of her hands and stood up. "Oh hey Steph, you're not interrupting. Ummm, let me introduce you to my friend, Natalie Vega."

Natalie immediately jumped to her feet and met her halfway. "Hi. Nice to meet you."

"This is my sister-in-law Stephanie and my nephew Colt. Oh and my soon to be born niece, Emma."

Natalie leaned over and rubbed the boy's sun bleached hair. "Aren't you cute?" He hugged his mother's leg tightly, hiding behind it.

"Lance wanted to let you know that the horses are saddled and ready. He needs to finish mending a fence on the east side of the property so he's about to drive over there."

"Okay thanks, Steph. We were getting ready to head out."

"Did you still want to ride?" Ryan turned to Natalie.

She wanted to ride with him now more than anything. Since there were no signs of dizziness she decided it would be safe. "Yes, I do."

"I'm going to make some sandwiches for lunch. Nothing big," Steph said rubbing her stomach. "Would you like to stay?"

Natalie turned to Ryan, waiting for him to ask her.

“Please stay. I’d like for ya to eat with us,” he replied.

She nodded at Steph. “Sure. I’d be happy to.”

“Great. See y’all in a little while.” She turned and walked into the kitchen.

Ryan put his arm around her and she knew without a doubt she had made the right decision to follow her heart. “C’mon let’s go for that ride.” He picked up his hat and led her outside.

“Have you ever ridden before?” Ryan asked as they stepped out the kitchen back door.

“Yes, but it’s been several years. I’m going to need a refresher and probably some guidance.” Natalie put her sunglasses back on, despite the slight haze in the air.

“Okay, no problem.” Ryan put his hat on and adjusted it, bringing it slightly forward where only his dazzling brown eyes showed.

They walked across the yard over to a cowboy holding the reins for two horses. “Natalie, this is my brother Lance. Lance, this is Natalie.”

She extended her hand and said, “Hello.”

He wiped his hand on his dingy jeans and then shook her hand. “Nice to meet ya.” He had a heavier twang than Ryan and they looked very much alike with the exception of Lance being slightly taller and leaner. “So are ya ready to show him how to ride?” He let out a smile and motioned with his head toward Ryan.

She giggled. “I’m sure he’ll be the one showing me.”

She approached the horse slowly and patted him on the nose. “What’s your name?” She stroked the horse’s head, allowing him to get to know her.

“This is Freedom.” Ryan took the reins from Lance. “Freedom, this is your master for today. Treat her well. Ya hear me.” The horse neighed and took a few steps back.

“So, do you remember what to do?” Ryan tugged on the saddle, making sure it was secured on the horse.

“Yeah, I think so. It’s all coming back to me.” Natalie ran her hand down the side of the American Paint horse. “Hi Freedom. You sure are a beautiful horse. I love your markings.” The horse nickered and neighed, giving her the sign to proceed. She prepared to mount the horse when Ryan stopped her.

“Wait a minute. You’re missin’ something.” He held his hand up and then dashed into the barn calling out, “I’ll be right back.”

Natalie checked the saddle but didn't see anything missing. However, it had been a long time since she'd saddled up a horse.

He returned with a cowgirl hat in his hand. "You're not complete without this."

Natalie placed her hand on his, helping him fit the hat on her head. "Whose is this?"

"It's my sister's. Do ya mind?"

"No, as long as she doesn't." She winked.

"Nah, she won't mind. Wow, you make a beautiful cowgirl." Ryan winked backed at her. He knew how to make her smile and she had to admit that she loved being complimented by him. "Can I help you up?"

"Please." Natalie placed her foot into the stirrup while he held on to the reins, keeping the horse steady.

"Ya good?"

"Yes." She ensured she had a good grip on the reins and her feet were properly in place.

He walked over to his horse and got on with little effort.

"You guys be careful, ya hear. I'll be on the east side of the property and will be back in an hour or so." Lance stepped out of the way.

"Okay. We'll be back shortly." Ryan looked over at Natalie. "Let's start out slow, okay?"

Natalie nodded. "Okay."

She kept her horse in sync with Ryan's, walking at a slow pace. The morning sun's rays peaked over the tall oak trees, preparing to beat the ground with another day of record-breaking heat. They wouldn't be able to stay out too long so she intended to enjoy every minute of it.

"How large is the ranch? Does it go all the way to the lake?" She raised her sunglasses to get a better view.

"It's five hundred acres and no, it doesn't go to the lake. We have a stream that goes through the property, which probably feeds off of the lake."

"I bet that's pretty. I've always wanted to live by the water. I guess that's why I like going to my aunt's condo in Austin. It overlooks Lady Bird Lake. It's really gorgeous."

"I bet it is. Have you ever been to Lake Travis?"

"No, I haven't." She shifted her weight, trying to get comfortable on the hard leather saddle.

"You'd like it. The water is really clear for a lake."

“Then we should go sometime,” Natalie responded.

They rode side by side crossing the land, laughing and talking along the way. She found herself opening up more to him because he seemed understanding about many things. Even though she wasn't ready to share everything, he gave her a sense of security that continued to build on the level of trust she needed from him.

The more they chatted, the more they discovered all the common interests they shared like going to the movies, the beach, swimming, and of course horseback riding. Never in a million years did she ever think he would be attracted to her. For one, she didn't even seem like his type. He was more of a country guy where she was more of a science nerd. He loved to talk and socialize and she preferred to keep to herself. Regardless, the attraction between them electrified her soul and it made her want to know everything about him and more.

“Gee, everything is so dry.” Natalie observed the sparse layer of green grass they traveled through.

“I know. We need rain badly. My parents said it's been really dry here. We've even lost some cattle. Based on the weather reports, I doubt they'll be lifting the watering ban anytime soon.”

“That's horrible. I didn't realize there were water restrictions in place. I guess I've been so busy with school, I haven't paid much attention to what's going on up here. Now that you mention it, my parent's yard isn't that green either.”

He led the way down a small hill. “This pond used to be bigger. It's practically dried up now.”

“I guess this global warming is becoming more of a problem.” Natalie noticed the cracked mud where water once reached.

“Yeah, you haven't seen the reports about it being a worldwide issue?”

“No, I haven't. I know the news said Austin's been dryer and hotter than usual and some crops had been affected. I didn't realize it affected the whole world. Since I'm majoring in biomedical science and not environmental science, I haven't kept up with the findings. I mean, don't get me wrong, it concerns me.”

“Oh, I understand. I hope I didn't insult your knowledge so please—”

“No, it's okay. You're just more in tune with it because of the ranch.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. My parents really wanted me to study agriculture so I could help my brother when they get older.”

“So why don’t you?”

“It’s not what I wanna do. Don’t get me wrong, I love the ranch but I’d rather be with people instead of animals.” He urged his horse to pick up the pace and so did she.

“I understand. So, what’s your major?”

Ryan lifted his cowboy hat and wiped his forehead again with a handkerchief. “I’m a business and marketing major”.

Her horse drifted closer to his, allowing her to watch his every move closely. “That’s cool. What department will you be interning at?”

He glanced over at her and she watched his eyes traveled up and down. He was definitely checking her out. She wondered what he thought about the way she dressed. She hoped the jeans and bedazzled t-shirt her mom picked out for her made her look cute instead of nerdy. As for the boots, her toes hurt and she wondered how much longer she could handle wearing them. She didn’t have enough money to buy new ones, so she wore an old pair that had to be at least a size too small.

“I’ll be working in the sales and marketing division.” He cleared his throat a few times.

“Makes sense, since you like people. I wonder if you and Lise will be working together. She’ll be interning in the marketing department too.”

“Hmmm, I don’t know. I guess I’ll find out week after next. What department will you be interning at?”

“The main lab.”

“That’s awesome. I wonder if you will be working with Dr. Kronberg?”

“I hope so. I can’t wait to meet him.”

Natalie struggled to keep her attention on the path they rode down. Her gaze kept wandering over to him, admiring the way he looked wearing a cowboy hat and fitted shirt which outlined every bulge in his upper body. Not to mention the jeans that hugged his body perfectly. Cowboys never caught her attention in the past but he sure grabbed her’s.

“It feels so free out here. Free from stress, free from the worries of life.” She breathed in the fresh country air, clearing her mind. It felt good to get away and enjoy nature. Something she hadn’t done in a while.



“It is nice out here. That’s why I don’t mind coming home on occasion. I’m glad ya came over.” Ryan reached his hand out and she latched on to it.

“Me too.” They held hands for a short while until the horses drifted further apart and her hand slid from his.

She continued to take in the pure air, allowing it to filter through her airways. She loved the way the air blew through her hair and it made her eager to feel the wind against her entire body. Adrenaline flowed through her veins and she yearned to let Freedom ride freely.

“I’ll race you to the creek!” Natalie leaned forward and gripped the reins tightly and ordered the horse to sprint.

“Natalie.... wait! I don’t think —” Ryan yelled out as she darted off.

She ignored his warning and pressed forward. Several yards later she looked over her shoulder and saw Ryan close behind. She laughed and leaned into Freedom, encouraging him to go faster. This was not like her to do something so reckless, but she couldn’t help it. The wind felt liberating as she sped across the open land.

Slowly, she raised her body up and took a deep breath. She felt brave and strong. Without much thought she let go of the reins and raised her hands up high toward the sky. She closed her eyes and imagined herself flying through the air; soaring over the vast open land to the wooded areas and down to the lake. She blocked everything from her mind and concentrated only on the sweet smell of the white jasmine shrubs blooming nearby.

“Natalie. Natalie. Stop! Stop!” Ryan yelled.

Natalie paid no attention to Ryan’s pleas. The feelings going through her body consumed every part of her. Her body was becoming one with nature. The wind seemed to flow through her, lifting her higher and higher. It howled and lashed against her body giving her the sensation of power and strength.

“Natalie....Natalie! Look! Look!” Ryan continued to holler in the distance.

Natalie struggled to separate herself from the wind and break the trance that consumed her. She sensed something was wrong and quickly opened her eyes when she heard Ryan’s frantic cry.

“Natalie. Stop! Stop!”

She grabbed the reins and pulled on them tightly urging Freedom to halt. The horse came to a sudden stop. She looked around trying to figure out why he sounded panicked. He pointed toward the horizon.

“What is that?” Natalie steadied the horse while her eyes took in the implausible sight. “Easy Freedom.” She coaxed the horse but he skittered around nervously.

In the near distance a warm reddish brown haze expanded across the open land. It rolled in, taking the form of a massive cloud, billowing and consuming everything in its path. The haze was headed in their direction.

Breathing heavily, Ryan struggled to speak. “It’s...it’s a dust storm. And it’s moving toward us. We gotta go... now.”

She watched the haze roll in like smoke billowing up from a forest fire. “In North Texas? I thought only West Texas gets dust storms?”

“My family said we’ve been getting them here lately, and they’re violent.” Ryan guided the horses to turn around. “C’mon, let’s go!” Ryan made a tsk tsk noise with his mouth and commanded the horses to move forward. Even though the horses panted heavily, they didn’t hesitate and quickly shifted into a sprint.

“We’ll shoot for the barn... over there. It’s a mile. See it?” The wind made it difficult to hear him, chopping every other word off. She followed his hand in the direction he pointed to and she saw their target destination.

“I can see it. Do you think we’ll make it?” she shouted back.

“I hope so.” Ryan yelled at the top of his lungs.

She glanced over her shoulder. The storm had to be only a few yards away. It didn’t take long for the fresh country air to be replaced by thick, gritty dirt. The horses slowed down as the storm surrounded them. Natalie coughed, inhaling the reddish dust with every breath she took.

Ryan pulled out the handkerchief from his back pocket. He guided his horse closer to Natalie and handed it to her. “Put this on. It’ll help,” he choked out the words, coughing and wheezing.

Natalie nodded and grabbed it from his hand. “What about you?”

Ryan let go of the reigns and took hold of his shirt and ripped it open. “I’ll use this.” He tied it around his face, covering his nose and mouth.

Darkness swiftly filled in between them and she lost sight of him. She reached up and pulled off her sunglasses only to realize that she needed them on. They protected her eyes from the dirt that now stung her eyes and made them water.

“Ryan...Ryan...Where are you?” she called out, her hand wavering back and forth in the dust. The thick and dark air made it impossible for her to find him. Freedom scampered and skittered around nervously in a circle and she struggled to get him under control. Then she heard his horse neighing.

“I’m right here. Where are you? We’ll have to walk the horses.” His voice trailed off, lost in the whirling wind.

She fought to remain calm. “Ooohhh...Ookkaaay,” she muttered under the cloth. Then Freedom came to a complete stop and refused to move.

“Whoa... Whoa Girl.” Ryan suddenly yelled and she turned, searching in all directions. Then she heard him command the horse. “Stop! Stop!”

“Ryan... Ryan—” Natalie reached out into the darkness, not finding him. “Where are you?” she continued to call out. The dirt burned her eyes and a lump formed in the back of her throat. Flashes of her near death plane ride a few months ago crept into her mind and caused fear to take over. She swallowed back the tears. Now was not the time to give into it.

She got off the horse and pulled his face close to hers. Freedom kept his eyes closed apparently trying to avoid the needle-like pricks of the whipping dirt. She checked his saddle, searching for something to cover up his head. Then she remembered she had on a tank top under her shirt. *Thank God.* Quickly she took off her shirt and put it around the horse’s face.

“You’re okay boy.” She patted Freedom, reassuring him. She hugged the horse’s neck and spoke into his ear. “Freedom we will make it to the barn. You have to trust me, okay. Let’s go boy.” She pulled on the reins but he hesitated at first. She persuaded him until he followed her lead.

Natalie had no idea if they were headed in the right direction. The thick air caused visibility to be near zero. Completely alone and in the middle of a storm, she feared the worse. She could see it all happening again, just like the storm that hit the plane. Would she make it out alive this time? She fought the feelings of despair and fear, determined to survive.

She closed her eyes and focused on her surroundings. She shuffled her feet along the ground, persevering through the storm. The dirt-filled wind thrashed against her face, stinging

her skin like a horrible sunburn after a day at the beach. She itched and burned as the dust entered in through her pores.

She kept her eyes closed, allowing her senses to fully take over. Somehow, the dirt gave her confidence and strength. It allowed her body to connect with the earth until she became one with it. She felt the ground moving and the entire earth rotating along its axis. *Guide me mother earth. Guide me.* At that moment, something deep within her stirred. All her surroundings aligned perfectly, like a navigational compass, telling her the cardinal directions. It pulled her body and guided her footsteps along the right course.

Natalie opened her eyes. Through the thick brownish-red dust, she saw something. She kept her eyes fixed until the air thinned enough to reveal the green barn straight ahead of the m. The sight of it brought instant relief and calmness to her. Step by step she made her way to the barn, pulling Freedom at her side.

“We made it, Freedom. Thank God, we made it.” She reached for the handle on the barn door to open it. At the same time, it slid open and a hand reached for her.

“Natalie, oh thank God, you’re okay.” Ryan pushed the door open further allowing her and Freedom to get in.

“Yes, we made it.” Natalie leaped into his arms.

Ryan embraced her, holding her close. “I was so worried about you.”

She took off her sunglasses and buried her face against his chest. Tears streamed down her face, scalding her eyes. “I was so scared. I thought I might die out there.”

He leaned his head back and cradled her face with both his hands. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t leave you out there on purpose. Please believe me.”

“What happened to you?” Her voice quivered and she swallowed several times, trying to clear her throat from the dust and dirt that scraped her mouth like sand paper.

“My horse took off riding like a bat out of hell. She brought me straight to the barn. I felt horrible leaving you behind. I was waiting for the storm to pass before I went out to look for you. I’m so sorry I left you out there by yourself.” He wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs in soft gliding movements.

Her heart told her he didn’t leave her intentionally. She just happened to get caught in another freak of nature storm. Why did these things keep happening to her? First it was the plane ride and now the dust storm. She had potentially come close to death not once, but twice now.

Natalie sighed heavily, still crying. “Thank God, I made it to the barn alive. Freedom got scared and wouldn’t move. I used my shirt and put it around his head. Oh no, I think I lost your sister’s hat.”

“It’s okay. It’s over.”

“Then...then something overcame me and my body...” she couldn’t stop the sobs.

Ryan placed his index finger over her lips. “Shhhh. You’re gonna be alright. You’re safe now. That’s all that matters.” He pulled her close to him and began to stroke her hair, easing the fear away with the gentle caress of his hand.

Her tears slowly ceased. Being in Ryan’s arms did make her feel safe. Safe from everything. She didn’t want to leave his arms ever. She nestled herself closer to him, allowing her hand and cheek to rest on his chest. The warmth of his skin relaxed her and that’s when she realized she was touching his bare skin. Through all the pandemonium she failed to notice he didn’t have a shirt on. How did she miss that?

She kept her hand steady and allowed her eyes to survey his finely sculpted pecks and abs. What her hands felt that night on the dance floor was real, very real. Ryan’s body was damn hot. A fine layer of dirt covered his bare chest and his hair stuck up in all directions. The scruffy look only made him sexier.

He lifted her chin and stared into her eyes. “You are so beautiful, Natalie.” His hand glided down her hair to her arm sending chills all over her body.

She gazed into his bloodshot red eyes. “Even with all this dirt on me?”

Ryan nodded. “Yes, beautiful. Dirt or no dirt, you’re gorgeous to me no matter what.”

Either he was crazy for thinking she looked good sporting the UT burnt orange dirt all over her body or somehow her beauty blinded him. Regardless, he knew the right words to speak. “Oh Ryan, you are a sweetheart.”

He picked up her hand from his chest and brushed his lips across the top of it. She closed her eyes, savoring the touch of his dry lips against her scorched skin. She wanted to feel his lips against hers. Glide her body against his bare skin. The demand of his touch focused her mind on one mission and one mission only, she wanted him. Then she remembered they both agreed to take it slow and get to know one another. What was wrong with her? She didn’t want to have sex with him. She barely knew him and it went against all her rules. Why couldn’t she control her

emotions? She convinced herself that it had to be the near death experience driving them closer together.

Ryan tightened his arm around her waist and pressed his body firmly against hers. He released her hand and then cupped her cheek. The warmth of his breath spread across her face, inviting her lips to meet his. She moved in toward him, moistening her lips with her tongue. Her heart drummed in her ear and her lips quivered waiting to surrender to his call.

A loud thud sounded, calling their attention away from one another. The barn door swung open, allowing a ray of light to shine directly upon them. They pulled away, and used their hands to shield their sensitive eyes from the blinding light.

“Thank God, y’all are safe. That was one heck of a storm.” Lance walked in rambling on and on. They stood looking at him, but neither one spoke a word.

His eyes darted back and forth between them and he cleared his throat. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to... ummm.”

“Yeah, we didn’t think we would make it.” Ryan drew Natalie close to him. “But we are safe.”

She looked up at Ryan, “Yes, I’m safe now, safe in your arms.”

## Chapter 5: Unexplainable Changes

“You’re glowing. Don’t deny it. You spent the weekend with Ryan, didn’t you?” Lise glanced up from her text book, eyeing Natalie.

Natalie fumbled to unpack her clothes from her bags, avoiding her friend’s gaze. “What?”

“You can’t play dumb with me. I see it written all over your face.” Lise motioned with her finger and then went back to reading her book.

Natalie finally looked up. She pressed her lips together, trying to conceal her happiness. It was no use. Her lips parted into a wide smile. “Not the entire weekend, only Saturday.”

“I knew it.” Lise shut her textbook and tossed it to the side. “Why didn’t you text me back?” She sprang up off her bed and rushed to Natalie’s side.

“Sorry, I got side tracked.” Natalie shrugged and then walked over to the bathroom to put up her toiletries.

Lise followed her around the room. “Tell me all about it? Did you sleep with him?”

“What? No... of course not.” Natalie continued to put her things away, still avoiding any direct face contact with Lise.

“Oh man.” Lise pouted and sat down on her bed. “Nat, please tell me you at least made out.”

Natalie walked out of the bathroom. “Ummm, no Lise we didn’t.”

“Then why do you keep smiling?” Lise pounded her hands into the mattress.

Natalie turned around, trying to hide her happiness. Nonchalantly, like she didn’t know her friend was dying for information, she dumped a bag of clean clothes on the bed and began to fold them. She knew Lise would hound her until she told her every last detail.

“Nat, tell me.”

Natalie tossed the pair of socks in her hands to the side and fell back on the pile of clothes. “Because I had another near death experience and it was wonderful.” She crossed her hands over her heart and closed her eyes. Thoughts of Ryan flooded her mind. Even though the dust storm scared her to death, she didn’t regret the time they spent together. She could still smell him, taste him, and feel him.

“What? You had...I’m confused. You’re happy because you almost died, again?”

Natalie opened her eyes and focused in on what Lise said. She sat up. “No. I mean, yes. I did have another near death experience but it ended quite well.”

Lise smiled. “I guess so, because you’re still alive and smiling like he rocked your world.”

She giggled. “Let me explain. We went horseback riding on his ranch—”

“He invited you over to his house? His parent’s place?”

Natalie narrowed her eyes at Lise, warning her to stop. “Yes. Can I finish?”

“Sorry.” Lise chewed on her lower lip.

“What? Go ahead, Lise.” Natalie got up and then scooted over the pile of clothes, clearing a spot on the bed to sit down.

“He must really like you. If a guy invites you over to meet his parents—”

“Wait. I didn’t say that. His parents weren’t home. I did meet his brother and his brother’s family.”

“Still. Okay, you met half of his family... which means he must really like you.” Lise’s voice escalated. She did a happy dance staying seated and for a moment she acted like her world had been rocked.

Natalie shook her head, unable to understand how everything excited Lise. “I guess if you say so. Anyhow, we went riding and there was a horrible dust storm. Violent.”

“OMG! Seriously?”

Natalie put her finger to her lips, instructing Lise to stay quiet and let her finish. Lise pretended to zip her mouth close.

“Yes, a horrible storm. I honestly thought that I might die. She shivered, recalling how the thick clouds of dust surrounded her and blinded her sight. We got separated. Eventually we both found our way back to a barn.”

Lise smiled. “Let me guess. I know what happened next.” She grabbed a small bed pillow and held it tightly to her chest.

“Not what you think. It was intense. He held me, caressed me, and told me I was beautiful. I got to bury my face against his bare muscular chest. Boy, does he have muscles. Whoa.” Natalie fanned herself. “Let me think what else.”

Lise practically cried over the story. “You two kissed and it was wonderful.”

Natalie sighed. “Actually, no. We didn’t.”

“No? You didn’t kiss?” Her smile quickly turned into a frown.



“No. We were about to when his brother threw open the barn doors.”

“Oh that sucks. Why didn’t you tell him to take a hike?”

“Lise, his brother needed to know if we were safe.”

“Oh well.” She grabbed her cell phone and started messing with it. “Why didn’t you guys hang out the rest of the weekend?”

“The storm caused a lot of damage to the ranch. Since his parents were out of town, he and his brother had to fix fences and tend to injured animals. They even lost a baby calf.”

“Gosh.” Lise muttered, not paying much attention to what she said.

“Did you hear me? An animal died, Lise.” Natalie spoke slowly, emphasizing each word.

Lise looked up from her cell phone. “Oh wow, that is bad. I wonder why you keep getting caught up in these weird storms.”

“I don’t know. It is ironic.” Natalie reached over to her pile of laundry and grabbed a shirt. She took her time, folding it nice and neat. “We chatted and texted the rest of the weekend. He was supposed to follow me back today but decided to stay home until Friday.”

“I’m glad things are turning out well for you two.”

Natalie sighed. “I can only hope. So, did you get to hang out with Sal?”

“Yeah, pretty much, until he left to go home on Thursday with Ryan. We got to know each other really well.”

“Lise.” Natalie turned around and narrowed her eyes at her.

“No, I told you, he’s not like that. I mean, we did make out, but all our clothes stayed on.” She rolled her eyes and then drifted back to her phone.

“Good for you! Getting to know each other is important.”

Lise shrugged her shoulders. “Yeah, I guess. I can’t wait for him to come back.”

“And I can’t wait for Ryan to come back either.”

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“Thanks for the movie and dinner. I’ve wanted to come here, just haven’t made the time.” Natalie looked at Ryan and let out an alluring smile.

“You’re welcome. So what did ya think about the movie?” He dug his hands in his short pockets and bit down on his bottom lip. He felt a little apprehensive about the conversation he needed to have with her.

“I liked it. However, I didn’t expect for it to end that way.”

“Yeah, me either.” He opened the truck door for her. When he walked around to the driver’s side, thousands of thoughts attacked his mind. He balled up his hands into a fist and clenched his teeth. His brother’s voice rang loudly in his head, “*Don’t be scared, just tell ’er the truth. If she doesn’t understand then she’s not the girl for ya.*”

He took a deep breath, got in his truck and started it. He smiled at her. She had to be the most beautiful girl ever. Her flawless skin shimmered like satin and she wore the right amount of make-up that gave her that sexy sultry look. Her lips glistened with a light shade of gloss, which made them irresistible. He had to force himself to look away; otherwise he knew he would steal a kiss from her.

“It’s only 7:30 p.m. Do you want me to take you back to the dorm or can I show you one of my favorite places?” He held his breath waiting for her response.

She pressed her lips together, not saying a word. After a few seconds, she turned to him and said, “Take me to your favorite place.”

He exhaled. “All right... I will.” He reached up and opened the sunroof to his black Chevrolet Avalanche and drove off. He scanned through the radio searching for the right tune.

“Can you leave it there?” Natalie reached for the radio.

“You like this song?” Ryan shot a quick look at her.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Sweet.” He had no idea that she even liked country music. They had more in common than he thought.

“What else do you listen to?” She asked.

“Oh, everything I guess. Dance music, some rock, Latin ballads which are my mom’s favorite, and some Christian music. I play the guitar at our church whenever I’m home. I guess you can say I’ve learned to appreciate all types of music.”

“That’s cool. I didn’t know you played the guitar.” The wind blew through Natalie’s hair and she struggled to keep it out of her face. He couldn’t help but notice how sexy she looked with windblown hair.

“Yeah, I’ve been playing since I was ten. Do you want me to close the sunroof?” He held his hand up to the button.

“No, that’s okay. The wind feels great. We haven’t had a nice breeze like this in a while.”

“You got that right. It’s been pretty hot and muggy.”

A strong gust of wind wisped through the sunroof and into her hair, filling the truck with a fruity floral smell. He inhaled, taking in her sweet scent. It gave him a shiver. He continued watching her out of the corner of his eye as she pulled her hair to the side. It took everything for him not to reach over and stroke her hair. He longed to run his fingers through her silky dark brown tresses.

He shook his head, trying to clear his mind. “What about you? What else do you listen to?”

“Dance music too, anything top 40, and country. I admit I don’t ever listen to Christian music, not that anything is wrong with it. I do sing along when I go to church.”

“That’s okay. At least we like a lot of the same type of music.” Ryan cleared his throat. “So do you know how to two-step? I know you can salsa dance.”

“Kind of. Okay, don’t make fun of me but my senior year I took a dance class at school. I guess because everyone was into that show, what’s it called... Dancing With The Stars, they decided to offer it. Anyhow, I learned several types of dances. I’m not that good. You’ve seen firsthand.”

He let out a laugh. “Seriously? I wish they would’ve had that class my senior year. I’ve always wanted to take ballroom dancing. In fact, I thought about signing up for it here. Hey, why don’t we take it together, in the fall?”

Natalie’s head turned quickly in his direction. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, c’mon it’ll be fun.”

“I’ll think about it.” She stared out through the window.

“Do you always have to think about everything?” He made his voice light, trying to not sound rude.

Her head spun around. “Yeah, I do. Is that a problem?” He noticed the slight elevation in her voice.

“No. Not all. Just asking.”

*Damn!* He didn’t mean to offend her and hoped he didn’t make her mad. He felt more comfortable around her but knew he needed to be careful on how he asked questions. He tended

to blurt things out without thinking about them first. The last thing he wanted to do was to upset her. For some reason, being around her caused his mind to go a little haywire.

Casually, he reached over and placed his hand on top of hers. He patted it lightly. "That's why I like you. You're different from me." He let his hand remain on top of hers while keeping his eyes on the road. He loved the softness of her skin against his rough hands.

"Really? What else do you like about me?" Her voice sounded alluring rather than inquisitive.

He tapped his finger against the steering wheel. His face felt hot and his mind raced with a million thoughts. "Ummm...let's see... you're beautiful, smart, kind, thoughtful, and very analytical." He glanced over at her, praying he said the right thing.

She leaned her head against her shoulders, acting shy. "Thanks. So you like that I'm a nerdy type of girl?"

"What? I didn't say you were nerdy."

"You don't have to. I know I am." She picked at the light pink nail polish on her nails.

"Well, I don't think you are. In fact, I thought you looked cute and sexy... wearing your glasses and your hair up in a ponytail the day I met you."

He felt her wrap her fingers over his. Judging by her reaction, it told him he said the right things.

She let out a slight laugh. "Sexy? Really? So I shouldn't wear my hair down and my contacts any longer?"

He looked at her. The wind continued to blow through her hair causing strands to stick to her glossy lips. He kept one eye on the road and the other watching her peel each strand away. Man, she was sexy and far from nerdy in his opinion.

"No... I mean you're beautiful with your hair down and no glasses." He searched for the right words, feeling like a nerd himself.

"It's okay. I know what you're saying. I guess that's what I like about you."

"What, that I'm a rambling idiot?"

"No, you're not an idiot. I like that you're funny, considerate, honest, smart, handsome, and..."

"And?" Ryan glided his thumb back and forth against the top of her hand. He could caress her smooth creamy skin all day and night if she let him.

She pushed a part of her hair back behind her ear and held onto it, winding it around her fingers. "You're sexy."

He burst out laughing. "Sexy? I don't think so."

She let out a giggle. "I do. I think you look sexy in a cowboy hat and jeans."

"I'll be sure to wear them next time." He winked and squeezed her hand. It flattered him to hear compliments from her. He worked hard to stay in shape and he took pride in taking care of his body. More than anything, it was nice to have a girl that didn't focus on herself constantly. That's what made Natalie even more attractive to him.

He turned onto a long and winding two-way road. Trees stretched over the road from both sides, as though locking branches with one another. It created a lush canopy of thick foliage that extended for at least a mile. He had been down this road many times, but for the first time, it felt cozy and romantic. Maybe because he had Natalie next to him, changing the mood completely.

"Can I ask where we're going?" She continued looking around, her eyes darting around from side to side.

He wanted to surprise her but based on her actions he thought it best to tell her.

"When you told me you had never been to Lake Travis, I thought you might like to see it."

"Oh... the lake." Natalie's hand went limp. He noticed her shifting back and forth in her seat.

"Is something wrong?" He wanted to take her to a romantic and memorable place and wondered if he'd made the right decision.

She squeezed her eyes shut before finally speaking. "Yeah, I'm okay," she mumbled.

"Are you sure? You're not dizzy again are you?"

Natalie glanced over at him. "No. It's not that." She paused for a minute. "The last time I went to a lake it was to clear my head." She turned away and let out a small sigh.

He heard the pain behind that sigh. Obviously the lake brought back some hurtful memories. He didn't want to pry and decided he would allow her to open up to him when she was ready. Damn, he couldn't win for losing.

"I can turn around, if you want."

She shook her head. "No, I'll be okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I want to see Lake Travis."

The gravel crackled and popped as he drove up to the area leading to the lake. He pulled up to a boat ramp and stopped. The setting sun painted the sky with streaks of orange and purple. It made the water glisten like gold and out of all the times he had been there, he had never seen such a breath taking site.

He didn't want to let go of Natalie's hand but needed to put the truck in park. He gave her hand a deep squeeze and let go. He felt her latch on, apparently not wanting him to let go either. Slowly, she released her hand from his.

"So this is what you wanted to show me?" Natalie took off her seat belt and leaned forward, looking out the front windshield.

"Yeah, it reminds me of summer vacations with my family when I was a kid. I know it's no beach, but it's the closest thing we have here in Austin." He waited to turn off the truck, still not convinced that she wanted to be there.

"It's beautiful. The water looks so inviting. I may have to jump in."

He noticed a change in her face. Maybe she would be okay after all. "People come out here to get certified for scuba diving. Do you wanna take a walk?"

Natalie nodded. "Sure, why not."

He let out a sigh of relief and opened his truck door. He came around and opened the door for her. He stuck out his hand, helping her get out of the truck. When she didn't let go of his hand, Ryan didn't hesitate to interlock his fingers with hers. They walked down to the water, holding hands. It felt good to be next to her; natural and right, in so many ways.

"Wow, there's sand." Natalie dug her shoes into the brown, sand-like dirt.

"I know. That's why I like coming out here so much. Feels like I'm at the beach."

"Just a minute, I don't want to get my shoes wet." She bent over and removed her sandals before the water reached them. She held on to them by the straps, allowing them to dangle from her fingers. "What about you?"

He glanced down at his boat shoes. "Nah, I get these wet all the time."

Something caught his eye as the water splashed over Natalie's feet. He had to take another look. For a split second, he thought he saw her legs and feet liquefy into water. The structure of them remained solid but they were clear, like the lake. He shut his eyes tightly and shook his head.

“I can’t believe the water is so clear, almost like the ocean. Hey, are you okay?” Natalie pulled at his arm. Her grip tightened and she shook him a couple times. “Ryan.”

“Yeah?” He opened his eyes and blinked a few times. He looked back down and saw they were normal. His eyes had to be playing tricks on him. He figured the anxiety building up inside of him caused it, since he still needed to have that talk with her.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I was just thinking that we should come out here during the day. Ya know, go swimming or rent a boat.”

“Yeah, that sounds like fun.” Natalie smiled at him but he could see the doubt in her eyes.

“C’mon, let’s walk down this way.” He motioned with his head.

He led her down the sandy shoreline holding her hand. A cool breeze blew off the calm water, not at all typical for an evening in May. Out in the distance, he spotted a few boats and saw a couple of people dotted along the beach area on the other side of the lake. He figured there would be more people at the lake because of the nice weather but they were practically alone.

Natalie gazed out into the horizon. “It’s a beautiful sunset. I’m glad you brought me here.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

Her lightly tanned skin shimmered in the setting sun’s rays and her hair flowed freely in the breeze. She looked radiant, almost Goddess like in her white dress. Then again, Natalie looked good in anything she wore.

Even though she excited him, she also calmed him. She put him at ease and he felt his heart surrendering to her. Never did he imagine falling for the quiet sophomore he knew back in high school. Her beauty mesmerized him and he nearly forgot that he needed to have that heart to heart honest conversation with her. There were so many ways to do this wrong. He had to do it right. He had to be completely honest and open with her.

With his shoe, he smoothed out the sand, thinking of the right words to say. “Natalie... I don’t want to step out of line again, but the feelings I have for you are beyond controllable.” He held his breath waiting for her response.

She turned toward him, gazing deeply into his eyes. She reached up and touched his cheek with her hand. “My feelings for you are uncontrollable too.”

His heart skipped a beat. So she had the same overwhelming feelings he had about her. He took her in his arms. “You don’t know how good it feels to hear you say that.”

“I’m scared though,” she mumbled.

He cradled her face in his hands and stared into her pale blue eyes. “Don’t be.” He glided his finger over her lips. They parted and he heard her let out a soft sigh. The plumpness and fullness of her lips were inviting, making him want to take them captive.

She glided her hand down behind his neck and leaned into him. Cautiously he brought his lips to hers, afraid that she might run off again. When she closed her eyes, he kissed her deeply and tenderly. It released every ounce of fear that consumed him, allowing him to show everything he felt for her. It had to be the most passionate and intense kiss he had ever experienced.

She responded willingly and didn’t pull away this time. He pulled her body closer to his, holding on to her tightly. Her hot breath against his mouth made him dizzy with desire and need. They continued kissing, not even stopping for a breath of air. His feet sunk deeper into the sand burying him up to his ankles. She wavered back and forth in his arms, and he struggled to keep them both upright. She pressed her body against his and his head swirled. For a moment, he lost all sense of direction and he felt his body lifting. He swayed back and then forward before finally losing his balance.

He held on to her with one arm, protecting her as best as he could. He used his other arm to break their fall. She cried out when they fell back on to the sand.

“Are you okay?” He lifted himself up off of her. “Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m fine.” She glided her fingers up and down his arms, awakening every nerve ending in his body. “Kiss me again.”

He leaned over her, caressing her neck and trailing kisses up to her luscious lips. She responded back with soft and light kisses. Her lips tasted so good, he didn’t want to part from them. He closed his eyes, taking in each kiss fully. She moaned low in her throat and it tormented him to the very core. He wanted her badly. Never had he felt this way before about a girl. Desire flooded his senses. He was losing control.

He pulled away. “I’m sorry.”

Natalie opened her eyes. “What? Is something wrong?”

He knelt down on the sand and shoveled his fingers through his hair. Why couldn’t he control himself around her? She was so irresistible but that was no excuse. He had to bridle the passion and feelings he had for her. This couldn’t go any further. He got up and walked off.



“Ryan. Ryan, what’s wrong? Did I do something?” Natalie chased after him but stopped when he held out his hand.

He ignored her pleading for a second, gathering his thoughts. He took a deep breath and let out a long and drawn out sigh. “No, ya didn’t do anything wrong. It’s me.” He held on to his head with both hands, pacing back and forth along the sand.

Natalie stared at him, looking confused. Who could blame her? He gave her all the right signals to only push her away. He had to be honest with her, otherwise how would he know if she was the right gal for him.

He walked up to her and took her hand. “I’m sorry. I really need to finish my talk with you.”

“Okay.” Her eyes sank and the glow from her face faded in to a look of worry.

He led her back down by the water and sat down. She knelt down next to him, keeping some distance between them.

“Natalie, there’s something I need to tell you.” He grabbed a fist full of sand and sifted it through his hand.

She placed her hand on his arm. “If it’s—”

“It’s not what you think. I need to be honest with you.”

She pulled her hand back. “Oh...okay.”

He hesitated for a moment and then looked over at her. His mind reviewed the words carefully before he spoke. “When I’m around you, I find it really hard to control myself. Like I said earlier, my feelings for you are beyond controllable.”

She nodded and barely mumbled, “Uh-huh.”

He cleared his throat several times. “Every time I’m with you, I want to lose myself with you. But I can’t. I made a promise and I’m sticking to it. I just don’t know if you are willing to accept that and if you’re not then...” the words hung in his throat before he managed to spit them out, “I’ll have to end our relationship.”

She winced and had a puzzled look on her face. “What? I have no idea what you’re talking about. I don’t understand.”

“What I’m trying to say is that... I’m a virgin.” He felt a flash of heat hit his cheeks.

She let out a small sigh. “That’s what this is all about?”

He dug the heels of his shoe into the wet sand. He took a deep breath and let it out quickly. "Yes. I'm twenty-one and still a virgin. If you can't accept that, I understand. I made a promise to not have sex until marriage and I intend on keeping it."

She laid her hand on top of his. "That is the most admirable thing I've ever heard from a guy. I only wish I could say the same."

Ryan felt everything drain from him. His shoulders sank and his head dropped down. He felt his body sinking deeper into the sand. "I understand. It's not easy to make this type of commitment." He stared into her eyes. "I wish you could walk down that same path with me, because there is nothing more I want than to spend each and every day with you."

Tears filled her eyes and she shook her head. "I... I don't think I made myself clear. I meant that I wish I could say that I was a virgin, but I'm not. I don't intend on having sex again until I marry. I only did it because I really thought Tony and I would marry. I've been beating myself up over making such a dumb mistake."

"So you're okay with me being a virgin and not having sex until marriage?"

She smiled, wiping the tears that trickled down her face. "Yes. I'm perfectly fine with that. I really value sex like you do."

He reached forward and took her in his arms. Her eyes met his and deep inside, he knew Natalie was the gal for him. "Then you're willing to have a relationship with me and fight off the urge not to give into our sexual needs? No matter how strong they are?"

"Yes, I am. I have to admit that I've never had a problem controlling myself but for some reason I have trouble with you."

"Then we will have to work extra hard. It won't be easy but I'm willing to give it everything if you are."

"I am."

He leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the lips. Everything about her felt so right. She leaned her head against his chest and he held her close. He could see himself spending the rest of his life with her. He didn't want this day to end. They sat there; his arms wrapped around her, watching the sun vanish along the horizon.

"Are you ready to go? It's getting dark." He whispered in her ear.

"If it's okay with you, I'd like to stay out here a little longer. It's therapeutic for me. If you know what I mean."

Ryan kissed her cheek. "I know exactly what you mean. Why don't we go over there?" He pointed to a pile of wood down the shore.

She followed his finger. "To that pile of ashes?"

"Yeah. How about I start us a fire? I think I may have a few pieces of wood in the bed of my truck and a lighter somewhere."

"Sure. Too bad you don't have a blanket and your guitar."

"Oh, I think I may have those too."

She put her hands on her hips and her eyes narrowed. "Did you plan this, Ryan Garrett?"

For a moment, he thought he did something wrong. Then he saw her lips curl up into a full smile. He winked. "Yes, right down to the fire."

## Chapter 6: There's No Denying

Natalie felt the vibration of her phone against her leg. Her heart skipped a beat, hoping it was Ryan sending her a text. She pulled the phone out of her lab coat and kept it under the table. She looked around for the professor and spotted him helping several other students a few tables in front of hers. She saw that Ryan sent her a message.

*Wish me luck. I'm headed to Kronberg for day one of my internship.*

She texted back:

*Good luck. I know you'll do a great job and impress them.*

She waited a few minutes and received his next text:

*Hope so. I'll call you when I get off. Maybe we can grab a bite to eat. I miss seeing your smile and looking into your beautiful blue eyes ;)*

She couldn't help but smile. He made her feel so giddy inside. She texted:

*I miss you too. I can't wait to see you.*

"Natalie. Natalie. Which one do you want?" Sean nudged her while waving a piece of paper in front of her face.

"Huh?" Natalie shoved her phone back into the pocket of her lab coat. She took the paper from his hand.

"Which project do you want us to work on? We need to make a decision quickly before the good ones are gone." His arm fidgeted against the lab table and his hand inched upward, ready to rise the moment they decided.

"Oh, ummm... let me see." She felt completely lost. She hadn't heard a word the professor said.

"I think we should go with—"

"How about the aptamers one? Sounds interesting." She pointed to one of the selections.

He adjusted his thick black frame glasses. "I guess."

"You don't like that one?"

"Honestly, I thought the one with biofuels because of the global warming sounded more interesting. It says more than one team can choose that one." He showed her where it said that on the paper.

*Global warming.* It caught her attention and she thought about Ryan's ranch and the problems with produce around the state. "Yes, let's do that one."

"Great." Sean took the paper from her and raised his hand. He waved it in the air until the professor acknowledged him. Even though Sean seemed a little persistent, she knew choosing him as her lab partner made sense. She met him during the spring semester in a biology class they both took. When it came to schoolwork, he proved to be reliable and dedicated to his studies.

He nudged her arm. "Are you coming or what?"

Natalie rubbed her forehead and brushed her hair back away from her face. Why did she feel completely distracted today? "Yeah. Sorry." She took off her lab coat and shoved it into her backpack along with her textbook.

"Are you okay? You seem a little out of it."

"I'm fine. I guess I'm feeling a little overwhelmed."

He held the door open for her. "How many classes are you taking this summer?"

"Just two and the lab class." She adjusted her backpack on her shoulders.

"That's a full load for summer. Plus the internship, right?" He reached over and zipped up her backpack. Apparently, she had forgotten to zip it closed.

She shook her head. "Thanks. Yeah, I'll be working on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays in the afternoon. By the way, thank you for putting in a good word for me. I know they typically want juniors."

"No problem. Besides, your grades spoke for themselves. You're going to really like working at Kronberg. It's cool and Dr. Kronberg takes the time to work with us and answer questions."

"That's so awesome. I can't wait for tomorrow. What days do you work?"

Sean held up his hand, shielding his eyes from the sun. It shined brightly but for some reason it didn't bother her, even though the rays peered right into her eyes. "The same as you. I'll be there to show you around tomorrow. I need to warn you about Franz. He's a little, eccentric."

"I've met him. He interviewed me for the job. Red frizzy hair, brown eyes and freckles all over his face?"

Sean nodded. "That's him alright."

“He’s kind of freaky and weird.” She shuddered. Thinking about him gave her the hebegebees.

He arched his eyebrow and gave her one of those looks. “That’s an understatement. He’s a freakin’ schitzo if you ask me. Most people call him the ‘Mad Scientist’ behind his back. I think he likes it. Don’t worry, he keeps to himself most of the time. Even though he’s supposed to supervise us, he doesn’t.”

“So, who does?”

“You’re talking to him. Since I’ve been there for a year, they offered me a part-time job as a lab assistant. I work closely with all the interns, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“Wow! You didn’t tell me that.” Natalie gave him a friendly slap on his forearm.

“Owww.” He rubbed his arm. “What do you have in that hand of yours? Lead?”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to hit you so hard.” She felt bad, wondering if she had actually hurt him. Poor Sean, he was so tall and skinny. He didn’t have an ounce of fat on his body or much muscle either. Why didn’t he take the workout supplements from Kronberg Laboratories? She refrained from asking or suggesting it to him, even though she wanted to.

“It’s okay, it doesn’t hurt.” He shook his arm, like he was trying to ease the pain. When he noticed Natalie staring at his arm, he quickly ran his fingers through his dark black wavy hair. “I didn’t tell you because I just got the job two weeks ago.”

“Good for you.” She tried to keep her eyes off the blaring red handprint she left behind on his fair skin.

“Yeah, thanks. Do you want to go get something to eat? We can get started on our project afterwards, if you like.”

She checked the time. It was ten minutes after two o’clock and her stomach grumbled with hunger. Since Ryan and Lise were both at their internships she agreed. “Sure, that’s fine. We both have to work tomorrow and the project’s due in a few weeks. Do you want to eat at the union?”

“Yeah, there’s plenty to select from there.” Sean said.

They walked down the stairs and crossed the street to the main campus area. The union buzzed with chatter and Natalie had to dodge the steady stream of students passing in and out of the building.

“I’m thinking we should make this a set time. You know, work on our projects after lab class. What do you think?” Sean pushed his way through the crowd.

“Sure. I’d like to find a quiet place if we can.” Natalie said, making her way to one of the restaurants.

“Leave it to me. I’ll find us something.” Sean smiled and gave her a quick wink.

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Natalie lay back on her bed and closed her eyes. With her finger she traced her lower lip. She recalled the way Ryan had kissed her deeply and passionately that night at the lake. Chills ran up and down her arms. She’d loved the way his body felt against hers and how he’d held on to her. The same way he did when she’d nearly fainted during orientation. She longed to see him tonight but her inner voice reminded her to take things slow.

Her phone chimed. She opened her eyes and picked it up. Ryan’s text message flashed across her screen:

*Can’t meet up tonight. Kronberg’s having a big shindig next Friday night and we’re busy helping out. Not sure what time I’ll leave.*

She sighed and her heart ached. Regardless of what that inner voice told her, she wouldn’t be able to see him after all.

She texted him:

*No problem. Maybe we can meet up tomorrow. Did you see Lise?*

He texted back:

*Yeah, we’re working together. She told me to tell you she’ll be at the dorm later tonight. I’ll give you a call when I get to my apartment. Gotta go. Bye beautiful ;)*

Natalie’s heart soared. *Beautiful. Beautiful.* She held the cell phone to her chest. Ryan always knew the right thing to say, every time. If only she was as gifted with communicating her emotions to him.

She searched her phone for the right emoticon. She found a smiley face blowing a kiss in the shape of a heart. *Perfect.* She pushed the send button. Ryan flooded her mind. Everything about him felt so right, so natural. She’d never felt this way about a guy before. Not even with

Tony. She winced at the thought of Tony and her kissing. Why did she make such a stupid mistake and have sex with him? Why didn't she save herself?

If only she'd gone out with Ryan first, she would still be a virgin. She shook her head in disgust. Despite her mistake, she couldn't believe that Ryan wanted to go out with her. It was unbelievable that he valued sex the way she did. Never in a million years did she peg him to be that type of guy; saving himself until marriage. That was practically unheard of when it came to a guy. Only girls did that sort of thing.

Giggles and smiles poured out. She was actually going out with Ryan Garrett! What would her old high school friends think? They wouldn't believe her. One thing for certain, he was with her because he truly liked her and not because he wanted to get in her pants. She refused to mess things up with him regardless of how uncontrollable her desires were. She'd respect his promise.

Her phone rang and she quickly picked it up. Her Aunt Sharon's picture showed up on the screen instead of Ryan's.

"Hi, Aunt Sharon." Natalie sat up in her bed.

"Hey darling. How's school going? Have you started your internship yet?" Sharon sounded a little winded.

"I started summer classes today and tomorrow will be my first day at Kronberg. Are you okay? It sounds like you've been running."

She sighed heavily. "Yeah, I'm scurrying around the condo, trying to pack. I'm headed to Europe and wanted to remind you to stop by this week if you can."

"Sure. No problem. I'll stop by Wednesday."

"Oh that will be great. Like I said, if you want to spend the night here you are more than welcome. I won't be back until the end of July so I need for you to check on the place each week."

"Okay, no problem."

"Well, gotta go. I'm staying at Chad's tonight so he can take me to the airport in the morning. Tell your mom I said hi. Luv ya."

"I will. Be careful and have a good time. Bye." Natalie hung up the phone. She got up and went over to her dresser and changed her clothes. Since Ryan had to work late, she decided to workout and grab a bite to eat afterwards. Besides, the workout would help her get a good night's sleep and be ready for her first day at Kronberg.



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Natalie headed up I-35 to Round Rock, a small suburb outside of Austin, to Kronberg Laboratories. She glanced at the thermostat in her car; one-hundred and three degrees. Summer had arrived. She fidgeted in her chair, peeling her skirt off her legs. Between the Texas heat and the adrenaline pumping through her veins, she felt like she'd just finished a boot camp class. She reached over and turned up the air conditioner. She couldn't go in looking all sweaty, especially on her first day.

She parked in the garage and then walked into the ten-story, silver and black building. A part of her couldn't believe she'd actually gotten an internship in the laboratory. They only hired a few interns every semester for the lab operations. Even though they had over thirty interns this summer, all of them, including Ryan, Lise, and Sal, worked on the business operations side of the company. All the hard work and determination would hopefully allow her to reach her dream one day as head research scientist. Kronberg made that dream seem so much closer.

"May I help you?" A lady wearing a gray uniform sat at the front desk. Several armed security guards stood nearby.

"Yes, I'm Natalie Vega and I'm interning in the lab."

The lady gave her a flat smile. "Welcome to Kronberg Laboratories." She turned to her computer and typed in some information. "Yes, here you are. You're working in the main lab area, reporting to Franz Rousseau. Let me get your badge."

Natalie waited while the lady searched through a stack of ID badges. "Here is your badge. You will need to wear it at all times."

"Yes ma'am." Natalie took the badge. She studied the photo on the front of it. It was only two weeks ago that she took the picture but she sure did look different with her straight hair and eye glasses. She clipped the badge to her shirt.

"Please have a seat over there." The lady pointed to an area filled with several young people who appeared to be interns too. "Someone will come and get you."

"Okay. Thank you." Natalie walked across the gray slate floor to a sitting area of sleek leather chairs and sofas. The modern décor and color pallet of white, gray, and silver gave the

building a futuristic feeling. She recognized many of the faces from orientation, even though she didn't know them personally. Before she sat down, she heard someone call her name.

"Natalie. Ready to go?" Sean waved and smiled, walking in her direction. He wore a long white lab coat that made him look pencil thin.

"Hi, Sean. Am I the only one?" She glanced back at the group of students behind her.

"Yes. The other two interns started yesterday."

"There are only three interns working in the lab?"

"No. There's a total of five. Two stayed on from last semester. Come on, I'll show you how to get into this place." He motioned for her to follow him.

They walked up to a large turnstile, located next to the side of the front desk. "You scan your badge and then press your thumb up to the scanner." Sean showed her by doing his first.

She followed his instructions. A green light illuminated on the display. "You can walk through now." A guard standing to the side informed her.

"Thanks." She gave the guard a friendly smile and walked through. He didn't smile back. She hoped her coworkers would be friendlier. Everyone seemed so tightlipped and serious. "That was easy," she said to Sean, while straightening out her badge on the lapel of her shirt.

"Yeah, nothing to it." He led her through the main common area. "Did you get a tour of the facility?"

"Yes, during orientation. This place is amazing. It feels like I'm walking through a scene from Star Wars or something." She gawked at all the transparent computer screens displaying information and videos along the walls.

"Yeah, it kind of feels like that or a scene from Iron Man." Sean led her down a long corridor and then made a right turn. A set of clear glass double doors marked with the words 'Clearance Required' greeted them. She watched Sean scan his badge and the glass doors slide open.

"All you need is to dress the guards like Imperial Stormtroopers."

Sean broke out in laughter. "Now that would be cool. Speaking of dressing up, next Friday is Kronberg's big annual masquerade party. Everyone's invited. You don't want to miss it."

She followed him down another hallway to the main laboratory area. "My roommate, Lise, is working in Marketing. She told me all about it last night. Sounds like it will be epic."

“Man, you have no idea. They go all out. It’s like a Vegas show on steroids. I’m sure Lise’s head is spinning trying to get everything prepared for next week.”

“That’s an understatement. She’s already stressed out, worrying how they will get everything done in time.”

“Sounds like you have the scoop on it. So are you going?” Sean scanned his badge again which opened a set of opaque glass doors. They slid open diagonally, disappearing into the wall.

Natalie followed Sean in to the lab. Her jaw dropped. “Wow, this is impressive.” She stumbled around in a circle. High tech gadgets surrounded her, lighting up in neon colors. Transparent computer screens hung along the walls, scrolling data and showing different video clips.

“You’ll get used to it. Come on, I’ll take you to your workstation. Franz left early and asked me to show you around.”

“Okay.” She followed him slowly, trying to assimilate everything around her.

“Let me introduce you to Dr. Kronberg.” Sean ushered Natalie over to a short older man standing in front of a computer screen.

“Excuse me, Dr. Kronberg.”

The white headed man turned around. “Yes, Sean.” He spoke with a heavy Swedish accent and it was exactly how she imagined him sounding.

“I’d like for you to meet Natalie Vega, one of the new interns.”

Dr. Kronberg’s thin lips parted into a flat smile. He stuck out his hand. “Hello, Natalie. It’s nice to meet you.”

She shook the ingenious scientist’s age worn hand. “Hello, Dr. Kronberg. It’s an honor to meet you.”

“Thank you. We are glad you are here. This will be a great learning opportunity for you. If you need anything at all, I’m here. Please don’t hesitate to ask me any questions. Remember, there is no such thing as a dumb question, only those not asked remain unknown and a mystery to all.”

Natalie smiled. Not only was he intelligent, but kind too. “Thank you. I’m looking forward to learning everything I can while I’m here. This is a dream come true.” The doctor pulled his hand back and she realized she hadn’t stopped shaking it. She retrieved her hand, feeling like a complete rambling fool.

The doctor adjusted his thin metal frame glasses. "I'm glad to hear that. We'll talk later." He gave a slight nod to both of them and turned back to his work.

She followed Sean to the back of the lab. "He is so cool."

"I told you. Over here is your locker to store your things. You'll need to make sure you put on your lab coat before going to your workstation. There are some areas that are designated as clean room only. I'll show them to you later. What you do is swipe your badge in the slot right in front of the lock and it will open."

"Thanks, Sean. I appreciate everything. Really, I do." She scanned her badge and waited for the locker to open.

"No problem. You're going to do great here. I know it. By the way, you didn't answer my question."

"I'm sorry, what question?" She put her purse in the locker and took the white lab coat off the hook. She struggled to get her arm through the sleeve.

Sean helped her. "The masquerade party, do you think you will go?"

"Thanks." She fixed her collar and stopped when a weird vibe struck her, making her feel uncomfortable. Why was Sean always helping her out? Oh no. Did she give him the wrong impression and now he liked her? She closed the locker door. More than anything, she wanted to crawl inside and tell him to go away. She couldn't coward down. She turned and faced him.

"Probably. Lise won't let me back out of this one. That's for sure."

"If she doesn't go or she's too busy you can go with me and some friends."

She smiled, not wanting to be rude. "Thanks, but I'm sure I'll go with Lise and ..." What was Ryan? Her boyfriend? They were going out so he must be her boyfriend, right? "My friend Ryan, who's also interning in marketing."

"That's cool. We can get a table so we can all sit together." He shoved his hands in the pockets of his lab coat and rocked on the back of his heels.

"Okay. That sounds like a good idea," she agreed, unsure of his motives and slightly confused. But she'd worry about it later.

"Ready to get started?"

Natalie nodded. "I sure am."

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Natalie motioned for Lise to stop. “That’s good. It looks great.” She pulled away, not allowing Lise to curl any more of her hair.

“I know. I just want Ryan’s mouth to drop when he sees you. By the way, I noticed you haven’t been wearing your glasses.” She twirled a few more strands of Natalie’s hair around her finger, spraying it with more hair spray.

“Yeah, I’ve been wearing my contacts. By the way, thanks for helping me. I know you’re tired from working all week.” Natalie got up and stepped into the bathroom to change her clothes.

“No problem. I think it’s sweet that you’re inviting him over for dinner. Besides, I didn’t mind cooking in your aunt’s gourmet kitchen.”

“It’s awesome, isn’t?”

“It’s a chef’s dream come true.” She yawned. “I think I’ll sleep in tomorrow. Wow, this bed feels great.”

Natalie peeked out the door to see Lise lying back on the big overstuffed bed. “You’re not going out with Sal tonight?”

Lise let out a long drawn out sigh. “Tomorrow. I’m way too tired tonight. Don’t get me wrong, I love my new internship but this event planning is so much work. I can’t believe I put in thirty hours this week. I’m not supposed to work more than twenty hours. Besides, I have homework and reading to catch up on, that’s if I can stay awake to do it.”

Natalie checked herself in the mirror, making sure the underlining of her dress was not stuck in the back of her panties. She didn’t need that embarrassment. “Ryan told me he worked about thirty hours too. I hope they don’t expect you all to continue working that much.”

“I hope not either. After all, school comes first. All I can say is this is going to be one epic party. Kronberg is going all out for this event. We should go shopping Sunday for our costumes.”

“That works for me.” Natalie’s cell phone chimed. She stepped out of the bathroom to get her phone. Lise was still lying on the bed with her eyes closed. She checked the message.

“That’s Ryan, he’s on his way.”

Lise opened her eyes and sat up. “Wow! That strapless dress looks great on you. The fire orange color makes you look hotter than hell.” She motioned for Natalie to turn around. “Let me fix your sash.”

“Thanks. Aunt Sharon bought this for me, along with a few other outfits. I guess her way of saying thanks for keeping an eye on her place.”

“What? You didn’t show me what she bought you.”

Natalie shrugged her shoulders. “Sorry, I forgot. They’re in the closet.”

Lise got up to take a peek. “Nat, you are so lucky. You know that?” She stepped out holding a denim romper up to her. “I may have to borrow this.”

“Sure.” Natalie put on her matching earrings and bracelet, also from her aunt. “Hey Lise, Ryan’s on his way.”

“Okay, I’m leaving.” Lise grabbed her purse. “Have fun and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” Lise winked and let out a huge smile.

“Lise, you know me better than that.” Natalie shook her head and walked her to the door.

“See you tomorrow.” Lise waved bye as she walked out the door.

Natalie shut the door behind her and dashed into the kitchen. She checked the food, making sure it was still warm. She lit a few candles and turned on some music from her MP3 player. It sounded awesome on her aunt’s state of the art sound system. She did a quick scan, making sure everything looked just right. It didn’t take much in Sharon’s lush condo; from the sleek leather couch to the chic platinum upholstered arm chairs and the glass accent tables decorated to match the Pottery Barn catalog. She rearranged a few of the cushions on the couch and stopped when she heard the doorbell ring.

Her heart raced and she had to slow her steps as she walked to the door. It had been almost a week since she saw him, thanks to the demands of his new internship and summer school. She literally couldn’t wait any longer. She did one last check in the mirror and fixed a stray strand of hair. Lise had her more self-conscious now and she caught herself paying more attention to how she looked. Before opening the door, she checked the small surveillance screen. Leave it to her aunt to have high tech gadgets. Ryan waited outside the door with his hands behind his back, wearing a pressed button down shirt, faded jeans and cowboy boots. *So he did remember to wear his jeans and boots.*

She opened the door and leaned against it. “Hi handsome.”

“Hi there beautiful.” He pulled out a dozen red roses wrapped in soft pink tissue from behind his back.

“Thank you, they are gorgeous.” She took the bouquet from his hands and raised them to her nose. “They smell wonderful too.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, stepping inside.

She bit down on her lower lip, trying to keep herself under control. It was pointless. She threw her arms around his neck. He embraced her, picking her up off the floor and swinging her around. She clung to him as the room spun around them. Her forehead touched his and their eyes locked. Like magnets, their lips drew together. They shared a deep long kiss that made her heart soar and her body swirl with butterflies.

He stopped spinning her around. Slowly his lips pulled away from hers. “I’ve missed seein’ you.”

She kept her fingers buried in the back of his hair. “You have no idea how much I’ve missed you.”

He lowered her to the ground. The second her feet touched the floor a wave of dizziness hit. She buried her head against his chest and closed her eyes. This habitual nuisance would not ruin her evening with him. She took a silent deep breath and shook it off.

He glided his hands down her bare shoulders, sending chills all over her body. “Are you okay?” He eased back, trying to see her face.

She hugged him tighter. “Yes. I missed being in your arms, that’s all.” She looked up at him, hoping she sounded believable this time.

Ryan’s eyes narrowed and he forced a smile. “Alright, if you say so.”

She shut the door and he followed her into the condo. “Gee, you did all this yourself?” He checked out the place and stopped in front of the table set for two. “I’ve never had anyone do this for me.”

“I did have a little help from Lise.”

“That was nice of her to help you. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll just put these in some water.” She walked into the kitchen and pulled out a tall chrome vase. She filled it up and arranged the roses.

She placed them on the dark walnut canaletto dining room table. The silver accents along the top drew her eyes to the center of the shiny vase. “Now the table’s perfect.”

“You weren’t kiddin’ when you said the view was awesome. Your aunt’s place is kickin’.” Ryan walked over to the tall pane windows in the living room.

She walked up behind him. “I told you.” The setting sun reflected a warm glow off of Lady Bird Lake into the condo. It set the mood perfectly for a romantic evening.

“So what’s for dinner? It smells wonderful.”

“Pasta. Ravioli, filled with chicken, spinach and feta cheese. Which I need to check on,” she said walking back into the kitchen.

“Sounds delicious.” He followed her and then stopped and picked up her MP3 player. She heard him change the music to a romantic country ballad. He had to be the most romantic guy ever. He walked over to the kitchen and leaned against the black granite bar, right behind her. “Thanks for cooking. I really appreciate it.”

“Sure, no problem.” She stirred the pasta sauce and turned off the heat. She dipped her finger into the sauce.

“Hey, be careful, that looks hot,” he said as she tasted the sauce. He took her hand and examined her finger. “You didn’t burn yourself or your tongue?”

She shook her head. “No.” Then realized what she did wasn’t very smart. Steam swirled up from the pot and the spoon she held in her other hand. She could have burned herself. But she didn’t. Why did her mind turn to mush when she was around Ryan?

“Is it ready?” He placed her finger in his mouth, sucking off the rest of the sauce.

Her body clammed up and the spoon slid out of her hand back in the pot. “Ummm…” The slickness of his tongue and the grip of his lips around her finger made her body quiver and shake.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist.” He winked and then kissed the top of her hand.

She smiled, still unable to speak. Why did he insist on teasing her like this?

He kept her hand in his and placed her other hand around his neck. He swung her around and gazed into her eyes. “May I have this dance?”

“Ummm… sure.” Natalie nodded, completely awestruck by the way he was sweeping her off her feet. “I hope I remember how to two-step.” Her feet stumbled as she tried to recall the steps. She had only danced with him that one time at the bar, but it didn’t take long for her to follow his lead. Their bodies synced perfectly together, sliding across the tile floor.

“Well Miss Vega, you do know how to two-step.” He danced with her, around the kitchen island, holding her body close to his.



She followed his every movement, not missing a step. "I guess." She tilted her head to the side. Her heart beat wildly as they danced around the kitchen and into the dining room. He drove her absolutely crazy.

He spun her around and then dipped her. He held onto her and sang along with the song, "All I can think about is gettin' you home." His deep raspy voice sent a tingling sensation that flowed down to her toes. Not only was he a great dancer but a great singer too.

Her body cried out for him and she struggled to fight off the forbidden thoughts and temptations. The emotions from her heart took over and she sang back. "Honey, there sure ain't nothing like you loving me all night long."

Ryan's eyes gleamed in pleasure. "Tonight's all about giving you what you want."

She whimpered low in her throat. "You're killing me."

"And you're torturing me." He pulled her up and swept the strands of hair away from her face. She couldn't stand the tension any longer and apparently, neither could he. Their lips crashed together. His lips devoured hers and she responded feverishly, swirling her tongue with his. He made her hot and filled her body with fire. Never had she felt like this before. There was something different this time, a desire, an attraction, and a need beyond control.

"Oh my God... your body feels incredible." She glided her hands over every inch of his well-defined body. She couldn't get enough of him. He trailed sensual kisses from her neck down to her bare shoulders, giving her tingles from head to toe. She buried her face in the nape of his neck. The sweet and spicy smell of his cologne intoxicated her. She wanted him, despite what they vowed not to do.

Ryan slid his hands down her back as he continued to caress her shoulders and her neck with his lips. He gave her butt a gentle squeeze and then spread his hands over the sides of her thighs, running his hands up and down. He whispered in her ear, "Your body's amazing," and then trailed his tongue down to her collarbone.

"Oh Ryan..." She whimpered out, running her hands up and down his chest, eager to touch his skin. With one quick sweep she ripped open the pearl snaps from his shirt. She dragged her palms across his hard pecs and up his chest. His skin felt tight and smooth and she wanted to run her tongue up and down him. With little effort he lifted her off the ground, allowing her to wrap her legs around his waist.

They kissed, tongues fused together until they panted for air. He stumbled around the kitchen and dining area, fighting to keep upright with her clinging to his waist. He pinned her against the wall, pressing his body firmly against hers. His kisses scorched her skin and she moaned in pleasure. He took her hands and braced them up above her head. She throbbed from head to toe and could barely breathe. The sensations were amazing and she thought she might explode at any moment.

“You are so hot, baby.” He panted, continuing to dominate her with the flicks of his tongue.

“You have me so...” She nipped at his lip, ready to devour him. Fighting her inner desires was harder than she thought.

“No. I mean, your body is really burning hot. Are you sure you don’t have a fever?” Ryan pulled back slightly, giving her a quick look over.

“What? No. I just want you so bad.” Sweat trickled down the sides of her forehead. She was hot, burning hot. Her insides felt like they were on fire. She ignored the heat, eager to show him how much she wanted him.

“I want you too, baby.” His voice was hot and heavy.

He released her from the wall and held on to her tightly. She cupped her hands around his face and traced her tongue along his luscious lips. He sealed his mouth to hers, kissing her with intense passion. Her fingers ravaged through his hair, unable to get enough of him. He began making his way to the couch with her in his arms when her foot hit the wine decanter. The bottle hit the floor, splashing red wine all over the mahogany wood floor.

“Oh crap.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry.” He relaxed his arms and she lowered to her feet.

“Forget about it.” She guided his mouth back to hers. Never had she been the aggressive one but for some reason she couldn’t control herself. She had to have him.

He kissed her and then pulled back. “I’m sorry, Natalie. I didn’t mean for us to get this far.... I better go.” He straightened his shirt and started to button it.

“No. Please don’t go.” She reached her hand out but he didn’t respond. She covered her face with her hands. She felt terrible for leading him on. The attraction she had for him was beyond containable. Why couldn’t she control herself? She lowered her hands. “I’m sorry. It’s all my fault.”

“No, it’s my fault. I started it. I should have never licked your finger. I... I can’t control myself when I’m around you.” He ran his fingers through his matted hair and paced back and forth.

Her heart ached. Why did wanting him hurt so bad? “I can’t help myself either Ryan. I have no self-control when I’m around you. I can’t wait to talk to you, to see you. I long for you to kiss me, touch me. I’m... ” She swallowed hard. Was this what she thought it was?

He stopped and looked at her. “I know. I feel it too.” He pulled her into his arms and held her close. So close that she felt his heart beating against her chest.

He stared deep in to her eyes. So deep that she swore his soul touched hers. “I’m falling in love with you, Natalie Vega.”

She smiled, tears rolling down her cheeks. “So am I, Ryan Garrett.”

## Chapter 7: The Transformation

Ryan heard pounding in the faint distance and pulled a pillow over his head. When he heard the knock again he opened his eyes. He jumped up out of bed when he realized the knock came from his front door.

“Okay, I’m comin’,” he shouted, pulling a shirt over his head and tripping over the covers hanging off the edge of his bed.

He looked out the peep hole and saw Sal, standing outside. He opened the door. “Hey man, what’s up?” He ran his hands through his matted hair.

“Hey dude, I’ve been texting and calling you since last night. I wanted to make sure you were alright.”

“Sorry, I guess my phone died.”

“Can I come in?” Sal took a step forward.

“Yeah.” Ryan opened the door further. “What time is it?” He walked to the kitchen, squinting to see the clock on the microwave.

“It’s noon. Were you still asleep?” Sal shut the door behind him.

Ryan picked up his phone from the bar and plugged it in to the charger. He yawned and shook his head. “Yeah. I guess my body needed sleep from the busy week.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t from last night with Natalie?” Sal took a seat on the couch and leaned forward with his arms hanging over his knees.

“What?” Ryan winced and rubbed his eyes with his hands.

Sal let out a slight smirk and shook his head. “Oh come on, man. You don’t have to lie to me. You didn’t answer your phone all night and you’re just waking up. So much for keeping to your word.”

Ryan walked to the living room and leaned over on the back of a chair. How could he convince Sal that he spoke the truth? “Man, I’m not lying. My phone died. I got home around eleven last night. And yes, I kept my promise.”

“So, if I go and check your room, I won’t find her in there?” Sal narrowed his eyes at him.

Ryan stood up, surprised that Sal didn’t believe him. “No man. Natalie didn’t come home with me.” He pointed toward his bedroom. “Go and check if you like.”

“So, you didn’t spend the night with her and she didn’t come home with you. Nothing happened.” Sal furrowed his brow, apparently not convinced.

“Well, I wouldn’t say nothing happened. In fact, things got really heated and... I almost gave in. This is harder than I thought dude. I don’t know how my parents or your parents did it.”

“I know, it’s not easy.” Sal shook his head.

“I can’t explain it. When it comes to Natalie, I can’t seem to control myself.” Ryan leaned back over the chair and buried his fingers in his hair. Why was this so difficult? He held out this long and never did it with Jen. Why was it harder when it came to Natalie?

“It’s hard with any girl. You know that, but I’m proud of you. You kept to your word and walked away.”

He did feel proud about keeping to his word, but every encounter with Natalie proved to be harder. His attraction for her pulled from deep inside of him. It stirred every emotion and ignited a need that teetered on the edge of uncontrollable recklessness. His love for her spread like a wildfire, consuming him entirely.

Ryan lowered his hands from his face and looked up at Sal. “Thanks for being my accountability partner.”

Sal got up and patted him on the shoulder. “That’s what cousins are for.”

Ryan let out a slight smile, thankful for having Sal not only as his cousin but as a great friend too. They grew up together and were practically brothers. They were there for each other, through good times and bad. Sal supported him when he had his football injury, encouraging him not to give up. He also helped him move on with his life after Jen broke up with him. When Ryan decided he needed a fresh start, Sal urged him to transfer to UT with him. If not for Sal, Ryan didn’t know where he would be today.

For a second, Ryan felt bad that he hadn’t been supporting his cousin in return. Back in high school, they both pledged to wait until marriage to have sex, following in the footsteps of both their parents. Ryan kept to his promise but Sal slipped when he became serious with his high school girlfriend. After they broke up, Sal decided he would refrain until he married. He wanted to try again and do what was right.

“What about you and Lise? She seems a little wild and adventurous if you ask me.”

Sal rolled his eyes. “That’s an understatement. She’s a wild one alright. It’s been a struggle for me too. Since I already know what it feels like, it makes me want to do it again.

She's no virgin either and turning her down is harder for me than it probably is for you turning down Natalie."

"I don't know man, it's been unbearable. I've never struggled like this before. Not even with Jen. There is something about Natalie and it's not all about the sex. It's the way she smiles, her wittiness, her scent, her baby blue eyes and the way she hides behind her glasses when she's nervous. I can't stop thinking about her. "

"Oh no." Sal's head dropped down toward the floor.

"What?" Ryan arched his neck back.

Sal shook his head. "Dude, listen to yourself. It's all over for you, man."

Ryan knew exactly what he meant. Although he didn't mind admitting this to his cousin, he didn't want his vulnerability to show. When it came to Sal, he usually figured things out on his own before Ryan told him. He was very intuitive and thought things through, kind of like Natalie.

"Don't worry dude. She's good for you." Sal took a handful of shelled peanuts from a bowl on the bar. He cracked one of them and dusted off the fragments from the nut between his thumb and index finger. He popped it in his mouth.

It made Ryan happy to know Sal approved of Natalie. Sal always warned him about Jen, but he never took his advice seriously. "I tell you, she's like nobody I ever met before. She might be the one. But time will tell."

Sal cracked another peanut. "I can only hope that I'll be as lucky as you."

"So Lise's isn't the one?"

"I don't know. If I can tame the wildness in her, she might be. I really like being with her. She's so full of life, funny and outgoing, the complete opposite of me."

Ryan walked over to Sal and put his hand on his shoulder. "Then you have a job to do because it sounds like you really like her. When you're with her, I see a part of you that I've never seen before."

Sal shrugged his shoulders. "I guess. Yeah, she does make me feel alive. Speaking of, I'm on my way to pick her up. Do you and Natalie want to hang out with us?" He tossed the last peanut in his mouth.

Ryan gave Sal one more pat and lowered his hand. "I can't. I have a ton of homework to get caught up on. Besides, I told my boss I would go in this afternoon if she needed my help. I need to check my messages and take a shower."

"I'm sure glad I'm in technology and not in marketing. Kronberg is working you guys too much, especially for an internship." Sal walked into the kitchen and dusted his hands off over the trashcan.

"Tell me about it. It's fun and I like it though."

"Better you than me. I guess I better go. Lise is waiting on me."

"Alright, give me a ring later."

Sal opened the door. "I will. See ya."

Ryan closed the door behind his cousin and then went over to his phone and turned it on. Sure enough, he had a text from his boss asking him to come and work for a few hours. He also had a text from Natalie, asking him to go to lunch and hang out with her, Lise and Sal.

He texted his boss and told her that he would be in by two and then dialed Natalie's number.

"Hi, I've been thinking about you all morning." Natalie's voice sounded soothing.

"Hello, beautiful. Sorry, I slept in. I must have been tired."

"That's okay. I didn't get up until ten. I must have been tired too."

"So are you still at the condo or back at the dorm?"

"I'm back at the dorm, here with Lise. Do you want to hang out today?"

Ryan's shoulders sank and his energy drained from him. He wanted to be with her more than anything but he had to be responsible and do what he needed to do. "I can't. My boss asked me to come in for a few hours and I also have a ton of homework and reading to catch up on."

Natalie let out a sigh. "It's okay. I understand. I have homework to catch up on too. Maybe we can hang out tomorrow."

"Yeah, of course. I'm dying to see ya. In fact, I'm imagining holding you in my arms and kissing your tender lips."

"Ryan, Lise is right here," Natalie whispered.

"Okay, I know you can't say anything back."

"Oh, I almost forgot. Tomorrow, Lise and I are going shopping for our costumes. Do you want to come with us? Sal's supposed to come too."

“Yeah, that’s fine. I’ll give you a call later when I get back from work.”

“Okay. Talk to you later.”

“Hey Natalie.”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Ryan.”

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“Lise, come on. You look great. The limo is probably outside waiting for us.” Natalie turned off the light in the room.

“Hey, turn that back on.”

Natalie flipped the switch back on. “I don’t want to be late.”

“Alright, I’m done.” Lise blinked a few times in the mirror. She walked up to Natalie and fluttered her eyes at her. “What do you think?”

The tiny rhinestone crystals sparkled against her eyelids and the smoky eye shadow. “They are hideous.”

“Ugh. Thanks.” Lise put her hands on her hips.

“I’m kidding. They are really cool. Your eyes are going to really pop from behind that mask.”

Lise held up her feathered gold and black mask to her face and glanced in the mirror. “I think you’re right.”

She lowered the mask and turned around, making sure the fringe on her black see-through hoop swung freely.

“Let me help you with that.” Natalie reached forward and fixed it. “I have to admit, you have an eye for bold fashion.”

She winced slightly. “Do you think it’s too much?” She twirled, allowing Natalie to get the full picture of her short black and gold corset style body suit.

“No. As long as your boss is okay with it.”

“My boss totally loved it. She’s so cool. She may work us like dogs but she sure knows how to reward us. Can you believe she bought this for me?”



“That was nice of her, not to mention the limo ride. Did you know she also paid for Ryan’s tux rental? Which reminds me; I better let him know we are about to leave.” She typed him a text.

“No, I didn’t know that. Too bad the company didn’t offer to pay for all the interns’ outfits for the party. I guess those of us in marketing were lucky.”

“Yes, but you all deserve it. I can’t believe how many hours you and Ryan put in this week.”

“Tell me about it.” Lise rolled her eyes.

Natalie fluffed out her petticoat from underneath the heavy tapestry dress. “I don’t know about this outfit.”

“What? I love the gold ribbon that outlines the emerald green paisleys. I’ve always wanted to wear a full corset dress. I love the nineteenth century era. Can you imagine the balls they use to attend wearing dresses like that?”

“I don’t know if I could get used to all of this. It’s a little much for me. I can barely breathe in this thing.” Natalie took a deep breath and adjusted the restrictive bodice.

“I think you look gorgeous in it. It totally accentuates your boobs. Ryan is going to drool when he sees you.”

Natalie pulled up on the dress, trying to cover her breasts.

“Don’t. Flaunt what God has given you.” Lise pushed Natalie’s hands down.

Natalie stopped fidgeting and exhaled. “Can you hurry? I haven’t seen him all week and he’s waiting for me.”

“Yes ma’am.” Lise saluted her. Lise’s cell phone rang. “That must be the driver.” She turned around to get her phone. “Hello? Yes...okay, we’ll be right down.” Lise hung up the phone. “The limo’s here. Let’s go.”

Natalie and Lise checked themselves in the mirror one last time, grabbed their purses and headed out the door.

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The sleek black Mercedes pulled up to the nineteenth century grand mansion located a few blocks from the university.

“You know, we could have walked. Then again, I’d be all sweaty by the time we got here wearing this thing.” Natalie pushed down on the skirt of her dress that nearly covered her face.

“We’d be all sweaty even if we had on shorts. It’s still a hundred degrees outside and it’s seven-thirty in the evening for crying out loud. You have to admit, arriving by limo makes you feel important.” Lise checked her lips one more time with her compact mirror.

“I guess.” Natalie peered out of the dark tinted window. “Wow Lise, I’m impressed. Feels like we are in LA for an awards night.”

“Now you know why I’ve been so stressed out. My boss relied on all the interns to pull this off.”

“You guys did an awesome job.”

The passenger side door opened and Natalie and Lise stepped out onto a red carpet that stretched to the curbside. Large LED spotlights crossed each other leading up to the entrance of the mansion. They walked down the plush strip while staged paparazzi snapped shots of them.

“Doesn’t this make you feel like a movie star?” Lise urged Natalie to stop and pose for a picture.

“Kind of.” Unlike Lise, Natalie didn’t care for pictures and showing off. Nevertheless she smiled for the camera.

“We might as well enjoy it. I mean, how many times do you get to dress up like this and look gorgeous?” Lise continued to pose by herself for some additional pictures.

She politely waved off a few guys asking to take her picture while she waited for Lise.

“Are those ice or glass?” Natalie stopped to examine the tall DNA double helix structures located on each side of the walk, right before the grand doors.

“Glass, I believe. If you think the entrance is stunning, wait until you see the ballroom.” Lise pulled Natalie through the double doors.

They walked through the stately entrance past the dining room and library to the grand ballroom. Muscular men painted from head to toe in an antique gold color, posed at the entrance holding candelabrum in their hands.

“Are those guys real?” Natalie whispered.

“Yes, can you believe it? Aren’t their bodies to die for?”

Natalie tried not to stare at their bulging muscles and rippled stomachs. It didn’t take long for her attention to be diverted once she stepped inside the ballroom. The massive room was

decorated to replicate the Masquerade Ball from Phantom of the Opera. Fabric in gold lamè and maroon hung throughout the room, giving it a dark mysterious appearance.

“My gosh. Whose idea was it for all of this?” Natalie did a three-sixty, taking in all of her surroundings.

Lise raised her brows. “Our boss, Lynn. Isn’t she creative?”

“I’m speechless.”

“Wait until you see the food. Come on.”

Natalie followed Lise over to the lavish buffet tables that featured a DNA double helix ice sculpture with a huge waterfall behind it.

“This food looks divine.”

“Lise?”

They both turned around at the same time to see a small-framed Asian lady holding her mask to the side of her face.

“Hi Lynn. Everything looks great. Do you need help with anything?”

“Yes, I do. Meet me by the stage in fifteen minutes.” Lynn checked her cell phone and huffed.

“Okay. I’d like to introduce you to my roommate and Ryan’s girlfriend, Natalie.”

“Hi, nice to meet you. You have magnificent creativity.” Natalie shook Lynn’s hand.

“Oh thanks. I really enjoy this part of my job.” Lynn squeezed her hand and smiled.

“I think you might know my aunt, Sharon Warren?”

“Yes, as of matter of fact I do. Too bad she couldn’t make it.” Lynn checked her cell phone again.

“I know. She doesn’t like to miss a good party. I’ll have to tell her about it.”

Lynn made eye contact with her for a brief minute. “Yes, you will. Have fun tonight.” She turned to Lise. “See you in fifteen.” Lynn made it obvious that she didn’t have time to chit-chat with her.

“Thanks, I will.” Natalie smiled and watched as Lynn frantically ran across the room over to the stage.

Natalie looked around for Ryan, but didn’t see him. The room quickly filled with employees all dressed up and showing off their elaborate feathered masks. She took out her phone and decided to text Ryan. She stopped when she heard a familiar voice behind her.

“I’m looking for a beautiful young lady by the name of Miss Natalie Vega. Have you seen her by chance?”

Chills ran up her spine. “That depends.” Natalie turned around, holding her mask up to her face, trying to downplay her excitement.

“Depends on what?”

“If you are the right guy behind that mask.”

He reached up and slowly lifted his gold and green mask. “Heellooo beautiful.”

She moved her mask to the side. “Hi. I’ve missed you.”

He took her in his arms. “I’ve missed you too.” He drew his lips to hers and the second their lips touched, another wave of dizziness hit her. She squeezed her eyes shut and willed it to go away. Within a few seconds, it subsided.

“You two need to get a room.” Lise scolded.

Natalie quickly pulled back, feeling a flush of heat across her face.

“Hey, don’t encourage them.” Sal walked up and gave Lise a kiss on the cheek. “You look, amazing.” He took a step back, taking in her full outfit.

Lise did a quick pose and held her mask up to her face. “Thanks. So do you. Put your mask on. I want to see what you look like.” She pointed to the mask that hung around his neck.

“Oh come on. I don’t want to put on this stupid mask.” He rolled his eyes.

“Please, for me?” Lise fluttered her eyelashes at him. Her eyes sparkled and Sal’s eyes twinkled with delight. He held the black mask up to his face. It was obvious that Lise had him wrapped around her little finger.

“Are you happy now?” He let out a charming smile.

“Damn, you’re hot.” Lise snapped her teeth at him, then growled and winked.

“Okay, now you two need to get a room.” Natalie turned to Ryan and shook her head. “Hey, there’s Dr. Kronberg and Franz. Do you all want to meet them?” She glanced back at her friends who all nodded.

She led them to the other side of the ballroom. “Excuse me, Dr. Kronberg... Franz.”

The doctor turned around. “Yes. Oh, hello Natalie. You look stunning tonight.”

“Thank you and you look handsome yourself.” Dr. Kronberg wore a traditional tuxedo but no mask. Even if he had worn one, it would have been easy to spot the white haired scientist.

“Thank you dear.”

Franz turned around, chewing on his nails. He gave Natalie a flat smile and barely let out a, “Hello.”

“Hi Franz,” Natalie replied with a cordial smile.

Franz had on a blue velvet tuxedo coat and shiny black pants that looked like something from the 70’s. Springs of red curls stuck out in every direction, covering his blue and black sequined mask on top of his head. His eyes surveyed Natalie and her friends, growing big until the darkness covered the white of his eyes.

“I’d like to introduce both of you to a few of my friends who are also interning at the company. This is Ryan and Lise.” They shook the doctor’s hand. Franz nodded and waved instead of offering to shake their hands. “They are both in the marketing department and this is Sal. He’s interning in the technology department.”

“It’s a real pleasure to meet you both.” Lise gave the doctor a friendly shake and then smiled at Franz.

Sal extended his hand forward. “Nice to meet you, Dr. Kronberg.” He then turned to Franz, “You too.”

“It’s nice to meet all of you. I take it you all are enjoying your internship and learning?” The doctor took his time, making eye contact with each of her friends.

“Excuse me. It was nice to meet all of you, but I have something I need to do.” Franz walked off, not waiting for anyone to respond.

The doctor turned and said, “Okay, see you later Franz.”

Everyone looked at each other, probably thinking the same thing. Franz was a complete freak-a-zoid.

Sal didn’t hesitate to speak up. “Yes. The company has a very impressive technology department. It’s great to be able to work here.”

“I’m glad you like it.” The doctor replied.

Ryan held up his hand and did a quick sweep of the room. “The marketing department spares no expense when it comes to celebrating. It’s amazing what we have been able to do here.”

The doctor nodded and smiled. “Lynn does like to go all out.”

A distinguished man wearing a black and silver mask that perfectly matched his salt and pepper hair strode up to them. “Good evening. Is everyone ready to have a good time tonight?”

Natalie immediately recognized the voice that edged on arrogance. It had to be none other than, Russ Hayle, CEO and President of Kronberg Laboratories. He let out a sneering smile and his blue eyes pierced through his mask and landed directly on her.

“Hello Russ. Yes, I think these interns are ready, *to get the party started*, shall we say?” The doctor’s eyes darted back and forth between them and Russ.

They all smiled at him and let out a laugh or two. The doctor adjusted his metal frame glasses and cleared his throat a few times. “I’d like for you to meet my newest intern, Natalie Vega.”

Natalie extended her hand confidently and waited for Mr. Hayle to shake hers.

“Nice to meet you Natalie.” He reached out and took her hand in his and shook it.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hayle.”

“Please, call me Russ.” He placed his other hand on top of her hand. He squeezed with both of his hands, giving her a more than friendly handshake.

“Sure... R--u--ss.” She stumbled on the words, feeling slightly uncomfortable with the way he held on to her hands. When she tried to pull her hand back he only held on to it tighter, not letting go.

“I’ve heard wonderful things about you.” His eyes widened and traveled up and down her body. His gaze lingered on her exposed breasts, sending an eerie chill down her arms, causing every hair to stand on end.

She yanked her hand away. “That’s good to know. I guess I have Dr. Kronberg to thank.” She turned to the doctor, eager to break away from Russ’ unsettling stare.

“Yes. I’ve told him what a great scientist you will be one day. I know a superstar when I see one.”

“Thank you.” She held up her mask in front of her chest, trying to cover it.

“Hi, I’m Ryan, Natalie’s boyfriend and this is Sal and Lise.” He stuck out his hand and gave Russ a manly shake. “We all intern here and were talking about how impressed we are with all the company does to celebrate.”

Natalie breathed a sigh of relief. Ryan had come to her rescue.

“That is good to know.” Russ shook their hands but didn’t show much interest in meeting them.

The lights dimmed and a band started off with a top-forty song. “It looks like the party is underway. Have fun tonight.” He turned to Dr. Kronberg and patted him on the back. “We’ll talk later.”

“You kids have a good time. Natalie, see you Tuesday.” Dr. Kronberg gave a small wave bye.

“See you on Tuesday,” Natalie replied.

“Sorry guys, I’ve got work to do.” Lise turned to Sal. “I’ll be back shortly.”

“That’s why I volunteered to help earlier.” Ryan put his arm around Natalie. “I wanted to be able to enjoy the party.”

“I should have done the same. Oh well.” Lise shrugged her shoulders.

“Hopefully you won’t have to do too much. See you in a bit.” Sal replied watching Lise walk off.

“I got us a table.” Ryan pointed to a table with a reserved sign that faced the dance floor.

“Cool. I’m going to get a drink. Want anything?” Sal took a step in the opposite direction.

“Sure, I’ll take a Coke Zero.” Natalie replied.

Ryan placed his mask inside his coat jacket. “I’ll have the same. Thanks, man.”

“Alright.” Sal trailed off, making his way through the crowded ballroom.

They walked over towards the table when Ryan stopped and motioned with his head.

“Look up.”

“Wow! How are they doing that?” Images of fire danced across the ceiling bringing it to life with the beat of the music.

“It’s a laser projecting the images. Cool, right?” His eyes followed the flames, watching it stretch across the ceiling.

“It’s awesome.”

“I suggested it to Lynn.” He smiled and tugged on the lapel of his tuxedo coat.

She held on to his arm, watching the flames dance. “Really? I’m glad she took your suggestion.”

“Me too. Come on, let’s go dance.” Ryan put his arm around her and led her to the dance floor.

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The fast music turned into a slow ballad and the dance floor thinned out. "I need a break." Natalie took a few deep breaths, wiping the sweat trickling down her forehead with her hand.

"One more dance?" He pulled her in his arms.

She sighed. "I'm all sweaty."

"Please?" His stare was imploring and she couldn't refuse.

"Alright, since it's a slow dance." She took another deep breath, trying to slow her heart rate.

He held her close and whispered in her ear. "Thank you."

His hot breath left goose bumps all long her neckline. She squirmed, adjusting her corset. "I can't breathe in this dress."

"Do you need mouth to mouth resuscitation? I can do that ya know."

She stared into his golden brown eyes. "I don't know about resuscitation, but I'd love for you to undo this darn corset."

His eyes widened with delight. "I can definitely do that." He reached up and brushed her lower lip with his thumb.

She puckered and kissed his thumb slowly and sensuously, forgetting about her struggle to breathe.

He growled low in his throat. "I'm dying to kiss every part of your sexy and voluptuous body."

"Mmmm, will you please?"

He leaned into her ear and whispered, "I'll do whatever you want baby."

His sexy voice awoke every nerve ending. She imagined him kissing every part of her. The thought sent shivers through her entire body. The word *control* crept into her mind. Before she could push back, Ryan trailed soft, sensuous kisses right below her ear down the nape of her neck. His other hand glided down her back, leaving a stream of sparks that caused her body to pulse with desire. The intensity of the sensation traveled up and down her body creating a hum of energy that buzzed between them. His scent filled the air and she closed her eyes, relishing his alluring aroma of sandalwood and bergamot.



When she opened her eyes her head throbbed and she swayed back. “Oh no, not again.” She held onto Ryan tightly, trying to steady her balance. This time it was more intense. Her head wobbled around like a bobble head doll and the floor moved fast under her feet.

“Are you okay? What’s wrong?” He held onto her, making sure she didn’t fall back.

“Ummm, I don’t know.” A surge of heat rushed to her cheeks and her body turned hot with fever. “I need to sit down.”

He guided her to the table. “Do you want some water?”

“Yeah.” Natalie nodded.

“Is everything okay?” Sean asked when Natalie sat down.

“She got dizzy. Is there any water?” Ryan looked around the table.

“Paul went to the bar to get some for us. Here he comes now, with a waitress right behind him. I’ll find an empty glass.” Sean got up.

“Here’s one.” Katie, one of the interns from the lab, handed Sean a glass. “She doesn’t look so good. Maybe you should take her outside or something.”

Natalie turned to Katie. “I’ll be fine. I think I got overheated wearing this heavy dress.” She picked up a napkin and wiped the sweat from her forehead.

“I need water please.” Sean gave the glass to the waitress, urging her to fill it.

Paul, who also interned in Marketing with Lise and Ryan, looked at them with confusion. “What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

Sean handed the water to Ryan and then turned to Paul. “She got overheated or something.”

“Sip it slowly.” Ryan handed her the glass of ice water.

She took a sip and then held onto the cold glass of water. The coldness felt good against her hot, sweaty hand.

Paul took a seat next to her. “My mom’s a nurse, may I?” He held up his hand.

She nodded. “I think it’s this darn corset. I can’t breathe.”

He placed his hand on her forehead. “My God child, you are burning up. You’re definitely overheated.” Paul sighed, fanning himself. “You’re making me hot just sitting next to you. And I don’t mean hot like that.” He rolled his eyes and loosened the bow tie around his neck.

“I hope not.” Sean narrowed his eyes at Paul.

Natalie wanted to laugh but didn't have the breath to. It was all crystal clear to her now. Paul and Sean had a thing for one another. How did she miss that? She felt like a complete fool for thinking Sean liked her. At least she didn't have to worry about that any more.

Ryan pressed his lips together and his eyes narrowed. He leaned closer to her. "You've been having these dizzy spells off and on since we met. Have you gone to the doctor?"

"No." Natalie's head dropped. This was not like her to avoid a potential serious problem.

He took a deep breath and sighed heavily. "Why not?" Ryan had never gotten mad at her but she knew he wasn't happy with her.

"I don't know. Maybe because it hasn't been consistent. It's only happened a few times." Natalie picked up a program lying on the table and fanned herself.

"I think you need to go see your doctor first thing Monday or go to the university health center." He brushed her hair back away from her face and his voice softened. "Natalie, please don't ignore your health. What if this is something serious?"

"I know. I promise I'll call first thing Monday. She closed her eyes and swallowed hard. "Oh no, I feel sick," she muttered under her breath.

"What's wrong?" Ryan leaned his ear closer to her.

"I have to go to the bathroom. I think I'm going to throw up." She eased her way up and grabbed her purse.

"I hope you feel better," Sean said.

"Let us know if you need anything, Ryan," Paul added.

"Thanks guys." Ryan guided Natalie through the crowd to the nearest bathroom. Luckily, a waitress directed them to a single bathroom where she could have some privacy.

He tried to follow her into the bathroom but she turned and said, "Please, I need to be by myself."

He stepped back hesitantly. "Okay. I'll be right outside if ya need me."

She nodded and shut the door. Immediately, she fell down to her knees, shaking and sweating profusely. She burned with fever and couldn't seem to catch her breath. She wanted to rip the tapestry dress off of her body. She reached up behind her and managed to loosen up the lacing. She took a deep breath and lay face down on the cold marble floor, praying for the nausea to stop.

“Oh my God,” she shrieked when a piercing pain struck her entire body. She curled up into a fetal position. Every part of her hurt and ached to the point it felt like she was dying. She moaned and cried out in desperation for the pain to stop.

“Natalie, are you okay?” Ryan asked through the heavy wood door.

She managed to speak. “Yeah, I’ll be okay. I need to lie here for a while. Please... go away.”

“Are you sure?”

“Go away,” she moaned.

“I’m going to stay right here, in case you need me.”

“No, I’ll be okay.” She cried out, unable to hide the tears of pain.

“Alright, I’ll be back to check on you.”

The pain, like nothing she had ever felt before, penetrated through every muscle and joint in her body. She bit down on her lip to keep from moaning out loud, but the intense pain made it impossible to keep silent.

Heat rose from her feet and traveled up her body to her lungs. Thick and hot, it extinguished all her air until she gasped for her breath. Her body jerked and shook, convulsing out of control. Sweat poured out of her pores in puddles and her eyes burned with fever.

Slowly, she raised her hand up to wipe the mascara and sweat burning her eyes. She blinked a few times, struggling to focus on her hand quivering in front of her face. It glowed red and orange with fire.

“Natalie, are you okay?” Lise tapped on the door.

It took a second for Natalie to comprehend what her eyes were seeing.

“Natalie?” Lise continued to call for her.

“Natalie, can Lise come in and check on you?” Ryan spoke through the door.

She tried to talk but nothing came out. She tried again. “I’m okay,” she croaked.

That was far from the truth. She wasn’t okay. Something was definitely wrong with her.

“Are you sure? Can I come in?” Lise tried to open the door.

When Natalie heard the doorknob turn, she rushed to the door. She couldn’t remember if she locked it. She turned the knob slowly and sighed when it refused to move.

“Damn, that’s hot!” Lise shrieked.

“What? What’s wrong?” Natalie could hear Ryan asking Lise.

Immediately, Natalie let go of the doorknob. She turned and rotated her hand, studying both sides. Had she caused the knob to turn hot? She looked into the mirror. Flames spread underneath her transparent skin, igniting her entire body into a burning inferno.

*On my God, I'm on fire! My body's on freakin' fire!* Her eyes gravitated down, checking out the rest of her body. Her clothes had disappeared along with her shoes. Where had they gone? She ran her hands up and down her body. It felt like her body except her skin had turned into an energy field with a fiery blaze brewing underneath. Her female anatomy resembled that of a Barbie doll; curves and mounds with no other distinct physical features. Even the hair on her head had turned a deep bright red, billowing all around her.

"Natalie, open up," Ryan demanded, pounding on the door.

The beating grabbed her attention. "Ummmm... everything's fine." She tried to clear her throat but her voice crackled like burning embers. She looked back at the heavy brass doorknob, now a few shades lighter orange than before. Her instincts told her to cool it down before Ryan tried to open it. She didn't want him to burn his hand too.

Grabbing the doorknob with both hands, she watched in awe as water flowed from her hands and surrounded the knob. The original worn dark color resurfaced, telling her the knob had cooled down.

"Oh my God, how did I do that?" she whispered under her breath. She had the ability to contain water within the palms of her hands. How was that possible? Before she could come to terms with what she had done, her entire body transformed into a body of water.

"Natalie, are you sure you're okay?" Lise sounded worried and scared. "Why won't she open the door?" She heard Lise ask Ryan.

"I don't know, but I'm about to break down this damn door." Ryan jiggled the doorknob.

She didn't know what to do. Her heart drummed in her ears and it felt like the walls were closing in around her. She turned around in a circle, searching for an escape. There was no window or second door. They couldn't see her this way. They'd freak out. She had to convince them she was okay so they would leave her alone.

"I'm okay. I just need to be alone. Ryan, I'll uhhmmm... text you when I'm ready to leave," she stammered out.

The doorknob stopped turning. "Okay sorry, we'll leave you alone. I'll be waiting at the table and take you home whenever you're ready."

“You poor thing. Let us know if we can help you,” Lise said.

“Okay, thanks.” Natalie sighed in relief as she heard them leave. She turned back to the mirror, stunned at her pristine blue transformation. Waves of water flowed freely all over her body. She touched her brilliant blue hair. It looked exactly like ocean water from the Caribbean. How was this possible?

Then reality hit and she went into complete hysteria. “Oh my God! Oh my God! What is wrong with me?” She backed away from the mirror until she hit the wall. She slumped down to the floor. What was she going to do?

Her mind lingered on the edge of a full panic attack. *I will be okay. Just stay calm.* She hugged herself, rocking back and forth trying to soothe the fear within her. Her mind raced with a million thoughts. She closed her eyes and buried her head against her knees. Maybe she was dreaming and this really wasn't happening. She rocked herself for several minutes, willing the ordeal to end.

She lifted her head and opened her eyes, praying she would wake up in her bed. When she opened her eyes, nothing had changed. She was still a small body of flowing water sitting on the floor in the bathroom at the mansion. Why was this happening? When she raised her hands to cover her face she noticed her composition changing once again.

She watched her arms, legs, and feet turn darker, transforming into a vibrant evergreen color. Her hands shook and her entire body shuttered. How was this possible? She rose to her feet and paced back and forth, telling herself it was her imagination. She held her hands up in front of her, completely awestruck at what she had become. Why was she green? She looked like a toxic waste dump. What was she going to do? How would she get home?

She continued pacing around the bathroom, trying to figure out what to do. She clinched her fist and gritted her teeth. She would get out of there. It took a few seconds for her to calm down. She focused on her breathing, concentrating on the wheezing and rattling sound of the air as it entered her nose and filled her lungs. Inch by inch, the air consumed her to the point it rose up through her throat and moved over her face. Her body became lighter and lighter until she lifted up off the floor.

“What in the world? Help! Somebody help me!” She moved her arms and legs as though struggling to stay afloat in water. After a few seconds she stopped moving, realizing her body

hovered just beneath the ceiling. She glanced over at the mirror. She was as clear as the air she breathed. Her nearly invisible body floated effortlessly. How had she turned into a body of air?

This by far had to be the most insane, delirious, and freakish thing she had ever experienced. One thing was for certain, she had to get out of there. She thought hard, analyzing every possible solution. She had to escape without being seen. A thought emerged and she imagined herself flying through the air and out of the mansion. It was possible, right? She repeated the words over and over in her head. *I can fly*. To her disappointment, it didn't work. She hadn't moved an inch.

She sighed; feeling frustrated but determined to get out. The small bathroom made it nearly impossible to move. Once more, she closed her eyes and focused on making her body fly. She felt her body gradually drifting through the air.

Her eyes popped open when she touched the mirror. "Yes! I can do this!"

She reached down and picked up her purse off the counter and inched her way to the door. Before she opened it, she listened carefully, making sure she didn't hear anyone coming.

Slowly, she cracked the door open and peeked outside. Her eyes narrowed and she took a deep breath, concentrating on what she wanted her body to do. All of sudden something deep inside of her emerged; a forceful, yet instinctive power coming from the pit of her stomach. She darted forward, gliding down the long dark hallway. She had done it. She was flying!

She stopped before the common area, hovering behind a pillar, determining which way to go. The main area and front doors were too risky. Her eyes scoped out a path right next to the library leading out to the veranda. Even though people filled the room, this was her only hope of escaping.

She waited for the right moment and sprang forward, zipping through the room and out a set of double doors into the night. She had escaped and now she was flying! She couldn't believe she was actually flying like a bird. It had to be the most exhilarating thing she had ever felt before in her life. It was mind-blowing and scary at the same time. She soared through the hot, muggy air and past the Austin skyline. She knew she was born to fly.

## Chapter 8: Inevitable

In the faint distance, Natalie heard people chattering. The indistinct voices told her it had to be the television or the radio. She woke gradually, the black behind her eyes lids turning lighter, to the point that she had to squint from the sun's bright rays.

"Is she okay?" a male voice asked.

"I don't know. I think she's breathing," a female voice replied.

"Hey, wake up." Natalie felt a nudge on her arm. When she moved, every muscle and joint ached. Sleep and tiredness weighed her down. It felt like her eyes were coated with lead.

"Maybe we should get a cop. She probably partied too hard last night. I mean look at the way she's dressed," the female commented.

*Partied too hard...what?*

"Yeah, you're probably right. Are you okay?"

Natalie felt someone touch her face and shake her head. Her eyes popped open and instinctively she grabbed the hand in front of her face and twisted it, pulling it away.

"Hey, let go," the guy yelled. A dog next to her barked several times and he ordered it to stop.

She released the guy's hand and jumped to her feet. "Leave me alone. What do you want?" Her vision blurred and her eyes burned from the light.

The dog barked a few more times and then sniffed her, licking her foot. The wet, sandpaper stroke from the dog's tongue caught her attention. Why did she only have one shoe on?

"Hey, take it easy." The guy backed up, pulling his dog with him.

"Yeah, we're trying to help you." The woman got up quickly and took a few steps back.

Natalie looked around for a moment, blinking her eyes rapidly. Where in the world was she?

"Do you need us to call someone for you?" The woman pulled out her cell phone from the band around her arm.

She stared at her for a second. Did she know her? The woman had to be a few years older than her, say early-twenties. She wore a tank top, shorts, and running shoes. Maybe she knew her from the gym.

Natalie took a deep breath and ran her hand across her forehead. She had the most excruciating headache ever. Once her vision stabilized she recognized her surroundings. She was on The Drag, the main strip along the edge of the UT campus, in front of an empty building. How did she end up here?

“Do you need our help or not?” the guy probed one more time.

“Oh, ummm.... I think I’m fine. I fell asleep, that’s all.” She brushed the hair away from her face and noticed her wristlet, dangling from her hand. “I’ve got my phone.” She opened her purse and took it out.

The woman and guy looked at each other. Natalie knew what they were thinking. They probably thought she got drunk at a party and passed out. How embarrassing.

“Okay.” The woman shot her a sardonic look and then slid her phone back into her arm band.

The guy shrugged his shoulders and yanked on the dog’s leash, instructing him to follow. The dog sniffed her foot one more time and then turned to follow his owner and the lady.

“Thanks.” Natalie blurted out, feeling bad for the way she acted. They didn’t bother to acknowledge her gratitude and kept walking down the street.

She checked her phone wondering what time it was. It showed 8:42 a.m. Saturday morning. A list of several missed calls flashed on her screen, all from Ryan and Lise. What would she tell them? She started to dial Ryan’s number, but stopped. She had to figure out what happened before she called him. However, the throbbing in her head made it nearly impossible to think.

A horn sounded and startled her. “Hey there baby? How much?”

She looked up and saw a car passing by with a guy hanging out the window yelling. She turned around, wondering who he was screaming at when she realized it was her. She wanted to run and hide. To make matters worse, a few people walked by her, staring at her and making sly comments under their breath. She had to get off The Drag and out of this dress.

She knew she couldn’t go back to the dorm. Lise would have too many questions for her. The safest place was the condo.

She limped her way down the sidewalk, stopping midway to remove the one shoe she had on. Going barefoot would be easier and her feet ached from wearing the stacked heels. She flagged the next taxi cab passing by and got into the car.



“Where to ma’am?” the driver asked.

“Ummm, 300 Bowie Street.” It took her a minute to remember her aunt’s address. Everything seemed so foggy and faint in her mind. She leaned her head back against the headrest and closed her eyes. Images flashed through her mind, recalling how she changed and transformed. She opened her eyes and looked at her hands. *Did all that really happen?*

“Rough night? Frat party?” the cab driver asked, looking at her through his rear view mirror.

Natalie crinkled her nose. She didn’t owe him an explanation, but she didn’t want to be rude. “Yeah, I guess you can say that.” She didn’t like to lie or make up stories, even if she didn’t want to tell others her business. In reality she didn’t lie to him. She had a rough night and she did go to a party. Maybe not a frat party but a party nonetheless. How would she explain this to Ryan?

It didn’t take long for her mind to drift back off, recollecting the events that took place inside the bathroom of the mansion. A shudder quickened through her body, recalling the excruciating pain her body went through. It made her feel sick and weary. She didn’t want to think about that right now. She had to figure out how she blacked out and ended up on The Drag.

She smiled when she remembered how exhilarating it felt flying through the air. Flying had to be one of the best things she had ever experienced. Nothing compared to it.

When they passed through downtown Austin, she recalled soaring around the buildings, and zipping by the bright neon lights glowing against the dark night sky. Being nearly invisible had to have been the best part of all. It had allowed her to fly without being seen by anyone.

“We’re here. Spring Condos, right?” The cab driver interrupted her thoughts.

“Oh. Yes, thanks.” Natalie sat up quickly. She looked at the meter and then paid the cab driver.

She walked into the four-hundred and fifty-five foot tower, sliding past the front desk security guard. The newspaper kept his undivided attention, preventing any further embarrassment. Luckily, the lobby was empty and the elevator opened immediately when she hit the button.

She went straight to the guest bedroom and fell back on to the bed. *This did happen, I’m not going crazy, or am I?* She ran her hand over the intricate ribbon design on her dress. It did happen, otherwise why did she wake up on The Drag, still wearing her clothes from the night

before? She would have awakened in her pajamas at the dorm or the condo if nothing had happened.

Her cell phone rang and she flinched. Ryan's name flashed across the screen. She let out a huge sigh. What would she tell him? She couldn't avoid him any longer.

She answered the phone. "Hello?"

"Natalie. Thank God you finally answered. What happened? Where are you?"

"I ummm... took a cab to my aunt's condo." She picked at the nail polish on her thumb, thinking of the right thing to say.

"I was so worried about you. Why didn't you let me take you home?"

"I don't know," she muttered. She got up and started pacing back and forth, trying to figure out what to tell him. Should she say that she had turned into some type of freak-a-zoid and flew home instead? No, she definitely couldn't tell him that.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was leaving. I didn't want to bother you."

"Natalie, c'mon. You were sick. Besides, you could have at least told me you were at the condo. I worried about you all night. I didn't know if something bad happened to you."

"I know. I'm sorry I didn't text or call you. When I got to the condo I ran to the bathroom and couldn't leave. I must have fallen asleep because I woke up next to the toilet." Natalie pressed her lips together. She couldn't believe that she lied to him. What choice did she have? He would never believe her.

"You poor thing. I wish you would have let me drive you home. I would've taken care of you." Ryan's voice turned from upset to soothing and caring.

Natalie sat back down on the bed. "Thanks. I didn't know if I caught a bug or if being overheated caused me to get so sick. I'm still not feeling that well." She hated this continual lying but didn't know what else to say.

"I'm sorry, beautiful. Do you want me to come over and take care of you?"

"No!" She stopped and changed the tone of her voice. "I mean, thanks. I think I'll sleep the rest of the day." She swallowed hard and tried to fight off the tears. It broke her heart. She needed Ryan more than anything and wanted to see him. However, she knew seeing him would be dangerous. She couldn't risk changing in front of him. She had to wait until she knew exactly what had happened to her.

"Okay. Is there anything I can do for ya?"

“Yes, can you let Lise know I’m okay? She’s been texting and calling me too.”

“Of course I will.”

“Thanks. I’ll call you later this evening,” Natalie said in a low voice. It killed her inside to lie and pretend that she didn’t want him to come over.

“Okay. Call me if you need anything.”

“Alright, I will.”

“Promise?”

“Yes, I promise. Ryan…” her lip quivered and the tears welled up in her eyes.

“Yes, beautiful?”

“I love you. I love you more than anything.” Tears streamed down her face and her breaths shortened.

“I love you too, Natalie.”

She hung up the phone, not wanting Ryan to hear her tears turn to sobbing. Her heart ached. This is not what she wanted. She wanted to be with Ryan, her love. Staying in a relationship seemed to be impossible for her. Why was it every time she fell in love with a guy something bad happened? Maybe she wasn’t meant to love anyone. She turned and buried her head into the pillow, weeping and crying, wishing she could wake from this horrible nightmare.

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A few hours later Natalie woke up, tangled in the sheets and covers. She threw them back, checking herself to make sure she hadn’t changed. She sighed in relief when she saw that she was still normal. However, it didn’t explain what happened to her last night. She had to figure this out. She closed her eyes, thinking back on what happened. She couldn’t concentrate. Fogginess clouded her thoughts, blocking all her memory. Her stomach growled and she realized she needed to eat.

She dragged herself out of bed and went to the kitchen. She opened the fridge and poked around. There wasn’t much food since Sharon had been traveling and she hadn’t bothered to go to the grocery store. Checking the freezer she found a few frozen dinners. She popped a lasagna in the microwave.

She sat down at the bar, waiting for her food to cook, thinking about the night before. Vivid images of what she turned in to flashed through her mind. Not only were they in her mind but also etched deep in to every muscle fiber of her body. She ran her hand up and down her arm, recalling the sensations she felt when her body changed and morphed. Her muscles were sore and her body hurt. It felt like she had worked out for hours.

She clearly recalled turning into a burning inferno with glowing crimson and orange flames. No human could have tolerated the intensity of the heat that had flowed from her head to her toes. How could she?

It shocked her, how she had gone from burning red hot to a cool body of water within seconds. She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with air, remembering how she had become as thin as the air she'd breathed. She shook her head in disbelief. Her ability to fly had been the most amazing thing ever.

She took her food out of the microwave and waited a minute to eat it, allowing it to cool off. She filled a glass with ice cold water and took a few sips. She continued to analyze each and every phase she had transformed into; the heat, the water, the air. They were all clear to her now. However, the vibrant green glowing thing had her stumped.

She ate her food, allowing her mind to recharge. When she finished, she twiddled the fork in her hand, continuing to think. She tapped the fork a few times against the granite countertop and that's when the idea hit her. *Fire, water, air, and earth. The elements of the earth, of course.* The green thing she turned into had to be earth. She had changed into the four elements of the earth. Why? How come? She needed to know what caused this and why it happened. Most importantly, would it happen again? She shook her head in dismay when she thought about Ryan. *What am I going to do? I can't tell him about this.*

She needed to get out and clear her mind. She thought of the one place that helped her relax and figure things out, the lake. Sure, it'd be risky but the sun would be setting soon. The darkness would prevent her from being seen if she changed. She grabbed Sharon's car keys and headed out the door.

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Before she got out of the car she sent Ryan a text message.

*I'm feeling better so I went out to get some fresh air.*

A few seconds later he responded:

*Is everything okay?*

She texted back:

*Yes. I need to clear my head. I'll call you when I get back to the condo.*

He replied:

*Okay*

She got out of the car and followed the same path that she and Ryan walked a few weeks back. How she longed for him to be next to her, holding her hand and talking with her. Things had changed so quickly. They had just confessed their love for one another and were barely spending time together to only have this freaky thing happen to her. Would they ever be able to be together again?

She kicked off her shoes and sat down on the shore, gazing out into the blue water. Purple and pink rays stretched across the sky and over the lake, creating a peaceful and heavenly sunset. She closed her eyes and focused in on everything around her. The gentle breeze blew through her hair and the warmth from the setting sun made her body feel cozy against the sand. She listened to the sound of the water, splashing against the rocky shore inviting her in for a swim. For some reason, she couldn't completely relax or clear her head.

Thoughts of what her grandmother told her kept circling through her mind. *That God would send the right guy.* She knew Ryan was the right guy for her, perfect in every way. She could taste his lips on hers and smell his scent. His love intoxicated her and she couldn't imagine not being with him. She had to slow things down until she figured everything out. She wouldn't take the risk of changing in front of him. If he knew what she had become he may stop loving her. Her heart told her it would be difficult, if not impossible to stop seeing him.

If only this hadn't happened to her. What if she never changed again? She wouldn't have to stop seeing Ryan. Slowing things down between them wouldn't be necessary. However, she knew that was wishful thinking. Her body had changed into something out of this world and it was only a matter of time before it happened again. What if she changed into one of the elements and never changed back to her normal human form? She shuddered at the thought.

She looked up at the sky, watching the colorful hues fade in to the darkness. Why did everything in life have to be so difficult? How would she explain to Ryan that they needed to

slow things down and not see each other for a while? She sucked at lying and it went against all her principles. She loved him and didn't want to hurt him. She refused to break his heart but didn't know any other way to protect him.

She hugged her legs tightly, wishing this was all a dream. Coming to the lake usually helped. This time she felt more confused than ever. Nothing seemed to help. Sitting on the shoreline, she had the weirdest sensation that Ryan was nearby. His scent filled the air and her body quivered with each breath she took. A nudge deep inside her told her to turn around. She looked behind her and saw Ryan walking toward her.

She smiled. Seeing him brought so much joy. A part of her was also scared and nervous; worried she might change in front of him. Could she hurt him? She had no idea what she was capable of doing. She wanted to run to him and throw herself in his arms. Instead, she waited for him to come to her and she prayed nothing would happen.

"Hello beautiful. I wanted to check on you." Ryan knelt down at her side.

"I'm okay. I needed to get away, clear my head. How did you know I would be here?"

Ryan winked. "Intuition. When you texted me and said you were going to get some fresh air, I had a feeling you would come here. It's kind of weird because the closer I got to the water, the more I felt your presence. Like something pulled or guided me over toward you."

"That is weird."

"I know, I'm a freak."

"No, you're not." She wanted to tell him that she was the freak and that she smelled his scent and sensed his presence too. She held back. He would probably think she was crazy. For a moment, she contemplated if she should tell him the truth about what happened.

"Honestly Natalie, I missed you so much. I couldn't wait to see you. You're not mad at me for coming out here, are ya?" Ryan stroked her arm with his fingers, sending chills all over her body, despite the warm humid air that surrounded her.

"No, I'm not mad at you. I missed you too." Natalie rose to her knees and glided her hands up and down his arms, forgetting all about the dangers she possessed or the need to take it slow.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there to take care of you last night. It won't happen again. I promise." He took her hands and raised them to his lips, kissing her palms.

Her heart sank with every word he spoke. The warmth of his touch comforted her and soothed her aching soul. "Why are you apologizing? I'm the one who left without you."

“I don’t know. I guess I feel guilty for not taking care of you.”

“Don’t. What’s important is that you are here with me now.” It didn’t take long for the distressing thoughts to return. She didn’t know what to do. Tell him or don’t tell him? She couldn’t stand to be without him. She needed him and had to be with him always. She didn’t want to put him in any danger. She loved him too much.

Ryan pulled her up in his arms and kissed her. His kiss grew more intense, creating a need within her that increased with every stroke of his tongue. He pulled away from her lips and stared into her eyes. “I love you more than you’ll ever know.” His lips lingered on hers and she yearned for more.

“No, I love you more.”

Once again, he took her lips captive and she lost herself in his heady kisses. She ran her hands up and down his back, feeling the contour of his muscles underneath his shirt.

Ryan moaned low in his throat.

With every caress, something overcame her. She felt herself losing control. She paused for a breath. “There’s something about your touch, your smell, the way you make me feel. I don’t know what it is. I get these sensations and feelings all over my body that I can’t explain.” Natalie panted.

“I feel them too beautiful. Something takes a hold of me. It feels so right. I can’t describe how it makes me want you.” His hands glided down her back and over her thighs.

Ryan seized her lips again. This time, causing something deep inside of her to move and turn. This was more than a sexual awakening. All the feelings he stirred up had her so deeply entrenched with his love. She completely forgot about telling him what happened and she ignored the sensations going through her body.

“You are so beautiful, you know that?” He brushed her hair to the side.

She tilted her head and stared deeply into his eyes. “And you are so handsome.”

He laid her back on the soft sand and pressed up against her. The sheer weight of his body felt good and she held on to him tightly. All her emotions collided inside of her; the passion, the romance, and most of all the love. She didn’t want him to stop kissing her.

Ryan pulled back suddenly. “Whhhhaatttt... what in the world?” His voice quivered and rattled with fear. His hands dropped from her face and he moved away from her.

Natalie opened her eyes. “Ryan, what’s wrong?” She reached out for his hand but he jerked it away.

He stumbled to his feet and then fell back on to the sand. He crawled his way backward, getting as far away from her as possible. “You...ummm...y--our f--ace. Something’s wrong with your face. And y--our ar--ms.” He pointed at her, his hand trembling.

She held up her arms and watched her body materialize into a vibrant green color. “Oh no, it’s happening again!”

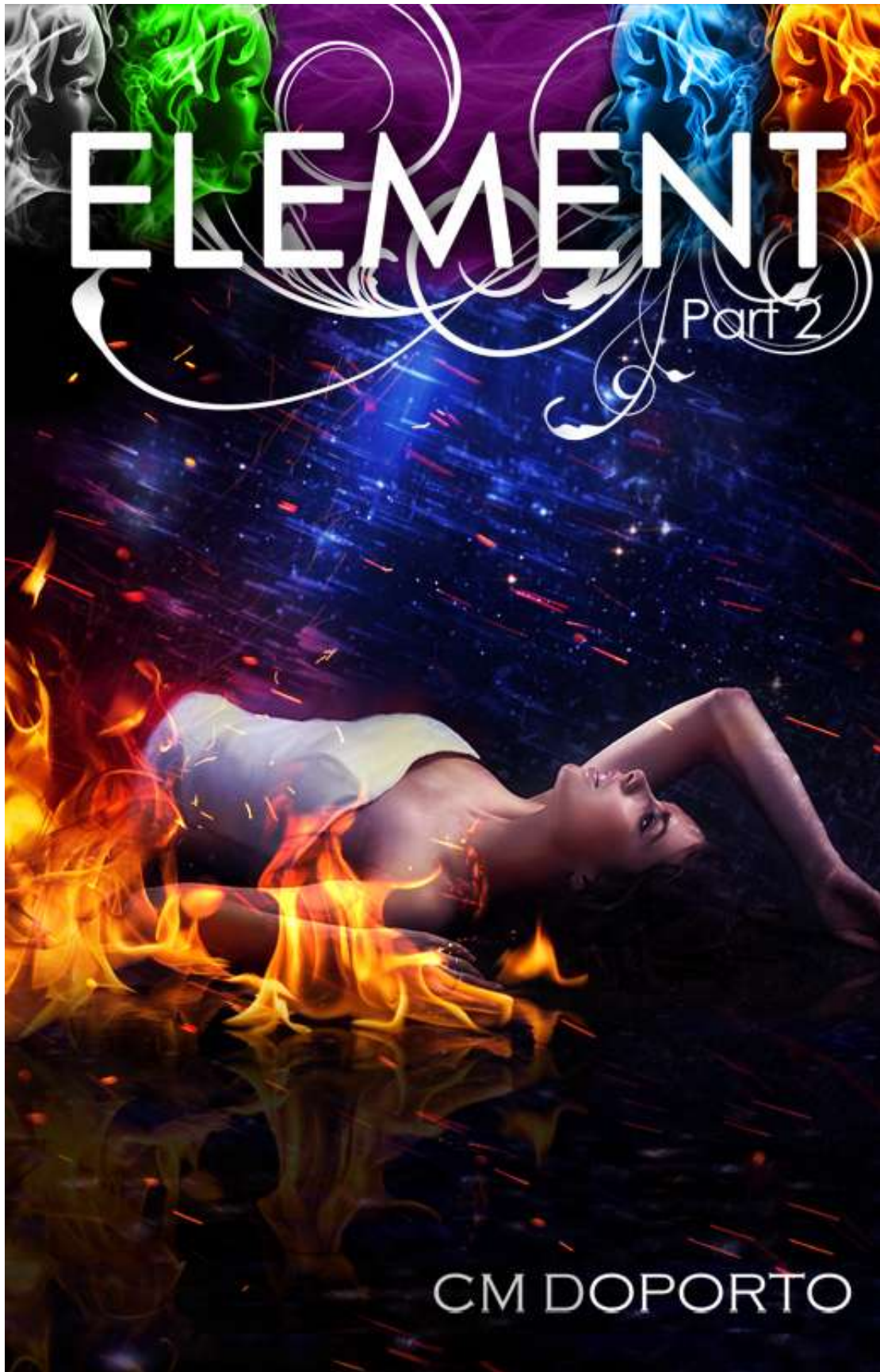
The color drained from his face and he gasped for air. “Wh--at? What do you mean it’s happening again?”

“I...ummmm...well, it’s like....” She didn’t know what to say.

He stared at her in disbelief. “What’s happening to you?”

**To Be Continued In**  
**Element**  
**Part 2**





# ELEMENT

Part 2

CM DOPORTO



## About the Author



**CM Doporto**

Born and raised in the United States of America in the great state of Texas, CM resides there with her husband and son enjoying life with their extensive family along with their Chihuahua, Mexican Redhead Parrot and several fish.

She is a member of Romance Writers of America, and is associated with the Fantasy, Futuristic and Paranormal Chapter and the Young Adult Special Interest Chapter.

To learn more about her upcoming books, visit [www.cmdoporto.com](http://www.cmdoporto.com). You can also like CM's fan page on Facebook and follow her on Twitter and Pinterest.